

We Can Survive

But Can we Communicate?

By Carolyn Baker and Sally Erickson (modified slightly)

When we think of preparing our minds, bodies, hearts, and living situations for global collapse, the focus is often on our individual or household living situations. Equally important is our need to develop a circle of trusting, mutually interdependent relationships. The culture we live in is based on hierarchies of control and influence. Work relationships, kept in place largely by paychecks and ordered by project managers and bosses, are the most common experience most of us have of being part of an organized group. We have little experience outside of those hierarchies. Even more rare in our hyper-independent culture is to depend on others for mutual aid, support and comfort. So, for most people, it likely feels overwhelming to consider how to build a wider circle of people based on mutuality, as part of preparation for the ongoing collapse of basic life support systems.

As daunting as that challenge may seem, consider that individuals in isolation will have a hard, lonely, and extreme challenge if they try to survive the world that will remain when systems collapse with ever-increasing rapidity and intensity. Humans are hard-wired as social beings. Absent the distractions of media and entertainment we will find that we need each other. At the same time, we will discover how emotionally and spiritually wounded we've become as members of the largely bankrupt, and often abusive, culture that empire has created.

Sadly, peoples' experiences of community end all too often in pain and disappointment. Such experiences range from attempts to live in intentional communities to the struggles of serving on church committees or being part of activist organizations. As a whole we are ill-equipped to create cohesive and cooperative groups and then to resolve ongoing issues and conflicts that naturally arise. People often express cynicism, despair and helplessness around the possibility of successfully creating and maintaining a sense of working community within a culture of empire. Clearly, it is critical to acknowledge the need for a sense of real connection, for the ability to work through conflict, and to cooperate in effective and joyful ways with others. Once we have come to terms with the need to do so we can begin to find others who have identified the same need and are ready for the task.

Let's first identify what we are talking about when we talk about *community*. In this context community does not refer only to individuals or families who own land together or who happen to live in proximity to one another, although proximity will more and more be the rule as fuel becomes scarce and travel is limited. We define community, in this context, to be a congregation of people who have, by the commitment and skills they possess, learned to establish relationships characterized by trust, understanding, mutual respect, and bonding that transcends personality and allows and even embraces differences of background or ideology. Such a group is able to think together effectively and to tap into deep wisdom about challenging issues. They can do this because they trust each other enough to question and suspend the assumptions and core beliefs that limit their insights as individuals. Such a group does not come together, as a therapy group does, for the purpose of healing per se, although insight and healing of isolation, unresolved past conflict, fears, and insecurities often occurs. The purpose of the kind of community we are speaking of is to come together to glean wisdom from listening and speaking with one another and to offer connection, support, comfort, and mutual respect. Such a group of people learns together to find better solutions, wiser actions and more joy together than is possible for them to do as isolated individuals, couples or families.

When defined in this way, the idea of community appeals to most people, even when they doubt their ability to find or create such an experience. But the times demand that we do what we've not believed we are equipped to do. It helps to remember that humans are indeed "hard-wired" for this. Indigenous peoples overall have felt the benefits of inclusion in close-knit social units. It is the wounding of the current culture that has disrupted that hard-wiring, often for many generations, and certainly most seriously in current times. But deep trust and connection is something we need in order to feel fulfilled and secure. Once accepted, the need to build community is simply another task to attend to as the current system unravels.

As tempting as it is to focus only on the logistics of living arrangements, how resources and tasks can be shared, preparation for crisis conditions, and other issues, it is equally important to develop skills to create and maintain authentic connection and to work through conflict. When groups fall apart it is almost always as a result of emotionally charged issues. It is important that people make a commitment to find ways to work with people's emotions, to communicate fully, and to bond. Groups will do well to cultivate skills in listening and truth-telling, because when emotional issues are not consciously addressed and worked through, they often sabotage a community's very existence. At the very least unresolved

conflict makes life miserable and drains huge amounts of energy that would better be utilized attending to other needs. Much talk of ecovillages and intentional communities abounds among collapse watchers. Evidence that dealing with relationships is essential is the fact that most of these situations devote a significant amount of time to building a workable sense of community.

Conflict is inevitable. A community must develop skills to effectively resolve conflict so that people feel cared-for and respected. Its apparent absence is a red flag signaling the likelihood of dysfunction, of unspoken feelings and truths that need to be told, or of a strict authoritarian hierarchy that keeps conflict as well as individual creativity submerged. Indigenous cultures at their high points skillfully navigated conflict, and in fact probably welcomed it. They evolved creative skills for addressing it compassionately and assertively, with elders, both men and women, who carried those skills and wisdom down through generations. Those of us reared in the hierarchies of empire are not so lucky. Most people don't feel fully adult much less secure enough to be considered real elders. We are having to glean the best we can from older cultures and learn from the most innovative practices that have come from psychology and organizational development to find our way in to creative, cooperative relationship.

Here are some insights that may be useful:

People who have had opportunities to sit in dialogue or listening/ truth-telling circles often at first feel overwhelmed with the amount of emotional work that needs to be done in order for group members to bond and build trust with each other. This has certainly been our experience. But when people make the commitment and see the process through the difficult stages, they find new optimism. Groups that break through to what Scott Peck called "true community," experience what human beings are capable of. Regular people, with the garden-variety neuroses and the wounding that is typical of most of us educated in public schools and reared in the typically dysfunctional families of empire are surprised at the connection possible. What we realize is that community members are able to consistently do this work together, and that when we do, we successfully dissolve internalized patterns that have been inculcated by empire. What we experience in the place of those old patterns is the joyful connectedness that empire had rendered utterly impossible.

Those who have participated in community-building workshops and other kinds of training in dialogue and human interaction find this is a repeatable experience. People find they are able in this work to include and allow for differences. This experience is akin to the profound, intimate joining that

indigenous people experience and sustain, which has allowed them to survive and thrive. Such experiences of mutual respect, understanding and bonding are likely to support individuals and groups in critical ways during time of societal upheaval.

There are principles that underlie effective group interaction. It helps immeasurably to have one or two strong facilitators present who are familiar with the inner terrain a group must travel to develop trust and to transcend differences. The process is rarely smooth. Facilitators are different from what we generally think of as leaders. Facilitators help the group, as a whole, move into shared wisdom. This is very different from a group that accepts and follows the wisdom or philosophy of a charismatic leader or the dictates of an authoritarian leader. Rather, this kind of community may be said to be "a group of leaders." Each person is regarded as someone who brings a unique set of gifts, experiences, skills, and insights. Strong facilitators help empower individuals to share those individual qualities for the greater good of the group.

Key to building this kind of community experience is the practice of compassionate listening and truth-telling. When one person speaks, the rest of the group listens attentively and stays present with both heart and mind. Speakers "speak from the heart" and speak when truly moved to speak rather than compulsively or in reaction. Another key is that each person learns to take responsibility for his/her part in whatever concerns or complaints he/she identifies. This requires each individual to examine his/her own assumptions and core beliefs and patterns, and to risk sharing those with the group so that they can be examined and understood.

With every passing day it becomes clearer to us that as civilization continues to self-destruct, we need to discern how we prefer to spend our time and energy, and with whom. What we least want to do is mimic the culture of empire by limiting our focus to logistics, thereby losing sight of our deep humanity. We know that we cannot survive alone. Even if we have learned every physical survival skill imaginable, we still need our fellow human earthlings in order to navigate collapse.

Dialogue offers us the opportunity to practice learning how to be together, regardless of the external circumstances we will face in the future. While we may learn to grow food and compost waste in the face of crisis, perhaps the greatest challenge will be this – to learn to listen to each other and speak our truths with compassion.

Taken From: *Sacred Demise: Walking the Spiritual Path of Industrial Civilization's Collapse.*