

1960s, Communes and Counter-Culture

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Courtesy Jerry T.

To understand of my involvement with counterculture is to look back at a time in my life I was about your age I guess (about 21).

In 1970, I was living in an apartment in Westminister, California with a friend from India. I lent him my car so he could drive to work, and he crashed it. So I was without a car but still with the car payment. I went to work one day, I was working at a gas station, the gas station had been sold. At this point in time I was in a great deal of despair and I decided it was appropriate to break with my attempt to fit in to the existing culture. By this time I was against the Vietnam War. I was upset about racism and material values. I was attracted to the hippie lifestyle that song going to San Francisco added tremendous appeal to me so I decide so I decided having very few resources to hit the road I went to Northern California looking for a commune and couldn't find one I wound up going to northern New Mexico in northern New Mexico were many young people that were interested in communal life I first visited Taos and found a restaurant where someone suggested that I should travel north of Taos to find the communes. So I found my way to a commune called New Buffalo that was featured in the film "Easy Rider". As it turned out, New Buffalo was a closed commune which meant they weren't accepting any more people but they told me of a new commune call Morningstar Faith Farm that was not too far away in a place call Arroyo Hondo. So I went there. Morningstar was an open commune and they accepted me. I slept in a hogan. It was on a high plateau and there were about 40 acres of land. I arrived in January 1971 and would stay for two months. I had a backpack, a few clothes, a few dollars, and basically that was it. I was determined to start a new life and so this as a break from my parents life and from society in general. I was open to the idea of communal living. Almost all of the people at Morningstar and I believe there must've been about 40, were my age or close to my age. Looking back, it makes me wonder why they weren't older people there. Nonetheless they were nice people. They embraced the hippie lifestyles which were friendship, celebration, and the idea of communal activities. There were drugs, mainly pot. I don't remember ever seeing alcohol there. And there was a shortage of food. One of the things I was encouraged to do was to apply for food stamps. I was able to go into Taos and get a book of \$40 worth of food stamps. That was pretty much all

of my resources while living in New Mexico. As I said food was scarce so well remember frying sliced potatoes in a pan one night for a meal. I was so happy to have enough to eat. I stayed Morningstar for about two months. I can't say that I became deeply personal with people But I found what I wanted on a deep level. I was interested in the intellectual and philosophical and found it quite enriching to have the discussions that we did as we talked about sharing, caring, and the meaning of life. I'll share one of the more unusual, interesting and exhilarating experiences that I witnessed in my life.

It was a celebration that was based on a native American church ceremony. The Native American Church is a Christian church that began in the 1860s, I believe. As part of a religious ceremony, the peyote was a sacrament. Peyote is a cactus that produces a hallucinogenic affect. It's found in southwestern deserts near El Paso. I remember a couple of the commune's members took an airplane from Santa Fe and flew down to El Paso. They harvested a couple of backpacks of peyote buttons and brought them back to share. The night of the ceremony of one of the members of the commune came around and passed out peyote buttons to anyone that wanted to participate. The buttons were eaten at sundown. The participants then went to the kiva, which is partially under underground building with three levels of circular earthen benches inside, and in the middle of the floor, a ladder comes down from an opening in the center of the roof it's actually a pole with notches on either side for steps. Near it was a small wood stove. About 20 gathered inside the kiva. One person was the medicine man, a spirit guide for the night. There was a small hand drum and a staff that would be used in the ceremony. The medicine man made a Kachina (thunderbird) on the floor out of glowing coals from the wood stove and it had a peyote button as its head. The staff was held by a person that would either sing or say a prayer. The drum was held by the person beside the singer. The staff and the drum passed around the kiva continually during the night. Everyone taking an opportunity to participate. A tremendous spiritual presence was felt. It was an exhilaration of intense love with life and of a heightened sense of awareness about everything that was going on. Every so often the medicine man would throw dry sage onto the burning coals which would fill the kiva up with pungent smoke. The singing and praying lasted throughout the night the entire night. One of the songs was this: "We are so tiny. We are so small. We are hardly anything, anything at all. Fish in the ocean, A grain of sand. We're all god's children. Come take god's hand." The next morning, members of the commune that had not participated in the ceremony came in and joined in a celebration and breakfast. There sunflower seeds, raisins, almonds, and I felt so excited to be there. We had a picnic that day. It was a

tremendous, moving experience that made me love life, love people, and want to be more compassionate.

One thing I wasn't happy about was how hungry we were and it occurred to me that I was eligible to receive unemployment in California and that could help the commune. So I made a decision, and that decision was to go back to California, start receiving my unemployment checks and return to Morningstar. I was fully intent on returning. I left some of my personal effects at Morningstar to say to myself that I was coming back. But when I got to California I was talked into staying in California by my friends who were there. That is how I left the commune.

I have always wondered about the road not taken; why I didn't go back; and what happened to those people that I was with. But it seems my next experience was similar to others. Many of the communes did not last for a long period of time. Indeed Morningstar was sustained by farming on a rather arid plateau in northern New Mexico. This was a questionable premises. They had very little technology, and very low likelihood of being able to produce enough crops to sustain the commune. The people that I was with were definitely countercultural. We did not like our governments foreign policy. We did not like the police, particularly as a symbol of authority. We did not like the fact the drugs were illegal. We did not like social and economic stratification. We distrusted organized religion. We wanted to be brothers and sisters. There is a line in the musical "Hair" that says: "Kids, be free. Go wherever you want. Do whatever want. Just so long as you don't hurt anybody." That was very appealing but economically it did not work.

There is a commune close to Charlottesville call Twin Oaks. It is an intentional community. It has rules for sharing. It is sustained by some of the products that they sell to the outside world. They make and sell hammocks. They also have members that work outside and bring their money into the commune. Twin Oaks has a set of responsibilities that are rotated among the members and space to share things on a collective basis. The commune has been ongoing for the past 40 years. So communal living can work. At the time I was in the counterculture, my heroes were people in the social movements, and musicians. It was a lifestyle that was not 9 to 5 and was not conventional. I think that many of us were rather naively change hoping to change society. I have been too large concerts, love-ins, and I got a sense of belonging to people of my generation at that time but the change never manifested in society in general. So I looked back with nostalgia, and with regret for things that could've happened. But at the same time I look back with hope because I

know that the love that was inside of me can be inside of other people. I think it is people of a certain age of people, of their early 20s, are very idealistic and have the opportunity to carry forward in their life with values from communal experiences. I look at myself. I became a vegetarian at that time and part of maintaining being a vegetarian from that time onward is to keep in touch with the hippie inside of me. I still have hope and see that young people are in a position to move this idea forward. I don't think utopianism is a path for everyone. But I think it's a path that can lead to be more meaning in life. It can lead to finding value in experiencing others, to see human values meaning more than material values and towards that end I hope that the search for Utopia will continue. I hope it is carried forward in each generation. We may not physically succeed in reaching utopia in the world outside. But if we can nourish the values of compassion, brotherly love, sharing, peace, and joy in our hearts, we will be of service to the world and our lives will find meaning in peace and compassion.