**Sharing More: Making the Move From Co-Op to Commune**

**Session Description**:

For those to whom cooperation is a life path, not just a phase, what comes after life in co-ops? What more can be shared? How about money? Income sharing communities (aka communes) build upon and expand the sharing already practiced in co-ops, collectivizing many, instead of only a few aspects of life. Sharing more enables a low impact, fulfilling and varied life that would not otherwise be possible. Cooperative skills built in housing co-ops are directly applicable to life as a communard, making commune life a natural next step for those wishing to deepen their commitment to cooperation.



**Outline**

1. Introductions
   1. I live at Twin Oaks, an income sharing community in central Virginia (aka commune)
      1. TO was created nearly 50 years ago and has nearly 100 members- the oldest and largest secular commune in the US.
      2. TO also belongs to a nationwide network of communes called the Federation of Egalitarian Communities (FEC)
         1. Each FEC community pays dues and has accessed to shared resources among the communities, like a catastrophic health care fund, labor exchange program, and funding for buying a new property.
      3. The agreement at Twin Oaks is that each member provides 42 hours each week of their labor, and in return all of their needs are covered; all FEC communities cover their members’ needs
         1. Food (2 hot meals cooked per day, and plenty of available ingredients)
         2. Housing
         3. Clothing
         4. Health Insurance (once a full member after 6 months, 100% of health costs are covered)
      4. One hour of work is worth one hour, no matter the work you are doing, and most members are involved in a variety of work.
         1. My work scene: Garden, dairy, managing the bike shop, and movement building work like the Point A project, which aims to establish new communes in the urban environment
         2. Other smaller tasks I’m involved in include cooking, cleaning, hauling wood, watching children and working in the tofu business
   2. Twin Oaks is where I live for the time being- less than a year ago, I was living in a housing co-op in Davis, CA called Cornucopia, and less than two years ago, I had no idea anything like the FEC existed
      1. We shared in the same way a lot of co-ops do: we made decisions together, split the cost of our food, etc.
      2. Cooperation was and is a central value to me; It seemed to me that if we couldn’t share space and resources, if we couldn’t work together, there was little hope for our future.
      3. I was looking for ways to take the sharing ethos further, and when looking through NASCO internships, I discovered a position with the FEC, which was practicing sharing at a level I had dreamed about but never experienced before- I was delighted and surprised to see such communities exist; I was aware of the concept of a commune but unaware that they were something currently existing.
      4. Seeing these communities as I place I could put cooperation into further practice as a lived value, I arrived at the FEC communities as a NASCO intern and shortly after became a member of Twin Oaks
   3. When talking about the things that communes share and about how this works, I will mostly be referring to TO, because I live there, but there are many communes within the FEC, and each operates somewhat differently. In each case, communes collectivize their resources and labor, and provide for all the needs of their members.
2. What do your co-ops share?
   1. FEC communities share pretty close to everything; if it can be shared, they’re probably sharing it. But co-opers are also no strangers to sharing, and probably share many of the same things with each other that communards do.
   2. What are some of those things? (Draw circle on flip chart to record responses)
   3. Some possible responses:
      1. Decision making: deciding how to run the co-op together, usually through consensus
      2. Responsibility: chores, administrative tasks, projects and roles of responsibility
      3. Food: buying food in bulk together and splitting the cost, either by calculation or paying a fixed “board”
      4. Tools: there are often tools (kitchen implements, power tools, craft supplies, etc.) that are available for anyone to use, but nobody to monopolize
      5. Space: sharing use of space for personal use and events, and deciding how to share it
      6. Social Time/Friendship: co-opers spend time together having fun, socializing, providing mutual emotional support, etc.
      7. Land: land is usually collectively owned by a larger legal entity, such that residents control it, but do not personally own it.
3. What additional things do communes share?
   1. It will probably be true that all things listed up to this point are things communes also share. What are some additional resources shared in communes that tend not to be in co ops (draw larger circle around first circle to contain these responses)
   2. Money!
      1. Twin Oaks collectively owns and operates several businesses (hammocks, tofu, seed racks, chairs, ornamentals, indexing), and the money from these pays for everything we need to buy.
      2. Other cottage industries: East Wind has nut butters
      3. By sharing businesses, communes share their work life- the community is your job as well as your living situation, whereas co-opers usually work outside jobs/go to school for their own livelihood
      4. Many communes (especially those that are young or in urban areas) pool the income from outside jobs to meet the community’s needs. Not everyone always needs to work an outside job; if some members hopld well paying jobs, others can focus on non-income labor.
   3. Cars
      1. At TO, cars are available for signout as needed, for either work reasons or personal use.
      2. We also send a “tripper” to town six days a week to do the community’s shopping: rather than drive to town to get it yourself, just put in a request and someone else will pick it up for you!
      3. The community pays for the maintenance of our cars, and much of the maintenance is done by TO members.
      4. The average group of 100 US citizens owns 80 cars. As a group of 100 people, we own 17 cars, and this seems to be plenty for us.
      5. When we own cars individually, they sit idle much of the time- when we share cars, someone else can use it when we’re not.
      6. Arranging carpools, aiming to get as much accomplished in one trip as possible instead of taking many trips.
   4. Bikes
      1. At TO we have a large fleet of public bikes that can be ridden by anyone; just grab any bike from one of the bike racks and go. If the bike that you were using before is gone when you come back, grab another!
      2. These bikes are maintained by the bike manager (happens to be me right now) and other member-mechanics.
      3. If you want a personal bike that you can always count on being avaialbe to you, one can be assigned and marked clearly with your name.
   5. (Commie) Clothes
      1. Many communes, especially larger ones have a collective closet (an entire attic for TO) that anyone can pull from as needed, putting dirty clothes in the collectively laundry for return to the closet.
      2. Clothes from the shared closet may be privatized and washed in your own laundry, then returned when no longer wanted or needed.
   6. Partners
      1. There are a variety of relationship styles in communes, including monogamy, but as compared to mainstream society, polyamory is more common in communes.
4. Things co-ops share that communes share in deeper ways
   1. Some things that co-ops share, but communes share to notably greater degrees:
   2. Tools
      1. A co-op may share a table saw, for example, but many tools are ultimately owned by some member of the co-op and will leave with them. It is more common in communes for these tools to be truly collectively owned, having been purchased with shared money for collective use. For example, Twin Oaks has an entire woodshop available for use on community or personal projects.
   3. Social
      1. Especially for rural communes, the members of your community are not only some of your closest friends because you share a way of life; they are 90% of the people you ever see. This can make for very open, very deep relationships, since so much is shared between you.
      2. Even in urban communes, where we have access to plenty of people outside the commune, the people we live with are a very big part of our lives, since we share virtually all of our material resources and much of our energy with them.
      3. Though co-ops usually have some sort of conflict resolution/mediation procedure in place, this is especially important in communes, since we depend on each other so much in our work and daily lives. Conflicts in communes are hard to ignore, and they spill over in other aspects of our lives.
5. What we can see from this graphic we’ve drawn is that co-ops already share a lot of the same things communes do. Communes share some additional things (and granted, sharing money is a pretty big commitment), but those living in co-ops are already halfway there, already sharing quite a lot and deriving benefit from that.
   1. Looking at this chart, I’d be tempted to say that you all would be well qualified communards! If you were to share some the additional things in the outside circle, you’d be there!
6. And why would you share money? Why a commune?
   1. What benefit do we get from sharing practically all of our material wealth? Income sharing can be a scary concept- It’s almost like marriage, and at TO you are marrying 100 people. When practicing this level of sharing, it can seem like we are at the mercy of those we live with and have no personal power of our own. But this is not true- although we are responsible to our community in many ways, we have a surprising amount of freedom! By sharing all our resources we create a number of benefits, for ourselves, the environment, and society.
   2. Sustainability
      1. Statistics:
         1. Overall, Twin Oakers have around 20% the carbon footprint of the average US citizen.
         2. We create less than 10% the solid waste of average US citizens. Average is 40lbs/week, but we create less than 4.
         3. We consume 70% less fossil fuel per capita than the Average US citizen and 80% less electrical power
      2. We don’t have any especially advanced technology that helps us do this (we have some solar panels- about 6.3% of the communities total electricity (including power hungry businesses) comes from these, or about 15% of our total domestic electricity needs (excluding businesses); we save resources by sharing.
         1. Most of people's possessions sit idle most of the time, when they could be in use by somebody else. By sharing our things, we avoid each person having to buy their own car, blender, bike, whatever it may be, and thus our consumption is drastically reduced.
         2. Car/trip sharing:
            1. Remember we only own 17 cars, where the average group of 100 US citizens owns 80- this translates to a lot of fossil fuel saved.
            2. By sending one person to do all our shopping and carpooling whenever possible, we reduce the number of trips we have to take.
      3. Not commuting to work also reduces our carbon footprint- we live where we work, usually less than a 5 minute walk away (not true for all communes)
      4. We grow roughly half of the food we eat, meaning we depend less on farming operations that use lots of chemicals and fossil fuel.
      5. Although sustainability is one of our values as a community, our small ecological footprint is largely a side effect of sharing. We don’t use special technology and don’t have any rules that force people to save resources- sometimes people leave the lights on, and we have still reduced it this far!
      6. Imagine what would be possible if we did use more green technology or intentionally limit our consumption…
         1. Example of living energy farm- a young community that cooks with solar ovens, pumps water by hand, and is converting their tractors to run on wood gas.
   3. Saving labor and money
      1. When we share resources, we need to buy less; when we need to buy less, we need less money, when we need less money, we don’t have to work as much!
      2. Even though quota at TO is 42 hours (more than full time) Twin Oakers work less than most people when considering:
         1. Labor credit is available for work that is not typically paid
            1. Cooking (when for the community)
            2. Cleaning the bathroom in your residential building or other common spaces.
            3. Parents can get some credit for caring for their own children
            4. Going to the doctor
            5. Voting
            6. Political work (getting labor credits for going to jail and direct action protests).
            7. In some circumstances, credit is even available for craft projects.
         2. There are several services people typically have to perform for themselves, that are performed for them at a commune like TO.
            1. Cooking (2 hot meals provided each day)
            2. Dishes (TO uses bus bins and people are assigned to do the dishes)
            3. Cleaning (People who choose to take credit for cleaning public spaces)
            4. Nobody has to spend time shopping, except for the people doing everybody’s shopping, which they get credit for.
            5. Laundry (if returning dirty laundry to Commie Clothes)
         3. Even though we work 42 hours, we can see that this is not the same as 42 hours in mainstream society- We have many everyday chores performed for us and get credit when we do them for others.
   4. All labor is valued equally.
      1. When we work “full time” in mainstream society, only one type of labor counts toward our 40 hour quota: the income producing kind.
      2. One of the benefits of income sharing is that the money earned is shared with those doing other type of valuable labor: domestic chores, child rearing, homesteading, movement building, etc.
      3. Members of communes work “full time” for the commune, but many types of valuable labor count toward this; an hour of income producing labor is valued equally to an hour of domestic work, gardening, projects for the benefit of the community, etc.
   5. Varied work/freedom with our labor
      1. Since many types of labor are valued, communards find themselves with a greater amount of freedom in choosing their work- most people contribute some amount to income producing areas, but to varying degrees. We are free to focus on the work we are best at or most interested in, without too much worry of how much money it produces.
      2. Not having to work a full time income-producing jobs, communards are also free to engage in many different types of labor, instead of specializing in just one thing. This allows us to become multi-specialists, with a variety of skills; overall well-rounded people.
   6. All our needs are met
      1. At the same time as having freedom in our work, we can also count on having all of our needs met- in fact, having security that we will be taken care of is part of what gives us this freedom.
      2. As mentioned before, we are fed, housed, clothed, have health insurance, and are surrounded by a supportive community.
      3. So long as we contribute, we are taken care of, regardless of exactly what that contribution is.
      4. Retirement: at TO work requirement is reduced by 1 hour every year starting at age 50, making for a gradual retirement, rather than a sudden one that can leave people in shock and a sudden absence of meaning.
7. Reiterate: The specifics I’m referring to are those of TO. There are many communes, each using its own systems to collectivize resources and provide for its members.
   1. Some communes track labor hours like TO; some don’t.
   2. Some use consensus; others vote or some other method.
   3. Some have collectively owned businesses; some pool income from outside jobs.
   4. Some are in the rural environment and grow a lot of their own food; some are in the city, where they buy more food or dumpster dive.
8. Even though sharing with others is conventionally seen as a sacrifice of personal freedom, the effect in practice is actually quite the opposite. No matter the specifics of how a given commune works, sharing income can actually give us a greater amount of control over our own lives, and provides us with security that our needs will be met.
   1. Sharing income is living our lives with a different narrative: in contrast to living out a story of rugged individualism, communes tell a story that asserts we are wealthier when we share. The success of many communes proves that this story can work!
9. How to make the move
   1. Many communes already exist, and based on the chart we made, co-opers make ideal candidates- they’ve already made the effort to come this far on the sharing spectrum.
      1. Visit thefec.org or talk to one fo the communards here at NASCO.
   2. I and several other communards work on a project called Point A, which is specifically dedicated to helping establish communes in the urban environment and more generally focused on spreading the meme of income sharing- making it more visible, challenging people to consider living by a different narrative.
      1. We are happy to work with housing co-ops interested in income sharing and provide our best guidance on how a co-op community might transition to income sharing.
      2. We are also happy to provide guidance to forming communes, helping them find funding, working out sharing, labor, communication and governance systems that will work for them, etc.
      3. We currently have a written resource under development called “Commune in a Box” that will outline all the important needs a commune will need to meet (income, governance system, labor accountability, etc.) and suggest some ways those needs could be met.
10. Conclusion
    1. Fingerbook: We have a small zine here that provides a brief introduction to income sharing and what we consider to be some of the important “ingredients” for a commune. We call them “fingerbooks” because they are like tiny hand books.
    2. You can learn more about the FEC communes at thefec.org and the Point A project at frompointa.org.
    3. Talk to the communards here at the conference!
    4. If community seems like it might be your cup of tea, you should consider either the Twin Oaks Commuities Conference over the labor day weekend or the West Coast Commmunities Conference which will next be in Oct 2017, probably in Oregon.
    5. You can learn more about the larger movement of communities in the US at ic.org, including a searchable database.