**What Life Is Like When You’re Born on a Commune**

by

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My parents spent the 1970s on communes: first, a shared house in Boulder; after that, a “self-realization fellowship” in Paonia, Colorado; then the Spring Hollow farm in Tennessee, with a dozen other couples. They were out to save the world, or at least themselves. Peace, love, and understanding.

After several successful years, my family moved, with Spring Hollow, to the Farm. With a population of about 1,500 at its peak, The Farm was the largest commune in the U.S.. Founded by Stephen Gaskin in 1971, it still hosts a premiere midwifery school run by Stephen’s wife, Ina May Gaskin, whose book *Spiritual Midwifery* remains a standard for those seeking an alternative to hospital births.

Of my sisters, two of us were born on The Farm. My eldest sister has a snowflake tattooed on the back of her neck—she was born in a blizzard in Colorado. My other sister was born in a tent on The Farm (no tattoo). I’ve said that I should get a trailer inked on the back of my neck, because that’s where I was born—in a mobile home my dad brought from Nashville. As with most Farm babies, a midwife trained by Ina May guided me into this world.

Stephen, who died this past July at age 79, fought in the Korean War, and came back to teach in San Francisco, first as an English professor at San Francisco State College, and then as a counterculture guru leading open-discussion meetings, what became known as Monday Night Class. During these classes, which met in churches and parks, Gaskin presided over his disciples from a meditation cushion, a stage, or a tree stump to explore spirituality and the purpose-driven life, much of which was determined by “vibes”: he preached that you could feel when you were telling the truth and when you were not, based on your own energy or the energy of the people around you. He was inspired by Buddhism and Christianity (along with the effects of marijuana), and his classes regularly swelled to 1,000 students, with extended Q&As: “No, it’s not a duality to say there is truth and then there are lies,” Gaskin once said in response to someone from the audience, “’cause truth and lies are the ends of a continuum, and the continuum is one continuum. Dig?”

Much of the movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was built on Ram Dass’s call to *Be Here Now*. Gaskin subscribed to this philosophy, as did my parents. “Even if it is Armageddon, I still haven’t got time to pay attention to something besides here and now,” Gaskin wrote in *Monday Night Class*. But my question for Gaskin and for every other guru out there is this: Whose here and now is that?

My dad started reading *Monday Night Class* during a troubled period in my parents’ marriage; he was introduced to Gaskin’s work by a friend in another shared house in Michigan and was stunned by the reality of free will—one of Gaskin’s many messages. The future wasn’t written.

Perhaps it was being rewritten. Without that initial spark, I wonder if we would we have ended up on The Farm. By the time my family moved there in 1978, two years before I was born, my dad was an experienced mason, and he brought in much needed revenue by running a masonry crew that worked off The Farm. My mom worked in the clinic, hoping to be a midwife.

Life on the inside had its charms and quirks. A Farm store operated like community-supported agriculture; I remember each house getting a box of cooking oil, Ajax, a bar of soap, margarine, salt, and seasonal vegetables, except most couldn’t supplement these with trips to a grocery store. Noodles and peanut butter were forbidden treasures for us, things my dad might buy with his weekly allowance to feed his masonry crew, since anyone who worked off The Farm had additional, necessary privileges.

While we were growing up, there was no refrigeration, but there were telephones and a laundromat. To get in line, you placed a call first thing in the morning so you could wash clothes for your entire house, which might hold a single family or 50 people. “It was a lot like calling in to win a prize at a radio station,” my mom told me, laughing. ““You are caller number four!’” Within minutes, all 15 spots would be full.

While men worked in the fields, or off The Farm to earn money, women had weekly or biweekly “house days.” One or two women would look after the kids in their home, make meals and do the laundry if they could. Then they would spend the other days of the week working in the community, outside the home. “I got to have a varied life,” my mom has said. “That was one of the things you missed when you moved away. But it was the only thing you missed.” That and friends, who had all but become family.

The Farm was not a farm in name only, or it wasn’t meant to be. The farming crew planted staples like soybeans, corn, and sorghum, among other crops. But the harvest couldn’t support the whole community, and kids went hungry, my sisters included. Two months after I was born, on July 11, 1980, state police showed up to bust the commune for growing marijuana, when in fact the city kids didn’t know how to identify marijuana. What had looked like pot from their helicopter was in fact ragweed, flourishing in row after row. That miscalculation became an annual celebration known as Ragweed Day.

Somewhere around that time, residents started demanding a leadership council (Gaskin had been the sole leader up to that point), and my dad was elected, along with 15 or so others.

Once on the council, my dad could see how Farm-wide decisions were made—far less democratically than one would like, which is to say not democratically at all. People had wanted a council so that Gaskin would share the burden of leadership, but the initial change in leadership was purely cosmetic. Our family jokes that Dad was the Republican on The Farm, i.e. a fiscal conservative who wanted to get things done. Sadly, the council’s dealings were not substantive. “It was deeply discouraging to me,” my dad has said. “I felt like the cards were stacked against change.”

When you join a commune, everything is yours. When you leave, nothing is. Before my second birthday, we left with nothing. There was no breaking point, no one incident anyone could point to. But my parents were not impressed with the quality of life, and they wanted better for their kids. So my parents, two sisters, and I hitched a ride to Michigan to stay with my uncle. Even though my dad had handed over every paycheck, The Farm forwarded our medical bills—I’d once been rushed to an E.R. after a peanut was lodged in my one-year-old throat. My dad gave me that peanut in a heart-shaped locket on my 16th birthday, calling it the “most expensive jewelry” he would ever give anyone. “I had worked like a dog for The Farm and the basic agreement was that we were all in it together,” he’s told me. “It reminded me that something had been lost.”

Sometimes I wonder if my dad feels the weight of a failed dream, even if The Farm lives on as an “intentional community.” “We were so capable, we had so much potential,” he told me. Everyone who joined was young, smart, and healthy, so why couldn’t they create something that thrived? My sisters barely learned to read from The Farm’s school; we lived in poverty, and the idea of community offered a greater sense of security than was actually delivered.

I can count the number of times I’ve seen my dad cry on two hands, but more than once The Farm—the gulf between what it was and what it could have been—was the reason. “By spreading the risk and spreading the reward, all lives could be improved in innumerable ways,” he’s said. They were going to answer questions to seemingly intractable problems, such as poverty, childcare, and healthcare. But he believes they never did.

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I wonder if Gaskin ever had second thoughts about the way things were handled on the farm, but I doubt it. He says in *Monday Night Class*, “ . . . you don’t need to worry about anything suddenly going wrong without you knowing about it, because you really know what’s going on, and you about [*sic*] know what you got coming.” Gaskin seemed impervious to criticism, from *Monday Night Class* and beyond. He spoke about the importance of “truth,” but it was his truth that reigned supreme; the cult of personality made him believe he was the expert on all things, from how to be one with God, to how to operate the backhoe that dug The Farm’s first swimming hole.

Are all utopias truly dystopias? Are elements of a dream also the seeds of its destruction: hubris, the overwhelming belief that *this has never been done before*, an utter lack of checks and balances? Before 1983, when The Farm essentially disbanded, and the population fell to its current 200, becoming an intentional community—far more autonomous than a commune, where everyone pays dues, lives in their own homes, drives their own cars, makes their own money—Gaskin could do no wrong in the eyes of his followers.

While I am proud of my parents for having lived an alternative lifestyle—and I am—they started over at 30 with three children, 10 dollars, scant professional experience, and no college degrees. Their hopes for another world were lofty and beautiful, but those hopes came with risks, and the risks failed.

The legacy of The Farm reaches far beyond the guru who built it: the thousands who lived there, were born there, its visitors, its neighbors, the relatives, and the communities that received those who left, the midwives and mothers who followed Ina May, and anyone whose read a Farm book or watched a Farm documentary. I am one of many.

I grew up playing Greenpeace’s board game Save the Whales, singing sad songs about air pollution, eating tofu, and dreaming big dreams. Some of those dreams were realized: I studied ecology in the Amazon, Mexico, and Alaska; I was a broadcast journalist for an anarchist radio station in Texas; I taught yoga in London; I worked at the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland; now I live in New York and call myself a writer. But I can’t help but wonder how our lives could have been different if The Farm had been different.