

Interview with Dennis Duermeier

Interviewer: Unknown

October 12, 1995

Q: In what commune(s) did you live? Name (was it known by more than one?); location; dates active; purpose or ideology of the group.

A: The last group of people we lived with moved out about a month ago. It has been more or less continuous with an odd few months here and there, but pretty much continuously since 1968 I have lived in a group situation. I grew up in Topeka and moved in with some people in an apartment in 1968. It was a real political setup. A lot of people living there were in the SDS and organizations like that. There was a peace vigil that went on outside of the state capital every Sunday for years, a silent vigil for peace. I kind of grew out of that situation and met many of the people I ended up living with at that peace vigil. I lived with two other guys but people came and went the whole time. I think of this as my political phase. It was a really heavy time, facing the draft and that kind of stuff. The questions were right in front of you. We didn't have a name and I don't know how long we were together, probably a year and a half.

Q: What other groups besides this one were you involved with?

A: There were a lot of living groups in Lawrence that I was involved in. There was a house on Louisiana Street called Floyd's Big House. I never actually lived there but that was one of the longer lasting communities that I knew of in Lawrence. We lived across the street in a little house called The Big House East. There were about five of us that lived there. We lived in another place at 14th and Tennessee that we called Bad Manners. That was the only place that really had a name because we put it on the door. I lived there with a group of people for about two years. We never paid rent, we never paid utilities, we were sort of just lost in the shuffle. We basically just renovated the place and stayed there. It was one of the cheapest living periods in my life that I can recall. I would have been living at these places between 1972-75.

Q: What was the structure of these two communities? How were chores and housework handled? What were the economic arrangements?

A: On Louisiana Street things were pretty organized. We had an organized cooking schedule, everyone had a house job to do. It seemed like we all kicked in money for groceries and had organized shopping trips. We each cooked one night a week and everyone had a cleaning night after dinner. This was one of the most organized places I've lived in terms of an unintentional community. At Bad Manners it was a lot looser, partly because there wasn't any money pressure on anybody. I was working one day a week doing a delivery job, making about \$30 a week and it was sufficient. We ate together a lot but it just kind of happened. Whoever was around would eat and it just kind of flowed. I think so much of it has to do with personalities involved. Some people are really uncomfortable without a structure. At The Big House East things were structured and at Bad Manners they were free flowing, but both ways seemed to work. When we had the Zen Center here it was really organized. We ate together and there was a cooking and cleaning schedule. People also had Zen Center jobs in the dharma room during practice, things like that. It was really organized at first. We did have kids living here and as time went on my wife and I also had kids, so it became more difficult to maintain that. Also, people that bought into the center wanted to leave and so we had to make financial arrangements for that kind of stuff. It ended up with us owning the house, and as we had more kids it was difficult to maintain the Zen Center schedule so we parted ways. But we couldn't afford to live here alone so we continued to have people living with

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us. It was a group atmosphere at this point but it was more or less like a boarding house. People more or less ate their own food, took care of their own rooms, and kept their own hours.

Q: Did these communities have a central religion or ideology? How were they practiced?

A: Outside of the situation in Topeka and the Zen Center there really wasn't an ideology at the places I've lived. I was personally looking for something that felt like a family, some sort of extended family at the other places. The situation at Bad Manners was the closest to reaching that, outside of my own family.

Q: Did the commune(s) have an open-door membership? An open-door visitor policy? What kinds of living arrangements were there? Were there nuclear family households, or large group households?

A: In Topeka it got to be a hotbed of political activity. It was pretty chaotic as far as the living situation was concerned. There were a lot of people passing through all the time and there wasn't a lot organized about it as far as food or daily living or anything like that. We had a lot of parties, a lot of people sleeping on the floor when you woke up in the morning, that kind of thing. We got booted out of our apartment because of a party we had. One of the guys kept an aquarium and he got really drunk the night of this party. He went in and tried to take his pants off, had them down around his ankles, fell over backwards and landed on this aquarium. It cut his ass really good and we took him to the hospital to get stitched up. Of course all the water went right through the floor and onto the landlords desk in the insurance office downstairs. He came up at 8:00 AM the next morning pounding on the door and that was that. So we got a house and it was kind of the same situation, a lot of people passing through all the time. Again, it was really political. We became foster parents for a guy from Mennigers in that house. Mennigers did this deal that when they felt that someone was ready to leave they would put them in a foster home in the community. We got to know him through this peace vigil and he decided he wanted us to be his foster family when he got out of there. We went through this whole interview process. His doctor came out and a social worker came out and they sat and had this whole interview process with us in our living room. This was back when all the Mennigers doctors were doing acid so he thought it would work out and gave us the stamp of approval.

Q: What were the people like? Who were the unforgettable characters?

A: In 1969 I got drafted and being political and everything I wasn't going to go into the army. I didn't find this out until years later but the day I got drafted I just slept through my induction at the bus station. A friend of mine also got drafted and his older brother was down there to see him off. They were calling role and everyone was getting on the bus. They got to my name and they call and nobody answers, and they call again and nobody answers, and they call a third time, and my friend's brother leaps up on my behalf, rips off his shirt and starts screaming "Fuck you! Fuck you! You're not getting me, I'm not going in your fucking army!" Then he just walked out. I didn't know this until six or seven years later when I met up with my friend again and he said "Did you ever hear what my brother did on the day we got drafted?" That's how it came out. The day came and went, nothing happened, nothing happened for weeks. Finally one day we were just sitting around this place getting loaded and got real paranoid and decided tomorrow they were going to come get me. So everybody I was with got up all the money they had, gave it to me, we drove to Kansas City, and I bought a ticket to New York to get

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away. The reason I went was because there was a woman who had lived with us and been in SDS in Topeka and she was involved in this collective called News Reel, which was a radical film-making collective. So I went and stayed with them for a while. At the time they were more or less living in this apartment on the Lower East Side. This would have been 1969. So I was kind of a hot prospect. Here I was this draft resister and they had this idea. A lot of people had come to New York in the similar situation as myself from all over the country. The News Reel people were into agitprop (agitation propaganda), doing all this radical film-making to hasten the revolution. So they had this idea that they were going to get all of us together and we would go to the draft board and say "Well, I'm a draft dodger from Kansas, Ohio, wherever I'm from, I'm ready for induction, I've seen the light, I'm sorry, but I don't have any money to get back home so can you induct me here?" The idea was we could somehow get into the army as a group and ferment some kind of rebellion in one of these companies. We would get word out to the News Reel people and they would be right there when it happened with their cameras and it would be this great propaganda coup. I was kind of hanging there waiting for that to happen. There was this whole idea that the revolution was going to sweep over everything but there was also this real ineptitude about a lot of things, just getting things together, getting organized, being on time. It just kept waiting in the wings and not really happening. I got to go to Woodstock in the mean time and I just ended up hanging around in New York until the Days of Rage in Chicago in 1969, which was supposed to be a year after the Democratic Convention. So all the organizers of News Reel went there and became fugitives, they got busted, disappeared, and went underground. So our idea never got put into action.

Q: How was the News Reel collective organized? What were the economic arrangements? Was there a formal governing structure? How were chores and housework handled?

A: It wasn't organized at all, just a bunch of people in this apartment smoking a lot of dope. A lot of people were making movies. But I was really on the periphery of all this stuff. There was sort of a hip hierarchy, and if you're from Kansas you don't plug in very highly in the hierarchy. It was very political but very unorganized.

Q: Was the News Reel collective based around this political ideology?

A: It definitely had an ideology and a purpose. A lot of times it seemed to me that the more ideological the organization or the undertaking the greater the personal problems of the people involved. It seems like a lot of times people were trying to work out their personal problems in the larger societal context in some way and were really projecting a lot of personal distress onto the world at large. It seemed like the people I met in this highly charged political environments had a lot of personal problems. The less directed communities seemed more successful to me. The interactions were more relaxed. The situations that I have been in that were the most successful were not ideological or what you would call intentional communities. But we were adults living together because we wanted to live together. There was more of an effortless about it and it wasn't an attempt to live together on some theoretical terms.

Q: Was there a central religious ideology in the communities you lived in prior to the Zen Center?

A: There was a drug mysticism religious element to it. My spiritual leanings were augmented by drug experiences I had and I had these experiences with other people I was living with. It wasn't really an

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organized spiritual community but there was a real spiritual feeling about it, an unspokenness. There was an attempt to discover more about yourself, who you are, and what it means to live in this world, and to do that in consort with like-minded people. In my mind it was spiritual. There was really an element of the sacred about it but if anyone had said that back then we all would have probably laughed about it. Several of us went to the Rainbow Tribe gatherings for three or four years in a row which was definitely spiritually based but that was about as defined as it ever got.

Q: What was the relationship between psychedelics and the community? Were drugs used? What drugs? How often? By most residents, or only some?

A: There were lots of drugs. We used to trip together a lot. This somehow really built a sense of community, you had to trust people in that situation. You could discover things about yourself and other people. It was kind of a way of life for ten years or so, not heavy drugs, just smoking pot. I never used to drink at all. It was just part of the life. Somebody would come over and they would always have something. On weekends people would usually trip, or for special occasions, full moon, Fourth of July, New Years, Arbor Day, whatever. Some people weren't into drugs but it never seemed to be a real issue. A lot of our communal activities seemed to be centered around drugs, getting them, or ingesting them, or coming down off them, or getting in the sauna afterwards. More than drugs, more than ideology, a sauna will build community more than anything else.

Q: What was the relationship between sexual expression and the community? What sexual rules and attitudes and practices were present?

A: There weren't ever really any sexual rules. One of the places I lived in broke up because of a sexual problem I was involved in and I remember that as being one of the worst experiences in my life. I was with a woman, and another guy there was with a woman, and the other woman and I started to have sex and it just blew the whole place apart. I never lived anywhere where people were fucking indiscriminately. I visited a place like that. A friend of mine's sister was living in a commune in Vermont. We got up there and it was completely snowed in for three days. These people were really on another planet. They were completely into free love and shared economy. They were up there in the snow running around naked. These people were just completely loaded all the time. I don't know how they supported themselves but the impression I got was that several of them were very successful in New York and had got burned out and moved up to this community. They had money and they didn't have to work and they had this place. They just lived out there balling each other, doing dope all day long, reading tarot cards, reading Kurt Vonnegut books, and having these interminable discussions about the nature of reality and the meaninglessness of materialism. It was a strange place. From what I heard, this didn't last very long and everyone trickled back to the city.

Q: What other things about daily life in the communes can you remember?

A: There is a certain ineffable beauty when a group situation works. I don't really think it is explainable, it just has to do with the personalities involved. Some places it is an incredibly struggle to live with people and other times you think "Why can't we all live like this?" It just seemed to me that the less structured the theoretical underpinnings of the groups have been the more successful they've been just in terms of humanity, human interaction, the pleasure of people's company. This lent itself to a lot of

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artistic expression, but in a really broad sense. One night I was lying in bed reading and the bedroom door opened and a group of people came in draped in black cloth, a bolt of cloth twenty feet long. It was big enough that it shrouded them down to about their knee. They didn't say a word, they just walked in, through the house and down out the back door. So I ran and got in the back of the cloth and we just walked around the neighborhood for hours, didn't speak to anyone, just chose houses at random and walk in. Stuff like that was going on all the time.

Q: What were the best and worst things you remember about communal living?

A: The places I think of most fondly, the places that were most fruitful and energizing, even glorious, they had something spontaneous about them that you just couldn't create by just sitting down and discussing it. It just grew out of the situation. I really don't have much of a feel for how common my personal history is in this thing because I lived in a lot of different groups. There were a lot of households of people around and a lot of shifting going on. If you were in one or two living situations it would be a lot easier to go through these questions and say "Oh yeah, we did this," or "Oh yeah, we didn't do that." But my personal experience involved so many different styles and so many different people and so many different situations that it's kind of tough to go through these questions very specifically.

Q: Do you consider the communes, and your participation in them, a success or failure? Are you glad you did it?

A: I'm really glad I did it. On a whole I consider it a successful experience. Everything I am has come out of that experience. All the values I have today were formed through that experience. Everything I really hold dear and what I consider important, the way I think I should live, really grew out of all those years. That really hasn't changed much even though I'm not doing it externally. It was a real formative experience. I think it's probably the attraction of Buddhism to me, this all embracing sense. It is completely non-exclusionary due to its fundamental tenets. That, to me was the beauty of the situations that I've been trying to describe, the one's that really worked well. They had this sort of flow to them. There was a feeling that the door was wide open to anyone who came in. That was a really wonderful feeling. I don't know what else to call it but magic. Not hocus-pocus magic, but I really believe that magic exists and we can create it. The times I participated in creating it were in these groups of people and the basis of it was this non-exclusionary feeling.