

## Chapter 21



### Living in a Diverse Community

#### *The Ideology of Diversity*

The diversity of Twin Oaks membership, in the sense of ideological differences, has been at times a major concern and at other times our chief pride. In the early seventies we worried a lot about these differences, acknowledged that they were serious, and made efforts to bring the whole group to basic agreement. This was a complete failure. We all had our own ideas, and we stuck to them.

Despairing of agreement, Twin Oaks began to see ideological diversity as a virtue. The idea is that, because we don't get whole group agreement on any one direction, and therefore have to compromise virtually every decision we make, we avoid all the dangers of going off any deep ends. It is true. The most extreme decisions this Community ever made came from the initial founders, who were either few enough to agree or else strong enough to ignore those who didn't. In present day Twin Oaks nobody could create such sweeping policies as our strict financial rules, the prohibition of television, or full communal authority in child raising.

Over the years this kind of diversity has effectively prevented our treading any straight and narrow path. One might even say it keeps us on a highway so broad that we're not sure where the pavement ends. Is this good? I'm assuming it's good, because

we're obviously a viable community. We have prospered where many other communities have crumbled. So hooray for diversity. (I guess. But I wish there were more people like me.)

### *Race and Class*

In the last few years the Community has turned its attention to another kind of diversity. We have begun to ask ourselves whether we are sufficiently diverse from a sociological point of view. In plain words, why do we have so few Black people, so few blue-collar men, so few gay men? We certainly do not deliberately discriminate along such lines. Minority group members usually meet friendliness and welcome when they visit. You could even say they are courted for membership. Yet they seldom join, and when they do, they frequently leave after a short time.

why have we had the same problem for 30 years?

Let me introduce Ira, who has a lot of opinions on this subject. Ira is a Black woman about 43 years old who has been a member of three different communities, of which Twin Oaks is the most recent. Ira fits in easily with white society, and [I would have forgotten her color years ago if she didn't keep talking about it.] The reason she talks about it is that she thinks racial diversity is desirable, and she thinks Twin Oaks shoots itself in the foot as it tries to aim for it. *we do.*

-gross Kat

One built-in contradiction, says Ira, is that there are cultural norms at Twin Oaks that the Black people who might otherwise be interested in us cannot tolerate. She names them: nudity; stained and sloppy clothes; dirty houses; small families.

If Ira is right about the kind of Blacks who show interest in community and about their typical biases and standards, then it is obvious that we are accidentally keeping them out. Occasional nudity and habitually sloppy clothing are thoroughly entrenched in Twin Oaks culture. We don't treasure bad housekeeping, but we tolerate it. Certainly we try to keep a lid on the number of children we have, considering that we haven't yet proved very adept at raising them. Under these conditions Ira doesn't feel that she can realistically extend her Black friends an invitation to try for membership. Does that make our norms and our caution about children a class or race issue? Ira thinks it does. *So do I.*

The Black candidates this Community is eager to accept are the ones who are just like the rest of us, only with darker faces—more people like Ira, in fact. If they like nice clothes, they can shop for them in thrift stores and rummage for them in Commie\*

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\*"Commie" here is for "community." The abbreviation is a joking reference to our supposed communistic beginnings. We also once had a garden we referred to as the "communist plot."

Note Kat writes only 5 paragraphs explicitly about race.

Clothes. We don't ask them to wear anything torn or stained. But we don't expect criticism from them if we wear what we please. As to nudity, there isn't enough of it at Twin Oaks to worry about, and some people theorize that anybody who can't tolerate that little bit is going to be too uptight to live here anyway. One thing is sure: We are unlikely to get agreement to change our ways in order to be acceptable to new people. [They are expected to change their standards instead.]

But these are white standards

Are Good Manners Middle Class? They aren't. Why are you even talking about this?

There are other issues of class that not only Ira but many thoughtful people see as boundaries we Twin Oakers unconsciously draw around ourselves and keep certain other people outside of. These are matters of behavior.

read white liberal

Twin Oaks is known in the community movement as a "middle-class commune." In some ways this is a fair description. Obviously the epithet doesn't refer to our income or the way we dress. In spite of the minor pockets of posh among our buildings and equipment, we qualify as "poor" by national standards, and even in the relatively poor town of Louisa we are thought of as people who might want to use old clothing or furniture when it is no longer good enough for local residents. The people who call us "middle class" usually mean something else. They are talking about behavior. White Supremacist behavior.

AAAAHHHHH, FUCK! AAAAAHHHHH

In spite of our diversity of opinion, we are surprisingly consistent in our way of talking to each other. We are considered "quiet." It is said of us that we don't shout, don't confront each other directly with hard words, and that if we have anything unpleasant to say to anyone else, we write a note. I can't deny any of this. I'll go further to say that even when we write notes to each other, most of us couch them in tactful language.

What are you calling it, who precisely is it, why is assumed to be lower-class behavior

Now introduce into this environment a person who has grown up in a family where everybody shouts—probably has to shout in order to get heard—or where calling other people names is standard practice, and a daily exchange of half-humorous insults the norm. Call this lower-class or whatever you want to call it, it doesn't fit into Twin Oaks. We try to avoid belligerence, sarcasm, insults, aggressive stances, and any verbal behavior that might make another person feel afraid or abused. When anyone comes in from the Outside who does any of these things, we notice immediately, and if there is any question of applying for membership, warning flags go out all over the Community via the swift lines of

How much is Kat using a discussion about "Class" to disguise

racist assumptions about black people. At the least she is making some weird assumptions about poor people.

gossip. Such a person's chances of being accepted by this Community border on zero.

} accurate

Is this classism? Ira says it is, and she isn't alone. A substantial and growing contingent within the Community these days is saying, "Give them a chance. They weren't raised the same way some of us were." Giving a verbally aggressive visitor a chance means telling that person what the behaviors are that bother people, explaining Community norms, and suggesting changes in the way he or she talks. Since we don't have any central mechanism for doing this, what usually happens is that about 5 different people will approach the person and give essentially the same message, none of them knowing that it has already been delivered.

- why not? we could

I imagine myself in this person's place, and I shudder. Would I be able to accept all that feedback and still want to join Twin Oaks? Only, perhaps, if I were desperate. Nevertheless, some people have in fact swallowed the criticism, figured out how to talk like a Twin Oaker, and been ultimately accepted for membership. Of such a person we say "He (or she) takes feedback well, and that's a good sign."

} when this happens to B&P66 it is traumatic

All this is clearly a filter that selects against a whole lot of people who were brought up differently and don't see why they should change. Calling it classism doesn't help anything. Most of us like our norms of courtesy. We have no intention of accepting a more aggressive standard. **We expect members to conform.**

This choice does not promote class diversity, and there are those who stoutly insist that Twin Oaks has no right to call itself a diverse community while expecting all applicants to conform to a standard that is easy only for those who were brought up that way. **This fence we have built around ourselves is not unclimbable, but it is a fence,** and those of us who are inside it tend to grow more and more alike in our speech.

### *The Refugee Family*

A few years ago Twin Oaks got a practical demonstration of worrisome cultural diversity when we decided to host a Salvadoran family of political refugees. We took in a young couple with a baby, **explained our systems to them in our inadequate Spanish,** provided them with most of the privileges of membership, and tried to help them legalize their status in a friendly country. (We finally saw them settled in Canada, so the effort was a success, as far as that goes.) While they were with us, we got word that they were in the habit of getting into arguments and hitting each other. Embarrassed by having to teach and correct the

morals of adults, we nevertheless felt compelled to tell them that we would not tolerate violence at Twin Oaks. They understood, but they didn't seem to be able to stop doing it.

Finally one day the husband announced that he was leaving and not taking his wife with him. He was furious with her and intended to punish her by stranding her at Twin Oaks. He said "You don't want me to hit her. If I don't hit her, I can't live with her. You don't know what she is like. Where I come from we hit each other from the time we are little children. Life is a series of blows. Everybody does it. I respect Twin Oaks, and I certainly appreciate everything you have done for us, but I cannot stay here where you won't let me hit my wife! I couldn't have any self respect if I can't control my own woman."

What could we say? Were we going to get across a whole lesson in fundamental feminism and nonviolence to this couple who had no interest in it? The wife did not fear his blows, and probably gave about as good as she got. All the time we were listening to the husband's explanation, she was wailing and begging him not to leave her.

What we did say was that we could not permit the violence, but we would take care of the woman and child and hope for his return. As I said, there was a happy ending, but somehow we didn't volunteer to host another refugee family after that.

The part where I really got the most of it

**Maintaining "a Standard"** "read white supremacy"

Some thoughtful and experienced members believe that the concept of diversity ought not to be stretched to include bad manners, regardless of its class origin. What they mean by desirable diversity is a colorful collage of different races and sexual orientations, different music and art, a variety of interests and talents and even opinions, all under the general umbrella of clearly understood and accepted norms of social behavior. They—I should say "we," because I'm in this camp—envision Twin Oaks teaching its standards to any who are willing to learn them, but never lowering the standard.

I use the words "lowering the standard" deliberately, knowing that some eyebrows will go up and the word "ethnocentric" will be spoken chidingly (in a nice way, of course). There isn't much question that courtesy, sensitivity, and compassion, as cultural norms, are superior to angry outbursts, swaggering, and sarcasm. I don't think you have to be ethnocentric to acknowledge that being kissed on the cheek is more fun than being slugged on the jaw. I'm not claiming moral superiority for the class (whichever one it was)

so you know this is fucked up!

Yeah, so ~~we~~ do BIPOC. They really like not having constant microaggression everyday. But that keeps happen at the "polite" white

that first modeled such decencies, but I prefer pleasant interactions to hostile ones, and so does everybody else. Obviously, this means learning not only some self control but also the basic vocabularies of kindness. If some people come to us who haven't had a chance to learn them yet, it is up to us to be patient. It is not up to us to broaden our culture enough to be polluted by unpleasantness.

Standard has to be maintained at all costs,

↳ purity talk? :| :|

### Class as a Personal Issue

Personally, I don't know what "class" I am. I was born to a poor family in the Depression, went to ordinary public schools, and lucked into two years of college. I was never taught how to dress, give parties, write thank-you notes, or eat a lobster, but reading and writing took me a long way. I suppose that makes me almost lower class. True to my origins, I entered adulthood with a smart-alecky tongue, and I took delight in clever and hurtful put-downs. Those old habits and nasty joys will probably never quite go away, but my speech has been much modified in the intervening years, particularly the Twin Oaks years. It turns out that it isn't necessary to be cruel in order to be witty. Kindly humor takes a little more work, but it's an art worth developing. I'm not claiming any great skill in the field of tact, even now, but my speech is not often intentionally hurtful any more, and this is because I'm a Twin Oaker.

Something we don't really do either.

I think that people who choose to live together need to treat each other well to the best of their ability. We can't afford the social penalties that come from doing less. If that interferes with our diversity, so be it.

Really. That is the conclusion you want to end on? Cool kat. Really cool.