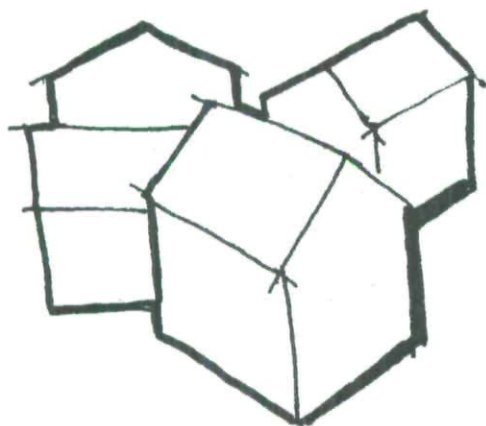


LIVING IN COMMUNITY: LESSONS FROM THE COMMUNE

Marian C. Bussey, Ph.D., University of Denver

The revelation that an acquaintance of the author's had also lived on a commune initiated a period of reflection and research on commune living. The author found that commune life embodied much that is optimistic and progressive about social work values. While some of the back-to-the-land motivation came from the 1960s counterculture, communes were also linked to the idealism of the 19th century and in a roundabout way to its expression in social work.

Compassion before Profit
Creativity before Conformity
Spirit before Materialism (The Farm, n.d.)



Summer 1974 was a long time ago – Nixon was president, the war was over, and my first husband and I were living on a commune. How easy it was for me in the '80s and '90s to forget I'd ever been there – just as I'd forgotten my cork-soled platform sandals, long homemade granny dresses, six-cup yogurt maker, Tim Hardin records, and other reminders of that decade. Did we really live off the power and water grid? Did we really bathe at a nearby lake? Did we really meet regularly for a Women's Consciousness

Raising Group? Yes, we did – and it was a glorious time.

I recently met another social work professor, and in the course of conversation we touched upon young people attracted to laid-back communities. I mentioned that I understood that impulse; I too had lived on a commune in the '70s. "Which one?" she asked, "I lived on The Farm for a while!" This began a cascade of reminiscences, both over lunch and for days afterwards. I began to wonder: how many of us in social work and social work education were rural communards at some point, and how does that experience shape (or not) our orientation to practice and teaching? My guess is that there are more than a few of us, and that above all, the commune experience, if it was a good one, has reinforced our progressive worldview and communitarian values.

These values seem to me to be at the heart of social work. When I teach social work history, we learn all about the Elizabethan Poor Laws, Speenhamland, outdoor and indoor relief, scientific charity, and modern social welfare policies. But the text we use (Trattner's *From Poor Law to Welfare State* 1999), is also, fundamentally, about values. Have we absorbed the Hobbesian philosophy that people must be controlled to govern their

natural greed and urge to fight? Then we will hardly trust that people could agree to live cooperatively without strife over possessions and without a strong military/political leader. Do we think human nature is essentially lazy, perhaps grasping? Then we will surely believe, as some entering students do, in the principle of 'less eligibility' (that public aid must always be less than the poorest paying job). I believe that long before the public can support policies that provide universal health or child care, or even non-stigmatizing aid, the public needs to feel the values of trust and compassion. It is easy for conservative politicians and pundits (and so clear in recent presidential elections) to find some examples of welfare abuse and use those in a cynical way to condemn the whole progressive social agenda. But when you have seen the good in human nature, *especially* at a community level, you know that that cynicism, and the suspicious, withholding, anti-poor agenda flowing from it, is wrong.

Our commune was located in the rolling farm country in South Central New York State. The college town of Ithaca formed the hub that brought all of us together; many residents of the commune were artists or craftsmen (yes, all male at that time!); others were friends of friends. My husband and I knew the potter on the farm from our Cornell days. He had moved to the commune after graduate school and had been there several years, while we had been holding down jobs in New Orleans, saving our two salaries, and dreaming of getting out to the country. We had eagerly scanned the ads at the back of *Mother Earth News* each month, waiting for the right combination of enough savings and a compatible commune opportunity before we made our escape from the city. Our first stop, found in those ads, turned out to be less a commune than a rural landlord-tenant situation. It was there the potter visited us and suggested we come back to New York State and visit a real commune – one made up of

people roughly the same age (somewhere in their twenties) and roughly compatible (back-to-earth, politically liberal, artistic, hippies). We packed our few belongings into the car, said our goodbyes, and headed for the rolling hills south of Ithaca.

The commune had been running for three years before we arrived and comprised 180 acres of hilltop land. It was an extraordinary place. You drove up the rough dirt road that left the paved road down at the dairy farm below and began an ascent through sugar maples, open meadows, and old orchards. You could see the main dining/living cabin long before you arrived at the grassy parking area, and as you parked you might spot a round yurt or two through the trees. There was no electricity and no water on the land, but there was gas. My husband and I had been using only a Coleman stove and lantern for weeks, so we found it a luxury to have a dining room heated and lit by propane. There was even music, powered by car batteries that were rotated in and out of the commune pickup truck. So cooking was easy, but refrigeration was hard. Luckily it was cool inside the cabin even in the heat of summer. Luckily also the commune was completely meatless. Perhaps the biggest challenge was water. Because the commune was at the top of a hill, it was impossible to install a straightforward hand pump, or that would have been done long ago. We relied on the farmer down the road for water. What a gift that was, one almost impossible to repay!

I was telling someone about the commune recently, and she asked: 'How did you pay for it – who were you renting from?' A valid question, and a valid assumption that we young rebels would have just been scraping enough money together to meet a modest rental. But actually there was a simple but sophisticated ownership structure to the commune, which was buying the land. The founding members of the commune had provided the down payment. Each new

person or couple arriving was expected to find a way to contribute, though there were absolutely no rules about that, or about how much should be given. Everyone paid what they could to the communal checking account; checks were disbursed, after the basic necessities of the mortgage, propane, and food were met, according to need. So it was actually rather communist—in a theoretical sense—from each according to his or her abilities/to each according to his or her needs (though not what communism had become in the 20th century).

But any group living together must work out a way to keep going that seems fair. It turns out doing dishes was the only chore we assigned. We used and stacked up dishes until they were all dirty, and then did them all at once. Since our potter made the dishes, there was a huge supply—the stack could number in the 50s or 60s by the time the supply ran out. So no one ever *volunteered* to do dishes—this task was strictly rotated!

In contrast, dinner at the commune worked in a beautiful and mysterious way. The tradition was that someone would have an inspiration around 4 p.m. about what to cook and then ring the bell briefly. That was a signal for a few helpers to show up to cut and stir and knead. A longer bell peal announced that food was on the table. Unlike the dreaded dish-doing, dinner was never routinized; there was no schedule. It was completely up to each person when and how often he/she wished to be the head chef, the *sous chef*, or merely the diner.

This issue of assigning chores, or just letting them flow, is at the heart of communal living decisions (and indeed related to values about human nature and whether people will work, if not forced to by hardship). What did other communes do to keep themselves fed and clean? While the literature on communes is sparse, as we will see, one sociologist who spent some time doing field work with West Coast communities during the late '60s and

early '70s asked the same question (Zicklin, 1983). His chapters on work and on economics were fascinating to me, because it appears that, like our group, the commune ideal was to have no hard and fast rules on this subject. Did commune dwellers sometimes take advantage and loaf? Yes. How much did that bother the others? It depends on what you considered work and whether you actually found work to be fun. One quote from a satisfied communard could have come from our commune (except for our schedule around doing dishes):

The sharing of work and responsibilities has come to us with surprising lack of hassle. We have no schedules, rotations, assignments, rules, etc. — it's all voluntaristic and it all gets done. Everyone is pitching in, working hard, not working hard... And, as the whole work-play distinction tends to blur, strikingly much of the work is a joy! (p. 120)

Zicklin (1983) also found that the communes with the most "affective ties" and therefore the most solidarity had the fewest money problems. Not that any communes he studied were rich—they weren't founded to make money. But some money flowed in from outside jobs, crafts, or cottage industries like bee-keeping or candle factories. And expenses tended to be very low. Communards certainly felt no need to have the biggest, best, or newest of anything, in pointed contrast to their parents' generation and subsequent generations. Given the emphasis on individualism and consumption in the rest of the world, Zicklin seems surprised that "it is all the more interesting to note that so little conflict is in fact attributable to economic and financial issues in our sample communes" (p. 150). I find it interesting when I teach the history of social welfare that the doctrine of

"less eligibility" has such a logical sound to it. Many students will agree at first that people would not work if they could get a handout that would cover the necessities of life. Yet the evidence shows, both in society and in the studies of communes, that most people actually want to and will work. And I like Zicklin's phrase affective ties—I think the more we can promote affective ties across diverse groups in our society, the more willing we will be to support those groups during times of illness or loss that make work impossible.

We developed strong affective ties—so much so that I used to dream of the commune after I left. We had such a variety of people that staying within the commune for a social life would have almost been enough. We spanned White ethnicities and religions, from Italian Catholic to Greek to Jewish to Anglo-Saxon Protestant. We had college graduates and college dropouts—in sociology, psychology, civil engineering, art. Most people had some connection to Cornell and Ithaca, though we were almost closer to Binghamton. New York City was never far away, either in space or in our thoughts. At least three people were from Brooklyn, Queens, or Staten Island. People's parents or siblings would drive up from New York for the day or weekend (depending on their age, attitude towards outhouses, and comfort with sleeping bags in a loft). We took the *New York Times*. So we were not cut off.

The women met for a consciousness raising group. We would make dinner, brew tea in the heavy pottery mugs, and settle long discussions of life and love. When I look back now, I can see just how similar our roles were to women of the prior century: we spent a fair amount of time gardening, canning, cooking, baking, heating water on the stove, cleaning clothes by hand, and so on.

The issue of gender is never far from any consideration of commune living. In the absence of modern conveniences everyone is going to have to work, and gender is likely

to play a part in the kind of work chosen. This was true whether the commune consisted of six or of six hundred members. Agnew's (2004) reflection on communes points out that while there were approximately one million young people living in communes during the 1970s, there were another three to four million living close to the land in smaller homesteads of two to three couples. Her book is a memoir of one such venture in rural Maine. She had all the drawbacks of rural, waterless, electric-powerless living, but without the spirit and heart of a commune to make it more bearable. She and her husband moved in to their new cabin in deep snow, and from then on rarely got warm or had enough to eat. She finally could not take any more "not so genteel poverty" or cold, and moved south to become a writer and English professor. She was not happy that the women in these '70s back-to-the-land ventures did most of the interior cleaning, cooking, and washing, while the men (in her book) did construction and wood chopping.

Most commune women I knew did not perceive any major problems in the balance of power between genders—just as work "flowed" and tended to get done, people went with their strengths, whether those were physical, social, artistic, or practical. But was that part of the trend found by Martin and Fuller (2004) in their analysis of power and equality in intentional communities: that women were more likely than men to report that the group was egalitarian even if other measures showed that it was not? Miller (1999) also explored the issue of gendered work on communes, and concluded:

The fact that communes did not perfectly liberate women did not mean that communes were invariably no better than the large society on gender issues. The simple fact that many women lived in close proximity made communes an easy place for

women's groups to develop, and consciousness raising among women (and sometimes men) was thus widespread. (p. 213)

We faced several fires involving the wooden yurt structures and the simple wood stoves, but otherwise we lived a safe life. One time state troopers had found a car deserted at the bottom of the hill, between our place and the dairy farmer, and traced the car to a burglary in Binghamton. They had to drive up to see if we were involved, but it didn't take long to clear us of the crime. Whatever they may have imagined about us, we were very peaceful and made income the old-fashioned way: with direct sales.

The core group of communards, including the two with checkbook signing privileges/responsibilities, were talented craftsmen beginning to build a reputation at state crafts fairs and beginning to make some income. There was a potter, whose thin porcelain clay bowls and light celadon green glazes were becoming famous in the area. There was a jeweler making amazing, tiny, replicas of carousels. There was the woodworker, turning out multi-hued chopping boards. The rest of us helped staff craft booths at fairs and festivals all over New York State. After the fairs each artist would put money into the bank account.

Deciding how to spend the money was a study in a New England town meeting (at least in my understanding of early town meetings). We sat around the table and made a case for each optional item. Did the main cabin need furniture? Could we make it ourselves? Had we exhausted the consignment shops? Did the potter need a new kiln? How much more pottery would he be able to fire, and did that mean the kiln would pay for itself soon anyway? Did someone's individual yurt need a roof – was it leaking, could it hold out another year with just caulk? When would we ever have enough to hire a company to

come put in the two-stage hand pump to give the commune water? All things were discussed; these are the ones I remember most. I thought each was a great discussion. From my point of view, each idea was laid out, the evidence presented, and then the prioritizing began. We looked to reach consensus, not take a majority vote. So we kept talking until everyone saw things the same way. The potter really did need a kiln, and we really could and did caulk that one yurt roof to extend its life one more season. Just once a new (very young) resident ran out of the meeting close to tears. When I went outside and sat with her later, she said she didn't see why we had to argue like that about money – that we were all children of the spirit (I am definitely paraphrasing here) and that we should get along. How amazingly different our perceptions! Having been around people who *really* argued, I found the commune round-table discussions beautifully harmonious. Boisterous? Yes. People interrupting each other to advocate for their cause? Yes. But full of good spirit and respect, and finally reaching the only possible solutions, given our financial picture? Yes!

Our time at the commune came to an end for purely pragmatic reasons: my husband and I ran through our savings and needed to get jobs. Winter came and brought cold rains to our tent in the woods. We left and rejoined the wage society, remembering our friends at the commune with feelings of love and loyalty. Three years later the commune came to an end as well. Like us, people needed to move and get different jobs, different training. We heard from our friend the potter that the proceeds of the sale of the land were divided up among those who had lived there longest and contributed the most. It sounded eminently fair to us. I have recently found five of the founding commune members. Some continued to thrive as artists/craftsmen; the woodworker became a professor of English, his partner an advocate for accessible public transportation.

So what remains of the commune spirit in 2005? Given how little I ever talked about my earlier experience, especially not with my social work colleagues, I had to do some research and reflection on this. I have my memories of commune life, but did my experience there inform my eventual move into social work? I haven't been able to find much about social workers and 20th century commune life, but my research opened up a few doors that may point to a link. Amazingly, or perhaps not given the vaguely old-fashioned or even disreputable air about communes, there are only a handful of books on commune living, whether scholarly investigations or personal accounts.

There is even less on communes or intentional communities in the social work literature. There are only four articles with commune as a keyword in *Social Work Abstracts*; three are about communes in China, and one is about communing with nature on a rafting trip. There were two that involved intentional communities, but one covered Alcoholics Anonymous and the other a traditional religious community. The psychology and sociology journals contain many more references, examining issues such as family structure, gender roles, parenting, and motivation to live on a commune.

Occasionally, the scholarly impetus to examine commune life seemed linked to an interest in the sexual mores of the times. Rubin's (2001) review of "alternative lifestyles" in the *Journal of Family Issues*, for example, seemed to include communes just as a possible source of these open relationships. In the works he reviewed, however, there were no links between communes and swinging or group marriages. In fact, it was hard to see why the word communes had been put in the title at all as it had so little fit with the other two terms (swingers and group marriages)!

The misconception that communes were "hotbeds of deviant behavior, rife with drug

use, unrestrained sexuality, and seditious political activity," to quote Aidala and Zablocki (1991, p. 105), was so common that the urban communards they studied would use the words collective or community instead of commune. It was actually refreshing to read their article, which showed that, contrary to stereotypes, activities such as drug use, sexual experimentation, participation in riots/demonstrations, and police arrests actually decreased after joining a commune. Commune dwellers, however, were more likely to have practiced yoga, participated in an encounter group, or been in a demonstration than others in their cohort (all considered "novel, nonnormative behaviors," [!] p. 105). There were some demographic differences between their commune sample and others in their age cohort, but less than predicted. Young people on communes were almost all White, most were from intact families, a higher percentage than predicted were Jewish (non-practicing), and 48 percent were from the middle class (similar to the 46 percent middle class in the national sample). While both commune members and their parents tended to have more education than the national sample, they were not from high status, high power professions, but usually from the "knowledge" occupations (teachers, nurses, musicians, artists, and social workers). Aidala and Zablocki were most interested in why people joined and whether it was because of alienation from society. They found that commune dwellers were actually *less* alienated and that their reasons for joining were more a search for a meaningful life and to bond with "others who agreed about important values and goals" (p. 111) than a rejection of the rest of the world. The authors point out that communes are common during periods of vast social shift, and the shift that occurred in the lifetime of the 1970s commune members was that from industrial to post-industrial society.

For a more classic sociological study of communes I turned to Zicklin's 1983 book on the counterculture. He traced the impulse to move to a commune to a "new naturalism," which included a belief in environmental purity, rejection of mass industrial society, and rejection of social conventions. In his view, the commune:

...erodes societally established boundaries between people. It is a rebuke to the capitalist, bureaucratic order of the larger society, for it places foremost importance on personal relationships, and it emphasizes trust, cooperation and shared concern rather than isolation, private gain and the application of impersonal procedures. It shows not only that the circle of the self can be extended, for this is accomplished outside communes in good friendships, but also that people can trust one another to the point of creating a common way of life. (p. 159)

He suggests that communards believed in the oneness of being and that they wanted their lives to be "expressive," in sharp contrast to the conformist, uptight lives of the rest of society. He marveled at the way communes could achieve solidarity without elaborate rules, explicit management, or penalties for leaving.

Zicklin (1983) was right that communes were not about money, and yet they were more than just an expression of the counterculture, which was his thesis. Miller, whose comprehensive 1999 exploration of communes developed from his scholarship on religion and utopian communities, goes beyond the surface of the counterculture and the '60s to trace the historical antecedents of communes. I wasn't surprised to see that some of the idealism and anti-materialism that was

so clear in our commune had roots back to the Transcendentalists and, after them, to back-to-the-land romanticism and progressive socialism. Miller points out that even the hippie movement, far from being unique or ahistorical, had roots in the bohemian 1950s, the health food movement, pacifism, and earlier spiritual movements: "The yearning for personal growth and fulfillment rather than for conventional social achievement that characterized the 1960s outlook reflects a central force in many historic American communes" (p. 7). He acknowledges the many types of communes: spiritual, environmental, arts and crafts, reformer/radical—as well as other inspirations: forming a new type of family ties (perhaps closer than the biological ones), and the wish to see land left open, the way the American Indians had done, not subdivided into individual plots.

One thing I am very sure of from commune life is how good and decent people are. The core of the commune experience, and why it has never left me even though I left it, was the way we meshed as a group. We had been brought together by so many different impulses, and most people arriving, like us, knew only one other person. How did we live together in harmony when there were no written rules, no homeowner's association dues or condominium declarations? What a joy to live and share and be inter-dependent with other like-minded people. And how bitter to have to deal with neighbors or homeowners' associations if you are not with like-minded people. Did certain types gravitate to the communes, or was it the magic and beauty of the commune life itself? Would some of the bitter people I've met later in life in a homeowners' association have been different on a commune? And could those of us who lived in harmony then do it again with the same people? Further research is needed!

Further research is probably also needed on the link between social work as a profession and the experience of commune or intentional community life. Aidala and Zablocki (1991) found that their urban commune participants had a higher proportion of social workers, or who had parents who were social workers, than in the general public. But my guess is that commune dwellers with no prior tie to social work may have also gravitated to this profession, as I have. The link in my case is not direct; I spent ten years after leaving the commune working a series of unrelated jobs. And my reasons for entering social work were fairly "clinical" rather than "community." Someone I admired very much was a licensed clinical social worker and she encouraged me to look into it. It is only through teaching social work history, and really appreciating the energy our profession has put into trying simultaneously to help individuals and families through life stresses and to bring about a more equitable distribution of resources, that I have linked my commune experience to my work as a social worker and social work professor.

Most of us in social work education have some kind of art or quote up on our office doors. Mine is from Jane Addams (1911):

*The good we secure for ourselves is
precarious and uncertain...
until it is secured for all of us and
incorporated into our common life.*

I have liked that sentiment from the moment I saw it. And after reading the full work from which that quote is taken (originally written in 1894 and republished as part of *Twenty Years of Hull House* in 1911), I am reminded of Aidala and Zablocki's (1991) observation that this kind of idealism and longing for a communal life springs up at each major transition, from agrarian to industrial society, and again from industrial to post-industrial. Addams lived during the transition

from farms to industry, and had the misfortune, during a few years of deep depression at any rate, to be born a woman in a society where well-off women of her background were expected to prepare themselves for a life of the mind and culture and then to resign themselves to a life of household anonymity and service. Her writing on the "subjective necessity for social settlements," and in the earlier chapters in the book, shows clearly that the settlement houses did at least as much for their residents as they did for the surrounding poor neighborhoods: they gave the settlement house participants a chance to channel their hopes, their vitality, and their altruism into a greater civic good.

I think some of the urban communes of the 1960s and 1970s were much closer to the settlement houses than my rural commune was; I know urban communes that got involved in neighborhood issues, in the welfare rights movement, in early recycling projects. But I can identify with what Addams called 'the snare of preparation.' In her case she referred to the fact that women were educated for a life they were not allowed to enter. In the case of my generation, we were educated for a life that was changed completely by the sad truths of our country's involvement in Vietnam, the covert but steady backlash against the radical movements of the '60s, as well as the larger economic transitions. No wonder some of that generation took a time out to explore what might be possible if we envisioned a different form of community. It wasn't until I was introduced to social work that I found a profession that fit so thoroughly with my ideals, a profession that acknowledges both our duty and our joy in working with others for the common good.

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Marian C. Bussey, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at the University of Denver, Graduate School of Social Work. Comments regarding this article can be sent to: mbussey@du.edu.



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