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Lost and Found in the Valley

By Emily Grubman



*The following is adapted from a blog entry titled “Letter *to* Lost Valley” posted September 11, 2023 at emilygrubman.substack.com/p/letter-to-lost-valley, on the “Farstruck” section of the author’s “Pretty Random Fiesta” site. It follows up on the author’s previous “Letter from Lost Valley,” posted July 31, 2023 at emilygrubman.substack.com/p/letter-from-lost-valley, which described her first seven weeks at Lost Valley Educational Center in Dexter, Oregon (lostvalley.org). An extract from this latest post also appeared in the review of David James Duncan’s Sun House in COMMUNITIES #201, at gen-us.net/SunHouse.*

As I’ve mentioned before, one of the main reasons I left New York last year was because I felt I had no community. (Of course, I had/have friends there, but I hadn’t felt like I was part of something cohesive since quitting Red Antler at the end of 2018.) But instead of moving closer to anyone I knew, I decided it made more sense to travel alone to brand new places and just assume I’d magically fall in with a like-minded community of awesome people who would change my life.

It was kind of a ridiculous plan—if you can even call it that. But it also worked.

Getting acquainted

I didn’t know what an Intentional Community was before this year. The idea was briefly introduced during my Permaculture Design Course (taken in March 2023 at A Quinta da Lage in Portugal), but I was more interested in gardening and grey water than these “invisible structures.” So when I googled “permaculture Oregon” and ultimately got accepted into Lost

Valley’s internship program, my feeling towards joining its intentional ecovillage was more of a “Sure, why not?”

That sentiment stemmed from knowing I’d only be at Lost Valley for three months. I figured I wouldn’t have enough context to offer meaningful input on any decisions, and that I wouldn’t be around long enough to be affected by them either. I assumed I’d be viewed as a temporary visitor (interloper?) more than a true community member. I felt separate, in service of. I was there to work and learn; if I was lucky, maybe I’d make a few friends.

This was mostly accurate for the first month. I worked my 20 hours/week (and squeezed in my remote work as a naming consultant around that), cooked and ate most meals by myself, attended some meetings as a silent observer, and powered through my social anxiety during potlucks and other gatherings. I enjoyed interacting with the community, but I was also exhausted from constantly being on First Impression Best Behavior every time I left my dorm room. I wasn’t sure how well I fit in among all these hardcore hippies, and I didn’t want to say/do the wrong thing.

This was one of the first times in recent memory where I felt like *I* was too mainstream. Considered the compost-loving, DIY-deodorant fReAk among my friends and family, here at Lost Valley I was suddenly the bald-armed, monogamous, city girl who doesn’t even have Chacos or a breathwork practice! Compared to all these extra-crunchy societal renegades, I was worried I stuck out like a smooth, French-manicured thumb.

But as I gradually got to know more people, I realized that there’s no single or “right” way to hippie and I wasn’t falling

short at all. What makes Lost Valley so special and strong is not that everyone is the same, but that everyone is wildly and weirdly unique. As long as we can all agree to live by a shared vision and values, then our differences are respected and even celebrated, à la the permaculture principles of “use and value diversity” and “integrate rather than segregate.” We all have a role to play, and it seemed my Type-A, horny-for-a-spreadsheet personality could be a boon rather than a liability.

Getting comfortable

On July 13, I texted some pals: “Ok it took a month but I think I’m finally forging friendships.” I had recently been invited to “Jersey”—the abandoned basketball court and only communal space on campus where smoking is permitted. Getting stoned and cracking jokes? This Gemini Rising was in her element. The next day, I joined two other garden gals on a spontaneous trip to a nearby river. We swam and snacked and gossiped and giggled. Slowly but surely, small talk was giving way to real talk and I was getting to know people—and likewise allowing them to get to know me.

Aside from the obvious fact that *it just takes time to get to know people*, a big part of what made me feel comfortable opening up was everyone’s candor, sincerity, and total lack of judgment. (Honestly, nothing seems to phase these folks.) Having grown up accustomed to secrecy, ruthless teasing, and sweeping things under the rug, I’ve had to (and continue to) work really hard to eschew my people-pleasing tendencies and be voluntarily transparent with my thoughts and feelings. So I was constantly gobsmacked to witness my fellow communitarians’ consistent vulnerability and honesty—whether during sociocratic decision-making meetings or simply in response to the quotidian question of “how are you?” For the first time in my life, it appeared everyone around me was always telling the(ir) truth, even if it might be an unpopular opinion. Everyone seemed to share a commitment to curiosity and compassion, and I felt safe and encouraged to open up. No longer fretting over how to be the best, most polite guest, I settled into just being myself.

Getting sappy

I’ve never been anything less than champing-at-the-bit to get my cheeks to San Diego for my family’s annual Labor Day re-

union at the beach. But this year’s countdown to arrival was bittersweet. For the first time ever, I wanted the calendar to slow down as I focused on savoring my final days at Lost Valley. I was just getting into the swing of community living, and I wasn’t ready to say goodbye to my new friends, neighbors, and routines.

Not only did I make some really wonderful friends, but I’m also now convinced that living in community is the *only* way to live. There’s always someone around, and there’s always something going on. And if there isn’t? Well, it’s been easy enough to dust off my community-building, resident-advisor skills and organize my own fun, be it a shared meal or movie night. Of course, there are inherent challenges with community, but I think they’re far outweighed by the many social, economic, and sustainability benefits. I know there have been, and will continue to be, many iterations of the Lost Valley community, but I feel lucky to have coexisted with this summer’s particular assemblage of wonderful weirdos.

Since striking out on this somewhat-exhausting adventure in January, Lost Valley is the first place (and group of people) that I could actually see myself returning to for a good long while—and a big part of that is knowing I’d be welcomed back. To know that I’ll be missed as much as I’ll miss LV makes my heart swell to the size of one of those forgotten zucchinis in the Meadow Garden. If things don’t work out with my European Dream, then Dexter, Oregon it is. (You almost make me hope I *don’t* fall in love with a handsome European who owns a villa by the sea. Almost!)

It makes me wonder: Was the love of a community the love I’ve been seeking all along?

Thank you for everything: the potlucks, the work parties, the movie nights, the Jersey hangs, the carpools, the laughter, the gossip, the candor, the warmth, the lessons, the quacks, the guidance, the meals, the emails, the vegetal abundance, the green thumbs, and so much more. This summer was one of the greatest experiences of my life, and I hope to see you all again soon. 🐦

Emily Grubman is a writer, naming consultant, and permaculturist. You can find links to more of her writing at emilygrubman.com/writing. Her previous article “All Eyes on Us?” appeared in COMMUNITIES #201.



Photos courtesy of Emily Grubman