

## Improving the Human Zoo



# IMPROVING THE HUMAN ZOO

Exploring Alternative Lifestyles  
Around the World

by  
Bjørn Grinde

The Darwin Press, Inc.  
Princeton, New Jersey

© 2014 by The Darwin Press, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews.

**Publisher's Cataloging-In-Publication Data**

Grinde, Bjørn, 1952–

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standards Institute for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

All photographs in this publication were taken by the author. Designed by Darwin Productions.

*Cover:*

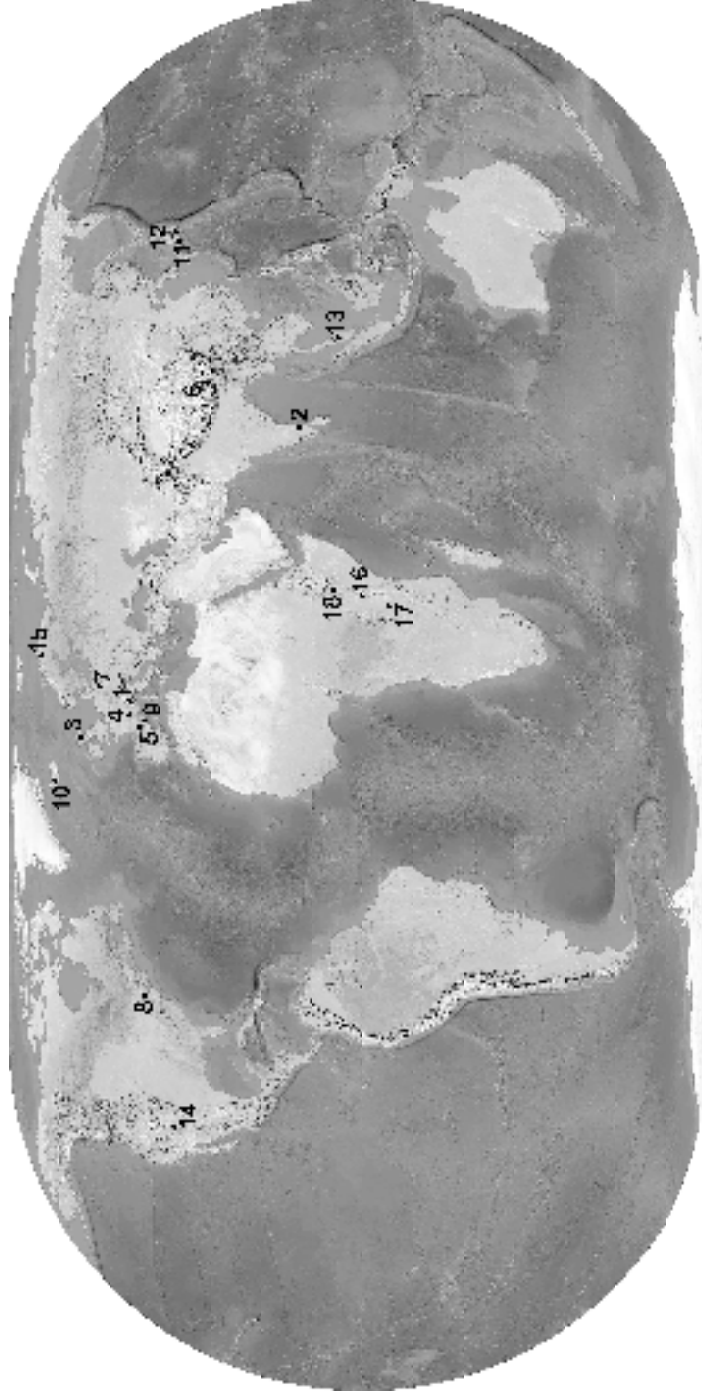
Published by:  
The Darwin Press, Inc.  
Princeton, NJ 08540-2202 USA  
[www.darwinpress.com](http://www.darwinpress.com)

Printed in the United States of America

# Contents

World Map indicating where places described are located	vi
Introduction	vii
Part I: What Is the Problem?	
1. The Zookeeper's Dilemma	3
2. The Biological Perspective	9
3. Keeping the Pendulum in a Desired Position	21
4. Our Western Bulldozer	27
Part II: Are There Alternatives?	
5. Damanhur: The Dream that Came Alive	35
6. Auroville: The City of Tomorrow	51
7. Findhorn: An Ecolife for Angels	69
8. Ark: A Blessed Alternative	91
9. ZEGG: The Bonobo Alternative	103
10. Ithaca Ecovillage: The Bourgeois Alternative	123
11. Can Masdeu: God's Little Farm	135
12. Solheimar: A Place for Special Needs	149
13. Toyosato: Where Communism Thrives but Does Not Exist	163
14. The Konohana Family: A Clone of Yamagishi, but Different	183
15. Indigenous People: Why the First Became the Last	193
Part III: What Does the Oracle Say?	
16. Water From the Moon	225
17. Why Can't Communities Be More Like Computers?	237
18. A Culture Worth Fighting For	255
19. Insight From a Tower	259

1. Damanhur    2. Auroville    3. Findhorn    4. Ark    5. St. Martin    6. Bhutan    7. ZEGG
8. Ithaca and Twelve Tribes    9. Can Masdeu    10. Solheimer    11. Toyosato    12. Konohana
13. Semok Beri    14. Navajo    15. Sami    16. Masai    17. Hadza    18. Omo



# Introduction

My country, Norway, is an excellent place to live. We have sufficient welfare to satisfy most needs, and we excel in terms of international comparisons of living standards. Nevertheless, health statistics suggest that not everything is as it ought to be. Approximately half the Norwegian population suffers at least one diagnosable mental disorder in a lifetime. Too many struggle with anxiety and depression; others suffer from chronic pain, loneliness, poor sleep, and misuse of alcohol or drugs. The brain is a delicate organ, and problems associated with it tend to have unpleasant consequences. In other words, it seems as though the quality of life for the average Norwegian is not that excellent—at least not as good as it ought to be, and perhaps could be.

The situation is similar in other industrialized countries. The welfare and health programs provided by society offer most people what the body requires but fail to satisfy the needs of the mind. It's a shame, because processes taking place in the brain determine whether one is happy or not. A broken leg causes some pain, but does not necessarily ruin your mood—a depression does.

If we can find out what causes the misery and why industrialized societies produce mental agony, I strongly believe it should be possible to alleviate this situation. A key purpose of my work as a chief scientist at the Division of Mental Health of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health is to identify measures that can improve mental health. To find out what it takes to be happy is, therefore, not only a personal pursuit, but also what my job is about. In the hope of finding remedies, I have traveled the globe studying people who live in ways that differ from what most of us are used to—for the reason that there is a lot to be learned from these people.

Many people have come together to explore practical alternatives to a mode of life that is encouraged in the Western world. They are looking for alternative ways of living where friendly collaboration and meaningful work offer relief to the mind. Moreover, they want to

live in harmony with nature and to express solidarity with future populations by caring for the planet and the resources it contains. These initiatives are typically referred to as *ecovillages*.

Long before ecological issues and mental disorders were even thought of as problems, people with spiritual values gathered in convents and monasteries. These constitute another type of *intentional communities*. Monks and nuns of all sorts of denominations have found comfort and strength in their God(s)—and perhaps have also found happiness. At least some of them have obtained the faith, or the skills required to live anywhere, under any circumstances, and still be content. I believe these communities are on to something, whether their intentions are ecological or religious, and I have, therefore, set up a research project to explore such alternatives.

Then there are also those who never took part in the ups and downs of technologically advanced societies. They never got that far. We call them *indigenous* groups, or *tribal* people, and claim that they are primitive. Some of these ethnic communities appear to have understood what our lifestyle is about, but they are not impressed. They have chosen to keep the Western culture at arm's length in favor of a way of life more in tune with how their (and our) ancestors lived thousands of years ago.

I went out to meet these people, traveling the world to do so, and found individuals who were happy and others who struggled. But first and foremost, I found that there is a lot to learn from persons who have an unfamiliar life situation and who embrace astonishing ideas compared to what I and most of the folks in my country, are accustomed to. Fortunately, the world still has much to offer in terms of diversity. For those who care to look, it's full of surprises.

The aim of my journeys was not merely to study these alternatives; I was also hoping to find a place where I might fit in, or perhaps meet someone I could team up with in order to create something completely new based on the visions I acquired about how things ought to be.

The words *Know thyself* were carved in stone some 2,500 years ago at



the entrance to the Oracle of Delphi. The inscription was probably just an advertisement put there to attract customers, but for me it's the essence of what an oracle should provide.

I'm fond of oracles. They are meant to provide answers to difficult questions. In Delphi there was an intoxicated woman, a priestess, placed in a chamber where a noxious gas, probably ethylene, emanated from a natural source below. Safely outside the hallucinogenic effects of the gas, there were sages who offered an interpretation—based on personal insight and intuition—of the mutterings of the priestess. People came from near and far to seek advice from this source of evocative wisdom.

I might not be an oracle sage, but that doesn't stop me from identifying with the wise men who sat there and tried to formulate appropriate advice. It's difficult to find sensible answers to demanding questions, and the questions we ought to ask are indeed demanding. Not only are the human mind and human affairs arguably the most challenging matters to comprehend, but the world indeed faces immense problems. Fortunately, I have found help. I have discovered a new "oracle source" with rather different qualities compared to the intoxicated priestess. Unlike the sages of Delphi, I have access to a resource that contributes far more than incoherent muttering. I have science.

Psychology, anthropology, sociology, and not least, biology provide a certain lucidity and authority to the answers we can offer—that is, if someone should ask, for example, how a community ought to be managed. Admittedly, the sciences do not give any clear-cut answers. Someone has to interpret the endless flow of information emanating from the scientific community. This is the kind of job I would like to try—to *be an apprentice priest with the Oracle of Science*. My travels were part of an effort to tackle this challenge.

Anthropologists talk about *participating observation*. If one wishes to understand a particular culture, or the peculiarities of the human mind, it's not sufficient simply to read about what people are doing and how they behave; one should join in and engage in the activities. Participation has helped me obtain insight. I also enjoy this strategy.

Besides implying a flavor of scientific commitment, participating observations are an excellent excuse for taking part in a community, and fellow humans are indeed our main source of happiness.

The purpose of my travels was to study how different ways of organizing a society affect people and how it impacts on their quality of life in particular. Consequently, my own questions to the oracle would be of the type: How can we reduce the prevalence of mental illness? How can we stimulate compassion and curb violence and crime? And what is actually required in order to create a community where people thrive and are happy?

Although I did study the social sciences, I am primarily a biologist and I consider humans as a species shaped by evolution. I chose to study biology because I was interested in this one organ of one particular species—the human brain. My scientific oracle is profoundly influenced by an understanding of how the process of evolution works, and particularly how it gradually molded our inherent qualities.

This book begins by explaining the evolutionary perspective. That is, I shall elaborate on why a deeper understanding of our innate characteristics is important. Next, I shall describe some of the places I visited and my experiences there. The selection provided is meant to reflect a sample of the wide variety available. These travelogues and accompanying comments constitute a large part of the book. Finally, I try to gather the threads and use my experiences and knowledge as a basis for answers—or other musings—from the oracle with respect to what it takes to create a prospering community with happy inhabitants. I also consider whether there are any suitable alternatives to my own home.

In the northwest corner of my house I have erected a tower. This is where I now sit and write. Through the windows I have a grand view. Far below there is a lake, Maridalsvannet, and around the lake there are farms. To the north is the Maridalen valley, and behind it rows of wooded hills. In the upper part of the landscape the trees carry a load of white snow. Further down, only the ground is white;

the snow has fallen off the trees, leaving a dark forest. Around my tower the scenery is white. When spring comes, I know it will all turn green.

The sight is beautiful. Nevertheless, it's the insight I try to focus on—insight into how one ought to deal with the nature of being human.

This book is divided into three parts:

**Part I** describes what I mean by *The Human Zoo*. The concept was introduced by Desmond Morris in his 1969 book with that title. As in an animal zoo, life in the modern world is quite different from the one that evolution shaped us to live in. The consequences are referred to as “diseases of civilization,” which include mental problems and a concomitant reduction in quality of life. My question is how can we ameliorate this situation?

**Part II** is a more personal account of travelling around the globe looking for alternatives that offer clues as to how we might proceed. I describe my experiences as a visitor in a wide variety of communities ranging from ecovillages to monasteries to tribal peoples.

**Part III** discusses what I found. Are there any alternatives to the present industrialized human society? I use an evolution-based understanding of the human mind to consider whether some of the features I have observed can be incorporated into an upgraded version of the human zoo.



## PART I: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?



We try to offer animals in captivity, like this African bush baby, the best of conditions. Are we better at dealing with animals than with humans?

# 1

## The Zookeeper's Dilemma

Norway is a prosperous country. We Norwegians appear to have an almost perfect democratic society with more liberty, equality, and justice than any revolutionary could ever hope for. Added to that is an ample portion of advanced technology and perhaps even some fraternity. So why do people not run around in green pastures of eternal happiness?

Based on international surveys of living conditions, we have fostered something very close to the Garden of Eden. Yet, when we look at the statistics, or assess the faces we meet on the streets, it seems as though we were expelled from that Garden a long time ago. The prevalence of mental disorders is as high as in any industrialized country. The crime rates might be slightly lower than most, but the figures on suicide rank almost at the top of the list. People appear to be lonely. I sense how the spark in the eyes of children fades as they grow up. What is going on? Why does life in a well-off, modern, industrialized society carry with it such a high burden of agony? Politicians scratch their heads.

People are entertained by watching wild animals in cages. When zoological gardens were first introduced, the caretakers assumed that as long as the creatures were given food and shelter they wouldn't mind a life behind bars. The animals should appreciate their enclosures because it relieved them from the toil and uncertainty of an existence in the wild; the fences offered security, and the food arrived promptly.

The animals, however, were not delighted. They wandered restlessly back and forth, refused to eat, and scraped themselves to bleeding against the concrete.

The zookeepers, too, scratched their heads, but unlike the politi-

cians, they found a solution. Life in a zoo improved considerably if they were able to provide the animals with conditions as close as possible to how evolution had adapted the various species to live. Orangutans, for example, tend to move around in the jungle on their own and should, therefore, have a separate enclosure with trees to climb in. Baboons, on the other hand, thrive in packs and require different sources of stimulation.

A zoo cannot create an exact replica of life in the wild, but it is possible to approach these conditions, to include key aspects of the organism's lifestyle. It helps when the zookeeper, or the pet owner, obtains knowledge not only of the nutritional requirements of the species in question, but also the behavioral demands. If the right measures are taken, then the animals do actually thrive in captivity.

Some compromises are required. For example, the area available in a zoo will necessarily restrict movements and explorative behavior. On the other hand, cage life has its advantages; the catering tends to be excellent, and if the animal appears even slightly unwell, a visit from a veterinarian cures most ailments. Some disorders are, admittedly, resolved once and for all—with a quick and painless death, but zoo animals in general should not complain about life expectancy; on average they most likely outlive their free-living relatives. It's not obvious that zoo-life causes impaired quality of life measured as daily happiness multiplied by the number of days lived. In short, living in a modern, well-run zoo is not necessarily that bad. Perhaps the politicians could learn something from the zookeepers.

Humans are a product of the same evolutionary processes that have shaped all other species on the planet. Furthermore, as in the case of a zoo, industrialized society offers a way of life that differs from how evolution designed us to live. Thus, we are all confined to some sort of "enclosure." The diseases of civilization, which to my mind include common mental disorders as well as a range of social problems, suggest that our human zoo is not particularly well managed. Our "zookeepers"—the politicians and others who are engaged in running society—should take note and preferably look for possible adjustments in our present way of life. In other words, I believe



we need to approach current problems in a manner similar to what a zookeeper would do. True, we are more flexible about our living conditions compared to most animals, but that doesn't mean that the average person will thrive under any circumstances. Evolution equipped humans with properties fit for a life in what we might, somewhat loosely, refer to as the Stone Age. We ought to keep this in mind when we try to improve society.

*We do not want to return to the Stone Age!* Science and industry have brought us too many advantages. We might, however, adapt our current way of life slightly in the direction of certain Stone Age conditions. That is, we could introduce a few compromises, even if they infringe on our confinement, as long as we retain hospitals, supermarkets, and smart phones. A cold and dirty cave in Alaska, without iPod and Internet, seems far beyond our limit of tolerance. A majority of people would find significant deviations from industrial comfort highly undesirable.

Then again, I believe many people are willing to adjust. It is, for example, possible to adapt diet, or the level of physical activity, to fit better with the expectations of the human body. Personally, I would settle for a compromise that doesn't include insects for dinner—although insects offer excellent nutritional value—but does include a reduction in the amount of refined carbohydrates and a sufficient dose of bodily activity to keep my heart and brain in shape. I am reasonably sure that these measures will increase my number of happy days, even if I include an occasional piece of cake.

The job of operating a zoo requires an act of balance—whether the cage contains a lion or is the home of a human. There are too many benefits associated with our welfare state that we should not let go of, even if it means minor troubles due to deviations from the living conditions to which evolution has adapted us. *Thus, the zookeeper's dilemma is to find the optimal compromises between natural conditions and what is convenient and desirable in a zoo.*

Most of the differences between Stone Age conditions and our pre-

sent lifestyle are beneficial. I see no reason to give up antibiotics when suffering from bacterial infections, or to abandon a soft and clean mattress for the hard and muddy floor of a cave. Only select disparities give cause for concern. Furthermore, the Stone Age “Garden of Eden” that evolution shaped us to live in was never quite as wonderful as the descriptions found in religious writings. The challenge is, therefore, to adapt conditions in our human zoo to key aspects of our innate nature but without sacrificing the technological and medical benefits. We might never find a solution that resolves all problems, but we should at least look for an optimal balance. If we do a decent job, people will have a better basis for happiness than what any previous society has ever managed to create.

In order to succeed in this task, we need to take a scientific approach. We need to understand the inherent nature of humankind. Of course, science will never provide all the answers; our theoretical knowledge, whether on lions or humans, will never be good enough to let the zookeepers or politicians sit in front of their computers and design the perfect enclosure. Trial and error are required, but it's when the experimentation is seen in the light of true insight that the designer really makes progress.

While the regular zookeeper can experiment with the animals he or she is in charge of, this is not that easy in the case of humans. On the other hand, humans are more likely to perform experiments with themselves. As long as enough people choose to live alternative lives, it is possible to study the results of various options. What sort of conditions work well, and what conditions cause mental suffering? What brings satisfaction, and what results in despair? Hence my desire to explore these alternatives.

There will never be one unambiguous and universally valid solution with regard to what our human zoo should look like. Most present societies can be improved, but that doesn't mean they need to end up being similar; various recipes might prove to be equally good. Moreover, people are molded by their environment, which means that the starting point—the present populations—differs considerably among cultures. The preferred solution should take this into account.

Our paradise is primarily situated within—that is, in our brain. It is possible to find happiness regardless of the circumstances you happen to live under because of the extreme adaptability and plasticity of the human brain. Although they are molded by the environment, your personal decisions have considerable impact. Then again, statistics on mental health suggest that far too many people are incapable of attaining a truly happy life. If our zookeepers do a better job, it is my firm belief that it will be easier for more people to succeed in their pursuit of happiness.

The job of being a zookeeper for humanity is apparently reserved for politicians and social scientists; the biological perspective is rarely, if ever, considered. It is not that biology offers all the answers; the social sciences have also done a great job expanding our knowledge about how we can help humankind. But biology does offer valuable additional input, which so far, unfortunately, has not been adequately explored.



One important factor in the quest for happiness is to adapt life to human nature—a natural source provided by the genes. This girl in Tamil Nadu is taking pleasure from another natural source.

## 2

# The Biological Perspective

I am a biologist but am not particularly keen on dissecting frogs or catching butterflies. I chose to study biology because I was interested in one most peculiar organ: *the human brain*. Isolated from the owner, it's an unimpressive, and not particularly appealing, grey or pink, jelly-like mass; yet, for me, it's the most amazing achievement ever made by the process of evolution. Our brains also happen to be the one section of the universe where we really ought to focus our attention, because by understanding this organ we stand a better chance at helping people flourish.

Not that the rest of the body is irrelevant, but *the brain is in charge*. It's the residence of the mind. However, it also happens to present us with the greatest challenge humankind has ever known. We really need to understand how humans think and behave, not only for the pursuit of happiness, but to save the planet. The problems of mankind include pollution, climate change, overpopulation, and the wars and violence we so eagerly engage in. The challenge is two-fold: We must understand the workings of the brain, and we must find out how to influence that organ in a desirable way.

In order to create our unique characteristics, evolution spent close to four billion years moving from simple, bacteria-like cells to present-day *Homo sapiens*; 600 million years from the first nerve cells to our nervous system; and some six million years since we parted from our closest living relatives, the chimpanzees and bonobos. Today we have sufficient knowledge to form a reasonably detailed picture of our evolutionary history. The biological perspective is primarily about understanding how evolution shaped the human species—which means, roughly speaking, the average person. Anthropology provides a better basis for appreciating cultural variation, and psychology typically focuses on individual peculiarities. The

strength of biology is to outline the role of evolution, which implies understanding how our genes impact on the way we (the “average” person) are molded by the environment.

Compared to most mammals, humans are relatively uniform, genetically speaking. The biological perspective, therefore, provides insights that largely apply to all people. The reason we are so similar genetically is because the present population has a common ancestor dating back only some 100,000 years. One hundred thousand years might sound like a long time, but in the evolution of large mammals it’s a blink of the eye. Although there are only a few hundred thousand chimpanzees left, there is greater genetic variation within this species simply because their common ancestors date back some half a million years.

On the other hand, we appear to be the most adaptable mammalian species; at the very least we have a highly malleable brain. This implies that we are easily shaped by our environment, which explains why we are such a heterogeneous mix despite our genetic homogeneity. This is also why we need the social sciences to help unravel the mysteries of the human mind.

I previously published a book, *Darwinian Happiness: Evolution as a Guide for Living and Understanding Human Behavior*, explaining the innate properties of humans and how to use that knowledge to deal with the challenges of life. I have also written a couple of books on particular aspects of human life, *The Biology of Happiness* and *God: A Scientific Update*. Here I will limit myself to a brief introduction suited to the present text.

As suggested in Chapter 1, I’m particularly concerned with one rule of thumb: *We ought to adapt living conditions to certain aspects of our inherent nature*. Two concepts are important in order to appreciate this notion: *mismatches* and *discords*. The point is to compare our current lifestyle with a more natural way of living, the latter typically referred to as “Stone Age conditions.” The relevant question is: Which differences in lifestyle are to our advantage and which are adverse? The term mismatch covers all differences, both those that have obvi-

ous benefits and the more questionable ones; discords refer to the latter.

A discord implies that the deviation from natural conditions has unfortunate consequences—perhaps not for everyone, but for many of us. Sleeping on mattresses and curing bacterial infections by antibiotics are examples of deviations with a positive value; sitting, as I do now in front of a PC, is most likely a discord. In the Stone Age, no one would sit for hours on a chair with hardly any movement besides fingers pecking away on a keyboard. Some people can do so for a greater part of their life without problems, while others experience pain in the neck, back, and arms just by looking at a keyboard.

I might argue that even if I do develop a stiff neck, it was worth it because it helped me to finish this book. Then again, as a behavioral biologist, I would offer myself some advice. Minor adjustments are often sufficient to ameliorate the negative effect of discords. In my case, I would suggest frequent breaks where I get up and move around, perhaps perform some appropriate exercise to counteract the strain, and I would recommend making the sitting-arrangement as ergonomic as possible. These are all adjustments aimed at adapting the environment to innate dispositions. By following these suggestions, writing can continue, and the writer has a reasonable chance to remain healthy.

Physical problems are often easy to deal with; a physiotherapist can massage your neck, and there are pills to ameliorate the pain. The more problematic discords are related not to muscles and tendons, but to the brain. The brain is our most complex organ, and it requires considerable development after we are born. This is partly because the birth canal limits its size, and partly because we humans need to acquire a lot of experience and knowhow in order to survive. As a consequence, the brain is particularly vulnerable to discords. If the (mental) environment deviates significantly from what the genes involved in brain development “expect,” the developmental process easily becomes “misguided.” We fail to acquire desired properties. In other words, we should be particularly concerned about discords affecting the mind.

In my view, it's the quality of life that matters and this is what our "zookeepers" should keep in mind when trying to find ways to improve society. I ought to point out that I tend to use terms such as "life quality," "well-being," and "happiness" as synonyms for what matters most in life. This calls for an explanation: What do I mean when I use these words? What is happiness actually about?

Mental problems are arguably the main cause of a reduced quality of life. Research has shown that if a person develops a physical handicap—for example, has a leg amputated—the level of happiness declines, but only for a while. It typically returns to the former "two leg" state surprisingly fast. Most people adapt to that kind of disability, at least in a country like Norway where disabled people are well cared for. They are supplied with crutches, wheelchairs, and prostheses as well as the financial support required for a decent life. Depression and anxiety, on the other hand, cause a lasting reduction in the quality of life, and it's a lot more difficult to make prostheses for the brain.

In my experience, most people do not think primarily in terms of maximizing happiness. Other criteria seem more momentous when making decisions—for example, factors such as money and social status. Presumably people often do not have happiness as their first priority simply because evolution didn't design us that way. The driving force behind evolutionary processes is ensuring survival and procreation, and positive feelings are just a means to sway behavior in particular directions catering to the genes. They are just one piece in the complex machinery that has evolved to promote survival. Consequently, although positive and negative feelings certainly influence our choices—which is their biological purpose—we are also guided by other factors. And when we are swayed by the balance of positive and negative outcomes, we tend to opt for a brief dose of immediate delight rather than more lasting gratification later in life.

The purpose of nervous systems is to orchestrate behavior, and behavior basically means movement—that is, using muscles. Plants are stationary and consequently don't require muscles—or nervous systems. Most animals, on the other hand, need to move around, and



they do so for two very obvious reasons. They must get away from what is bad for the genes (for example, predators and toxins), and they must go to what is good for the genes (such as food and mates). This dichotomy permeates the behavior of animals.

Primitive nervous systems operate by what is referred to as reflexes and instincts. Then, some 300 million years ago, evolution took a twist: It introduced *feelings* (a term that for me includes both emotions and sensations) as a novel strategy to guide behavior. The rationale was that feelings improve an individual's ability to respond to life's many challenges, thus increasing our ability to survive. The whole point of feelings is that they come in two fundamental types: positive or negative, good or bad, rewarding or punishing. This is in line with the dichotomy of behavior where bad feelings lead us away from what is bad and good feelings toward what is good—for the genes that is. Feelings supply the animal with a “common currency” for weighing positive and negative options. For example, the importance of procuring food, and thus the size of the reward, depends on how empty the stomach is. However, the reward must be weighed against the danger of being injured by attacking a dangerous prey.

*Our capacity for happiness is simply an accidental byproduct of the introduction of feelings in the evolution of our lineage.* Although feelings and emotions gradually became more and more important, they never totally replaced other means of behavioral guidance. Even humans still have reflexes, and our minds are subject to innate dispositions that do not necessarily evoke any form of feelings. The salient point for the present discussion is that feelings are the substrate of happiness. The *mood modules* are the nerve circuits in the brain that deliver the rewards and punishments. *Happiness, or mood tonus, can be construed as the net sum of positive and negative sentiments.* This definition requires an elaboration.

I find it useful to consider the brain as an organ based on *modules* that represent separate functions added by evolution over time. Imagine a pocketknife with various tools. Depending on the demands of the

moment, you can pull out a knife, a corkscrew, or a nail file. In a somewhat similar fashion, the brain modules can be engaged when needed. The modules are the hardware that performs the various functions the organism requires. There are units responsible for particular emotions (like anger, fear, and love), units that register sensory experiences (touch or smell), or units that control muscles (such as movement of a finger or blinking of an eye). The module concept is a simplification. The brain is not as orderly as a pocketknife, but it helps create an overview of how the brain is designed.

While pocketknives rarely have more than a dozen functions, the brain can be divided into several thousand. How many is primarily a question of whether you split functions into subroutines or merge



The biological purpose of life is to pass on your genes, but you might choose to let your genes sail on their own and instead set the course for a place, or a life, where happiness prevails.

them into larger units. Moreover, while the pocketknife tools are distinct, the brain modules are diffusely demarcated and often use overlapping neural pathways. Also, in the case of the pocketknife, the tool remains pretty much the same, but the brain is constantly molded by life. One thing they have in common is that both tend to be blunted by age.

Feelings are best described as depending on two sets of modules: the mood modules and modules that add “flavor” in the form of more specific types of emotions such as hatred or jealousy. For feelings to play out their biological role, the nervous system is required to have the capacity to *feel*, which implies some form of *awareness*. Awareness is a rather peculiar faculty and is presumably the progenitor of what we today refer to as *consciousness*. I regard the introduction of feelings and consciousness as the most important event in the history of life. Without these features no one would ever be happy, or unhappy. Neither would we have obtained our measures of free will and intelligence; instead, we would all be more or less like worms or vegetables.

Biologically speaking, the purpose of life is, and always has been, a question of survival and propagation, but thanks to the exquisite features described above, one can choose to defy one’s genes and instead opt for happiness. Choosing to do so, one ought to know something about how the brain works.

For some people, the pursuit of happiness, at least in the form typically referred to as pleasure, is considered immoral—perhaps even wicked. For me, it’s the most sensible thing to pursue, but then happiness in my terminology incorporates a lot more than what most people associate with indulgence. If God, or a “meaning of life,” is required to have a good life, then those are appropriate means. Such aspects of life serve as a form of “stimulant” that triggers the positive mood module. There are countless options to choose from, but they all converge on the same basic feature of the brain: They stimulate the capacity for pleasant feelings that evolution has bestowed upon us. Pushing these buttons is what happiness is about. Interestingly,

all sorts of pleasures, from chocolate to friends or sensing a purpose, converge on partly shared brain circuitry!

Obviously there are pitfalls to such an arrangement, such as allowing immediate gratification to spoil the chance for future happiness. Smokers, cake lovers, and drug addicts ought to consider whether their habits contribute positively or negatively to their total amount of happiness when integrated over a lifetime.

Most of what we go through in life is characterized, if only vaguely, by a positive or a negative mood tonus. Sometimes it's obvious which side of neutral we're on, but in other situations it can be hard to tell. Anger can feel pretty good, especially if you think it's justified and you're in control; the situation becomes less pleasing if you realize your opponent is about to kill you. Anyway, anger is rarely a good strategy for happiness because in the long run we're better off with friends than with enemies. The salient point is that by understanding what good and bad experiences are all about one stands a better chance at elevating the lifetime mood score.

Fortunately, if everything is fine—your stomach full, body warm, and there is no pain—the brain offers you a good time. The default setting of the mood module is positive simply because it's in the interest of the genes to be in a body with an optimistic and encouraging attitude to life. You're more likely to help your genes by taking the trouble to search for food or a mate if you feel great. This presumably means that the brain maintains a basal activity in the neural pathways involved with rewards; unfortunately it doesn't take much to upset this state of mind by activating the negative mood modules. Besides physical pain, there are two other types of punishing feelings that are particularly bothersome. One is *anxiety*, which in my vocabulary is excess activity of the fear module, and the other is *depression*, which is when the "low mood" module keeps churning away. The big question is what causes unwarranted activity in these three modules?

I believe that discords related to industrialized society are partly responsible. These discords cause stress, and excessive stress might lead to exercising the punishment modules, thereby causing them to become more active than they should be.

Pain, fear, and low mood are important functions. They activate punishing feelings because they are meant to steer you away from, or warn you about, something unfortunate. Individuals lacking in these functions—for example, people with no capacity to feel pain—have a serious disorder. They tend to die young because they find it difficult to take care of themselves. Occasional negative experiences are part of life and should not be dreaded inasmuch as they provide essential information; besides, a bit of brain punishment helps us appreciate the good times. It's the superfluous, or non-functional, activity we wish to avoid.

Most likely Stone Age people also suffered from anxiety and depression; the problem, I believe, is that the prevalence is much higher today. A similar statement can be made about physical pain. Of course, we sometimes fall and hurt ourselves, but something is wrong when a third of adults suffer from persistent and mostly non-functional pain—as they do in my country.

Few people complain about excessive activity of the good-mood modules. This is not only because superfluous joy is easier to bear; it also appears to be less likely to happen. The penalty function is more sensitive; in biological terms it has a lower threshold for activation. This all makes sense because it is imperative that you react quickly and wholeheartedly to a dangerous situation. If you suddenly notice something looking like a snake, it's better to respond even if it proves to be a stick, than not to react in case it was really a snake. On the other hand, missing the opportunity to pick a ripe apple is unlikely to kill you. Consequently, punishment modules tend to be easily triggered. Unfortunately, this also means they can more easily become over-activated, and excessive activity implies a negative impact on your conscious life. They end up bothering your mind.

*Exercise* is a key word. Most people are aware of the opportunity to expand muscles by pumping iron, but it's also possible to train mental functions. This point is easily recognized in the way we can improve on mental tasks—anything from playing chess to memorizing numbers. Whenever we activate a brain module, the effect is somewhat similar to lifting a weight. The problem is that some functions,



In the rural part of Laos, there is not much money; but perhaps also fewer discrepancies, or discords, between present life and the way humans are adapted to live.

the punishment modules in particular, should preferably not be exercised. When these are stimulated on a regular basis, they might end up dominating our mind—which is not what we want.

Most modules apparently have an “on” and an “off” button. Like the tools of the pocketknife, various types of feelings are pulled out when needed and then returned to the inactive position so as not to stand in the way of other tasks. Thus, the number one rule of thumb for those who wish to improve well-being is to exercise the off-buttons for punishment and the on-buttons for pleasures.

Our daily life necessarily implies some sort of “exercise.” If we walk to our office, we improve our leg muscles; and if we enjoy a friendly chat, we stimulate our social rewards. This is why the environment, and the way of life, matters. It is, however, possible to specifically exercise the above-mentioned “on” and “off” buttons; if we

should wish to do so, one option is to use the *happiness exercise app* that I recently designed for the iPhone.

Broadly speaking, there are two problems related to mental health: One is that affected individuals don't function well in society; the other is that they have an impaired quality of life. The two are often associated, but not always. People with Down's syndrome might need some assistance in dealing with the practical aspects of life, but research suggests that they are not at all lacking in mood. Reduced happiness is primarily a question of activity in the punishment modules of the brain, and diminished mental capacity might actually protect against the stress that industrial society so readily dishes out. Depressed people can be deeply unhappy but nevertheless able to take care of themselves and their jobs.

Assuming our zookeepers opt for happiness as their ultimate aim for mankind, they should follow the following two strategies:

To create an environment that avoids discords and does not contribute to excessive activation of the punishment modules.

To teach people how to care for their own mental health by helping them understand their brain and how to best exercise the appropriate modules.

The more obvious consequences, such as diagnosable chronic pain, anxiety, and depression, are only the tip of the iceberg. Many other common ailments—including sleep problems, substance abuse, and antisocial behavior—can occur as indirect results of malfunction in these modules. An inability to sleep properly, for example, is often due to anxiety. Moreover, a large percentage of people are bothered, for example, by undue worries or a somewhat low mood, without these grievances being of sufficient magnitude to warrant a diagnosis.

Our zookeepers should try to design an enclosure that caters to the human mood modules. If they do, not only will the population be happier, but the improvement would also lead to economic benefits because mental problems are among the most common causes of sick leave and disability. Furthermore, happy people are more likely

to be empathetic and to contribute to the common good of society. I believe that even minor changes in lifestyle can bring us a long way, and in my travels I was looking for clues and tips for how to make such changes.



### 3

## Keeping the Pendulum in a Desired Position

A pendulum points in the direction of gravity, unless you pull it to one side. You can hold it in a position away from the perpendicular, but that requires the use of energy. If you let go of your grasp, the pendulum will swing back and forth until it eventually stops where gravity dictates.

Man is a product of heredity and environment. The hereditary part—that is, our genes—is difficult to change; thus, the environment is what we need to focus on. The genes set vague limits as to the conditions where we can thrive, but arguably no other species is as flexible in this regard as we are. Not only can we survive a wide range of situations, but we can be happy almost anywhere. A properly trained Buddhist monk might claim the ability to find bliss in a solitary dungeon in Tibet, where moldy bread and aggressive rats constitute the environment. The point is that by adjusting certain factors in the environment we can make it easier for most people to thrive.

Some constraints are absolutes. Unlike polar bears, we freeze to death in the Arctic without clothes to protect the body. Other factors are more flexible, but still worth being aware of. The communist utopias worked poorly because it's difficult to instigate the required level of unselfishness within a sea of strangers. We do have compassion embedded in our nature, but it is balanced by selfishness. Even within a family, or a tribe, relationships require attention and a concerted effort; it's considerably more difficult to obtain the same quality of relations on a national or global level. As I explored on my travels, it's not necessarily impossible to introduce com-



What has a pendulum to do with how to make people behave like saints?

munist ideals; but those who have such ambitions ought to be aware of the obstacles to such a path. They need to devise a strategy that will work on the material at hand—the human mind.

Evolution has given us a wide range of emotional and behavioral tendencies. People sacrifice their lives for strangers, but in the next moment kill their own children. A flower is sufficient to induce joy, yet extreme riches might not prevent gloom and eventual suicide. The big question is: How do we make the most of the human condi-

tion? That is, how can we stimulate positive aspects of human nature and inhibit what is detrimental?

This is where I like to use a pendulum as a metaphor. Gravity causes the pendulum to point straight down, and in my analogy that is a natural (but not necessarily optimal) balance between positive and negative aspects of the human mind—for example, between empathy and aggression. Society (our zookeepers, if you wish) can grab the pendulum and pull it in the direction of compassion, but this process requires “energy.” It requires the use of various means that inspire sympathy. We must exercise the “on” buttons for empathy, which means creating environments that form people’s personalities in a desired way.

The pendulum serves as a metaphor not only for compassion versus aggression, but also for other aspects of the human mind where we might wish to move away from the point of gravity suggested by our genes. During my travels, I was especially concerned with happiness as opposed to gloom.

The opportunities our zookeepers have to move these pendulums can be divided into two types. The first is to exploit the possibilities embedded in kindergartens, schools, and mass media to influence both children and adults. Because the mind of a child is more open for input than that of an adult, the early years ought to be given priority. For example, kindergartens might teach the toddlers social values and how to care for one another. The measures used, whether kindergarten lessons or television programs, can be referred to as “mind exercises” in the sense that they are designed to have an impact on people’s brains. A related option is to teach people how to engage in personal brain exercise. Content people tend to care more for their surroundings, so if you can help people strengthen their good-mood module, the return should be two-fold. The population will be happier and help build a better society. Some of the places I visited were tuned toward using meditation as a form of brain exercise.

The second type of opportunity is to create conditions that cause less stress and frustration. A step in this direction is to create an en-

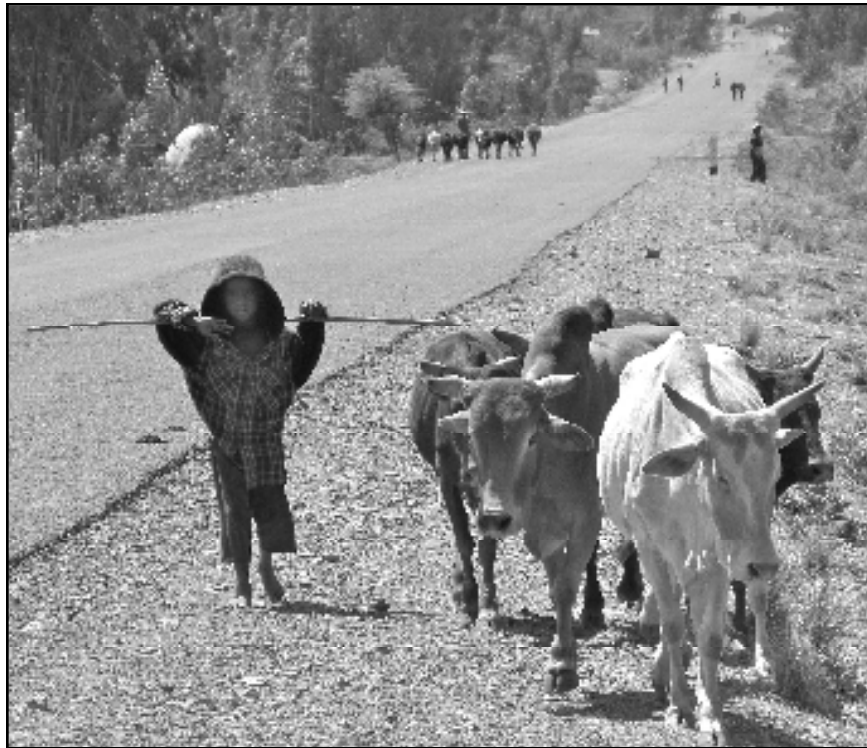
vironment with fewer mental discords. Discords contribute to tension, and the concomitant dissatisfaction and irritation easily lead to anger and aggression; in other words, both the compassion and the happiness pendulums move in the wrong direction.

What I was searching for in my journeys were “handles” that can be used to pull the relevant pendulums in desired directions, whether in the form of “brain exercises” or the avoidance of discords. I hoped to find environmental features, or perhaps better referred to as cultural features, that can be employed by most societies. For example, studies have shown that skin contact calms people and contributes to their well-being. In some communities it’s customary to hug each other as a way of greeting, and to carry one’s babies close to the body rather than putting them in a stroller. These are simple measures that might—in the long run and in a large population—prove to have an appreciable impact on quality of life.

One might argue that pulling the pendulum away from the gravitational position implies setting up mismatches. It does. But we ought to opt for an environment different from that of the Stone Age—after all, most mismatches between then and now are desirable. By using our knowledge of human nature, it’s possible to create something that offers people better lives than they had then. Understanding life in the Stone Age is useful for pinpointing unfortunate features of a modern lifestyle, and thus helps us improve the position of the pendulum.

Compassion and happiness are closely linked because social relations are the most important factor in terms of quality of life. This statement is in line with psychological research, and my biological theories say the same thing. Being with other people offers some of the most potent ways to activate reward modules, but social life is also probably the biggest problem in terms of discords and frustration. I believe that depression and anxiety, for example, are largely consequences of unfortunate aspects of human interactions. If one manages to pull the pendulum corresponding to social conditions in the direction of trust, empathy, and community engagement, much is achieved in terms of happiness.

The importance of social life explains why I'm so interested in "intentional communities." They are all experiments in living together, and they are highly diverse. In his book *The World Until Yesterday*, Jared Diamond writes that we need to learn from the experiments in living that humans have performed over thousands of years, including all the trial-and-error testing of how to organize a society and how to live. I agree. I think that we are experimenting all the time, just like the zookeeper, and that we can learn from each other's mistakes and successes even if the experiment has only lasted some years. Intentional communities are a prime arena for trying out novel ideas, and I'm a keen observer. Looking at tribal life, as Diamond does, is interesting, but these experiments are tuned to a very different environment compared to industrialized nations. We really need experiments in modern living, and it helps that we have a whole new understanding of what humans are and how to make the most of the human condition.



Our bulldozers create excellent, straight roads, but do we know where they will take us?

## 4

### Our Western Bulldozer

Economists talk about capital. Capital, in the form of money, is important to have if you want to accomplish something. Labor and production factors can be bought, and they are useful assets whether the product is tea bags or happiness. But there is another type of capital that I believe is even more important—*social capital*. This is a characteristic of the human mind, and it turns people into positive participants willing to contribute to the common good. Social capital is a question of how culture shapes the mind; that is, how clever we have been when it comes to moving the pendulums in desired directions. In order to obtain this form of capital, we need to establish a society where people thrive and where our positive traits are stimulated. I believe this is where the shoe pinches in terms of helping humanity flourish and that this is what our zookeepers, and I, should focus on.

Sending a man to the moon or creating smart phones and other electronic gadgets—these are the easy tasks. The big challenge is to bring out the best in human beings, and to create an environment that makes the most of the opportunities inherent in our genes.

The world is becoming ever more uniform. A hundred years ago there were still indigenous people who had never seen an anthropologist, but now most of the old ways are transferred to books and museums while Coca-Cola is sold from the most remote straw huts. There is a battle for the human soul, and there is little doubt that the winner is the industrialized, urban society ruled by market economies in combination with various versions of social democracy. Our Western culture is about to sweep away the alternatives. With regard to where people in cities stand in economic terms, differences appear trifling. The world has chosen a winner in the battle for cultural hegemony, but has humanity really won?

There are, however, exceptions. Some countries go their own way. Places like North Korea and Afghanistan are different from countries in Europe; unfortunately, they don't seem to have found a course toward something better. Consequently, these are not the alternatives I am interested in. Actually, I'm not necessarily looking for one particular alternative, unless I find myself an ideal place to settle down. Anyway, I first want to study and experience the variety that is still present here on Earth, although perhaps less visible than before. I want to see how different ways of constructing a community work. When I come across places where people seem happy, and things work well, I wish to understand what factors are contributing to the success. What is there to learn? How do they manage to hold the pendulum in a preferable position?

Western culture moves forward like a bulldozer. True to tradition, we want a wide and straight road toward economic growth. Unfortunately, the bulldozer easily leads us astray.

The country of Bhutan in the Himalayas has chosen a different course. Forty years ago their king proclaimed that what mattered in his country was not *Gross National Product*, but *Gross National Happiness*. Leaders around the world laughed. Everyone knew that what really matters is money. Today, few laugh, and some countries, including France and Great Britain, are beginning to follow in the footsteps of Bhutan. I believe the king made a wise choice. Wealth should be no more than a means to help people flourish; happiness ought to be the Number One priority.

Money is one of the Western world's many forms of "narcotics." We depend on it and crave constantly for more, whether it does us good or harm. When everyone else drives Porsches and swims in champagne, it's hard to find happiness in water and meditation. Not surprisingly, it's difficult to convince people that money should not be the top priority. In a world where cash is in charge, the money-powered bulldozer determines the direction. It seems less important whether people struggle with mental agony as long as the bulldozer is moving up the hill we call economic growth.

Research on self-reported quality of life demonstrates that mon-



ey, beyond what it takes to meet basic needs, does little to improve well-being. A nice house and an expensive car might boost our self-esteem, but for most people these things have a limited effect on the mind's capacity for satisfaction. Happiness is, in other words, difficult to buy. Moreover, if people can be content without extravagant consumption, it will be a lot easier to develop alternatives that will allow future generations to flourish.

The famous economist John Stuart Mill wrote in his book *Principles of Political Economy* that, when a country has reached the financial level required to offer people what they need, it's time to stabilize the economy and focus on human growth. The book was published in 1848. His ideas seem to have been forgotten.



Sometimes a narrow trail is preferable even though there are occasional obstacles.

Great prophets such as Buddha and Jesus demonstrated that it is possible to live a simple life and to show compassion for others and still be happy. I imagine that they beamed with joy, and that this radiation was a major reason why followers flocked around them. We need the equivalent of these prophets in the form of communities proving that it really is possible to build a society where friendliness prevails, the use of resources is sustainable, and people are content.

It's particularly important that people are happy. If we hope to make the majority change their lifestyle and level of consumption, we need to offer an alternative that allows an equally good, or preferably better, quality of life. If Jesus had been miserable, Christianity would most likely never have happened. This is yet another reason why I emphasize well-being in my evaluation of the locations I visit.

Economists apparently claim that expansion is as important as air. For them, talking about zero growth is heretical. Only fools and Utopians do so. Today's leaders apparently fear that the world will collapse, or move toward Armageddon, if they prove unable to blow air into the financial balloon. Unfortunately, they have a point. It's difficult to maintain employment, production that creates prosperity, and a society that values initiative and innovation without gearing it all toward expansion, but at the same time the constraints are obvious. Forty years ago Paul Ehrlich gave us the equation  $I = PAT$ . Humanity's *Impact* on the planet is a product of *Population* size, *Affluence*, and *Technology*. The population increases, and the politicians wish for wealth to increase. The question then becomes: To what extent can technology compensate in order to keep the product of the three factors from causing havoc?

For example, experts estimate that by the year 2050 we must be a hundred times better at reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions; otherwise, the effect on the climate will be devastating. Few believe we can develop such technology. The equation suggests that there are only two options: limit the number of people or limit consumption.

Actually there is a third option. If we fail to keep pollution to a level the planet can tolerate, the limitations will eventually *force*

change. In Norse mythology we use the word *Ragnarok* for the kind of visions that brings forth. The bulldozer is moving toward a cliff. Perhaps there is some distance left, but more likely we are close to the edge. In my inner vision I see the bulldozer crossing the edge and falling. Can we stop this from happening?

I believe it's not too late to change course, and the first step is to chart the options. Are there alternative directions? And if so, where do they lead, and how do we turn the wheel?

I was never a big fan of zoos as I prefer to see animals in their natural environment. However, in the case of one species, ours, I make an exception for we have devised all these highly fascinating communal menageries. Perhaps most people live more or less as prisoners of circumstance, behind high fences based on cultural conventions, but some have escaped. They have furnished a diverse "flora" of lifestyles definitely worth a visit.

So what did I find in my search for alternatives? Is there a Shangri-La behind the mountain of problems that pile up in our Western world? Are there gleaming "islands" in the form of intentional communities where people have created something that is both different and better? Finally, and not least, is there a place where I fit in?

I went out into the world hoping that the various communities would offer some suggestions, and that with the help of my scientific oracle they would point out a possible path. I went out searching for answers because we live in a world full of possibilities, and because I know that happiness depends more on compassion than consumption. I went with the belief that it is feasible to create a society where people are even happier than in present-day Norway—which supposedly is one of the happiest countries on Earth—and at the same time preserve the planet. My travels have spanned many years, taking place whenever I could find the right time and the right target.

My oracle, and its apprentice priest (me), had a difficult task. Perhaps I did not return with all the answers I might have wished for, but then again, I didn't come home empty-handed.



## PART II: ARE THERE ALTERNATIVES?



At first sight, Vidracco looks like any dusty and sleepy Italian village, with old stone houses covered with tiles of red clay.

## 5

### Damanhur: The Dream That Came Alive

Oberto Airaudi and his friends had a dream. They dreamt about a new society, a place where spiritual harmony descends on a sea of happy people. Then, gradually, the entire world would shine. Thirty years ago they discovered a place in the foothills of the Alps, a valley with fruit trees and peace a few hours' drive north of Torino in Italy. There they began to dig. For fifteen years they kept on digging in secrecy. Their first step in saving the world was to build a huge underground temple: *Il Tempio dell'Uomo*, the Temple of Mankind.

Then, suddenly, a disgruntled associate betrayed their efforts and the authorities were told about the underground activity. The bureaucrats decided that whatever it was, it should be torn down because Oberto had never obtained the proper permits to carry out his construction plans. The authorities changed their minds, however, when they saw the strange rooms with their unique, lavish artistry. Perhaps they also recognized the problem of tearing down something that was already underneath the surface.

Thus it all began. Today they are no longer just a group of friends, but a new "country," built on new principles. They have their own schools, newspapers, health care, coins, flags, and wine—as well as their own spiritual philosophy. The place even has its own rules for something as proto-Italian as soccer: They play with three teams on the field simultaneously. Altogether, these people form the *Federation of Damanhur*, which currently consists of some forty *nucleons* (their social units) with twenty to thirty members each. The dream is no longer pure fiction—but is it reality?

What caught my attention is not that they tried. Many people did. The age of the hippies was so full of utopian collectives that you could step barefoot on idealism from anywhere to the moon. The remarkable thing about Damanhur is that the initiative survived,

that it still exists even though the beginnings and the present product are about as surreal as it gets. Did they create something reminiscent of the paradise society I am looking for? I'm a skeptic by nature, but decided that it was worth taking a closer look. Perhaps they have, at the least, conceived some interesting features of paradise.

I am met by *Aquila di mare* and *Cavalluccio marino* (Sea Eagle and Seahorse, respectively). People of Damanhur take the name of an animal they feel akin to. The two women greet me with a smiling *con te*, meaning "for you." Damanhurians have their own distinct way of greeting; *con te* is to remind people that they are there for each other, and that it is important to foster positive thoughts for fellow humans. If time permits, they might press their palms together in front of their chests and look down. And, of course, they hug and kiss.



Damanhur is situated in a beautiful piece of nature and has, if looked upon from the right angle, spiritual and dreamlike qualities.



One of the first things I notice is that instead of dividing society into nuclear families, in Damanhur they form larger entities in the form of “nucleons.” Within these entities there might be couples, threesomes, foursomes, or whatever constellations are called for, but the nucleon is the more important unit. Gradually it dawns on me that I am onto something here. Their nucleons are akin to my idea of a Stone Age tribe!

I’m invited to lunch at Cavalluccio’s place. Her nucleon owns a small farm on the hillside. It is a huge, old stone house that bears signs of having been rebuilt, extended, and adapted to new stocks of humans many times. Spread around inside and outside are various tools interspersed with a selection of cozy and/or edible animals.

The dining table is in the basement next to an old wine press. Responsibility for cooking rotates and today it’s Cavalluccio’s turn. Various vegetables, pastas, and other food stuffs appear on the table, along with an ample supply of red wine. Most items, including the wine, are produced on the farm. Plenty of food, but not so many people. It is summer and half the group has taken off to the Mediterranean for a swim, she explains.

*Gipeto* (Lamb Vulture) is present. He works as a construction worker, and there is too much to do for him to take a day off. Cavalluccio says that he’s actually quite shy, but while working he sings so loudly that the sound masks even the church bells down in the village. Today his daughter has come for a visit. The mother moved to another nucleon, but that doesn’t seem to matter. With an entire tribe to spend your time with, the company of a wife (or husband) is less important. The girl, who is fourteen, has only one mother and one father, but now she has two nucleons where everyone considers her part of the group and takes responsibility for her well-being. Children are a collective commitment. I know some teenagers who might have managed without that level of attention, but she seems to be happy.

“They cost a bit,” says Cavalluccio. She is referring to the children. Consequently, I’m told, getting pregnant is a communal decision.

“For a long time the economy of Damanhur was very bad,” she

continues. "Having a child is a significant obligation for everyone. Today the economy is better, so the girl gets whatever she can take of food, schools, and universities."

Cavalluccio and her boyfriend *Gibbone* (Gibbon) are a typical pair of Damanhurians. She is a healer, and he is a goldsmith, which should be an excellent starting point for matrimonial links; yet *he* lives in a different nucleon. That too seems to be OK. The local philosophy recommends that relationships ought to be appraised once a year or so, a rule that applies whether you're a couple, a threesome, or if you happen to be of the same or different gender. For some time the Italian authorities complained about immorality and came up with allegations of bigamy, but eventually they gave up keeping track of Damanhurian relationships.

A typical problem for the average hippie colony was that the idealism tended to dry up along with the money. Communism is a very interesting idea that, unfortunately, has proven rather difficult to achieve. Or have I found the exception? I start by asking:

"How are the tribes organized here in Damanhur?"

I was a bit too fast. I mixed in my own ideas about Stone Age ideals and used the wrong word. The people around the table wrinkle their noses; they do not appreciate being framed as tribal people. I apologize, and tell them that I meant, of course, nucleon.

"Even the children of Damanhur know they live in a symbiotic relationship," explains Cavalluccio. "We are part of a cooperative community where the group means more than the sum of the individuals. People 'feel' each other's presence, no matter where the others are located."

I like her last sentence, but realize that in order to gain insight into the deeper aspects of Damanhurian economics, I have to come up with more direct questions. I ask whether they feel the presence of the others particularly strongly when they sweat over the local harvest and household chores while their friends are sunbathing on the beach?

The question turns out to be an excellent starting point for a lively discussion. Eventually I learn that they have given up the orig-

inal philosophy of everyone giving everything to the community; today people pay a “tax” to both their nucleon and to the Federation of Damanhur. Then again, for most people money is simply not that important. They try to retain the idea that everyone *gives* what they can and *receives* according to their needs—and that they should help those who struggle to meet their obligations. Work is play, preferably something to be taken care of in the company of others, but it’s also a means for self-realization. In other words, it would be great to have a dip in the sea, but tending the grapes is not a bad alternative.

Maybe not the ideal situation for the average Italian?

Cavalluccio is the first to admit that not all people appreciate their lifestyle; too many are shaped by the dominant culture to fit into a money-driven, nuclear family type of society. The emphasis on



Lunch with the nucleon of Aquila (seated in front of the standing woman). Eating together is considered important, and the food is both tasty and ample.

group projects in primary school notwithstanding, both Norwegians and Italians still use personal freedom as mantra. Community life requires a strong commitment and a lot of obligations; it's the price they pay for having a durable social network. Yes, the people of Damanhur are expected to contribute a lot, but they do get a considerable return on their investment. Their philosophy of life might not be optimal for making money on the stock exchange, but it is not necessarily a bad investment when the dividend is given in the form of happiness.

Health care in Damanhur is an interesting story. The place appears to have the best coverage of healers anywhere in the world. Cavalluccio works in close collaboration with the Damanhur Minister of Health, *Formichiere* (Anteater), who is trained as a physician with emergency medicine as a specialty. In her office, the three of us soon find the tone when discussing world health problems. In the room next door, people sit in line for their weekly dose of *pranatherapy*; I tried that too, but I still don't know what it is.

Formichiere emphasizes her work on preventive medicine. Her ideas make sense; everyone gets regular checkups, and she educates the inhabitants about diet and hygiene. She is also concerned with psychosocial factors. I would love to have her as my personal physician.

"The health here in Damanhur is better than in the surrounding villages," she claims. I believe her. But when I ask where she thinks the shoe pinches, she replies, to my surprise, "Stress!" They have organized their community pretty much according to my biological recipe, so why should they have problems with stress? Formichiere explains:

"People have too much to do, too many activities. Take me... The responsibility for people's health is a volunteer effort. I earn my money by working in a hospital outside."

It turns out that her situation is typical. Damanhur would like to be self-sufficient and independent of the industrialized world, but in practice most find jobs elsewhere to make a living. When they



Formichiere, the Minister of Health (to the left), and her collaborator, the healer Cavalluccio. The Minister was perhaps a bit stressed, but I suppose most ministers are. Both appeared to be in good health and excellent mood.

return home, it is volunteer rescue service, fire squads, childcare, and farm work; and after that there are discussion meetings, committees, and meditation practice—until the only thing left is to do the dishes, and start a new day.

“People are happy, but a little stressed,” she says. And I still believe her. “Maybe pranatherapy helps, but we are a little stressed,” she says with even more pressure on the words, staring alternately at the clock and at me with pleading eyes.

I have traveled quite a bit in Italy. When jogging in the countryside, I usually end up with a pack of ferocious dogs at my heels; in Damanhur the dogs come along tail wagging and relishing my company. Is it magic? According to Oberto, Damanhur is situated at a spot where four of the world’s eighteen “synchronic lines” meet. It gives the place, and its inhabitants, a very special aptitude. To tune in to this transcendent power, it helps to walk between rows of stones laid

out in spirals. Outside the spirals I sit with Oberto, or *Falco* (Falcon) as he calls himself, and ask how he came to know this.

“Much of the knowledge comes from the citizens of Atlantis,” he replies. I manage to block the smile that was about to form on my lips, and meet his eyes with a serious, questioning face. He is elegant and eloquent, with comforting eyes that look at me without being intrusive. I know he is a couple of years older than me. It turns out that he travels a lot—both in time and space; more recently he has preferred the future rather than Atlantis or other places of the past. Just recently he returned from the twenty-second century with a lot of relevant information to help humanity get its act together.

It’s not that I dislike travelling, and I would love to visit Atlantis, but ... the spiritual philosophy of Damanhur has a somewhat unusual touch. They call their doctrines *esoteric physics*, meaning “physics understood only by select persons,” and their philosophy is so esoteric that I have great difficulty in understanding anything. Perhaps I do not belong to those selected.

Most people I know are somewhat concerned as to what the future might bring. Of course present-day humanity is intellectually brilliant; we can send men to the moon and cure everything from syphilis to sore feet. We are excellent when it comes to finding technical solutions, which of course is important, but the real challenge is to bring out the best of human nature. I like the way Oberto puts it: “We must make people divine. Only then can we steer clear of the dangers that lie ahead.”

He tells me that the children of Damanhur are told the following story: Long ago, God gave humanity a great treasure. Unfortunately, they did not appreciate this fortune, so God decided to hide it. He thought that one day, when the need arose, people will struggle hard to find it, and only then shall they learn to relish His gift. But where should He hide it? Perhaps on the top of a mountain, or at the bottom of an ocean? No, it would be all too easy; humans crawl all over the planet. Finally, He knew. He had to put it in the only place where hardly anyone cares to look. He hid the treasure inside the human mind!



At various places they have stones laid down on the ground forming spirals. Walking in and out of the spiral is supposed to heal you. I am not sure in what way, or how, but the clay figures probably take part in the healing process.

Fortunately their esoteric physics is no big deal; my teacher, *Kapra* (goat), emphasizes that it doesn't really matter what you believe. She is German and has a university degree in social science. Only one of the principles of Damanhur's philosophy is important: It states that no principle is important. Both theory and practice should be flexible so that the community can adapt to novel challenges.

Perhaps I understand. Damanhur has proven to be adaptable. I might add that it's not unlikely some people laughed when they first heard about a man who was the son of a virgin, went on to walk on water, and eventually rose from the dead.

Kapra has not finished her lesson. She points out that what really matters is that they actually *have* a spiritual philosophy. They need to believe in something that offers purpose and meaning to society—preferably something sacred. Here I agree wholeheartedly; their philosophy fosters community feelings and is crucial for the task of bringing out the best in people. Yes, a belief in spiritual attributes can be helpful. I tell her that, in my opinion, one should judge the quality of a creed on how it affects people, but not in terms of whether it happens to match scientific dogmas. And that I even wrote a book on God, *God—A Scientific Update*, in order to save Him (or Her) from the “altar of science.”

She looks at me with an expression that appears to convey a bit of skepticism before she goes on to explain that they do emphasize diversity, whether in ways of thinking, behaving, personalities, or activities. Diversity enriches the community. It is OK.

Skepticism to my ideas or not, I like that. It makes sense—at least as long as the diversity doesn't cause society to split up into groups that begin to argue about some trifle, such as how virginal Jesus and the Virgin Mary really were. In Damanhur, they have found ways to preserve harmony; they can, therefore, afford variety in ways of thinking. Eventually, as I get in touch with more of the inhabitants, I realize that the citizens are not required to dive body and soul into esoteric physics; it seems sufficient to just avoid unnecessarily critical comments. Spirituality is there to benefit the community, not to cause conflicts.



According to their concepts, life consists of three facets. *The Game of Life* covers daily activities and the attitudes that accompany these. They emphasize that we should be there for each other, and that whatever one is doing, the activity should induce a positive feeling. The *Constitution* consists of rules that govern social life, and *Meditation* covers the spiritual side of life. In addition to regular meditation, they have a substantial selection of intricate rituals. I read their Constitution. It has no laws and no paragraphs. But there are twenty principles intended as recommended tenets, which, in sum, don't add much to the Golden Rule: One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself.

"Join us tomorrow night," Kapra says, "then we will celebrate the full moon." I'm in. From a bench high above the stage of the outdoor temple I see the moon, complete in shape and with a beautiful shine, rising above the wooded hills on the opposite side of the valley. The place is shaped like an ancient Roman amphitheater. I have seated myself close to the top where I can let my eyes move between the yellowish moon, which transforms the dark and mysterious night sky, and whatever is going on below. I want to observe both the spectators and whatever will take place on the stage. I sense a quiet, expectant atmosphere in the front rows. Some people appear on the stage—all dressed in wide, white robes hiding their features. There is music and singing. A horse with a rider enters from the right, but appears to be somewhat lost. Then a horse without a rider arrives. Somebody lights a bonfire. The dancers at the edge of the stage look like they are lamenting, but perhaps more likely they are singing. All I hear is powerful drumming.

The full moon celebration is evocative, not ecstatic, but then again it is a lot more than just a show. Kapra told me that Damanhur, completely voluntarily, has decided to take over the job of the Delphi oracle. According to her, the world is in dire need of an oracle. I certainly agree, but had considered applying for that job myself; then again, I don't mind that they beat me to it. There is room enough, I decide, for the world to have several oracles.

Anyone can send questions to the Oracle, but they should concern an important issue, and the queries must be submitted in writing one month in advance. The oracle priestesses, that is, a collection of the older and more experienced women of Damanhur, are drifting around on stage. I believe the Oracle of Delphi had their answers ready without much delay, but I suppose that the quality of advice benefits from a month of deliberations. Unfortunately, both questions and answers are prepared in Italian, so I have no clue as to how sensible the local oracle is. I do, however, have a vague notion that my response would have been different. But would it have been any better?

Oberto gave them the Doctrines of Faith. If you ask people, he is a great prophet; but, like any great prophet, if you ask him he will deny it. He sits down several times a week to answer questions from both residents and visitors. There's no doubt that he is influential, but the power is officially transferred to democratically elected representatives, and he does not want to be worshiped. I respect this man. Only the best heads of state are willing to give up power voluntarily.

I have snooped around the place for so long that *Gufo* (Owl), the journalist for Damanhur's local newspaper, asks for an interview. I take advantage of the occasion by interviewing her. I'm still curious as to how much further they need to go in order to reach my biologically outlined Shangri-La.

"People are people," she says, "and of course conflicts arise, but the framework here makes it easier to find solutions. Each nucleon has a 'key person'. The Federation has a council. All these people are up for election, and they negotiate in cases of dispute. Besides, we all try to look after each other. People speak up and offer advice if they see something that is not good."

My first reaction is a slight skepticism concerning the idea that everyone else should always take upon themselves to find the solution to whatever they conceive to be my problems—but then again,

perhaps the idea is not so bad. Well-meaning advice is certainly preferable compared to the threat of purgatory and eternal damnation, which I assume is the case in the surrounding valleys. Advice, warranted or not, is also better than having a neighbor who refuses to talk to you. Maybe... maybe I even miss, on rare occasions, having someone, other than my mother, who actually cares about what I do.

"Damanhur gives people a common purpose," Gufo continues. "We aspire to make the world divine! But we begin with ourselves. Our commitment is more important than whatever minor life-problems emerge. Daily quandaries mean next to nothing. We aim at spiritual development, but first and foremost we want to be part of the Damanhur municipal, and the community of mankind."

I believe I understand. Anyway, I choose to go on to a different topic:

"How large is the country of Damanhur?"

"The spiritual boundaries are important, not the physical ones," she explains. "Anyone can take part and belong to the magical people, whether they live here or in Norway, but the more active residents live in or around the village of Vidracco and the valley of Valchiussella. In the village there are many people who do not belong to Damanhur, but the mayor comes from Damanhur, and even the majority of those who do not belong with us voted for him."

I sense a certain pride in her voice.

The following evening, I'm in the top of a tree. Maybe not right at the top, but on the terrace of a house built high up in one. *Camaleonte* (Chameleon) lives there together with the trees and the other members of his nucleon. They have several houses spread out among the branches, and between them there are bridges. His nucleon is the caretakers of the sacred forest on top of the hill above the underground temple.

Camaleonte makes music. Actually, it's not so much him; it's primarily the trees. On closer inspection it turns out to be the little children in their pots; the large trees have apparently lost their sense



Symphony for a keyboard, two teenage trees, and a computer. Camaleonte, the conductor (when the trees don't take charge), is partly concealed by the leaves. Apparently one of the trees was a bit off key at the time, yet I found the music pleasant and inspiring.

of melody. The potted trees, on the other hand... He has attached electrodes to the leaves and the roots. Small fluctuations in electrical potential between top and bottom are collected, amplified, and converted to sounds with the help of a computer. Personally, he plays along on a keyboard. The sound is quite melodious and pleasant. The band currently consists of his keyboard and two scruffy

“teenage” bushes. As usual, I’m curious and ask him how cooperative the plants are to work with?

“More often I listen to the trees and adapt my playing accordingly,” he tells me, “but on a good day the trees listen to me. Then it’s I who leads the orchestra.”

The music also has a practical side. It stimulates the plants to grow. The point is *almost* scientifically proven. The present sacred forest consists of relatively young trees planted in recent times; Damanhur would prefer to have a more aged and wild forest, but that takes time. They expect the process should speed up with a little help from the music.

I buy the CD he has released and decide to climb back down before the tree harboring his house grows too tall.

It’s the last evening. I sit in the local café, pondering about how I could fit in here. The table is set with pizza and a jug of Damanhurian wine. The waitress is a lovely Italian girl who, I have been told, is a true child of Damanhur and speaks excellent English. To start a conversation I ask her name and how long she has lived here.

“My name is Menfi,” she says. “I’ve been here ever since I was born fifteen years ago. Will start high school this fall.” I can’t help thinking that women certainly grow up fast in Damanhur. Perhaps music affects their development too.

After returning my glass to the table, and my body to a more relaxed position, I recall the question I had intended to ask: “What is it like to have spent your entire life here in Damanhur?”

“Fine,” she replies smiling, and without hesitating, “but it will be fun to get out. High school is elsewhere. And I want to travel. But most likely I shall return. Life in Damanhur is best.”

I look at her. Does her response simply reflect a commitment to speak positively about the place? No, I believe she is honest, and according to her, I will find the same sentiment in most of the young people of Damanhur.

As she leaves my table, I begin to ponder about what I have learned. I realize that the question I’m trying to answer can be rephrased as: *How do we make mankind divine?*

And the answer? Half the job is done by establishing close and lasting relationships, as in a Stone Age tribe. But what about the other half? There is no button to press that makes people happy and simultaneously turns empathy on and evil off. The solution rests with finding the right measures, the required handles on the pendulum. Damanhur possesses many sensible knacks: the way they greet each other, how they teach community sentiment, their spiritual philosophy with inspiring rituals, places to meet, shared activities, and much more. They have actually created an alternative that works. I doubt that anyone here has heard about human behavioral biology, but they have come up with solutions that fit my theoretical visions. They have dared to try, to fail, and then try again, thus avoiding dogmatic dead ends. I am much more impressed by their practice than by my theories; after all, the real challenge lies in the people, not in the text. No one in Damanhur will claim that they are divine—yet—but most people do seem to lead meaningful and enjoyable lives.

Yes, the dream is still alive, and it has almost transcended reality. At the same time Damanhur is a somewhat peculiar place that might not suit everyone. I wouldn't mind spending more time here, or to come back, but to stay permanently? I would need to learn Italian. Anyway, first I want to check out some other dreams that point in different directions. I have heard about a place far away.

## 6

### Auroville: The City of Tomorrow

I land in Mumbai. There I find a bus heading south that brings me all the way to Puducherry, the closest “real” town. I’m in Tamil Nadu, the state at the bottom of the East coast of India, and equally close to the bottom of world poverty. Once more I seek a paradise, but this time I do so with far less optimism than in Italy. The *City of Tomorrow* they call it. *Auroville*. French was never my favorite subject at school, but I know a few words: *aurore* stands for dawn and *ville* for city. Together the name spells hope not only for a dismal part of In-



Auroville is difficult to spot. I do meet an easy-going Tamil with an oxen wagon coming down the dusty road made of ancient, reddish soil. Life appears to have stopped somewhere long ago. But behind the green walls of vegetation there is more.

dia, but for the whole world; a new dawn shall break the horizon. The aspiration, however, is formulated by people from another continent.

It's utterly dark by the time I arrive in Puducherry, and the dawn seems very far away. The unmistakable odor of eternal urine and feces is only occasionally broken by that of rotten fish—but not at all disturbed by the heavy doses of exhaust wafting over the cracked tarmac. I'm not sure I really want to see the dawn. Not here anyway.

The immediate solution is to escape into a bar. The lady on the stool next to me looks like a retired prostitute, and she compensates for the stench of the street by applying a solid dose of something reminiscent of products for toilet sanitation. I'm trying to down a lukewarm beer, pondering whether there are any places on Earth further from paradise? Perhaps the same place without the bar might do. Her chemicals deliver a bit of relief for my nose, so I move a tiny bit closer—and realize that she is not retired.

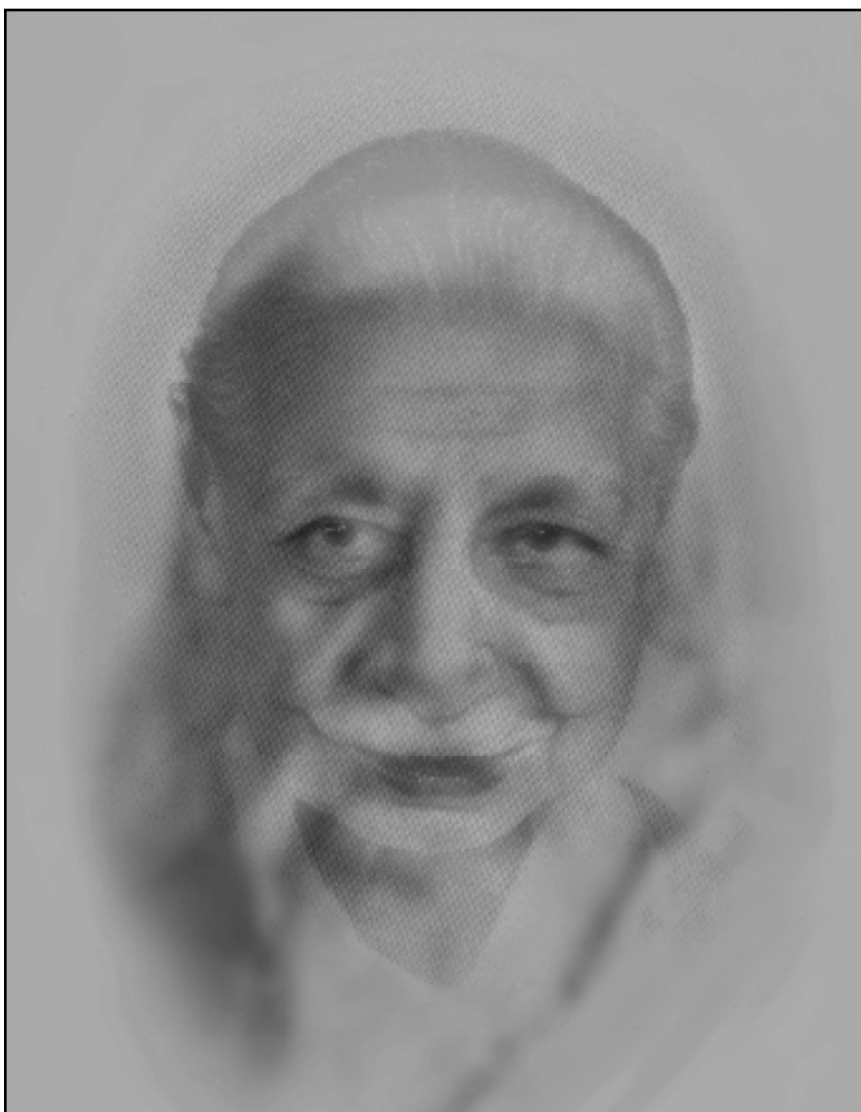
The only things alive in the streets outside are dead cats and dogs. Their insides are teeming with life and so horrid looking that even the vultures refuse to come close. I decide that a glorious dawn is unlikely to reach this city in the near future. Then again, it's late October; I suppose everyone tends to get a bit depressed this time of year.

The sun does rise—somewhere behind the smog—and offers enough heat and light to awaken the maggots, mice, and other vermin. I grab the first taxi available hoping the driver knows where to go; and, after a few blocks, praying that he knows how to drive. In pure joy at having a foreign passenger—everybody knows they are easily fooled into paying way too much—he races out of town scattering dead and half-dead dogs along the way. Only where there are people blocking the street does it delight him to blast the horn. I'm happy to pay twice the fare just for the chance to get away, to move into a new day and, hopefully, into a different city.

*Auroville*—a clever name for a peculiar idea. A place that has the nerve to declare that they are the solution to all of mankind's present



and future problems. The first dawn of a new world. I am as skeptical as ever, even when the cabbie says farewell to the last shantytowns of Puducherry to spew its dirty exhaust on greener pastures.



The French woman Mirra Alfassa became a twin soul, and a kind of wife, for the Indian guru Sri Aurobindo. Together they founded the City of Tomorrow. Hold the photo close to see her, and move it far away to see him.

The countryside looks delightful, with sacred trees and holy cows, some of them drawing the plows for dark-skinned farmers so thin that their loincloths seem ready to drop off. At the very least there is a new dawn for my curiosity. I love people with different thoughts, new notions, and the willpower not only to speak out, but also to act out. With Puducherry for comparison, it should be easy to erect something that can pass as an improvement.

It turns out that the city is hard to find—even after I have found it! True, there are some roads. They consist of pitted red soil cutting through a thick green forest, but with few exceptions they are deserted. The occasional people I see are Tamils who do not look like they belong to any city—and certainly not the city of tomorrow. Later, as I get to know the place, I do find other humans, but they are mostly travelers like me with curiosity and a few days or months to spare. The 5,000 Tamils who are employed in Auroville, and who do most of what needs to be done in a city, constitute the vast majority. Real inhabitants are almost as rare as retired prostitutes in Puducherry. According to official information there should be more than two thousand of them, but I realize eventually that many are living elsewhere at least part of the year.

The houses are arguably even more hidden than the citizens. There are actually a lot of homes, but they are wrapped in the greenery of the forest and spread out over the seven square miles of land that the city possesses. A front door is indeed a rare sight. Then again, according to the city charter, “Auroville belongs to nobody in particular.” Back home in Norway I have a house in the woods and a forest that is actually part of the city of Oslo—so I certainly prefer the green wrapping compared to the combination of cracked concrete and dead dogs in Puducherry. Any city in the Stone Age, if there ever had been one, would also be situated in the forest. But the cities of the future—all spread out among trees and meadows? One can always hope, but the odds for that to happen are probably better in Heaven than on Earth.

Sure enough, when I finally discover some occasional buildings in the woods, they ooze of style and money. The charter goes on to

state: "Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole." Should I demand a part? Auroville aims to reach a population of 50,000, but it is currently one of the slowest growing cities in the world. This is a little puzzling considering that the place is surrounded by the world's fastest growing nation. Even in Norway one would hesitate to claim that a few thousand souls constitute a city; in India they barely qualify as a village.

With the help of some local Tamils, my taxi driver finally finds the Central Guesthouse where I'm welcomed with herbal tea and open arms. The room they give me is clean with a lingering fragrance of incense and meditation. At the back, there is a large glass door facing a small, semi-private garden. Behind it are more trees.

"Something like this can only happen in India," says Fabienne who is French and has lived here for more than seven years. I have finally met one of the residents, a sympathetic and well-kept woman of forty or so, who looks like she knows what she wants. Her husband came with the "wagon train" that founded the city in 1968. The first missionary testimonials drifting out from Auroville struck like lightning in dry hemp among the alternative-hungry hippies of Central Europe. People packed their derelict VW buses and idealized 2CVs and moved east toward the dawn.

Fabienne continues with a bit more pressure in her words: "Is there any other country with a government that grants money to do such a thing? An experiment with the intention of building a new world on a spiritual basis?"

Maybe not. Especially considering that Auroville officially belongs to humanity and not to the nation of India, where it happens to reside, and which covers an appreciable part of the city's budget. Actually, Auroville receives funding from a variety of sources—including UNESCO that bases its support on the statement, "A city the world needs." Auroville has also secured the patronage of people like the Dalai Lama and the Prince of Wales. This is a serious effort! And it certainly is "alternative," although I still don't quite understand what sort of alternative. What are they trying to do?

Fortunately, Fabienne has not given up on enlightening me. Auroville is about building a society based on communal living,” she concludes with a smile.

I am not sure if I ever came across a society without some form of communal living, and I can’t recall a city where the community was better hidden—at least for curious newcomers—but still I can guess what she means. It is possible to develop communal feelings without the crowdedness of a metropolis, and I do not exclude the possibility that solidarity sticks deeper here than in my hometown of Oslo.

Mauna has been here even longer. She wears her gray hair with dignity. I meet her at one of the local cafes where the tea is boiled using solar energy, the cookies are so healthy there is no recognizable taste, and the Internet is almost free. Like most residents, she speaks fluent English and French in addition to a reasonable dose of Tamil.

“The task is to develop a new form of consciousness. It involves digging into your own mind and finding the unity with all living things,” she says in a last effort to enlighten me.

I’m still puzzled.

After more than thirty years of hard digging, she admits quietly that even for her it might be a bit further to go. I wish her good luck. She seems fit for her age and might easily pass her hundredth birthday. Hopefully she will get where she wants—wherever that may be—either before or after her demise.

The story began in 1914. Mirra Alfassa arrived from France and began an intimate relationship with a local guru named Sri Aurobindo. (His name adds an extra layer to the choice of name for their city.) Mirra grew up in Paris where she trained to be an artist, but her spiritual yearnings pulled her to India. She found in Sri Aurobindo everything she searched for. With spiritual inspiration from him, she began to dream—while asleep according to the story—about a future society based on divine consciousness. Then in 1968 her dream was fulfilled in the dawning of a city. The place should blend the best of East and West: India’s spiritual depth and Europe’s scientific mastery. Today she is referred to as Mother with a capital M.

At first it was only a tree.

To find a suitable spot for the city, Mirra went north from Puducherry—into the arid plains—until she came across a banyan tree. There she rested for a while, and then she founded a city—or perhaps a new country. The enormous tree is still standing and serves as a spiritual center. It's an awesome piece of nature. The branches of the old trunk together with several new trunks shooting from the branches cover an area of at least sixty feet in diameter. Banyan trees are important, not so much because they carry a kind of semi-edible fig, but because they provide shade and thus a place where people can come together and talk quietly about important issues. The residents of Auroville, along with the more common species of tourists and visitors, still flock around the column-like trunks of this particular tree. These days, however, the focus is on what lies beyond.

The first thing that meets visitors here in the heart of Auroville



MOTHER's temple. The old banyan tree is embedded in an evergreen lawn. Behind it stands the huge temple. My first perception is that a flying saucer has paid a visit and left a giant, golden egg.

is a medium-sized amphitheater located the distance of a long stone's throw across a manicured lawn from the banyan tree. In the amphitheater there is an urn with soil from 124 countries—a symbol of international harmony. The earth was dug up, brought here, and mixed by representatives from each country at the ceremony that marked the opening of the city. Today the theater is, according to my informants, a place where citizens gather to do anything from conducting parliamentary meetings to performing a play.

Apparently these things do not happen very often. At least they didn't while I was there. But perhaps that is because there's something else. If you stand at the top of the theater, and let your eyes move across the acres of super-green, water-lavished lawn, you will see an egg! It rises high above the famous banyan tree. Not just any egg, it is a hundred-foot-tall, gold-plated version—most likely visible from space—and venerated by spiritual and non-spiritual beings alike. People come from afar just to experience this magnificent monument. It's the spiritual heart of the city—and the dream—referred to as *Matrimandir*. The name is Sanskrit and means *mother's temple*. In this case, it's not simply a mother with capital M, but MOTHER in all capitals. The universal and all-embracing MOTHER of the universe and all sacred beings. I stand there, appropriately in awe, and expect small green men from Mars to pop out of the egg at any time—perhaps inviting people to join them in the Age of Aquarius.

Once, some 2,500 years ago, Prince Siddhartha Gautama sat underneath *his* banyan tree. He sat and sat for a very long time, until he was enlightened and given the corresponding name Buddha. The world moved on. In Auroville they have reinforced the banyan tree effect with this magnificent egg. It's an incubator, I learn—not to breed men from Mars but to facilitate meditation. Inside, after climbing stairs and passing narrow hallways, you will find a large white chamber—the place for meditation. The building is a newly invented contemplation device, but the intention has not changed much since the days of the Buddha. Meditation is the “way,” it's the ingredient required to lead people toward divine, or universal, con-

sciousness. By meditating, with or without a dose of spirituality, it is possible to reach a sense of *unity with everything* and, hopefully, a corresponding solidarity with all fellow human beings and other living creatures. You might think this sounds eccentric, or that the idea would serve better in an episode of *Star Trek*, but I'm intrigued. Should I believe in this weird idea?

There is reasonably strong scientific evidence that meditation can improve your mental health. My *happiness exercise* app for iPhone is based on meditative techniques. But to change a city—not to mention the world?

In slightly more scientific terms, one could say that Matrimandir is an incubator of social capital, and if there is one thing this planet really needs, it is a lot of social capital.

According to Mother (with the medium-sized M), you can achieve a similar streak of enlightenment by engaging in community work, which is a reasonable statement coming from a woman erecting a city.

My hostess at the guesthouse introduces me to Gomathi. She is about twenty years old and newly married—a grown up, pretty woman who is intelligent and speaks excellent English. Both she and her husband are Tamils; they grew up in a nearby village and now live and work in Auroville. I want to find out what the Tamils think about these “white people” who have come out here to create their personal dream city. Gomathi, along with several thousand other locals, do most of the routine work, yet few of them are citizens.

As a first surprise, I learn that most Tamils who work there do not want to become citizens: “It means less freedom,” says Gomathi. She objects strongly to my suggestion that the Tamils are taken advantage of. On the contrary, she claims, the real citizens of Auroville do not solely spend their time searching for universal consciousness—even if that may be challenging enough. They create schools, health centers, and development projects that benefit the whole region. They have started a number of small businesses, created work opportunities, and turned the landscape from more or less wasteland into a lush forest.

“Auroville has done a lot for us Tamils,” says Gomathi as she smiles and shows me the symbol of Auroville drawn with henna in her left palm. The symbol looks like a cross between a flower and a wagon wheel, and I understand it symbolizes the creation and development of the city. I sit on the floor in her home. It is a small apartment allocated to Gomathi and her family, which includes mothers, grandmothers, mothers-in-law and occasional children who pop up from out of nowhere, as well as chickens, chickens in law, a rooster, a few dogs, and, I believe, I caught a glimpse of a cat or two. The floor is covered with food in my honor. The mildly intrusive dogs and chickens are gently waved away from the palm leaves full of all sorts of cheerfully colored Indian snacks. It tastes good, but I’m a bit worried as to whether my stomach will praise the meal the following day.

Henna coloring doesn’t last forever—especially not in the palm.



Gomathi is proud to work for Auroville. That’s why she painted the city’s symbol with henna color on the inside of her hand.



I ask Gomathi about the future. "We like this place. Maybe one day we will become citizens of Auroville, but if we can afford it, we would rather buy a house outside. It would be nice to have a place that is all ours, perhaps with a garden. If we both work hard, perhaps we save money."

Gomathi and her family seem happy the way their lives have turned out. I'm sure they someday will fulfill their dreams and find even more happiness—with or without universal consciousness. Just like my stomach. It's definitely happy the next day, even without any consciousness. This is a rare treat; I have travelled a lot and India is the only country that consistently turns my stomach inside out. As they say here, "Happiness is a dry fart!" Perhaps Auroville has had an impact on the sanitary conditions of the region as well.

It is important to live in harmony not only with your inner nature, but also with the surrounding nature. In Auroville they put great emphasis on sustainable development: Energy sources must be renewable, and organic agriculture and industry must be both ethically and environmentally responsible. They are clever. Everything from coffee shops to soap boileries and incense foundries seem to work well. They generate jobs, they create useful products, and profit is plowed back into the town. I'm more uncertain about their political system. The guiding principle is that mental training should suffice; this should lead society forward and make traditional politics more or less obsolete!

"Once the proper divine awareness is there, other problems will resolve themselves," claims Fabienne.

A kind of spiritual anarchy. What she means to say is that when compassion and communal responsibility drifts to the surface of the human mind, as a result of time spent meditating in the golden egg, or elsewhere, everybody will work toward what is best for everybody. When people engage themselves in the community, and in each other, conflicts evaporate like water from the soil in the dry season. I find the idea appealing. They are building a city on social capital obtained by self-realization through meditative practice! Perhaps a

somewhat esoteric idea, most certainly so for the ears of my hometown city council, but if nobody tried, who can say it's impossible? Auroville has, after all, broad support from the outside world. And from me?

Yes, I like the idea. It reflects a positive attitude, and an interesting experiment. They have been around for a while, so can they at least claim a "proof of principle?"

I sense a profound vacuum with regard to decision-making. Auroville has more than 200 homeless citizens, but when I was there they had not built any new living quarters in the past three years. The construction of Matrimandir temple and the surrounding park area, however, had been going on more or less continuously since the founding of the city. I heard some cautious comments that perhaps more money could be allocated to homes, and does the city really need this monumental edifice? After all, they already have this monumental tree offering meditational shade as a gathering point. Personally, I prefer to meditate on the nearby beach.

Well, did Oslo really need a new Opera House? There is definitely a shortage of affordable housing in my home city as well. Then again, the Opera House, situated more or less in the sea, is a beautiful building that is visited by lots of people who have no intention of ever listening to the music inside. Perhaps it helps lift the soul of Oslo, and perhaps it's actually more useful when it comes to lubricating the wheels of society than all the oil it cost to build it.

What about this feeling of "unity with all." It's a mantra I have heard in a variety of contemplative and religious practices. Supposedly it is a state of mind that not only offers deep bliss, but also brings forth compassion and responsibility—which is what Auroville wants citizens to find. Maybe it's just a feeling—something going on inside your head—but then again, emotions are not to be underestimated; after all, they are what largely determine our behavior. Another Indian guru, Maharishi Yogi, explained to the Beatles a long time ago, that if he could get an adequate share of the Earth's population to meditate, then peace would descend upon the planet. At about that time, I received my first lessons in meditation by one of his disciples. The claim has so far not been refuted. Auroville is

working to obtain evidence, and for this purpose Matrimandir plays a key role.

I sense that the temple is more important for Auroville than the Opera House is for Oslo, but my assessment might be influenced by the fact that I enjoy meditation more than this somewhat old-fashioned form of upper-class entertainment.

Unfortunately, the City of Tomorrow is struggling to become a city of the present. The rarity of citizens is the minor problem; a greater cause for concern is the underground water table in the area that drops at an alarming rate. During the rainy season, there is no problem. But what falls down has a tendency to hurry back to where it came from. So they dam up the rivers and do what they can to retain the rain because swelling rivers move not only water, but take the topsoil along—all the way to the Bay of Bengal and beyond. Conse-



Plant a tree! I contribute by making sure this little bush without a name (I don't know her name), ends up in fertile soil. Whether or not "my" consciousness ever reaches heaven, I throw in a prayer for my little tree to get there.

quently, planting trees has been a main priority for Auroville. The trees not only keep water and soil where they belong; they also create a pleasant local climate. You need not move far outside Auroville to see how it could have been—and how it was only a few decades ago.

Yet, the bit of prosperity that has befallen the region has had its repercussions. Free electricity for the farmers is a handy way of gathering votes for local elections, but in combination with subsidized pumps, the consequences are not surprising. Water is precious in India, and as sure as the sun shines above, there is water below—if one digs deep enough. That is, deeper than your neighbor, and deeper than the year before. The local farmers have not found universal consciousness, and planting trees does not feed hungry children. In order to avoid the tragedy of the commons, one needs to dig even deeper into the human mind. Auroville is working on it.

Auroville has achieved a lot, and not solely in terms of buildings, industry, and infrastructure. As the days pass, I begin to sense an aura of compassion. They have a community spirit, at least a lot more than a similarly-sized village in Norway, and Auroville has undoubtedly been a source of enrichment for the Tamils living in the area. But will they ever save humanity?

The citizens are not randomly selected, and to be admitted requires a serious and sustained commitment. A relevant question is, therefore, whether the positive feelings that float around are due to local advances in divine consciousness—or just a selection of people with suitable attitudes. Furthermore, even to the extent that they really have created something locally, it's a giant leap to do so globally. Perhaps problems do evaporate in a meditative state, but can this state be maintained around the clock? There are so many other aspects of the human mind, and some of the more nasty ones tend to get their share of attention. A fervent meditative rain is required to keep the entire Earth saturated.

Neither Fabienne nor Mauna hide the fact that the place has its share of conflicts. Besides questions as to building projects, there are considerable differences in ideology. Even supposedly minor issues, such as whether one should use a bike with or without a motor, re-

quires as much energy as the more fundamental issues. Actually, I consider this observation to be a positive sign; when people engage themselves in minor matters, it means they do engage themselves in the community and have the required energy to care. Moreover, it suggests a lack of more serious matters.

Central Guesthouse rents both types of transport for a cheap price. Although I started out with ideals—which meant pedals—my quality of life improved a few notches when I switched to a moped. The distances are considerable, and although the trees provide shade, bicycling left me as dry as barren soil on a sunny day.

It is unfortunate if ideology takes the form of a straitjacket. This is not only my thought, but is one shared with about half the population here. Religious propaganda is, in principle, prohibited in Auroville. Most people consider the local ideology as spiritual but not religious; they fear that if preachers really get the hang of it, free-thinkers will lose their rightful rights. Then again, a substantial percentage has more divine visions; they tend to blend Mother with the medium M and MOTHER in even larger letters and demand faithfulness to Mirra's and Sri Aurobindo's visions. The visions are recorded in various scriptures and are sustained by a kind of priesthood based around the tomb of the two in Puducherry.

It's not easy to get everyone to agree, but on the other hand, neither is it necessary. Peace and prosperity are possible across a wide range of opinions—consensus simply makes things easier.

What would happen if a dark-skinned hippie from India were to occupy a substantial portion of the Norwegian west coast, for example, in the traditional and industrious region referred to as Sunnmøre, and proclaim that this, from now on, is a separate country independent of the king and local community council? Would the government endorse the initiative as part of an effort to save humanity and consequently open its purse? I think the answer would be a resounding "No." Even though Norway, in my opinion, supports many initiatives with less potential for helping humanity than Auroville. I commend India for perhaps being a bit more open-minded than my own breed, and I praise Auroville for the effort.

As with the dream of Damanhur, the Auroville experiment is alive. The idea of “divine consciousness”—in the form of a commodity that brings out the best in people—is fascinating, and who knows, maybe one day they can turn it into reality. Whether the call is for meditation, or other tools of the community trade, it is important to try. In the case of therapists engaged in helping people with individual quandaries, success depends not so much on psychological theory, but on trying and on having a compassionate person available to offer support in the healing process. Auroville has equivalent qualities on a community level, and they do breed empathetic and engaged people.

Meditators don’t make war—at least not while meditating—and meditation really has a potential to affect the human mind in a positive way. On the other hand, the meditator does not dig up potatoes or catch fish from the sea while meditating. I’m not sure the people



The world is to be saved by meditation. In Auroville there is always an opportunity to sit down—preferably with fellow humans. Here I find the light, while others meditate outside the Central Guesthouse.

at Sunnmøre would skip fishing and furniture production to serve the Indian hippies. And, although the starting point is very different here in India, I'm not sure the present division of labor is the best long-term strategy for saving the world.

Auroville is no doubt more suitably situated here in India, and, if nothing else, the place has created a comfortable life for aging hippies, mostly French but with a fair share of Germans. The old-timers live in the finest villas behind the tallest trees—when they are not back in Europe to relax and drink tastier versions of wine. They do, however, deserve credit; at the very least for improving the lives of the local Tamils and, in my mind, for trying out an alternative strategy of living.

I return home with heartfelt love for the vision behind Auroville, but also with a sense that human nature threatens to overthrow the place. Their grasp on the pendulum might be faltering, and gravity is stronger than grand visions. By "human nature" I mean here the more selfish attributes. It requires a sustained effort to maintain universal solidarity, not the least in aging humans finding life reasonably comfortable without worrying about others. Auroville appears to be heading toward a class distinction between veterans and newcomers. I believe in meditation as a tool, but a bit more is required to create the city of tomorrow. Then again, Auroville might actually prove to possess what is required. I patiently wait for the future of the City of the Future.

Whatever direction the future takes, Auroville should be evaluated for what it has achieved, not for the remaining distance to Nirvana. The place really deserves a star in my grade book. I want to go back, but realize that to stay here I should have arrived forty years ago. Perhaps I should look somewhere closer to my home country? In Auroville I met a woman who whispered to me about angels.



The only angel I am sure I saw at Findhorn. She looks a little lost, but that might be because she has a broken wing and is unable to fly away from her God-forsaken, lonely spot behind a shed. Eventually I realize that angels can thrive anywhere.



## Findhorn: An Ecolife for Angels

Spring has arrived in Scotland. There are small buds on the branches, the sky is deep blue, and the flowers do what flowers do. I arrive at the small village of Forres with lots of energy and a positive attitude to all sorts of alternatives. At lunchtime I enter Cluny Hill College. I'm ready to transform my life, because that is one of the things they do here. In the morning I felt so great that I joined a local orienteering competition. It's one of my passions. Unfortunately, I missed the final post and was disqualified, but that was probably because I had not yet gotten in touch with the angels the place is so famous for. I understand that they fly high and low all over the area, and they would probably have guided me to victory, if we had only been properly introduced.

Forres is located in the far north of Scotland. From the top of a hill I see the distant North Sea. Before that, behind green pastures with white dots of sheep, there is a small fishing village called Findhorn. Right next to it is a totally different kind of village belonging to the *Findhorn Foundation*. This place, with its 400 inhabitants, is what most people associate with the name Findhorn. It's to this place that I journey as a pilgrim.

Cluny Hill also belongs to the Findhorn Foundation, but lies on the outskirts of Forres some eight kilometers inland. The huge building is something in-between an English mansion and a full-scale castle. Some of the members live here, but the house also offers first-class ecological living for people like me who want to learn how to transform my life even more. The garden complements the house. It's dotted with flowers and meditative spaces; yellow daffodils pop up like elves even in the darkest and most secluded corners, while prominent trees provide shady areas without blocking the view from



Cluny Hill functions as a sort of headquarters for Findhorn. The atmosphere creates expectations not only of angels, but also noble phantoms, ghosts, and all sorts of apparitions. I like it.

my window on the first floor. Right across the yard looms a huge cherry tree in full glory; at every puff of air, pink white petals fly off like angels. These, however, fall to the ground, but I hope to meet some with more powerful wings to carry me away to life's sweetest spots. For the moment the leaves will have to do. Behind the house, there are wooded hills where spiritual paths lead you in endless spiritual circles for as long as it takes.

I am to spend a week at Cluny as a participant in a course they call *Experience Week*. The course runs pretty much every week throughout the year and provides a taste of all Findhorn has to offer in terms of angels and related delights.

There are twelve of us participants, mostly women. They are more or less my age, I think, but I soon realize that most of them are younger.

Shirley and Jyan are our tutors. Shirley is Scottish and looks Scottish, with long reddish-brown hair and a face so pale you only

find it in true Scottish women. I don't know where Jyan comes from, but she worked as an actor in her previous life and looks like an elf materialized as a human. Her red hair is stunningly chaotic considering it's only an inch long. It draws the attention away from her face, which has the ambiance of good-natured horror. Based on my first impression, she would be the perfect actor for the rendering of a Dickens novel.

Shirley explains that she and Jyan are *Facilitators*—not teachers. They are here to facilitate our transformation. I have not yet completely understood what the end product of the transformation is supposed to be, but I have prepared myself mentally to end up as anything from an elf to a troll. It's all fine with me.

They hand out a folder with relevant information about Findhorn. On the outside is printed: *Expect a Miracle*. Upon reading it, I'm even more uncertain as to what to expect, but I most certainly would love to meet the angel of my life! On the other hand, if they set the bar too high, we are almost certain to fail. I decide that my primary ambition is to find out what Findhorn is all about. This seems like an appropriate aspiration. Any transformations or other miracles can be considered a bonus.

"As with so many other stories of creation, this one starts with a garden," Jyan explains.

Her voice is fantastic. It has the fragrance of relaxation combined with deep-felt compassion. Already after the first short introduction, one of the participants decides to tell everybody how enthralled she is with Jyan's voice. A couple of the others are about to fall asleep.

It turns out that in this case the garden belonged to Peter, Eileen, and Dorothy. Together they ran a hotel in the building where we are now gathered. Economically, the operation could perhaps have run more smoothly, but the main problem was that the three had a rather unorthodox relationship with hotel management. In 1962 they were consequently fired and forced to move to a small caravan down at Findhorn. The garden was a necessity because they happened to lack money for food.

At that point they discovered Dorothy's particular skills. She communicated with the plants, and thus ensured that the vegetables

thrived. At first it was just the peas, but she soon realized that all plants have a spiritual side that one can tune in to. The proof, according to official sources, appeared in the form of cabbages of forty pounds or more. They popped out of the sandy and barren earth—according to the same sources—as a consequence of Dorothy’s smooth talk with the plants’ guardian angels.

Eileen developed a similar ability to communicate with the guardian angels of human souls. Peter did not share this faculty, but by being charismatic and tuned to the practical aspects of a life with angels, he managed their affairs so that the guidance stemming from the two women led to appropriate measures being taken. The combination proved to be almost divine; word got out, and people flocked to the place. A congregation was born.

Neither the official brochures nor our facilitators go into detail about the prehistory of the founders. By talking with other residents, I find out that both Peter and Eileen had separate marriages before they merged. Peter’s seductive abilities got Eileen to leave five children and a spouse who worked at the local Royal Air Force base, which happened to be next door to the caravan. Eileen broke completely away from her past life and acquired three new children with Peter.

Who says prophets must be as pious as Jesus and the Virgin Mary? Perhaps it is best when spiritual leaders show human qualities; it makes life easier for sinful mortals like me.

The caravan is still there. A tiny bubble of a home painted green below and white above. The place must have been a hefty space for three adults and three children, not to mention the angels. The kitchen garden is also still in place on one side of the wagon; on the other side, a house for communal meditation has appeared.

Contact with nature and spirits still form a backbone for this community, a lot is based on the peculiar powers of the three founders. Dorothy created a unity with nature by means of her contact with the spiritual beings that exist in all living things, Eileen focused on the soul and emphasized meditative techniques, while Peter’s motto was: *Work is love in action*. The combination has drawn

many gifted and creative people to Findhorn. They work together and put (at least to a reasonable degree) community priorities ahead of personal desires.

Work is needed, of course, and should, according to Findhorn's philosophy, be performed with joy and commitment. I agree. Their attitude is fully consistent with my understanding of behavioral biology. All natural, life-sustaining activities are potentially accompanied by joy—courtesy of the genes, but delivered by the brain. Enjoyment is the brain's means to make sure you attend to the needs of the genes, and the brain is happy to dish out rewards for more or less anything it (or you) defines as useful. However, in order to harvest anything, you need to tune in to whatever drops of pleasure drip your way.

I assume that in the Stone Age, man went hunting or gathering bananas with the same true enthusiasm. Of course, there were no vacuum cleaners or dishwashers at the time or a house to be painted, weeds to be removed, or screws that only need to be screwed. Perhaps not all current tasks are equally easy to enjoy, but then again, I believe the social setting means more to job satisfaction than what the task involves. At Findhorn they proved very clever at creating the right social environment for required activities.

My group is, of course, considered part of the community—for the time being. The aim of the week is, after all, to offer us a taste of how it feels to live in this human anthill. In the morning we all participate in the ongoing work at Findhorn. Shop or factory owners should take notice; here people pay to be allowed to work! It might, however, be difficult to employ the same strategy in the local shopping mall. At Findhorn our participation feels right, but you need to be rather ingenious to cultivate the same attitude among cashiers at a supermarket.

Before we begin anything, it's necessary to satisfy the needs of our inner spirits. Where two or more gather for work, the job requires a bit of attunement, that is to say, an "adaptation" of body and soul to each other and to the task ahead. We must be in line and in tune



We are almost ready to give the plants and angels in the greenhouse our attention, but first a bit of “attunement.” Attunement has been an export commodity from Findhorn that has been picked up by other ecovillages. It’s a process I immediately appreciate.

with our inner angels for the activity to have any meaning. It’s all taken care of rather quickly. We form a circle and grab the hands of our neighbors, people say their name, a short note as to how you feel, or maybe where you come from depending on how acquainted the group is. The person conducting the activity then adds some appropriate words. To conclude, the conductor sends a handshake around the ring.

The process establishes a level of social connectedness. This is important not only for personal quality of life, but also for the quality of society. In fact, according to our facilitators, attunements cover several functions. One is to get in touch with our inner self and the “angels” that happen to hover around there (or, for the less spiritually inclined, to get in touch with our feelings). Another is to share our needs and concerns with others in order to learn to know, and perhaps help, each other. I believe the process might also induce a

sense of sharing personal burdens with those around you; the weight is distributed among the people whose hands are connected. Presumably we have an innate tendency to assume that people we share our concerns with also stand by us—not solely in physical terms, but as true support. Moreover, any form of physical contact has togetherness value. The tiny bits of intimacy involved in holding hands move people closer to each other. When the task or work is finished, we set up a similar circle, albeit with less talk, that is designed to “disconnect.”

The first attunement of my Experience Week group is over and we are about to select work tasks.

“Findhorn is a piece of clockwork in which all the parts have to act in concert for the clock to follow time,” Jyan starts out with her most appealing voice. Then she moves on to describe the work that needs to be done. Things get a bit more complicated. She wants to form five work groups: building maintenance, kitchen service, gardening, caring for vegetables, and cleaning. *Then we choose.* Not surprisingly, it turns out that gardening is more popular than household chores; after all, the choice takes place in the absence of the occasional rain clouds that slide across the landscape. Obviously all tasks need to be cared for, but it is also important that each person makes a choice tuned to his or her inner voice. A somewhat tricky situation evolves. I eagerly wait to see whether Jyan can resolve it.

She allows everyone to speak on behalf of his or her inner voice. Then she offers some feedback, such as “it is important to devote yourself to the community” and “are you really sure the vegetables are what suits you the most.” Subsequently she lets each person have a second go in interpreting his or her inner voice. And another round. And one more. And indeed, after slightly more than an hour, all the work groups are staffed.

If I had not been curious as to how Jyan would deal with the situation, I might have proposed to draw lots. In retrospect, I realize that lottery is not in line with the Findhorn philosophy; chance doesn’t respect people’s inner voices. Perhaps more important, there is something about the process we go through. It might actually be worth the time spent. The process builds community feelings by

reminding people we are collectively responsible for getting things done. It feels good to be willing to sacrifice your own preference for the betterment of the group. Nevertheless, I guess most participants would have considered a draw to be more fair, rather than letting those who prove the most difficult to manipulate end up with the more attractive jobs.

I end up in the vegetable garden—dragging along a hint of guilt for not volunteering for kitchen service. But the spinach begs to be harvested, the angels are ready, and I decide to enjoy the pleasure of harvesting food for the many mouths to feed.

Most of the vegetables live in greenhouses located in a huge garden down at Findhorn. The place inspires a relaxed effort. At one end there is a pond with water lilies; at the other end some sheds for tools as well as a room to eat lunch on wet or hot days. Between the two ends, horses graze while dogs and cats run around. Personally, I look for angels.

Finally I find one of them! She is hidden between some bushes in a dip just beyond the tool shed. Unfortunately she has lost one of her wings and appears a bit disheveled and scruffy. I feel sorry for the poor creature, but there is not much I can do. She is made of heavy metal, and I doubt that she could ever fly. Not quite the life of an angel that I had in mind.

As the spinach is finding its way to the kitchen, I plant lettuce, pull weeds, and repair frames for the greenhouse. It is varied and meaningful work in the company of nice people. All in all, twenty of us this day. I do not find any more angels, but there are plenty of strange and interesting human creatures of all varieties of age and nationality. Some have come here just for the opportunity to work in the famous gardens of Findhorn. Those of us from Experience Week are there only in the morning, while the other lucky lot is allowed to work both morning and afternoon. Of course, they pay a bit more for this privilege.

Michael works as a guide, and he takes us on a tour of Findhorn. He grew up here along with Shirley. Both felt at some point a desire for





Michael is an easygoing, angel-like guide, as witnessed by the added set of wings.

getting away, but after experiencing the outside world for some years, both chose to come back. Not only did they return to Findhorn, they also returned to each other. Not surprisingly, both agree that this is where happiness resides.

"Peter was a strong leader," Michael explains. "This was important in the beginning, but eventually Peter's strength became an obstacle for initiatives from other people rather than a support. Therefore, he left the place in order for Findhorn to define its own existence." By doing some research, I realize that there is more to the story. Peter went on to new girlfriends, or as it says in the brochure, "to work internationally."

Michael thrives as a guide; he is charming and inspiring and has intelligent answers to complicated as well as sensitive questions. Findhorn is a major tourist attraction, so of course they have well-qualified guides. We stop outside a home where an aging hippie with a gray ponytail pulls weeds in the flowerbed. We tourists snap

photos and movies with sufficient insistence to make even the dandelions blush. I imagine Michael with a tail of Japanese sightseers visiting seven ecovillages in Europe in less than seven days. It doesn't seem right. The idea of Findhorn as an attraction, where strange houses, longhaired men, and amusing anecdotes entertain tourists, does not please me—the message they stand for is worth more.

I am sure Michael could have handled a busload or two of Japanese visitors, but the Korean fellow, Son, who is part of my Experience Week, is a whole other story. He doesn't know a lot of English and is harder to herd than a flock of Scottish wild sheep. Every time we round a corner, someone has to shout out for him, or call him by phone, to make sure he doesn't end up lost in the Scottish Highland. Son experiences the Experience Week through his movie camera. It offers a constant whirr as a backdrop to whatever activities we have, but although the camera is generally present somewhere, he is absent, or at least absentminded, most of the time. I get the feeling that some of us would wish for both him and his camera to move even further away, but I hear no voice raised more than a quarter of a decibel when they suggest he might turn it off.

To qualify to become a full member of Findhorn, and thereby receive a salary rather than having to pay for work, you must complete at least one year of programs. The salary is equivalent, as I understand, to what I would give my children for allowance; yet people keep coming.

"The site has grown simply because it attracts men and women who thrive so well that they end up staying," Michael tells us. There are homes to fit any taste and wallet. Like a realtor he shows us the full range, from ancient caravans to luxurious ecohouses. The better ones are for sale on the open market, the more dubious alternatives are owned by Findhorn. As employees, Shirley and Michael are entitled to free board and lodging, but they may also choose to buy their own quarters. The two can't afford new, state of the art ecohomes and have instead opted for a small shelter in a nearby village.

At first, the locals were rather skeptical of the nascent hippie colony sprouting around Peter, Eileen, and Dorothy's caravan. Michael recalls that the other elementary school children bullied kids from Findhorn, but today the place is quite acceptable—perhaps even high status for the youth—and certainly popular with the local city council. The Findhorn Foundation breeds not only cabbages, but also industry and enterprise. They contribute some five million pounds annually to the municipal treasury.

One afternoon is set aside for play. I like to have fun. The child in me has never been dispensed with; in fact, at home I'm a bit worried that my two adult children are getting too old to play with me. At Findhorn, preferred games involve some form of body contact or alternative ways of getting mentally closer. One option is to shut your eyes and then be assigned an unknown partner who you explore by feeling each other's hands. Alternatively, one person lies down on the floor in a "fetal" position and the other "packs him out," or we come together in threesomes with the instruction to tell something personal that no one else knows.

"You should learn to listen with your heart, eyes and fingers," Jyan says with a voice that reaches us even when she whispers.

"If you need to say no to some activity in order to protect yourself, it's not really a response aimed at the others, but rather a yes to yourself," she continues. "Also, you should use the word 'I', and not needlessly resort to 'we' or 'one'. You ought to present *yourself*, not put your opinions in the mouths of others."

"This is about a transformation, both of you as a person and of the rest of the world," Shirley suggests. "You will become a better person, and you will feel better about yourself." Or, as I read in the official presentation of Findhorn, "The world is healed when people are healed."

I understand that the aim of Findhorn is to bring heaven down to earth. This will be achieved by teaching people to listen to the wisdom that everyone carries inside, and to live in harmony with the "deep intelligence" of mother Earth, but most of all by creating good

relations among people. The transformation they talk about involves changing one's consciousness to enable these things. Meditation, attunement, and the willingness to give of yourself are key means of achieving this goal. The change in consciousness—in the form of compassion for both humans and other living things—should lead to actions and a way of living that preserve both society and nature. In order to improve the odds for success, they have formulated a few statements for people to agree on. They are of the type: "I commit myself to help others and our planet, but realize that I also need to pay attention to my own needs." If you happen to belong to those who find the word "commit" a bit too strong, feel free to insert the word "try." Findhorn has a relaxed attitude about rules.

I believe in what Findhorn stands for. It makes sense and it works, at least here. The twelve of us do really become attached to each other.

We have moved to an alternative activity—*sacred dance*, which is also known as Circle-Dance for those who dislike the idea of anything sacred. The steps are based on folkloric traditions from various parts of the world, particularly the Balkans, but the instructor complements the steps with a deeper spiritual meaning. Three steps forward means to move toward the future, and one step back is just the way life sometimes is. I like dancing. I try to listen to the explanations, but I enjoy the mood and movement without any thoughts about future or past. In my youth, I participated in a small group of dancers who performed choreographies based on ethnic dances.

I sense that not everyone enjoys the ball.

In order to appreciate a stay at Findhorn, it's important to get rid of your inhibitions. Most people have a reasonable dose of self-conceit, perhaps combined with some clumsiness, and a consequent fierce fear of making a fool of themselves. As a behavioral biologist, I believe it has to do with a desire to achieve reputation and status, as well as a desire to fit in with the group, but at Findhorn you ought to curb this tendency. For one, others really don't care about how you dance, or for that matter how you behave, as long as no one is

hurt. If they were to notice anything about you as a person, it's more likely to be your uptight look—not whether your feet move in the wrong direction or your stomach creates some interesting noises. The trick is to be fully present in the activity without reflecting on embarrassment or lack of talent.

One afternoon we have time off, and together with a couple of the others I visit Auriel. She has lived 18 years at Findhorn and has thinning white hair, and she is showing her age, but her mind is obviously quite astute. Moreover, she is a likeable and lovely character as she offers tea in good old-fashioned British style.

Auriel lives in a *spirit container* along with her daughter and her daughter's female companion. The house is round and small, with three floors set up as intervals in a spiral. She talks about her work as a teacher at a local Steiner elementary school and about her close relationship with spiritual beings.

"God is like radio waves," she points out. "They exist everywhere, but you must have the ability to tune in to sense them. It requires that you engage your heart; we need the heart to feel God's presence."

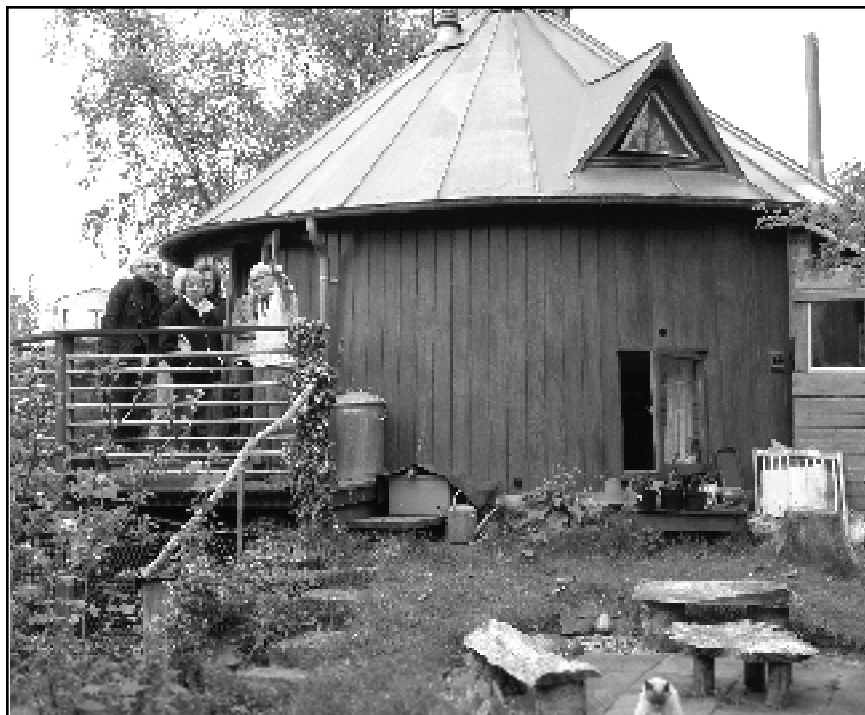
One of us asks question about the three founders. It turns out that only Dorothy is still alive, 90 years old and living at Findhorn. Eileen died here and lies buried under a bush just behind Auriel's container. Peter died in a traffic accident in Germany. I get the feeling that the three founders are still venerated as prophets; voices are soft and faces devotional when we talk about them.

Dorothy studied biology before she started her career as a spiritual leader. Charles Darwin studied theology before ending his days as the world's most famous biologist—neither then nor now need the road between the two subjects be particularly long. I'm a biologist, but have written perhaps the only serious text describing God ever written by an atheist.

Then I get a bit cocky—considering myself an expert on divinity—and consequently burst out that to my knowledge their favored

organ, the heart, has roughly the emotional and spiritual capacity of a tomato. The room suddenly turns quiet. I sense all sorts of gods and ghosts staring at me with sad and solemn eyes. Of course, it was a stupid thing to say. I might write about God, but I certainly lack the required qualities of a true prophet. I nod obediently when flooded with protests against my unsavory and cruel slaughter of the heart.

The term “spirit container” might explain my momentary loss of spiritual intuition as well as the atmosphere of levity I recognize at Auriel’s home. The word “spirits” has, of course, two meanings: spiritual beings and alcohol. The common denominator here is whiskey. The huge barrel the house is made of was originally used for storing whiskey. In technical terms such barrels went by the name “spirit



Auriel (to the right in the photo) lives in a “spirit container.” She points toward the grave of her old friend, Eileen, one of the founders. The tomb is under a lush bush just outside Auriel’s garden.

containers”; thus, their repurposing as homes in Findhorn might perhaps be more properly referred to as “soul containers”—while some would argue that the whiskey still reeks out of the walls and, perhaps, helps the souls reach out of their bodies.

As the days pass by, I calm down. I am less ambitious, not pushing so much to observe the people around me or to write down what I experience. It’s a comfortable feeling. On the other hand, something in me protests that this is not *me*. I’m used to efficiency and continuous engagements. Besides, I have a project to finish, this book, and book projects require a strong impetus. Yet I realize for the first time what they mean when they claim that the place has “energy,” or an aura, and that the energy fosters “positive vibrations” between people. Previously I had a tendency to close my ears to those sorts of terms and consider them New Age gibberish; now I realize that they have content. They stand for something that is real—real in the sense that it affects people’s mind, and not just the minds of others. Mine is also susceptible to the aura of calmness and compassion here at Findhorn. Instead of being stressed with a personal agenda, I adapt to the people around me.

*I am about to be transformed!*

The genuineness of the aura does not necessarily mean anything more than the activation of certain modules in the brain, the point being that this is what matters. Activating the right modules is what adds quality to life. For a community to create an atmosphere of kindness, care, and positive feelings in a way that really impacts on the soul is an art. It’s the *art of life*. Anything else means nothing. The modules activated by compassionate company are among those that provide the best experiences, *so why sacrifice this activity on the altar of science just because someone uses words like aura or angels?*

One evening we go out to the Findhorn River. We meet the stream where the water squeezes through a narrow gorge not far from its final destination. Pan, the Greek god of nature—as well as of sex and fertility—lives here. Or so we are told. It’s a lovely piece of forest surrounding the sparkling stream. If I had been Pan, I too

would have settled down here, just waiting for anyone else to come around. Jyan suggests we go by ourselves in silence to feel the presence of nature. Enormous rocks, even bigger trees, and intricate cliff formations nourish my attempt to sense something divine; the smell of wood in the spring comes to me like the most seductive perfume. Despite numerous visits to all kinds of temples and churches, I still get my strongest “religious” experiences from pure nature. On good days, I really feel a unity with all living things and a devotion that grabs my body like a pleasant chill. It’s almost as though I hear the trees explain why they stretch toward the sky and the flowers whisper to each other about pollination and love. This evening at Findhorn River the feeling grows stronger than ever.

I am somewhat unsure as to whether my sensations deserve the right to be called religious, but I like the idea of sharing this forest with a divine power. A power that permeates all of nature. Call it



Participants at the Experience Week. Son (far right) with the movie camera for once turned off. To the left in front of him is Jyan, and in front of her Shirley (far right of those kneeling). I found my place in the back row.



angels—and feel free to say they speak to my heart—because I like this feeling.

Underneath the mugs of water put on the table at the Cluny dining hall, there are flower-shaped pieces of paper on which someone has written suitable words. To get in touch with other residents, I seat myself at a different table, not just the one where my usual gang eats. I ask one of the veterans about the colorful notes.

I try not to smile when he offers me, as expected, a heartfelt response. It is admittedly difficult for me to believe that water molecules are energized by adding the word “passion” underneath the mug, but my informant is definitely serious. Nor did I ever feel the healing power of crystals—even after listening to several in-depth discussions on the pros and cons of various stones. You don’t have to believe in such theories as a resident of Findhorn, but it certainly helps; you fit in much more easily if these kinds of thoughts fit with your visions. I’m envious of those who do fit in. If I had not been so fond of science, I would be either very jealous or deeply involved in the innermost feelings of water molecules. The convictions permeating people at Findhorn offer several delights—although perhaps some frustration when the water, for whatever reason, is not sufficiently energized or the crystals do not cure your ulcer.

Is it time to call a spade a spade and say that the key feature of Findhorn is a scheme to develop relevant brain modules? Are not angels, meditation, and socializing simply forms of exercise aimed at brain centers offering positive feelings?

There is another question I ought to ask, and this one goes to me: *Is science able to offer better, or even equally good, training regimes?*

I am not sure. I can imagine religious tendencies that are inherent in the human mind and that offer an excellent entry to enjoyable experiences. Perhaps most, or at least many, people need spiritual or metaphysical premises in order for things to feel good. If so, it’s not at all obvious that my science has anything additional to offer: It might just serve as a toy for nerdy minds like mine, while Findhorn has created a proper reality in the form of giving people something substantial and good.

I hesitate to discuss such issues with Jyan or Shirley. It is not

that I think they would take issue with my thoughts, but I probably wouldn't succeed in explaining to them what my science stands for. It is, of course, partly a question of semantics; one might choose to define feelings as something associated with the heart, but then the term "heart" includes bits and pieces of the nervous system. Moreover, they hardly need any scientific update; angels and energized water molecules work fine (or at least better) without one.

Every now and then I ask people at Findhorn whether they enjoy life. The typical answer is a cautious "yes." Many of them are here because they have problems, and at Findhorn they find understanding and support—items that are not easily available from the national health services. If someone struggles, others will care and try to help. I believe the answer should be a resounding "*Yes!*"—at least in the sense that those who have chosen to stay at Findhorn are better off here.

Findhorn is not a cult. At least not in the somewhat negative connotation that suggests brainwashing and submission. As to these two characteristics, I found a lot more cult tendencies in the army, not to mention government agencies. At Findhorn they really want the best for all, and they offer people more than a fair amount of personal freedom. They are spiritual, but not necessarily deeply religious. Some members might see themselves as Pantheists, others as Catholics, Jews, or atheists—one's choice of faith doesn't bother other inhabitants.

Dorothy created something with her use of the word "angels." I think she never thought about physical beings hovering in the air, but rather that every living organism includes something indescribable, a sort of "energy field" that reflects qualities inherent in the individual. After some years, and a lot of bad press, she changed to the word *devas* in order to curb uninspiring critique from The Church and other outsiders. The word is derived from the Sanskrit verb "to shine" and can encompass all sorts of divinities. She felt there is something present in the plants, and I believe that for all practical

purposes it's the same feeling I had by the Findhorn River—a sense of fellowship with all living beings. If you prefer, look at it as activities in the human brain, but I do not find it particularly intelligent to say, “It's *only* feelings.”

A lot is about how one chooses to use words. Whether thoughts go to angels, to the cheese at the breakfast table, or to one's children who have left home, it seems fair to say that the reference is to an activity that takes place in the mass of soft tissue somewhere behind the nose. The point is that words like “angels” and “heart” have certain qualities in our culture. They are useful because they help many people to bring forth feelings they otherwise would be unable to conjure. It should be up to each person to choose words that suit him or her. I like roses. Perhaps they have a bit more to offer if I manage to sense their divine attributes.

For all practical purposes, feelings *are* what matter. Science should have the status of no more than an instrument; it's the feelings that give pleasure. Divinities have perhaps added more quality to people's lives than science ever did simply because they appeal more strongly to certain qualities of the human mind. That is why I no longer laugh at angels; they really do fly around, albeit perhaps primarily inside my brain. Actually, they do exist outside my head, I found one for sale at Findhorn. She is about five inches tall, shaped in clay, and presently rests beside my computer screen in my tower office at home. The color is dirty white, which I suppose suits me, and her feet are buried in a piece of blue sky. When I take her in my hand, I make her fly.

What Findhorn stands for is great. In fact, I agree with most of it—given that I'm allowed to interpret things my own way. The one thing I might object to is that James Watson's book on the discovery of DNA, which earned him a Nobel Prize, is placed on a bookshelf in the library labeled New Age. Otherwise the place is almost *too* perfect. I had expected the hot water to disappear occasionally, or the dinner to be burnt because the chef was occupied with internal transformations, or, at the very least, that I would hear a bit of yell-

ing and heated arguments. All I manage to uncover in terms of conflicts is a note on the bulletin board, "The textbook on miracles is missing from the library."

So what about the miracles we were told to expect? Have they suffered the same fate as the textbook describing them?

Suddenly I see the light. Finally I understand everything that I came here wanting to understand. I have searched high and low for angels, tried to sense the soul of passerine birds, and drifted along with the mood of petals falling from the cherry tree. All this time I focused on the wrong spot. The answer has been there, right in front of my eyes, all the time—or perhaps, rather, just *behind* my eyes. *The people here are the angels.* That is, they behave like angels. They are kind to each other, dishing out hugs, smiles, and "Thank you" at the least of occasions. Well, there might be occasional frowns, but people are far more angel-like than anywhere else I have been. Findhorn has managed to bring forth the angel in the human brain!

In Auroville and Damanhur, it was about making people divine; here they reach out for the angels while I talk about brain modules and pendulums. It is essentially the same, and it's not about religious superstition or brainwashed zombies, but instead is about realistic goals linked to what really matters to humanity. The problem is rather that the hard-boiled atheists and other outsiders have restrictions when it comes to the choice of terms they allow. Findhorn has been referred to as the *Vatican of the New Age*. I have been to Rome, and I am sure which of the two religious centers I would prefer to take on the task of leading the world.

For me it is a miracle what Findhorn has managed to achieve with such a difficult and unruly substance as human beings. All I have managed to create is text; here they produce happiness. It's not just *one* miracle; it's *the* miracle the world needs.

The last night has come. We were told to feel free to obtain something more potent than energized water to drink for dinner. In the beginning I feel a bit like the angel with the broken wing, out of touch and out of place, lost somewhere behind the tool shed of biolo-

gy. Then the wine starts flowing along with the tears of the female participants who feel sad because we are splitting up. Another sign of success. In the middle of the second bottle I am almost sure an angel hovers above me. Or perhaps inside me. Anyway, I am trying to find my way to God, or at least something divine. I decide to try to follow that road—wherever it leads.



It's difficult to find a monastery with a more heavenly position than the L'Abbaye de St Martin du Canigou in the Pyrenees. But does the place satisfy my religious, and rebellious, desires?

## 8

### Ark: A Blessed Alternative

There are indeed many paths to God.

Long before hippies started to stick flowers in their hair, or “ecovillage” became a mantra for alternative-hungry youth, people gathered to live communally with each other—and their Gods. Being religious is like a dream for me. For many years I have sought for signs of God, by visiting all sorts of temples and holy places; or, at the least, I have tried to induce the accompanying sensations in my head. Perhaps I did not try hard enough. I really believe in God’s blessings; that is, I believe religion has an enormous potential when it comes to helping mankind—if we can manage to tame the latent power of religion in the human brain.

My belief is so strong that I have erected a temple in my garden, and in front of it a *Shinto portal*. The portal has two slightly tilted logs, and two crossbars on top, all painted in red as the Japanese Shinto tradition dictates. According to this tradition, the purpose is to offer a gate that lets the Gods in (or out).

From my room in the tower, I look down at these structures just a few divine steps away. I like the sight, but so far I have never seen any Gods either coming or leaving. At the moment, the ground is covered with snow, and I’m contemplating whether Gods create footprints.

Then I have this urge to do something. In countries like Thailand and Laos, it’s expected that people, particularly men, at some point in life have at least one longer stay in a monastery. The time is ripe, although my belief may be less so. I have already obtained a robe, so all I need is a suitable cloister that will accept my vow. Fortunately there are all sorts of convents, both as to type of religion and type of practice. There should be something for all sorts of taste—including mine.

Perhaps my taste is a bit special. Are there really any monasteries suitable for skeptic hedonists? Living only with men gets a bit boring in the long run—actually the same applies to only women—and I am not really sure that I'm ready to wrap up, or cut off, any and all sexual desires. I suppose that at some point in life the idea of celibacy comes more naturally, but I'm not quite there yet. For the time being, I need a somewhat liberal and broadminded convent. I went out to see what I could find.

My hottest monasterian dreams are actually more about fellowship with fellow humans than with God. Besides that, I pray for a place with a view. If my mind cannot reach heaven, I prefer at least a place that offers my eyes a glance.

*L'Abbaye de St Martin du Canigou* lies on a tiny, natural plateau high up in the steep, wooded hills on the French side of the Pyrenees. Construction started in 1009 by Guilfred, the count of Cerdanya, with the purpose of housing devout Benedictine monks. The monks thrived there with a beautiful view over the valley and far away mountains and church spires. They stayed for 800 years. Then the last four kindly asked their bishop for permission to move down into the valley. Old age had left them frail, and they needed more convenient pastures for their final days on Earth.

Today the monastery has been restored, and a somewhat different tradition is in charge. The *Community of the Beatitudes* are newcomers both to the place and to God—the order was formed in 1973. The buildings are pretty much the same as they were a thousand years ago, but the present convent has a slightly modernized approach to serving the Divine. For one, they accept monks and nuns sleeping under the same roof. In my eyes, this is an interesting starting point, so I climb up all the hills, knock on the door, and put on my most pious face.

I am greeted by a nun who is willing to give me both a tour and a talk.

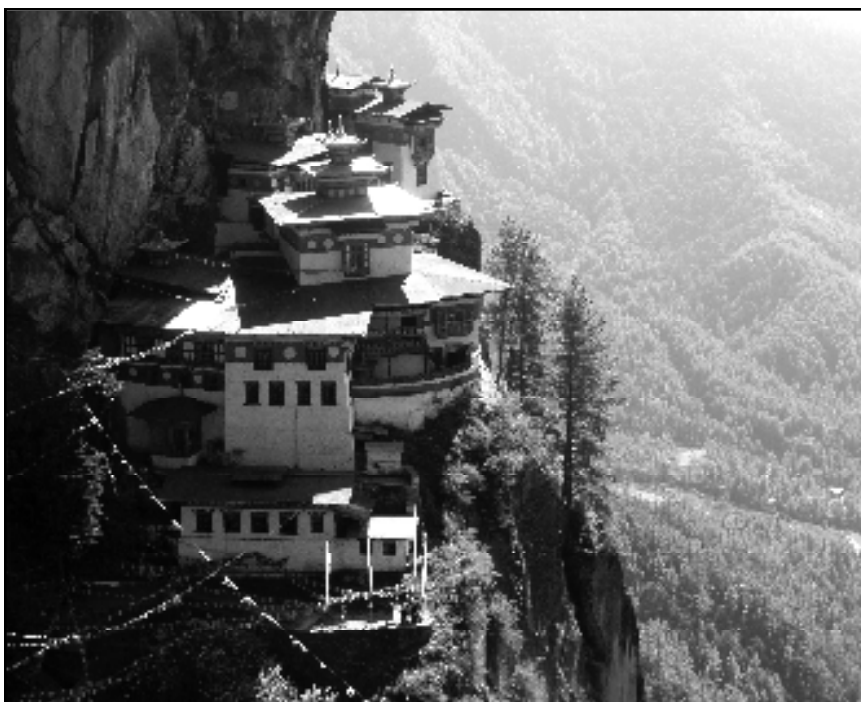
It is really a coed monastery, but the two sexes apparently don't share much apart from prayer. I don't need to, or dare to, ask, but I feel confident that the local God does not appreciate anything in the



direction of eroticism or sex. Although the present inhabitants are a bit more frivolous compared to their predecessors, they still appear a bit too Catholic for my taste. I suppose sex might lose some of its appeal here at the convent, particularly as one needs to get up in the middle of the night for prayer and worship, but an inner turmoil tends to emerge in me when exposed to strict rules of conduct. So I walk down again and conclude that the hike got me as close to heaven as I am likely to get here.

The Buddhists have an even longer tradition of monastic living, so perhaps they have developed a less pietistic view of life. At the very least, they build upon teachings that I have great sympathy for.

*Taktshang* monastery in Bhutan has an even more dramatic location, but perhaps a more relaxed attitude. The buildings appear to be hanging onto the middle of a cliff. Outside their doorstep, the



In Bhutan I find a monastery with an even more spectacular location, and with doctrines far from those of asexual Catholics.

rock moves vertically up and vertically down, so this is no place to wander about in religious complacency. They call it the Tiger's nest. I suppose the name reflects that the place is so exposed that even birds wouldn't want to nest here. On the positive side, you can let your eyes rest on even higher and more distant mountains. The way down to the valley below, where the farmers still harvest their rice with the same tools as when Buddha was born, consists of only one short step. The stride takes you fifteen hundred feet, and perhaps all the way to Nirvana, if you were to choose that direction.

The monastery is certainly worth the long walk up, but I soon realize that only male Buddhist monks are allowed as residents. Besides, staying here requires much more than just learning the language, which certainly is difficult enough; I would need to give up a lot of what I cherish.



The Ark monastery in Saint Antoine l'Abbaye is liberal, has all the fellowship you could want, and focuses on ecophilosophy and peace rather than commandments. The perfect place for me? The buildings behind the trees are part of the convent, and so is the church to the right.

Location is not everything, I conclude, as the sun is setting and the shadows from the mountains creep closer. I choose the long way down, rather than the one-step shortcut, but decide not to give up my quest for an alternative monastery.

Lanza del Vastro went east all the way to India to work with Mohandas Gandhi. During a pilgrimage to the Ganges, he saw the light. Back in 1948, this led to the creation of the *Ark* community—something in between a monastery and an ecovillage. Eventually, similar communities popped up here and there in France. My mind descends on one of these, the monastery of *Saint Antoine l'Abbaye*, just south of Lyon.

The train from Lyon cuts through the idyllic and ever so French Rhône valley. At the train station, I catch a bus that takes me into the rolling and rural farmland to the east—all the way to a tiny village built and named for the resident monastery. The giant buildings in weather-shaped slabs of ocher sandstone top the village, which runs down the hillside ending at a small river. The accompanying church is a landmark built in the traditional French Gothic style. An excellent basis for a life of bliss.

Outside the village, the farmers plow their fields with relaxed but noisy old tractors. Here people have prayed and toiled from long before the Ark movement appeared. The monastery is a thousand years old, and only lately this new breed of Christians are there to open the doors—including those to heaven. Previous monks saw it as their main duty to guard the relics of St. Anthony, not the least because this saint, and/or his relics, cures the disease known as *St. Anthony's fire*. Today we know that the condition is caused by toxins produced by a mold that thrives on cereals, but in those days it was attributed to the evil wish of witches. Burning them was consequently a main part of the cure. Both the mold and the witches are (mostly) history, and new ideas permeate the old stone walls.

“Based on the teachings of Gandhi, our ideology is a mix of pacifism and Christianity,” my male door opener explains to me. I have forgotten his name. There is a thing about the monastic atmosphere that pushes names out of memory. Even the faces fade to universal

prototypes. I suppose we are all equal, and perhaps anonymous, in the eyes of God.

My guide's faith is certainly celestial. Although neither he nor anybody else wears anything resembling convent uniforms, their clothes are old, worn, and youthful in looks. The latter term describes the congregation as well.

"This place is open for both singles, couples, and families. Everyone is welcome," my informant continues, "But in order to become a monk, you need to go through a period as an apprentice. Afterwards it's up to the brothers and sisters to decide whether you fit in as part of our family."

He looks at me with kind, questioning eyes.

Fair enough.

Fortunately they also welcome non-family guests. I find out that their "family" includes some 30 adults and 25 children, but more than a thousand visitors pass through each year. They want visitors partly to impart to them the words of God and pacifism, and partly to earn the money required to operate the place. People pay for lessons in spiritual progress, meditational practice, and, of course, room and board. None of these are expensive.

The movement derives its name from the Ark of Noah. The founder, Lanza, experienced two world wars as well as India's fight for independence, and the immense suffering that ensued due to conflicts between Hindus and Muslims. He more or less gave up on modern society. But when this version of humanity at some point reaches sunset, the world needs islands from which a new world order can sprout. Thus, what Noah did for the animals, Lanza would do for mankind.

I like the idea. Who would not want to be onboard when the deluge is upon us? On the other hand, I'm a bit less pessimistic about the modern world. I believe there is a chance that we can motivate the present civilization in the direction of peace and tolerance—or at least prevent the situation from getting any worse. After all, that is my main reason for travelling the world in search of alternatives. As I get to know the family of St. Antoine, it's my impression that they too sense the light at the end of the tunnel.

Just like their predecessors, they wish to farm most of their food themselves. They also wish for every capable hand to participate in all of the various functions of farming and monasticism; otherwise they fear that there will be a status-soaked division between farm hands and desktop heads. As long as everyone gets dirty now and then, and no one displays superior clothes or gadgets, they should all stand equal and be equally happy. Possessions lead to a desire for more possessions—particularly when others have and you don't.

It all made sense to Gandhi, and it makes sense to me. The people here try to live according to these ideals—with minor adaptations to present cultural realities. Everybody might help out in harvesting the potatoes or doing the dishes, but some tasks admittedly require particular skills, or the continuous attention of a single mind—such as running a pacifist campaign. Besides, there are obvious advantages of having someone work outside the convent and thus bring in money to be shared by everyone.

The place is well kept. Actually, all the monasteries I have ever visited have been well kept; where discipline and diligence prevail, required tasks are cared for.

The Antoine monastery lacks a magnificent panorama, but the French rural idyll is worth a second look. It brings my mind back to the glorious medieval period—if it could ever be described as glorious. In the pastures next to the convent garden, some horses stand around in what appear to be everlasting prayers. My hosts tell me that all the Ark monasteries are situated in green pastures so they all cultivate the land, chop wood, bake their own bread, and make their own cheese. And, of course, they are all on board the same “Ark” so family members can find safe harbor at half a dozen ports.

Members are allocated room according to their needs. Obviously, a family requires more space than a single person. In addition, they have a number of guest chambers and communal rooms.

Companionship matters a lot. I join them for their evening assembly. We meet for prayer, song, and dance. They build strong bonds not only with God, but also with each other. I like that. The atmosphere is definitely amicable. Relationships are built on respect



I recall the monastic walls and gardens, but not the people living there. Is the oblivion just me, or part of monastic life?

for individual peculiarities; whatever way you wish to portray God, or how anchored the portrayal is in your mind, you're met with open arms. I like that too.

The time has come for sing-along. The circle contains at least 30 souls seated on cushions around the walls of a hall. I try to sing along. My French vocabulary—comprising less than thirty words—and a not so fabulous voice restrict my effort, but I really wish to take part in the fellowship. Candles, along with some religious artifacts, hold the center stage. The people are nice. In this convent

there is room even for someone like me, where the roof is high enough. At least that is the way it seems from my position on the floor.

Children are scattered among the adults. When the song fades out, one of the men stands up and reads a text in French. Based on the intonation, I assume it has to do with God. Afterwards there are some practical announcements and an appropriate discussion. I don't understand but I do appreciate the ambiance created by the gentle voices. It's all very comforting. I would have jumped if anyone said as much as "amen" with a raised voice. Even the children abstain from making noise. True, some of them do not sit still and waltz around on the floor, but any tendency to produce sounds is softly hushed. The kids do not appear particularly engaged in the discussion, and probably end up no wiser than me, but that clearly doesn't matter.

Then I do jump! The speaker has switched to English and I recognize my name. I immediately realize that there is every reason to jump as he asks me to stand up and explain what has brought me here. It feels like a command. The answer is not that straightforward; shall I talk about evolutionary perspectives on the human mind, about my search for our biological roots, or my feeble and uncommitted attempts to seek God? Perhaps not. I go for a somewhat simplified elucidation. And relax when nobody seems to mind.

"We do welcome people with all sorts of beliefs. We actually find enrichment in diversity. It's inspiring to learn about other ways of approaching God," one of the women explains to me afterwards. I appreciate her words.

After a short pause, she continues with a mild voice: "You need, of course, to fit in with our community."

"With the practical aspects, I mean," she adds.

They focus on spiritual growth—in whatever direction it may take—not the doctrines of the pope. And even if you don't really possess that much spirituality to cultivate, you're still welcome. That is great. The Ark is about as far from traditional godliness as you can get and still sense a vague glimpse of God. Even I breathe freely here.

Prior to becoming a full-fledged member of the family, one is, however, expected to make a vow. Then again, in a place as accommodating as the Ark, you may design an oath to fit whatever phrases please you. I like the way they relate to God. Here there is no pressure to conform to strict monastic rules, or swear to celibacy— unless you happen to add these elements into your personal pledge. Their religion is pretty much in line with my biological philosophy; the question is whether I can live with or fit into the rest of the deal.

At the Ark, they practiced sustainability long before the word became fashionable. I suppose all monasteries do, and small footprints and self-reliance in both food and entertainment characterize this sort of life. Still, this place is somewhat different in that they really do engage not only in their local communion with God, but in the affairs of the world outside. Inner development is important, but so is trying to set the globe on the right course. Towards peace that is. Their commitment to non-violence is in tune with a lot of secular groups; thus, they have many friends outside their walls who support the place and the work being done.

The next day is pretty much like the day before. I find time to take a walk, and, of course, to eat and sing. This is only occasionally interrupted by prayer. The religious part is not pushy, but I realize that the place leans more toward monastery than ecovillage, which, I suppose, doesn't matter as long as people are friendly, obliging, and happy. Perhaps not extremely jovial, but then again, it's difficult for French people to open their hearts in English. Unfortunately, my knowledge of the language impedes my participation. It doesn't help much that *merci* and *bonjour* are part of my vocabulary; I would need to learn proper French.

The third day is somewhat like the two before.

The same can be said about the fourth.

Back at my chamber, or cell I suppose, I sit down and meditate. To avoid unnecessary impropriety, I've chosen not to ask about their policy with regard to alcohol, so after the meditation I open a bottle of wine. I need it. The wine helps. For once it seems to bring my head out of indolence rather than into it. Perhaps it does not help me



*think*, but it helps me *feel*. The scent of cloister has drifted deep into my body, and now the wine adds its aroma. The Ark is really a wonderful alternative, if I could only learn the language. Given, of course, that I don't mind going through the same experiences, the same routines, every day. And every year.

I suppose one is entitled to a vacation now and then. I also suppose I could adapt—and thrive.

But not today. There is too much to do, and so much waiting for me outside these walls. Or is the problem that I have become too dependent on luxury? Do I fear letting go of my personal freedom, my computer, and my economic affluence?

I fear the answer is at least partly “yes,” but I prefer the excuse that I'm too old to learn French. Languages were never my strength. I also fear that my presumed innate religious tendencies have stranded on the rock of science. Then it hits me that part of the problem with monastic life is that it erases your personality. People really are kind and nice, but I miss some of the sharper edges, the parts that make each individual unique and interesting—albeit not necessarily always pleasant. Over the years, the edges of personality are worn down, just like the slabs of stone constituting the walls of the monastery. People drop their character and temperament in order to fit into a wall of rectangular bricks. They have a community shaped by a thousand years of unwritten and unspoken commands. Besides, if I were to move in, I would need someone to live together with in anti-celibacy. Perhaps one day?

Alternative living as practiced here at the Ark is an excellent alternative—for those who fit in. I am afraid that might exclude a majority of the population even though the Ark is, in my mind, the best monastery I ever visited. Nevertheless, in order to postpone doomsday the world needs alternative alternatives. I move on. I am hunting for a different sort of community, perhaps even less pious and more unconventional and on the edge, but I reason that with a God as flexible as the one they have at the Ark, He is sure to be with me in my pursuit. So I decide to take a giant leap of faith.



At ZEGG, eroticism, art, and nature merge in a life form that is rather liberating after spending time in a monastery.

## 9

### ZEGG: The Bonobo Alternative

There It all began in 1991. A group of young people coming from a radical artist community bought a former training camp for Hitler's elite SS troops. Their aim was to create something different. With a place designed for indoctrination in hatred, racism, and torture as a starting point, "different" ought to be easy. The group has grown to a hundred adults and children, and I was curious as to exactly what they have fashioned. According to their website, the result, referred to as ZEGG, is "communal living as an alternative to profit and consumer mentality." I never found out exactly what the acronym stands for, but an English version I saw states, *Centre for Experimental Culture Design*. The rumors tell a juicier story.

The community is famous, or infamous, for particular aspects of human interactions. Not only did they create something new compared to the Nazi camp, but also in comparison to most ways of living found anywhere on Earth—within the human species at least. After my not so successful attempts at finding a home in a convent, ZEGG seemed to be the next step; but I am frightened as to what is going to happen.

With a guilty conscience, but lots of convenient excuses, I start the engine to something as inherently consumerist as a rental car. The sixty miles southwest from the airport in Berlin should take about an hour. The December night is dark, foggy, and cold.

An hour later I have no idea where I am—only a vague notion that I might be even farther away from my destination than when I started. The Berlin suburbs have become a prison camp with their endless, inescapable grid of roads; I feel like the famous *nacht-und-nebel* prisoners of the war—condemned to disappear into the night

and fog. Then again, perhaps some deeper force, or subconscious doubt, tries to prevent me from reaching my destination.

In another two hours, and well past midnight, I breathe a sigh of relief. I escaped the prison, and now I deeply appreciate German *ordnung* as I detect a note with my name on the bulletin board at the ZEGG guesthouse. The note contains instructions required to find a bed.

At breakfast the next morning, Irini approaches me to confirm that I am the one she expects me to be. Irini is originally from Panama, of Greek descent, but has been part of the ZEGG movement from the start. She has a Ph.D. in a mixture of art and education, and has retained an artistic and educational approach to life. Together with her friend, Cornelia, and life partner Roland, they are our teachers. The course I signed up for is *Letting Go of Limits and Definitions*, which can be translated as “throw away all of your inhibitions.” Perhaps not the curriculum of choice for anyone. Limits refer to any constraints related to any types of genitalia, or other anatomical features, that might impede personal relations or your wildest desires. As stated in their description, “Sexuality needs to be free. It cannot be bound by marriage vows or moral constraints, but requires instead truthfulness and trust.”

For a brief moment I feel like returning to my suburban Berlin prison.

Twenty people gather in the room where the theoretical part of the course takes place. Some of them appear to be curious like me. Some are perhaps more of the sexually hopeful and needy type. There is a slight dominance of men. Somewhat on the obese side. I do not feel particularly old in this crowd.

I carefully investigate their faces—hoping they won’t notice. Are any, or all, of the men homosexual? I try to avoid their eyes. Not that I have anything against gay people, but neither do I have any burning desire to engage in all sorts of unlimited activities. It’s not that easy to break down barriers that have been there for a lifetime. Then I remind myself that whatever happens I should consider it as part of my anthropological strategy of participating observations.

Not that I mind trying alternatives. Early on I realized that bi-

sexuality, after all, implies an advantage by offering twice as many opportunities. As such it's more sensible than old-fashioned heterosexual behavior, but it is not always that easy to live sensibly. On the Virgin Island of St. Thomas, I once met a psychology professor who had just returned from Asia where he worked on a Michelin guide to the gurus of India. We met at an "open-minded" party, and he quickly invited me to San Francisco while insisting that converting me was the easy problem. I stayed with him for a week. It turned out that his male partner had converted to Catholicism and consequently decided to live a life of celibacy; the only opportunity left, in terms of intimacy, was an oversized duck. The bird devotedly followed my friend around the apartment, and shook its tail more vigorously than any hooker, but it did little good for either duck or man. Hence me. He treated me to all the pickup tricks I ever knew, and quite a few more, but with no more success than the duck. Converting me to bisexuality proved almost as difficult as converting me to a proper religion—although both transformations are on my wish list.

At ZEGG, it turns out in the end that the most needy, the one with the most unfulfilled desires, is a female filmmaker from northern Germany. But I don't know that as I sit with the others on cushions laid out along the walls and listen to the soft talk of our instructors.

In the middle of the floor there is a bit of decoration—or perhaps some sacred objects. Against one wall our three teachers embrace each other. Irini is dark, small, and exotic. Roland is huge, he reminds me of the giants of old fairy tales, and wears a shoe size that would have created agoraphobia even for my feet. Cornelia is bright, light, and business-like. I find them all easy to appreciate.

Each of us is requested to tell how we feel. Besides me, three of the others have limited knowledge of German so Roland translates into English. The first surprise comes when the most shy and clearly uncomfortable woman, a stylish and proper lady in her thirties, says she has come to do something "sinful"—while clinging to what I suppose is her husband. After some back and forth in German, the translation is corrected to "sensual."

ZEGG's emphasis on sexual liberation has not gone unnoticed

by the surrounding community. In the rather conservative and somewhat Christian former East Germany, the place was initially viewed as something in-between a brothel and hell; but apparently the relationship with their neighbors has improved. And, as Irini points out, the aura and vibrations characterizing the place today are certainly completely different compared to those during the war.

Later I ask Irini whether all this shared sexuality creates a bit of jealousy now and then; Roland is her life partner, but I had noticed that Cornelia seemed rather glued to his body now and then.

“Yes, of course,” she answers honestly. “In my relation with Roland, I have worked hard to get rid of jealousy. Only now, after more than ten years, can I honestly wish *bon voyage* when he goes travelling with one of his lovers. But I mean it. I hope they enjoy themselves.”

I know men who would appreciate Irini’s attitude.



Cornelia, Irini, and Roland (from left) are our teachers in the art of losing inhibitions. They all shine of happiness and unconstraint, and appear to know what they are up to.

Back to our schedule. The plan is to warm up with a sauna before taking on the more mentally demanding tasks. An aging English gentleman tells me he has lost all his hair due to being bullied—*all* his hair. Now he asks if he needs a bathing suit.

The sauna is nice and warm even before we press in 23 people. It seems as if most of the air is displaced in favor of body and soul. The last bits of breathing space disappear when someone pours a bucket of water on the stones, generously sprinkled with sensuous oils. I'm sweating and panting. Will I really survive if I let go of my last limits?

On the other hand, we certainly do get close to each other. Air or not, the social atmosphere is good. We sing Indian songs from times eternal—with endless healing effects. Bodies and bodily odors are so evenly dispersed in the room that it is difficult to distinguish between one's self and others. In the background there are occasional soft groans, suggesting that some of the participants are giving each other assorted massages. Limits are already fading or falling. I try to take a deep breath.

At lunch afterwards I feel like I'm starting to know at least some of the others. Mohammed is from Damascus but lives in London where he's engaged in therapy and healing. He is jovial, appropriately chubby, with short, black spikes of hair, and, despite being a Muslim, he doesn't seem to require women to cover up. In Damascus he has five brothers and six sisters, so he feels very much at home here in our cramped group—so much so that he offers an introduction to *sound healing*, his therapeutic specialty, using nothing more than his voice.

The food is vegetarian of course. We eat in the cafeteria at the guesthouse, which offers food for anyone who is at ZEGG. Most people come, the exception being those seeking meat or privacy. Those who wish to cook their own meals may do so. The food is excellent, but I would probably also wish for occasional alternatives at some point.

The residents pay 400 euros a month for room and board, but each person has limited influence as to where to lodge or what to eat.

Those are the rules. Cornelia, who is the local economist when not organizing limit-breaking courses, says that if anyone has trouble paying, others do what they can to help. Money is, unfortunately, an issue, but once you're an inhabitant of ZEGG, people won't turn their backs on you. Similarly, the rules of the kitchen imply that everyone signs up for occasional cooking and dishwashing duties. I find the food tasty and plentiful, and enjoy the chance to do dishes while chatting with others.

One of the veterans, a jovial woman my age, tells me that the original ideological leaders, Sabine Lichtenfels and Dieter Duhm, disappeared to warmer climates some years ago. They went on to create an alternative to this alternative in Portugal, a place called *Tamera*.

"Moving on without obvious leaders has both advantages and disadvantages," she points out. "In ZEGG, issues concerning the community are decided on in plenary meetings. It means that everyone agrees."

"So everyone agrees?" I ask innocently.

"Obviously, there are those who disagree," she replies with a slightly stern voice in response to my touch of sarcasm. "It would be easier to implement measures if we had a single leader who could enforce his will, but the consensus principle is important."

I believe I understand. As long as people have a reasonably good relationship with each other, and with the community, it's possible to end up with some kind of agreement. If not right away, then following sufficient hours of discussion. In the long run, I suppose most people are willing to agree on most anything for the chance of ending an endless debate. It is valuable to reach consensus, but. . . .

Later I discuss the issue with Irini.

"Did you ever feel that a decision went against you?"

She takes time to think, and to look deep into my eyes.

"I would like to live with Roland, but what rooms we are given is a community decision. Maybe they will give us a room to share sometime in the future. For now we accept that the wishes of the community come first."

After some further thoughts she adds:



"It's rare that decisions create serious problems. Worse is all the time spent on making them."

Others, too, complain about how hard it is to get things done—the "ship is difficult to maneuver." It's a bit sad if the alternative communities create more obstruction, bureaucratic or otherwise, than what the keenest bureaucrats of the European Parliament can come up with. I'm still unsure as to whether enlightened autocracy is better or worse than extreme democracy.

To improve efficacy, ZEGG has a council of thirteen who prepare cases and make recommendations. Recommendations are adopted either because there are no objections within two weeks after they are announced or because they are accepted by the General Assembly. If frustrations become unbearable, people may, of course, ease their vexation through sexual activity.

But there is also another option—one that has led to fame in alternative circles. *Forum* was introduced by Lichtenfels and Duhm and is considered an indispensable tool in the community. Forum implies a ritualized form of communication where the topic is whatever troubles hide in the depth of your soul, the point being to make an individual's inner, emotional forces visible to everyone else. The purpose is threefold: one, to obtain more intimate knowledge of each other; two, to understand the needs of each person and thereby resolve practical problems; and three, to obtain a therapeutic effect for the particular person. The individual in focus stands up in the middle of the room and declares his or her frustrations along with various details of their mental life. The rest of the group contributes by providing encouragement and appropriate feedback. "The combination of physical and emotional intimacy builds bonding and trust," says Irini.

As I learn eventually, there are other forms of social garnish that contribute to this purpose. I believe in what they are doing! Perhaps a bit too boisterous for the average, introvert Norwegian, but dealt with in a proper manner their strategy certainly has a potential for pushing pendulums and increasing social capital. But do they go too far in their pursuit of togetherness? What is not surprising for a behavioral biologist, nor shocking for the people at ZEGG is a distinct

desire for *private time*. Consequently, it's recommended, almost commanded, to "take time off" now and then in some quiet corner of the compound.

"ZEGG's vision is to facilitate both inner and outer peace," explains Irini, "and to offer a lifestyle that does not hurt nature or people."

That sounds good. I also understand that they want to break away from traditional Western culture with its unsustainable drive to earn money—for then to spend money. Moreover, they consider their ideas and the form of life they offer to be the best alternative around, and they wish to bring their formulas to the rest of the world. Therefore, courses. Great! I like people who want to save the world.

Their initial ambition was to set up a full-fledged university with their versions of all sorts of studies, but the plans were gradually downsized. The building we are in has, therefore, been given the name *Uni*. One day, perhaps, they will expand because the courses they offer are quite popular. Most of them are not as limit-breaking as the one I'm taking, but more in the flavor of art, music, and healing. The classes are an important source of income for ZEGG.

Their website is well written and presents the place in a factual and not overly starry-eyed manner. It states that the community consists of a multitude of people who complement and support each other. Each individual needs to develop his or her personality and learn to take responsibility for everything, from the community to the rest of the world.

"People do really support each other here," says Irini. "The social relationships we create are what the world needs most of all."

I like her voice, I like what she says, and after a week, I actually believe in her.

"If we manage to communicate about love, then love will be free of lies and suppression. People will no longer fear being abandoned," she continues. "We wish for an interlocked community. A mesh where everyone has some sort of relationship with all the others. Some more intense and intimate. It's all a question of love."

I first heard her say "mess" not "mesh," but I understand. They

want a society where love, both mental and physical, is included as a healing element and where people help each another in a socially safe and environmentally stable world. It sounds good. Perhaps too good?

Their home page has formalized the message by listing the following criteria that a proper community should heed to: a wholehearted commitment to others, an awareness of personal sexual desires, integration of couples and families in a larger social network, and respectful communication both between sexes and between people of the same gender.

Amen.

It's Saturday night fever. We dance and drum and dance some more all for good fun—and, of course, to generate bonding. Afterwards I have an appointment to see Cornelia.



Gandhi is a popular figure many places. Here the wall quotes him, "We must be the change we want to see in the world." At ZEGG they accept the challenge and supposedly have the tools required to create that change.

She is about my age, youthful in mind, and oozes a demeanor of leadership and efficiency. She could easily have slipped into the upper echelon of any international corporation. I believe she can lead, and I know she can listen. Besides, she may serve as a key to help me unlock the mystery of ZEGG. We sit in the abandoned and dimly lit cafeteria, the party is over with the exception of occasional, drowsy drumbeats.

"Here we have all sorts of relationships. Some live as couples, others in exploratory love. The number and gender of participants are not important," she explains. "Whatever problems arise, we resolve in Forum."

Earlier that evening I walked past some of the "love nests" erected in the outskirts of the property, which are meant to boost the extravagant love life. The small houses and tents seemed somewhat dusty. I tell her about my observations and ask with a slightly worried voice:

"Is there really that much frivolous, lustful sex going on?"

She looks gently at me and admits that it was probably more before. Times change, the protest movement is not as vibrant anymore, and people grow older. "Yes, it was probably more before. Perhaps sexual appetite declines when we age."

I nod.

"As the resident economist," she goes on, "last year was very promising."

I get the feeling that sex as a topic of discussion is about to evaporate; perhaps the present limits of lust is a bit embarrassing. Instead

I ask, "What makes a person popular? What gives status?"

The questions get her going again.

"We like people who share and work for the community. It's also important to show understanding for other people's needs."

She pauses, "At the Forum meetings you demonstrate who you are and what you stand for. Not only should you offer helpful and compassionate responses, you must dare to display your own shadows."

I think I understand what she means by "shadows." We all have some less than optimal aspects in our personality—things we might

prefer to hide. The next question is actually even more interesting for me, but it feels a bit awkward to ask.

“And if you ... if you do have a high status. What do you get? A better room? More money—or more partners?”

It turns out that a good reputation is not easily convertible to anything. She mentions prestige, but that is the same as reputation and not a particularly tangible reward. Your voice will be listened to, but don’t expect economic benefits for being the good guy, not even sexual benefits. According to Cornelia, the woman who is arguably the most influential person at the moment lives in one of the least attractive buildings. Their last ideological leader, to the extent they had one, bought a house in the neighboring village and moved out of ZEGG.

I see. Or, I think I do. The point is that reputation *is* enough! People here don’t really value money or things; the joy of helping others and feeling useful is worth more. The sense of “flow” when you do things together, the hugs, smiles and kisses you harvest because you’re willing to also give them—these are what matters. It’s enough. In a place like ZEGG, where people have close ties to each other, and all are deeply rooted in a shared ideology, it actually works! At least for the most part. This is great! For me it means that they have cultivated the best parts of human nature—*they have found out how to pull the pendulum.*

My group is now ready for the first act of the most notorious activity that takes place within the premises, *the giant oil ritual*. According to our curriculum: “A sensual experience in hot oil. A form of *body-art-action*. Let it all loose, relax, and dissolve the boundaries of yourself.”

A somewhat cryptic description, but I am not deeply surprised when the actual content is clarified. In brief, you undress and crawl into a plastic coated “pool”—all twenty of us. The pool is located in a dimly lit, but well heated, basement room set up for the purpose. The next step is for the course leaders to pour some buckets of hot oil over our naked bodies. You are asked to close your eyes and then to see what happens. You should move around with eyes closed; for that is the only way to “see.”

Sounds tempting?

I'm mentally prepared to end up with a dozen aging, but frisky, gay men on top of me. The idea is not particularly inspiring, but I decide that some sacrifice has to be made for science; the oil ritual is participant observation at its most participating. I wonder what the somewhat reserved appearing young women of the group feel about their prospects. Do they look forward to having a heap of aging, greasy, frisky, and sexually frustrated heterosexual men topping off the evening?

Women are present, and women participate. No one is alone for as much as a second and, yes, some experience a lot of hands.

I cheat. Now and then I open my eyes to really see what happens. I'm primarily curious as to expression on the faces, as I know pretty much what is going on. The problem with open eyes is that it becomes rather uncomfortable when oil finds its way past the eyelid; but this, of course, is science. Whether your eyes are closed or open, it's generally impossible to know whom the hands touching your body belong to. Are the fingers part of a woman, a gay man, or just a man with pioneering curiosity?

Nadia is Greek. She's here on a two-month exchange program through the Leonardo da Vinci program of the European Union. She is young, pretty, luxuriant, and charming—in short, she has all the credentials needed to be a popular element in an oil ritual. Even before we started, I expected her to be a focus point for men—or rather their hands. In the glimpses I get when I dare to open my eyes, it's easy to locate her in the landscape. There is only one mountain in the binge, and she is at the bottom of it. My immediate fear is that she will suffocate. The men certainly have managed to let go of their limits—if they ever had any.

There is actually one rule. Hands, fingers, and other anatomical features should remain on the outside of bodies. Not that alternative placements are frowned upon at ZEGG, but considering the potentially irritating effect of the oil, the rule makes sense, although it is not universally heeded.

After two hours of play, we take a shower and meet for a debriefing. Our British gentleman complains that his hands at some points were

pushed away by other hands. He could not tell whether it was those of the woman he was fondling, who happened to be Nadia, or other men trying to protect their turf. As a behavioral biologist, I am not particularly surprised; both alternatives sound likely.

Our oil team, fronted by Irini, commends him for expressing his frustrations. No one stands up to take responsibility, so they give the floor to Nadia.

"Before we started I admittedly was a bit concerned about the age difference," she starts diplomatically.

I try not to take it personally.

"But it did not really matter. After a while I did not care where all the hands were. The experience was good."

They told us before, and they were right. The two hours in the bin passed as two prolonged minutes. The nudity thing was soon forgotten as you gently let your body slide around in the pigpen, occasionally above, then below, a pile of other bodies.

The ritual was originally developed as "action art" by a Viennese school of art back in the sixties. The objective was to enact a liberating rebirth . . . and, I suppose, to provoke the more conventional part of the city. As to rebirth, I'm not sure, but the other objective was certainly met. Provocations turned out to be so much fun that in order to ensure a continued interest they switched from the sunflower oil (what we were served), to blood, and then to spaghetti. I probably prefer the sunflower oil.

Irini tells us that at ZEGG their aim is to turn the oil bath into a meditative experience. I can see that. There was really something meditative about sliding around like a school of fish without water, accompanied by New Age music. The experience never really breached my limits.

A German girl was crying even before we started. It turned out to be partly because her boyfriend had left her, and partly because he returned to her just before she went to ZEGG. Who said life is easy? Apparently *he* did not like the idea of her frolicking in sensual experiences without him, and *she* did not like the fact that he did not like the idea. Afterwards she complains about all the hands she had to

remove from intimate areas. She too is commended, of course, for revealing her sentiments. The English gentleman nods, but states that it really is a “turn-off” to get your hands stopped. It’s discrimination. At least it is contrary to the fundamental idea behind the project. Both are, of course, correct in the description of their feelings, and both are encouraged to add more words to their experiences. In the end we all agree that the reported feelings are real, and must be allowed, but that occasionally people have wishes that conflict with the wishes of others, and, therefore, cannot be completely met.

I like the way Irini and the other two lead the discussion. The human mind is, unfortunately, not crafted to the effect that everyone’s desires fit together like nuts and bolts.

Our talks are both therapeutically useful and informative. People are very open, yet manage to express compassion for each other and an understanding of conflicting viewpoints. It’s a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. Our teachers have managed to bring very different souls, from very different places in life, close together. It’s an impressive feat. I am admittedly unsure as to whether the success should be accredited to the three leaders or to the group, but I’m happy to give our tutors, and ZEGG, most of the praise.

The next day, we take it one step further—to the extent that further steps are possible. They mix the oil with clay—copious amounts of both. This is an immediate success, and everything gets even smoother and people enjoy themselves even more loudly. We throw mud around, and are hit by mud from all directions, again primarily by sensing and not seeing. Irini and Cornelia walk around naked outside the bin and accompany the séance with a bilingual version of the Genesis. We have gotten used to our play-bin, so both hands and bodies are even more on the move. The bodies form endless waves that break all around me. In a reckless moment of curiosity, I get mud in my eyes. Irini sees the problem, and hands me a paper towel.

For whatever reason, I recall one night a long time ago. I was part of a crew competing in a sailing race in the outer part of the Oslo fjord. The weatherman on our radio shifted between talking



about a full storm and a hurricane. The frigidly cold ocean, mixed with water from above, engulfed the boat in a horizontally moving river that created an icy layer inside my clothes. We stamped against the waves with a sail the size of a T-shirt—still hoping to complete the race, and if so be sure to win. But we were making no progress. I had long finished vomiting when one of my friends observed jovially: “Damn it. I’m glad I’m doing this for fun, I would never have done it for money.”

There is a full storm in our mud bin as well. The climax comes, for those who have not reached it before, when the music plays *Conquest of Paradise* by Vangelis. People start humming and drumming on whatever thighs and tummies they can find, so oil and mud fly in the air like sea spray. A kindergarten could not have given a better performance.

I’m glad I’m doing it for fun.

For me the oil rituals were more like an alternative form of social coziness than a sexual experience. Moreover, it was quite fascinating, not only to observe how others tackled the situation, but also to learn how I myself reacted. You know roughly what gender your hands are on—at least you have the option to find out. Sometimes you can also guess whose body it is, but you rarely know where the hands creeping around your body come from. It didn’t matter. The oil and mud made the whole situation less intimate. The structure of what you touched was pretty much the same regardless of the object—skin felt the same as the plastic surface of our play bin.

Afterwards Nadia tells me that she found it easier to have a dozen hands on her body compared to just one hand. In the latter case, the experience became more personal—more like an intimate invitation.

I read in one of their brochures, “There is no single formula for how to build a new way of living, the challenges are too complex. Besides creating sustainable technology, we need to create environments that support inner growth. We began ZEGG in 1991 to bring these two aspects together: What does the Earth need? What do people need?”

I believe in the main theses behind ZEGG—albeit perhaps not in all the details. The famous German author Goethe once stated, after being asked to comment on the quality of a text, “It has both quality and originality; but what is good is not new, and what is new is not good.” ZEGG stands for something that is both original and good. They are honest in their commitment and have developed a lot of valuable features. Moreover, their philosophy is open for discussion, and allows for dissent. I sincerely appreciate their frankness and willingness to listen. In my heart, I might have wished for them to embrace my point of view, that is, an evolutionary perspective on human nature. For example, the analogy with a pendulum also applies to sexual behavior. Their extreme open-mindedness says something about what is possible, but perhaps they have pulled the pendulum a little too far in the “opposite” direction. The Catholic attitude is more uptight and oppressive than what I think is appropriate, and what is optimal for the purpose of making people happy, but the attitude at ZEGG is perhaps slightly too frivolous. The human mind is equipped with strong emotions related to sexuality and bonding, and the notion of “no limits” is not necessarily ideal.

Mammals are not the experts at forming couples. The birds do far better in that 90% of bird species, but only 10% of mammals, opt for this strategy of procreation. Furthermore, even among the best—the most monogamous—birds there are always some kids who have the “wrong” father. Using genetic methods, it’s easy to investigate the nestlings and determine whether the male in residency really sired the children who hatch there. If I were to evaluate the human species, I might describe us as “seventy percent monogamous”—give or take thirty percent in terms of uncertainty and variation between individuals. We have a distinct tendency in the direction of falling, and staying, in love with one partner, but we do not top the list of species with respect to strength and duration of bonding.

I would like to see a more open and relaxed attitude to sexuality in Western society, and I believe that one step in this direction is to teach people about the emotional life evolution has bestowed on us. There are some natural inconsistencies in the human mind that we are better off accepting, such as the mixture of pair bonding and an

interest in novel partners. By accepting this aspect of our innate tendencies it might be easier to live with each other, whether in pairs or in other constellations.

In my mind, only two species of animals are unfit to be Catholics: humans and the bonobos. Catholics claim that all sexual activity should take place in the bed, under the sheets, between legally married man and woman, with the lights off, and with the sole purpose of procreation! The problem is that evolution has given these two species a somewhat wider perspective on sexuality. In humans sex evolved to be part of the pair-bonding process. Sex helps man and woman stay in love, which is why neither men nor women care whether the female is in estrus—that is, capable of being impregnated. My dog would laugh at this silly waste of energy, but we don't have much choice because, unlike dogs, we've lost the capacity to sense ovulations. Any other mammals would make excellent Catholics in that they are exclusively interested in sex for the sake of procreation. They only copulate when the genes are likely to get something in return for the effort. There is, however, one exception: the bonobo. In this species sex has developed in roughly the same direction as in humans, albeit with a minor twist. For them the aim is not pair bonding, but improving relationships among all the individuals in the group. Their behavior is, naturally, adapted to the purpose; a quick one before dinner, preferably with all or most of the others, helps limit arguments about distribution of food. And if two males end up a bit on edge, the solution is a good-natured round of "penis fencing"—definitely safer than a duel with swords.

Humans might not be the optimal raw material for Catholicism, but I am not sure we fit in with the bonobos either. We have within us a certain shyness, a tendency for pair-bonding, and it's in our nature to react with jealousy. Therefore, I'm not surprised to hear that Irini spent ten years of hard effort to get rid of this feeling. Bashfulness is not simply something we learn from our parents, or at school; there is an innate component.

Jealousy was added by evolution for an obvious purpose, the feeling is there to help prevent the loss of a (potential) partner. For women it's primarily a question of losing a caretaker for their children, but for men it's more the risk of having other males inseminate

one's partner. The feeling activates the punishment circuits because it's there to make you avoid something that might be bad for your genes—it *should* be uncomfortable. Most people, therefore, prefer not to be jealous, and the main tool for reducing the burden of this unpleasant feeling is to develop conditions catering to trust and intimacy. It's worth pointing out, as they do at ZEGG, that trust does not necessarily require sexual monogamy. It is theoretically possible to develop close relationships between three or more people at the same time because it is possible to have several short-term sexual partners and still retain a perfect relationship with one. These options are merely more difficult. For most people, the easiest solution is to choose the sanctuary of a monogamous relationship—or a series of monogamous relationships—but even these options are not particularly easy. I suppose the salient point is that whatever you opt for, the result is unlikely to be pleasing over the long run unless you put in a concerted effort. At ZEGG they do.

Cornelia admitted that sexual promiscuity has declined, and more people have opted to live in simple and stable relationships. Perhaps the pendulum is approaching its center of gravity. As to the surrounding community, I believe it would be preferable if the Church would loosen the grip of folded hands on the pendulum. And although jealousy is firmly rooted in the human mind, in most cases it is preferable to curb this sentiment. I stand by ZEGG, as erect as I can.

The ZEGG community does, however, have a problem in conveying their message. When people hear about free sex and oil rituals, they stop thinking. Negative associations grab their attention; thus they fail to perceive what ZEGG is really about—creating a community based on positive relationships. Why? I believe the answer is that the outside community is so deeply hung up about sex, while at ZEGG it's no big deal.

I try to air my biological perspectives, but the time is limited and it is difficult to get across what I mean. Irini and Cornelia have their model for what life is about, and they don't need another one. They

probably would say the same about me. There is, however, one topic I'm passionate about: Are people here happy? Happier than those living in nearby Berlin?

During the time spent at ZEGG, I discussed the question with several residents. No one tries to serve me a sunshine and paradise story.

"Sure there are people here who have problems. We do not recruit engineers and finance acrobats from the top layers of society," Cornelia explains.

Another informant points out that the people of Berlin have more reasons to be unhappy. In ZEGG they have companionship; there is always someone to talk to, or give a hug to, and this means that a troubled life is less troublesome here. Personally, I hold ZEGG as a definite favorite in the happiness competition. Nevertheless, I want to travel further in search of greener pastures and new adventures, with or without sex, now that my limits are wide open.



I am not particularly enthusiastic about the official version of the American dream, but then again, when the snowiest New York winter in decades turns to cold February rain, you know you are a bit off season. Moreover, underneath the surface of this culture there are a lot of interesting things going on.

## Ithaca Ecovillage: The Bourgeois Alternative

This time it's serious. No more "just for fun," or trying to do participating observations. This is real science. I am taking my interest in alternative forms of living to a higher level. At least that's what I think, as David's car makes a left turn onto Rachel Carson Way. Yes, this must be the way to go—certainly for the place where we are heading—named in honor of the author whose book *Silent Spring* helped give birth to the environmental movement back in 1962. The driver, David Sloan Wilson, is a world-famous biologist who focuses on how to improve communities. *One block at a time* according to the title of his most recent book on how he approaches his hometown of Binghamton.

Binghamton proved to be a tough case. Together we are initiating a project where the starting point might be a bit more amenable: We want to study "intentional communities," places where people live more or less communally with more or less of a purpose. At Ithaca Ecovillage, the intention is sustainability. Both David and I have visions based on evolutionary thinking as to how one might improve conditions of life for any sort of community, and we both want to put our ideas to the test.

The one positive thing that psychologists and evolutionary biologists seem to agree upon is that social life is the most prominent factor for achieving a good life. This agreement is encouraging. Intentional communities offer the right setting for examining this statement, and this is what David and I are up to. One of our hypotheses is that people living in communes ought to be happier than the surrounding population, at least happier than they were before they moved there. The data we hope to collect are meant to test both this theory and other ideas about how a community ought to be organized.

Fortunately, Laird Schaub has promised to assist us in this endeavor. He is a self-taught communitarian with forty years of experiences in organizing, maintaining, and helping communities prevail. He is also a key person in the *Fellowship of Intentional Communities* (FIC). FIC is the perfect starting point for our research. Their Internet pages list all sorts of information for more than 1,600 places in the U.S. alone. According to Laird, there are many more: An additional thousand communities are members but keep (at any one moment in time) their heads below the Internet surface. David and I want to take advantage of the information included in this database, and use the contact addresses to send out an Internet based questionnaire to probe how individual members are doing. In that way we hope to obtain relevant information not only about subjects such as whether or not people in intentional communities are happier than the general U.S. population, but also whether some forms of communal life work better than others.



Instead of spreading the buildings out, they have left the land free.



David returned to his duties at Binghamton University, while I am sitting in the community guestroom in the Frog neighborhood of Ithaca Ecovillage writing these lines. Before embarking on the project, I want to learn more about life in a typical American intentional community.

Liz is the founding mother, and from her I learn that the place has twenty years of history. She still serves a key role while they are completing the third, and presumably final, neighborhood. Each consists of 30-40 living units and some 60-90 people. They are, wisely, set up as separate entities that struggle independently to find, or develop, community spirits and happy inhabitants.

Liz explains that they bought the 175 acres of land after a local developer went broke. The developer wanted to sell the American dream in the shape of a standard suburban housing project. In line with the rules of bureaucracy and profit, 90% of the land would be split between houses and 10% would remain as commons. Liz and her mates turned that upside down. The houses here are concentrated on the 10%, leaving the rest of the land free for other purposes, such as the two farms operating within the ecovillage and the private gardens that people are encouraged to cultivate. In principle it's a win-win situation; besides leaving the forest and fields available, it brings people closer together. They refer to the model as co-housing: People own their own units but there are communal buildings, communal activities, and communal responsibilities. And, of course, the place includes a co-chickening community for hens.

Ideals sometimes differ from realities. I'm curious to find out how things work out. "We chose Ithaca because it's a progressive and intellectual area," Liz explains. "People here are more likely to try the ecovillage life, and outside neighbors are less likely to object to our experiment."

This makes good sense. However, there is one hitch: Intellectual people tend to have intellectual jobs with demanding and time-consuming schedules that leave less free time to participate in community building. If the inhabitants don't invest time and engagement, the communal part of the community is unlikely to work.

Seen from mainstream America, Ithaca Ecovillage is rebelling,

but seen from inside the intentional community movement, I heard the place described as somewhat bourgeois. I suppose the bouquet of communities needs some flowers for people in the middle class or above, but will the concept work in the absence of hippie-style, easy-going, socially experimental folks? The persons, or rather personalities, involved are a crucial factor. As Laird points out: "Some people who set off to create a community, I just know won't make it. They are not attractive enough."

Liz is a grown up, firm woman with a perpetual smile. She is clearly attractive enough; Ithaca Ecovillage is here to stay. Too much is invested for the place to close down, but that does not guarantee the happiness of its inhabitants.

By being here and interacting with people, I try to sense the "pulse" of the place. Their communal dinners are a good starting point. Most of the inhabitants are not present, of course. There seems to be a selection favoring those on the retirement side, but the atmosphere is jovial. They take turns making food and cleaning up. In fact, each member is obliged to contribute 2-4 hours per week in communal service, organized in work teams such as meals and maintenance, which again serve a dual purpose: Things get done and people get together. Added to that, as an extra bonus, are the development of shared responsibility for the well-being of the village and the general "feel good" phenomenon that comes from a job well done. I'm asked to help with the dishes, which works just fine with me because I get to talk with more people. I usually end up doing the dishes when visiting communities, not necessarily because I am a bad cook—which is true—but because it's easier to transfer this job to newcomers, and perhaps more difficult to create enthusiasm for the task in veterans.

One of the more dinner-happy veterans gets a bit philosophical as we finish up the vegetarian stew:

"The best thing about this place is that you really get to know your neighbors."

Then, some three or four bites further along in the meal, she adds: "That, of course, is the worst thing about the place as well."

Liz says that 85% of the people do participate and fit in. The remainder includes a few individuals referred to as "high mainte-

nance” persons, who would prefer not to be part of the community. They have, in other words, a screening procedure; and before buying as much as a waste bin, one must visit the place for a week or more and participate in various communal activities.

The procedure implies that a seller cannot always go for the first or highest bidder. Apparently, this is not a big problem; all the units are already sold and those (humans) with the highest maintenance don’t really want to be part of the place anyway. So Liz tells me. Still, 85% sounds like a splendid figure; in my little suburban village in the outskirts of Oslo, the number of participants is closer to 30%. Still, free-riders are a persistent source of frustration and conflict, more so here than at home because there is a stronger expectation of compliance. You can accept that a person you rarely see doesn’t live up to your standards, but things get more unbearable the closer the person is to being “family.” That is to say, spouses and children in particular, but neighbors sharing communal buildings are certainly included.

Evolution did not design human social life to be easy. Social insects, such as ants and bees, are lucky in that respect. But then again, things would be very dull if we were as easy to handle as them. Besides, there would hardly be any need for behavioral biologists.

“Alpha males or females need not apply. They rarely fit in,” Liz points out.

Even the best sieves sometimes let the wrong-sized material through, so they do need a routine for sorting out conflicts. Ideally, things are settled with the help of an internal negotiator, but in rare cases they seek help from outside sources.

Dick is a retired anthropologist—a gentle man with curly, grey hair. He is an excellent source for a scientist trying to learn about the place. He concedes that there is some form of evolution in the life of a community: For instance, there comes a time when endless meetings and explorations of the inner feelings of neighbors tend to reach saturation. The place can live with that, but not if the energy driving people to at least a minimal level of devotedness burns out. If the will to participate and care for the community evaporates, the place is in for serious decline. It’s more comfortable to look the other way

when a work force is called for, and it's in human nature to forget to clean up the mess after having used the communal house. Now and then—but not all the time.

This means that a bit of yelling and policing is sometimes called for. Not the most popular job around. Ideally, a properly timed and formulated pep talk will serve the purpose and bring gregariousness back to the desired level—at least for a brief interlude. It's all in the laws of thermodynamics; if no energy is put into creating order then disorder and defiance will follow. According to Dick, Ithaca Ecovillage is doing fine. One could always wish for even more ideal conditions, but the place works.

The way I see it, the important point is that they don't shy away from noticing and bringing up problems. Occasional conflicts are inevitable, and these are no big deal as long as they are not swept under the carpet. The fact that they are frank in their discussions with me, and seem quite capable of sensing in what direction their



Communal dinners are prepared several times a week—for those who so wish. The kitchen, and the kitchen workers, appeared more tidy and efficient than at my home.

local culture is moving, are vital signs of health. It gives me faith that the place will survive.

Being in a scientific mood here in Ithaca, I devise a simple experiment. I leave a can of beer on the top shelf of the shared cold room. How long will it survive?

The property is quite beautiful. It overlooks distant hills and forests and has a pond for swimming just in front of the communal house. For the time being, unfortunately, the pond is covered with snow. Then again, the snow means I can engage in one of my favorite activities—cross-country skiing. As Liz sees it: “We need to connect not only with each other, but also with nature.” I’ve heard this before; it’s almost like a mantra in these sorts of communities, and I wholeheartedly agree.

The trail leads past the pond and clutch of houses. From a distance, the place does look a bit bourgeois in the meaning of a well-kept, suburban, upper middle class residential area. Although they try to make units as affordable as ecological building costs permit, the place is not for poor and homeless hippies. However, this is what most people want, me probably included. I enjoy non-conformist places like Damanhur and ZEGG—for a while—but in the end would I not want to creep back into a well-organized, comfortable house with ample privacy and a careless bourgeois life-style?

The sky is blue, and I am not the only one skiing. Rod is out here. He is a community designer, in the sense that he designed and built Song, the second neighborhood in the village. In my mind, this neighborhood has the nicest houses, with large windows and grey-brownish walls of untreated wood. Rod tells me the walls were left unpainted to save costs and reduce toxic waste. I agree. The painting industry has oversold their products for too many years. The survival of wooden structures doesn’t depend on paint, but on the details of construction; wood that is not allowed to dry out when weather permits will rot no matter what you cover it with. As Rod tells me: “When designing a house, you need to strike a balance between controlling nature and working with nature.”

Something similar could be said about a community. How loose or tight things are organized is one of the most important dimen-

sions on which each place must take a stance. There will always be those who feel a need for regulations specifying anything from where to walk your dog to when to play a guitar, as well as those with more anarchist inclinations who desire nothing but freedom. Both sides must be willing to compromise. I appreciate freedom, but there is a cost unless you somehow manage to shape the human soul so that people are spontaneously considerate.

The local rules are printed in a booklet in my guest room, and they are not particularly anarchistic. I notice the nude bathing guidelines. Unrestricted nude bathing can take place on the northwest side of the pond. On the other side, at the public beach, it's OK from 7:30 p.m. to 8:30 a.m. Otherwise it can only be practiced according to detailed regulations such as: "Individual(s) who would prefer that nude bathing does not take place in their presence should hang the purple towel from the north-facing side of the canopy



Rod, the designer of the buildings, in front of his Song neighborhood.

frame.” The rules are a bit off-season, perhaps, but relevant for my attempt to understand the place.

As a rule of thumb, the more people you gather in a community the more written regulations you need. I believe this is one of the laws of human nature. One thing I’m sure of, however, is that our ancestral Stone Age tribes sufficed with unwritten codes of behavior. The detailed rules here at Ithaca do taste a bit bourgeois, but I’m sure they help reduce conflicts.

Ithaca Ecovillage is not inexpensive, and not exactly tribal, but is it “socially affordable?” Based on my observations, and the response from a number of residents to my more or less direct line of questioning, there are many more nice neighbors than bad ones. Lawsuits are a favorite pastime in the States, but lawyers are not likely to generate much revenue here. When asked, Liz remembers cases where people moved out because of conflicts; she can think of two, perhaps three. In my attempt to function as a mixture of scientist and journalist, this is what I dig for. But I realize that just bringing up the issues easily creates a skewed picture. People are more likely to take note, and remember, when they hear about “shit happening” rather than sunshine. Serious conflicts are simply not where the shoe pinches. If anything, it’s probably the minor issues—compromises that are mildly annoying because the resolutions are not completely in line with one’s visions, as well as the occasional “sub-standard” behavior of the neighbors.

I decide to take on another scientific (or journalistic) assignment. The Ecovillage might be a bit off from my innermost visions of Stone Age tribal life, but there is an alternative close by. In downtown Ithaca, springing out of the same American cultural heritage and the same stock of people, someone has created something definitely “tribal.” *The Twelve Tribes*. They run a café, the Maté Factory, that I soon discover serves excellent coffee and bagels. After some talk, they invite me to their Friday night celebration with dinner and a dance. Great!

Bits and pieces of praise for Yahshua (Jesus) create the right atmosphere for food, followed by Israeli folk music and dance. This is

good, old-fashioned Christianity spiced with Judaism. The organization is sufficiently off the grid to be prosecuted for anything from misspelling the name of Jesus to unlawful homeschooling and spanking of children. I like this place.

The dance, of course, is in line with the words of my host, “We like to keep it clean”—in the meaning of “devoid of flirtations.” With all these lovely women dressed in nice 19th-century dresses, I might have preferred something more frivolous, but I do manage to get a wonderful smile from one of them. I wholeheartedly support their choice, because it’s their choice, because people seem happy, and because they partly fulfill my ideals about ancient communal life. They share their labor and money, albeit most likely not their spouses. Their rules of life might seem strict, but through these rules, and their shared belief in God, they manage to bring members close enough to “care for each other, and love others more than you love yourself,” and even invite people like me. I love God when He leads to evolutionary practice.

Communal compassion seems to require a central belief or ideology, if not outright religiosity. Ecology has some potential in substituting for God, but religion is certainly more omnipotent. That is what I really like about faith; it has an incredible potential for bringing out commitment in people—not just toward God but also toward each other. Unfortunately, that is also what I fear the most; there is no telling where “moldy” devotion might lead. I still can’t get my mind off the pictures taken after the suicide pact of the Peoples Temple that resulted in more than 900 deaths back in 1976. Since then the world has experienced an endless list of religious-motivated violence.

Despite a heap of bad press coverage over the years, the Twelve Tribes have survived, and are thriving. In my mind, this would most likely not be the case if half the accusations against them were true. More likely, the press is eager to capitalize (in a dual meaning) on juicy allegations, and there is less to be gained from boring truths or hard retractions.

In the Ecovillage up the hill, people are concerned with sustainability, but at the Twelve Tribes they probably leave even smaller



footprints. Some 30 to 40 people share one (big) house, and I see no signs of excessive consumption. Both alternatives require some “brainwashing.” That is to say, people need to tune in to a certain way of life, but the religious alternative presumably requires a more concerted effort to make people adhere to community practice. I sincerely hope kindergartens and schools in the States are willing to do their share of brainwashing and thus make the future population of the country more tuned to communal alternatives. I also hope that both the alternative communities in Ithaca will survive, but my bet is that ecovillage-style co-housing will have more adherents in the coming decades. Deeply devoted religious life seems likely to require a rare type of person.

I conclude that the Ithaca Ecovillage is a bit bourgeois. And so am I. As to the scientific investigation, it rolls on. In another year or so, the results will hopefully appear in a scientific journal.

What about my beer can experiment?

The can vanished on the second day, but I am not sure how to interpret this result. For one, I don’t know how communal community beer cans are. In my enthusiasm for experimentation, I forgot to find a proper control. What is the average life span of a beer left to fend for itself in a foreign refrigerator? Even Google could not supply me with an answer. I conclude that all humans have their strengths and weaknesses—and that they do tend to get thirsty. The result of this experiment is unlikely to be published outside of these pages.

The experiment did teach me one thing, though—where to put empty beer cans. The communal kitchen has half a dozen (more or less) labeled garbage opportunities, presumably with individual philosophies attached. Without an example to go by, finding the right one was not an obvious task.

More importantly, after six days in Ithaca I still believe in the potential for happiness when living in a community. Ithaca might have been my choice, if I had been American. But coming from the other side of the Atlantic, I head back across the ocean. I’ve been told of a place that is quite the opposite of bourgeois. My curiosity is as strong as ever.



God's little farm is not so small, not much of a farm, and perhaps a bit disorganized. But it is an extraordinary place.

## 11

### Can Masdeu: God's Little Farm

It is not a farm, but neither is it like anything else I have seen. Surrounded by forest, but less than a mile from the nearest apartments of Barcelona, there is this giant, ancient building. It's too big to be considered a simple house, but it lacks the qualities of a castle. Its name is *Can Masdeu*, Catalan for "small farm belonging to God." I like the name, but the place is more intimidating. Part of the buildings date back to the 17th century, but most of the present structures are only a hundred years old. It looms where the terrain forms a wide hollow. Behind the complex, the hillside rises steeply toward the top of the ridge where the mountainous terrain keeps the city firmly in place along the Mediterranean Sea. Looking east, my gaze meets the gray, hazy air that envelops most major cities.

A hundred year ago, this was just the right spot for a special purpose. Barcelona needed a place, sufficiently close and sufficiently remote, to store the city's lepers. The gardens, which still surround the building, bear witness to how the inhabitants were allowed to grow their own food, thereby decreasing the chance of having them infect the people of Barcelona. It was an arrangement perhaps to the benefit of all.

Time passed. For all I know, the inhabitants were happy. Then there was this Norwegian doctor. I don't know if he ever visited Can Masdeu, but that would not be required. His name was Armauer Hansen, and he discovered *Mycobacterium leprae*—the bacteria that cause leprosy. His discovery led to an effective cure, which meant that leprosy was no longer a serious threat. The inhabitants of Can Masdeu disappeared, along with the fear of becoming infected. Sixty years ago the place was empty—and the decay had started. The strange thing is not that the place now teems with life, but that it

took fifty years before the first squatters arrived. The house seems ideal for urban hippies in search of a nearby free alternative.

The gravel road that begins where the city ends is blocked by a locked bar. Later I learn that there is no real lock; the occupiers have replaced it with a solid, but easy to open, carabiner. Not surprisingly, the owners of the building did not offer the occupiers the key. I prefer to walk, even though darkness is rapidly approaching. It's a chilly evening in March.

It does get dark, and in the end I can hardly see where the wind-



I like this doorway. The chimpanzee seems to contemplate on the cross above the door, perhaps wondering whether God is present inside.

ing road gives way to forests or cliffs. Then I finally recognize the outlines of a towering building. I sense something from a fairy tale, but darkness has descended and my vision is not very accurate.

After knocking on several doors, I finally find one that responds. Danny might also figure in a fairy tale, but he is real enough and welcomes me in.

The interior is definitely not a castle. Layers of dust and waste beneath the graffiti-scribbled walls create the homely atmosphere that you're unlikely to achieve without fifty years of neglect followed by a decade of anarchist squatting. The fact that the place appears run down does not bother a true anarchist. I can adapt. It is, after all, the social life that interests me, and it is the social atmosphere that matters.

Danny turns out to be a young Dutchman with long blonde hair, a short bristly beard, and a positive attitude toward me and anyone else. He is rather talkative as he shows me around: kitchen, pantry, meditation room, common room—actually several of them—and finally, up a steep and narrow staircase, the dormitory for guests. And, fortunately for me, a spare bed. He seems somewhat surprised, even though I had (I thought) made an appointment to sleep here. The moon is up and a dim light passes through a small, smeared window. Cannabis and tobacco should only be lit outside I'm told in a friendly tone. Unless it is raining.

Danny did not skip the bathroom on his tour. It doesn't exist. Outside they have rigged up a shower, but after a surprising bout of frost the pipes no longer deliver any water. The showerhead is still there, so they *do* have a shower. Or so I'm told. You can pee anywhere—preferably outside, even if it's raining. Then to one of the highlights. A few meters above their water reservoir, they have, with their own hands and using the materials at hand, erected an outdoor toilet! You need to be a reasonably anarchist-oriented architect to appreciate the result. Apparently they did not have much building material at their disposal, and consequently the toilet has a door-frame at one end, but with no door. A "window" covered with transparent plastic is at the other end. Not exactly a model of privacy.



I have visited fancier lavatories. It might have helped to turn the seat around so that the user can appreciate the view toward Barcelona. To my surprise, the tap carried water.

But these are just details. I remind myself that it's the social life that matters.

I want to find out how the place works for the inhabitants. Do they feel more like lepers or like God's little famers?

My guide is an interesting case; he's sort of a squatter on the squatters. The site has 25 resident members, as well as an unregistered number of visitors that come and go—mostly friends and acquaintances of the residents. It has been decided that there is no room for more residents, so visitors are expected to leave within some days or weeks. Danny has been there for several months; he

enjoys the place and wishes to stay even longer, but he's not formally a resident. "It has a lot to do about kindness," he points out.

Danny is a likeable guy who contributes to the community, and most inhabitants are, therefore, positive about his presence. This means, of course, a bit of pressure to remain a nice fellow; fortunately he has a suitable personality. What's interesting is that the destiny of the place, and thus all of its inhabitants, is somehow based on the same principle. The problem with occupied houses, this case included, is that there tends to be someone who owns them; and owners are not particularly happy about uninvited guests. Can Masdeu belongs to a private hospital. The hospital has won an eviction order in court, and the police have already been there to kick the squatters out. But as all occupiers are keenly aware, courtrooms are located a considerable distance from reality. To throw out a large bunch of lively and youthful inhabitants, fortuitously including three young children, requires something more tangible than paperwork. Moreover, Can Masdeu has a trump card: The inhabitants have managed to generate considerable sympathy from people in the city. If required, there are a lot of friends who will stand in the way, literally, of a police action.

And how have they obtained this sympathy? By being nice and contributing to the community outside of their walls. In other words, they are in the same situation as Danny.

The beauty is that it works. Like the leper colony, it's a situation that benefits them all (excluding the hospital I suppose). As long as there is a spare bed, it doesn't matter if Danny stays. And as long as the hospital has no particular use for Can Masdeu, it doesn't really matter that the occupiers are in charge. Details, such as their illegal connection to the power supply, seem to be something the world doesn't really need to know about.

I ask Danny how they have obtained sympathy from the city. He points to the patchwork of small gardens spread out on three sides of the house. They are the first things you come across as a visitor. "Some belong to us; the others we let people from Barcelona use," he explains.

I understand that the place works somewhat like a communal

garden. They allocate lots so that school classes can learn about gardening, and they give lessons in relevant subjects covering anything from organic farming to composting for beginners.

“We offer many other courses including dance and movement,” Danny continues, “and every Sunday there is an open house. People buy cheap food at our cafe.”

I tried their cafe. It’s called “Rur-Bar” and sells, among other things, their homebrewed beer—that, too, at an affordable price. Both food and drinks are tasty. According to Danny, the name of the café reflects a disagreement as to whether Can Masdeu is urban or rural; in true anarchist fashion they ended up with a compromise.

In addition to their courses in gardening and dancing, they offer workshops covering everything from how to repair cracks in old houses to building new ones with straw and clay. I choose Danny’s *contact-improv* class. It’s a kind of dance. The point being to move, with or without music, while touching, either physically or with your eyes and mind, one or more dance partners. You improvise your movements by “listening” to the body of your partner. It is a great way to get to know others—and yourself.

I’m sure not all inhabitants of Barcelona appreciate what Can Masdeu has to offer, but the support is sufficient to suggest that the place will survive—at least as long as they continue to be nice and find a way to give something back. Besides, in the traditionally conservative Ave Maria praising Spain, Barcelona is an open lung where all sorts of activities are allowed to breathe. Long live the well-intentioned anarchy!

The name of the place suggests that the anarchy in this case even has God on its side. Even hardcore atheists may appreciate the notion of “God’s little farm.”

Okay, so they survive the pressure from the “real world” by good deeds and concomitant goodwill, but how do things work internally?

Danny taught me to read the movements of others, and now I try to read happiness or gloom in the eyes, facial expressions, and voices of the inhabitants. Moreover, I supplement the limitations of



my person-reading skills by asking for a chat with anyone willing and linguistically able. The effort is somewhat hampered by the fact that I know even less Catalan than Spanish.

Obviously the answer depends on whom I end up talking with. Of course there are issues, but then again I suppose there might be a few problems even in God's paradise—and this is, after all, just His tiny farm. On the other hand, they are a reasonably stable group, which is a good sign. Only twice has there been a need to throw someone out: One was a thief and the other was an alcoholic with violent tendencies. Nor is there a problem recruiting new residents. It seems to be more difficult to find a vacant room here than a cheap apartment in downtown Oslo.

"At least money does not create any problems," I hear from one of the veterans. "Most of the time we have none, and we don't really care."

I have noted that the activities they offer have no price tag, but



Behind the open library is the "Botiga Gratuïta viva el llibre mercader!" Even with my limited language skills, I get the point: Commerce is to be released from the quandary of money. I try it out in practice; that is, I find nothing that fits me, but I leave a shirt.

they do accept donations. The amount depends on capacity and generosity—much like the Church. Residents are expected to donate 25 euros per month to cover expenses. As long as they don't pay rent or electricity, expenses imply food. I doubt you'll find cheaper food and lodging anywhere on Earth. The meals are mostly vegetarian, not so much due to principle but to limitations to what they can grow in their gardens or obtain at low cost elsewhere. If a suitable occasion should arise, they happily slaughter a chicken or two.

Guests are expected to contribute a bit more: two euros per day. The facilities are certainly not five stars, but neither is the price, especially considering that the money covers both room and board. Besides, they don't exactly run around writing bills. I had to ask several people before I found an unlocked box where I could put money.

Can Masdeu has its own store, which is mostly about clothing. Unlike regular shops, there is no staff. No one is in charge! It all works fine because the shop doesn't take money. If you need a garment, you just take it off the hanger. If you possess clothes you don't need, you leave them there. It's difficult to imagine an easier way to run a business—as long as it has nothing to do with business.

Obviously the place is eco-friendly. You won't find any commune with a hint of self-esteem that does not think in terms of sustainability, and worry about the exhaustible and indefinable needs of the Earth. For 25 euros a month it's rather difficult to destroy the planet, yet composting and recycling are esteemed activities here. The chickens hanging around on the premises live on leftovers—unless the rats get there first. They burn wood and talk about wind power. Perhaps one of these days. For the time being, free electricity will have to do. The washing machine is powered by a derelict bicycle. Is there any better way of combining the need for clean clothes with the need for exercise?

The place has an aptitude for anarchy, and anarchy is what they got. But, as Robert points out, anarchism does not imply the absence of order, just the absence of rulers. For him, Wikipedia proves that anarchy can prevail. Wikipedia belongs to everyone; things are taken care of on a voluntary basis by a large number of unpaid users, and it



On Sundays people come up from the city to eat cheap food and drink home-made beer from the Rur-Bar—an establishment guaranteed to operate without a license.

works. We all have the opportunity to ask Wikipedia whenever we need an answer for something.

Robert is a kind of spokesperson. He is not a leader by any means, and he actually doesn't really want to do too much speaking either. One of the problems with anarchy is that when no one takes the lead, there is not much leadership taking place. Any ten-year-old kid knows that anarchy flourishes in cyberspace; the question is whether it can flourish in a rampant, bygone leper colony. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, a group of real people is more difficult to manage compared to relationships on the Internet. The latter rarely require more than a friendly and heartfelt touch on the keyboard, and they don't demand that someone cook, or clean, or make sure the lettuce in the garden is given water.

In order to take care of household chores and farming, the residents are expected to put in eight hours a week. On Tuesdays the needs of the house are satisfied; on Thursdays it's time for the garden. Every second Thursday there are additional meetings where

practical topics are addressed. Committees and facilitators prepare issues for the meetings to make sure that the time is used fruitfully, presumably resulting in a cleaner house and a tastier salad.

Robert points out that social life, and the way they organize themselves, is an ongoing experiment. They have no clear-cut answer about how problems should be resolved, and with 25 more or less unselected individuals, problems do arise. Someone slams the doors when others are trying to sleep, and there are those who never show up when it's time for work. Some people talk incessantly, while others rarely open their mouths. In fact, if you look carefully, the least talkative person is most likely not even present at the meeting. During my stay, the individual responsible for dinner was nowhere to be found one day, and others complained that the pickled cucumbers were not in the place they ought to be. These things create feelings. Can Masdeu is dominated by men. I suppose most women find the bathroom amenities less than desirable. And, as one broadminded female occupant pointed out to me, "Spanish men don't talk about feelings, they are more geared toward doing."

Consequently, the agendas for the general meetings tend to be of a practical nature. Is the time ripe for planting carrots? How do we deal with the rats? Can Martin build an adobe hut in a corner of the garden to escape the noise of the community? When I was there, they had collectively realized that feelings had grown to become something rather visible and tangible—uncomfortably so. The next general meeting should therefore focus on how to deal with grievances and disputes.

Dinner *was* served. I helped out as much as I could. *Someone* always, or almost always, steps in. My overall impression is that most of the time most people do seem relaxed and friendly. They take time to smile and hug each other.

If I were asked to evaluate the quality of life of the residents, they probably would not end up with a top score. The somewhat primitive conditions take a toll, and room for privacy is limited. Furthermore, managing emotions is, at least in my opinion, a more important and more difficult challenge compared to organizing the

vegetable garden—and should, therefore, be given top priority. On the other hand, it is not obvious that the residents of the nearby city would receive a higher grade.

Actually, the situation at Can Masdeu is not that different from the average nuclear family; some members are mature and responsible, while others are less so, regardless of whether the family includes teenagers or a group of free-spirited adults. On this side of the Pearly Gates, there is hardly any place where questions such as “who does what, and how much do *you* do?” are not an issue. What matters is how clever one is at resolving conflicts and creating positive relations. With 25 members, more problems are likely to appear when compared to a family of five; but, on the other hand, they have the advantage that life can go on without everyone being the best of friends. If the mother cannot stand the father, the situation seems doomed; in a commune there is more room for discrepancies. Two people can dislike each other without the inevitable downfall of the community. A tad of anarchist “it-doesn’t-really-matter” attitude might benefit both the community and the family.

Whether the issue is how to get rid of rats or how to deal with shirkers, the solution should be based on consensus. Most (but not all!) intentional communities agree that this is the way to true salvation. The rat problem was resolved by a somewhat violent resolution.



If anarchy is getting on your nerves, or you simply want a toilet with a door, Barcelona is only a short walk away.

They had tried the service of a cat, but apparently the cat was of the anarchist and pacifist do-as-you-please type—or perhaps simply lazy. Equipped with the local rifle and a strategically located box of peanut butter, a couple of residents dispatched the majority of rats over the course of a long and sleepless night. Even the most animal-friendly guardians of animal rights had grown weary of rats eating their crops and creeping into their beds. Peanut butter and bullets were a consensus solution.

If someone had asked the rats, who knows, they might have agreed; a fast bullet during a nightly feast is probably preferable to a slow death by a sadistic cat.

As I get to know people, I have to let go of some preconceived assumptions. The outside world tends to label people who sleep on the floor in a house occupied by anarchists as losers. In my mind, “loser” is not the appropriate word because the important issue is whether a person is happy, and happiness depends on a lot more than housing conditions. But, admittedly, I do not expect to find people high up on the social ladder in such a place. Danny is an interesting exception. He has not slipped out of life to get trapped by the shady side of anarchy, but admits, in a private conversation, to being a medical doctor presently working on a Ph.D. related to the treatment of malaria. The University of Liverpool has given him a solid scholarship, and if he needs to talk with his mentor, they do so by Skype.

I refrain from asking how things are going with his degree. Instead I ask Robert whether it might be possible to come to terms with the owners of the house, perhaps in the form of a long-term lease, and thus obtain more security for the future.

“Oh, by no means,” he replies. “We are in a state of limbo. An ‘in-between’ condition. We don’t really exist. We are alive, but we are not part of the system. It’s an ideal situation.”

He senses that I am a bit confused, so he continues: “One thing is the financial aspects of renting, but a hundred times worse are the mile-long bureaucratic thorny shrubs blocking all options. They might even start sending us electricity bills. For the time being, we fortunately lack any address to address.” This is indeed true anarchy,

and when it comes to avoiding the stifling clutch of bureaucracy, they certainly have my full understanding and unrestrained blessing. So is the situation perfect?

The one thing Robert admits to occasionally miss is a portion of religious idealism. He believes that there is more strength in folded hands than in consensus decisions.

In the absence of faith, they have to make the most of the situation and send an atheist prayer to whichever God is in command of their little farm. I conclude that they have found an interesting niche within a big-city landscape, but there is no room for me. Besides, sooner or later I would miss a proper toilet and shower. Perhaps my needs are somewhat special. Then again, I've heard about a place that caters to people with special needs!



Solheimar—the "Home of the Sun." In a valley behind the church, they obtain light from above and heat from below.



## Solheimar: A Place for Special Needs

Sesselja Sigmundsdóttir was without doubt an enterprising woman. There are actually many enterprising people in Iceland, some, unfortunately, are a bit too innovative. Financial acrobatics and creative banking flourished to the extent that when the world decided to hold its breath, and no longer breathe money into the balloons of the stock exchange, it all collapsed like the volcanic craters this island is famous for. The financial crisis that struck Iceland in 2008 is not so visible to the tourists, but you do not need to scratch deep to realize where the quandary lies. Iceland is still an expensive country for travelers, but it has become a lot more expensive for Icelanders. In addition, people are troubled by the sudden lack of financial security.

Sesselja was not looking for money; she wanted to help children. Perhaps that's why her accomplishments survived both the financial crisis and World War II as well as a lot of additional, and quite unnecessary, hardships. For more than eighty years, Solheimar has offered individuals who want to "develop their inner potential" a place to be. Sesselja did not use the term *ecovillage* when she started Solheimar, but embedded in her philosophy were notions such as the importance of growing your own food, using organic farming methods, and providing a sustainable diet where vegetables and fruit are key ingredients. For her, relating to nature meant to really have a relationship with nature. Her primary concern, however, was to give orphaned children a better life. Eventually, she mixed in mentally handicapped children because, in those days, no one else was willing to care for them.

Unfortunately, her philosophy clashed with the prevailing mindset in Iceland. For one, it was considered important that healthy children not come into contact with retarded children; you never



Sesselfja's kind face gazes down from the stamp made in her memory. In the foreground is an artist whose products are sold in the store. His paintings are somewhat on the naive side, like the two on display behind him, but colorful and nice.

know, it could be contagious. Two, vegetables were not regarded as food for people. Sheep and cows eat them, but humans should live on fish and meat. The authorities demanded that she build a high wall between the house for the normal children and the house for the abnormal children. They also demanded a different diet. She refused. For her, we are all equal, and she didn't like the idea of killing animals. The government made a special law designed to have her removed. But she refused. And the place is still there in a small gorge just an hour's drive on good roads east of Reykjavik, as secluded as it can be in a perpetually open landscape, but noticeably far beyond the ocean surrounding Iceland.

Some of the houses are situated on the flat and barren plateau. There, pointing toward heaven and inspired by the mountains beyond, is the church as well as their new and attractive assembly hall. The place caters to everything from American tourists to students who want to learn more about “inner potential” and how to foster its development.

In the basin, they’ve planted trees. So many trees that—at least on an Icelandic scale—you can almost consider it a forest. Trees are a commodity Icelanders are known to appreciate. Norwegians, on the other hand, come to this island to experience the openness of the landscape; they like the lack of green barriers blocking their view. I like both.

At one point Sesselja obtained philosophical inspiration from Rudolf Steiner—the founder of *anthroposophy*. Equality and spirituality were central features of his teachings. His ideas live on in two types of institutions: the Steiner Schools (or Waldorf Schools as they were originally called, bearing the name of the cigarette factory where the first one was located) and Camphill villages. The latter are places where people with special problems live together with people who only have normal problems. Solheimar, however, started out ten years before the first Camphill village; Sesselja was a true pioneer.

The preferred term is “special needs” because “problems” sounds a bit negative. Gradually they have expanded their horizon in terms of clientele. The special needs can now be linked to drug addiction or a tendency to end up in prison.

According to the philosophy, Camphill villages are small Gardens of Eden where people live together like a large family focusing on mutual enrichment regardless of needs. I eventually realized that the idea is rather ingenious, no wonder Camphill villages have spread to more than a hundred locations in twenty countries, including Norway. The six places in Norway are united under the slogan, “A dignified life—proximity to people and nature.” All the inhabitants are expected to work and contribute to the community, albeit some of them are necessarily more productive than others. It’s an advanced form of integrating people with handicaps into society.

Obviously you do not talk about *them* and *us*—in relation to type of needs—although everyone knows who is who.

I ask Pétur Sveinbjarnarson whether the enrichment is truly mutual. Pétur's business card says President, and after more than thirty years of life at Solheimar he has acquired a jovial face and a well-fed body suggesting a lot of enrichment.

"Helping each other is an integral part of life here at Solheimar," he claims. "It's not possible to imagine this place without people with special needs. They are important. The point is not to integrate this lot with the others, but to integrate the others with them. Helping each other gives meaning and purpose to life." It sounds almost too good.

"How many are here?"

"One hundred five inhabitants, of which 43 have special needs."

The numbers are proclaimed without hesitation—and I'm sure they are correct, but Pétur stresses, with even less hesitation, that those with special needs, obviously, are no different from the others. Everyone is equal, of course—at least in the sense of "equal value." And everyone has needs. It's just that some have more needs, or different needs, than others. In the end, it doesn't really matter.

On the other hand, upon reflection, it does matter. Their economy and survival are based on the money paid by the Icelandic government for them to take care of troubled or handicapped people. In a way, it's a business strategy. Then I arrest myself for being unnecessarily critical. Resorting to negative critique is too easy, and what Solheimar stands for seems pretty close to ideal for all parties involved. In any case, their approach makes sense. Those in need could hardly have been better off anywhere else, and the others have created for themselves a cozy little corner of the world where the sun shines bright and where human glow generates almost as much warmth as the eternal volcanic heat beneath the surface. I believe Pétur has lived a good life, but I am convinced that he has also enriched the lives of others.

He tells me that the number of inhabitants should not exceed 100–150 individuals. They should not expand beyond the point

where everyone knows everyone and thus creates personal ties with everyone. I have heard mentioned the same estimate in other communities, and it agrees with what behavioral biologists assume to be the limit of human capacity to form relationships. Thus, the present population at Solheimar should be fine. The problem, however, is that they are not the same hundred people each year; individuals keep coming or leaving. Thus, the place does have a “number problem,” and people need to familiarize with new faces all the time. You never know who will stick around long enough for the ties to be lasting.

All ecovillages have the same problem, but the communities that manage to bind people closer together get a more stable crew—perhaps for better and worse. New faces can be enriching, so the point is not necessarily to lock the doors to any exchange. On the other hand, it’s not necessarily contentment that keeps people put; in some places lack of individual economic resources makes it more or less impossible to leave. Elsewhere, religious faith expects coexistence until death. Unfortunately, it’s rather difficult to have it both ways: full individual freedom combined with bonds so strong that only death can break them apart. The point is relevant, however, whether you’re discussing communities or couples.

Some Camphill villages consist of one big “extended family.” These places tend to have a shared economy; whatever comes in goes to the family, and whatever you need is taken from the same purse.

“Solheimar is special,” Pétur tells me. “Things have changed a lot since the place was founded in 1930; now we employ people and give them salaries. Most employees live as normal nuclear families, or singles, in lodging, but we do have a lot of shared activities. We want to continue in the tradition Sesselja started, but at the same time we need to bring in new ideas. The outside society is changing, and we have to adapt to current reality in Iceland.”

In other words, I am unlikely to find any intricate triangular or larger human constellations or bonobo-style activities that grab the attention of the outside world. Solheimar is perhaps a bit less “alternative”—at the least less exotic—but I believe Pétur when he

points out that they need to adapt to modern culture. Speaking of the current conditions, I ask whether the financial quagmire matters for a place rooted in idealism.

“Everything has indeed become more expensive,” he admits. “On the other hand, increased unemployment means it’s easier to recruit people.” Well put. A good leader should focus on positive things. I decide to dig further

“As seen from the outside, I would assume it might be easier to build a well-functioning community without having the burden of all the special needs. Isn’t it difficult to maintain your patience? Is it really cool to hang around with the retarded? Given similar economic conditions, would you rather be without them?”

Pétur is welcoming and pleasant even when I am not. He says something. I don’t remember what, but then it isn’t really an answer. Yet, he may be right. How would I respond if someone asked me whether I thought the Earth would be better off being flat, or if our planet should preferably orbit around Vega rather than the sun? One needs to deal with reality and make the best of it. Moreover, I sincerely believe that the potential hardship of caring for needy people also has an upside. People with Down syndrome tend to be happy and easy-going, and being with them *can* really help you grow. You see yourself in a slightly different mirror. As Valgeir, my tour guide for the site, phrases it: “Being here does impact on your soul.”

They meet every morning. All of them. Preferably outdoors. They grab each other’s hands and form a big circle. Some might have an announcement to make, or simply go over a few practicalities. Then they say a little prayer, perhaps even a short period of silence, before they all spread out to start their daily chores. Community building is important. I ask Pétur what else they do to oil the wheels of the social fabric.

“We place great emphasis on communal activities. There are events in our church, choirs of all kinds, dance, music, theater, football matches, and much more. Not only to bring people together, but because it helps the individual develop his or her potential.”

While wandering around I even observe a small—one hole—golf

course. Solheimar obviously caters to a variety of needs. Apparently there are activities going on most days of the week—at least in the wintertime when there are no tourists.

“We have 35,000 visitors every year, which is more than one-tenth of Iceland’s population,” says Pétur, “and 99 percent of the Icelandic people support what we are doing.”

He is in sales mode. Part of his job is to obtain sponsors willing to help them, either in the form of state funds or money from sympathetic philanthropists.

“Unfortunately the present president of Iceland does not belong to the 99 percent, but our former female president, Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, the first woman elected to be the head of a country, is a dedicated friend.”

It turns out that the local president, Pétur, lives in Reykjavik most of the time, and his son, Guðmundur Petursson, is the one in charge of the site. Presidency, however, is far from a supreme power; the board makes the important decisions, and it’s composed of people from Solheimar as well as government officials.

I buy lunch in the local cafeteria. The food is tasty, not expensive, but not free regardless of residential status or needs. All in all, the place is not so different from the canteen where I work. In other words, it is hardly the place where you are bound to end up in vigorous discussions with strangers; but it is sufficiently open-minded that I soon find myself in conversation with a young woman who moved here with her husband and small child eight months ago. Her job is to organize tour programs for visitors of all sorts. She and her husband thrive, she claims, but she assumes that a couple of years will be enough. The pay is low, of course, but the housing and food are reasonable.

“Solheimar is always short of money,” she says.

The financial crisis hasn’t stopped Icelandic diligence, and Solheimar will prevail. Whatever monetary problems they might have are not reflected in the buildings, with only some minor exceptions. The porch railing outside my apartment lacks some planks and the lamp in my living room is broken, but all in all maintenance is no worse here than at my home.

I try to ask her whether higher wages should be given priority over architecturally priced meeting facilities in Russian larch. Her response does not suggest any conflict, only that these matters are left to the board.

Children are no longer a sustainable commodity. Unfortunately, that's just the way it is. Sesselja's ideas about helping the helpless children are outdated, which is unfortunate because helpless children are a lot cuter and more gratifying to help compared to similarly helpless adults. Outdated because orphans are supplying the adoption queue, and disabled children are cared for by devoted parents with heavy support from the public health system. Solheimar, therefore, has to make do with adults.

"A common problem for ecovillages is to develop sustainable industry," Pétur points out. "Business should not only be sustainable



I believe in Valgeir (right), my guide on the premises, when he claims that Solheimar covers most needs. Perhaps the needs differ a bit from one person to the next, but the main need—fellow humans—is universal. Behind the two are greenhouses where vegetables and small trees have their needs cared for.



in terms of the environment, but also financially viable for those required to survive on the profit.”

In other words, the typical inhabitants of ecovillages live either on government welfare, on retirement salary, or on support from those who belong to the former two groups. Pétur is right. Most of the places I have visited struggle to create income based on their own work. Organic farming rarely pays, particularly when dozens of people share the job. By taking care of people with special needs, the Camphill villages have solved this problem; they do a job for the state, and the state pays.

At Solheimar they wish for an even stronger economic foundation. Most residents are, after all, without special needs. Moreover, the core idea is to find meaningful tasks for everyone regardless of their needs. To exploit their human capital, they need, in other words, to establish some sort of industry. So far they have four partly independent businesses: (1) tourists (to which my presence makes a small contribution); (2) horticulture, (3) cultivation of trees; and (4) a store. The store sells groceries so that people won't need to drive far away for basic shopping, and it sells the products of “self-realization,” including knitwear, candles, wood carvings, and paintings.

“A *sustainable* way of life in a *sustainable* community,” says Pétur. The word “sustainable” obviously tastes good.

The tomatoes are tasty too. Four people are busy packing them when Valgeir and I show up. He has promised to show me around, and the workers are happy to take a break. Two of them, I understand, are volunteers who have come in from other countries for a few weeks to work for free—partly to learn about this place and partly to develop their inner potential. I do not ask what category the other two belong to. The atmosphere is jovial and the pressure to deliver is not unpleasantly stressing; they take time off to offer us a cup of appetizing herbal tea and a plate with delicious, albeit slightly less sustainable, cookies.

Apparently the revenues gained from the tomatoes and other facets of their business enterprises are not that important. Solheimar has an untapped source of wealth that is situated beneath our feet.

Not oil, as in my country, but water. Then again, it's not just any water, but water holding well above 90 degrees C. Hardly as sexy or lucrative as oil, but Valgeir smiles when he says that they are actually quite rich.

Like so many other places on Iceland, at the bottom of the valley I sense the unmistakable aroma of sulfur fumes. Deep below the surface the place is boiling. The hot water not only heats up all the houses and greenhouses at Solheimar, but also their small swimming pool. Still, the energy currently used for heating is only a small part of what they can harvest from the source; hot water is, for example, convertible to electric power that can be sold on the open market.

The plans, or at least the thoughts, are already in place.

Valgeir fits my image of Icelandic men: handsome and well maintained with a trace of a Viking beard. I assume he is younger than me, but he possesses a sense of confidence and calm that only comes with age and an appropriate attitude to life. We are in the hen house where he proudly presents me with an unusually large and colorful Icelandic rooster.

"The hens don't produce many eggs," he continues, in a sort of parenthesis, "but that's the way we want it. We want our farming to be organic. Without a more stimulating fodder, the hens will never lay many eggs. Too few in fact."

During my short stay in the hen house, I see no eggs and I count more mice than chickens. I ask, maintaining my friendly tone, whether the mice are also part of organic farming.

Valgeir looks a bit startled, but only for a brief moment. He tells me that if I like mice, I should have been here during the winter when these animals really flock to the warm and cozy hen house. Then it gets truly crowded. Obviously the mice are simply there. They always have been. He admits that someone, at one point, set up traps that kill mice, but they did not like it—neither the mice nor soft-hearted men. Both prefer a more sensitive line, and the mice are now being caught in more mouse-friendly traps. They are subsequently taken on a tour and dropped somewhere in another district far from the hen house and other effortless sources of food and

warmth. I refrain from asking what the mice might think about this solution.

It turns out that Valgeir has taken matters into his own hands. Together with a neighbor, he has constructed an independent facility for poultry with food more to the taste of egg-producing chickens.

Our next stop is certainly organic. Tree planting is the word of redemption. Icelandic people are as keen for trees as Norwegians are for cheap alcohol. Once a large part of the island was covered by birch, but that was before the Vikings arrived. Today, forest schools, which raise small trees before they let them loose in the open countryside, are a sure business strategy—not the least for Solheimar. “People here really like the idea of a forest,” Valgeir tells me, “I suppose primarily because we hardly have any.”

A forest has great value. I hardly saw a single summer cottage along the sea, but where someone had planted a few derelict bushes in the interior, cottages were more numerous than trees. “The trees are organically fed, of course,” he points out, “and, therefore, particularly suitable for bringing the forest back to this island.” The cute little seedlings in their tiny pots apparently thrive on organic food. Besides, they have ample time for inner development.

There are kids around; I’ve seen a few. They belong to the people who work there, but they too have needs—for schooling among other things. For me, anthroposophy is about how to bring up the next generation of humans—not trees. So I ask Pétur what they have to offer.

“We would like to have our own kindergarten and school, but for the time being it’s not practical,” he says. “We had one before, and maybe sometime in the future, but now the kids attend daycare and school along with other children of the municipality we belong to.”

I am somewhat surprised, but perhaps this is the best solution. After all, it is important to integrate with the outside community as well.

Later I contact Anni Haugen. She is an acquaintance from a time long ago, and she works on childcare issues at the University of Rey-



The new assembly house has won architectural acclaim and covers a variety of needs—including lectures for American bus tourists. The house reflects my impression of Solheimar: sturdy, nice and neat, but somewhat predictable and conventional. I consider the complete statement to be a compliment.

kjavik. A very likeable woman, who offers me lunch at her home accompanied by her wife, Margret. It turns out that her wife worked at Solheimar, including a job as a manager for the school they once had. She's a psychologist who is presently engaged in therapy. I assume Margret can tell me what really goes on behind the polite and somewhat businesslike façade put up by my previous informants. How often does "rain" break the sunshine at the home of the sun?

"There were conflicts," she recalls. "Not necessarily more so than you'll find at any workplace, but perhaps no less either."

"Perhaps life is not that easy with a bunch of retarded and demanding clientele," I suggest.

"No, no," she immediately retorts, "those people never cause any problems. It's the staff that does the quarrelling." Otherwise, neither of them is able to bring forth any negative rumors concerning the place despite my persistent attempt to fish for more juicy details. Apparently there has been a discussion as to what Solheimar really has to offer people with different, and more or less complex, needs. Their services are not primarily based on mainstream psychology. Moreover, it seems clear that the place is presently run more like a business venture than out of idealism, which for some people in the

government does not suggest an improvement in the services offered. Yet, all in all, Solheimar seems to have a solid reputation with the social authorities of Iceland. The place depends on government approval, and so far they are on the safe side.

It's my last night at Solheimar. Soon I must move on. The mountains of Iceland are calling me. Perhaps I have not had all my needs satisfied, but the main need is silenced—my curiosity. Solheimar works. From their starting point in anthroposophy, they have added a solid touch of ecophilosophy and created a practical solution to integrated communal life. The early emphasis on forming a unified family has slipped and been replaced by profitability and the requirement for privacy and decent salaries by the employees. Like Ithaca, they have opted for a somewhat bourgeois style, but I would not hold that against them. They have done what is needed to survive and thrive.

They have their own church with their own priest who takes the liturgy in his own hands. At Solheimar, the ceiling is high in the house of God as well. They retain a basic Christian type of belief, but do not let religion stifle accomplishment or human diversity. Officially, Iceland figures as perhaps the most Christian country on Earth, but in reality the country is closer to the bottom of the list. According to statistics, most people belong to a church, but in reality most people rarely if ever find themselves inside one. According to Valgeir, the church at Solheimar is among the few churches in the country that have a substantial congregation. I feel confident that the church plays a positive role for the community. I also believe people thrive here—whatever their needs might be. Perhaps it is not the most vibrant place I have visited, but like Ithaca they are creating an alternative that suits a larger fraction of the Icelandic population. They deliver what they promise: a good life for all sorts of people. The place is solidly anchored in the cultural heritage of both anthroposophy and the country, but yet totally different from other Icelandic villages. Here people live and work together with a common goal and a shared purpose.

Margret was there for two years and enjoyed her stay, but has no

desire to return. I was there for a short week. The place is fine, but I feel an urge to move on—even more confused as to what sort of needs I actually have. I like places that challenge my personality and my ideas, but at the same time I want a place ripe with empathy and human qualities. At Solheimar they started out with communal living, sharing their income to create a society where everyone is equal. They eventually gave up on these ideals. Does it mean that true communism and egalitarianism are simply impossible to achieve with human minds as the starting point? I fear so. Then I recall a place I heard about when working in a faraway country many years ago.

## 13

### Toyosato: Where Communism Thrives but Does Not Exist

Ernest Callenbach once wrote a novel called *Ecotopia*. It's about an ecologically based utopia, a place where people are happy because they live in an egalitarian society with a sustainable relationship to the environment. Some readers made him aware that the community he describes actually exists—in the form of Yamagishi communes, where people really live off the land and aim to be part of the nature that feeds them. They have their bodily needs covered from the food they produce and a shared purse. Their mental needs are met from a strong-knit community based on equality and solidarity.

Callenbach went out to see whether the Yamagishi people really had managed to establish the reality he had only succeeded to create in print. After all, he had framed his description as an utopia—a real life utopia would be something highly extraordinary, something the world had never before seen. Like Callenbach, I also went out to investigate. Several of the communities I have visited sported similar ideas. Can Masdeu was, in principle, anarchistic and egalitarian, and places like Ark and Damanhur originally tried to function on shared income. In the end, all these places had to renounce their ideals in favor of more pragmatic versions where the inhabitants are “almost” equal. I considered this sort of modification as an adaption to human nature; after all, we are created with a slice of selfishness and a desire for status, which means that we tend to prefer to stand slightly above the others. True communism and anarchism, at least with a larger group of people over a prolonged time, might be theoretically possible, but seems highly unlikely given the way evolution has shaped us.



The Japanese garden outside the dining room is, perhaps, the most frivolous part of the compound. But beneath the surface, in the deep corners of the human mind, they have achieved a more groundbreaking transformation than any of the other places I visited.

I sense it already on the night flight from Moscow to Tokyo. The petite elderly lady in front of me is obviously on her way home. Three times she turns around and asks, in a worried tone, and in understandable but far from perfect English, whether it's okay if she lowers her seat. Each time I answer, "Sure, no problem, just do it." When she finally understands—or accepts—my answer, she bows a dozen times and overwhelms me with thanksgiving as if I had just saved her from the guillotine. Only a Japanese would have even thought of asking.



In Japan, the worst thing you can do is to annoy another person. No penance is adequate for those who disturb the peace or are responsible for grievances. Actually, the idea of punishing a perpetrator is rather superfluous; the penalty comes from within. Japan is, therefore, not a paradise for lawyers; in fact, I was told that they have one-tenth the number of lawyers per capita compared to the U.S. If your blunder is sufficiently grave, you are expected to condemn yourself to capital punishment. Happiness can be somewhat transient in this country.

Yamagishi Miyozo did not fit into this land of conformity and self-restraint. His revolutionary ideas led him so far out on the edge that during the Second World War he regularly had to hide from the police. His favorite hiding place was in a local hen house, which led him to develop an enduring interest in chickens—more precisely, in what makes them happy. The ensuing insight was used to revolutionize not only the poultry industry in Japan, but also its human counterpart. This sounds somewhat familiar. It is roughly the same as my ideas of optimizing our human zoo.

I once studied anthropology. To gain practical experience, I got myself a scholarship to work at a university on the island of Shikoko, a place where traditional Japanese values and cultural expressions still stand strong. I never learned much of the language, partly because my colleagues politely asked me not to—they badly needed to practice their English—and partly because I am not much of a language wizard. I did, however, focus on comprehending their culture. This background proves useful for my present mission to understand the Yamagishi movement, particularly what they preach concerning social life, and to assess whether their ideals have passed the test of time.

Japan is just like I remember it, wrapped in a perpetual haze. The light gray humidity looms over the endless landscape of small houses in concrete and cheap siding that stretch all the way along the railway from Tokyo to Nagoya. The setting seems safe and quiet, but without any sparkles of innovation or artistry; life here revolves around practical matters and economic efficiency. In accordance with the scenery, most fellow passengers are dozing.

In Nagoya I switch to a local train.

I've barely had time to jump onto the platform in Tsu before I see a man waving eagerly to me. It's Goto. He is an architect, around 50 years old, with a crew cut and a look like a cross between Clint Eastwood and a Japanese Mafioso.

After the war, life became a bit easier for Yamagishi. He began to gather people to put his ideas into practice, and in 1958 they started an agricultural collective. The key principles, at least in terms of the human inhabitants, were that everyone is equal, no one stands above or has authority over the others, and that the concept of property is redundant. What they have belongs to all. For me these principles are the core part of communism and anarchism. I recall reading *Animal Farm*, George Orwell's satire on communism. In the book, the farm animals take over the farm in true communist spirit. They proclaim the place to be egalitarian and non-authoritarian, but pretty



The welcoming party at Toyosato. In Japan people dislike doing things alone, so having seven people meet me is close to the norm. Kondo (No. 1 from left), Goto (2), Masako (6), and Kishi (7) are the ones I spent the most time with.

soon some of the animals appear to be “more equal” than the others—particularly the pigs headed by Comrade Napoleon. The pigs rapidly take control, and in the end the farm resembles what “real communism” seems to be like: the power structure and oppression of the Stalinist Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, the ideals of equality and power to the masses faded rapidly when adopting *perestroika*. In a parallel fashion, the people of China no longer wave Mao’s *Little Red Book*. My primary research goal, therefore, is to find out whether the ideals still stand here. I want to find out who, if anyone, has become “more equal” in this Japanese version of a communist utopia.

In the car on the way to Toyosato, which is the largest and most famous Yamagishi collective, Goto explains that their ideas have spread. Today there are more than 30 collectives, or *jikkenchi* as they call them, with a total of some 1,500 inhabitants. The three syllables *ji*, *ken*, and *chi* stand for practice, to be expressed, and place, respectively. A *jikkenchi* is, in other words, a place where one tries to transform the Yamagishi ideology into reality. It is a community that demonstrates the feasibility of a set of principles—somewhat like Auroville. Most *jikkenchis* are located in Japan, but there are also small clones in countries like Thailand, Switzerland, Brazil, the United States, S. Korea, and Australia, albeit with mostly Japanese-born members.

My *jikkenchi*, Toyosato, is sort of a family farm but with 500 family members, about 1,000 cows, 8,000 pigs, and an unknown number of chickens. It is far larger than Orwell’s *Animal Farm* or any farm in Norway. The place is so big that they use Google Earth to get an overview, and my tour of the premises is done by car.

The farm is obviously well managed. Among other things, it includes a dental clinic, a large park with a baseball field, and even a one-hole golf course. It also has a sufficient fleet of vehicles to be the envy of any major industrial compound. In short, they have all they need—and perhaps a substantial bit more.

The first thing that strikes me is that, although the farming operation runs like the best of any capitalist enterprise, the place is rather devoid of artistic fancy or the whim and décor that characterize the other ecovillages I have visited. I suppose that, like elsewhere in

Japan, people focus on work and rational solutions. The most unrestrained object on the farm, arguably, is the traditional Japanese garden situated outside the huge canteen.

The room Kato and I enter reminds me of the lobby of the hotel where I once stayed as a guest of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow. Large, functional sofas in beige imitation leather are placed firmly in a room almost completely devoid of decoration. The welcoming committee has expanded to seven people. They smile. Two of the ladies serve green tea. Everyone looks curiously, and a little nervously, at me. Partly, I suppose, because I'm a *gaijin* (foreigner), but perhaps mostly because I'm something as bizarre as a biologist and scientist who wants to study them.

Kondo is designated as my special guide, benefactor, and interpreter. He's a handsome man with a very friendly manner and a penchant for singing old Beatles tunes. He claims to be 66 years old, but seems younger both in body and soul. More importantly, he speaks decent English with a vocabulary that far exceeds what The Beatles used in their songs.

"Do you eat breakfast?" he asks.

"Occasionally," I say carefully, but go on, "Actually, most days."

It turns out that here at Toyosato people usually skip that meal because they believe it is healthier to eat only twice a day, and because the food is then appreciated more.

"I'll make sure you get," he says.

I object. If you are in Rome, or in a *jikkenchi*, then follow the local norms. It's part of my "participating observation." Not until the time approaches noon the next day do I begin to regret this decision.

"The children are given breakfast," he continues to make it easier for me, but that, of course, only makes it harder to accept food in the morning.

I also learn that young children sleep with their parents in their allocated family room, but from the beginning of secondary school most of them move into dormitories for either boys or girls.

All of the inhabitants are supposed to stand equal when it comes

to possessions, so if you own a house or other property when you join the commune, it's expected that the assets will be transferred to the community. On the other hand, you cannot join without first staying there a year as an "apprentice," so it is not a case of just snatching people's money.

They actually do dish out cash to whomever might consider it worth having. School children are given pocket money, and adults can claim 10,000 yen a month (roughly a hundred U.S. dollars), but in general the inhabitants only bother to collect if they happen to need cash. Everything on the site is free, including the necessary, if not the most fashionable, clothing. People rarely move outside, which means there is really no reason to drag money around. Should there arise a need for more extensive expenses, the issue is discussed in a meeting; but it's rarely a problem whether you need a new TV or a university education. Money simply isn't a problem.

Eventually I feel that I am beginning to get to know my new friends. They relax because they realize that I'm not the short-tempered and difficult to deal with type of *gaijin*, but one who smiles back. Furthermore, they understand that I know Japanese culture and hence do not "step in the salad." There are lots of "salads." The more serious, but common, *gaijin* errors include not taking one's shoes off when entering a room, and jumping into a public pool without first washing thoroughly. I know. I have been here before, so I am a housebroken *gaijin*.

The practical details I observe while staying there do add to my regard for the place, but I am primarily interested in their ideology. I learn that the first step in becoming a full member is to attend a two-week course. They call their philosophy *kensan*, and consequently refer to *kensan*-school and *kensan*-meetings. If someone's idealism should begin to fade, another week or so at *kensan* school ought to get the person back in line. My obvious question is, "What do you learn at school?" Or, perhaps, "How do you learn at school?" Whenever I bring up these questions, they love to answer, but I have a hard time getting a consistent and unambiguous response.

"I am you and you are me," says Kondo. "We're all part of na-

ture's great community."

"It's in the heart," says Masako. She is a comfortable, adult woman with a round and motherly face.

"The most important thing is that you do not need money or possessions to be happy," elaborates Kishi, "and that all people are equal, no one is in charge of others... and that getting angry doesn't benefit anyone."

He cares for the pigs. Pigs often put up funny facial expressions—so does he, but unlike the pigs he usually adds a kind, albeit slightly awkward, smile. Eventually I realize that he is far more intelligent than I first thought.

"To be a Yamagishi requires mental development," he continues after a long pause.

In Japan, the word "pig" is even more of an insult than it is in Norway or the U.S. Caring for edible animals is not the occupation you'd wish your children to have, and particularly not dealing with pigs. Being involved in slaughtering animals is really the worst thing that can happen, spending your life scrubbing toilets is much preferred. When I worked on the island of Shikoko, the pariah outcasts associated with butchering (referred to as *burakumin*) were still around and still more or less untouchable. Kishi is small and slender, a person who might easily be bullied elsewhere, but he talks about his life with the pigs and life in the jikkenchi with the same enthusiasm. I never hear anything resembling a snort. I consider it a solid sign that egalitarianism prevails.

"It is a process," he explains, still referring to kensan. "You must go inside yourself and work on your mind. There are no teachers in this school, only a moderator that helps the participants ask questions to themselves such as what makes you angry and what makes you happy. A core idea is that if we avoid making each other angry, then we will all live in peace and joy."

Kondo takes over.

"The idea of sharing everything, and being there for each other, seems strange for people at first, but gradually it will be part of you.

And only then are you happy!"

Brainwashing, I think.

But then I give it a second thought—perhaps it is better de-

scribed as brain *exercise*! Kensan school is not necessarily any more about brainwashing than the Norwegian school system, and if it manages to make people happy then one might argue that their syllabus is more important than memorizing the Lord's Prayer. As the days pass, I can't help but notice that there is indeed an amicable atmosphere here at the jikkenchi; people do seem to be content and kind to each other.

"The practicalities of living in a jikkenchi are not that important," says Masako, "it's the mindset that makes the difference. I have two children who have grown up here, but both have chosen to live outside. The important thing is what they learned by being here, the right attitude to their fellow human beings and a disregard for possessions."

I believe I understand what they are saying, but it sounds almost too good to be true. "Don't some people, occasionally, contribute less than what the others feel they should?"

They admit that this might be a problem, but *I* have to admit that the problem seems less here than in any other community I have visited. Work here is not something you do for money, or to assert yourself in competition with colleagues, but something you do for the fellowship. You thrive by participating in meaningful tasks. It's no big deal if people contribute in varying degrees, but occasionally they need to raise the issue of attitudes in kensan meetings.

"If you feel someone is doing less than they should, the problem is primarily in your head," claims Rita.

She's from Switzerland but has a Japanese husband and has lived for more than twenty years in jikkenchis. She certainly seems happy. Obviously she sticks out from the rest because of her appearance: She is short, with blond hair that tops a slightly chubby body. One evening the two of us sit up long after everyone else has gone to bed. She is a highly useful informant, partly because she speaks fluent English, but mostly because, by being European, she is in a better position to understand my questions and formulate answers I understand. Also, she seems honest and sincere without any need to defend or idealize the movement.

As part of my (somewhat passive) participating observation, I am



Humi-san sits on the lawn and weeds, not because anyone asked her to, but because she thrives there and she wants to contribute to the community—even though she's 93 years old. I notice that she radiates joy and I conclude that it is not just because Kondo and I stop to talk with her.

invited to kensan meetings. All the various teams, such as the groups in charge of animals or the canteen, have daily meetings that are mostly about practical questions; but the gatherings are also intended to remind people about the basic values they live by. When needed, they add time to deal with more personal issues, whether in the form of conflicts or simply that someone feels a bit down.

In the joint kensan meeting, with representatives from each of the working groups, the core topic of the day is noodles. They take turns being a representative. The chat is free without the need of a chairman or of a “raise your hands please,” and a lot of laughter is included. Another jikkenchi has started a noodle factory. Because all jikkenchis are part of the same “family,” and thus share whatever there is to share, the noodle jikkenchi has sent them a batch of noodles and asked for a taste report in order to improve the product. We had hot noodle soup for dinner the day before, and the flavor is an even hotter topic. Everyone seems to have highly particular opinions



as to how noodles ought to look, smell, and taste—not to mention their consistency—but then noodles are not to be joked about in Japan. Their responses are varied, but apparently point in a slightly negative direction; neither the consistency nor flavor of the noodles are optimal. Personally I found the noodle soup to be as good as noodle soups can be, but then I am no expert.

Fridolf is another example of their extended family life. He is German, but lives in a Swiss *jikkenchi*, and has come all the way to Toyosato for a three-month stay to have some dental work done. Free, of course, because money only comes into play when dealing with people outside the system, but it is equally obvious that he will help out in-between his dental appointments.

After a long and emotional noodle discourse, they have barely time for one more question. The guy who is responsible for onions needs to plant 200,000 onions and could use an extra hand. It's a simple matter that is quickly arranged, and the solution includes both Fridolf and me.

An important principle of the meetings is that anyone should be able to raise any issue. I assume that if noodle tasting and onion planting are the only obstacles troubling the 500 souls presently around, it means they are doing something right. Perhaps my local school board could pick up a point or two from *kensan* school.

Another day Kishi takes me to the pigpen. Or rather, pigpens. The 8,000 heads change their locations four times as they grow older. Five times if you include the dining table. It is an industry; there are no cozy mud ponds with ducks and water lilies.

On Orwell's farm, the pigs were the ones who were "more equal" than the others. Then it occurs to me that the situation really is not that much different in a *jikkenchi*! After having said hello to several hundred pigs, I come across what I'm searching for. I meet the one individual who really is the "most equal" of anyone on the premises. A huge boar stretches his titanic body in a large, single occupancy, first-class (I assume) pen. Here there is both sunshine and shade as well as privacy. I am sure this "number one comrade" had more sows than Casanova had women; he is dirty all over, smells bad, and ap-

appears obnoxious. In *Animal Farm*, Orwell calls him Comrade Napoleon, and the name fits well for the local version of this character.

As we leave the place, we discover that one of the children has run off: A small brown piglet is, perhaps somewhat hesitantly, heading toward Tokyo and a more alluring life. Freedom and equality or not, the situation creates a lot of fun—at least for the humans involved. One of Kishi's coworkers comes to our rescue while we offer the piglet a bit of kensan schooling—in between attempts at chasing him (or her) back to where we think he belongs. The two men talk to him with a soothing voice in Japanese. Eventually the piglet gives up his plans, apparently realizing that the best place to be is at a jik-kenchi, and with the three of us limiting his options, or directions, he returns home to the pigpen with mom and lots of egalitarian piglets. Outside, the world moves on; inside, everything is as before. I wonder whether the little piglet one day will be the next Napoleon. Inspired by the search for freedom, I have a question.

“How about someone fancying a vacation, or just to try life out-



In the end I find what I'm looking for—Comrade Napoleon—the boss who is more equal than everyone else (at least among pigs). But I found no human equivalent at Toyosato.

side for a while?”

“Holiday is not a concept we are accustomed to,” Kishi admits.

I believe him, but more or less the same might be said about any Japanese workforce. I do eventually realize that if you want to take time off from a jikkenchi, it’s no big deal. Whether you desire a trip to the beach, need to take care of your parents, or to find out what things are like on other continents, it is feasible. You just need to remember that the holiday starts at a kensan meeting. Masako has recently spent two months in China to learn how things are there. Goto has been to Mongolia, and Kondo travelled for a month in Switzerland with his wife to celebrate their 60th birthdays.

“You see, we were born on the same day in the same year,” he says, smiling.

I believe them. They actually manage to pull the load together without the need of a whip.

One day, Kondo takes me to the first jikkenchi, Kasugayama, half an hour’s drive away. “A world laboratory for humans” is carved in a stone monument at the entrance.

Katoji has lived here for more than 40 years. He was enthralled by Yamagishi’s ideas while in high school and chose to try jikkenchi life, opposing his parents’ pressure to undertake a university degree. He is almost as tall as me and has a friendly smile with a face looking like a kid from primary school. It surprises me to hear that we were born in the same year, but I console myself with the fact that he doesn’t have the same distinguished streak of gray in his hair.

“I never regretted the decision to come here,” he says in a convincing voice. “Life has been good for me.”

The past twenty years of his life have been spent caring for chickens.

“Even hens and roosters rarely get angry when they live in the spirit of Yamagishi,” he claims.

I’m skeptical. Chickens are known for their pecking order, and to avoid having this behavioral tendency blossom in a crowded hen yard should require a bit more than what I expect chicken kensan

school is able to provide. Perhaps something on the order of a massive input of pacifying medicine would be better. These birds are arguably even further from being innate communists than humans, and my skepticism seems partly justified. It turns out that Yamagishi, sensibly enough, decided that all chickens should not be *completely* equal.

What is common to both birds and man on this farm is that life is arranged in accordance with Japanese efficiency and practicality. Each enclosure has about 100 hens and 4 or 5 roosters. Even with 25 hens per rooster, I would expect conflicts and accompanying pecking, if only to secure the top quality of hens or the best feeding positions. However, I can't help but notice that all of the birds have their feathers intact. I do hear a lot of cackling, but it turns out that we are approaching feeding time and everyone is a bit frantic. Peace descends upon the compound along with the food. Wisely, the feeding trays are large enough to avoid unnecessary competition. I suppose Katoji is right when he argues that as long as they keep the birds happy, and not stressed, there will be less aggression. Just like humans.

Back to the pecking order. Yamagishi found, during his many hours hidden in the henhouse, that the roost pins, where they sit and sleep, should be of different heights. Each enclosure has six such sticks in a row, and the innermost is an inch or two above the first one. In other words, the "most equal" birds sit slightly above those at the bottom end of the pecking order; but with only an inch difference, it seems reasonable to argue that the birds are *almost* equal.

As is the case at Toyosato, this place has thousands of chickens and pigs stacked away in huge, but closely packed buildings. Combining that with a nice warm day with no recognizable movement in the air, I'm surprised we are able to breathe. Admittedly, my sense of smell is reasonably immune to most kinds of stench, but I have visited places with far fewer animals and felt an urgent need for a gas mask. Again, Yamagishi found a solution! They have a system for handling feces where they add a particular mix of microorganisms. As a result, whatever comes out of the animals are brought back into the eternal recycling of nature in an almost odorless way.



Katoji thrives with the hens and roosters; he ought to, because they have thousands of them. They are all cared for in the best of Yamagishi spirit, although in the case of birds “almost equal” is considered sufficient. Feeding trays are common ground, but the roost pins (in the back) are mounted at different heights.

Back in Toyosato, we meet Humi-san as she squats in a small garden in-between the industrial-sized buildings. I can see that she’s weeding. Humi-san was there from the beginning; she lived with Yamagishi and never regretted her choice. Now she’s 93, but seems to be both physically and mentally competent. I find her charming. She tells me that her husband died in the war, less than a year after they got married.

“Yamagishi was a great man,” she says.

I answer *anata wa kirei des*, which means “you are beautiful,” because she is, and because there is not that much else I can say in Japanese. If girls grow up fast in Damanhur, aging is particularly slow at the jikkenchi.

It is my last night, and the table has suddenly been filled up with beer, wine, and all sorts of snacks. We sit in the lounge belonging to the house where my room is situated. It’s a party! The main limitation for fun and frivolity is the lack of a shared language. Spontaneity suffers when anything spoken must be translated either to or from English. Although the place resembles a student’s dormitory, the party does not; yet the atmosphere oozes of kindness and

empathy.

Actually, everyone I've met here has been exceedingly nice, but is it because they know I intend to write about them? I recall a friend who once told me that if he wishes for excellent service in a restaurant, he orders the most expensive wine, sniffs when the bottle is served, and then refuses to accept it. "I only make sure the chef notices," he claims. At Toyosato, I feel confident that they treat all visitors, and each other, equally well. In any case, they seem far more honest than the average Norwegian politician when it comes to discussing good and bad aspects of local life.

There is, however, one thing I have been wondering about—partly inspired by the piglet on its way to a more alluring life on the outside. I hesitate to bring it up, not to appear rude, but it is a rather important issue. Finally, I gain the confidence to ask.

"Not that any of you are old, but...I've noticed that there are not that many younger people here, younger in the sense of less than 30 years of age. What happens? Is it difficult to retain the youth?"

The question stops the small talk.

"Most kids who grow up here choose a life outside," admits Masako.

"And there are not so many new ones coming in. Maybe we are not that clever when it comes to spreading our ideas," adds Kishi.

"It doesn't matter, sooner or later the rest of the world will follow us," claims someone whose name I don't know.

Perhaps a bit optimistic I think, but I say nothing. I know that for the last decade the whole movement has been in decline as far as the number of members is concerned.

"We must live our lives. I do not worry," the man continues. "Even if we should be the last jikkenchi, we can still have a good life."

"In my mind it would be sad if all that Yamagishi stands for should disappear," I tell them, "the world needs to *see* what you have achieved."

Most of them nod. Then one of them asks me what I would do to attract the younger generation. I suggest that the outside culture is not the same today as forty years ago, and that people who are sixty

have other interests than those in their twenties.

"If you have both feet firmly stuck on the ground, not only do you stand still, but you are exposed to the elements."

They seem to understand. As a first step, I recommend setting up a kensan meeting with the youth to discuss what they think is needed to make the jikkenchi attractive to their generation of Japanese. My guess would be more emphasis on music, play, and artistic expression. Maybe even a touch of New Age spirituality.

The people look thoughtfully at me, but they do not say much. It seems to be a touchy issue, but they clearly are aware of the problem, and they do wish to find a solution. I know there have been some conflicts regarding inhabitants who choose to move out. Obviously it's free for anyone to leave, but those who do typically wish to get back whatever property they gave away when they first arrived. This has led to a couple of court cases that have ended with a compromise where the jikkenchi returns perhaps half the value. According to Kondo, it's not a matter of "giving back" but rather to provide assistance to start a new life outside the jikkenchi. The allegation that the movement has tried to gather riches by luring prospective members to donate all their belongings seems wrong. From external sources I learn that, at least in some cases, the movement has turned down people asking for membership because they have considered it unlikely that they would fit in.

There is actually another touchy subject I would like to raise. Whenever we sit down, they serve tea or coffee; perhaps not so unusual, but here the serving is always left to a woman. Not that this practice breaks with Japanese tradition, but I thought perhaps the idea of egalitarianism had balanced off some of the conventional gender differences as to job tasks. Or are women slightly less equal than men—as in the case of the roost pins in the henhouse?

To my surprise, this question does not generate any elusive glances or uncomfortable faces. It is clearly an issue that has been debated several times. One man is quick to point out that equality is not a problem. I choose to look inquisitively at the women. Rita finally meets my eyes.

"It's Japanese culture. At home both sexes are happy to serve,

but in the case of guests, most women feel a strong obligation to pour the tea. They would be uncomfortable not doing so, and I doubt that any of them mind. We need to adapt to local culture.”

The other women nod. I believe in her answer, and I am sure that traditional gender roles are less of an issue here than in regular Japanese communities. To the extent that differences exist, the serving of tea is unlikely to be where the shoe pinches. Kondo is accompanied by his wife; I have talked with both, and feel confident that at least in their case the man is not the one in charge.

“I am deeply impressed by how you’ve managed to create a community based on communist and anarchist ideals,” I say, trying to turn the conversation to a more positive subject. Kondo looks bewildered at me.

It turns out that he has never heard about these concepts. After a long consultation with his pocket computer and electronic translator, he finally looks up. “Oh yes, Yamagishi ideology probably has something in common with these two words, but that was never the intention!”

After an internal discussion in Japanese, Kishi addresses me: “Communists talk about property and ownership, while we don’t own anything. Besides, for Yamagishi the absence of possessions and leaders was the means to obtain something—not an ideology. He felt that equality is needed for us to be happy. By standing together and on equal terms we avoid hostility, jealousy, and anger. If what we have happens to resemble what you call communism and anarchism, this is just a coincidence. We are not communists.”

Kondo adds in a low voice, “I thought communism failed. Didn’t the countries that tried communism finally give up?”

I finally see the light. I’ve traveled the world to find out whether communism and anarchism is possible. *The Yamagishi movement proves that the answer is “yes,” but in the total absence of the ideologies I talk about.* I am suddenly even more impressed by what they have achieved.

Kondo is quite right that communism and anarchism are not exactly the catchiest ideologies these days, which, I suppose, is another reason for not using them. Stalin killed millions of people in



his attempt to impose communism, Mao pretty much followed suit, and Hoxha in Albania was no less of a despot. These sorts of things tend to create bad publicity. Not the least because they all failed. Here they have imposed pretty much the same thing, but with no other tools of implementation than talk!

In Stalin's defense, it might be added that Yamagishi spent decades to convert a few thousand select souls while Stalin needed to convert tens of millions—without any sort of selection for communist fitness—in a very short time.

The main difference in my eyes, however, is not the numbers but the starting point. One of history's great paradoxes is that Japan is a capitalist country while China is (or was) communist. The "national souls" of these two nations are rather different; in fact, they seem to point in opposite directions. The Japanese are group-oriented, but the Chinese are individualists bursting with aspirations to snatch as much as possible for themselves or immediate family. I believe this difference helps explain both Yamagishi's success and the Chinese failure. In China, the feudal lords did not hesitate to use force and abuse to oppress people, while those in corresponding positions of power in Japan felt responsible for their vassals. The former strategy obviously led to dissatisfaction—and eventually to armed revolution—while the more content Japanese had fewer reasons to turn on their overlords.

Still, the Yamagishi movement is rather extraordinary even in Japan. Consequently they have received a fair amount of negative publicity. People call them a cult and accuse them of brainwashing innocent people to give up their belongings only to end up in slavery among pigs and chickens. To the extent that communism and anarchism are negative epithets, I would have understood the use of these terms to throw dirt, but "cult" is all wrong. In my eyes, the problem is rather the opposite; they are short on religious or spiritual inclinations—a tea ceremony now and then and a traditional Shinto garden notwithstanding. Their preaching has nothing to do with religion; they believe in science and are most certainly not dogmatic. My biological visions of happiness are received with curiosity, and they show sincere interest when I give them my book on *Darwinian Hap-*



The Toyosata welcoming committee was large, the farewell committee has grown fourfold. Very nice people, I conclude, and an excellent place to grow old.

*piness*. At the same time, they don't mind if someone wishes to live by some sort of God. These people have taught me a lot, and I feel that they have also been highly responsive to my views.

Late that night, Kondo turns to me and says:

"There is actually a place somewhat similar to Toyosato that does have a lot of youth. They call themselves the *Konohana Family* and live at the foot of Mt. Fuji."

Now I know where to go next.

A solid group of well-wishers gathers to say farewell. I will miss Kondo and the others, but I feel at the same time a slight gasp of "finally free" as I wave goodbye. However, I know the problem is inside my head and that I ought to work on it. A week at kensan school might turn me into a true jikkenchi member, but I would first need to improve my Japanese.

## The Konohana Family: A Clone of Yamagishi, but Different

The next day I am welcomed by the Konohana Family.

I really enjoy mountains, so I climbed Mt. Fuji many years ago. A utopian community on the sunny side of one of the world's most famous mountains sounds truly utopian. I arrive with Seiko—a Japanese friend from the past. Junya meets us at the bus station. He is tall by Japanese standards, thirty years old, and was previously a professor at a university in Tokyo. I recognize the scent of youthful intellect.

It doesn't take long to realize that as far as communism and anarchism go, this place is a true clone of Yamagishi. They claim to have originated independently but admit to having harvested from the jikkenchi philosophy. Eventually I learn what makes them different.

The food they serve is vegetarian and looks delicious. I bring the loaded chopsticks into my mouth just as everyone else begins a communal prayer. I try to chew discreetly and decide that I wouldn't really be able to join them in a Japanese prayer anyway.

The variety of food items is overwhelming, particularly considering that this is just an ordinary lunch, and everything they eat—except for salt, sugar, and oil—is homegrown. They cultivate more than 260 varieties of 90 different species of plants, including 10 types of rice. The vegetarian delight is supplemented with milk from goats and eggs from hens. Adding various subsets of these items, and using different styles of cooking, they can generate a rather extensive menu. To top it off, they make at least 30 types of sweets. Everything is, of course, cultivated according to the best handbooks in organic and ecological farming. I am impressed.

It's also impressive that during the same period in which the



Konohana Family is a kind of upbeat version of Toyosato. With Mt. Fuji as a backdrop, Mitsuo explains about the art of growing vegetables and the art of cultivating humans.

number of Yamagishi members has dwindled to half its original size, the number of Konohana members has increased from 20 in 1994 to around 80 today. And the average age is below thirty.

After the meal, some of the members line up on the “stage side” of the room to give a welcome concert. Apparently they do so each time a guest arrives, and that happens almost daily. The lead singer is, unfortunately, seriously ill, but their self-composed, uplifting songs are still a feast for my ears. The songs are melodious and performed with lots of enthusiasm. A self-appointed welcome-chief, in the form of a three-year-old boy, climbs up and down my lap doing his best to disturb my listening. I consider it an excellent sign that the children trust strangers—even in the form of a *gaijin*. I know that some Japanese children become frightened when spying on a troll of a *gaijin* like me.

In my mind, I have come to terms with Japan being the cradle for New Age communism. My present focus is on why Konohana has the appearance of a youth club while Toyosato might (I know I’m overdoing it) be characterized as an old folks home threatened by depopulation.

Konohana is an ecovillage. They are mildly critical of Yamagishi's traditional farming practice compared to their more sophisticated ecophilosophy, but they are equally fond of using cars to move from one field to another. Then again, their patches of farmable land are scattered around, partly because the whole country is divided up into tiny (by most foreign standards) pieces, and partly because these pieces are hard to buy but can often be borrowed free of charge. The typical landowner is old, has no children willing to go into farming, feels reluctant to sell because land is something a family should cling to like it was the last grain of rice, and appreciates that the soil is actually being cultivated.

Is semantics sufficient to explain the Konohana success? *Communism* is obviously out, so don't even think of mentioning it, but so is traditional *collective farming*. The term *ecovillage*, on the other hand, is a breath of fresh air coming from the most hip corners of the Western world, and consequently is an excellent sales pitch for the young people of Japan. You don't need to push many Internet buttons to realize that ecovillages are fashionable. Along with the package comes a fresh take on artistic expression, as exemplified by their



Here is the food-packing workforce. Households in the area can subscribe to bags of assorted vegetables, depending on the season, and have it brought to their door. It's a jolly bunch, and they have time for a cup of tea and a friendly chat with us.

songs, as well as constructive socializing tricks such as forming a circle and holding hands. Traditionally, Japanese people do not touch each other, not even a handshake, they just bow. I can understand if young people exposed to Western culture sense a desire for some minimum measure of physical contact.

Konohana is much smaller than Toyosato. Mitsuo, who is our primary guide and translator, says they hesitate to move beyond 100 members. I agree. Communism, or whatever you call the ideology, is easier to achieve in small groups. She can hardly be past thirty and wears narrow glasses framed by a foreign-looking face. She points to the local supermarket as we pass by (in a car) and claims that after living here for five years she has not yet been inside. Purchasing, to the extent that they need to buy anything, is taken care of by a special work team.

If you are sore after sitting through hours of kensan meetings, Konohana is not the place to escape to. Every day, or every day and night is more like it, they assemble. Ten blends of tea and thirty varieties of sweets notwithstanding, to me the schedule infringes a bit too much on the available spare time. Then again, it's probably more boring to me than to the others, because I do not understand what they are talking about. Mitsuo tells me that you don't *have* to show your face every night, but she admits that to dodge most meetings would be considered rather rude. I notice that many of them improve the delight of attendance by bringing books to read, knitting to be knitted, or anything else to pass the time for the minimum of three allocated hours.

They start off with the youth group. Kids from five to fifteen have their meeting, fashioned after the adult world but with an obvious touch of kids play. The young ones have the opportunity to bring up whatever issues are bothering them. I find it an excellent strategy; besides bringing up relevant concerns, the kids learn to express themselves in front of a group and to take responsibility. Moreover, they are primed to fit into the cultural setting that is necessary for a place like this to exist. I have finally learned to refrain from considering their ideology to be communism, because I believe what they do has a rather different, and considerably improved, flavor.

As the kids finish, the adults take over. Most people seem to

have something to inform or disclose. Eventually I realize that this is the original form of Facebook, a sort of Stone Age version where actual talking face to face is back in fashion. They all get to know what the others are up to, what they think, and how they feel. It's great, but I'm glad they have not yet reached a hundred friends.

As the clock approaches midnight, people gradually vanish in a polite and quiet manner. I assume it is because they want to find their beds. The last detail is to have the treasurer go through the current fiscal situation. I do not need a translation to understand what he's talking about; he looks like an accountant and sounds like one. Besides, he was sitting next to me and spent most of the time counting money from a metal box. Finally, it's time to stand up, form a circle, and hold hands—in line with the ecovillage bible. After that, and now way past midnight, I volunteer to do the dishes. Tomako is there to help me. She is a single mother to a twelve year old boy—an easy-going, long-haired kid. She, on the other hand, has the hairstyle of a nun, but a beautiful face and a charisma that can melt tofu. Her



Tomako proves to be a great person to talk with. Not only because she speaks excellent English, but because she offers intelligent responses to my more or less intelligent questions.

petite body is covered by a Buddhist robe.

I learn that she desired a child, but was not particularly keen on having a husband. Eventually she realized that life as a single mother in Tokyo was rather challenging; life at Konohana is much better for both her and the boy. As usual I take the opportunity to learn about the place, and realize that she is a highly intelligent informant.

“Of course, problems arise, but they are really opportunities to learn about yourself and thus mature to be a better person,” she claims.

I like her attitude.

“Don’t you sometimes get tired of these long meetings?”

She looks at me with wise eyes.

“I like to sit here with the others. If I get bored, or there is something else to take care of, then I go, and usually we finish before midnight. Except if someone starts talking about anything that has to do with sex, then it easily goes on for several additional hours.” If so, there can’t be much time left for any live practice, I think. But I say nothing.

Another feature of Konohana is a touch of spirituality. I missed that at Toyosato. Their name, Konohana, alludes to a Shinto “goddess” associated with Mt. Fuji. According to legend, Konohana was a gorgeous lady but short lived; her sister Iwanagahime was ugly, but lived to be old. I suppose the moral is that one should not expect to have it both ways, but perhaps to be content with what life has dealt you.

The next day I have the opportunity to sit down with their spiritual leader, Isadon, and a translator. He has been involved from the start and takes care of any spiritual issues—during the day he also cares for the bees. I noticed that at our nightly meeting he had comments on most of the issues that arose. He reminds me of Falco in Damanhur, but his hair is disappearing, and whatever closeness and charm that might have evolved during our chat was lost in translation. It’s difficult to get close to a person when your conversation is through someone else.

I try to ask about the ideology behind Konohana and what tech-



niques they are using to improve community spirits. He waves his hands now and then, but it turns out that the topic he prefers to talk about is astrology. They have adopted the two-thousand-year-old calendar of the Mayan Indians, and apparently the calendar is so ingenious that it allows them not only to predict the future but to take charge and act in a way that changes the future. He has recently moved into a new and more spiritual phase of life. It remains somewhat vague to me what this transition entails, but I do catch his explanation of why one steps into a different kind of world upon reaching sixty. It so happens that at this particular age Jupiter (with an orbital period around the sun of 12 years) and Saturn (with a period of 30 years) are in the same position as when you were born. Obviously, that just has to mean something!

I thought astrology had gone out of fashion even in the hottest New Age circles, but I say nothing, of course. At one point I almost raise an objection, but I suppose the planetary orbits get in my way. The fact that his estimates of orbital periods are not accurate, and that the planets are actually closer to being in the same position after



I am full of admiration for what they have achieved, but their spiritual leader Isadon (left), here with a translator, seems only interested in astrology. Fortunately, what matters is not theory but practice.

59 years, doesn't really matter. It's just a detail.

I find them superb when it comes to fine-tuning practical solutions for tomatoes, and all the other 260 varieties of plants and animals they care for, but when it comes to the one species that really demands deep insight and a painstaking care for details (mankind), they choose to let the planets rule! The odd thing is that of all the places I have visited, the Konohana family is arguably the place that has proven best at pulling the pendulums in desired directions. Their social life would be a prime example if I were to write a textbook on community building. Is it all just pure luck?

One of their main contenders as to being the ideal community is Damanhur. They too had an exceedingly exotic philosophy. Is weirder better? As a scientist, I feel a bit lost for words (or rather a distinct need for polite restraint) when it comes to offering an opinion about their teachings, but the inhabitants don't seem to mind—in fact, they are doing great! I conclude that I am the problem—if not, then science is.

Later I get another chance to talk with Tomako alone. I know I can entrust my quandary with her. She suggests that Isadon is a good person when it comes to bringing people together, but that most of them don't put much emphasis on astrology. And that the practicalities of caring for humans indeed are their first priority. Humans *do* require more attention than tomatoes. This is good to hear because if community engagement was something you could turn on with a simple switch, or by following planetary migration, there would be no need for behavioral biologists like me.

Both Konohana and Toyosato have managed to establish a community where everything is shared. Although Konohana has a spiritual leader, I would say that both places are organized without any hierarchy. Before I went to Japan, I thought both these aspects were more or less impossible, that keeping the pendulum in such a position would simply be too much of a burden in the long run. Many ecovillages started out with similar standards but eventually gave up. In Japan, this way of thinking seems almost as natural as the use of chopsticks, which means it is the perfect place for fine-tuning

communal ideals.

Inspired by the movement of heavenly bodies, there is still the question of why Konohana is rising with the morning sun while in Toyosato I sensed more of a sunset.

The Toyosato jikkenchi is, in my eyes, too large (500 members), but most jikkenchis are well within the size of our ancestors' tribes, apparently without size having any particular effect on age structure. Konohana has a spiritual leader and a sense of something divine. I believe this helps; it makes the place a bit more exciting for young people ready to try something new. At the same time, I was not deeply impressed by their spiritual teaching; it's reminiscent of the "backdrop Shintoism" one finds everywhere in Japan—interspersed with large doses of astrology. Yet, I suppose it is better than having no religion.

Young people quickly sense what is "in," and at Konohana they have managed to create something on the "in" side. It helps that they have an attractive location at the foot of Mt. Fuji and close to Tokyo. It's easier to recruit people to novel ideas from a metropolis rather than from the countryside. It also helps that they have an open and positive attitude toward love and sex. In Konohana this is a popular topic of discussion, and what Isadon stands for is reasonable: Anything is fine as long as it's good for those involved and for the community.

Perhaps the more relevant answer is that the Yamagishi movement started 40 years before Konohana. In those days, what Yamagishi preached was probably as hip as what Konohana stands for today. The problem, of course, is to remain fashionable. The members age while the outside culture changes, and in order to stay popular you need to continuously adapt. This is not that easy. In forty years' time, Konohana might be in a similar state of aging unless they manage to renew their teachings and practices without tearing down the elements that keeps them going. Novel places with an attitude more in line with coming generations might sprout; that is, if Japan manages to retain the underlying culture that nurtures these kinds of miracles. Unfortunately, I fear that Japan is changing in the wrong direction, but perhaps ... if they recruit the help of a behavioral biol-

ogist?

I am deeply delighted to find that what Toyosato and Konohana stand for is actually possible with such an unruly starting point as the human mind, but I realize that I'm not Japanese—nor is it likely that I shall ever be.

My initial concern was to find our human roots. I wanted to understand what sort of life we are actually adapted to live and to see whether this would bring relevant insight to the question of how to organize a modern society. This line of investigation is pursued in the following chapter.

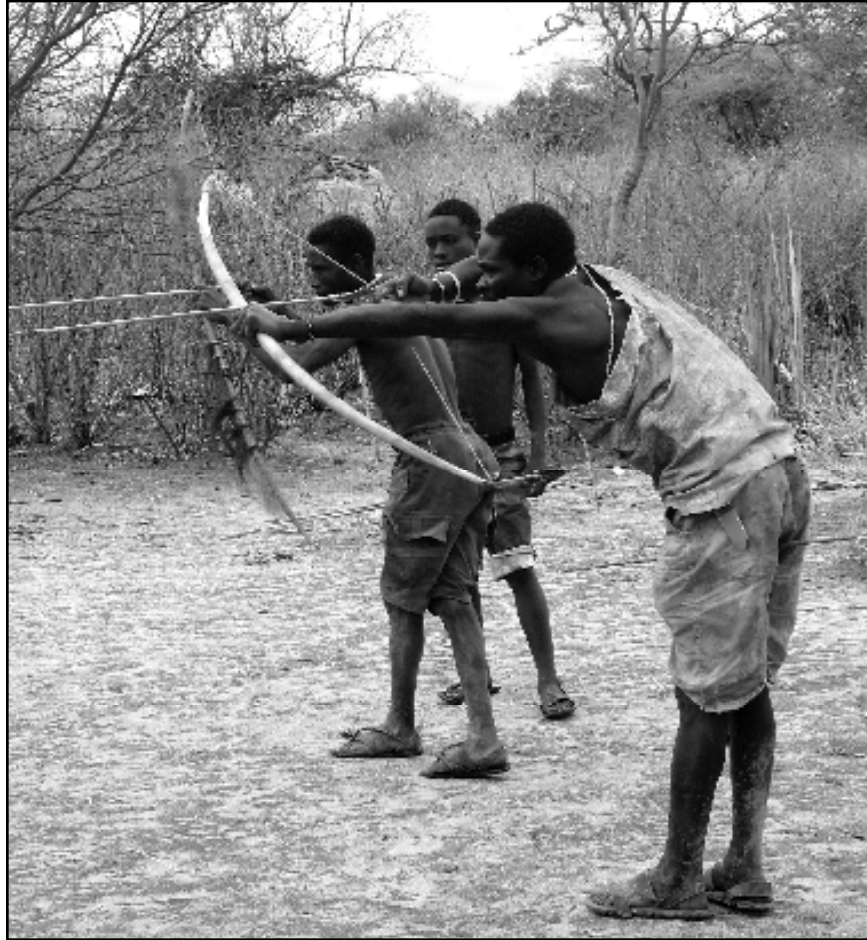
## 15

### **Indigenous People: Why the First Became the Last**

The idea of adapting life to our inherent nature has been a recurring theme in my visits to alternative communities. Simply put, this means that my scientific oracle recommends that we should consider implementing a select few of the elements of the Stone Age way of life. Obviously we need first of all to know how people lived in those days.

A hundred thousand years ago, the average life expectancy was lower, at least compared to present Western countries, and people struggled with many health problems that we can now cure. On the other hand, the circumstances were not necessarily that bleak; for most people, food was probably easily accessible, otherwise we wouldn't have seen the significant expansion that led to our species colonizing the entire globe. At that time the Earth was still vast, with plenty of room for everyone as long as you were willing to move around. People necessarily lived the life their genes were attuned to. Moreover, no one missed TV or mobile phones—just as we do not miss the gadgets people will have buttoned to their bodies a hundred years from now. Were people happy then? And is there really something to learn from the Stone Age in terms of aspects of living that have value for present society?

While waiting for someone to invent a time machine, I sought populations who are not as far removed from their roots into the past as in my home country—that is, indigenous people. To the extent that they still live like our distant ancestors, they are not caged up in the “human zoo.” Is it at all possible to retain tribal values in a modern world and still lead a happy life?



There are still people who live more or less like our Stone Age ancestors—some of them impress me more than others. Here Hadza men show off their proficiency with a bow and arrow. The heap of hide-covered branches above the man to the left is their current home.

### With an Eye For Jungle

The drizzling rain is not that wet, and the many puddles that fill the trail are not that muddy. Yet there is something disheartening about this abundance of water that turns the green forest into an eternal gray muddle.

We walk in silence, each carrying our own thoughts. There is a constant gurgle from the depths of my leather boots, but I *know* that the water is not going to stop us. Neither do I care that shrubs and

ferns gradually take charge of the path we are following. We'll just have to push on. Along the trail, the trees form two walls and a roof that keep us locked up inside this obscure, damp world. It's not a problem, I can adapt to this part of the situation, but I really hate what is lurking in the water.

I know that's where the attacks originate, and I've wrapped my socks as best I can around the bottom part of my pants. Yet they force their way in. Every time we stop and I take my boots off, there they are. Usually at least two or three. The easiest solution would be to let them finish their meal and then crawl back out, but "no," we humans are not created that way. Such a response would be incompatible with our innermost feelings. The sight of the gray-brown, flabby leeches, which fill their stomach at my expense, fills me with indignation. I get angry because they trespass on my feet, and because I don't like the way they look. On the other hand, it fills me with joy to see them squirm in the flames of my lighter. The fact



This Semok Beri man just sits there; he doesn't even turn his head in my direction, but keeps staring down at the remains of the fire. I imagine that he is a philosopher, but I have no idea as to what his philosophy is about.

that the brain actually delivers rewards for justified anger, and associated behavior, is something society seeks to hush up.

Loreza has been sensible enough to put on long rubber boots—a veritable fortress compared to my footwear. She is Malay and Muslim-light with a bank job that provides a basis for an independent life. She might not be the most beautiful Malay I've seen, but certainly one of the nicest. Small, round, and good-natured, with short hair in a boyish fashion. I met her in the depths of Taman Negara National Park in the middle of the Malay Peninsula. Now we are even deeper inside the protected rainforest, past where the wooden canoes can take us, and apparently soon past where the path leads.

That's where we finally find them. *Orang asli*, Malay for "original humans." They are the namesakes of the *orang utan*, "forest man"; that is, the apes the orang asli traditionally share the jungle with. In the West we call them aboriginals. Both they and the orangutans are shy creatures—and both are endangered.

Taman Negara is home to two stocks of aboriginals—the Batek and the Semok Beri; the group we have found belongs to the latter. The park ranger indicated roughly where they might be, and Loreza volunteered to help me get there. Not that she knows the jungle any better than I do, but at least she understood what the park ranger said.

They live in a small clearing. Nine people. All except one are alert and on their feet by the time we step in. According to my anthropology textbook they should be dressed in loincloths, but apparently they have not read it. Most of them wear something that once might have been referred to as shorts. A few have even covered their bodies with something resembling T-shirts. I observe a sooty, dented kettle next to the fireplace. The man who did not stand up sits in a shelter with a roof of intertwined foliage. His black hair is so short that the curls are almost invisible; he just sits there and stares down at the remains of what was once a fire. Over the years, I have stared into a considerable number of bonfires, or the remaining ashes, while contemplating on philosophical issues; now I'm wondering what is going on in his mind. Has he realized that Stone Age life is the way to go? Does he recognize my respect for what he stands for, and does he understand why I trudged so far to meet his tribe?



These people still live the life of hunters and gatherers. They set up simple huts of branches and leaves but rarely stay in the same spot for more than a week or so. Several families typically hang out together in small tribes where members are considered equal (at least excluding matters related to age and sex), and political leadership is an unknown concept; according to my anthropology textbook. It is the kind of life we humans are adapted to live; but is it also the way I, as a biologist, argue that we ought to live? I braved rain and leeches to find out how things are going with this last remnant of the sweet old Stone Age.

The jungle is not only their home and their supermarket. If you ask them who they are, or what they are, they describe their forest. The trails and rivers make up the arteries of the body in which they live. The government of Malaysia owns the land (or so they claim), but for the aboriginals the land is not only *their* country, but also an indispensable part of their soul.

Malaysia is an interesting case of ethnic clash. The Chinese are the largest minority comprising some 24% of the population. They have money and control most of the economy thanks to their ability to let determination and aspirations prevail. Indians make up only 7%, and they are mostly poor and live like poor people are expected to live in this part of the world. The Malays are the majority with a slightly higher than 50% share. They have the political power, if only thanks to a constitution that states that this is the way it should be. They came here before the Chinese and Indians, and consequently claim certain rights, including various forms of positive discrimination. The head of state should, for example, be Malay, and Malays have easier access to universities and bureaucracies. In return, they are the ones with the more cozy personalities. Malays are less persistent, and they walk around with wider smiles than the Chinese. When someone occasionally runs amok, however, it is most likely a Malay. The word “amok” actually derives from their language, and it means uncontrollable anger.

The aborigines of peninsular Malaysia, which excludes the Malaysian part of Borneo, are too few to enter the percentage list—too few for anyone to care about. They have been exposed to the com-

plete Armageddon of colonialism, missionaries, anthropologists, and slave traders, where the latter began long before Europeans arrived. Their life is not exactly a dance in a rose garden; perhaps it is more like a dance on the ashes of what their forebearers once had. Those who are not pulled into the slums are displaced to the deepest parts of the rain forest. Of course they lived here long before the Malays came wandering, but that's a minor detail most people find easy to forget. The point does not interfere with the rights of the majority.

I stare down at the same ashes as the seated Semok Beri. These are the thoughts I think should be in *his* mind, but I am convinced they are not, because he looks like a modest man. He definitely has my sympathy. Perhaps the sympathy, in my mind, will last all the way back to the campsite where we stay, but I know it won't bring the flames back to his fire.

There is another man who speaks for the tribe. He has an eye hanging outside its socket, and I wonder what sort of accident could have caused something like that. Otherwise he seems in reasonably good health and good spirits. Skinny, of course—obesity is not a problem in the depths of the rainforest. Slightly discouraged perhaps—at least not extrovertly happy to see us—his face carries an indecisive expression. Nevertheless, behind the skepticism I sense a hint of expectation in the corner of his eye—that is, the one that still has a corner. Not that we talk much. Loreza knows nothing of their language, and the man speaks only a few words of Malay. I can speak neither.

They have all stopped doing whatever they were doing, if they were doing anything at all, and gaze at us with inquisitive but somewhat frightened eyes. With the exception of the one man sitting, of course. I cannot stop wondering what he is thinking. They are not hostile, and their expressions are more like worried humility. They smile slightly when we give them gifts. They let us take some pictures but do not invite us for coffee or cakes.

I am sure the balance of power in Malaysia seems logical and straightforward as seen from the cities. The country has a civilized government, and economically they are better off than most countries in Southeast Asia. I want to ask the man with the loose eye how things are when viewed from the depths of the jungle. Have the re-

sources that form the livelihood of Semok Beri people changed over the years? Is it fair that others decide who is to own the forest while it obviously belongs to them? Can they still be happy here? And, not least, how does it feel to be among the last remnants of the Stone Age in a world that has turned into something totally different?

I never ask. The man's vocabulary of Malay is not adequate, and even if it had been, he most likely would not have had any answers to offer me. He seems more interested in the relatively new T-shirt I give him. I don't think he plans to protest against the authorities, and I don't think it is for him to whine. After all, these people have a long history of adapting to their circumstances.

The natives share the jungle with leeches and all sorts of other critters, but unlike me they manage to live in harmony with them. No one has rubber boots or socks wrapped around their pants; they all walk around barefoot. This observation makes me almost envious. I wonder whether humans capable of forging peace with leeches would also be able to cope with the bickering stemming from the country's ethnic diversity.

Loreza interrupts my thoughts. She wants to go back. The sky is getting dark, and I know our flashlight can hardly reach down as far as to the leeches on my legs. It makes no difference to me. I have entered a reckless mood where I will let leeches do what leeches must, and where the night offers a welcome escape from gloomy visions.

Neither do I care about all the sounds the darkness keeps throwing at us as we try to follow the narrow trail back to civilization. I refuse to be less of a man, or more sulky, than the natives. If they can cope with life here, so should I, without letting tiny animals or invasive plants ruin my mood. From nature we all arrived, and it is, after all, to nature I want to return.

Loreza is more into chatting. She says that the government is trying to integrate the aboriginals into their balanced society—at least those who wish to be integrated. "The authorities want to give them a chance," she says. "We want to offer them medical help." Apparently she is a bit embarrassed concerning the eye that should have been put back in place or removed.

"They do send doctors in here," she continues.



The interior of Malaysia consists of a hilly landscape with densely packed and rather wet forests. Here and there you find remnants of human life from the distant past.

I suppose this was not the year, or decade, for a doctor's visit. I point out that, like leeches, the eye will most likely fall off all by itself—if they just let nature take its course. And, I insist, it should take more than a lost eye to quit life in the rain forest. It is, after all, their home, and the government should give them a chance to continue their Stone Age life.

The rest of the way neither of us says anything. I don't think she agrees.

With the exception of the kettle, some rags, and a couple of machetes, I saw nothing that originates from outside the forest. Although they are slightly closer to consumerism after our visit, they are highly unlikely to drain the world's resources. Unfortunately, they did not appear to be particularly happy about their high status as super-ecological anti-consumers; instead I believe I saw jealousy in their eyes. These people are not aroused by expectations of cold beer; they live their lives, but it seems as if this life—like the forest—is no longer entirely theirs. The "scent" of industrialized society is a more urgent threat than leeches and rain.

Maybe we should not have given them any gifts. It feels wrong

not to bring something in situations like this, but at the same time giving presents, whether to begging children in rural areas or tribal people far away in the periphery of civilization, helps to drive them away from their real lives. From there on, the course and pace seems steadily in the direction of urban slums. Humans seek material goods—they rarely realize that what they find is not necessarily worth having.

Perhaps I should have curbed my curiosity and not disturbed the lives of these unsuspecting indigenous people. Life is full of choices, and I suppose that no matter what you do it generally turns out to be slightly wrong—and slightly right. My last thought is that the rulers of Malaysia probably have the same thoughts.

Unfortunately, my curiosity is difficult to restrain. I go on to seek aboriginal people on the island of Mindoro in the Philippines and in Northern Australia before I conclude that the Stone Age, at least in these parts of Asia, is, or ought to be, mostly history. The remaining residues are not particularly inspiring. That, however, does not mean there is nothing to be learned. My visions were never to return to the Stone Age, but to form a modern civilization with perhaps a few key elements from the life of those bygone days. Moreover, one might argue that the aboriginals I met belong to groups that have ended up within the “field of gravity” of civilization. Apparently there are aboriginal groups, both in Malaysia and the Philippines, who refrain from external contacts. Maybe they are happier. Or maybe they feel the knife of civilization pressing even stronger against their throats. I do know that very few tribal groups remain that do not feel the bad breath of the Western world. Soon, I fear, there will be none.

The way of life that I experienced—life in a no man’s land on the outskirts of industrial society—is certainly not the Garden of Eden I’m looking for. For the tribal way of life to be sustainable, they need a certain population size. This requirement is necessary both to have neighboring tribes for the exchange of spouses and to form a larger cultural setting. In the present situation, the inevitable touch of Western consumerism is pushing people even further away from traditional values. The indigenous peoples in this part of the world are

following a disparaging trend: Impaired livelihoods drag people to the cities where they perceive the benefits of mainstream society but rarely get a chance to take part in the party. The first ones have, in other words, ended up last.

It is still possible to survive in the jungle, the biggest problem (maintaining the Stone Age lifestyle) being what money can buy—not that you need it, you just have to have it. As a friend once pointed out: “The Stone Age didn’t disappear due to a lack of stones, but due to access to other things.”

I have not given up on my belief that tribal life has its advantages. The aborigines are, for example, probably less plagued by loneliness and depression than people back home in Norway. They might not be what they once were, but neither have they incurred all the diseases of civilization. I suppose that what I’m looking for is some sort of combination: A revised version of the Stone Age where the benefits of the modern world are mixed in with tribal values. The question is: Where can I find such a thing? Has anyone managed this feat?

### **The Upgraded Tribal Life**

I turn again to the United States, the flagship of opportunities and industrial solutions. A country characterized by luxury and aspirations—at least until their bulldozer got jammed in the mud of rotten bank loans.

At one time, this country harbored a rich variety of indigenous people. Most of them are now part of the American dream, but there are still Indians who want to remain somewhere on the outskirts of mainstream society. Most of them are delegated to reservations where they have a degree of autonomy and the option to keep their traditions while, in principle, retaining the benefits of belonging to this great nation. This ought to be an excellent opportunity for a brilliant alternative: Native American tribal culture with their eco-friendly view of nature interspersed with the good life of a full refrigerator.

One of the reservations covers the entire northeastern corner of the state of Arizona and flows partially into neighboring states. The Navajo Nation reigns over some 27,000 square miles, nearly a fifth

of Norway, but has only 175,000 inhabitants. Inside the Navajo reservation is a separate, smaller piece of land given to the Hopi Indians. While the Hopi traditionally engaged in agriculture, the Navajo lived as hunters and gatherers before they changed to cattle farming. The mixture of horticulture and pastoralism is asking for trouble; cattle require large areas, and preferably new areas, while those who grow food want to harvest their plots in peace from ruminants and ruminant owners. The two ways of life also seem to shape people differently. The Hopi and Navajo are two closely related populations, but in temperament they stand, at least according to rumors, far apart. The Hopi are quiet. In any case, their name is derived from *hopituh shi-nu-mu*, which can be translated to “the small and peaceful people.” The name *Navajo* is also derived from the Hopi language and means “thief.” The Navajo do have a long tradition of mixing commerce and assault, as these two activities were considered to be pretty much the same. I know people who might agree. The Navajo prefer to call themselves *Diné*, which in their language means “the people”—without any further specification. Originally the two tribes shared a reservation, but conflicts led to the land being divided, although this did not end the conflicts.

Quarrels with neighbors might not be the optimal starting point for creating the ideal community, but then again, having an external enemy can lead to internal cohesion. I find a room at a Navajo guesthouse in the hope of learning how the Indians are coping.

One doesn't find many leeches in Arizona, nor is one bothered by humidity and lush walls of vegetation; instead there are mountains, deep valleys, and plateaus without much more than a few cacti and small shrubs to keep the openness at bay. Above it all is a deep blue sky that rarely turns gray. The sunset gives the sandstone cliffs a red color that catches your eye and mind until the entire landscape disappears into the night. Here and there strange towers of rock stand up from the plains. The formations look like they are shaped by human beings, or gods, who want to impress with their creative abilities. The truth is that they were carved by natural forces long before the Indians' ancestors arrived on the continent some 20,000 years ago.

I am there as a tourist. Tourism is an important industry, since

they do not have much in the way of other options for employment. So, I am well received. The reservation is situated far from the industrial centers of mainstream society, which explains the lack of job opportunities. But why would they need any jobs? Why not live like their ancestors off the open air and land, cherishing the fellowship with their tribal mates?

Apparently it's not that easy when you're halfway or more into the American dream. Money might not be everything, even in this country, but money does appear to be the most important feature. I experience an occasional dance, the art of making jewelry, and some ephemeral sand paintings, but these cultural elements appear to be cosmetic. It seems that the deeper parts of Indian traditions are not much more than a distant echo. People are instead concerned with the benefits of industrial society, and where there is no work social benefits are the obvious option.

The teepees are replaced by caravans. Maybe their lives are slightly different compared to the average American, but the main features of life are pretty much as in other poor communities in the U.S. The tribe as a unit seems to have limited significance. People gather in villages, but the nuclear family is what matters—to the extent that it has survived.

In order to obtain more information, I check various public sources. According to these, the Indians are not doing very well. This ethnic entity tops all the statistics you don't wish to top: suicide, poverty, divorce, alcohol abuse, lack of education, and children born outside of marriage. Unemployment is, of course, also included; in the Navajo Nation it's approximately fifty percent. The statistics suggest that the Indians are in a quagmire and that their quality of life lies fallow. Once there must have been close-knit tribal communities, but these appear to be a distant past. When the daily requirements for sustenance no longer require cooperation, it doesn't take long before social cohesion evaporates. You don't need a community to gather your Social Security, or to spend it on beer and booze.

The Navajos are known for their humor. In ancient times they used humor to make interpersonal problems not just bearable, but even fun. Biologically speaking, this is what smiles and laughter are



for—to create positive social relations. They are so fond of laughter that they have developed a special ceremony to be performed the first time an infant creates sounds reminiscent of laughter. They envision that the newborn belongs to two worlds; one is divine and the other secular. The first laughter is a sign that the child chooses the world belonging to humans rather than that of the gods. To celebrate the event, the parents invite the others to attend an *a'wee chi'deedloh* (the baby laughed) ceremony. Guests bring gifts. One by one they walk past the child, who, with the help of the parents, gives each of them a salt crystal in return. It's a symbolic act. Giving away



In this photo of me, at age 11 (on the right, with the most dedicated gait), I am beginning my career as a seeker of alternatives. We are following a Sami woman to her lavvu camp at Finnmarksvidda. (Photo by Hans Grinde)

salt puts the child on the right track as a compassionate and generous member of the tribe.

A very sensible ritual. I have never experienced it, and I don't know if it still exists, but it was something I was told.

The buffalo are gone. The Indians "hunt" for money, as does pretty much everyone else in this country. Gambling is illegal in most parts of the U.S., but the reservations can make their own rules and casinos breed cash. Traditionally the Navajo resented the idea of gambling, but after years of internal struggle the first casino in Navajo country was opened in 2008, a kind of final proof that the dance around money had taken over.

I conclude that the American dream has strangled my dream of tribal life in a Garden of Eden with refrigerators.

On my last night on the reservation, I lose a game of billiards at the local bar. This is where you get in touch with the Indians. Then I buy two bottles of beer, one for me and one for the guy who won, but the beer doesn't taste that good.

My visit to the Navajo reminds me of my first encounter with another culture. Many years ago I was travelling with my parents and brothers in Finnmark, the northernmost part of Norway. In Alta we had to take my older brother to a doctor. A Sami woman was also there; she had walked all night to seek help. When she came out of the doctor's office, she saw my father's car and realized immediately what it was. She had heard about those things, they called them "taxi," and they bring people around. So she took a seat.

My father took the challenge, oblivious to the distances and road conditions in Finnmark. After a couple of hours, the car had to be parked. She had money, but when we refused her payment, she instead invited us to her camp. Still without knowledge of the conditions or the distances, my parents agreed.

My primary memory is all the mosquitoes. There was a constant swarm in front of my face so I was only able to catch glimpses of the endless rolling plains covered with wet heath. The other thing that got imprinted in my brain was the Sami camp.

They were just a small family—a husband, some dogs, and a couple of infants. The man did not speak any Norwegian, and was

not particularly friendly. The kids just stared, at us or out in the air. Beside a small earthen hut, they had a large lavvu, the Sami version of a tent. The woman waved us in. In the semi-darkness inside I could smell, more than see, the fireplace and the reindeer skins covering the ground. As my eyes got used to the dark, I recognized occasional kitchen utensils. The place was as homely and nice as any room I had ever been to.

Outside the lavvu, most of the vegetation was gone—trampled down and eaten. A small corral contained a few reindeer; the rest of the herd, we were told, was grazing somewhere out there. They mentioned a number, which I do not remember, but I understood that the number meant a lot; reindeer constitute their bank account, and the Sami are allowed to boast about grazing capital. After eating some dried reindeer meat, we pushed back through the mosquito swarms to find our car.

This short meeting taught me that there are other ways of living than what I had experienced in our suburban house outside Oslo. The Sami lifestyle intrigued me. I wanted to be an anthropologist.

This desire was finally ended when, at the age of eighteen, I read



They do a bit of show for the tourists and sell more or less traditional crafts. It's not exactly pristine tribal culture, but are the Masai on to something?

*The Naked Ape* by Desmond Morris. Morris is a biologist, and he describes human beings as he would have described any other species of animals. It made me see the light, and I decided to study biology because then I could understand mankind from an evolutionary perspective.

The Sami, Inuit, and Indians all stem from a stock of humans that ventured to the far north after leaving Africa. They also have a related fate in that most of them ended up halfway, or further inside industrialized nations. Their standards of living have been revised—and upgraded if measured in terms of industrialized products. But, based on my impressions, their quality of life has more often been downgraded. Obviously there is considerable variation as to how they cope, but I believe the overall situation is not particularly promising.

There are some destructive elements in human nature. When you're offered the "scent" of material possessions, it is a bit like taking the first sip of the bottle. The road leads on to consumerism, drugs, and selfishness. In order to maintain the positive qualities of a society, an active and determined effort designed to counter these trends is needed. I believe the indigenous people of Norway and North America are struggling to retain what really matters: social relationships, the meaning of life, and closeness to nature. Once they had a culture that worked, but it is difficult to adapt traditional values to life with one leg in a modern society. Is it even possible at all? I didn't find what I was looking for in the remnants of tribal people in the rich West, but decided to try one more continent before giving up on the past.

### Conscious Choice or Lack of Choice?

Masai Mara is a national park in Kenya, but also Masai land. The word *mara* is taken from their language and means "spotted." The landscape has patches of trees and shrubs in the otherwise open savanna plains. Small white clouds form even more spots, both in the sky and in the form of shadows that glide across the ground; as for the animals, the gods have added the same spots to their fur—at least in the case of the giraffe, leopard, and cheetah.

I sign up for a safari that guarantees that we shall see at least four

of the “big five game:” elephant, lion, buffalo, rhinoceros, and leopard. Three Masai tribesmen are hired as guides to help the organizers fulfill their promise. The Masai live in the park and know the wild-life there better than anyone else.

I like to observe animals in their natural surroundings rather than in a zoo; nevertheless, the most entertaining and interesting part is being with the Masai and experiencing their way of life. Our guides are tall, proud, and polite. They carry long sticks and walk around, as most Masai, in red or purple draping. They tell me that a distinct dye is chosen in order to teach the lions to stay away whenever they see this color. There are lots of examples of evolution employing the same idea; butterflies, for example, often have bright colors to tell birds that they contain toxins that make them unfit for food. Then again, some butterflies are not poisonous but manage to fool the birds by having a color reminiscent of toxic species. I am not convinced that all of the purple-draped Masai are equally dangerous.

One of the guides has a constant smile. Whenever he becomes confused, he grabs the lower part of his earlobe and hangs it above the upper part. It’s an exercise that requires large holes in the ears, preferably large enough that a mouse can creep through, which is what you find on pretty much every man. The guide performs this exercise when I ask questions, which he answers earnestly, but in somewhat awkward English. His face takes on an even more smiling—and harmless—look when the ear is styled in this fashion.

The ears are great, but what pleases me most is to hear that the Masai have decided to maintain their traditional culture and way of life despite the Kenyan government trying to push them into the cities. I wonder how they are coping. Based on the standards of typical African village life, they are actually quite rich, partly due to entrepreneurship in cattle farming, which is their traditional sustenance, but also due to their popularity and diligence in the tourist trade. But are they truly happy out here on the plains? Have they really managed the feat of combining tribal traditions with the right amount, and right selection, of products and services from the outside world?

Based on my biological perspective, a close-knit community is arguably the most important element with respect to maintaining

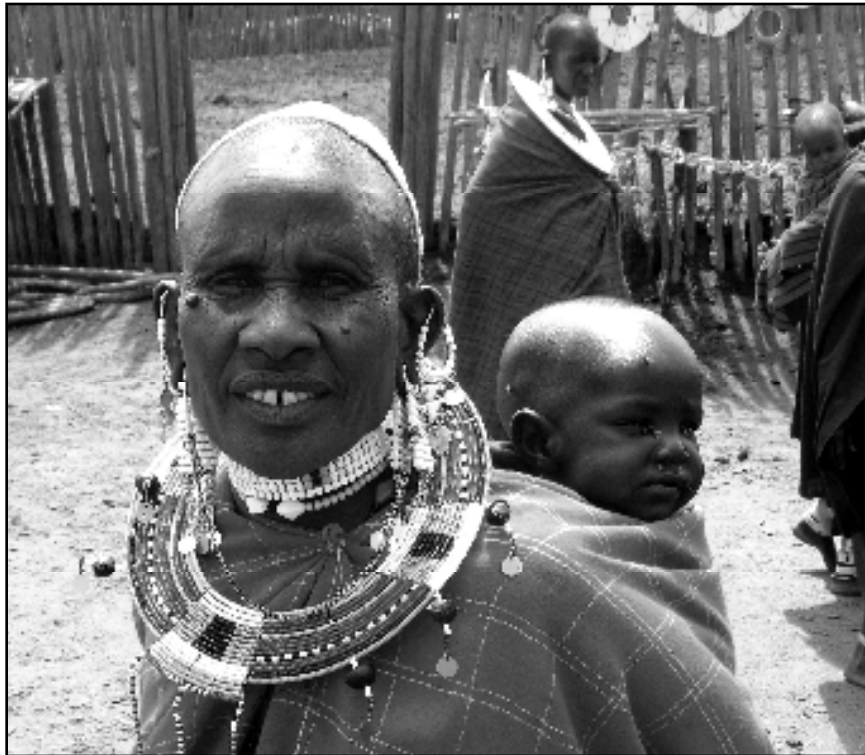
quality of life, and out here on the savannas community life seems to have survived the ordeal of modern times. The village where the guide takes me has buildings made from mud and twigs. Cow dung is, as I understand, too precious to be used as a building material; they need it to fuel their fireplace. Surrounding their quarters they have set up a fence made of bush and thorny twigs designed to keep predators at a thorn-lengths distance. In front, large poles substitute for bushes. Amidst the cluster of cottages, there is an open space where children play between swirls of dust. In the shadow of the walls, and under the solid acacia tree that grows on the edge of the open space, the women sit down in quiet conversation. Instead of the mosquitoes I met with in northern Norway, the Massai have an equally ample supply of flies. It strikes me that the flies are even more annoying than the mosquitoes.

I have to bend over to get into my guide's home. It has three rooms: a lounge/bed-room, a "kitchen," and a place for livestock. The latter, outer chamber is reserved for the vulnerable calves—as well as chickens that seem to go wherever they want. All rooms are equally small, dark, and empty, but based on the soot on the walls I can guess where the food is prepared. The inner room is primarily for sleeping because daytime is normally spent outdoors. There are no windows, but a bit of light seeps in as there is no door at the entrance. Apparently intruders are not a problem. I suppose that, when you own pretty much nothing, you don't worry about thieves.

I sit on a blanket in the darkest, but comfortably cool, corner and chat with my guide. He seems intelligent and quite enlightened. It turns out that he has gone to school in a small town some distance away, and he considers returning there for further studies.

Back in the blinding light of day, I am greeted by a considerable collection of plastic beads and related handicrafts in amounts sufficient to open a mall; everything is for sale, and, of course, at a special price just for me. These people can handle more than cattle. Is the Masai village really just a sort of display set up as part of a commercial venture?

After doing a bit of shopping, I consider a walk to the back of the enclosure to find out whether that's where they parked the Mer-



Some people claim that the Masai life is better for men than women. At one point I was wondering whether it is best for flies.

cedes. As a scientist, I obviously end up doing just that, but there is not so much as a trace of wheels, only a limited collection of cow dung.

The point is that these people know what they want. They remain here on the dusty plains where life revolves around finding water for the cattle, picking bits of edible things here and there, and protecting themselves and their stock from intrusive lions. The tourists offer occasional diversions, and put a bit of money in their pockets, but not enough to create a living—or give life a meaning. The flies they just have to accept. Outside there is a blazing sun, and inside is a dark room without decoration beyond the smoke stain from the open fire. It's a life far from the narcotic power of a TV. The children have no other toys than what they can find in nature, and the primary adult entertainment for men is drumming, preferably

accompanied by jumping up and down. As long as they don't have electricity, they are not bothered by all sorts of devices that steal their attention; instead there is time to just sit down and chat.

My impression of aborigines in Asia is that they are doing poorly in the cities, but they are not doing so well out in nature either. The Masai could probably carve a decent living as city businessmen, but are their lives even better out here? I sense that the savannas have something to offer them—something a town cannot provide. I believe, and hope, that the answer is “yes,” that life is better here.

The Masai are not that isolated; they sell their cattle to the outside world and know very well what money can buy. They also realize that medical care and a bit of education offer definite advantages; yet, many of them seem to stick to the adobe huts. They have made a conscious choice. Beautiful scenery with views to distant hills, the silence among the animals, the spots in the landscape, and the camaraderie of a small community outweigh the lure, and the benefits, of the city.

In most of the world the situation is the other way around: People flock to urban areas—or rather to their surrounding slums. The Masai demonstrate that it is possible to resist this temptation. Perhaps their tribal life is revised upward, but it's still a life in harmony with ancient traditions. At least some of them choose the tribe even if industrialized life is within reach!

For me, the plains seem overloaded with dust. The spots I end up focusing on are the flies on the dirty faces of children. Besides, I would obviously miss both my refrigerator and TV. Still, I sense that the Masai have a good life; there is a spark in their eyes and there are lots of open smiles. This alternative actually works—and it is real. Have I found what I'm looking for?

I decide to move even one step closer to the shared roots of humanity. The Masai way of life is, after all, rather different from that of Stone Age man. Instead of hunting and gathering they are pastoralists, moving around with their herds of cattle, and although I found no TV or Mercedes, they have access to other consumer advantages. There is, however, another tribal group not too far from where the Masai live. I've heard that their way of life has hardly



changed; moreover, they still stay in the heart of the land where our species was born. Encouraged by the Masai, I want to find out how *they* are doing.

If Masai country was dusty, the land of the Hadza seems more on the muddy side. We almost give up already at the start of our journey; a substantial congregation of trucks blocks the road because they are stuck axle deep in the sludge. I am traveling with two other Norwegians, Marit and Geir, and together we sit by the roadside watching this wilderness drama of big cars that spin and spin on the most slippery, worn-down tires you can imagine.

Our driver wants to give up, and we are having our own doubts. Perhaps we can get there, but if the rain keeps coming we are unlikely to get back.

There are roughly a million Masai left in Africa, but fewer than five hundred Hadza cling to their traditional life. These relics of the distant past live as hunters and gatherers around Lake Eyasi in Tanzania, pretty much in the same way as their ancestors have since humans first became human. Lake Eyasi is situated in the East African Rift Valley, an area that stretches from the Red Sea to Mozambique. The Rift Valley is considered by many to be the cradle of human evolution.

The Hadza use a “click” language. There are a few other distantly related languages in Africa that also use clicking sounds, but the Hadza stand apart from everyone else, not just on this continent, but on the entire Earth. In fact, they stand far apart both genetically, linguistically, and culturally. This branch of the human family tree separated from the main trunk some 100,000 years ago. Today their closest relatives are another small group called the Sandawe, but they have adopted agriculture. The Hadza are arguably the one remaining culture on Earth with the closest ties to our ancient, shared cultural heritage, which means that in the present world they certainly qualify as alternative—although their alternative was once pretty much the universal standard. In other words, they offer important clues as to what sort of life our genes are designed for, which means really going back to our roots. I am consequently unwilling to give up just

because of some mud, rain, and beasts on wheels; one cannot, after all, expect a smooth highway into humanity's past.

The driver finally finds a way—down a grassy slope, around a couple of struggling boxes on rubber feet, across a bridge that is about to be flooded, and out into nowhere.

Several hours later he parks in an apparently deserted village. A dozen or more huts in adobe and straw roofs are spread out. Small and slender trees are evenly distributed between the houses. The village belongs to the Isanzu people and turns out, on closer inspection, to truly qualify as a village because it contains both a church and a bar. One of each, of course. The church has four walls without windows under a thatched roof. At one end a flimsy cross rises above the straw. It is deserted. The bar is obviously the most luxurious construct in the village; it includes some cracked, recycled planks in addition to the extreme flashiness of two colored light bulbs. It's about as much "pomp and circumstance" as you're likely to get in this corner of Africa.

We approach the bar and find that it even contains a couple of human souls. One of them turns out to be an Isanzu man who, besides his own language, has some knowledge of both Hadza and Swahili. He is willing to serve as a guide, and together we set out into the bush to find these enigmatic people.

They find us. Suddenly there is this man blocking the trail without any sign of movement. I realize that he knew we were coming and was waiting. He leads us to where the rest of his group sits around and chats in the shadow of an afternoon sun—once again the ground is dusty and dry. The surrounding bushes give the place a homely feeling, and behind one of them I sense a real "home" in the form of a couple of pelts strung out on top of some bent branches.

We are set to start our investigation and I am deeply enthralled. There is, however, as usual, a language issue. The driver speaks a bit of English besides Swahili, while the guide prefers Isanzu. After a while, I realize that the latter has only a limited knowledge of Swahili and Hadza. The Hadza people speak, of course, only Hadza. It's like letting *Google Translate* transform a text four or five times into novel languages. If you then compare the result with the original,

you are in for a few surprises. The present case is further complicated by a highly limited vocabulary at each stage of translation. In other words, it is not the right setting for engaging in a soulful conversation about life's inscrutability or the Hadza's thoughts about evolutionary adaptations.

Instead I look around.

Here there are not many signs of upgrading. True, they have knives and elaborate arrowheads made of iron, but the art of producing anything in metal is way beyond their culture—after all, they belong to the Stone Age. These wonderful objects have been obtained by trading with an Isanzu blacksmith, whom we later visit. Admittedly, their clothing has changed too. The missionaries have obviously been here before us; the men have shorts with colors matching the local soil, meaning they are probably never washed, while women are dressed in colorful shawls. Besides modesty, women's desire to look good is the one line of products consumerism can be sure to rely on. Archeological evidence, particularly in the form of stones used as a source of ochre pigments, suggest that even Nean-



What do you do if you fancy a smoke and have no matches (or tobacco)?

derthals knew how to improve their appearances. I am pleased, however, that the next step down the consumer line—advertisements for Coca-Cola—has not yet arrived here.

The twenty or so members of the tribe seem friendly, maybe a bit tense, or perhaps just thinking about what our presence has to offer them. They lack the confidence and wide smiles of the Masai, but then they are far less trained in the art of dealing with tourists. Even the children do not risk a smile, but stare at us with dark eyes wide open. After a while I do manage to induce some cautious grins. The smile is humanity's main welcome signal, but out here they're not trained to fling it out each time they enter a supermarket or bump into someone on the bus.

While the women sit together talking, and watching, the men demonstrate their skills. I suppose this is the way it should be. The most important skill is to shoot a bow and arrow. It is difficult enough to hit the target they put up, and I would never be able to shoot a bird in flight. True, they augment the killing power of the arrows by adding poison, but you still need to hit the prey. The Hadza do hit—at least during target practice. Marit strikes the target, and receives admiring glances, while my arrows end up in the bush. This is fun. Now they smile; for here sport, entertainment, and vital training are brought together in one activity. Those who do not hit the target might as well dig themselves a grave, or worse, move to the city.

It's time for a smoke. An older gentleman with distinguished graying hair, and a slightly less distinguished outfit, helps a younger man fire up the pipe. The pipe is clearly homemade, the content is unlikely to be tobacco, and there is no message saying "smoking kills." The most fascinating part is the way they light it up. The older man has a "hand drill" in the form of a thin stick that he lets spin between his hands. The bottom end rests against a piece of wood and some tinder. In a surprisingly short time, I see first smoke and then flames. If Norwegian smokers were required to use the same procedure for lighting their cigarettes, I'm sure smoking would not be a health problem.

The authorities wanted them to be farmers, like other good citi-

zens, and handed out some patches of land and a handful of seeds. It didn't turn out very well. That style of life is not part of their culture, and when your ancestors have lived as hunters and gatherers for millions of years, you do not turn to agriculture overnight. After the first harvest, they returned to forest and freedom. I understand them, and there is considerable evidence that early (or primitive) farming actually reduced health and quality of life. Eventually, the authorities gave up and now allow the Hadza to go on with their hunt, even where hunting is prohibited for everyone else. The Hadza, I was told, are also the only group that is not visited by tax collectors.

They have won a few other battles in their struggle to be who they are. Once, for example, the politicians in Dar es Salaam decided they could make some money by hiring out Hadza land as a private hunting ground for an Arab prince. The Hadza protested, some were even sent to prison, and the deal eventually fell through.

This is what I like to hear.

Like the Masai, the Hadza, at least the ones that are left in the forest, have made a conscious choice. They want to live the way everyone lived until agriculture began to fasten its grip on humanity some ten thousand years ago. It might be slightly less of a choice for the Hadza compared to the Masai—the former perhaps lack what it takes to prosper in the city—but even if their options are more limited, it's still a question of a conscious choice based on what they value in life. To me it means that the Stone Age is not completely dead! The thought warms the heart of an aging biologist.

I do, however, wonder how viable this choice is in the long run. Apparently the problem is not the appeal of the city; at least some of the Hadza have journeyed there but returned without having seen the light. The question is rather whether their livelihood will remain. The only thing the Hadza want is to retain the land they live on because, in their own words, without the land they are nothing. The problem is, of course, that others want the same territory for other purposes, whether it's hunting safaris or agriculture.

The concept of "owning things" is somewhat alien here. As for food and tools, they have a culture of sharing, and the one thing that really matters, they have together. That one thing, of course, is the

land. Like many species of animals, and presumably early humans, being in control of the territory required for sustenance is essential. It does not imply possessing in the sense of having a Mercedes, but rather in the sense “being a part of.” The important point is to have unrestricted access to the type of resources you need—meaning plants, animals, and water—within that territory. In a way I feel I “own” the forest surrounding my house. Legally I certainly do not (the land belongs to the city of Oslo), but I feel it is “mine,” and that I belong there as an integral component of the landscape. It is a good feeling, so it’s what I choose to go by. I believe that the lack of this form of belonging to nature can be an unconscious stress factor for city dwellers. For the Hadza, it’s certainly worth fighting for.

The Hadza have their own creator. She goes by the name *Isboko*,



In the Omo valley, there is a more varied flora of indigenous people than anywhere else in the world, including these Arbore girls. The people here certainly live in alternative ways—as seen from a Norwegian perspective—but I preferred what I found with the Hadza and Masai.

and she created whatever was worth creating—including animals and humans. Unfortunately, at some point she got a bit careless, or overzealous, in her job. She made the mistake of forging a couple of human-like beings who turned out to be a disaster for the rest of the world: the man-eating giant and his wife. Fortunately, she realized her blunder and, as a talented goddess, dealt with the problem by having the monsters removed from the Earth by saying the words, “You are no longer human, and you don’t belong here.” The Hadza could use some help from Ishoko, as they are surrounded by nature-eating cultural giants, but I’m not sure if she still exists.

I sincerely hope these people will manage to preserve their culture and way of life; however, I fear the worst. Perhaps the animals and other resources they rely on will diminish to the extent that they have to change their livelihood. It’s also possible that the craving for cola, booze, and Western gizmos will capture their minds to the extent that shooting with a bow and arrow is no longer fun. In either case, the distance to the slum districts of Dar es Salaam is short.

I don’t hear any of the Hadza lamenting, but I do. While I strive to find options for the future, here civilization is busy tearing down one of the few interesting alternatives that actually exist. It’s a shame. I have found the roots of humanity, but someone is about to cut the stem.

My exploration of African tribal people continues in the Omo Valley in the far south of Ethiopia. This area is also part of the vast Rift Valley, and it has been a hub for human migration since people started walking. Today there are some 45 different ethnic groups living here, each with their own language, culture, and past history.

Of all the indigenous people I have visited, the Masai still come out on top in my subjective, and somewhat arbitrary, happiness “barometer.” I believe they have made the most conscious choices as to how life ought to be. The tribal people of the Omo valley are equally photogenic, primarily because that’s how they get money. Each photo has a price tag for each person inside the frame—only a few cents of course. But even this minor business leads to a lot of quarreling and vigorous fights to gain access to the spots right in front of tourists with the more trigger-happy cameras. I sense that

these people are not approaching a sustainable balance between tribal life and the modern world.

This doesn't mean that everything is rosy for the Masai. As nomadic cattle-herders they are in somewhat the same situation as the Navajo in Arizona, and neighboring populations consider them warlike and intrusive in the way they assert themselves. Western social scientists have also pointed out that their society is hierarchical, with relatively large differences in status. Nor are the Masai a shining example when it comes to Western ideals of sexual equality. According to traditions, men are in power and are happy to take multiple wives. Their traditions also dictate circumcision of girls, but some groups have started to listen to well-meaning advice from the outside world to ban the procedure. Admittedly, those I got in touch with were all men; they seemed to be in high spirits, but I'm unsure as to how satisfying life is for the women. They probably have fewer options.

I recall something a biology colleague once remarked, "If women find something wrong with men, they can thank themselves. It's the women's choice of partners that has created men as they are today." From a biological point of view, this is a reasonable remark; but as a political statement it is less appropriate. Both men and women should take responsibility for creating a better society. I would rather emphasize that all of us, regardless of gender or cultural background, have strengths and weaknesses. I believe the Masai ought to listen to constructive criticism, but how easy is it to change select elements of their traditions? They may very well fear that if one brick in their cultural heritage is removed, the whole "construct" will collapse. The individuals left on the savanna are, after all, in a vulnerable position. Even minor changes in their mindset and the adobe huts will crumble, the cattle will mix with wild buffalo, and the people will move off to the cities.

The next question is whether we—the know-it-alls from wealthy and distant countries—have the correct answers about which cultural elements they ought to change and which to retain. My culture does not have that much to brag about when it comes to mental



health. I am convinced that the Masai might have some words of wisdom to offer us, but I am equally sure that people in Norway would not listen—because we are the ones who are rich and successful!

Not only each individual, but each culture, has strengths and weaknesses and thus would benefit from considering alternative ways of doing things. If the Masai are open to novel solutions, so should we be. We are actually in a much better position to opt for changes because we have the freedom that comes along with economic power, but that doesn't mean we are more open for change. Yet, according to the voices of people who feel contempt for cultural elements in faraway countries, we certainly expect them to change. Norway is a good country. We are reasonably clever when it comes to pulling the pendulums in the right direction, but that doesn't mean we can't improve.

Tribal life on the African savannas is hardly a solution for the future of mankind, even if it worked ever so well a long time ago, and even if it is still a viable option for some. The most important point for me is that the choices made by the Hadza and the Masai suggest that modern industrialized society is neither the only, nor the final solution. In my mind, what one finds in the Western world is not the pinnacle of achievement as far as what humans can theoretically accomplish.

It is perhaps easier to choose the traditional life out in the wilderness on a continent where you are unlikely to gather much wealth anyway, and where the climate does not really require that you own so much as a pair of shorts. At the same time, I have the impression that both the Hadza and Masai do actually consider their situation, and that they have concluded that happiness does not come in the form of a paycheck. Something gets lost when you move into a city. I would like to believe that both they and I agree that that "something" is first and foremost human relations. You lose a community where people stand together. You also lose close contact with nature, days filled with meaningful tasks, and time to enjoy life. In my country, we have so many grand activities, so much to be

experienced, that we barely have time to do it all—and hardly ever is there time to enjoy it when we do participate.

Many people consider Africa to be the worst continent. True enough, it is the poorest continent. I suppose the economic bulldozer is bogged down in the dust or mud somewhere on the savanna; but then, at least, it's not approaching the edge. Outside the cities, people don't care that much about economy, they live their lives and find happiness over a cup of homemade rooibos tea with their neighbor.

I'm back home. It feels like I've tried everything, but did I find anything? Did I return any wiser?

Although I missed the target, the elaborate Hadza arrow now adorns my tower office. It is an important reminder of a life I want to understand, that I'm drawn toward, but have given up living. Under the arrow is my computer, and within an arm's length are pretty much anything I need to give life some sort of meaning—in the form of a manuscript. I look down at the snow-covered lake in the valley below, and the hills with black and white forest beyond it. I am thankful that my windows keep the freezing temperature outside. When some people these days actually choose a sort of Stone Age life in competition with a computer and four walls, life in the true Stone Age must have been rather charming.

For me, the first ones somehow became the last. I finished my travels roughly where the human journey began—with tribal people in Africa. Tribal life is probably last on the list of preferred conditions for the vast majority of people, and indigenous people come pretty much last on the list when you assign status. Still, for me they are high up on the list of where we ought to seek enlightenment.

It's time for the oracle to retreat and start pondering. Have I learned something that can help create a better society, and what do I really want for myself?

### PART III: WHAT DOES THE ORACLE SAY?



“Like water from the moon,” they say in Japan. Does the saying have anything to do with the alternatives I’m looking for?

## 16

### Water from the Moon

*What sort of living conditions and social arrangements allow for the best quality of life?*

That's the main question I would like my oracle to respond to. It's been a long time since I last had to take an exam, but I still recall the fear of failing. I wonder whether the priests of the Oracle of Delphi felt the same. The problem, of course, is that I don't have any clear-cut answer; actually, most likely there is no single answer as to how one ought to organize a community. On the other hand, I doubt that such trivialities would have stopped the priests, and I won't let them stop me either. In the next chapter I shall suggest some design elements, but first there are a couple of topics that should be addressed. For one, I want to reflect on nature and nurture. And two, I have some comments concerning Stone Age man as well as what it means to create a paradise here on Earth. This leads to the significance of retrieving water from the moon.

#### We All Used to Be Equal Inside

People differ. One need not leave Norway to draw that conclusion, but the point becomes even more obvious if you compare people from various cultures around the world. Things that make one person happy are not necessarily what another one prefers. Society should try to create conditions that offer everyone an opportunity for a decent quality of life; but if we differ that much, is it possible to set up guidelines indicating what those conditions ought to be?

I believe the answer is both yes and no. "Yes" because there are aspects of the environment that are either good or bad regardless of individual peculiarities. "No" because there are several ways to satisfy even the basic demands of a "human zoo" and because we are, indeed, different.

Individual peculiarities depend on both nature and nurture, but

of these two nurture (or the environment) is responsible for most of the variety we observe. Human mentality is molded in all sorts of fashions: For example, the Masai of Tanzania are of a different mindset compared to the population of Oslo where I live. It's this plasticity of the human brain that intrigues social scientists, and upon observing the scope of the variation it is easy to conclude that genes have nothing to do with who we are.

But they do. The environment plays out its role within limits, or guiding principles, set down by the genes. We all have innate tendencies that push our feelings and behaviors in certain directions, and these are important determinants as to what sort of qualities our lives will have. Therefore, we ought to "listen to our genes"—even though all they have to say is a modest whisper. All possible lifestyles are not equally useful in terms of generating happiness. The impact of some alternatives might, for example, cause increased activity of the punishment modules.

I have already pointed out that, genetically speaking, we are a reasonably homogenous species. This implies that the genes start out whispering pretty much the same thing whether you are born in Tanzania or Oslo (disregarding differences as to sex and age). True, there are genetic variants, and they certainly contribute to the differences we observe in people, but this variation is typically about how "compelling" the whisper is. Some of us are disposed to be easily angered, while others are by nature more kindhearted. We are all, however, bestowed with the capacity for both aggression and compassion.

Although each individual has innate peculiarities, these even out when considering populations. Most genetic variants are present in all populations, which means that the Masai have pretty much the same *inborn* mental constitution as ethnic Norwegians. Some genetic variants are more common in my country, but still, regardless of how strange the Masai may seem to a Norwegian, the two populations are *on average* quite similar genetically speaking. If a society has a long tradition of violence, the concomitant exposure pushes individuals in the direction of aggression, and anger becomes a more dominant feature of their minds. But this is about cultural impact, not innate differences. As a rule of thumb, the differences between

individuals are due roughly 50/50 to nature and nurture, but differences between cultures are primarily a question of nurture.

If the genes are represented by a “rubber band,” their output (in the form of the human brain) can be twisted and formed into many shapes without even stretching the rubber. Which is great. This means that the world can retain a lot of diversity. Both the Masai and the citizens of Oslo can find happiness within the general frame offered by their culture, regardless of how different these environments are. However, both cultures can improve by adjusting some features to the effect of creating conditions even more tuned to quality of life.

There are genetic markers that can be used to define the various human ethnic groups. (I avoid the term “race” because it carries negative connotations.) Some of these markers have distinct impacts on visual appearance, for example, in the form of skin color or nose shape. The point is that if we were to examine the properties that really matter, such as our mental capacity or propensity to experience various feelings, it seems unlikely that we will find relevant genetic markers that can be used to separate subpopulations. This stance tends to evoke the following question: If ethnic groups are so obviously different in appearance, how do I know that they are not equally different “inside”?

Actually, we are not that similar “inside” (inside the brain that is), but, as pointed out above, the variation is primarily a question of how the environment has shaped the mind. The “average baby” has pretty much the same potential regardless of which ethnic group he or she is born into. This means that *we are all quite similar at birth*. In other words, the cultural differences we observe are due to the human brain being so plastic. The way we live has a lot to say as to how our mentality develops, which again is highly important for our quality of life.

It is true that the outer signs that distinguish different stocks of humans are due to genetic factors. I believe I can explain the apparent paradox that genes specify pretty much the same thing (on average) with regard to mentality, but not with regard to appearance. Traits like skin and eye color depend on relatively few genes; if there is a mutation in one of them this easily leads to a visible change in



My Turkish friend Masud wishes to establish an ecovillage on the island of Avsa in the Marmara Sea. Here he is trying to convince three elderly locals about the advantages of ecovillage living. It might be a bit late to change the mentality of these ladies.

appearance. Our mental faculty, on the other hand, depends on the interaction of a large number of genes. It is estimated that about half of the 21,000 protein-coding human genes are involved. The genetic contributions to brain function, when comparing different populations, are, therefore, evened out. Another important point is that while we can explain a selection process favoring differences in pigmentation, and in certain other anatomical features, there is no obvious reason why evolution should move toward distinct differences in personality or intellectual capacity in various subpopulations.

### On Stone Age Men

Based on my observations, inhabitants of the ecovillages I visited



have to some extent listened to the whisper of the genes. Their lives are slightly closer to how it was in the distant past. Not that they think in terms of adaptation to our genetic heritage; instead it appears to be either an intuitive choice or a solution based on trial and error. When I did discuss evolutionary perspectives and why we ought to approach our roots, to my disappointment most people disapproved of this way of thinking.

I believe their disapproval is due to a negative attitude to the notion that genes have any impact on humans, which has been brought on partly by the social sciences and partly by the popular picture of “Stone Age man” as a dumb brute. He is seen as something beastly, strolling through the forest and hitting whatever comes around with his club. This image belongs to the cartoons, but, unfortunately, it has escaped the comic pages and lives on in people’s minds as a myth that has proven hard to kill. The colonial period helped create and perpetuate this myth. Tribal people—or any original populations of occupied territories—should preferably be considered as incompetent and lowly creatures prone to warfare. The people in charge of the colonies appreciated this image because it eased the process of taking the indigenous populations’ lands. And the church liked the idea of having all these souls to save. Consequently, the general Western population assumed that whatever we brought to these brutes would be to their benefit. It is about time to kill this myth.

The fact that the human species is genetically quite homogenous implies that we also stand close to our ancestors who inhabited the Earth 100,000 years ago (the time when present populations started to split up). Until 10,000 years ago they all lived in the Stone Age, and this is a very short period of time evolutionarily speaking. Evolution doesn’t stop, but it moves slowly when it comes to large mammals such as humans. Anyway, it means that I, as a Caucasian, am genetically closer to my Stone Age forbears than to, for example, the Japanese—simply because they parted from my lineage some 50,000 years ago. My point is that neither tribal people, nor our Stone Age ancestors, are (by birth) any more brutes than we are.

If evolution had not bestowed *Homo sapiens* with a strong tenden-

cy toward friendship and benevolence, *you* wouldn't be here. We could not have managed to create a technologically advanced society, and the accompanying population boom, without our capacity for cooperation. These traits are, for all practical purposes anyway, equally present in the genes of all contemporary and past populations; the differences observed are due to the fact that we are shaped by divergent environments. One typical effect of the environment in large-scale societies is, I believe, an increase in mental problems. The consequence is not only a reduced quality of life; I fear that the concomitant stress and frustration easily leads to more aggression. I'm sorry, but the cartoon version of Stone Age man—that's us! Unfortunately, we no longer swing clubs; we have devised a variety of far deadlier weapons.

The harsh struggle for existence in the Stone Age is another myth. In the last 100,000 years our species has had considerable success; otherwise, we would not have spread out around the entire globe. This means that the lives of our forebearers, at least on the average, were easier than the lives of pretty much any other mammal because no other species has come close to this human accomplishment. Globally speaking, famine and malnutrition are probably more of a problem today than a hundred thousand years ago.

The third myth I would like to kill is that the Stone Age tribes fought in perpetual wars with neighboring tribes. Modern man is the true expert on war; at the very least, present ways of warfare are far deadlier than those of the distant past. Conflicts are usually a consequence of a fight for resources and are quite often associated with an increased population density. From the anthropological literature, we have ample information about warfare among tribal people in recent times, and there are considerable differences between various parts of the world. Obviously conflicts do arise, but I believe that where the conditions were favorable the more typical picture was one of peace. People exchanged spouses with their neighboring tribes and thus developed positive relations.

Steven Pinker claims in his book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, that we are more peaceful today than in our past. His documentation and conclusion are, however, based primarily on the history of large-scale societies dating back only a few

thousand years. The information on indigenous people typically concerns populations that are squeezed into somewhat marginal conditions, or have a higher population density than what presumably was the case ten thousand to a hundred thousand years ago. I doubt that Pinker's improvement curve can be extrapolated back to the early Stone Age. On the other hand, I agree with him in that Western culture has grown to the task. Most countries today have a culture that emphasizes order and peaceful coexistence, meaning that life is safer now than a hundred or a thousand years ago. Although, as pointed out by Pinker, the improvement is probably as much a question of policing, rather than changing people's mindset. Armed law enforcement is a powerful tool. A moral, vindictive God also deserves some of the credit. Unfortunately, this positive development is partly counteracted by our ingenuity when it comes to inventing means of violence.

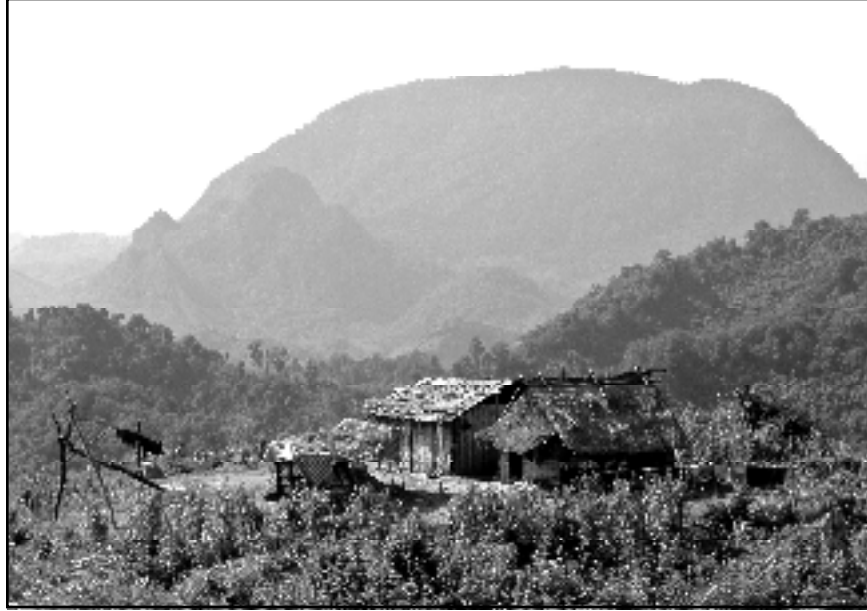
I consider the reduction in violent death rates a sign that we may have the ingenuity and willpower to further enhance the conditions for the human race. So what else can we do?

### Eutopia

Many cultures have legends of past paradises, the Garden of Eden described in the Bible is just one example. The legends are typically about a time when people lived in harmony: Peace and tolerance permeated the forest, and everything flowed in a state of bliss. Could the stories actually reflect vague recollections of a distant past that have been polished and idealized after being retold a thousand times?

Other fables look to the future and describe a time when the conditions will be equally splendid, a Heaven on Earth, or a Shangri-La behind the mountains, where we humans are finally reunited in true happiness. Are these prophecies a consequence of a sense that something is wrong with the present way of life? Are visions of the past and of the future actually based on the same longing for a life without misery and a belief that this is possible?

We will never get rid of pain. Negative feelings are an important part of being human, and we need to accept some agony and discomfort. Yet it is, at least in theory, possible to foster a culture where



Where there is plenty of space and ample resources, people tend to live in peace. This little farm in Laos might not be the optimal version of paradise, but it is perhaps no less likely to foster happiness than our modern cities.

positive feelings dominate. A somewhat simplified and close to ideal version of paradise might be within reach, and personally I much prefer one suboptimal paradise in the hand than ten in Heaven.

I'm not the only one with this preference. The book *Utopia* by Thomas More was first published in 1516, but it is still reprinted. The text describes life on a fictive island in the Atlantic the way More felt a community should, and could, be like. More was inspired by Plato, whose book *The Republic* (ca. 400 B.C.), outlines how to create a better society. Today the word *utopia* has a somewhat dubious reputation. It is taken to mean an unrealistic dream. Instead, someone coined the term *eutopia* as the optimal, sustainable, and realistic alternative. The name, and perhaps the vision, is modified, but the dream lives on. Some people use this dream to create novel types of communities.

### Large Doll Shoes

For a regular tourist, life on Earth may appear to be pretty much the same everywhere. Existence revolves around carving a livelihood for

oneself and the family. However, in this somewhat culturally homogenized world there are “islands” that differ from the norm. There are places where people have moved together and have tried to set up a life that promotes other ideals than simply the dance around the family purse. You won’t find these alternatives unless you know where to look, and you won’t understand what they are about unless you spend some time getting to know them. I have tried because I wish to find out what is possible, and because I myself have felt the desire for an alternative. There are thousands of “islands;” I have only visited a few, but I have tried to sample them in a way that encompasses the breadth of options.

*Ecovillage* is the present buzzword. The concept became popular after an article called *The Ecovillage Challenge* written by Robert Gillman in 1991. He is the astrophysicist who at one point in life decided that “the stars can wait, but our planet cannot,” and subsequently changed his gaze from the sky to alternative ways of living. The ideas have led to several movements, including the *Global Ecovillage Network* (GEN), *Fellowship for Intentional Communities* (FIC), *Foundation for Community Encouragement*, and *Living Routes*.

Gillman outlines five criteria meant to describe what an ecovillage is, or rather should be:

1. The place has “a human scale,” which means that all the members know each other and feel some sort of fellowship. This limits the size to a hundred or so individuals; in the case of further expansion, it is recommended to set up an alliance of suitably sized units.
2. The place has “all facilities.” This does not imply a Jacuzzi or the right to serve alcohol, but rather that the daily needs—such as living quarters, work, and recreational activities—are provided for.
3. Human activities are harmlessly integrated into the natural world.
4. The community supports healthy human development.
5. Technology and social organization should be sustainable into the indefinite future.

These criteria are, I suppose, easier described than executed. To fulfill all of the requirements is a bit too much for even the best of

ecovillages, but they do set a standard that one can strive for. I have one additional criterion: The community should cater to the happiness of its inhabitants.

One day I might try to write a Michelin Guide to the alternative communities of the world. I believe the more successful places I visited came sufficiently close to the above ideals to represent what we are likely to achieve in terms of a “paradise on Earth.” Not that there is no room for improvement, but they are good enough to deserve stars in my guide.

Even in the best of ecovillages, a substantial fraction of the products and services come from the outside—anything from spades, to solar panels, to T-shirts with slogans like “Green is queen.” These places would not survive without support from the industrialized world. Outsiders point out that the inhabitants are actually scroungers, thriving on other people’s capacity to create inexpensive products. Out of politeness, I hesitate to mention that a fair number of the members, at least in some ecovillages, live on social benefits donated by the same society that many of them despise.

On the other hand, it is not fair to be too critical. It is, after all, rather difficult to cut all ties with the outside world, particularly when this represents the environment one was born into. Neither is cutting all ties necessarily the point. Ecovillages generally are not trying to tear down industry; they simply want to demonstrate that it is possible to live life with smaller “ecological footprints,” and that their solutions might be healthier for both body and mind. I believe they are reasonably successful.

The idea of “footprint” refers to impact in terms of pollution and depletion of resources. There are recognized methods designed to measure the footprint, and people in ecovillages tend to wear doll’s shoes compared to the oversized boots of the typical city dweller.

To be honest, I am exaggerating somewhat. In the case of Findhorn, which is among those with the best reputation, one report concluded that their per capita impact is approximately half the national average of the United Kingdom.

If an industrialized United Kingdom did not exist, I suppose the people at Findhorn would have come even closer to their ideals in

terms of sustainability. And I am sure that if our society, for whatever reason, should cease to function, we would be a lot worse off than them. So, if you believe that doomsday is approaching there is every reason to seek the nearest ecovillage. Whatever lifestyle you adhere to, you are sure to end up with smaller sized “shoes”—that is, if you survive. On the other hand, as long as ordinary society offers a rather decent deal, do the alternative communities really represent anything worth pursuing?

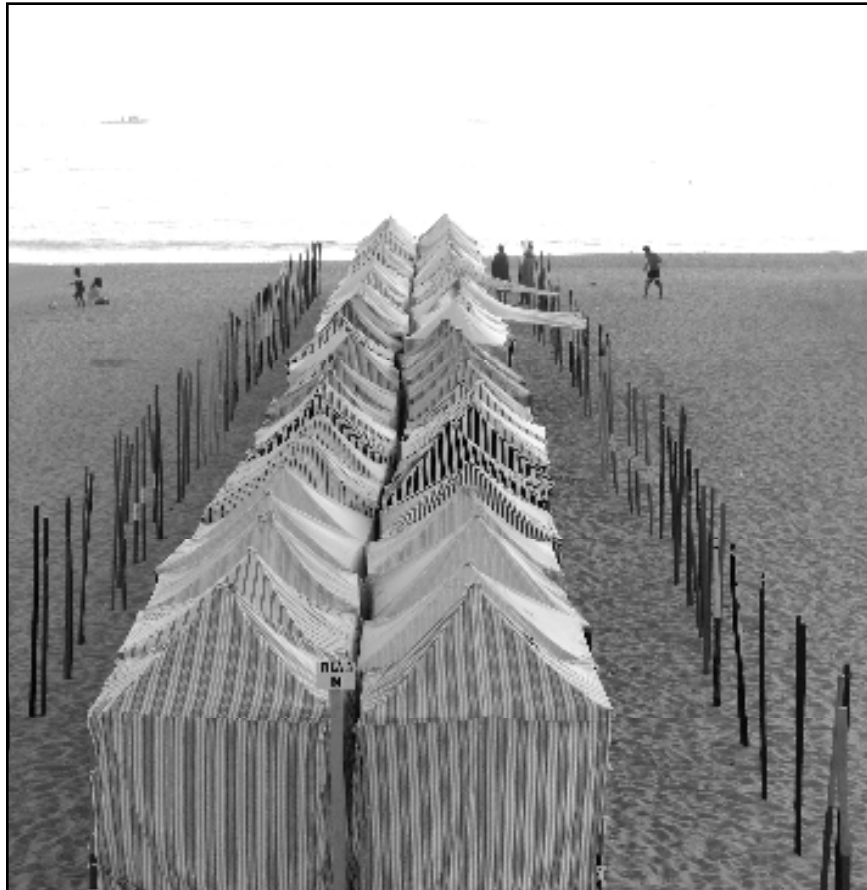
Most efforts devoted to creating alternatives are short-lived—if they get off the ground at all. In these cases, I suppose the answer is “no.” However, the more interesting communities *have* survived. Solheimar was begun in 1930 and Findhorn in 1962, and neither would be on a list of communities threatened by extinction. If nursed and tended to, it is possible to create something that pulls people away from the industrialized, core-family life—and manages to retain them because the option at hand provides for a meaningful and happy life.

### There is Water on the Moon!

A Japanese proverb says, “It is like getting water from the moon,” and refers to something that is impossible to achieve. You might dream about it, but it doesn’t exist. And even if it did, you would never get it.

Jules Verne, along with lots of others, dreamt about travelling to the moon. Then suddenly someone did. It was not easy. The first man to set foot there, Neil Armstrong, said, “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.” More recently, we have proven that there really is water on the moon—although it is tied up inside rocks. This means that today we can actually travel to the moon and bring back water. We have managed to do what only a short time ago was believed to be impossible!

Unfortunately, I fear that offering the entire present and future population of Earth suitable conditions for a happy life is an even bigger challenge. It most certainly *seems* impossible—but it is not!



What if society could be digitalized and manipulated like a computer?



## Why Can't Communities Be More Like Computers?

### Advice on Happiness

Now to the hard part: answering the question of what the conditions ought to be like. In the absence of a specific recipe, I shall provide some advice as to features I believe ought to be considered. My recommendations are attuned toward improving quality of life, or happiness, and the biological perspective that I introduced in Part I suggests five principles to this end:

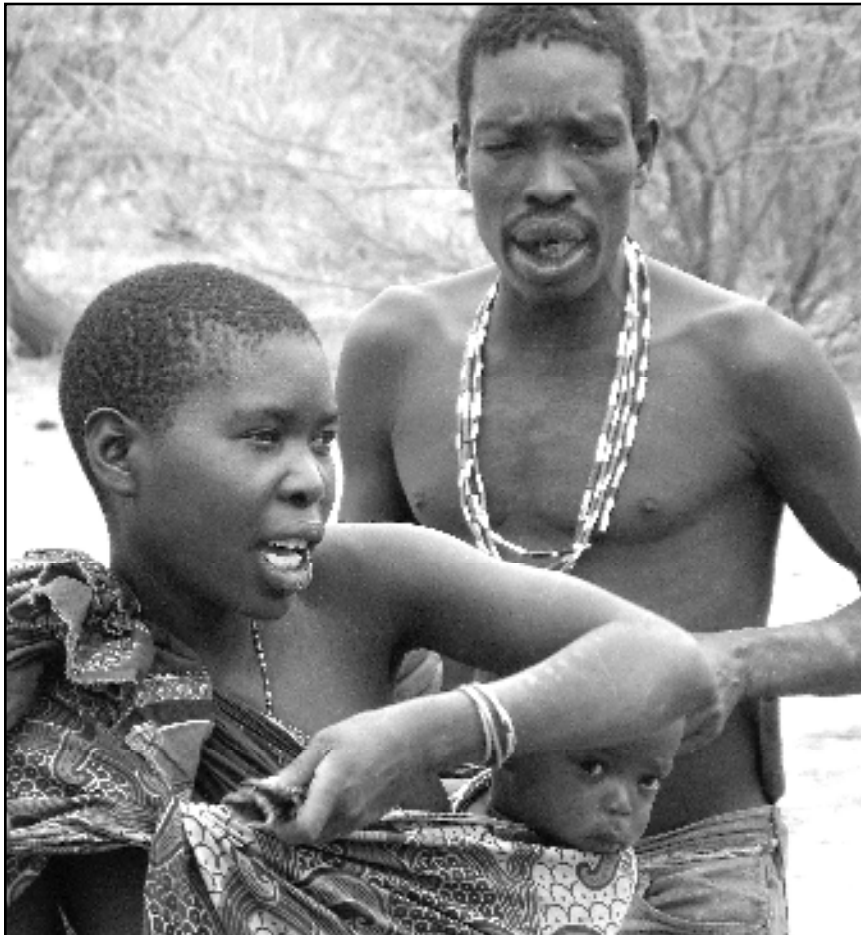
1. Happiness is about activating modules in the mind that generate positive feelings (including elements such as friendship and “meaning of life”) and avoiding the activation of those modules that yield negative feelings.
2. Regular activation of punishment modules can lead to a brain where these become more prominent and have a larger impact on consciousness.
3. It is possible to seek positive stimuli, and train the brain to enjoy these, and it is possible to exercise the ability to turn off negative sensations.
4. We are born with a “default contentment,” and if we can manage to retain this then life will be good even in the absence of particular pleasures.
5. “Discords,” in the meaning of detrimental differences between modern life and what our genes are adapted to, create stress and can lead to a loss of default contentment due to an increased activity in punishment modules.

The question, then, is how do we turn these principles into practical advice? Did I learn anything from the places I visited that has a bearing on this question?

The first three principles are about shifting the mood tonus in a positive direction. A major problem in modern society is that the punishment modules are often activated to such an extent that they “hijack” the mind. In order to counteract this problem, we need to understand what kinds of negative feelings the brain comes equipped with, and what kinds of experiences and situations stimulate these feelings. An interesting assignment is to consider the three more important punishment modules in light of how things were at the places I visited.

*Fear.* In my vocabulary, anxiety reflects a misguided, or hyperactive, fear function; a condition that may date back to early childhood. For an infant, safety implies knowing that a caregiver is within reach. A lack of proximity leads to activation of the fear module. Parents in modern societies tend to assume that everything is fine if the door is locked and the burglar alarm is on, but the problem is that the infant knows nothing about burglars or predators. His or her safety is entirely a question of parental help, and thus parental proximity, if anything should happen. Traditional advice has been to let the child cry when put to sleep alone. Eventually the child learns that screaming doesn’t help and accepts his plight—but the situation might still activate the fear module. I believe that excessive separation tends to “exercise” the fear function to the extent that it easily becomes unnecessarily dominant, which means anxiety problems. The solution is to let infants sleep with parents and to carry them around during the day—preferably skin-to-skin because physical contact is known to calm both adults and infants. Indigenous societies get a high score on this measure, but people living in ecovillages also seem more likely to stay close to their children.

The competitiveness of work, and the general time-squeeze of modern society, tends to cause stress in adults, which implies another way to activate the fear module. With tribal people such as the Hadza, this is much less of a problem—perhaps one of the advantages of not having clocks. The situation was more variable in ecovillages, but overall I consider them less stressed than the average person in the outside world. The pressure to produce and to win the race of life is reduced in a close-knit community.



The Hadza typically carry their babies around skin-to-skin, and they sleep together at night. Minor details like this might help protect the child against anxiety related problems.

*Low mood.* The evolutionary perspective suggests that this module is activated when something is “not as it ought to be.” Quite often the problem involves relationships with other people, but it can also be a question of failing in tasks you are engaged in. In other words, gloominess might suggest that your social network is not optimal and you are lonely. Being alone was dangerous in the Stone Age; people needed to collaborate to ensure their survival. The feeling is unpleasant because it is meant to induce you to take proper

actions. If the low-mood nerve circuits become too dominant, we talk about depression.

In ancient times, the hunt sometimes went wrong; these days, flunking an exam or losing a competition are more likely events. Regardless of the task, the situation is disagreeable because we are meant to find a better strategy. As in the case of anxiety, the point is that when the low-mood module is frequently activated, the concomitant brain exercise may lead to hyperactivity in the form of depression.

Both in terms of social life and when it comes to managing the tasks at hand, indigenous tribes and ecovillages typically score better than the average person in Western societies. Close-knit social bonds are the rule rather than the exception in alternative communities. The tasks are more down to earth, such as growing or collecting food, and there is less demand for high performance.

*Pain.* Perhaps one third of the adult population in Norway suffers from chronic pain, the problem is typically associated with the muscles and the skeleton. One common cause is unnatural strain on certain parts of the body, either due to muscles rarely being used or the muscle tonus being retained over a prolonged period. The prescribed prevention is varied physical activity. This is generally the rule for indigenous people, but it's also more common in ecovillages than in modern society.

Pain is often associated with inappropriate activation of the immune system, for example, in the form of rheumatism and related inflammatory conditions. Inflammation induces pain in an attempt to make sure the affected part is protected from further damage. Unfortunately, the immune system seems to be the victim of discord conditions. The alarmingly high prevalence of asthma, allergies, and autoimmune diseases testifies to this contention. One possible explanation is that we are too obsessed with hygiene, the immune system does not quite develop the way it should because the environment is not what the genes "expect." For example, the system expects a more constant exposure to the (mostly harmless) microbes that are in the soil. Both indigenous people and those in ecovillages tend to stay a bit closer to dirt.

If you really want to exercise your brain, you ought to create a regime that strengthens positive feelings. Meditative techniques offer one relevant strategy. It is possible to focus on relaxation, which implies turning off stress and punishment modules and thus return to the default contentment state. It is also possible to use meditation as a platform for specifically activating desired modules. Meditation is a common practice in many ecovillages. I never saw any indigenous person meditate, but then they probably have less need for doing so.

Many people claim that the most important happiness ingredient is having a purpose, or a meaning, in life. I doubt that thoughts about the meaning of life troubled the typical Stone Age person; their daily tasks probably offered all the commitment they needed. The alienation of present society does, however, create a need. We have been removed from nature, as well as from social networks and tasks that have obvious and immediate value. People in alternative communities typically score better on this issue than those in the general population. The *intention* of intentional communities specifies a meaning of life, whether it's a question of sustainability or serving God.

### So What?

The above list of happiness-related principles reflects answers offered by my "oracle" when asked about how to improve quality of life. The list is not meant to be exhaustive, but merely to point out some relevant environmental elements that are possible to apply.

Based on the above considerations, I expect people in well-functioning alternative communities to obtain relatively high scores on tests of well-being. The point is complicated by the fact that quite often those who seek these communities have problems fitting in with mainstream society. Their starting point as to happiness might not be the best.

For me, the most important observation is that on most of the measures, *ecovillage customs converge with my biological theories*. I consider that good news—for both them and me! The observation supports the wisdom of my oracle *and* the sensibility of what these communi-

ties are trying to achieve. The nice thing is that they and I approach the issue from very different perspectives. Mine is theoretical while theirs partly intuitive and partly trial and error. Their practices corroborate the principles my oracle bases its answers on, and this observation offers my oracle the required confidence to embark on further comments and elaborations.

### The Problem of Discords

Arguably the most important measure is to avoid discords (principles 4 and 5 in the above “*Happiness Principles*” list). This does not mean creating a “human zoo” where the conditions are as close to the Stone Age as possible; only select features of such conditions are worth retaining. Most aspects of our modern lives are positive; the challenge lies in finding the few that contribute to the “diseases of civilization.”

Nearsightedness is a useful example. In industrialized countries, about half the population suffers from this condition. In fact, the figure for young men in Singapore is reported to be 80%. In rural areas of Third World countries the condition is rare; for example, it occurs in only about 1% of farmers in Nepal. In other words, something related to our modern way of life causes nearsightedness. The question is . . . what?

Eyes are meant to develop through an interaction with the environment. If the conditions differ from what the genes “expect,” the eyeball might end up too large compared to the curvature of the lens, which means you are nearsighted. Continuous focus on a fixed distance, for instance, when reading, is one possible discord; and another is the unnatural cycle of daylight and dark due to the invention of artificial sources of illumination. Both of these conditions reflect changes in the human environment and as such might cause problems by impacting on eye development.

I was surprised when research found evidence that neither of these two conditions seems to matter, while a third and somewhat surprising aspect of present life apparently does. Research suggests that the main problem is keeping the kids indoors! If they do go out for an hour or two each day, the prevalence of nearsightedness falls,

perhaps due to a more varied constellation of peripheral sights.

This example is a reminder that research is required to pinpoint the actual discords responsible for various conditions, not the least in the case of mental problems.

### **The Achilles Heel**

Nearsightedness is easy to diagnose and easy to treat; mental issues are about as prevalent, but considerably more difficult to deal with. Consequently, I believe that the most troublesome discords of modern society are related to the brain and that social interactions are key factors. The traditional tribal unit has disappeared, and it's difficult to set up a suitable substitute. In other words, the problem with the "shoes" of industrialized societies are twofold: They are too big to secure sustainability, and their poor fit with the natural human condition lead to blisters and sores in the mind.

Psychologists who do research in positive psychology tend to agree that social relationships are the most important aspect of the environment. Quality of life is affected both directly, for example, by the value of friendship, and indirectly through effects on greater society, for example, in the form of violence and criminality. It is, therefore, particularly important to pull the compassion pendulum in the right direction. The Yamagishi communes not only create happy individuals, but are also well-run and successful enterprises.

Unfortunately, the challenge related to social life is not only important, but also particularly difficult. Industrialized society is based on having people congregate in cities, and the present size of human populations makes any small-scale alternative unfeasible. Moreover, work and recreation are today independent activities engaging constantly new constellations of people. In short, it is exceedingly difficult to divide all citizens into close-knit units.

Not that life in the Stone Age was without conflicts, but the conflicts were presumably easier to resolve. Having close social ties, and depending on each other, creates a positive climate for settling disputes and retaining friendship. Furthermore, the tribe was the primary unit for both work and leisure and covered the need for companionship. In cities, most of the people one encounters are

strangers, and close relationships are typically restricted to the nuclear family; many don't even have that. As an acquaintance once pointed out, "It is easy to make new friends, but very difficult to make old friends." In fact, I believe the social set up is the most vulnerable feature of industrialized society. It is the Achilles heel of the modern world, and as such it is the most formidable challenge for the human zookeepers. Arguably the most important aspect of alternative communities is to test out measures that can be used to strengthen communal feelings.

In industrialized societies, social capital seems to be reversely proportional to riches. Since 1985, the average American has gone from having three to only two persons they entrust, and related reports suggest that the increase in wealth in China has led to a similar decline in interpersonal relations. Rather than building social capital, most countries seem to be losing what they once had. This is a dangerous trend.

Perhaps the main challenge is to find ways to divide society into suitable chunks. In tribal societies, people are born into small units, and these can function independently of others even if comprising only a handful of individuals. In the Western world it is not just the practical problems of downsizing society, but also the issue of starting up with a mentality that has been shaped for life in a crowd of strangers. Even in the Stone Age, ensuring positive relations required a concerted effort; today the task requires a lot more. It is encouraging to see how well many alternative communities are doing. One should, however, keep in mind all the initiatives that did not make it.

Community building is an art—the most important form of human art. In my description of the various communities I visited, I have commented on features that the artist can include in his repertoire—anything from holding hands in a circle to strategies for tackling conflicts.

### **The Drug Trap**

The human mind was formed in the absence of all the products of our affluent society. If an opportunity arose in the Stone Age, people



would immediately take advantage of whatever became available; even in times of plenty, finding food required an effort. Today all the effort required is a stroll along the aisles of a shopping mall, and the products are fine-tuned and optimized to hit our senses with maximum power. Moderation is a virtue, and the ability to withstand temptations is a necessity.

A heroin addict continues to push the needle even if the drug no longer offers any pleasure. The craving is so strong that the addict can't stop. The brain recalls the extreme reward once offered by the shot and is consequently tuned to get more at any price. It doesn't really help that the reward has more or less vanished, partly due to a neurological adaptation in the brain, and partly as a consequence of the addict's realization that he ought to quit. The craving has put down roots in the subconscious part of the brain. It's a trap that the mind has been lured into, and the habit is not compatible with long-term happiness.

The insight gained from trying to help these people is important because similar mechanisms are also involved in connection with other types of habits—anything from a desire for sweets to being hooked on gambling. We are unlikely to have a good life if we yield to cravings that have a long-term negative impact, but the design of the brain implies that we easily end up in these traps. Exploiting the mind's potential for pleasures is not in itself bad; the problem is getting into bad habits.

These "drug traps" are not only related to external stimuli that yield pleasures; personal freedom is one of the many desires that can turn out to be harmful in the long run. Those who insist on only catering to private concerns are unlikely to make the effort to fit in with others. Life may be great for the time being, but perhaps not throughout one's entire life. Personal autonomy can, in other words, begin to resemble an addiction, and those "hooked" on the "freedom drug" follow the cravings of the moment.

In a similar fashion, people tend to go for city life. We are attracted to places where many people gather because they offer all sorts of stimulation without requiring much commitment. That too, in my eyes, is a trap akin to being hooked on narcotics. The choices



The king of Bhutan claims that in his country happiness is what matters, not money. I like the statement, but it is perhaps easy for the king to say. His minions, such as this young shopkeeper, appreciated doing business with me.

made are based on short-term desires, not on long-term quality of life. The ecovillages create an alternative.

I don't want to overstate the negative aspects of either personal freedom or city life. Meeting new and interesting individuals can boost life quality, and most people probably do a good job at balancing social networks and time to be alone. Thus, the typical city dweller may thrive into old age. The intentional communities do, however, help generate connections, and they typically make sure all the members participate, which is particularly important for those who struggle to find their way in the urban crowd.

### **Money is Expensive**

As discussed in Part I, the purpose of society is, in my mind, to create conditions that make it easy to find a good life; the purpose of

the individual is to create his or her personal bliss. Anything else in life can be categorized as a "means to an end."

Of course, the means are important. A good life cannot be purchased on the Internet or turned on by some switch in your forehead; but it does depend on living conditions that tend to require "financial muscles." Moreover, it's difficult to assess a society based on how people feel, which explains why our "zookeepers" tend to focus on counting money, schools, hospitals, miles of highway, and similar signs of affluence. This focus is rational to the extent that these assets are important premises for what society has to offer the individual. It *is*, after all, easier to generate happiness in a well-organized and affluent society.

The fourth dragon king of Bhutan, or K4 for short, claimed in 1972 that in his country what matters is Gross National Happiness. I like that. Although long queues on the roads improve GNP by making sure people spend more money on gasoline, this is a dubious strategy if aimed at improving either happiness or the environment. Similarly, a society is not better because they have more psychiatrists if at the same time they have more problems with mental health. According to my sources in Bhutan, they have only one psychiatrist, and he happens to be crazy. Even in Bhutan, however, they realize that economic growth and development are important factors. Moreover, after travelling in Bhutan, I found that most people are more concerned about income than well-being.

Money and material possessions are, regrettably, of prime importance in modern life. People in ecovillages might value them less, but that does not mean they don't care about them at all. A community that says "to hell with money" is in for a rude awakening. The Hadza could perhaps get away with it, but even they have learned to appreciate purchasing power; if nothing else they cherish the iron arrowheads made in the neighboring village.

We all drift around in the same financial quagmire. We need to play by the rules of economics: make a profit or get lost. So when the economy says jump, you jump and dance to the flute of the market forces—or you sink down and disappear. Perhaps the world has to,

or ought to, be this way; if nobody takes the effort to create products, then the products will stop coming. Consequently, money is the Achilles heel for the ecovillages. They don't really want to follow the scent of money, but, if they do not live up to certain economic standards, the place will most likely vanish. At the same time, they typically prefer to live where there is lots of space and open nature, and it's exceedingly hard to find affordable land in places where employment opportunities are ripe.

Finances are not just a problem for those who wish to find alternatives to the road laid down by the Western bulldozer; they are an Achilles heel for the whole world. Our economically driven industry has given us a lot, but at the cost of pollution and depletion of resources. In principle, it should be possible to design an economy where the effect on the environment is included in the price tag, which would reduce the negative impact of production. But not surprisingly, it has proven very difficult to agree on terms and to implement such a policy internationally.

The London-based New Economic Foundation produces a *Happy Planet Index* where they list all the countries according to how well they are doing. They use the following formula: quality of life (measured by questionnaires with questions of the type, "On a scale from 0 to 10, how well do you feel?")  $\times$  life expectancy / ecological footprint. If you look at the numerator, Western countries such as Norway end up on top. But if you include the denominator (the negative impact on the planet), Norway is suddenly far down on the list.

In economics there is the proverb, "What you measure is what you get." The effect of actions taken to improve society will, to a large extent, depend on the direction you have lined up for that society. If you want to increase GNP, a stronger financial situation is what you can hope for; but unless you also insist on cleaner air and a stable climate, these latter features are likely to go down the drain. Accordingly, it is rather important that we define and outline what we really want. The formula set up by the *Happy Planet Index* makes a lot of sense to me. It's only when we add the actual costs in terms of a devastated Earth that we really see how much the industrialized economy actually costs. Only then do we learn the true price of our



What has God got to do with it? A group of Tamils passing the ancient Hindu temple in Mamallapuram, India.

infatuation with money. The ecovillages try to find strategies that should reduce this cost.

### The Bliss of God

Most, if not all, of us have irrational convictions, and sometimes the strangest ideas contribute the most to our contentment. For example, the notion of a Kingdom of Heaven that opens the door for us when we die has presumably offered people more joy than knowledge of the true nature of heaven. There are several scientific articles concluding that religious people are happier than those without a faith, and that religious communities survive longer than secular ones. I am convinced that religions, or related belief systems, have a considerable potential when it comes to improving society. In short, I believe in God—or the least in the notion that faith can help mankind—if we only manage to “harness” the phenomenon referred to as religiousness.

Marx considered religion to be opium for the people. In a way he was right, religion does capture the mind and has certain similarities

to an addiction; but of all the varieties of “narcotics” you might be hooked on, I believe it’s difficult to find any better alternative than God.

Atheists typically claim that we ought to be as rational as possible in any situation. *My stance is that being overly rational can be irrational.* We did not evolve to think in logical terms; we evolved to be influenced by a variety of feelings. And in the absence of feelings, whether rational or not, there will be no happiness. Should you, for example, relate to the person you fall in love with in an analytical fashion, or is it better to enjoy your affection without contemplating excessively on whether you have performed an objective evaluation of his or her weaknesses? I believe that people who manage to engage in positive emotions, whether for spouses or gods, have found a source that will enrich their lives. For me personally, science has taken the form of an addiction, which means I find it exceedingly difficult to enjoy God. Fortunately, science is not the worst form of “narcotic.”

My faith (in God) was reinforced by observations made while travelling. The more successful and long-lived alternative communities I visited were typically those with a spiritual touch. Religion, whatever gods or qualities are included in the sacred visions, does, in my experience, not only contribute to individual quality of life, but to community coherence. We all know that the “long arm of the law” is actually rather short while the “arms of God” are infinitely long—at the least for those who sense that God can see them. In other words, it is easier to have people contribute to the common good if they believe that God is watching. Furthermore, those who have faith tend to follow divine commands with pleasure, while punishment is required to enforce rules laid down by the law. In addition, shared worship really has the potential of bringing a congregation closer together. I conclude, therefore, that God ought to be called upon by those who wish to construct a Heaven on Earth.

Personally I would prefer to live in a community where a spiritual element was part of the fellowship, but I would prefer a faith that is not dogmatic and whose teachings are in line with the innate nature of humans. A religion that turns hard against science or natural

sexual behavior, for example, would not obtain a top grade from my oracle.

Some intentional communities take a stance against religiousness. Partly they prefer to be an alternative for "rational atheists," and partly they fear being depicted as a cult. It is certainly possible to create a flourishing community using an atheist template, but "God" has this tendency to find a way in, albeit perhaps in some form of disguise. The ideologies associated with ecology and sustainability have in some places taken on religious qualities. The immediate impression is that the ideas are rational, but upon closer scrutiny you sense an engagement and attitude that has spiritual connotations. The Greek goddess called Gaia is sometimes called upon.

Our planet deserves all the focus and worship we can offer. As a religion, I suppose faith based on Gaia, or on ecology, is somewhat less potent than the Christian God; on the other hand, Gaia offers a better foundation for finding the solutions to some serious environmental issues.

### The Sorrow of Sex

An important evolutionary function of sexual behavior is to improve relationships. This activity also offers some of the most potent rewards the brain can muster. In theory, sex should be the number one source of enjoyment and the number one choice of activity, but in our Western society these expectations are rarely met. For too many people, including victims of sexual assault as well as the perpetrators, sex is a rather destructive element of life. In short, sexual behavior appears to be another Achilles heel of modern society.

At ZEGG they have a liberating view on sexuality, and I believe they "take the bull by the horns." Sexual desires are a particularly potent force in the human mind simply because procreation is the most important factor for the genes. Consequently, the feelings related to reproduction have a strong impact. Unfortunately, as in the case of the eye, sexual inclinations mature in interaction with the environment of the individual and are, therefore, easily malformed by discords such as oppressive social norms. Misguided and frustrated desires further increase the propensity for violence and abuse. By

branding natural sexual yearnings as immoral and wrong, society might in fact accentuate the exploitation and misuse it wants to avoid. A more accepting attitude should help alleviate the problem.

Most large-scale societies have written or unwritten regulations pertaining to sex. Within a tribal community, behavior is more easily constrained by the fact that everybody has close ties to everyone else. Because sexual desires are such a strong force, particularly in men, concise rules were needed to regulate and suppress behavior when the community members no longer had close ties. The need would be evident due to the consequences of a liberal practice—such as sexually transmitted diseases and children lacking the support of a father. The sexual ethics associated with Christianity are but one example. Today, however, part of the rationale for introducing strict moral rules is no longer present. Unwanted pregnancies and diseases can be avoided by the use of preventives, and in most countries the police force offers better protection than what women had two thousand years ago. I believe humans have an innate tendency toward a certain level of bashfulness, and that women, particularly, are designed to show restraint, but I also believe that sexual behavior preferably should be dealt with in a more tolerant and lenient fashion than what we typically see today.

The ecovillages I visited had a more open-minded view on sexuality than the surrounding communities. My oracle supports this stance.

### **If only Society Could Be Like a Computer**

The various places I visited indicate the variety of options available when it comes to forming the human brain and building a community. In my mind, they demonstrate that it is possible to pull the pendulum far away from the point of gravity. At the same time, it became obvious that the pendulum will not remain in that position in the absence of a continued and coherent effort. Starting up with a solid dose of idealism is not sufficient; the communities need tools suitable to “grease the machinery” and to build social capital.

I have discussed various tools that I believe suit this purpose. It is a rather large toolbox, including items such as staying close to in-



fants, setting up community gatherings, forming a tradition of hugging, and establishing a system for decision making. The tools are somewhat like apps on a mobile phone. You can “download” them, but they might be more or less useful in the setting of your particular community. Many places will need to establish new “driver software,” and perhaps perform a “reboot,” in order to establish a “culture 2.0” version that will allow the desired apps to run. It would feel strange if we suddenly decided to start the departmental meetings where I work with Findhorn-style attunements.

The obvious problem is that these types of changes are a lot easier to implement on a computer than in a society.



You don't have to go all the way to the moon to find water, but someone has to fill up the kettle.

## A Culture Worth Fighting For

### The Future Empire

Building an empire is not like it used to be. A few centuries ago, you could go out with a handful of soldiers, occupy a piece of land somewhere far away, and tell the inhabitants that they now belong to you. If they wish to do well in your newborn colony, they simply have to behave “civilized.” All you ask for is their freedom, labor, and resources; in return they will get some bandages and all the copies of the Bible they can eat—but they need to understand that being civilized means being like you.

The world has moved on. Today, building an empire is about selling brand names. Seen in a slightly wider setting, it means promoting cultural elements. The winners of this race, such as Coca-Cola, Western music, and McDonalds, do not gain any land, but they receive lots of revenue—in addition to the joy of seeing their products conquering a large fraction of the world’s attention.

Culture implies behavioral traits that are passed on by learning rather than by genetic inheritance. We humans are not the only ones who have this capacity. Chimpanzees transfer a variety of cultural elements, and in many other species there are similar signs of cultural development. On the island of Koshima in Japan, people fed potatoes to the local macaque monkeys. The monkeys appreciated the potatoes, but the givers did not care to wash them. In the beginning, the animals willingly crunched and spat sand and dirt until Imo, a particularly bright young female, one day decided to rinse the potatoes in the sea. It is the simple elements of culture that really have the capacity to spread out—elements that anyone can adopt. A few days later, nearly 100% of the local macaques were following Imo’s cultural innovation.

Washing potatoes might not convey the same status as a hit tune or a new religion, but in essence it is similar. Cultural transmission

is about bringing on a new idea or a new way of living. Some cultural elements spread out without any effort—whether they are sensible or not—while business people spend a considerable amount of money trying to get their products into the minds of the consumers, quite often without any appreciable effect.

Those in charge of the “human zoo” ought to start out by attempting to understand why some elements spread like fire in dry grass, while others never find their way out of the sales offices. The next step is to try to distribute the elements, or apps, that improve living conditions while weeding out those that are not beneficial. As long as humans are equipped with brains rather than personal “neck-top” computers, these are the tools needed to improve society. Unfortunately, as I am sure sales personnel and idols-to-be will agree, it is not that easy or simple. Only a select few elements catch the soul of the world.

Once, all you could wish for would be to have the majority of your tribe agree with your ideas. In those days there were many tribes and many ideas. Today there is pretty much only one “tribe” left, but its membership entails some seven billion people. The entire globe is part of the catchment area for novel cultural elements, whether in the form of new tunes, electronic gadgets, or ways to generate social capital.

The world is becoming less colorful because the colors tend to fade along with the creation of worldwide winners of the cultural race, but this situation does offer an advantage. We have managed to gather the world under one umbrella, which means everyone stands to gain from new cultural elements. On the other hand, it also means that the world is more vulnerable. Unless we are able to coax our unified culture in a positive direction, we have a serious problem. Moreover, among the deluge of elements going extinct there are probably some that would be worth saving.

Imo’s insight into washing potatoes was clever, but the problems facing mankind require even more ingenious solutions. Most people are solidly anchored in the past. If you spent your life in the nuclear family, the idea of more communal, or ecovillage-like, solutions seems alien. In order to impact on people’s attitudes, I believe the



These bracelets made of colorful fabric have not reached the world market—yet.

most important key is to do what worked in the case of Imo—the potatoes tasted better after being washed. If people sense that life in an ecovillage improves well-being, then I expect they will stop and listen.

**An Apartment Building and a Few Enthusiasts is All It Takes**  
Don't despair if your job or your spouse requires that you live in a city. Fortunately there are some alternatives to the alternatives. At about the same time Findhorn got started, the concept of *co-housing* was introduced in Denmark as an option for city dwellers with communal preferences. The traditional ecovillage with 50 acres of land and adobe houses is difficult to establish in urban areas; instead the idea is to create ecofriendly housing that caters to social life. Munksøgård in the Danish city of Roskilde is one example worth visiting.

Is it possible to spread this cultural element like the washing of potatoes? Would it help to commercialize the concept?

Intentional communities are traditionally erected from the “inside;” that is, starting with the initiative of a group of people who

desire to live together. Another strategy is to have companies engaged in urban development design projects that fit with the ecovillage ideology but with the intent to sell units to whomever puts up the money. The sale depends, of course, on whether “ecovillage” is a suitable sales pitch. The *Beddington Zero Emissions Development* project in London was a proof of concept. The building was finished, and sold out, in 2001. People still live there, more or less ecologically minded and more or less socially inclined.

I prefer the strategy where the starting point is humans rather than commercial enterprise. I believe that both may do, but it is easier to generate social bonds if the inhabitants are involved in the process of creating the place. On the other hand, the eco-idealist typically lacks the knowhow and resources to establish structures larger than compost boxes or outdoor toilets.

It is not necessarily that difficult. *Majbacken* in Göteborg, Sweden, is a notable example. In 2004, four people started an association for alternative living in an old apartment building in the city’s downtown. Moving on like legal house occupants, the association now owns the vast majority of the apartments. People who want to be part of the co-housing project can either rent or buy a unit. The important point is that all the inhabitants are old—when I was there, the oldest of the thirty residents was 88. Together they cook dinners, take care of maintenance, and arrange parties and tours. They claim the companionship helps them retain a youthful mind and a happy retirement, something the social services would be unlikely to offer. As a behavioral biologist, I consider their solution to be ingenious. The arrangement can be copied in other places—fortunately it cannot be patented—and it demonstrates that it’s never too late to change your style of living. This is the type of cultural element I find worth fighting for.

## 19

### Insight From a Tower

#### The Future is Not What it Used to Be

I owe my interest in the human brain to Desmond Morris. He is known primarily for his books on human nature, but he is also a painter. Above my office desk there is a card he once sent me with a picture of one of his surrealistic works owned by the famous Tate Gallery in London. Next to it hangs a copy of his favorite painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch. Painted more than 500 years ago, it is as surrealistic as any work by Salvador Dali, and with more futuristic imagination than Steven Spielberg could have dreamt up. It consists of three panels, and I believe they depict the path of the human race going from the Garden of Eden, via overpopulation and war, to the final doomsday. The topic could not be portrayed in a more vivid way, nor could the prospect look any grimmer.

It doesn't have to be this way. It is possible to improve our conditions and devise a better future. The communities I have described offer alternatives. The average inhabitant of intentional communities is, according to my assessment, not only happier, but also more empathetic and engaged with their fellow human beings—especially compared to what you find in European cities designed according to the art of social science and European Union directives.

I prefer sometimes to believe in what may seem impossible. I recall a sign alongside a fish pond, saying, "Please do not walk on the water." If nothing else, an optimistic stance, along with the vision of walking on water, does add drops of delight while on the journey toward either paradise or doomsday.

Too many of us fail to enjoy the moment. Instead we take pictures, hoping to find time later to enjoy what we once had the chance to experience. Much later. Perhaps there will never be a "right time," and even if you do, it might prove difficult to extract

anything resembling the actual experience from old photos. Of course you do get a multicolor version of your life; and then, perhaps, real life will matter less?

I believe we are best served by learning to enjoy life as it happens. By approaching each day in this way, we might also realize that material goods are less important. After the Second World War, my country was tuned to the creation of welfare. If people only worked hard, the future would be bright; in time there would be radios and cars for everyone. People did work hard, and they were rewarded not only with radios, but TVs and all sorts of appliances—while the visions of the future slowly faded. Perhaps the future will never be quite the paradise of our dreams, but if we can make people happy today, and create conditions that allow our descendants the same option, we should at least avoid doomsday.

I believe we should aim high. Medical science knows more about how to heal ailments than ever before, and we train people to run faster than they did in the Stone Age. In a similar fashion we ought to work toward a society where people are happier than ever before. We know something about well-being, and we can sketch a path going in the right direction. In this pursuit we need to focus on the fact that the greatest challenge is not the invention of new gadgets, but the mastery of the human mind. The one thing I feel certain about is that the future world will be a different place from what we have today; yet for all practical purposes it will be inhabited by humans having the same innate predispositions.

### **The Earth is Round**

King Arthur had a bright idea. He observed his knights quarreling and their armor rattling just for the right to sit at the top end of his table. He resolved the issue by having his carpenter craft a round table. When the knights realized that there was no longer any top end, and that they were all equally far from the center, they stopped fighting.

The Earth is also round. My house in Oslo is about as far from the center as the flimsy huts of the Hadza. Actually the closest place to the center of Earth is the North Pole, but people don't really want



to live there. Personally I prefer to get as far away from the center as possible, on high mountains in warm regions—but it doesn't really matter. One can enjoy life on the savannas with no more gadgets than a bow and arrow, and one can be miserable in Las Vegas even with a stack of dollars in the pocket. Other humans are the most important external ingredient in a successful life, and they are all over the place. We are all knights of the round world because genetically we are bestowed with pretty much the same prerequisites for pleasure. It is up to each of us to form our own lives. The choice is yours, but it will help if the future keepers of the human zoo create suitable conditions.

### The View from My Tower

One purpose of my travels was to help the Oracle of Science answer the question of how to create a community where people flourish. I brought back the outlines of some options. My other intent was to find, or create, my own ideal society—so why did I just ramble around instead of spending my time helping to shape a suitable place? Here I have even less to offer in terms of an answer.

Most people are not particularly brilliant when it comes to making intelligent choices in life, and I would not claim to be any better. Besides, I was always more tuned to theoretical rather than practical aspects. So, I still sit here in the northwest tower of my home. Through three large windows I see the valley below and the forest beyond. I lean back and let my eyes wander. It feels good to look at a reality that far away from where you are yourself.

Then I turn my attention to a nearly finished manuscript. My eyes let go of the view so that my mind can focus on the insight required to turn my thoughts into words. If I did not write, I probably would not have learned much—the ideas gain meaning only when I force myself to think them through critically and turn them into sentences. One day, I decide, I shall leave my tower and enter something more practical and communal. One day, perhaps. What really matters, of course, are the processes that take place in my head—that's where positive feelings are created. On the other hand, I also know that the environment I live in, and that shapes my mind—

particularly the social environment—means a lot. It is part of human nature to be influenced by others and to find joy in companionship. In other words, I need to focus both inwardly and outwardly.

My thoughts return to all the places I visited and the positive feelings I experienced in the company of the people there. Do I really need anything else? Actually, I suppose, it was the journey itself that gave joy and meaning to my life.



The world needs to be built brick by brick, but the most important resource is still human beings, like these children in Bhutan.

