

# The Irony of Right Livelihood

By Arty Kopecky

It strikes me that, in our society, monetary recompense is often inversely proportional to the value of the work. At the top we have bank presidents, hedge fund managers, and corporate CEOs, earning outlandish sums, accumulating fortunes in the many millions. And they are overseers of a culture that promotes greed and is often destructive and is perfectly happy to run people over by the thousands. Their flagrant selfishness creates vast discrepancies of wealth that threaten our democracy, vacuuming up so much money that the middle class is being destroyed.

On the other hand, we have many kinds of worthwhile work that isn't paid monetarily at all, but is right livelihood. People who work for the hospices, food banks, mentoring programs for kids, doctors without borders, are a few examples—as are people in intentional communities who, by serving each other and creating important innovations in our culture, are developing what is sometimes called the “shared” or “sharing” economy.

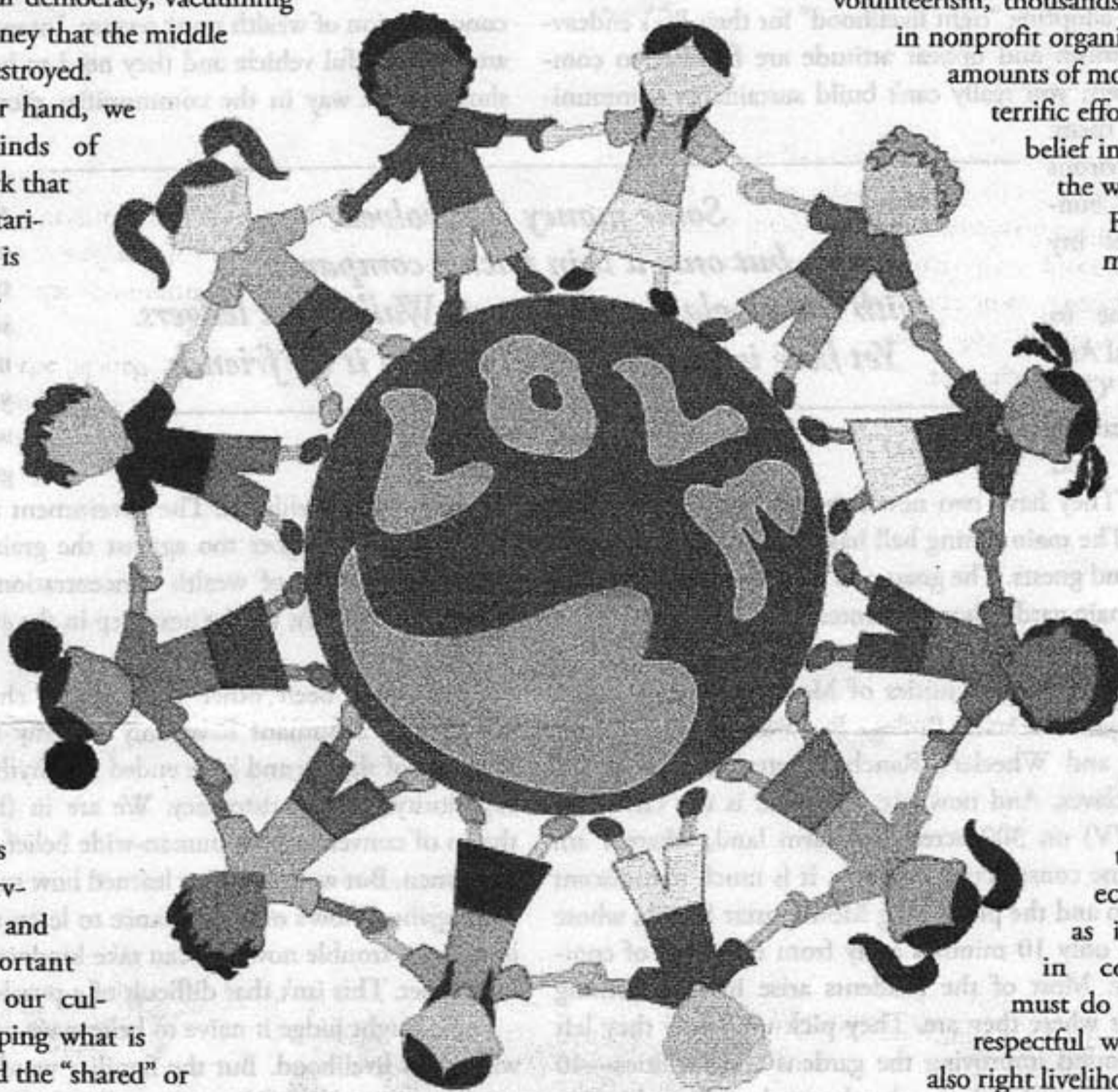
New Buffalo, the community (commune) where I lived and worked from 1971 to 1979, was a rather pure example of right livelihood. The land was gifted (105 acres with 40 acres of water rights). Then the pueblo, consisting of main meeting room kiva, central kitchen, washroom, pantries, and 15 or more rooms, was built entirely

with enthusiasm (and mud). No one received pay. I and others eventually planted the fields (main crop alfalfa), developed a dairy and extensive gardens, and did so for 14 years without a paycheck ever. We did it to create an alternative economy because it was right. Of course, this is also what keeps COMMUNITIES magazine going. For 40 years there has been a call for articles; people respond because they want to build this movement. And in our modern world, besides outright

volunteerism, thousands of people work in nonprofit organizations for small amounts of money, putting in a terrific effort, mostly out of belief in the rightness of the work.

Back to those masters of the macro economy: one of our biggest chores is changing the society's ethic, from a take-no-prisoners economy based on perpetual expansion, to a friendlier, more considerate, sustainable shared economy. And, as in everyday life in community, we must do it in a peaceful, respectful way. And that is also right livelihood. Pete Seeger's song “My Rainbow Race” contains the prophetic line, “Now's our last chance to learn to share what's been given to me and you.”

We're headed for eight billion people on earth. So many natural systems, forests, oceans, deserts, climates are being adversely affected by humankind. And often rage, blame, anger, and violence are the humans' response, rather than thoughtful





consideration and brotherly and sisterly love. Into this mix are developing many cultural innovations, from activists protecting trees and fish and forests to businesses creating more earth-friendly systems. And I believe the intentional communities movement holds huge, even the biggest promise. Indeed the growth and enlargement of communities sharing properties is the barometer for me of whether we can enter an Aquarian Age.

This effort is being done almost all through "right livelihood." Some money is involved, but only a thin trickle compared with the moola flowing across Wall Street ledgers. Yet here is our best hope; so keep it up friends. Work your arses off (as they say). Create those ecovillages and land-based and city-based communities; help your friends. Make the whole world your friends.

As Pete Seeger sings, "Now's our last chance to learn to share." We'd better do it now. And many are rising to the occasion, reflected in the DVD *A New We*, increasing traffic to the IC sites, and especially the growth of more intentional communities. They are adopting "right livelihood" for their life's endeavor. This optimism and upbeat attitude are familiar to community workers; you really can't build sustainable communities without them.

My own environs of Sonoma County encourages my hopeful view.

We're home to the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, a place calmly bursting with good earth energy. They have two new large and very professional greenhouses. The main dining hall has been expanded to serve more family and guests. The goats and chickens look clean and healthy. The main garden hosts volunteers each Wednesday and supplies huge salads every day.

We also have the communities of Monan's Ril (the Cadillac community), La Tierra, Bodega Pastures, Star Mountain, Ocean Song, and Wheeler's Ranch. There are perhaps 10 cohousing enclaves. And now, six years old, is the Greenvalleyvillage (GVV) on 300 acres, half farm land, where I am helping on some construction projects. It is much reminiscent of New Buffalo and the pioneering Morningstar Ranch, whose original site is only 10 minutes away from this oasis of community energy. Most of the residents arise in the morning and...stay right where they are. They pick up where they left off fiddling around improving the gardens and facilities—40 or 50 or more people helping each other and creating this new Aquarian culture. And at the end of the week no one is handing out paychecks (I really wish I could). This is right livelihood.

Damanhur, the marvelous community in Italy, has created the elaborate Temples of Humankind—largely through love, which is right livelihood. Here in Sonoma County we built a

similar but temporary Harmony Altar encompassing the spiritualities of humankind and love of the people. The communities need spirituality, but it shouldn't be a cult or dogmatic, so I am very impressed to see these all-encompassing beliefs manifesting in many places. Just a bit of money is involved but no one is paying the creators.

A common refrain is "balance is the question" (and love is the answer, to live in harmony). Right livelihood needs to be rewarded more and if there is to be balance society cannot be so top heavy. At the highest level of wealth, Bill and Linda Gates and Warren Buffett are paying people for right livelihood in an organization dedicated to medical services for the poor worldwide. That's a giant endeavor. Prince Charles of England, a devotee of organic farming, supports some country farms and crafts.

Thinking on the grand scale, for civilization to continue, not just for 10 more years or even 100, but thousands—for us to be in the middle of human history, not the end—the irony of the concentration of wealth must reverse. Intentional communities are a wonderful vehicle and they need to be supported. Those showing the way in the communities movement must make

this life so appealing that some of the wealth, instead of being concentrated on the selfish accumulation of mansions, vehicles, yachts, and finery, will support the good work of those

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pursuing right livelihood. The government taxing the wealthy, to redistribute it, goes too against the grain in America. But the Gordian knot of wealth concentration still needs to be unraveled: logically, it's the next step in the evolution of human society.

There have been other momentous changes, historically speaking. We humans have only recently ended the 10,000 year rule of slavery and have ended the myth of the God-given superiority of the aristocracy. We are in (hopefully) the last throes of converting the human-wide belief system to equality of women. But we haven't yet learned how to share. There's that song again: "Now's our last chance to learn to share." I believe it; we're in trouble now. We can take kindness and friendship a lot further. This isn't that difficult of a puzzle.

Some might judge it naïve to believe we can save civilization with right livelihood. But the familiar words of John Lennon are appropriate here: "You may say I'm the dreamer, but I'm not the only one." 🍌

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*Arty Kopecky is the author of New Buffalo and Leaving New Buffalo, recounting his eight years at this "free style" commune. For more information visit [arthurkopecky.com](http://arthurkopecky.com).*