



# COMMUNITY SERVICE NEWSLETTER

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## The Classic Tension Between Individuality and Community

BY DON JOHNSON

*The following article was an address given by Mr. Johnson September 15, 1996, for the New York Society for Ethical Culture.*

According to a new poll conducted for the League of Women Voters, 57 percent of non-voters nationwide said they would rather work overtime than vote, 30 percent said they would rather go to a sale at a favorite store, and 27 percent said they would rather watch a new episode of a favorite television program. The survey concluded that people stay clear of the polls not because they are any more alienated than those who vote, but because they simply prefer to do other things. (Richard L. Berke)

I have seen individual members of an organization paralyze its efforts to move ahead because they did not agree with an earlier decision by the majority, insisting instead that the group, committee or board return to their still unresolved agenda. While majorities can make terrible judgements, at some point an organization, family or nation has to act upon decisions.

I spent some time in a setting this summer where the incumbent Democratic governor and the Republican challenger were trying to outdo each other in supporting individual rights. Finally in one last ditch effort to be the genuine real defender of individual rights the Republican challenger stated he, was opposed to any regulation where weapons could be taken—businesses should not be able to keep people from bringing concealed weapons into malls or department stores and court houses should not be able to prohibit concealed weapons from the courtroom!

I remember my own consternation with the fundamentalist viewpoint that no action should be taken to change racial behavior, like outlawing separate fountains or restrooms, but we should simply attempt to change individual hearts. As bad as race relations still are, who truly believes today that government action was unnecessary or premature?

My point is that too much insistence on individual rights or preferences makes coordination, lawfulness

and mutual assistance impossible. We cannot wait until everybody agrees to move ahead, whether it contains issues of choice, national policy or organizational directions.

Yet, on occasion popular opinion has unfairly pressured, even forced, nonconformists to bend to a tyranny of the majority or face drastic consequences. Too much power to the community or the state erodes the personal freedoms to which democratic life has been long devoted. At some point individualism must blend with democracy and liberty with community. A community or nation's greatness and future depend on its ability to balance individualism with civic responsibility and simple liberty with a communal commitment.

At its best individualism places emphasis on individual worth and action. It also regards this action-oriented self not as an isolated or totally autonomous self but as an individual dependent on many forces and influences. Such balanced individualism recognizes its debt to those who have gone before. As one of the individual's strongest defenders, John Stuart Mill says in *On Liberty*:

*"It would be absurd to pretend that people ought to live as if nothing whatever had been known before they came into the world; as if experience had as yet done nothing toward showing that one mode of existence, or of conduct, is preferable to another. Nobody denies that people should be taught and trained in youth as to know and benefit by the ascertained results of human experience."*

I am reminded of the words spoken by the actor Ralph Fiennes playing the part of Charles Doren in the insightful movie *Quiz Show*, directed by Robert Redford. When he confesses to the Senate, we hear the words: "I have soared too high on the borrowed wings of others!" We have not learned our lessons well if we see ourselves as self-made individuals, rather than recognizing our deep obligations and debt

to others. Liberty exists only through connectedness with the members of the overlapping communities to which we belong.

Think of our own Ethical Culture emphasis: Individual uniqueness and worth, with all that means in terms of the self and identity and autonomy, yet with an emphasis on the ultimate significance of our relationships with others and the natural world, and our privilege and opportunity to make a positive difference with others and jointly in the broader world.

But, to return to Mill, we see the tension:

*"But it is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of faculties, to use and interpret experience in that person's own way. It is for them to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to the person's own circumstances and character...to conform to custom, merely as custom, does not educate or develop in the person any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowments of a human being. The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice...the one who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan for life, has need of no faculty than the apeline one of imitation... without any of these things, what will be his comparative worth as a human being."*

Mill states that it is only by cultivating individuality and calling it forth (within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others) that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation. Whatever crushes individuality is despotism!

For Mill the moment individuality must be interfered with is when it interferes with the rights of others, when it would cause harm to others. But also for Mill

one can cause evil to others not only by actions, but by inaction. Individuals are answerable for the evil they do to others and for what they don't do to help. For justice is more than merely maximizing freedom and preventing individuals from doing each other harm. And individuality can develop best when nurture has been present through others. Individuals need community even to come to self-definition and some sense of fulfillment. Obligations of beneficence and caring towards others are necessary. Such obligations come out of relationships.

When our Great Books group combined a reading on Locke with one on Thoreau, this tension became clear. Most of us remember reading Thoreau with delight and self-confirmation during the sixties when the Vietnam war and the civil rights movement were going on. But reading it now in the light of militias, Oklahoma City or the World Trade Center bombing, or in the light of the so-called Gingrich revolution, we had a different reaction:

*"That government is best which governs least....That government is best which governs not at all...government never of itself furthered any enterprise...I do not wish to be regarded as a member of any incorporated society which I have not joined...It can have no pure right over my person and property but what I concede to it."*

Many of us said, "Whoa! Wait a minute. No government! No regulation, no Social Security, no action on behalf of the corporate body!"

I had the privilege this summer of spending a fair amount of time in the Blue Ridge mountains and on the Blue Ridge Parkway. As I traveled it I thought of how, in the midst of a depression, government stepped in and gave people jobs and built a beautiful scenic highway that will be enjoyed by numerous generations unless the conservative reactionaries get their way. They are not conservatives— for conser-

vatives would want to maintain and sustain such meaningful public works.

I don't want to coerce people to vote, but I have no respect for a part of the populace that rides to comfort on the backs of others and their efforts. To shop or to watch TV rather than to go vote is not about individuality or liberty as fought for by either Thomas Paine or John Mill! Such actions are about laziness, irresponsibility or selfishness. Individuality as conceived by Mill and others had to do with the fulfillment of a person, not their settling for modern toys and shallow entertainment.

As one of our members who is working on voter registration said to me recently: "I believe with all my heart that voting is a personal act of empowerment, as well as an act of faith in and solidarity with one's community."

The word community may be used to mean small-scale, face-to-face groups like the family, the congregation, and a bowling team, and they all have their place— but it's not enough. It may also be used as a code word to cover coercion of people into false consensus or submissiveness. As Robert Bellah has said:

*"A good community is one in which there is argument, even conflict, about the meaning of the shared values and goals, and certainly about how they will be actualized in everyday life. Community is not about silent consensus; it is a form of intelligent, reflective life, in which there is indeed consensus, but where the consensus can be challenged and changed— often gradually, sometimes radically— over time."*

Community at its best offers at least these four values, as Bellah sees it:

**I** It is based on the sacredness of the individual. Anything that would oppress individuals, or

stunt individual development, would be contrary to community and, I might add, self-destructive.

**2**Community affirms the central value of solidarity. It recognizes individuals do not exist in a vacuum. Individuals are realized only in and through communities. Strong and healthy, morally vigorous communities are the prerequisites for strong, healthy, morally vigorous individuals. If we continue the lackadaisical attitude the public holds toward the education of the young, how can we expect them to create a future with meaning, purpose and fulfillment? The public failure to demand a decent school system as a priority is a disgrace. Even if one perceives Cardinal O'Connor's offer positively, it is no answer to our current dilemma—for the public has refused to demand more. I read this summer of a moment in a mountain community when the teachers rose up and condemned the shoddy state of education and criticized the fact that people in the county were spending five times more on dogs than they were on education! They shamed a population into providing a better education.

Our Society and other Westside institutions have joined others in a voter registration drive, and I am supportive of such an effort. But I'll tell you right now we have to do more—we need to make it clear to all candidates for office that we will no longer be accomplices in this suicide as a nation. Our children must come first—from the prenatal stage through the entire educational system!

**3**Community in its best will support "complementary association." An individual will belong to multiple communities, not just one. As Mill said, "human nature is not a machine to be built after a model...but a tree, which requires growth and development on all sides." We are not members of one community, but many which we choose. We are a community of communities which at some point have to work toward a common purpose and vision.

We cannot succeed in our common quest if we choose a chauvinistic community, a parochial one, or an exclusionary one. We must seek an intentional community, a focused community, an open community. We need a community that sees its own survival in the survival, liberty, health and wholeness of the individual. And we need individuals who recognize all individuality is social and invariably part of a larger part.

**4**Community rightly understood is committed to the idea of participation as a right and a responsibility, and I would add as a privileged gift of our humanity. A political definition of community grounded simply on the sum of individual preferences is inadequate and misleading (and I would add self-defeating.) Community is instead a process based in the search for the common good—a search we must all choose to be committed to move towards and that demands our best, not our least. It means we must stop thinking only of the immediate moment and what feels good, but be committed to a future that we personally will not live to see, but which will be our legacy. The ultimate patriotism needed today is not to defend the status quo nor to defend our country against an outside invader of evil, but to plan, and if necessary, sacrifice for the generations to come and to defeat the evil within—the evils of self-serving indifference and apathy.

The concepts of rights originally affirmed in the Bill of Rights were understood as immunities—guarantees against government intrusion. This notion of rights has been displaced by rights as entitlements of individuals now freed of "any and all ties of reciprocal obligation and mutual interdependence." (Elshtain) Such a notion has brought an end to conversation and dialogue, an encounter of warring identities, the fracturing of community and the decay of civility. Communal attachments and civic engagement are not "optional extras on a fixed menu of individual choice and market exchange." (John Gray)

It is community which enables our existence and allows our flourishing (although we may have to counter it to get there) and our individual personalities and actions shape and fashion our communities. Individual survival is so enmeshed with the well-being and survival of the community and every other being within it, and the community is so dependent upon the flourishing of its individual members, that seeing this as a struggle or battle portrays the wrong picture.

The great philosopher Martin Buber challenged us, if we want some experience with the divine, then we must admit that we know nothing about it but the place, "and the place," he said, "is called community." ♪

*Don Robert Johnson is Senior Leader of the New York Society for Ethical Culture. He currently serves as President of the American Ethical Union.*

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"ANY INTELLIGENT FOOL  
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IT TAKES A TOUCH OF  
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THE OPPOSITE  
DIRECTION."

...

Albert Einstein

## The Opposite of Love

BY KAZUKO WATANABE

*Reprinted with permission from the Spring Issue 1996, Number 98, Yu-Ai Friendship, the Newsletter of the World Friendship Center, Hiroshima, Japan.*

Before starting class, I see many students coming into the building from outside. Most of them hold the door for a moment to check if there is someone coming after them. This small action makes common faces very beautiful. Thoughtfulness is related to charm.

With the advance of civilization, we got many modern conveniences. For example the automatic door. Even if you have a handful of packages, you can just stand before it and wait for it to open and close automatically. Many people might say it's great and appreciate the convenience, but on the other hand, we mustn't forget that automatic doors take something away from us; that is the "consideration for the one after me."

The simple fact is, we can't live alone in this world. There are other people expecting or needing our kindness just as we are expecting theirs. Whether or not you remind yourself of this simple basic fact, every time you stand at the door, it may unknowingly make a big difference with your heart. I'm afraid the change is already obvious which creates more self-centeredness and less thoughtfulness as a result.

It's true that most Japanese have learned how to apply makeup and wear nice clothing or accessories. They have become very fashionable in comparison with long ago. (I'm very sorry to say, there are few people who are truly dedicated to the care of others or kindness.)

If we say that civilization's goal is to make people live "alone", you can easily understand when you

think of things named “auto”. Civilization has given freedom to the physically as well as mentally handicapped, freed people from the nuisance of human relations and made all the speedy processing possible. These all help to provide busy people with more free time. Tools can do things people are unable to do. At the same time, like the automatic door, they reduce the chances for people to help each other, they make us forget how to have a caring attitude.

Consideration is not something done from the superior to the inferior such as, strong to weak, nor wealthy to poor. It is for and from all people. It should be the natural way of human beings as the Chinese character “hito” or “men” illustrates. [It is made up of] two imperfect figures supporting each other to make one perfect figure. We have been oblivious to it in our busy everyday lives.

Here is a comment by one young mother who first volunteered at a handicapped home. “In my everyday chores, I keep forgetting things. I am busy cutting cabbages, scolding my children.... It wasn’t until I had seen diapers piled up to the ceiling when I, for the first time, felt I remembered many things I had long forgotten. For example, there are people who I don’t know living over the sea, laughing or crying just like us. There is miserable starvation and futile wars are going on and on....” This young mother, while folding diapers, noticed something she had forgotten in her hectic day-to-day activities. We need each other in this world and it’s only natural that we extend to the needy our spare time and energy. “They are not my children, nor friends, just unknown people, though, I was so glad to have a chance for remembering them sometimes.” After reading this comment, I felt she learned that “giving is much more rewarding than taking.”

We tend to understand that the opposite of love is “hatred,” but truly it is “indifference.” Now city life causes us to grow into indifferent people because of our solitary life styles. Hate is not good, but there is

still hope where hate exists. At least you don’t ignore that person. However, indifference is to ignore the existence of others. Today people close their feelings. This situation can be saved only by the thoughtfulness and kindness that make you aware “all people need each other.”

You can’t just sit there and wait; you have to take the first step and volunteer. You can plant the seeds of love in the desert, pour on water and watch carefully. That’s when love sprouts and grows.

One candle, who is the starter, endures “the pain” of burning itself, then giving its light to the second candle, while never losing its own light; thus the world becomes twice as bright.

If you have no smile  
from expected person.  
Instead of being unpleasant,  
you can smile at him yourself.  
Indeed, it’s he who needs  
the smile from you.

This poem reminds us of deep compassion. Over one’s own needs it cares for others’ necessities. This is the essential beauty of human beings who can place themselves in another’s place, disregarding their own wants or needs. Only an independent person can act this way; it’s not possible for anybody of cowardice.

Life’s quality depends on how time has been spent. A good life is not necessarily a long life, but how much time has been spent in caring and loving. The more civilization advances, the more we must nurture thoughtfulness. To those who say kindness is unnecessary, we give them Jeral Jandry’s message: “In the end of life, there remains not what one has collected, but what one has given.” ☸

*Kazuko Watanabe is the President of Notre Dame Women’s College.*

# Report on Mitraniketan, India

BY JUDITH & ROBERT MCGAHEY

*Mitraniketan, an educational community, was started in the 1950's by K. Viswanathan, who had been inspired by Arthur Morgan to do so.*

We were staff at the Arthur Morgan School in North Carolina during Viswan's two visits to Celo in 1976 and 1978, and have long admired him and his work. This was our first visit to Mitraniketan in Kerala, India, during a leave last fall. Bob was interviewing Sunderlal Bahuguna, Gandhian leader of the opposition to a massive dam in the Himalayas and Judi was a Rotary Foundation medical volunteer at Kodai International School, the local hospital, and with several local development groups in Kodaikanal, eight hours by train from Mitraniketan, near Trivandrum.

We made two visits to Mitraniketan while in India, a long weekend in November and another brief visit in December to meet Sethu, who is married to Viswan and was away when we visited in November. We were initially hosted by Asha, the eldest daughter of Sethu and Viswan. Her husband Ragu is working very hard to learn the ropes with respect to the world of international grants. While we were there, he was involved with a potential grant from the international development arm of the Swiss government. Asha and Ragu have a son, about eighteen months old, who brightened everyone's days.

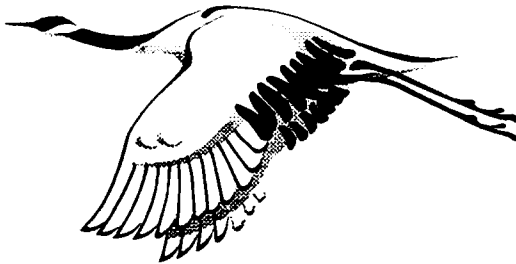
We had an extensive tour led by Asha and by a young man about 25 years old named Jaya, a villager who came to the school at Mitraniketan when he was about eleven or twelve. He is now working on his MBA while keeping the books for the community. We were impressed by the number of operations, by the liveliness of the people we met, and by the sheer

beauty of the place, both natural and architectural. Apparently the simple but elegant style of their architect, the British Quaker Lorrie Baker from Trivandrum, has spread throughout the state.

The sectors of the community which chiefly impressed us were the school, the farm operation, and the fledgling People's College, a folk high school which the Danish government is sponsoring. Visitors always report building projects, and this is one of two ongoing large projects. Several dorm units, a central office and classroom, and staff housing are currently being built on the lower margin of the community beyond the field which is below the church. The upper part of that large field is the site of the second building project, an indoor stadium (roofed but no walls, similar to the school's beautiful auditorium), further proof of Viswan's dedication to providing the village kids with urban opportunities for self-development. But Mitraniketan seems to be running out of space for more buildings.

It is too soon to tell whether the sericulture [silk cultivating] will be a successful venture. There is also now a silk-weaving enterprise. While we were touring, all the machine-run operations were at a standstill due to a long power brownout, with the exception of the computer training center, which had a backup generator.

The computer center is one of the five areas of emphasis at the People's College, which has its first group of students in vocational training (supplemented by facilitated reflection on lifestyle and values), though the facilities will not be completed until next summer-fall. The others are electronics, auto mechanics, carpentry, masonry, and leather working. Of the almost three hundred applicants Mitraniketan received for 50 slots, 220-odd were for electronics and computer training. There were none for leather working, which is a low-caste position (though potentially profitable), and very few for the building trades. They are going to have a tough time



providing training for many youths other than those who see silicon-lined futures. But developing software computers would be a great cottage industry for Mitraniketan, which goes on-line in March.

The People's College completed a three-month course in leadership training of village women in early fall. It focused on giving these leaders from women's development programs the skills to use available resources to handle community problems. For example, they were informed about what their villages' entitlements were from the central government, so that the middle agencies and bureaus would be less able to skim off money before it reached the village. The college conducted an intensive entry interview of each participant to determine their personal, family and village problems—in order to tailor the course towards the participants' needs. The People's College will be conducting follow-up interviews in the villages with these graduates to assist them in utilizing their new-found skills.

We were particularly impressed with Mr. Thomas, the first principal of the new People's College. He has an extensive background in rural development in Kenya, and, at 56, is making this his last position. He arranged a morning with a translator for us to talk about our work and life at Celo, and to hear in turn about why each of the students in the class were at the People's College. He seemed to understand rural

people's needs, to be a good listener, and to have considerable relish for the job.

We were fortunate as well to meet Mr. Karthikeyan, the first director of Mitraniketan's agricultural research unit, now retired. He is a born farmer, has a probing intelligence, and many of the successes of both Mitraniketan and the local farmers, who have watched very carefully and emulated things that worked, may well be due to his leadership. When we talked of Kerala's successes, he chortled and said that the people were still too individualistic, that they needed to learn better to work as a community. He also felt that they were just beginning to learn how to farm, though he noted with approval the local farmers' returning to traditional intensive farming of many crops at all levels of their small plots.

International groups still come quite often to Mitraniketan. While we were visiting a group of social workers from Sri Lanka arrived, accompanied by staff of a British NGO. There were women interns from Sweden, the U.S., Germany and the U.K. These groups bring energy, but like us, required hospitality.

Before we left, we raised with Viswan the traditional horns of the dilemma of Mitraniketan's future: succession and sustainable finances. Viswan says that he is not worried about the issue of succession. The processes are in place, and they will produce the leadership. As for the other issue, that of finances, he says there are definitely continuing problems. He feels there is a particular need for a revolving fund to support intervisitation with communities in the U.S. with similar focus. As for the regular salary shortfalls, he says the staff are patient, and that they know they would be taken care of in an emergency. There seems to be a lot of juggling of funds from different sectors to pay the bills.

Our take on the succession issue is that the leadership will percolate up through the community. From what we saw, Mitraniketan has the resources for compe-



tent financial management and trouble-shooting. What is not so clear is what will happen in the area of vision: the unique combination of a passionate commitment to the poor, unbounded optimism, and broad-ranging inventiveness that Viswan has.

We also talked about the related issue of self-sufficiency. The community still requires fairly large infusions of outside funds to thrive, just like the Arthur Morgan School (AMS) at Celo. We agreed that it would be great if some of the other small industries could do well enough to help support the school. But this is unlikely. Unlike AMS, *none* of these kids can pay the tuition, and there are about three hundred of them.

Viswan was really glad to see us, for this is the first time that any AMS staff have visited Mitraniketan, which has rather been part of the Yellow Springs network (Elizabeth Morgan spent time there co-incubating schools with Viswan before AMS opened.) We agreed that this was a connection that is vital to continue. We will be giving a slide show at Celo to make a report on our visit and kick off a drive to establish a fund to enable airfares for promising young leaders at Mitraniketan to visit Celo/AMS and other promising sites for intervisitation.

Viswan made two requests of us. First, was to help broaden the base of the scholarship fund for students at the K-10 school. It costs Rs. 5000 yearly (about \$140) for each student. Second, was to drum up interest and leadership for a conference on Arthur Morgan. Interest is sprouting already; we are tentatively planning a conference for summer 1998. ■

*Judith McGahey is an MD and Robert is a professor at Moorhead College in Moorhead, MN.*

## Letter from Mitraniketan

Greetings and best wishes for a Happy New Year. My family and the larger family of Mitraniketan are fine and actively involved in their tasks. Our second daughter Beena recently went to Canada on a placement by Canadian Cross Road International, who send their volunteers to Mitraniketan also.

In collaboration with the Danish Folk High School Association, we have organised the People's Education Programme under the banner of People's College. The first batch was conducted on a trial basis for three months with 30 participants. It was a huge success and based on that we have organized the necessary changes in the curriculum, a course for a one year period. We have also started to construct an Indoor Stadium for our students and youth.

Recently, as in the previous years, a group of students and faculty members of Heisenberg College in Germany came here for three weeks. This time they took initiative to construct a boy's hostel building as an extension of the existing hostel, which can accommodate sixty more students.

We are exploring ways and means to get financial support to put an end to the irregular payment to our school section— an urgent necessity. All other activities are going well. Our responsibility also has considerably increased as Mitraniketan has become a centre of national importance. We are particular to maintain the same atmosphere even though the activities have increased.

We had a good visit recently by Dr. Judith and Mr. Robert McGahey. We were very happy to welcome them in our midst. We hope this will pave the way for developing a closer link between the Arthur Morgan School and Mitraniketan in due course.

*Viswanathan & Sethu*

# Down in the Dumps

BY QANI BELUL

*Reprinted from the February 1997 issue of FRIENDS JOURNAL, Philadelphia, PA 19102.*

The other day my wife and I were rooting through a pile of discarded bicycles near our local train station in Japan when she commented she recently read that one of the things that irk the Japanese about us *gaijin* (foreigners) is our tendency to go through their trash looking for usable items. This comment intrigued me. I've known a fair number of dumpster divers, dived myself now and then, but never, until the moment I heard my wife's comment, had I truly considered the implications behind the act.

That afternoon, as we pedaled our bikes around the small Japanese seaside town in which we reside, I began thinking about fellow dumpster divers I've known in other parts of the world. As a former Peace Corps volunteer in Mali, West Africa, a vivid memory I'll not soon forget is waking up one morning to see a child's tiny black arm reach through a crack in my door, blindly searching through my wastebasket, which sat just inside the entranceway. It wasn't hard to figure out what my small neighbor wanted—he was hungry and hoped to latch onto a few mango pits I'd thrown away the previous day.

It isn't only food that is salvaged in that extremely poor section of the world. Almost everything is worth picking out of the trash and reusing. Children use discarded batteries as tiny bowling pins. They set them up and, using stones for the bowling ball, create their own miniature outdoor bowling alleys. Discarded cans are used not only as drinking containers, but also as toys. By attaching strings to the ends of two cans, children use them as stilts. They take hold of the string handles, step onto the upside-down cans, and shuffle around on the dusty roads.

Old plastic bags are washed and reused until worn to shreds. These shreds are then bound tightly together to form balls for children to play soccer with. Old tire treads are used to make sandals, while tire tubes are cut into strips to make bungee cord. The cord is used for everything from straps for bicycle racks to slings for slingshots. When it's worn to pieces, it too is salvaged for uses like sandal repair, weatherstripping, engine gaskets, or innertube patches. Paper, like plastic, is rescued from the wasteful *tubabs'* (foreigners') refuse to be used again. It's not unusual for Peace Corps volunteers in Mali to find their discarded personal letters wrapping a loaf of bread or other food item at the local market. I learned quickly that if I didn't want my loved one's letters floating around the market, I had to either hold onto them or burn them.

Later, on a small organic farm in Ohio, I had the good fortune to live among another group of expert dumpster divers. A Quaker family there permitted me to live in their woods and subsequently educated me on dumpster diving in the United States. After having grown up in a middle-class neighborhood, where many of us consumed much and conserved little, living near this dumpster-diving family was a breath of fresh air. For them, salvaging is a common activity—often a family outing—with even the small children pitching in to help. They regularly find useful items in the local commercial dumpsters: water hoses, bicycle tires, children's toys, radios, power tools, gardening implements, picks, shovels, fax machines, paint, lumber, cement, clothes. As the children grow older, they begin to realize the implications of waste and, like their parents, sometimes



wonder aloud why people throw away so much that is still usable.

So when my wife commented that some Japanese are irked by us foreigners going through their garbage, these memories of fellow divers came flooding in, causing me to stop and consider the implications of a human being searching through another's garbage.

Japan is probably one of the best countries in the world in which to dumpster dive. It's an incredibly rich country, and the quantity of goods thrown away is astounding. It has been said that in Tokyo alone approximately 200 pianos *a day* are discarded. My wife and I often discover perfectly good, usable items in the trash— umbrellas, radios, televisions, microwave ovens, fans, futons, lamps, furniture— and will put off buying a particular item at the store to see if we can salvage it. Foreigners living in Japan sometimes joke about furnishing their apartments at no cost by doing all of their shopping at the dump.

Considering the amount of wealth it takes for countries like the United States and Japan to be able to afford to throw away so much, the implications of the Malian boy searching through trash for old mango pits are profound, and it becomes difficult to imagine that such vast economic differences are what make dumpster diving a worldwide phenomenon: economic inequality creates both waste and need. Those who have a lot tend to waste a lot, while those who have little are driven to collect these free goods and put them to use. Granted, it's a simple concept, but one that is difficult to fully comprehend unless one exists at an economically disadvantaged position.

As for the possibility that people become irritated with those who search through their garbage, well...if you'll pardon the misquote, "To irk is human; to forgive divine." Or more appropriately: To waste is human; to salvage divine. ♪

*Belul lives, writes, and dumpster dives in central Japan.*

## Book Reviews



THE SIMPLE LIFE: *Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*, by David E. Shi; Oxford University Press; © 1985; 332 pp softcover; \$13.95 (plus \$3.00 s/h) from Community Service. Ohio residents add 6% tax.

BY JIM CROWFOOT

Having attended the October 1996 Community Service Conference on simple living, and personally seeking to simplify my life, I read THE SIMPLE LIFE: *Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture* to learn more about why simple living is both so attractive and so difficult and to gain ideas about what could be done now to advance simple living. In this book, David Shi, a historian, tells the long and exciting story of the quest for simple living in the United States. The book is based on his knowledge of U.S. cultural and political history and his in-depth research on both the intellectual and practical history of people's efforts to simplify their lives. He describes, documents and analyzes the ongoing quest for this lifestyle from the earliest European settlement through the 1980's. His sympathetic and critical analyses are based on both his historical research and his deep commitment to the positive potentials of simple living and to learning from past successes and failures.

The book is well written and provides a wealth of interesting information and insightful analyses. He carefully documents what he describes through aptly chosen quotations and accompanying footnotes

containing original references. I found this to be a constant stimulus to read further and learn more from people and movements who have maintained and extended the quest for simpler lifestyles.

Since our own ideas and lifestyles are so strongly influenced by U.S. history and culture, I found many heretofore unknown connections between my own struggles and ideas concerning simple living and the ideas and practices of groups and individuals from earlier periods of U.S. history. Shi's book is a rich and valuable resource for learning more about different understandings of simple living in the United States and about the many, many individual and group efforts to implement this lifestyle and their successes and failures.

By now you may be asking yourself, "What is Shi's definition of 'the simple life'?" He states:

*"...the precise meaning of the simple life has never been fixed. Rather, it has always represented a shifting cluster of ideas, sentiments and activities...there have been, and still are, many forms of simple living representing a wide spectrum of motives and methods. Their common denominator has been the core assumption that the making of money and the accumulation of things should not be allowed to smother the purity of the soul, the life of the mind, the cohesion of the family, or the good of the commonwealth. As I have employed the concept, the simple life represents an approach to living that self-consciously subordinates the material to the ideal." (pp. 3-4)*

Throughout this book one of the strengths of Shi's analysis and an attractive feature of his writing is his focus on individuals who exemplify the historical developments he describes. In each period of U.S. history, these individual practitioners, analysts and advocates of simple living are amply quoted and the reader gains a deeper sense of their ideas and prac-

tices and how they relate to the culture of their time and ongoing barriers to simple living. For example, Shi enlivens and deepens an early chapter on the Puritans by describing and quoting the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Reverend John Cotton, Governor John Winthrop and others, on the topic of simple living, their views of why it was important and their own struggles as individuals and leaders to implement simple living. Some of the other individuals whose views on simple living I enjoyed reading about included well known personages like Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and Theodore Roosevelt as well as lesser known individuals like John Woolman, Samuel Adams, Caroline Kirkland, E.L. Godkin, William Dean Howells, John Burroughs, Arthur Morgan, Helen and Scott Nearing, Ralph Borsodi and Mildred Loomis.

Here are some of the major themes of Shi's analysis which he develops across the different periods of U.S. history:

- the different antecedents and sources of simple living in the U.S., predominately Christianity in Puritan and Quaker varieties and Classical Philosophy in Greek and Roman types and consequently there being both religious and secular strains of simple living;
- the ongoing tension throughout U.S. history between simple living as an ideal and way of life, and economic growth as an ideal and attendant practices accompanying increased standards of living and the concentration of wealth;
- the ideas and practices of simple living often having been a reaction against modernization with its urbanization, industrialization, secularism, class stratification;
- the frequent practices of individual leaders and/or elite groups advocating simple living as a way of life meant for people of lower economic classes or advocating it more broadly but failing personally to adopt this lifestyle;
- the contrast between ideas and practices of simple living as requirements based in the values, norms or

rules of a specific group or political entity; also, simple living as individually chosen in the absence of any externally imposed rules;

- the pattern of simple living being widely advocated and practiced in times of national political and spiritual crises and subsequently being relatively ignored;
- the frequent connection between simple living and “high thinking” in terms of ideas and intellectual life maintained by elites who were a small proportion of the population;
- simple living as an aesthetic stressing balance versus simple living as an ascetic way stressing an extreme of sacrifice.

While I strongly recommend reading *THE SIMPLE LIFE*, I do find it lacks some important things which interest me. I particularly would have liked analysis which included an understanding of domination and subordination and the negative consequences for individual independence, flexibility and creativity and for intergroup collaboration. I wish that Shi had given greater attention to: women’s involvement in simple living; relationships with Native Americans and ongoing racism as influences on simple living; ongoing presence of poverty and its relation to simple living; ideals of economic growth and secularism in relation to the failures of simple living; Amish ideas and practices.

I hope I will maintain my awareness of David Shi’s concluding words from *THE SIMPLE LIFE* and that they help you decide to read this book:

*Simplicity in its essence demands neither a vow of poverty nor a life of rural homesteading. As an ethic of self-conscious material moderation, it can be practiced in cities and suburbs....Determining and maintaining the correct degree of simplicity is not a simple endeavor. Human nature and the imperatives of consumer culture constantly war against enlightened restraint. Nevertheless, simplicity remains an animating vision of vital moral*

*purpose....Practitioners can gradually wrest control of their own lives from the manipulative demands of the marketplace and workplace. Then they can begin to cultivate a renewed sense of republican virtue, spiritual meaning and social concern. Properly interpreted, such a modern simple life informed by its historical tradition can be both socially constructive and personally gratifying (pp. 280-1.)* 🍷

*Jim Crowfoot is the former President of Antioch College in Yellow Springs, OH. Currently, he serves on the Board of Trustees for Community Service. David Shi is the President of Furman University in Greenville, SC.*



## Readers Write

### Newsletter Feedback

We were happy to see Pat Stewart’s letter in your January/March ‘97 issue [Vol. XLV No. 1.] We hope that she and her husband take out a subscription, [sic] you need good, steady subscriptions. We will supply names as they become evident— you might want to emphasize this networking to member subscribers. It is our wish that your organization prosper.

Doris & Don Cuddihee, Greer, SC



## About "The Value and Future of Simple Living" Conference

I want to thank Bill Felker for a positive and comprehensive overview of the last Community Service Conference [Notes on the Community Service Conference on Simple Living, CSN Jan/Mar '97 Vol. XLV No. 1.]

It seems from the letters printed about the conference that a number of the attenders were unhappy with my presence there. I was criticized for speaking from conservative Quaker and Christian perspectives and for wearing the "formal" clothes of a plain Friend, as well as for talking too much in my small discussion group.

I hope I never stop following the plain lifestyle I have been led to, and that I continue to frame every discussion of simplicity with my faith, which is central.

But I *do* need to apologize for dominating the small group discussion. It's a character fault I cannot deny, and yet I haven't done enough to eradicate it. Those

who know and love me have learned to tell me: "Scott, you're talking too much," or, more to the point: "Please shut up and listen to someone else for a change." This often works, although only for a short while, unfortunately.

So please forgive me if I offended anyone, and next time feel free to tell me to pipe down.

Scott Savage, *Barnesville, OH*

*Editor's response to Scott: Thank you for your good letter of February 24<sup>th</sup>. I am wondering how much of it you would like in the Community Service Newsletter. [He wanted it all in.]*

*Scott, I agree with you that you should not feel you need to change your plain lifestyle or your principles or speech. And I think most of the people at the fall conference enjoyed the challenge and chance to learn from others.*

*Of the eight letters on the subject of the conference, only three had anything disparaging to say about your ways and two others specifically mentioned enjoying your presence and challenge.*

*We hope you will be able to come again.*

We think of you often and have good memories of involvement with Community Service. The fall conference sounded particularly good!

Cyndde & Jim DeWeese, *Butler, OH*

Yes, please bring Joe Jenkins back this fall to discuss "How to Make \$ Legally and Still Keep a Low Tax Income." I'd buy a book on the subject.

Lance Grolla, *Cretone, CO*

## Members Directory

I'm in receipt of the annual Members Directory. Thank you very much. I have no specific need for it at present, but it's handy to have in the event I'm looking for a kindred soul.

Rudy Potochnik, *Modesto, CA*

# Announcement

## Community Service Fall Conference

The subject of our fall conference this year will be "Committed Living for a Sustainable Community." It will be held at the Outdoor Education Center of Antioch College the weekend of October 17-19<sup>th</sup>.

Amongst the resource people present will be Joe Jenkins, author of THE SLATE ROOF BIBLE and THE HUMANURE HANDBOOK, Tova Green, of the Crabgrass Organization and author of INSIGHT AND ACTION, and Greg Coleridge, who will be speaking about Akron, Ohio's local, non-money currency.

Please save these dates. More information will be available in our July/September issue.



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## Membership

Membership is a means of supporting and sharing in the work of Community Service. The basic \$25 annual membership contribution includes a subscription to our quarterly Newsletter and 10% off Community Service-published literature. Larger contributions are always needed and smaller ones gladly accepted. Contributions of \$12 cover the newsletter only. All contributions are tax-deductible. Due to added postage costs, foreign membership, including Canada, is \$30 in U.S. currency.

## Have Your Friends Seen The Newsletter?

Please send the names and addresses of your friends who might enjoy receiving a sample Newsletter and booklist. For specific issues, send \$1 per copy.

## Editor's Notes

We welcome letters to the editor (under 300 words) and articles (700-2000 words) about notable communities or people who are improving the quality of life in their communities. Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you wish the article returned. The only compensation we can offer is a year's subscription to our newsletter, the satisfaction of seeing your words in print, and knowing you have helped spread encouraging and/or educational information.

## Address Change

If there is an error on your mailing label, or you are moving, please send the old label and any corrections to us. It increases our cost greatly if the Post Office notifies us of moves, and you will not receive your newsletter promptly.

## Contents

Printed on Recycled Paper

The Classic Tension Between Individuality and Community	DON JOHNSON	1
The Opposite of Love	KAZUKO WATANABE	5
Report on Mitraniketan, India	JUDITH & ROBERT MCGAHEY	7
Letter from Mitraniketan	VISWANATHAN & SETHU	9
Down in the Dumps	QANI BELUL	10
Book Review:		
THE SIMPLE LIFE: <i>Plain Living</i>		
<i>and High Thinking in American Culture</i> by David E. Shi	JIM CROWFOOT	11
Readers Write: D.&D. Cuddihee, S. Savage, C.&J. DeWeese, L. Grolla, R. Potochnik		13
Announcement		
Community Service Fall Conference		15



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