

Back to the Land

I was part of the back-to-the-land movement.

We shared a distrust of the “system” that functioned through relatively rigid patriarchal hierarchies limiting creative initiative. This system produced the Vietnam war, cities shrouded in smog, rivers so polluted they burned, ghettos, segregation, race riots, poverty in the midst of plenty, repressive and tortuous economic and military relationships with “developing” countries, and a large middle class living a hollow Leave-it-to-Beaver lifestyle: seemingly devoid of meaning, jingoistic, damaging to the environment, and emotionally phony. We would not be plastic people, **we would be real.**

We didn't believe the stories our culture told to explain the realities of our lives and the actions of our leaders. We came to the forest, because we didn't fit, or didn't want to fit, into the society we knew. Or perhaps, we came to search for a collective relationship to the natural world which would heal the damage we held inside ourselves and, we hoped, heal the culture we came from. We were arrogant enough to believe that we could show the way, wherever we were going.

We aimed to be “self-sufficient” and to divorce ourselves from the “military industrial complex”. Ideologically and culturally, if not in fact, we rejected consumerism, professional careerism, and technology in general. We wore beads, leather, sandals, long hair, shells, feathers, buck knives, leather pouches, and amulets. The appropriation of the trappings of tribal culture was no accident. Many of us wanted to live by the old ways, which we did not know.

And, we smoked marijuana. Rightly or wrongly, many of us felt that marijuana was a “mind expanding” drug, that it had opened our minds to a keener or deeper aesthetic and spiritual appreciation of music, relationships, art, sex, and the beauty inherent our natural surroundings. Marijuana was credited with improving the capacity to perceive connections between apparently disparate concepts and phenomena. And, perhaps, it did break down the ability to maintain rigid, logical boundaries between conceptual categories and disciplines, and enable one to perceive the world more directly. Sometimes to the detriment of whatever project you might be working on. Of course many people also used marijuana as an escape from responsibility, as a way to avoid facing unpleasant personal realities, as a pleasant way to relieve stress, and as a defense against intimacy in relationships.

We had lots of ideas, and even more opinions, but most of us knew almost nothing about what we were doing.

Just being there was an act of faith and vision, or disgust and desperation, depending on what opportunities or constraints we left behind. We were primarily suburban and urban refugees with little, if any, experience in farm or homestead skills.

We wanted community and we wanted isolation, privacy. While mostly young, white, and middle class we were not necessarily a homogenous group. We were college educated and high school dropouts. We were wealthy scions and unemployed laborers. We were draft dodgers and Vietnam veterans. We were pacifists and we were anti gun control. We were Buddhists, Christians, Pagans, Taoists and agnostics. We were apolitical and we were democratic, socialist, anarchist and libertarian. We believed in new age philosophies and we were cynics and skeptics. We believed in communal lifestyles and we were individualists (often in the same person).

Some of us arrived single and some as couples, but many couples did not last the first winter together. Summers could be idyllic, but winters were rainy, dark, and difficult. Wet or green firewood, frozen waterlines, small cabins, broken cars and washed out roads taxed the endurance, finances, and homesteading skills of us all. The concept of “cabin fever” took on substance as a kind of forced withdrawal from the constant social and technological stimulation of “civilized” behavior patterns. Single parent families and multiple family children were common. We needed each other and we knew it.

No one I know succeeded in being self-sufficient, I rarely hear the phrase today. There were certain technological products few of us managed to do without: roads, cars, chainsaws, propane stoves and plastic water pipe. Our efforts were financed in various ways including: savings, equity from previous homes in the city, low-paying jobs in the local economy, seasonal work, periodic spells of work in more populated areas, parental support, welfare, commodities, and food stamps. Rarely was anyone able to make it off the resources on their land.

We learned carpentry, gardening, auto mechanics, and road maintenance skills. We made jewelry, leather goods, pottery, hand-carved pipes, wooden boxes,

spoons and ladles, macramé, and all manner of crafts. As our homesteads became livable our attention turned to building alternative institutions: a health center, schools and community centers. We learned about forest rhythms of growth and recovery on the cut-over lands we purchased. The scars from recent logging (stumps, skid trails, and silted up streams eating away at their banks), viewed from the perspective of the remaining stands of old growth, were graphic reminders of what had very recently been lost. Often the roads we drove in on were old haul roads and themselves the most vivid scars on the landscape. We felt this loss, and eventually this responsibility, and began the process of recovering what we thought had been.

Ironically, and quite naturally, one of the main flags of our rebellion was the instrument that co-opted our idealism.

At the same time that we began this community building and restoration effort we discovered that marijuana grew quite well in this region. When we learned that pulling the male plants and leaving the females to flower without fertilization created a very tasty bud with a high THC content, the nature of the community's relationship to marijuana began to change. This development was almost inevitable. Cannabis is a hardy plant and even a poor gardener can reap a decent harvest. As the prices for high quality home grown began to rise, the entire socioeconomic foundation of our community changed radically. It was a compelling and hopeful time. The community was potentially funded to set itself up for a sustainable and equitable future.

Access to capital provided by marijuana funded numerous visions, dreams, and ambitions. Community centers and alternative schools found the support and involvement necessary to experiment and thrive. A health center was founded, committed to alternative therapies, preventative medicine, and patient centered care. As the community became more involved in creating institutions we searched for non-hierarchical models of organization, we made decisions by consensus, we paid everyone equally, and we took our organizational memberships seriously.

People committed time and energy to salmon rearing projects and stream restoration efforts. Watershed based organizations began to appear and efforts to protect remaining intact habitats began to bring our concerns to government regulatory and public land management agencies. We learned words like biodiversity and mitigation. We began to learn more and more about place, the forest we had come to live in.

And, we thought we were really cool... funky, righteous, and cool. Being somewhat out of touch with the rest of the world, we, quite naturally, began to believe we were the counter cultural center of the known universe.

We grew older. We became established. Our family relationships, whether traditional, step-parent, or same sex, became more stable and nuclear. Our children grew older and many entered the public school system. We became well acquainted with our property lines. Fences, gates, and no trespassing signs began to appear. We no longer needed each other in the same ways. Some of us became quite well off. Those of us who did not grow weed benefited from the multiplier effect of the general prosperity. We built shops and additions, and bought new vehicles, tools, inverters, satellite dishes, stereos, TV's, VCR's, and all manner of consumer items. I don't mean that we had no restraint, but we sought comfort and the security of some type of means of production. Because we had items of value, rip-offs began to occur. Some of us felt compelled to defend property with guns. **Conscientious tracking and distrust of outsiders was endemic to the area.** There were accidents and people were hurt and killed. In a very real way, **we, as a community, lost our innocence.**

This community was sandbagged by marijuana, the perfect vehicle to deconstruct our idealism. Because marijuana was already a part of our culture we had little inherent resistance to growing it. It was low-tech, natural, and organic and the production of marijuana was consistent with the parameters of our needs for economic support. We could stay where we were, work flexible hours, work outside, stay close to nature, earn a living, and remain apparently separate from mainstream American society. As it turned out the money itself and the access to status, respect, power and material well-being that it represented was enough to actuate and dramatize our own internal inconsistencies. And then intense, annual aerial community surveillance and repression of marijuana cultivation by local and federal law enforcement began.

Obstacles to our holistic eco-community building efforts presented themselves. Our buildings effort were literally

and metaphorically red-tagged by the building inspector. Our stream and fish restoration projects were undermined by upstream logging. Watershed advocacy groups met with powerful opposition from large timber companies who appeared to have undue influence on government regulatory and management agencies. We saw that we could not remain isolated as a community even as we were becoming more distant from each other. We sought funding from government agencies and foundations for restoration efforts, for our health center, and various other non-profit activities. Our institutions, in the process of striving for competitive funding resources and coping with the responsibilities inherent in organizational growth and development, began to assume more traditional hierarchical structures as a part of our efforts to overcome financial and organizational obstacles to the realization of a (we thought) shared vision.

When we had nothing or very little we recognized our common ground, and maintained a commitment to changing our relationships to each other and the environment. As our vision confronted the sources of power in our remote communities: private capital, corporate influence, local government, law enforcement, and state and federal government agencies, and as the stakes grew higher in terms of private property, career development/advancement, and organizational growth and influence, we displayed a tendency to revert to models familiar to our heterogeneous backgrounds. Those of us able to articulate issues in a language understood by business-

man, foundations, scientists, courts, politicians and bureaucrats formulated strategies for moving our agendas forward and rose to leadership positions within our businesses, our organizations and our communities.

Paradoxically and rationally, we began to recreate the business, social, and organizational models we intended to leave behind in order to further the development of our vision of equitable sustainability. Although significantly different from more mainstream efforts, our institutions no longer represented a paradigm shift. These models of our own creation now stand between us and a direct relationship to each other, and to nature, the sources of the sustenance we originally and instinctively sought in coming back to the land.

What stopped us?

We instinctively attempted to escape a downward spiral of participation in, and association with, increasingly pathological social behavior.

We tried to heal ourselves through a commitment to creating a way of living that honored community and environmental integrity. Out of our alienation from and disenchantment with modern industrial society we reached for a connection to what was real and grounded: a direct relationship to a natural environment. Our efforts ran up against two powerful obstacles:

the political, social and economic clout of the dominate interests in our remote area, our own world views and ambitions which we inescapably and unconsciously brought with us.

Although, society as a whole is much more complex, the basic dynamics operating in this experience demonstrates the way that the “benefits” of technological prowess, and rational, dualistic, enlightenment appeal to our personal needs for comfort, security, status and respect. Our inability to develop the personal power to articulate effective, coherent alternatives capable of resisting the combination of temptation, coercion, and entrenched hegemony wielded by elite corporations and government representatives leaves our best intentions vulnerable to co-optation.

The power of external vested interests is a direct expression of our personal participation, which we cannot evade, in the paradigm we want to change. We cannot confront one without confronting the other. When we challenge them both, it is our highest expression of psychological health and wholeness.

- John Rogers
Excerpts from a blog published anonymously in 2006

