

How the Harmonists Suffered Disharmony: Schism in Communal Utopias*

By Dr. Donald E. Pitzer

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me to address this first reunion of descendants of the Harmony Society of George Rapp. It seems something of a miracle to meet and learn from descendants of the celibate Harmonists. Obviously, *seceders* are sometimes the only ones to produce descendants from communal groups.

In Praise of Seceders

Yet seceders have been given a bad name. Ever since the American Civil War seceding has sounded like a mistake. Ever since the Protestant Reformation schism has been said with a snarl no matter how you pronounce it, “skism” or “sism.” Diversity, disagreement, and division all have had negative connotations. We have been taught to embrace unity and obedience, loyalty to one’s faith, keeping one’s commitments, and staying the course. However, especially in America, declaring your independence, asserting your individual rights, and following your own conscience and reason are also held in high regard. We are beginning to see that harmony is only possible with diversity and that unity should not mean unthinking obedience to any leader or movement just because we are loyal.

So let us take time today to praise seceders—seceders who have had just cause to leave overly restrictive communal societies. On this descendant reunion occasion, I will try to explain why the Harmony Society suffered

*This keynote address, presented to the Harmony Society Family (Descendants) Reunion at Old Economy Village, Ambridge, Pennsylvania on June 28, 2008, has been revised and updated for publication. Invaluable in this process has been the research of Dr. Eileen Aiken English that resulted in the Out of Harmony exhibit at the reunion and in her *Demographic Directory of the Harmony Society* published by the Richard W. Couper Press, Clinton, New York, in 2011.

disharmony, secessions, and schisms and to compare its experience with other well-known movements that attempted communal utopias. Communal societies, since the 1960s often called intentional communities, are small, voluntary social units partly isolated and insulated from the general society. Their members share a lifestyle, an economic union, and an ideology. They experiment with their ideal systems—social, economic, religious, philosophical, governmental, ecological, sustainable—often in hopes that their utopian visions will be realized worldwide by divine plan or human effort. At their best, such communal groups are laboratories providing models for worthy reforms and examples of benevolence. At their worst, they are abusive warning signals of the dark side of human nature with its proclivity toward power-hungry leaders and all-too-willing followers. On the best side, we think of communal initiatives such as Habitat for Humanity beginning at Koinonia Farm in Georgia and building thousands of homes for needy people around the world. We



Photo by Connie Pitzer

Donald Pitzer presenting the keynote address at the Harmony Society Family (Descendants) Reunion at Old Economy Village.

think of Catholic and other monastic orders establishing countless schools and hospitals. Communal groups have pioneered equal rights for women and minorities, emancipation of slaves, infant and adult education, and care for orphans and the elderly. Ecovillages are demonstrating methods of sustainable living through alternative technologies beyond the age of oil. Co-housing projects are providing economical and secure residences. Retirement communities are making life longer and more enjoyable. Community-oriented groups from the conservative Amish to the liberal Twin Oaks at Louisa, Virginia, are showing practical ways to promote peace through non-violent conflict resolution. They give hope to the possibility of creating harmony out of our increasing diversity.¹

In its best days, the Harmony Society itself gave extensive academic and vocational educations and equal voting rights to its female and male members. It built three thriving towns that provided a much higher standard of living than then enjoyed by most Americans — plentiful food,



Photo by Connie Pitzer

Speakers at the Harmony Society Family (Descendants) Reunion at Old Economy Village. *Left to right:* Rev. Larry K. Waltz, Walter Brumm, Eileen Aiken English, and Donald Pitzer.

clothing and shelter, schools, music, art, and a fine library. Harmonists helped Indiana write its first constitution and shored up the new state with a loan. The Harmony Society traded with at least twenty-two states and ten foreign countries; opened the first natural history museum west of the Appalachians; stimulated the early railroad, steel, and oil industries; and produced prize-winning silk. And the Harmonists materially assisted other communal groups including the Zoarites of Ohio, the Hutterites of the Dakotas, and the Zionist movement that began communes called “kibbutzim” in Palestine. One might have thought that the Harmony Society, a religious initiative so harmonious as to be this prosperous and generous, could not suffer disharmony. Nevertheless, hundreds eventually found good cause to secede.²

Harmonist history reminds us that most religious and secular movements which establish intentional communities to promote their goals advocate laudable, even utopian, ideals as they begin. But if they follow their worst inclinations, their organizers and communes sometimes succumb to authoritarian control and abuse that define a dystopia. A few take on the dangerous characteristics of a cult led by an unquestioned, dynamic leader who makes outrageous demands, often in the name of God. Some say with George Rapp, “I am a prophet and am called to be one.”³ Others claim to be the Messiah, God on earth. Shaker leader Ann Lee was considered the female Christ by her faithful communarians. Jim Jones of the Peoples Temple and Sun Myung Moon of the Unification Church put on the mantle of God in our own times. Such leaders and groups often deny members’ freedom of thought, conscience, and action. They may demand their time, labor, and unquestioned devotion. They may assign members new names, uniform dress, and restricted sexual relations.

Sexual practices in communal groups have reached to all extremes. Mormon founder Joseph Smith began polygamy among his communal Latter-day Saints at Nauvoo, Illinois, in the 1840s. It was officially abandoned at the insistence of the federal government before making Utah a state in the late nineteenth century, but fundamentalist Mormon sects still practice patriarchal plural marriage blatantly today. At Oneida, New York, in the 1840s, John Humphrey Noyes set up a biblically-justified free love system he called complex marriage and masterminded one of America’s few eugenic experiments. At the other sexual extreme, Hindu, Buddhist, and Catholic monastic orders have embraced celibacy not only

as abstention from marriage but from all sexual relations in a gesture of total devotion to God. However, lay members in these religions are free to marry and procreate. By contrast, the hallmark of several early American communal groups was to require *all* adherents to purify themselves from the lusts of the flesh in preparation for the coming kingdom of God on earth. Prominent among these celibate groups were the all-male Society of the Woman in the Wilderness at Germantown and the Seventh-day Baptists of Ephrata, both in Pennsylvania, and the Shakers in settlements from New England to Kentucky and Indiana.

For the Harmony Society, the ultimately divisive practice of celibacy became a total rejection of sexual activity in and out of marriage. To Harmonists, sexuality defined humanity's sinful, animalistic nature after Adam's fall from grace. Father Rapp's explanation of the complicated mystical, theological, and millennial significance of sexual abstinence convinced most of his faithful to commit to celibacy during a spiritual revival at Harmony in 1807 and 1808. Rapp's teaching was based largely on the biblical interpretations of German mystic and theologian Jacob Boehme. Adam, created in the holy image of God, had God-like masculine and feminine aspects held in mystical and procreative sanctity in a unique creature without reproductive or digestive organs. But Adam's God-man condition came to be replaced by corruptible animal-like organs with their lustful desires and detestable processes. Adam's sin produced separation from the creator and cosmic disharmony. This separation and disharmony resulted from his evil desire for a separate helpmate with whom he could physically unite like the procreative animals he observed in the garden. So God created the female Eve from the hermaphrodite-like Adam and left him vestigial breasts as evidence. Believing all this led the Harmonists to a powerful conclusion. Personal salvation through Jesus Christ, the second Adam, and cleansing by their own self-imposed celibacy could restore them to Adam's pure state in the image of God and prepare them for Christ's imminent second coming.⁴ Virtually all Harmonists who chose not to secede stayed true to this doctrine, vision, and discipline.

If Father Rapp went beyond reason in demanding total celibacy, a few communal leaders have violated the sanctity of life itself by leading their unquestioning disciples to the extreme of committing suicide. We all would have urged their members to secede. We would have warned the 913 at Jim Jones' Peoples Temple community at Jonestown, Guiana, to flee his insane suicidal demands in 1978. We all wish that more members

had chosen to leave the Branch Davidian compound of David Koresh near Waco, Texas, before the fiery conflagration that consumed eighty-nine adults and children in 1993. We all would have pointed out to the thirty-nine believers of the Heaven's Gate household near San Diego how preposterous the claims of Marshall Applewhite were that a space ship following the comet Hale-Bopp would arrive to spirit them to paradise after their mass suicide in 1997. Such suicidal groups remind us of the promises of eternal bliss given to Japanese kamikazi pilots in WWII and to current Islamic fundamentalist suicide bombers.

Right now we all would plead with any abused women to escape with their children from the patriarchal, polygamous Mormon sects such as Warren Jeffs' Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Community of Goods

Yet, what would we have advised the disciples of George Rapp as they arrived in America in 1803, entering a land of religious freedom and individual free enterprise opportunities? Would we have warned them of the financial and procreational hazards as their prophet sought to unify his religious movement around community of goods, celibacy, and belief in Christ's imminent return? Remember, the Harmonist movement was *not* communal when it began in 1785 with George Rapp's unlawful preaching of radical pietism, pacifism, and millennialism.⁵ His separatist, primitive Christians challenged the established Evangelical Lutheran church in the duchy of Württemberg. Beginning in meetings in his own home in the small village of Iptingen, Rapp's group exhibited traces of communal sharing from its early days. He did not, however, ask his followers to take the momentous step into first-century Christian common property before they set foot in America—the complete community of goods practiced for a time among the believers in Jerusalem and described in the Acts of the Apostles chapters 2, 4, and 5 in which “All the believers were together and had everything in common.”⁶ In reality, it was only out of economic necessity and a desperate desire to hold his waywardly drifting followers together in a single community that Rapp cajoled his faithful into committing to community of goods at Harmony, Pennsylvania, in 1805.

At that point, Johann Georg Rapp's pietistic movement entered a new, communal stage of development, a more controlling stage, to await the utopian kingdom of God on earth. This was a phase many of his early

believers chose not to enter even if they continued to believe much of their prophet's religious teaching. Harmonist historian Karl J. R. Arndt summarized the situation in his *George Rapp's Disciples, Pioneers and Heirs*. Arndt observed, "Because the mass of Rapp's followers arrived before sufficient land could be purchased, many went off on their own and disappeared into the great mass of immigrants. Those more individualistically inclined, and especially those proficient in trades, readily found employment or could establish their own shops." Arndt notes specifically, "The idea of an association for mutual assistance but with private possession of property was prevalent among Rapp's followers until the middle of January 1805." "The idea of the common fund was not accepted ... easily; it took a good deal of praying and preaching before this ideal was finally accepted in the Articles of Agreement of February 15, 1805." Arndt continues, "It was during January and February of 1805, when the common fund idea was being pushed fanatically by George Rapp, that more followers decided to leave and adopt the individual system completely." Arndt argues, "It is to the credit of Rapp's preaching powers that not all of these left his



Photo by Donald Pitzer

Harmony descendants at the Pavilion at Old Economy Village.

association.”⁷

Before the Harmonists adopted common property, Dr. Philipp Friedrich Conrad Haller already had found Rapp’s overbearing leadership style and growing bent toward common property and celibacy so disturbing that he had slipped away from his land-scouting party. In 1804, Haller led the first sizeable group to abandon Rapp’s movement in America. Meeting twenty-five immigrating families as they arrived at the pier in Philadelphia, he convinced them not to join their prophet but rather to follow him. After converting to the German Baptist (Dunkard) faith at Germantown, they founded the non-communal, non-celibate Blooming Grove community on 422 acres of land in Lycoming County, Pennsylvania, where their descendants still farm the land, cherish their origins, and practice their faith.⁸ Haller thus spared his seceders the practices of community of goods and celibacy which became principal causes of disharmony in the Harmony Society. The first group to secede after the Harmonists adopted common property was led by one of Rapp’s earliest disciples, Dr. David Gloss. Gloss, who had conducted the first boatload of Rappites that landed in Baltimore on July 4, 1804, led about a dozen families away from Harmony in 1805. This group freed itself from common property, settled in Columbiana County, Ohio, and recovered their original financial contributions to the Harmony Society by successfully filing lawsuits.⁹

Now let us ask ourselves honestly: Without the advantage of hindsight, would we have told hundreds of German immigrant peasants and tradesmen to abandon their charismatic leader as soon as he insisted that they imitate early Christian communism (with a small “c”)? Could we, or they, have perceived that binding their financial resources and children’s inheritance forever to the Harmony Society could later become so unacceptable? Most other religious movements establishing themselves in America did not make communal living a requirement or an early method of survival. Importantly, we notice that many of these non-communal churches, unlike the Harmonists, thrive to this day partly because they left their members free to conduct their own financial affairs and live where they pleased. Methodists, Baptists, Episcopalians, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans abound. Catholics live everywhere in addition to monasteries and convents. Moravians are found around the globe today in part because their communal plan for survival in colonial America was designed to be temporary. Calling it the “General Economy” and using it well in Bethlehem and Lititz, Pennsylvania, and

at Bethabara and Winston-Salem, North Carolina, they jettisoned it in 1762. The Hutterites are an exception. Their 400 communarians have grown to some 40,000 in six northwestern states of the United States and four Canadian provinces since emigrating from Russia in 1874. They hold common property in about 470 “Bruderhof” communities.¹⁰ They have succeeded by having large families and by branching into new “daughter” colonies in a developmental process of dividing their Bruderhofs when they reach about 120 members. As fellow pietistic pacifists, the Hutterites accepted the Harmonist invitation to set up the Tidioute Colony on Harmony Society land near Titusville, Pennsylvania, in 1884.

On the other hand, several groups akin to the Harmonists eventually found their communal commitment a burden that among other factors cost them their very existence. These include the Society of the Woman in the Wilderness; Zoarites; Swedes who followed Eric Jansson to Bishop Hill, Illinois; and notably the Shakers who saw some 20,000 reside at one time or another in nineteen settlements but now number three in their last community at Sabbathday Lake, Maine.

Since community of goods and celibacy became Harmonist tenets of faith and chief causes of their schisms, we might see the individualistic path-not-taken, which many early seceders preferred, as a way more likely to have saved the Harmonist movement from its ultimate demise. So would we have advised those who signed life-long articles of agreement to secede in the 1810s or later when their communities became wealthy and famous? Or what if Father Rapp had been flexible enough in later years to let his religious movement develop into another stage—a stage in which members discontented with their financial commitment were allowed to reclaim their private property, private livelihood, private dwellings, and private lives while maintaining their Harmony Society membership? Instead, the autocratic leader fossilized himself and his movement by believing he was a prophet divinely chosen to introduce his communal saints to the returning Messiah.

By contrast, other movements that formed communal groups in their early stages often found the flexibility to adjust their practices and organizational structures in a process I have called “developmental communalism.”¹¹ Movements that show such ability to develop beyond their strict communal stage often retain their vitality and expand. If George Rapp had thought about it, the very vitality and expansion of Christianity itself depended on this developmental process. The communal Christians

in Jerusalem described in *Acts* only held to the communal requirement for a brief time. Soon the early believers adopted the progressive idea of new Christians living anywhere and holding private property. They also abandoned the Hebrew customs of circumcision and animal blood sacrifice as they reached out to convert Romans, Greeks, and others beyond the Jewish world. This growth into a universal faith also occurred without Christians requiring celibacy, as Rapp might have done well to have taken note.

In modern times the Owenites, Mormons, Amana Inspirationists, and others demonstrated this developmental vitality. The secular Owenites of Robert Owen only practiced communalism for two-and-a-half years at New Harmony after purchasing it from the Harmony Society in 1825, and none of their other communities lasted even that long. However, the Owenites then used publications, lectures, and labor and political organizations to carry forward their socialistic agenda for women's rights, birth control, liberalization of divorce laws, freedom for slaves, tax supported public schools, free public libraries, trade unions, and producer/consumer cooperatives. Mormons after the 1840s suspended their communal United Order arrangement in favor of simple tithes and offerings and have grown to more than twelve million worldwide. After nearly a century of common property, the Inspirationists of Amana, Iowa, made an amiable adjustment to private ownership in 1932. Their religious movement is still alive in their seven villages today. The Amish for more than two hundred years have found ways to live in tightly-knit, cooperative communities without demanding community of goods at all.

Nevertheless, we must note that an ominous double jeopardy threat hovers over all communal societies and the movements that founded them. Movements like those of the Owenites, Mormons, and Inspirationists are adaptive enough to progress into new organizational structures but lose their communes in the developmental process. Movements that make the communal discipline a permanent commitment usually injure or kill the movement itself. If, like the Shakers, Harmonists, and monastic orders, the movement demands celibacy, an end to the movement as well as to its communities is certain unless members are replenished by outside procreators.

Celibacy

Celibacy especially affected the second generation of Harmonists as Christ failed to return. Would we have advised young adults to secede who fell in love and wanted to marry? Would we have been able to convince any Harmonists, young or old, not to make the dangerous trek from Harmony to the Indiana frontier? After all, Rapp had already convinced them they were the beloved Church of Philadelphia extolled in Revelation 3 and a symbol of the “woman clothed with the sun” in Revelation 12 who escaped into the wilderness for protection. As the “sun clad woman,” the Harmonists had already fled to America. Rapp found it easy to suggest that, as the Bible said the sun woman had to flee a second time, so would his symbolic flock—this time into the wilderness of the Indiana Territory.

Although New Harmony became more prosperous and famous than Harmony, young Harmonists, driven by hormonal and marital desires, began making the liberating but hazardous decision to leave. As Father Rapp became increasingly a cult-like leader and Christ did not return, maybe it dawned on them that celibacy is *generational* suicide. Only human beings can produce more human beings. Obviously, celibacy, if practiced by everyone, would end the human race with this generation. Shockingly enough, Jacob Henrici, as head trustee of the Harmony Society in 1868, admitted this fact and even gloried in it: “If men, by subduing their passions ... could accomplish an eternal life of innocence, perhaps it would suit God’s design ... that our race should become extinct. We certainly can comprehend that an existence in Heaven is infinitely more worthy of our attention than an existence on earth.”¹²

Much of the disharmony in the Harmony Society began with the celibacy issue. This happened despite the fact that second generation Harmonists who sincerely wished to stay within Rapp’s fold succeeded in pressuring their prophet into performing at least eighteen marriages after 1805.¹³ Rapp might have saved his movement from future secessions and disastrous schisms if he had built upon this evidence of essential flexibility. However, he conducted the ceremonies reluctantly and continued to teach staunchly against sexual consummation. Consequently, at New Harmony, resistance to celibacy grew into the first significant sign of apostasy since Father Rapp had insisted on organizing his disciples communally. Young Harmonists who chafed under his denial of sexual relations were among the forty-three who risked the dangers of the wilderness to escape his utopian

town.¹⁴ Many of these seceders suffered dearly for their decision. Mahala Edona Cook, the first woman to elope from the Harmony Society, left with Johannes Schreiber in 1824 only to have him rejoin Rapp's community soon after they were married. Then they divorced the same year.¹⁵ Daniel Blessing (also spelled Plessing) fled in 1818 and, in Vincennes, married Polly Francis with whom he had a daughter Margaretha Christiana. When Polly died, David entrusted the baby to his Harmonist parents, and she was taken later from Economy by her grandmother in the Great Schism of 1832.¹⁶ In 1816, Johannes Schmid could tolerate the celibate life no longer, forsook his Harmonist wife Friederike Sophie and their two young daughters, became a schoolmaster in Miamisburg, Ohio, and married Catharina Berner. Eventually, he had second thoughts and wrote to George Rapp unsuccessfully seeking to rejoin as a teacher, confessing that his marriage had been "an almost uninterrupted life in hell.... I had to pay for the secret wish which I formerly had had in the Harmonie."¹⁷

Seceders and Schism

Because departures by the rising generation exposed a crack in the unity of his Harmony Society, the communal father would have been well advised to recall that his own original converts in Württemberg were seceders—despised separatists from the established Evangelical Lutheran Church. He might have saved himself and his Society great grief had he become fully aware that in his adopted land all religious movements and their communal groups were voluntary. Although seceding is heavily laden with the emotion of severed personal relationships, ostracism, excommunication, and possibly the risk of one's eternal salvation, members *can* leave. Rapp had done so himself. And it had cost him and his German separatists dearly.

If the separatist leader recalled these things, he did not heed the warning. Moving uncompromisingly forward, he expected a "Jerusalem fund" begun at New Harmony to be used any day to send representatives of his waiting sun woman to greet the Savior upon his return in Palestine. In this mindset, he and his Harmony Society suffered schism on a grand scale between 1827 and 1832—one of the greatest threats to the life of any organization and one of the most gut-wrenching traumas a movement or a person can experience. This partly tragic, partly liberating drama played out in his third and most impressive town here at Economy.

We might contend that Rapp mostly brought these troubles upon himself. On community of goods, he remained obstinate. He often refused voluntary remuneration to those who left, reluctantly submitted to court awards by those who sued, and seldom permitted seceders to return — unless, of course, it served his own purposes. On celibacy, he stood firmly against all sexual relations. But, in a suspiciously close relationship with the pretty, twenty-one-year-old Hildegard Mutschler, who had been a member of the Society from birth, he destroyed the confidence of many who seceded in 1832. By making her his assistant in his alchemy laboratory, he tied Hildegard to his increasing obsession with the urgency of producing the legendary philosopher's stone. Discovering this elusive substance with its mystical powers to cure disease, heal the soul, and turn base metal into gold would reconfirm his divine mandate to lead his restless disciples into God's kingdom. Hildegard slowly replaced Rapp's adopted son Frederickas his most trusted confidant. A jealous Rapp expelled Jacob Klein in 1827 when he showed romantic interest in Hildegard. In 1829, Hildegard ran away



Photo by Connie Pitzer

Donald Pitzer (left) and Helene Headley, a descendant of Hildegard Mutschler.

with Conrad Feucht, one of the Society's business agents. When news of their marriage reached Rapp, instead of denouncing them as sinful seceders in his usual way, Rapp actively sought their return, readmitted them as husband and wife, and baptized their children.¹⁸

Amid these circumstances, the Harmony Society suffered its most schismatic days. In 1826, several families left to join Concordia, a German utopia near New Philadelphia, Ohio, that never materialized. In 1827, the independent-minded Peter Kaufmann withdrew after failing to convince Rapp to expand his movement along Owenite lines. Nineteen Harmonists followed him to Ohio where they formed the Society of the United Germans at Teutonia in Columbiana County.¹⁹ An odd series of events between 1827 and 1832 created the largest, most destructive schism in Harmonist history.²⁰ The failure of Rapp's alchemy experiments and his intense desire to introduce his perfected saints to the Messiah soon laid him and his community open to the false claims of a would-be messiah, German Bernhard Mueller. Mueller sent letters to monarchs and church leaders calling Christians to join him in America where they would escape the tribulation before the Millennium. At the most opportune time, September 1829, an official-looking letter by Mueller's emissary Johann Georg Goentgen arrived at Economy. The three-and-a-half year period that Rapp had prophesied as the fulfillment of the last days "time and times and half a time" in Revelation 12: 4 had just expired without any sign of Christ's return. Goentgen's letter declared Mueller to be the Count de Leon, the Lion of Judah of Revelation 5. It said the Count would soon come to America in possession of the secrets of the philosopher's stone to begin his role as the returning Messiah who would lead the redeemed during God's kingdom on earth. Overeager to hear such news, Rapp recklessly declared a man whom he did not even know the "Anointed One" and invited him to come to Economy where the Harmonist community would assist him in initiating the long-awaited millennial kingdom. Although Rapp later saw Mueller as the evil dragon of Revelation 12, his gracious invitation and initial praise set wheels in motion for the Harmony Society's Great Schism of 1832.²¹

In the months after the Lion of Judah and his entourage finally arrived in October 1831, his and Father Rapp's millennialistic egos clashed. Disaffected Harmonists gravitated to the Count. In a bold move they organized the New Philadelphia Society under his leadership, declared themselves the "true Harmonists," and said those still loyal to Father Rapp

were the actual seceders from the Society's original purpose. The Count's followers claimed that they had signed the new Articles of Agreement of 1826 under duress and that these were a "premeditated fraud" intended to "get absolute possession of [their] property." They said Rapp's refusal to let them learn English severely impeded their chances of leaving. They asserted that members who seceded before had been denied their fortunes or any funds to begin anew. They charged that knowledge of the liberal institutions of their adopted country had been withheld intentionally from them and that their civil and natural rights, as guaranteed under the constitutions of Pennsylvania and the United States, had been denied.²² On March 6, 1832, trading one questionable millennialist leader for another, one third of Rapp's flock, 256 all-too-gullible Harmonists, exited Economy with Bernhard Mueller.²³ Submitting to his complete control but enjoying his release from their celibacy pledge, they began their New Philadelphia Society at nearby Phillipsburg (now Monaca). By agreement, they relinquished all claim to Harmony Society property in exchange for their household possessions and \$105,000.²⁴

This Great Schism of 1832 began the long decline of the Harmonist movement. Some of the most indispensable original members of the Harmony Society left with the Count. Among these was Christopher Mueller—physician, schoolteacher, printer, musician and music conductor. He and many other New Philadelphians soon became disillusioned with the Count as his professed knowledge of the philosopher's stone failed to produce the gold intended to underwrite their new community. Christopher Mueller sued his new prophet for claiming to own a stone that was either ineffective or nonexistent. The Count had always proclaimed that his own symbolic sun woman disciples would have to move farther into the western wilderness, so he conveniently set sail down the Ohio with his remaining faithful one day before the date set for the trial. These Harmonist seceders, still faithful to communalism and the millennial vision, sailed with the Count all the way to Louisiana. In 1834, they built Grand Ecore in Natchitoches Parish as nearly as possible on the latitude of Jerusalem according to the Count's instructions, only to witness his death in 1836. Then, still believing the Lord would soon return, they followed one of the Count's earliest German supporters, the same John Goentgen who had written the infamous letter of introduction to the Harmony Society for the Count in 1829, to a location they named Germantown near Minden in Webster County. There, until 1871, these few Harmonist seceders lived

out the remainder of their lives in unfulfilled hope.²⁵

During the period of maximum schism between 1827 and 1832, would we have advised Harmonists to secede into the private economy or stay in Rapp's Divine Economy, to follow a new charismatic leader or remain loyal to their aging one? Even if we question the seceders' decisions, we must concede that they faced daunting difficulties, disappointments, and deceptions. Count Leon promised he was the Messiah and had the philosopher's stone. Many of the ninety or so disillusioned former Harmonists who forsook the Count at Phillipsburg were easy prey for another charlatan—the German immigrant preacher Dr. Wilhelm (William) Keil. Keil, like the Count, lifted the ban on sexual relations and, in 1844, led his disciples to Missouri where they built the town of Bethel in Shelby County. Surely, the former Harmonists should have been more wary. Keil certainly knew that he did not possess a book written in blood containing mystical formulas that would permit him to walk on water and perform other miraculous works. Yet at Bethel, he indeed demonstrated that he could walk on water. Only a few ever discovered that he had stretched a wire across the stream just under the surface. Like Father Rapp and Count Leon before him, Keil then insisted that his faithful move even farther west. This time it was the Oregon Territory that caught a communal father's eye. In a trek of biblical proportions, like that of the Mormons to Utah, Keil led his former Harmonists across the arduous Oregon Trail in 1853. He had promised his young son Willy that he could lead the procession. So, when Willy died at Bethel just before the two-thousand-mile journey, Keil placed a wagon at the front containing Willy's body preserved in alcohol. Once the wagon train arrived in the Oregon Territory, they buried Willy's remains. The pioneers then set up two communities: Willapa, in the present state of Washington, which existed until 1855, and then Aurora in Oregon, which endured from 1856 to 1881.²⁶ Both Bethel and Aurora preserve their historic communal sites to the present. I met my first Harmonist descendants in 1974 at Bethel—Merrel and Lucille Bower and their distant female cousin Marion Bauer. At age ninety-five, Lucille is still the town historian.

If the Harmonist seceders were sometimes deceived, led on dangerous journeys, and directed to build new towns, they also suffered the trauma associated with being rejected by leaders, relatives, and friends who remained behind. Personal relations and emotional health can be shredded by ostracism, excommunication, and risking one's eternal salvation.

George Thorwarth seceded, married, became depressed, threatened suicide, and begged George Rapp most pitifully to forgive and reinstate him.²⁷ Jacob Zundel withdrew, eventually found religious reassurance with the Mormons, and persevered with them from Nauvoo, Illinois, to Utah.²⁸ After the Count Leon faction left Economy, the council of elders there ruled that no Harmonist could keep a former member overnight, give him a meal, host him in his home more than a quarter-hour, or even shake his hand.²⁹ Ten years later Christopher Mueller wrote to George Rapp testifying to the lasting pain of this decree. “When I met your money carrier Romelius [Baker] ... I wanted to give him my hand as an old friend and dear acquaintance, [but] he withdrew his hand saying: another time.” When, just after he seceded in 1832, Christopher had tried to continue his close friendship with Rapp’s granddaughter, Gertrude, whom he had tutored in music from childhood, she rebuffed him harshly: “I am surprised very much that you could be so foolish to think we may still be your friends.... You have broken the bond and have committed perjury,



Photo by Connie Pitzer

Harmony descendants on the porch of the Rapp House, Old Economy Village.

have left our narrow path and in place chosen the broad path. You love and now seek that which you formerly considered dirt and stench.... I will be happy if I hear very little or much rather nothing at all from you or see anything of you.”³⁰

Unfortunately, such bitter and often permanent animosity between former religious associates is common. In their journals and records, Shakers sometimes condemned to hell-fire those who left their communities for the sinful world. Monastic orders may recommend excommunication from the church. Mormons who followed Brigham Young to Utah after Joseph Smith was lynched in Illinois renounced those who followed Joseph’s son Joseph III to found the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (renamed the Community of Christ in 2001). After centuries, Muslim Shiites and Sunnis still kill each other over an issue of succession; Shiites follow the bloodline of Muhammad, Sunnis do not.

Lessons from Harmony Society History

In conclusion, let us take three lessons from the disharmony and schismatic sufferings of the Harmonists. The first is about harmony itself. We cannot sing in unison and harmony at the same time. Harmony only comes from balancing unity and diversity, even discord, in a singleness of purpose. So harmony is the happy product of correctly understanding and treating diversity and discord.³¹ At times in its century-long history the Harmony Society epitomized that balance between unison and discord that defines the cosmic harmony its members anticipated. In those times, the Harmonists joined in joyful songs of their own composition, marched to the harvest fields (both men *and* women) led by the brass instruments of their own town band, gave children a diversified cultural and occupational education, zestfully celebrated their annual Harmoniefests, and awaited Christ’s return with pure hearts at peace with each other and with their neighbors. It is this harmony within diversity that our shrinking world now demands if we are to live in peace and prosperity, or perhaps live at all.

Father Rapp described this display of Harmonist harmony in his book *Thoughts on the Destiny of Man* in 1824. New Harmony, he wrote, is a community “where those who occupy its peaceful dwellings, are so closely united by the endearing ties of friendship, confidence and love, that one heart beats in all, and their common industry provides for all. Here, the members kindly assist each other, in difficulty & danger, and share with

each other, the enjoyments, and the misfortunes of life; one lives in the breast of another, and forgets himself; all their undertakings are influenced by a social spirit, glowing with noble energy, and generous feeling, and pressing forward to the haven of their mutual prosperity.”³²

Lesson two is about keeping our institutions and society flexible and developmental—always being alert to challenges and opportunities, always embracing positive, constructive change while preserving all that has proven true. Harmonist history teaches that whatever does not change ultimately dies. Implicitly, it also warns against the paralyzing effect of millennialism if that belief means the only solution for current problems is the promise of future divine intervention.

We have seen how the Harmonists suffered debilitating disharmony resulting in schisms that ultimately ruined their fondest dreams. Their prophet gradually lost his charisma and authority as he found it impossible to adjust his demands for community of goods and celibacy or to reconcile with potential or actual seceders. His questionable relationship with Hildegard Mutschler compromised his credibility and sacrificed the confidence of some of his most loyal disciples, including his adopted son.

Lesson three is about authoritarianism. Both Harmonist loyalists *and* seceders teach us to beware of abusive authoritarian control. Like aging, gradual change can pass without notice. Independent reason and judgment, civil and human rights, and even life itself can be imperceptibly lost when slowly exchanged for promises of security—security on a personal, national, or eternal scale. Harmonist loyalists remind us that constant vigilance is the price of freedom. Harmonist seceders remind us that we always have a choice. We always can secede.

Notes

1. For an overview of communal societies in America founded before 1965, see Donald E. Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). For those founded since 1960, see Timothy S. Miller, *The 60s Communes: Hippies and Beyond* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1999). For contemporary intentional communities, see periodic editions of *Communities Directory* (latest 2010) and *Communities* magazine published by the Fellowship for Intentional Community, Rutledge, Missouri.
2. On the history of the Harmony Society, see Karl J. R. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society 1785-1847* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, revised edition 1972); Karl J. R. Arndt, *George Rapp's Successors and Material Heirs 1847-1916* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971); Arndt's eight documentary histories of the Harmony Society published by the Indiana Historical Society, Peter Lang, Inc., and the Harmony Society Press (his own imprint); and Donald E. Pitzer and Darryl D. Jones, *New Harmony Then and Now* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2011).
3. Quoted in Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 15.
4. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 97-99, 146-48. Harmonist patriarchalism also emerged from this Garden of Eden scenario in which Eve's will was supposedly subjected to Adam's since she was taken from him. See p. 98.
5. Frederick Rapp, George's adopted son, dated the beginning of his father's "primitive Christian Church" (in the words of Karl J. R. Arndt) to 1785, the year that George's last child was conceived and he is assumed to have become celibate. See Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 40.
6. Acts 2:44 NIV.
7. Karl J. R. Arndt, *George Rapp's Disciples, Pioneers and Heirs: A Register of the Harmonists in America* ed. Donald E. Pitzer and Leigh Ann Chamness (Evansville, Ind.: University of Southern Indiana Press, 1994), 16, 17.
8. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 61-63, 68, 78. The Blooming Grove Historical Society carries forward the study and historic preservation of Haller's community. See www.bloominggrovehistoricalsociety.org. Its president, Reverend Larry K. Waltz, summarized the community's history at The Harmony Society Family (Descendants) Reunion.
9. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 65-67, 78, 79, 87, 99.
10. Simon M. Evans, "Alberta Hutterite Colonies: An Exploration of Past, Present and Future Settlement Patterns," *Communal Societies: Journal of the Communal Studies Association* 30, no. 2 (2010): 27.
11. See Donald E. Pitzer, "Developmental Communalism: An Alternative Approach to Communal Studies" in *Utopian Thought and Communal Experience*, ed. Dennis Hardy and Lorna Davidson (Middlesex, England: Middlesex Polytechnic, 1989), 68-76 and Donald E. Pitzer, "Response to Lockyer's 'From Developmental Communalism to Transformative Utopianism'" in *Communal Societies: Journal of the Communal Studies Association* 29, no. 1 (2009), 15-21.
12. Quoted in Arndt, *George Rapp's Successors*, 150.
13. Karl J. R. Arndt, ed., *Harmony on the Connoquenessing 1803-1815: George Rapp's First American Harmony—A Documentary History* (Worcester, Mass.: Harmony Society Press,

- 1980), 271-72.
14. Eileen Aiken English, Sarah Buffington, and Eric Castle, "Out of Harmony: Secession from the Harmony Society," Exhibit script, Old Economy Village, Ambridge, Pennsylvania, 2008, 5.
 15. English, Buffington, and Castle, "Out of Harmony," 6; Eileen Aiken English, *Demographic Directory of the Harmony Society* (Clinton, N.Y.: Richard W. Couper Press, 2011), 40.
 16. English, Buffington, and Castle, "Out of Harmony," 6-7; English, *Demographic Directory*, 35.
 17. Quoted in English, Buffington, and Castle, "Out of Harmony," 7; English, *Demographic Directory*, 119.
 18. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 425-27.
 19. Dr. Walter A. Brumm, a speaker at the Harmony Society Family (Descendants) Reunion, has done the most research on the Concordia and Teutonia community initiatives.
 20. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 449-98
 21. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 498.
 22. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 474-77.
 23. English, Buffington, and Castle, "Out of Harmony," 14.
 24. English, Buffington, and Castle, "Out of Harmony," 16-17; Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 474-75.
 25. English, Buffington, and Castle, "Out of Harmony," 17-20; Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 521-40.
 26. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 539-41; Pitzer, *America's Communal Utopias*, 78; English, Buffington, and Castle, "Out of Harmony," 19-20. The latter gives names of former Harmonists who followed Dr. Keil to Bethel and Aurora, and others who returned to Europe.
 27. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 424.
 28. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 541.
 29. Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 495.
 30. Quoted in Arndt, *George Rapp's Harmony Society*, 501-3.
 31. Donald E. Pitzer, "Harmoniefest: Unison, Harmony, and Discord in the Harmony Society," *Communal Societies: Journal of the Communal Studies Association* 26, no. 1 (2006): 19-25.
 32. [George Rapp], *Thoughts on the Destiny of Man, Particularly With Reference to the Present Times* ([New Harmony, Ind.: The Harmony Society In Indiana], 1824), 66.