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Whole Systems Design
Autumn 1999
Second Letter to Facilitators

Spreading Roots (Something to Smile About)

Sue and Guy, Guy and Sue,

It's been a pleasure getting to know you and participating with you in this mind-expanding educational exploration. I do consider it a privilege. And I do believe assuredly that at this moment I am in the right place at the right time and that the work we are doing is meaningful and honorable – perhaps even moral. For that reason alone, we are sure to have a satisfactory culmination.

I have no criticisms of the program: It is engaging, well-informed, and professionally conducted. The classmates' genuine interest and growing enthusiasm, assisted and directed by well-designed organizational theory, is accelerating the fusion of a coherent whole – and that is a sight of beauty.

I am not quite sure what to make of 'graduate school' as a coherent whole, however. There's a different attitude here: like we're all supposed to be sharing some kind of collective institutional world-view but no-one will say just what it is, and I surely don't know. Does successful completion of graduate school imply different expectations from life? Does it necessitate an adjusted self-image? Will it put me in a different class? Will I need to join a club? I think that what I am detecting is an unintentional snobbery from the school as a whole (I just looked it up and that is my intended meaning) – but it's curiously absent from the Whole Systems Design Dept. Isn't it comforting to be innovative, to be free to enlarge boundaries, to not be emotionally dependent on the approval of 'superiors' and other institutional icons? When I first got to Seattle, I would smile at the people I passed, as is my habit, but most people would not smile back, so now I am more reserved about my smiling. Maybe these people aren't smiling because they live in the city? The whole city is like that.

I first got to Seattle in the Autumn of 1981: I was in the Navy at the time, and had just driven a motorcycle all the way from Florida to catch my first fleet assignment on board the USS Enterprise, dry-docked in Bremerton. That initial year was very good for I and I: I had a beautiful girlfriend 12 years older than me; I would often take the ferry over to Seattle to go bar hopping; I loved to take my motorcycle cruising to explore some of the rich beauty of the Pacific Northwest – all good fun.

The second time I arrived in Seattle was in the Summer of 1992. I was working in Alaska but coming back to Seattle for my extended off-season vacations (outlined in my autobiography). Seattle was hopping on those days; the whole town was alive (at least that's how I perceived it). I connected with a colorful group of people in the U-District who had just opened a restaurant called "The Healing Earth," associated with and inspired by a band called "Tribal Therapy." This was my first indulgence in 'community' and I loved it: the experience was fundamentally transforming. I can make a direct connection between that germinal period and the series of events that have led me to Antioch.

My most recent arrival in Seattle, the Autumn of 1999, feels different. As I walk my old haunts, the whole mood has changed – people aren't smiling anymore (well some people are smiling but they are obviously smoking ganja!) My old therapeutic tribe seems to have disbanded. The few that are left seem pale and weary, as if their extended exposure to the city has drained them of their previous vitality. (While editing, the thought occurred that maybe they are as healthy as ever, and perhaps what I am perceiving is colored by *my* experiencing increased vitality elsewhere?).

The city has changed, or I have changed, or the world has changed. What once was a 'town' feeling around here has degenerated into a true 'city' vibe. As Seattle's reputation spread across the country, people responded and in droves and masses they came and imported their generic USA, Inc. city culture paradigm with them. From the archetypal, mythological perspective I choose to take, Ecotopia has been colonized by invaders. That distinct Northwest character that makes this region so special, that re-inhabiting indigenous culture that is a direct reflection of the spirit of this land, has evacuated the city and has been planting itself in outlying areas. That cultural flowering that I experienced in 1992 cannot coexist with generic USA, Inc. city culture.

Being here in Seattle helps me to realize that recently I have been living in virtual paradise. During my 5-year stay at Fairhaven College, I lived in a deluxe school bus cabin on a farm for three years, and after the farm was purchased by a cohousing group, I stayed with close friends or lived out of my van amongst the trees. My flexible living situation allowed me to travel extensively and witness other paradises around the globe. The whole time I was fully immersed in education at Fairhaven, a tremendous community growing experience in its own right – and growing community is an essential component of paradise. I have been led to believe that my dreams can come true.

Before, during, and between Fairhaven College, I would pass varying amounts of time in the Okanogan. For example, I have gone over there the past two Summers. There is a piece of land that I have lived on previously and can return to anytime. While there, especially in the Summer, I experience total freedom: I walk around naked on the land, I worship the Sun (living for most of the year in overcast Bellingham!), I devote time to my spiritual work: meditation-yoga-breathing-reading-writing. Such conditions are an excellent opportunity to harmonize the nervous system with a Gaian (and ultimately

galactic) vibration – as is living amongst the trees in Fairhaven, surrounded by community.

But living in the city is a very different context. Here I am bombarded by all sorts of discordant vibrations: traffic, sirens, news, helicopters, ambivalence, apathy, aggression, suffering, suspicion, greed, fear, and many different kinds of electromagnetic radiations I cannot even sense. I feel like my nervous system has become too relaxed, too trusting, to deal with such confusion. I find myself wanting to withdraw, to recoil, to find a safe place to hide, to evoke prior coping mechanisms like alcohol. The experience of the city is overwhelming for my nature-encoded nervous system. I don't *want* to drive through frustrating traffic; I'd rather not drive at all. I don't want to feel numb, unsafe, indifferent, or unaffected; I want to fully engage with my environment. And most of all, I don't *want* to participate in an oppressive, decaying culture.

My entire educational endeavor can be considered an effort to expose the inherent toxi-cities of the pattern of civilization (city-based culture) and to imagine, define, and design new patterns of human settlement that are a post-civilization phase. For all these reasons, I find it very unsettling to remain in the city. My stay here is surely an interesting, confirming, investigative experience but I will not remain here and exchange electrons any longer than necessary.

Back to the program: In many ways I feel that "Immersion in Whole Systems Design" is a review for me. I have read Capra's *The Web of Life* and it provided valuable advice for filling in my self-designed, systems-based undergraduate degree. I have seen *Mindwalk* and discussed its implications twice before in a classroom setting. I have read von Bertalanffy's *General Systems Theory* and Laszlo's *Systems View of the World*. I have read *The Tao of Physics* and *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* and have entered *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. I have in my library *Sacred Geometry* by Lawlor and *The Power of Limits* by Doczi, and have consulted these resources for a Sacred Geometry study I initiated. I feel well-versed in the whole systems design philosophy of Permaculture. I have written well-received papers "General Systems Theory as a Conceptual Tool for Village Designers" and "A Pattern Language for Ecovillages," both fundamentally systems derived. I have experienced five years of Fairhaven College, sitting in a circle in seminar format with interesting people, discussing possibilities. (The young people at Fairhaven are more passionate and emotional though less discriminately reflective than our class of adults). In summary, I have been integrating the systems view into my thinking, writing, and personal worldview for some time now. That brilliant flash of insight that comes from the shift to holistic thinking has, for me, become familiar.

For all the above reasons, I consider my program at Antioch to be a continuation and logical extension of *work already in process*. I have already been specializing in one subfield of Whole Systems Design (Village Design) and wish to pursue that inquiry to its conclusion. My work could be likened to a growing plant: already established are firm roots in fertile soil; a strong central stem of fundamental principles has been branching

out into associated disciplines. The season at Antioch will see this living potential begin to flower, a pleasing sight to see. The post-Antioch phase will see the flower matured into ripe fruit containing potent seeds that can be sown anew. At Antioch, I am not rediscovering my origin; I am bringing my work-in-progress to bear fruit. The fruit will be meaningful professional work in association with my peers.

As I write this section, I am sitting in my garden at Fairhaven College. Here, more than any place in the world, feels like home. This garden, this particular spot of earth that I have modified in my own image, feels more like 'home' than any of the houses or parks or buses that I have lived in around here, even more than the hamlet of Fairhaven as a whole. That's because it is the *center* of my community of relationships. These relationships are deeply meaningful for me because they provide my life with *context*. Sitting here, I am at once connected to the center of the Earth and with people, places, and situations all around the globe. This is my power point, the fertile soil from which my life's work began to grow and take form. All organic models must be prepared to explicitly demonstrate context, and then cyclic processes of growth. Context is not an arbitrary matter; a growing plant cannot be uprooted and displaced without stunting growth – better to wait until it has borne fruit.

I pulled into the greater Bellingham area earlier this afternoon – I was so exhilarated to be back! I parked my van and went to the Post Office to collect my mail. On the way I ran into Mandy, an extremely alive and intelligent 15 year old. We hugged and shared stories about our common intersections: her Mom, Phil Hawes, and traveling...we were smiling the whole time. Then I went to my favorite used book store and bought twelve new books, and found some real jewels. The people I passed in the store were smiling back as I smiled, or we were smiling together. Then I went to get a burrito at my favorite restaurant. While sitting there eating, a good friend came up to me because he said he saw my van in the parking lot. It was *so* good to see him. We have similar interests and goals and he has already offered to participate in an "Ecovillage Design" course I have proposed to present at Fairhaven College. After re-establishing our connection, he left. Five minutes later, another old friend came to sit at my table – she saw me through the window. She too is a deeply meaningful, symbiotic relationship in my life. We went to school together and have built trust and communion with one another. She hugged me warmly when she first arrived, and upon leaving offered me a place to stay "if I need refuge." I was very happy to hear of her accomplishments: she is establishing a Land Trust on Lummi Island. She is very capable and I intuited that we may work together in the future. Then I went to get a beer. While there, my friend Jeff showed up. I used to flirt with his now-wife, and we are still all friends. I first saw their son Eli as a bulge-in-a-belly and have seen the lad grow up enough to begin talking.

The point is, as soon as I arrived in my 'context,' life instantly responded with spontaneous, meaningful social interactions; I was fully engaged with my environment and that contributed directly to my 'aliveness.' These were seemingly random encounters but they revealed an underlying pattern, a delectable riddle to solve in the

projection-reflection behavior of evolving living systems – and there are hundreds more people I could have connected with in some way. Why just these? This place is my context, the center of my meaningful pattern of relationships. My life's work-in-progress is an organic, emerging property growing out of this meaningful context. I am an organ within the organism I have grown within/into. I want to build an ecovillage, but not just any old ecovillage. From the "Summary and Evaluation" I wrote as the terminus of my undergraduate education, a few lines were quoted at the graduation ceremony: "The community already exists; they just need a place to live. I want to build an ecovillage for them. That is my job."

When I first began this program, I wasn't sure whether it would be better to live in Seattle or Bellingham. I wasn't ready to make a decision until I had experienced living in Seattle directly. As fate would have it, my financial aid was delayed for two-and-a-half week, beyond my control. My 'direct experience' of living in Seattle commenced with living out of my van on urban streets, penniless, and this initial condition has irretrievably influenced my attitude toward this new context. Perhaps the delay of financial aid was a blessing? If it had arrived on time I may have rushed out to rent a dank box somewhere.

Since I've begun this program, I have managed to return to Bellingham twice, and both trips were occasions for unremitting joy. The events of this passing season have prompted a clear understanding of exactly where 'home' is; they have been a lesson in the symbiotic relationship between an evolving living system and its context. I am now more inspired, committed, and determined than ever to enhance the quality, fertility, and sustainability of the patterns of relationship within my specific context; that is, I want to deepen my connection with home.

The Bellingham area will be my home base of operations as I pursue my Master's degree. I will come to Seattle only when absolutely necessary. I will include travel in my education because it is important in my field of study – but I will always return home to the Bellingham area.

I believe it is time to make 'home' even more specific: I believe that it is time, finally, to work on getting that piece of land, a place where my community can spread roots and grow and flourish. I believe I will integrate this work into my degree; after all, there is no distinction for me between work-education-life. These thoughts make me so happy I feel like *smiling*...