

Egalisharian™ Customs

My ideas are new, and therefore I have been obliged to find new words, or to give new acceptations to old terms, in order to convey my meaning.¹ ~ Charles de Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu

Words represent thought. New words help me bring clarity to ideas or experiences because I cannot find adequate ones among the words that exist.

Egalisharian™ is my coined term for a unique set of customs, practices, and traditions that self-governing farmers in Britain used for hundreds of years before the landing of the Norman Invaders in 1066. Adding the superscript (™) follows the customs of the Norman conquerors and their political and philosophical descendants by affixing a symbol to my creation to signify that it is “mine.” The trademark symbol (™) shows it is not registered but still lets me give notice to the public that my new word is distinctive. But language itself is not “owned” by anyone, yet by convention and laws I can claim a contribution to this shared or common resource as something distinctly “mine.”

Egalisharian™ is a mash-up term that begins with “egali-” from *egalitarian*. Egalitarian means equal, and comes into English from French, with older roots in a word from Latin. The ending syllables “-sharian” I build from the English word “share” which has roots through the Germanic languages into Old English and from there into our usage today. Thus in one word I meld syllables with Latin roots to ones with German and English roots.

I release Egalisharian into the world because we keep and use language as a shared and common “property.” Languages, like people living in rough equality in groups, are the common and original heritage of all human cultures in the world. It is not that we began as individuals and chose to collect together as groups, as some

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philosophers would tell it. Instead, we began as groups and continue as groups due to the benefits of living together. Today's dominant economic system emphasizes private property and gain. Returning to self-organizing groups may be a means of finding more love, support, and community for those who are interested.

My motivation to rediscover Egalisharian customs began while watching the 2003 documentary, *What I Want my Words to Do to You*. In this film, writer Eve Ensler (*The Vagina Monologues*) conducts a workshop with a group of women serving long sentences in the Bedford Hills maximum security prison in New York. As many of the women shared their tragic journey, they also revealed that they were not the same people that had committed those crimes. They didn't mean, of course, that theirs were cases of being falsely accused. They meant that some of their experiences while in prison had brought about a change in their personalities.

Several women revealed that wanting to be known and seen led them ultimately to actions that brought them to prison:

I think I did a lot of what I did to be seen and heard and known by my parents.
So many of my actions were hardly worth the costs for the attention they brought.
Wanting friends and wanting to be accepted played a big part in why I'm here.

When Ensler asked: "What is one thing that is changed about you since you've gotten to prison?" one inmate summed it up:

I mean, so much transformation goes on behind these walls that a lot of the outside people don't even understand. How people reinvent theirself (sic), how they become aware of things they weren't even aware of before they got here. It creates new people. And we're not the same people who came in here, 10, 15, 20 years ago.²

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I found it telling that these women transformed themselves through participation in some type of group. The group might be a twelve-step program, a Bible study group, or a two-person group formed by finding a fellow inmate to be honest with. These groups benefited the inmates by offering a place for them to heal and gain insights into their actions.

Reflecting on life in the United States, I saw the pattern that led these women to prison is upside-down: first you must "reach bottom," as twelve-step programs call it. Reaching bottom means a person feels some aspect of their behavior is out of their control. Only then do people seek help to reform and redeem their lives.

I began to wonder how this stress on people as *individuals* began and how did the belonging community get so frayed that it took being behind bars to discover it again? And critical for my efforts was asking "Who drove this change?"

Coincidentally, I started researching a timeline on the history of enclosures in England. I wanted to understand how a similar process informs the loss of affordable housing in countries with capitalist economies today. The modern name, "gentrification," seems like it should be a wonderful thing, but this process casts many people out of their homes into the streets.

I found a bloodline from the enclosure laws that displaced people for over 700 years to gentrification laws today. But the enclosure laws had to begin at a particular time and they also replaced something. This led me to wonder "What customs and practices did the enclosures enclose?"

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I quickly learned that there were many enclosures in the 18th century. As I followed their history back in time, I discovered the first law that permitted them was 169 years after the Norman Conquest. According to research by Lionel Green, a key part of the Statute of Merton of 1235 gave lords of the manor rights to “enclose commons and waste lands, provided that sufficient land is available to satisfy customary tenants’ rights.”³ This is a law the Norman lords wrote for their own benefit – it had no mechanisms for resolving disputes between a lord and the people already living on and using the land.

In 1066, William the Conqueror defeated King Harold at the battle of Hastings and soon after conquered the rest of England. What type of culture did he conquer? What was the life of common people like in 1065 and earlier?

One example of pre-Conquest culture I found was during the reign of the Saxon King Alfred the Great (b. 849, d. 899; King of Wessex 871 - 899). He was a warrior, scholar, thinker, translator, and lawmaker. I remember news reports that King Alfred’s bones (or those of his son Edward) were identified in 2014.⁴ What could King Alfred’s return to our awareness be trying to tell us? Why would he come into *my* awareness? Does his spirit want some of his insights taken up again and brought forward?

King Alfred is the only English monarch that historians call “The Great.” One legend tells that King Alfred worked out a way to have no theft in his realm. I had to pause my reading and imagine no theft today – I could leave my computer unattended at a café and go to the counter for another muffin. Homes and cars could be left open. Lots of folks would not be in jails.

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How did Alfred end theft? After he had secured his kingdom, King Alfred wrote a Law Code collated from the laws of all three kingdoms in Britain at the time: Kent, Mercia and his own Wessex. The law that eliminated theft was simple: when something was stolen and the actual individual thief could not be found, the entire “hundred” would be fined.⁵ A hundred was a collection of one hundred families of freemen, composed of ten tythings of ten families each. To test this law, King Alfred would leave a golden ring at busy crossroads. It was never taken.⁶

The hundred was the centerpiece of the frankpledge tradition and custom for maintaining fair relationships. Typically a male youth pledged into his local hundred at the age of twelve. The tything court would meet once a week to deal with small disputes among families, and the hundred court would meet once a month to deal with larger issues or cross-tything concerns. Attendance at these courts was mandatory. These courts dealt with crimes but also common disagreements such as how farming plots should be allocated.

The members of the hundred in the frankpledge network also farmed the land using the open field method that rotated either two or three crops. The farming land around the village was held in common and each family got an allotment of several plots to farm. The farming of a particular plot represented a folk-right, not ownership, and periodically the farmers rearranged among themselves which families worked which plots.⁷

I began to wonder how the annual re-shuffling would work. It makes imaginative sense that they met after the final harvests and before the next planting

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season, so late fall to early winter. Everyone knew the land was shared in common and each family had folk-rights to at least two plots to farm each year, let's say. Here's my imagined scene for part of the re-shuffle:

Cuthbert: Well, it's my turn to speak. I'm grateful that last year I worked the upper hillside plot and one in the middle of the flatlands.

Somehow with my scrambling with a sickly wife and injured boys, many of you helped with the farming. I thank all who pitched in. I'll return the favor, trust me for that.

As you all know, those were some of the best strips of land for farming, and we had more than enough, so we shared our excess with many of you at various feasts, and with the bondsmen families. You also know my wife recovered but my boys died from wounds they got fighting alongside the king. May God welcome them in heaven and we always remain free.

As for my plots for this year, I have only a need for a middling good stretch for myself, wife and remaining small children. They can be anywhere about our village. My kids are getting bigger and to walk and haul does them good.

After all the male head of households had given their updates, I imagine they set off the parcels that would be fallow the coming year, and perhaps followed with rounds of selection, for which several schemes could work.

I was astonished. So here, in England before the Norman Conquest, was a deeply shared communal living and land-use system. This combination of rough equality in communal decision making and intentional reorganization of folk-rights are the essential features of Egalisharian™ customs.

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Customs are part of a people's culture that express how that culture's members individually and collectively make sense of – and enact – how to live their lives. To untangle how people as separate persons and people working together as groups made sense, I combined the sensemaking theories of Karl Weick with the first-, second-, and third-person schema from English grammar. My culture-building map involves first-, second-, and third-person sensemaking.

Weick meant by sensemaking those processes and activities people use to reduce uncertainty, ambiguity, ambivalence, or complexity.⁸ Sensemaking is both active and receptive – about authoring as well as reading.⁹

First-person sensemaking includes all the ways an individual member can understand and create in private and while alone. It may include making lists or comparison tables, conducting independent research, recalling dreams, or journaling. It also includes all the prior life experiences and education a particular member consciously or unconsciously draws upon while contemplating their life and options.

The essential features of second-person sensemaking are that participants can speak directly to one another, ask questions, and everyone's participation moves along at the same pace. Thus people engaged at this level of sensemaking construct meaning together. Frankpledge culture with its tything and hundred courts relied upon direct, second-person sensemaking.

Third-person sensemaking shows two different faces. One face subordinates people and their experiences by enshrining authorities, experts, rules, and laws. The influence of this perspective pervades our culture. One finds its domination through the

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convention of speaking of "law," "truth," "facts," and "knowledge" as though they existed independent of human understanding and interpretation.

The third-person sensemakers and decision makers can be quite distant from the people their decisions impact. One sees this every day in the headlines about corporate CEOs closing plants far removed from the company's headquarters. This puts people they have never met out of work.

The other face of third-person sensemaking builds from first- and second-person sensemaking to create a participative structure in which any member may suggest changes, or initiate fresh approaches. Customs, theories, old practices, and so on, are for people to reference but they are not enshrined and permanent. In larger groups, the final decision may be voted on by people who do not know the original proposer; but everyone involved feels connected through their common membership.

A person may enter at any sensemaking level to build a path back to Egalisharian living. They might imagine or create a vision for such a life. Or, like the women in the Bedford Hills prison, they might discover the benefits of mutual help and support in a structure imposed upon them. Or, a person might join an organization or practice like Alcoholics Anonymous with established norms for how the group functions and a set of stages or steps that members work their way through.

Though the Norman third-person sensemaking framework is now dominant across all major institutions, there are expressions of sharing and mutual support that function independent of the sanctions or approvals of the state, schools, church, or

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corporations. Below are a few examples of ways back to Egalisharian living viewed through the sensemaking lens.

Wise Not-Understanding

And when you realize that their activities are shabby, that their vocations are petrified and no longer connected with life, why not then continue to look upon it all as a child would, as if you were looking at something unfamiliar, out of the depths of your own solitude, which is itself work and status and vocation? Why should you want to give up a child's wise not-understanding in exchange for a defensiveness and scorn, since not-understanding is, after all, a way of being alone, whereas defensiveness and scorn are participation in precisely what, by these means, you want to separate yourself from.

~ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*¹⁰

To intend to stick to a “child's wise not-understanding” to most of us immediately sounds immature, as a state of deliberate ignorance and withdrawal from the “realities” of the world.

But – must we refer to what Rilke *did* as the lack of understanding? Rilke had reflected deeply about what he wanted to do with his life and made a choice. He had switched off the nagging of his parents and the material seductions of the general culture to pursue a career as a poet. He also traveled and had attended military academy as a youth.

Rilke, therefore, was not a hermit away from the news of his day. He kept for himself how he made sense of his world. It took work; it was something he intentionally *did* – and an active verb is called for.

I will name Rilke's active effort to hold to a “child's wise not-understanding” *soloknowing*™. Soloknowing is holding firm to a personal frame or interpretation of

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events, even as other people actively attempt to push their way of understanding upon everyone. Soloknowers may feel alone and isolated when the hysteria of “understanding” swirls around them.

The type of personal sovereignty Rilke displayed every person who seeks Egalisharian living has to find within themselves. In different words, Kurt Vonnegut said the same thing, “To practice any art, no matter how well or badly, is a way to make your soul grow. So do it.”

The “art” is up to each of us to find. It can be anything: painting, dancing, cooking, raising children, teaching, gardening, or being a good friend. I call that moment of accepting one’s art and committing to expressing it Beswitched™.

Professional fine artists (painters, sculptors, photographers, etc.) write an artist statement. The artist says in these texts, “This is who I am,” “This is what interests me,” and “This is how I express myself through art.” I find this an intriguing practice and some of the best written expressions of first-person sensemaking.

Artists neither seek nor want external permission. The permission to be an artist comes from within. With a few fortunate connections with other artists or people with an appreciation of one’s talents along the way, artists wake up to taking their art seriously.

Most artists understand that exposing their works to others for viewing (as performing artists like musicians and dancers do) or possible purchase (as fine artists do), also exposes oneself to criticism. As sculptor Anne Truitt writes, “visibility attracts lightning.”

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So there is an inward permission to do the art, and an outward permission for people to react as they will. Many theater performers, playwrights, and directors don't read reviews. They either have others screen reviews for them or they don't pay attention at all. This is liberating for the artist.

Artists work first to please themselves. They nurture their work alone until it feels ready for outside eyes. Virginia Woolf once visited Auguste Rodin's studio. He had one work under a tarp and asked visitors not to peek, but they were free to look about the rest of the studio. Woolf lifted a corner of the tarp and Rodin walked over and slapped her hand, saying, "I told you not to peek!"

Thus, artists have self-appointed permission to protect their works and their integrity. All permissions are ultimately self-permissions.

Artists know that what they value is of value, to them if to no one else. Anne Truitt weighed the balance of her options when low on money:

There is a point where lack of money feels like a draining of bone marrow. I began to seriously contemplate taking a routine job of some sort but am loathe to do so. Not out of laziness but because I fear the kind of sickening failure implicit in betrayal of self, the spending of my energy drop by drop instead of into the waves that lift my work into existence.¹¹

Most people who practice artistry of some kind in their lives at less than a professional level are not called to an extreme level of devotion to their craft. One can find one's beswitched™ inner artist without necessarily being what is commonly considered an artist. I.F. Stone said anything at its best is poetry. We can play with that: when we live at our best, it's artistry.

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While they work, artists are the inversion of people at “rock bottom.” Rather than feeling the pain of scraping along the bottom, the artist, as a dedicated sensemaker, explores the thrill of bringing material experience to something exquisite within.

The work never will match the vision, and they know that, but the effort as a type of spiritual devotion can only strengthen their sense of personal substance. It grows their souls.

Practicing first-person sensemaking prepares one for sustained second-person sensemaking with other people in groups. Many groups are not directly concerned with the growth and health of each member – they meet to discuss books in Book Clubs, or watch their favorite teams in the noisy atmosphere of a pub. The group can also be a place for personal growth and healing, a hive of second-person sensemaking, like Alcoholics Anonymous.

Alcoholics Anonymous

Doc S. drove us both from Akron to Cleveland one night and the same pattern was repeated. The universality of alcoholism was more apparent here. In Akron it had been mostly factory workers. In Cleveland there were lawyers, accountants and other professional men, in addition to laborers. And again the same stories. The pattern was repeated also in Chicago, the only variation there being the presence at the meetings of a number of newspapermen. I had spent most of my working life on newspapers and I could really talk to these men. The real clincher, though, came in St. Louis, which is my hometown. Here I met a number of my own friends who were A.A.s, and the last remnants of skepticism vanished. Once rollicking rumpots, they were now sober. It didn't seem possible, but there it was.

~ Jack Alexander, 1945¹²

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) taught me a few things about second-person sensemaking and support groups in general. In the spirit of second-person

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sensemaking, these lessons are not hard and fast rules or laws but serve as reminders of qualities to attend to.

To study AA's origin story is to appreciate how difficult it can be to get something off the ground. AA had its beginnings in 1935. It is the considered result of personal trials and shrewd observations of Bill W. and Dr. Bob, two men who struggled with alcoholism and founded AA. Though their names are now disclosed as Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, I will refer to them by their anonymous names.¹³ They found anonymity helped alcoholics want to attend meetings. It serves the same purpose as a commitment to confidentiality serves now in many types of groups. I'll put anonymity as the first characteristic on my list of lessons.

Before he worked out his steps to permanent sobriety, Bill W. struggled with cycles of drinking and relapse and attended the Oxford Group (later renamed Moral Rearmament) in various cities for support and help. The Oxford Group has several features that Bill W. wove into the structure of AA: confession supports change, people can help each other, a group is required, and changed people must help others change. This adds four more items to my list of lessons.

The leaders of the Oxford Group had a distinct class preference. They recruited new members from among the elite strata of society. Bill W. was edged out of participating because he was not "maximum" enough.

Bill W. recognized that alcoholics came from every strata of society. Rather than publishing a list of prominent members as the Oxford Group had done, Bill W. and Dr. Bob founded AA upon the practice of anonymity. Upholding anonymity meant the

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founders remained humble and they themselves had to refuse using their connection with AA for private gain. Bill W., with the help of “group consciousness” – a belief that a group after honest and open discussion would have a better decision than a single person deciding alone – learned to prioritize service to AA over making money for himself. Following this principle Bill W. withdrew an endorsement for a book by a friend and turned down an offer to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine. He also dissuaded the Nobel Prize Committee from considering giving him one of their famous awards.

He was not free to “monetize” his leadership role, as today’s venture capitalists would call it. But those constraints had a positive effect for AA. First, group consciousness brought Bill W. the understanding that seeking personal gains would hurt, not help, AA. Second, AA members also understood monetizing his connection with AA would violate their core values. Just as when a chapter forgot one of the values Bill W. would gently remind them, so also when Bill W. forgot one of the values, he got a reminder from the members. Participating in AA was a *reciprocal* arrangement. Reciprocity is another lesson learned.

Between June 10, 1935, when Dr. Bob took his last drink and the founding date of AA, and the explosion of national awareness of AA with Jack Alexander’s article in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1941,¹⁴ the organization straggled along. Both of the co-founders were broke even as they traveled to help new AA meetings get started and personally assisted uncountable alcoholics in their own homes. For a couple of years,

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Bill W. and his wife Lois were literally homeless after the bank lost patience with them and foreclosed on their house.

In the middle of this financial crisis, Bill W. used connections he had made during his career as a stock analyst to appeal to John D. Rockefeller, Jr. for help building AA. After having his staff research AA, Rockefeller surprised Bill W. by strictly limiting his financial support to just \$5,000 instead of the requested \$50,000. Rockefeller told AA's founders that AA as a movement would do best by building itself out from the contributions of people who became members and found that AA helped them reduce their drinking. Rockefeller put that the money in an account for Dr. Bob and Bill W. to draw down a \$30 a week stipend and to pay off Dr. Bob's mortgage.¹⁵

Later Rockefeller convened a meeting of his friends to help them learn about AA. His son Nelson told the assembled wealthy people the same message. The money collected that night was far less than Bill W. had his hopes set on raising. Eventually Bill W. admitted that the alternative support Rockefeller gave – offering the services of his executives and lawyers to help AA with legal matters – was better for AA. “Only much later did we realize what Mr. Rockefeller had really done for us,” he wrote. “At the risk of personal ridicule, he stood up before the whole world to put in a plug for a tiny society of struggling alcoholics ... Wisely sparing of his money he had given freely of himself. Then and there John D. Rockefeller, Jr. saved us from the perils of property management and professionalism. He couldn't have done more.”¹⁶

What have AA members accomplished? Beginning from just two people in 1935, and publishing fewer than 5,000 copies of *Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1939, AA has grown.

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AA keeps no membership rolls, doesn't require the payment of dues or fees, and anyone can attend a meeting. AA's General Service Office, however, estimates that there are 118,000 active meetings helping 2.1 million people annually around the world.¹⁷ From big cities to small towns across the US, in correctional facilities like Bedford Hills, and in most major cities in the western world, one can find AA meetings. One friend once told me that while traveling in Paris she felt the old urge to get a drink and knew she had to find a meeting. She found one and was welcomed. This adds "all are welcome" as my last lesson from AA.

AA has organized a way for people to deal with the personal challenges of alcoholism. Cooperative businesses help people deal with material challenges of saving money and having a place to work. I turned to them next to see what lessons they hold.

Cooperative Businesses Update Egalisharian Customs

Groups of individuals around the world and throughout time have worked together in pursuit of common goals. Examples of cooperation, or collective action, can be traced back to our prehistoric predecessors who recognized the advantages of hunting, gathering, and living in groups rather than on their own.¹⁸

~ Kimberly A. Zeuli and Robert Cropp

I would delete "rather than on their own" from Zeuli and Cropp's quote. Our ancestors used the advantages of living in cooperating groups, because that was the only way to survive. There was no cost-benefits analysis with its balancing and testing of one way of being versus another.

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Zueli and Cropp also note that “Between 1760 and 1843, nearly seven million acres of agricultural land in England were enclosed in estates. As a result, large numbers of small farmers were driven from their land ...”¹⁹

Cooperatives this long after the destruction of the frankpledge system and, looking to organize themselves during the rise of industrial capitalism, would have to make a fresh start. The basis for the hundred and frankpledge system had been destroyed: the people who lived on land they shared and owned together had been forced off by the enclosure of the land by the barons and moved into cities. In the cities, people suffered whereas before they were free farmers.

Eight hundred years after William the Conqueror began the process of dissolving the ancient practices of cooperation embedded in the tythings and hundreds, people had to relearn how to trust each other again and develop dormant skills of cooperation. It was a jerky, stumbling process.

The newly rediscovered need for cooperation would require promoters and thinkers – to imagine both the material basis for cooperating and what the norms and rules should be. The leading promoters of cooperatives in early 19th century England were Robert Owen and William King. They approached the same concept – cooperatives – from opposite ends.

Robert Owen, a successful industrialist, thought deeply about how to organize communities around cooperative principles. Owen promoted large communities supported by resources from outside of the community at first. Owen used up most of

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his fortune founding a community based on his ideas in New Harmony, Indiana in 1824. The community failed.

William King, a physician and Utopian Socialist, advocated small and humble beginnings with capital (and volunteer service) supplied by members.

Interest in co-ops bloomed throughout England with many conferences being convened on the topic and the founding of over 300 cooperative societies. King's own efforts were successful for a time, but he had to shift his attentions to his own finances and cooperatives organized along his ideas dissolved due to internal rifts.

But with 300 seeds, one might take root. Following King's approach, a consumer co-op was launched in 1833 in Rochdale, England. It failed, but a core group of 28 members continued to delve into what it would take to found a successful co-op with the following goals:²⁰

- (1) to sell provisions at the store;
- (2) to purchase homes for their members;
- (3) to manufacture goods their members needed; and
- (4) to provide employment for their members who were either out of work or poorly paid.

In sum, they wanted to "establish a self-supporting home colony of united interests" and to "arrange the powers of production, distribution, education, and government" in the interests of its members. In addition, they hoped to open a "temperance hotel" in one of the cooperative houses to promote sobriety.

These 28 Rochdale Pioneers studied hard:

"The Pioneers learned from the co-op failures of the past. For example, the business practices they adopted for their small store, later called the Rochdale

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Principles, were novel primarily in their combination; many had been borrowed from other cooperatives."²¹

The Rochdale Cooperative still exists. Parliament provided formal legal status to cooperatives as legitimate businesses in 1852. Soon after, some cooperatives organized themselves into the North of England Co-operative Society. Now named the Co-operative Group, it has become a cluster of co-ops engaged in many sectors: food, finance, farms, insurance, banking, and funerals – and the world's largest consumer owned enterprise. The Co-op Group's website list its values and principles:²²

Principles more valuable than profits. We're founded on a set of values and principles describing a different, fairer and better way of doing business.

Our Values

Self-help – Members joining together and making a difference. Whether it's supporting a national charity like British Red Cross or working in their local community.

Self-responsibility – Every member doing their bit, making our co-op a success by supporting its activities and using its products and services. They encourage others to support it too.

Democracy – All members are equal. Voting power can't be bought – it's one member, one vote.

Equality – Our co-op gives all members an opportunity to get involved, like campaigning for fair trade.

Equity – Co-op is committed to fairness.

Our Principles

Voluntary and open membership – Anyone over 16 who likes the way we do business can join.

Democratic – Any member can vote if they've spent £250 in a year. That's only £4.80 a week.

Member economic participation – We want every member to be a loyal customer. It's our responsibility to give them a good reason to be.

Autonomy and independence – We're only accountable to our members, not shareholders.

Education, training and information – We'll give members what they need to play a full part in our business, including all the information they need to make informed choices— whether that's buying a funeral plan or a loaf of bread.

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Co-operation among co-operatives – We work with, and support, other co-operatives in lots of areas, for example, jointly buying from our suppliers to keep prices lower for customers.

Concern for the community – We use our profits to support the local communities we serve and give back to members.

The co-op business model is here to stay. The Co-op Group has more than eight million members, runs 3,750 outlets, employs over 70,000 people, and has an annual income of more than £10 billion.²³

Ironically, William King and Robert Owen clashed during their lifetimes over whose concept of cooperation should prevail. The cooperators didn't cooperate! They could have shared the credit as Owen had the vision and King showed the means.

Owen's vision:

I know that society may be formed so as to exist without crime, without poverty, with health greatly improved, with little, if any, misery, and with intelligence and happiness increased a hundred-fold; and no obstacle whatsoever intervenes at this moment, except ignorance, to prevent such a state of society from becoming universal.²⁴

King's means:

Co-operation means, literally, "working together." ... We must form ourselves into a Society for this especial purpose; we must form a fund by weekly deposits; as soon as it is large enough, we must lay it out in various commodities, which we must place in a common store, from which all members must purchase their common necessaries, and the profit will form a common capital to be again laid out in the commodities most wanted. Thus we shall have two sources of accumulation – the weekly subscription, and the profit on articles sold.²⁵

The challenge for cooperators today, as it was then, is that so-called mainstream culture is skewed away from cooperation and toward structures of dominance and hierarchy.

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Still, I personally have experienced many forms of cooperative efforts in my life. Not all of them could be called successful, and some were very well organized but intentionally brief—lasting only a few days. I can count six cooperatives I belong to: two grocery store cooperatives, a memorial services co-op, an outdoor retail and recreation co-op, and two community supported agriculture cooperatives.

I live in a condominium, which is primarily a real estate scheme to help more people buy homes who otherwise might not have been able to afford them. Most of the other owners put in as little time as possible to deal with our common challenges. Some owners don't put in any time at all and use their units as rental property but let the rest of us deal with the daily problems. This was not my original goal.

My partner and I wanted to join an intentional community where the other owners understood that living well together required good will and hard work. What happened showed me that vague good intentions are not enough. There's a definite skill set needed by everyone "pledged" to cooperate that makes an intentional community work. Many of us were working hard on drafting by-laws for dealing with disagreements but we were all new to one another. We also were reviewing architectural plans for the scope and scale of the project.

Before we had worked out all the rules and the etiquette of how we would sustain our egalitarian principle, something I was working on sparked a strong reaction from the wealthiest male. He had put in a great deal of time organizing the project before we joined.

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He wrote me a long email attacking the work I was leading on a committee sanctioned and chartered by the whole group to recruit a greater diversity of potential members. I knew immediately this alpha male was cross with me. He didn't send copies to the whole group or the other committee members. Later, during mediation between the two of us, he claimed he had some questions. I pointed out that there wasn't a question mark in the email. Not long after that we "unpledged" ourselves and left the project.

Leaving meant that I would not experience one of my lifetime goals of living in genuine community. I am stalked by "what ifs." What if the group had had sturdy enough agreements to handle his questions and my answers *as a group*? What if we all had been through a skill-building workshop and he had found a more diplomatic way of raising his concerns with the committee?

Like King and Owen, I also found that simply intending to cooperate will not automatically lead to success. No artist finishes every work they start; no support group is guaranteed to survive; not every co-op will create enough cash flow or recruit enough members to stay in operation. What I know – my soloknowing – is that it is important to me that I made the attempt. What I've learned I can share with others.

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What Makes Sense Now?

The greatest terror a child can have is that he is not loved, and rejection is the hell he fears. I think everyone in the world to a large or small extent has felt rejection. And with rejection comes anger, and with anger some kind of crime in revenge for the rejection, and with the crime guilt – and there is the story of mankind. I think that if rejection could be amputated, the human would not be what he is. Maybe there would be fewer crazy people. I am sure in myself there would not be many jails.”

~ John Steinbeck, *East of Eden*²⁶

I glean two dozen “lessons” from my survey of frankpledge, soloknowing, AA, and co-ops that support Egalisharian practices:

Soloknowing™/ Personal Permission	Voluntary Pledges To Help Each Other	Self-Help	Self- Responsibility
Anonymity/ Confidentiality	Confession	Organize Groups	Changed People Must Change Others
Welcome To All	Democracy	Equality	Fairness
Organizational Autonomy	Organizational Independence	Education, Training, & Information	Cooperation With Other Cooperatives
Concern For Others	Scheduled Conflict Resolution Times	Shared Norms And Expectations	Highest Values Are People, Relationships And Principles
Beswitched™	Periodic Rebalancing	Reciprocity	Group Consciousness

Depending on their purposes and goals, cooperators mix and match these and other characteristics they need. Every type of cooperation is different. The weight and rank of the features that emerge as vital to their launch, continuation, and development

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will be, by necessity, different as well. To use the arts again as an example, the characteristics of a collaboration to produce blown-glass sculptures is radically different from the characteristics a company of actors use to produce a play.

The idea of periodic rebalancing towards fairness wants a philosopher and advocate. The few I know do not approach the major reshuffling of property on the scale practiced in the open field system of pre-Norman times.

I have a small-scale personal example from college. As an entering freshman at Amherst College I was assigned a room in a dorm with a roommate. This is the custom, of course, and the admissions committee had used some formula to pair us up. At the end of my first semester I decided to stay on campus to save money. Another student also too distant from home to afford the cost also stayed. Several of our floormates trusted us with their keys and gave us permission to use their hotplates, refrigerators, popcorn poppers, and most importantly, their stereos. With this open access we moved from feeling very much like we were of a “lower socio-economic status” (that is, poor) to feeling like we were spending a couple of weeks at a luxurious resort.

When everyone returned we called a meeting of the floor (a tything court?) and pitched an idea: let’s reshuffle the roommate mix! After all, we reminded them, the school had thrown us together and had not consulted us. Just on our floor, we could remake our arrangements and experience living with a different friend for the last part of the year. My friend’s roommate and my own roommate were on board, but the other floormates passed.

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Each “room” in this particular dorm had two sub-rooms. Most roommates used the front room for desks and bookshelves, and the back room had a door and was the bedroom with separate twin beds.

So we had four people and four rooms – dorm rooms 202 and 205. One of my friends had grown up in a large family and never had a room of his own. In room 202, we gifted to him his own bedroom and made the front room the study area with four desks. What use he made of this privacy is his story to tell, not mine.

In room 205, we put the three remaining beds in the front room. This left one room – what used to be my bedroom – empty. So we called it a meditation room.

What still amazes me to this day is we actually did it. We looked to our own local situation and tried something of our own design. In the process, the four of us thought about how we wanted our space to work.

There were ten rooms and twenty students on my freshman dorm floor. Our innovation caught the fancy of two other students, and sixteen students passed. Was my idea a success or a failure? From a third-person perspective looking at the numbers, four out of twenty is not much cause to celebrate. From my first- and second-person perspectives, the re-arrangement was a great success. Also from a second-person perspective the other sixteen students got to witness our experiment. All of us had tremendous loyalty to our floor. They were extremely supportive, plus this innovation gave everyone a great conversational topic. Once people – especially young women from neighboring colleges – heard our floor had a meditation room, they had to see it.

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Like the Rochdale Pioneers and Bill W. learned, each element of cooperation requires careful study and experiments to work out what the group needs. For example, how do the collaborators negotiate the tension between a member's choice to join (first-person sensemaking) and what is mandatory to continue to belong as a member in good standing (second- and third-person sensemaking)?

To illustrate this tension I'll share a story of a youth that addressed one of the more vexing issues in modern education – student dropouts. Students in a school are a type of modern tything or hundred when they organize *themselves* for mutual support. In parenthesis I'll note the sensemaking level.

In Washington state, as is the case in many places around the world, attendance at school is required of students until a certain age (third-person, mandatory). Dropping out is a gradual process (first-person, voluntary), and begins with a student skipping a class, then several classes, then not coming to school once day a week, and so forth until they are no longer coming to school at all.

Typically efforts by the authorities to “make” the student attend have very mixed results. One senior changed everything at his school. First, he gave himself permission to do something (first-person, beswitched). He organized his friends in his grade (second-person). His team got the home phone numbers for every senior. He then organized all the remaining grades in his high school in a similar fashion. Now when a student missed school someone on the team who knew the student volunteered to call (second-person, participation).

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The call went like this: “Hi James, I missed you in school today. Are you feeling okay? Would you like to know what we covered and the homework assigned?” That was it. The missing student felt the care and showed up the next day (first-person). The students’ interest in the classroom content isn’t what brought them back. Had they been interested they would not have skipped school. Rather, the absent students returned because their peers showed they cared about them (second-person, voluntary). This senior’s success at reducing dropouts was recognized by an award from the state’s school directors’ association.

Though this example reveals the power of lateral, peer-based support, I am not so naive to believe that experimenting with a type of modern frankpledge system has much of a chance. Part of the problem is that the period when the frankpledge was the custom was a violent one. The men in the hundred fought in the armies of their earls and kings to keep their lands. Travel between territories was dangerous, due to the risks of being robbed or killed on the roads. I haven’t found much written on the status of women, but my presumption is that girls and women had a hard life without rights or a voice. Pre-Norman England practiced slavery. Rights to a share of the land was a requirement for membership in the frankpledge system.

However, the hundred courts mostly dealt with small and extremely tedious disputes, according to Regia Anglorum, a pre-Norman reenactment society in England. This shows that major stresses and contention were *not* part of the routine business of the hundred, and in passing, of the tythings either. In other words, by and large, people cooperated well together.

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In sum, my reflections reminded me that through belonging one can tap into both collective strength and become vulnerable in ways that can lead to personal growth and healing. Today, we need to co-create more opportunities for people to pledge into a group of peers: to confess their confusions and troubles; to share tools and learn skills; to get help with financial matters, even co-signers on loans; or better, to pitch in and help pay cash for major items such as a car.

Updating and upgrading a way to pledge, or otherwise demonstrate a choice that one wants to belong, could be an essential element for renewing Egalisharian customs of deep reciprocity. The second element, mandatory attendance, may initially feel repugnant to many. Yet, from being locked in prison against their will, the women in Bedford Hills found ways to change by discovering their better selves through support groups or supportive friendships.

Members of the frankpledge would not recognize the reciprocity embedded in modern support groups. But support groups might be the wedge to growing our personal and cultural souls. I, like almost everyone else, had no social custom expecting me to pledge into it when I turned twelve. I have had to work at it. I have enjoyed the deep attentions of supportive friends from elementary school days until now. Currently I am in a men's group that meets every three weeks and I also have a peer support call with a friend once a week. I belong to another group that meets once a month over a shared meal. I am always open to more collaboration in my life.

I know we can collaborate and cooperate more – its in humanity's cultural DNA. A westerner asked an Inuit hunter what he did when he got lost in the fog and snow.

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The hunter said he closed his eyes and imagined his trip from the beginning to find his way again. Very wise, and a guide for us: let's close our eyes, imagine our collective origins, and find our way again.

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