

Interview with Alan Johnson

Interviewer: Tim Miller

April 27 1996

Q: So for the record, this is Alan Johnson. And it is April 27th, 1996. And you don't mind if we. . .

A: Umm, March 27th.

Q: Oh it is March. OK March 27th.

A: 1998.

Q: Do you mind if we use your name?

A: Not at all.

Q: OK, to start things off, what communes did you live in?

A: Umm. Depending on your definition of commune, I lived with multiple groups of people from 1968 through 1975?

Q: How does it break down in years?

A: 1968 through 1971 was with a number of friends who were scholarship hall buddies and their either girlfriends or concubines. And as far as people within the community, at large houses rented mostly by Dr. Daniel Lang. Then considered the major slum lord of Lawrence. There after I was briefly married and moved out to a farm near Ottawa with a small group of four other people where we both farmed and had a hell of a good time. 1979, late 79 to 83 I lived under another communal living situation with a seventeen year old stripper, two drug dealers and three close friends who actually paid their rent.

Q: So the first place you lived in was with scholarship hall people?

A: Yeah.

Q: Was it in a scholarship hall?

A: No. They were people I met in my freshman year in 1967 in the scholarship hall.

Q: OK.

A: We rented a house again from Dr. Daniel Lang and moved everybody who had money into it.

Q: And that was in Lawrence?

A: It was 1614 Kentucky.

Q: Did you have any ideology attached to that one? Why did you guys decide to live in a commune together?

A: We enjoyed being together. We anticipated that in that point in my life change and growth was the singular goal. So we moved in together because we all fit together. It was something that we were anticipating I think mutually or communally was good for all of us. And I certainly think turned out to be.

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Q: And the dates on that were 67 to?

A: It was 68 when I met the people the co-renters in 67 and moved in in 68 and lived there until 71 when I graduated college.

Q: How many guys were there?

A: There were eighteen people living in the house at one point. 6 gay men, 2 gay women and what's that, 8?

Q: 8

A: So there were 9 straight males in the house at the time.

Q: Did you have any name for it?

A: Yes, we called it 1614 Kentucky.

Q: Personal opinion, why did so many people flock to communes during this time?

A: Personal opinion, I feel that people longed together and I wouldn't call it anything more. It was a mishmash of approaches to dealing with what was going on. There was so much going on within society at the time that I found it necessary to find people who share similar ideas, ideals, goals and the same essential attributes that I did. The gay men and I had some conflict but the lesbians and I share a lot. It was a time of trying to find not only yourself but people that were a lot like yourself and I think all of us were doing that at the time.

Q: How did you get involved in communal living? Had you heard about them before?

A: No, communal living only as far as I know now in New Mexico at that time. We did simply because I has a number of friends as I did needed a place to live. Did not want to live in a structured living situation, i.e. scholarship halls, dormitories, fraternities, sororities. They wanted to live free and deal with people pretty much on a day to day basis without (?) and we could communicate. Everyday, every hour. Morning, noon, night we always had some kind of connection. They were kindred souls.

Q: Did you have any predisposition to it? Did your parents have any background in it?

A: Dad was an associate warden in the federal penitentiary.

Q: So he kind of did.

A: Mom and Dad were Ward and June Cleaver, No. No predisposition whatsoever. As a matter of fact, I was a cadet colonel at Leavenworth high school my senior year and was planning on entering the military. So it happened between the end of my senior year and that time.

Q: What type of books and literature did you read that influenced you or the commune?

A: At that time we had a number of bibles in terms of literature. Stranger in a Strange Land, The Narnia Series, that trilogy with Gandalf and . . .

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Q: By Mary Stewart?

A: No, boy, should have been earlier. The Narnia Series, the Dune Series was influential. I had two really good friends who were computer wizards that read science fiction constantly. So there was an infusion of science fiction on a daily basis. Gandalf, Bilbo. . .

Q: The Hobbit Series.

A: Yeah there you go. Foundation Trilogy, that's one. There was five bibles in the house as far as we were concerned for how to lead one's mind further. And the Foundation Trilogy began the whole series.

Q: So you guys pretty much started it.

A: Yeah. I paid for it.

Q: Did everybody who moved in with you share the same idea of growing and learning? Is that kind of a central theme?

A: It was very, I guess that average IQ of the people, the testable IQ that the people that initially moved in was well above a hundred and thirty. We were all just a little bit weird. We share a lot of concerns about society and about one another. A bonding element was probably society and what was going on with the Vietnam war at the time.

Q: What was daily life like?

A: The what?

Q: The daily life?

A: Umm, my freshman scholarship hall roommate Tran would get up about 7:00 and start playing guitar in the living room. That was a cue that we should all get up, come down and have breakfast together. We'd do waffles, we'd do bacon and eggs, we'd do hash browns and hamburger, we'd do whatever was available. Land try to avoid the cockroaches. After that it was pretty much everybody would go their own way. We had people working at the computer center, we had people running Seven Eleven's, we had a number of people that were just college students and a number of people that did absolutely nothing, as far as I could tell, but wake up, sit around the house, stare at the television and then give up.

Q: Did you have any ceremonies or rituals.

A: Tran and the guitar in the early morning was a ritual.

Q: Did you have any rituals that promoted growth or ideals or anything like that?

A: We had, because we had so many gay people living in the household we had something akin to house meetings. There were continual conflicts between the gay and straight people living in the house. And my feeling was that we needed to spend a lot of time at least allotted time each evening talking about anything that had come up. Almost like a house meeting, almost daily. Like why did you throw my two week old dog out a second story window?

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Q: Was it pretty stable with the eighteen people or did they come and go?

A: It was incredibly stable for about six months. Then we had a number of severe conflicts with individuals in the house. We meaning the non-gay populous in the house. I essentially booted them out. So it was to that point. I think it was the Supremes. We had one party one night and the entire gay population of Lawrence as far as I could tell showed up at our place to dance. And when I was on the third floor and the whole floor started to shake I went down and started asking people to leave. The civility dropped severely.

Q: How did people relate to each other? You talked about the non-gays and gays had conflict. Does that include the gay women and gay men both?

A: Yes. We sat down. We sat down and talked about our feelings we talked about our mental and physical infrastructure and why we were who we were. We just opened everything up. No holds barred.

Q: Was there a lot of conflict between individuals?

A: No, none. Everybody seemed to be very much open to openness to talking about who they were, where they'd been. Why they felt they were who they were and why. That was not a lot of social conflict at all. Everybody seemed to be open to talking about what was going on with them.

Q: What was the food like?

A: Let's see, I ate a lot of glop. That's any form of pasta and a little bit of hamburger one can of mushroom soup. Umm, it varied. Two or three people were vegetarians. Two or three people were nothing but protein and meat eaters. The rest of us just kind of scoped out whatever was in the refrigerator and was edible.

Q: How did you guys buy groceries?

A: We bought them in small . . . small . . . small teams that snuck up to the grocery store with black hats on.

Q: Did you liberate the food?

A: Uh, we did, I hate to admit it, but we did occasionally take something that was not earmarked as ours. No, by and large, everyone was bright enough to be employed or their parents were putting money up their butts. So we had plenty of food. We had six refrigerators in the basement of this place. Six refrigerators and eight burner stoves. (Interruption when I got a phone call) There were four floors and an institutional kitchen, 2 six burner stoves, up to six refrigerators at one point. Four bedrooms, a living room, an institutional dining room. I heard of it being used as a whore house, and a number of other things previous to that.

Q: So what did the landlord think of you guys living there?

A: He loved us, I paid the rent.

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Q: So did you, yourself pay the rent?

A: We all, the total tab for that house was \$250 a month. I figure we put in, depending on who had cash available, about \$20 each a month.

Q: Did that take care of bills, too, or did the landlord take care of the bills?

A: No. You had to harass people for bill payments.

Q: But everything was pretty much split up as far as that goes?

A: Yes.

Q: And people did individual grocery shopping and paid for their own basically?

A: Yes. And wrote their names on it.

Q: How were the household chores handled?

A: Honestly?

Q: Or were they?

A: I did them. Now we tried to share. We tried a scenario of splitting up chores. You clean the toilet and I'll do the dishes. And that fell apart almost immediately. It came down to the people that were fastidious and into having a clean household did all the chores. And nobody really balked at that.

Q: What about cooking? Did you all cook together and eat together?

A: No. Everybody ate separately.

Q: OK, the economic arrangements. What did you mean earlier when you said that you paid for it all initially?

A: If you get a \$150 phone bill and you cannot find your seventeen roommates before the deadline, you paid the bill. And then you chased down the seventeen roommates. Do you know anybody in Spokane? Do you know anybody in Vegas? It was OK. It was just an incredible delay in getting bill paid and somebody had to go ahead and there were about three of us that constantly coughed up money to cover the bills until we could cover the debt of the others.

Q: OK, so the phone bill was in your name. Were any other bills in your name?

A: They were all in my name.

Q: Who was on the lease?

A: Me.

Q: Were you the only one?

A: Yep.

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Q: Did you guys have any formal governing structure? Like did you have any formal way of dealing with conflict?

A: Just house meetings.

Q: Would you call those more informal?

A: They were very informal.

Q: Did most of the people show up for those.

A: Yes. They were required to but forgiven if they had a good excuse.

Q: Did you have any particular leaders or groups of leaders?

A: Yes. Every once in awhile Jesus would show up for one of our house meetings. No we didn't have any leaders.

Q: How about house rules?

A: Yeah. Don't throw my dog out the window. No it was fairly straight forward. If you make a mess you clean it up. You could cook it, get rid of the trash and wash the dishes. Because when you have eighteen people living in one house, and you've got two stoves and a small sink, somebody's going to have to do a lot of dishes. But cleanliness was paramount. And Daniel Lang's homes were renowned for cockroaches. So I was constantly running around stepping on the little fuckers. Keep after the stuff in the kitchen.

Q: Did you have a garden or anything you tried to. . . ?

A: We had a garden, yes.

Q: Did it grow?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you do it for food or just to have a garden?

A: Enjoyment.

Q: Was it a vegetable garden?

A: After a fashion, yes.

Q: Here you didn't do any building or anything like that?

A: No. I offered to do a number of physical improvements on (?) and Dr. Lang indicated he wanted nothing to do with paying for it.

Q: When you had members come and go, who decided they could come and go?

A: Well, it was pretty much decided at the evening meeting when we had them.

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Q: What type of stuff did you require for someone to live there?

A: An empty room.

Q: OK. So you had some people sharing rooms then?

A: Yes.

Q: Was it couples?

A: Umm, gay couples and almost all situations we had one, two, well over the house a year and a half, two years we had three heterosexual couples sharing rooms. Relationships became abusive and they left.

Q: Did you ever have to throw people out? You said something about throwing out the gay people.

A: Yes.

Q: Was that decided at the house meetings also?

A: Yes.

Q: Did you have an open door visitor policy?

A: A what?

Q: A visitor policy. Like when people came over and crashed at the place did you monitor who had people over?

A: One morning I woke up about six in the morning and God was staring me in the face. I'm going, who invited you? We had no policy.

Q: Did you have any married couples?

A: Marriage is a bizarre term. I would consider most of the gay men married, that were living there. And all of them that were living there got divorced. But no, we had one, two three children live there over a two year period but it was all each one under a month.

Q: What were the relations of the surrounding community? What did you neighbors think of you?

A: They loved us. They thought we were kick ass.

Q: Were you ever hassled by the police?

A: No.

Q: Did you have any relations with other communes in this time?

A: Well, at that time I don't consider anybody to have lived in a commune in the strictest sense. We had numerous friends living in multiple relationships living situations. So yeah, we had people living all

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over town. You could say a street number and they knew exactly where the house was. And they knew who lived there. So yeah, we had a lot of relationships with other communes.

Q: What kind of drugs were being taken in the house?

A: Excuse me? Is the recorder on?

Q: It's OK, you won't be implicated.

A: Umm, almost strictly at that time LSD, marijuana and hashish.

Q: Did everybody in the commune do drugs?

A: Yes.

Q: Why did you decide to leave and when?

A: I got married.

Q: Oh that's right. This commune, did you consider it a success or failure?

A: I experienced growth. So I feel it was definitely a success for me.

Q: Do you think that the other people. . .

A: I went through the Vietnam war.

Q: Did you have people from the house that were drafted?

A: Yes.

Q: How did they deal with it?

A: They went.

Q: I mean how did the other people around them deal with it?

A: It was very sad and we got fucked up.

Q: Did you keep contact with them?

A: Yes.

Q: Did any of them come back to the house?

A: No. But I know where they live and I'm still very close to them.

Q: When you lived, after you got married you moved onto another commune? Where was that?

A: It was only four of us.

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Q: So it was more like just a communal living situation?

A: Yeah. That's what a commune is, right?

Q: Where was that?

A: Just west of Ottawa. About seven miles outside of town on a farm.

Q: What was the basic structure of that place?

A: Really good friends that wanted to get out of Lawrence.

Q: How many other people were there?

A: There were five of us?

Q: Five others?

A: Yeah, we all worked in Lawrence and we all had professional full time jobs but we need an alternate identity and the only drugs we ever did were marijuana, cocaine and acid.

Q: And that place, who owned the land? Did you rent the land or did you rent the house?

A: One of the young lady's fathers owned the land.

Q: And what did the community around there, did they even notice you were there? What did they think?

A: They would ask us to come over and fix their barn or whatever. Rebuild the interior of their house.

Q: Did you build any buildings there?

A: We roofed barns, the interior of the house, the exterior of the house. Also rebuilt all the out buildings. And built and rebuilt buildings for the neighbors.

Q: How did you do the bills? Did you pay rent?

A: No.

Q: And did you just split up bills?

A: Yep.

Q: What about household chores?

A: Me again.

Q: You're just too anal.

A: Pay back from mom going Alan do the dishes. No. Alan do the dishes. No. OK, you're going to do the dishes for the rest of your life.

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Q: What were the house rules there?

A: Katie barred the door. I mean, shit at that point we were all approaching thirty. And were very, very close friends. So whatever happened, happened.

Q: Were any of the five married.

A: We had one guy living there and me and a girlfriend. I was getting a divorce. And another couple both of whom were approaching marriage very quickly.

Q: Did you, out there was there a visiting policy or was it pretty much the same six people all the time?

A: Normally it was five people. Sometimes it was down to four just because the guy kept going back to Kansas City. But yeah, anybody plus.

Q: And the final place was in 1979? And you lived with a stripper.

A: Seventeen year old stripper. Yes. And a number of other people.

Q: And where was that?

A: My current home.

Q: OK. Where is that at?

A: Eighth and Connecticut. We were told that we were a target for the police department because there were constantly gun shots and other difficulties occurring well after midnight.

Q: So about how old were you then, in 1979?

A: 34.

Q: Mid thirties?

A: Yeah.

Q: How many people?

A: Anywhere from two to eight.

Q: So there was the seventeen year old that was the stripper, about what ages were the other people?

A: 79? There was a 34 year old, a 28 year old, a 17 year, another 28 year old, a 37 year old and I never knew how old the other guy was.

Q: In that place, what was daily life like there?

A: Very strange. Suffice it to say that three of the people living in the house worked at the same bar two blocks up the street.

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Q: What bar was that?

A: AJ's. So when you get home from work there is no telling what will be going on, who will be there, what they will have.

Q: How did the people there relate to each other?

A: Very poorly. Oh yeah, it was nasty.

Q: But it went on for how many years?

A: Four or five.

Q: Were you a founding member there too?

A: It's my house.

Q: Did you buy that house then?

A: Yes.

Q: And you invited the other people in?

A: They kind of invited themselves. And I, in my alcoholic stupor said, can you pay rent? Shit, move in.

Q: So you pretty much footed the bills again?

A: Yes.

Q: So how did you deal with conflict in that house? And did the gun shots have anything to do with it?

A: Yeah, that's true, that's true. One night, old John Watson, wait, that's not his real name, said if you don't pay me your share of the gas bill I'm going to throw your large fucking ass out the second story window. So he goes, I don't think you can. So I went downstairs to the weight bench and said I bet you can't bench 220. I bet you can't either. So I did. He couldn't, so I threw his ass out the second story window. And he paid his bill. That's kind of the way it worked.

Q: So how did you guys manage to get along for as long as you did with this much conflict?

A: Because I'm incredibly tolerant.

Q: Was your name on all the bills again?

A: Yeah.

Q: How were chores handled there? You again?

A: Me again. I'm anal.

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Q: Was the governing structure pretty informal again or did you pretty much say it was your house?

A: There was one person who showed up in that situation that turned out to be a god send for me and that was Max. He was the older me.

Q: Elizabeth's husband, Max?

A: Yep. And knew how to look people in the eye even though they were much larger then he and, no you're going to do the dishes, no you're going to pay the bills now! And I'd always drop back and go, wow go do it to them also.

Q: How did you meet these people?

A: Pretty much live I've met everybody I've met, on the streets, in bar, at parties.

Q: Did they come live with you for a variety of reasons?

A: Mostly people in need of a place to sleep.

Q: Was it partially financial too? Did you have a pretty cheap living situation?

A: In large part, I don't think it made that much difference in any of them. It was mostly, I need a place to sleep and you're cool so I'll hang with you until something else happens.

Q: Did you do any building there?

A: Pardon me?

Q: Did you do any building? I know your penchant for building.

A: Do bears shit. Yes of course I did building.

Q: What kind of building did you do? Did you do buildings or . . . ?

A: Everything. You do everything from shelving, to saunas to sheds, to garages, to ancillary buildings. It's just out buildings are very simple. So yeah.

Q: In the first place you talked about house meetings. Did you have anything like that in this place?

A: No. Well we had coffee meetings. There would be Nanette, Max and me. She would go Alan, I'm cleaning the downstairs today. I'd say that's really neat because I'm sanding plaster this afternoon.

Q: So it was pretty informal?

A: Yeah. Sip, sip.

Q: What did your neighbors think there?

A: They love us. No, actually the neighbors, I had an 88 year old woman across the street who came across the street to ask me to make sure that people were not attacking her house. And she had a number of kids throwing bricks at her upper story windows. So we arranged to have super heavy duty

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wire grids put over her windows and spent a number nights on the porch howling at any teen age people who went by. No, I currently consider myself, mostly because of the people I lived with over the course of the last 16 years in that house, to be an anchor of the neighborhood and that's how people treat me.

Q: Now just some general questions.

A: No.

Q: Yes. I didn't ask you in all three of the communes, what types of sexual rules were there?

A: Is that thing still working? OK. In that first scenario from the sixties on there was college kids on a rampage. Nobody mature enough to understand what they were doing or why. And the second one it was pretty much coupling with someone with whom you were planning out a relationship. And the third one it was, if it moves, fuck it.

Q: So this last one, why did it end?

A: Because I got married.

Q: Was that to Teri?

A: I got married to my current wife. I found someone that could actually beat me up.

Q: So at that point did you pretty much kick everybody out?

A: It took a long time. Max stuck around going, you're not going to get married. No you're not going to get married. You're not going to stabilize your life now. Yes, we kicked everybody out.

Q: She had three children when she moved in?

A: Right.

Q: Were there people still living there when she moved in with the kids?

A: Max. For almost a year. And he kept buying them candy which was a really bad idea.

Q: Are you glad you did all this?

A: Of course.

Q: You liked it?

A: Without the experience, the diversity of people, and the kind of people I've been able to live with on a daily basis, I wouldn't be me. Anything else would have closed me off and made me feel something was missing. No, I'm quite happy.

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Q: How has your life after community been affected by the experience?

A: Oh, Bob Dole is going to get the Republican nomination. And barring him winning, I can't think that would have been more pleasant than having lived with that number of people in that number of situations. I only wish it had been in, say Mexico.

Q: Would you do it again?

A: With a bunch of rag ass hippies. Oh I would do it again. I'll do it again now.

Q: Do you think Teri would?

A: I tell what. Teri has been through a stranger life than I. I'll bet if I talked to Tim I could talk her into it.

Q: Do you have any documents? Flyer from parties or pictures?

A: No. The only thing would be Ancillary notes from when I was director down there and writing daily notes to the staff which may include something about my living arrangements. That would be real tough to find.

Q: Do have any other anecdotes or things you can remember or things you want to make it into the annals of history?

A: We live in a world that contains such incredible number of species of animal and plant phyla that a large part of we don't pay any attention to. And I was just really glad to spend some time with some people that attended to me. I grew up. I've learned a whole lot. I didn't get shot in fucking Vietnam for standard oil in California. And I'm still here.

Q: Did you not get drafted because you were in college?

A: I didn't get drafted because I ate eight pounds of licorice in two days. My blood pressure of over the god damned limit.

Q: If you don't have anything else, I think I'm done. Thank you dear.

A: Good luck with this.