

The Paradoxes of Community

A brief overview of some apparent contradictions and ironies in communal life as elucidated by Andrew Plant

Just think back to the time when you joined a Camphill community for the first time. Try to remember why you made this step. What motivated you to leave behind your family, your friends and your place in mainstream society and instead choose to become part of an alternative intentional service community? Were you responding to a feeling of unease and dissatisfaction about some aspects of society that you did not feel good about? Perhaps you felt that you could find a better way of doing things? You would have known that you were neither the first nor the only person to have taken this step. You would soon have realised that the community you joined was not the only one of its kind but nonetheless you may not have realised the full significance of your momentous decision. Not only had you stepped into a particular contemporary world-wide movement of intentional communities you had perhaps unwittingly also stepped onto an alternative path of history. In fact you had taken up your place among a long line of people, going back centuries, who had refused to accept things the way they are and instead set out to create their own alternative social reality.

No doubt there were a number of factors that called you to community and it would not be surprising if somewhere among them there was the longing for both Eden and Utopia. On the one hand the wistful hope to escape the materialism, consumerism and self-centredness of modern society and to re-capture a simpler and less cluttered way of living, more in tune with Nature and more acutely aware of the promptings of one's inner conscience. On the other hand the fervent belief that it is possible to create a better, more just, more peaceful and more equitable society that allows each person to develop to their full potential in freedom. Throughout history these two paradoxical motivations - no matter how illusory they proved to be in practice - have been the fundamental and archetypal drives that have continually prompted people to build and join intentional communities – the yearning to return to a better past and the striving to create a better future.

Many, if not most, of the religious communities throughout history were formed by people with very strong religious principles who rejected the worldly wealth and power and what they saw as the corruption of the Church and the clergy. They modelled their communal striving on the lives of the early apostles as described in the Acts – a life of simplicity, poverty and community of goods and a life of service in spreading the message of Christ. At the same time these religious communities saw their separation from the world and their communal and godly lifestyle as the necessary preparation for the impending millennium – the Second Coming of Christ when he would establish the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth.

The secular communities also had one eye on the past and the other on the future. Their members had a jaded view of the forces that had ushered in the Industrial Revolution and all that went with it –capitalism, the division of labour, urbanisation and social dislocation.

In response to these perceived social ills they were inspired to re-create the social cohesion and natural lifestyle of pre-industrial village life. In much the same way the archetypal Camphill community that you joined was were also based on land work, hand crafts and

shared living in an extended family setting. In addition the early Camphill communities had always been wary of both modernity and technology.

The builders of these secular egalitarian communities held that the natural goodness inherent in each person has become corrupted by the inequalities and imperfections in society, through the profit motive and through the sanctity of private property. They were fired by the belief that the individual is the product of their environment and that it is possible to create the perfect social order that will in turn lead to the unfolding of human potential. The Utopian society of the future will be founded on the rational principles of education, enlightened co-operation and social and economic equality.

In the Camphill communities these principles are reflected in the firm belief in the innate dignity and higher nature of each human being and the development of new communal social forms grounded in the socialist principles of the Fundamental Social Law⁽¹⁾

The modern manifestations of intentional communities, the eco-communities, are built on much the same paradoxical foundations as their predecessors. In general they eschew what they consider to be the worst aspects of the modern world – the capitalist globalisation of the economy, of culture and of the media, the centralised power structures of mainstream politics and the on-going destruction of the environment. They also shun organised religion and instead honour not just the feminine principle in general but the atavistic wisdom of Mother Earth, paganism and tribalism. They hold that the only possibility of saving the world is through the use of modern technology for the generation of alternative energy, the re-creation of small scale social units and the emergence of a new planetary consciousness. The term 'New Age' is proof of their millenarian hopes.

The Camphill communities predate the modern eco-villages and eco-communities but have shared their essential concepts of rural, small scale, self-regulating, egalitarian land-based communities working as far as possible outside of the mainstream power structures. In addition the Camphill communities share the millenarian outlook of both historical and contemporary intentional communities. Anthroposophy sees the course of history as the on-going development of human consciousness – from the state of group consciousness to individual consciousness and then to a perfect future of a new age of expanded universal consciousness.

There has always been a blend of pessimism and optimism in both millenarian and Utopian thinking. On the one hand the sense of loss, the fall from grace, the expulsion from Paradise, the experience that the Golden Age lies in the past and can no longer be regained. As a result we have to endure division, depravity and darkness in which the only future is the dystopian vision of the End Times; the War of All against All.

On the other hand is the optimist anticipation of better times to come, a new age will dawn and we will eventually witness the fulfilment of the prophecies – the religious Millennium or the secular Utopia.

Perhaps also mixed in among your reasons for joining an intentional community was the search for a sense of belonging; a sense of finding common cause with like-minded people who are engaged in the shared quest of bringing about a better world. Intentional communities are by definition made up of people who have much in common and who attempt to foster mutual support and more genuine relationships. Yet at the same time we

know that people crave for personal autonomy – for their own space and time and the means to express their individuality.

Which brings us to the next paradox – namely that each of us is both a social and an anti-social being. Which means that while we search in community for close and meaningful social interactions and for supportive and trusting relationships we inevitably come across interpersonal difficulties, conflict and power struggles. I doubt that there is anyone who has ever lived in an intentional community who at some point or another has not experienced the interpersonal conflict and schisms that not only destabilise but also destroy communities.

There are strange forces at work in intentional communities – forces that reflect something deep about human nature and that seem to make it almost impossible to ever create that perfect utopian community that we are all searching for. Those people who found and join intentional communities are by nature non-conformists who choose not to go along with the orthodox norms and expectations of society. Putting together a group of such strong-willed and contrary characters could not be expected to result in peace, harmony and social cohesion.

Yet, strange though it might seem, when such people come together in community they submit willingly to a much stricter and more demanding set of rules in their newly-adopted mini-society than the ones that they had rejected in the society they left. The difference lies in that they have freely chosen their new and self-imposed social disciplines and find fulfilment in their submission to the will of the community, which is regarded as something higher than their own individual will. The irony is that no sooner does the community begin to cohere than some members begin to resist the new orthodoxy, to contest the new leadership structures and to set up alternative and conflicting camps. Schisms open up between the more conservative members who seek to uphold the traditional forms of the community and others who argue for more liberal and progressive ways of adapting to changes. Interpersonal conflict, power struggles and ideological schisms are often a hallmark of intentional communities and at times it seems that the urge for self-determination outweighs the striving for community.

On the personal level, it is an illusion to think that we – and all the others – suddenly become better people just because we have joined an intentional community. Some aspects of a person's make-up and their past and some of the shadow aspects of human nature are hard to overcome and, despite the best of intentions, conflict is as rife in community as it is elsewhere. It is often easier to admire the concept of community than it is to find something to admire in my fellow communitarians. Who has not at some point echoed the feeling - full of both positivity and despair - 'I love community – it's the other people I can't stand'.

Interpersonal difficulties are just as rife in Camphill as in other communities and yet I have the feeling that outright and public conflict between Camphill people is less of a feature today and is less damaging than it has been in the past.

Perhaps this is due to the fact that new organisational structures have to some extent replaced the influence of dominant individuals and as a consequence community processes are less susceptible to being derailed by strong egos, personal antipathies and power disputes. In some indefinable way, community seems to have become less personal and perhaps also less intense and as a consequence communities are less disturbed by personal and ideological issues. Could it be that the apparent lessening of interpersonal

conflict and jostling for power is a sign of community maturity and of wisdom learnt from bitter experience, or could it be a sign that, due to the fundamentally different ways that communities now operate, community dynamics play themselves out differently than in the past?

Moving on from questions to do with how community members relate to each other, it remains clear that those who choose to live in communities will always have to wrestle with the dynamic between the individual and the communal. Each intentional community has had to find their own way to come to terms with this – in relation to their social and cultural forms, their organisational structures, what they expect and demand of their members, and also in their living arrangements. The paradoxical terms ‘living alone together’ or ‘living together alone’ have been applied to both historical monasteries and to contemporary cohousing. Community holds out the promise of togetherness, which at times can appear to a double-edged sword. One Camphill co-worker, when asked to describe the best and worst aspects of community life, replied that the best aspect was ‘never being alone’ and that the worst aspect was also ‘never being alone’.

Having lived in your community for some time you might have experienced how things have changed over the years, in all sorts of ways. Over time the community members become less willing to conform to communal expectations and instead begin to assert their personal needs and wishes. The community in turn becomes more tolerant of deviance and diversity and more open to new ideas. Paradoxically the community becomes looser in terms of its social arrangements at the same time as it becomes tighter in terms of its organisational structures. It seems that at some point in their development, in order to guarantee their survival, intentional communities have to go through a time of re-organisation. What used to work informally in earlier days now no longer works. Communities grow bigger and more complex and in the process need more differentiation and organisation. Each community has its own story to tell but many of them have come to a certain point in their development when they have had to face reality and make pragmatic and sometimes drastic compromises in relation to their founding ideals in their search for a way forward.

Camphill communities have not been immune from these changes. They have had to respond to the changing needs and wishes of their members and to the fact that it has been increasingly necessary to integrate an employed workforce alongside the traditional residential and unsalaried co-worker model. In addition they have had to come to terms with the introduction of the regulatory regime that comes on hand of the core task of providing care and support of children and adults with disabilities. This has entailed a major re-appraisal of the way in which the communities function and a major shake-up in order to ensure the appropriate levels of compliance and accountability.

In the process the Camphill communities have had to introduce all manner of organisational and governance systems that go with being a professional education and care service.

It could be said that one of the greatest strengths of Camphill has been the security that comes with a guaranteed income from the state – a feature that sets it apart from most other intentional communities. At the same time this has also been the greatest weakness since it meant that the Camphill communities had to comply with regulations and requirements that it would not have necessarily have had to adapt to otherwise. There can be no Camphill

community - in Britain or Ireland at least - that has not had to make major adjustments on hand of these changes and all the other changes at work in their community.

When we consider the variety of ways in which Camphill communities have responded to the many changes and challenges facing them we come to the crucial, if paradoxical, insight of Donald Pitzer.⁽²⁾ He identifies what he calls a 'double jeopardy' that intentional communities face at some point in their development. He argues that communities that refuse to respond to change end up becoming rigid, stagnant and increasingly authoritarian. Communities that engage in change processes, however, end up losing their distinctive identity and social cohesion and thus jeopardise their long term future as a community. It seems that the stark choice facing intentional communities is that 'you are dammed if you do and dammed if you don't' - neither resistance nor adaptation is a guarantee of community success.

In much the same way that people are attracted to community through their desire to forge better social relationships and to find common cause with others of a similar mind and then find themselves drawing back and retreating from the close encounters and the difficulties that inevitably ensue, so there is also a paradox in the way that intentional communities relate to the world. Communities invariably begin by turning their backs on the world but then find themselves drifting back again. In addition they also find that the world makes its way into their community – sometimes despite their best attempts to keep it at bay.

Communities can never sustain total isolation; they need to have an income and this is often through providing something that other people in mainstream society want. Traditionally this would have been agricultural or manufacturing surpluses and today it is more likely to be courses and conferences. Most communities have also had to employ outside workers in order to sustain their enterprises and the workers would have brought the world into the communities with them. More recently media technology and instant electronic communication has made it virtually impossible to keep the world – both the real and the virtual ones - at a distance. The members of communities are also susceptible to the lures of modernism and consumerism and no doubt the pull of the world is felt more keenly the more that the members become disillusioned with the rigours of their communal life. As before, all of this applies to the Camphill communities and yet there is an additional factor that ensures that the communities cannot separate themselves off from the wider society even if they would choose to do so. Society and the state both have a vested interest in the work of the communities – they entrust vulnerable people to the care of the communities and also fund their placements. The unavoidable consequence is that the Camphill communities, and the other communities that provide a social service in return for state funding, have to be accountable to a wide range of external agencies and are inextricably linked to the world whether they like it or not and in ways that they would not necessarily have chosen.

There are many intentional communities that have a mission to influence the world for the better. Yet these communities that seek to touch the world are also in turn touched by the world and unfortunately all too often the touch of the world is the heavier.

The relationship to the world is also not static and indeed for some communities the dynamics can be somewhat ambivalent. No doubt all intentional communities have at some point in their history met with misunderstanding, mistrust, hostility and in some cases intimidation and attacks. Yet as the years pass the communities come to be seen in a better light. They welcome visitors and guests, set up shops and conduct tours. At their demise

some of them are turned into visitor centres and museums thus completing the journey from persecution to prestige.

No doubt, like any other communitarian, you want to see your community do well and to prosper. You hope that you will attract plenty of new members and that you will have enough money to do all the things that you want to do in terms of building new buildings, starting up new enterprises and generally getting bigger and better. However, as they say, you might need to be careful what you wish for. Experience shows that too much success can be a bad thing in terms of sustaining a heightened sense of community. With too much money and a plenty of resources people tend to become more complacent and individualistic and focus more on personal enterprise than the common good. Furthermore, the longer a community lasts and the more successful it becomes, the more organisation it requires. The sense of community is never more intense than in the early pioneer days when money and other resources were scarce but the levels of energy and inspiration were high.

In order to ensure continuity you might also hope that the young people born into the community choose to stay in the community as adults. After all they have been fully immersed in the culture as they grew up and unconsciously absorbed the customs, rituals and social mores of your community. Yet experience shows that just those young people who you had hoped might have upheld and honoured the community traditions and might have led your community into the future either choose to do things in their own way and bring about changes to their communities that you, as a member of the previous generation might not approve of, or they leave their communities in order to find a place for themselves in the world outside. History shows that the members of the second and subsequent generations are less inspired and less committed than their parents or predecessors. They shy away from the fervour and fundamentalism of the pioneer generation and are more susceptible to the attractions of the world beyond the boundaries of their community. The Camphill communities are no exception to the challenges of succession. There has never been any expectation that children born into the Camphill communities will stay on as adult members and generally speaking it has been newcomers and employed co-workers and staff rather than the next generation of co-worker children that have made the development and expansion of the communities possible. The increase in the number of employed people working in the communities and in the number of people with disabilities accessing the day services provided by the communities has brought about the more recent phenomenon of a feeling that there are two communities – one that follows the ebb and flow of people coming in and out of the community during the working day and the residential community made up of all those whose home it is.

It is this new mix of people coming to work in the communities, along with a more flexible and inclusive outlook, that continues to ensure the sustainability of the communities and yet paradoxically there have been significant difficulties in integrating this diversity.

The final irony is that the combination of the instinctive and irresistible drive to grow bigger and to develop, the need to adapt in response to ever-present challenges and the inevitable and inexorable momentum of change means that you find yourself living in a very different community than the one that you have spent so much effort and energy trying to preserve.

I have lost count of how many paradoxes, ironies and incongruities there were in all of this and no doubt you could add more from your own experience. What becomes clear, however,

is that the Camphill communities, in common with all other intentional communities, are replete with complementary and contradictory personal and social dynamics.

For this reason life in community can be as full of tiresome difficulties as it is lit up by moments of ineffable grace. Hence we have no choice but to resign ourselves to living gracefully with the uncertainty of paradox – which, after all, is part of the sometimes uplifting and occasionally disconcerting mix that is community life.

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References:

⁽¹⁾**The Fundamental Social Law as formulated by Rudolf Steiner.** *'In a community of people working together, the well-being of the community is greater the less the individual claims for themselves the proceeds of the work they have done and the more they make these proceeds over to their fellow workers and the more the needs of the individual are met by the work done by others'*.

⁽²⁾ Donald Pitzer: 'America's Communal Utopias' 1997. The University of North Carolina Press.