In Memoriam

Visionary and Activist: Kathleen Kinkade (1930–2008)

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Kathleen Kinkade (better known as Kat) died on July 3, 2008, at Twin Oaks, the intentional community near Louisa, Virginia, that she founded in 1967 with a small group of people inspired by B. F. Skinner's utopian novel, *Walden Two* (1948). Born December 8, 1930, Kat was not the stereotypical 1960s commune founder. Older than most, divorced, and the mother of a teen-aged daughter, she was drawn to intentional community living not from a desire to experiment with drugs and sex or escape reality but "to make a new and better society" (Kinkade, 1973, p. 1). Five years after the start of the community, she wrote,

We are still after the big dream—a better world, here and now, for as many people as we can manage to support. More, a new kind of human to live in that world: happy, productive, open-minded people who understand that in the long run, human good is a cooperative and not a competitive sort of thing. One man's gain must not, if we are to survive, be another man's loss. (Kinkade, 1973, p. 5)

In her early 30s, Kat was a bored office worker attempting to earn a bachelor's degree at night in order to find a more meaningful career. She was required to read *Walden Two* in a philosophy course by a professor who described it as "sinister" and "dangerous" (Kinkade, 1973, p. 7). In contrast, she saw the novel as "a brilliant flash of light" (p. 7). "I

cannot exaggerate the excitement I felt as I read it," she wrote, adding that "the community it depicted was everything I had ever wanted, everything I had ever believed in, everything I needed to be happy. It was impossible to believe that there was no such place in real life" (p. 7).

Within months, Kat was in touch with other *Walden Two* aficionados, leading to the formation of Walden House in Washington D.C., a short-lived urban commune that she described as "a dismal failure in every way" (Kinkade, 1973, p. 26). Undeterred, she attended a conference at Waldenwoods in Michigan in the summer of 1966 with people from around the country, including behavioral psychologists, who had an interest in forming a *Walden Two* community. This conference served as a meeting place for the group that went on to start Twin Oaks, but Kat was disappointed by the attitudes she encountered at Waldenwoods among the academics, who she felt planned a "psychologist-king role" for themselves (Kinkade, as quoted in Komar, 1983, p. 7). "They lacked the commitment even to consider starting a community with a small group and no money. It was clear they mostly wanted to become famous as the results of their 'experiment' got published. I despised them" (Kinkade, as quoted in Komar, 1983, p. 7).

Unlike the academics, Kat's group "wanted community and we wanted it right then, money or no money, psychologists or no psychologists, planning or no planning" (Kinkade, 1973, p. 26). With the help of a man who had some inherited money and

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“a passion to do something good with it” (p. 25), they purchased a 123-acre tobacco farm near Louisa, Virginia, where they settled in the summer of 1967.

The road was anything but easy, and Kat’s “blunt practicality and executive talent” (Grimes, 2008, p. 20) undoubtedly helped the community weather the lean early years. Kat figured they made about 20 cents per hour on their first crop (tobacco). “Our ignorance was boundless,” she wrote about their early farming efforts (Kinkade, 1973, p. 63). They were populated by “lots of idealists and philosophy majors” (p. 196), but few had practical skills. Eventually they landed a hammock contract with Pier 1 Imports that provided stable income and moved the community toward a middle-class standard of living. But, as Kat wrote in 1984, “we are rich in ways we have chosen” (Kinkade, 1984, p. 18), such as outdoor space, flexible time and work hours, fresh food, security for sickness and old age, and the support of other members.

In *A Walden Two Experiment* (1973), Kat’s account of the first 5 years of the community, she suggested that *Walden Two* originally served as both inspiration and blueprint:

In general our approach to systems has been to take first the ones proposed in *Walden Two* and stick to them as long as they work well. As we find fault with them, we then make changes to correct the faults and make the systems fit our situation better. Skinner’s book has been of immense service to us in giving us a point of general agreement for a starting place. Because we have *Walden Two*, we do not need a leader or teacher. ... The debt we owe to Dr. Skinner is enormous, but there is nothing sacred about the institutions we derived from his book. All of our systems are subject to change, and most of them have changed even over the few years that we have been a community (pp. 56–57).

From a behaviorist perspective, change would be expected, in that Skinner was not advocating his brand of community living in *Walden Two*, but, rather, an experimental ap-

proach to finding cultural practices that work (see Altus & Morris, 2004). As Skinner himself urged, “Regard no practice as immutable. Change and be ready to change again. Accept no eternal verity. Experiment” (Skinner, 1979, p. 346).

Experiment they did. In the early years of Twin Oaks, community members created a labor-credit system to promote equitable distributions of the work. Following Skinner’s suggestion in *Walden Two*, they initially awarded more credits to undesirable work than desirable work to increase the chances that all work would be completed. When this did not produce the results they wanted, they experimented with different methods of awarding labor credits until they arrived at a system that met the community’s needs and values (see Kinkade, 1973, 1994). They tried out an air crib (see Skinner, 1945), building their own model after returning a poorly constructed commercial one (Kinkade, 1973). Members wore golf counters and homemade beaded jewelry to track behaviors they wanted to change, graphing the results for motivation. Many of these experiments were ineffective and short lived, but the community did learn to manage contingencies in a way that was beneficial to the group (Kinkade, 1994). For example, labor credits and vacation time were used to reward behaviors that were valued by the community, and members who didn’t keep up with the work requirement were in jeopardy of being kicked out.

With an influx of hippies and “new age” enthusiasts in the early 1970s, interest in *Walden Two* dwindled. According to Kat, behaviorism was “explicitly repudiated” (Kuhlmann, 2005, p. 101). The sense of the community was, in Kat’s words, that “behaviorism is one thing that a few people believe in but most of us don’t. We’re an eclectic group, we believe in all kinds

of things, and it's been that way ever since" (p. 101).

In an interview 24 years after the start of Twin Oaks, Kat said that she still considered herself a behaviorist "in the big-picture sense," and expressed some disappointment that her beliefs were not more widely shared in the community (personal communication, March 10, 1991). According to Kat, the reason behaviorism didn't last at Twin Oaks was because "people at Twin Oaks carry the very same baggage that the average American carries—they balk at the idea of being manipulated and controlled." She noted that "the behaviorism used by most people doesn't empower an individual or teach self-help or self-sufficiency. Instead, it sets up unfortunate power relationships of dominance and dependency." She commented that Skinner's impact at Twin Oaks had not been through behaviorism per se but through his astute insights about what would work, such as the planner-manager system of government. "The blueprints were good," she noted, although she described some of his ideas as "naïve" and hard to implement, such as group child care and the very short work week described in *Walden Two*. "Yes, we did get women into the work force, but we also have to complete all the jobs they've done for free—the child care, the laundry, and the cooking" (personal communication, March 10, 1991).

Kat left Twin Oaks for several periods. In 1973, frustrated that Twin Oaks had closed its doors to new members, she left to help start another community, East Wind, in the Missouri Ozarks "which would be like Twin Oaks in every way except one: We would never close our doors!" (Kinkade, 1994, p. 87). Later she spent 4 years in Boston as a computer programmer. But Twin Oaks always managed to draw her home, and she eventually realized that "I had made no mistake in

choosing community as my vocation" (Kinkade, 1994, p. 90). Around the age of 70, Kat moved to a house in nearby Mineral where she lived independently for several years. When her health failed, she returned to Twin Oaks, and a team of community members provided care day and night until her death (see O'Laughlin, 2008).

Twin Oaks does not mention its behaviorist past on its current Web site homepage, but instead focuses on the community's commitment since its beginning in 1967 to the "values of cooperation, sharing, nonviolence, equality, and ecology" (Twin Oaks Community, 2009). With a current membership of about 85 adults and 15 children, Twin Oaks has continued as a secular, income-sharing community without a central leader for 42 years, an uncommon feat in the annals of communal living (see Oved, 1988). As Laird Schaub, the executive secretary of the Fellowship for Intentional Community noted,

[Twin Oaks is] a shining example of a long-lived secular community that has successfully survived a complete turnover of its founding leadership (Kat being the last to go), and a noted counter-example to the trend among income-sharing groups to de-collectivize as they mature (as posited by historian Donald Pitzer in his theory of Developmental Communalism). (personal communication, February 10, 2009; see Pitzer, 1997)

The other two communities that Kinkade helped to start—East Wind (35 years old; currently with about 50 adults and 5 children) and Acorn (16 years old; currently with about 9 adults)—also continue as secular, income-sharing communities that work together with Twin Oaks in the Federation of Egalitarian Communities "to create a lifestyle based on equality, cooperation, and harmony with the earth" (*Federation of Egalitarian Communities*, n.d.).

In a Web site created to share memories of Kat (<http://katkinkade.ning.com/forum>), an early Twin

Oaks member posted the following remembrance:

Sitting in the farm house porch swing in the summer of '67, Kat was insisting that we listen to and discuss the Twin Oaks Constitution she was writing. Reluctantly Scott and I listened, but really we just wanted to figure out how we were going to build the dorm that was to become Harmony. After all, we thought, who needs a constitution, everyone knows what Walden II is about. How right she was. Every vision needs a visionary. And Kat was that and more.

Indeed, Kat's vision, and her many years of labor, resulted in a community that is widely looked to as a model for secular, egalitarian intentional communities and attracts hundreds of visitors a year for its tours, conferences, and gatherings (V. Renwick, personal communication, February 8, 2009). Twin Oaks has achieved fame beyond the Intentional Communities movement, evidenced by coverage in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Psychology Today*, and *Time* magazine, among others (see Twin Oaks Community, 2007, for a full listing). As Laird Schaub commented,

In her lifetime, Kat's community developed into a beacon of inspiration for an entire generation of community wannabes. Today there are communities scattered all across the landscape whose founders came together at Twin Oaks or were otherwise inspired by [Twin Oak's] story and example. (personal communication, February 11, 2009)

Kat wrote that "we will not be living up to our responsibilities unless and until a good part of the population can make community living (Walden Two style) one of its choices" Kinkade, 1973, p. 226). The

many communities inspired by Twin Oaks may be spreading social change more slowly than Kat would have preferred, but they are spreading it nonetheless, and her fundamental role in that process is immeasurable.

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