

EcoVillage at Ithaca

Review

Steve Welzer

2006

a review of

EcoVillage at Ithaca: Pioneering a Sustainable Culture by Liz Walker. 256 pages. New Society Publishers. 2005.

Those who are best comprehending The Problem are making alliances with those who are best comprehending The Solution. Liz Walker's timely book is a chronicle, manual, and inspiration for that movement. The Problem being addressed is that the praxis of our civilization is unsustainable. The Solution is to move in the direction of living more locally and more lightly.

A key aspect of the movement for a new society will be fostering the emergence of intentional communities committed to taking an integrated approach to addressing the problems of ecological degradation and social dysfunction.

People need to make change together, ideally at a scale where they feel empowered and consequential. We need to have the pleasure of company and co-participation, the motivation of peer appraisal (and praise!), the sense that we are engaged in significant common enterprise and shared goal-achievement. It is in community, through joint action, that we have the best chance to improve our quality of life while making significant strides in the direction of sustainability.

Walker and Joan Bokaer founded the EcoVillage at Ithaca project (EVI) in 1991 and have been instrumental in guiding it toward realization of its initial vision: A multi-neighborhood cohousing community modeling innovative approaches to ecological and social sustainability. Setting on 175-acres overlooking Ithaca, N.Y, it features an organic farm, education center, and natural areas (over 80% of the land is preserved or has been restored as green space). The residential component of EVI is currently two (eventually to be three or four) clustered cohousing neighborhoods surrounding a shared commons. Psychological/ characterological health is dependent upon having a place and a status within a comprehensible social world. Disorientation results from trying to negotiate within domains that effectively lack boundaries and limits; from trying to succeed confronting standards associated with steeply pyramidal status hierarchies.

We're given the impression that we are fortunate to be presented with near-limitless sources of stimulation, choice, and opportunity. But psychologists are discovering that such an operational milieu is confusing, distracting and anxiety-provoking. In our globalized mass-production/mass-consumption/mass-communication reality, human scale long ago ceased to be a value. All has gone "hyper" too much, too fast, too far, too big; too synthetic and overly complex. Ours is now, indeed, a civilization of disorientation and discontent.

The lesson to be learned is that social pathology invariably results when a society becomes unmoored from a basic grounding in natural sensibilities of limits and balances. Avoiding a collision course with madness will require more than technological panaceas, corporate constraints, or governmental regime change. We need to restore the

human scale in all aspects of life. We need to reconstitute real community. We need to find our way Home. Cohousing and ecovillage communities will serve as models (and base camps!) for the broad global movement working to Green our civilization and set it on a path toward sustainability.

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