

EcoVillage Network of the Americas

## Living at the Ecovillage Crossroads

by *Tami Brunk* 2480 words

I can't say I wasn't warned.

“The world will arrive at your doorstep,” I was told when I told her I'd taken a five-month job as Innkeeper at the Ecovillage Training Center (ETC) at The Farm in Tennessee. Two months have passed since my arrival. I feel at times as if I've landed at the apex of a universal shift in consciousness. I get to open the door, fix breakfast, and make the beds for change-agents from all corners of the world who teach and learn about natural building, ecovillage design, permaculture, and solar energy systems. When the dust clears after a workshop, I'm focused once more on the basics: feeding the ducks and chickens, watering the greenhouse, turning the 17 duck eggs in the incubator.

The Ecovillage Training Center was founded by Albert Bates in 1994. Its purpose was to promote technologies and light-living strategies people at The Farm and pioneering “green” communities across the globe which have been developing for the past 30 years. The ETC promotes small-scale, low-tech, community-based solutions to large-scale global problems in an age where “magic bullet,” one-size-fits-all remedies have proven their limitations. Thumb through an assortment of recent magazines or listen to NPR and you'll see that environmental concerns—peak oil and global climate change in particular—are now hitting the mainstream with a fervor last seen in the early 1970s. People are waking up. Again.

I'd never visited a “real” ecovillage before my arrival at The Farm. Somewhere in the back of my mind I hoped that when I entered the gate I'd be transported into a cartoon version of a utopian society complete with wind generators, bountiful orchards, and happy, naked children dancing in fields of organic strawberries. What greeted me instead were horses, open fields, and old standard “stick-built” houses—hardly a change from the scene outside. When I pulled into

the driveway of my new home at “YoUR Inn at The Farm, I first noticed all the clutter. The broken-down truck and two dilapidated buses along the drive into the ETC parking lot; rain-soaked laminated signs littering the lawn, piles of cardboard boxes in various states of decomposition. I grew up in working class, rural Missouri and to me this all looked suspiciously familiar.

Those of us who want to be bridge-builders between alternative systems and the mainstream often scan visionary projects with a critical eye, hoping the image projected will be one “outsiders” will understand. We’re intimately familiar with all the stereotypes the mainstream projects onto the counter-culture and want to be able to surprise the people we’re reporting back to with the sharp strategy and purposefulness of the projects and individuals we’re trying to translate for. The ETC though, and The Farm itself, demands that visitors dig a little deeper, beyond first appearances. Once we do we find layer upon layer of deep, loamy experience and wisdom, built upon years of experimentation, action, and reflection.

That first night, my wariness melted as soon as I walked down the hill toward the creek and discovered a sinuous cob-and-straw-bale castle-building with enormous round doors and a dragon design along the side. On the way I’d also passed a fanciful cob chicken house decorated with colored glass bottles and tiles. Both of these buildings had rounded walls and living roofs covered with moss and grasses. A cacophony of frog song erupted from the creek below and the graywater ponds. As a biologist, troubled by reports of dwindling amphibian populations worldwide, the racket was proof that this forest was healthy, and full of life.

The Inn was built in the late 1970s from all recycled materials. At one time nearly 50 people lived here at once and the interior still retains its 70s decor with kitschy paintings, homemade artwork and collages. The Inn was expanded and retrofitted over the past few years with 16 solar panels on the roof. These provide much of our energy needs including our two large refrigerators, most of our lighting, electricity for computer use, the TV and VCR. We’re hooked up to the grid, too, mostly as a backup. Our water is heated by the solar tanks on the roof, heating time reduced by a “flash” propane heater. Our graywater is filtered into small ponds and a black water system is in the works. An enormous cistern at the top of the hill collects water for watering the gardens. A compost toilet sits out back. Two solar showers in the front yard, right next to the garden. A passive solar, south-facing greenhouse helps heat the house in the winter. We recycle our plastics, aluminum, paper and cardboard as well as fully composting all organic waste.

The Farm is about as seasoned an ecovillage as one might find, though few Farm folk classify it as such. Since its inception in 1971, Farm members have tried to live off their land base of 1750 acres. By the late 1970s, enormous gardens provided two-thirds of the food for a community that reached, at its peak, 1400 members. Farm enterprises like the soy dairy and Geiger counter factory as well as groundbreaking inventions like the solar car and portable concentrating photovoltaic systems sprouted up out of the fertile ground of collective dreaming and doing.

In 1983, accumulated community debt forced a changeover from the original communal economic structure, and over the next five years at least 900 Farm members left, unable or unwilling to pay the newly required, though modest, yearly membership dues. Those who stayed behind tightened their belts and strengthened existing businesses like the Soy Dairy, Farm Midwives, and Book Publishing Company. By 1988 The Farm's debt was paid.

And working here at the Inn, I've discovered that Yes, the world does arrive at our doorstep. If you called the ETC within the past two months, the voice on the other line might be attached to someone from Austria, Manitoba, Great Britain, Israel, Palestine, Cameroon, New York City, or Kentucky. In the two months since I've been here, we've hosted a two-week permaculture and natural building course, a shiitake mushroom course, and a solar design course. A steady stream of apprentices, friends, and guests have also stayed with us. Many evenings, Albert presents a mind-blowing video or slide show about peak-oil, the Global Ecovillage Network, history of The Farm, or everyone's favorite: David Blume's Alcohol DVD, in which Blume waxes eloquent on the potential for alcohol to replace petroleum as our global energy source.

The Inn acts as the heart of the ETC and has a way of humanizing everyone so that education, work experience, age, and professional accomplishments seem inconsequential. Albert models this: here at the ETC he mows the lawn, organizes an 'extreme croquet' session on Sunday afternoons and develops elaborate schemes to protect the water hyacinths in our gray-water ponds from hungry ducks. He disappears for a week to New York City. An Inn guest breaks the news to us midweek: Albert is speaking on ecovillages at the U.N.

Valerie Seitz, my fellow Innkeeper and an instructor here at the ETC, is a 30-year old green architect from Austria who recently designed an ecovillage in Holland. She could be teaching at a prestigious Dutch or Austrian University, and soon, perhaps, will be. At the Inn though she makes beds, sets the table with dogwood-tree blossoms and candles, and feeds the

ducks and chickens.

The cast of characters who come to the Inn is eclectic: a stay-at-home mom from Dallas; a filmmaker from L.A.; a Country Kitchen waitress from Bemidji, Minnesota; a broadcast journalist from Israel; a Palestinian permaculturist; a social worker and drama teacher from New York City; a Harley builder named “Turbo”; and a 40-year-old retired IT employee, to name a few. We’ve hosted engineers; architects; poets; shoemakers; backpackers; and investment bankers. I’ve been learning to let go of stereotypes for the “kind of people” interested in communal living, building a home from straw and clay, installing a PV system, or weeding an organic garden.

Lives are changed here. With only three days notice, Valerie left for China yesterday to speak at a Sustainable Cities Conference before an assembly of city planners and statesmen who plan to design a model “eco-city” within the next 15 years. She was asked to attend by a couple from the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) who used the ETC as a base to prepare their next Sustainable Cities presentation; part of a multi-year project initiated in 2004.

Time moves in a strange, viscous heave here. Everyone comments on it. It passes slowly and quickly all at the same time. Each day I make note of indoor and outdoor temperature, battery load on the solar system, rainfall. Each day when I mark the date I’m stunned to see how the days tick by like quick breaths: May 5, 6, 7. I’m not keeping up with my (substantial) family and friends outside of this place. Everything outside seems to fade into the background: precisely the fear I had in coming to an intentional community. The gate at the entrance, the fact that I don’t have my own phone line, make me feel isolated from my support system outside of the Farm.

It’s true that in community our weaknesses and strengths come through magnified. My lifelong struggle between intimacy and boundaries surfaced within the first couple of days of our “immersion” permaculture and natural building workshop, with 35 of us all living, working, and eating together. I was falling in love with everyone. The children, the mothers with their concern about the future, the apprentices, who want so much to bring something harmonious and real into the world.

Exhaustion set in on the fourth day. I was rising every morning at 5:45 to put on coffee and tea, cooking and cleaning and trying to absorb the intricate, holistic weave of permaculture philosophy and practice. As the Inn we create a family vibe: we cook and clean together, hang up laundry. And I found I needed some armor. I put on this armor and “disappeared” after people

had become used to my softness. I was learning about energy, and what I create in groups.

I've been learning that I often promise more than I can give, and that I invite others to believe I can be close to everyone all of the time. In a place like this when we host large groups, my buttons are pushed constantly, until I feel myself sinking away into the background, wishing I were an extrovert instead of this odd hybrid of introvert-extrovert with extremes in closeness and distance.

And the difficulty is that I have relationships and projects lying about in many other places, too. Abandoned projects like the abandoned buses lying in the lawn. The interview with Helena Norberg-Hodge still sitting on my laptop, half edited, the one I imagine will someday be published in *The Sun*. The CV I keep promising myself I'll put together so I can apply for a "real job" that pays at least \$30,000 a year to pay off my loans.

My attention and time is largely spent at the Inn but I've begun to connect more and more with people and organizations within the Farm community. The hidden layers rise to the surface; I visit the Soy Dairy, Mushroom People and Plenty, an international aid organization. I've discovered the veggie deli and their delicious tofu and butternut squash spring rolls, "soysage," tofu pie, barbequed gluten, and "Tempuna" spread. Yoga sessions are offered at a neighbor's house, just a minute's walk through the woods.

Each Sunday dozens meet at a clearing in the for "church"—a meditation and round of *Om*. The Farm Store is a 10-minute walk through the woods from the Inn, and sells the best dark chocolate money can buy, as well as providing a center for co-op orders and deliveries.

I'm developing a relationship with the more-than-human community, too. Yesterday, I found a family of wrens who've nested in the shop. Hannah, our apprentice from Great Britain discovered a baby Painted Box Turtle the size of my palm. This morning I see deer moving in the forest outside my bus and find a speckled kingsnake in the greenhouse. I know that wildlife here is abundant because the community values wild plants and animals. Farm values dictate that even the copperheads and ticks are "senior species" who were here before us, and have as much right to live here as we do.

Ed is our solar installation workshop instructor. A 50-something hippie from a small town near Aspen, Colorado, we share a love of the Rocky Mountain West. He joins Hannah and I on a walk up the road to the Farm school, to the "wholeo" dome that sits in front, a dome made of colored, stained glass in fantastic designs. It's past noon and the sun makes the colored glass molten, glowing. We lie on the gravel under the dome and stare up at the patterns. A bumblebee

buzzes frantically along the edges of the dome, mad to get out. We can see the gap at the bottom where green grass and sunlight meet but the bee is too busy crashing against molded lead and glass to notice.

We talk about how life unfolds differently than we think it will. Ed says he's never had a plan; he just sets achievable goals. I like that. Hannah says she wants to write novels but knows there's no making a living at it so she'll be a journalist for now. We're just quiet for a while. I feel like I could lie here forever, staring up into the DNA spirals and bubbles of clear glass and the other groovy patterns. I feel like a real hippie now, but I'm really not. I love Ed and Hannah just like I loved Murad, a Palestinian Permaculturist, a week ago. It's real and it's temporary. I'm tired of saying goodbye.

But I'm also glad to be an Innkeeper at the Ecovillage Training Center, to be learning about global energy supplies, strategies for sustainable living, and my own hidden gifts and shortcomings. I've come to appreciate the elegance of the teaching pedagogy at the ETC—partly planned and partly providential. Learning to mix cob or design a PV system is important, but not the main point. What matters most is our ability to work together with humor and patience, share our stories, and encourage each others' sometimes graceful, usually fumbling efforts to live artfully within the limits of Earths' bounty, and with each other.

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