

Spring 2009

In the Arms of the Community

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Recommended Citation

Joseph, Elizabeth Anne, "In the Arms of the Community" (2009). *Inquiry Journal*. 6.
https://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2009/6

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commentary

In the Arms of the Community

—Elizabeth Anne Joseph (Edited by Brigid C. Casellini)

In the spring of my sophomore year (2006), I had a conversation with a friend where she patiently listened to my frustration over the impending, predictable summer of working at a restaurant in my hometown. During our talk, Julie suggested that I volunteer at a communal farm in West Virginia where she had lived previously—see a new place, do good work, experience a different way of life. I was immediately interested. A few phone calls later and I had plans to volunteer at Bethlehem Farm that summer. Looking back, I could never have predicted that this experience would inspire a grant-funded research project in creative writing and even post-college plans to build community through agriculture.

Some time after I arrived at Bethlehem Farm, a group visited from an intentional community called *Bruderhof*. The Bruderhof community centers life around family and faith, most prominently the Christian teachings of ‘love thy neighbor as thyself,’ nonviolence, faithfulness in marriage, and compassion for the poor. When the group arrived that evening, it was their voices I heard first: nearly forty high-school-aged youth with a number of adults accompanying, all dressed in simple, modest clothing—slacks, skirts, and head-coverings. The group walked up the mountain together, in unified song. Gathered around a roaring bonfire, there was a bustle of introductions. With each hand-shake my curiosity grew. It was not until the Bruderhof sang again just as the stars came out (listening as well, I imagine) that I crossed the distinct line in education when you realize you *must* know more. Song after song, I watched their silhouettes around the fire, wondering.



Liz Joseph, bottom left, with her fellow farm caretakers at Bethlehem Farm.

When the music ceased I was on my feet, ready to flood someone with questions— who are the Bruderhof? Where are they from? What is an intentional community? How does everyone learn to sing like this? I could barely see the face of the woman who graciously entertained my questions, though by the end of our conversation she handed me her mailing address and told me that the best way to learn more, to “seek” as she phrased it, was to visit.

Time passed. The next spring at the University of New Hampshire I was turning over ideas for a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF) project. I was reading essay after essay by Wendell Berry about returning to the local. I was taking the courses “Sustainable Living” and “Ecological Ethics.” I was frequently riding my bike down to the UNH organic garden. I was coordinating monthly dinners for the community of

Durham. And in my spare time, I was endlessly seeking the particulars of local food, craft, music, business, politics, environment, and people. Community was on my mind.

I wondered: What does it really take to live with a genuine spirit of community? What would our communities look like if we did? What are the values necessary to make such a commitment? I knew I could not answer these questions by formula, book research, or abstraction. I needed to write based on real-life experience.

It was then that the night in West Virginia came back to me. I wrote to the Bruderhof asking to visit, that we might “seek together.” My SURF proposal was to live with the Bruderhof for three weeks, ground my writing on the values of community based on this experience, and eventually share this writing with my own community at the University of New Hampshire.

Experience

Come early June, I arrived at the New Meadow Run Bruderhof Community in Pennsylvania by train. It was a rainy night. I could not see where I was and wondered what I had gotten myself into. By the end of my three weeks, however, I was fully immersed in daily life. Living with a host family, I worked in the communal kitchen as well as the wood shop. I planted seeds in the thirteen-acre organic gardens, shared meals, participated in meetings with over 200 people, learned traditional folk dances, even joined as one of the many voices singing. Moreover, I asked countless questions and listened in earnest. I witnessed both the challenges and joys of communal life. At night, oftentimes barely awake, I scribbled images, stories, words, songs, and yet more questions into a worn notebook.



Bethlehem Farm



Communal dining space at New Meadow Run Bruderhof Community where over 200 people would gather for meals.

I discovered that, by sharing all resources in common, the Bruderhof work to embody a faith and a lifestyle that values every person and thinks first of the common good. Based on my experience, I wrote eight short stories on eight values that I witnessed as central to the health, integrity, and sustainability of the community: Youth, Sense of Time, Sense of Place, Connection to Nature, Simplicity, Unity, Straight-speaking in Love, and Commitment. What follows are brief descriptions of the eight values.

Youth— to embrace the youth of our communities and to encourage all people to cultivate a childlike spirit in themselves.

Sense of Place—to know, understand, and value one’s present surroundings. We can know who we are by knowing where

we are, the distinct particulars of our local community. To live, legislate, and learn with a memory and respect for the history, integrity, and complexity of our surroundings.

Sense of Time— to know, understand, and value one’s history. By learning our history, respecting the wisdom and experience of older people, creating connections between generations, and preserving traditions, we may better appreciate the present and shape the future.

Connection to Nature—a land ethic that encourages the human population to live in harmony with the non-human populations and to spend time in, and learn from, the natural world. This inspires an intimacy, wonder, humility, and respect that is for the benefit of the entire community—humans, plants, and animals alike.

Simplicity—a lifestyle that seeks to reduce consumption of resources, excess, and waste. The value of simplicity encourages one to live with a light touch on the earth and to find the renewal that comes with slowing down, unplugging, doing meaningful work, and working with neighbors.

Unity—an understanding that each person is one part of the collective whole. Unity recognizes that everyone has a part to play and that each individual's choices influence the integrity, needs, and health of the common good.

Straight-speaking in Love—to speak, think, and interact with honesty and love. This value acknowledges mutual imperfection, encourages direct, genuine communication, and fosters depth of relationships.

Commitment— an obligation beyond intentions, hopes, or desires that binds a community based on some shared foundation. Commitment is a strong force that can hold a community together in the face of struggles, catastrophe, or suffering that would threaten to break it apart.

Outcome

In writing about these eight values, my intention was not to document or explain Bruderhof life; rather, it was to illustrate foundational values of community itself and to hopefully stir conversation about what we want our own communities to look like. After a year of writing and rewriting, I presented in the spring of my senior year a finished compilation of short stories titled *In the Arms of the Community* at UNH's Undergraduate Research Conference. The entirety of my project—researching through experience, writing, and eventually sharing with my own community—was nothing short of transformative.

There was tremendous hope stirring in me after observing and participating in a lifestyle that moves beyond oneself to seek first the common good. It is a powerful experience to witness the raw, honest lives of people living intentionally together, and to find that it is beautiful, let alone possible.

There was the incredible challenge of putting such a dynamic experience into words. A long period of reflection eventually yielded writing and frequent revision. Stories sometimes found their way into telling word by word. Many a sunrise followed a night of writing to mark the completion of another story finding its way to light.

Finally, there was the sharing of this hope and these stories with my own community through the finished compilation and presentations, a sharing that brought me from a journey out to a journey in. After that summer in Pennsylvania, it was incredibly fulfilling to return to UNH to share my experience and stories, to come full circle back to the beginning—a beginning that speaks not only to the events that led me to the Bruderhof, but also to a love for my own local community that moved me to learn more. The meeting in West Virginia was *how* I came to this project, but long before that summer, there was a commitment to and love of community—firmly rooted in the people and environment at the University of New Hampshire—that was *why*.



Liz Joseph at Mandala Farm in Maine.

In many ways, my project ended where it began: With the lilacs that bloom on Dimond Hill in the spring. The smell of a new book from the book store and the writings in the margins of a used one. The laughter of friends on Main Street, in a residence hall, from an office in Ham Smith. The bells of Thompson Hall. The energy at a hockey game or Durham Community Dinner. The alternative spring break trips, ideas in a classroom, movement on Main Street. The student body— diverse not only in background or belief, but also in talent and in dreams. The blooming orchard at Woodman Farm. The sound of the *Downeaster* passing through. Wagon Hill marking the route to UNH, and all that happens therein.

The love of community, which years ago inspired me to this writing project, is still with me now as an apprentice on a diversified, organic vegetable and horse farm in Gouldsboro, Maine. My hope is to continue as an apprentice for future seasons so that I may continue learning the skills I will one day use to strengthen and enhance my own local community, all as part of my larger goal of working toward and writing about ecological and social justice.

And, while some are surprised to hear of an English major—gone—farmer’s apprentice, my commitment to building community (and topsoil) is in many ways rooted in my SURF writing project—which was in turn rooted in the community at the University of New Hampshire to begin with.

A heartfelt thank you to the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research staff and donors who made this project possible; to Clark Knowles, my writing mentor; to the University of New Hampshire, my community for four years and beyond; to Bethlehem Farm, moving us all in a better direction; to the New Meadow Run Bruderhof Community, for so graciously sharing their lives and stories with me; and to all those doing the good work that these times ask of us, you are models of hope, companions for this journey.

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Author Bio

*With inspiration taken from the writings of Wendell Berry and from the University of New Hampshire community, UNH alumna **Elizabeth Joseph**’s desire to understand the meaning of community led her to a research project in creative writing. With the assistance of a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship (SURF), Joseph, an English major who graduated in 2008, spent three weeks living in an intentional community and wrote eight short stories based on the experience. Her research reached far beyond the realm of strict academic and career goals; it sharpened her outlook on life. “I learned that doing research—moving beyond one’s realm of experience, thought, imagination, knowledge, and understanding—is important, even necessary. And I learned that it’s what you do after this moving beyond that perhaps matters most.” In publishing this commentary for Inquiry, Joseph hopes to stir up conversation among the journal’s readers about the stories and ideas she presents in her writing.*

Mentor Bio

Clark Knowles is a lecturer and teaches writing in the English Department at the University of New Hampshire. His fiction has appeared in Glimmertrain Stories, Inkwell, Zahir Tales, Black Warrior Review, Scribners Best of Fiction Workshops 1999, The Flying Horse Review, and Red Rock Review. He received his master’s of fine arts in writing and literature from Bennington College. The New Hampshire State Council on the Arts recently awarded Knowles an Individual Artist’s Fellowship for the year 2009. He lives in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, with his wife Gail, daughter Grace, dopey beagle Fielding, and lazy cat Evil.