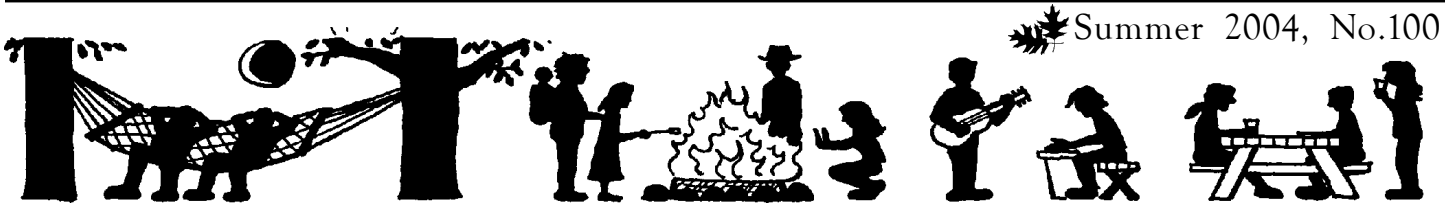
The Leaves of Twin Oaks

Summer 2004, No.100



News of the Oaks

by Mala

Once again this year, Twin Oaks remained pretty full. This winter we reached our highest population ever: 94 adult members! Last fall we decided to temporarily raise pop cap to 94, since housing a family in Degania frees up some space. Even with the extra rooms, we were just one member shy of a waiting list. Since our last writing we've gained new members Sandy, Bri, Apple, Hillary, Shayn, Rider, Peter, Kathryn, Seamus, Cherry, Daniel, and Marie-Claude. The annual spring exodus has brought our numbers back down into the eighties, with a couple notable absences among our families with young children. Cleo, Craig, and Adrian have gone on leave to see the world and experience other community options, and Paxus, Hawina, Sky, and Willow are spending the summer in romantic Europe. Two members who joined quite recently— Nyima and Layna— both moved on as a result of persistent wrist injuries. Long-term member Val has decided to move to Boulder Colorado for a taste of non-commune life following the graduation of her daughter Maia, who along with Alyssa and Rose, makes up the cream of the Louisa High class of 2004. Pele is spending the summer hiking the entire 2000-mile length of the Appalachian Trail. And Keenan and kids went to Guatemala, but returned early.

Our greatest winter preoccupation was cranking out beaded hammocks for a massive Pier 1 order. The hammocks management team worked 'round the clock for months to iron out the kinks in the bead supply flow; friends, ex-members and other communities pitched in to produce; and we buckled down to the jigs. The climax of the push was a shipping party for the huge December order. The warehouse that morning was full of Oakers, from 11-year-old Imani to 73-year-old Marione, all doing their bit to get 1800 hammocks boxed and ready to go. So many hands made for light and delightful work and we were done in record time by one p.m.

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Juniper, Marcello, and Summer belt out some soulful tunes as the All-Request Dance Band rocks the Halloween Party

Live Music at Twin Oaks:

a past, present, and future history

by Ezra, with assistance from ex-members.

From the very beginning, the goal of Twin Oaks Community has been not just to survive materially, but to create an alternative culture. By turning off the television, we turn ourselves on to all sorts of "home-grown" entertainment. Over the years, this has taken many forms, from primal scream therapy to poker night to knitting circles. Live music has always been an important element of Twin Oaks' homegrown culture, and in this article I want to take a look at the history and the present of musical groups at Twin Oaks.

In some ways, Twin Oaks has always been a perfect place for bands: everyone in the group lives close together, everyone has more free time than they would "out there," musical instruments and amps are never hard to find, and there are always plenty of opportunities to perform for a ready-made crowd of enthusiastic and supportive people.

In researching this article, I spoke with ex-members and long-term members about their memories of bands at TO. What came out was a colorful history of oddly named groups, many of whom formed for a performance or

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We celebrated with a hammock shop auction, in which we traded Hammockies (credits earned per hour of production work during the push, and beautifully designed by Woody) for goods and services donated by members and friends. Auction items ranged from breakfast in bed to an astrological consultation to a pair of hand-knit wool socks. Pooling Hammockies was permitted, so the member who auctioned off her companionship in a double-tub (the top-selling item!) wound up sharing a tub with eight.

Since then, the pace in the hammock shop has been less hectic. Recent hammock shop highlights include the replacement of Folger's with ecogroovy fair trade coffee; beautiful new jigs, designed and built by Hans; an evening of stories with Kat; and, on a snowed-in day this winter, 21 people in the shop simultaneously, without any treats or special events!

In other income news, folks have been getting together in the chair shop to listen to *A People's History of the United States* and *This American Life*. Exciting events in the tofu hut involved the explosion of our hard-working soysage machine "Mr. Stuffy," which sent the top of the machine flying through the roof at great velocity, and our recently discovered ability to complete entire production days without relying on River. Jake is more erudite than ever after indexing a 7-volume history of the world. Woody's business of ornamental cut flowers, which he is successfully selling at the C'ville farmers' market, is now officially an income area.

Our new gothic greenhouse provided us with fresh greens all winter long, and early tomatoes in the spring!

Promethea and baby Gwen joined other local families for a "nurse-in" on the Charlottesville downtown mall in June.

Yet another new area under Woody's direction is poultry. This year we have begun to raise our own geese, chickens and eggs, and as of this June, homegrown chicken has become a regular part of our community meals. This winter, we took another step toward greater self-sufficiency by erecting a beautiful new gothic greenhouse, which allowed us to enjoy fresh-picked salads and greens nearly every day through the cold season. We've increased our milk production by returning to twice-a-day milkings; now our refrigerators are bursting with as much delicious homemade cheese as we can possibly eat. The dairy crew and friends recently gathered to mourn the passing of long-lived and beloved milk cow Santana.

Jonah celebrated his third birthday and weaning with a Big Boy Party, in which he, his father, and his male primaries and friends gathered to discuss the joys of being big boys and not nursing anymore. The homeschooling scene has really taken off: Asana joined the ranks of the homeschoolers, and Brenda has organized a highly successful Thursday group, in which local kids join our kids for classes and activities. At the other end of the age spectrum, Piper recently celebrated her eightieth birthday; she and Reading Windows are both still going strong.

Quota's currently a pleasantly low 42, but we'll hike it if we get behind in hammocks production. We got all excited when some property on Yanceyville Road (with a storefront, a nice house, and several other buildings) came up for sale; eventually, however, we decided it was overpriced. (8-year-old Asana lucidly commented, "We can't afford brown sugar and we're going to buy land?") Our newest cargo van was christened Vandrogyny, making it a pair with our new minivan, Vanarchy. The phone crew hired a Ditch Witch, trenched the community, and finally laid the much-awaited fiber optic phone cables; an equally valiant crew refilled the trenches by hand. The fiber optic cables will soon be hooked up to the phones and for the first time in decades, you'll be able to call Twin Oaks and not feel like you're calling Outer Mongolia. And our new sauna was well-used throughout the winter and spring, allowing us to swim in the pond year-round!

The Musical Watchers' Club celebrated its first birthday. Besides the weekly screening of an old musical, activities this year included a field trip to New York to watch two shows on Broadway. Oakers put on their own musical this spring: *Willy Wonka and the Tofu Factory*, which proved to be a big hit. Folks are getting together in groups to study music theory, quilting, non-violent communication, rugmaking, and the Kabbalah. Alex recently completed a popular 6-month run of serving buttermilk pancakes at Morningstar every Thursday. Sean held a great art opening in TCLR; his cool wooden paintings now grace many walls around the community and a gallery in C'ville. We've also been enjoying the fruits of his latest artistic interest, welded metal sculpture, although his metal whirligig's potential for decapitation has rendered it mildly controversial.

The All-Request Dance Band made its debut at the Halloween party. The band formed its set by asking Oakers to brainstorm dance songs, distributing the brainstorm as a ballot, and learning the top-voted songs. The number one Halloween song was, of all things, "Play That Funky Music, White Boy." Who knew that Wild Cherry had such a Twin Oaks following? Halloween costume highlights included Ben as evil one-eyed Bert; Dream as a crazed German groupie for Matt and Anja's band, Louisa Thunderpussy; and Mara and Doug's baby Cassidy as a tiny fierce dragon.

The All-Request Band also rocked the house at New Year's, where our ranks were pleasantly swelled by the FEC Assembly attendees, and at our 37th Anniversary party this June. In addition to the ususal Anniverary festivities, we were treated to a surreal soap-opera wedding. Anja married Marcello in a theatrical ceremony punctuated with interruptions by ex-husbands presumed dead, jealous girlfriends, and an international spy.

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two and then disbanded, only to reform with another name. I learned of bands with names like "Phat Boon Fire Dang" and "Moist," "Everyone Please" and "Dr. Bob's Psychic Enema." In the rosters of band members, many of the same names came up again and again: Free (who is remembered for once playing with 3 different bands in one night), Scott, Allegra, Kana, Ted, and Devon (just to name a few). The bands' musical styles ranged from grunge rock to bluegrass to top-40's with a few originals thrown in.

Some groups displayed a remarkable consistency and longevity. The Flying Tomatoes, organized around a core of ex-members Ted, Scott, and ____, stayed together for years, enlivening countless Twin Oaks celebrations. Writes Ted: "We played at equini, solsti, and anniversary. We'd generally start after lunch and go until dinnertime. We played with various people singing. Kat sang 'La Bamba' with us during our first performance, which was in ZK dining room. Lots of guests and visitors came and went and played with us for a bit - including Laughing Water, who played xylophone, and Gino, a tough guy who was picked up hitchhiking and stayed at TO for 2 or 3 months. We played lots of reggae, Grateful Dead, Beatles, Neal Young, sixties stuff. Talking Heads was about as current as we got early on. We changed lyrics in songs like Neil Young's 'Down by the River' — instead of 'I shot my baby dead,' we said, 'I brought my baby bread.' We also started purposely adding songs by women. For one fall performance at the bozo beach Alexis brought some overripe tomatoes and threw them at us! My bass amp still has a stain on it."

Ted had other memories of this time: "One December the TV space was moved to a new building and we moved the band equipment to Tupelo from that damn, dingy, old musty ZK basement where we'd regularly hit our heads on the I-beam that runs along the ceiling. During all this time I used to go down to the compost café or Kana's room where Kana would be hanging out and always had a guitar handy. He played fingerpicking, ragtimey old blues and standards. He and James played together a lot and for a few months I came down every Wednesday and after awhile Free started showing up with his mandolin (early 98?) and that was the best 4-piece ensemble I've ever been in. Then Kana died. Around 1997 Buddy emailed me and Craig and I went over with Devon and she did some recording over the next few months. We put those recordings on demo tapes and I used them to get her a gig at the Corner in Charlottesville. The rest is history . . . "

In the years following the end of the Flying Tomatoes, the bands that I heard the most about were "Tardy Rap" (about which Ted writes: "We were good despite the stupid name. We did 50s tunes and got people dancing") and the now legendary "Tears for Bon Jovi." This 80's pop cover band seems to be best remembered for the sight of Nexus in tights and a stuffed codpiece.

My own history at Twin Oaks begins in December of 2000, in the musical void that followed Kana's death, Devon's moving to C'ville, and the break-up of Tears for Bon Jovi. At the time, there was no established Twin Oaks band to speak of. Soon after joining Twin Oaks, I started taking part in a regular jam session on the Tupelo living room couches. Fronted by diva *extrordinaire* jAz, we took on the name "Soul Couch" and began performing a mix of music of the last few decades at coffeehouses. It wasn't long before we found a drummer, went amplified, and played a number of performances around the community under the moniker "Electric Couch." Soul Couch eventually broke up, but by then Twin Oaks had become the home of several members of the Currin family, a group of musically talented siblings from the West Coast. Individually and collectively, they were frequently found in the Tupelo music room, and eventually treated us to a couple of highly original performances of the short-lived but unforgettable "Pheasant Family Band."

The Tupelo music room at that time was also the setting for ongoing forays into the musical *avant-garde.* Initiated by Sky and myself, the project began as a "rhythm workshop," involving as many as 8 or 10 people banging on assorted percussion instruments. Eventually people started adding melodic instruments and the ensuing group was known alternatively (depending on the volume and attitude of the "anti-music" being played) as "Sonic Cloudscapes" or "Sonic Deathscapes." Around that time, a hard-blowin' blues harp player named Brian rounded up a group of musicians and whipped them into a reasonable semblance of a blues band, playing down-and-dirty arrangements of classics such as "Mustang Sally" and "Roadhouse Blues." This group, which

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THE VULGAR BULGARS!

by john

Being the only Oaker to see all recent local shows of the Vulgar Bulgars *who is not currently sleeping with a member of the band*, I am the unbiased voice who can describe to you the joy of seeing Virginia's finest klezmer band, though I admit to crushes on them all. Ben plays the quickest notes on his clarinet while dancers' arms flail. Kassia uses her whole body to leave her violin's notes stuck in the air before she repeats a crazy melody. Ezra on his upright bass feverishly pulls out a rhythm and, resting and smiling, explains the next song. Matt looks intensely over the crowd as he sneaks a cowbell or high-hat into an impossible beat.

Klezmer music ranges in style from ecstatic dance music to slow ballads (horas) fit for Jewish weddings and holding hands lovingly. Klezmer has roots in eastern European folk music and gypsy music.

The best show, I believe, was at an amazing teahouse in Charlottesville. The Twisted Branch Teahouse is the kind of place you hope every human has when growing up and it was a perfect venue (save limited dance space) for the Vulgar Bulgars.

Oh, they're beautiful, and of course, their music is beautiful. The are currently playing some gigs all over Virginia and DC. Maybe you can come and see them when they play at Floyd Festival this summer! You can be informed about their shows and recordings at www.vulgarbulgars.com!

Twin Oaks goes BUST! by Ezra

This past winter, Twin Oaks once again popped up on the radar of the mainstream mass-media, when BUST Magazine (tag line: "For women with something to get off their chests"), featured us in their Winter 2003 issue. On the front page, next to a, well, bust-y, photo of Kelly Osbourne, between "Take this Job and Shove it" and "50 cool gifts from $1 to $75" was the intriguing come-on for "Exile in Girlville: life on a feminist commune." Turning to page 54, one encounters a two-page spread with the headline "Ecovillage People" opposite a color photo montage of flowers, shirtless communards in the garden, and clothes hanging on the line. The following article covers six pages, although more than half the space is given to Cynthia Connolly's excellent color and b&w photos of people, landscapes, and intriguing objects. The article, by Emily Rems, begins with a short history and description of the community. She goes on to describe a Twin Oaks visit. Mala, "a 28-year old woman with a Chicago accent and a laid-back but briskly efficient manner," plays Frazier to her Professor Burris, guiding her on a tour of the community. Once Mala has filled her in on the nuts and bolts of life at the Oaks, she goes on to interview a number of Oakers, mostly women, and uses excerpts from these interviews to discuss the many joys and tribulations of commune life. The tone of the article is largely upbeat and sympathetic, mostly accurate, and in general Emily Rems seems to "get it" more than other mainstream writers over the years. For your pleasure, we list below some of our favorite excerpts from the article. For the full article, you just have to buy a copy of BUST magazine— you may even learn something about Kelly Osbourne.

"As the car rolled to a stop, I spotted six tanned young people in tees and cutoffs, quietly harvesting big shiny peppers and tending to beans out in the field, while cows mooed their good mornings from a dairy barn down the hill."

"Kaweah combined the homey wood-plank architecture and clean outdoorsy aroma of a ski chalet with the hodgepodge utilitarian décor of your typical liberal arts college dorm, minus the television."

On River's "Famous Wednesday Mac 'n' Yeast": "This kickass vegan concoction involving elbow macaroni, nutritional yeast, and a blend of magical herbs and spices was so inexplicably cheesy, it could win over the palate of even the most devoted dairy-lover."

On Twin Oaks: "…what is known today as one of the most successful and remarkably enduring social experiments the communities movement has ever seen."

On Val: "a 38-year old with a bright smile and an even brighter mullet. . . .[who] proudly dangled her exposed ta-tas above her lunch plate. . ." (and later in the article) ". . . my friend from lunch who's been hanging out at Twin Oaks for 16 years. . . "

"Rather than putting all their emotional eggs in one person's basket, some dodge the break-up blues by engaging in the popular Twin Oaks practice of polyamory."

Great closing quote by Anja! "There are activists out there who say we're just hiding in the woods, not changing anything, but every day we are learning to consume less, to live more responsibly than they ever could. Things are getting better, but slowly."

Congratulations to the GRADUATES!

Twin Oaks teens Maia, Rose, and Alyssa graduated from Louisa High School in June. Maia will be attending the Univesity of North Carolina, Rose is going to Northern Kentucky University, and Alyssa is headed to Hollins University. Look in a future issue of *The Leaves* for an update on their future plans and reflections on life beyond Twin Oaks.

Sky

by Imani (age 11)

I wish, I wish, that I could fly
Over the moon, across the sky
Dance with the clouds, talk to the sun
I wish, I wish - just me, just one
Say hi to the stars and their silver glow
I wish, I wish, that I could go
Fly through the blueness of the air
Go past some airplanes here and there
And when it rains, I'll go to sleep
In my bed so dark beneath

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featured amazing vocals from Piankhy in addition to the tunes from Brian's harmonica, called itself the "Twin Oaks Blues Explosion." Although the "Explosion" only performed at a few parties, they all turned out to be hard-dancin' wild sweaty affairs.

The next few months were a relatively quiet period in Twin Oaks band history. In the fall of 2003, I returned from PAL, ready to start some new projects. One of these was the "All-Request Dance Band," a lame name for what has turned out to be an ongoing phenomenon. We posted a paper on the O+I board, asking Oakers to list the songs which they would most like to hear performed by a live band. The ensuing list, many pages long, was then turned into a ballot, and people voted for the songs they liked the most. The votes were tallied, and what resulted was a

"scientific" look at Twin Oaks' favorite dance songs. The band, composed of "Blues Explosion" veterans Andreyev, Summer, Matt, and me, along with additional vocalists Kate, Juniper, and Marcello, dutifully set out to learn these songs. Our first performance was at Halloween of last year, and was a huge success, with rock-star costumes and plenty of wild dancing. This process was repeated for New Year's, Validation Day, and Anniversary, with the band committing to learn at least 8 (and often more!) new songs for each performance. As of this writing, the "All-Request Dance Band" is going strong, although we're still planning on getting a better name!

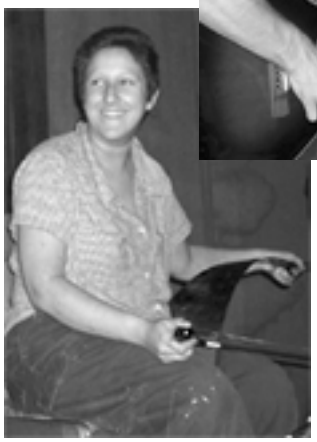
Another musical project that began around the same time and is still active today is the klezmer group "The Vulgar Bulgars." From the beginning, the VB's had a more ambitious agenda than most Twin Oaks bands: to perform not just "on the farm," but also to take their music to public and private venues throughout Virginia. In the nine months since their inception, the Vulgar Bulgars have played at weddings, parties, street corners and farmers' markets all over the area, and have landed a regular spot in the rotation at The Twisted Branch, a popular C'ville café. They are one of two current Twin Oaks bands to claim some real estate on the internet; you can listen to them at www.vulgarbulgars.com.

(left)
Anja and Matt as"Louisa Thunderpussy" at a recent coffeehouse (open mic) performance.

(far left, middle)
Ben's clarinet playing gets the patrons of the Twisted Branch at little more twisted every time the Vulgar Bulgars grace the stage.

While you're on line, you might also want to look at www.superdaughter.com, the site for yet another current Twin Oaks musical group, "Super Daughter." Super Daughter consists of musical *maestrii* Summer and John, who compose and record original lyrical tunes. Other contemporary Twin Oaks bands include the Teutonic heavy-metal duo "Louisa Thunderpussy," who bring a fanatical cult following to each of their live performances. Rounding out the current lineup is the group of pickers and grinners known collectively as the "Okara Mountain Jig Riggers." While the Okara Mountain crew can frequently be found plucking away at assorted string instruments on the Tupelo porch, their primary gig is as the house band for the Twin Oaks contra dance, which we have been hosting every month or two this spring.

Indeed the summer of 2004 seems an especially fertile time for music at Twin Oaks. The sounds of practicing bands can be heard just about every night in the Tupelo Music Room. The "green room" upstairs has become the home of a computer sporting all sorts of recording hardware and software. This year in particular, the community has been delightfully generous and supportive of live music, allocating over $1000 for the purchase of a new PA system and microphones and for the repair of our dilapidated amplifiers and equipment. And the community continues to provide the sort of support that's always made Twin Oaks a great place for live music, best expressed in a quote from ex-member Grá: "Twin Oakers as an audience are just about the best crowd you could wish for. Playing for Twin Oaks is about the most fun I've had performing ever."



John (above) and Summer (at left on saw) are "Superdaughter," releasing their first LP this summer.

HARDSCRABBLE? by Jake

Twin Oaks Scrabble™ buffs were invited to the annual Friends of the Library/Literacy Volunteers of Louisa Winter Tea and Scrabble Event. Pam, Stella and Jake participated and hauled off a stunning array of prizes: a new deluxe Scrabble™ set, a new Merriam-Websters dictionary and a copy of *Dude, Where's My Country?*, by Michael Moore.

The event made the front page of the weekly *Central Virginian*! (Not a lot happens in January in Louisa County) To quote the newshounds of the *CV*: "This year the top scorers were several members of Twin Oaks Community. The clever people from Twin Oaks walk away winners almost every time." (This prompted some to ponder the perjorative potential in the word "clever.")

Soymilk Rivers and OkaraBizzara Bars

by Summer

A dramatic cut in space has forced me to slice the synopsis of this past spring's musical production of *Willy Wonka and the Tofu Factory* [wild cheering] to mere sentences, likely devoid of adjectives and witty side comments. Nevertheless, since being in the Leaves might be the closest some of us ever come to seeing our name in lights, I stubbornly insist upon keeping the following list: Adrian, Andreyev, Anja, Ben, Brenda, Bri, Cherry, Debby, Dream, Ezra, George, Jake, Jayel, Juniper, Kassia, Kate, Kele, Kristen, Mala, Marcello, Matt, Meredith, Pam, Peter, Rusty, Seamus, Sean, Summer, Valerie, Zack. These are the *30* lovely people who helped put together the play, as actors, musicians, directors, lighting technicians, costume designers, and generally cool folks.

A brilliant mix of artistry and anarchy provided the creative impetus we needed to rewrite the traditional script. In Roald Dahl's story, the chocolate factory is passed patriarchially from one white male to the next and the workers are typically ignored. In our version, Charlie deems full factory ownership to the Oompa Loompas themselves [more wild cheering] who are delighted to discover inspiration in songs such as "Solidarity Forever" and Wonka's famous ballad "Imagination" ("…there is no life I know to compare to a worker-owned cooperative!").

Glad to be able to combine good politics with drama, community with humor, and big, loud musical numbers with tofu hut apparel, we managed to pull it all together. Of course, the last minute was more than a bit helpful. Rumors are already flying about what the next major endeavor will be, so if you didn't make it out for Wonka, don't be too dismayed. In this current peak of Twin Oaks' creative flourishing, there's always next time!

"It is we who mash the soybeans; press the tofu that they trade;
We who risk our lives among the boiling barrels of whey;
Now we stand unpaid and starving midst the soyfoods we have made;
But the union makes us strong."

The Tao of Tree Felling

Below is a brief article written by Valerie (pictured at right in "chainsaw pose") for submission to a yoga publication. Valerie has been practicing yoga for 7 years and this year started offering classes to Twin Oakers and friends.

As the chainsaw bites into the log I'm cutting, I lower my shoulders, and relax the muscles that I don't need to be using. I focus on not working harder than I need to in this physically- challenging moment.

I live at an intentional community and ecovillage in central Virginia. Our group of 100 people is realizing our dream of living alternatively by practicing non-violence, sharing income, and living sustainably on our 450 acres. Part of how we do this is by processing storm-damaged trees and scrap wood from our furniture business into firewood to heat our houses. In the past several years of doing this work, I have noticed my yoga practice finding its way into my forestry work. As I split or saw the wood, I move my body with mindful awareness. (This is very practical when a moment's inattention can have disastrous results.) As when I'm on the mat, I mentally lead myself through each step of the action I am engaged in. I tune into my body, listening for the cues that let me know it's time to take a break and rest for a few minutes. More directly, yoga has made my muscles strong and flexible, ready to engage in this strenuous outdoor work.

In both my yoga practice and my forestry work, I find I am continually learning to accept what is, and to accept the path itself as the goal of the journey. Some days my practice and my workshifts fly by and are full of ease; other days I face challenges that I struggle to overcome. Everyday I feel grateful for a life that so easily integrates these two aspects of myself.

Local Homeschool Group at Twin Oaks

by Brenda

Homeschooling has been going stronger than ever for the last few years at Twin Oaks. Currently we have 6 homeschooled children (ages 6, 7, 9, 10, 11 & 12). All, except for the 9-year old, have never attended school outside of Twin Oaks. For some, a primary disadvantage has been lack of contact with more homeschoolers. Recently, though, we've been able to partially remedy this with the formation of a weekly homeschool group that consists of 8 families.

The group is a cooperative effort with Twin Oaks members and outside parents as class leaders. We meet every Thursday for five hours for various classes and socializing.

Some of the organized classes are Music (clarinet, piano and violin), Drama, Spanish, Bike Maintenance, Computer, and Science.

In mid-June, the kids performed their self-written play *The Wild Adventure to Onomatopeia* and showcased their magic skills to a packed crowd of Twin Oakers, parents, and guests.

Here are some comments from children in the Homeschool Group:

"My favorite activities are Drama and Español. In Drama we're forming a play. We don't know what it will be called exactly, yet. In Spanish we learned colores and did a frijoles skit. That was fun. I met some friends and I'm even going to be in a magic show. I have two magic tricks."

"My favorite is the computer class and working with animation."

"Writing the play is my favorite thing. I also liked the activity where we put together odds and ends to make a marble track."

"I like the people that come. Drama is very fun, and I really like the game 'freeze.' I like playing games in our Spanish class."

The Life and Death of a Calf

by Meredith

Too many hours of labor have passed and the calf is still only half-born, half in this world, half in the world where we all rested before being born. In the dark of midnight, I cup my hand and push it past the cow's thick vaginal lips toward her womb. All day Penelope has been nervous and restless, though not straining.

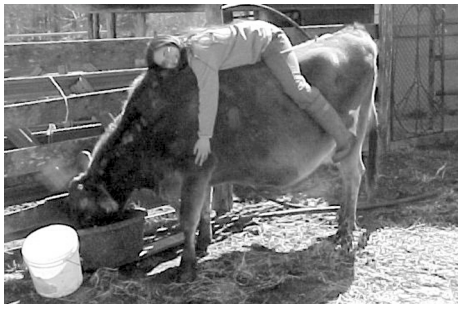
Warm wet flesh surrounds my arm, and I barely notice the sweet familiar smell of manure within inches of my face. The calf's hooves are still there, each consisting of two half-moons, slimy and soft with neonatal cartilage. Could they be a little further out than the last time I checked? I pull on them a little, and they move. Encouraged, I keep pulling. I reach further in, and finally realize.

These are the hind legs. Instead of diving into the world, front feet first, like most calves do, this calf is stuck with back feet through the cervix, positioned so that Penelope just can't squeeze him out.

Knowing that there is no turning back, that he needs to come out before his umbilical cord is crushed, I keep pulling. By now, Penelope has begun to push. She groans. I am surised at this sound, and its almost humanlike quality. Her dark hips rise and fall with the contracting muscles. The sky is clear, the air cool, and both of our breaths are white with warm moisture.

We work together. She pushes, and I pull on the white ropes that I tied to the calf's ankles. I have taken off my sandals to get better traction, and the grass is cold and wet, almost numbing on my feet. Penelope arches her back and rises to her feet, and keeps pushing. I pull, putting my weight on the ropes, feeling the ache in my back and knowing that it will be temporary.

When the entire hindquarters are visible, they twitch and kick, indicating that the umbilical cord must have broken. This one event enables the fetus to move of its own accord, separate from the mother. Autonomous, able to control itself, but also vulnerable. For now, the animal no longer receives nutrients from its mother but must eat, and drink, and breathe.



Our Dairy Manager Meredith atop the beloved jersey Santana, who died this spring.

Alone at 1 a.m., standing fully clothed in the shower... I let the water turn from warm to hot, bringing the flush of life back to my skin.

And breathe. I pull, Penelope pushes, and soon the wet calf slides onto the grass. Is it alive? No movement, no breath. I take the "Vetspirator Jr." and try to pump air into its lungs, not ever having used this strange tool. I pound on its chest, stick pieces of grass up its nose, trying to elicit that gasp of breath to restart its life. But it has suffocated in the fluids of the mother's womb. Not knowing what else to do, I decide that I've done what I can. Between its legs, I see the lump indicating gender: male.

And now what? Penelope, if anything, seems only relieved. She will be fine now. I drag his limp cool body through the dirt toward the ash can, the nearest place I can think of where it will be protected from stray dogs. We can bury it tomorrow. I try to lift it into the three foot tall can, but the slippery body, weighing almost as much as I do, falls back to the dusty ground. Propping the front legs up on the rim, on my second heave I am able to get it into the can. My back hurts, but the job is done.

Drenched in blood and dirt and cervical fluid, I walk through the dark, into a silent still building. Alone at 1 a.m., standing fully clothed in the shower – it seemed easier that way – I let the water turn from warm to hot, bringing the flush of life back to my skin.

What does it mean, to that calf, to me, to the universe, to be alive for just a little while? Is it significant, for a soul to be born and to die on the same day? After all, every life is just a blink of an eye, in relation to the life of the universe.

The next day, Sufi dancing, we sing:

Thank you Mother Earth,
for the beauty I have seen today
I offer praise to all the beings
that have given of their lives in
this way.

Indeed, I am filled with a sense of honor at being witness to this process. A strange beauty, seeing life as it flows and ebbs. I leave the field that night, thanking that calf for his life, for his birth, for his death. Thanking him for this gift that I might understand, and accept.

Poetry by Kristen

For Madge

Taking old things, reforming them,
Did it hurt, did you feel it again,
The burning book, the quiet grave,
The ghosts of dresses
and echoes of sighs

Sifting through the rubble
The refugee finds a picture here,
A scrap of cloth there.
The cameraman weeps,
hands over face.
Tragedy is ordinary,
But show us again how to feel,
how to remember.