

Our Cultural Agreements at Common Ground Ecovillage

APPROVED BY GENERAL CIRCLE, October 20, 2024

Preamble

Why we need the Cultural Agreements: As we consolidate ourselves as a community, we have created a clearer set of expectations and practices for realizing a harmonious and sustainable community. Our goal in this document is to describe the breadth of the culture we envision and are beginning to practice. Following the principle that “it is easier to go somewhere if you know where you are going”, we describe our underlying values and the ways in which we attempt to embody them to help ourselves achieve our goals. It is also important that members know what they are and what to expect. Having a document can help us remember our aspirations.

Connection to other important documents: We also want to relate the Cultural Agreements to the Principles & Intentions (P&Is). The Cultural Agreements build upon the Principles & Intentions (P&Is), reflecting many of them (especially #s1-7, 10-20, 22-24, 26-30, 32–35), but also provide a well-articulated cultural container for both current and future P&Is.

How the Cultural Agreements were developed: The following articulations were developed over a number of years and have received contributions from numerous members, consented by General Circle in —, and shared in Community on the Ground and other settings in Summer of 2024. We hope these agreements will be evaluated yearly, as we learn and grow. We also hope the practical examples will continue to expand as we develop new ways of being in justice and harmony with all.

Briefest summary: Our key values are nonviolent communication, mutual care, and deep respect for the land that sustains us. These agreements are designed to nurture our relationships with each other and the larger vision of “right relations” with neighbors near and far, and the earth, ensuring that our actions are aligned with our principles of compassion and cooperation. The five sections in these agreements set our ideals and our pathways through which we aim to create a resilient and thriving community that honors both human and ecological well-being. We acknowledge these are aspirations and we will all sometimes (often?) fail to achieve them; we will just keep trying and learning and trying again as we move forward in a shared journey together.

The Community as its own Entity

We recognize the role of the community which needs to be understood and respected as an entity of its own. In our decision-making, impact on the community itself is considered in addition to all the individual persons and their interconnectedness..What

this looks like will continue to grow and change as we ourselves grow toward permacultural and regenerative principles.

Practical Examples:

- Asking ourselves and each other “how does this behavior or decision affect the community as a whole?”
- Cleaning up after ourselves or our group, leaving a space (physical or emotional) better than we found it.

The Land and their Communities

We acknowledge our responsibilities to listen, respect, and interact with this planet and, to the best of our ability, respond to both human and more-than-human needs on a continual basis. We recognize the reciprocal relationships we have with the plants, animals, fungi, and all the soil, air, and water beings that create a vital and valued ecosystem. [[See Land Acknowledgement Here](#)]. We also recognize our incomplete understanding of the land and all that dwells within/on/over and the challenge of interpreting what is being communicated. We are mindful of projecting our own feelings and preferences onto others, both people and non-human beings. It is important that we make decisions with humility as the land is vastly older and vaster than we can probably comprehend, and how it moves and changes is not on our time scales or in our terms.

Our ability to respond to the needs of our surroundings will continually grow and change as we work toward better understanding of what restores balance. Our community strives to be sustained by food we grow or obtain locally and to return to the land what we can to the best of our ability, limiting our participation in oppressive, harmful food systems.¹ We also strive to give back to the land by nourishing the ecosystems that flourish there.

Practical Examples:

- Asking ourselves and each other “how does this behavior or decision affect the land, and the soil, water, and air as well as living beings?”
- Spending time on and with the land both individually or with others
- Growing food in ecologically supportive ways that increase the vitality of the land, build resilience, nurture diverse relationships, and expand bio-capacity.
- Eating seasonally and celebrating what is available
- Avoiding waste of the gifts of the land
- Enjoying & engaging with the land in ways that enrich self-awareness and/or bring joy and resiliency.

¹ Harmful food systems may include use of harmful pesticides, exploitation of farmworkers (i.e. poor working conditions, below a living wage), exploitation of animals, and/or excessive fossil fuels used to package and/or transport food a long distance (i.e., across state/country lines).

The Wider Net of Communities

We recognize the importance of the communities in which CGEV is embedded, including our neighborhood region, country, and world beyond. We work to create reciprocal relationships and recognize the responsibility to share and learn in a non-hierarchical way from this wider net.

We aim to continually learn from and with others as we work toward economic, social, racial, gender, environmental and ecological justice. Given the dynamic and changing nature of our community as well as the dynamic and changing nature of this wider net of communities, we simply state our value to coexist and grow together in harmony, balance, and unity. We recognize that this requires careful attention to co-creating trust and respecting protective boundaries with sensitivity to each community's unique identity & needs.

Practical Examples:

- Finding out from the farm team about the next time they will be delivering free veggies to our neighbors and joining in.
- Participating in Efland/Mebane community events/celebrations
- Inviting neighbors to CGEV events
- Learning from our neighbors what they care about and becoming involved with local community issues

Care and Consideration for Each Other within our Community

Care and consideration of others is a vital feature of community and is conveyed in many ways. Recognising, respecting, and celebrating ways in which we are similar and different are key elements. We show these through the approach we take with each other and our ways of communicating with each other.

a. The Approach We Take with Each Other

As a community of individuals we do expect to be together and enjoy each other – being a part of CGEV involves sharing work and exploring ways to be with each other. At the same time, we recognize the importance of balancing our own and others' needs for solitude. We imbue respect into our actions with each other as well as the world around us. We assume goodwill and exercise benevolence. We attempt to listen with empathy and honesty.

We try to exercise the "Platinum Rule" of doing unto others as they would have done to them when this is possible. We are diverse human beings. In our interactions with each other we strive to ask and learn what does and does not work for us all.

When interactions don't work for us, we remember to trust each others' intentions and practice warm curiosity about others' goals. We also acknowledge impact, and the importance of speaking the truth about the impact -- both when something works and when it does not work for us. In our own steps, we aim to walk lightly with low impact on others.

Because feedback is such a central component of our decision-making and community processes, constructive feedback and self-reflection are common events. Another way we demonstrate our care for each other is by asking for consent before offering observations or comments or by asking for help in receiving constructive feedback.

We do our best to approach each other with genuine curiosity of what others' experiences are like. We work toward recognizing that conflict can provide opportunities to learn about ourselves and each other. When conflicts occur, we strive to meet relationship tensions as a form of relationship nourishment and an opportunity to strengthen rather than divide. We offer multiple ways in which conflict in the community can work to be resolved, including offering helpers and more structural processes. We agree to address conflicts between ourselves and other members as soon as is practical. When members are unable to resolve conflicts independently, we agree to a facilitated conflict resolution process using one of Common Ground's approved frameworks².

We aim for accountability and strive to do what we say we will do. At the same time, some goals are aspirational so we need to clarify what we will surely do versus what we hope to do. This helps us be realistic with ourselves and others about what we can and cannot accomplish, and hopefully reduces the burden for each individual.

We know we will not always achieve our goals. We will make mistakes, perhaps many of them! We deeply value the space to make mistakes and be held by the community as we learn. In such situations grace and generosity of spirit are key responses as well as sincere attempts to rectify any problems and prevent further harm. It is absolutely essential that individuals can try new ways, without judgment, so that we risk and try new things. Willingness to be transparent and vulnerable with each other is supported by creating an atmosphere of safety and acceptance. We are letting go of defensive self-protection and trusting each other to do the same. We will be changed by each other as we unfold ourselves and this community.

We also want to always celebrate and savor our successes! As we experiment in living together, play and playfulness infuse our work with joy. Humor and lightheartedness provide cushion to our failures. But beyond celebrating successes (and occasionally failures) we want to celebrate in general: the sun, the rain, the joy

² [5-Step Relationship and/or Conflict Process](#) , [Conflict Negotiation in Community](#)
[Conflict Resolution Cheat Sheet](#)

of greeting each other. Every step in our envisioning and creating our ecovillage can bring celebration. Also the beauties of the day and each other are celebratory-worthy!

We also aim to let go of perfectionism and seek instead to emphasize the concept of “Good Enough for Now, Safe Enough to Try” (GENSET) which allows us to more readily take reasonable risks. We know we can evaluate our processes and outcomes, learn from them, and change what does not work..

b. Communication With Each Other

At CGEV, we listen. At CGEV, we also speak our truths (but only our own truths in that we don't speak for others without their consent or without naming them). Our community incorporates sociocracy to provide a governance structure that engages everyone in decision-making in a respectful, clear, and participatory process. We commit to hearing everyone's voice, making decisions together and improving processes, based on principles of consent, transparency, and accountability.

In our day-to-day expression, we value how we communicate with each other, working toward expression that is nonviolent, compassionate, and is both honest and effective so that our thoughts can be heard and understood. We may often have different understandings of the same events; our thoughts about them can be conveyed in many ways without loss of honesty or transparency. We acknowledge cultural differences in expression and listen for the underlying meaning being expressed.

One aspect of learning to connect with each other is taking responsibility for translating others' styles instead of requiring others to do that work for us. We look for the truths in what we hear, the needs, how or whether needs are being met, and what we can offer or potentially change in our behavior. Our curiosity about what others think, feel, and experience helps us become open to being changed. By cooperating in this way we practice regulating our own emotions and automatic negative thoughts and gain insight about ourselves.

Exploring how human culture and history have influenced our beliefs and behaviors (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism) is an ongoing process to which we are committed. Interaction can help us to become aware of the ways in which dominant culture, our schooling and families have influenced us, as well as discover our various forms of privilege and lack of privilege. As we investigate these, we celebrate our resiliencies and challenge any sense of unworthiness.

We recognize that what we expect from others, spoken or unspoken, affects each other's well being. Recognizing and expressing our expectations are key communication skills that help us to understand what we ourselves and others are thinking. Power, perceived power, lack of power, and perceived lack of power are experiences that we bring from our pasts into our community whether we intend to or

not; our relations with power and lack of it may need to be discussed and explored often.

c. Appropriate Technology Use

There are practical matters in communication as well. While we acknowledge the huge capacities for communication and information sharing that digital technology now affords us, we balance that with understanding it provides new challenges and limitations, and that our members have different affinities for engaging with technology and the associated information overload. While we may rely on tools like email or other digital platforms for practical tasks, we are mindful of the impact that constant connectivity can have on our well-being and our relationships with each other and the natural world. Thus, we prioritize intentional use of technology, ensuring it serves our collective goals without compromising our health, presence, or connection to the land. We encourage periods of disconnection from screens, fostering opportunities for deeper engagement with our surroundings, our community, and ourselves. By consciously balancing our use of technology, we strive to cultivate a culture where personal and communal well-being takes precedence over digital convenience.

Practical Examples:

- Increasing vigilance toward our biases of sexism, racism, ageism, homophobia, ableism.
- Taking “the temperature” in meetings (have a temperature taker in meetings) and calling for Feelings Rounds or Clearing the Air Rounds as needed
- Inviting conversations or facilitated “relationship nourishment” meetings with each other when some tensions might seem to be building so as to listen and learn.
- Becoming aware of our power with and our power over, and the power others perceive in us
- Learning to identify when unconscious expectations are contributing to disagreements or negative self-judgments.
- Being conscious of the harm that diagnosing, stereotyping, demanding, stonewalling, and making accusations has on our relationships.
- Recognizing how the habit of judging as right or wrong, is part of the destructive nature of competitive culture.
- Looking for our role when there are interpersonal tensions.
- Asking clarifying questions
- Forgiving each other our humanity, and making amends ourselves when needed.
- Actively seeking opportunities to create closeness and trust with each other through work, play, creativity and just being.
- Regularly acknowledging our gratitude for each other.

- Letting go of the false ideal of perfection.
- Practice “Good Enough for Now, Safe Enough to Try” (GENSET)!
- Using nonviolent, compassionate communication styles
- Asking ourselves “Is what I am saying helpful, timely and respectful?”
- Asking whether what we are about to say is gossip.
- Listening for others’ experiences and truths.
- Speaking our own truths, but in ways that can be heard by others.
- Reflecting back what we think we have heard. In this way we can receive confirmation or revision in our understanding
- Speaking up and being brave when we have a concern or curiosity about a decision being made rather than being silent.
- Avoiding the temptation to speak for others without their consent and without naming them
- Thinking about our email use: is this communication best in email (e.g., information sharing, short requests) or in person (e.g., ideas to be explored interactively, longer conversations), etc. Read and think about: [The Email Charter](#)

Care and Consideration for Ourselves

Self-care is a vital part of enjoying life and being able to live our principles and intentions. We agree to be conscious of the impact our mental states, physical health, and emotional development have on our neighbors and friends. We each choose how to honor the gift of life and take responsibility for the flavor it lends our community. This includes understanding that human needs for safety, nourishment, rest & recreation, love, creativity, autonomy, spirituality, finding meaning in life, and to be valued may be widely shared, but in different amounts and will be achieved in our own individual ways.

One important aspect of being capable of personal accountability is to take the time to connect with what is going on for ourselves emotionally. We can ask ourselves “What am I truly needing here?” We can honor the wisdom of our bodies that help us to “feel” our way to learning what we need.

We are individually responsible for developing the capacity to communicate our feelings and needs without causing harm or neglecting relationships, including our relationship with ourselves. We practice making specific, actionable requests as a way to care for ourselves and provide clarity.

We know that self-care is challenging to maintain. Accepting the non-linear aspects of self-growth, and the ways in which we sometimes miss our desired pathways is just another part of life. We do not need to apologize to others or ourselves, or to ask forgiveness of others; we just try again as needed. For some of us, however, apologizing is some powerful healing medicine!

Practical Examples:

- Being aware of how triggers may affect our interpretations.
- Finding balance in life in a daily and weekly schedule
- Creating space for self-care, both routines, habits, and spontaneous love!
- Being aware that the upset experiences of others may be “in them” and listening without feeling attacked, or less than, or “wrong” in some way
- Being aware that most problems are indeed solvable
- Being willing to learn new ways, new things
- Sharing our ‘love languages’, “care and feeding manuals” etc with others. Our community is so willing to support each other when we do know what works for each other.

Concluding Thoughts

In writing our cultural agreements, we notice the ways in which opposites seem to be inherently true in our community. While we deeply value community and recognize the community as an entity in its own right, we recognize the tensions between the needs of the individuals who comprise the community with the needs of the community as a whole. While we strive to listen to others and trust their truths, we also value being willing to speak our own truths. In the same way, we recognize the simultaneous rights of the land, including the soil and creatures within or upon it, and balancing the needs of those others with the humans who care and listen. All are important. Our community is rarely an “either/or” thinking community, preferring “both/and” types of valuing and thinking, and setting solutions that work for all into play.