

SHARING SPACE – A VISION

By Guy Evans

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The following 'visioning' story is set in an imaginary community called the Ranch. The Ranch is composed of families, single folk, and retirees who all live in close proximity to each another on a large plot of land. Each individual or family owns their own small segment of this land as well as their own home. Ranch members have joint ownership in shared open spaces and in a community Common House and Spiritual Hall.

Several times a week, members can take part in a communal dinner prepared in the Common House. They also can share child care, dog care, house care, as well as the simple pleasures of self-entertainment – dancing, singing, and acting are all favorite weekend activities on the Ranch!

The Ranch supports a diversity of spiritual beliefs, ranging from Christian, to Buddhist, to Pagan. All traditions are honored in the Spiritual Hall where various services, rituals, and gatherings are held. A universal tradition shared throughout the Ranch is the wisdom circle. One night a week, Ranch members gather in same sex circles of 5 to 8 people to share joys, concerns, and to offer support. It is the wisdom of the circle that has ensured the continued integrity and success of the Ranch.

The story takes place one evening in early December, twenty-seven years after the Ranch was formed.

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The end of a long day.

I walk home after spending the evening in the circle of men. The new couple who moved in down by the aspen grove need all of our prayers tonight – theirs is an exercise of forgiveness and attention.

The gravel on the path crunches a comforting rhythm as I walk. I know every turn and dip in the path, every clump of sage in the winter, every shoot of balsam root that pops out in yellow delight each May. The path supports me as much as the men do, as much as my wife does, as much as anyone here at the ranch. It never fails to comfort, console, inspire, embolden, and even tame me back to my true self.

Tonight the stars set sprawled out in the sky like sequins strewn across midnight blue velvet. Like the path, those constellations above have served me faithfully over the years as well. Trusty Orion took his stand by my side

way back in the southwest years – years when I would slur my drunken longings up to the great hunter on the way home from the bar. Now the dreams drift to him more articulately, and earlier in the night, but with no less passion.

The men met in the Common House tonight. There, in a circle that stretches back to the beginnings of the ranch and beyond, we met to pass around the gnarled sage branch and to invoke the wisdom of the ancestors.

Our circle formed just as the day's busy buzzing of activity quieted down. The preparations for the winter solstice are nearly complete. Every year it seems the place stirs a little crazy in its activities leading up to the darkest day of winter, and every year I seem to wonder why we go to all the fuss of decorations and rehearsal, and every year, once the first bell sounds marking the beginning of the ceremonies, I remember – we gather to honor the solstice to pull our sight up from the ground, to extend it back beyond our birth, and ahead beyond our death, we gather to take in the wisdom that the darkness offers, for all of these reasons we prepare and honor solstice, and continue to continue to pass on the traditions of the ranch.

Of course others do it for the endless dancing and feasting – a party for the gods and the earth – but I am happy with the ritual and solitude that the solstice provides.

On my way out of the Common House, I noticed that Casi posted the child care schedule for the next month. My wife Juliana and I will be gone for a week in the middle of the month, but will still get to spend three nights with Blake and Britney.

The two have been coming over to spend time with us now for a few years, ever since Blake turned thirteen and the usual adolescent friction began to heat up with his mom. I remember when our oldest daughter Anna did the same during her early teen years. She found a woman she could talk to in Eileen McArthur, the artist. Once, perhaps twice a week, Anna visited Eileen to eat dinner, talk, and find a sense of direction in the wide landscape of life out beyond the parental grounds that Ju and I raised her on. We had faith that Anna would finally find her own place to stand in the world – and she did, eventually. I'm only glad she had a teacher and a guide in Eileen to make the process easier than my own.

Blake is exactly in the same space as teen-age Anna was – unsure, curious, and daring. He and I play music when he visits – me on the piano, him on the violin, and we talk – about school, about girls, about poetry – I can only hope I am giving him a little of the attention and unassuming affection that I missed as a child. I can only hope that he may be spared some of those arduous years that I went through to discover – for the first time – my own humanhood.

I leave the gravel path and step onto the brick patio that approaches our home. I can see a single candle burning through the kitchen window, the usual sign left by my wife that she has already gone to bed, but that the water is hot in the tea pot, and my cup and bag are ready by the stove.

I think back to those early years on the ranch when Ju and I were just learning what it meant to share a space – not only with others we cared about, but also with the coyotes, deer, and even the rattlesnakes.

Twenty-seven years ago now. Two kids grown, two parents wiser and grayer, and what once was just a sketch on the architect's desk, now an established community of homes and common spaces.

I think the sense of sharing is my fondest memory: building the paths, the common house, the many homes, the fences; repairing water lines, repairing solar systems, holding parties for birthdays, solstices, silly nights; the comings, goings, the births, and the deaths, all shared with so many faces that with time I came to call family.

The gamble indeed paid off – the radical ideas that we shared in those early years of gathering before the Ranch truly did work. The notion that life could be experienced richer, fuller, with more adventure, and more ease in the company of dedicated neighbors did stand up to the test of reality.

Back then, it was as if we were re-inventing the wheel. We lived in a culture of isolation. Connection made electronically. Communication made electronically. Community made electronically. It was the dawning of the virtual world of the Internet, the proliferation of chat rooms, email, and JPEG photo attachments of the kids and the dog. And it was the death of physical touch, the way the Romantics wrote about it, the death of a life based on the sharing of real salty years, and real fifth grade jumps of joy. We had no choice but to turn about.

The taste of true community lay too fresh and enticing on our tongues in those days. The success of the first men's and women's groups, the success of Playback, the warmth of the hearth at those cherished Lodato gatherings, all of these forces pushed us forward with a longing for more intimacy, more connection. There was no way to whittle ourselves back to the old – the corporate scheduling, the pre-packaged life, the frenetic pace of consumption. A return to such a life would have marked our death as spirits. And so we created the Ranch, so that like revolutionaries from throughout time, we might stay alive as fully emotional and sacred human beings.

As I enter the house, I hang up my coat on the rack that our friend Bob made from recycled orchard props. Even a coat rack has a history around here. The props were salvaged from one of the hundreds of orchards that were failing back when we built the house. I have always liked Bob's philosophy – re-use the old wood, incorporate nature's gray weathering job into the design, hide screw holes, and minimize exposed cuts. The result: an earthy,

warm, and very unique piece that says not only home, but our home, as in Guy and Juliana's home – simple, functional, and one of a kind.

I pour myself a cup of tea and look around the kitchen. So much of this house is like that coat rack – built with materials that were plentiful, that did not overly tax the environment, and that required more than one friend's hand in building. I see the exposed logs overhead that serve as the ceiling joists, thinned from a dense stand of timber on private land an hour's drive south. I see a few windows that Ju found at a used building supply house – perfectly functional, energy efficient, and good looking. They came from a retired couple's home in Chelan that was getting a face lift. And I see the thick wall around the windows made with bales of straw – stacked Lego style, skewered on re-bar stakes, and plastered.

The chair at the kitchen table creaks softly as I sit down with my tea. I smile at the funny note left by my wife. “Bean, hope you had a good men's group, some tofu scramble for you if you want in the fridge.” Signed Bird, with two small stick feet that have left tracks across the bottom of the page.

I never could have done it without her. Our guiding mantras were always recycle, re-use, re-invent, return to the earth – I could have never practiced these principles without Ju. Like any practice that goes against the entropic human tendency to unthinkingly use and dispose, I needed her as she did me, as we both did the rest of the community – we needed each other to take the old worn out environmental slogans off the bumper stickers and put them to practice out in the field.

Because it wasn't easy. We didn't have a lot of money which helped with our mindful economics, but even then, the tendency to run to the hardware store for that special \$20 tool needed to finish the roof (that would never be used again after the project's completion), or more significantly, the habit of running to Aikea for a set of bookcases, or coffee table was quite strong. My grandparents grew up back in the 30's during the Great Depression and knew from the start how to be thrifty and conserve resources, but two generations later, by the time I came of age, all habits had been lost in the sea of superstores, direct mailings, and the two and even three car garages.

We had to retrain ourselves to think recycle, reuse, reinvent, return to the Earth – and this time it was for the Earth's sake. We needed each other to remind *each other* every step of the building process about thinking creatively. And it worked!

Beautiful porcelain sinks emerged from piles of junk in dusty barns, old moldings flowed in from local remodeling contractors sympathetic to our cause, and unused paints left over after big commercial jobs stacked up

for use in bathrooms, studios, and dens. We championed the lost art of resourcefulness and the results continue to marvel visitors to the Ranch.

Each house and each studio (to say nothing of the Common House and Spirit Hall), sits as a tribute of originality and uniqueness. These buildings have soul – soul that comes only from natural materials, simplicity, and age. Many guests remark about the feeling of life and vibrancy they experience when walking into a Ranch member's home. It is as if the care used to build the walls and roofs was somehow impregnated into the stucco, tile, and trim, only to radiate back to those who now occupy their spaces. I know I certainly feel it.

I finish the last of my tea and sit quietly for a moment watching the flicker of the candle. The old ache glides up from my chest – the sweet and bitter ache that comes with knowing the fruits of simplicity, with tasting them daily, and also from knowing that many who we see on the street in town, who we trade with and work with, may never know such bounty. The borders of ecology, spirituality, community, and intimacy can blur into one breath so easily. Why must the world continue to treat them as separate? I ache for those trapped in the pit of habit with no ladder to use for escape.

On my way into the bedroom I think about Frank and Molly, the new arrivals to the Ranch. I think about the stories Frank shared in the men's circle tonight of what their life was like out there in the virtual world.

Frenetic, anxious, and brittle were the words he used to describe how he felt every morning before droning through the fifty-hour week at the corporate job. Frenetic, anxious and brittle were the words he used to describe his social life after work when the crew would gather at the downtown pub and start tipping the pint glasses until everything started to fade away. And frenetic, anxious, and brittle were the words he used to describe his relationship with Molly. Caught up in the fast-forward flow, they were unknowingly acting out the roles of their parents performed before their youthful eyes years earlier, they were unknowingly being seduced by the notion that the next move to that bigger house and the next promotion at work and the next shiny car would eventually fill up the gaping voids between their hearts.

I let out a big sigh as I stop by the closet to undress. Those words, those aches and longings that Frank spoke of tonight, remind me of the black days of my own past. So long ago it seems now, but still just as dark. Those years tested me, my bones and my psyche. They taught me the sound of my own breath, they led me to other wanderers in the wasteland, and they eventually led me to this place.

And now, Frank and Molly, well into their own journey have found their way here, to continue on their path with the support of kindred spirits.

I unlace my boots and remember the length of time – measured in years – it took Ju and I to finally meet as wanderers and truly continue on together hand in hand. We had been married for quite a while before the real joining of our spirits took place – so thick was the pain and mistrust left over from childhood and early relationships. Only after years of continuing to scrape and peel away at the layers did we finally come to the true union of hearts. And so I pray tonight for Frank and Molly, that they too might find the strength and the persistence to continue with their own stripping down – that they might learn the art of listening, the art of acceptance, the art of sacrifice, of patience.

I hang my shirt up on a hanger, and pad into the bedroom. I see that Ju left another candle burning in the small altar space set off of our bedroom. The flicker of flame casts flowing patterns of light onto the arched white stucco ceiling overhead.

I take a few deep breaths and sit down on my meditation cushion. As I breathe in, I send my thoughts out to Molly and Frank – I send my prayers out that Frank might learn to go beyond the fear he has of other men taking Molly away from him, and that Molly, may have the patience to help him heal. I remember the look of fear he wore on his face tonight in the circle, borne from this age-old condition. I send him my prayers, “Yes, my friend, have courage. You and your relationship are safe here.”

I breathe out and turn their fate over to the universe, to the silent one I met in the wasteland long ago. I hand over other concerns as well – that the Common House might get the new roof it needs next season, that Anna might continue to find her way in life in this her first year at the University, and that the solstice gathering might be filled with cheer, reverence, and communion.

I continue to sit in silence. My head empty of thought. Just the sound of my breath and the presence of the silent one.

After some time, I bow to the small altar, stand up, blow out the candle, and slide into bed with Ju.

I lean over and gently kiss her on the forehead. She doesn't stir. Some nights, from some dreamy place she will feel my lips and make a small sound in reply. But tonight she has already slipped too deeply into the night's grasp.

I pull the covers up around my neck and feel my body sink into the refuge of sleep. I close my eyes as I have for many moons now on the Ranch – comforted, cradled, and content.