

Home Free Home Introductory Piece  
John Coate October 2016

I first saw Lou Gottlieb singing with The Limelighters on the Hootenany TV show. It was 1963 and I was a twelve-year-old, living in the San Francisco Bay Area. He was lanky, professorial and hilariously funny. So much so, that as I grew into mid-60s rock and roll and the cultural revolution that accompanied it, Lou stayed in my mind as a great wit and musician, though I had lost track of The Limelighters.

A few years later when I was an older teen, and by then increasingly sympathetic to the growing counterculture, I saw him in a TV news story as the owner of some land in Sonoma County who was prohibited in court from deeding his land "to God."

By then he was still lanky and even professorial, but his hair and beard were so long I couldn't recognize him. I was intrigued by the idea, though I thought of it at the time as a kind of Dadaist theater piece. What struck me in the story was the news reporter's description of what people were doing on the land they called Morningstar Ranch. The report said that a bunch of people lived communally on the land, not using money and sharing what they did have.

It was the first time I had heard about what the culture often calls "hippie communes."

It was yet another new idea that was part of a constellation of new ideas that meshed perfectly with my growing awareness and consciousness.

Like millions of others in my boomer generation, I was raised in an America of unprecedented middle class wealth. Safe in neighborhoods where most of the mothers were at home and ready to help if you needed it, enjoying annual escalations in convenience and media products, riding in huge six-passenger cars that could go 100 MPH with ease, water-skiing in fast power boats or flying to vacations in places like Hawaii instead of having to just drive to the local river resort. We were nurtured and protected; educated at public schools with seemingly limitless resources, and we had incredible rock music written for us rather than for our parents. And we had an increasing array of good stereos and radios to play it. It seemed like we had it made.

We also had to witness the horror of our young President getting his brains blown out on TV and we did these ridiculous drills at school where we hid under our little metal desks in case a Russian nuclear bomb blew out the twelve-foot wall of windows that illuminated our modern classroom.

Still, despite rioting in the ghettos, it looked like we might be making progress as a nation in terms of racial equality. And it looked like we as a nation were a "Great Society" committed to improving the lives of the poor and the elderly.

All this even while gas only cost twenty-five cents a gallons and someone would fill your tank for you, clean the windows and check the oil.

Our parents had us dialed in. Why should we be dissatisfied with anything?  
And then they sent us to Viet Nam.

I already knew that our white middle class society had a problematic underbelly that showed itself in mass materialism and a rigid insistence on conformity.

But growing up, we watched this ill-advised Cold War maneuver expand month-by-month into a national catastrophe of historic proportions, with escalating body counts on nightly TV corresponding to increasing call-ups from the Draft Boards. It became clear to me, and a large number of my contemporaries, that the beautiful world of mid-century privilege we enjoyed was deeply rotted. The future, as designed by the perpetrators of these acts of mass lunacy, became so unacceptable that radical things must be tried.

Concurrent to all of this, a different kind of world was emerging as a kind of group mind-meld that shared certain traits denoting various levels of buy-in. Long hair, bell-bottom pants, a love of the experiments in rock music, art, film and writing, attending anti-war rallies plus enjoying the occasional toke of grass were just a few that were adopted by the millions. Farther out from there you had those using psychedelic drugs like LSD, committing to vegetarianism or some other earth-friendly practice, and living in group houses, sometimes even pooling their money to some degree. Still farther and you had the true dropouts who went off into the countryside to live as off-the-grid as possible in self-built housing, seeking new paths of sustainable living that allowed minimal buy-in to the culture at large. Then, at the farthest outer edges of the countercultural zeitgeist of the 1960s, you had Morningstar Ranch and Wheeler's.

Morningstar was founded as a blend of spiritual revelation, Mahayana-level human compassion, and a philosophical inclination to experiment with solving the coming post-industrial problem of human labor once the world became substantially serviced by robots. Open land refused no one, and tried to live outside of government intrusion or the approval of the neighbors. It offered absolute freedom to anyone living there to explore the inner reaches of their minds however they chose to do it: with or without religious or spiritual structure, and with or without the use of psychedelic drugs. Those hours-long yoga and meditation and tripping folks lived side-by-side with biker winos who weren't capable of functioning in regular society. Soon there was enough perceived chaos that government intrusion was a certainty. What happened next was well known in the press and is well covered in this book.

What is less known is the influence Morningstar and later Wheeler's had on the counterculture as it was emerging, and ultimately on the culture in general. Morningstar entertained a great number of visitors from the Haight-Ashbury when it was in its full flower and it served as the place where the Diggers grew the food that they used to feed huge numbers of young hippies, runaways and refugees from the culture at large. At first the Diggers set up their free bread and vegetable food line in the Golden Gate Park panhandle, just three blocks down from Haight Street. The crowds became so large in late 1967 that they moved it all farther out in the Park to Speedway Meadows.

That year I was a senior at George Washington High School in San Francisco, just a few blocks up the hill from Speedway Meadows. Numerous times I wandered down there after school to check out the food line. It wasn't because I was hungry. It was because I could witness one of the most extraordinary examples of this birthing community spirit, worldwide in its sense of belonging. In addition to a set of tables and giant pots with long-haired people ladling out chow to large numbers of

other long-haired people, there was entertainment by bands set up on flatbed trucks, some of whom are now in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I saw the Steve Miller Band play once and twice I saw Big Brother and the Holding Company with Janis Joplin. Another time I heard that Jimi Hendrix played there as did Cream. These weren't publicized gigs to promote concerts or records. It was a word-of-mouth chow line for people living in crash pads.

In a time of movements, when large numbers of people break from the norms of society and experiment with new ways of expression and of living, some of the projects and experiments out at the far fringes do not necessarily translate into a lot of people emulating them verbatim. Some, inspired by the sheer boldness of a Morningstar or the Diggers or the Merry Pranksters, opted for something along that same continuum, but closer into an orbit where a greater degree of self-control was likely. Whether it seemed safer for the kids or just less of a burn-your-ships statement, many came reasonably close to a Morningstar way of living and in turn made certain similar lifestyle choices seem viable.

In the early 1970s, the culture at large was influenced by the nationwide success of Wheeler's resident Alicia Bay Laurel's Living on the Earth book that, in the gentlest and most appealing way, inspired countless people to either try some of the book's projects and instructions, or to at least use it as a way to understand better the people at the forefront of alternative living. Someone close to me once hitchhiked while still in high school to a nearby town in northern Virginia, to buy Living on the Earth at a bookstore.

Of course, some of the less pleasant aspects of Morningstar and other extreme endeavors, particularly around sanitation, inspired others with a sense of what *not* to do. Sometimes that meant assuring that the toilets did not overflow, or that there was an actual school for the kids.

It is no coincidence that some people who lived at Morningstar and Wheeler's were founding members of other collective living arrangements large and small. In particular, a number of people who were among the founders of The Farm in TN, as well as the Caravan that preceded it, had lived at Wheeler's.

I was just nineteen years old when I joined the Caravan in 1970. One of the women on my bus had lived at Wheeler's and relayed knowledge and experience to us along with some great stories. Others did the same when The Farm was in its early years. I lived at The Farm until 1983, but luckily for me, my relationship to Morningstar and Wheeler's continued in a new form, a new kind of influence from Morningstar and Wheeler's.

In 1986 I began working at The WELL, the online community founded by The Whole Earth Catalog's Stewart Brand. There I met Ramon Sender. Ramon was one of the first members of the WELL and he adapted some of his social practices that derived from those earlier days into this new medium. In particular, Ramon began something he called the "WELLbeam." This was a kind of incantation that you would do in front of your computer on behalf of someone in the WELL community who needed some sort of uplift or even a kind of get-well prayer. Before long, it became standard for members to send "beams" to others in need. Others who founded their own online communities took customs like the WELLbeam and incorporated their own versions of it into their own community.

The WELL was influential in many ways that are beyond the scope of this book, but to my knowledge the WELLbeam was the first group conveyance of comforting prayers and good wishes in an online environment. What is important is not necessarily that a name or a set of words was exchanged. What matters is that it injected directly into the nascent online culture that good feeling – good vibes – can be consciously shared between people for their mutual benefit using networked computers. And even as I write this in 2016 there is a topic in the WELL News Conference called “Request for Beams.” This topic has regenerated itself in an unbroken sequence for thirty-three years.

And it was through Ramon that I finally met and got to know Lou Gottlieb. I was thrilled after all those years to become friends with this man who had maintained a special place in my affections since I was twelve. Lou paid me the ultimate honor the year before he died by playing piano at my wedding.

Not long after, I attended a reunion at Morningstar Ranch in which many of the original dwellers came to be together one more time. I brought a copy of the Morningstar Scrapbook with me to get some autographs. My favorite simply said, “May all roads lead you home.” [Quote from page 186 of the Scrapbook]