

*In Issue #25 of Living Lightly, Ervin Laszlo asked what would happen if we all evolved our consciousness. This article by Christobel Munson traces the steps of a small rural Australian community to work out a way that allows the people in it to live together in conscious awareness, and to deal effectively with conflict without resorting to cold warfare.*

## LIFE AS US: *The Challenge of Living Together* by Christobel Munson

**E**stablishing an intentional community in the countryside is a challenge. At one end, there's the idealistic vision: to break away from the anonymity of big city living to set up a workable community with others with a similar outlook. To share one parcel of land with the companionship and support of other families and individuals, where your individuality is valued and respected. To work out basic rules for co-existing on that common land...

At the other end of the spectrum, there's the cold, hard reality of everyday life.

Finding the money to pay for common projects such as roads and repairs; finding the time to plant and maintain trees; working with people who, at some point, are sure to press your buttons.

To breathe life into a community so that real people find practical ways to live in harmony over long periods of time, means trying to find a comfortable way to live that's balanced somewhere between 'me' (my needs) and 'we' (the needs of the community). Unlike living in the suburbs where you buy an apartment or a house and hope the neighbours won't intrude too much on your privacy, setting up a community is a bit like choosing a new family. There's one difference. You don't have to take potluck with the neighbours. You get to choose them.

One small intentional community of 12 households located near Byron Bay, on Australia's east coast, is breaking new ground. In a shire where there are 37 communities, many dating back to the hippy era of the 1970s and 80s, the people of this 113-acre farm, Jindibah, have decided to take community living beyond sharing the rice and dhal and regenerating rainforest, to what they see as the most important aspect: finding a way to live together and deal with their differences day-by-day.

After the founding members had experienced the anguish of two early members leaving the community in a storm cloud of cold war and threatened litigation, those remaining paused to reflect. Beyond the platitudes and idealism, they found what mattered to them most was a need to develop a common language to deal with differences, and, let's be honest, conflict.

### COHESIVE COMMUNITY LIVING

Enter Greg McHale, a local psychotherapist. He was given a brief to help the Jindibah community to develop a way they could be themselves and co-exist, without tearing at each other's throats when opinions differed. What they wanted was a blue print for living together as a cohesive community.

Several community members had long experience working with a Jung-like psychological approach to self-discovery known as Psychology of Selves, or Voice Dialogue (VD) and the Aware Ego. Developed by Doctors Hal and Sidra Stone, who are based in Northern California, VD allows an individual to experience and observe their many differing 'selves'.

Greg McHale had trained with the Doctors Stone and worked with

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VD for more than 20 years. He shared the views of the Jindibah people in perceiving this approach could work well here. Having lived on a community in Maleny, Queensland, for five years before moving to the Byron area, he had first-hand experience of both the benefits and the internal difficulties faced by communities.

In McHale's opinion, VD "values the flavours of diversity. It respects opposites, so that nothing is right or wrong. It's a wonderful process because it's non-blaming." His community experience had shown him that difficulties surfaced around values. Pets, for instance, can provoke fury and rage.

Intentional communities today are still perceived to be somewhat 'New Age'. McHale points out that the New Age perspective is often overly identified with 'the light'. He finds it tends to disown its shadow side, namely conflict, anger and vulnerability. Conflict is then perceived to be outside a conscious, spiritual, communal life, and is something to be avoided. But if anger is suppressed and conflict avoided, the neighbour's barking dog can end up getting drowned, as happened in a community in an adjoining shire.

"One of the problems of community life is managing conflict. It can be a major obstacle. The VD model, in the way it views bonding patterns (see BOX below), can be a powerful and helpful model to view conflict", McHale says.

## DIFFERENCES ARE NATURAL

So in the Jindibah community, the fundamental thought is that differences between people are a natural part of life, even between people whose objectives are apparently the same. We don't all think the same way, all the time. They are finding that using the energy stimulated by differing viewpoints can be the catalyst to finding a synergistic solution to a situation.

But it doesn't always work that way. In 'real life', two people can get locked into conflict, or 'hooked' and start to hate each other. At worst, feuds can destroy a community. The key to avoid reaching that point is in the members of the community getting to know themselves and each other so well that they understand where each other's vulnerabilities lie, and what strategies can be called in to protect this vulnerability. In VD terms, this process is sometimes called the development of awareness, or the Aware Ego.

## GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER

Every three months, community members of Jindibah get together for a half-day workshop with Greg McHale. After he gave the group an initial understanding how VD works, explaining the primary and disowned self system and bonding patterns (see BOX), individuals were then ready to see and discuss what triggers off their vulnerability and fears, and how they each react in those situations.

"From that place, community members get to know how each person's personality is structured, what particular primary selves tend to dominate when that person becomes vulnerable, and what are the beliefs of that primary self system. Finally, they discover what that person needs in the moment to feel safe," McHale explains.

For instance, one community member was overly identified with his 'responsible father'. If others were unable to join in on community working

bees, or had to leave early due to external work commitments, he started getting irritable. As his vulnerability, or identification with the 'responsible father' emerged, the community made a budget available and encouraged him to employ outside help when needed. Now everyone is happier.

### CONFLICT AS TEACHER

McHale's position is that conflict can be a teacher. "It's all about vulnerability," he explains. "The outcome is that once people can identify their primary selves, they see how these selves can limit them. Revealing the link between behaviour and vulnerability creates compassion, a valuable outcome. People learn to see that their reaction to each other shows what's missing in themselves. Difficulties are opportunities, not threats. That's a valuable learning experience".

Until the industrial revolution, most humans lived in rural communities. People often grew up and lived in the same area, with the same people, all their lives. They learned about themselves and each other naturally through constant interaction, just the way it happens in a large family. This led to a strong sense of community spirit and identity. As families migrated to the cities for work, that feeling of community has progressively disappeared, leaving many of us feeling isolated and with a sense of loss.

Since the early 1960s a trend to establish 'intentional communities' has emerged right round the world, partly to try and recapture the security and joy of living within an extended family or tribe. Part of that process involves re-learning the skills of living in harmony with others. The Voice Dialogue course developed by the people at Jindibah can be applied in any circumstance, whether it be a small intentional community such as this, or a country, or a business.

Voice Dialogue and the Psychology of Selves is widely used internationally in a number of differing arenas. Utilised in the business world in Holland, France, Australia, the United States and Germany, it is also undertaken in conjunction with other modalities such as psychiatry, with the Meiers Briggs Test, with body and breath work, astrology and dance, and for dealing with death and dying. The Jindibah experiment is the first community use of Voice Dialogue to deal with inter-personal conflict.

#### *How does the Voice Dialogue consciousness model work?*

**Psycho-therapist Greg McHale explains:**

'The Psychology of Selves, Voice Dialogue and the Aware Ego is an approach that looks at the development of 'sub-personalities', or selves, in the personality.

It states that, as a result of conditioning and experiences, we develop what are called primary selves, to protect vulnerability very early on. The parts of us that are opposite these primary selves are pushed into shadow, and become disowned.

In this work, we have the opportunity to experience these selves and to develop awareness around them. This helps us separate from powerful primary selves, and to embrace what is disowned.

This approach also looks at the development of bonding patterns: how we react either positively or negatively to people who hold our disowned parts. For example, people who are primarily identified with nurturing and pleasing others, are often reactive to people who are more self-oriented. This impacts on people's perceptions of each other in community life, often polarising people in "me" versus "we" dynamics, causing reactivity and conflict.

Within communities, people polarise around a number of issues, and bonding patterns emerge.

Typically, people on communities can 'hook into' each other (or "develop a bonding pattern" in the VD model) over such issues as commitment - freedom; personal energy - impersonal energy; mental - physical; pusher - layabout; responsible - irresponsible; adult - child; power - vulnerability; stability - spontaneity; communal (us) - individual (me); poverty consciousness - abundance; organiser - free spirit.'

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