

Songaia: An Unfolding Dream

By Fred Lanphear

Songaia, an intentional cohousing community with a commitment to live in harmony with Earth, was inspired in part by Thomas Berry's classic book, *The Dream of the Earth*. This book transformed my life and led me to introduce Berry's profound thinking to those of us who were re-envisioning the direction of our community.



For me, the book signaled a paradigm shift, turning my world-view inside out. I had spent 25 years of my life as a chemical-based agriculturist and 20 years involved in human development. I was a product of 21 years of formal education, shaped by the Christian church and the dominant story of the 20th Century. At the age of 55, I was faced with a radical decision—to move beyond my training, embody organic agriculture, and acknowledge that my human-centered context was too small. I was challenged to see all life forms as interdependent and to accept an emerging new creation story. It was the beginning of a journey and adventure into an unfolding future.

The year was 1990 and the place was the Residential Learning Center in Bothell, Washington—a program center and intentional community of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA). The ICA, an international organization concerned with the human factor in world development, was in a prolonged process of reorganization. It was, as well, a time of re-visioning the direction of our own community. Something new was being called for. I led the community in the study of Berry's book and we agreed that learning to live in harmony with Earth and all its creatures would be a central value. We also wanted to share a rich spirit life, be open to diversity, commit to life-long learning, honor individual, family and

community, share responsibility for community welfare, and reach outward

toward others. Twelve years later we are 13 families working together to give form to that dream.

Songaia (the name is derived from Song of Gaia, or Song of the Living Earth) is located on 10.7 acres in a rapidly developing suburb designated as an urban-growth area. The cluster of 13 units in the form of 6 duplexes and a single dwelling attached to a common house is located on 3 acres in the center of the property. The common house is where families gather for meals, meetings, sharing-circles and celebrations. Four acres of the property is lush, second growth Douglas Fir and the rest open meadow, gardens, and fruit trees. Learning how to care for this sacred land and all its creatures is one of the challenges and adventures of our dream.

What distinguishes Songaia from other neighborhoods is not our physical layout, but our intent to live together cooperatively and in harmony with Earth. We are a diverse group with different expectations and needs for being in community. All of us do not have the same commitment and passion to participate in a new Earth-centered ethic, but there is an openness to explore what that would mean. So far, it has taken a variety of forms, from a community food model to shared amenities. The food model consists of corporate meals five times per week using staple items from a community pantry—all for only \$80 per adult per month. Bulk purchasing reduces our costs and avoids resource-wasting packaging and advertising.

Living in community often brings individual and community needs into conflict with each other—a situation further complicated when environmental needs unto the seventh generation are considered. Making community decisions is hard work. It requires developing communication skills and using group processes. It also requires developing trust among its members. Trust is developed by creating a strong culture that is shaped by consensus building, singing, heart-filled rituals, sharing-times, celebrations, traditions, a mentoring program and childcare, and a flexible and intentional budget. With this trust comes the opportunity to wrestle with issues that shape each of us, the community, and in some ways the larger society.

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The challenge we face at Songaia is not unlike the challenge given by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, when he said, “The task before us now, if we

would not perish, is to shake off our ancient prejudices, and to rebuild the earth.” Each of us carries the prejudices, cultivated over thousands of year (since post-aboriginal civilization), that the human species is at the center of the universe, and that Earth and all its creatures are there for our use. It will take the creation of a new biocentric story, and generations of its appropriation, to correct that misunderstanding. All of us from our own generations and cultures play critical roles in this evolutionary process. All I participated in during my lifetime was necessary to bring me to this time of realization. I sincerely believe we are participants in an emerging new consciousness that will pave the way for the New Story, and for the language, rituals, and life patterns that will inculcate it.

Making such a change will require community. The church has been one of the primary communities to foster and perpetuate the dominant story, but the church, with its investment in the dominant story, is unlikely to create and champion a view that contradicts it. More likely, the New Story will emerge from communities in the workplace, in centers of education, in intentional residential communities, and among environmentally-oriented social action groups, who will embrace it and live it and lead others to follow.



Illustration by Mary Southard