

Interview with Aaron Blosser

Interviewer: Unknown

December 2, 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. How did you come to get involved in communal living?

A: I met some people who were involved with Divine Light Mission while I was in Boston attending MIT. That was kind of the beginning, meeting those people and getting a different outlook on life than I had growing up in Kansas City. I started at MIT in the fall of 1970. The guy I remember the best was named Stony Ballard. He was a year behind me so I met him in the fall of 1971. He and I were roommates and were interested in finding out more about Transcendental Meditation. You were supposed to pay \$45 and you were given an initiation. You would then receive your mantra. One of the requirements that they had was before you showed up you had to abstain from alcohol for forty-eight hours and abstain from marijuana for two weeks. It was during that two-week period that I heard about Divine Light Mission. Our perception was that it was a very similar thing. There was an initiation and you were given a mantra, except that it was free. So we said, "Hey, we'll do the free one!" So we got involved with that and we had two or three other friends from MIT that were involved. I ended up going to New York City to be initiated. It was just a weekend trip kind of thing. About a year later, I moved into a house of Divine Light Mission people. It wasn't an ashram but it was a cooperative living situation. There were seven or eight of us in the house. We shared expenses. The only thing we had in common was that we had all been initiated into Divine Light Mission. I can't remember much about that group. It seemed like our meals were pretty haphazard, not very well organized.

Q: How did people relate to each other at this house?

A: That's a good question. There were a couple of people I got to know fairly well. But it did seem, looking back, a little disjointed. It wasn't like we were all good buddies that decided to live together.

Q: How was the community's religious ideology practiced? Were there any rituals or ceremonies?

A: I remember that we did a lot of singing. That was one of the things that attracted me to Divine Light Mission. It was a group full of joyful songs. We had *satsang*, which was a meeting to sing songs. It was a religious ceremony but most of it was singing. The meditation was done by yourself. It wasn't something we did in groups. It seems like we had a small service every night. Then we would join together with a larger group once a week. Divine Light Mission was real new to the United States in 1971. The founder of the group, or at least the individual we referred to as "the Perfect Master" was twelve at the time. His name was Maharaja Ji. The idea was that he was the embodiment of perfection. A lot of people thought that this was the second coming of Christ. There was a lot of enthusiasm. A lot of what fueled that group was the bouncing back and forth of ideas concerning love and harmony and here was the person that was going to help us realize the divinity within ourselves. It was a real strong movement for a while. They probably packed up and went back to India. I don't have any idea what they are doing now. I guess his father died when he was young and his father was the Perfect Master. It was sometime soon after that, he said, "I have this power and it is my job to go out into the world and show people." I remember going to several festival that he was at. There was something called *darsan* and we would go down a *darsan* line. This was a line that was 2000 people long. There were ten people that kind of pushed us through. We would kneel at his feet, get up, and we were instructed to hold our hand by our ear and he would blow a kiss into our ear. That was his supreme blessing. People often

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had *darsan* dreams in our group where they would dream of the Perfect Master and he would blow in their ear. I don't know but that may have been self-induced to a certain extent. You would wish for the *darsan* dream to happen and a lot of the time, it would. I went to a festival in the Astrodome in Houston. It was probably a financial disaster. I can't imagine renting the Astrodome and breaking even. We were all housed quite nicely. They had an organized system. A number of different groups of the Divine Light Mission were in Houston and they put everyone up dormitory style. They were hoping to fill the Astrodome and I know that didn't happen. But there was a huge crowd. It was the same type of thing with a lot of singing and everyone being "blissed out". That was the important thing. The more blissful you were the better. Everyone sought bliss. At the time, it seemed real but looking back it may have been a kind of superficial blissful state that you hoped to be in.

Q: What was the food like? Was it a vegetarian kitchen?

A: Yes, definitely vegetarian. A lot of the people that we knew at the time that were involved in Divine Light Mission were going on extended fruit fasts, only eating fruit for a week or a week and a half at a time, then back to solid foods. The motivation was spiritual, but I can't really say for sure. Maybe it was just the cleansing idea behind it.

Q: How were chores and housework handled?

A: We took turns with those things. I wasn't a very good cook at that time but I remember taking a turn doing that. The house only had one bathroom. It was a full bath but it only had a bathtub, no shower. There was difficulty there with everyone wanting to take a bath in the morning. So we decided to time everyone to see who could do the shortest bath. One guy could do everything you needed to do in a bath and get completely clean in ten minutes. I was amazed. We did have one problem. At first, we were fairly open to other visitors from Divine Light Mission. There was a lot of traveling at the time and people would come in and spend the night. But we had to kind of close down the house because one group, two people, who showed up and asked to spend the night. The next morning two of the people had cash stolen so we didn't really allow visitors after that. If one of the people knew them then we would talk about it. I didn't live there very long, maybe three months, then I moved back to Kansas City. I had dropped out of MIT before that and I was working at a bank as a check sort machine operator. It wasn't a job I enjoyed very much so I moved back to Kansas City.

Q: Did you continue to be involved in the Divine Light Mission once you moved back to Kansas City?

A: I did get involved with the Divine Light Mission group in Kansas City once I got back. I wanted to continue with the practice and it seemed to me that the best way to get involved was to move into a house. I had a good experience in Boston so I tried it in Kansas City. I lived in a house on 39th Street called Divine Graphics. There were six of us. I met these people through the Divine Light Mission. I hadn't known them for more than two or three weeks but I felt more of a closeness with them than I had in Boston. It was called Divine Graphics because most of the people, except for myself, were artists. They did silk screening and airbrush painting. I was working as an ambulance driver. I bought my first car while with this group. I was interested in a Volkswagen van and I almost bought it. But even before I had almost bought it, everyone in my group had asked my if they could ride in it to a big Divine Light

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Mission festival in Toronto. I didn't end up buying it, it was a weird deal. That isn't really topical but it does have a little bit to do with the interaction of the people. If there hadn't been that jump with everyone wanting to ride with me I might have gone ahead and bought it. Six people in a Volkswagen bus is a little hairy.

Q: What were the economic arrangements at Divine Graphics? How were chores and housework handled? What was the food like?

A: At Divine Graphics, we shared meals. We had yoga classes. I bought three or four pieces of art work from people there because I was the only one in the house that had much money. I was the only one who had a full time job. We didn't have a communal pool of money. But by buying their artwork, I helped them out to a certain extent.

Q: What kinds of living arrangements were there at Divine Graphics?

A: It was a large house right across from Westport High School. It was in an interesting neighborhood. 39th Street was so busy that it made it so you really couldn't get to know your neighbors. I can't remember ever having any connections with the neighbors. Everyone who lived there had their own bedroom, which was nice. There was plenty of space for doing artwork. We did live simply. I seem to recall that everyone just had a mattress on the floor. It too was a vegetarian kitchen. We shared food expenses and took turns fixing food. We shared the household chores as well.

Q: Was Divine Graphics the only Divine Light Mission commune that you lived in while in Kansas City?

A: There was another house that I lived in on Harrison, 73rd or 74th and Harrison. I don't remember if that was before or after Divine Graphics, it probably was before. That situation didn't work out as well. There were two young women there who were seventeen years old and twins. They seemed immature. They had a terrible time cooking. One of them had a pressure cooker blow up. She was cooking beans and one of the bean skins had gotten up and blocked off the valve that lets the pressure out. No one got hurt fortunately. I don't remember much about that group. I remember that there was one strong leader and the house kind of formed around him. There were about seven or eight people that lived there. After the festival in the Astrodome, which I believe was called The Millennium, two of my friends were going to California and I decided to go with them. We stopped in a hotel in Las Vegas and I said, "I want to live here." So they just left me there. I stayed there and made contact with the Divine Light Mission people there. I stayed there for six months and shared a mobile home with two other people from the Divine Light Mission. It was interesting that it was so easy to just go to a town, meet Divine Light Mission people, become friends, and set up houses. It all seemed to flow.

Q: Why did so many people involved in Divine Light Mission flock to communal living?

A: I think that there was the feeling that living with other people of your faith helped to keep your faith strong. You were less likely to be distracted. You could stay more focused on your meditations. You could be encouraged to meditate. If you were living by yourself in an apartment, it would be so easy to get out of meditation practice. From my point of view, the main reason for living together was to support each other. I moved out of Divine Graphics in 1975. I had met and was involved with a woman

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who wasn't a part of Divine Light Mission. I moved into her apartment. I think I was definitely fading away from Divine Light Mission but I can't remember if it was a clear-cut break or if this relationship just became more important than my involvement in Divine Light Mission. I think that was the pulling energy, pulling me out the communal situation more into living individually.

Q: Did these houses in Kansas City have an open-door membership policy?

A: At Divine Graphics, there wasn't any change-over. The people that lived there stayed there. I'm sure that if anyone would have moved out we would have sent out the word to the Divine Light Mission community. But there really wasn't any change-over during the time I was there. In each of the houses, we felt that there was a certain number of people we should have and we shouldn't have any more. We didn't want a situation where you were just packing more and more people in. I liked having my own space and would have felt uncomfortable having the numbers change all the time.

Q: Was there a formal governing structure at these houses in Kansas City? How did it work?

Was there a single leader or a group of leaders?

A: I think in the case of the Harrison house that the leader was just the person that had the most money for starters. He kind of rented the house and told everyone else that he was looking for people to join him. So it was more a leader in the sense of starting it and keeping things going financially rather than anything else. As far as spirituality, he was probably on equal footing with everyone else. This is not related to housing, but within the Divine Light Mission, there were teachers known as *mahatmas* who would come through town periodically. They were the people who were empowered to initiate new members. So there was that hierarchy. There was Maharaja Ji then the *mahatmas* then the followers. But the *mahatmas* never stayed long enough to live in a house. They were there for a week and then gone.

Q: Were there rules or agreements about dress or other matters of style?

A: No.

Q: What were the relations with the surrounding culture/neighbors like?

A: I don't really know because we never had any contact with them. We had a sign out in front of our house that said "Divine Graphics". People probably wondered what that was about but I don't remember anyone asking us.

Q: What kinds of artistic expressions were present? Was the artwork related to Divine Light Mission?

A: Some of it was and some of it wasn't. One guy did a painting a little bit larger than my outstretched hands. It was of two magnificent wings, a pair of wings with intricately painted feathers. In the center was a heart. Even though this wasn't an official emblem of Divine Light Mission, hearts and wings were often used. It's interesting that the heart and wings is also a symbol for Sufi groups. Divine Light Mission and Sufism are way different but some of the symbolism is the same. There were a couple of people there that worked in silk screening and their business was commercial. They did a lot of T-shirts. They also did limited edition prints. When I got involved with that woman and moved out of Divine

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Graphics, I also got involved with a Sufi group. Two blocks from her apartment, there was Sufi dancing. That was catching on really big. There were upwards of 100 people that would come together for dancing once a week. It was at St. John's Church on Troost. One of my big attractions to that was also the singing. I never really lived with Sufis. I lived in a place called the Flo Home that was kind of a Sufi house. I can't really say that's true though. There were maybe one or two people in the Sufi group, one guy who was involved in hatha yoga, and some other people that had no affiliation. So it was kind of a hodge-podge. It wasn't a group that you could say came together for a certain religion. It was more of a group of people that just decided to live together that had different beliefs.

Q: When did you stop being involved with Divine Light Mission?

A: I think it was December of 1975.

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

A: I don't know what kind of stance Divine Light Mission took. I don't recall hardly any drug use. I don't recall any alcohol being in any of those houses. I can imagine that given the atmosphere of the time there were probably people who had a little pouch of marijuana with them from time to time. But it wasn't the kind of thing where you would walk in and smell it in the air. If used at all it was probably really discreet. It's funny given the time, but it doesn't seem like it was really an issue. Divine Light Mission, or at least what I knew of it, wasn't saying yes or no. I think that there was probably the hope that people would get high on religion and not get high on drugs. There was a stance taken in the Sufi group over the drug issue, which caused a split. Pir Vilayat just saw too many Sufi initiates using drugs in California and thought it was totally to their detriment. There was a certain amount of division with the Sufi group in Kansas City. The leader of the group was a man named John Wirick and he sided with the West Coast group. I had been initiated by Pir Vilayat so it was my inclination to go with the eastern group. It wasn't really an east/west split but it's a convenient label.

Q: What other communes did you visit or otherwise know about?

A: I got involved with a group called the Renascence Project when I was living at the Flo Home. I can't remember how I first found out about them. The Flo Home was at 3426 Harrison. The Renascence Library was about five blocks west of there on the 3600 block of Walnut. I remember from a practical point of view, my interest was to learn skills for renovating the house I was in because I knew they were doing a lot of renovation. There was also the educational aspects. There was such an energy of sharing ideas. It was to a certain extent an elitist group. We were thinking that we really had a new way of looking at things. A lot of the Renascence Library ideas had to do with recycling, changing the way we did things with an emphasis on doing things for the earth. There was also the idea of getting in on the ground level of a wealthy corporation. One of the overall, futuristic ideas for the corporation was to establish a colony on the moon or on a space station. This was to be a new frontier or a new direction to be striving for. The Renascence Library was actually one of three corporations. To become a member you put in a certain amount of money, maybe \$1000 or \$500. You also agreed to take a series of classes that Matt Taylor taught, a semester of classes two or three times a week. The classes were usually a

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meal and a lecture by Matt Taylor. The function of the Renascence Library was to give the classes. You also put in a certain amount of work, maybe fifty hours. My first involvement with them was working off my fifty hours. I was still living in the Flo Home. There were some homes that were group homes of people involved in the Renascence Library but I never considered moving into one of those because the Flo Home was working well. At one point, I quit my job as an ambulance driver and started working full time at the Renascence Library. Financially it wasn't very good. Some people had their room and board paid for by the project and any salary above that was received in shares. But since I didn't need room and board, all or my salary was paid in shares in the business. Eventually the business went bankrupt so the shares were worthless. I worked maybe six months for them. My position was the financial secretary. I took directions from Matt Taylor and was like an officer in each of the three corporations, or at least the treasurer of the three corporations. One corporation was the Renascence Library. Another was Terra Corporation and its main focus was buying old houses in the Hyde Park neighborhood that had already been turned into apartments, renovating them, and then renting them out. Those were the houses that we were all working on. The third was Renascence Research. I never really understood its reason for being in existence. I don't know what it did. The idea was that these corporations would grow, prosper, and flourish. Other corporations might even branch out and the whole conglomerate would lead in the direction of the space project. I'm not sure that the project actually went bankrupt. When I quit I never went back. I didn't really keep in contact with them. At the time that I quit there were probably eighty members. There were probably about ten or eleven full-time workers. Most of the members had other jobs. When I look back at it I think rather than taking the job as the financial coordinator, which was really frustrating, a better of way of plugging in financially and energy-wise would have been to keep my ambulance job and invest in the corporation. I could have helped the corporation better that way rather than working and not getting paid. There had been talk that Matt and one of the full-time people were going to write a book about the project but I don't know if that was ever published.

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

Are you glad you did it?

A: I think it was definitely a growing time. I enjoyed those years. I have a lot of fondness for that time in my life. From the time I left college until 1978, it was definitely a time of upheaval and changing ideas and going through a lot of maturing and growing and exploring.

Q: Why did so many people flock to communal living?

A: Part of it may have had to do with the Vietnam War, for instance. There was kind of an energy among colleges to put a stop to the war. I wasn't involved in any protest marches or anything. From my point of view, I don't have any idea why there was such a nationwide movement in that direction. To me it seemed like the right thing to do. For me the draw was being with people that shared my beliefs.