

## Why I decided to leave, and why I wouldn't consider returning

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7/18/2022

### **Intent**

I wanted to write a leaving letter before I left Twin Oaks. A few people asked me to do so, and I thought it would be a chance to provide perspective and criticism on the community. I tried to write this in my final days there, but the emotions became so overwhelming that they threatened to cause an outburst in me, and I did not feel like the community would responsibly handle that. Instead, I put my head down and waited until I could leave, deciding that I'd write about my experience once I was in a place where I felt comfortable expressing the fullness of my emotions. After moving, however, I realized that I was so frustrated at Twin Oaks that I didn't even want to dwell on the experience further, lest I continue to obsess. I was gone and no longer had to pay it any mind, or so I thought.

Despite my desire to leave it behind, I still visit Twin Oaks in my dreams. Each time, I encounter something that reminds me why I left, and I wake up upset. I write this letter because I evidently have things left unsaid, because I would like to live my days in the present instead of ruminating on the first half of this year, and because I want to reclaim my dreams, which I cherish so dearly. Independent of those intentions, I do hope that my experience provides perspective to others, although frankly at this point I doubt the community's capacity for the self-reflection needed to resolve these issues.

I do not want to discuss this beyond this document. I found it unfair that I had to endure what I did without having the opportunity to vent my frustrations, so this is the release that I believe I should have been afforded. I will not respond to attempts to contact me for anything outside of business dealings.

### **Context of my arrival and why I left**

I arrived at Twin Oaks fresh from several major therapeutic breakthroughs. As time went on and I struggled more and more, I became confused. Typically when I felt stressed I could turn inward and notice some way in which an unresolved trauma was impeding my ability to live in the present. At Twin Oaks, however, this strategy didn't work. Over and over, I would turn inward and I would only feel peace with myself. It didn't make sense to me that I was feeling internally aligned and yet still totally stressed. I was living cooperatively in community, contributing to this project of an intentional society. Why was I feeling more stressed than at the miserable job I had before I arrived? Things only started to make sense when I stopped assuming that the stress was internal, and started considering that the environment of Twin Oaks was having adverse effects on me.

I decided to leave Twin Oaks when I realized that I felt wholly deceived by it. I didn't expect it to be perfect of course, but I at least expected good-faith cooperation. I didn't expect to feel lied to. I arrived with the expectation of participating in an intentional society where we'd work together to find the most equitable solutions to our problems. Instead, I learned that I had moved to a community that actively avoided communication and confrontation to the point that it was used as a punishment, and one of the worst things that you could be sentenced to. I moved to a community that claimed to be committed to dismantling hierarchies, but which operates with an unofficial hierarchy anyway. I moved to a community which benefits from the aesthetic of social

justice and radical cooperation, but which is not actually materially committed to those same virtues.

Twin Oaks does not accurately describe itself to newcomers, or to the world. This much is known, as it was part of the discussion of the fishbowl that I participated in before I left. What I don't think the rest of y'all realize is that when the community relies on visitor labor and has 30% community turnover, this depicts a very sinister reality in which Twin Oaks is effectively luring in a workforce dejected from the mainstream with promises of co-operation and egalitarianism in order to exploit them for their labor. A reason why non-white new members leave so quickly is because they have the lived experience to recognize this exploitation much sooner than their white counterparts.

### **Yes, there is a hierarchy**

This is known. Some senior members even refer to Sunrise and Beechside as monarchies. Y'all don't tell that to visitors or new members of course, because otherwise the population would suffer, and then who would you convince to work in the tofu hut?

As Kat Kinkade says in her book, newcomers are expected to conform to the community and fall in line. That hasn't changed since that book was written. New members are expected to conform and not stir the pot, even if they're struggling or being abused. If you are struggling, going against the status quo is impossible because it would mean contending with people who are better supported by the community structure, who have enough energy and resources to make your life difficult enough to get you to stop, to run you out of your SLG, or to turn others against you.

### **The hierarchy legitimizes the absurd, and it's dangerous for everyone.**

Twin Oaks has a maddening power dynamic regarding the legitimacy of ideas. I saw genuine concerns of new members get dismissed almost immediately and solely on the basis that they came from a new member, who must not know what they're talking about. I had people doubt and deny experiences that I had because I was new and they assumed I was naive. And yet inversely, everyone, especially new members, are expected to engage with ignorant or even delusional beliefs as if they are legitimate just because they've come from someone who has lived there longer than they have. You are expected to take seriously sentiments that were defunct 30 years ago while simultaneously not being heard by those same individuals. It is abusive and imbalanced, and has the emotionally manipulative hallmarks of a codependent relationship.

Not all ideas are created equal, which may be a shocking thing for some of you to hear, but which is not a radical sentiment to anyone who has lived a marginalized life. For example: You don't argue about the validity of your life with a racist or a homophobe if you're a queer person of color, because doing so suggests that their ideas are legitimate and that your life should be subject to debate. Some ideas just aren't valid.

It is senseless to deny constructive change by engaging in debate with absurd ideas, and it happens so often at Twin Oaks that, due to the power of the hierarchy, reactionary and absurd

sentiments are held as legitimate when they are unreasonable on their face, with no grounds for meaningful debate.

A relevant example of this is the A/C debate that I've heard has had a resurgence.

**The need for A/C is not a debate. It is a health issue. If Twin Oaks does not invest in A/C, people are going to die preventable deaths and that is not an exaggeration.** And yet, I bet y'all are hearing about how A/C isn't "environmentally friendly" or being warned about the dangers of Freon, despite it being banned in A/Cs since 2010. These 'debates' deflect the discussion away from the core issue of rising temperatures without providing actual alternatives. This frustrates attempts to resolve the issue. This style of rhetoric is not about co-operating to solve a problem, it's about domination and control, or if I were trying to be charitable: paranoia and anxiety.

Paired with the hierarchy at play in the community, this results in a dynamic in which a few people, simply by virtue of their tenure, can make you capitulate to their will, even if it's absurd or stemming from a place of paranoia, instead of doing the things that need to be done to secure your safety and the safety of the community. This is the same thing that prevents action regarding the mold despite the number of folks with respiratory problems, the obscene working hours, the crumbling buildings, and so many other quality of life changes that are sorely needed. This is the source of the stagnancy in the community.

Related to this is the sense that Twin Oaks, by virtue of its very existence, is entitled to enough gratitude to dismiss harsh criticisms. It happened several times that I was told that I should be grateful for Twin Oaks instead of criticizing it. I heard stories from others who were told the same thing. **This is manipulation.** It creates an environment in which people feel like they're not supposed to criticize their community, which is the exact opposite sentiment an intentional community should be trying to foster.

### **Exploitation, deceit, and racism**

It is no mystery why people of color largely cannot live at Twin Oaks, or at least it's not a mystery to people of color. Twin Oaks is a recreation of the mainstream in many ways, and that includes the recreation of racist institutional and cultural structures.

To be explicitly clear: **It must be recognized that Twin Oaks was created by White people, in anticipation of the needs of only other White people. Since then, the community has not examined, dismantled, and intentionally restructured its relationship to race and White Supremacy, so it continues to embody it.**

I believe the overwhelming majority of issues I experienced whilst at Twin Oaks stem from the white supremacist ideology that underpins the structure and culture of the community. After all, it becomes easy to justify any other abusive power dynamic when you've already subconsciously accepted that it's permissible that your community is only willing to support white people. In this way, white supremacy poisons the well and harms even white folks, as allowing the exploitation of any group undermines the security of every group. It is an ideology of certain self-destruction.

It was insanely frustrating to be told that the community recognizes that it struggles with white supremacist ideology, but to receive no equity to mitigate the harm that that would cause me.

Y'all admit that the community has a racism problem and does not adequately support POC and so invite POC to live with you in hopes that they'll solve racism for you, and then at the same time expect them to conform to and meet the expectations of the same system that you already admitted is harmful to them.

You expect POC to function successfully in a system that was designed without considering them, and then throw your hands up in the air and shrug your shoulders when they burn out and leave, angry as hell, as if you bear no responsibility in the upkeep of the community that drove them away. **It's an intentional community. You are all responsible for how it affects people, and yet only a few of you seem to act like it.**

POC being asked to do the same amount of work as their white counterparts are in actuality doing MORE work because they have to pick up the slack to support themselves in areas where the community fails them. Part of that labor is coping with the stress and knowledge that the community isn't designed to facilitate the existence of people like them. POC at Twin Oaks are having to do more with less resources. This is the exact same racial dynamic at play in the mainstream. A difference at Twin Oaks is that the community benefits from the aesthetic of saying that it's committed to eliminating racism in a way the mainstream does not necessarily claim. This attracts good-willed and good-intentioned POC who legitimately want to build and benefit from a world in which they're **finally** treated fairly, and then it betrays them, wringing them of their energy and hope.

I felt like an idiot when I finally realized what was going on, because how could I let myself be duped like that? Didn't I have enough sense to know not to take white folks at their word? I eventually realized that I shouldn't blame myself for trusting people, or for believing that a better world is possible. I'm just human, and I always want to hope for the best in people. Unfortunately, sometimes that lets ill-intentioned folks take advantage of me, and that's on them, not me.

How can you claim to be anti-racist when you have loopholes in your own property code that allow people to benefit from their outside resources via gifts and family? White people in the U.S. have more generational wealth and resources than POC. A loophole that allows people to benefit from their private resources inherently benefits white people more than it benefits POC.

How can you claim to be egalitarian when you have a PAL policy that lets people off the property code and mandates that people can't stay on the farm while on PAL? What if you're like me and don't have resources to go places or family to stay with? What value is a PAL to me as compared to a middle class white man with gift money? It winds up just being a system by which white folks can use their resources to go on vacations for up to a year while POC who don't have those same resources get to take a 'work vacation' at most.

How the fuck can some people regularly receive thousands of dollars in gift money and no one bats an eye? How am I expected to feel like we're all in this together when my quality of life in the community is so different from someone else's because of the circumstances of our births?

I can't. You shouldn't ask me to. I wouldn't even care so much about the outside money if you weren't then asking POC to live in moldy houses without air conditioning while working 42 hours a week and then have the audacity to claim that it's "better than the mainstream" and that they should be grateful. That's a disgusting, manipulative lie.

If you want to solve racism at Twin Oaks, there's a clear way to demonstrate that: Give POC less quota requirements as an acknowledgement that the community structure isn't as good at supporting them as it is for white folks. A community dedicated to eliminating racism would understand the necessity of this measure and be both willing and able to have the discussions necessary to educate the ignorant members of its population who would be upset by it.

I can guarantee you that this would force the community to reckon with its racism because the following would happen:

- POC would have enough time and energy to begin advocating for themselves in earnest, or to spend on their own lives, allowing them to feel like living at Twin Oaks is worthwhile and hopeful instead of exploitative.
- There would be outrage from those of you who would claim that it isn't 'egalitarian,' thereby demonstrating your ignorance on the topic of racial power dynamics and identifying yourselves to those of you who DO have a decent understanding of those dynamics and also the energy to educate your fellows. This education should be supported by Twin Oaks structures and resources.
- There would be bad-faith actors among you who would suddenly identify as POC to protest the equity and to benefit from a lower quota, thereby publicly demonstrating your willingness to exploit POC identities for your own gain. These people should be expelled from the community, as a willingness to exploit POC identities should not be tolerated under any circumstances, unless you wish to poison the well.

By the end of that reckoning Twin Oaks would emerge either as a place ACTUALLY committed to weeding out the racism in its structure, culture and population, or it would reveal itself as a place that is at least honest about not being committed to eliminating racism, breaking the illusion of good-will.

### **Goodbye**

My experience at Twin Oaks wasn't all bad, but in retrospect I realize that the best parts of my time there was the time I spent connecting with people who I felt were genuinely trying to live with and understand me and others. For that reason, I still believe in community. Community was my dream since childhood, and I'm glad I tried it out. I hope to live in community again someday, hopefully. If anything, Twin Oaks has been an experience that has taught me what dangers to look out for.

I now view Twin Oaks as a White Liberal escapist summer camp. A slightly tweaked version of the mainstream with a carefree hippie aesthetic to provide the illusion of social justice and radical co-operation, and content enough with that result to abandon the utopian project there. I

don't think people of color should live at Twin Oaks, and I even feel the need to warn people who are genuinely interested in community about my experience there so that they won't be so easily manipulated, if they still decide to visit at all.

I really hope things change. A better world for everyone is possible.