

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN:

A History of Narrow Ridge Earth Literacy Center 1970-2004

Christopher T. Smith

BA student in History

Carson-Newman College

Project Advisor: Dr. Beth Vanlandingham, Associate Professor of History

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Chapter 1

Introduction to Narrow Ridge

Narrow Ridge Earth Literacy Center in Washburn, TN is a place for solitude in the modern, industrial world where people can experience an environmentally-friendly lifestyle, while learning about sustainable living and Earth literacy. Narrow Ridge strives to promote living based on ecologically sound practices such as organic gardening, composting toilets, and sustainable home construction within a community of like-minded people.

Narrow Ridge offers for retreat and solitude hermitages which demonstrate the feasibility of a more ecologically sound lifestyle, but it also offers workshops and academic programs with courses from social ecology to organic gardening. Narrow Ridge focuses on three cornerstones which define “Earth literacy:” sustainability, spirituality, and community.

Sustainability at Narrow Ridge is the endeavor to live in a way that is mindful of the environmental impact of every action or inaction and to purposefully choose the actions that have as little negative impact on the environment as possible. At Narrow Ridge, sustainability is about a change of lifestyle that is more in-depth than just changing incandescent light bulbs to compact fluorescents. The center promotes lessening environmental impact by living more simply through means like passive and active solar energy, decreasing consumption of consumer goods and energy, eating local and organic (often vegetarian), using composting toilets that require no water, and ecological construction with sustainable materials like structural strawbale. These are only a few examples of the way people living at Narrow Ridge “reduce their footprint.” As Bill Nickle, the visionary founder of Narrow Ridge, explains, “Sustainability . . . is

being sure that what we humans are doing is enhancing the life of everything else because the way this web of life is put together is dependent upon one another.”¹

Spirituality refers to a new point of view of the role of humans on Earth, i.e., that humanity is not *on* Earth but *of* Earth like any other organism. Narrow Ridge is not a religious organization or sect— it is an interfaith organization that promotes reflection on humanity’s place in the Universe. Nickle’s philosophy centers on Earth as self-healing, self-educating, self-governing, self-fulfilling, and self-propagating— all terms from Thomas Berry’s “new cosmology” which is grounded in the belief that humanity is a part of Earth and that humans have a “kindred” relationship with Earth.²

Thomas Berry’s new cosmology is the idea that humanity needs to rethink its relationship with Earth and with the Universe. Under the old cosmology, humanity believed itself to be separate from the Earth community and that idea led humans to destroy Earth and its resources. Humanity’s new role in the Earth community is to live within Earth’s natural systems and within the order of the Universe. The new cosmology is all about communion between humans and nonhumans. In the opening chapter to his book *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*, Thomas Berry describes the communion that humanity must adopt and the new cosmology:

In reality there is a single integral community of the Earth that includes all its component members whether human or other than human. In this community every being has its own role to fulfill, its own dignity, its own inner spontaneity. Every being has its own voice. Every being declares itself to the entire universe. Every being enters into communion with other beings. This capacity for relatedness, for presence to other beings, for spontaneity in action, is a capacity possessed by every mode of being throughout the entire universe.³

¹ Rev. Bill Nickle, personal interview, Washburn, TN, 4 Aug 2008

² Ibid.

³ Thomas Berry. *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*. (New York: Bell Tower, 1990), 4.

Berry believes that humanity has ignored the connection of all beings in the Earth community, and thus humanity's actions harm that community:

So too every being has rights to be recognized and revered. Trees have tree rights, insects have insect rights, rivers have river rights, mountains have mountain rights. So too with the entire range of beings throughout the universe. All rights are limited and relative. So too with humans. We have human rights. We have rights to the nourishment and shelter we need. We have rights to habitat. But we have no rights to deprive other species of their proper habitat. We have no rights to interfere with their migration routes. We have no rights to disturb the basic functioning of the biosystems of the planet. We cannot own the Earth or any part of the Earth in any absolute manner. We own property in accord with the well-being of the property and for the benefit of the larger community as well as ourselves.⁴

Humans are not separate from Earth and its systems. Humans have been living outside of those systems and the effects have been detrimental to the environment and humans.

Nickle chose the name "Narrow Ridge" for the purpose of identifying it as an interfaith organization- accepting of all religious creeds or the lack thereof. In doing so, he chose a term from Jewish theologian Martin Buber. Although an ordained United Methodist minister, he wanted to avoid the label of a Christian or Methodist group. So the spirituality aspect is less about a religion and more about a deep relationship with Earth. Narrow Ridge is not a church, but Dr. Larry Osborne, Board member and psychology professor at Carson-Newman College, stated that it "fulfills the function of a church. We have a community of people that care about you and have a worldview that seems to account for the way things are and cover the main questions of life."⁵

The third cornerstone, community, is especially important to Narrow Ridge. The sense of community is to some degree the binding force of the endeavor. The people at Narrow Ridge have the common goal of changing the way humans interact with Earth. However, their

⁴ Ibid, 5.

⁵ Dr. Larry Osborne, personal interview, Jeff. City, TN, 9 Jan 2009.

relationship to the surrounding inhabitants of Hogskin Valley, through Washburn and Grainger County, and into Appalachia is also a part of the aspect of community. The community within and with-out acts as a support--within Narrow Ridge from the joint belief in basic ecological and cosmological principles and outside through programs designed to positively aid the surrounding community. For example, Narrow Ridge has pioneered the use of land trusts which puts land into conservation easements which limit development and thus lower property taxes for neighboring landowners who otherwise might have to sell the family farm and leave the valley.

From a combination of these values comes the idea of “Earth literacy.” Dr. McGregor Smith, founder of the Earth Ethics Institute in Miami, FL and a powerful influence on Bill Nickle, coined the term; his words best describe the concept:

Earth Literacy is an environmental movement in which life on Earth is seen to be at a turning point. The turning point is a crisis in our perception of reality. To respond to that crisis, we are beginning to rethink the way we live our workaday lives. . . . Earth Literacy expands the meaning of literacy. It measures our ability to participate constructively in Earth’s evolutionary process. It teaches us to become conscious members of the wonderful society of all living and nonliving beings.⁶

Earth literacy is learning to live *with* rather than *against* the natural world. Mac Smith draws from Berry and others who echo similar sentiments to create a curriculum for bringing humanity back on course with the Earth community:

Earth literacy is a budding curriculum aimed at freedom. Albert Einstein said that we [humans] are prisoners of a delusion. Delusion causes us to endanger our species and our planet. When we entered the modern scientific age, all of reality changed except the way we think about it. Our old way of thinking is our prison. We think we are separate. We do not calculate nature’s losses as our losses. We imagine we are in control of the natural world. We try to manipulate and fix nature as we would a machine. That is why Earth’s capacity to sustain and regenerate life is diminishing. For humans to continue on Earth, Einstein said we will have to master a new manner of thinking. If we don’t, humankind will drift

⁶ Dr. McGregor Smith, “What is Earth Literacy?” Earth Ethics Institute, (5 Jan 2009).

into “ultimate catastrophe.” Earth literacy’s budding curriculum is about awakening from that delusion.⁷

It involves an understanding of ecological principles and learning how to live in the boundaries of those systems. Included is a new way of looking at life, i.e., a view that Earth is the teacher and humanity is the pupil, not the master.

In the past, Narrow Ridge has offered an assortment of programs to the public and to students to foster education about Earth literacy or promote living an Earth literate lifestyle at Narrow Ridge. Programs have included the Vision Quest, workshops on a number of topics related to alternative energy or farming, tours of Narrow Ridge facilities and wilderness areas, community music jams and festivals, academic programs for college credit, community-supported agriculture, and recently a green burial ground, all of which have had their own degrees of success and longevity. The story of the successes and failures of these programs, along with the story of Bill Nickle’s visionary quest to establish this place for learning in the mountains of East Tennessee, is the story of Narrow Ridge

⁷ Dr. McGregor Smith, “What is Earth Literacy?” Earth Ethics Institute, (5 Jan 2009).

Chapter 2

The Reverend-Dreamer Bill Nickle

Deep in the mountainous terrain of northeast Tennessee, in an area that runs through a place called Hogskin Valley and up Log Mountain, lies Narrow Ridge Earth Literacy Center. The founder of Narrow Ridge is The Reverend Bill Nickle.⁸ The story of Bill Nickle and Narrow Ridge are very much the same story. Narrow Ridge was born of the belief that humanity must have a different type of relationship with Mother Earth – humanity is not *on* Earth, humanity is *of* Earth, and Earth must be treated with respect. Nickle defines “Earth literacy” as the existence of “certain basic ecological and cosmological principles that are necessary for sustainability”.⁹ Currently, humanity ignores these principles and exploits the resources of Earth. Nickle believes that humanity can alter course and use resources in a manner that is sustainable rather than destructive. On this belief, Narrow Ridge was conceived and created.

Considering that the dream of Narrow Ridge began around 1970 and did not reach fruition until 1990, this conception was not an easy task. Bill Nickle’s vision of “green mountains and clear water flowing” led to the creation of Narrow Ridge, and that vision is the driving force behind the Earth Literacy Center.¹⁰ His vision is the glue that has held this organization together at its core for nearly twenty years. They are grounded in theological beliefs and basic principles of ecology.

The very beginnings of those beliefs lie with the influence of Jewish theologian Martin Buber and his concept of the “I and Thou,” a delicate relationship between the sacred and the other where everything is sacred and nothing is only an object. Buber wrote that being in a place

⁸ Bill Nickle has noted that he has never been referred to as The Reverend and always asked church members call him Bill. It has been used here to note his status as an ordained minister but is not used elsewhere.

⁹ Rev. Bill Nickle, personal interview, Washburn, TN, 4 Aug 2008

¹⁰ Nancy Woodruff, “Story of Bill Nickle,” unpublished manuscript in possession of author

where everyone and everything is sacred, a Thou, and nothing is an object, an It, is walking the “narrow ridge.” The ridge is narrow— making it very easy to slide off and into the realm of the object and the It.¹¹

In the beginning stages of conceiving Narrow Ridge, Nickle was not involved with nor did he have a concept of “Earth literacy” or “new cosmology”. He considered himself a “good conservationist and a good steward of the planet.”¹² He had the ideas of Martin Buber but those ideas had not been extended into Earth literacy and ecological cosmology, though they did involve a sense of community. Buber clarified his definition of the “I and Thou” by describing this relationship in terms of the community:

The narrow ridge is the meeting place of the We. This is where man [*sic*] can meet man in community. And only we who are capable of truly saying ‘Thou’ to one another can truly say ‘We’ with one another. If each guards the narrow ridge within himself and keeps it intact, this meeting can take place.¹³

Community is shared by those people for whom nothing is relegated to the realm of the ‘It’, the objects that a person does not consider important. If the ‘It’ is a nuisance or in the way of selfish human progress, then there is no problem removing the object because it has no meaning. When things, people, and places become ‘Thou’, these things are sacred and it is these things that humanity longs to save.

While the refinement of his ideas at Wesley Woods and his association with McGregor Smith contributed greatly to the development of Narrow Ridge in its present form, the philosophy of Martin Buber pervades Nickle’s ideology. Nickle has always sought a way to

¹¹ Maurice Friedman. *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber*. (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1991), 57-59.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Martin Buber quoted in Maurice Friedman. *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber*. (St. Paul: Paragon House, 1991), 57.

bring people into community with each other and with the environment. The “I-Thou” philosophy of Martin Buber is, at the least, one of the greatest influences on Nickle’s belief in Narrow Ridge. Nickle gave his organization the name Narrow Ridge from Buber’s description of the “I-Thou.” He explains that the Narrow Ridge is not a physical location like Hogskin Valley, but that the Narrow Ridge is a place in the heart. The most important thing is the relationship between a person and everything around that person. “In that I and Thou relationship . . . everything is a subject, nothing is an object. If I treat you as an object, you’re not a “Thou”- you’re not sacred,” Nickle explains of Buber’s concept.¹⁴ Being a “good conservationist,” Nickle applied the “I-Thou” concept to environmentalism to say “If I treat the world outside as an object, then it’s like I can destroy the air, the water and pollute it. But if I look on it as a “Thou’, then it’s a totally different relationship.”¹⁵

Any time someone becomes interested in learning about Narrow Ridge Earth Literacy Center (hereafter referred to as Narrow Ridge), the history begins with Bill Nickle. His personality, ideals and seeming inability to compromise on those ideals have turned him into a thing of myth. Take, for instance, the Vision Quest program that Narrow Ridge offers to small groups. Individuals begin with days of preparation for three days of fasting and intimacy with nature through solitude. A United Methodist preacher-turned-mountain man, small in build and gaunt, leads individuals up a wooded mountainside, speaking about connectedness with nature, spirituality and community. Once on the mountaintop, the participants are separated and left alone through three nights with little gear¹⁶ in order to seek a deeper understanding and connection with oneself and with the natural world. Afterwards, participants are provided the

¹⁴ Rev. Bill Nickle, personal interview, 4 Aug 2008.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Participants are instructed in basic survival skills along with safety training to be prepared in case of inclement weather or wildlife encounters such as a snake bite.

opportunity to share their experiences which range from clarity of thought to “heavenly” visitation.

One may ask what a rail-thin Methodist preacher is doing fasting on a mountaintop for a spiritual connection with nature and that is when the story of Bill Nickle is told. In 1989, seeking a change in his life, Nickle resigned his position as director at Wesley Woods United Methodist church camp in Maryville, TN. At the time, Narrow Ridge was still only a dream. Earlier in his life he had tried to live in community with nature but the first attempt at organization never advanced beyond Nickle, his family, their log home on 40 mountain acres, and a charter. Speaking about where he was in 1989 Nickle states, “I had a lot of doubts about trying to come back. I had this log house here, but I had rented it out; but, I just took a leap of faith I guess you’d say, and said well I’m going to try it again.”¹⁷ Nickle took a year off and during that time attended a workshop in Lake Junaluska, North Carolina, where he heard McGregor Smith of Miami, Florida, “the guru of Earth literacy,” for the first time.¹⁸ Smith was using terms like “Earth literacy”- a term he coined- that “just rang a bell with me [Nickle] that what Mac was saying was really much in tune with what I was thinking.”¹⁹ As Nickle describes his attendance at the workshop and subsequent work with Smith in Miami, it becomes apparent that this event, this meeting, carried great significance for Nickle and for the story of Narrow Ridge. Like an Old Testament prophet, Smith spoke the precise words that provided the necessary motivation for Nickle to pick up where he had left off in 1980 and to try once again to establish Narrow Ridge.

Before entering into a discussion of the new Narrow Ridge, one must understand the development of Nickle’s ideas in the years leading up to his 1989 meeting with Mac Smith. In 1980, Nickle applied for a position at Wesley Woods, a United Methodist Church-affiliated

¹⁷ Rev. Bill Nickle, personal interview, Washburn, TN, 4 Aug 2008

¹⁸ Rev. Bill Nickle, personal interview, Washburn, TN, 27 Jan 2009.

¹⁹ Rev. Bill Nickle, personal interview, Washburn, TN, 4 Aug 2008

youth camp on the edge of the Smoky Mountains, and was hired. Narrow Ridge was laid aside, “released . . . to the safe keeping of the mountain” for the time being.²⁰ Bringing Narrow Ridge to life and keeping a family going in the isolation of Hogskin Valley had not been an easy task. There was no money, grants, or much support coming to Narrow Ridge when Nickle completed construction of his log home in 1977. Since its charter three years earlier, Narrow Ridge had shown little movement forward “while, it seemed, they were simply learning to live on the mountain.”²¹ Nickle’s first wife Carol practiced law in Knoxville and daughter Noel attended Webb School- an hour commute and away from home 12 hours “seeing no winter daylight on the mountain except on weekends”- while son Chris waited for the bus to Washburn Elementary until he could join his sister at Webb in 1978.²² The story as written by Nancy Woodruff relates the struggle of this time:

The ridges and mountains were beautiful, life in the log house around the massive stone fireplace was idyllic at times, and yet they were learning that it took more to keep a family going. Mostly it took less commuting stress and more income. Their remote, beautiful mountains were not kind in this respect- to them or to their neighbors. More and more families were driving out of the valley to earn a paycheck. If only the dream of Narrow Ridge could have risen up into reality. When it had not after eight years, it became time for a change.²³

The needs of the family demanded a change and the position at the church camp eased the daily work commute and finances.

With Narrow Ridge set aside, Wesley Woods brought a much easier life. Over the next nine years Nickle would develop Wesley Woods into a “year-round environmental education program and expand its [Wesley Wood’s] facilities, with Nickle swinging a hammer and leading

²⁰ Nancy Woodruff, “Story of Bill Nickle,” unpublished manuscript in possession of author.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

the staff in off-season building”.²⁴ This change in program and development of environmental education at Wesley Woods are very symbolic of the changes in Nickle’s personal ideas about the environment and people’s relationships with other people and the environment: “It was a period of growth, of learning environmental issues, of working constantly with youth, of seeing his own youth graduate high school and leave for college. By 1989 he was reaching the tired point. He needed a change.”²⁵ The time spent at Wesley Woods was preparing Nickle and planting ideas of which he had no notion previously: the role of humanity in ecological principles and a greater need for community.

For Bill Nickle, reflecting on his time at Wesley Woods in order to tell his story, those nine years were critical years of development, the years when his thinking expanded and matured. He explains his own growth in this way;

To begin with, I think that I didn’t have any kind of a concept that I was really an Earthling. . . Well, now I believe that we’re [human beings] totally different, but we’re not that much different. Everything in my body- the minerals, the makeup, seventy-five percent water or sixty-six and two-thirds or whatever- it’s the same in a human being or a cow or a tree or whatever. The water’s there. The chemicals are there. If you boil it all down genetically you can take a worm out here and it’s got a lot of the same genes that alter and become a baboon or an opossum or a fox. We’re all very much related. I didn’t have that sense of kindred – kinship.²⁶

He explains this new understanding as a change in his perception of humanity’s relationship with Earth. As he matured at the camp, he developed this “sense of kindred-kinship”:

[. . .] no longer are we sitting on top of this planet Earth and it’s our stage- let’s do everything we want to do. Earth itself is water, air, and soil and animals and trees and bugs and everything else and then there are human beings. Within the concept of the new cosmology, its like apples are not placed on an apple tree, [instead] they grow out of the tree. Human beings and everything else were not placed on this Earth; we all actually evolved out of it.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Rev. Bill Nickle, personal interview, 4 Aug 2008.

²⁷ Ibid

This was Nickle's comprehension of what he would later be able to call the new cosmology- the addition of cosmology to ecological principles. Alongside that developing notion was the growing sense of a need for community. As Nickle explains, at Wesley Woods, despite age or education level, the youth were only there at camp for a week at a time:

You could see things happening, but then they go back. They could be "green" almost in a week whether it was just a totally new understanding of how to care for the planet; but, then they go back and school or parents who don't even recycle an aluminum can reverse or nullify the environmental education the youth just received.²⁸

This pattern of events reinforced Nickle's growing conviction that what was needed was a community- "a community of people that had a particular intent on caring for creation."²⁹ This community would make concern for the environment the norm rather than the exception.

Nickle, who was a youth minister at the beginning of the 1970s, believed that this sense of community was what young people desperately needed. He imagined a place where youth could escape the turmoil that the Vietnam War as well as the social chaos of the 1960s had created.³⁰ That place would immerse youth into the natural environment and allow troubled students to find comfort and peace in God's pristine creation.

Nickle, along with many others, was frustrated with the institutional church during the 1960s and 1970s. Nickle was working as a youth minister in a church in Kingsport, Tennessee and "Tension in the church grew over the involved approach Nickle and [wife] Carol³¹ were taking, and their frustration grew over the church's inability to serve the deepest needs of young people."³² This conflict eventually led to a sort of break with the institutional church in

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Nancy Woodruff, "Story of Bill Nickle," unpublished manuscript in possession of author; Rev. Bill Nickle, personal interview, 4 Aug 2008.

³¹ Nickle's first wife, who currently practices environmental law in Knoxville, TN

³² Nancy Woodruff, "Story of Bill Nickle," unpublished manuscript in possession of author.

Kingsport, and in 1973 Nickle took a position in Knoxville with the University of Tennessee's Wesley Foundation. Frustrated with pulpits, Nickle eagerly embraced this opportunity to work more directly and actively with students. Although he was unhappy with the institutional church, he did not forsake religion or leave the ministry. On the contrary, he picked up a four church circuit around Washburn and later accepted the job at Wesley Woods church camp in 1980.

To read the story of Bill Nickle's dream and the struggle to bring Narrow Ridge to life brings to mind the stories of Christian saints who persevered for long, difficult, discouraging periods of time before experiencing a breakthrough- an angelic visitation or voice from the heavens that gives the saint a launch pad for the mission which their lives are remembered. These histories, called hagiographies, reflect the polished image of a saint whose story of struggle and triumph has been recited over and over again. Nickle's second wife, Nancy Woodruff, wrote this story for Nickle and for Narrow Ridge. Her written work is a product of the continual retelling of the story. Indeed, Nickle has been referred to as a "prophet" and "visionary leader" by those who know him well.³³ The facts of the story are not false and the struggles nothing less than real hardships, but the telling of the story creates an image of a modern-day saint who has pressed forward with a vision that has not changed and who firmly believes in the cause of Earth literacy.

Woodruff's story begins chronologically with Nickle's activism in Kingsport, TN, and continually emphasizes Nickle's vision in bringing the dream to a reality:

Narrow Ridge began as a dream. Thankfully in the heart of humans who would act. And in one human especially who would act over and over again to pull the dream into enough physical reality that other humans might see its potential, contemplate its pull on their own hearts and minds and also act, if not at Narrow Ridge the place then wherever they might choose.(1)³⁴

³³ Dr. Larry Osborne, personal interview, 20 Oct. 2008

³⁴ Nancy Woodruff, "Story of Bill Nickle," unpublished manuscript in possession of author.

In this story, Bill Nickle is the man who can act to make a difference, and he is particularly suited for bringing this place into being. He is the dynamic personality that has enough drive to never forsake the dream. It is through Nickle that others come to believe in Narrow Ridge and to translate that belief into action.

The story begins in 1970 with Nickle believing that there should be for young people an alternative to war and drugs that could be found through immersion into nature. When the search for a place to exercise the vision “had grown wearisome,” Nickle found the first forty acres of Narrow Ridge and in a “leap of faith” secured the land. The next eighteen years would be years of struggle for this prophet. Nickle and his wife Carol had broken with the institutional church as tension grew. He even faced criticism from his family for leaving a decent job to live in the remote mountain cabin. Although legally incorporated, Nickle could not find support for Narrow Ridge. He wrote and submitted grants for government money and Methodist money but no support came from those sources. Although he and his family built and moved into a comfortable log house (whose construction had its own struggles), daily life in the remote mountains of Grainger County was not easy.

Enter the mountain. In Woodruff’s story, the mountain is all-knowing and teacher in life’s hard lessons- the kind of lessons that must be learned to mature and grow:

Every step of the way the mountain continued as their teacher. Digging a foundation by hand, lifting logs, hauling stone, bringing water to the higher level of the new house, circling yards of frozen water pipe in the tiny cabin for thawing only to freeze again in the sway created by the rocky slope, taking delivery of logs for the new house- all these were gifts of learning from the mountain. (2)

The mountain provides lessons on community: “Again the mountains were teaching this minister/homebuilder/dreamer their ways- in religion and culture and community life. In remote, rural areas the key to social and even physical survival lies in you getting to know neighbors and

letting them get to know you.” The mountain teaches Nickle these lessons; it sends Nickle and his family to Wesley Woods; it knows that painful times are coming and that there is a struggle. Thus, it needs Nickle to grow and mature his dream: “When an opening came for the director of Wesley Woods, a Methodist summer camp on the edge of the Smokies, Nickle applied and was hired. Did the mountain know? Could it see a future that needed him to know more? Perhaps (3).” And things did get better for the Nickles- an easier commute, relaxed financial strains, and a simpler life. Nickle achieved great things with the environmental education program at the camp; but, the environmental education program at Wesley Woods was not the same as the vision he had for Narrow Ridge. By 1989, Nickle was tired of camp life. Narrow Ridge was still on hold, but now Nickle had many of the ideas of which he had little notion previously- cosmology and Earth literacy, for example, though not under those terms. Still, Nickle was unsure about trying Narrow Ridge again. By 1990, all the pieces were in place for Nickle to try Narrow Ridge again. The only thing lacking was the concept he needed to make the physical, the philosophy and the spiritual all come together. He finally found this in the idea of “Earth literacy” being propounded by philosopher Mac Smith. At that workshop at Lake Junaluska where Smith talked about new cosmology and Earth literacy, everything the institutional church, mountains and church camp had taught him came together. Under Earth literacy, Narrow Ridge could begin again, with community, sustainability and spirituality forming the foundation for this new incorporation.

Chapter 3

The Board and Bill: Initial Successes

The differences in Narrow Ridge's new beginning in 1991 as compared to the 1970s were influenced by two major things: Bill Nickle's added experience (Wesley Woods and meeting with McGregor Smith) and the introduction of a Board of directors. The interaction of the Board with Narrow Ridge's founder and the continuous struggle of Narrow Ridge's mission and direction are central to constructing a history of this organization. The Narrow Ridge Board has not always agreed with Nickle's or each other's visions, purpose, or strategies for accomplishing that mission. At one point, the tension caused Nickle to resign his position as Director of Narrow Ridge and cease formal relations with Narrow Ridge. An in-depth look into Narrow Ridge Board minutes and discussion with Board members reveals the struggles of operating Narrow Ridge, especially when members had differing views of the mission and purpose of Narrow Ridge.

If the idea of Narrow Ridge is to have a place that is a model of sustainable living within a community, how has it gone about achieving this idea? The answer is a long and difficult path of trial and error and journeys down myriad paths. Narrow Ridge is a struggle: the mountain of Nickle's earliest beginnings and the theology of Buber both indicate continual struggle in a place of constant uncertainty, but Narrow Ridge's struggle in the twenty-first century is for organizational survival. Survival is hard work in the mountains of Appalachia. Narrow Ridge has constantly faced three main challenges: sustaining a shared mission/vision; paucity of financial resources; inadequate human resources.

Past research has found that entrepreneurial firms/new ventures often rely on the founder/entrepreneur for initial strategy that will determine performance.³⁵ It has been Nickle's vision and story that have drawn many people to Narrow Ridge. Nickle is the entrepreneurial, visionary founder that birthed and to a certain extent has sustained Narrow Ridge. With the addition of a Board of Directors, the strategic decision-making would have to shift from Nickle's founding vision to the collective vision of the Board. This is a necessary step in developing a sustainable organization:

With the growth and complexification of organizations, there is continually a need for organizational renewal, innovation, constructive risk-taking, and the conceptualization and pursuit of new opportunities, a pursuit that often goes beyond the efforts of one key manager. The entrepreneurial role stressed by Schumpeter [45] is socially vital but it can be performed by entire organizations which are decentralized. It can easily exceed or even circumvent the contributions of one central actor.³⁶

The "entrepreneurial role" is the typical image associated with an entrepreneur: a strong personality that makes intuitive, strategic decisions on behalf of the firm which relies on that decision-making ability.³⁷ As a firm grows, though, its expansion moves beyond the abilities of one central figure even though it is still linked to the vision of that figure. This process of growth for organizations is not easy.

Narrow Ridge has always invited individuals of very diverse backgrounds to become involved. Since each person's intellectual journey is different, it brings him/her to have his/her own special emphasis on some element of "community, spirituality and sustainability," despite the fact that they all share a similar commitment to an intentional lifestyle at Narrow Ridge or in

³⁵ Melissa Middleton Stone and Candida Greer Brush, "Planning in Ambiguous Contexts: The Dilemma of Meeting Needs for Commitment and Demands for Legitimacy", *Strategic Management Journal* 17 (1996), <http://www.jstor.org>

³⁶ D. L. Miller, "Correlates of entrepreneurship in three types of firms", *Management Science*, 29 (1983), <http://www.jstor.org>.

³⁷ Ibid.

conjunction with Narrow Ridge and its environmental message. Assemble a Board of directors from this pool and it is unlikely that a consensus on issues of programming, fund-raising, or organizational identity will always emerge between the Board and the founder of the organization.

It is the chief operator of the nonprofit who has the responsibility of carrying out the mission of the organization as defined by the nonprofit's board of directors.³⁸ In the case of Narrow Ridge, that chief operator up to 2000 was founder Nickle. Thus, there is an interesting potential dilemma in that it is Nickle's vision that birthed Narrow Ridge but now a Board might alter that vision or its implementation in a way that Nickle might feel counters the purpose of Narrow Ridge. This is a problem often faced by nonprofits with leaders who have sacrificed for the organization³⁹ and are "unable to let go and truly share leadership."⁴⁰

Crutchfield and Grant, in their book *Forces for Good: The Six Practices of High-Impact Non-Profits*, cite well-known nonprofits such as Habitat for Humanity that faced decline or collapse when the Board of Directors decided that the organization needed to go in a different direction. In the case of Habitat for Humanity, Millard Fuller created a movement, but the Board needed to build an organization to sustain the movement, and conflict followed.⁴¹

In the re-founding of Narrow Ridge, Nickle added a Board of directors and constructed the by-laws that would govern the organization. Narrow Ridge would be dedicated to a

³⁸ Peter F. Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization: Principles and Practice* (New York: HarperColins, 1990), 157.

³⁹ Hildy Gottlieb, "Founder's Syndrome? Who Me?" Help 4 NonProfits Community Driven Institute, ReSolve Inc., <http://www.help4nonprofits.com> (Jan 9, 2009).

⁴⁰ Leslie R. Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant, *Forces for Good: Six Practices of High-Impact Non-Profits* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 169.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 170

“theological study of the environment”⁴² with nine Board members who would meet regularly and in committees. The by-laws state the objectives and purpose of Narrow Ridge:

The Center is established to study, teach and demonstrate a theological approach to principles of ecology and sustainable living. It shall conduct and carry on general activities which will physically and spiritually enrich the lives of persons (including but not limited to lower income and underprivileged of Appalachia) by making available to such persons educational, recreational, cultural, and employment opportunities related to a theological study of the environment.⁴³

This is the mission that Nickle set forth for Narrow Ridge when he re-incorporated it in 1990-91. Those first few years were years of growth and successful programming. Narrow Ridge held its first Board meeting in November 1992, and Nickle began the education of his Board in the community, spirituality, and sustainability principles he believed Narrow Ridge should practice or should continue to practice. During these first five or six years facilities were built, additional land holdings were purchased, and a number of successful programs were launched. However, around 1997, things at Narrow Ridge began to shift in a way that Nickle had not intended. Board members were endorsing a greater emphasis on community activism as they pursued activities designed to better the lives of low income families in Appalachia through very practical means such as teaching local mothers how to can food or prepare nutritious meals. Nickle did not disagree with this type of community outreach for Narrow Ridge, but he believed that Narrow Ridge was losing sight of its original vision. The Board and circumstances were pushing Narrow Ridge away from Nickle’s vision.

Generous donations from Mac Smith and Mike Wilburn⁴⁴ kick started Narrow Ridge in 1991 with an influx of start-up funds that Nickle had not had in 1972 when he first tried to

⁴² “By-Laws of Narrow Ridge Center,” Article III, section 1.

⁴³ “By-Laws of Narrow Ridge Center,” Article III

⁴⁴ Mike Wilburn was a park ranger in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park who purchased much of the land surrounding Narrow Ridge and also donated a large sum of money and land. Upon his untimely passing, Mike’s family donated much of the land he purchased adjacent to Narrow Ridge.

launch the project. The cash allowed Narrow Ridge to start programming and educating people about Earth literacy. Nickle assembled the Board of Directors and they set about developing Narrow Ridge. The years 1992-1999 were fairly successful ones in terms of programming. This is not to say that every program had large attendance or even interest, but many of them were at least sustainable and able to hold themselves up, e.g., the academic program or Earth Knows Publishing. In 1993, Narrow Ridge hosted its first Hogskin History Day, a community get-together/festival with music and food and community dialogue. The Board minutes of August 8, 1993, report that the first Hogskin History Day “was a success with members of the community attending and sharing about families, lifestyles.” Narrow Ridge hosted two permaculture conferences in 1992 and 1993 that resulted in a master design plan for Narrow Ridge land. Narrow Ridge also developed much of its land into land trusts, i.e., land divided into tracts and sold with lifetime leases which have development and construction restrictions. The Hogskin Valley Land Association came together during the period March 1993-1994.⁴⁵ The land trusts, of which there are now three- Hogskin, Black Fox and Little Ridge, remain a large part of what Narrow Ridge does in preserving and setting aside land for wilderness and education. Although the land trusts redirected the focus from the original master plan that had other uses for the land⁴⁶, the sale of leases provided Narrow Ridge with critical revenue, and the many sustainable and comfortable homes that were built at Narrow Ridge helped spread the idea of sustainable home construction through tours. They demonstrated the feasibility of living a life of simplicity in the modern world.

Another significant addition to the Narrow Ridge slate of programs was Earth Knows Publishing. Earth Knows began when McGregor Smith presented Narrow Ridge with an

⁴⁵ Board Minutes of 11 Feb 1993; 8 Aug 1993; 10 Dec 1993; 27 May 1994; 12 Aug 1994

⁴⁶ “Notes from April 29, 2006 Narrow Ridge Board of Directors Meeting” with additional information from 1992 Master Pan included

opportunity to pursue publishing books on Earth literacy. Nickle presented the idea to Board at the February 11, 1993 meeting:

McGregor Smith, Granddaddy of Earth literacy, Miami, wanted to know if Narrow Ridge was interested in getting into the publishing business. He is willing to give \$4000 grants to each Earth literacy center toward funding the publishing of a book. He wants, perhaps Narrow Ridge, to be the organization who would see to getting the materials into its final form.

In 1994 Narrow Ridge received the four thousand dollar grant to publish a book written by Board member and University of Tennessee professor John Nolt. His book, *Down to Earth*, went to the printing press for one thousand copies in February 1995. The Board minutes of April 27, 1995 report good news about the printing: “Press releases have been sent out and radio interviews are being done. There will be an article in the faculty/staff UT newsletter. Sales are going good.” Less than a year later, in March 1996, John Nolt reported receipt of a manuscript from McGregor Smith and that *What Have We Done? State of the Bioregion Report*, written in conjunction with the Foundation for Global Sustainability, would be published the coming fall. Sales of *Down to Earth* continued, leading the Earth Knows Committee to seek Board approval to purchase more copies because orders could not be filled with the current inventory.⁴⁷ Earth Knows published *What Have We Done?* in 1997 and prepared to publish *Now That You Know* by Mac Smith. Smith’s book was for sale by late October, 1997.⁴⁸ Even through hard times at Narrow Ridge, Earth Knows continued to generate income. More recently, the Board discussed the possibility of selling the books on consignment to bookstores to increase sales and reduce their over-stocked inventory.

The academic program has always been a part of Narrow Ridge’s mission and a necessary program for financial stability. The academic program, which focuses on college-level

⁴⁷ Board minutes of 26 Aug 1996

⁴⁸ Board Minutes of 18 Oct 1997

classes, offers programs ranging from a week long immersion experience to a full summer program. Students from Southwestern University in Kansas, Miami-Dade College in Miami (both associated with Mac Smith), Maryville College, the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, and Carson-Newman College have lived there in community and studied social ecology, Earth literacy, renewable energy, and technology. Many also elect to participate in a vision quest.

Nickle was elated at the success of the program. In the director's report of August 18, 1999, he reported:

Eight residents participated in the summer program. Thanks to a wonderful staff team effort, the residents without exception felt that the experience was one of the best of their lives! . . . My sincere belief is that this experience is at the heart of what takes place here. Proof of this comes in many ways, one of which was the return two-day visit of L.K.Plain, a graduate of Southwestern College. During his brief visit, L.K. shared with me how important this place was for him, in what he actually learned about Earth Literacy and real life. Such was the overall evaluation of this summer's residents as well. On a scale of 1- 10, most gave it a ten and no one less than a 9.⁴⁹

The 1999 summer program was not without its faults. Nickle mentioned in his report the difficulties of community living in Strawbale Lodge and the overextension of human resources that the program demanded. He also praised the addition of new cooking and gardening classes: "We have gardened and cooked in the past but never in such an intentional way as it was done this summer."⁵⁰ Although not perfect, things seemed to be progressing at Narrow Ridge. Yet Narrow Ridge needed more money to survive and to get this money they began pursuing grants. Differences over implementation of the grants and the direction of Narrow Ridge became an issue between the Board and Nickle.

⁴⁹ "Director's Report" 18 Aug 1999

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Chapter 4

The Board and Bill: Struggles

Despite increasing successes, everything at Narrow Ridge was not smooth sailing. Narrow Ridge was plagued with financial struggles, which are still a problem. When grants were not forthcoming, major sources of funding came from the academic program, workshops and donations. The problem was they produced little income beyond meeting their expenses.

Narrow Ridge sought funds through grant-writing, but this effort often proved difficult because of its dual mission:

We're kind of in two fields. One is the religion or spirituality area, and if you're there the people in the science area don't want to give you money. And if you're in the science area, which we are, then the people in the religion area don't want to give you money.⁵¹

Nickle also commented that oftentimes the grants that Narrow Ridge received were due to personal connections with those administering the grant. It was difficult to get grants from more impersonal sources who often could not grasp the mission they were being asked to fund. For example, Mary Bryan, the Director from 2001-2003, has commented that organizations did not want to fund spirituality but rather would fund food security.⁵² Another involved member of the Narrow Ridge community, Marcus Keyes, said, "Here is a group talking about the interconnectedness of everything in the world and how we must live everything within that context. For many people, its not getting money to the poor, it's not taking care of the people directly who are hungry," and so funding is more difficult to obtain.⁵³

Even though Narrow Ridge was seeing many successes over these years with its programming, it was not without some consequences. One of the most critical of these was the

⁵¹ Bill Nickle, personal interview, 27 Jan 2009.

⁵² Mary Bryan, telephone interview, 13 Feb 2009.

⁵³ Marcus Keyes, personal interview, 29 March 2009.

increasing need among the Board members for clarity and understanding of Narrow Ridge's mission and direction. Having assembled the Board of Directors himself, Nickle had the task of educating them on Earth literacy, eco-spirituality, and intentional community. Getting the Board "in" on his vision was critical to Narrow Ridge's success.

While Narrow Ridge was enjoying some initial success in the academic program, book publishing, and workshops, the Board was struggling to agree on a sustainable mission for Narrow Ridge. The authors of *Forces for Good*, a handbook on creating successful nonprofits, emphasize the importance of having a clear vision:

Engagement of individuals starts with something obvious, but not at all simple: a clear and compelling expression of an organization's mission, vision, and values. As they articulate their mission and values to outsiders- and inspire others to act on their vision- these organizations are able to appeal to people's emotion at an almost unconscious level. Such connections inspire others to engage with the organization to express their own beliefs and values.⁵⁴

At Narrow Ridge, Nickle created the original mission statement and articulated that mission to the Board of Directors. Narrow Ridge's mission has those three cornerstones of community, spirituality and sustainability, all of which Nickle believed to be necessary to change the way humans converse with Earth. What inevitably happened, however, was that the Board lost a clear understanding of the equal weight that should be given to each of these three cornerstones. Some emphasized community, while others de-emphasized spirituality. The result was conflict. Nickle continued to emphasize eco-spirituality while others on the Board embraced community outreach. This became evident in the conflict that developed over the USDA "Motherhood and Apple Pie" program which Narrow Ridge launched in 1999. Though Nickle believed in the value of such a program, the "Motherhood and Apple Pie" (MAP) program did not exactly align with eco-spirituality and was taking energy away from what he saw as the core mission of Narrow

⁵⁴ Leslie R. Crutchfield and Heather McLeod Grant, *Forces for Good: Six Practices of High-Impact Non-Profits* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 87.

Ridge. Nickle had actually helped put together the initial \$10,000 grant with much help from Weyman Fussell⁵⁵ to research the possibility of conducting the program. When it came time to actually execute the program however, Nickle tried to turn the directorship of Narrow Ridge over to Mike Sosadeeter, who had written the \$95,000 grant to implement MAP. Board minutes from July 24, 1999 are cryptic on the subject— indicating perhaps, the intensity of the conflict that was developing. The minutes say “Mike’s differences with Bill’s” followed by “Bill RE[about] Appalachian Poor- originally figured they would participate and learn. USDA being spun off fit his view” but do not reveal any more. Sosadeeter ran the program until basic differences with Nickle over implementation of the grant influenced Sosadeeter to leave the position:

There was that whole idea that he wanted to take Narrow Ridge in a little bit different direction than I saw it going. I felt like Earth literacy and the new cosmology was what it was about. He was a little bit more towards community action and local community and which was why I thought he would fit into the MAP program.⁵⁶

Nickle was forced to oversee the start-up of the program. Soon there was dissatisfaction among the people at Narrow Ridge. Mary Bryan, bookkeeper, coordinator and interim director for Narrow Ridge related that “People felt like he [Nickle] needed to step back and let the organization grow,” and that he was a founder with a lot of control.⁵⁷ Marcus Keyes stated fairly that everyone involved in decision-making was responsible and that Board acquiescence was just as important as Nickle’s presentation:

Bill is gentle, strong, committed; and he is so committed and so committed to Narrow Ridge that he can be very strong in his opinion at times. There is nobody who has given as much time to Narrow Ridge and for the good of Narrow Ridge as Bill Nickle. All of these qualities are qualities I respect. I believe that if a person goes to a meeting and presents his thoughts, he should do it with all his heart. I believe that’s what leadership has to be. You have to share what you

⁵⁵ Weyman Fussell, Ph.D, Agronomy

⁵⁶ Bill Nickle, personal interview, 27 Jan 2009.

⁵⁷ Mary Bryan, telephone interview, 13 Feb 2009.

believe and share it with passion. Yet, you share it in a way that can be heard and you must always listen with the same passion.⁵⁸

For Keyes, listening was just as important as presenting and Nickle's strong commitment sometimes kept him from listening.

As this conflict with the Board was intensifying in 1999 Nickle was offered an opportunity to work in Mississippi developing the Episcopalian Church's environmental education program. He decided to leave: "I wanted to be sure that Narrow Ridge could take its own direction and not necessarily be what I set it out to be. It seemed like it was a good time to let Narrow Ridge have its own way, to go where it needed to go."⁵⁹ Nickle officially resigned December 31, 1999, leaving the problem of managing the MAP program to the Board.

The MAP program was supposed to provide local women education and experience in canning food, growing vegetables, preparing nutritious meals and also in making crafts for additional family income. At first, the MAP program seemed to be taking off when the program coordinator Debbie Sharp⁶⁰ reported making inroads into the community⁶¹ and recruiting four mothers.⁶² The North Side Task Force was assembled with members of the community to support the MAP program, but fizzled by March 2000. The Board discussed this problem and Narrow Ridge's role in the program at the March 29 and April 19, 2000 meetings. Reflecting back on this time, Keyes stated that the MAP program "didn't fit the purpose of Narrow Ridge" which was sustainable development.⁶³ Some members of the board thought that MAP was a

⁵⁸ Marcus Keyes, personal interview, 29 March 2009.

⁵⁹ Bill Nickle, personal interview, 27 Jan 2009

⁶⁰ Debbie Sharp is a licensed social worker. Narrow Ridge hired her to coordinate the MAP program and handle reports to the US Dept. of Agriculture. After the MAP program, she remained involved at Narrow Ridge and spent some time on the Board.

⁶¹ Board minutes of 18 Aug 1999

⁶² Board Minutes of 15 Sept 1999

⁶³ Marcus Keyes, personal interview, 29 March 2009.

Narrow Ridge program while others thought MAP was a separate entity that was supposed to be sustained by the community.

The MAP program never found strong community support, quite possibly because the program involved educated outsiders to the valley telling the less educated inhabitants how they need to live. Even though the practices at Narrow Ridge could provide security in the future they were not looking to solve present needs. Bryan stated that Narrow Ridge was not accepted in the community and that a stigma had been associated with Narrow Ridge until more recent programs such as the music jams had opened up Narrow Ridge to the community.⁶⁴ Keyes related that Narrow Ridge has never seen itself as outside the community, but the center cannot just “love the land and the hills, but those that live here and have a history here. . . . We have to become people who are yearning to be local. . . . Our actions should show that we are not foreign to this place.”⁶⁵ In the broader world of non-profit organizations, Stephen L. Fisher, in summarizing essays dealing with the “hows and whys of rural organizing” in *Fighting Back in Appalachia*, wrote, “The authors stress the importance of local indigenous leadership recruitment and training, shared and long-term consciousness raising, the development of internal democratic social relations, ideological patience and the willingness to connect with people as they are.”⁶⁶ Despite the work of Debbie Sharp, Interim Director Mary Bryan, and others, the program was abandoned in April 2001, and the grant money transferred to the Clinch Powell Community Kitchen.

⁶⁴ Mary Bryan, telephone interview, 13 Feb 2009.

⁶⁵ Marcus Keyes, personal interview, 29 March 2009.

⁶⁶ Stephen L. Fisher, *Fighting Back in Appalachia: Traditions of Resistance and Change*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 8-9.

Chapter 5

New Harvest CSA and Narrow Ridge

When Bill Nickle resigned as Director at Narrow Ridge in 2000, he left advice that the Board take time to think about the goals and direction of Narrow Ridge. The Board decided to continue the academic program, but without Nickle's charismatic presence there never were enough students registered to make the plan feasible. During this same time, a Narrow Ridge agriculture program was attempted but with little luck. By 2001, the Board still was showing little progress on many programs and was seeking a vision for Narrow Ridge. At that point, they were presented with a proposal submitted by John "JD" Dimick and Aubrey Baldwin, the proposal being to start a community-supported agriculture project (CSA) on Dimick's leased land in the Hogskin Valley Land Trust. The drama surrounding this reveals the Board's difficulty in managing Narrow Ridge "from afar."

In 1999, JD Dimick lived in Wisconsin and worked on a CSA farm. He contacted Narrow Ridge about the possibility of beginning a CSA venture which the Board decided to pursue.⁶⁷ He did not feel, however, that such an arrangement warranted a proposal to the Board at that point and thus did not submit one.⁶⁸ In 2000, Dimick moved into an agreement with Narrow Ridge that he live in the Garden Cabin in exchange for upgrades to the cabin to make it more habitable and to do light maintenance of the grounds around the cabin.⁶⁹ Then, in January 2001, Dimick submitted a proposal to the Long Range Planning and Development Committee (LRPDC). This proposal requested use of Strawbale Lodge⁷⁰ for housing Aubrey and two full time interns, as

⁶⁷ Board minutes of 15 Sept 1999

⁶⁸ Board Minutes of 20 Oct 1999

⁶⁹ Board Minutes of 10 Nov 2000

⁷⁰ The Garden Cabin is a small cabin on Narrow Ridge land that utilizes solar energy and has a garden adjacent to the cabin. Strawbale Lodge is a dormitory and meeting place in the Hogskin Valley Land Trust neighboring Narrow Ridge that is constructed with structural strawbale insulation and solar power. Becky Barn is located on Narrow Ridge property next to the Garden Cabin.

well as the use of Becky Barn for washing and packing produce. The CSA would have twenty-five members and the farming would take place on Dimick's lease. In return for use of the facilities, Dimick and Aubrey would serve as teachers and aides in the academic program and provide a share of produce to students, help update the solar system at Strawbale, and maintain Becky Barn.⁷¹ Although questions arose at the LRPDC meeting about a contingency plan in case the academic program fell through, such as having Dimick provide produce for workshop attendees or a Washburn family in need, the LRPDC approved his proposal and suggested to the Board of Director's that the proposal be accepted with the added stipulations that Strawbale Lodge be vacated whenever a group wanted to rent or if the academic program exceeded 8 students.⁷²

Dimick drew up a final proposal dated January 14, 2001, for the Board, but it was apparently tabled pending enrollment in the academic program. Board minutes from March 21, 2001, show that the Board requested a revised contract to reflect changes in the academic program. New Harvest CSA requested that the original contract be signed and changes made later- probably so they could begin the work of CSA farming.⁷³ The housing proposal included the stipulation that 1) Aubrey and interns vacate Strawbale if it were rented or otherwise needed and 2) the CSA contribute forty hours of work to upgrade the solar system and other hours to maintain the grounds.⁷⁴ On the use of Becky Barn, Dimick planned to construct shelving and a countertop for packing produce with a share of the produce going to Narrow Ridge to use for allowing him to utilize the barn. This proposal would be valid through October 2001.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Dimick and Baldwin Proposal to Long Range Planning and Development Committee Jan 3, 2001

⁷² Minutes of Long Range Planning and Development Committee Jan 3, 2001

⁷³ Board Minutes of March 21, 2001

⁷⁴ Proposal for Community Supported Agriculture/Intern Housing, submitted by JD Dimick and Aubrey Baldwin, Jan. 14, 2001

⁷⁵ Proposal for Community Supported Agriculture Project/ Use of Becky Barn, submitted by JD Dimick and Aubrey Baldwin, Jan. 14, 2001

Narrow Ridge Board minutes do not mention the activities of the CSA for the 2001 growing season, but that is not surprising since the CSA is not really a Narrow Ridge program. The next mention of New Harvest in the Board minutes comes on December 8, 2001, when Dimick presented a contract for 2002. Discussion followed concerning several items that must have emerged as difficulties with New Harvest through the growing season:

The CSA's benefit to Narrow Ridge; the April through September CSA timeframe; the difficulty of predicting the time, duration, and frequency of Strawbale rentals; the need for Strawbale to be open to frequent maintenance; problems with renters' and interns' belongings; the use of Wilburn House; and the work JD will do to fulfill his remaining thirty hours.⁷⁶

The majority of the concerns voiced at the meeting revolved around the housing situation at Strawbale Lodge. Facility rental has long been a part of Narrow Ridge operations and fundraising. It still is one of the most important experiential aspects of Narrow Ridge. A group, family or individual can rent one of the facilities for a few days as a retreat or vacation. The January 14, 2001 proposal had two interns and Aubrey residing in Strawbale for the six to seven month season. Dimick and Aubrey stated their hope that they would not have to vacate Strawbale more than once a month and be given as early notice as possible.⁷⁷ Apparently there was a concern over personal items left in the lodge during a rental (part of the contract stated that personal items could be left at the lodge). Board minutes of May 16, 2001 show that some possessions had been "riffled" during a rental. Dimick's thirty remaining hours of work on the solar system was also a point of discussion. By December, he had spent 10 hours of the proposed forty plus hours, though it was decided that some time he was going to spend in January with an expert in solar systems would count for some hours. All of these issues combined to become a drain on Narrow Ridge's resources in terms of personnel to inform the interns of rentals, the lost

⁷⁶ Board Minutes of Dec. 8, 2001

⁷⁷ Long Range Planning and Development Committee Meeting Minutes of Jan. 3, 2001; Proposal for Community Supported Agriculture/ Intern Housing submitted by JD Dimick and Aubrey Baldwin Jan. 14, 2001

hours of work on an upgraded solar system, and use of Wilburn House for office space.⁷⁸ Dimick submitted a proposal for the use of Wilburn House on October 18, 2001, which the Board approved with revisions at the February 20, 2002 meeting and reaffirmed at the March 23, 2002 meeting.⁷⁹

The 2002 season apparently went well for New Harvest. They hosted two new interns who even began their own CSA on land at Wilburn House per an oral agreement with Narrow Ridge staff.⁸⁰ In October, New Harvest's contract with Narrow Ridge expired but Dimick was granted an extension to January to prepare and present a new contract.⁸¹ In May, Dimick made a proposal to purchase the Garden Cabin and make some modifications such as enlarging the square footage of the house, but this was ultimately rejected by the Board.⁸² During 2003, the Narrow Ridge Board began to take a closer look into the work of New Harvest and its relationship to Narrow Ridge. Minutes of an informal Board meeting on July 30, 2003 reflect a growing concern that culminated in a fact-finding interview with Dimick by member Anne Dungan on August 23, 2003.⁸³ She discovered that many arrangements and agreements between New Harvest and Narrow Ridge were unspoken or oral agreements with individual members such as use of Narrow Ridge land for the CSA or the addition of a chicken coop at Becky Barn to which the Board had never voted on or agreed.⁸⁴ When these findings were submitted and discussed, the Board decided that New Harvest had come to rely on Narrow Ridge resources in ways that threatened their nonprofit status.⁸⁵ Dimick's CSA was a for-profit venture and New

⁷⁸ Board Minutes Dec. 8, 2001

⁷⁹ Board Minutes of Feb. 20, 2002; Board Minutes of March 23, 2002

⁸⁰ "New Harvest CSA and Narrow Ridge: Summary of a Fact-finding Conversation, August 23, 2003

⁸¹ Board Minutes of Oct. 16, 2002

⁸² Proposal for purchase of Garden Cabin from Narrow Ridge, May 4, 2003 submitted by John Dimick and Britta Lees

⁸³ Board Minutes of Aug. 24, 2003

⁸⁴ "New Harvest CSA and Narrow Ridge: Summary of a Fact-finding Conversation, August 23, 2003

⁸⁵ "Narrow Ridge and New Harvest CSA: A Report from the NR Board Meeting, Aug 29, 2003"

Harvest had come to use Narrow Ridge land and three facilities during the growing season. As a result, Narrow Ridge decided to end its relationship with New Harvest and pursue other goals more in-line with the original vision and mission of Narrow Ridge:

This whole arrangement was viewed from the beginning as a short-term effort to enable New Harvest to get started on the Hogskin Lease belonging to JD Dimick. However, over time, much of the farming and production activity of New Harvest relied more, not less, on Narrow Ridge assets. Rather than attaining an independent existence, the trend has been to assume that it can expand its use of NR assets each season. [. . .] New Harvest occupation of the Garden Cabin and extensive, constant use of Becky Barn (and adjacent, recently constructed chicken shed) pre-empts and inhibits NR activity in the very center of its property for its programs during the busiest time of the year.⁸⁶

A report noting many changes was submitted to Dimick and basically amounted to the termination of business on Narrow Ridge assets.⁸⁷ Also, when the Board had refused his proposal to purchase the Garden Cabin, he stated that he had been looking for a site closer to Knoxville.

Anne Dungan arranged a meeting with Dimick to relay the information. She reported back to the Board on September 14 that she had a very hostile meeting with Dimick.⁸⁸ The meeting which had been held before this September 14 meeting had been characterized by a “pride in the work and progress of his CSA and his [Dimick’s] awareness of the need to address the demise of the contracts and arrangements between New Harvest and Narrow Ridge.”⁸⁹ The second meeting with Dimick following the Board’s decision to terminate the relationship was characterized very differently in the background section of a new contract based on the Board’s decisions from September 14, 2003:

At the second meeting, when the concerns of Narrow Ridge were expressed to him, J.D. became irate, verbally abusive and used foul language. In spite of repeated requests to discuss the issues peaceably in a constructive manner, J.D. repeatedly insisted that it was obvious to him that Narrow Ridge was threatened

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Board Minutes of Sept. 14, 2003

⁸⁹ Ibid.

by the success of New Harvest and wanted to get rid of it. He stated that [the] Narrow Ridge Board had a 'history of bad decisions' and declared his intense scorn for Narrow Ridge choices in the past and present.

The Board was appalled to learn of J.D. Dimick's shocking behavior toward its representatives and sweeping contempt for it. It noted that, at the time when, through the Board's active support or inattention, New Harvest was thriving and growing on Narrow Ridge property, J.D. Dimick says he felt the most intense scorn for the Narrow Ridge Board's decisions. Now he is furious with the Board for wanting the return of its land, buildings, and equipment for its own use. The inconsistency is striking.⁹⁰

On November 2, 2003, the Board minutes reported a request from Dimick that a professional mediator be called upon and a meeting take place between the Board and himself. Based on the last meeting with Dimick, the Board was leery of such a meeting. After this mention of a meeting, the next entry concerning New Harvest in the Board minutes comes in April 4, 2004, when a member of the Board reported that New Harvest was clearing out its possessions and deconstructing the chicken coop. With that, the experiment of community-supported agriculture at Narrow Ridge ended.

The story that Dimick told about his experience at Narrow Ridge is very different. Dimick agreed that initially both he and the Board believed that community-supported agriculture should be a part of Narrow Ridge and that a CSA fit well with Narrow Ridge's mission. Dimick intended to use Narrow Ridge resources which were not being used very frequently at the time and to develop them as the basis for a for-profit enterprise that would eventually move to his seventeen-acre lease in Hogskin. He consistently promoted Narrow Ridge when visitors came to see his CSA. He began living in the Garden Cabin in 2000 and in 2003 he submitted a proposal to buy the cabin so that his own future and that of the CSA he was building would be more secure. He was worried about having to negotiate year-to-year contracts and adapt to changes required by the Board. According to Dimick, this proposal met informal Board

⁹⁰ "Contract between Narrow Ridge and New Harvest CSA for 2004: Based on the Board's Decision Taken Sept. 14, 2003

approval; he believed that the matter would be voted on and approved at the next Board meeting. Then, the next he knew members of the Board had scheduled a meeting with him and presented him with a report that asked him to pack up and leave. He had spent time and money improving the Garden Cabin at a time when Narrow Ridge had few funds for such projects. He claimed to have worked many hours shoveling tons of manure into fields to improve the soil. From his point of view, he was improving Narrow Ridge assets and everything was going well when he was suddenly told to move his business and livelihood by a Board of directors that was full of members who did not even live or work at Narrow Ridge. Dimick admitted taking some liberties with the facilities at Narrow Ridge, but he believed that the additions were necessary to a good CSA and therefore reflected positively on Narrow Ridge. From the outset, Dimick believed that he had Board support for his farm and admitted that he had made some executive decisions when no Board members could be found. One example of these “executive decisions” was the decision to name a road through Narrow Ridge property “New Harvest Road” without formal permission of the Board. In the end it appears that there was both a lack of communication between Dimick and the Board and examples of miscommunication. The two sides had increasingly divergent ideas of what the mission and purpose of Narrow Ridge was and how New Harvest CSA would fit into that. This created major tension and caused a rift between the two.⁹¹ After this acrimonious confrontation between the Board and Dimick the two parted company on bad terms.

The conflict with New Harvest CSA and the severe crisis that emerged around the implementation of the MAP program highlights a key point in understanding the history of Narrow Ridge. After Nickle left Narrow Ridge the Board, many of whom did not actually live or work at Narrow Ridge, had trouble articulating a clear vision of the mission and purpose of

⁹¹John D. Dimick, personal interview, 9 Feb 2009.

Narrow Ridge. This is a problem common among non-profits. Without a clear vision it was difficult for the Board to unify around a specific direction for the programs at Narrow Ridge. What they discovered was that it was very difficult for Narrow Ridge to engage in many different programs that tried to do many things at once. In trying to pursue so many programs that tried to simultaneously promote community, spirituality and sustainability they began to realize that this required resources of money and personnel which they simply did not have.

Narrow Ridge hasn't been focused and has gotten into endeavors and programs that may be great; but, they took personnel, they took time, they took money, and it didn't ultimately enjoy either local community support or Board support or leaseholder support. So Narrow Ridge has a good history of good ideas that have petered out after some series of months or years, I think, because of the way they were decided on. In my biased view, they should always reflect back on the core mission, the core values."⁹²

Since the main understanding of the Narrow Ridge mission and vision came from Bill Nickle, his absence left a void that others at Narrow Ridge were unable to fill. Although many worked hard to keep Narrow Ridge going what the Center was lacking was Nickle's charismatic and compelling personality. Narrow Ridge was, it seemed, really Bill Nickle. Without Nickle the organization began to fall apart. By the end of 2003, Narrow Ridge had almost no financial resources remaining and only five of the nine positions on the Board were filled. Narrow Ridge was unable to get an academic program off the ground, had given up on the MAP program, and had ended the experiment with the CSA.

⁹² Larry Osborne, personal interview, 9 Jan 2009.

Chapter 6

Recent History

Nickle returned to Narrow Ridge in 2003 and set about rebuilding Narrow Ridge. With Board approval, Nickle sold several tracts of land in and adjacent to the land trusts which put money back into the accounts and began to systematically fill the board to get it back up to nine members. This time people with a common commitment to eco-spirituality were recruited. The period from 2004 to 2008 was, according to Board member Larry Osborne, “painful” for Narrow Ridge.⁹³ Some members left the Board when conflict arose over programming or financial issues. This time around, as Nickle worked with the new Board, the Board allowed and even pushed conflicts out in the open in order to winnow the Board and reach a point of solidarity of purpose among the remaining members. Osborne recalled that during his time on the Board there were many harsh words spoken and many “flaming e-mails” sent around. Current Narrow Ridge Director Mitzi Wood-von Mizener agreed that conflict was persistent for several years although the process helped bring about a useful consolidation. “People invest a lot of themselves into the organization and everyone has their own unique dream of what it can be or how we should direct our attention and they’re not always on the same path . . . but there is a common purpose that everyone seems to share.”⁹⁴

As of 2008-2009, the Board and staff of Narrow Ridge are optimistic that times are getting better. The makeup of the Board has changed since 2004 to include people more closely aligned to the original core mission and values of Narrow Ridge. Having this has proven to be critical throughout Narrow Ridge’s history. A new volunteer director, Mitzi Wood-von Mizener, has brought fresh leadership and organizational skills resulting in a steady increase of successful

⁹³ Larry Osborne, personal interview, 9 Jan 2009.

⁹⁴ Mitzi Wood-von Mizener, personal interview, 23 Jan 2009.

program activity. A new farmer, Thomas Henderson, is now on staff and working to re-start a more mission-based agriculture program. Financial stability still remains a daunting challenge, but the new Board is enjoying a collegial spirit and shared vision that was missing during earlier years. Narrow Ridge has slowly implemented new programs to reflect the core values such as community music jams, a “green” burial ground and a renewed agriculture program. These new programs foster community between Narrow Ridge and its neighbors promote sustainable living and Earth literacy; all of which support Nickle’s founding philosophy.

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