

The Colors of Experience: Learning with Children and Adults in Cohousing

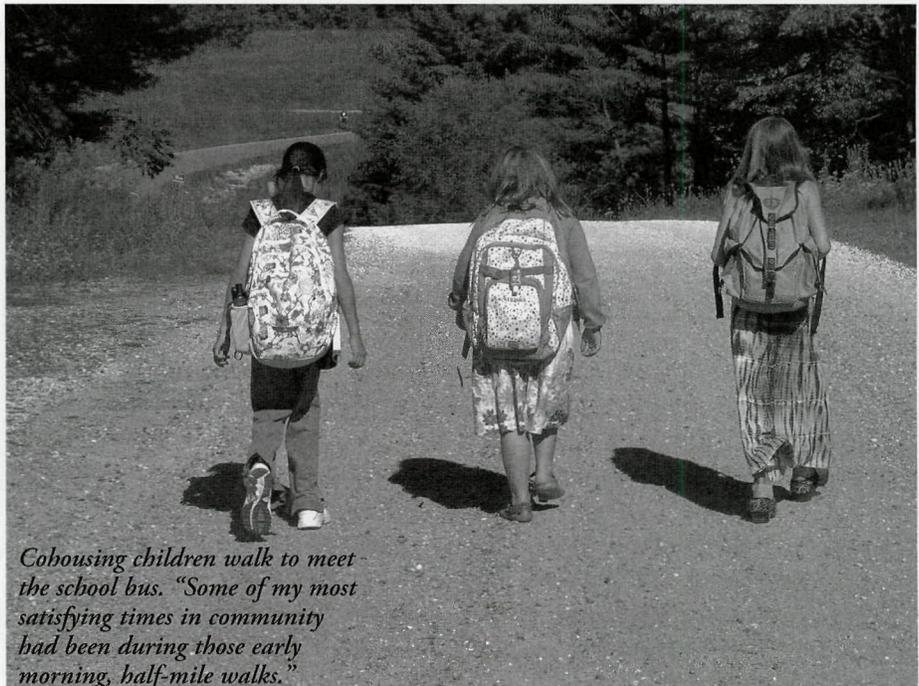
By Michelle Wheeler

“You look like Helen Keller,” seven-year-old Moby said enthusiastically, watching his nine-year-old neighbor tap a stick in front of her as we all walked one morning to the school bus. “You ought to learn Braille, because you never know.” Just weeks earlier, he had confounded me as he squinted and stared pensively into the empty five-acre lot at the top of the lane. When I asked about what was catching his eye, his words slowly oozed out like those coming from an adult sizing something up, “I’m visualizing a house.”

Grateful for precious moments like those when I have been present to witness the amazing multi-dimensionality of a child—for that matter, another human being—I thought how easy it would have been to just continue to think of him as the rough-and-tumble little boy who loved to choreograph and dramatize sports plays by diving for footballs, rolling with little concern for injury. Some of my most satisfying chunks of time in our intentional community had in fact been during those early morning, half-mile walks to the bus stop, a distance short enough not to physically weigh down the spirits of those walking, but long enough to invite that which resided in hearts and minds to be pronounced and shared.

Vermont’s visual beauty alone explained the attraction felt by tourists and second-home escapees from the city. Gently rolling hills, fresh water lakes, and swiftly moving rivers nestled small villages surrounded by green wide-open spaces, all against a backdrop of mountains on both the east and the west. In our valley, the sun rose over the Green Mountains and set beyond Lake Champlain and the Adirondacks of neighboring New York. When late afternoon clouds rolled in from the Northwest and bunched up against the northernmost ridges of the Appalachians, they darkened the sky as if lights were going down for a stage show. As the falling sun’s rays shone through openings in the cumulus from across the lake, it was as if spotlights from heaven illuminated the fields and forests surrounding our home.

For many outsiders, the words “intentional community” conjured up images of communes left over from the ’60s and ’70s, but the closest ours came to the stereotype in my mind was when the occasional naked toddler ran across the green or when two or more young farmers harvested fresh produce or stood with hunched-over backs pulling weeds from the market garden. While our cohousing residents indeed maintained some hippie-era consciousness of civilized living as an ongoing experiment, and were willing to toss aside some preestablished norms for a chance to live more deeply in community, I preferred to imagine that our efforts resembled the historical establishment of a new village or town. With 26 households full of different histories, politics, and expectations coming together to co-operatively manage over 100 acres of common property, we followed various



Cohousing children walk to meet the school bus. “Some of my most satisfying times in community had been during those early morning, half-mile walks.”

Photo courtesy of Michelle Wheeler

tried and true protocols as counseled by veteran communitarians but also made up rules as we went along, setting the stage for the unleashing of impulses to implement additional creative ways to be with each other.

Sharing and realizing what was in our hearts, minds, and wildest imaginations had seemed to come more easily during the earlier years. Some had even mentioned it feeling like summer camp for them as well as their children. But as time moved on and novelty wore off and the stresses of everyday life took priority again, it became clear that for many adults, the honeymoon was fading. I imagined that many even retracted

some of their previously-shared multiple dimensions in an attempt to regain firm footing in appearances that had served them well at another time, in another place.

The children reminded us that present moments were golden and that greener pastures were here.

Unable to see how various hot issues among community members were over make-or-break, life-or-death decisions, and inexperienced with the stress that must accompany ownership of property and improvements, I was left to believe that interpersonal difficulties must be rooted simply in irritation and inexperience with contrary styles, in misunderstandings between differing personalities. Wanting to ease the pain of my neighbors, I took the opportunity to bring the topic of temperament to the stage during our third summer in cohousing. Having minored in drama in college, I knew that a “play” in the theater provided a place where everyone’s part, no matter how large or small, was integral—as, I believed, it should be considered in community. Relying on the season to provide a relevant metaphor, I likened the combined personalities of a community to a rainbow and wove pedagogy with fun for our annual solstice celebration.

More than aware that many resisted and resented “typing” as pigeon-holing with all its negative connotations, I knew that in my own life, recognition of patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behavior had allowed me to accept myself as well as others with less judgment. Obviously, none of us were simple stereotypes, but by focusing our attention on more well-defined, caricatured types, we could at least all start our thinking from the same place. I hoped we might then be more comfortable thinking in terms of each of us having “preferences” or “leanings.”

Faced with myriad theories on why we think, feel, and act as we do, I discovered on YouTube a brilliant one-man presentation showing four different reactions to inadvertently sitting on a tack¹, each coming from one of Rudolph Steiner’s descriptions of the Sanguine, Choleric, Melancholic, and Phlegmatic temperaments. I took the liberty to imperfectly map Steiner’s labels to the colors yellow, red, blue, and white, a terminologically simpler code suggested by Taylor Hartman in *The Color Code* (Simon & Schuster, 1998), and then asked a veteran actor-neighbor to lead our solstice production with a reenactment. On the day of the event, my neighbor’s “yellow” character leapt up and with a smile on his face sought the kindred spirit initiating such a great gag. His “red” jumped up and with a scowl on his face looked around for the scoundrel who dared do such a thing. His “blue” eased up cautiously and with sorrowful eyes stole glances to see who might have reason to humiliate him. His “white” just lifted one cheek of his buttocks, grabbed the tack and tossed it aside as if nothing even happened.

Laughs died down and I as the mistress of ceremonies acknowledged the discomfort some might have felt in identifying with the red or blue response, those being the least attractive under the circumstances. I assured my neighbors that it was the situation of sitting on a tack that had given rise to the limitations of these control-seeking colors. If the context had been finding the car keys to get to work on time, we might have seen

1. www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7mEh53rTc0

them rise better to the occasion than their less organized comrades. Knowing every temperament had both strengths and weaknesses contributing to the drama called getting along together, I displayed posters listing each color's strengths, hoping we might choose to accentuate the positive.

Sure, it was easy to appreciate the yellow sanguine's core motive of having fun and the challenge it gave the rest of us to lighten up, but we also needed the balance the red choleric gave. They knew life was serious business, too, and they had no problem with following through on jobs needing done even though their focused, goal-oriented ways sometimes lacked a warmth others of us missed. Along the same vein, while the equanimity and Buddha-like composure of the white phlegmatic suggested inherent enviable wisdom that carried them through crisis, we blue melancholics super-sensitive to the twisting and turning of life's ongoing challenges were more than happy to talk about it, to be accessible to others needing empathy and compassion.

The production and afternoon continued with other neighbors performing additional skits and song, winding up with a rendition of "If I Only Had a Brain" from *The Wizard of Oz*. My intention was to emphasize through this selection the noble quest of trying to become a more "charactered" individual, one who exhibited the positive traits of each personality, that multi-dimensionality that turned each of us into our own rainbow. Hartman defined character as "essentially anything we learn to think, feel, or do that is initially unnatural and requires an effort to develop." He believed that "it is predominantly character, not personality, that ultimately determines the quality of our lives."

After all was said and done, someone living outside the neighborhood used the word *compelling* to describe the event. Grateful for her kind words, I knew that added nuances stemming from gender, generational, and cultural differences made our community palette a veritable explosion of color. To be sure, I wanted peace among the people, as in resolution of conflict, but not at the expense of that color and the good plot of struggling against the odds to create a more satisfying model of community. Though individuals might resort to less civilized behaviors from time to time, better selves would prevail when eyes shifted back to the prize, when players questioned their behavior as either adding to or detracting from larger goals. Knowing the prize for us had always been the lifting of loneliness brought about by living in a largely conventional, conformist industrialized world, I was afraid if we had to leave cohousing, I wouldn't know where I could so intimately experience being one of such an assortment of original personalities bearing witness to hard edges chipping away. Good books and theater provided fictionalized versions of what I sought, but the real thing was so much better.

Moby delighted me one spring morning as he caught the spirit of dance and spontaneously joined a group of us women doing Zumba in the back of our neighbor-instructor's house. Some say that a Sanguine life comes naturally for children. He warmed my heart on another occasion when he gently put his arm around the back of an injured friend and offered comfort as he walked him home. While I watched him one afternoon get off the school bus, break into a smile, and open his arms to one of our many waiting toddlers, I knew he was already well on his way to being a true character. When we adults taxed with keeping all the balls of life up in the air occasionally dropped them, at least there were the children. Their numbers in our community had exploded to nearly double in four years' time. In between forced excursions here, there, and everywhere, their presence offered us a welcome reminder that present moments were golden and that greener pastures were here and that with a little bit of imagination, we could indeed go a long way in a richly-colored world of our own making. 🐣

Michelle spent three decades in her native West Virginia before agreeing to move through all four corners of the country with her New Yorker husband. She has been happy to live the past five years with her family at Champlain Valley Cohousing in Charlotte, Vermont.

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