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Loving Is a Political Task

By Achim Ecker

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When Dieter Duhm founded the “Bauhütte” in 1978, it was about developing a culture without violence and destruction. Since then we have come a long way, from an in-depth self-exploration (the “Social Experiment” and intensive community-building in the Black Forest) to a well-respected and well-known seminar center in Bad Belzig: the ZEGG (German acronym for Center for Experimental Social Design).

I was thrilled when I found the Bauhütte in 1984. At that time, at the age of 24, I followed the motto: I will stay as long as I do not find anything more relevant for peace among people and between people and nature. I lived and learned in community, traveled the world, advised countless communities with my partner Ina Meyer-Stoll, and we spread our form of communication, the Forum¹, in many countries and continents. For 38 years I was in the right place to live and work.

Now things have changed, so that I think I have to move on from the place that I have built up and made flourish ecologically and socially with all my efforts over three decades. Today the seminar business has outstripped the community that sustains the place, and taken away the importance it was supposed to have. The community has, in my perception, lost its strength and its core. For now we have a sabbatical to rethink. In the following I will describe the process of change as best as I can. I see similar processes in many communities and groups.

How it began

In order to create a peaceful world, it is important to find out why it is not yet peaceful. So we looked profoundly to find out why people betray their love and act cruelly. If it is not just some “evil” people who have conspired against the good, the true, and the beautiful, we inevitably have to look at ourselves. What do we carry within us that enables and produces hatred, hostility, and exclusion of dissenters to this day? Can we prevent the inner monster from breaking out again as it did in German fascism?

For us, community life meant an education in which one trains in practicing a constructive attitude. We wanted to do something to counteract the increasing individualization in our society; for example, by putting the idea of “I want” second, following “it wants.” We were interested in reintegrating people into a social space where individuals experience that not everything revolves around themselves. Instead, we took on social responsibility.

Ultimately, having a fixed self-image always gets in the way of the One, of love. Thomas Hübl later put it this way: “What we call personality is the sum of our no’s to life.” We create a personality, a “someone,” out of a deficiency within us. There we are not enough and create an image of ourselves as being enough.

¹ The forum was developed by Dieter Duhm after his stay at the Friedrichshof by integrating and modifying the form of “self-expression” there. It has been transformed and constantly expanded over many phases. In its essence, however, it has remained the same: a trust-building tool for transparency and social feedback in groups. (See also zegg-forum.org/en.)

Today, this narcissism is a characteristic of the larger culture. Community, on the other hand, means social feedback that enables me to align myself ever more finely so that my actions serve the whole (and thus also me). What am I willing to invest in the newness that is to come?

What was important about the community before ZEGG?

Dieter Duhm is still a great visionary and lover. His vision, his spirit, and his big heart for people and all life carried us over many years, through some of the shoals of our lives towards connecting communal experiences. Time flew and at the same time stretched into infinity. He was the experimenter in this experimental laboratory and we learned a lot from him. He shaped a protected and held space where we could shed social, familial, and personal patterns, enabling us to have new experiences. At the entrance gate of the “Bauhütte” of Gut Rosenhof in Schwand a handwritten plaque welcomed visitors and guests: “Dear visitor, you are entering the interior of a cultural crystal. Put down all mental plates and ideas as you enter.” We trained our alignment to another world, another existence, to a life of peace and connectedness. We learned to love and stand up for each other.

Political thought was extremely important for me during this time, when I was able to expand many of the views of myself and the world that I had brought with me. Dieter Duhm always had the world in his heart in his frequent speeches and lectures. As an inner-German refugee, he himself had experienced exclusion and violence and a broken society. These experiences sharpened his view and his compassion for the situation of so many people worldwide. From this he developed his strong impulse to love and heal.

Just for myself personally, I would find it difficult to mobilize the strength to look at all the shadows within me, to release the pent-up and repressed pain in them and to go through them. However, if my going through this might conceivably bring about a positive change in the world, then this idea alone was a strong motive.

We explored our individual patterns, conflicts, and changes as examples of the patterns, conflicts, and changes necessary in the world. When I change something in my patterns, not only do I have a direct impact on my immediate environment, but even more, I affect the deeply interconnected living world around me, and thus I affect the whole fabric of life of which I am a part.

As a result, I am no longer so identified with my individual problems, because I see that they are collective issues with which I am not alone. Recognizing this was helpful: we learned to see and understand ourselves as individual manifestations of the whole.

Founding of ZEGG

In 1991 we bought the ZEGG site. The community, which was spread over Germany and Switzerland, had a center again. We called it “Center for Experimental Social Design” after a design by Dieter Duhm from 1978. To our surprise, he did not move to Bad Belzig with us. That caused a lot of uncertainty. Who should be able to take on this role and how do we make the transition from a community with a clear leader to a grassroots democratic community (what Spiral Dynamics² calls a “green meme”)? It took four years until the founding of Tamera in 1995 to make this transition. At that time it was an important step to embrace our responsibility completely.

² Spiral Dynamics is a theory of human development that was introduced in 1996 in the book *Spiral Dynamics* by Don Beck and Chris Cowan. The book is based on the theory from the 1950s by psychology professor Clare W. Graves. The term vMeme refers to a value system that acts as an organizing principle and expresses itself through memes (self-propagating ideas, habits, or cultural practices). The preceding letter v(=value) indicates that value systems are involved. The colors remind us of the living conditions and capacities of consciousness of the individual systems.

Several times a week we had big plenary meetings with about 60 people where we discussed all decisions and made them by consensus. These long community meetings became increasingly annoying for many. For me personally, they were an opportunity to see everyone and make appointments. Almost everything was communicated orally. There were no minutes at that time.

Life took place all over the site, with everyone and everywhere. It was a dense life where one year was like five. I was enthusiastic and learned a lot, especially as a human being, but also as a craftsman. Every house was also mine. I felt welcome everywhere. We visited each other often and almost always without an appointment. No door was closed. We mostly were happy to help each other when someone needed something. We were simply there for each other. No one was annoyed by the visits and wanted to be “undisturbed”—at least in my experience. If it didn’t fit, you said so.

Of course, we had to take out loans to buy the 14 hectare site. In the beginning we needed about 4 million DM for the purchase and necessary investments. In the following years the sum grew and is now 3 million Euros, the estimated value of the site. We have a big loan from a Swiss foundation, from the residents, from friends, and only a little from banks.

In the beginning we had little money and only built with what we had. The carpenter’s workshop dismantled the press-board cupboards from the German Democratic Republic and built shelves, window frames, etc. out of them. New wood was rare because it was expensive. We lived in the houses as they were, changed wallpaper, repainted, put cheap carpets on old floors and mattresses on top; that was enough for us. We used the resources we had and brought with us. Everyone contributed everything.

When we needed money, there were community activities like selling pretzels in pubs to earn it—also work in massage parlors and other jobs. Not much time was spent on that because we didn’t need much money yet; our needs were small.

Guests were community guests. The business structure (Ltd) existed only on paper and few were aware of it or its manager in everyday life. For us, the community was far above everything else in importance. We always knew: if it goes wrong, we sell; hopefully we can pay back the money we borrowed and move through Europe as a nomadic tribe.

In the beginning, the community came first; we were committed to addressing anything disturbing our experience of being together. Only further down the line came the private: “my” room, “my” retreat, “my” kitchen, etc. Whether the social (and fulfilling) density first became thinner and less sustainable, and therefore private needs emerged, or whether the private needs wanted to come back on stage after a long absence, and thus dissolved the social density, is like the question of hen and egg.

Growth—the hamster wheel begins to turn

Gradually the seminars became more necessary for the financing of ZEGG and also for the individuals. Up to now, the seminars had mainly served to convey our own experiences and insights from the intensive community life. There were not many seminars beyond the big “conferences,” as we called them then. Now we started to establish ourselves as a seminar center. Our guests no longer came to a community but to a seminar house. They expected an orderly, clean operation with more comfort and, for example, no mixed-sex bathrooms. The demands on the kitchen increased. All this meant more work, more expenses, and more effort. In return, we had to earn more money, i.e., have more guests, etc. As a result, we worked more and spent less time on community life and resolving conflicts. At the same time, individuals had an increased need for money for holidays,

training, etc. This is actually logical, because more need for money creates more need to work and more everyday life, from which one then also has to recover. In the early years, there was little or no such desire. Everything that I found exciting, attractive, and interesting at that time took place within the community. Thus a life with little money was fulfilling.

One cannot explain ZEGG without the time in the “Bauhütte.” The community of love that was built up at that time carried us for long and created a commitment and friendship that were essential for the existence of ZEGG. That was the early period from 1978 until about 1998. Even today we still live from the social credit we created when we lived intensively in community. Continuously the “social density” and also the orientation toward the cultural change work decreased. We live off the interest, so to speak, and use up the “capital.”

There were also external circumstances that contributed to the change—e.g., continuous attacks by the press and autonomous leftists, which had a wearing effect in the long run. They made us overcautious in what we thought, did, and said. It was exhausting to dare new things in living together, in love, relationships, and sex, and to be constantly fought as a result. There was a creeping process of inner and then outer adjustment so that finally there was peace and we could just live. It was easier to row back, to step closer to society, and to give in to our own inner inertia. New people only got to know this housing project ZEGG, where people left each other alone more. That was a lot better than what they knew. The orientation increasingly gave way to arbitrariness. Some noticed this, but it didn’t lead to changing course; instead, those who called for a change were ignored or fought against. That is what happened to me.

The pattern becomes visible—the evolution of communities

We slowly but surely slid into privatization and adaption to mainstream society. Today, houses and their surroundings are “private.” My living space has shrunk and so have my opportunities. But we have become more professional. We began to see work not as a contribution to a lived vision, but as something you more or less like and do because you have to earn money or because you are recognized for it. People wanted to “secure” themselves more and more individually. We no longer trust being carried by each other. We preferred to be alone with a few people in our free time, wanted a fuller bank account, sickness benefits, pension, insurance, etc. This did not make us more sustainable or ecological.

We continued with necessary and long-delayed investments in running the seminar business. Finally, the nonprofit status with its manifold requirements was granted. Whether this was a blessing or a curse, I don’t know. More people were employed. The hamster wheel turned faster.

As a community and a business, we conformed to legislation, sometimes because we were forced to, sometimes in anticipatory obedience. We questioned it much less than in our early days, but felt that—especially since nonprofit status—we no longer had a choice. In the Corona times, this unquestioned conformity became extreme and put a strain on the community. We slid into crisis—despite our knowledge of communication, projection³, and blame shifting.

Unacknowledged fear patterns that are no longer worked on communally play a role in this. Fear is used to govern, which could be observed well before the Corona period. In a 2002 lecture I said, “Wherever unconscious fear is involved, we are governable. That is why the question of overcoming fear is so important. Fear creates confinement and thus violence and restricts

³ What moves you emotionally, upsets you, annoys you, or occupies you always reveals your own concern. The stronger the emotional energy, the more likely it is your own problem that has been projected outwards. We then fight our own projected contents in others. We accept hurting them in order not to have to accept our responsibility. Freedom from shadows on a certain topic is therefore a good thing if you can look at it from different sides without being very concerned (but with empathy). At the same time, sometimes the clarity of sacred rage is needed.

communication possibilities. Rumors spread and produce further fear. Avoiding fear and conflict does not produce freedom from violence or a better world, but only looking away. To be capable of peace, fear must be positively worked through.”

All in all, there seems to be a powerful pull in that direction away from close community. The ICSA⁴ studies on historical community projects and the kibbutzim in Israel also attest to this. I attended the 1998 conference in Amsterdam and spoke about ZEGG there. In 2001, the ICSA was held at ZEGG, which was a highlight in our community history. Kibbutzim have been around for about 100 years—and they evolved towards more and more privatization and alignment with society. After the conference at ZEGG I termed this pattern⁵ “community entropy” and have been working to counteract it ever since. Ina and I gave all we had for the past 15 years to reinspire and revitalize the community. At all times we invited teachers, thinkers, and emotional workers to ZEGG who seemed compatible with the cultural idea. In this way, we always succeeded in igniting sparks of new inspiration and thus counteracting communal entropy. Today I have to recognize that it was not sufficient.

So the question is: How do we shape the development of community so that it does not follow this pattern? Is it possible? What kind of attitude do we need to overcome this pull? What kind of fulfilling togetherness do we need? For me, it used to be free love, a positive and carefree attitude towards sex together with being uplifted in an authentic community of people. It was also the participation in an avant-garde project with the goal of peace and the end of all violence.

In 2016, I asked my community, “Are we not naïve today if we think that the path we have taken, which leads ever closer to society, ... makes us happy? Do we really want to go this way or should we again scale everything down to a level where we need less? Is that even possible? Aren’t we already RACING far too much in our lives like the HAMSTER on its wheel? We are becoming more visible ‘above the radar,’ but are we becoming more effective? Are we still an alternative or has the logic of capitalism already taken us over? We are invited more to conferences, but we have less to say. Where is our (r)evolutionary impulse? What is right?”

Responsibility for the world

The wave of refugees in 2015 reminded me that as we enter the hamster wheel, as our turnover increases and as the ecological footprint of our lifestyle increases, we are also more involved in the destruction. Thus we are partly responsible for the fact that more and more people cannot live in their exploited countries.

We are so happy about our luxury, which we have “earned” and which seems modest compared to society. But we forget that it can only be maintained with the exploitation and suffering of people some of whom are compelled to go, in times of crisis, to where their resources are taken: to us! Our lifestyle has already destroyed their livelihoods.

By not acknowledging that we are exploiting others with our lifestyles, we are helping them to have the illusion that they could also live like this. They then want to and inevitably become co-exploiters, co-perpetrators of the destruction of the foundations of life on this once so beautiful planet. We are caught in the middle.

⁴ The International Communal Studies Association holds triennial academic conference of international communal researchers. In 2001 the conference was held for the first time at ZEGG—in a community. See icsacommunity.org.

⁵ Australian researcher Bill Metcalf describes striking trends in communities: from more radical to less radical; getting older as a community; from disorganized to professional; and the trend from more intimate community to cohousing.

We now live in the existing paradigm of the capitalist logic of exploitation and war, of anesthesia through consumption and distraction through exaggerated sensitivities⁶. We no longer question this culture. We live in it a little less destructively, a little happier, and are smaller accomplices by a degree. We can still point to those who are bigger accomplices.

Withdrawal into the private sphere is the path taken when we are in a tight spot. Everything else, the path into contact, into connectedness, feels like a risk—especially now after two years of prescribed distance, mistrust, and mask-wearing. Corona has torn us out of normality. Just now Corona is subsiding—and already we have a new war in Europe because of Western and Eastern power fantasies. There will be no more normality. Maybe that’s good, because it was based on exploitation and social inequality. It requires skillfulness and strength to go a new way, beyond the usual. But the survival of humanity demands that we find and walk this path.

When I have time to listen, I hear inner alarm bells. We in ZEGG are becoming more and more a cohousing project. I never wanted to live like this and still don’t. I fear for our diminishing commitment to cultivating a more humane world.

My vision of ZEGG

I laid out my hopes in a letter to the community in 2012: “In my vision, ZEGG is a beacon for love in the world, enlivened by people who consciously and curiously walk towards their own development and see personal boundaries not as limits but as exciting challenges. The true adventure lies within. We all agree on that. We need ourselves and the mirrors and perspectives of others to illuminate our shadows and our blind spots with the greatest possible awareness. We also know that every step we take on this level is a step for the world.”

I want to live in a community that puts community living back at the center: where we work on ourselves, become more transparent with each other, challenge each other, share with each other what we love about each other and what separates us. I want to live in a place where we learn from and with each other again, experience ourselves as an intentional community again, experience things that connect us and can bring themes into our festivals that come from a lived experiment. We have learned many tools, but we also need to use them.

I want to live with people who melt away their conditioning and act from their heart. To do this, we have to want to heal our shadows and traumas. Gabor Maté wrote about this: “Trauma distorts our perception so that we no longer see the world as it is.” This is a dangerous condition from which wars arise. We have the ability to love again the part of us that has closed itself off in hurt. This is often uncomfortable, but it is the only way I know of to our greatest potential. We can learn to love each other at these points of pain. Love means wanting to feel everything—not just feeling good. According to Dami Charf, a trauma therapist, there are choices that feel good AND are good for us and for the world. But very few of them are. Most of them do not feel good, but are good for us and for the world. In other words, abandon the postmodern dogma of “It must feel good.”

“We as a community,” I continued in my letter 10 years ago, “are at a point right now where we would need two months of intensive time together! To feel ourselves as a whole community again, to experience, to wrestle for values and human contact. That would be so important, to take time for

⁶ “Why were people suddenly fighting only for recognition? And not for equality? ... Could it not be that this question was only invented to distract from the question of having or not having? ... Almost all neoliberal projects provide for some kind of consideration for the vulnerable, because it is precisely this that enables enrichment and privatization by destroying the spaces of equality. ... A considerable part of neoliberal pseudo-policies and the sensitivities they stir up is based on attention to the issues of (cultural, ethnic, religious, sexual, etc.) identity. If you are no longer able to give people a perspective for the future, you simply divert their gaze to their past, their origins or to the point at which they stand.” (Robert Pfaller, *Adult Language*, Fischer, 2017)

each other. We could build up the big whole of us again. That is something that remains indescribable if you have never experienced it. There is a magic in the big group that a small group does not contain. The experience of being in the big group with myself and my issues. Without that, we spend an incredible amount of time in and with small and smaller groups, clarifications, conversations, and individual counseling for many things that—if we were to reanimate the big vessel—would perhaps dissolve! It is like a second, alternative stage that we could enter. But we would have to enter it with full commitment; otherwise it would not reveal its magic. This stage is certainly the more uncomfortable one!”

The alternative

Laurence Heller, the founder of NARM, said that trauma is a subjective, physically experienced overload and a natural process. Trauma leads to loss of attachment and separation from aliveness. We no longer address things anymore for fear of restimulation or even retraumatization. This is what he calls “overprotection.”

Wilhelm Reich coined the term “Christ-murder”⁷ for a situation in which people, out of their shadow, cannot bear others in their aliveness and love, and therefore attack them. It is unbearable for them to see love, which is at the same time their greatest longing and greatest fear. The loss of paradise stands for the loss of aliveness in us. If people follow their fear, they fight love and light as much as the person who offers it. Or they overdraw the person who offers it. This does not lead to love either. It is the sad normality of the murder of Christ in our day-to-day society.

The alternative is simple and difficult at the same time: I recognize that my deeply buried longing is addressed and I let myself be touched. Then I begin to love myself where I thought I was unlovable. Life together on this planet could be a paradise again.

I now would like to refine the title of this essay: **Loving and Accepting Love Is a Political Task.**

Achim Ecker has lived, loved, and worked in ZEGG for three decades as a human and spiritual inspirer and trainer, planner, craftsman, and permaculturist. He has helped cultivate the social soil for a lively and innovative community and the humus-building process for a fertile flowering and edible landscape on sandy soil. He travels internationally with his partner Ina Meyer-Stoll in many communities and networks as a consultant and friend. He is the author of various articles on interior work and ecological issues—most recently, “Gemeinschaft als Haltung” (published at sein.de/?s=Achim+Ecker).

⁷ Wilhelm Reich: “Those who have lived too long in the dark cellar will hate the sunshine. And perhaps his eyes can no longer tolerate any light at all. That is where the hatred of sunshine comes from. ... Man, who has spent millennia in emotional crippling, has accepted life in neurosis as normality. ... The emotional plague, the ‘Thou shalt not feel!’, then expresses itself in hostility to life.”