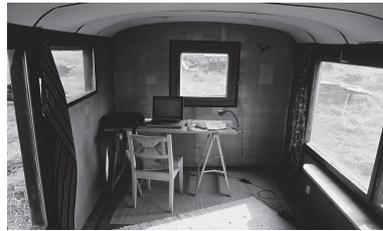

Living in Community

What does that mean? By Michael Würfel

One fine day I moved to the flatlands, to the village community of my choice, which I'd known for years of visiting and volunteering: Sieben Linden Ecovillage in northern Germany. At that time I desperately wanted to get out of the city, and a life at the "ecovillage" promised to be inspirational. Inspiration, scope for personal development, life as an adventure playground – those things were lacking in the life I lead before. More than six years have passed since then. It's been a long time now since I became a full member of our ecovillage-cooperative and I've taken on all sorts of tasks, ranging from emptying compost loos to organising weekly film screenings. My share in the cooperative that owns Sieben Linden's land (which I borrowed) is paid off; I care for my mother on site, she came to live here when she became bedridden; I met my partner and she moved here too; we found a living group with whom we form a close little community within the village; we are raising a daughter in the village. So much has happened that the comparison between my life six years ago and my life today can hardly illustrate what is special about community living – but some things clearly happened because I live in community.



First weeks in a trailer, 2007

Communal life broadens the horizon, I'd say. It can take a while and potential insights seldom lurk where you expect them – but comparatively intense contact with a relatively large number of co-inhabitants ensures plenty of opportunities for "growth", "maturity" and "authenticity", not least of all thanks to tensions and conflicts. The special thing about neighbourly contact within a community, as opposed to a village or an urban semi, is that you witness people in various aspects of daily life. Not just for jolly BBQ invitations, but also when they're splitting up with their partners, when they experience success, when they have to give in during confrontations – grumpily or gracefully. They interact with you during all these experiences and you learn to re-evaluate people time and again, or perhaps not even to judge them in the first place (after six years I've still got a long way to go with that one). Maybe community life enables you to become a little wiser.

But maybe not, because obviously it's incredibly annoying to have to deal with issues you'd considered sorted out, or that are completely irrelevant to you. For example, when it's been decided that so-and-so cannot join the community, but two months later you're called upon to discuss awarding him/her a "special residency status". And if you say no or even put in your veto right then you're expected to stand up and explain yourself. Or the irritating feeling of unfairness when so-and-so, unlike you, doesn't do his/her bit in the household, even though you took time out from personal pleasures in order to fulfil your fair share. In moments like these it can seem seriously sensible to lead a private life, to interact with the rest of the world only via your job, consumption, newspapers, election day and holidays, plus a few friends or relatives.

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You may notice that, having spent six years here, I find myself talking and writing less about the advantages of community life than about the differences in comparison to a “private” lifestyle. Community life is intense, and sometimes “intense” just means “too strenuous”. Intense also means “lots of interactions”, though, and here is an insight that does surprise me: Six years ago I would not have thought that community life would lead me to interact more intensively with “the outside world” than my “private lifestyle” did. Quite to the contrary, I worried that living in a community (on the land and far from city culture) would result in losing my connection to the “outside world”, whatever it is that this term constitutes. But that fear is gone. My social senses have been sharpened, and isn’t that key to any form of connection to the world and to society? If I don’t take much notice of mainstream culture and day-to-day politics now, then it’s because most of it seems rather unimportant. My community provides me with quite a distanced attitude, which I find helpful. There’s hardly any inundation from advertising, pseudo-social networking over mobile devices or other tentacles of the media machines; instead we chat face-to-face with fellow humans: with each other and our many visitors. And of course there’s still literature, film, newspapers, the internet, etc.

When I look out at the outside world, I’m not too keen on the way society, with its many privately living people, is developing. Who’s elected, what people allow politicians and the media to convince them about, what they buy, what they think of as cool – I get a clear feeling that our communal life is more future proof. Nobody here is satisfied with empty promises; silly decisions are closely followed by resistance; rather than shopping we repeatedly get kicks out of swapping things; being cool is unimportant or at least is completely contrary to the mainstream definitions of the term.

Although I’m often annoyed by having to deal with other people’s sensibilities, I sense that generally, communal life makes people more fit to live in society.

Living in community – this can of course mean any number of things. Above I described my own experiences – the perspective of a guy living in a large community that’s rather extrovert, with many seminars, conferences and workshops. Other communities will differ in many ways. How far does a community go in terms of even allowing its own culture of communication, and therefore differentiating itself from “private” living?

When we talk about community in this book, we always mean people who live together intentionally. When living in community, we cannot avoid having to consult and make compromises, making fellow community members into confidantes, and questioning our own behaviour. I therefore suspect that in more or less any situation in which people live together intentionally, they are given the opportunities I describe above; opportunities lacking in a purely private lifestyle.

In my community, there is a trend towards growth – there tend to be more people wanting to join than there is accommodation available for new members. Why do these people come? I think it’s rarely a purely rational



Newcomer introducing himself, 2008



decision: “My life needs to be more communal so off I go to the ecovillage”. The people who want to stay here have found some link to this place which appeals to them; they’ve kind of fallen in love with it. They get inspired. I had lots of ideas about what I would do once I lived here, when I was at that stage – I had in mind some great art projects and wanted to build a high wooden tower to look out over the flat lands. Plus I saw myself nourished by this wonderful group. Loved and respected by many.

When newcomers introduce themselves to us it may sound like their life was ready for a change and that they just like the concept of an ecovillage. But in order to actually decide to live in community, I’m sure that they also have plenty of ideas and high hopes for how this new life will be, just like I had – that’s what we humans are like. When it’s actually time to move, it may not feel so very different from any change of location. Living space, contacts, post code and nearest train station change – what communal living actually means, however, only becomes clear bit by bit.

The arguments for and against communal living might be most important when you’re trying to explain to friends your plans to move. In their worries, actual fears about living in community might show up. That you may always have to listen to other people’s opinions about your decisions. Having to share a bathroom with strangers. That you’re never really alone with your loved one anymore because there’s always so much community around you (even though intentional communities do have doors, unlike the one in the hilarious film “Wanderlust” (2012)). That you are giving up on your career, on “everything you always worked towards”.

That will seem absurd to you, if you’ve already fallen in love with your community and with the many ideas that become reality there and to which you want to contribute, with the sunshine in the courtyard and the future that awaits you.



But after the initial enthusiasm there will in fact be moments in which everything you were looking forward to becomes too much. I’m quite sure you’ll get annoyed at some point. At least in the hustle and bustle of our (very busy) community, I’ve often experienced new inhabitants feeling overwhelmed and finding things complicated, or even just too much to handle. And it’s a fact: This

community you dreamed about, the community I still dream about – neither you nor me will actually manage to create just that, because there’ll never be enough time to create the perfect communal life you dreamt about, especially if you have to make a living, maintain a happy relationship with your partner/family and take that private time off that you’ll need to recharge your batteries. This place offers so many opportunities of things to do/establish/revolutionize, it just won’t be done. The ecovillage overdose (in our case) follows as a matter of course. I recommend experiencing this without panic. This is the moment in which many things falls into place. At this point in time, you begin to really understand something new about communal living and you’re learning about yourself. And subsequently you’ll be better equipped to help improve the community

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you live in. That's how an adventure playground works: sometimes things collapse, but you'll take note of what kind of construction works.

In my opinion it's important for communities to encourage such insights and to make room for your own change. Your community should allow you to participate in its development, but depending on your current needs, it should also allow you to take a step back from it. On the whole, it should have a resilient structure. This can be achieved with flat hierarchies, joint decision making, communally owned or managed real estate that cannot suddenly be taken away by some owner, even if this entails communal expenditures. And with a set of very basic rules that mark a bottom line, like the acknowledgement of the necessity of communication.

Many people who engage in movements of solidarity and sustainable management of natural resources come upon the idea of communal living. Apart from the other tempting promises of ecovillages and such, they can see their ideas put to work there, often with a thoroughness that is just too hard to achieve in the mainstream. Take a community that goes vegan – with one swoop (let's ignore the 18 months of preceding discussions) all the non-vegan foodstuffs are gone. With no more temptation, it's easy to stick to the plan. Tempting is both the promise to feel strength in unity and the consistency with which those good ideas from the "alternative" can be implemented within a group structure. Vegan cooking, abstinence from cars or mobile phones, non-violent communication... – Any ideas that results in elaborate campaigns within "private life" society and end up as T-shirt slogans can easily be implemented within a community without much hassle - as long as there is general agreement. With or without the T-shirts. This is one of my explanations for the fact that communities are often colourful places where people get together who have already seen and tried many things, and who participate in trying out things that sound new and exciting. Which, in turn, makes communities even more interesting, also eventually for the mainstream media – you might even say, the more we lose interest in them (or in the things they usually report on), the more they take notice of us. Anyone who wants to be on TV has quite a high chance of success in the public relations department of a progressive community. The media often come with the intention of shooting something about "dropouts from society", but judging by the reactions of journalists and viewers alike, community is often actually avant-garde.

When I was a child (and even a teenager), I wanted to be a bank manager and envisioned my future as a married man with two children



Instead of in some suburb... I live in a former circus trailer living in a typical family home. Smiling happily from behind the garden gate. Let's face it, little Mike: That would have ended in tears. The wife of my teenage dreams would not have been able to cope with me for very long, and vice versa.

When I look at myself now (quite impartially, of course), then I see that a large propor-

tion of my personal happiness is thanks to my communal experiences, my place in the village and within our little living group. I'm not alone when I need support, and my somewhat rough edges are accepted. One community member once said that they "get rounded off" as the years in community go by (like pebbles in a river), but I don't see that happening on me just yet. But the community knows me, can give me the space I sometimes need, is fully capable of pretty harsh criticisms, but always invites me back into the group. Even the relationship with my partner works very well within this loose but stable tapestry of interpersonal relationships. And therein lies another massive advantage of communal living, which in itself probably justifies all the hassle. Namely how childhood and parenthood can function within intentional communities.

In compliance with my hopes as a father, children in communities can grow up with other trustworthy adults and other children who are like siblings to them, in a safe environment, without fear, or traffic. That's what I want for my family or rather, in my case, for the family-like unit of four adults and one child that I am a part of.

Furthermore, if ever the relationship between my partner and myself loses its strength, then we don't have to leave our community. Provided that we both consciously and individually made the decision to live in this community, we will not have to free ourselves from the community one day, even as we may need to free ourselves from each other. In that case we could simply live on opposite ends of the village. Everything we like about our community can continue and as parents we can remain in close vicinity of our child.

I intend to love my partner (or why not call her wife) forever. But I also know that it can turn out differently, and I live in relaxed anticipation of any outcome, because we live in a community that includes both of us, a couple of other close comrades, and our child. In my personal inventory of five years of living in community, this stands out as one of the dramatically underestimated benefits. That's what I'd call a viable social concept, unmatched by anything mainstream culture can offer me. ☸



*Three parents bathe the baby
- one takes pictures
(all photographs in this article:
Michael Würfel)*