

Living Lightly

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Lebensgarten

BY DECLAN KENNEDY

When a family from Berlin bought a settlement which had been originally planned and built in 1939 as housing quarters for an ammunition factory, they intended to transform it into a holiday resort. But then – inspired by the example of the Findhorn Foundation in Scotland, and with the help of six other founding members – they decided to initiate a spiritual and ecological centre instead.

Lebensgarten is situated 3km outside the village of Steyerberg in Germany. The housing area has 65 row houses and various community buildings. After the war, it was used as a barracks by the British army before it stood empty for almost eight years.

Within three years of the purchase, all the houses had been either bought or rented by people interested in participating in this ecological and spiritual experiment. By January 1999, there were over 150 people in the community – of different ages, social and professional backgrounds, with different religions, motivations and objectives.

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The most important "spiritual" maxim which has made it possible for people to live together in Lebensgarten Steyerberg is the perception that the world is our mirror. The difficulties we have with other people (or other physical, economic or social structures) always represent the difficulties which we have to overcome within ourselves. We are not victims, but fellow-creators of our own lives. With this, we assume the full responsibility for everything we do and experience. The community demonstrates to everyone, indeed to each individual, that change starts within one's-self and – this is consoling – that everyone is experiencing similar difficulties in the process of change. It is substantially easier to work on such factors together than alone or in isolation – whether it is in an urban or rural environment.

This work on ourselves and with the group has taken at least as much time and energy, up to now, as the work on the ecological renewal which, by the way, is only one of many different projects within the Lebensgarten community. There is a relatively large group who are practising and teaching alternative healing methods. Another group produces arts and crafts. Some have started to give music therapy and others organise and hold courses on subjects ranging from encounter groups to permaculture and practical environmental projects.

Continually we are asked how the individuals and families earn their money in Lebensgarten. There are as



many answers to this question as persons who live there. Some have created their own work, others have found jobs outside. Some individuals can carry out their freelance profession anywhere, others keep their necks above water by drawing unemployment benefits. There are old age pensioners, people living from savings for a transitory period until something else crops up, and a few who have come in for an inheritance and are making a completely new start. Almost all have to stand on two legs – earning money as well as doing that which they enjoy most (but for which they more often receive little or no remuneration). Some have managed to combine the two.

A couple run a co-operative "shop" on a part-time basis. Two members make jewellery, one man has started a bookstore, and another has a shop for selling biological building materials. Three of the members bake three times a week, for the needs of the community. There is a school of mediation which offers professional training in conflict resolution. It has now been decided to offer this training in English as well as German, with the first of these 21 day courses taking place from Friday June 11, 1999, to Friday July 2, 1999.

Talking and acting with each other in such a way that the conflict opponent becomes a co-operating conflict partner means identifying the tensions and conflicts that are present, naming them, developing them in a dialogue so as to be able to mediate – which means that solid structures and unproductive confrontations have to be released. Mediation as an important method in conflict management then becomes an alternative to heavy personal disagreements, to legal controversies and to complicated, political, decision-making procedures.

Courts and reconciliation work tend to pronounce one party as being right, while the other has to pay a fine or do some sort of retribution. Lebensgarten mediation pronounces the idea that "it takes two to tango" – in most cases, both sides have some fault, or have at least spurred on the conflict. If we really want to achieve a lasting peace between formerly conflicting parties – and this applies to conflicting countries and races too – we have to drop the idea of "winners and losers" and strive for a win-win solution. Only in this way can life go on peacefully in an eco-village or in the world, and make a lasting contribution to peace at large.

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