

Pragmatic Utopias ♦ A People-Skills Survival Kit

IN CONTEXT

A QUARTERLY OF HUMANE SUSTAINABLE CULTURE

ECO-VILLAGES
Sustainable Communities
Around the World



THE JOY OF COMMUNITY
M. Scott Peck



THE FARM,
TWENTY YEARS LATER
Albert Bates



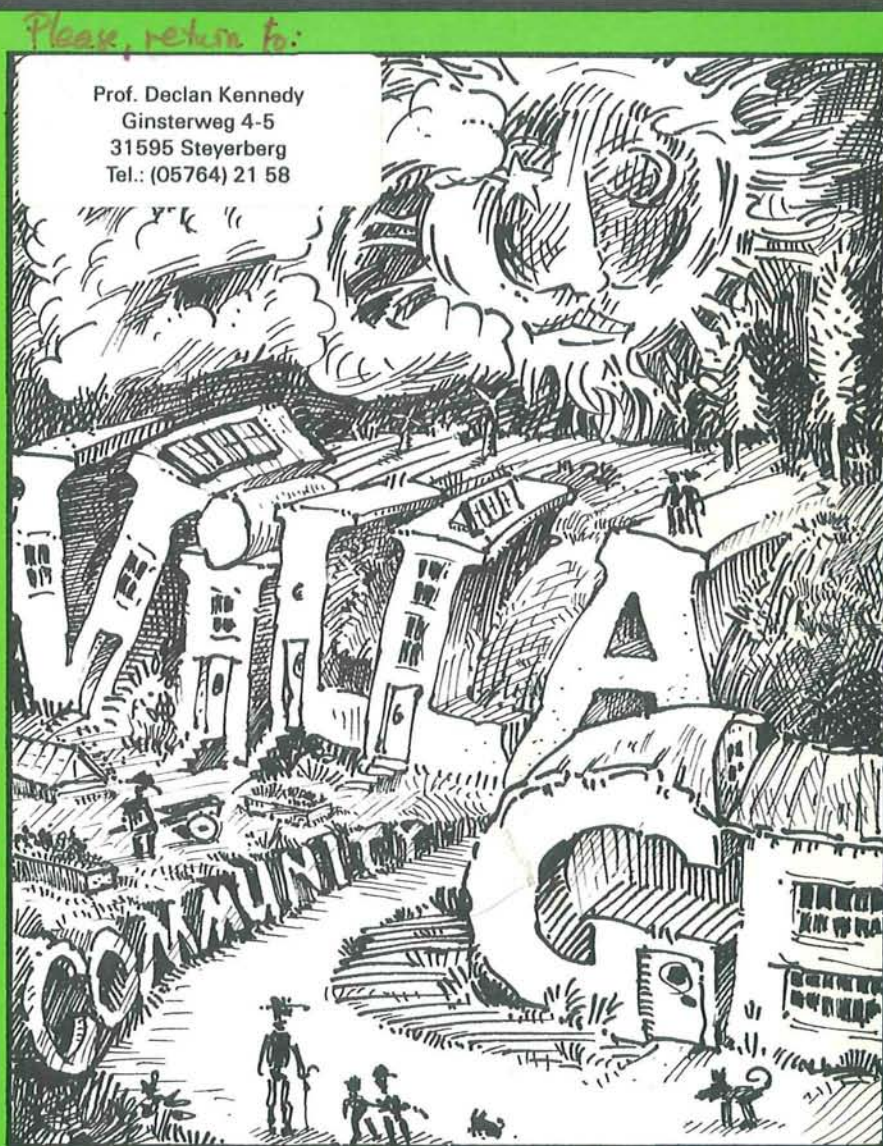
BUILDING HEAVEN
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LIVING TOGETHER
Sustainable Community Development

STEYERBERG: AN EXPERIMENT IN TOLERANCE

*This alternative community in Germany also experiments with
permaculture, solar cars, and how to run a fun meeting*

an Interview with Declan Kennedy, by Diane and Robert Gilman

Declan Kennedy is an Irishman, an architect, a permaculturist, a dancer, a former president of the International Simulation and Gaming Association – and a lover of life. As founder of the Permaculture Institute of Europe, Declan has helped to bring permaculture concepts into urban planning and community design. He is also currently the Germany country coordinator for the Global Action Plan (see IC #26). Here he describes life in *Lebensgarten Steyerberg*, an alternative eco-community near Hanover that used to be the housing for a Nazi munitions factory. Contact Declan at Ginsterweg 4, D-3074 Steyerberg, Germany.

Diane: *How does leadership function at Steyerberg? How are decisions made?*

Declan: Leadership is almost a dirty word. That may be putting it too strongly, but people within the community don't want anybody "leading." At first we just wanted to make decisions together, and then we decided that what we really wanted was *consensus*.

This took a hell of a lot of time, because we were so used to committee meetings, where people just vote things up or down. When we began to work with consensus, there was always a minority of people who had been living previously with something they couldn't say yes to, and this kept pulling us down. But we just went on discussing and discussing until we got to a decision we could *all* live with. Maybe it wasn't perfect, but we could live with it.

We began to move more toward a model of *trust* rather than leadership. You trust somebody in a particular area to do the right thing, and you might even delegate them to do it. We also used the "focalizer" idea from Findhorn [an alternative spiritual community in Scotland], but instead of having one person designated to "focalize" the work, we used a little group of three. They defi-

nately had a leadership role for a particular task – say, renovating the kitchen – and they would get ideas from other people and then make the final decision, since they were the people actually organizing the work.

There were also the people who would say, for instance, "Let's start our own co-op." The community would come back with "Great idea! Why don't you start it?" "Oh no, I don't want to start it on my own," they would say. "Who else would like to work on this with me?" Soon there would be a group of two or three involved.

Diane: *What about disputes? How are they handled?*

Declan: Disputes come up often, obviously, and we try to make them "public" within our group. That's why our Wednesday Meeting is a very sacred thing – we don't have visitors, so that people can open up and say things like "I just don't like the way you are doing that." Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. We have noticed it has a lot to do with the number of people who happen to be in the meeting.

Diane: *The fewer people, the easier to handle?*

Declan: Definitely. Also, we do the meeting differently all the time, to keep it from getting formalized. One or two people run it for a month, any way they wish. Then it changes over to somebody else. Sometimes it isn't really a meeting – it's just fun and laughing and jokes, maybe even dancing! And sometimes it is very serious.

Diane: *So through this process have you been able to handle the majority of the disputes?*

Declan: Except for disputes that are of a very personal, perhaps even sexual nature. Then we ask the individuals if they want support to work it out, and fix another meeting time for that.

Or they might pick out a few people and say, "Can you help us out? We're having a rough time and need to talk to somebody." So it is very flexible, the way things work here.

Diane: *How does the community get its food? Are you a permaculture community?*

Declan: No, not really, though we have a Permaculture Institute and some permaculture gardens. Some people were scared of permaculture – they thought it was too much for them, or that it was "eco-fascism." But people are concerned with taking care of nature – that is very much within all of us here.

We have four row houses, very tightly joined together, with very small organic gardens. But nobody tries to support themselves from gardening, because it is awfully difficult on our very sandy soil.

Two years ago a group rented a piece of land about three miles away and grew a lot of the vegetables for the community. They were supported by the community, and others would help with weeding and things like that. But then they figured out that their hourly wage was about a quarter of what you would otherwise pay somebody, and the motivation decreased.

I took over the plot and started moving it in a permaculture direction, and now it is coming back. It was too much for me alone, so I got a group of young people to help me, and that started a new system within the community. This group is now suggesting that there be individual garden allotments for community people, done in a permaculture way. That's a funny thing – lots of people here *do* permaculture without calling it that.

Robert: *What other ecological values are expressed in the community? Is there anything special about the way that the community handles its energy needs, for example?*

Declan: Yes, though our members might not even believe it themselves – but if they looked at other settlements around here, they would see quite a difference. There is a learning process going on here, but we don't realize it until we go somewhere else. We are very conscious about saving energy, especially electricity. Someone who never said anything about energy before will suddenly say, "Let's put a door closer on the back door, because it opens 20 times a day and wastes energy." Awareness just builds slowly.

We have done a lot with passive solar design in our buildings. And we have our own solar car and a "solar filling station," which is a battery

of photovoltaic cells on the roof of the main buildings that we use to recharge the car's batteries. It belongs to the community – you can take it whenever you need it, and you plug it in when you get back.

Diane: *What holds the community together?*

Declan: Our three goals are peace, creativity, and tolerance. Not just religious tolerance, but also just tolerating that some people do things completely different than I do. This gives a richness that is fantastic.

Robert: *What do people do for work?*

Declan: About a third are working outside the community. Another third are retired, on social security, or disabled. But we were quite amazed that so many – about another third – were able to work within the community itself. Some work on the seminars we offer. There are seven in the Permaculture Institute. And there are a lot of healers here – everything from mechanical healers to paramedics to spiritual healers.

Robert: *What about ownership? How were the buildings paid for?*

Declan: The whole thing was bought by two brothers who received an inheritance. They were originally going to make a holiday camp out of it, but they found out there was no attraction here for a holiday camp. Then one of them got to know Findhorn, and he decided that was the sort of thing he would like to do. The brothers still own roughly two-thirds of the land and the buildings, and a third they sold to members. The rest is being rented to members.

As a result, we have a terrific social spectrum here. We have one woman who says she's a millionaire. She's 72, and joined because she just liked the flavor of the spiritual things happening here and wanted to live in a more loving way with people. There are some who are on medical disability. Then there's a couple who have been on social security since they arrived. They have four children, and I don't think he ever intends to work, but that is accepted as well.

The other day, when the social worker came up from the village, she told us that we were below average in terms of the number of people living on social security or "on the dole," compared to the rest of the municipality. We felt good about that – we're not mooching off of anybody.

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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF WOODBURN HILL FARM

I lived for almost eight years in a converted chicken coop. But my experience at Woodburn Hill Farm in St. Mary's County, Maryland, while unusual, was not unique. Many rural intentional communities were born in the "back-to-the-land" movement of the 1970s. Some flourished, most died. Our group survived on a 128-acre formerly Amish farm because seven middle-class, thirty-to-forty-something folks and their children were too damn stubborn to give up on their dreams.

Many of us were agricultural amateurs, but Sylvia, who had taken numerous courses in organic gardening, honed our cultivation techniques. With her instruction, we proved the wisdom of an ancient Hindu proverb: If there is enough manure, even an idiot will be a successful farmer.

All the physical work at Woodburn Hill was, as much as possible, non-sexist. Women and men stretched to learn a variety of new tasks, and we worked hard and played hard. I'll never forget Ann Maureen's comment as she stood straddling a water pipe: "Here at Woodburn Hill Farm, our love and energy are exceeded only by our naiveté."

We tried to "live lightly" at Woodburn Hill. We challenged ourselves to live as "close to the ground" as possible. We felt substance and direction in the old Shaker hymn: "'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free, 'tis a gift to come down where you want to be."

In our heyday, a friend called the Farm a "child-rearing cooperative." Although I never fathered a child, I was blessed with the chance to help raise the children. In varying degrees, those kids adopted all the adults as parents. I remember the time Jon answered the phone, and the caller, who was selling something, asked to speak to his father. Jon replied, "Which one?"

Yet our numbers dwindled as families moved, and children graduated from high school. Four years ago, the Farm nearly died.

We three survivors finally had the sense to invite our friends to join us in ownership. Twenty-two did, and now a renewed Woodburn Hill Farm is building new visions of a creative community dedicated to healing.

Guess I've got to get up on the roof to patch the leak in this old chicken coop.

— Frank Fox

Frank Fox is a freelance writer and communitarian living in Mechanicsville, Maryland.

Diane: *So each person is responsible for his or her own finances?*

Declan: Oh yes. That is an important part of our philosophy. If you are concerned with creativity, then you have to be responsible for everything. If there is anything keeping us together, it is the theory that we are all responsible for our own lives. It is not a communal economy. If you come here to live, you have to figure out how you're going to do it.

Robert: *What are some of the more difficult challenges the community has had to face?*

Declan: We've had disputes over whether to engage in protest politics, what kind of nutrition is best, and even the details of our renovation plans. We've worked them all out.

At the moment, there is again a movement in Germany towards free sexuality, started and supported by a group called MIGA. We have several people in our community who are involved with MIGA, and the challenge that came up over the last six months was a dichotomy between people who were supposedly "sexually free" and other people who were just "spiritual." This brought up a lot of discussion, and we have had a lot of meetings as a community because of this. It has been a very good period as well, because it has made us get things clear — but a couple of MIGA people moved out feeling embittered.

Diane: *Did they want the rest of the community to conform to their group's norms?*

Declan: Yes. They said, "You're all being too monogamous! You should be coming to my place!" They were really brash about it. Again, it all comes down to tolerance.

Robert: *What are some of the most valuable things you've learned living at Steyerberg?*

Declan: Our greatest strength is that we have managed to get a social system going here in a small way which can be a model for the rest of the society. We've learned that you really have to look in the mirror. If problems come up, it is mostly the problem within you, in trusting the other person. You just cannot run away from it.

So you talk about it, and confront it. You open up about it to the other person or group, and in doing that you've taken the first step toward the solution. And the solution comes. Through discussion and through looking within yourself, you find where the real problem is — if there is one at all. It just keeps coming back to you, yourself. ▲