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Making Magic

Ecological Community in an Urban Neighborhood

by Daniel Bartsch, Robin Bayer, Hilary Hug,
David Schrom, and Joan Schwan

A HANDFUL OF TWENTY-SOMETHINGS with dreams of a back-to-the-land ecological community rented a post office box in Palo Alto, California in 1972. We called ourselves Magic.

Like many of our peers in that era, we envisioned carving a little niche of sanity into what we considered an increasingly insane society. We wanted sustained, loving friendships. We wanted to earn livelihood by addressing fundamental human concerns. We wanted to discover how we might more fully apply ecology to live and die well.

Over the past 30 years we've realized or surpassed many of our early aspirations. Though we initially planned to gather friends, save money, buy country land, and move onto it ASAP, we've—to our amazement—stayed in the same urban Palo Alto neighborhood.

Our aim here is to share some of our experiences of the past three decades. We want to give you concrete examples of what's possible in your own neighborhood, and encourage you to go ahead and create community, right where you are.

Magic Today, an Overview

Five Magicians who have lived and worked together closely for periods ranging from 10 to more than 20 years, plus two infants, occupy two small adjacent homes. We typically share these with three to five interns whose tenures may vary from days to years.

Four resident Magicians generate livelihood by operating a nonprofit public service organization called Magic, where they demonstrate ways to apply ecology to further common good. Former residents and other long-term partners, most of whom live within easy walking or bicy-

cling distance, also play key roles in this venture, and thousands of people who have supported the nonprofit organization form an extended public service community.

Residence, Then and Now

Some of us began living together in 1972. We jointly purchased a house in 1976. Between two and 12 of us have resided at Magic for nearly 25 years. During the 1990s, we've consistently been six or more.

At first we shared a home primarily to conserve resources and to enjoy the company of others similarly concerned about personal health, social justice, and environmental quality. Within a few years we realized much of what we wanted to remedy in the world around us was a mirror of our own beings, and we began to look inward more often.

Living and working in close quarters, we reveal a great deal. As we grow more appreciative of others' love and intelligence, we talk and listen more openly. With practice, we're becoming more adept at seeing self and others more accurately, and at assisting each other in doing so. Most of us now view this as a principal benefit of living as we do.

Consensual Livelihood

We incorporated the nonprofit Magic in 1979, and since then have served more than 20,000 people directly, and many more indirectly. From its inception we've used ecology, broadly defined, as a foundation and framework. In our programs we interweave four themes—health, cooperation, stewardship, and values inquiry. We perceive these to be fundamental issues of near-universal concern, and we aim to further common interest by addressing them.

Daniel Bartsch, Robin Bayer, Hilary Hug, David Schrom, and Joan Schwan have lived and worked at Magic for periods rang-

ing from 10 to more than 25 years.

Nonresident associates who offer programs through Magic may draw personal compensation equal to the median wage in the locale where they reside. Magic residents who volunteer full-time for the nonprofit organization receive support similar to that offered by the US Peace Corps. We're fed and sheltered; our incidental expenses are paid. We combine together medical care with a mixture of individual and institutional resources.

Ecological Service Community

As we live, laugh, labor, learn, and love together, we're shaping a dynamic service community with fluid boundaries. This informal partnership includes residents, associates, volunteers, donors, clients, and others who interact in Magic's name to demonstrate how people may learn to more consistently apply ecology to further common good.

Hundreds of people visit Magic for classes, workshops, mentoring, mediation, meetings, and parties each year. On a typical day, five to 10 visitors join us for lunch or supper. Magic residents and associates also deliver services off-site to school, government, business, nonprofit, and individual clients.

With this combination of unusually intimate and extensive public interaction we afford diverse opportunities to give to, receive from, and better understand Magic.

How "We" Do I Want to Be?

Magicians and those whom we serve benefit from synergies among residential, livelihood, and service communities. At the same time, residents especially walk a fine line to match engagement in each community to our individual tastes.

Some have felt too exposed in a home where guests or other program participants are ever present. Others have pursued livelihood outside Magic and felt less connected to those who serve full-time through the nonprofit.

Similarly, if we put too much emphasis upon readily measurable public service outcomes—youths mentored, disputes mediated, trees planted, or classes taught—we become strangers at home. If we dwell excessively upon relationships among residents, we sacrifice opportunities to interact with, and contribute to, others.

We see repeatedly how any of us can shift patterns of personal participation and send ripples of disturbance through others' lives. And we're also discovering that as we become



Dana Knobel

Magicians after a weekly community meeting, August 1999.

more practiced, we're better able to anticipate disequilibria, and restore balance before they become too large.

"Radical" Means "Root"

Some who become interested in Magic press for details about a specific project, or about how we structure and operate our residential community or nonprofit organization. Though we're pleased to talk about programs and policies, we think we risk misleading if we respond to inquiries about these without also mentioning our philosophy and practices.

We perceive the essence of Magic to be a commitment to practice ecology. When we said this in the early '70s, we meant the application of a set of principles such as recycling and conservation. Now we mean more consistently employing in everyday living the same method by which principles like recycling and conservation were discovered. This method includes holding ideas open to question, and using our senses and other faculties to test them. By questioning and testing our ideas, we discover which we can use to successfully (i.e., with better than random results) predict outcomes, and which will be a basis for disappointment.

Using this method, we're re-examining the underpinnings for our lives, our responses to the questions, "What do I want?" and "How can I get what I want?" By such inquiry we're probing toward the roots of our being—instructions coded in genes or training we received early in life about survival, reproduction, and meaning. We're shedding illusion, and learning to more often get what we want and want what we've got.



Neighbors brought together by Magic enjoy the fruits of cooperation.

What's the Deal?

Magicians concur that community entails evolving contracts, however informal. We're continuously probing these "deals," to make them more explicit and to assess, "Is this what I want to ask and offer?"

We lack sufficient resources to realize everyone's wildest dreams, so we've made trade-offs. We've foregone what we consider unnecessary, even burdensome, material trappings so that we may enjoy greater freedom.

In 1989, Daniel became suddenly ill and was hospitalized for 10 days. During that period, someone from Magic was with him around the clock, and members of the extended Magic service community beat a path to his door. A hospital administrator who volunteers with us reported that nurses on Daniel's unit were puzzled. "What's the deal?" they wanted to know. "Who's this moneyless, jobless, childless, unmarried, thirty-something that so many people care about so much?"

Some call us ascetics. We think we're hedonists. As we live more toward common good—with each other, and with the world beyond—we're enjoying life more. By demonstrating underacknowledged connections between pleasure and more consistent attention to common interests, we're prompting others to rethink and restructure their social contracts.

Begin Where You Are

Thirty years ago, Magicians thought of Palo Alto as a way station, a place to collect people and resources in anticipation of relocating to a more rural setting. Part of our strategy was to begin immediately to develop additional skills for creating and sustaining cooperative community

in our next location.

One sunny June Saturday in 1976, as we wrapped up a satisfying morning of gardening and gathered for lunch in the dining room of our newly purchased home, a driver careened his car around the corner and a passenger fired a bottle into the curb. As pieces of broken glass ricocheted onto our laboriously double-dug and freshly planted raised beds, Michael asked, "Is this why we moved here?"

Fifteen years, 7,000 hours of Magician life, thousands of hours of life from hundreds of other people, dozens of public meetings, more than 100 hours of public testimony, two lawsuits, one city-wide ballot measure, and who knows how many hundreds of thousands of dollars of city staff salaries later, we'd converted six through streets to cul-de-sacs. Daily

vehicle entries and exits to our neighborhood had dropped from 13,000 to 3,000. Residents knew each other better and appreciated each other more. Magicians had evolved vision and selves to take giant strides toward ecological community right where we were.

Find Opportunity in Threat

In 1979, we received an ominous-looking registered letter from the Palo Alto City Attorney. Yep, we'd violated the law—by planting trees! He ordered us to remove the spindly saplings, which we'd put in a barren space between sidewalk and street outside our home, and he threatened enforcement proceedings if we failed to comply.

In the 20 years since, we've spearheaded two mayor-appointed tree task forces, successfully lobbied for major revision of local, state, and national government tree policies, and spurred the creation of tree advocacy organizations in Palo Alto and more than a dozen other Bay Area cities and towns. We've organized more than 10,000 residents to plant and maintain nearly 30,000 trees along streets, in parks, on open-space lands, on school grounds, and in residential and commercial landscapes. We've written and distributed software enabling people to better foresee consequences of different municipal tree management policies, published in the *Journal of Forestry*, presented papers at national and international conferences, been featured on network television, and taught many thousands of people about the needs and benefits of trees.

How did we do it? In a nutshell, through an ecological approach to community. With the sum of all the one-on-one relationships among Magicians and others with whom we've interacted toward the achievements listed above,

we've created a community of tree advocates. Again and again we've asked, "Who else cares or might care about trees?" "What common ground can we establish with them?" "How can we together further our shared goals?"

Almost everyone we've encountered wants the same things. We're all to some extent mistaken about how to get them. Once people take an ecological approach, admitting to uncertainty, observing and reasoning and imagining together, we're much better able to surrender prejudice and misconception, find common goals, and reach agreement about how to move toward them. We have yet to find a better way to build community.

Listen to Others

In the early years of Magic's street redesign and tree programs, long-term residents around us frequently lamented the neighborhood's status as a forgotten corner of the city. Sympathetic elected officials advised us to gain political clout by creating a formal association. Though we were still planning to leave town in short order and had little desire to take on this task, we heeded what those around us were saying.

In the summer of 1980, Magicians organized a picnic attended by more than 100 residents to launch the Evergreen Park Neighborhood Association (EPNA). For a decade plus we shouldered a lion's share of responsibility, periodically sustaining the association when others flagged.

Since the early 1990s, young families have flooded into Evergreen Park. From their ranks Hilary has recruited and trained a new generation of EPNA leaders. Now others publish the newsletter, organize the annual picnic, and actively pursue issues ranging from school quality, to park maintenance, to emergency preparedness. A community rebirth is under way.

Through EPNA we've drawn neighbors together and given government officials reason to take us seriously. We know hundreds of neighbors by name, and Magicians are honored and respected as "people who made the neighborhood better for everyone."

The rewards of our leading role in EPNA extend far beyond neighborhood affairs. Elected officials—some of whom now occupy county, state, and even national office—and city staff we've met in our capacity as EPNA leaders have joined us in making Magic by facilitating permit processes for expansions and renovations, and by assisting with service projects.

Remember to Dance

Anarchist Emma Goldman is reported to have told some of her more somber colleagues, "If I can't dance, you can have your revolution!" Every Saturday evening 10 or 20

of us honor Emma with a couple hours of dancing and music-making, followed by a potluck supper. These events afford regular opportunities for participants in the extended Magic community to play together.

When Magicians make music and dance we're especially present, and especially grateful. Those of us who've lived and worked closely for many years evidence in our celebrating the richness of these shared pasts. Guests join us in exploring how to be more caring, genuine, and reassuring in such settings.



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Stay Open

In February of 1992, we'd just stood up from a Sunday residents' meeting when the phone rang. A former client was calling from one of his neighbors' homes. In the yard outside, more than 100 people had gathered to protest a street closure on the line between their neighborhood and an adjoining town. An angry contingent of several dozen people were threatening to march across the border and vandalize property. The caller won-

dered if a Magician might come directly and explain how we'd used street closures to improve life in our area.

David hopped on a bike. Twenty minutes later he was standing before an agitated crowd. After he described the Evergreen Park experience, some listeners requested ongoing assistance. Eventually, with the endorsement of all parties, the legislators in the two local governments whose constituents were affected contracted Magic to conduct a public education program.

We soon heard ourselves being called mediators, a word with which we were only vaguely familiar, even though mediation turned out to be how we'd routinely resolved conflicts at Magic from day one. With generous guidance from professionals, training sponsored by a local foundation, and experience gained in two decades of living and working cooperatively, we were able to contribute to a resolution supported by the residents of 80 percent of the approximately 1,000 directly affected households. After reading extensive newspaper coverage of the conflict and its outcome, prospective clients were soon ringing our phone off the hook.

Since then we've mediated hundreds of disputes, and taught conflict resolution skills to couples, families, employee groups, and school children. We've generated substantial income for Magic, won a national award, earned a new identity, and drawn diverse new participants into the Magic service community.

Stand for Common Good

By publicly standing for broad interests of humankind, and backing words with deeds, Magicians provide a rally-



Jennifer Brown

Robin discusses development of the Palo Alto Comprehensive Plan over tea at Magic with a fellow mayoral task force member.

ing point for other thoughtful, good-hearted individuals. We've discovered in our locale a large population of such folks, hungering for partners in a carefully considered approach to public service.

One way we stand is by challenging fundamental ideas long and widely supported by the powerful. During 1993-96 Palo Alto General Plan revisions, Robin served on a mayor-appointed advisory committee. The sole voice advocating strict limits to building and paving, she drew dozens of people to city hall to testify, broadened the public discourse, and prodded the consciences of those—including quite a few of her fellow committee members—who privately conceded that they shared her views but were unwilling to risk standing with her publicly. Individuals who respected our stand during the general plan review process have since supported Magic in other ways, or taken bolder stands in other land use controversies.

Ben Franklin wrote, "The best sermon is a good example." As Magicians learn to better align word and action, others are inspired to stand with us. We hike or walk wherever we go. Even Daniel manages by attaching a "handycycle" to his wheelchair. One day a fellow cyclist pulled up beside Joan and said, "After seeing you arrive on your bike to give that talk to our Rotary, I started commuting by bike. I'm in better shape than I've been since I played college baseball. Our family has saved more than \$5,000 by selling our second car."

Integrate

Since the mid-1980s, we've engaged in youth mentoring.

Initially we worked through court referral programs or other agencies. In 1989 we began Magic Mentors. Using volunteer mentors, we've provided services for a fee to affluent families, and without charge to those with less money. Often we'll mentor someone continuously from middle school through high school.

The nominal objective of the mentoring relationship is usually improved academic performance, but our overarching purpose is to model an ecological approach and to motivate youths to test it. This strategy has paid handsome returns. Mentees have turned failure to success at school, at home, at work, and in other forums. Some have developed talents for writing, music, or sports. Others have found a cause and worked diligently for it. Many have evidenced a newfound love of learning and sense of self-determination.

Through Magic Mentors we transfer wealth from those with surplus to those with little. We provide youths an integrated learning opportunity from a role model only a few years their senior. We assist them in adapting to the environments—school, work, family, larger society—in which they are embedded. And we elicit support for other Magic activities from those able and wanting to provide it. The program might "succeed" without our being attentive to one or several of these outcomes, but we make it much stronger by integrating as we do, and all of them contribute to the evolution of the Magic communities.

Organic Means More Than "Pesticide-Free"

Magic is organic. We grow toward opportunity. David broke a foot in the early 1970s. Previously a dedicated runner, and suddenly unable to run or even to bicycle vigorously, he learned to swim. In the process, he gained insights about how adults learn, and about how to swim farther, faster, with less strain.

Years later, Corinne was offering "lifestyle tune-ups" to people who wanted guidance in change. In 1980 one of her clients, a physician, introduced David to a cardiologist colleague who had injured a shoulder swimming. David suggested stroke technique adjustments. The pain disappeared. With the cardiologist's sponsorship, Magic initiated a swim program for Stanford University faculty and staff.

Over the next few years, we taught several hundred Stanford affiliates. Two of them, a planner and a grounds manager, became interested in a study of native California oaks on campus lands that Erica, a Magic resident intern, was performing. In 1985, they retained Magic to implement an oak regeneration program which continues as we write.

Other swim students included urban planning and civil engineering faculty. They provided expert testimony and research guidance for Magic's neighborhood street redesign and land planning projects. Still others were psychologists, psychiatrists, and anthropologists. They've counseled and advised us as we've explored our individual

personalities and group dynamics.

Now, after Magic has been located for decades in the same neighborhood, and has established a reputation for excellence in diverse programs, such fortuitous connections are common. We're routinely presented with more opportunities to grow and develop than we can comfortably accept.

To make the best of these, we aim to remain unencumbered by rigid ideas about who we will be or what we will do in the future. We perceive that the less we insist upon, the freer we are to adapt. By taking an ecological—inherently a questioning—approach, we continuously transform Magic and ourselves.

Too Good to Be True?

All these satisfying tales of success and achievement are only part of our story. We have another side, one in which we've heaped disappointments high.

Within Magic we've been deceitful, rash, indecisive, insensitive, ill-humored, angry, reckless, narrow-minded, thoughtless, lazy, incompetent, fearful, and more. We've worked ineffectively, lived half-heartedly, and felt crummy. At one point in the late 1980s, we abandoned shared vision for individual, and dwindled in just a few months from eight residents to two.

We've sometimes been at odds with the world beyond Magic as well. We've made poor investments, had our property vandalized, been investigated by agencies ranging from the local building department to the US Postal Service, and endured anonymous threatening calls in the middle of the night, obscenities shouted at us on the streets, and malicious rumors.

We've been denied access to facilities, had courses and speaking engagements canceled, seen elected officials manipulate public hearings to limit our testimony, and been stonewalled by government employees. We've lost thousands of trees to drought, rodents, and vandals, mediated disputes without visible positive effect, and watched people we mentored go to jail or even kill themselves.

So yes, we've stumbled, and we've fallen. We have come of age in an era of alienation. We've come together ill-practiced in the arts of community. Like many who stood for common good before us, we've been opposed by those who fear loss of privilege. Like many others who innovate, we've been resisted by those who benefit from adherence to current ways. We're a learning community. So long as we keep learning, failure is impossible. We can only quit or persist.

Yes, We Can!

How many times have you exclaimed or heard someone else protest, "Somebody ought to do something about that," and then go on to explain, "but I'm too ... [tired, busy, powerless, ill-informed ...]"? We've made Magic in



By a Painter

The next generation of Magicians learns to care for trees.

large part by seizing these opportunities. Sure, we care about big issues—human numbers, environmental quality, peace, justice, and sound information by which to address all of these. We show that we care by our everyday actions in Palo Alto. Six billion people living day-to-day have arrived at this moment and together we are all, as we write and you read, shaping the next.

Disability and Ability: A Community Perspective

by Daniel Bartsch

I'm 48. I feel chronic pain. On a good day I walk maybe a hundred steps. Some days I venture out of bed for only an hour or so. Usually I sit in a wheelchair. Most people consider me disabled.

Each of us is a mix of disability and ability. Though I may be less able than many to independently satisfy material desires, I'm proving more able than many to empathize with others when they feel hardship, and to feel content myself.

I live and volunteer with Magic, a residential community, working partnership, and nonprofit organization (see article in the first section). Because Magicians aim for material simplicity and loving consciousness, I'm more valuable here than I've been in prior homes and workplaces.

For me, learning to see self and others more accurately is among the most difficult and rewarding aspects of life. I've been pleased with how much I can contribute to, and benefit from, this process at Magic.

For example, I'm hypersensitive to cold and drafts. Occasionally I still wait too long to ask for consideration, and then feel agitated when I do. Increasingly though, I remind people promptly and calmly, and they respond graciously. I'm also learning to use others' carelessness as a stimulus to be more considerate. When I concentrate on modeling the thoughtfulness I'm asking, I hurt less, others feel reassured, and all of us become more loving.

A few years ago I began growing carob and locust trees from seed. Though doing this "on my own time," and nominally "just for fun," I secretly wanted to develop it into a new Magic project. Soon I was importuning others for assistance, and cutting corners in fulfilling commitments to prepare meals, host guests, and mentor younger Magicians. I wanted to believe that I was able to initiate and establish "my own" project independently, but as others questioned and I listened to my own explanations, I realized that I was relying heavily on others and subverting our common agenda, so I wound down the venture.

Of course, in a healthful community environment each person strikes a beneficial balance between accepting others' views and advocating for her or his own. What we're learning at Magic, however, is that more often than we previously imagined we see each other more accurately than we see ourselves. We now think of stubborn refusal to acknowledge this pattern as one of the most common, crippling, and destructive "disabilities," and one of the least admitted.

Despite my own continuing—albeit waning—resistance, I've benefitted enormously from others' honest, loving assessments. I'm far more confident, articulate, poised, relaxed, knowledgeable, content—even healthier in some ways—than I was when I arrived at Magic 20 years ago. And I see how others have benefitted from my presence by becoming calmer, more loving, more peaceful, more grateful, and generally happier. I look backward with satisfaction and forward with enthusiasm.

Whatever your abilities and disabilities, there are opportunities for you in community. May you enjoy searching for and creating them!



The author, 1999.