



SARAH STEINBERG

*Melissa Godbeer, a member of the student group, appreciating one of Findhorn's windmills.*

# How I Learned to Hug a Windmill

## *An Inside Look at the Findhorn Community Semester*

**T**his past fall, during my senior year at College of the Atlantic in Maine, I took courses for three and a half months at the Findhorn Foundation in northern Scotland, a 44-year-old ecovillage internationally recognized for its sustainability education. I discovered the Findhorn Community Semester through Living Routes, a U.S.-based organization that sponsors study-abroad programs in seven ecovillages around the world. Living Routes' courses are designed and taught by ecovillage residents and granted credit by the University of Massachusetts

at Amherst. This affiliation allowed me to easily transfer the full semester's credits back to College of the Atlantic and apply my federal financial aid to the program.

On September 1, 2006, I joined 11 other American students to begin our adventure at Findhorn. We took four college courses—Applied Sustainability: Ecovillage Living at Findhorn; Theory and Practice of Group Dynamics and Conflict Facilitation; Worldviews and Consciousness; and Exploring Sustainable Living Through Creative Expression—and were

responsible for three weekly work shifts in Findhorn's community kitchens and gardens. Classes, work, homework and any socializing time we could fit in made for a busy week!

I appreciated that our classes were all experiential; the 12 of us did everything from dancing the 5 Rhythms, a spiritual practice developed by dance therapist Gabrielle Roth, to touring Findhorn's Living Machine wastewater treatment facility, which purifies much of the community's graywater in a constructed ecosystem. We did not have to sit in a classroom talking about wind power; we got to go out and hug Findhorn's four windmills, learn up close how they worked, and paint a collage on the windmill named "Joy." (I liked how Findhorn gives its tools more character and respect by naming them; for example there was Mr. Oak, a wheelbarrow; Dolly, a dishwasher; Joy, one of the windmills, and so on.)

---

*I appreciated that our classes  
were all experiential.*

---

Applied Sustainability was the class I was most excited about when applying to the program. It brought together topics like ecological footprinting, renewable energy, waste management, transportation design, green and natural building techniques and organic farming. Our teacher, Jonathan Dawson (who is also president of Global Ecovillage Network) was very articulate. He said things in ways that helped me think differently about familiar subjects and make connections I had not realized before. In one class, Jonathan showed us slides of ecovillages all over the world and described their many different activities. He said the vast majority of successful ecovillages are in service of some greater good, as Findhorn is in its spirituality and sustainability education programs. Another day in that class we did rough calculations of our individual ecological footprints—the amount of arable land necessary to support our consumption habits and daily activities. Findhorn as an institution has an ecological footprint per capita half the size of the average person living in the UK, with its greatest savings in the food and energy sectors. As Jonathan described it, considering the



*Findhorn member Lisa Shaw introducing the student group to the windmills.*

fossil fuels required for all the pesticides, packaging, and transportation required to produce food, we are practically eating oil! I had tried to limit my energy use in other ways, but I had not thought of food in these terms before. It was interesting to look at it that way, and comforting to know that a lot of the food we ate at Findhorn was grown organically in our very own gardens. Back home now, I am trying to continue eating primarily locally grown, organic food.

control of my thoughts and actions. To some extent I already knew that, but talking to people at Findhorn really made me take this enormous power to heart. Now if I am not happy with myself, or with the way things are, I realize my circumstances in any given instance are that way because of what I have or have not done, at least to a great extent.

Living at Findhorn changed me in other ways, too. For example, I had been struggling with the idea of ecovillages and their place in the world. It was so peaceful at Find-

---

***We were treated like part of the community, however transient.***

---

Findhorn’s work-study programs for visitors last anywhere from a week to six months. Our semester program was actually one of the longer programs, and it allowed me to experience the community more like a long-term resident would, seeing new people come and go. However, from the vantage point of more permanent residents, our group was just like the many other visitors, appearing one day and leaving a jam-packed 14 weeks later, with a new batch of students to arrive two months later.

Yet from very early in the semester, our teachers and focalizers emphasized how the 12 of us were not just visitors; they encouraged us to think of ourselves as full community members and to act accordingly. I had been worried about what Findhorn members would think of this group of American students coming into their midst. But when we got there, I found that we were treated like part of the community, however transient. I was just as present in the lives of everyone at Findhorn as they were in mine, and was no less of a person because I was only there for a set amount of time. And for me, this was not some timeless break from “real life”; it was simply another chapter. I learned that I have the power to change my perspective like this, and that I have

horn, yet I sometimes felt antsy because I was not out living the life of an activist like I was used to. I was thinking ecovillages were little bubbles of peace and sustainability, but I didn’t quite see how they would make the world a better place unless a revolution came and everyone moved to ecovillages.

But one day during our Applied Sustainability class, Jonathan described ecovillages as laboratories for social, environmental, and technological experiments. He said education and consulting for others about ecological sustainability are two key ways ecovillages can spread their ideas to mainstream culture. I had thought that it was a shame for Findhorn members to be teaching our group so much, only to have us leave and not give much in return to the community. But actually that’s the purpose, to fill us with ideas and then send us out into the world to make it a better place. Ecovillages that do not want to host students can offer consulting services to local municipalities, for example. This idea was driven home when it was announced later in our stay that the Royal Air Force base next door had seen the success of Findhorn’s living machine wastewater treatment facility, and had installed its own reed bed system. Now I recognize that ecovillages are hubs rather than bubbles.



SARAH STEINBERG

*Painting ecological footprints on the windmill named Joy.*



SARAH STEINBERG

*Harvesting potatoes from Findhorn member Craig Gibsone's, compost pile.*



EMMA ALGER

*The student group preparing for a sweatlodge.*

In December, I returned home feeling empowered to make a serious contribution to my college town, Bar Harbor, which is also a popular resort destination. The small, year-round population there is overemployed in the summer when millions of tourists come to visit by car and cruise ship, and underemployed when tourists go home in the winter. The money residents earn in the summer seems to leak out of the town boundaries during the fall and early winter, and by January, many people are struggling to make ends meet. So my

Finally, I was consistently amazed by how each Findhorn resident seemed to be a wealth of knowledge just waiting to be tapped. From permaculture to car-sharing, raw diets to vermiculture, composting toilets to pottery, alternative currencies to bagpipes, and player pianos to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—you name it, I found someone in the community with a wealth of first-hand knowledge on the subject. Everyone has taken a different path in life and gleaned a wealth of knowledge along the way. Never

---

***We did rough calculations of our individual ecological footprints—the amount of arable land necessary to support our consumption habits and daily activities.***

---

senior project this year is to establish a local currency in the town. It will be like the “Eko” currency used at Findhorn, where one British pound could be exchanged for one Eko. At Findhorn, a community bank called “Ekopia” grants the British pounds they collect in exchange for Ekos as low-interest loans to local businesses and organizations. While not everyone at Findhorn uses Ekos, all the on-site business owners, and a few in the neighboring village, accept them as they would cash. In actuality, it is as if people agreed to exchange IOUs while their money was invested in the community. Findhorn member David Hoyle, who started the Ekopia project, explained to our sustainability class how the system works. At that point I felt really empowered and ready to lead this economic revolution in my town. In the past, I have often taken supporting roles in various projects, but when I suddenly felt inspired to create and lead this project, I knew I had do it!

underestimate who sits down across from you at the lunch table, and do talk to “strangers”; every person is a potential friend and ally, each with a unique story and passion. Talking with others has gotten me interested in things I never thought I would be interested in. Simply listening with an open heart and mind has taken me much of the way. The collective wisdom in an intentional community is immense. That is one of the main things I learned at Findhorn, where the whole community is a wonderful classroom. ♻️

---

*Sarah Steinberg is a senior at College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine. She lives at the Downeast Friends Community.*