

Dragonfly Community is 25 This Year

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Revolution was in the air throughout the world at the end of the 60's. It's hard to believe now when the only superpower left is becoming fascist and most national economies are marching to a neo-conservative beat but that was the passion of that time. The feeling was that anything could happen and young people would be the agents of change, a change that had to happen because the status quo was definitely not acceptable. The war in Vietnam was seen as the product of a corrupt system, it was massive violence being wrought upon an innocent people of another race. Governments everywhere were rocked by thousands of protesters in the streets of cities, many campuses had buildings occupied by students with demands. Some people, despairing of changing the system from within, created alternative institutions or moved to the country in order to build a better world. The counter-culture was not a fashion statement; it was the manifestation of the belief that change was imminent.

The revolution didn't happen but the social landscape was changed forever. The war in Vietnam was stopped and movements that altered the operating paradigm of this culture had their beginnings (or renewal) in the sixties environmentalism, feminism, gay rights, black liberation, anarchism, native rights, pacifism and their progressive off-shoots in the next decades anti-racist action, midwifery, animal rights, organic foods, anti-nukes, alternative schools, co-ops of all kinds, punk rock. The Sex Pistols Anarchy in the U.K was one of best selling albums of the 70's. No nuclear power plants have been built in the West in the last 20 years. Anti-ballistic missiles were shot down before they left the drawing boards and the UN got a number of important international treaties signed by many nations (with one notable exception). Any politician hoping to get elected (here in Canada) has to pay lip service to a current environmental issue. (How can you tell when a politician is lying? Their lips are moving.) Things may not look too different on the surface than they were 40 years ago but underneath is a new world (still) waiting to be born.

The most significant change one that altered the ground we walk on but is so widespread it hardly gets noticed is in gender relations. Feminism took many forms from the demand for equal pay for work of equal value to goddess worshipping, womyn-only music festivals. Equal rights for women has come to mean equal opportunity for jobs which is important but also doubled the number of potential wage slaves for Capital to exploit. Feminism has also saved many lives by exposing the darkest side of patriarchy - violence towards women & children. In the domestic sphere, it was usually assumed in communes that housework was to be done by everyone irregardless of sex.

It was easier to define what we didn't want in that new world after the revolution violence, discrimination, patriarchy, poverty than to define what we did want, what kind of system would replace the old order. When you throw out capitalism and communism, what are you left with? Everybody wants peace & love and while grounding those lofty ideals into more workable concepts like non-violence and co-operation is laudable, it's still a far cry from creating a new society. Armed with such ideals, however, we did our best in the next years to put them into practice amongst ourselves in our own situations.

The University of Waterloo was one of the Canadian campuses blessed with strikes & sit-ins around the end of the sixties. At that time, I left home and enrolled in a new experimental program called Man-Environment Studies there. Over the next years, I witnessed another American invasion but this time it was of Yankees opposed to the Empire. An SDS radical came and rapped with the residents of my dorm. Ralph Nader gave a speech and Public Interest Research Groups started popping up. Draft dodgers were being put up in safe houses by university professors.

A fellow freak, Jim Campbell, and I started a co-op house to reduce our cost of living and a dozen students crammed into it. Between the two of us, we kept it going for the next 7 years until we bought the land that became Dragonfly. Those were heady days, the 70's, days of struggle and days of joy. The struggle was on all levels from the psychological to global and joy took many forms - dancing, swimming, gardening. We became known as the Fairview Collective and our members took part in many of the projects of the alternative/left community of Waterloo and its sister city of Kitchener - food co-op, resource centres, women's shelters, Third World support, gay liberation, various publications. The percentage of students in our household dwindled over the years but we remained connected to radical campus politics. We engaged in ideological battles there with authoritarian leftists and also got involved in municipal politics over the provision of services like transit.

In 1978, enough people with enough money came together at Fairview to buy 250 acres of Canadian Shield in eastern Ontario. I hadn't finished university, having dropped out after two and a half years in order to work on building community. What I had learned in that time was that a utopian world would consist of communities freely associating with each other in federations. By the end of the decade, Jim & I were living an attempt at that dream along with a dozen others.

It was a commune but was seldom referred to as such because of the word had fallen into disfavour from being over-hyped by the media. The place was called Dragonfly in honour of the insect that devoured other insects that were the bane of an existence in the backwoods mosquitoes and black flies. We were the last of a number of groups that had moved to the Bancroft area in that decade, we had joined a cluster of back-to-the-land folks like many that still dot the landscape throughout North America. Over the next 25 years, we maintained a collective identity whereas the previous communes had devolved to families & individuals

sharing the land as neighbours or else everyone moved away and the land went back on the market.

At first, we wanted to become as self-sufficient as possible so we could provide for our own needs without having to rely on the wage economy. It wasn't just for ideological reasons - opposition to Capitalism and resistance to being bossed in a workplace - but also because we were new to a rural area where there were few jobs to begin with. We were quite industrious in the early years adding buildings, animals, gardens and machinery to a farm which the old couple we had bought it from had already been recovering from ruin.

The population fluctuated greatly and most of the Fairview folk had moved on within a few years. Some have remained involved since then and meetings held once or twice a year on the property help manage the place. Because of the legal structure of our ownership (it's called joint tenants and technically is the same as marriage) the land would be almost impossible to sell. So we're stuck with it for better or for worse. For me, it's a home of last resort, a place I can always return to if all else fails.

Some of us started working at a greenhouse operated by back-to-the-land folks north of us. It was a simple plastic and hoop structure used to start vegetable crops and flowers that were sold out the door to customers in the area. When the family running it broke up, we inherited the business and moved the structure to Dragonfly. Since that time, the greenhouse business has become a focal point of activity and interest on the farm while remaining semi-autonomous. It now stands as the oldest retail business around the small village down the road.

Our existence has been important to the local counter-culture. The fact of it just being there and not going anywhere has attracted others to move in as neighbours. Dragonfliers have always been involved in the community, engaging in the same realm of activities that we had been at Fairview. We housed the publication of an alternative magazine that had grown out of the food co-op. The provincial anti-nuke network had a meeting there. Later, we had our own version of opposition to the nuclear establishment when the old uranium mine was proposed as a waste dump. (Of course, people who grew up in the area were more militant than we were in getting the idea deep sixed.) Everyone around Bancroft knows of Dragonfly as an entity that is more just the people living there.

We also played a role beyond the area because of people going back and forth to the cities and city folks coming to visit. Part of the land is devoted to a conference site which has hosted gatherings of anarchists, new agers, witches and kids. The sixties took a longer time to die there than most other places.

I've always seen Dragonfly as 250 acres of potential, there is so much that could have happened and still could. At present, more people would be helpful but first we have to address the reasons people left in the first place and why more are not

joining us. There are problems from the outside and another set of problems internally.

The lack of employment in the area has been a factor. It's a problem that people have tried to get around by creating their own work, as with the greenhouse. Incomes have also come from selling some crops, making crafts, working with wood, or using computer skills as well as from transfer payments like welfare and pensions.

Growth of more houses for people to live in has been limited by legal restrictions that the province forces the municipalities to adopt. The will to challenge these restrictions or to bend them has been lacking, however. The infra-structure that most of us grew up with just isn't there - running water, electricity everywhere, sewage disposal and automatic furnaces. Anyone wanting to live at Dragonfly has to start from scratch.

There's also a lack of social infrastructure, the problem of people not being able to relate very well in ways outside of hierarchy and legal retributions. That means there is no effective system of accountability: meetings are held and decisions are reached and then nothing happens. Direct action outside the meetings becomes the way of getting things done - doing it yourself. It's hard to make plans when things are so poorly organized.

A hip psych prof in my second year of university was asked why so many communes broke up and he answered with one word "sex." I would amend that to say "sex and its consequences - offspring." The green-eyed monster of jealousy was always ready to strike but parental break-ups have been more of a problem since the first couple at Fairview decided to have a child. This is where the gender war hits the front lines of social change.

We really need some kind of mechanism for resolving conflicts besides having one (or both) parties fleeing the situation. It's always two or more rational adults involved but when emotions get mixed in, reason is a casualty. The bond with a child is quite powerful but two people have it, two people in a world of changing values.

The whole world is physically changing. All the latest catastrophes are incontrovertible proof that global warming is a reality. It needs Revolution if there is to be any hope that we won't burn up. Saving the world will take more than words, it will mean putting into practice all the methods of living in harmony with Nature that we are capable of. We know it's possible and it was the only way before civilization drove a wedge between humans and everything else.

The greatest value for Dragonfly is that we are part of the movement proving that another way is possible, that the future of humanity is not development as usually conceived of. We don't have to be destined to live in energy-intensive suburbs

stretched between mega-cities. Enjoying all the amenities of modern life and eating well do not have to depend on the exploitation of natural resources and other people. Our predecessors (speaking as a white North American) built these countries starting with almost nothing so it behooves us to build a better world (starting with a lot more) because we have to. The technology is there, how many more blackouts will there need to be before we seriously start using it?

It is in communities like Dragonfly where such technologies are being tested and new ways of relating to one another are being implemented. There is a Federation of Intentional Communities that stretches around the world, thousands of communities providing living proof that hierarchical capitalism is not the only future in store for us. Dragonfly is a member but more people are needed there and in the whole movement. Co-op houses and lofts in the cities are urban examples of people trying to go beyond the nuclear family, consumer-oriented lifestyle that is driving this planet to the brink of disaster.

For me, the Revolution consists of being conscious of my effect on the physical & social environment and then acting in the light of that awareness. When enough people give up their cynicism about change and empower themselves to make a difference about the way things are going, then it will happen.

There is hope yet.

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