

Watson year summary
By Tim Richards
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My Watson year has been an animating experience for me. My project proposal was theoretically and intellectually comprehensive, but it was not three-dimensional, not alive. The lived experience of my year fleshed out for me what holistically sustainable individual and community life is really about, gave me experiences of how it tastes, smells, what it looks like, what it feels like. I'm enlivened by what I experienced.

The Watson let me explore the idealism of communities while concurrently exploring my own idealism. Some of what I found was disappointing or dysfunctional, but in comparison to the problems of mainstream society, many of these alternatives were still preferable despite their flaws and quirks. Most of the individuals and communities I encountered were trying to do the best they could at this point in time while striving to do better as they move forward, which is all anyone can ever do.

How are the experiments faring? I visited about a dozen different ecovillages and intentional communities, depending on how you count/define them, and found that none has achieved what I would define as holistic sustainability. However, collectively they contain much learning and experience to contribute to the actual picture of what this would look like, with each community having its strength in one or some combination of the component parts of holistic sustainability: ecological, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual/psychological sustainability.

One piece of learning that became clear to me along the way is: just as it is difficult for a community to assemble all the aspects of holistic sustainability into a cohesive whole, so too is this difficult for an individual. Why hold communities to such high standards if I personally wasn't meeting the criteria either? When viewed through this lens, it was much harder to be dismissive of the efforts (as the trained critical lens of my education often encouraged me to do) and easier to be appreciative of the accomplishments and strides in which they had succeeded.

A big realization for me was just how unbalanced of a human being I am. I learned that the human being is at least four-dimensional: intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual. My overly intellectual education and activism prior to my year had led me away from a passionate and enjoyable life, or only conceptually pointed to this type of life. During my year, I realized how flat my life had become, the mental problems I incurred by solely living in my mind during college, what was lacking in my previous life relationships, etc. Before my year, sustainability activism for me was all about material sustainability, and I had carried this bias into my year. Moreover, I was too serious in my activism (and life), eschewed enjoyment (there's no time for that, we have a world to save!), and didn't often engage in human connections for their own sake, but rather for activist utility.

At a certain point, I realized my year was more about community than sustainability, though most of the communities had the goal and purpose of sustainability. I also discovered the degree to which sustainability and community cannot exist without one another. I was shown how I needed to alter the path of my sustainability activism, how it was ironically unsustainable, not as compelling or fulfilling as it could be.

Whereas I thought I would be getting hands-on lessons in practical solutions for sustainability, I ended up getting an education in the parts of living a more connected life in which I was even weaker: community, being social, living with others, sharing, and coming into contact with the emotional and spiritual parts of life rather than the intellectual and material ones on which I had been focusing. Thrust into the mushier but perhaps more profound lessons about the messiness of being human on planet Earth, I was transformed into a more well-rounded, fully healthy human being.

For example, I was challenged by the New Age, heart-centered approach to being. This conflict was latent in me since my October visit to the Findhorn spiritual community. Many people there commented on the coexistence of my strong intellectual orientation and my more sensitive emotional side. Some said I embodied a conflict between these spheres, while others said I struck a good balance between the two.

Observing my own reaction to my immersion in Findhorn and its culture, I realized I was not directly immersed in my experience and environment, but critically detached from both. What was it that was causing me to hold the people and place at arm's length? For one thing, it was my skeptical philosophical training. I also think I seek balance. I noticed that in more spiritual places, I became intellectual, critical, and skeptical; in more practical places, I tended towards the sublime, abstract, and mysterious.

My intellectual activist friend Blaine made an interesting comment about how the New Age way of being takes practice; otherwise, you just fall back into old patterns of cognition and perception. He meant this as a criticism of that mode of being, that it somehow needs inculcation rather than being normal or natural.

When he said this, it occurred to me that the critical liberal arts lens inculcated by our institutions is also a way of being that requires practice. We constantly enact and perform this on a daily basis, which structures the way we not only see but also be in the world. Why should we privilege our orientation towards reality more than the New Age one just because it is familiar to us and is our most comfortable tool of world comprehension and creation?

This internal conflict was best put on display for me outside of myself with my experience at the very end of the year at the FuturePerfect sustainable living festival in Sweden. The event, organized by very driven, highly intellectual, fast-paced multitasking workaholics was held in Angsbacka, one of the largest New Age spiritual retreat centers in Northern Europe.

The cultural clash was evident: each day, while the activists wanted to push forward and do things, the Angsbacka crew wanted to take time for meditation and open-hearted sharing. Angsbacka folks were more laid back and had a casual approach to work, which drove the activists mad. I found this “conflict” to be quite amusing and illustrative of my own internal conflicts.

The activist organizer of the festival best summarized this on the last day in summary remarks to the audience: “we need to reconcile a movement that is too internally focused with one that is too externally focused.” We need to balance the head/mind and heart/spirit within each human being as well as within society at large. Each orientation needs the other; they are not in conflict, and I contain both within me harmoniously.

Being vs. doing is another key distinction gleaned from my year. In India, one of the assigned community tasks was the dreamer, someone who would walk around the community and ponder what was missing or what could be better in the community while everyone else engaged in the daily tasks of running the place. Without this time for zooming out and visioning, a community (or individual, or family, or society) could quickly become stale, uncreative, visionless, stuck. Perhaps the Watson allows a visionary year for budding innovators to think about how society might be different, while the rest of society continues its tired patterns of education and careerism. I have gained quite a bit of insight while being paid to be the dreamer for a year.

It’s a shame that our production and progress-oriented society requires even the activists working to change that society to think that they must be doing things all the time. I had been very caught up in this need to act constantly, keeping in mind all the things environmentalists are worried about. In these communities, there may not be a difference between saving and savoring the world – their different way of being IS activism. Doing less and consuming less are some of the most radical countercultural activities that can be done in the context of our society, both spiritually and materially speaking.

Another of the key learnings from my year was thinking in terms of networks, relationships, and the social. During the FuturePerfect festival, I realized that community was less about working to confront the daunting tasks we collectively face as quickly and efficiently as possible than it was about building and enjoying relationships in the process of so doing. Community-oriented approaches to sustainability flesh out the African proverb “if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.”

At the returning fellows conference, someone said that what endures years later is the connections that have been made. Already, this seems to be true to me. Thinking about the people I met, how they made me feel and how I made them feel, and all the wonderful sharing that happened between us both then, now, and as we move forward through time gives me an overwhelming feeling of goodness and gratitude. Thinking about all the people and projects I know and can interconnect is a great feeling – I could spend weeks just networking people and writing emails to everyone I met.

After the conference, I was depressed my first week back home for various reasons, then I kept talking to receiving support from friends I now have all over the world. I feel nourished just thinking about this broad network of friendship and support being there for me whenever I need it, and for all the people who I can be there for when they are in need. This web of support is central to what community is and does.

My definition of community began to expand during my travels. Staying on a farm in Tasmania, with a family in Barcelona for Christmas, a tourist guesthouse in Auroville, all suggested that any gathering of people in a given place at a given time could be considered to be a community. I started to see the potential for community everywhere and tried to build it with everyone I encountered by assuming closeness and shared needs.

However, I also learned, especially upon leaving the container of intentional community culture, that community is a mode of being and/or skill that we moderns have forgotten how to embody/do. Society is structured either to the individual or nuclear family units, with needs being met through commercial transactions.

Even basic needs for survival are left to money – obtaining food, shelter, healthcare. Other needs are confined solely to a romantic partnership – the need for closeness, intimacy, touch. It's no wonder that there is so much social discord and disease, given that we have a society not designed around the fulfillment of human needs, but rather around the production and consumption of material goods. Community is about living life around the meeting of human needs together. Community is about sharing life together, its joys and challenges and sorrows.

I realized that the study of my travels concerned not only modern attempts at communal ecological living, but also human lifestyles through the ages. It was an inquiry into all human life strategies at all times. A study of historical events and circumstances is necessary for radical critiques of contemporary realities. I know I am going to have to study a lot more history to know the specifics, but we are one of the first societies to rely so heavily on money for life. We are not the first civilization in danger of collapse from overconsumption. Running out of resources alone won't be the problem: a convergence of economic, ecological, and social crises will challenge us dramatically.

However, at the FuturePerfect festival, I heard one man speaking about what gets him up in the morning. He said it was the question “How do we take this potential disaster and turn it into the greatest thing that ever happened to us as a species?” We are co-authors, co-creators of what happens next, at least on our human end. From the end of nature, we may not be able decide just what happens next, but we decide responses. As another speaker put it, the question is not how do we change the world, but rather how do we respond in the right way at the right moment to the changes that are already taking place. As Milton Friedman aptly said, “a crisis is a terrible thing to waste.”

We have plenty of crises on our hands that can establish a vibrant and loving way of living together on this planet. I experienced firsthand the way in which crisis can bring people together in a loving way rather than incite mayhem. While I was in Christchurch,

we were hit with two significant Earthquakes in one day – a 5.5 followed by a 6.6. This was June 13, following strong earthquakes both in September and February that killed over 180 people and destroyed the central business district of downtown Christchurch.

One may think that people would be shattered and hopeless, possibly even that there would be looting, etc. True, many people left Christchurch after the February Earthquakes, but those who stayed learned the meaning of community as a methodology for meeting needs. People banded together and helped one another meet any unmet needs that arose, from food and shelter to psychological support. The normal social barriers were broken down and people bonded over the shared tragic experience of the quakes along with the newfound difficulty of living in a geologically unstable region. The responses to the disasters in Japan and Norway also suggest that love rather than fear can predominate in disaster response and bring people together to endure difficult events.

This is all to say that it usually takes various types of breakdowns for human learning – illnesses, breakups, deaths, disasters, wars, etc. I experienced this in my own life and the lives of others during my travel year. Pain and failure seem to be inevitable parts of the evolutionary and developmental processes, from the personal to the species level. The lesson that community offers is that we are stronger together and can grow and accomplish more when we combine forces.

At the returning fellows conference, someone mentioned that the purpose of the Watson is to learn how you can make changes in the world, rather than to work on changing it. I found this to be an apt summary of many of my own experiences. I experienced several different takes on what life can be, both within the community context and as a traveler. Rather than necessarily working to advocate one change or set of changes, I studied the changes that people were making and evaluated them for myself, taking note of what I liked and disliked. This inventory will be useful to me now as I move forward and figure out a) how I want to live and b) what strategies I want to employ in changing the world.

Maybe I will live in community, maybe not. Right now, I feel a strong need for either having my own space or for living with a carefully selected group of people passionately gathered around a specific purpose. Whether or not I choose to live in community, I need to work with and be around people who are part of what we could call conscious culture – culture that is both internally and externally aware and striving to live accordingly.

Though I don't know where or how I will live, I have a compass to guide me, which is my life's work of creating a vibrant self, family, community, society, and planet. The specific ways and places in which I will manifest my life's work are yet to be seen, but are possibly less important than the relationships and experiences that happen in its fulfillment. For now, I will continue to Watson around – that is, to be a vagabond with a purpose – but this time exploring my own country as a traveler, interacting with people and projects here.

I am grateful to Watson for allowing me to travel the world and have these transformative experiences, but also grateful for the imperative I now have to live differently and for the

courage to do so. In a sense, my year is over, but it undoubtedly will morph into what becomes the rest of my life, rather than being that awesome year I had that one time.

The most important thing is that the Watson has empowered me to live my life as I envision and create it moving forward, manifesting idealism. Thoreau's imperative to "go forth and live the life you have imagined" has been in motion for me since my departure on August 13, 2010 and won't stop for the foreseeable future. The vision is evolving as I go. I'm not living the dream; I'm just living the life I want to live, thanks to the help of many friends who support my life's work, including an awesome foundation that invested in me and got me out there doing what I want and need to be doing. For all of this I'll be forever grateful!

Watson Foundation response:

Dear Tim,

Your personal growth during the course of this Watson year has been immense, as you released yourself from the academic pursuit of your project and allowed yourself the space to step back from your tendency to evaluate and focus on the action of being in a place. The Watson in reality is a concept rather than the concrete pursuit of intellectual and cultural knowledge. You laid out a project proposal with neat parameters of, "I will go here to learn this." But through your experiences you figured out that the real value is as much in the pursuit of a goal as in achieving the goal itself (if that is even an attainable aspiration to begin with!)

When you say that you realized that the year was more about community than sustainability you are right – sustainability was your project, but community was the human interaction required to pursue it. What you came to experience is that as the year progressed, there ceased to be distinct line between your project and yourself. Very few people know, really truly know, how to live the experience, and while that is one of many lessons to have taken from the year it will likely be the one to have the greatest influence you. You have had the opportunity to see the value in living a four dimensional life, and though you may forget from time to time, and slip into an intellectualized view for a bit, the Watson experience will always be there...tugging you back to the pursuit of passion in your life.

As you have already found, the people you connected with over the course of this past year will be your friends for years to come, and as you go through the process of figuring out your next steps, they will be a wonderful support network – for they will be able to relate to your point of view in a way that few others can. The idea that the purpose in your work must move you closer to the life you envision– something that spurs your passion and manifests your idealism– is universal among fellows. Which is exactly why you find our alumni doing such interesting things in very niche areas of expertise. There may be a few hits and misses before you land on exactly what that is for you, but you'll get there. In the meantime, I hope your Watson across the US has been enjoyable and full of those wonderful serendipitous moments that keep things exciting on the road.

This formally concludes your obligations to the Thomas J. Watson Fellowship Program. It was a real pleasure coming to know you over the course of the past year and a half, and I look forward to finding out what you are up to in the years ahead. Please keep in touch, and do come visit us should you ever find yourself in lower Manhattan!

Take good care,

Jennifer Ludovici
Assistant Director
Thomas J. Watson Fellowship Program