

Chapter 4

Community Vision — What It Is, Why You Need It

IT WAS CRISIS TIME at a community I'll call Willow Bend. This small community in the rural Midwest launched itself in the early nineties with no vision or vision statement. That means they had no shared expression of their desired future, no "why we're here" agreement that aligned community members and inspired them to work toward their shared aspirations.

Then the bottom fell out of the market for the wooden children's toys they manufactured as their primary community business. Overnight they lost almost half of their annual income base. Under severe financial strain, the members held long meetings to figure out what to do. Unfortunately different Willow Benders had widely different ideas about their purpose for being a community.

"We're here to show people a low-consumption lifestyle that works financially," says Tom. "We've got to recoup our losses somehow."

"No way!" exclaims Kathleen. "We're just here to enjoy ourselves and not have to work for the man. We'll just eat beans for awhile."

"How can you say that?" asks Andy, incredulous. "We're supposed to radicalize people! We're supposed to show that you don't have to compete

so much and can share things equally and all get along!"

Except they weren't getting along, and were competing mightily themselves, for the underlying basis of Willow Bend's reality. With no common vision, they had nothing to return to — no common touchstone of values, purpose, or aspirations about why their community life mattered, how it fit into the larger world. Because they use consensus decision making, no majority of Willow Benders with the same vision could determine the vision for the whole group. On the surface it looks like they were arguing about money. But they were actually expressing the inherent structural conflict of not all standing on the same ground. And unlike folks in forming-community groups, people with different visions can't simply go their separate ways and start different communities. Willow Bend was their home, and no one could ask anyone else to leave because of their "wrong" vision. As the conflict grew intense several people saw no way out and left the community. Now Willow Bend had two crises — not enough money and not enough people to carry out the tasks of their other community businesses.

I hope this (true) story illustrates why it's so important to establish why we're here as a basis for creating community — and why everyone in the community needs to be on the same page.

Kat Kinkade, cofounder of Twin Oaks community in Virginia, describes a similar circumstance. Once some friends of hers were appalled by what they read in the vision documents of a particular community. But when they met someone from that community whom they liked very much, they decided to visit, and found everyone there to be friendly, warm, and charming. Figuring that actions speak louder than words they decided to ignore the community's declared vision and values and join anyway.

But as Kat's friends lived there over the months, they found themselves increasingly at odds with the community's founders. While everyone was warm and courteous at first, the newcomers' values and goals weren't compatible with the community's, and soon they were embroiled in serious conflict over the direction the community. Eventually the dissension and distrust grew so bitter that Kat's friends left the community — and so did several other members, disillusioned by the bad blood generated by power struggles over vision and values.

"This left the group weak, angry, and exhausted," says Kat. "It was a community tragedy, and not an uncommon one." I've heard this same story more than once about other communities.

So the first major task members of a forming community group is to clarify and write down their vision, and make sure they all agree on it.

Some well-known, long-lived, apparently successful communities don't have and never had a common vision, or at least, never wrote anything down. This can work — but in my opinion it doesn't work well for long. Not having a com-

mon vision can blow a community apart when a major challenge or crisis occurs. Or it can slowly erode everyone's vitality and well-being over the years as each conflict arising from different visions adds to the accumulation of resentment.

"A common vision is neither necessary nor sufficient for starting a new community, since many have gotten by without one, and some that had one failed," observes community activist Tree Bressen. "But a common vision greatly increases the probability of success. If your group is going to all the trouble to start a community, can you afford not to give yourselves the best possible chance?"

Sound a Clear Note

A vision doesn't start out as necessarily "visual," and although written down, it's much more than a collection of words. It begins as a quality of energy that grabs you and doesn't let go. It's like a beam of energy leading your group from where you are to where you want to go.

Your vision must be articulated in a way that others can understand easily. It must be simple, clear, and authentic. As Sirius cofounders Corrine McLaughlin and Gordon Davidson say, it must "sound a clear note on inner levels," so it will attract others who resonate with that note.

"It's like a tuning fork against which you measure your resonance," says Adam Wolpert, cofounder of Sowing Circle/Occidental Arts & Ecology Center. "It shows how well you're doing in the theory-practice gap. It helps you aim high."

Once it's written down, a well-crafted vision:

- Describes the shared future you want to create.
- Reveals and announces your group's core values.

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- Expresses something each of you can identify with.
- Helps unify your effort.
- Gives you a reference point to return to during confusion or disagreement.
- Keeps your group inspired.
- Draws out the commitment of the people in your group.

"By describing what we want to have happen," says Adam Wolpert, "it's like an insurance policy for the future, for what we *don't* want to have happen."

Elements of a Community's Vision

The terms "mission," "purpose," "values," "goals," "objectives," "aspirations," "interests," and "strategy" are often associated with a community's vision. These words mean different things to different communities, as you'll see in the sample vision documents. Here's how I use these terms.

Vision. This is the shared future you want to create, your shared image of what's possible, the thing that motivates your actions to create community. It's often expressed as the "who," the "what" and the "why" of your endeavor. Ideally it's described in the present tense, as if it were happening now.

Mission, Purpose. Your group's mission or purpose expresses your vision in concrete, physical terms. It's what you'll be physically doing as well as experiencing as you manifest your shared image of what's possible. To understand the difference between "vision" and "mission," consider a community with the vision: "A world where everyone has adequate, healthy shelter." Its mission, to express this vision physically, could be: "To build a model demonstration village using

low-cost natural building materials, and through outreach programs teach our building methods, particularly in Third-world countries."

Values. Your group's vision arises out of its shared values, the characteristics and processes you deem worthy. Values are expressed by how you behave now, and how you intend to behave, on a daily basis, as you live in community. In the above example, the community might hold values of sustainability, fairness, kindness, generosity, service, accessibility, thrift, and conservation of resources.

Interests. This includes experiences, states of being, or physical things people may be interested in relative to your future community. Interests usually arise from values and can be expressed as goals. Many of you may be interested in composting, perhaps because you value sustainability, and express that as a goal to build compost for your future community garden.

Goals, Objectives. Goals or objectives are milestones you commit yourselves to accomplish, but short-term, often in a few months or a year. Your community's goals are measurable: you know when you've accomplished them. In the above example, the group might want to finish building their model village in three years, and in the following year begin their outreach program to countries in Central America.

Aspirations. These are strong desires or ambitions for inspired, elevated goals, arising from values. Your community may have a goal to construct a meeting hall for 100 people in two years, and, because you value beauty and sacred space, your aspiration is to build a meeting hall that will be beautiful, calming, and uplifting.

Strategy. Your strategy affirms a series of goals in a particular time-frame. If your vision expresses the "who," "what," and "why" of your community, your strategy encompasses the "how," "where," and "when." It usually involves budgets and cash-flow projections and time lines. Altering your vision will completely change the future you're creating, but altering your strategy only changes how you end up getting there. In the above example, the group's strategy for achieving their goals might be to raise \$500,000 and share low-cost building methods in the first two years by offering public workshops and seeking grants from private donors and public foundations.

As we'll see in the next chapter, a community's vision arises in part from the resonance of its individual members' combined values, interests, aspirations, and goals.

Nature's Spirit, an aspiring spiritual community in South Carolina, expressed the difference between their vision (their dream), mission (their physical activities), and goals (their specific, measurable actions) this way:

Vision: A world that values the diversity of all life and provides for its sustainability by living in harmony with nature and spirit.

Mission: To create a community in which we work to expand our consciousness by living in the question: How does one live sustainably in harmony with nature and spirit? This will enable us to be of service, share our experiences, and link with similar local and global efforts.

Goals:

- Procure and care for a commons — a land trust that will ecologically support a small village of 50+ people.

- Build a self-sustaining infrastructure to support our basic needs.
- Create homes, gathering places and guest facilities using sustainable building methods and energy sources.
- Maintain an organic stewardship of the land that will provide for our own and others' food needs while giving back to the Earth.
- Create and nurture a spiritual center as the core of our community.
- Create an interdependent social system.
- Initiate necessary enterprises to assure economic viability with minimal dependence on institutional structures and the market system.
- Establish educational, leadership, internship, and exchange programs that will enable us to be of service to others, communicate and share our experiences, and link with similar local and global efforts.

Your Vision Documents and Vision Statement

Some communities have formal vision documents that describe in inspirational terms the shared future they hope to create together. Other groups may have various documents that give a sense of their vision, often conveyed through a vision statement, possibly a brief description of their purpose or mission, inspirational or factual paragraphs about their community and what they hope for it, and sometimes lists of shared values and goals. These can appear in internal agreements and covenants or formal documents associated with the legal entity through which the community owns land (corporate bylaws, partnership agreements, or operating agreements), and in promo-

tional literature and information.

Your vision statement — a concrete plan like a note to the form Center in what we accomplish.

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tional literature such as website text, brochures, and information packets for prospective members.

Your community's vision is not the same thing as its *vision statement*, although a vision statement serves some of the same functions. The vision statement is your vision articulated — a condensed version in a few sentences. "It's like a notice posted at the gate to all who would like to enter," says Stephen Brown, cofounder of the former Shenoa Retreat and Conference Center in California. "It says, in effect, '*This is what we are about; this is what we hope to accomplish; this is what guides us.*'"

Shenoa Retreat and Learning Center: We have joined together to create a center for renewal, education, and service, dedicated to the positive transformation of our world.

Harmony Village Cohousing: We are creating a cooperative neighborhood of diverse individuals sharing human resources within an ecologically responsible community setting.

Meadowdance Community: We are an egalitarian, child-centered community that welcomes human diversity, ecological sensibility, mutual learning, and joy.

Earthaven Ecovillage (from "ReMembership Covenant"): (We are) an evolving village-scale community dedicated to caring for people and the Earth by learning, practicing and demonstrating the skills for creating holistic sustainable culture, in recognition and celebration of the Oneness of all life.

A well-crafted vision statement:

- Offers a clear, concise, compelling expression of your group's vision and mission

(and sometimes, its goals).

- Is short, ideally about 20-40 words.
- Embodies the same quality of energy as your vision.
- Helps focus your group's energy like a lens.
- Offers a shorthand reminder of why you're forming community.
- Helps awaken your vision as a energetic presence.
- Is easily memorized, and ideally each of you can recite it.
- Communicates your group's core purpose to others quickly: "*This is what we're about.*"
- Allows your group to be specific about what it is — and is not.
- Is what potential new members want to see first.

And, like your community vision itself, the vision statement:

- Is something every member can identify with.
- Helps unify your effort.
- Keeps your group inspired.
- Reveals and announces your core values.
- Gives you a reference point to return to during confusion or disagreement.

Like the examples above, your vision statement should be fairly clear and unambiguous. There seems to be a high correlation between clear, specific, and grounded vision statements and communities that actually get built — and between flowery, vague, or downright pretentious vision statements and communities that never get off the ground.

(Note: Some of the communities from which I excerpted sample vision statements, pg. 39, use the terms "vision statement" and "mission statement" differently than I've just described. But you'll get the gist.)

Do It First

Identify and articulate your vision first, *before* buying property together. If not, you could end up like one eco-spiritual community in the

Northeast. Six years after moving to their land, and after finishing a major building project, they began having differences about what their next steps should be. They couldn't understand why their conflict was so intense. Why were they so at odds with each other? What was wrong with those other people? Finally the group called in a group process consultant who asked each member to fill out a questionnaire about what they valued and aspired to in their community. The

EXCERPT FROM VISION DOCUMENTS, DANCING RABBIT ECOVILLAGE

Our Mission: To create a society, the size of a small town or village, made up of individuals and communities of various sizes and social structures, which allows and encourages its members to live sustainably. ("Sustainably" means in such a manner that, within the defined area, no resources are consumed faster than their natural replenishment, and the enclosed system can continue indefinitely without degradation of its internal resource base or the standard of living of the people and the rest of the ecosystem within it, and without contributing to the non-sustainability of ecosystems outside.)

We encourage this sustainable society to grow to have the size and recognition necessary to have an influence on the global community by example, education, and research.

While Dancing Rabbit is still a small community in the pioneering stage, we call ourselves an ecovillage because our vision is of something much more than what we currently are.

We intend to grow to be a small locally self-reliant town of 500 to 1000 residents, committed to radical environmental sustainability. We will be housed in a variety of living arrangements, eat a variety of foods, and work on varied projects. It will be a society flexible enough to include egalitarian communities, cohousing, and individual households. But while we may have different approaches to some issues, the common desire for environmental sustainability will underlie all key decisions at Dancing Rabbit.

Although Dancing Rabbit will strive for self-sufficiency and economic independence, we will not be sequestered from mainstream America. Rather, outreach and education are integral to our goals. We will vigorously promote ourselves as a viable example of sustainable living and spread our ideas and discoveries through visitor programs, academic and other publications, speaking engagements, and the like.

(See Appendix 1 for more sample vision documents.)

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questionnaire revealed that community members lived in either one of two subtle but different paradigms of reality, expressed by the following two vision statements:

1. We are an educational organization and model demonstration site based on ecological principles. We live as a residential community in order to facilitate our work hosting classes and workshops.
2. We are a community of supportive friends valuing an ecologically sound, sustainable lifestyle, and to help others, we offer classes and workshops in these topics.

Some community members believed the first was the community's reason for being, others believed the second — and until that time *no one knew the other reality existed*. It was a stunning revelation. Different people had different visions, which they incorrectly assumed everyone shared. Although by this time people were arguing most of the time, their core problem wasn't interpersonal conflict. Their problem was structural — *built into* the system. Theirs was definitely a "time-bomb" kind of conflict, with members unable to see it's not that "John's being unreasonable" or "Sue's irresponsible again," but that John and Sue were each operating from a different assumption about why the community was there in the first place. And what should they do with such structural conflict? Which people should stay in the community and which had the "wrong" vision and should move out?

Having a clear, grounded, inspired vision and vision statement does not in itself ensure a com-

munity's success. I knew two forming communities with beautiful vision statements that broke up. One halted because its members were young parents with too many responsibilities to spend the time that creating a community requires. The other was geographically challenged — its members were aligned in vision, but members had strong loyalties to two different locations. Some forming community groups with well-aligned visions have broken up for other reasons, such as losing their chosen property to a competing buyer with more money. And some new communities with great visions that have already moved to their property and begun building, have sometimes been brought down by conflicts with neighbors, zoning regulations that restricted their expansion, or the departure of too many members. Although it doesn't solve everything, at least an inspired common vision gives a challenged community a central core to rally around during challenges like these, and encourages them to have the heart to persevere.

Other structural-conflict issues can break up communities as well — coming to grief over how decisions should be made, or what their agreements were, or through exhausting interpersonal conflict. Nevertheless, and I can't emphasize this strongly enough — for the best chance of success, make creating your vision and vision statement the *first* thing you do.



How do you do this? We'll explore that next.

Chapter 5

Creating Vision Documents

THE PROCESS OF COMMUNITY visioning can be exciting and challenging. It involves deeply held values, strong interests, and high aspirations. It brings up both known and hidden expectations and assumptions.

The members of your group may hold many shared values and some differing values, and similar as well as wildly different ideas and expectations. Some of these may be realistic, others not. Your task is to unearth, sift, and refine these ideas and expectations until you come up with a grounded yet inspiring description of your shared community future.

This generally involves two steps:

1. **Exploring the territory.** You explore your dreams, hopes, and expectations for community in a series of visioning sessions, writing down highlights of what you learn, ideally on large sheets of easel paper. The sessions can include wide-ranging discussions, deep personal sharing, and visioning exercises. It's best if these sessions are long — half-day, day-long, or weekend meetings.
2. **Writing it down.** A smaller task force or committee uses this material to draft a preliminary vision description and vision statement. The whole group critiques the work,

makes suggestions for improvement, and sends it back to the small group for revision. The back-and-forth process between the task force and whole group can occur as many times as needed until it's done. The larger or the more diverse your group, the longer this process may take.

Some groups finish within a few weeks or months, but only if they're relatively small, their members know each other well, or they're fairly homogeneous in interests and values. But if your group is large, your members diverse, or your plans ambitious, it can take more than a year. The six cofounders of Shenoa Retreat and Conference Center spent a year and a half identifying and crafting their vision documents. The 15 to 20 members of Earthaven's original group spent two years.

Some community veterans say it's better if the group is relatively small, for example between three to five people, or at least no more than ten. Visioning with a smaller number of people helps reduce the likelihood that the group will try to contort itself this way and that in order to include the diverse visions often found in a larger group.

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strong agreement about the purpose of the community, and allow it to unfold organically from that strong and firm nucleus or seed, than it is to start with 20 people who have no clear agreement or purpose, and then try to discover one," advise Robert and Dianne Gilman in their book *Ecovillages and Sustainable Communities*.

However, regardless of the size of your group, everyone needs to contribute to the vision. It doesn't work if especially influential people articulate the vision and everyone else just goes along with it. When people don't "vote" for the vision at the outset by helping create it, they end up "voting" for it later, through their behavior. Those aligned with the vision will vote "Yes" by behaving consistently with it; those who were never really aligned may vote "No" on the vision by balking at or unconsciously sabotaging certain processes or tasks later. If everyone in the group participates in the visioning process and buys into it at the beginning, the community functions as a more harmonious, cohesive whole later on.

More Than One Vision?

You may not be able to resolve vision differences easily. Let's say you discover that most people in your group want a rural self-reliant homestead at least an hour's drive from the city, but others want a country place that's no more than 30 minutes from their city jobs. Among both the hour-away and job-commuter groups, some definitely want open, honest feedback but others want none of that "touchy-feely stuff." Some of the for-process as well as anti-process people want a homeschooling co-op; others don't. With diversity like this, you're probably not destined to end up in the same community. But your visioning process wouldn't be wasted. It could help bring clarity to what each of you does and does not want in a community — a helpful first step.

A scenario like this could have several outcomes:

1. The vision of the original group members remains constant and the people who resonate with it remain involved. Those who don't, leave the group.
2. Some people leave your group, disappointed that more people didn't share their vision. New people join your group, attracted by the vision articulated by the largest number of remaining group members, or by the most influential members.
3. Your group disbands. Too many people wanted too many different things.
4. Your group splits into two or more smaller groups.

What's typical? Smaller groups of long-time friends, especially those who have already worked together on visionary, spiritually oriented, or activist projects tend to align to a common vision. Larger groups, especially those whose participants don't know each other well (such as people responding to public announcements about forming a community), tend to experience high attrition and/or splinter into smaller groups. This is fine. One or more of the smaller groups may go on to form a community.

If a group is small and based primarily on deep connections or shared friendships, most members will tend to stay in the group and alter any expression of community vision to fit everyone's interests and desires. The founders of Sowing Circle/OAEC in northern California were long-time friends and environmental activists, some of whom had been housemates on and off for 15 years. They wanted a community that would operate an educational center and demonstration site based on ecological principles. One artist member supported this vision,

yet wanted to continue painting and teaching painting. So when the community established its non-profit center, they included arts and called it the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, offering workshops on landscape painting along with those on organic gardening and permaculture design.

This kind of coalescing of interests usually works best if a founding group is fairly small. Most of the seven founders of Abundant Dawn community in rural Virginia had previously lived in large income-sharing communes. Some wanted an income-sharing community; others wanted independent finances. Since friendship and connection was their major draw, they formed smaller subcommunity "pods" within Abundant Dawn. Founders favoring income-sharing became the Tekiah pod, those favoring independent incomes became the Dayspring Circle pod, and they all still got to live in community together.

However, if a forming community is not based on existing friendships but on an idea that it would be nice to live in community, then the original founders will probably hold to their particular visions and others will drop out, especially if the initial forming group is large, or if its members were attracted through flyers or other public means. Such a group tends to have multiple values, aspirations, and expectations, making the visioning process more complex. Some communities, particularly cohousing communities, begin with this challenge.

When your group is diverse, do you adopt a vision that will cause some people to stay and others to leave, or do you try to mold the vision to meet everyone's different values and interests?

Don't try to create a one-size-fits-all vision. "All too often there's the temptation to accommodate or shape the vision to suit the needs of

each person, either because the group needs to recruit new members or because they have a misguided sense of wanting to take care of everyone or be 'all things to all people,'" says Stephen Brown. "To be successful, a forming community, like a business, needs to hold a relatively narrow focus and sharply defined objectives. If the community tries to do too much, by attempting to meet the needs of all who come along, it will spread itself too thin and either not get off the ground or run out of steam fairly early on. The vision therefore also defines what the project does not intend to accomplish. If your vision is too broad or comprehensive, and tries to please all of the people all of the time, it will fall of its own awkward expansiveness, trying to be in too many places at once."

How do you handle it if, after weeks or months of visioning sessions, you discover you are really two potential communities? What if many people leave, or the group splits in two? This can feel chaotic and disorienting — and newly bonded group members or long-time friends can feel loss knowing their friends won't be joining them in the same community future. If this happens it's perfectly OK; it's part of the process.

"A key challenge for the group at this time is to help everyone discover his or her own vision, and, in so doing, allow everyone to see which visions are sufficiently aligned to serve as the basis for the group vision and which visions need to find expression elsewhere," observe Diane and Robert Gilman in *Eco-Villages and Sustainable Communities*. "It is important to avoid the expectation that every initial member of the group should continue with the group, since for some that could mean either suppressing their own vision or attempting to force a vision on others that the others do not truly share. Honor each

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Finding out that you have multiple directions and diverse ideas, and that you may in fact be two different potential communities is not a sign of failure but a step along the way. Even with the best of intentions, if your group discovers that you're not all on the same page, you can still wish each other well and form two communities. (And you don't have to lose each other as friends.)

A Sacred Time

Your visioning process is one of the single most important tasks you'll undertake as a forming community. This is where you'll speak from the heart about what really matters to you. It's a sacred time. Your voices may become suddenly soft, or tight with emotion. You may get tears in your eyes. You'll be unearthing — birthing — something here. Listen for that deep sense of purpose, that group entity that wants to be born. And listen equally, for what seems "off," or unrealistic, or something only personal growth or therapy could provide. This is the time to ask yourselves: "Are these expectations realistic? Do they make sense?"

Visioning seems to involve both the process of exploring and that of revealing, much like Michelangelo finding the sculpture hidden within the marble. Something new emerges, sparked by the potent brew of individual values, ideals, aspirations, and expectations.

If you haven't done so already, it's important to decide now who is and is not a committed, decision-making member of your group. You may have some less committed members, people who attend meetings only occasionally or who have only recently joined, or people who feel

more tentative about the idea of community or about your group specifically. You may want to consider asking these people not to participate in the visioning process. Or, you might want to include them in the processes but (with everyone's knowledge and consent ahead of time) give less weight to their interests and suggestions than you do those of the more committed members. This can be a difficult issue to bring up for discussion, as some people believe "it's not community" if you consider excluding or limiting anyone's participation. But consider it practically. If six of you meet regularly and have similar interests, and a seventh person comes occasionally, or is present for some but not all of your meetings, or has substantially different ideas about community than the rest of you, should that person's values and desires be part of your shared community future? Maybe they should, and maybe not, but I believe you'll be better off discussing and deciding this with everyone involved ahead of time.

"That's Not Community!" — Hidden Expectations and Structural Conflict

Most people drawn to community have expectations or assumptions about what "community" means. They believe they know why they want to live in community, and what they'll expect to find there. Some expectations or assumptions focus on activities — we'll share some resources, we'll share some meals, we'll cooperate on decisions. Others arise from painful experiences from the past and focus on emotional states the person hopes to feel in community — connection, inclusion, acceptance. Past emotional pain can motivate people toward community because at some level they believe community will provide what's missing from their lives. "Missing" factors that propel people toward community

can include affection, acceptance, inclusion, and emotional safety. This can involve conscious loss and known expectations — “It’s going to be like a warm and loving family” — as well as unmet pain and unconscious expectations (“...and I will be totally loved and accepted, finally!”).

Hidden expectations about community usually aren’t realistic. They often take on a golden, nostalgic quality, like looking back on a paradise lost. Here’s what one member of a forming community wrote about her personal vision of community:

Like a warm embrace, a gathering of friends, laughter on sunny days, caring and offering support in times of need, like coming home. Warm, homey, spiritually rooted, peaceful, joyous, celebratory, connected, close, respectful, emotionally honest, trusting. Home!

There is absolutely nothing wrong with this vision. It’s probably what we all want. The question is — can we expect community to provide it?

“The fantasy of creating an ‘ideal’ community tends to transform a simple discussion into a magical blend of fact and fiction,” writes Zev Paiss in *Cohousing* magazine. “Visions of community are fertile grounds for the expression and growth of long-suppressed dreams. And the opportunity to express these feelings can have an urgent quality in the early discussion stages.”

Suppressed pain and hidden expectations or assumptions about community can be a prime source of structural conflict “time bombs” that erupt weeks, months, or years later. This happens for two reasons.

First, living in community cannot erase buried emotional pain. When people find that after living in community they’re still yearning for something valuable and elusive (although they may not know what it is), they tend to feel angry

and disappointed. Not knowing the source of their discomfort, they tend to blame the community, or other members, for it.

Second, hidden expectations about community differ widely from one group member to another. This comes up when we each think we’re behaving in good community fashion but someone else is aghast at how our behavior “betrays” community ideals. Someone will express frustration, even outrage, when we’ve just breached an invisible rule in that person’s own personal paradigm. “How can you say that? That’s not community!” Or, “How could you do such a thing? That’s not community!”

The community visioning process can offer your group an excellent opportunity to flush hidden expectations to the surface and examine them rationally.

“Don’t go into all this psychology stuff,” advised one experienced community friend. “It sounds like therapy talk. Community isn’t about psychology. It’s about neighbors learning a high level of functioning together so they can make decisions and get the work done.”

I disagree. Community *does* involve psychology stuff — which, in my opinion, is why roughly 90 percent of new communities fail. Forming a community is deeply psychological. Emotional pain and hidden expectations exert a powerful pull on people, and community founders are no exception. Put a group of people in a community visioning session, and you have dozens of different needs and expectations, known and unknown, ricocheting invisibly around the room.

I bring this up so your group can use the visioning process to identify, if possible, any hidden expectations and bring them in to the light of day. Knowing what everyone wants (and *really* wants), will help your group see where you may be on the same page and where you may not be.

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And the best time to examine this is now, in your visioning meetings, before you go out and buy land together. You don't want to find wildly differing pain-driven expectations later, when everyone's financial investment, homes, and community self-image are on the line. The more time you spend on this issue now, the less you'll spend later. The exercises below can help your group with the visioning process. See Exercise 7 for help with accessing hidden expectations.

Exploring the Territory

The following exercises are offered to help trigger insights and stimulate the process of sharing, discussing, unearthing, and revealing the components of your community vision. They're offered as a smorgasbord of options: you may be inspired to choose some or all of them, modify them, use exercises from other sources, or make up your own.

As mentioned earlier, this may take several half-day or day-long sessions over several weeks. I suggest meeting in a cozy room with enough tea, snacks, pillows, and childcare to be comfortable and relaxed for many hours. Choose a facilitator, or arrange for an outside facilitator. To remind you of your goal, make the following poster on a large sheet of easel paper and hang it where everyone can see it.

OUR COMMUNITY VISION

- Shared future we want to create
 - Reveals & announces our core values
 - Each of us can identify with it
 - Helps unify our effort
 - Reference point we can return to
 - Keeps us all inspired
-

The group will need lined paper for each person (legal pads work well), pens or pencils, pads of extra-large (4" x 6") yellow sticky notes, both red and green paper stick-on dots, sheets of easel paper and blue masking tape (it doesn't pull paint off walls), and large sheets of easel paper covering roughly a 4' x 8' area of wall space, or a large whiteboard.

Exercise #1: Individual Values, Group Values

The first exercise is designed to help people become more aware of what they may want to experience in community living.

Depending on the size of the group, it can take from one long day and evening, to a week-end (or two different day-long sessions). The exercise works in a large home or facility where people can go off by themselves and concentrate.

The exercise begins by writing five different two- or three-page recollections of experiences in which you felt especially fulfilled in a community-like setting or a shared group activity. These settings can include:

- your family
- summer camp, as a child or as a camp counselor
- hiking or camping trips with friends
- a college dorm, fraternity or sorority, or student co-op
- a shared group household or intentional community
- an activist or service project, a shared work task
- a therapy group, 12-step group, ritual group, or men's or women's group
- a theatrical or musical presentation

- a team sports activity or shared athletic event
- your workplace
- the military

You're looking for times when you felt profoundly happy with other people, as if you were blessed to be there, as if you had "come home" — when you not only enjoyed the experience, but felt connected and bonded with the other people present.

If you can only think of positive times that weren't all that profound, that's fine. Just write about some experiences you enjoyed with others. If you can't think of five different times, that's OK too. Just write as many as you can.

While writing these stories focus mostly on what you felt and thought during these experiences, rather than going into detail about what happened.

This is focused work that requires concentration. Some people can do it anywhere; others will need privacy and quiet. Make sure people get the quiet they need. If some people finish before others, ask them to go elsewhere if they want to talk with others so they won't disturb those still working. Writing five little stories can take several hours. Take breaks as needed, and when everyone has finished, take a break.

Each person will end up with an overview of activities they especially like to do and states of being they especially like to feel in a community-like setting.

Next, form into groups of three. One person at a time reads their stories and the other two listen, taking notes if they like, and reflect back to the speaker what the stories tell them about that person's values, beliefs, and aspirations. The first person writes these insights down, adding any more that come up.

After everyone has had a turn, each person selects five or six of the values, beliefs, or aspirations that are most personally significant, and writes the essence of each in a phrase or short sentence (not in a single word) on large yellow sticky notes.

Each person reads out their phrases and hands them to the facilitator, who sticks them on the wall of easel paper or a large whiteboard. The group can ask clarifying questions but doesn't otherwise comment on the statements, or agree or disagree with them.

After everyone has finished, the whole group, or a few people from the group, clusters the sticky notes into whatever natural categories they seem to fall into. These may include "interpersonal relations," "shared meals," "governance and decision-making," "celebration," "shared work," "children," "ecological values," "spiritual values," and so on.

The facilitator gives each person half the number of stick-on red dots as there are people doing the exercise (e.g., three dots if you are six people; five if you are ten, etc.). Each person places a red dot next to the clusters that are most important to him or her personally in a future community.

Now the facilitator gives each person the same number of green stick-on dots as there are people in the room (in other words, twice the number of red dots). Within the clusters, each person places a green dot next to the individual phrases that are most important to him or her personally.

Sit back and look at where the dots are. This is an indication of what's most important to you as individuals and as a group, and how aligned or divergent your values and interests may be.

Talk about what you see. Do most of you share the same values and interests?

(To keep this work for the writing-it-down phase of your visioning process, ask someone to copy the clusters, phrases, and red and green dot indicators onto one or more sheets of easel paper you can hang in the room.)

Exercise #2: Individual Values, Group Values

Here is a shorter and simpler exercise designed to get at the same kind of information, although it's far less rich and revealing than the first exercise.

Pass out five or six extra-large yellow sticky notes to each person. Everyone answers the questions, "What values do you hold personally for community?" and "What values do you think we share in common?" on the sticky notes, with one answer per note. It works best if this is done silently. At the end of five minutes, everyone places their sticky notes on the wall of easel paper or a large whiteboard. As in the above exercise, the whole group or a few people cluster the sticky notes into categories of similar values.

Don't be concerned if people don't just write values, but also write interests or ideals. The exercise will still give you an idea of how aligned you may be, individually and as a group.

Hand out the same proportions of red and green sticky dots as in the above exercise, and ask each person to put red dots on the clusters and green dots on the individual sticky notes that express the values they hold most dearly.

As in the above exercise, sit back and look at where the dots are. (And to keep this work for the future, ask someone to copy it down on one or more sheets of easel paper you can hang up.)

Exercise #3: Brainstorming

This exercise is similar to the first two. Brainstorming offers a quick overview of your whole group's many interests, values, and ideals.

In this process you each call out words or phrases that embody what you're seeking in community. The facilitator and a second person write the words and phrases down on the large yellow sticky notes, which they stick onto the wall space covered with easel paper or a whiteboard. As you call out your words and phrases, don't hold back. Say anything and everything that comes to mind. Don't criticize or comment on anyone else's offerings — this is a time to let ideas pop up like popcorn, without censoring.

Cluster the post-its into categories, and place your red and green stick-on dots, as above.

Look at the clusters and dots, and talk about what this shows you about yourselves. (And have someone copy it onto one or more easel papers you can hang up, as above.)

Brainstorming is like a snapshot of your group at a given point in time. If you do this exercise in the early stages of the visioning process you'll get a quick overview of what the group generally wants at that time. If you do it again towards the end of the visioning sessions, you may get different results.

Exercise #4: Non-negotiables

Each of you lists on a piece of paper those things, situations, and systems that *must* be or *must not* be present before you will seriously consider going forward with the community. Then everyone reads their lists and a scribe writes them on a large sheet of easel paper for everyone to see. This exercise will show you places where various individuals in the group may seem incompatible, but don't worry; this is just a beginning step. "The exercise is amazingly revealing, because it forces us to examine what is really important to us," says cohousing consultant Zev Paiss. I recommend doing this exercise at least twice, once in the middle of your visioning sessions and

again at the end (which may be weeks later), because what people consider "non-negotiables" can change so much over the course of visioning work.

"Despite the apparent solidity of the term 'non-negotiable,'" notes Zev, "as we learn about our personal priorities and experience working with others to develop a collective vision, those items most important to us inevitably change."

Exercise #5: Where do we Draw the Line?

Process consultant Rob Sandelin uses this exercise to help groups disagreeing over different choices or strategies. It shows that a group can agree on a common value, but not agree on the lengths to which each person would go to express that value.

Let's say everyone in your group assumes you're all on the same page about what you mean by "ecological living." But some of you want the community to grow most of its own organic food and everyone eat vegetarian, and others want each household to make its own decisions about this, and offer a choice of omnivore or vegetarian food at common meals.

On a large sheet of easel paper that everyone can see, create a list, and, in increasing order of effort, time, or "strictness," outline the different actions people can take to express the value or principle you're discussing. Items at the top of a list on "ecological values," for example, might include: "Buy organic produce," "Recycle trash," and "Compost kitchen scraps." Farther down you'd find actions that take more effort or commitment, such as: "Eat vegetarian," or "Flush the toilet rarely." The bottom, listing the most "radical" actions, might say "Use only off-grid power," "Build only with recycled lumber," and "Don't use a car unless you're car-pooling."

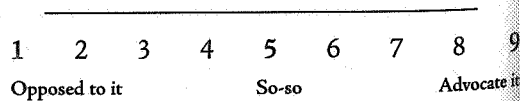
When your list is complete, give everyone as many red dots each as the number of items on the list, and ask each person to put dots by the actions they are personally willing to actually do in their daily lives (not actions that they simply support theoretically). Some will have dots left over, since probably everyone won't be willing to do everything on the list.

This exercise presumes that people aren't simply "for" or "against" various values but differ in the matter of degree, which show up in what they are willing to actually do. It can help your group see, immediately and visually, where you fall as individuals in terms of specific actions you will or will not take regarding seemingly shared values. Doing this process with a variety of these shared values — "honesty," "love of nature," "spirituality," and so on — can help you see whether most of you, in fact, are aligned in vision, and if any of you differ radically. (Better to find this out now.)

Exercise #6: The Public/Private Scale

This exercise is used by Rob Sandelin to help groups get a sense of how strongly their members feel about a sensitive issue that some members may not want to speak about openly. Let's say you're discussing an aspect of your future community life that seems to bring up discomfort and apprehension, but no one is coming out and saying what's bothering them. If you suspect that some people do or don't want something but don't want to say so publicly, you can use this exercise.

On a sheet of easel pad paper, write a horizontal line numbered from one to nine, with the numbers one, five, and nine larger than the others. Below is an example of what your paper will look like:



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Give everyone a blank slip of paper and ask them to write the number that corresponds to their level of support for the principle, activity, or situation you've been talking about. A nine means you wholeheartedly support it; a one means you're adamantly opposed to it; a five means you could go either way. The other numbers are graduations of support or lack of support for the subject. Collect the slips of paper and make check marks at every number the people have written. You may have one mark at 9, three marks at 3, and three at 2, for example. Now you'll have an immediate and visual way to see how the group as a whole really feels about the subject. It can be a real eye-opener. You may find that only one or two people strongly support something, and most others don't care or actively oppose it. Depending on what your scale tells you, there may be no need to discuss the subject further. Without having to embarrass anyone publicly, you now have a realistic indicator of the spread of opinion in your group about a particular value or ideal.

"This technique is a quick and powerful way for an individual to see where they fit in with the rest of the group," says Rob. "If the scale shows everybody is at the 7-9 range and I am the only person that is at a 2, that is very valuable to me to know. Conversely, it is very helpful for the group to know that one of its members is not aligned with everybody else."

Exercise #7: Hidden Expectations

This exercise, derived from art therapy, operates on the principal that you can bypass your thinking process and access your unconscious mind. It involves answering questions, but this time, answer them as fast as you can with your pen or pencil in your non-dominant hand. (If you're right-handed, use your left hand; if you're left-handed, use your right.)

Writing as fast as possible with the non-dominant hand is what makes the exercise work. Your writing (or printing, if that's what comes out) will tend to be large and scrawling, even primitive. It may reveal expectations about community that you know very well, as well as expectations that may be important to you but about which you may be barely aware. You may have strong feelings as you write.

Prepare the questions in advance, in questionnaire form, with a copy for each person. Leave at least half a page of blank space for each answer. It should take about eight double-sided pages.

The exercise takes about 20-30 minutes, and seems to work best when everyone in the room does it at the same time. The exercise doesn't necessarily trigger deep insights in everyone, and it doesn't do it every single time. But it can offer a powerful source of insight for some.

You don't have to share your answers with anyone, so be as candid and uninhibited as you like. Don't *think* when you're writing. Just write as fast as you can and let your non-dominant hand do the work.

1. What do you want more than anything? For yourself.
2. What do you want more than anything? For the world.
3. What do you want more than anything? For your children.
4. What do other people do that hurts you?
5. What do you fear?
6. What makes you mad?
7. What makes you cry?
8. If you could go back in your childhood and change your mother (or primary female caretaker), what would you change?
9. If you could go back in your childhood and

- change your father (or primary male caretaker), what would you change?
10. What didn't you get as a child?
 11. If you could make something in your childhood better, what would it be?
 12. If you could make something in your childhood go away, what would it be?
 13. What do you need to feel safe?
 14. What do you need to feel loved?
 15. What do you need to feel happy?
 16. What kind of community do you want?

When everyone is finished, take a break. When you return, gather in groups of three and invite anyone who wishes to share what they learned to do so within the small groups. Speaking is optional. Some people will speak, some won't; hearing some people describe their insights can motivate others to share their own.

When each small group is finished, return to your whole group, and again invite people to share what they've learned. Don't write anything down at this point, but just listen, and then talk about any expectations — known or hidden — that anyone may want to talk about. This process can be very revealing, and it can also help you feel closer and more bonded as a group.

The point of this exercise, however, is not necessarily for you to *share* any conscious and hidden expectations with the group, but simply to *uncover* them. It's an opportunity to look them in the face, so to speak, and ask whether or not they are realistic, or if they serve you. If you discover that you expect companionship and playfulness in community, for example, which might be a fairly conscious expectation arising from growing up in group of active brothers and sisters, that's fine. This seems like an expectation that serves you: being more aware of this expectation can motivate you to consciously create

congenial, playful aspects of your community's social life.

However, discovering that you might have hidden expectations that in community you'll always be included and never be left out, or that you'll always be fully accepted and never criticized, or that you'll always be totally emotionally safe and never experience conflict — watch out. Expectations like these can be time bombs. You can take the space now to defuse them by naming them, sharing them (if you wish), examining them more closely, asking yourself if they seem realistic, and becoming willing to laugh about them and let go of them.

If everyone in your group is doing this, it can have a profound effect on your shared vision for community, which can be considerably more realistic and grounded than it might otherwise have been. Congratulations!

Sharing from the Heart

You can certainly combine elements from these various exercises and make up your own. You can repeat "Non-negotiables" and "Brainstorming" as many times as you like, to see how the group's ideas are shifting or coalescing. You can bring in "Public/Private Scale" and "Where Do We Draw the Line?" anytime to get a sense of how everyone in the group feels about something, not just the most outspoken ones. The whole idea is to stimulate awareness of what you each really want, and get a sense of your group's shared or differing components of vision. Ideally, the ideas from previous discussions and exercises will be captured on large sheets of easel paper on the walls.

Really get into this with each other, as you share what you aspire to, deeply yearn for, expect, hope, and fear about living in community. These conversations can be tense, they can be deep. And they're often funny. It's a good time for

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a sense of humor, as you might find out that the two most inspired "burning souls" in your group have opposite hidden expectations. Consider these revelations to be part of the process.

At this stage you're not creating strategy — how you'll get there — but simply working at identifying and visualizing the various aspects of your shared future. Have a note-taker write down the main points of your discussions, type them up, and save them for the more comprehensive writing process to come.

You may discover aspects of your future community that some of you want and some of you are indifferent about or don't want. You can negotiate, trying to meet everyone's interests while not limiting anyone's opportunities. If that isn't possible, you can see if some people are willing to let go of some part of their personal desires so the group may gain alignment on a wider part of the vision. You may want our community to raise horses because you love them; for example, and I may want us to raise fields of wheat because I secretly fear famine. Can either of us let go of these personal desires so we can all live in our rural, self-reliant homestead? You may want us to operate a coffeehouse in our storefront space because you love the arts and intellectual pursuits; I may want us to run a soup kitchen because I yearn to serve the homeless. Can either of us let go of this so we can all create our vibrant urban community?

With differences like these, it's a time for deep and heartfelt sharing, of asking ourselves "Is this realistic?" "Will this work for me?" "Will this work for all of us?" "What's really important to each of us?" "What can I live without; what's not negotiable?" There is no real rule — you will need to navigate this unfolding territory as you think best.

Writing it Down

To help with the writing process, I suggest making the following posters on large sheets of easel paper (see below), and hanging them up as reminders of you what you're aiming for.

OUR VISION DOCUMENTS

- Can include Vision, Mission, sometimes Goals
 - Vision: Shared future we want to create
 - Mission: What we'll be doing to create it
 - Goals: Shorter-term milestones we commit to
 - Vision Statement: Vision articulated briefly
-

DECISION-MAKING AND THE VISIONING PROCESS

Many experienced communitarians believe that consensus is the appropriate process for deciding an issue as critical as the visioning process. "The consensus process itself fosters an attitude that can help forge a bond and build trust in your group," observes consensus facilitator Betty Didcock. "When the input of everyone is honored, who knows what might surface — a strong single vision that draws everyone, or multiple visions that suggest the presence of more than one potential forming community."

Other community activists, such as Rob Sandelin, suggest not using consensus for your visioning process. For consensus to work well your group must have a common purpose, and when you're still in the visioning process, it doesn't have it yet. A group needs a method, he says, such as, say, 75 percent voting, in which some people can diverge radically from others about what they want in the community without bringing the whole process to a crashing halt. I personally agree with this view, although there are groups out there who employed consensus for their visioning process and it worked just fine.

ASSESSING YOUR VISION DOCUMENTS

You may want to test your vision documents and vision statement against the following criteria:

For you as an individual:

1. Do you feel good when you read the written expression of your vision?
2. Is it meaningful for you? If not, how would it need to be changed to make it meaningful?
3. Does it resonate with your personal sense of identity? Do you feel as if you can "own" it?
4. Does it inspire you?

For your group:

1. Is your vision document simple, clean, and authentic?
2. Does it reveal and announce your group's core values?
3. Does it focus on the "who," "what," and "why" of your project?
4. Is it fairly concrete and grounded (not vague or flowery)?
5. After you read it, can you remember it? Do you "see" it?
6. Does it express your purpose?
7. Does it inspire your group?
8. Does it generate excitement?
9. Does it show what your community will be like when your vision is achieved?
10. Does it express passion, conviction, and commitment?
11. Is it possible in the current zoning, building-code, and lending environment?

Your Vision Statement:

1. Is it clear, concise, and compelling?
2. Does it express your vision and purpose?
3. Does it also reveal and announce your core values?
4. Is it fairly short? Can you memorize it?
5. Can you identify with it?
6. Does it inspire you?
7. Do others "get it" right away?
8. Does it seem reasonable? Is it unrealistic? Is it too ambitious?

OUR VISION STATEMENT

- Expresses vision and mission/purpose
- Clear, concise, compelling
- Ideally short, 20-40 words
- Ideally memorized
- Helps awaken vision
- It's what others see first

One way to do this is for everyone to go home and write their own idea of what the community's vision statement would be. At the next meeting read each person's version, then get into groups of three and merge them. Then select a committee of three or four people to write a rough draft of vision documents and/or a vision statement based on the groups' merged statements. Include in this writing group, if possible, a visionary thinker, a systems thinker, and someone skilled with words. It works best having a small group write something to present to the group because it's much easier to respond to something already written than it is for everyone to sit around and try to write the whole thing as a group. At the next meeting, the group reviews the first draft, decides what it likes and doesn't, makes suggestions and refinements, and sends the amended draft back to the small group for more work. This round robin word-crafting process can occur as many times as needed until the full group pronounces the vision documents complete.



Next — power imbalances in communities, and how your decision making and other self-governance methods can spread power equally among members.

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