

THE INTEGRATED EXPERIENCE

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A love of agriculture and community leads Whole Village founding member Jeff Gold to the ecovillage lifestyle

“Don’t worry about me. I’ve got lots of people here offering to help me out,” environmentalist-communitarian Jeff Gold says, reassuring a friend over the phone inquiring about his hernia operation yesterday. Indeed, Jeff lives with 22 other people in Whole Village, an ecovillage intentional community in Caledon, Ontario that he helped found.

I’m sitting with the 57-year-old in his suite, one of many in the 15,000 square foot residence. The kitchenette table is covered with stacks of paper. A brightly-colored psychedelic painting of a Gaia-like woman stares back at me from the wall behind Jeff. When I called to set up this interview, Jeff had never mentioned his operation. He says how he thought it would distract him. Fair enough. But I get the sense that he would jump at every opportunity to keep himself busy. I can tell he loves his work from the number of hats he happily wears. At Whole Village he sits on a few committees, cares for the buildings and equipment by doing whatever electrical, plumbing and carpentry is required, consults the farmers, maintains the website and communicates with the media. In addition to his work at Whole Village he also volunteers with environmental organizations and as a tai chi instructor.

The first 20 years of Jeff’s life were about as typical as you can get: living in suburban Toronto in a middle-class Jewish family with a businessman father, stay-at-home mother and three siblings. He went to medical school at the University of Toronto, but dropped out after six weeks. Desperate for some hands-on experience, he took off in 1969 on a year-long trip to Asia, Africa and Europe. While travelling, his thoughts turned to the environment, coming to the conclusion that agricultural work would be the right way to line up his lifestyle with his beliefs. Despite lacking any prior experience, he decided to start up a farm in Lanark, Ontario with his new wife Jane. With some assistance from sympathetic neighbors, they muddled their way through and established a successful farm. But a few years later, Jeff grew restless from staying in one place. Wanting to travel once again, he sold the farm.

Jeff and his pregnant wife took off with their three young children in 1978 on a road trip that retraced his original journey. They ended up settling in Pakistan’s Hindu Kush tribal areas to work as agricultural consultants for the UN and have their baby. “It was pretty wild,” he says, reminiscing about the adventure. “It’s the kind of place you’d go into the village and guys would ride in on horses with rifles over their shoulders and bandoliers and bullets across their chests.”

Abandoning a promising farm operation and the settled life, with three young children and a fourth on the way, may seem bold, but to Jeff, it all makes sense. Work isn’t his life. To him, life is work. He lives for, what he calls, “the integrated experience,” an ecovillage farming lifestyle that conflates work, play, family and community into one unified whole. “It’s always work, yet, at the same time, never really work—just life. After years of searching for a particular lifestyle, he finally found it when he settled down at Whole Village.

Since it was established only four years ago, Whole Village has been working hard to live up to its ecovillage name by achieving energy sustainability. By consolidating numerous families and individuals into one large building, they designed the community to demand far less energy than if they’d built several smaller buildings. Heat and hot water comes from a geothermal system and they use a photovoltaic system for electricity. They organically farm much of their food, including vegetables, fruit, eggs, chicken feed and honey. They have a strong conservation plan that includes planting 1000 trees a year, preserving the wetlands and serving as stewards of the land.

I join Jeff and about a dozen other Whole Villagers for dinner, a regular occurrence in the community’s shared dining room. A few members had just come in from gathering maple syrup on the property’s 191 acres of land. A

few others volunteer their time to prepare a bountiful buffet of leek-stuffed potatoes, Jerusalem artichokes, beets, eggs, salad, pumpkin pudding and chocolate pie. Most of what's served is organic and comes from the farm.

As an intentional community focused on sustainable living, agriculture is central to their beliefs. They operate a community supported agriculture (CSA) farm as a business, but Whole Villagers' finances are independent. Most who work do so off the property.

Taking a look around, I see a pretty even mix of children, young, middle-aged and retired adults. I meet J.M, who, along with his wife, Julie, compose one of Whole Village's younger families—who, Jeff believes, are the lifeblood of the community for their ability to keep it going throughout their lives and, hopefully, their children's. J.M works as a tiling contractor during the day, but is sure to leave time to paint his spiritual art after work. He's also eager to help out on the farm whenever he can, happy with the variety of work Whole Village offers.

Over dinner I speak with Brenda Dolling, a retired schoolteacher who is keenly working on Whole Village's outreach and education efforts. She tells me about her busy day tomorrow with Trent University and Katimavik groups coming for educational tours, proving what Jeff had told me: Whole Village is not an isolated bunch, but an active contributor to the larger community.

Robert, one of the Kulikauskas' seven children, is buzzing around the room, excitedly snapping pictures of everything in sight with his new camera. After I finish up my meal, he enthusiastically leads me on a tour of the property, showing me their farm dog and the barn where the chickens sleep at night. It also just may be the future home for a herd of shorthorn cows, a major item to be discussed at tonight's Meeting of the Round.

Robert, excited to hear the outcome of the cow discussion, stays up for the beginning of the meeting. We arrive to see Jeff sitting semi-reclined in the spacious common area, one of the first to arrive for the meeting. The rest of the community slowly fills in all the other seats around him. This meeting operates on formal consensus, a decision-making process that seeks mutual agreement by asking everyone's opinion. Jeff takes a background role through most of the meeting, raising his hand to vote on some financial issues raised in previous meetings. Natalie Ford, a guest of Jeff's applying for membership at Whole Village, presents her biography and answers the group's questions to help them assess whether her goals align properly with Whole Village's. She shows keen enthusiasm for the ecovillage lifestyle and receives compliments about the volunteer work she's done. But when a member asks her how she feels about consensus, her enthusiasm sours somewhat. Unhappy seeing personal needs sacrificed for the community, she relates the importance of individual autonomy within the group. One member, obviously disturbed at her anti-consensus viewpoint, asserts that they've been living together and using consensus decision-making for five years. At that point, Natalie attempts damage control by assuring everyone that she believes in consensus while still maintaining the importance of individuality.

Jeff was once in Natalie's position. Discontented with the status quo, he struggled to find his place in the world. A strong individualistic streak brought him to farm living, but he still wasn't satisfied. Though he believes in personal growth—"People are either growing or dying—there's no in between. In order to keep growing you need to be continually challenged."—he believes that the best way to balance his life is by adopting a collectivist lifestyle.

In Whole Village, Jeff's found a community of like-minded individuals to live and work with. Living in an ecovillage gives him the opportunity to assist the larger community more effectively because he's working with a number of committed environmentalists keen on working towards progressive change. Living life as an integrated experience also

means that he's almost always at work. For him that's a pleasure because his work relates to the environment, his passion in life.

by Kiva Bottero