

Creation, Discovery and Community Formation in the ZEGG Forum

by Thea Tupelo and Graham Meltzer

In November 2005, we attended a five-day course at ZEGG (Center for Experimental Cultural Design), located in Belzig, Germany. ZEGG is a large, well-known, long standing intentional community that has featured in many Communities Magazine articles. The course, Forum I, was an introduction to the fundamental principles and practices of the Forum, a social technology developed and refined at ZEGG over 25 years; it is a critical component of their 'social glue'. We were both very moved and inspired by the experience and decided to jointly write this article as an expression of our appreciation. We came to the course from different directions and backgrounds. So we feel it's appropriate to write separately of our experiences and impressions. Graham's take is that of a social researcher and part-time communal dweller. Thea has lived for many years at Twin Oaks, another long-standing flagship community located in Virginia, USA.

Thea's take ...

For me, living in community has always been a personal and collective process of creating and discovering common values among diverse individuals. In my home community of Twin Oaks, it was a vision of a Walden.

Two community (a la B.F. Skinner) that brought our founders together originally, but over the years we have emerged as one of the more philosophically diverse populations in the Intentional Communities Movement. We have developed many systems and practices over a period of nearly 35 years which have contributed to the creation of a stable and viable alternative to the mainstream society, and in my 6 1/2 years of membership here I've sought to understand the essential unity which underlies all the daily rituals that make up our communal life: our work, our self-governance, our play, our art, and our support systems. It seems that many of us here are perpetually engaged in a quest for deepening trust and refining a common vision together, and some very useful and powerful tools for building community have been integrated into the culture here over the years. Several of us Oakers are currently exploring one such process called the Zegg Forum, which addresses issues of trust, transparency, love, and human nature, which we currently have no community venue to explore at Twin Oaks.

In November of '05, I attended the first in a series of courses offered by Achim Ecker and Ina Meyer-Stoll at ZEGG. My first taste of the Forum came earlier in the year via the Network for a New Culture, an American organization which hosts a Summer Intensive Camp in the tradition of the ZEGG vision on each coast every summer, where I found myself deeply moved by the power of the process to bring people into a place of profound sharing, unity, and trust. I kept thinking to myself both at Summer Camp and during the course at ZEGG, "if the Forum can create this sense of community among relative strangers, imagine the possibilities among people sharing a life together!"

Part community meeting and part ensemble art performance, the Forum is a way of coming together in order to re-discover the truth of each individual's experiences within the larger context of a shared collective vision. This is not a process for community decision making or intellectual problem solving. The focus is instead on exploring emotional, interpersonal, and

archetypal truths for groups who share or wish to create a common culture. A forum can be as small as 10 and as large as 100.

Participants create a container by forming a large circle around the "stage" or "middle", where individuals come to express what is authentic, alive, and true for them in the moment. There is a heightened quality to these "performances"- the person in the middle is encouraged by the facilitator to express the essence of their emotional reality in the form of physical movement, song, dance, words, or by simply allowing themselves to fully "be" in the feelings and thoughts of what is happening for them right now. Each Forum lasts for about 90 minutes and there is usually time for about three people to go into the middle. Each person who has gone into the middle is then offered the opportunity to receive appreciations and mirrors, a form of feedback where those who are called to come into the middle and express their own unique perceptions of what they observed of the person.

To know how others saw me in a particular context and to understand how it may differ from my own self-perception was a challenge. I found myself habitually identifying personally with the feedback, judging myself, or wanting to dismiss or discount others. We were asked by our instructors to experiment with consciously shifting our perspective to include ourselves in the greater historical and cultural evolution of humankind. Experiencing the process in this way, I became more and more aware that each person who went into the middle was telling my story as well as their own. On this universal and intimate human stage, we are tapping into a collective intelligence which can guide us in creating a more loving future together.

Graham's take ...

What constitutes a community (ie. what are its fundamental qualities or attributes) is a much debated matter. For me, the essence of a community is found in the interpersonal relationships of its members. A cohesive and successful community will invariably have social relations of a high order or quality. The exact nature of that quality will vary from group to group according to their circumstance and aspirations. But for me ... my 'ideal' community would be one committed to developing open-hearted and authentic (no bullshit) relationships. In other words, the group works hard over a long period of time to establish clear, if not transparent, means of communication amongst its members.

This is a tall order of course. There are not that many intentional communities of the past or the present that have held such an aspiration as a central tenet. One contemporary group that does exactly that is ZEGG, located on the outskirts of Belzig, a small town south-west of Berlin. I first visited ZEGG in 2001 for a conference. Immediately upon arriving there my sociologist's radar for social phenomena picked up something quite extraordinary. Whenever any two members came together in some form of interaction (even the most perfunctory) they appeared to engage with total authenticity. Furthermore, their interaction exuded a warmth and camaraderie that was quite palpable.

As a long-time communal dweller, and over the last 15 years as a researcher/writer, I have spent time in perhaps a hundred intentional communities. Yet, never before had I witnessed such intimacy of engagement ...

at least, not within a secular community. I'm sure there are many religious groups and others with charismatic leaders that might exhibit a similar degree of social bonding. In a way, ZEGG's ideology and practices constitute a kind of religion, or perhaps more accurately, a spirituality.

They believe in the power of open-hearted communication as a means of transforming personal and collective consciousness. They believe too, in being mindful or meditative in everything one does and that even the most mundane work should be considered "love in action". These are clearly spiritual beliefs and practices.

Since that first visit, I have returned to ZEGG annually, either for a Summercamp or a workshop. Every time, I feel moved and inspired by the experience ... finding that my capacity for creativity, intelligence and pure joy are powerfully expanded. In an infectious atmosphere of open-heartedness, I experience newfound levels of love and compassion for those I meet (and also those that I don't). Were it not for the fact that I don't speak German, I feel sure that I would be living at ZEGG today. As it is, I am moving to Findhorn in March 2006 where I know that many of the same attributes, qualities and practices can also be found. Nowadays, as it happens, ZEGG and Findhorn are closely allied and members often travel between them. The Forum is now practiced within the Findhorn Foundation with the encouragement and support of the ZEGG community.

In November 2005, I went to ZEGG for my annual 'fix' of open-hearted communication and sharing. This time I decided to attend a Forum course ... in fact two consecutive courses - Forum I and Forum II. The experience of each was quite different. However, the single most outstanding feature of both was the manner in which the group of about 15 participants became a community. We arrived as strangers yet, within a very short time, our relationships had assumed an intimacy and open-heartedness that one might expect of an exciting new relationship. Sure, this was a honeymoon of sorts! However the experience illustrated something quite profound. In an atmosphere of transparency and authenticity - where people are freely expressing what is presently essential and true for them - then one's capacity for love and compassion is greatly expanded. One is much less likely to feel bored, closed or judgemental toward somebody expressing and standing for their truth.

It is important to note that the Forum is not a form of therapy. Deep personal pain, including damage wrought in childhood, is often expressed by the protagonist in the middle. However the facilitator's role is not to play therapist. Rather he or she might remind the presenter of the wider social and cultural context of such pain - its universality as part of the human condition. Or else, they might bring the presenter's attention to the present day manifestation of their pain and reveal actions and reactions which reinforce patterns of behaviour. The purpose is generally to focus on the context of the issue and not encourage the presenter to dwell or wallow in the pain itself. This intention is further reinforced by the 'mirrors' or feedback offered by the group. These too, offer different frameworks or world views within which to locate one's own issue. This experience inspired both of us to begin brainstorming possibilities for introducing the Forum in other communities with similar visions. We've invited Achim and Ina to the US in May and June of '06 to teach the Forum course to interested communities and organizations on each coast.

Both Ina Meyer-Stoll and Achim Ecker have lived in intentional community for more than 20 years and have been experiencing and living the Forum process at ZEGG since 1991 (www.zegg.de). For more than 10 years they have been teaching in different communities in Germany and other countries. They see themselves as constantly learning to be more authentic in their lives and in their teachings. They would like to offer their skills in teaching this well practiced tool for trust building between people.

The course they would like to teach is a 2 to 6 day introductory course to Forum taught in English. You will get a clear idea of the world view behind the technique and practice it by doing. Living in a community with a strong focus on love, partnership and friendship, the relationships between people have their special attention during the process. Both are active in GEN-Europe (www.gen-europe.de), the European part of the Global Ecovillage Network. Ina is General Secretary and Achim Vice President of this organization. So another part of their attention is on living a sane life on this planet. Achim is active in the German Permaculture movement.

More information about the Forum is available on the ZEGG homepage: (http://www.zegg.de/englisch/texte_und_vortraege/forum.php).

Contact us at: ina@zegg.de for more information.