WHAT’S NEXT? ONE EXPERIMENT WITH COMMUNITY-FOCUSED LIVING

By Laurie Cone

In a recent issue of Sierra, Naomi Klein shared how she was learning the importance of environmental and justice movements’ describing what they are wanting to create, giving form to the ‘utopia,’ rather than always fighting what they oppose. Her words made me realize I might be doing what she advises as I’m trying to better embody my deepest values in this next stage of my life. Do you know what ideal living would look like for you? As my younger son approached the end of high school, I saw a chance to make some changes, but given so many economic and ecological uncertainties, what changes would make the most sense?

I knew I wanted to lower my consumption of both natural resources and fossil fuels; I knew I wanted to be part of a close, creative, justice-oriented community; and I knew I wanted to grow most of my food, while increasing the soil’s health instead of diminishing it. But how could I reach these goals?

Several years back I’d had the unsettling realization that I wasn’t as close to my aspirations as I wanted to be. I lived in a very walkable older neighborhood—I could walk to work and the library, not to mention to excellent restaurants, bakeries and music venues. I had solar panels on my house, owned more secondhand possessions than new, had faithfully been part of community supported agriculture for years, and have been known to go through public trash to get the aluminum cans out for recycling. But pretty abruptly one day it was clear to me that even my careful environmentalist life was not sustainable.

At this point I had been teaching Environmental Science in high school for a number of years and had repeated experience explaining what an “ecological footprint” was, and giving the online quizzes that help students calculate how many Earths would be needed to sustain the lifestyles of their families. The calculations are somewhat simplified, but the answers of four-to-five Earths are always both shocking and at the same time sadly believable.

I wondered what level of consumption and lifestyle would actually be sustainable for our now seven billion plus population. Depending on the source of the data, it seemed the best match might be somewhere between Cuba’s and the Republic of Georgia’s standards of living. I haven’t been to Georgia but I do know a fair amount about Cuba and would say that, even without the political challenges, living with those economic hardships takes a pretty strong community support system.

During this time of mulling over my discomfort about how to live, I attended a talk on “Small House Communities” at a local music festival. I liked what the speaker, Harvey Harman, was saying about how if people have fewer personal belongings and smaller individual and family space, they naturally interact more with their surroundings, both natural and cultural. I’d dabbled with tool sharing and bartering, and had almost joined a cohousing group a few years earlier, so many of the benefits were familiar to me. But I and my family alike were startled at
the comfort and speed with which I decided that I wanted to be part of that movement—not later, but starting right away!

Harvey was developing an intentional community on a beautiful peninsula between a section of the Deep River and Sandy Creek, in the small town of Franklinville in Randolph County, North Carolina. I visited soon after his talk, and bought a lot within the week. That was three years ago, and while the story is still unfolding, I want to share some of it in case others might find it helpful or encouraging. It would not be true to say what my new community is trying to build is a utopia, but I hope that I and others continue to imagine great things are possible even with a group of people who’ve never done anything like this before.

The short answer when someone asks why I’m leaving a sweet circle of Raleigh friends and activists is to almost jokingly say that I want to see if I can live like we only have one planet. The longer answer has become important to me as I over and over lose sight of why I’ve turned a perfectly good life upside down for a so-far unknown destination.

My original plan to have a very small house tucked into a south-facing slope happily shifted to become a multigenerational home for my 81-year-old mom and I, plus a very snug space for visiting children and siblings. The seven households preceding us in the development have chosen this community for a variety of reasons. The qualities listed below have been the most important to me.

- Having a more relational way of living on land, including food production that improves soil health, as well as anticipates climate shifts. Also having a super-insulated house with a wood stove and solar panels that lets us sharply reduce fossil fuel consumption
- Focusing on ‘village-mindedness,’ helping to shift our priorities from the thriving of our individual households toward the thriving of neighborhood, small town, and local county, as well as the non-human members of the local ecosystem
- Having the opportunity to steward and protect conservation land along the Deep River, including a publicly accessible “rail trail” which is the first section of a growing system, and designated as the newest North Carolina state park
- Getting to figure out the right amount of support and privacy for multi-generational living in a not so big house, in a densely built neighborhood of people wanting to live more communally
- Being part of the resurgence of a small town with a rich history

It also hasn’t hurt to have gatherings that include singing with lots of harmony, and sharing common land that includes a small park with a picnic area and a pizza oven!

For a day or so after articulating these most important qualities of this new place and life, I felt relief, and clarity that I was trying to build a life that at least potentially would be good enough to justify the challenges the transition was bringing. But then, on further reflection, I’ve realized that this living opportunity is just the foundation for a new way of thinking and being for me. I
won’t be able to think in truly countercultural ways until I am able to separate myself from the norms and expectations of the traditional Western lifestyle.

When we think about the many problems we’re facing in society today, they seem to be a growing list of symptoms of a dire impoverishment in Western culture that some trace back to the spread of Romans then Christianity crushing land-based religions and social organization. Others might trace it back even to the beginnings of organized agriculture. The more I’ve learned about the cultural poverty in which most of us are immersed, the more meaningful are Audre Lorde’s words from an essay in *Sister Outsider*, “The master’s tools will never be used to dismantle the master’s house.” Before I can recognize and implement the radical change needed, I will have to live outside of the privilege and ease through which this culture has seduced and domesticated me.

Responding to the challenges to our climate and ecosystems, the divisiveness of our politics, and the undermining of our democratic structures will require fresh thinking and continued creative action on the part of all of us. As Rebecca Solnit said in an interview earlier this year, “The future is not yet written. What the story is depends on what we make it.”¹ My hope is that each of us finds ways of living that keep us feeling connected and transformed and energized for the work that we’re each born into this time to do.

*Editor’s note: The “mom” Laurie refers to is Ecozoic Reader editor Alice Loyd. Laurie and Alice expect to be living in their new multigenerational home in April 2018.*