

Leaving Utopia

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Virtually everyone leaves Utopia after a time. The quick and hearty do not necessarily defect early, nor is it always the witless who linger on. One leaves when he has gained what he came for, when his commitment is exhausted, when it is no longer necessary to sort through the breviary of questions that concern his freedom.

Tom Patton, “Foreword” to W. F. Olin’s *Escape from Utopia*

Throughout history people have set up alternative communities to create a “better way of living”. Even though most have been religious-based there have been several periods in Australia when they have not.

In the late 1800s there were various attempts to settle on land under a co-operative system and these experiments were based on socialistic and communistic principles. In June 1895, The Queenslander newspaper regarded such attempts as futile. “Those who fondly dream of Utopia must be content to live in dreamland.” Even though the communards started off full of faith and enthusiasm, “jealousy, envy, strife and all uncharitableness have sprouted like weeds among the wheat of goods fellowship”. None of these communities survived.

In 1893 two hundred and twenty Australians, led by journalist William Lane, sailed from Sydney to South America to set up a utopian socialist community. Paraguay was at that time offering free land to those willing to farm it. Within twelve months the community, “New Australia”, was deeply divided and a splinter community “Cosme Colony” was set up. In spite of their dreams to create a new Australia based on equality and mateship, both experiments failed. The 600 or so members left in a steady stream over the years (mainly because of conflicts with other members) and by 1909 both colonies had dissolved and reverted to private title.

Half a century later, during the 1960s and 70s, there was another wave of secular communities as part of the worldwide, anti-establishment movement, triggered in part by the Vietnam War. People of all ages decided to drop out of a society they regarded as contaminated with materialism and move to rural regions particularly along the East Coast of Australia. They proudly saw themselves as moving back to the land to become self-sufficient.

There were thousands of attempts to live communally – from small communes and shared households to large intentional communities. The majority failed

within a short period. Sociologist Bill Metcalfe claims two-thirds collapsed within the first year and the rest within three to four years. The reasons for this failure are varied. Many groups folded because of interpersonal conflicts exacerbated by the pressure of the hippy creed of living in “perfect harmony”. There was the lack of privacy of communal living – both physical and emotional – and there were difficulties with sharing not only assets but also partners. And there was the realisation that it was not possible to live completely independent from the mainstream society. One could not pay the rates with a bunch of bananas.

Disillusioned communards returned to the cities and suburbs or else they continued to live in rural areas. Many purchased their own properties and set up businesses so that once struggling dairy towns such as Maleny, Mullumbimby, Bellingen and Nimbin were transformed and revitalised. They have been transformed yet again in recent years as wealthy people in search of a sea change or downshifting have moved there. Now it’s difficult to find a property in these areas for less than half a million dollars and the alternative flavour is rapidly being replaced by trappings of wealth – certainly not what the pioneering hippies had in mind when they originally moved there.

However a number of the original alternative communities did survive and one could conclude from the mere fact that they have survived for thirty plus years, that they are success stories. These include Crystal Waters Permaculture Village near Maleny in Queensland; Billen Cliffs and Tuntable Falls in northern New South Wales; Moora Moora Co-operative in Victoria; Bundagen and Patanga on the mid-coast of New South Wales. Using Moora Moora and Crystal Waters as models, a few other communities were set up in the ’80s and ’90s: Rosneath Farm (Western Australia), Kookaburra Park Eco-village (near Bundaberg), Jarlanbah Permaculture Hamlet (Nimbin) and Fryers Forrest in Victoria. And in recent years others are forming such as the Currumbin Eco-village on the Gold Coast hinterland.

There has however been an enormous shift away from the ’60s ideal of communal living and sharing everything. Nowadays most communities provide free title of house-lots usually an acre in size, which means members can buy and sell when they choose to. There is also common land that members own together (includes roads, dams, water tanks, maybe a hall, etc.) and communities invariably operate under some kind of government legislation (Body Corporate, Co-operative or even a company) to manage this. Most of the conflict in eco-villages arises from disputes over managing common land.

So downshifting is nothing new – though you might think so judging by recent media reports. It’s just a new name for dropping out, or moving into a less stressful and busy lifestyle. Just as eco-village is just a new name to replace intentional or alternative community. What also is not new is that while communities are no longer collapsing as they did in the ’70s, the turnover in most is extraordinary high, though this is rarely if ever reported. There is no mention of this on the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN) website, nor the websites of various communities. There is also no mention of any difficulties. Hilder Jackson, one of the founders of GEN, even warned me not to write

about the problems and conflicts of eco-villages: “I would be careful in bringing them to the general public which is all too eager to go against anything new like eco-villages. In the big society they are hidden between rules and courts of law”. But I disagree. Shouldn't the full picture be given, the pros and the cons? Shouldn't people be warned as so to the pitfalls?

So why do so many people leave?

Chris, a primary school teacher from Adelaide first visited Kookaburra Park in 1999, and was convinced she had found what she was looking for. “My first experience of people I met gave me such a good feeling. For a long time I had had the yearning to settle in the country. I wanted to escape the insanity of living in the city – one day running into the next day, crammed with things to do, where we didn't have a life. We worked to get money to spend money, took kids places and had no time to do anything. We wanted to break our patterns.”

Within months she and her family had moved there to begin a new life. Chris had dreams of growing her own food and designing and building a house. She also had dreams: “to be involved with like-minded people, developing on a personal level plus having fun. I thought that that potential of everyday living would be more interesting at Kookaburra Park. Community was at the core”.

But within a year, in spite of building their solar-passive house and establishing vegetable and flower gardens plus an orchard, Chris realised her life had ended up more “insane” than the city life she had tried to escape. Kookaburra Park had failed to even remotely meet what her hopes and expectations had been and she had found that she did not have a lot in common with most of the people. “You get to know people to a certain degree and then you realise you can only relate to a certain level.” Chris now regarded the community as dysfunctional because of the way she thought the place was run and mismanaged and some of the types of people who are attracted there. Her two teenage children and her husband, reluctant to move there at the outset, grew more and more discontented. Being away from their extended family and two older children was difficult to cope with especially in times of crisis and illness. They decided to put their house on the market and leave. In spite of her disillusionment, Chris said before she left, “I will miss having no bills and no mortgage. It has been a good life experience on how to live economically. I will miss the free time, the close relations we developed with certain people, the veggie planting group and the dance and personal growth group – things that have potential here when people are getting on well. I will miss the physical stuff I created on my own block: damn shame not to see the trees grow up”.

At the time Chris left, a quarter of the properties at Kookaburra Park were up for re-sale. Most of these were later sold in late 2003 to retirees seeking a safe and quiet place to live. Few, if any, were seeking a so-called alternative lifestyle. Similarly, when I was living at Crystal Waters in the mid-90's, a large percentage of the houses were for sale. And a significant number had changed hands since 1987 – from the time it was redesigned as a group title development, which allowed then for free title of house-lots.

Bruce also left about the same time as Chris. He was one of the early settlers in Kookaburra Park and moved there in 1995. He found that, “Once you become involved on the committee or doing anything in the community you become a target. Some people have so many hidden agendas plus emotional and mental problems that they try and dump on others”. Even though he realised within eighteen months that the place “was dysfunctional, wasn’t working because there was no clear vision”, he had stayed on (mainly for his daughter). Now he is in Tasmania where he works as a microbiologist; in his eight years living at Kookaburra Park he only managed occasional work to supplement dole payment. Looking back he says: “I think the main reason people leave is that their needs and goals are unfulfilled; they become dissatisfied and discouraged. Also people change, their needs and goals change. I think that some people are keen to leave, making plans to leave; there are others who are trapped, who don’t think they can leave because they have nowhere else to go to; a third group have to believe it’s okay for them to feel okay”.

In contrast, Nigel Reid, a resident of Jarlanbah from its establishment, sees too much idealism as being a problem. “People come to Jarlanbah with their preconceived ideas of what living in a community will be like. They leave when their ideas fail to match the reality.” But when I asked another Jarlanbah resident what was the one thing he would be glad to be away from if he left, he said community bullies! This is seldom articulated but is a very widespread problem, exacerbated in part because people are “trying to get along” and in some respects are willing to play “happy families”.

One of the difficulties of most communities is that there are no criteria for membership. Anybody can live there, including bullies, and nobody can make them leave. When dealing with certain personalities – those who are abusive or have deep emotional problems but think there is nothing wrong with them – mediation and conflict resolution rarely succeed for they are mere band-aids. Even restraining orders from Courts don’t faze them, for essentially these people are attention-seekers and think they are right. For these types of people (and they are to be found in most if not all communities,) eco-villages must be some kind of heaven because they can get away with behaviour that would not be tolerated in the outside world. Unlike workplace bullies from whom you can at least escape in after-work hours, the real challenge in communities is that you have to live amongst these people – drive past their houses, run into them at the letter boxes or a community gathering. The psycho-social trauma they can inflict on those they target is astonishing. Things are never helped by the community rescuers who as in the outside world empower bullies even in subtle ways by feeling sorry for them or making excuses for their behaviour. The notion that bullies are our own “disowned selves” – that is they are acting out parts of our selves that we try and ignore or repress – is sometimes bandied about and you always hear someone piping up with: “It’s just your (the victim’s) karma”. Anything rather than stand up to them.

While some people may leave because of the bullying, others leave for the same reasons the hippies left the communes of the sixties. These include the conflicts and stress that can come about from living in close proximity to a group of people some of whom you may find you have little in common with

after all. There is sometimes an invasion of privacy. Whilst living at Kookaburra Park, I got so tired of people just walking in my home at any hour of the day, I strung ropes across my veranda with a sign, “Do not disturb. Writing in progress”. I tried a sign at Crystal Waters a few years before but one resident insisted that all one needs is a psychic barrier and people will not bother you!

But what about those who stay? In spite of all the challenges and cycles of conflict, for some people there are more or better reasons to stay than to leave. A few cannot imagine living anywhere else.

Usually it is the social benefits of village living that far outweigh the costs of political fall-out and interpersonal squabbling. Lynne lived on the North Shore Sydney for eight years and says she didn’t know anyone in her street. After having experienced community life when she lived in New Guinea, she thought this is “awful, this is not the way people are supposed to live, we are not meant to be shut away in little boxes, not caring about each other, not even knowing people who are in need”. She likes living at Kookaburra Park, likes the tranquillity, the quietness, the no-dog and cat rule (“don’t have to put up with barking and pooping”, she says) and the community atmosphere. She believes that one can avoid the in-house fighting and the body corporate conflicts, or just not let it get to you.

Peter spent years working as an agricultural consultant for CSIRO before moving to Kookaburra Park. He gets very irritated by the “somewhat wilful ignorance of things, the lack of critical analysis and discussion and the New Age crap. Also, the few people who want their way no matter what. The way the Body Corporate Act is, these people have so much power, the power to obstruct and even sabotage things”. At the end of two years he decided to leave and had his place on the market for some time but has changed his mind. He’s even gone back onto the body corporate committee to try and deal with the “village idiots”. He likes the idea of community. “You know your neighbours, doesn’t mean you like them, and there is a degree of safety in that, even if your neighbour is an asshole. There are always people to call on in an emergency or crisis or to give a helping hand. Also theft, crime and vandalism are minimal – which make these places a Neighbourhood Watch paradise.”

For those who dream of a better way of living, this notion of sharing things in common and living a simpler lifestyle may seem a wonderful idea but these things in practice are never easy or simple. As University of Missouri’s Professor Lyman Tower Sargent says, “communal aspects rather than being the glue, is mostly why communities become unstuck”. He also warns, “we know now, to our cost, that dreams can become nightmares. Hence, we must approach dreams –perhaps our own most of all– with both respect and caution”. Anthropologist Karl Popper warned: “those who envisage making heaven on earth will only succeed in making hell”.

People like Chris, Peter, Lynne, Martin and Bruce were certainly lured in by unrealistic promises of promoters as well as the false advertising of developers. And they all mentioned being influenced by articles in green magazines such as *Earth Garden*, *Permaculture Journal* and *Grassroots*.

Articles which all had a positive spin. The problem is that there are the misguided but sincere “true believers” who really do think they have a key to changing the world! In 1996 at a permaculture conference in Perth, Max Lindegger from Crystal Waters said: “My message is that eco-villages soon will be common in urban and rural areas, in poor and rich countries, north and south. It’s up to us. I think the sky is the limit”. He went on to quote Ted Trainer from the University of NSW: “Would it be an exaggeration to claim that the emergence of the eco-village movement is the most significant event of the 20th century?” Well yes, it most certainly would be.

Unfortunately, most of the websites for various eco-villages around Australia are no different from the usual real-estate spins. They promise some kind of heaven on earth, which simply does not exist except in the imaginations of their promoters. Take for example this extract from the website for the new Ecovillage at Currumbin:

Live a deeply satisfying quality of life...feel the social charm of a village atmosphere taste delicious fruit from a multitude of gardens, hear the soothing flow of water over creek stones, see a diverse range of people enjoying extensive amenities, breathe the fragrance of lush tropical flowers, take heart that you contribute to enhance the natural environment. Introducing a sensational new way of living...

How about a good dose of realism? Don’t people deserve a more accurate picture? For example one of the designers of Crystal Waters, Barry Goodman, talks of the “tough times in community living”. He writes that: “there is, for most people, a personal confrontation of massive proportions”. One has to be careful or wary of the “true believers” of any movement. Interestingly enough new research shows that people who are in a “negative” state of mind give more accurate information and accounts than those in a “positive” state as the latter is likely to “trigger less careful thinking strategies”. (Soon to be published in the Journal of Experimental Psychology).

After 14 years of being involved with eco-villages, I believe they are a viable alternative to living in the suburbs or inner city living. There are things I like about them and things I don’t. These places are just another place to live – they will suit some people and certainly won’t suit others. There would be far less resentment amongst those who finally do leave, if they had been told the truth at the outset. And maybe some wouldn’t have gone there in the first place.