

CIRCULAR FERTILITY CYCLES • GREENING COHOUSING

COMMUNITIES

Life in Cooperative Culture

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ECOLOGICAL CULTURE



Simple Living Close to Nature

Alienated from the Ecovillage

Does Individual Action Matter?

Humanure Composting Made Easy

Growing Veganic Soils with Local Materials



COMMUNITIES

ECOLOGICAL CULTURE

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ON THE COVER

Students from our EcoVillage Ithaca’s Eco-Gap program work with Ithaca College students in West Haven Farm’s greenhouse, Fall 2018. Photo by Liz Walker.

Foundational Language for Ecological Culture

By Jen Bayer and Hilary Hug



Magicians with surplus food they gathered at a farmers' market for local social service agency partners.



Jen (third from right) and twin sister Hilary (far right) celebrate their 21st birthday mid-COVID-19 with a Magicians-only dinner at the beach.

Photos courtesy of Jen Bayer and Hilary Hug

Words matter. From early life we learn to tie words to what we think, feel, and perceive. With this process we lay a foundation for, and build a fence around, much else that we are and do.

In George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, totalitarians contrived Newspeak to prevent their subjects from thinking and articulating subversive ideas. Today those who reap narrow personal gain from business-as-usual manipulate language to perpetuate the status quo. When they appropriate "green" and "sustainable" to promote "green consumerism" and "sustainable luxury," they drain away capacity for progressive thought and action.

For four decades nearly 200 people—one to two dozen at a time—have lived together as Magic, a residential service learning community founded to research and teach human ecology. We've hailed from dozens of US states and from 40 countries on five continents. We've been newborn to 80-something; millionaire to indigent; a panoply of sexual identities, races, and religions; and trained in everything from accounting to zoology.

We've taught ecological culture in schools, universities, and community settings in the United States and abroad. We've made it a foundation for public services ranging from hatha yoga instruction to mediation, neighborhood organizing to tree planting, advocating science-based resource policy to publishing *The Art and Practice of Loving*.

As we've made common cause with each other, and with tens of thousands of people from backgrounds even more varied than our own, we've become ever more aware that ecological culture is a product of diverse perspectives, skills, and aspirations. We're enthusiastic about making it a big tent where all of humankind can find a home, a realization of *e pluribus unum*: from many, one.

To that end we ground firmly in *ecology* what we mean and understand by ecological culture. We've discovered that when practitioners and proponents find common ground at this foundational level, we enjoy strength of unity as we protect ecological culture from ever-increasing efforts to dilute, corrupt, and co-opt it.

In 1866, just seven years after Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, in which he outlined biological evolution by natural selection, German naturalist Ernst Haeckel coined the word *oekologie* to denote "scientific study of interactions between life and environment." Haeckel made clear that for any of us, environment includes other people, other life, abiotic nature, and everything we shape from nature. Haeckel's ecol-

ogy and Darwin's evolution are bedrock for ecological culture.

To show this we at Magic construct a very simple framework for human ecology with two words and a double-headed arrow signifying interaction. We add a key, a lock, and an open lock with the key inserted to capture the essence of Darwinian evolutionary success: organisms maintaining a match with the environment to survive and reproduce. (See Figure 1.)

As with any other species, so with ours: population size and information, and environmental resources and hazards are key factors in adaptation. Of these four factors, information is pre-eminent. We rely on it to reproduce, to tap resource, and to avoid hazard. (See Figure 1.)

Humans carry both genetic and experiential information. While we require generations to adapt genetically, we can adapt more quickly by learning from experience. Moreover, when we learn from each other, we can leverage individual experience to potentially even further enhance adaptivity.

In *The Evolution of Culture in Animals*, evolutionary biologist John Tyler Bonner characterizes learning from each other implicitly and explicitly, deliberately and accidentally as *culture*. With this definition he brings culture nearer shared meanings, "nurture" or "assist in growing," common

to “cultivate,” “agriculture,” and other words with the same root.

Bonner shines light on the overarching importance of culture to human adaptation. Contemporary changes to social and physical environments are without precedent in scale and speed. To sustain favorable interactions we alter information commensurately. Culture is essential to meet this challenge.

However, culture is a two-edged sword. Just as we may learn from others’ mistakes, so may we learn their mistakes. Rapid cultural propagation of misinformation can impose a crushing burden. A person passing a defective gene degrades information of her or his descendants. Someone transmitting maladaptive culture can—as compellingly illustrated with (anti)social media—almost instantaneously poison the information of millions.

Humans realize the positive potential of culture and limit its hazards only to the extent that we use ecology to draw and share a map—our story—that is faithful to the territory—reality—so that we can more fully and accurately predict consequences of choosing one or another path. (See Figure 2.)

Haeckel included the word “scientific” in his definition of ecology. Revolutionary physicist Albert Einstein once remarked, “The whole of science is nothing more than a refinement of everyday thinking.” A large part of what he meant by “everyday thinking” is two questions, “What do I want?” and “How can I get it?” and our responses to them, from which we generate myriad daily behaviors.

Because fulfilling want or taking action to fulfill it necessarily involves the *future*, however near or distant, ideas about what we want and how to get it are *predictions*. Over our lifetimes we learn rules for predicting more accurately. Those rules are the essence of science, both its methods and everything we’ve learned with them.

Physicist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn introduced the phrase “paradigm shift” to denote how, in the face of new findings, we replace familiar models of reality—frameworks for our stories. Over the century and a half since Haeckel invented “*oikologie*,” people have been demonstrating how ecology can be a new paradigm to redress increasingly evident fundamental flaws in

widespread economic, political, religious, and philosophical stories.

We who’ve founded and sustained intentional communities have in many cases done so to create with our lives new stories of family, livelihood, society, and humanity’s place in nature. In doing so we’ve evolved diverse aspects of culture: food, shelter, furnishings, dress, grooming, governance, religion, education, language, art, music, recreation, transportation, communication, and more. Consciously or subconsciously many of us have been relying upon, generating, and communicating by example ecological culture as we describe it here: learning from each other grounded in scientific study of interactions between life and environment.

While the perils of our era are many, and humans will almost certainly continue to destroy what we value, much remains to be protected so that we and those who follow may enjoy greater opportunity to live and die well. By embracing, developing, and disseminating culture rooted firmly in the science of ecology, we contribute to this end. 🐦

Jen Bayer has grown up at Magic, and loves being outdoors enjoying and caring for nature. She and her twin sister Hilary initiated Silicon Valley Barcode of Life (svbol.org) in 2018 because they consider biodiversity essential to human well-being and they perceive current and projected losses an existential threat. Jen’s other interests include music, visual art, writing, and speaking publicly to advocate science-based policy. She’s previously published two articles in COMMUNITIES, and one in Pacific Horticulture, and letters to the editor in the Palo Alto Weekly and Stanford magazine.

Hilary Hug is a life coach, fitness instructor, and mediator. She first came to Magic in 1988, promptly departed for a few years of volunteer work in Indonesia, returned and has remained. Hilary leads workshops on life-planning and community-building, teaches yoga and valuescience, and oversees Magic’s residential service learning community. She’s a mother to twin girls born in 1999 and to a boy born in 2004, and she enjoys outdoor activities, especially in natural settings, music, and good times with friends. Hilary earned a B.S. in Human Biology from Stanford University.

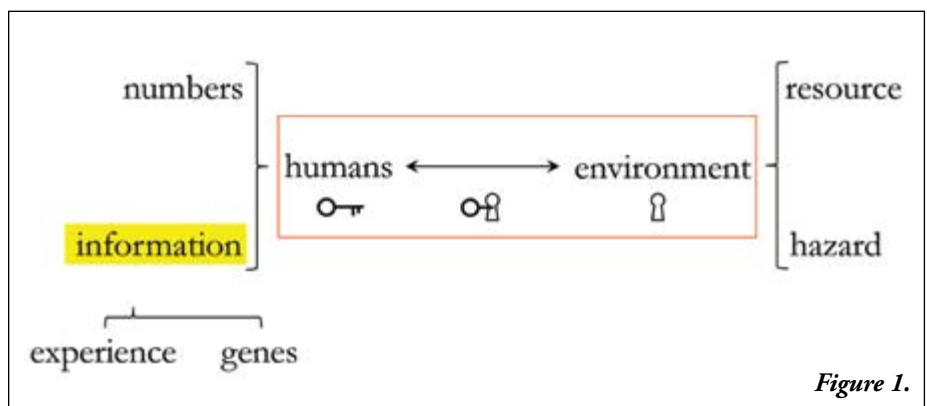


Figure 1.

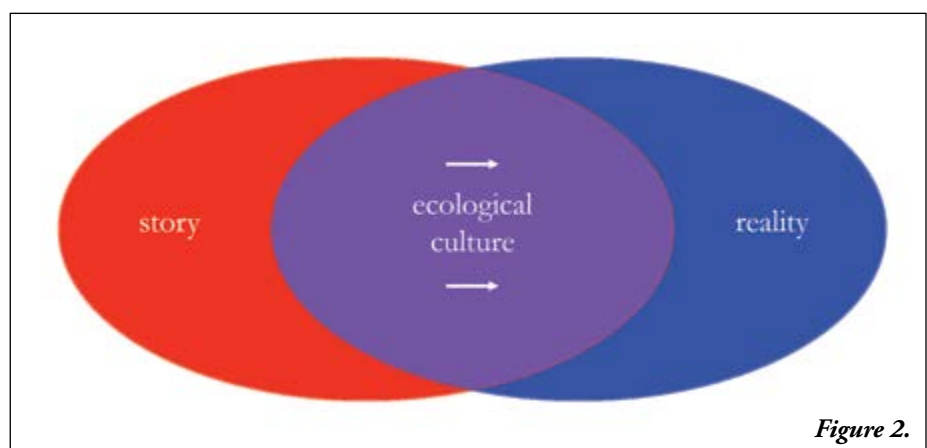


Figure 2.