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Aging in Community

By Valerie

At age 72, Cameron is about to embark upon a voyage. He'll be spending a one-month vacation kayaking the waters of the east coast of Canada, in a boat that he has spent the last year building himself, with a group of kayaking enthusiasts that he met over the internet. At age 83, Piper spends five days a week running her "Reading Window" program. She has an office where she tutors children who have difficulty reading, during after-school hours. A former teacher, she developed this unique teaching method herself, has received an \$8000 grant from a local agency, and has plans to write a book detailing her method so that others can benefit.

Are Cameron and Piper typical elders at Twin Oaks community? They're certainly in good company. In our community of 85 adults (and 15 children), 30 members are aged 50 or older, and all are living the active and engaged lives that are the norm in our ecovillage of 100 people.

In our community, each member works 44 hours a week, both in our collectively-owned businesses (hammock-making, tofu-making and book indexing) and in our domestic areas (gardening, cooking, office work, cleaning, building repair, etc.). This is how we support the community and keep it running. More-or-less in exchange for this work, the community provides all of our basic needs – housing, food, healthcare, clothing, etc. Once someone reaches the age of 50, the person works one hour less each week every year. In this way, older people are able to stay engaged and continue being active, which is of benefit to both physical and mental health, while also being able to take it easy and work less if that is required. One older member reports that his favourite work is herding the dairy cows that provide our drinking milk (along with organic cheeses and yogurt) with our Border Collie sheepdog, which we jokingly call a "cow-dog". Another older member balances communal laundry shifts, which keep her physically active, with office work, which "provides a variety of problems that I can use my brain to solve".

By and large, older members report being relatively fulfilled here, and having most of their expectations of life as an older person met. Although some struggle with health challenges, because of our lifestyle, Twin Oaks members tend to be more fit than our mainstream counterparts. Our older members overall are relatively healthy. One older member, who requires a very-low-sodium diet due to a physical condition, laments that our communal cooks don't always remember to take this need into account when serving groups meals. The community has provided a Care Group for this member, and one of their tasks is to help coordinate these types of needs related to her condition. Our oldest member does have one thing that concerns her, which is her desire to avoid a lingering death. She feels she has no peers with which to discuss this. However, she has arranged for a Living Will, through the community's Legal Manager, which clearly states her request to avoid "unnecessary prolonging of life by artificial means". Sometimes the most difficult thing can be asking for help with something. Our oldest member explains: "It can be especially hard when people say no, but even when they say yes, there's always a balance of how much to ask for. I try to think about prevention—how I can stay as self-sufficient as possible for as long as possible. That means not pushing myself, but I need to find the balance between doing things myself and asking for help." One advantage is that at Twin Oaks, unlike many older people living alone, there is always someone around to ask.

But how does life on the commune overall compare to the lives our older members would be living if they chose to have a more conventional life? How do they feel they measure up to their peers in mainstream society? Most older members feel they are better off living in community. As Piper says: "It's enormously better here, there's always something you can participate in if you choose to. Also it's important for me to be doing something politically meaningful, and that's easier here than in the mainstream." Piper loves to dance, and knows she has it good at Twin Oaks, with our frequent parties where a woman in her 80's dancing to rock-n-roll is a normal occurrence, not an unusual spectacle. She summarizes: "I am definitely better off here than I would be out there. I know I could survive in the mainstream, and I'm actively choosing to be here." Cameron feels similarly. He notices that older people are much more integrated at Twin Oaks and much less segregated by age than in mainstream society. He believes he is less socially isolated here than he might be elsewhere. On a very practical level, he realizes that, as a former professor of Anthropology, his job peers have more money than he does (at Twin Oaks, retirement income is turned over to the community) but that is outweighed by other benefits, including the fact that he doesn't need to worry about medical costs himself, since the community will cover those expenses.

With members living more closely with people of all ages, this also raises the question of a potential downside, and the possibility of increased intergenerational conflict. Whether or not this exists depends at least partially on who you ask. Marione, aged 75, says she doesn't perceive conflict per se, however she does notice a sense of difference from younger people. She explains: "Younger members have a different life energy. I try to make verbal connections with them so I feel more personally connected." Another member says that sometimes it can be difficult to participate in conversations with younger members: "I talk in full sentences, and younger people talk in sound bites." Sometimes younger members don't seem to have the patience to listen to an older member. Piper's approach is to remind herself that "all the older people here have had the experience of being younger, but none of the younger people have had the experience of being older." This gives her compassion during times of a lack of understanding, such as when a younger member was unhappy that the community has provided motorized carts for older members who have troubles walking from building to building.

From a younger member's perspective, the difference can be individualized. Aubee, aged 30, reports: "For me, it's more personal. Some older members I like, and some I avoid, like anyone else here. I don't perceive older members, as a demographic, to behave a particular way." Other younger members do notice some cultural gap between age cohorts, and see some separation but not active conflict. Aubee adds that sometimes it's hard to gain respect from older members unless you've "paid your dues" working in the community. She feels there is a perceived transience of youth, which is partly true but partly a stereotype that she resents being cast in. Tom, aged 40, points out that depending on one's age, being "old" can mean very different things.

These differences in perception played a role several years ago when the community was having difficulty attracting new members in their 20's, and having an abundance of members over 50. At that time, after much discussion, we decided to temporarily put a hold on accepting members aged 55 or older, until our average age dropped. Creating this policy was a difficult decision, and controversial in the community. Our challenge was finding a balance between maintaining a non-ageist policy, and on the other hand, being able to address concerns such as health care costs for our already sizeable population of older people, a culture that remains a blend of youth and elders (without becoming a

"retirement community"), and enough strong backs to fulfill the substantial amount of physical work needed by the community. At the same time, we also realized that all communities have barriers; some are economic, some religious, some behavioural, some geographic. Happily, our average has become lower, we have dropped that policy, and decided not to return to it. This is a relief for the members who were concerned that it was at odds with our value of non-discrimination.

And where does this leave our older members? Many are happy to have peers coming into the community. Piper has a broader view--she likes the idea of "oldies" in different communities being in contact, perhaps by email. Marione sagely sits back and contemplates that she is observing the process of Twin Oaks adjusting to meeting the needs of older members as that demographic grows. "This process is going well enough, with Twin Oaks doing it's best to meet our individual needs as we age and change". That description is of course a perfect metaphor for the community itself, which will this year reach middle age when we celebrate 40 years of existence in June 2007. Perhaps the group can take some wisdom from the individual(s), and itself learn to age with grace, dignity and serenity.