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The Culture of Holistic Centers - An Anthropological Perspective

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Have you taken a workshop at a holistic center? There are many advertised in this magazine, ranging from yoga teacher training to *How to Sing in the Shower*. Have you spent quiet time at a center on a personal retreat or a holiday? Perhaps you've been to Breitenbush Hot Springs here in Oregon or to one of the fourteen centers represented at the Holistic Centers Gathering, held at Breitenbush, April 20-24, 2008?

Even if you haven't visited a holistic center are you curious about what goes on at these places? Do you wonder whether the people in charge "walk their talk"? I did, and that's what led me to begin an anthropological research project on the cultures of holistic centers.

A grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada has allowed me to visit Hollyhock in British Columbia; Mount Madonna, Spirit Rock, Harbin Hot Springs, and Avalon Springs in California; and Kalani in Hawaii. I have been a participant observer at three Holistic Centers Gatherings: at the Haven on Gabriola Island, BC in 2006; at Naropa University in Boulder, Colorado in 2007, and at Breitenbush in 2008. The Gatherings, hosted by a different center each year for more than two decades, offer representatives—usually directors or senior staff—a chance to discuss core values, share concerns, explore potential solutions to problems ranging from reservations software, to staffing, to carbon offsets. They provide an opportunity to experience how the host center operates. At the Breitenbush Gathering this included a tour of the water, heating, and lighting systems that support off-the-grid sustainability.

My curiosity about what makes holistic centers tick arose from my own experiences as a guest. The more I learn about them as an anthropologist, the more the integrity of holistic centers impresses me, as does the deep importance of what they offer in the challenging times we live in.

How exotic are these cultures? How do they organize themselves? What languages do they speak? How do they interact with each other, with their staff, and with their guests? What are their values? These are some of the questions I've asked in studying the "tribes"

[the Record](#) of holistic centers and their annual Gathering.

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Holistic centers are exotic indeed to many of my academic colleagues: foreign to their experience yet attractive to their senses. They say, even to my face, that my project is “woo-woo.” But, to me, the centers have their heart and their origin in mainstream society, and in that sense they are not exotic at all. The centers are part of a global, holistic movement, seeing all beings, the planet, the universal energy as interconnected and interdependent. Holism, the idea that any system is greater than the sum of its parts and that the parts make sense only in terms of the whole, identifies both what these centers do and what they are. What they do is to offer a range of programs that integrate health, spirituality, consciousness, and social/environmental issues. They stimulate the mind, awaken the spirit, and nurture the body.

How centers describe what they are is similarly holistic. Breitenbush advertises itself as “a place to bring life into balance.” It is a worker-owned cooperative with more than thirty years experience in community living. Other centers I’ve studied—including Mount Madonna, Harbin Hot Springs, Kalani, and potentially the new Avalon Springs—exemplify different forms of community following a variety of holistic models.

For the people who run these centers, theirs is no ordinary job. It is a calling, and, especially for the centers with residential communities, a way of life. As an Operations Director of a center put it at this year’s Gathering:

The challenge is to be the best we can be, to carry forward the responsibility that we have to the centers we’re involved in such that they be the best center they can be. So that when people come, that’s what they take away with them: the desire to be the best that they can be.

This can be lonely work as each center tries to stay financially viable and spiritually strong. Centers can feel that their tribe is alone in a world of challenges as they explore ways to stay relevant now that yoga and organic food are mainstream, and gas prices are rising, and the economy is facing recession, and peace is elusive at all levels from the personal to the global. The Gathering provides reassurance that other centers are facing the same issues around staffing, marketing, programming and so on. It allows common solutions to emerge. A website, offers to share information, the possibility of collective purchasing, and the application of open-source approaches to Centers’ issues are some of the collaborations that emerged from this year’s Gathering.

At some centers, living in community provides an opportunity to deepen relationships. At the Gathering everyone has a chance to connect more deeply and to remind themselves that, as one person said, “This is a journey that we have been chosen for. Let’s not be in our heads so much that we forget what we are here for. Let’s remain in our hearts [as we deal with problems we at first approach with our heads] and walk our talk.”

The language of this culture, at the centers and at the Gathering, is non-violent, conscious communication. It is heart-centered. People speak of ‘holding the container’ or ‘chalice’ for the programs at their center and for those who come on personal retreats. A participant at the recent Gathering emphasized to me “the importance of creating a sacred space, a container that could really hold the whole individual or group, for a particular purpose which could be spiritual growth, personal development, so they could be better people in the world.”

At some centers, living in community provides an opportunity to build connections and deepen relationships. At the Gathering everyone has a chance to connect more deeply and to remind themselves that “this is a journey that we have been chosen for.” They try to find the balance between head and heart, between business and community. They try to walk their talk and each walk is distinctive. Each center has a unique mission that is true to its own core values. In the words of a director at this year’s Gathering: “When we express something that comes really deeply from within ourselves, we’re really giving something deeply to the world. When we contrive something because we think there is a market for it, it’s always a struggle and hardly ever successful.”

The language of this culture uses the words ‘love’ and ‘hope,’ and these are central to their core values. They believe, in the words of the singer-songwriter Katie Gray who graced the 2008 Gathering with a concert, that, “We always have the choice to choose fear or to choose love and hope.” Planetary conditions—climate change, inequality, war and other kinds of violence—bring up fear. But people working at holistic centers find that truth-based work calms their fear. To paraphrase one director at this Gathering: When we’re bombarded with how fast we have to go and how much we are supposed to be afraid, we must remind ourselves to counter that, to build positive connections, to be lifeboats in these dark times. Using a different metaphor, a Breitenbush community member suggested the Gathering is a small but key gear in the machine of society that leverages the work of awakening.

This evokes the Great Awakenings of the 1730s and 1820s which empowered individuals to save themselves and American society through spiritual action. A third era of unrest and reform, the cultural politics and intentional communities of the 1960s and 70s, helped shape today’s holistic centers. Now the centers have new and important roles to play in personal, cultural, and environmental transformation. Each center seems to me to be a contemporary version of the revolutionary City on a Hill, a beacon intended to enlighten and emanate positive energy in times of profound social change.

It is a privilege to be the anthropologist invited to sojourn amongst these tribes, to listen closely to their stories, to explore how they organize themselves, to identify what works and what doesn’t, and to try to understand and convey their deeper truths.

Margaret Critchlow earned her Ph.D. in anthropology at McMaster University, in Hamilton, Ontario. She is a Professor in the Department of Anthropology at York University in Toronto. Under her previous name, Margaret Rodman, she is the author of three books on the South Pacific islands of Vanuatu, the co-author of a book on Toronto housing cooperatives, and co-editor of three books on the Pacific, most recently (2007) *House-Girls Remember*, a collaborative project with twenty-one indigenous women on the history and present conditions of female domestic workers in Vanuatu. She can be reached through http://www.arts.yorku.ca/anth/faculty/faculty_index.html

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