eco villages

LESSONS FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

Karen T. Litfin

An inspiring and instructive journey to the wide range of communities pioneering a sustainable global future.

Jakob von Uexküll, founder of the Right Livelihood Award and former member of the European Parliament

One of the most powerful questions asked of us by our world crisis is: "How can we live together in ways that allow us to 'be the change' together?" Karen Litfin's book gives us answers. These ecovillage experiments – idealistic, imperfect, courageous, creative, and honestly described – will help us transform our consciousness and find our way forward.

Terry Patten, co-author (with Ken Wilber, Adam Leonard, and Marco Morelli) of *Integral Life Practice*

In these times of political gridlock and myopia, Karen Litfin's tremendously engaging and informative exploration of ecovillages around the world points the way to a viable and attractive future very different from the bleak place to which we are now headed. You will enjoy this book!

James Gustave Speth, author of *America the Possible: Manifesto for a New Economy*, former Dean, Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, Yale University

Nature teaches us that nothing disappears when it dies; it merely becomes something new. Karen Litfin's lucid and heartfelt book reveals the new life emerging in the cracks of failing systems. Through her eyes, we meet people everywhere who are building high-joy, low-impact communities. Litfin is the perfect guide: intellectually rigorous, spiritually awake, and deeply caring. If you want to create a richer, gentler life for yourself and your community, read this book!

Vicki Robin, bestselling author of *Your Money or Your Life* and *Blessing the Hands That Feed Us*

Karen Litfin is a perceptive, thoughtful, and gifted observer of the human predicament. In writing *Ecovillages*, Litfin combines her intellectual prowess with her sensitivity and compassion to tell a hugely important and inspiring story.

Chris Uhl, author of *Developing Ecological Consciousness*, Professor of Biology at Pennsylvania State University

The world is in for a major transition, a huge downshift, ready or not. For those inclined to roll up their sleeves and get ready, ecovillages can offer insight and hope. As Litfin shows in this compelling book, they exemplify an "affirmative politics," a politics at once ecological, economic, community-oriented, and spiritual. Ecovillages aren't for everyone but, in these uncertain times, their lessons may be.

Thomas Princen, author of *The Logic of Sufficiency*, Professor, School of Natural Resources and Environment, University of Michigan

Karen Litfin has not only written a book of great importance to all of us at this pivotal moment in history, she has also done it in a way that is lively, moving, informative, and compelling. This first-rate book deserves to reach the widest possible audience; we must pay attention to the issues Litfin addresses if we are going to thrive as a species on this fragile planet.

Nina Wise, performance artist and author of *A Big New Free Happy Unusual Life*

Karen Litfin understands that today we need inspiration as much as information to forge the vibrant communities that will carry us into an enduring future. The success stories she brings to life are just what we need to revivify our existing communities on a planet perched at the precipice.

Kurt Hoelting, author of *The Circumference of Home: One Man's Yearlong Quest for a Radically Local Life*

ECOVILLAGES

For my teachers

ECOVILLAGES

LESSONS FOR SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

KAREN T. LITFIN

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First published in 2014 by Polity Press

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-7949-5
ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-7950-1(pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 10.5 on 12 pt Sabon
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by T. J. International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.politybooks.com

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It has literally taken a planetary village to write this book. First and foremost are the fourteen communities who invited a curious academic to live in their midst and the 140 ecovillagers who gave lengthy interviews. My research was greatly facilitated by the following people who served as community liaisons: Aly Mansare and Mariama Guldagger (Colufifa); Alan Corbett and Max Lindegger (Crystal Waters); Macaco Tamerice (Damanhur); Diana Leafe-Christian (Earthaven): Liz Walker (EcoVillage at Ithaca); Michiyo Furuhashi (Konohana); Lois Arkin (Los Angeles Ecovillage); Bandula Senadeera (Sarvodaya); Kosha Anja Joubert (Sieben Linden); Sigrid Niemer (UfaFabrik); Ina Meyer-Stoll (ZEGG). I also thank Bagnaia, the charming Italian ecovillage where I convalesced while too sick to travel. For consulting with me about the journey, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Jonathan Dawson, Ross and Hildur Jackson, Kosha Anja Joubert, and Diana Leafe-Christian.

Each of the fourteen micro-societies I visited is like a world unto itself, with its own ethos and ambiance. As much as I endeavored to dive deeply into each one, what I could glean in a matter of weeks was necessarily shallow – particularly because most interviews required English translation – and only a small portion of that has found its way into the book. Moreover, my field is global environmental politics, not community development. Consequently, I have inevitably made mistakes and glossed over important aspects of each community. While a cast of thousands stands behind this book, I alone am responsible for the shortcomings. For these, I apologize with the hope that the overriding transformative message nonetheless shines through.

There were those who facilitated the journey and those who supported the writing. To the extent that you are now holding a lively

and accessible book rather than an academic tome, Margaret Bendet is largely responsible. Not only is Margaret, with her keen sense of nuance and authenticity, my favorite writing teacher, but she also became a treasured friend. For our serendipitous Easter meeting at the Whidbey Institute, I thank my friend and colleague Johnny Palka.

To all those who read the manuscript, entirely or in parts, I owe a debt of gratitude: Sarah Ellison, Wendy Visconty, Anya Woestwin, Chris Uhl, Lauran Zmira, Leanne Do, Vicki Robin, Tim Richards, and David Marshak. For research assistance, I thank Mark Visconty, Julie Johnson, and David Wilkerson. For help with the index, I thank Catherine Quinn and Angela Gaffney. My thanks also to Stephen Dunne for computer assistance. I am especially grateful to my dear friend Donna Gregory for enlivening the early chapters and offering wise counsel throughout. For bringing this book to fruition, I thank my editorial team at Polity, especially Louise Knight, Pascal Porcheron, Clare Ansell, and Gail Ferguson. They have shepherded the project with good humor and the greatest of care.

To have the freedom to write this book – a highly personal seven-year project – is a great privilege. I acknowledge the Department of Political Science at the University of Washington for enabling this unconventional international relations scholar to fully engage her academic freedom. In particular, my sincere thanks go out to my chair Peter May and my colleagues Jamie Mayerfeld and Christine DiStefano for their encouragement, and to Aseem Prakash for challenging me to scale it up.

For helping me to begin thinking of myself as a writer, I thank the Mesa Refuge for a residency in a lovely cottage overlooking Tomales Bay. I will never forget the day the agricultural levees came down and the Pacific Ocean trickled up the tributaries, bringing new life to an old wetland. It was the perfect metaphor for this book. My thanks, as well, to Carroll Smith and Janice Giteck for their Whidbey Island guest cottage, where I organized more than two thousand pages of research notes.

This book would not have been possible without the loving support of my friends and family. I am especially grateful to Rand Hicks for grasping and emboldening my larger vision; to my dearest friend, Anya Woestwin, who sees my higher self and always finds a larger framework for the rest; to my daughter, Maya Jacobs, who inspires me every day and loves me no matter what; and to my mother, Kathleen Wilkinson, who believed in me even when she couldn't understand me. And there's no question that my journey was inspired by Laura, who lived the possibility and sent me on my way.

It is an odd thing to buy a farm and start a community in the midst of writing a book and teaching full time, but that is what I did. Thanks to Dan Neumeyer and Bill Copperthwaite for coordinating the building workshop for the tapered-wall wooden yurt where this book was written. The beauty of the wood inspires me every day. Thanks, too, to my former students and Maya's friends who, in pulling thistle and whacking blackberry, helped me keep the faith. Of all those who have endured the innumerable hours I've spent incommunicado these past four years, the members of SkyRoot Community top the list. For their patience and generosity of spirit, I offer my heartfelt gratitude to Sarah Gillette, Beth Wheat, Anne Wheat, TraceyJoy Miller, Joanne Pontrello, and Byron and Raven Odion. I promise to be more present.

This book is not only *about* the pioneers who are writing the story of planetary interdependence with their lives; it is a *consequence* of an invisible web of personal and global community. I am the beneficiary of that web in more ways than I can possibly acknowledge.

Ecovillages at a Glance

Community	Country	Approximate Population (2012)	Landscape	Founding Date	Primary Worldview
Auroville	India	2,000	Rural	1968	Spiritually focused
Colufifa	Senegal, the Gambia	350 traditional villages	Rural	1964	Interreligious
Crystal Waters	Australia	200+	Rural	1984	Secular
Damanhur	Italy	1,000	Rural	1975	Spiritual
Earthaven	USA	55	Rural	1995	Spiritually eclectic
EcoVillage at Ithaca	USA	160	Suburban	1991	Secular
Findhorn	UK	600	Rural	1962	Spiritually focused
Konohana	Japan	80	Rural	1994	Spiritually focused
Los Angeles Ecovillage	USA	45	Urban	1994	Secular
Sarvodaya	Sri Lanka	15,000 traditional villages	Rural	1957	Interreligious
Sieben Linden	Germany	140	Rural	1997	Spiritually eclectic
Svanholm	Denmark	140	Rural	1979	Secular
UfaFabrik	Germany	35 onsite	Urban	1979	Secular
ZEGG	Germany	80	Suburban	1991	Spiritually eclectic

— 1 —

LIVING A NEW STORY

For years, I've had the perfect job: a tenured professorship in a field I love at a major research university. The perks include a stable income with good benefits, a downhill bicycle ride to my office each morning, and a podium from which to encourage thousands of bright young people to ponder the most momentous issues of our time. Soon after the beginning of the new century, my once-obscure field of global environmental politics began climbing to the top of the public agenda. Suddenly students were hungry to learn what I was teaching – maybe not all of them but enough to make my work exciting. At last I could lecture about climate change, the mass extinction of species, and resource depletion without sounding like Chicken Little. I've been giving these lectures for two decades now, and the big picture hasn't changed much in that time. What *has* changed is that a lot more people are beginning to see that perhaps the sky (along with the rest of the biosphere) might well be falling, or at least changing in some palpable ways. Ways we can see, hear, and feel – warmer winters, fiercer storms, holes in the ozone layer. Nature has been giving us a wake-up call for quite some time now, and people are finally beginning to wake up. For one who thinks about this stuff nonstop, this is very good news.

As a professor, my job is to acquire and communicate a lot of knowledge. On these issues, though, I'm fascinated by what I *don't* know – indeed, what it seems nobody today *can* know. We don't know, for instance, how many species there are or which of them are critical to our survival; we only know that because of human behavior other species are disappearing a thousand times faster than before the industrial era. We don't know what it will be like to live on Planet Earth when it's 3–10°F warmer; we only know that the

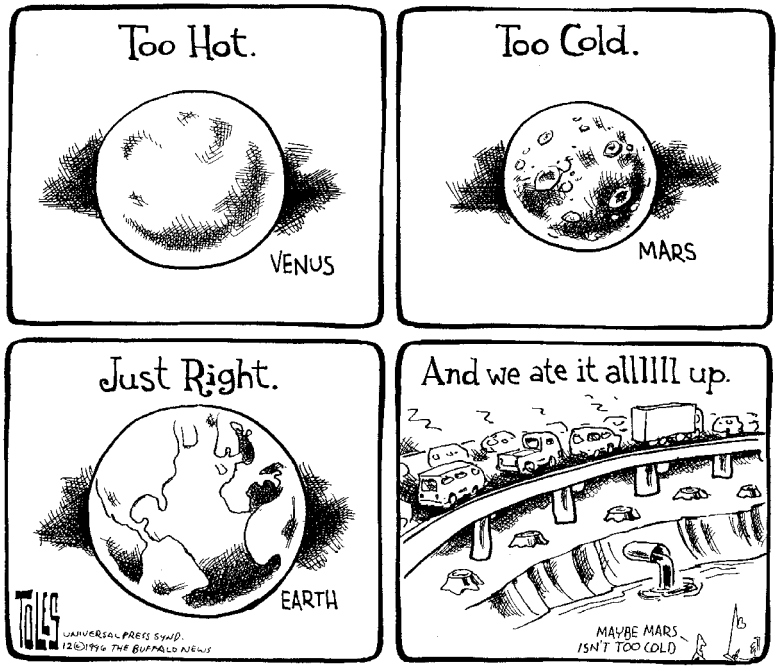

Figure 1.1. Humor helps to lighten the mood in my classes

Source: TOLES © 1996 The Washington Post. Reprinted with permission of UNIVERSAL UCLICK. All rights reserved.

scientific consensus is that's where we're headed. We don't know when oil production will peak or whether it already has; we only know that we're utterly dependent on the stuff and we've already picked the low-hanging fruit. I find this combination of knowledge and ignorance utterly compelling. We can't be completely certain, but the evidence points to a profoundly disturbing conclusion: our way of life is driving us into the perfect storm. For the young adults in my classes, this comes as a rude awakening.

Over the years, I've learned to temper all this gloom and doom with a healthy dose of humor. I start each lecture with a political cartoon. Soon after I've pointed out what nobody knows about what's coming toward us as a species, I usually show one of my favorites: "Goldilocks Goes Global."

A dark sense of humor may help in the moment, but relief is temporary. One upshot of my perfect job is that I was making thousands

of students fearful, angry, depressed, and guilt-ridden. Having steeped myself in the available information, I also inflicted these states upon myself. Until, finally, I said "stop!"

If in the face of the end of civilization as we know it, the best I can do is cite statistics and a few woefully ineffective treaties, what kind of teacher am I? I want to empower my students, not paralyze them, which means that I have to be empowered. Passion grounded in fact is what ignites personal power and transforms responsibility from a moral burden to a genuine ability to respond.

The response, as with the issue, is inevitably multifaceted and must come from a variety of sources. All told, the bottom line is that we need to find viable ways of living with one another and our home planet, changing some systems from within and restructuring others entirely. Some responses – corporate social responsibility, government subsidies for renewable energy, municipal recycling programs – offer tangible ways to work within the system. Personally, I'm inspired by responses that reinvent life from the ground up, and of these I'm most intrigued by the ecovillage. This is a gathering of individuals into a cohesive unit large enough to be self-contained – that's why it's a village – and dedicated to living by ecologically sound precepts. I find ecovillages compelling because they weave together the various strands of sustainability into integrated wholes at the level of everyday life and because they've sprung up spontaneously all over the world.

This is, of course, a book on ecovillages, but, before focusing on the subject at hand, I want to present a bit more of the big picture, the framework within which ecovillages have emerged, so that it's clear what "reinventing life" truly means.

A new story

For some time now, I've been looking for a way to make sense of this unfolding environmental mega-crisis. It's one thing to see and feel that we're in a pickle. It's another to put our recognition into an intellectual framework. How did we, who view ourselves as the pinnacle of evolution, become the most destructive force on the planet? If every culture lives out its core story, what cultural stories have engendered humanity's current morass? And since our survival as a species requires harmonizing ourselves with our home planet, what new stories might foster our capacity for doing that? For decades, I hunted for answers to these questions in disciplines ranging from economics to philosophy, from geology to theology.

In a nutshell, I concluded that *homo sapiens* is a splendid oddity in the natural world: the species with the capacity of separating itself from the whole – at least in our own minds. The very term "environment" assumes that separation. One of our culture's most compelling stories has been our conquest of nature through technology. We've told ourselves that our comforts and conveniences would protect us from the vagaries of nature – and to a great extent they have. But now the tattered ozone layer and collapsing ice shelves are evoking a new story: *we are not separate*. If we take this story to heart and follow its radical implications, it offers some very good news – for the biosphere and for ourselves.

Humanity has become a force of nature, a geophysical force operating on a planetary scale. We didn't get here overnight. The story of separation, which crops up in one way or another across many cultures, has deep roots; only recently did it produce epic consequences. With the scientific and industrial revolutions, knowledge engendered power in new ways. Starting with seventeenth-century Europe, Earth was carved up into a patchwork of sovereign states. The economic and psychological counterpart of the sovereign state was the rational self-interested individual who, alongside nations and firms, found himself (*sic*) in fierce competition for resources, power, and wealth. The collisions and conglomerations of these "particles" were like Newtonian particles in a mechanical universe. Nature was reduced to territory and property, a vast storehouse of resources for human consumption, and an unlimited repository for our waste.

Three centuries ago, when most Europeans never reached their thirtieth birthday, that story made sense. With only a billion people on Earth and a vast frontier in the New World, nature seemed unshakably robust and inexhaustibly abundant. Today, with 6.8 billion people inhabiting an increasingly vulnerable planet, that same story is, to put it mildly, evolutionarily maladaptive. The impulse toward self-protection has mutated into a fearsome capacity for self-destruction, particularly in the wealthy countries. Yet, as the story of separation and conquest reaches the end of its tether, the unfolding crisis carries within itself the seeds of a new story.

If "independence" was the by-word of the old story, "interdependence" is the by-word of the new. If the old metaphors were drawn from Newtonian physics, the new metaphors are rooted in ecology, where symbiosis is the rule. Whatever its political utility in the past, independence was always a biological fiction; current trends are driving that point home. The so-called individual is inextricably reliant on a vast web of external ecosystems and internal microbial networks.

At the level of international politics, sovereignty is being eroded by global networks of communications, finance, crime, terrorism, disease transmission, ecology, and transnational activism. Europe, the birthplace of the sovereign state and the epicenter of two world wars, is now home to a particularly intriguing post-sovereign entity, the European Union. The 2008 economic meltdown highlights the same lesson that the even thornier issues of climate change and peak oil challenge us to learn: we now live in an era of planetary interdependence (for an explanation of peak oil, see Box 3.5).

No longer relegated to a collection of objects to be consumed, nature (albeit a profoundly altered nature) emerges as teacher and we her students. When we grasp the meaning of "nonrenewable," we learn to favor bicycles over cars. When we learn that living systems, being cyclical, generate no waste, we see that there is no "away" in which to throw our garbage and pollution. And we discover the value of compost. As our knowledge grows, so too does our sense of homecoming to our place on Earth.

When we come home, we do so in a specifically human way. Like other animals, we are eating, drinking, breathing creatures. *And* we are equipped, perhaps uniquely so, to come into conscious harmony with the rest of creation. In doing so, we find our individuality not in our ability to *acquire*, but in our capacity to *inquire* – and then to express ourselves as unique parts of the whole. Like cells in the larger body of the living Earth, we become that aspect of Gaia that is growing into awareness of herself. From this large perspective, "sustainability" is just a dry word for our new story's central plotline: coming home to our place within the larger community of life that sustains us. The upshot of this story is that there are no environmental problems. There is only the age-old *human* problem, now writ large: how, then, shall we live? Benjamin Franklin's purported words to his compatriots at the signing of the US Declaration of Independence now have a global ring: "We must hang together, gentlemen . . . else, we shall most assuredly hang separately."

The challenge of "hanging together"

So how *do* we "hang together?" How do we forge enduring symbiotic relationships that acknowledge our interconnectedness? How do we live *with* one another? It's not easy, as many of us have found, to live in groups. We face challenges even in pairs, as I saw in my brief attempt at cohabitation with my daughter's father. To forge a stable matrix of

relationships among individualistic modern people, within tribal- or village-size groups . . . Group living of any kind requires a commitment to something higher than the fixtures and plumbing of life.

I had my first experience of conscious group living in my early twenties in California when a friend and I started the Orange County Peace Conversion Project – right in the belly of the beast, as we liked to put it. Those were the years when political leaders talked seriously about winning an all-out nuclear war. So we set out to inspire people, especially workers in the local military industries, to consider how the money and expertise being poured into war preparations might be used to enhance life. Within three years, we had five thousand supporters. We were against nuclear weapons, but our focus was mostly on what we were *for*: a life in harmony with one another and with the Earth. We didn't know it at the time, but we were muddling our way toward a politics of "yes," despite being surrounded by so much that seemed negative. Living by example was an essential ingredient in our homespun recipe. When a generous woman donated her house to our project, several of us, all in our twenties, moved in and lived hand to mouth. We grew our vegetables, ate low on the food chain, bicycled whenever possible, converted our driveway into a neighborhood recycling center, and made our decisions by consensus. That was 1979, long before the term *ecovillage* was coined.

Like many adventures in community living, our idealistic experiment dissolved for mundane reasons: couples broke up, people left, and eventually our generous donor wanted her house back.

Over time, life's disappointments and a certain dry pragmatism buried my ideals under a heap of obligations and responsibilities. After those quixotic years in Orange County, I entered a fourteen-year period of intellectual intensity on my way to academic freedom, first as a PhD student and then as a single mother and a professor on the tenure track. During those years, I learned to hone my mind, weave complex webs of thought, dress them up in suitable jargon, and get them published. I wrote about what mattered most to me, the human face of global ecology, but always in the stilted academic language that remains impenetrable to ordinary people. I was in a protracted rite of passage. Some day, I imagined, I would make a difference. Some day.

When I first came to the University of Washington in 1991, I considered group living once again. Alone in a new city, I didn't want to raise Maya, my daughter, in isolation. Besides, I knew we could live more sustainably in community than in a single-family home. The most promising possibility was Songaia, a new group that owned

11 acres in a semirural area north of Seattle. I attended meetings for several months as we developed a site plan and got to know each other. Every meeting ended with boisterous songs and a shared meal.

In the end, as much as I cherished the prospect of raising Maya in such a wholesome environment, I was deterred by yet another of the classic issues associated with group living: location. I was daunted by the commute. For me, the ecological and social benefits of community life were not worth long hours on the freeway. So I bought a house near the university and, bowing before the academic dictum "publish or perish," I put my nose to the grindstone.

As I've said, it was the perfect job, but something was missing, something big. I cared about my subject, thought about it constantly, saw it as vital – and yet I was not *living* as if it were true. My lectures, painstakingly researched, all pointed to one extremely inconvenient truth: our everyday actions are unraveling our home planet's life-support systems. And *our* actions included *my* actions. For me, this was even more inconvenient. No matter how inspiring my lectures might be for others, what did it matter if I didn't change my own life! Sure, I bicycled to work, ate organic, recycled, and shopped at thrift stores. Without any huge effort and even including my international flights, I was able to reduce my ecological footprint to just over half the American average. Still, if everybody on the planet lived as I did, we would need two and a half Earths. Who was I to talk about coming into conscious harmony with the living Earth? There was a yawning gap between my lofty notions of planetary sustainability and my own economic consumption. At the end of the day, as I bicycled homeward up the long hill, I felt like a fraud. But what more could I do?

Enter Wonder Woman

Then one evening, a ruddy-faced woman came knocking on my front door. With her close-cropped hair, at first glance I took her for a man. "Is this where the meditation group meets?" she asked. It was. As she took her seat in our weekly meditation circle, I was curious about this new arrival: she seemed different.

At the next meeting of the meditation group, Laura confirmed that she was, indeed, different. My toilet stopped flushing, and, while the rest of us sat in the living room bemoaning the high price of plumbers, Laura asked for my toolbox and did the repair. In time, I found out that she could fix just about anything. She could build, plumb, and wire a house. She could grow anything rooted in the earth. Whereas

I, and virtually everybody I knew, used money to navigate through the material aspects of life, Laura relied upon her skills, her personal relationships, and her ability to barter.

Inspired in her youth by St Francis, Laura had decided to live simply. Her inner life and a handful of deep friendships came first for her. She lived on her earnings, less than US$6,000 a year. By the time she knocked on my door, she had been living with outer simplicity and inner wealth for twenty-five years. I could see that, with all my degrees, I had a lot to learn from this high-school dropout – who is, by the way, at least as well read as my overeducated friends and I.

Laura was master of the spontaneous project. In the time she lived in my vicinity, my home and garden got a substantial upgrade. When I complained about the ugly shrub blocking my living room window, she was back in a flash with her chainsaw and shovels. After one look at my chaotic garage, so many years of detritus from a middle-class life, Laura masterminded the dreaded clean up. A conversation about the evils of concrete led to half my driveway being transformed into a terraced strawberry bed. With every project, I navigated new equipment (a hammer, a chisel, a drill, a handsaw, an electric saw) and learned new skills (how to dig without hurting my back, how to make yogurt, how to build soil, how to compost my own shit). Laura's guiding question seemed to be: How can we maximize our effectiveness and minimize our harm to the Earth? And how can we do it having the most fun?

One huge consequence of Laura's material simplicity is her spacious approach to time. People say time is money, but perhaps it's more accurate to say time is wealth. Although Laura had virtually no money, she seemed to have all the time in the world, while I had money but so little time. If a conversation was important to her, Laura would give an entire day to it. If she felt like making art with rocks, she would give an entire day to that. If I needed help around the house, Laura was right there. I, on the other hand, was constantly rushing from one appointment to the next. I could buy time from other people – the plumber, the massage therapist, my daughter's music teachers – but I had no time myself, while Laura couldn't buy other people's time but her time was her own. When I told her how I often felt squeezed by the lack of time, she teased me. "Litfin," she said, "you're the victim of your own choices!"

I started to make different choices. I bought a pedal-activated electric bicycle, made it my primary mode of transportation, and within three years put more than four thousand miles on it. Growing food takes more time than buying it, but it's a lot more fun. So I took a