Embracing the Existential Crisis: The challenges and possibilities of established communities

Becoming a stable, established community is something to celebrate. It can also bring a whole slate of problems that may not pose an existential danger, but can drain the life out of a community. This doesn't have to just be the way it is. If we come together and embrace the challenge a whole new world of community is possible.

Sky Blue (they/them pronouns) has spent over 20 years living in a variety of intentional communities and currently lives in Valley Oaks Village, a 25 year old cohousing community in Chico, CA. Their parents met in a now 54 year old intentional community called Twin Oaks in the late 70's. Sky came back to Twin Oaks as an adult and raised a child there. Sky has also visited over 130 different communities in the US and Europe and served as the Executive Director of the Foundation for Intentional Community for 4 years.

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So in case you're wondering, yes, Sky Blue is my real name, which might not surprise you hearing that my parents met on a commune in the 70's. Community is very much where I come from. I grew up knowing about intentional community, and some of my earliest memories are from when we visited Twin Oaks when I was 4 years old.

For reference, Twin Oaks is a rural, income-sharing community in Virginia of about 100 people that holds egalitarianism and non-violence as core values and practices a high degree of self-sufficiency, including food production and community businesses.

I have these magic memories of playing in the river, running around through sheets drying on laundry lines, eating homemade ice cream in the kids building, and sitting in a hammock with my mother while she pulled ticks out of my hair. I was raised by communitarians, but wasn't raised in community, so when I came back to it as a teenager it felt like coming home.

The theme of this online conference is Cohousing Over Time. It definitely gives you a certain perspective when you've been in community for a while, particularly an established community. We humans have this funny tendency to relate to things like that's the way they've always been. So, the

idea that where a community now stands used to be, say, an abandoned walnut orchard, and that none of these buildings used to exist, it's hard for the mind to grasp.

It's also almost impossible to grasp what it took to make it all happen. I think sharing the founding stories of communities is a deeply important practice. The fact that we can take our communities for granted is in some ways a beautiful thing. We made it. We did it. The almost impossible task of creating a community. It's a miracle. And yet that taking for granted has its downsides. It's important that we try to grasp what it took and in some ways continue to relate to our communities as if we're still trying to get them off the ground or at least still works in progress.

Cohousing Over Time to me is about perspective and context, and it's about challenges and opportunities, the seeing and embracing of which requires the understanding and integrating of perspective and context over time.

So, speaking of not taking things for granted, why am I talking to you right now? Why was I asked to give this keynote? It's important for me to acknowledge that I am a highly privileged person. And at this point in time, as we are faced with monumental challenges as individuals, communities, and a global society, it's important to center the voices and experiences of people most impacted and most marginalized. I'm not one of them, and these days I'm hesitant to take the stage like this. And I know that the organizers of this conference considered this carefully.

The reason they asked me, and I said yes, is because I've been part of this world of community since before I was born, and I've made it my life's work. The fact that I was able to do that is a manifestation of my privilege, and I look forward to the day when more people who don't look like me will have had the same opportunities.

I want to start off by sharing more of my story. I was born in 1980, 17 days before Mt Saint Helen erupted. I'm 41 years old, my daughter is 19, and I now understand what having a mid-life crisis is all about.

In the early 90's, I was in my early teens when my older half brother moved back to Twin Oaks. My older half sister started going to UC Berkeley and soon moved into a student housing co-op. My father started meeting with people about starting a cohousing community, and Valley Oaks Village, in Chico, CA, was built in 1996, when I was 16. We moved in and a few months later I became a member. I went to meetings and was part of the consensus process, albeit fairly passively, but I was welcome and this was my first dip into the pool of community.

By the summer of 1998, I had gotten out of high school early, had done two years of community college, and was about to transfer to UC Santa Cruz. But for the summer, I decided to meet up with my brother at the annual Earth First rendevous. It was a transformative experience to be in a community of people, some of whom had spent decades of direct action putting their bodies on the line to stop environmental destruction. We then went to East Wind, a sister community of Twin Oaks in Missouri, where my brother had moved. Seeing a community practicing egalitarianism, cooperation, and self-sufficiency just made so much sense to me. Spending two more years to get a piece of paper I had no idea what I would do with did not. I knew then that I was made for community. But I thought that piece of paper might come in handy at some point, and it was just two more years. So I made a promise to myself. I knew there were student housing co-ops in Santa Cruz. I would find one and live there while I finished up school.

I kept that promise to myself. And as it happened, the house I moved into was in trouble. The house was actually owned by NASCO Properties, an arm of the North American Students of Cooperation, which helps co-ops get started and holds the title while the co-op pays off the mortgage through them. But over the previous summer, the house hadn't been making payments, and had become a renowned and disruptive party

house. The neighbors were trying to get the city to sue. Someone from NASCO came to the first house meeting I attended as a new member and put it to us bluntly. If the city sued they would just shut the house down. If we wanted to stay open, we had to agree to a few things. Most of the house was on board, and several of us spent hours in a cafe coming up with a new set of house agreements. We saved the co-op, and we only ended up needing to throw one person out in the process.

Over the next 9 months I spent time as the membership coordinator, helped revamp the membership agreement, did some neighborhood PR work, and learned more about consensus and facilitation. When UC Santa Cruz put a hold on my enrollment because I'd missed the deadline to declare my major and restricted the classes I could sign up for, I said fuck it, I'm done. I was learning so much more living in the co-op, and I didn't need a diploma for that.

In the summer of 1999, I was 19 years old, and I went wandering around the country and found myself at Twin Oaks just in time for Y2K, which they'd done some prep for of course, and it seemed like as good a place as any to see what happened.

I wasn't too concerned, but I wasn't sure. I was raised with a consciousness about climate change. I've been waiting for the apocalypse since I was 12 years old. And this is a lot of what drew me to community. I was raised with the understanding that consumerism and inequality were drivers of environmental destruction and that community is part of the solution.

I moved to Twin Oaks largely because I knew I'd be able to learn a lot, and as a community with no buy-in I could join and leave whenever I wanted.

I didn't plan on falling in love and having a kid when I moved there. But life happens, and all of a sudden I was part of only two families that have had 3 generations live at Twin Oaks.

I did a lot of different things at Twin Oaks, including group process and policy development, business management, networking and outreach, the weekly dump run, making tofu and hammocks, but one of the things I'm most proud of was organizing the community's 50th anniversary celebration in 2017, which brought together about 400 ex-members and friends and family. I ended up spending 19 years either as a member of Twin Oaks or living close by. I got an intimate experience of what 50 plus years of community building looks like.

Two and a half years ago I left Twin Oaks, and this year I took on the mission of finding a group of people to help start a new community. Starting a community has been a dream of mine since I was 18. But it was clear to me that I should spend some time living in community before I could seriously pursue that. I've returned to California and am living back at Valley Oaks Village, where my community journey started. VOV is now a 25 year old community. I've gotten to see the community grow up and the community has gotten to see me grow up.

It was a joy and an honor last year when I got to do some facilitation and process support for the community. Getting to come full circle, from a 16 year old dipping my toes into community for the first time, to being able to lend some experience and expertise, was the kind of gift that's only possible in community over time.

My time in the communities movement has given me the opportunity to spend time at a number of long-term communities. Several, like Dancing Rabbit, Earthaven, Ithaca Ecovillage, Songaia, and the trio of cohousing communities in Ann Arbor, MI, were started sometime in the 90's. Others, like Twin Oaks, The Farm, and Arcosanti go back to the late 60's and early 70's. Koinonia, which is where Habitat for Humanity was founded, was started in Georgia the 1940's as a radical inter-racial Christian community where it was illegal at the time for blacks and whites to sit down for dinner together. I also had the opportunity to visit the Amana Colonies, in Iowa, an egalitarian Christian commune founded by German immigrants in the late 1800's.

Now, many of these communities look and operate very different from the typical cohousing model. But one of the things I've learned from visiting over 130 different communities is that all of them, from the most mainstream cohousing community to the most radical commune, are far more alike than they are different. People are people, and cooperative organizations that have achieved a level of success and stability have the same dynamics regardless of what they're doing. And when you live together, when you share your home and steward land together, even if you have your own house, it creates a kind of intimacy that you just don't find anywhere else.

I've also learned a few things along the way about the challenges and opportunities facing established communities. And sometimes the challenges and opportunities are two sides of the same coin.

For example, cohousing communities tend to have low turnover. Obviously there are benefits to this, like retaining skills, institutional memory, general familiarity with how things are done that can aid efficiency, and the depth of intimacy you get from long-term relationships.

On the flip side, low turnover can result in a lack of age diversity as people get older. And as with any lack of diversity, it tends to be self-reinforcing. Few people enjoy being the, or one of the only people of any particular identity in a community, whether it's a person of a particular age, a POC, or an LGBTQ+ person.

The shadow side of the long-term relationships is when there's unresolved conflict that's been allowed to fester, which tends to not only affect the relationship in question. Any time a thread is frayed or broken the social fabric is that much weaker. The conflict might also be around some community incident that was never fully processed by the community, both in terms of its impact on relationships and in how the community functions. Maybe there was a reactionary policy that was put in place to try and stop the thing from happening again but that didn't really address the underlying

issues and now there's this rule that maybe doesn't make a whole lot of sense particularly to people who weren't around at the time. Maybe some people feel betrayed in some way by how an incident was dealt with. As years pass, these things atrophy and it can become harder and harder to do the healing and reconciliation needed to fully integrate the experience so it's not in the way.

Another benefit of legacy communities is they tend to figure some things out over time, which can make it easier to get those things done so you have more time for other things. The flip side is getting stuck in doing things a certain way that aren't serving the evolving needs of the community. When things are done a certain way to meet certain needs it can make it hard to see when different needs have come into play, and there can be a false sense that things are working just fine, and if it ain't broke don't fix it. Hearing that things may not be working can be challenging for some people, especially for those for whom things are working or who identify so strongly with the community that they take any criticism about the community personally. This is a place where an analysis of power and privilege needs to come in, particularly if you want to diversify your membership.

Another issue that doesn't just affect legacy communities, but I think is worth noting, is affordability. It goes up and down of course, but in general things have gotten less and less affordable since cohousing took off in the US in the 90's. This can impact who is able to start or move into a cohousing community, which can make it harder to foster diversity. It can also play into community dynamics if some people in the community have a harder time making ends meet than others. This can turn the volunteer time needed to make the community work from being part of the joy of being in community into a burden, and tensions can arise from there.

Your community might not be experiencing all these issues, and may be experiencing others. The fact that you're at this conference means that if your community is experiencing these kinds of issues I'm probably not saying much you're not already aware of. But part of the nature of these

issues is that they tend to become inter-related, interlocking, and mutually reinforcing over the long-term and can make addressing them feel completely overwhelming.

Part of that overwhelm might also come from the fact that you know that not everyone in your community sees things the same way, or is interested in community process, and most of us tend to be at least a little conflict avoidant.

You might see issues that are getting in the way of your potential as a community, but others might be fine with the way things are. What's the problem? Why are you always focusing on what's wrong? They might feel like some amount of issues and tension is just normal and will always be there. And that's true to an extent. But I want to assert that we have a responsibility to try and do better, and that there are real benefits to it. And by naming these issues and starting to map the landscape of what you're dealing with you can begin to see a path forward.

Still, that path might be hard to see more than a few steps ahead of you. As you journey through the wilderness, I encourage you to try and find your north star. And that north star, is your sense of shared purpose.

Every community has a purpose. Sometimes it's stated, sometimes not. And its purpose evolves over time, intentionally or not.

To whatever extent your community was clear about why you were creating a community and what you wanted the purpose of the community to be, the founding and building of a community is an exciting time that in itself provides that shared purpose.

But at some point that falls away. In the absence of some other larger purpose, communities have a tendency to default into maintenance mode. People start focusing less on the imminent shared project of building their community and more on living their own lives.

Now, again, one could ask, what's wrong with this? Isn't this kinda the point? Aren't we trying to create places where people are able to just live their lives in community?

On some level yes, but a lack of shared purpose tends to create some problems.

Having a shared purpose creates an inspiring context.

It gives us a sense of meaning that motivates us. It has us look for what needs to be done instead of trying to minimize what we have to do. Without a sense of shared purpose, standards tend to slip and you start seeing the martyrs vs the slackers dynamic. Without something inspiring to do together, intimacy tends to fade.

In the absence of a clear sense of shared purpose, groups start getting into what I call lowest-common-denominator politics. People's reasons for living in the community start to diverge, which can create conflicting priorities. As time goes on, the only thing the group can really agree on is the status quo, even if no one is particularly happy with the status quo. And the group doesn't even really talk about it because they know they won't agree.

So people start focusing more on changing things in little ways to suit themselves, or trying to keep things the way they are. They seek to meet their needs in more individualistic ways. They make little decisions bigger deals than they need to be, and are more prone to engaging in petty drama.

Or, you start seeing the classic dynamic of the long-termers vs the newcomers, which often plays out along generational lines, but not always. Sometimes it manifests as Founders Syndrome, where founding or long-term members feel entitled to things being a certain way and become overbearing. Sometimes new people come in without much recognition or respect for how things are and demand change in ways that might be damaging and counterproductive to what they say they want as they get

more caught up in being right than in being effective. Sometimes the power dynamic is more balanced but still becomes combative or adversarial. The need for stability and the need for change become oppositional, when I think we all know in our hearts that they don't need to be.

Humans are very narrative-based creatures. We always have a story in our minds about what's going on, right now, in our lives, in the world. Having a sense of meaning is a basic human need, and we will always make things mean something. It's what motivates us. We need to have some sense of why it is we do what we do, why we get out of bed in the morning.

We will also always have problems. Partly this is just the uncertain, uncontrollable nature of life. But it's also because of our need for narrative. What are the struggles that define us and give us a sense of purpose?

The question becomes, what stories are we choosing? What are we choosing to make things mean? What problems are we taking on? What do we say is our purpose?

Having a sense of shared purpose is what integrates these seemingly conflicting needs of stability and change. But I should be clear, the shared purpose needs to extend beyond your property line. Being part of a community gives us something as individuals that's greater than ourselves to be concerned about and helps puts our individual problems in perspective. But a stable community becomes a kind of individual entity that then needs something greater than itself to be concerned about to put its problems in perspective.

Why?

Well, because there is a lot to be concerned about. There are some problems in the world that we need to do something about. These problems are at least part of what motivated most people to start communities in the first place. But simply creating nice little communities for ourselves is not enough, for multiple reasons.

One reason is that our communities are not islands. We will still end up getting run over by the growing impacts of trauma, climate change, and systems of oppression, or at minimum we will simply continue to be part of perpetuating those problems. The context of the world has changed, and how we're being called to show up in the world has changed with it.

Another reason is that getting to live in community is a profound privilege. We also have a debt of gratitude to the people who came before us who pioneered these models. If this is something we believe in, that we think is good for people and good for the planet, we have a responsibility to leverage our privilege and pay it forward and help make community available to others.

It takes a level of stability to be able to be resourced enough to do the work of addressing these problems, in ourselves, in our communities, and in the world around us. Doing this work will also demand that we make changes and advocate for change, in ourselves, in our communities, and in the world around us. Community over time is what allows us to do this work.

On a more mundane level, having a shared purpose gives us a reason to work through our conflicts with each other and be in more intimate, satisfying relationship with each other. In the context of a greater purpose, little decisions become more obvious and are given an appropriate level of concern.

And in general, a shared purpose will help make it clear where stability is needed and where change is needed, and give us the motivation to embrace the discomfort and to become practiced at making needed change, within ourselves, in our communities, and in the world around us.

Again, a community's purpose, stated or not, intentionally or not, will evolve over time because things change. Codifying your shared purpose can be important, but can also have it's pitfalls. It's crucial to make sure that you continue to renew and revise your shared purpose. You can think of this as

being like renewing your vows in a long-term marriage. Too often, things like vision and mission statements just collect real or virtual dust sitting in filing cabinets or google drive folders that no one looks at and has little connection to the group's activities. Your shared purpose needs to be alive, meaningful, that helps guide your actions, that is referenced and renewed through living each day, and is periodically revisited.

Part of what I'm getting at is that your shared purpose needs to have practical application. Part of why I think vision and mission statements often don't serve a group very well is because they're incomplete on their own. What do they look like in action? What are the goals and objectives? What are the specific projects that help you fulfill your purpose?

The opportunity of being in a long-term community with a sense of shared purpose is to leverage our collective capacity to do things that can have an exponentially greater impact than what we could do as individuals. We need this. And the world needs it.

Now, I realize that what I'm suggesting is not easy. What might that shared purpose even look like? What would the process even be for figuring it out? I would say that the foundation of this work is relationships and conversations. You need to reach a critical mass of people who want to come together to do this work, who recognize that even though it feels overwhelming and impossible and will be intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually challenging, it's worth it. All you have to do is be brave, vulnerable, compassionate, collaborative, adamant, and persistent enough to start the conversation, see who shows up, see how it goes, and then go from there.

Actually getting your whole community on board with some shared purpose, let alone the process to create that shared purpose, might simply be impossible. But there's still plenty you can do with those of you who do want to do that work, and maybe as you go you'll be able to inspire others.

And you have a whole world of support here in this movement to figure this all out, in conferences like these, in the network of professional facilitators and consultants out there, and in the supportive relationships you build with each other.

Thank you so much for giving me this time with you. I hope this has helped give you some context for the work you're about to do today in this conference.

My contact info will be in the participants list. Feel free to reach out if you'd like to chat.

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