

**DRAFT**



**ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE:  
A PROPOSAL FOR COMMUNITIES  
TO REINVENT OURSELVES AS WE REINVENT THE WORLD**

*Introduction and Thank You! 2*

*The Need 4*

*The Opportunity 6*

*How Change Can Occur 7*

*Change From the Inside Out & Ground Up 7*

*The Role of Communities 8*

*From Reaction to Creation 9*

*The Appeal of Direct Engagement 9*

*The Importance of Slow, Deep Work 10*

*The Power of a Constructive Program 12*

*Towards a “Restoration of Humanity” 13*

*Withstanding the Tide 14*

*Bridges to a New Era 15*

*Common Fire’s Vision of Transformational Communities 16*

*A Brief History of Common Fire 16*

*Large-Scale Communities & Learning Centers 18*

*Autonomy in the Communities 20*

*Four Essential Characteristics of the Communities 22*

*1- Engagement a Diversity of People 22*

*2- Ongoing Personal Growth and Dialogue 24*

*3- Aligning Our Lives with Our Beliefs 25*

*4- From Transformation in the Community to  
Transformation in the World 28*

*A Final Few Essential Characteristics 29*



*Citations and Notes 31*



## *Introduction and Thank You!*

*“In our dreams we have seen another world...  
We saw that in this world there was no need for armies;  
peace, justice and liberty were so common that no one talked about them  
as far-off concepts, but as things such as bread, birds, air, water...  
This world was not a dream from the past...  
It came from ahead, from the next step we were going to take.  
And so we started to move forward to attain this dream,  
make it come and sit down at our tables, light our homes, grow in our cornfields,  
fill the hearts of the children, wipe our sweat, heal our history...”*

- Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos

**This document is about a vision for model communities** – vibrant living spaces and learning grounds that bring together people to imagine, co-create and actually experience the more just and sustainable world they dream of, and for the impact of those communities to be felt far beyond their official boundaries.

At Common Fire, we believe deep and lasting change in the world can only be achieved if we transform the cultural norms that are giving rise to the tremendous suffering and destruction in the world today. We believe we must carve out spaces in the world that are dedicated to helping nurture more just and sustainable cultural norms in our personal lives, in our organizations and communities, and within the broader movement.

This is the purpose of these model communities. They will be created by and serve a broad diversity of people who share a vision of transformation in the world that moves from the ground up and from the inside out. The settings will be beautiful and natural – in both rural and urban environments – and will be centered around gardens, residences, and multipurpose spaces with offices, workshops, studios, etc. They will not be insular places where people withdraw from the world, but ones that allow people to more powerfully step into the world – residents and interns, students and retreat participants, friends and neighbors alike.

### **The role of Common Fire is:**

- First, to inspire and inform people’s appreciation of the importance of these kinds of model communities;
- Second, to provide strategic support to groups that wish to create this kind of community, to best ensure that they are successful in the initial stages of forming their community, establishing themselves on land and in their living and working facilities, and moving through the challenging first years beyond that.

A small version of these communities already exists in the Hudson Valley, two hours north of New York City, where Common Fire opened its celebrated housing co-op in 2006. Two large-scale versions are on their way to becoming reality – one in the Beacon/Newburgh area an hour north of New York City, and the other in California’s Bay Area. Our vision is that there will be a blossoming of similar Common Fire communities in each of the major regions in the United States over the next decade.

The **first ten pages of this document** lay out *why we’re doing this*. It presents a brief overview of both the needs and the opportunities in the world today that we’re responding to. Then it presents our “theory of change” – our thoughts around how the desperate situation in the world today can be transformed.

And the **following twelve pages** take those ideas from theory to action and describe specifically **our vision for transformational Common Fire communities**.

Our vision is inspired by the work of countless people, both ancestors and contemporaries, some of them named throughout this document. Much of their work was birthed through great conviction and sacrifice. We are honored and humbled to bring these ideas together and offer Common Fire as a vehicle to help manifest them. Whether we know you personally or not, the vast web of interconnection between you and us means that echoes of your own thoughts and actions are to be found in here as well.

With this document we invite you to become even more firmly connected with this vision. We invite you to share your ideas and help us shape what these communities look like, to share other critical resources like time, money, and expertise to help make them real, to become part of them by visiting or joining an existing community or helping launch a new one, and to take these ideas and blend them in unique ways with your own passions and visions. We hope this document will be a source of information and inspiration for you. Please share it with others who you think would appreciate it.

We’re honored you’re taking the time to read this, and hope it can make a meaningful contribution in your life and in our shared journey in this world.

*Thank you, thank you, thank you! And enjoy!*



# *Why Common Fire Communities?*

## *Why Common Fire Communities? - The Need* \*

*"Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course... that may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner we know... A great change in our stewardship of the earth and the life on it is required if vast misery is to be avoided and our global home on this planet is not to be irretrievably mutilated."*

- From "Warning to Humanity", 1992, signed by 1600 of the world's senior scientists, including a majority of the living Nobel laureates in the sciences

We are living in the most critical era in human history.

The world as we know it, and as humans have known it for the past 150 years, represents a radical departure in the 200,000 year history of homo sapiens. Never before have we as a species had the power to cause ourselves and the planet the intense suffering and destruction that we currently unleash every day.

### *Our War Against Nature*

- We're extinguishing species at a rate higher than the meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs 65 million years ago.
- We're radically transforming every ecosystem worldwide through global warming.
- Over half the planet's original forests have been destroyed, mostly in the last three decades, and nearly 40 percent of the world's agricultural land is "seriously degraded".
- Plastic outweighs phytoplankton 10 to 1 in the oceans. Seventy five percent of the world's fisheries are already fully exploited or overfished and seafood stocks are expected to collapse by 2048. Sixty percent of the world's coral reefs have died or will be dead by 2030.
- And most of the 10 billion animals killed every year for food in the US alone are subjected to horrific lifelong cruelty in factory farms, with such farms now prevalent worldwide.

---

\* Citations throughout the document are done as endnotes. All citations from this section on "The Need" are listed in endnote #1.

## *Our War Against Ourselves*

### **Worldwide:**

- Two billion of us on the planet are regularly hungry and one billion don't have access to safe water.
- Over \$30 billion are spent in the international arms trade each year, 25 countries are involved in active recognized conflicts, and there are up to 300,000 children fighting as soldiers.
- In the United States, materially the richest country in history, over 50% of the national budget goes to military-related expenses. By diverting 1/20th of that amount annually humanity could eradicate extreme poverty and hunger as well as reverse the spread of AIDS and malaria worldwide.

### **In the United States:**

- 50% more people die from suicide than homicide, a number that doesn't include overdoses and chronic health issues related to drug and alcohol use.
- Three million women are battered each year and 1,400 are murdered by current or former partners.
  - Each year more than a million children experience homelessness.
  - On any given day 40 million people don't have health coverage.
- A higher percentage of our population is imprisoned than anywhere else in the world, accounting for 1/4 of the world's imprisoned population. Black men between the ages of 20 and 39 account for nearly 1/3 of all sentenced prisoners, and 1/3 of black men are deprived of the right to vote at any given time.

## *Population Growth, Peak Oil, and Politics*

*All of this and much more is unfolding at a time that we humans are about to reach an extraordinary landmark. 2000 years ago there were 300 million of us on the planet. 200 years ago there were 1 billion. By the year 2100 there will be nearly 10 billion humans on the planet, and the trend is that each of us is consuming more goods and energy every day. At the same time, we're rapidly running out of cheap oil, the cornerstone of today's world economy, particularly our agriculture and transportation systems.*

As all of these challenges grow and overlap and exacerbate each other, they will place tremendous strains on our political systems, where some politicians will find themselves overwhelmed in trying to respond to them, and others will exploit them to sow further division and violence on a national and international level.

**The bottom line is that the planet and our social structures are about to get stressed far beyond anything they've known in the history of humanity.**

## *Why This Community? - The Opportunity*

*“The most remarkable feature of this historical moment is not that we are on the way to destroying our world - we've actually been on the way for quite a while. It is that we are starting to wake up, as from a millennia-long sleep, to a whole new relationship to our world, ourselves, and each other. This is the great and necessary adventure of our time.”*

- Joanna Macy

There is reason for tremendous hope and inspiration as well. Collectively, we have available to us powerful tools and a deep knowledge of ourselves and the world. These tools and knowledge can help us bridge to a more just and sustainable human story on the other side of these desperate times.

- **Local Economies** - We are creating vibrant local economies that do not lead to the degradation of the environment or depend on the oppression of others.<sup>2</sup> And we are able to generate clean energy with increasing efficiency.<sup>3</sup>
- **Interconnectedness** - We increasingly understand the interrelation of all species and ecosystems on the planet,<sup>4</sup> as well as the relationship between prosperity and justice in human society and the state of the natural world.<sup>5</sup>
- **Personal Healing** - We have a myriad of ways of exploring human psychology and doing deep healing work, allowing us to recreate ourselves more in the image of who we wish to be and not pass on so much of our pain to others.<sup>6</sup>
- **Oppression & Diversity** - We are increasingly sensitive to the ways prejudice and oppression are passed on, the ways they exist on a systemic level, and the ways they are internalized.<sup>7</sup> And we've developed powerful models for communicating, cooperating, and honoring each other across lines of diversity.<sup>8</sup>
- **Power Dynamics** - We increasingly understand how people, corporations, and governments maintain power and perpetuate norms that tend to exclude the majority of people.<sup>9</sup>
- **Movements** – More than a million autonomous grassroots organizations have been formed within virtually every nation, culture, language, and religion.<sup>10</sup> We have technology that allows people around the world to communicate more easily,<sup>11</sup> and we have a wealth of experience in coalition building.<sup>12</sup>
- **Processes of Reconciliation** - We have experiences of society-wide reconciliation overcoming legacies of deep division and violence, examples of non-violent change that transforms both those who have traditionally been the oppressed and the oppressors.<sup>13</sup>



- **Health** - We are able to combine new technologies and medicines with the deep knowledge of traditional medicine, nutrition, and physical and spiritual practices to maintain optimal health and heal ourselves.<sup>14</sup>
- **Happiness** - We have diverse cultural traditions and scientific research that reveal many common lessons about ways to best support human happiness, and there are strong voices and experiences worldwide that in particular speak to the limitations of material wealth in making us happy once our basic needs are met.<sup>15</sup>
- **Ongoing Engagement** - And we have an increasingly deep appreciation of peace, justice, democracy, and sustainability not as destinations, things which are achieved, but as things that must be nurtured through ongoing individual engagement and persistent personal growth.<sup>16</sup>

### *Why This Community? – How Change Can Occur*

*“If we are to get on the right side of the world revolution,  
we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values.  
When profit and property rights are considered more important than people,...  
racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”*

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

**So where do we go from here? How do we even begin to take hold of this complex and overwhelming situation? How do we use these tools and knowledge in ways that will affect real change?**

First, it is critical to recognize that, at a core level, the vast suffering and destruction in the world are not the result of isolated political or economic problems. They are manifestations of the underlying culture from which they surge. It does little good to struggle to create change in the world if in our own lives and work we are recreating the very norms that give rise to that violence and destruction – to fight against “the machine” while we’re feeding it under the table. Stephen Covey put it simply, “If we keep doing what we’re doing, we’re going to keep getting what we’re getting.”

*To have a meaningful and lasting impact in the world we must create in our personal lives, in our organizations and communities, and within the broader movement, the cultural norms we wish to see in the world. This is the central tenet of Common Fire’s work. From the inside out, and the ground up, we must weave our lives out of the justice and beauty, joy and health we desire for the world.*

**And how do we create a sustainable and just culture with our lives when our visions and actions are so enmeshed with the violent and destructive world around us?**

As sacred beings with profound potential for joy, beauty, creativity, and connection, we are worthy of so much more than the violence, injustice, and destruction of the world we have inherited.

Yet we are of this world, and our daily lives and our very sense of ourselves, our society, and our environment, are enmeshed in this world and shaped by it. Even as we suffer the limitations of this world, we are ourselves recreating our world every day. Even as we are inheritors of the culture we are living and breathing, we are the elders and the ancestors creating the culture our children and grandchildren will live and breathe.

We have the capacity to create a world that is far more just and sustainable. But there is tremendous inertia behind the ways we live and we can only touch a fraction of our potential when we work in isolation.

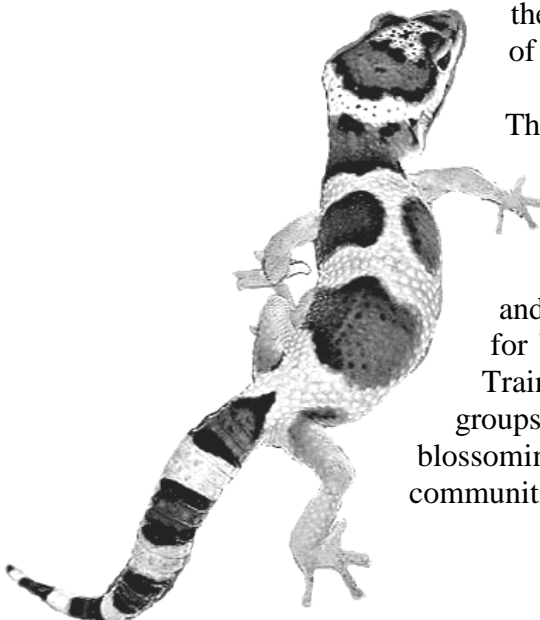
The path is much easier and more effective when we walk it with other people who share our concerns and our hopes for making a better world, creating new cultures and new systems together. We must carve out spaces in the world and in our lives that reflect back to us our highest hopes for ourselves and our planet, spaces that heal the dividedness in our lives - separation between races and genders, between rich and poor, between young and old, between humans and nature.

*"The next Buddha will not take the form of an individual. The next Buddha may take the form of a community; a community practicing understanding and loving kindness, a community practicing mindful living. This may be the most important thing we can do for the survival of the Earth."*

- Thich Nhat Hanh

**The more sustainable and just cultures and systems we need to turn to are already being born.** Committed groups of people around the world are joining together to carve out spaces where they can cultivate new ways of seeing the world and living in the world – and to protect and maintain many of the old ways of indigenous cultures. These small but powerful efforts are not reflected in the mainstream media so their historic significance can be missed, but they hold the seeds of the future.

These seeds are being nurtured at the Tamera community in Portugal, at Gaviotas in Colombia, Findhorn in Scotland, Mitraniketan in India, and in the Zapatista communities in Mexico. They are taking hold in hundreds of ecovillages and communities in the US like Thunder Valley, Twin Oaks and Jubilee Partners, in the temporary communities of the Center for Whole Communities, YES!, Seeds of Peace, the Peacemaker Training Institute, and the World Social Forums, and in the support groups and workplaces informed by Be Present. And they are blossoming in Common Fire's housing co-op and fledgling large-scale communities in New York's Hudson Valley and California's Bay Area.





These communities and many more worldwide are taking a stand for new ways of being in the world that are more joyful, healthy, and in solidarity with other people and the planet.

*"People are aware that they cannot continue in the same old way but are immobilized because they cannot imagine an alternative. We need a vision that recognizes that we are at one of the great turning points in human history when the survival of our planet and the restoration of our humanity require a great sea change in our ecological, economic, political, and spiritual values."*

- Grace Lee Boggs

We have the opportunity:

To act based on what we want for ourselves and the world rather than out of reaction to what we don't want;

To define ourselves by what we aspire to, not by what we resist;

To release into the beauty and sacredness in ourselves and others, rather than holding out against what is negative in the world;

To dedicate our lives to be acts of creation rather than opposition;

To move in the world from a core place of wholeness within ourselves, rather than from places of woundedness and loss.

The difference is subtle, but vital. It shifts how we experience our own lives, opening the door for us to live for ourselves more of what we want for others. It also shifts how others experience us and what we are seeking, motivating people with inspiration and hope where anger and sadness often prevail. It allows us to transcend the dynamics that are giving rise to so much violence and destruction, to imagine entirely new ways of living that honor all beings.

*"If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?"*

- Alexander Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago

**The process of pro-actively creating what we wish to see in the world, starting with ourselves, can run counter to many of our natural tendencies.**

Work that seeks to have a direct impact in the world, such as advocacy, political and legal work, direct services, direct actions, etc., these can be more personally satisfying on a number of levels.

- The work itself can feel very tangible and can provide a way to do something immediately.
- When there are positive results, they are often very concrete – we know what we’ve accomplished, we can see it, we can touch it.
- The results may be profound, providing tremendous relief for the people, places or other beings that are affected. That may include us personally or our families or close community.
- We can experience the gratitude of others who are affected, and sometimes we receive public acknowledgement and praise. We may even achieve a certain social status for our work.

All of these are generally very positive things.

Direct work can also satisfy a desire for simplicity, and a desire to experience ourselves as “good” or “righteous”, which can be positive or not so positive.

Traditional images of social change (or revolution) often offer the prospect of fast change on a large scale. They also usually involve direct confrontation with the “other” people or institutions that are “causing the problems”. In doing so, they often skip over the real complexity of a situation, as well as the complex humanity of each and every person involved in the situation (very few of whom are absolute demons or heroes, yet are often cast that way). And they usually allow people to avoid taking a long hard look at their own faults and the ways they often contribute to the problems in the bigger picture.

In moving right past that complexity – and right past ourselves and each other – we miss the opportunity to affect real change that is grounded in individual transformation and that offers collective liberation. Nothing solid or long-lasting can be built on a foundation that isn’t solid itself.

**But the greatest challenge in doing the work of recreating ourselves and forging new models of community is that neither happens overnight.** And while we’re doing this

slow transformative work, people are dying, the planet is dying. It’s that simple and that real. Anything we do that is not directly saving lives (or saving ecosystems, or species, etc.), is part of them being lost.



But unless we address the underlying systems and culture, many more lives are going to be lost; the very planet may be lost.

It can be heart-wrenching to see so much suffering and destruction taking place and not be able to just jump in and end it, to recognize that it is so vast and deeply rooted that we don't have the resources or conditions to do more than scratch the surface of the situation any time soon. However, there is no silver bullet for the overwhelming crisis we face.

When we acknowledge there is no quick fix and reconcile ourselves to the fact that the world is still going to be incredibly unjust, violent, and destructive tomorrow, and next week, and next year, we free ourselves to focus on the slow, deep work that offers the greatest hope of really making a difference. With this acceptance we can channel our sadness, pain, anger, and hope into work that sets us up to make a difference on a much larger scale in the long run, and really best serve the world, our children, and ourselves.

This is *not* to say that people should not do “direct work” on issues. That work has an important role. It saves countless lives, cultures, ecosystems, and species. It helps politicize people by calling attention to the issues. It inspires people with its successes. It radicalizes people when they come face to face with being ignored, disrespected, demonized, imprisoned or physically abused.

And some people are just really good at doing direct work. They deserve our encouragement and our deep gratitude.

But that doesn't take away from the fact that direct work is by its nature limited in what it can achieve in most situations. As Wendell Barry writes, “I am dissatisfied with such efforts because they are too specialized, they are not comprehensive enough, they are not radical enough, they virtually predict their own failure by implying that we can remedy or control effects while leaving causes in place.”

So even while direct work addresses some very real needs, those needs are still only symptoms of the underlying problems. The world desperately needs people who are focusing on the root causes, people who are committed to doing deep personal work and forging new ways of living in community (and reconnecting with ancient and time-honored ones).

*“We must build a new society within the shell of the old.”*

- Dorothy Day

**History has shown that when people do the work of building the world they want to see, starting with themselves and building outward, they can affect change on a massive scale.**

In probably the most famous example, Gandhi attributed most of the success of the independence campaign in India not to the non-violent direct action he is so famous for, but to his “Constructive Program.” Indeed, Gandhi wrote that political power increases in "exact proportion" to success in the constructive effort.<sup>17</sup>

By “Constructive Program” Gandhi meant:

- For the individual – “increased power-from-within through the development of personal identity, self-reliance, and fearlessness;”
- And for the community – “the creation of a new set of political, social, and economic relations.”<sup>18</sup>

Many people the world over have developed strategies similar to Gandhi’s constructive program.<sup>19</sup> There are three critical benefits that are generally seen in these strategies:

1) **They allow us to “build liberation in the here and now”.**<sup>20</sup> They provide the opportunity for those involved to immediately begin the work of reinventing themselves and their community in line with their values and their true potential as sacred and powerful beings.

They provide alternative ways of interacting with each other and making decisions for the community, alternative forms of work and recreation, and alternative means of securing food and goods – alternatives that meet people’s core needs without contributing to the suffering and destruction they are seeking to overcome.

And to the degree they serve the most marginalized people in a society, they provide immediate assistance to those in greatest need.

2) **They develop in people the perspectives and skills needed to sustain a new society.** As people step into positions of responsibility and power within a new community, and as they put into practice new ways of seeing the world and living in it, they are training themselves to powerfully challenge the existing institutions outside the community. They enter those institutions and transform them from the inside or create alternative institutions.

There is no waiting for a big “revolutionary moment” to abruptly attempt to step into these positions and try to move society in a new direction. Each step is practice for the next, we are always doing the personal and interpersonal work and developing the processes and systems necessary to take the movement to the next level.

3) **They help create powerful alliances** that can go on to build even larger institutions and more effectively challenge the injustices of the existing ones. These alliances are made up of the members of the core community, those being directly served and supported outside the core community, and the broader population that is inspired by the positive vision the community stands for – not just what it stands against – and by its effectiveness in achieving tangible results.



*“You do not have to be good.  
You do not have to walk on your knees  
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.  
You only have to let the soft animal of your body  
love what it loves...  
the world offers itself to your imagination,  
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting —  
over and over announcing your place  
in the family of things.”*

- From “Wild Geese”, by Mary Oliver

There are three other critical benefits to this approach to transformation that are not often considered. First, in doing this inside-out ground-up work, **we’re not only addressing root causes, we’re going beyond them.** This has been the focus already of much of this document. Instead of running around trying to provide cures for everything wrong in the world, we’re weaving a culture and society where the prevention is built right into the health and joy and stability and respect in each person’s life, where so much that is wrong simply cannot take root in the first place.

**Second, it’s incredibly important to note that this approach also creates an inspired and healthy core within the justice and sustainability movement.**

People who are happy and healthy are naturally able to work more effectively and sustain their work. This is something that is noted in for-profit, non-profit, public service and activist sectors alike. Burnout doesn’t help anyone. But we must guard space in the world and in our lives to nurture happiness and health *for its own sake*. This is central to what Grace Boggs refers to as the “restoration of humanity”.

Generations before us have not struggled and given their lives so countless generations after them can also struggle and give their lives. Yet for many people in the movement their lives have come to be defined by “the struggle”, their worth is measured by them and others by how much they sacrifice, and their very sense of self is focused on “helping others”.

Our personal lives and communities often hold little space for the vital practice of simply being human, of “helping ourselves” – taking care of ourselves physically, emotionally, and spiritually, enjoying our relationships with family and friends, connecting with nature, allowing ourselves to experience deep joy and sadness, laughter and tears – savoring life.

If our entire movement is focused on helping others, then where do we, and where do our children, learn the craft of taking care of ourselves and leading rich, fulfilling lives? At what point is the world “fixed enough” that people can start to take the time to live their own lives outside the “struggle”?

This isn't about taking care of ourselves at the expense of others, or to the neglect of others. It's about including ourselves in the circle of compassion we feel for all beings. It's saying that concern for ourselves must go hand in hand with concern for others.

And, **third**, by creating communities where people are not only living in a much more just and sustainable way, but are also healthier and happier, **we can also minimize people for whom this kind of living may seem quite foreign feeling threatened by the change we're modeling.** We can make that change inspiring and inviting even to the people who seemingly most benefit from the way things are currently. Which is a critical element for moving beyond conflict and struggle to reconciliation and collective liberation.

*“Because of this civilization’s obsession with growth, its demise is 100 percent predictable. We simply cannot go on living this way. Our version of life on earth has come to an end... We can either try to plan the transition, even at this late hour, or the physical forces of the world will do it for us—indeed, they already are.”*

- Adam Sacks

We have available to us, then a strategy that offers the possibility of creating communities of people who not only affect deep change within themselves and their immediate communities, but also have an impact that radiates outward, creating significant transformation in the broader society and world. In the traditions of the “tipping point”, the “butterfly effect”, “emergence”, and “field theory”<sup>21</sup>, we never know at what point the quantity of people living differently in the world, and the quality of that difference, will cause a rapid and massive shift on a national or even global level.

There is another possibility that must be considered, though. While the strategy described here is about turning the tide on a broad level, some people believe there is too much inertia behind the systems and values underlying the violence and destruction in our world. It's possible the massive ecological and social crises that are just beginning to unfold worldwide cannot, for the most part, be averted. Perhaps the great purpose of our time is not to turn the tide but *to prepare for the tide and lay the foundation for what will follow.*

But the importance of doing the work of personal transformation and creation of community is the same, even if the reasons are different. Indeed, if our calling is to withstand the tide, it's arguably that much more important that we carve out havens for people to live in different ways. There will be much pain if we are to go through such a transition. These havens will help show the way and lessen that pain. Our highest priority must be to guard the highest and best aspects of the human spirit so we can pass them on to future generations. We must plant the seeds that will sustain them. We are our children's necessary link to humanity's roots, to our hundreds of thousands of years of ancestors, to the source of life.



## *Why This Community? – Bridges to a New Era*

*“Perhaps things will get worse and then better. Perhaps there's a small god up in heaven readying herself for us. Another world is not only possible, she's on her way. Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.”*

- Arundhati Roy

We live in one of the most remarkable eras in human history. We have before us the opportunity to create communities for ourselves and our children that resemble in many ways what may simply be the “norm” for humanity at some point in the future – whether that future is near or distant. In the end, *the true significance of this time lies not in the epic scale of violence and destruction that is being unleashed, but rather in the human communities that are emerging and synthesizing so many learnings about how to live in love and joy, while honoring the earth, each other, and ourselves.*

These communities are being forged in the fires of extreme adversity, yet their creation is one of the greatest moral imperatives of our times. Even in the midst of so much suffering and loss, we stand on the brink of an unprecedented era of integrity and well-being. When the people of that time look back on this era, they will see the creation of these communities as one of the greatest moral imperatives of our time, and a critical juncture in the evolution of our species.



# *Common Fire's Vision of Transformational Communities*

## *Common Fire's Vision – A Brief History of Common Fire*

*"In my life's work, my heart longs for and seeks those who are committed to living and leading by example -- from the ground up and the inside out. Common Fire is a shining and beautiful example of this."*

-- Julia Butterfly Hill, Founder, Circle of Life Foundation; Author, Legacy of Luna

Common Fire ([www.commonfire.org](http://www.commonfire.org)) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit. It was founded in 2001 to help create communities that manifest here and now the more just and sustainable world we all deserve. Our first major project was an award-winning housing co-op which opened in 2006 in New York's Hudson Valley.

Two hours north of New York City, the co-op is a large single family residence specifically designed to support shared living. It's a home where a diversity of people committed to making a difference have come together to inspire and support each other to live more fully into their potential. The resulting cross pollination allows them to create more holistic responses to the challenges of our day, and they can support each other to bring greater integrity into their personal lives.<sup>2</sup>

*"Before living in the co-op, I saw my actions in the world as merely reactions to what the world presented me. After my experience living, learning and growing in the co-op house, I have gained a richer perspective that I can dream of how I want my life to positively and effectively create change in the world using all of my resources, social supports, intention and will power..."*

-- Keisha Lewis, Former Co-op Resident

As just one manifestation of this commitment to integrity, the co-op is the highest scoring green building in the Eastern US and the third highest scoring nationwide, as documented by the US Green Building Council.<sup>3</sup> Among the key features are:

- The building is located on 36 acres of land, most of which have been set aside for permanent conservation;
- It uses 50% less energy than a comparable building, and 90% of that energy is produced on-site by solar panels;

---

<sup>2</sup> You can learn more at [www.commonfire.org/coop](http://www.commonfire.org/coop).

<sup>3</sup> You can learn more at [www.commonfire.org/green](http://www.commonfire.org/green), which provides the most comprehensive introduction to green building on the Internet.



- The building uses 35% less water, is 99.9% PVC/vinyl free, over 50% of the wood used was certified as sustainably harvested and over 20% was salvaged;
- There is an extensive root cellar that allows residents to buy, store, and consume mostly local fruit and vegetables even through the winter.

Other manifestations of people’s commitment to integrity include:

- The time they set aside to share and listen deeply to each other about their thoughts, their dreams, their struggles and their joys;
- The work they have done to document the history of the land and establish relationships with the descendents of the native people who lived on the land;
- The food they eat, which is mostly local, organic, and cruelty-free;
- The simple, non-consumptive lifestyles they maintain, etc.

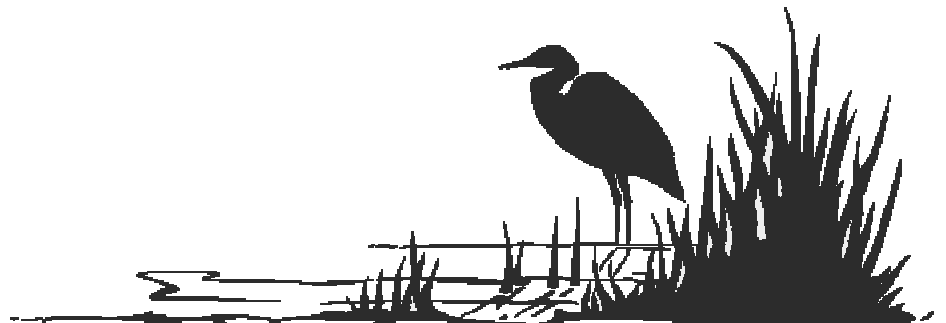
*“Common Fire provides a rare opportunity to get away and recharge in the beauty of the Hudson Valley. But the true experience is being surrounded by inspirational people who’ve dedicated themselves to serving and educating others.”*

-- Jasmine Taylor, Co-Founder, Los Angeles Community Harvest School;  
Former Program Director of Tavis Smiley’s Youth to Leader Programs

The impact of the housing co-op has been felt far beyond the immediate community. Each of the residents is able to prioritize their particular passions and skills thanks to the time and money that are freed up by living together.

More than 2,000 people have come to the co-op for tours and community events there. The co-op provides free and low-cost meeting space for the broader community. This has included a board retreat for the local Worker’s Rights Law Center, a Be Present training for community leaders from the surrounding four counties, and a retreat for social change leaders from New York City exploring the connection between their activism and meditation, art and spirituality.

And more than 50 people have stayed at the co-op on free retreats. These include community organizers, nonprofit leaders, writers, teachers, health-care workers, arts activists and more, mostly from New York City.



## *Common Fire's Vision – Large-Scale Communities & Learning Centers*

*An earlier draft of this document was circulated for feedback in 2007. That feedback had a significant impact on later versions, but at the same time that earlier document itself inspired two groups of people begin the process of creating Common Fire communities. A group of people in New York City and in the Beacon/Newburgh area an hour north of New York City have been meeting since March of 2008, and a group of people mostly from Oakland and Santa Cruz have been meeting since November of 2008.*

*As you read this, know that the vision described here is already being actively pursued by many people, and that at the same time it is a living document and will continue to evolve.*

*"This hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists. The saving of our world from pending doom will come not from the actions of a conforming majority but from the creative maladjustment of a transformed minority."*

- Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Common Fire's vision is to support the development of neighborhood-scale communities and learning centers, eventually one in each major region of the United States. These communities will take the work of our Hudson Valley housing co-op to another level, operating on a larger scale and allowing residents to meet far more of their needs on-site. And they will have an important focus on working with and training people from outside the communities.

These communities will serve as learning grounds for people to experience and experiment with the more just and sustainable world they dream of. They will be places for people to pause, remember, and re-connect with themselves, with the land, with people from different perspectives, and with a sense of purpose, so that more holistic innovations for addressing the change needed in our world can emerge.

Like the co-op, these communities will bring together a broad diversity of people with a shared commitment to:

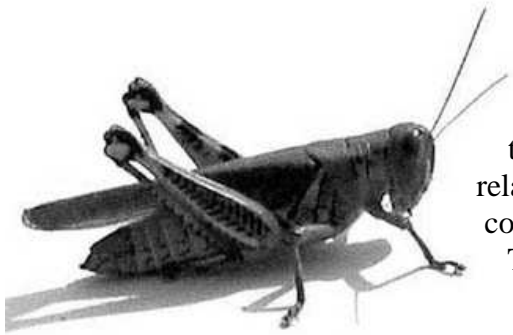
- transforming themselves as they strive to transform the world,
- weaving justice and sustainability into every step of the journey,
- and being engaged in the world beyond the immediate community.

We expect the communities will begin with 20-30 people, expanding to around 100 or more over in the following years, with a steady flow of people visiting, participating in on-site programs, and interning.

Our goal is that money will not be a barrier for people to visit or participate. And people who have never had an experience in communities like these or in a rural or urban areas, whichever the communities are set in, will be given support in getting to the communities and meeting people and learning about community life.

The communities will be located in beautiful settings near major urban centers. They will be sited on land that ranges from 10-200 acres or more.

In addition to living spaces, they will each feature a retreat center, a small guest village for short-term guests, and multipurpose buildings with offices and studio space for non-profits, artists, activists, health care workers, etc. They will also feature some mix of a central kitchen and dining hall, a cafe/lounge, a health center, gardens, and a multi-practice spiritual center (for meditation, religious services, yoga and such).



The buildings will be designed and laid out to immediately inspire a sense of beauty and to foster community. They will be clustered in one or two areas so the overwhelming sense of the experience is one of relationship to the natural environment preserved around the community and to the other people within the community. The facilities will be laid out around a social center/plaza with space for gardens, a playground, a sports field, and an outdoor theater.

The passions and strengths of each community will be different, and so will the projects they undertake. Here are some of the many ventures people have suggested they would like to see in the communities, in addition to the retreat and visitor facilities:

- A training center in the creation and sustaining of intentional communities
- An organic Community Supported Agriculture farm
- An international summer camp for youth
- A birthing center and midwifery training program
- An animal sanctuary
- An alternative school/homeschooling center
- Appropriate technology and permaculture training
- An alternative media outlet
- A recording studio
- A non-profit publishing group
- A meditation and yoga center
- An elder care center
- A holistic healing arts center
- A variety of different residencies for activists, artists, non-profit professionals, educators, and more.

## *Common Fire's Vision – The Role of Common Fire*

*“We need to realize that no single person or school of thought has the answer, because what’s required is far beyond isolated answers. We need to realize that we must inquire together to find the new. We need to turn to one another as our best hope for inventing and discovering the worlds we are seeking.”*

– Margaret Wheatly

Diana Leafé Christian, author of *Creating a Life Together: Practical Tools to Grow Ecovillages and Intentional Communities*, and for 14 years the Editor of *Communities* magazine, has estimated that about 90% of people who come together to create intentional community fail.

Common Fire’s goal is to inspire and inform people’s sense of the importance of the kinds of communities described in this document, and **to help ensure that the groups we work with are among the 10% that succeed**. So we provide strategic support to help them be successful in the initial stages of community-formation through establishing themselves on land and in living and working facilities, on through the challenging initial years on the land. What we offer to our partner communities is:

- The credibility and recognition we’ve established for ourselves through the Tivoli Housing Co-op and our work with the Beacon/Newburgh and Bay Area communities, including having the Tivoli Co-op certified as the highest scoring Green Building in the Eastern US;
- The support of Common Fire’s Board of Directors and network of supporters, who collectively have tremendous experience in creating and sustaining community: legal processes, financial arrangements, fundraising, corporate partnerships, communication, conflict resolution, green design and construction, personal growth, permaculture, recruiting, consensus, etc.;
- In particular, the support of our two full-time Board Director and Co-Founders, Kavitha Rao and Jeff Golden, and their collective 30+ years of manifesting their dreams, managing non-profits, and living in community.
- Significant financial and fundraising support from Common Fire, as well as use of Common Fire’s existing financial infrastructure. That includes templates for loan applications, fundraising appeals, and corporate partnership proposals, a history of impeccable financial audits and reviews, regular bookkeeping, bank accounts, a webpage for online donations, etc. Common Fire also provides visibility and credibility that can attract land sales below market rate, or outright donations;
- A well-developed philosophy of change and community, as summarized in this vision document and the companion video;

- An established corporate structure with final public charity status.
- And existing relationships with related non-profits and community experts.

Common Fire's goal is *not* to own or manage these properties or these communities. And it is *not* to produce cookie cutter copies of the same community. The more people who are engaged in building a community the richer it will be, thanks to the different perspectives and knowledge they each bring. We want people to have the room to give as full an expression of their own passions and wisdom as possible. We want to support them in shaping the culture, processes and structures of their communities in ways that reflect their unique spirits and the unique needs, opportunities, cultures and geography of their local region.

This vision document, and the four essential characteristics described in the next section, provide a critical foundation for the specific kind of community we believe is desperately needed at this point in history. And we have expectations that the groups we work with will generally follow established best practices in community development. But, beyond that, we are very excited to see tremendous variety in the communities that emerge.

At the same time, in a sort of parallel process, our vision is that there will be a high degree of independence for individuals within the communities to manifest work that is meaningful for them and adaptable over time. This piece of our vision is still *very much a work in progress*. We look forward to fleshing out the details with the community groups we're already working with. And it will probably still be different in each community.

But we hope that while the communities will be a tremendous source of support for each person to be successful in their work, at the same time most of the ventures within the communities will not be initiated or managed by the community as a whole.

We believe allowing great autonomy to people in their work will provide the communities with great vitality and resilience. Just as in nature, we want people to be able to respond to the changing context of their community and the broader society, where individuals feel very connected with their work and are empowered to quickly shape it how they think best, and where a variety of perspectives and models of working can unfold at the same time.<sup>22</sup>



## *Common Fire's Vision – Essential Characteristics of the Communities*

*“One of the greatest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that the oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings’ consciousness... Once a situation of violence and oppression has been established, it engenders an entire way of life and behavior for those caught up in it – oppressors and oppressed alike.”*

-- Paulo Freire

One of the greatest challenges in manifesting this vision will be the question of how to create communities that do not simply replicate the norms of the broader society and that address the deepest needs of this time. This will require an intentional commitment to certain principles and practices. Everyone who lives and works in the communities will commit to being part of the larger experiment of creating and nurturing a community that reflects the kind of world we wish to live in. And beyond that, there are four essential characteristics of Common Fire communities, characteristics that we believe are critical for the time we’re living in.

### ***Essential Characteristics – Engagement of a Diversity of People***

It’s essential that a diversity of people be engaged in all facets of the evolution of the communities.

By diversity we mean the broad variety of characteristics that make people different in their values, perspectives, and experiences. We celebrate the uniqueness of each person, and at the same time when we speak of valuing diversity, we give much greater weight to those characteristics that most deeply differentiate between people and those that historically have affected people’s ability to self determination.

We already count among our supporters a great diversity of people who, like you, are helping shape the vision of the communities. The circle of people who help manifest the vision will be similarly diverse. And one of the major criteria that will be used to select the Autonomous Ventures that will be part of each community and the groups that will use the retreat center will also be the ways they contribute to the diversity of the community.

Diversity is a critical aspect of the communities for a number of reasons:

- Engaging with a diversity of people (and other creatures) draws them more fully into our circles of compassion, deepening our sense of connection with a broader range of beings and strengthening our concern for them. This is true whether we largely identify (or are identified by others) as part of a marginalized community, a “dominant” community, or mixes of the two. Meaningful engagement with people we perceive as very different from us has also been documented as a

significant factor in the development of a commitment to service (an “altruistic personality”).<sup>23</sup>

- It allows us to create visions of the world and strategies for change that better reflect the needs of *all* of us, and that better reflect our collective wisdom for how to address those needs. In turn it allows us to build stronger, broader alliances in support of our efforts.
- Investing power in people from marginalized communities (as one aspect of engaging a diversity of people) is critical for us to counter the massive bias that exists in how resources get used in the world and the ways the needs of marginalized people tend not to be addressed – or tend to be addressed in ways that are totally inadequate.\*
- The lack of understanding and compassion across lines of diversity is one of the root causes of many significant issues in the world, so working on strengthening communication across these same lines is itself a fundamental aspect of affecting those issues. In other words, effective engagement across lines of diversity not only helps us be more effective in creating change in the world, *it is in itself* creating change in the world.
- These communities are dedicated to helping create new realities, to breaking with the destructive and violent norms of the broader society. Engaging with a diversity of people – who already have different views of the world and different norms for how they live – is one of the most effective ways of challenging people’s assumptions and helping free their minds to imagine new possibilities.

Whether someone visits a community for a day or lives there for decades, whether they eat a single meal in the dining hall or do a long-term study of some aspect of the community, we look forward to them having the rich and all-too-rare experience of being part of a truly diverse community.

---

\* Power by its very nature insulates people from knowledge of the reality of marginalized people (and other creatures), whether we are ourselves of marginalized communities or largely dominant ones or a mix of both. People tend to work with, school with, and socialize with people of similar status in society. So their own values and perspectives on the world, including their limited knowledge of the circumstances of more marginalized people, is reinforced as normal. And their own concerns and challenges come to define their sense of what needs to be addressed in the world. So that’s where their resources tend to go, trapping power in the circles where it already exists. Even the perspectives of marginalized people are deeply affected by schooling, media, and other systems owned and operated primarily by non-marginalized people.

And to the degree the reality of marginalized people is understood and valued, it is difficult for that reality to be altered. The more a person benefits from the way things are in the world and is not personally threatened by them (or the more marginalized a person is and fearful of still greater repression) the easier it is to accept the way things are and settle into a life of personal comfort and safety. The easier it also is to accept partial solutions to problems in the world when more complete solutions would more fundamentally challenge the way things are. And the easier it is to fall into pursuing one’s limited self-interest even while intending to pursue the greater good.

## Essential Characteristics – Ongoing Personal Growth and Dialogue

*“The true focus of revolutionary change is never the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within us.”*

-- Audre Lorde

Healthy relationships and communication are the cornerstone of any effective movement for transformation in the world. Without a basic level of trust, openness and respect among people, the movement becomes fragmented and driven by fear, jealousy, and ego. Personal growth and opportunities for collective learning become stifled and people become dissatisfied and disillusioned. Where trust, openness and respect are nurtured, people are happier, more effective, and more resilient in the face of challenges.

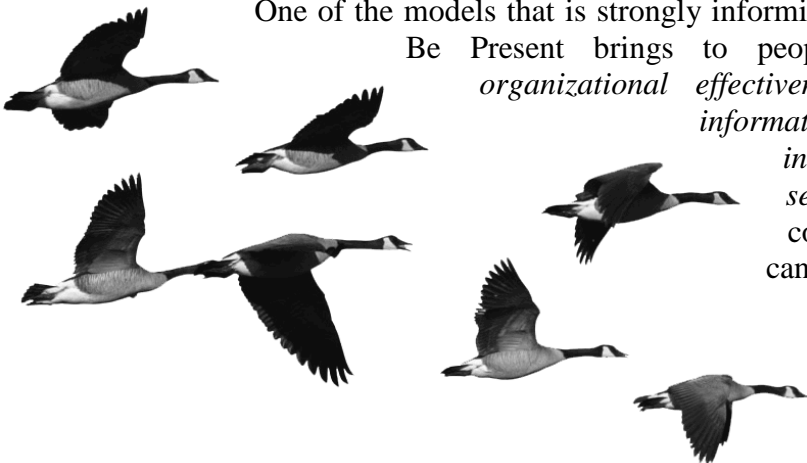
So a cornerstone of our vision is that all people living in the communities will participate in some form of ongoing personal development work and engaged dialogue with others. What these practices and spaces will actually look like is not yet clear and there will be flexibility to allow different models to unfold at the same time and inform each other. But the common denominator will be that they will help community members and visitors:

- support personal growth and healing;
- understand and relate to each other as deep, sacred beings, as well as complex beings with a broad range of needs, desires, and fears;
- facilitate the development of understanding and trust among people.

It will also be essential that these spaces and processes allow people to grapple with the issues of the world as they arise in the process of both work and play, and for them to be dealt with in a very personal, honest way. By allowing people to explore the roots of societal problems within themselves and the way they live, the engagement with others not only helps people be more effective in their work in the world, it *is* itself some of the most important work they can be doing in the world.

One of the models that is strongly informing our thinking is that of Be Present.

Be Present brings to people *“a model for personal and organizational effectiveness which replaces silence with information, assumptions with a diversity of insights, and powerlessness with a sense of personal responsibility.”* We continue to explore what this model can look like in our community settings.





Our work is also informed by:

- The model of the Tamera community in Portugal where every person in the community participates in “forum”, a support group that meets 2-3 times a week.
- Paulo Freire’s idea of “praxis”, a continual blending of action and reflection where they each inform the other. Also his idea of education work being the foundation for transforming situations of oppression, and where the only meaningful education work involves an engagement of a diversity of people as equals learning from each other and starting from each of their realities as they see and live them.
- The related idea of praxis in the tradition of liberation theology, where the combination of reflection and action are essential to realizing each of us as “historic beings”, not *subjects* of history but *actors* in creating history.
- We are also seeking to ground this work in traditions that are much longer lived than these. We are looking to bring more fully into this visioning process and into these communities, people who have experience with indigenous traditions around commitments to dialogue in groups and as a community, including the Maori tradition of wangara, and other practices that have been sustained by groups of people for at least seven generations.
- And we are looking forward to seeing how work around the concept of “communities of practice” (and “learning organizations” and “learning communities”) that have been rigorously developed in the past decade in the for-profit world can help inform our work.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Essential Characteristics – Aligning Our Lives with Our Beliefs***

*“When one tugs at a single thing in nature,  
[one] finds it attached to the rest of the world.”*

- John Muir

*“We must make it easier for people to be good.”*

- Peter Maurin

*“Let them march all they want, as long as they pay their taxes.”*

- Alexander Haig, US Secretary of State, 1982

We will seek to nurture community-wide cultures and systems where benefiting from the exploitation of another person or creature, or benefiting at the expense of future generations, is just unacceptable. Specifically, community members will set a high bar when it comes to deciding who they are willing to work with and support, generally

avoiding organizations, businesses, and practices that compromise the well-being of other people or creatures, and conversely seeking opportunities to support those that are aligned with the communities' visions.

This may sound like simple common sense, yet it runs counter to the dominant economic and social norms throughout much of the world today. Indeed, a huge portion of the violence and destruction occurring in the world today arises not from malice, but from people being invested in the current systems and contributing to them in small ways – small ways that add up and that collectively give the systems their power.<sup>25</sup> In fact, it's almost impossible to live in the US today and not participate – and be complicit in – these systems. The conventional ways of how we get around and what we eat and how we interact with one another and on and on – all of these are generally bound up with the suffering of other people or creatures or the degradation of the planet.

The problem is particularly striking when it concerns people who are actively trying to create change in the world. There are so many people making major sacrifices throughout the world – giving of their passion, their brilliance, their very lives – to create change in the world. Usually they are working in a single issue area, and success is measured by both them, their colleagues, and the public based on the specific campaign at hand. The result is that most of the time they are not only not supporting people working in other issue areas, they are undermining each others' efforts as they maintain a singular focus on that one campaign. In some aspects of their lives they are often even undermining their own efforts.

Some real life examples include:

- major environmental nonprofits that invest their endowments in companies that are documented as serious environmental offenders;
- unions and labor-rights groups that buy posters and buttons for their pro-labor campaigns that are produced in sweatshops or that use paper from clear cuts;
- social justice organizations that hold their trainings at facilities that get their electricity from coal-fired power plants located in communities of color or furniture from prison labor;
- people fighting global warming who frequently fly great distances or who buy food transported from the other side of the planet.

Each of these actions may seem small and insignificant, but collectively they are what give such power to the institutions and practices that underlie much of what we are seeking to transform. While we are each fighting the good fight in our small arenas, when you step back you can see that those small arenas are themselves operating within and feeding the broader system and culture.\*

---

\* This is related to another problem in the way people often try to create change in the world. People have a tendency to see the ways other people are causing problems in the world, but not themselves. And so we tend to all play the game of trying to get others to change but not engaging ourselves in the kind of critical self-analysis that we want other people to engage in – not recognizing that for many people we are “the other” that *they* are pointing at.

The Common Fire communities will provide environments for people to move beyond this “business as usual” way of life. It’s much easier to learn about the connections between our actions and what’s going on in the world – and to make the relevant changes in our everyday lives – if we are living and working in a supportive community of people. This is not to say that everyone in the communities will agree on everything. But they will share a commitment to live more in line with their values, and they can support each other to creatively come up with solutions. The diverse perspectives of people working on different projects within the communities will allow everyone to broaden the scope of their own work and learn about the many ways the work we do affects and intersects with the work of others.

It’s our intention that this spirit will pervade all aspects of community life, but a few specific examples already stand out. Our commitment to diversity and ongoing dialogue in the communities are two important examples. Others include:

- In the spirit of Common Fire’s award-winning housing co-op in New York (certified as the greenest building in the Eastern United States), all facilities will be constructed or renovated to not just meet basic criteria for green building, but to be models of environmental and social integrity. 100% of the energy consumption will be from clean, renewable sources.
- Again, as has already been modeled by the Common Fire Housing Co-op, we will strive to have most of our food produced on-site or locally and regionally, as well as organically. We will seek to meet as many of our other needs for goods and services locally or regionally and through businesses and individuals that themselves buy locally, are cooperatively owned or are unionized or have documented fair labor practices, are animal-cruelty free, and that are environmentally sustainable.
- We are striving to locate the communities near access to public transportation, ideally near trains as they are so much more energy-efficient than cars and buses. We will also strive to use means of transportation within the communities that are based on clean, renewable energy sources.
- Common Fire has begun some very exciting conversations with a broad spectrum of people thinking about financial compensation and sustainable work practices for staff. All of the autonomous community ventures will be invited to engage in a dialogue about how we can bring our compensation plans into alignment with our higher goals. What does it look like to work for justice and sustainability in what is currently the most materially rich country in the world and still stand in solidarity with our global neighbors and the planet? How do we attempt to model a different relationship to money and private ownership while still meeting each of our differing needs, and still acknowledging that we live and operate within the greater economic reality of our time?



A lot of thought has already gone into answering some of these questions and laying out models that provide for simple yet rich lives, affording people healthy homes and food, wellness funds and health care, savings for when/if they ever leave the community, access to transportation/vehicles, money for retirement, and support to meet the specific needs of children, aging parents, and more. It will be a very exciting dialogue to see how this emerges for all the diverse participants in these communities

- Everyone living in the communities will be responsible for participating in some way in the political life of the community. It is not yet clear what this will look like, but the Common Fire Housing Co-op and its Board of Directors operate using a blend of informal and formal consensus. We are excited to explore ways different responsibilities can be divided up in the community and ways we can learn from models of formal consensus in large groups and models of dynamic governance/sociocracy. Access to power will be shared through structures like: participatory democracy, routine skill-building and information sharing, rotation of leadership roles, and frequent evaluations.

### *Essential Characteristics* – **From Transformation in the Community to Transformation in the World**

*“I think I have told you, but if I have not you must have understood,  
that a man who has a vision is not able to use the power of it until he has performed  
the vision on the Earth for the people to see.”*

- Black Elk

We want to set up structures beforehand that allow us to maximize the impact we have in the broader society, **sharing information and inspiring others**. One piece of this is that Common Fire will be responsible for implementing a program designed to receive a significant number of visitors and allow them to learn about and have a meaningful experience in the community. It will accommodate visitors for anywhere from a day to a week and beyond. We expect there will be an internship component as well.

Common Fire will also strive to support its staff in the communities to take regular trips to visit other communities, non-profits, and conferences to support a cross-pollination of ideas and energy. We will encourage a similar arrangement for people in the various Autonomous Ventures.

Meg Wheatly of the Berkana Institute writes about the importance of this kind of work in the context of “emergence.”

*Emergence is life's process for taking local actions to achieve global impact. In nature, change never happens as a result of top-down, pre-conceived strategic plans, or from the mandate of any single individual or boss. Change begins as local actions spring to life simultaneously around*

*the system... Emergence happens through connections. Therefore, any process that can catalyze connections becomes the means to achieve change at a global level. We are working intentionally with this powerful process when we name, connect, resource, and illuminate communities of practice. Inside these communities, leaders learn quickly, create new practices, and feel supported in their pioneering work. And through emergence, their relatively small, local efforts can become a global force for change, powerful enough to create the world we all desire, a world where the human spirit flourishes as the blessing, not the problem.*

Another aspect of being strategic is taking our impact into the world is **focusing our energies incrementally outward from the communities**. This is something that again is already taking shape at the Common Fire Housing Co-op. Members of the co-op are helping to organize progressive people moving into positions of power in the local town.

Working outward from the Common Fire communities into the local towns/cities is important for a number of reasons:

- Focusing our energy on local change means building from our place of greatest strength. There will be a large number of allies within our own community who are already having the meaningful discussions that allow them to be effective allies. The community will also tend to attract people to the local towns who have similar commitments to transformation in the world.
- Keeping our energies focused on a smaller local arena rather than dissipating them more broadly means our influence can be much deeper and more thorough. We have emphasized already in this document how important we believe it is to nurture deep change over broad change as the cornerstone of really getting beyond the root causes of so many problems in the world today. Beyond that, we believe that a more profound transformation in the local area is more likely to inspire and inform people in other places who can undertake similar processes.

We have been urged to think about how **technology** can be leveraged to have an even greater impact. We are already committed to sharing as much of our own learnings and vision on our website for free, as we have done with the Housing Co-op in New York. But this idea of leveraging technology is new to us and there is probably great potential that we have not yet figured out how to tap.

### *Essential Characteristics – A Final Few*

- We want these to be places where people can connect deeply with nature. This means we are looking for places of great natural beauty, and it means we are committed to supporting the conservation of large tracts of natural and agricultural lands around the communities, both on the property and in the area in general, including establishing conservation easements on our properties. We will also strive to protect the most beautiful places on the land in their natural form,



placing buildings away from those places and places of greatest ecological importance.

- We want these to be places where people can connect deeply with other people, with themselves, with their own spirituality. Among other things, we will strive for the buildings to be inspiring for their beauty as well as their “greenness”. We’ll also strive to keep motorized vehicles to the periphery of the communities, except as needed for physically challenged people and moving furniture, food, etc.
- It’s important that the communities be non-dogmatic. It has been a key part of the culture of the Common Fire Housing Co-op that it is very welcoming and relatively comfortable for a diversity of people. We will strive to maintain a similar spirit in these communities, loving and honoring each other in our weaknesses and pains and unique paths, while also seeing in each other the potential to always learn more and more fully align our lives with our values.
- We will strive to provide models of simple yet deeply rich living. Particularly in today’s world that is so driven by consumption and materialism, living simply is one of the most powerful paths available to help us find personal fulfillment as well as create a more just and sustainable world. It frees us from the treadmill of working and pursuing material wealth that has no correlation with quality of life once our basic needs are met, and that often decreases quality of life above a certain income. It gives us the possibility of having more time and money to dedicate to our personal lives and to critical social and environmental work. It gives us greater freedom as consumers to choose to not buy the products of companies that are causing great harm in the world. And it gives us greater freedom as workers to not feel the need to take jobs or stay tied to them if they are contributing to suffering and destruction in the world.



## Citations and Notes

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Extinction Dave Foreman, Confessions of an Eco-Warrior, p1  
[http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/051758123X/ref=sib\\_fs\\_bod/105-3335974-0842042?ie=UTF8&p=S00C&checksum=SjfnB5zsvnCc291LCCae%2FB5s1OI7ir9uQ3Fp1WVT1M%3D#reader-link](http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/051758123X/ref=sib_fs_bod/105-3335974-0842042?ie=UTF8&p=S00C&checksum=SjfnB5zsvnCc291LCCae%2FB5s1OI7ir9uQ3Fp1WVT1M%3D#reader-link)
- Global warming affecting all ecosystems World's wildlife and environment already hit by climate change, major study shows, The Guardian, May 15 2008  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2008/may/15/climatechange.scienceofclimatechange>  
“Is the New UN Global Warming Report Too Conservative?”  
Monthly Review Feb 2, 2007 <http://www.monthlyreview.org/mrzine/cf170207.html>
- Forests UN Env't Programme <http://earthwatch.unep.net/emergingissues/forests/forestloss.php>
- Land degradation Intl Food Policy Research Inst “Global Study Reveals New Warning Signals” May 21, 2000 <http://www.ifpri.org/pressrel/2000/052500.htm>
- Plastic in oceans Derrick Jensen, “World at Gunpoint”, Orion Magazine, May/June 2009  
<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/4697/>
- World fisheries UN Food and Agriculture Org <http://www.defyingoceansend.org/gjerde.asp>
- Seafood stocks Science Magazine, “Impacts of Biodiversity Loss on Ocean Ecosystem Services”  
<http://www.pewoceanscience.org/press/press-article.php?ID=58>
- Coral reefs “Time bomb ticking for coral reefs?” MSNBC Oct 27, 2006  
<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15412865/from/RS.5/>
- Factory farms Humane Society of the US <http://www.hsus.org/farm/humaneeating/>
- Global hunger Worldwatch Institute State of the World 2005 Trends and Facts  
<http://www.worldwatch.org/node/73>
- Global access to water UNICEF [http://www.unicef.org/progressforchildren/2006n5/index\\_35524.htm](http://www.unicef.org/progressforchildren/2006n5/index_35524.htm)
- International arms trade BBC <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4238644.stm>
- Active conflicts World policy Institute  
<http://www.worldpolicy.org/projects/arms/reports/PRWaW052505.html>
- Child soldiers Human Rights Watch <http://www.humanrightswatch.org/campaigns/crp/facts.htm>
- US financial status Angus Maddison, The World Economy: Historical Statistics  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_past\\_GDP\\_%28PPP%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_past_GDP_%28PPP%29)  
*Note: we do not in any way equate financial status (in this case GDP) with well-being or general “richness” of a country and its people. We believe it’s important to highlight how financially rich the US is to put into sharp relief how immoral its priorities are. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the US GDP was vastly larger than that of any other country, and GDPs in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were vastly larger than at any other time in history.*
- US budget and military War Resisters League <http://www.warresisters.org/piechart.htm>
- Cost to eradicate poverty, hunger, etc. World Bank  
<http://www.worldbank.org/html/extdr/mdgassessment.pdf>  
*Note: we do not necessarily agree with all of the measures of “well-being” as captured in the Millennium Development Goals, nor do we necessarily agree with the strategies the UN and others (including the World Bank) recommend for achieving them. We do believe that a significant difference could be made in the world on these and other issues by shifting how the US government uses its resources and we use this statistic to highlight one ways of measuring the potential impact of such a shift.*
- Suicide/Homicide World Health Organization  
<http://www.who.int/entity/healthinfo/statistics/bodgbdeathdalyestimates.xls>
- US prison population Kings College London, International Centre for Prison Studies  
<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/rel/icps/world-prison-population-list-2005.pdf>
- Black men in prison Urban Habitat Race, Poverty and the Env't <http://urbanhabitat.org/node/856>
- Disenfranchised black men Human Rights Watch <http://www.hrw.org/reports98/vote/usvot98o.htm>
- Domestic violence Nat'l Organization of Women <http://www.now.org/issues/violence/stats.html>
- Children homeless Nat'l Center on Family Homelessness  
[http://www.familyhomelessness.org/pdf/fact\\_children.pdf](http://www.familyhomelessness.org/pdf/fact_children.pdf)

---

Health insurance Congressional Budget Office, “How Many People Lack Health Insurance and For How Long?”, May 2003 <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdoc.cfm?index=4210&type=0&sequence=1>

Population stats UN, “The World at Six Billion”

<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/sixbillion/sixbilpart1.pdf>

Peak oil summary Upstate House, “Peak Oil and Our Future”, Jeff Golden

<http://www.upstatehouse.com/archive/article.php?dept=81&issue=45>

Peak oil stats <http://www.lifeaftertheoilcrash.net/> <http://www.energybulletin.net/primer.php>

<sup>2</sup> The EF Schumacher Society, <http://www.smallisbeautiful.org/>

The New Rules Project, <http://www.newrules.org/>

The Fair Trade Movement, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fair\\_trade](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fair_trade)

<sup>3</sup> “Fast Facts – Cost of Renewable Energy”, Network for New Energy Choices,

[http://www.newenergychoices.org/index.php?sd=no&page=mediaKit\\_reCosts](http://www.newenergychoices.org/index.php?sd=no&page=mediaKit_reCosts)

The Citizen-Powered Energy Handbook: Community Solutions to a Global Crisis (great overview of renewable energy options and initiatives individuals and communities can take), Greg Pahl

“Green Dreams” (on biofuels)

<http://magma.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/2007-10/biofuels/biofuels.html?fs=www.nationalgeographic.com>

“Whither Wind” (on wind)

<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/178/>

“Reasons Not to Glow” (primer on why nuclear is not the way to go),

<http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/316/>

And for a paper that cites the ways solar is coming down in price but is much more an argument for ways to greatly increase the cost-effectiveness of clean energy going forward:

“Fast, Clean, Cheap: Cutting Global Warming’s Gordian Knot”, Harvard Law and Policy Review, January 2008

<http://thebreakthrough.org/blog/Fast%20Clean%20Cheap%20HLPR%20v6.doc>

<sup>4</sup> Insert Citations: interrelation of all species and ecosystems

<sup>5</sup> Insert Citations: the intimate relationship between the state of the natural world and our connectedness with nature to the state of peace, prosperity, and justice in human society

What is a Whole Community?, Peter Forbes,

[http://www.wholecommunities.org/pdf/publications/What\\_is\\_a\\_Whole\\_Community.pdf](http://www.wholecommunities.org/pdf/publications/What_is_a_Whole_Community.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Insert Citations: ways of exploring human psychology and doing deep healing work

<sup>7</sup> Insert Citations: sophisticated understanding of the ways prejudice and oppression are passed on, the ways they exist on a systemic level, and the ways they are internalized.

<sup>8</sup> Insert Citations: models for communicating, organizing, and honoring each other across lines of diversity

<sup>9</sup> Insert Citations: the ways people, corporations, and governments maintain power and perpetuate perspectives and norms that tend to exclude the majority of people

<sup>10</sup> Blessed Unrest, Paul Hawken, <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/265/>

<sup>11</sup> Insert Citations: technology that allows diverse people around the world to much more easily and rapidly communicate

<sup>12</sup> Insert Citations: coalition and movement

<sup>13</sup> There are a tremendous number of books and articles that explore South Africa’s experience with its Truth and Reconciliation Committee, including No Future Without Forgiveness by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Country of My Skull by Antjie Krog. Long Night’s Journey Into Day is an award-winning documentary that looks at the Commission’s work.

“Rethinking Truth and Reconciliation Commissions: Lessons from Sierra Leone” is an interesting 2005 document by the US Institute of Peace that looks a situation where the South African model didn’t necessarily work so well in another circumstance. <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr130.html>

<sup>14</sup> Insert Citations: combine new technologies and medicines with the deep knowledge of traditional medicine, nutrition, and physical and spiritual practices

<sup>15</sup> Insert Citations: diverse cultural traditions and scientific studies common lessons human happiness, strong voices and experiences worldwide limitations of material wealth.



---

The Art of Happiness, His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, <http://theartofhappiness.com/>

Your Money or Your Life, Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, 1999. <http://www.yourmoneyyourlife.org/>

“All They Are Saying Is Give Happiness a Chance”, New York Times, Nov. 12, 2007,  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/12/opinion/12mon4.html>

“The Futile Pursuit of Happiness”, New York Times, Sept. 7, 2003, [http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~dtg/Futile\\_Pursuit.htm](http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~dtg/Futile_Pursuit.htm)

“Happiness Doesn’t Cost the Earth”, BBC, July 12, 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/science/nature/5169448.stm> and The  
Happy Planet Index, compiled by the New Economics Foundation, <http://www.happyplanetindex.org/>

“Is Great Happiness Too Much of a Good Thing?”, Washington Post, Oct. 1, 2007,  
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/09/30/AR2007093000632.html?hpid=moreheadlines>

<sup>16</sup> Insert Citations: increasingly deep appreciation of peace, justice, democracy, and sustainability not as destinations, things which are achieved, but as things that must be recreated every day through ongoing individual engagement and persistent personal growth

<sup>17</sup> “Reading Gandhi” by Tom Weber of the The Transnational Foundation for Peace and Future Research,  
[http://transnational.org/SAJT/forum/Nonviolence/2004/Weber\\_ReadingGandhi.html](http://transnational.org/SAJT/forum/Nonviolence/2004/Weber_ReadingGandhi.html)

“Gandhi’s Constructive Program — and Ours”, Joanne Sheehan, <http://www.peaceworkmagazine.org/node/234>

“Constructive Program”, Janet Chisholm of the Fellowship of Reconciliation,  
<http://www.forusa.org/programs/decade/const-program.html>

<sup>18</sup> Robert Burrowes, “The Strategy of Nonviolent Defense: A Gandhian Approach”

<sup>19</sup> The idea of a “constructive program” as used broadly in this document is generally equivalent to “prefigurative work” and is similar to the idea of “dual power”. People interested in specific examples of the three critical benefits of constructive programs or a more detailed exploration of how they work and the role they can play in radically transforming societies on a larger scale will find plenty to read by doing a search using any of these three terms. For a light, quick intro to the idea of prefigurative work: “Prefigurative Politics in the Pro-Democracy Movement”,

Amoshaun Toft, <http://www.social-ecology.org/harbinger/vol2no1/prefigurative.html>

A good overview of the concept of “dual power”: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dual\\_power](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dual_power)

For a very academic and historic look at prefigurative work in the Communist/Marxist tradition: Marxism,

Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers’ Control, Carl Boggs

<http://www.geocities.com/cordobakaf/boggs.html>

“The Sword that Heals” by George Lakey is a great overview of the importance of non-violent struggle, with a brief reference to the concept of prefigurative work.

<http://www.markrudd.com/activism-now/challenging-ward-churchills-pacifism-as-pathology/>

<sup>20</sup> Chris Crass, “Developing a Power Analysis”, Jan 26, 2007.

<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=11958>

<sup>21</sup> “Tipping point”, “butterfly effect”, “emergence”, and “field theory” references

<sup>22</sup> Organizational development literature refers to these kinds of models as “chaordic” (a combination of chaos and order), “self-organizing”, and “cellular”. A good business-oriented overview of the evolution of this organizational form, its risks and benefits, check out “Organizing in the knowledge age: anticipating the cellular form”, Miles, et al, 1997, [http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary\\_0286-297283\\_ITM](http://www.accessmylibrary.com/coms2/summary_0286-297283_ITM)

<sup>23</sup> Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World, Laurent A. Parks Daloz, Cheryl H. Keen, James P. Keen, and Sharon Daloz Parks

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.infed.org/biblio/communities\\_of\\_practice.htm](http://www.infed.org/biblio/communities_of_practice.htm)

<sup>25</sup> Insert citation: small ways we become invested and complicit in the system