

Tensions on Erraid: how the need for “human sustainability” challenges an intentional spiritual community

By

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## **Abstract**

The desire for an alternative to the lifestyles most commonly available in western societies continues to motivate individuals to search for intentional communities. The mandate of the small island community of Erraid, and its parent organization the Findhorn Foundation, is to provide service to the world by educating guests on living more in tune with nature, Spirit, and fellow human beings. In order to facilitate this experience, they require the presence of short-term participants and long-term members. My research showed that although most short-term guests were satisfied with their experiences of Erraid, members struggled with their aspirations to live there permanently. “Human sustainability”, as the members called it, was difficult to achieve because of the tensions created by the conflicting reality of the Findhorn Foundation presenting itself as an alternative to the lifestyles in the “West”, while relying on that very system in order to exist and have people to “educate”.

## Acknowledgements

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis to my partner, Andrew, and to my dog, Whistler. I do not wish to imagine what this experience would have been like without you. You are two souls that enrich my life everyday and help to show me all the beauty life has to offer.

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## Prologue

One afternoon on the isle Erraid, Charlotte<sup>1</sup>, a long-term guest of a few months, and I were sitting on the large couch in House 6. The wood burning stove was well stocked and radiated a warmth that enveloped us. Trying to show my gratitude for her willingness to sit down with me and be interviewed, I awkwardly offered her tea and biscuits knowing that nothing I could offer her from my kitchen would compare to the gift she was about to impart to me. Kindly, she joked that she felt well taken care of and should return to our House sooner and more often. I felt very grateful to Charlotte for putting me at ease and for her confidence and trust in me. We both got settled and I began the interview.

One of the key terms I had learned to use on Erraid was “love in action”. I found the concept fascinating and decided to ask her what it meant.

Charlotte (C): [...] I think using the words “love in action” is a great way to talk about work. It’s revolutionary, potentially. It’s also very related to that idea of tuning into that which is greater than ourselves, you know that, that love is action through me.

Karina (K): Yeah, that’s a great way of putting it. Um, do you feel like there are practices for you that help you connect to that which is greater than ourselves?

C: Yeah, yeah being in nature is the main one for me. I don’t currently have a very structured spiritual practice, and I never have. Um, what tends to work the best is outdoor physical exercise. Basically the endorphin thing. Um, but I also experience, as I said, before, I’ve experienced something when meditating in a group, especially if there’s a strong leader directing the meditation, and beauty and music, and singing can do it. And other things. You know, if I can just get out of my own head, and pay attention to kind of almost anything, I can get to see Spirit in action, that which is greater than ourselves. Which many people don’t even admit exist, and that’s fine.

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<sup>1</sup> A pseudonym.

K: Have you, uh, you were just saying that you were experiencing something, do you want to describe that a bit more when you're in...

C: In the zone...

K: Yeah, if you can, sometimes these things...

C: Um, yeah, well I had a little bit today on the walk, we went down to Belfour Bay [a beautiful spot on Erraid], and Angeline's boots had holes in them, so we just sat down and didn't trudge through the water, and I just, you know it had a little bit of exercise outdoors, I sat down on this rock, and I could just...sigh...I relaxed, you know. And I could smell the smells, and feel the breeze, and hear the waves, and it was all so beautiful, it took me out of myself. Which was lovely. Um, what's the question? (laughter)

K [very curious now]: When you're in the zone, what does it feel like?

C: It feels serene, it feels relaxed, it feels like the chatter in my head is somewhere else, and that I am in touch with...When I am in touch with something that's greater than myself, I feel calm and clear, centered, confident, and there's just no bullshit. So for your interview, there's no interference from other things. [Laughter from both of us]

This was not the first time (nor the last time) I heard about experiences like these on Erraid. I got the sense that there was this great optimism and potential that seemed to emanate from both short-term and long-term guests. Our interview continued and I asked Charlotte about the potential of intentional communities: were they a decent alternative to the nuclear family? She responded,

C: I don't think we're the only ones who need an alternative to the nuclear family.

K: What might be the pros and cons [of intentional community]?

C: I mean this opens a whole range of discussions about what society is, and...you know...just a huge hour long rant...(laughter). The short answer is yes I think people living in intentional community whether we succeed or fail and in what ways we succeed or fail, we're attempting something else, and that's growth, so that's good. And I think whether or not they...more and more people in the world end up in intentional communities or not, maybe, they're

just like the research labs of human social interactions, I don't know...they're so intense...not that many people can survive in them for all that long...

Hmm...I reflected on her statement: "not that many people can survive in them for all that long". Was her perceptive comment also true of Erraid? Was love in action sustainable in the long term? So my adventure began.

## **Chapter One - Introduction**

The functioning of communes has fascinated both sociologists and anthropologists alike in their quest to examine what makes a community (Oved 2013), how they labour and how it works (French and French 1975). Rosabeth Moss Kanter, often cited for her extensive research on communes in the United States, notes that the “initial impulse for the utopian search” is generally prompted by one (if not all) three critiques of society: religious, politico-economic, and psychosocial (Kanter 1972, 3). Intentional communities have been argued to respond to the ills of modernity, including but not limited to, alienation from work, one’s self, others, and nature (Delanty 2010; Bruce 2002).

Abrams and McCulloch define communes as groups of people “devoted to communal living for its own sake as a way of institutionalizing friendship within and around a chosen domestic place” (1976:33). They argue that the Findhorn Foundation, an organization based in different locations in Scotland, has exercised influence on the commune movement as a whole, but that the Findhorn<sup>2</sup> community is surprisingly difficult to define as a commune in their terms (51). Kanter, on the other hand, offers a broader typology of communes: service communes and retreat communes. She describes how retreat communes “seek geographical isolation, discard technology, and develop pastoral visions embodying a return to a nostalgically viewed past” (175), while on the other hand, service communes have a mission, and

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<sup>2</sup> In the text, the term “Findhorn” refers to the original and larger community in the North East of Scotland; “Erraid” refers to the island itself and the community which inhabits it; And the “Findhorn Foundation” or “Foundation” encompasses both communities (and its others, such as Iona), and refers to the whole organizing body and all of its staff.

they define themselves as serving society by seeking engagement and involvement (191).

As a spiritual intentional community, the Findhorn Foundation and its residential communities (Findhorn, Erraid and Iona) practice three founding principles: deep inner listening, and acting from that source of wisdom (this source of wisdom is referred to by many names such as God, Mother Earth, Nature, Inner Self, Soul, etc.), co-creation with the intelligence of nature, and service to the world (findhorn.org). In tune with these principles, many practices occur, such as meditation, blessings, sharings, and more. Although the Foundation takes on many roles, transcending even Kanter's expansive typology, I am most intrigued by its purpose as a spiritual intentional community, an educational facility, and a model for sustainable living.

The Findhorn Foundation hosts hundreds of educational workshops, such as the Living Essentials Apprentice Programme (LEAP), Being in Community, Experience Week, New Year Retreat, and much more. As a model for sustainable living, Findhorn and its satellites try to establish practices that promote environmental protection and safety. The organization also attempts to construct its buildings with the most recent environmentally-safe standards. The learning of these values by the organization's guests tends to derive from the experiential and transformative process of participating in the daily tasks offered by resident members.

Sociologist Elizabeth Dinnie, suggests that the primary function of Findhorn is "education through demonstration, rather than the creation of an alternative way of

life” (2008, 187). However, in order to function the way it has been in most recent years, the Foundation requires a core group of members who take “responsibility for learning functions” as well as temporary guests who serve as a “transient group of clients that have a limited involvement and expectation that they will move in and out of the group” (2008, 212). I argue that members are not only relied upon to provide material support and guidance, but they are also relied upon ideologically to demonstrate that love in action is possible and available to all.

While Dinnie worked with people living at Findhorn’s main site, I conducted five and a half weeks of ethnographic fieldwork on the island of Erraid. The small island community is currently owned by a Dutch family, the Van der Sluis, but is inhabited by Findhorn Foundation members and visitors during eleven months of the year. For most, if not all visitors I met, Erraid represented a place where they could transform their values and themselves in order to enjoy a more meaningful life. In order to accomplish this transformation, they are meant to experience life as it is lived on Erraid and partake in the community’s practices. I argue that although Findhorn’s primary function may be of education, the act of demonstration by the core group of members leads to the idea and practice of living an ‘alternative lifestyle’. For some of the guests, there is also a desire to experience and live the lifestyle they witness. The members on Erraid rely on this transient group for their financial independence. In my opinion, equally as important as the necessity of hosting short-term guests, is the long-term commitment of the members. The members I had the pleasure of encountering on Erraid wished to make Erraid a long-term home (perhaps not indefinitely but certainly for more than three years). However, three of the five

members experienced difficulties in achieving this goal, and the two other members considered it a key issue.

Indeed, Erraid seemed to have a higher turnover rate of members than the larger Findhorn community: generally one to three years. This reality was a primary concern for the members at the time. During one of our conversations, a member, Archie asked me: “Does it work, or is it set up to fail? Maybe you can give us the answers...” It only occurred to me months after my departure from Erraid (and a few thesis drafts later), that I could wholeheartedly take his and the other members’ concerns about “human sustainability” seriously. I was introduced to this term by a few of the members and other guests, and what I understood it to mean was that the primary question for members was how to recruit and retain individuals or families to stay on Erraid in the long-term (e.g. become members who could commit to living on Erraid for at least one year). Thus I took the time to go through all of my data, interviews, journal notes, memories of conversations, and as much literature as I could, in order to come to (what I hope is) a useful and valuable thesis. Based on my findings, all of the members of Erraid showed varying levels of dissatisfaction with what they called the lack of “human sustainability”. The way the members described human sustainability suggested that it was not only the difficulties in adding and sustaining their numbers that was an issue, but that ideologically they were struggling to fulfill their aspirations to live the particular lifestyle of love in action.

I found that one of the largest obstacles to their satisfaction derived from the tensions between the Foundation’s roles, particularly between being an educational center vs. being an intentional spiritual community with the aim to model sustainable

lifestyles. In other words, the results of my research show that the inevitable practices associated with maintaining Erraid as a business (education center) undermines its sustainability and its ability to deliver alternative lifestyles. At the time of my research Erraid had only five members when it is normally expected to have between six and ten members at any given time. Exacerbated by their low numbers, one of the difficulties for Erraid's members was the significant work load. Their heavy workload worked against their desires for a particular lifestyle which involved approaching work as love in action, thus creating a particular tension concerning their values and work.

The Foundation's decision to be an educational center has allowed it to blossom and reach thousands of individuals. However, the selling of educational services has created a certain dependence for both Erraid and Findhorn to host short-term guests in order to share their knowledge and experiences. This sharing allows them in many ways to remain viable as a site of resistance to mainstream Western lifestyles and the capitalist and consumerist systems in which individuals are involved. Nonetheless, this reality makes both communities complicit and entangled in the very systems they are trying to oppose: although the Foundation remains successful through its continued opportunities and presentations of alternatives (workshops, Experience Week, Living in Community programs), it nevertheless continues to take a consumerist stance by charging individuals to pay for their experience of the community (Dinnie 2008:42).

Based on the Foundation's stance and mandate, I argue that it has evolved (in some ways to survive) to serve a mainstream capitalist market in order to remain of

service to the wider world. This reality and the limited nature of Erraid's transformational abilities is mentioned by Charlotte, a member who expressed her wish that Erraid would be less dependent on the "outside world", less dependent on fuel sources, and generally more sustainable environmentally and socially through developing its own innovative solutions. On Erraid I witnessed and experienced some attitudes which were anti-capitalist, anti-consumerist, and anti-modernist (mine included). Erraid is both presented by the Foundation and understood by many who visit to provide an alternative to these systems and their ideologies (e.g. capitalism, consumerism, modernism). However, I found that the members had difficulty living this sustainable alternative because, despite their attitudes, they are unavoidably embedded within the very systems they oppose. I argue that these systems are so pervasive that they also influence the desires and expectations of members and visitors, and play an important role in the chosen mandate and organizational structures of the community. As an example, individuals pay to come to Erraid to experience a certain lifestyle. This very act is consumerist in nature, and takes place within the sphere of a capitalist market. It is difficult to recognize the pervasiveness of these discourses and yet the tensions I observed and experienced surrounding "human sustainability" on Erraid illustrate this reality.

The difficulties experienced by the members regarding "human sustainability" are carefully analyzed in chapter four. The barriers to their goal became my main focus of study, and I expand on them briefly below. In short, the members felt that in order for the community (and themselves) to function to its (their) full potential they required a much larger influx of members, and their long-term commitment. In terms

of retention, the members were suffering due to concerns surrounding work, privacy and their dependence on Findhorn and the Dutch family. Even though Erraid generally met the needs of short-term visitors who searched for a place to be with their children, to relax on a retreat, to perform “back to basics” work with integrity, and for a way to “reconnect with nature”, it seemed to be failing, insofar as recruitment of members from among the guests was increasingly difficult.

Firstly, the low number of members made it difficult for parents to be supported in their child rearing of young infants<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, though there was a satisfaction in doing “back to basics” work, guests I spoke to enjoyed the work they performed outside of Erraid (such as nursing or social work, for example), and desired to return to pursue this work. Thirdly, although “reconnecting to nature” was mostly a pleasurable experience, an island where many actions are heavily affected by the weather or the tides was not necessarily the place guests wished to settle.

An important difference between the lives of the short-term guests and the members that impacted retention and recruitment was privacy. Short-term guests were often willing to “sacrifice” their privacy for a week or two. For some members, sharing a home with different individuals every week was not as challenging as for others. I noted that this depended on the individual, but that it was not a concern for most short-term guests since they had come for a “communal” experience which

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<sup>3</sup> Here it is important to note that two members, Archie and Sophia, continue to live on the island with their two children who attend school locally off Erraid. This arrangement seemed to work very well for them. I also learnt that they successfully lived on Erraid prior to their children attending school. Though it seemed challenging to the parents during my time on Erraid, I do not wish to suggest that it is impossible or uncommon to raise children on Erraid.

involved being in close contact with others for the short duration of their stay. In the long term, the necessity to always “host” and “share” with others began to drain some of the members, and also hindered their opportunities for intimacy and a place they could call “home”.

It is important that I note here, that although these members identified certain things that were challenging their lives and their desire to stay on Erraid, they did not express any doubt that the community (and the Foundation) would continue to exist with or without their presence. In my limited experience of the Foundation, I would have to agree with their conclusions. Indeed, the turnover of members and guests has not seemed to diminish or damage the workings of the Foundation (at least at a large scale). My opinion here is substantiated by the Foundation’s primary focus on education (where turnover is required for its financial needs), by its survival for more than half a century, by the loss and the gain of members after my departure, and by the opinions of the people I spoke to on Erraid.

So why does it matter that only these few individuals (to my knowledge) felt disappointed by the lack of human sustainability on Erraid? Before delving into this question, I first wish to make it clear that I believe Erraid and Findhorn are places, environments, and groups of people that are of value. Although this thesis presents arguments for the ways in which Erraid is falling short for some of the members and potential members, I deem its existence something good and worth sustaining. This opinion derives from my own personal experience of Erraid, and my own emotional, philosophical, and political commitments that favour attempts at something different from the norm. My work reflects some of the desired changes of members and visitors

which would help make it a more humanly sustainable community.

Now, by way of four different responses, I tackle my initial question of why their concerns are important. The first, personally, is that simply their lives and concerns mattered to me. The second involves the Foundation itself: while short-term involvement is the current norm, it is crucial for the Foundation to understand what might not be working and why people are leaving or unhappy because this provides it with the opportunity to confront its weaknesses to better adapt to a changing world. The third is at the level of scholarship, and is partially related to both earlier statements in that, anthropologically speaking, the discipline hopes to add to the existing knowledge of human diversity by taking human concerns seriously. Additionally, intentional communities provide rich ethnographic opportunities and the study of their strengths and weaknesses can shed light on the complex and somewhat contradictory realities involving their simultaneous embodiment and resistance to mainstream systems. Last but not least, the participants' assessments point to a serious critique of Erraid, and the Findhorn Foundation as a whole, to engage meaningfully with the desire of individuals to live alternatively to the dominant lifestyles accessible in the West. Instead of offering members a sustainable lifestyle, because of Erraid's reliance on the Dutch family owners, the Findhorn Foundation, the income generated by short-term guests and other factors discussed above and below, the community remains imbricated in a complex relationship with larger mainstream systems and their accompanying ideologies, thus affecting the fulfillment of their desire for an alternative to these unsustainable systems.

My analysis relies heavily on ethnographic data collected during my time on

Erraid. I also draw from David and Elena French (1975) whose book on “communal work” enriches many of the arguments made by participants regarding their desire to visit Erraid. Abrams and McCulloch (1976) also studied the Findhorn Foundation, as I mentioned briefly above, and their work on communes is still greatly cited by both sociologists and anthropologists. I also draw on Miranda Joseph (2002) as she provides a critical argument for the generation of new communities under capitalism and how they serve the latter in particular ways. It is through Joseph’s (2002) work that I am able to argue that Erraid remains tied to (and within) capitalist systems. Last but not least, Fischer’s (2014) concept of “frustrated freedom” serves in my analysis as a way of understanding many of the challenges and frustrations experienced by members. These important works are expanded upon in the following chapter, under the section “Coming Upon Findhorn: literally and literary”.

Immediately following this introduction, I contextualize the project for the reader: I go through a short history of the Findhorn Foundation and Erraid, and I explore scholarly perspectives on intentional communities as sites of resistance to mainstream systems and ideologies, including capitalism, and locate Erraid within this discussion. Chapter 3 begins with a description of my methods and ethical considerations, followed by my findings from my forty days of ethnographic fieldwork on Erraid. This chapter provides the reader with a look at the esteemed practices of the Foundation, and the ideals that occupy the hearts of the members and short-term guests. The results are analyzed in Chapter 4, and their implications for viable alternatives to participation in mainstream systems are reflected upon in my conclusion.

## Chapter Two – Setting the Scene

### **The Findhorn Foundation History and its Satellite Community Erraid**

The Findhorn Foundation's history is readily accessible on their website [www.findhorn.org](http://www.findhorn.org). The Foundation dates back to 1962 with its three founders, Peter Caddy, Eileen Caddy and Dorothy MacLean. It began simply with the three adults and the Caddy's three children in the town of Findhorn, and has since grown to an intentional and spiritual community of over three hundred people. Peter, Dorothy and Eileen believed "they were creating a new way of life following divine guidance, and that all their needs would be met in accordance with this higher plan" (Dinnie 2008, 5).

Peter was British and Eileen was a child of British and Irish parents. Dorothy, on the other hand, was born and educated in Canada, though she spent many of her years living in Britain and in the United States. They were all connected by their interest in alternative spiritualities and through their acquaintance with Sheena Govan. Sheena Govan was a spiritual leader and guide to each of them (Sutcliffe 2003). Sheena was Scottish and resided in Britain. In his work, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices* (2003), author Steven J. Sutcliffe, argues that Sheena is the primary reason that the Findhorn members chose to reside in Scotland. Sheena died in 1967, and although she visited Findhorn, she did not play a direct role in its founding. Peter passed away in 1994, and Eileen in 2006. Dorothy is currently 94 years old and resides in Findhorn ([findhorn.org](http://findhorn.org)).

The Findhorn Foundation began when the aforementioned six individuals moved into a caravan in the seaside village of Findhorn. Being short of funds, they

decided to attempt to grow vegetables in the sandy and dry terrain. Their success was made famous by many published newspaper articles and visits by stunned horticulturalists. This was due in part to the large vegetables they produced (40 pound cabbages for example), as well as the spiritual connections that both Dorothy and Eileen shared. Dorothy would communicate with the spirits of plants (which she called angels, and then devas), whereas Eileen's guidance came from an inner divine source she sometimes referred to as "the still small voice within" (findhorn.org). For the next eight years, the group grew to no more than a dozen people who lived, worked and meditated together (Dinnie 2008, 5).

A key person in the expansion of Findhorn is David Spangler. David is an American spiritual teacher who arrived in Findhorn in 1970 with his partner Myrtle Glines. The two of them "helped to define and organize the spiritual development processes that have been a central pillar of the Findhorn community ever since" (findhorn.org). David departed from Findhorn, and in 1974, founded the Lorian Association which is a not-for-profit organization with the purpose of "empowering an exploration of new Gaian-centered models of relationship that can lead to wholeness through an incarnated spirituality"<sup>4</sup>. During and after David's stay at Findhorn, the renowned success of the garden as well as their spiritual practices spread and attracted hundreds of people.

In 1974, the Findhorn Foundation offered its first residential workshop entitled "Experiencing Findhorn" and the Foundation began to orient itself "towards spiritual education as its main purpose and income generating activity" (Dinnie 2008,

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<sup>4</sup> [lorianassociation.com](http://lorianassociation.com)

65). “Experiencing Findhorn” was the first “Experience Week” of the Findhorn Foundation and lasted two weeks. There have been many changes and developments to the Experience Week since then, and it remains the primary way that guests experience the Foundation at Findhorn. However, there is no “Experience Week” on Erraid or on Iona, though individuals are encouraged to attend an Experience Week at Findhorn. Both websites specify that an Experience Week is not mandatory to temporarily visit their communities, as they provide different experiences. Today, to participate in Experience Week, guests pay a certain fee (tiered price) and become acquainted with Findhorn’s practices, rituals, and ways of living. The tiered prices are £760, £590, and £480 as indicated on their website. The tiered pricing structure is in effect in order to accommodate a diverse range of people. The prices are all inclusive of participation in the Experience Week, of guest rooms (towels and linens), all meals, and access to community facilities like their meditation sanctuaries (findhorn.org). There is also a bursary available for those who wish to apply (the exact amount is not listed on the website and may be on a case by case basis) and different payment options (spread payments over a maximum of 3 months).

The spiritual educational center in Findhorn, begun by Spangler, now holds educational workshops all year round, and attracts over 2,000 residential visitors from over 70 countries (Dinnie 2008). The cost of Experience Week and residential programs creates the conditions in which most guests and residents in the community are middle age and middle-class, come from the European Union, and have a certain level of disposable income (Dinnie 2008, 93-4). Though these statistics do not include the island of Erraid, my findings there are consistent with Dinnie’s assessment in that

86% of my participants were in their 30s, 40s and 50s (60%, 40s and 50s). They also seemed to qualify as middle-class and 11 of 15 were from countries in the European Union. Of the four remaining, two were from Australia, one from the United States, and one was originally from Mauritius, though she had been living and working in the United Kingdom for years. There were also a majority of women, which is equally noted by Dinnie (2008, 84-85). Rose (1998) suggests that the age of the majority of the guests is significant in that they were raised in the 60s counterculture. As my data is more recent, the majority of the guests I encountered were raised in the 70s and 80s.

Today, the Findhorn Foundation is also a non-governmental organization and a registered charity in Scotland that is associated with many partners including the United Nations Department of Public Information, and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research in Scotland. It is recognized as a learning center that includes the Findhorn Foundation College accredited by the British Accreditation Council for Independent Further and Higher Education (short course provider). The Findhorn Foundation is a founding member of the Global Ecovillage Network, and is home to the New Findhorn Community Association, which is comprised of 32 diverse organizations. As previously noted, on their website, Findhorn is presented as a spiritual community, a learning center, and an ecovillage ([findhorn.org](http://findhorn.org)). Oved (2013) suggests that Findhorn has moved away from the commune to become a community on the global scene that plays a crucial role in creating a dialogue with other bodies and organizations who are seeking to improve the quality of life on earth (156).

Dinnie presents data which estimates that 30,000 people have participated in

an “Experience Week” at the Findhorn site since 1974 (2008, 88). She argues that these residential programs not only provided income, but also potential new recruits to the Foundation. They also generated more work for members in planning the week and “focalising”<sup>5</sup> for the guests. The increase in guests and their interest to remain at Findhorn also prompted the members to establish membership procedures. Finally, their presence also provided the residential group with witnesses that “gave additional purpose to their way of life” (2008, 65).

It was in the 1970s that both the retreat centre known as Traigh Bhan on the isle of Iona began as well as the custodianship of the isle of Erraid. As my research took place on Erraid, I present the reader with a brief history of the island<sup>6</sup>. The tidal island of Erraid is located on the west coast of Scotland, adjacent to the larger island of Mull. It measures no more than 187 hectares. The island contains archaeological evidence of human habitation dating back to 300 AD. The island also housed, at different times, Scottish Gaelic speaking peasants, crofters, and individuals whose livelihoods depended on fishing. The fall in kelp prices starting in 1822 combined with the Highland Clearances, ranging from the 1780s to the 1900s (Education Scotland, The Clearances n.d.), also greatly affected the island’s population. In 1866, Erraid was purchased by the Stevensons, contracted by the Northern Lighthouse Board to use Erraid as a base of operations for the light keepers and builders. They

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<sup>5</sup> “Focaliser is a term used within the community to refer to anyone in a leadership position. Focalisers have responsibility without authority; they hold awareness for practical matters as well as the spiritual focus for a department, work shift, event, or meeting” (Riddell 1991:98).

<sup>6</sup> The history that follows (except when noted) is derived from the online source [erraid.com](http://erraid.com), written and managed by members of the Foundation

are responsible for the building of the four cottages which remain functional on the island, as well as the outhouses and lighthouse observatory. Once the automation of lighthouses occurred (between the 1960s to the 1980s) (Northern Lighthouse Board, Automation of Lighthouses 2009), permanent keepers were no longer required and Erraid was sold to a businessman from Glasgow who vacationed there with his family.

In 1977, a Dutch family, the Van der Sluis' bought the island. According to the Foundation's website, the Van der Sluis's had personal ties with the Findhorn Foundation, and thus in 1978, offered them custodianship of the island under the condition that they care for the island for eleven of the twelve months of the year. Each summer, for a few weeks, the Van de Sluis' return to vacation on the island. Erraid is open to visitors all year-round except for the month they call "Dutch time" when the family returns for their vacation. All guests, plus the members have to vacate the island during "Dutch Time".

### **Coming Upon Findhorn: literally and literary**

Working on my thesis proposal, I did some preliminary research and found two doctoral dissertations of individuals who had conducted fieldwork at Findhorn. Liz Dinnie's (2008) and Steven MacLennan's (2010) works help inform this thesis as well as contextualize Findhorn's history, workings and layout. MacLennan's work provides captivating findings that become of use in my discussion and analysis of "love in action" in chapters one and two. I use Dinnie's work in the historical descriptions of Erraid and Findhorn as well as to strengthen many of my analytical arguments. Dinnie also includes statistics on the guest and member population, which also complement my own observations.

As I briefly make reference to in my introduction, I initially discovered the Findhorn Foundation on the Internet; more specifically through basic web searches for “ecovillages” and “ecocommunities” for a project due in a graduate Geography course on climate change. We broached the topic of ecovillages in the course as one of the ways groups of people respond to climate change. Ecovillages offer opportunities for both prevention and mitigation of environmental changes associated with climate change and they continue to emerge around the world (Bang 2005). We covered a vast amount of topics in the course, and though I did not make use of my discovery of the Findhorn Foundation at that time, it had piqued my interest, so I recorded it for future use.

Then, the future came, as it inevitably does, and I was in the process of finding a suitable topic of study for my master’s thesis in anthropology. I pursued anthropology for a number of reasons-though I admit one of the most important concerned my enjoyment of it-the other is the fact that the discipline allows for vast topics and interests to be explored and seeks to expand our understanding(s) of the world(s) we find ourselves in. Since I was often questioning my lifestyle, I decided to return to the website to get a closer look. Though I had initially discovered the site through an interest in geography, based on what I discovered, I felt that ethnographic research of the Foundation (specifically of the smaller community known as Erraid) would lead to a fascinating and enriching discussion regarding an alternative way of living: a way of living that had the potential to reveal rich insights on the environment, on spirituality, and on culture.

Pre-departure and during my time on Erraid, it was important to me to

maintain an open mind about the practices and beliefs displayed on the website, as well as held by members and guests. Similarly, I actively chose to try to understand the Foundation's claims and to observe how they were practiced by individuals. However, I acknowledge that throughout this project, I bore in mind some of the critiques of the Foundation and New Age movements: (1) they only cater to those of privileged backgrounds (often white, wealthy and from "Western" countries); (2) the potential (or lack thereof) of an intentional community to create social change is weakened by the focus on the privileged, ignoring the suffering of the poor; (3) how the ultimate goal of changing a single person's lifestyle has the potential to gloss over larger societal issues while offering guests a false sense of freedom and agency. Indeed, this "false" sense of freedom and agency is an important retention issue discussed in chapter four.

Though I see the value and the academic importance of the criticisms enumerated above, I find their approaches dismissive of the lives of the people I met and spent time with. To place my participants as accomplices of an unjust and exploitative system does not accurately reflect their attempts at creating a meaningful life for themselves, and the tensions that ensued. Moreover, I am sure that many of the participants' themselves would agree with various critiques of New Age practices and their communities, and yet this fact does not even begin to allow myself nor the reader to grasp people's experiences of Erraid and why this is of importance. Thus, I chose an approach that would allow me the ethical freedom to respect the lives, choices, actions and visions of the people I met, and to see the potential of the Foundation as a transformative site.

## **Spiritual Ecology**

On the homepage of the Foundation ([www.findhorn.org](http://www.findhorn.org)), a beautiful image of a setting sun on the horizon of a waterway greets the viewer. As one explores the site further, images of trees, beaches, and people holding hands in a garden are also popular. I was struck by much of the language that was used to describe both the Foundation and its satellite community, Erraid. Terms and phrases including “nature” such as: “co-creation with nature”, “being in nature”, “intelligence of nature”, “cooperating with nature”, “forces of nature”, “nature spirits”, and many others are abundant on the site. On the Erraid community website ([erraid.com](http://erraid.com)), the promise is that one works and lives “very close to the land and the elements”, where most aspects of one’s daily life are determined by the tides, the moon, the sea, and the wind. Both websites also advertise that the work they do is spiritual and transformative. On the Findhorn Foundation webpage dedicated to their Vision, it reads “by being the change we want to see in the world, listening to the deepest part of our being and cooperating with nature and with each other, we have since 1963 been at the forefront of creating a positive and sustainable future” ([findhorn.org](http://findhorn.org)). On Erraid’s website, it reads, “we are a spiritual community and the thread that brings us together is our search for a holistic quality of life and a greater expression of our divinity” ([erraid.com](http://erraid.com)).

I begin this section with this descriptive paragraph because it was my first point of contact with the community that led me towards the desire to examine “nature” and “spirituality” on Erraid. Thus came my discovery of anthropologist Leslie E. Sponsel (2012) who argues that it is our alienation from the environment that is leading to its destruction. His point resonates with Kanter’s argument that the

creation of communes in the 1960s and 1970s revolved around a psychosocial critique of society. The critique involves alienation and loneliness: both social isolation and inner fragmentation: “it holds that modern society has put people out of touch with others and with their own fundamental nature. It rejects established society’s emphasis on achievement and instead adopts as its credo ‘self-actualization’, or ‘personal growth’” (1972, 7).

Indeed, instead of discussing ways to re-arrange our economic systems, Sponsel (2012) argues that spiritual ecology is the crucial approach to consider in dealing with our current crisis. In his book, *Spiritual Ecology A Quiet Revolution*, Sponsel articulates that the “primary working assumption of spiritual ecology is that the natural and the supernatural are not discrete and incompatible domains, but instead are interwoven into the very fabric of human existence and experience, [...]” (2012, 19). The absence of a relationship with nature “is conducive to the domination, exploitation, degradation and destruction of the environment” (1998, 163). An example of these consequences causes a disequilibrium (such as global warming), and peoples adhering to spiritual ecology, usually place an emphasis on treating the crisis spiritually as well as in a material manner (Sponsel, 2012, 14).

Many of the ideas of the guests and the members I met on Erraid resonated with Sponsel; here are examples of two participants that conveyed similar ideas regarding the “conventional” world and the disequilibrium:

Paul

Oh, I do have the knowledge that, I mean it’s quite obvious, anyone who has got half a brain and who can step outside the kind of paradigms that are presented by conventional society in terms of possession of power, and security, can see the idiotic lack of cooperation with nature and the disaster that that must lead to, it’s not like I have to be any kind of spiritual genius to

see that.

April

I think that the state of the natural environment that it is now is a reflection of how humanity is now. And the fact that there's so much pollution and natural disasters is because we are not taking care of ourselves and we're not taking care of our environment.

For Sponsel, in order to solve many of the contemporary world's dilemmas, it is imperative to forge an active spiritual relationship (or hold a set of beliefs and worldviews that one might refer to as "spiritual") between what is perceived as human and non-human. A spirituality that is central to one's existence and provides the basis on which all of one's actions are measured is a step forward in healing the planet and ourselves. The concept of co-creation within the Findhorn community resonates with Sponsel's ideas in that "nature" is perceived as an intelligent agent that is meant to be reached out to, and worked with.

The concept of co-creation first came into being when Dorothy MacLean (one of the foundation's founders), meditated in 1963, and received an insight which taught her that one of the purposes of being a free human (and "child", presumably of "God"), is to "sense the Nature forces such as the wind, to perceive its essence and purpose for me, and to be positive and harmonize with that essence" (findhorn.org). For Dorothy, the important thing was for humans to co-operate with the intelligences of nature. Dorothy proceeded to make contact with what she refers to as Devas and/or Angels which are the "'overlighting' being of the species [of plants], which was the consciousness holding the archetypal design of the species and the blueprint for its highest potential" (findhorn.org). She experienced a formless energy that helped guide her with her work in the garden, and helped it flourish (findhorn.org). The

founding principle of co-creation and many of the practices that ensue, such as attunements, tuning-in/out, and blessings, are representative of this idea of a spirituality which includes humans and non-humans on the same existential plane in constant interaction with each other. The practice of attunement is based on the idea that one invokes an “active cooperation with an overlighting consciousness, to help align our actions and unfold the highest potential available in that particular task” (findhorn.org). Spiritual ecology provides a theoretical lens to investigate how spiritualities on Erraid are related to environmentalisms, and how what is perceived as natural and supernatural are interwoven (Sponsel 2012, 19).

Many of my research participants stated that changing the world, which includes all manner of sins (including degradation of the environment), is tackled by changing the way one chooses to live: through one’s actions and the beliefs in co-creation with nature it is obvious that all aspects of existence should be treated with love and respect. For example, Charlotte, a long-term guest, describes how the state of the environment results from the way human beings treat each other:

Charlotte

I do very much feel that the way we treat each other is strongly related to how we treat the earth. Things like the common ground<sup>7</sup>, that’s developed over meeting after meeting after meeting, of people you know getting really clear what they believe a group can agree to. And it’s parallel to how we should or could choose to treat the Earth.

The Findhorn Foundation is open to various forms of spirituality, and offers one's spiritual practice as a significant way to solve the contemporary dilemmas discussed by Sponsel (2012). Diverse forms of spiritual practice occur both at the

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<sup>7</sup> Please see Appendix 1 for the document called “the common ground”.

Findhorn site as well as on Erraid, though their primary values revolve around the following: deep inner listening, co-creation with nature, and love in action (see Appendix 1). Moreover, many visitors to Findhorn's island site, Erraid, discussed with me that they were disenchanted by our very individualistic lifestyles, overly consumerist tendencies, and lack of proper care for each other and the environment. In theory their response to leave their current occupations and either visit or stay on Erraid to explore a more spiritually sustainable way of interacting with our environment corresponds with Sponsel's ideas as well as Kanter's.

However, some issues with Sponsel's approach are that it assumes a harmonious existence between humans and nature as unproblematic, when in reality this "relationship" might be lived in many different ways. Even just on Erraid, many individuals practiced their beliefs and values concerning the environment differently. Spiritual ecology and co-creation also seem to assume that being in relationship with something or someone inhibits the possibility of abuse, corruption, or conflict. As probably most humans can attest to, many abuses actually occur in relationships, and sometimes to the people we are closest to. Indeed, as much as individuals on Erraid, including myself, tried to act in ways demonstrative of our respect for and closeness to the environment, the practices we employed were not always "eco-friendly", such as the everyday use of wood burning stoves, for example. Moreover, the idea of being in relationship with nature also presupposes that we are already *not* in relationship with "it". And why should we be divided by nature in the first place?

Yet these are the ideologies that help shape the lives of those on Erraid. Indeed, many aspire to a lifestyle that attempts to harmonize with nature by being the best

and most caring version of themselves. One of the most compelling reasons for people to come to Erraid is to transform their lives according to the values of spiritual ecology and co-creation. Notably, some of the data I collected from members suggests that, in practice, it was challenging to adhere to and sustain these values in the circumstances they found themselves (certain organization structures and their low numbers). In practice, spiritual ecology or co-creation are not the quintessential answers to the question of human sustainability and long-term happiness. Though co-creation and the ideas behind spiritual ecology are important to the lives of those on Erraid, ethnographic research offers insight into the tensions produced between the attempt of living a sustainable alternative to “western lifestyles”, and the reality of having to act within these “western” systems.

### **New Age**

A crucial element to understanding Findhorn and Erraid is its associations with the New Age. Though the term itself only arose once or twice during my time on Erraid, I nevertheless find the scholarship on the matter relevant to my research.

In Sutcliffe’s and Saelid Gilhus’s work *New Age Spirituality, Rethinking Religion* (2013), they describe how the term ‘New Age’ became popularized in academic works from the mid-1980s onwards; although in an earlier work of his, Sutcliffe traces the usage of the term back to the 1930s. The expression has been generally used to describe a large variety of phenomena which only partially includes astrology, tarot and other kinds of divination; channelling and mediumship; magical ideas about multiple ‘bodies’; and body practices like yoga, tai chi, and ch’i kung (Sutcliffe and Saelid Gilhus 2013, 3). Paul Heelas, anthropologist and expert in religious studies,

describes how “on first sight, the development of the New Age marks a radical break with the modern condition. As the term ‘New Age’ implies, it has to do with a way of life, a set of values, which apparently rupture or transcend what modernity has to offer” (1996, 3). Heelas describes that the New Age was also known as the Age of Aquarius, and hippies seeking an escape from the “contaminations of modernity” (1993, 105). Modernity itself, or the modern condition, has been argued to include “the industrialization of work; the shift from villages to towns and cities; the replacement of the small community by society; the rise of individualism; the rise of egalitarianism, and the rationalization both of thought and of social organization” (Bruce 2002, 2).

Critiques of New Age communities or communes tend to argue that the movement is essentially a movement towards the self, a “self-spirituality” (Lasch 1980; Heelas 1996; Mills 1994; Johnson 1995; Bruce 1996; van Hove 1999; Urban 2000): a “trend within advanced capitalism to commodify everything and convert it into a marketplace of choices for individual consumers” (Ivakhiv 2003, 93). Authors Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (among others) also argue that a “silent takeover of religion” is occurring by the corporate world of business, turning religious traditions from many parts of the world into vague and saleable spirituality in tune with western individualism and neoliberalism (Carrette and King 2005 as cited by Mikaelsson 2013, 163).

In terms of community, it has been argued that New Age communities do not easily survive long-term, precisely due to this idea of “self-spirituality” which is positioned at odds with community. However, in her dissertation, Dinnie uses

Kanter's work on commitment "as the mechanism which links individual actions to the social structure" (Dinnie 2008, 208) to show how the New Age community of Findhorn has survived for over forty years. Dinnie (2008) also uses Sutcliffe (1995, 26) to argue how a change from social to individual transformation (how Findhorn attempts to offer an example of a way of life which involves reclaiming or seeking the self) is actually what characterizes New Age spirituality as a whole. For Dinnie,

The Findhorn Community has managed the organizational difficulties stemming from individualism by altering the purpose for living together and by creating different layers of involvement. The idea of pioneering a new way of life for themselves has given way to education and demonstration to others. Lifelong commitment has been replaced with temporary involvement. Having a purpose for collective life other than living together equips the project with an idea which can be used to transform, discipline and guide members, create organizational arrangements around commitment, and link individual transformation to social change (2008, 210)

In the big picture, I agree with Dinnie's insightful conclusions concerning the continued existence and success of the Findhorn Foundation, as well as the Foundation exemplifying many keys aspects of the New Age.

Yet, in my opinion and in the opinions expressed by both members and short-term guests of Erraid, its survival and continued existence is not really their issue and primary concern; because they do believe that Erraid and the Foundation will continue to exist. Instead, their focus on human sustainability actually demonstrates a tension with the idea just previously mentioned where "lifelong commitment has been replaced with temporary involvement" (Dinnie 2008, 210). I experienced many of the frustrations of the members concerning their desire to reside on Erraid for a long period of time (perhaps not a lifelong commitment but certainly for several years), and how they concluded that their current "set-up" was not conducive to this

desire. It is precisely this shift towards temporary involvement that generates the tension between the ideals of Erraid as an alternative lifestyle and its practices, which create difficulties for long-term members.

For the members on Erraid, their response to their disappointment was to attempt to make the island as humanly sustainable as possible. To achieve this goal they implemented certain changes: three examples included trying to interchange weeks of hosting obligations (one week “on”, one week “off”); to plan for guests to stay in the empty cottages first; and to implement a structure-free Wednesday where both members and guests were left free to their own devices (although the animals and the boat still needed attention). Though most members agree that these changes were beneficial, they did not seem to entirely solve their struggles in the long run. I address their struggles which included privacy, work, and freedom, extensively in chapter four.

Instead of signaling a success or failure on the part of the Findhorn Foundation’s survival, their disappointment and their struggles point to a serious critique of Erraid, and the Findhorn Foundation as a whole, to engage meaningfully with the desire of individuals to live alternatives to the dominant lifestyles accessible in the West in the long term. Despite the attempts made by the Foundation (and Erraid) to offer seekers this ideal alternative, because they are a business and require income derived from mainstream society, they have not created conditions in which long-term residency is generally viable and sustainable. For example, because of the fact that Erraid is owned by the Dutch family the Van der Sluis’ and occupies this role

of retreat for members of the Findhorn Foundation<sup>8</sup> (organizational structures), the idea that members can also exemplify a style of living that is sustainable are ideas (and realities) at odds with each other. The evolution of Erraid into its current financial situation (relying on production and consumption) and its level of low membership, have led the members to criticize its lack of human sustainability (Joseph 2002).

### **Work and Community**

Oved states that from its beginning Findhorn has been a working community (2013, 153). Work is considered spiritual, as well as a way to serve the world where love is emphasized (Oved, 2013, 153). The New Age movement attempts to capture the idea that a person does not (and perhaps should not) work only for the sake of an income, and instead seek personal and psychological rewards (Heelas and Woodhead 2001, 54-5). In theory, this resonates with the Foundation's philosophy since work on Erraid is referred to as "love in action": this is what members as well as short-term guests aspire to while they live there, and hope to bring with them once they leave the island. MacLennan (2009) also discusses Findhorn's motto of 'work is love in action': "love in action is practiced in various work departments [...and refers to] showing love and gratitude to the building for providing warmth and shelter, and also by engaging in cleaning, one is metaphorically cleansing the self" (27). Thus, in Findhorn and on Erraid,

Work is not a necessary evil, a purely economic pursuit, a vocational calling, or a mix of economic pursuit and professional/personal satisfaction. It is an expression of love and gratitude for unseen spiritual realms delivered in

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<sup>8</sup> It is also interesting to note that Erraid at times serves as a retreat for members located at the Findhorn site.

practical ways, and it is also an accountable practical action. (27)

The Foundation intimately connects work and spirituality such that work actually is a spiritual practice (love in action). In practice, however, due to the low number of members on Erraid, the ideal of love in action was not always easy to adhere to. The members were often overworked to ensure a meaningful experience for the guests and were not always able to entertain a spiritual connection to work.

For many of the guests and members of Erraid, the desire for “living in community” was a response to many of the ills of modernity. Indeed, the study of “community” has a vast and rich history in academic disciplines including anthropology and sociology. Sociologist Gerard Delanty argues that the “popularity of community today can be seen as a response to the crisis in solidarity and belonging that has been exacerbated and at the same time induced by globalization” (2010, x).

Marx's work on the relationship between alienation and the capitalist means of production in his 1844 manuscript “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts”, outlines four results of alienated labour: “alienated labour alienates the worker, first, from the product of his labour; second, from his own activity; third, the worker is alienated from 'species-being'; and fourth, from other human beings” (Jaeggi 2014, 11). Alienation from labour, from community and from nature is a popular explanation for the emergence of communes and the rise of spirituality through movements like the New Age. Indeed, the Findhorn Foundation's focus on love in action is one way of responding to this alienation. However, when the members are overworked and stressed, love in action cannot always provide a sufficient solution.

David and Elena French's *Working Communally, Patterns and Possibilities*

(1975) presents the reader with a similar critique to Marx in terms of the alienation of labour. For the authors, the emergence of the counterculture of communes in the 1960s and 1970s was a movement in response to an oppressive work system. Their own analysis of the “roots of discontent” for this countercultural movement away from industrialized cities and the available work, is rooted in four “immediate issues which led people to be unhappy with their lives”: (1) production and consumption, (2) the nature of work, (3) control, and (4), ecology: physical and human (1975, 4-14). While this is a common interpretation, and while many of the issues resonated with both short-term guests and members on Erraid, my findings suggest that French and French’s arguments may not be sufficient to account for the relationships guests and members had to work on and off Erraid. I delve deeper into why below, considering the four issues they identified.

In their discussion of the first issue, production and consumption, the authors argue that in order for workers to derive satisfaction from their work they must be able to see the satisfaction of those consuming their labour or the products of their labour (1975, 4-5). They state that most people do not work in the sectors that make the goods and services that the vast majority of the population consumes directly (1975, 5). Moreover, once one’s labour is construed as meaningless, to seek respite from the meaningless goods, one curiously consumes more goods (1975, 6). These goods are then not thoroughly enjoyed by one’s self due to the constant demand of more work and the constant drive of consumption (1975, 6-7). On Erraid, participants engaged with the idea that consumerism was rampant and meaningless in their lives in western metropolises. The appeal of coming to Erraid certainly pertained to the

desire to lessen one's consumption and to re-shape one's life through a spiritual transformation of one's values by engaging in the practices established by the Foundation. However, both myself and some of my participants find that consumption itself cannot be completely eradicated: indeed, the act of coming to Erraid itself may be interpreted as the consumption of an experience since one is required to pay.

Many of the short-term guests and a few members indicated that they did not feel alienated, or unhappy in their careers outside of Erraid. However, their jobs did include more direct contact with the recipients of their labour: e.g. nurses, engineers, teachers, social workers, child care workers, etc. French and French (1975) argue that alienation, in part, comes from a rupture between the labourer and the product of their labour, whereas these jobs in the service sector allow employees to be in contact with those using their services. Though there is also the opportunity on Erraid for individuals to be in direct contact with the product of their labour, the limited diversity of the opportunities available also limited people's desire to stay long-term.

For French and French, the nature of work is questioned and often demeaned when one no longer sees a value in consumption (1975, 7). The need for the type of work that yields no visible benefits begins to look and feel silly or crazy (1975, 7). The work that one performs may no longer occupy significant importance in one's life, nor, as the authors write "turn us on", and thus in the work place one finds passive, unsatisfied, unhappy, or absent workers (1975, 7-9). On Erraid, Charlotte, a long-term guest, found that the work on Erraid had "integrity", and that the work was meaningful, useful and purposeful:

...because part of human sustainability is good work, you know, and there is good work around here. For me gardening and cooking are important. I mean,

for me, I have no time for widgets and gadgets, and the things that business people want to sell. For me, the only worthwhile human, only...the four or five most worthwhile human endeavors are producing food, shelter, clothing, medical care, energy and education. And beyond that...you know, the rest of it is kind of nonsense, really, for me. So here, the work is mostly pretty solid. You know, it's got integrity, there's a useful purpose to it.

However, instead of being disenchanted with work, many participants expressed a desire to transform their lives by connecting to their Self, or to learn how to co-create with nature. Thus, their motives were contrary to what one could presume given the scholarship on New Age and alienated labour. Moreover, French and French's (1975) argument does not allow us to understand the experience of the members who began to feel alienated from themselves, even if the work had integrity and purpose.

For French and French (1975) when one does not have control over the conditions or the nature of work, workers often feel impotent (1975, 9). French and French argue that though workers have a voice, they are not in complete control of their work situations: for example, a faculty member may tinker with grading systems, "instituting pass-fail for their classes instead of letter grades, but they are unlikely to be given the option of dispensing with grades or classes altogether" (1975, 10). Indeed, even in democratic elections, the authors argue that the population delegates their self-sovereignty over to the representatives who make decisions for them (1975, 11). The idea of control played an important part in the concern for human sustainability on Erraid. Many individuals sought freedom while on Erraid. For short-term guests this was often accomplished, while for members they experienced a lack of control which led to "frustrated freedom" (a concept I borrow from Fischer (2014) and which leads to a diminished capacity to exercise one's agency, and leads to a

decrease in overall wellbeing).

Last but not least, French and French's issue "ecology: physical and human", tackles how the fragmentation of western lives between work, play, worship, learning, etc. has destroyed community and instead one has many communities in which one participates (1975, 12). These multiple communities produce multiple identities which create "transitory events and disposable people" (1975, 13). Similarly to Sponsel (2012), the authors argue that social degradation leads to environmental degradation (1975, 13). It follows that if it is difficult to connect with and understand another person, there should be little basis for involvement in the lives of rivers, for example (1975, 14). They conclude that because people are severed from their fellow human beings and their ties to the earth, everything appears evanescent and without meaning (1975, 14). In theory, Erraid's ideal and appeal is precisely to restore and piece together these fragmented relationships through community practices such as co-creation with nature, and the work of love in action. All of French and French's issues resonate with both guests and members because this is precisely what Erraid is meant to respond to, in theory. This philosophy is a part of the strong appeal of Erraid, how Erraid advertises itself, and why guests opt to become members. In theory, French and French's (1975) ideas resonate with members and short-term guests, but in practice, their arguments are challenged by the very difficulties experienced by the members and some of the reasons for why short-term guests are deterred from staying (see Chapter Four).

Heelas (1993) argues that it is not entirely possible to leave (or be rid of) capitalism in such a way that one can escape the culture of which one is a

counterculture. Heelas has also argued that Findhorn is part of the New Age; and that the New Age is a counterculture responding to the ills of modernity. Heelas proposes that modernity (or its ills) is not just “one thing entirely dominated by those cultural values associated with materialistic capitalism and consumption” (1993, 106). Instead, Heelas writes: “as Charles Taylor--among others--has argued, modernity is a complex of different moral orientations. And from this perspective the countercultural New Age belongs to an important dynamic encapsulated by modernity itself” (1993, 106). Similar to this argument, Joseph (2002) argues that the current economic and social system has allowed new communities to emerge (Joseph 2002).

Miranda Joseph, author of *Against the Romance of Community*, argues that “community is one of the most motivating discourses and practices circulating in contemporary society” (2002, xxx). Joseph is critical of Marx's view on capitalism as breaking down communities by freeing and obliging individuals to sell their labour: instead, she argues that capitalism enables people to create communities on “new grounds”, but that these inevitably serve an evolving capitalism in particular ways (2002, 47).

One of the examples she gives of these communities is the transformation of NGOs. She presents evidence that shows how NGOs first presented alternatives to Western societies, and wished to help give voice to the poor of diverse countries, but materialized instead into organizations that “build on existing hierarchies, and exacerbate differences in wealth and power at global, national, and local scales” (Joseph 2002, 114). She also notes that NGOs who do not wish to deal in capital, and

are not about capital, rely on it for their survival: “Non-profits mobilize for capital but not only for capital subjectivities that are not (only) of it are in fact its absent center and yet set it in motion” (Joseph 2002,118).

The Findhorn Foundation, akin to this paradox, also relies on capital generated in the larger world (society “out there”) to survive, though capital is meant to be absent from its center (Joseph 2002). I argue that there is an implicit tension to presenting Findhorn as of service to the world, offering an alternative to capitalism, and yet depending on that very system to survive by way of recruitment and income. Moreover, the tension is felt explicitly through the difficulties of the members to make Erraid “humanly sustainable”. The realities of running Erraid (compared to “running a business” by some participants), has placed the community and its members in an interesting dynamic with the capitalist systems they are trying to escape/alter.

## **Chapter Three - My Stay on Erraid**

### **Methodology**

My project primarily involved actively participating in the lives of the people I met on Erraid. The culmination of this research lies in my attempt to reflect these experiences in this thesis. My desire to engage with the people I met on Erraid and to attempt to understand their lives derives from my understanding of ethnography. Campbell and Lassiter (2014) wrote that one of the commitments of ethnographic practice “is committing to a particular way of being with people” which is all about “engaging in, wrestling with, and being committed to the human relationships around which ethnography ultimately revolves” (4). This emphasis on human interaction leads me to agree with Campbell’s and Lassiter’s opinion that ethnography is positioned, relational, and also deeply subjective (2014, 4). Thus, I whole-heartedly concede to the fact that the conversations I had, the interviews I held, and all of my experiences are interpreted through my own very personal lens.

Instead of attempting to pursue an “objective research position”, which I believe masks the complexities of a person’s worldviews, agendas, hopes, etc., it is through my own shared experiences with individuals that I am able to attend to my own, as well as their own, positions, subjectivities, and experiences (Campbell and Lassiter 2014, 4-5). Campbell and Lassiter also note that the practice of ethnography “demands honest and rigorous appraisals” of the ethnographer’s own assumptions and ethnocentrism, much of which are learnt about through the relationships with one’s collaborators by way of co-experience and shared dialogue (2014, 5). Indeed, ethnography is a very collaborative process which relies on the relationship between

ethnographer and collaborator (5). Considering the above, I decided to make any potential participants aware of my project and my intentions. In my initial interactions with the community through email (the address is listed on their website), I first enquired as to the possibility of a researcher living and working with them. I had no idea who was living there at the time and what to expect as a reply. However, the response was prompt and positive from Ruben, one of the members. Once I had a draft of some interview questions in June 2014, I decided to send those ahead of my arrival, and they were also received positively. The decision to conduct research on Erraid was made in spring of 2014, and I spent forty days on the isle in Fall 2014.

In the relatively early stages of the project, I also had to take the time to explore the ethical implications of my proposed ethnographic project. This included deciding on actions which would prevent or reduce any harm to participants, to always ensure I had informed consent (which included hardcopy forms in my case), as well as strive to accurately represent and portray any participants' experiences while also respecting their confidentiality and/or anonymity.

In terms of recruiting participants, some offered to be interviewed while others agreed upon my request. In this way, the data I collected also rests upon the choices I made in the field regarding who to interview. During my five and a half week stay, there was an introduction circle each Saturday when new guests arrived. Whether it was during this introduction circle or in subsequent more informal and private conversations with individuals, it inevitably surfaced that my principle reason for being there was to conduct research for my master's thesis. Several individuals

made it known that they were interested and fascinated by this fact and offered any help they could. Thus, once I requested interviews, a handful willingly volunteered the first week of my fieldwork. Once I figured out which individuals were staying for a few weeks, and which were only staying for a very short period (a week or less), I attempted to privately plan my own interview schedule around this knowledge as well as who was willing and could take the time to do so.

In terms of respecting participants' confidentiality, the least ambiguous way of acquiring consent for this project was to base my ethnography on audio-recorded interviews. It was during these interviews that I shared the consent form with details regarding the project that was approved by the Carleton Ethics Board, and where I tried to provide a space for them to answer the questions they chose, as well as the freedom to decline to answer any questions or to end the interview entirely. Of the 15 interview participants, I encountered only two individuals resistant to being audio-recorded. This was because, I think, they felt was either unnecessary or an invasion of their privacy. I felt close to both of these participants, and had already shared so much personal experience with them, that they may have felt that the interview would be "too formal", redundant, and perhaps not the best way for them to share their thoughts. I collected twelve recorded interviews, for a total of thirteen individuals, as one interview included a couple. I decided to take very sparse notes during the recorded interviews so as to allow myself to concentrate on their responses. That being said, I wrote much more for the two individuals who did not wish to be recorded, but it was nowhere near the amount of data I collected with the recordings. Two of the audio-recorded interviews occurred after my departure,

through the telecommunications application software, Skype.

When choosing interviews as the primary source of knowledge for this project, I concede to adhering to certain types of epistemological and philosophical positions. These include the “belief in the autonomy and freedom of individuals to ‘speak their mind’ and convey their thoughts to others freely and openly”, as well as the idea that people may become more authentically themselves via public discourse (Campbell and Lassiter 2014, 87-88). The interview produces valuable insight into a participant’s worldview, values, agendas, hopes, etc., but it is limiting for the ethnographer in the ways that it does not show how a person actually goes about living. It has the potential to gloss over a person’s complexities by sustaining one whole narrative. It also usually generates a certain type of knowledge that is expressed through speech, and through certain expected behaviours and ways of being. The first-person narrative I acquired through interviews is nevertheless critical to my project in that I felt the participants were honest and open about their feelings and their concerns. It was through these dialogues that I was given the task to attempt to explore what is (and is not) occurring on Erraid in order to provide a more humanly sustainable environment. In order to address some of the limits of the interview method, I also rely on my own shared experiences and observations of Erraid.

I wrote in a journal, every day, during the 40 days of my stay. This journal includes comments on daily occurrences and schedules, as well as many of my personal feelings and impressions. That being said, I remember very consciously choosing not to include certain experiences or conversations. From the beginning, I

attempted to establish a personal ethical “line” which would influence my decision in writing about (both in my journal and in this thesis) personal matters. Since I cared for these individuals, I strove to differentiate between material that would be important and appropriate to this academic project and what would be considered irrelevant and too personal. I chose not to include conversations and occurrences that I felt were too personal and that might feel like an invasion of privacy. I also assured each person would have a pseudonym, even if this was not important to everyone.

That being said, I have not attempted to completely conceal the identities of participants’ by altering their histories and experiences, and thus would not be surprised if participants’ recognized themselves and each other in this text. Because of this and the purpose of the project, I selected excerpts from the interviews which I believe, given the opportunity, the participants’ would discuss openly with other people. I am more delicate with the stories I include that are not taken from interviews, and in some cases, I do not attribute the actions or dialogues to any particular person. Moreover, the challenges to human sustainability written about in chapter four are based entirely on the very concerns broached by participants.

In terms of being a paid guest on Erraid, I did not feel that the members or any visitors to Erraid were indebted to me, or I to them based on this monetary exchange. I did feel the need to participate however, but this I did willingly, knowing that I had invested financially in the experience. Moreover, I was left to decide how much money I was to contribute weekly to the community, but I did not experience any conversations about what this amount should be, or how this could impact my experience. I found that my relationship as a “guest” being hosted by the members,

was important in that I felt that the members possessed the wealth of knowledge regarding Erraid that I sought. They were the people I sought to interview the most. The relationship created boundaries in terms of my access to information: I was not privy to “members only” or even “members and long-term guest” meetings. I also felt that on a daily basis, the love in action tasks were offered by the members, and thus certain protocols and practices were expected of the paying guests.

During my fieldwork, I aimed to build positive relationships with the people I lived with. I wanted to be there: I wanted to experience Erraid for myself, and I wanted to know how other people experienced it. This thesis is the result of that work.

### **Who are “Erraidians”?**

During my stay on Erraid, the number of individuals who resided on the island fluctuated weekly from sixteen to twenty people. There were also “builders” on the island: about ten men who were restoring the two cottages by the pier. The interactions I had with the builders were always friendly, polite, and short. We did not share meals or any labour activities with them. While I was on Erraid, there were five adult members (as well as two children) who had lived at least a year on the island, eleven long-term guests (staying more than three weeks, including myself and including three children), and between zero to seventeen short-term guests (staying for less than two weeks). The members were Sophia, Archie, Ruben, Anna and Tess. Of the long-term guests, one, Lukas was waiting to step into Trial Membership with the goal of becoming a member in the near future. During my time there, I met a total of twenty-nine adults and five children. I recorded interviews with thirteen of the adults, and took notes for two non-recorded interviews, for a total of fifteen different

accounts.

During my stay, the individuals who resided on and visited Erraid were of many different nationalities: Dutch, American, Canadian (myself), German, Brazilian, English, Mauritian, Scottish, Austrian, Australian and New Zealander. Of my participants, six identified as male and nine as female. Their ages varied, four were in their 30s, five in their 40s, four in their 50s, one in their 60s, and one in their 70s. Occupations held by the individuals also varied greatly. Some examples include teachers, child workers, artists, sales manager, nurse, Findhorn staff, computer technician, engineer, professor, psychiatrist, carpenter, etc. Their religious backgrounds also varied, though many were brought up in or familiar with Christian faiths. One exception was Ada who was raised Hindu, but here is her take on being a spiritual being:

so [the meaning of] “spiritual” for me is some kind of connection with something greater than oneself, and with time I’ve called that with different names, but for me it’s also, one source, many paths. So I am accepting of that, and it is something of a belief, a connection with a greater source, whether it’s a creative source of light, of God, Christ, they are so similar. And to me the words do not matter: I am multifaith. I sing as fervently in a church as I would do in a temple, or in a Sufi gathering, and for me it’s the same thing: I see the doctrines and the theology as the hand of man, and I tend to connect with what is beyond that. I am respectful of, of course, of the norms, I am respectful of that, as much as I can be, but I am connected beyond that.

All of the participants practiced some form of meditation. Many also expressed a curiosity about different rituals and some were interested in expanding their spiritual beliefs and practices. Most of the participants as well as other guests had some prior experience with intentional communities, whether it was Findhorn itself, or with different ones in other locations.

### **Description of the site**

Many of the participants described the isle of Erraid as being quite remote. The Foundation's websites advertise it as such, and geographically speaking, it is indeed remote. To accurately portray this to the reader, I shall describe my own physical journey to Erraid. I decided to fly into Edinburgh, as it is a city I know well. Once in the city center, I took an early afternoon train lasting roughly 3-4 hours to the city of Oban, on the west coast of Scotland. I decided to stay overnight in Oban and rest from my journey. From Oban, I took a 45-minute ferry ride over to the isle of Mull, specifically to the small port town of Craignure. Once in Craignure, I hopped on a West Coast Motors bus to Fionnphort. This is a beautiful scenic drive of just over one hour in length. Once in Fionnphort, I was greeted by a member, Archie, who drove for roughly 15 minutes to a parking lot on Mull where I caught the boat to Erraid. For many who have not ventured far from big cities, Erraid seems very remote. For myself, I had on a previous occasion visited the Isle of Skye, also on Scotland's west coast, and had a sense of what this journey and location might entail.

The physical remoteness of Erraid plays into this perception that one is more "in nature". That is an attractive concept in itself to many people, because it is the idea that one is taken away (relieved) of work and possibly social pressures and expectations found in "regular" city living. Erraid as a place of retreat greatly attracted various individuals who came to relax, renew, or refresh themselves. That being said, the actual experience of living on Erraid, if one does choose to partake in community activities, is described as quite intense: Ben, a short-term returning guest to Erraid, describes the island as a place where one is 'stuck' with one's self. This is also due to the living situation where everyone who stays on Erraid through the Foundation lives

and works together. This requires a certain level of self-awareness as to one's ability to communicate and ultimately get along with the other strangers who are sharing the island. Thus, the sense of remoteness felt physically in the journey can also be felt internally in the intense experience one has with one's own thoughts and feelings and interactions with others<sup>9</sup>. Erraid is certainly advertised as a "break", and many short-term guests also feel that this is so. However, for the members, living on Erraid is work. Short-term guests who become long-term guests or trial members, also begin to see how much work and dedication is required to run the island and host guests (this was my own experience). Members undoubtedly understand the appeal of Erraid for short-term guests and the pleasant experience that ensues for them. Nevertheless this seemingly simplistic difference reveals that there are tensions between the perception of Erraid's purpose depending on whether you are a member, short-term, or long-term guest.

To access the island from the parking lot on Mull (where Archie drove me to), a person can either walk across the Ross of Mull at low tide, or can embark on a very short boat ride where the boats are docked at the pier (Figure 1.3). At high tide, the water rises right to the top of the large concrete block of the pier, but at low tide, one walks down to the a beach east of the cottages. From the pier, facing the community, one can see a few large sheds and two small cottages to the south. The two small cottages by the pier were being renovated during my stay, and they have served in the past (and perhaps in the future), as temporary homes for guests as well. As one

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<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Erraid is not so remote in the sense that internet is available and used readily by guests. There is also a landline, and some cellular phone coverage, though this is not always reliable.

approaches the buildings, there is a slight hill upwards, where one passes the hen house on the right and a few fenced in areas. At the top of the unpaved road, there is an old well-maintained white gate which opens onto an unpaved street where the four very large cottages are located. The four cottages are each divided into two different spaces: there are actually seven separate living quarters, while the eighth space holds the dining room, kitchen, pantry, dairy and what is referred to as Room 8, which has the look of a living room and is also the meeting room. Adjacent to the dining room, on the left (closest to the entrance gate), one can enter the “welly boot room”. This room contains extra rain boots, jackets, overalls and other outdoor clothing left by visiting guests or purchased by the community members. There is also a washing machine, and through another doorway one enters the “freezer room” to find extra-large freezers and stores of additional food, dishes, jars, soap, etc. The seven living spaces contain 2-3 bedrooms each. In the entry ways of Houses 2 to 7 one can also find useful and communal things: local literature, sheets and rugs, a small boutique, Findhorn and spiritual literature, towels, and the Erraid community shop (which is quite small and includes crisps, chocolate, postcards, some jewelry, basic pharmacy needs, to name but a few of the things). It is also based on trust as no one constantly monitors the shop, but instead there is a bowl where one drops off the exact change for payment.

In front of the cottages, parallel to them, lie the gardens, all pleasantly gated by low brick walls. I was told that the main structure of the cottages themselves has not much changed, however different renovations have occurred over the course of the three decades that the Findhorn Foundation have been caretakers.

The street is surrounded by wooden or steel gates that are easy to open and close. The members ask that everyone close the gates behind them when entering the gardens or leaving the street to ensure sheep do not wander in, or that children do not wander out.

Sheep and cows graze beyond the walls and over the rest of the island; they are owned and cared for by a neighboring farmer outside of the Findhorn community. The community has a good relationship with the local farmer, John, and during my stay we participated in a “sheep run” with his three sheep dogs. This adventure took many hours and involved walking all over the island as well as attempting to keep sheep in certain areas. Around the month of August, the Dutch family returns to holiday on the island. Prior to their arrival, the members as well as any guests are expected to vacate all cottages, and leave them tidy and clean.

The interior décor as well as floor plan of every cottage is slightly different. I resided in House 6 whose floor plan I roughly sketched (not to proportion) as Figure 1.4 below.



Figure 1.0 View of the street from the 2<sup>nd</sup> cottage



Figure 1.1 View of a garden over the street wall



Figure 1.2 View of the cottages from a nearby hill



Figure 1.3 View of the Pier and sheds

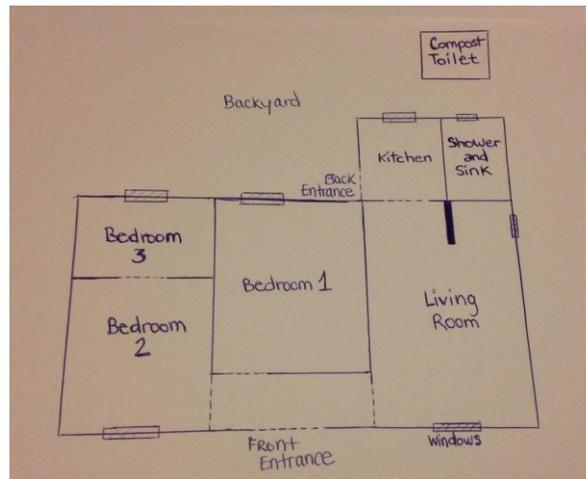


Figure 1.4 Rough Floor Plan of House 6

Another small structure that is important to the community is the Sanctuary. This is a small wooden rectangular room with one wall of glass which sits at the top of a small hill and offers breathtaking views over the waterway called Erraid Sound. The Sanctuary is where meditations occur, as well as some singing and attunements. Anyone is welcome into the sanctuary, although it is advised to discuss the attendance of children with a member or the week's focaliser beforehand. The sanctuary is always unlocked, and one may find a small collection of books, candles, incense, sage for smudging, and angel cards spread on the ground. There are many chairs and pillows and blankets for people to grab and sit on during any of these rituals. There is also a well-kept outlook post (the lighthouse observatory) which is a small round building

that provides information on the lighthouses that still occupy the region and that one might glimpse here and there in the far distance. The island also has many beautiful beaches with clear blue water, some within short walking distance. I, myself, swam at least half a dozen times (even though the water is quite cold in the fall months).

There are also other buildings: a candle studio/workshop space and another building which was used for the renovations of the windows. This second workshop was affectionately referred to as “Mother’s Pride”. The candle studio required some major renovations and clean-up and thus was not in use while I was there. I spent many pleasant days in Mother’s Pride helping with the “windows project”.

As defined by the Erraid community on their website ([erraid.com](http://erraid.com)), the community’s purpose is threefold: first, it is to look after the island, its buildings and its gardens, second, to enjoy these, and thirdly to share the island and its gifts with others. From the information I was able to gather, Erraid is financially independent as income arrives with guests. However, since the Dutch family still claims ownership of the island, any large-scale expenditures required for the maintenance of the cottages or sheds, for example, are the family’s financial responsibility. Ruben, a member having lived on Erraid for over two years, and in his late 30s, briefly discusses these relationships:

Financially, Erraid is independent. But I mean, we depend on so many other things: we depend on Findhorn, we depend on the Dutch family, we depend on the local community. It’s all together, it’s impossible to separate those...

Moreover, the Erraid website explicitly states what is covered by the income generated by the guests:

Income arrives with guests, and expenditures cover food, garden supplies, maintenance, animal care and small allowances for community members.

Large capital expenditures, such as the recent refurbishment of the roofs, are the responsibility of the Dutch owners.

Thus, an example of a large-scale expenditure which preceded my arrival was the newly installed roofs on each cottage. And while I was present, the builders on the island were also involved in quite a large operation fixing up the two other cottages by the pier.

Members welcome “Short-term” and “Long-term” visitors who must pay a certain monetary sum to live on the island and participate in the Findhorn community. “Members”, on the other hand, are individuals who have spent a significant period of time with the community. As such, they have taken up certain responsibilities and gone through certain “rituals” so that they are no longer charged to live on the island. Instead they are paid a small allowance of £25 per person, per week, by the Foundation, and this amount grows to £35 after their first year.

Though there are some exceptions, the four principle ways a person would come to stay on Erraid for a short period of time involve participation in one of these “styles” of stays: Love in Action Weeks, Retreat Weeks, Celtic Festival Weeks, or as a Work Exchange Volunteer. Each style has its own price and includes different activities and grades of participation. The Retreat Weeks tend to be the costliest, as individuals often choose not to participate in daily jobs, but do join for communal meals and spiritual practices. The Celtic Festival Weeks include some specific activities significant for the festival they celebrate. A Love in Action week generally involves the full participation of the individual in weekly jobs. The Work Exchange involves a person offering certain skills and labour for the opportunity to stay free of expense on Erraid. On the website, one can identify the price ranges for each week. A Love in

Action week costs between £500-£250, a Retreat Week £500-£300, and a Celtic Festival Week £500-£250.

Another way of remaining on Erraid for a longer period of time is to be considered a Long-Term Guest, a Trial Member, or to become a Member. Generally, guests who express an intent to stay long term are first invited for two weeks. Then there is an attunement amongst the members to see if it feels appropriate for the person to stay longer. If there is a consensus, the individual is given Long-Term Guest status and receives a reduced cost (£100 per week). Long-Term Guests intending to become members (of the Findhorn Foundation but based on Erraid) have the opportunity to speak to existing members about what it is like to live on Erraid and the responsibilities involved in caretaking. The subsequent stage, which can take multiple weeks, is for the members to go through another review wherein the long-term guest would be granted Trial Membership which also involves a reduced cost (£60 a week) and gradually increasing one's responsibilities. From my interviewees it can take anywhere from 22 weeks to 12 months to become a full-fledged member. Two of the members noted that the process takes a lot of time, demands reflection from all parties and is not meant to be "rushed".

Members are responsible for certain focal areas: kitchen, bookings, boating, gardens, and there is one member chosen to be the island focaliser who is also responsible for the legal affairs of the island. Every week, a member is the week's focaliser who is the main "go-to" person for the guests residing on the island. They are responsible for ensuring the needs of the guests are met, including giving them a welcome tour of the street (communal spaces, cottages, gardens, etc.) and the cottages

when they first arrive; explaining how the kitchen, pantries and drinking water works; introducing rules and checking in with them on a daily basis. The focaliser also tends to lead the morning tuning-ins and sharings, but this is not always the case. Members are thus the main caretakers of the island, and are charged with many various responsibilities to maintain the island as well as to continuously host guests. While the love in action guests have the opportunity to work they are not responsible for organizing and managing the work that is available. Thus, for Erraid to run smoothly and effectively, members suggested that an increase in their numbers would create a more ideal and productive setting.

### **An Overview of Community Practices**

What follows are the descriptions of certain practices which I participated in during my time on Erraid. I include these for a handful of reasons. First, it is my intention to better situate the reader and further contextualize the field site. The second reason is that some of these practices help to create community, and some accomplish this by changing the perspective on work. Changing one's perspective on work, mostly through love in action as mentioned briefly above, is one of the Foundation's most central tenants. Others are meant to appeal to one's wellbeing through spiritual means. While most of the time these goals were achieved, there were nevertheless moments when tensions arose regarding the meaning and practice of work.

#### *Rhythms*

On Erraid, there are "daily rhythms". This term translates loosely into a daily schedule which is flexible, but habitually followed. The rhythms for Monday, Tuesday

and Thursday include from 8:30-9:00am Silent meditation space in the Sanctuary (not guided), 9:15am morning meeting in Room 8 followed by “Love in Action” (a thorough discussion of this topic is found further below), 11:15am Optional Tea Break, 12:30pm Lunch in the Dining Room, 3:15pm Optional Tea Break, 5:00-5:30pm Guided meditation in the Sanctuary, 5:30-6:30pm Sacred Singing in the Sanctuary, 6:00pm Dinner in the Dining Room. For many of these rhythms there is also a person who will walk down the street ringing a bell to ensure everyone is aware of the time and the breaks.

For all guests who partake in meals (which is almost always everyone), there is also KP (jokingly referred to as kitchen party) which involves the cleanup of the dining area, the kitchen and all of the dishes. Generally the week's focaliser makes the KP schedule and it can include 1-3 individuals. KP occurs after lunch and after dinner. Saturdays include a “community clean” of common areas in the morning, and they also involve the early departure of guests, as well as an afternoon arrival of new guests. These new guests tend to arrive either from a bus coming from the Findhorn Foundation (weather permitting), or through other means of transportation including public transit or private car, before they are quickly boated or walked over to Erraid. Dinner is cooked by someone (often a member, trial member or long-term guest) and is served around 6:00pm. There is also an introductory circle after dinner. Sunday begins with a “start of the week meditation” at 10am, this is also where everyone is invited to choose an angel card (their “angel of the week”). Afterwards, weather permitting, a member or the focaliser offers a guided walking tour of the island in the afternoon. This tour can last between one to three hours. If one is lucky, sometimes a

guest will also offer to cook a nice Sunday brunch for everyone. This is a treat! I brought Canadian maple syrup and ensured everyone got to taste it with my housemate's homemade crepes.

Wednesday is known as a structure-free day. I learnt this was only recently implemented by the five members as a way of securing a day "off" for everyone. The decision to create a structure-free Wednesday hints at the difficulty the members were experiencing in terms of managing the demands of labour. Sophia, a member, noted that most times members did not have a full day off since a meal was required. Thus, they decided to terminate the meal prepping, and now only require care for the animals and the operation of the boat to and from Mull on Wednesday. This decision was also one of the ways that the members tried to make Erraid more sustainable for them. Often, guests decide to travel together to the Isle of Iona on Wednesdays. I was very fortunate on one of my Wednesdays to embark on a wonderful day trip with guests up to the picturesque town of Tobermory on Mull. Last but not least, Friday is dedicated to homecare, where it is expected that everyone tidies up their cottages. There is no prepared lunch on Friday, and guests have the afternoon free to enjoy the island or do as they please. There is a prepared dinner.

This is but a glimpse of the rhythms and daily occurrences on Erraid. Much of what the members do on a daily basis was not made obvious to me. They hold their own meetings, their own attunements, take care of the boats, arrange bookings, and have many other responsibilities that do not always include mingling with the guests. The rhythms are quite flexible, and there were certain afternoons where one might work very hard cooking a meal, and then take a Monday morning off for example.

According to their website<sup>10</sup>, members are expected to work five days a week. Normally the Foundation tries to have between six and ten members, but there were only five during my stay. Due to this low number, I felt that they worked *very* hard, and probably worked in some capacity six, if not seven, days out of the week. As for the hours of work, I would venture that the majority of the time they tried to work between 9am and 5pm. The idea that the current members were working very hard was echoed by many short and long-term guests. Sophia, one of the members and the island focaliser, told me:

At the end of the day you can't get too attached to anything here, because none of it is ours. We're taking care of it. And the agreement most of the time works. We live here 11 months of the year, trying to look after the place. And they [the Dutch family] come for one month. When the amount of community members dips really low that's when it's a strain, so you know when it's a thriving community of ten committed members for one or two years, then yeah, great we can do everything. But yeah, I think that's what people find hard.

Members have specific 'focus areas' which can include the animals, the garden, the kitchen, the boats, bookings, etc. I do not know exactly how many focus areas there are. Thus members spend some of their time managing these areas and do not always do work with short and long-term guests. Since I was a long-term guest, I was not privy to many of the jobs accomplished by the members. Members also have their own meditation sessions on top of the community ones. Thus, most of the experiences I discuss are from the perspective of a guest, though I specify when I discuss member-specific work.

I found that the rhythms provided short-term and most long-term guests, including myself, with the feeling of freedom and being in control of one's choices and

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<sup>10</sup> [www.erraid.com/details-of-membership](http://www.erraid.com/details-of-membership)

actions. However, though many appreciated the rhythms which served as a way to structure their lives, they were flexible only to a certain point. As a short-term guest a person could choose which tasks one wished to partake in, but one did not have the opportunity to offer up tasks. Thus, there is a freedom and flexibility experienced by most guests since they have the element of choice, but there is a lack of control because they do not have the opportunity to offer tasks. For most guests who only stay a short time, the variety of the tasks is fulfilling, and there is rarely cause for displeasure, dissent or protest. For myself, though I understood the importance of completing all of the tasks on offer, I found that near the end of my stay I became bored with the tasks available. Moreover, I remember feeling that I wished I could propose different ideas for chores that could be performed by myself or others. That being said, I did not get the same impression from other long-term guests, or from Lukas, the trial member. However, for the individuals who enjoyed their jobs outside of Erraid, such as nursing, engineering, and social work, it was fairly clear that because their trades were not required on Erraid, they would not seriously consider staying in the community in the long-term.

### *Love in Action*

A Love in Action week follows the daily rhythms outlined in the previous section. Those guests on retreat are exempt from love in action. As MacLennan described earlier, 'work' in the traditional sense, which can involve necessary tasks that one may or may not enjoy, is instead presented as an action in which the individual has the opportunity to practice and express love. Some of the tasks that I partook in during the daily rhythm of "love in action" included gardening and

weeding, cooking, painting, wood splitting, cleaning, clearing, and other jobs that consistently demanded some sort of manual labor. In this list, I mention the word “cleaning”, though homecare and community clean-up are not necessarily under the daily rhythm calendar of love in action, this way of approaching and practicing tasks is meant to apply to *everything* one does. For one of my participants, Thomas, the concept and application of love in action was about bringing “quality to the things that we have to do anyway, and that felt like a revolutionary concept” to him. He generously shared with me that he once experienced a deep meaningful connection with another person while they did what he described as a disgusting job: repairing an old shabby toilet. He was pleasantly shocked that such a “love experience” could happen at the same time as performing a job he disliked. For Sophia, the idea of love in action is a spiritual practice: “there’s no work, play, or whatever, you’re just serving, and doing it all the time”. She confessed that changing her approach from work to love in action helped her to enjoy activities she might otherwise be doing with resentment.

Using French and French (1975) here, one can see how love in action challenges the roots of discontent. Love in action is a spiritual and philosophical outlook that allows the worker to find meaning in their labour and their products. Moreover, in love in action, a person might work alone in silence and attune to spirit, thus forging a connection between seen and unseen dimensions, which is meant to lead to a further understanding of the self, as well as produce an ecological relationship between human and environment. More often than not, however, I, as well as most others, practiced love in action with a small group of people; sometimes only with one other person, but it made for a very intimate and meaningful experience

of labour. Thomas' physical experience of love in action transformed his view on work so that it no longer alienated him from the labour itself, from the fruits of his labour, from himself, from other human beings, or from his environment.

A typical love in action day (Monday, Tuesday and Thursday), involves a morning *sharing*. As defined in an Erraid handbook from the house I was a guest in, sharings are a "time of the week where we have the opportunity to connect as a group on a personal level. The sharings offer us a private and sacred space to share from the heart. They are about sharing who we are and what is moving us". Here I summarize the general perception of sharings through Thomas' words on the importance of them:

I think the sharings are extremely useful, and my wish would be that they would spread much, much, more, not just in communities. Because I see what healthy effect they have, now if I start a day with some other people, to at least know a little bit where they are at, makes such a difference, because then I am differently with them, you know if I know that they are struggling with something, or physically not so well, and I've worked in work places where you don't do that, so I know the difference. And it is strange, kind of, not connecting with each other, and not knowing how the other one is, somehow. I find it very healthy to do that [the sharings].

The sharings occurred in Room 8, and on Fridays we held an especially long session as it served as a sort of recapitulation of the week. Everyone who participated in love in action joined the sharings, except for those on retreat, who sometimes chose not to come. I was not under the impression that someone would be penalized for missing a sharing, but the members made it clear on multiple occasions that this was an important part of living on Erraid. The sharings involved three rounds. The first is when everyone "checked in": saying as few or as many words as they wanted to describe their mood, their thoughts, their feelings, etc.

It was not too difficult for me, though many times I did not know what to say as I had just woken up and felt like a 'blank slate', so to speak. That being said, Friday sharings were generally the more intense ones. On my first Friday, I sobbed in front of everyone. A few other individuals cried as well, whether it was because they were leaving, or were dealing with difficult emotions and personal struggles. I tend to cry when I see others cry, so I was out of luck. In my diary, I wrote, of that first Friday sharing: "I'm not sure why I cried, really. A lot of emotions: goodness, sadness, homesickness, confusion, anger". Though after the sharing, I quickly recovered and joined my house-mate in the kitchen to bake bread for the community.

The second round of the sharing involves the members of the community offering up available work for the morning and afternoon for that particular day. The third round involved everyone choosing (based on the work on offer), what they intended to do for both love in action sessions (morning and afternoon). Some jobs (such as splitting wood) did not require more than one person. However, the work was accomplished more quickly with two individuals. Depending on the tasks available and where individual guests wanted to work, there was room for negotiation on the number of people that could participate in each task. There were rarely any disagreements while I was there, though perhaps there were a few times where the job I would have liked was taken by someone who spoke before me in the circle. In this situation, I often just chose a different task. My understanding is that if I really wanted to do a certain job, I could express this desire, and some sort of negotiation would take place. It was extremely rare for short-term or long-term guests to offer ideas for jobs that could be done if the members lacked any.

I remember that one afternoon, I was a little weary of returning to work in the garden, and when I noticed that the member, Tess, who was scheduled to facilitate the garden work was absent, I quickly proposed a different idea to the two short-term guests who were present with me. That being said, I felt unsure whether my idea was acceptable (even though the guests were up for it) so I searched for the nearest member for approval. I was told by the member I found, Anna, to consult with Tess who was expecting us for a session in the garden. Once I told Anna that Tess was absent, and Anna was not entirely sure what we should do, I took advantage of the situation to make the decision to lead the two other guests into the island with me. Because it was such a beautiful day and one of the guests was just newly arrived to the island, I thought that we could take some “brushing” tools with us and clear up some of the walking paths on the island. We did indeed accomplish this task, and enjoyed a beautiful afternoon out on the island. Though I was never scolded or reprimanded in any way for this decision, I did feel somewhat like a rebel when I proposed and carried out the task I wished to accomplish. This very small scenario reflects the limited control that short-term and long-term guests have over the choice of work. This situation also hints at tensions that may arise between the duties and opportunities available to members vs. long and short-term guests.

Another long-term guest, Charlotte, expressed that the

concept of sharing with your work group or your living group, [...] can be good. [...] The danger of these is that they can turn into a moan fest. [...] At the moment, as it is right now, it feels nice. It feels a nice way to say good morning to everybody, it helps me leave non-work stuff out, and bring my work self in.

In the sharings, everyone is invited to share what they are feeling and thinking. Again, this is not enforced, though most people choose to say something. Though the

sharings are useful in bringing people together and offer everyone a glimpse into each person's state of mind, they did not strike me as an ideal place for conversations of dissent. Long-term guests and members informed me that it was only in their private meetings that they could declare possibilities, commit to new ideas and changes, and express their displeasure with people or situations. For short-term guests, these conversations did not formally occur. Instead short-term guests were encouraged to fill out feedback forms, or express any opinions to the week's focaliser prior to their departure.

In this way, the short-term guests are kept separate from any major decision processes as well as being excluded from situations in which critiques of the community could arise. Thus, members and certain long-term guests are privy to an experience of "togetherness" by the exclusivity of the types of meetings they are able to participate in. The experience of short-term visitors is thus set apart from those living on the island, reinforcing the tension between what Erraid is and how it works for these two different groups of people. In my experience, most short-term guests did not mind this separation, as they did not feel entitled or knowledgeable enough to provide suggestions or express criticism about the community and its operations. Then again, they may be providing these opinions in the written forms. During my stay, there was perhaps only a handful of short-term guests (who stayed for 2-3 weeks) that felt that some changes needed to be made in order for Erraid to run more successfully: these suggestions included the members' reevaluating what they hoped to achieve on Erraid, while also maintaining a more open and constructive relationship with the wider Foundation and the Dutch family owners.

It is not entirely clear to me if children are expected to partake in love in action. If they are very young and require constant supervision, often the adult guest will not always partake in love in action, and watches the children instead. However, when the children are older and able to garden, or paint, or feel compelled to help in the kitchen or other areas on offer, this is definitely encouraged and accepted. One of the couples had two young daughters (just about three years old), and one afternoon, I offered to take the girls to one of the beaches instead of doing one of the love in action jobs, so that their mother could partake in a love in action job on offer. Arrangements like these seemed welcomed by the community.

Love in Action takes place year round, however during the winter months, there are very few guests that visit Erraid. Thus, my assumption is that of those who are there, they try and divide up the tasks as best as possible, and practice love in action in all of their undertakings. To my knowledge, the only times individuals did not participate in some of the jobs were because they were on retreat, or they felt ill (this happened to me), or they had other personal tasks which needed attention<sup>11</sup>.

#### *Tuning-in and Tuning-out*

Prior to the beginning, and at the conclusion of a task, it is encouraged to 'tune-in' and 'tune-out'. This 'tuning' is generally led by a member and involves first holding hands with all participants. For the 'tuning-ins', the member offers a few calming words that ask for an openness of mind and spirit and involve bringing our being to the attention of the present task and the co-creation that will take place. At the

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<sup>11</sup> More often this applied to members, however I was told that I could take time if I required it to work on my research/thesis, and another guest wished to work on her personal projects as well.

'tuning-out', the words are generally of gratitude and of letting-go of the tasks performed, in order to appreciate the next moments (activities) to follow. For Ruben, one of the members, tuning in, tuning out, and love in action are invitations to find a place of gratitude, awareness, slowing down, and breathing space: "they are very much an invitation to just become present, becoming aware of what you are doing". He also discusses how these practices create a "sort of hyper-reality" or "hyper awareness" that can be very tiring at times, but that can also bring about much joy and freedom.

### *Attunements*

There are also "attunements" in the community, and these take place for various different reasons. In the handbook I found in my cottage on Erraid, an attunement is defined as "a time when we personally center ourselves, consciously open to spirit which flows through us individually and as a group, to connect with one another and with the purpose of coming together". I did not participate in any organized or led attunements. Ruben described one for me (below), and I know that the members conducted various attunements for the individuals in the community that were either hoping to stay as a long-term guest or go into trial membership.

It is basically going into meditation; it is a short visualization of people stepping into the process, or into the light, I can briefly explain it to you. We visualize forming a circle...well it [the visualization] starts off by inviting people to go for a walk on a beautiful day and to walk to your favorite part of the island, all the residents form a circle, members only really, because it is about the core group inviting the people in, and then this person [hoping to join the community] joins the circle, and we then see this person, the circle opens and closes behind this person, he or she steps into a column of light, which holds that specific energy, long-term guestship, or trial membership, or membership, we ask ourselves the question is this the right time for this person to become a long term guest, etc., in the Erraid community. 10-20

minutes maybe, of silence, then we share what our answers are, and what our concerns maybe are, and if there's no paramount objections then it's a yes. It usually works out fine, and if there are concerns, we can create space to chat more about it, or to invite this particular person to join the group and chat more about things. And then people, have different views, different accents on what they want, and want to see, and so on. So a concern for somebody, may not be a concern at all for somebody else.

There were also attunements on Friday evenings for short-term guests that were held to help them conclude their time on Erraid and to try and 'attune' for the amount of money they would leave the community. Indeed, on the Erraid website of the Love in Action page, the cost is actually listed as £500-£250 *by attunement* (my emphasis). During my time on Erraid, I first participated in two weeks of Love in Action, and paid an amount closer to the lower range mentioned above. From the third to fifth weeks, I was considered a long-term guest, and paid £100 per week. I did not participate in any attunements, one of the reasons being that I left the island on a Wednesday as opposed to a Saturday as most individuals do (attunements for payment purposes occur on Friday evenings). To my knowledge they did not attune for me to stay, though I suspect they at least had a discussion or consensus that my continued presence was acceptable.

In terms of my financial interactions with Erraid, the members were very-for lack of a better word-*laissez faire*. I was not asked to pay a certain sum, nor did I have a very clear discussion with anyone on how much I had to pay. It was only in a discussion with my house mate (also a long-term guest) that I learnt of the reduced price for long-term guests. Of my own volition, I decided to pay an amount at the lower-range for two love in action weeks as a regular guest, and then paid the remaining weeks as a long-term guest. I had a very brief discussion with a member

based on my desired payment arrangements, and I did not receive any negative feedback whatsoever. But nor did I receive much direction, either. In terms of the attunements, to be frank, I would have liked to participate in one, but I did not voice this opinion. Instead, I anticipated that I would be directed (or invited) to do one, and quite simply that invitation never came. It is possible that as a student doing research with them, they also were not entirely sure how to “treat” or “accommodate” me in terms of attunements and cost. I do not have a clear conclusion or answer concerning this particular experience.

### *Angel Cards*

As mentioned briefly previously, the use of angel cards was quite popular on Erraid. I chose an angel card every week. These cards are in the form of small white rectangular bits of paper, where one side is blank and the other contains a word and a small image. There is a book which accompanies the little cards, and in this book, the meaning of each word is described in a paragraph. Individuals are welcome to interpret and use this information in whatever ways they deem fit. There is also an invitation for someone to choose an angel for the whole group for the week. For myself, I enjoyed choosing angel cards, they reminded me of my childhood, when I very crudely played fortune teller with friends and family. There is a ranging degree of those who take the cards seriously, those who think it is a harmless activity, and those who try and focus on their angel cards for the week they are on Erraid. I received (or chose) the angel cards in the chronological order of Peace, Joy, Peace (a second time), Contentment, Risk, Grace, and I picked the group angel of Courage on my last week.

Angel Cards were developed as part of The Transformation Game created by Joy Drake and Kathy Tyler, residents of Findhorn. The Findhorn Foundation offers week-long workshops of either 4 or 7 days called The Game of Transformation. Though I do not know the purpose of the angel cards within The Game, on their own they are a set of 72 illustrated cards. The cards are meant to “offer doorways to a realm of spiritual awareness which can encourage us to greater wholeness in our lives” (findhorn.org). One is encouraged to reflect and meditate on the card they select as this is a “particular aspect of your inner life” (findhorn.org). The website notes, that the more one focuses on the “quality reflected by the word and picture on the card, the more you will find this quality echoing in your life” (findhorn.org). In my time there, there were certain weeks when the cards seemed to bear greater meaning than others. For example, in my journal, the week I chose the angel card of Risk, I wrote:

I took the angel of risk too seriously! I laugh now but I was actually really scared! I can't believe I went where I did and made it back! [For the reader: I had just explored a section of the island where the terrain was very difficult and dodgy] I am SO thankful! Well perhaps there was an angel looking after me! I think adrenaline was pumping so much that I didn't quite appreciate my triumph, or the spectacular view of the sea. A good lesson for me I think. Though I'm pleased with my body, physically. So thank you, whatever helped me today!

### *Blessings*

Last, but certainly not least, another important term and practice on Erraid is the “blessing” or “blessings”. Blessings are said prior to every meal, very similar to saying grace in Christian traditions. The Blessing can be said by the cook or anyone who eagerly asks to do it. When I said my blessing, I expressed gratitude to the leeks and potatoes that we were about to eat, and to all the work that went into the growth of the vegetables. I thanked all the love and energies that went into the making and

preparation of the meal, I thanked my human helpers and everyone for their company. Most blessings tread along those lines. The term 'energies' is also popular among short-term guests and members alike. Some describe feeling the energies that connect every living and non-living, visible and invisible things, while for others, they come to see it as a philosophical and even more scientific approach which can be used to help explain what they perceive and understand in their lives.

The community practices listed above show that in certain circumstances tensions exist between the opportunities afforded to the members and not to the short-term guests. They also reveal the care taken by the members into making Erraid run smoothly to provide short-term guests with an ideal experience. There is also a lot of care given to guests, and also taken in the selection of trial members. Many rituals and a lengthy stay allow potential members to experience different trials and tribulations that may face the community. The tensions that arise between members and short-term guests are more pronounced when considering the purpose of Erraid. These tensions add to the reasons why the members are having difficulty with "human sustainability": they are a part of the larger picture (and the larger tension) where members experience challenges in recruiting and retaining new members in order to live long-term on Erraid.

## **Chapter Four – The Question of Human Sustainability**

In this chapter, I outline the heart of my argument and the ethnographic data to support it. As I mentioned previously, five members is below the ideal range of 6-10 for Erraid to function smoothly. Both Sophia and Archie, married members, wondered if their lives were not sustainable because the life they are leading is difficult:

Questions that we are asking are...is it too hard? Do people need their car, and their house, and the tele, and the smart phone? ...there were stories, that there were 10 members and 30 guests, and I think those days are gone, for now they are, and I think when you've got 10 members and 30 guests, this place is much easier. In many ways is easier, certainly from a work point of view, and those days certainly haven't happened in the three and a half years we've been here, really, a couple of times we've had quite good numbers, but never any sustainability, never any...staying for a while. So yeah interesting questions...does it work, or is it set up to fail? Maybe you can give us the answers...?

Archie very kindly concluded his statement by humbly suggesting that I might be able to provide them with some answers; though I found that there were many reasons that they themselves could see and mentioned as to why this was occurring.

In trying to explore the answers to his question regarding “human sustainability”, I found that the issues that arose could be divided into the categories of retention of members, attraction of new members, and Erraid’s purpose (namely the combination of its three roles as discussed in the introduction, as well as the dual purpose of being a service and work community). Within these categories, I discuss issues relevant to work, privacy, child rearing, and living “closer to nature”. Ultimately, I argue that these tensions point to a failure on the part of the Foundation to answer to individuals’ desires for an alternative lifestyle. Erraid’s and Findhorn’s stance as presenting an alternative to the lifestyles in the “West” by transforming their values

through spirituality are at odds with their dependence on that very system in order to exist and have people to “educate”.

## **Retention**

During my time on Erraid, I observed that the two primary concerns of the members of the time revolved around work and privacy. I begin with a look at work. During my research, I remember an informal conversation I shared with Anna and Tess (two members who had been on the island for over a year) in the community kitchen after dinner one day: they expressed to me that they sometimes wished they could experience Erraid as a guest would, that this would be so “relaxing”, and “nice”, and “easy”. Indeed, for them, as they saw themselves, living on Erraid demanded a lot of hard work from them, and because of their low membership levels, created a stress which hindered Erraid's human sustainability. Moreover, this situation also made it difficult for members to always practice love in action in that the heavy workload made it difficult for them to be mindful or present in their work, while also appreciating and loving all of the tasks required of them.

Ruben, whom I first shared a discussion with on the topic of “human sustainability”, briefly references its relation to work:

So this human sustainability, it's a term I like very much... um...and uh yes sometimes people go on about eco-sustainability, and they tend to lose sight of the human sustainability, and that's what she [previous member] referred to back then. And I thought, wow yeah, that's interesting. And I think...um...this community is pretty good at that, the members, the residents, I think we do our best to not let our guests slave away too much, and trying to encourage people to not overdo it, I mean why?

In his statement above, Ruben relates “human sustainability” primarily with work, and ensuring that no one is overworked and stressed, as he sees no real need for it.

However, in my experience, though I agree that the guests do not “slave away”, I found that the members worked very hard. Ruben confessed that when he lived in the city work absorbed a majority of his time and caused most of his stress and unhappiness.

Below, he elaborates a little more on the topic:

I get the impression that previous communities have very much been about work, things that need to get done. I've seen a little bit of that. And I think this configuration is trying to relax a bit more, trying to relax with the things...if things don't get done, then fine. Don't need to pressure ourselves, because in the end, we came here on a voluntary basis, and it's not like we earn lots of money, of course we love this place, and want to do what we can, but we don't want to drive ourselves into the ground doing it.

For Ruben, the idea of working just to work is not appealing. He also recognizes that he is not really paid for the work he does, only provided a weekly allowance. Moreover, due to the low number of members, Ruben realizes there is a lot of work to do, and so he, as well as the other members, try to do as much as they can. Ruben points to the fact that it is very difficult for them to do everything that there is to do, and that in order to avoid the lifestyle he had left, it is important to relax and not pressure themselves. The idea of pressuring oneself contradicts the Foundation's aspirations for its members and guests to live intentionally through love in action and communion with Spirit and nature. Moreover, because members are technically also guests and are not proportionately compensated financially for their time and work, to put pressure on themselves seems nonsensical.

In terms of work, the idea of pursuing love in action in one's undertakings is made difficult by the enormity of the tasks the members feel they have. Earlier, member Sophia mentioned how love in action helped her appreciate work that would normally be uninteresting, and I argue that this philosophy does indeed help the

members in coping with their work and their mindset. Nevertheless, the tension between “doing work because it is there and needs doing”, vs. approaching everything through love in action is present in the island's affairs.

One of the most touching moments for me on Erraid (and there were many!) was during a rather emotional and intimate sharing that occurred one morning. I did not take note of what happened at the time, as I found it to be a very personal one for those involved, and could not see it as academically useful. I realize now that it reflected the stress, tension and immense amount of work attended to by the members. In order to further respect their anonymity, I shall simply recount that it involved two members, and will not indicate which two. That morning, everyone was seated in a circle in the common room 8, and we were in the first round of the sharing. When their turn arrived, one of the members began their speech by expressing their appreciation for all the work *another* member was doing. As this member was describing the responsibilities of the other member (though not in great detail) that they were thankful for, the grateful member began to cry. This led the targeted member to cry, triggered an emotional chord with those present, and to no surprise, made me cry as well. Even recounting this moment makes me emotional! Though the love and appreciation between the two of them was palpable, I felt as though the speaking member was overwhelmed with gratitude and with empathy toward everything that the other member was doing. This was another indication to me that there were many things that were “behind the scenes” in terms of the enormity of the work, responsibilities and tasks attended to by the members.

Along a similar line, I discovered that due to the relationship between Erraid,

the Dutch family and the Findhorn Foundation, there arose situations in which many members felt disempowered in terms of actions they could take to make changes in the community. Indeed, due to the many players involved in the operation of Erraid, Ruben expressed that making changes (that would lead to sustainability) were difficult to achieve:

I've told you before it's this interesting triangle of knots and bolts, and if we decide that we want to change something, people over at the Foundation might be like, woah you can't do that, or the Dutch might go, woah you can't do that, so I don't know how to change that, really. And I think that also creates the human unsustainable side of it sometimes. And within those given sets of boundaries and rhythms, I think we absolutely do what we can to make it sustainable.

I noted that the members did implement changes which they felt would be more sustainable for themselves, and consequently a more pleasant experience for guests as well. Three of these changes<sup>12</sup> included trying to interchange weeks of hosting obligations (one week "on", one week "off"); to plan for guests to stay in the empty cottages first; and to implement a structure-free Wednesday where both members and guests were left free to their own devices (although the animals and the boat still needed attention).

Moreover, Tess, a member, found that one of her biggest challenges was that she had many ideas for how to make Erraid more sustainable or other ways to improve the community but that these were very difficult to realize due to the lengthy and time-consuming decision-making process of including Findhorn and the Dutch owners:

I think that a big challenge for me from this place [Erraid], is about efficiency. Like how this place could be... like I'm not making my own decisions, so I

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<sup>12</sup> These are the same changes mentioned earlier in the introduction.

can't decide for everybody. I can say I'd love to meditate more together, or really we have the nose in the same direction [by this she meant having a spiritual practice that would help them all align in their vision of Erraid], I would also love to be more strict sometimes like have more gate keepers here [in terms of adding new members], but that's really me, and my opinion. So the challenge is really a lot of letting go, because though there are some changes that I was a part of, still there are other forces [which make bigger changes difficult]. So I think that's the biggest challenge: sometimes I see 'oh, it can be like this or this', but maybe it's not the time, or most of the time I'm going too fast, that's the feedback that I get back from the community, because I see a lot that I want to change, or do better, what's more sustainable, it's too fast, and to let that go, and it's alright, be happy with small changes.

Above, Tess points to the challenges of the decision-making process which involves more players than only the small Erraid community. I argue that Tess felt held back by the "opportunity structures" (in this case the relationships between Erraid, the Foundation and the Dutch owners, as well as the Foundation's protocols) which made it difficult to for her to exercise her agency in terms of changes she hoped to implement in the community (Fischer 2014, 156-8).

I've found that the feelings of frustration experienced by the members do not serve as any evidence of spiritual weakness, but instead coincide with Bart Victor's and Edward F. Fischer's "frustrated freedom". In his book, *The Good Life Aspiration, Dignity, and The Anthropology of Wellbeing* (2014), Fischer finds that in his sample of Guatemalan coffee farmers, a significant amount of individuals' subjective wellbeing decreases with the existence of "frustrated freedom" (144). "Frustrated freedom" is the condition in which

a person's agency is effectively greater than the available resources and opportunity structures; that is to say, individuals possess the subjective agency to achieve more than their material resources and opportunity structure can enable. In such a condition, opportunity and resource deficits frustrate their perceived capacity to successfully make the decisions and choices that they believe would enhance their wellbeing" (154-5)

Though I do not wish to compare samples with Fischer, I have found that due to Erraid's dependence and triangular relationship with the Dutch family owners and the Findhorn Foundation, members felt that they were unable to enact certain changes which would lead to a more sustainable environment. In terms of feeling powerless, individuals who carry a lot of responsibility are frustrated when they are not allocated a proportional amount of control. My understanding of Findhorn's principles (and thus Erraid's) is that they aspire to a horizontal power structure in that each member plays an equally important role and holds equal weight in decision-making. Guests are not allocated this degree of power. The difference and difficulty with Erraid is that although the members can and *do* make decisions together (and act on them), there seem to be some actions that must also be taken up (or agreed upon) by the Dutch family and by the Findhorn Foundation. While I was not privy to the members-only meetings where major decisions were made, Ruben, as well as the other members, made it clear that some decisions required approval by these other actors in the triangular relationship.

Another important struggle affecting "human sustainability" was the idea of ownership and privacy on Erraid. French and French (1975) suggest that the search or the need for privacy is "only a symptom of the extreme individualism which our environment imposes on us" (45). They argue that in America, individualism has deep social roots. Interestingly, the authors note that the term "privacy" is not one that is easily translated into other languages, and yet, for the three members, though they were fluent in English it was their second language, and it was this term they chose to use in our discussions. They did not outright define the term, nor did I ask them to

(silly me!). French and French (1975) merely mention privacy in passing and as a result of individualism. They argue that well-working communes find that there is no real conflict between individual self-realization and strong group life (46). Tunick (2001) writes that the understanding of privacy depends on one's view of society and the individual's relation to the latter:

If we see society instrumentally as a set of institutions and associations the only purpose of which is to provide the infrastructure or means for us to lead our personal lives, then we might want as little to do with the infrastructure, and as much privacy, as possible. But if we see society differently, not merely as an enabling infrastructure, but as the very source of a worthwhile life, then we may not wish to shelter ourselves from it. We may be leery of calls for privacy which, if heeded, would shut us off from the very thing we all need to flourish, a thing we might call "community" (518).

Tunick's (2001) statement above certainly resonates with the principles of the Findhorn Foundation since they believe in offering an educational and communal experience for individual transformation which depends on interactions and practices involving others. The "community", though comprised of mostly transient individuals, is where this transformation occurs. The issues of privacy that I noted on Erraid did not involve self-realization, nor an inability to be one's self. Moreover, the members recognized the importance of learning from others, and accepted their purpose to share the island whole-heartedly with others. Instead, privacy was prized for the opportunity of intimacy and "as the state of limited access by others-most of the time voluntary, but sometimes imposed-to certain modes of being in a person's life" (Boone 1983, 6).

Ruben expressed that a lack of privacy made it difficult for him and Anna to be intimate:

I think over time, and I think I can speak for the both of us [him and Anna],

having guests in the house, every week, it did create some issues...just not feeling, not having enough privacy, really, not enough private space, of course we have the master bedroom, but if there's always someone else in your living room, the balance sometimes isn't right, really. And uh, yeah sometimes intimacy can become an issue, when there's people walking around all the time, you know it's not like this is where we live, this is our private space, we can do anything we want, it just doesn't work like that. And...um...something that ties with that, is that sometimes, we think that this place is perfect for family, if you have a place to yourself, as a family unit you've got your own house, no guests, nothing, and you've got the community as soon as you step out of your door, as a couple, or as a single, you are always, 100% in the community.

During my stay on Erraid, I found that I was able to find time for myself to be alone, and it did happen where I retreated to my room, to nap, to read, to watch some films, to release some emotions, to think over things, to write, to skype, to be by myself. I came to realize that Saturdays were a bit rough for me: the day most people left in the morning, and new folks would arrive in the afternoon. I found I was emotionally drained, sad even, at seeing my new found friends leave, and then have to perk up and begin to meet new people in the span of a few hours. I found that the moments I took to be on my own on certain days were extremely healthy. I was also thankful to be given that space by others. My experience was that if a person retreated to their room or closed their door, those boundaries were respected, and the person was not disturbed. Of course, being alone during love in action was a more difficult thing to accomplish, but I also felt that if someone expressed their desire to be on their own, this would be respected, and not criticized or ridiculed.

Also, though I came to Erraid alone, I was (and remain) in a relationship with a young man back in Ottawa, Canada. While on Erraid, I admit it was sometimes difficult for us to have private discussions through Skype or Facetime because of the wifi/internet arrangements in the buildings. This was at times unfortunate, but did

not cause any major issues between us.

Once I had returned home, I wondered what it would be like for the two of us to reside on Erraid. And at this thought I remain torn: I would absolutely jump at the chance to return to Erraid with him, and yet the lack of privacy is something that I think we would also struggle with. We both cherish our privacy, both individually and as a couple, and to have to share “our home” with people almost all the time...well, I sympathize with Ruben and Anna, as I am sure it would be an issue for us as well.

Furthermore, for Tess, another member, privacy was also an issue “A big one [problem with sustainability] is no privacy, a big one; always sharing your house with guests”. The other two married members with children did not seem to experience the same “issues” as the three other members. And this, they admitted, was because they were in the “best situation”: because they are a family of four, they are not required to host any guests in their cottage. Because of this, they had a certain level of privacy that the other members, at times, lacked. Thus, I sensed that the three members’ desires for privacy, both for intimacy and for time by one’s self, were not deemed as spiritually weak or frivolous but valid and important in their discussions. Indeed, one of the changes they implemented: one week “on”, one week “off”, for example, showed that all of the members took these concerns seriously and had come to a consensus to try and provide more space for the members required to host. Here, the financial reliance on guests consuming the production of their lifestyles on Erraid creates this “frustrated freedom” and the tensions between a possible alignment of members’ values and their aspirations for work, for example (Joseph 2002).

I also want to stress here that there is a tension between the mission and

protocols of the Foundation and how these were experienced “on the ground” by the members. Erraid is physically set-up in such a way that there is very little privacy for anyone (the cottages all have multiple bedrooms); it is also philosophically set-up so that people are together most of the time and thus provides a very communal experience for everyone (through community practices like sharings, blessings, shared meals, love in action, as well as the idea of human growth through interaction). A tension lies between the members and guests respecting and celebrating the idea of “community”, or “commune” where life is quite intense, while also desiring a certain level of privacy that is difficult to achieve in their current environment.

Another important consideration is that members needed to vacate the cottages during “Dutch time”: when the family returns for their annual vacation. This is generally during the month of August. Three of the members mentioned to me, whether in passing or in our interview(s), how having to vacate during the month of August caused quite a disturbance in their lives on Erraid. The members also needed to be financially able to live away from Erraid for one month. This was not going to be sustainable for one of the members for much longer. Another feeling was that the energy and the mood of the place changed in anticipation of the family’s arrival. Another, that when they returned, the place was not quite as clean and as homey as they had left it. The two married members, Sophia and Archie, shared with me that most of the time they appreciated the month off: they used the time for leisure and to travel with their children to visit friends and family in Scotland and England. However, the requirement to leave Erraid every year was a reminder that they did not own the buildings they lived in, and were thus at the mercy of both the Dutch family

and the Foundation.

Although some members desire an alternative lifestyle primarily in the ways of work, and feeling connected to one's self, one another, and nature, they believe that their lives would be more sustainable had they further opportunities for intimacy, for control over their own affairs, and the places they call "home". Because they do not own the cottages they sleep in and live in, many members had difficulty experiencing security, stability, and freedom.

### **Recruitment**

As discussed in chapters one and two, the search for alternative ways of living is often a prerequisite for many of the reasons people visit Erraid in the first place. Other reasons people listed included spending more time with one's children; experiencing Erraid as a place of renewal and retreat; an example of spiritual living and a place to explore one's path; a place where one feels that they are in community, and belong; a place with more flexible structures; a place to come to heal and sort through one's dilemmas; and finally a place to come and reconnect with oneself and nature. All of these reasons relate to critiques of our modern society concerning the capitalist system and its markets, the lack of cooperation between individuals and states, and point to a desire to transform the world by first transforming ourselves. Indeed, the idea of separation is prevalent in New Age discourses and the move towards belonging tends to be identified as a transformation of consciousness (Liftin, 2013, 71). Liftin argues that Findhorn's spirituality "is embodied and relational, aiming not for *liberation from* this world but rather for its *transformation*" (Liftin, 2013, 71, her emphasis). Indeed, both members and short-term guests attempt to

transform themselves through multiple practices.

Many (though not all) of Erraid's guests experienced some sort of disillusionment with work in their past experiences in the capitalist markets or western centers which led them to search for an alternative. Ben shared with me why he was first prompted to visit Findhorn:

My values based on life were all about work and money, and um, both my first wife and I were back at home, and both exhausted, recovering from our respective crisis' in life, we both said to each other: "there's got to be a better way of living than this". And it was quite interesting that we then started looking into ways of making us...looking at what was making us unhappy. And we both of us came to the conclusion that it was our attitude and relationship with money and work and so forth, and there was something missing. There was definitely something missing that wasn't making us very happy, and we wanted to find that happiness in life.

Ben's statements here relate to the section on work, but also connect to this idea of Erraid's purpose in terms of individual transformation. Ben shared with me that Findhorn did in fact help him transform his values which lead to a healthier lifestyle in and outside the Findhorn community. That being said, though he visits the communities on occasion, he happily lives outside the communities and pursues the work he enjoys, albeit in a "healthier" way. In this way, the Foundation fulfilled its purpose for Ben, and there is no need for him to stay long term.

Moreover, in our many conversations, Scarlett, a long-term guest and mother of two twin daughters who were 2 years old, discussed wanting to spend more time with her children since her current employer would not permit her to lessen her hours. Initially it had been her partner who took care of their girls, but Scarlett felt she was missing this part of their life and wanted to try to make a significant change. She quit her job, and her partner participated in the work exchange program on Erraid

restoring all of the windows. Together with their girls they spent a few months on Erraid; they arrived shortly before me and left a few weeks after my departure. Sophia also mentioned wanting to reduce her working hours as a full-time teacher to part-time but this did not materialize, so they decided to make the move to Erraid:

Family life took over as well, and we were looking for something new: a way to spend time with our children, not be in the rat race. We had enough of teaching full time, part time wasn't an option where we were. So yeah we found this place at the right time; we'd also had a little bit of a spiritual awakening, reading books and meeting people who inspired us, and we just thought this is a place where we can probably live the life we want to live, with like-minded people, with nature.

The small size of Erraid's community allows parents to spend time with their children while they either participate in a retreat or, provided that their children can participate, in the love in action work. For children who are very young, at least one of the parents is expected to remain with them and supervise to a certain extent, and there have been arrangements where another person watches the children while both parents do other love in action work. On one occasion, I offered to take Scarlett's two daughters to the beach, while she worked with her partner and other guests in the Mother's Pride workshop. I spent an amazing few hours with the girls, and I know she was pleased with the time to do other things.

That being said, I found that on Erraid, the terms of such an agreement--the splitting and sharing of child rearing for young children (pre-schooling)--was not clearly established. Two of the children attended the local school on Mull, while the third was home schooled. While it seems obvious that in the short term parents have the opportunity to spend more time with their children, it was less clear whether they actually got to spend more time with them once they were sent to school during the

day, or if they were home schooled. Though the home school arrangement occurred, I was not clear on the details and the sustainability of such an arrangement. My argument here is that in the long term, I am not convinced that Erraid offered an alternative to the opportunities for “spending more time with children” than found outside of Erraid. I was not privy to discussions concerning any changes that may occur in child caring strategies, but Dinnie (2008) also pointed to the fact that in Findhorn, most children went to school, or the family sought to place themselves in the wider community as it was difficult to work full-time as a member while having to raise children. I do not know the current situation at Findhorn, but Erraid simply did not have the number of members or guests to accommodate such arrangements. In this way, the opportunity to spend more time with one’s children did not always necessarily materialize or play a role in the recruitment of families willing to commit to living on Erraid in the long term. I wish to note, however, that Sophia and Archie, find that living on Erraid offers them a valuable way of living their lives and raising their children in a way that resonates with them. The argument of time then, is not the “be all end all” of considering to move to Erraid with one’s children.

In terms of visiting Erraid because it acts as a place of retreat, or a place to connect with nature, I found that these two reasons eventually turned people off from staying in the long term. First, as a place of retreat, Erraid is seen as not being a formal part of the “outside world”, and with that comes the lack of variety of tasks and use of expertise. Moreover, as I’ve shown earlier, Erraid is not a place where one is perpetually on vacation, but where one works hard. In terms of it being a place to connect with nature, it can actually be quite difficult to live on an island year round.

Indeed, Ruben also jokingly mentioned to me how he sometimes simply scrolled online to receive some other sort of input (other than just the island):

The great thing about this place is that we have all that nature around us, to kind of ground us again, to bring us back to sanity, when other things might drive us nuts, when all of that interpersonal stuff is going on all the time, its just, everybody I think, well me, pretty much everybody uses nature to calm down again, find our feet. I sometimes use nature to slow down again, and I see the narrows and I think wow this is a beautiful place, and also times I don't go there, because I just don't want to kind of...see the island, I don't need a constant reminder of the fact that I am here on this island, and then I long for shops, or I just go on Amazon, just to look at things some times...you know...input...some other input then just this all the time...

As Ruben expresses, life on an island which at first seems romantic and ideal, does not come without its share of boredom and difficulties. Maud shared with me her reason for not wanting to stay on Erraid was that "it's a bit too closed. I couldn't live all year on an island". Indeed having to depend on the weather and the tide to cross the island made a few members feel rather enclosed and sometimes "stuck".

On Erraid, there was one guest, Lukas, who was in the midst of becoming a trial member (in the hopes of becoming a member). It seemed very clear to me, and to him as he shared, that he was meant to be on Erraid. He thrived on the island and was excited to continue his journey. He also felt more purposeful by receiving further responsibilities. Thus, the retention issues experienced by the current members, as well as the recruitment issues just mentioned above, did not deter him from seeking membership and living on Erraid.

### **Erraid's Purpose**

Another source of tension (or contradiction) was in the perception of the purpose of Erraid. By its purpose I mean whether it serves as a sustainable alternative community to the West, or whether it is a place of transition and education, where

people are only meant to come in passing.

April, a guest who stayed on Erraid for three weeks, expressed her opinion that Erraid is a place where one can come to heal:

...It feels like you enter into that and they help you along through a process, like whatever your intention is for being there, for however long you're there, it's almost like they don't do it for you but they give you the environment to do it yourself, which is very unique, they don't hold your hand, [...] on Erraid I felt very much that they were there to help you along on the process on your own. I think in the worst of times when you're not getting along with somebody, especially on Erraid, it's like where are you going to go? You know you have to have dinner with them the next day, so you have to find a way to resolve it. You know, you don't have to like everybody, but you know you do have to be respectful and learn how to deal with your differences in an appropriate way, and if you don't then you leave. So I think they are really good...I don't know if I could do it forever, but I would definitely probably want to do that, like the on and off going into the community setting like that and maybe stepping out.

April's comments here also reveal that she may not want to live on Erraid or in Findhorn in the long term. However, as exemplified by her comments, what Erraid seems to do right is provide its guests with meaningful experiences.

And I think Findhorn is really just so clever. Because you can go there, even if you go for the one week, even if they can get you to start thinking just a little but differently, about one thing, then you leave there and you take that with you. So its like they plant a seed, and then you go, and you go back into your community or your neighborhood or whatever, and then people hear you talking about things in a different way, and then those people, you know even if they are just like oh this is crazy, they might start thinking about that too. So its almost like...giving more light to the world, even if its just this tiny little light that gets out there, and then you know other people can become illuminated by the light that you bring. And I think a lot of other people go there and they just blow up and they turn into like this huge beam of light.

And for me, Erraid it just seemed so perfect that it was the lighthouse, lighthouse keepers, so if you're out there lost in the fog, you can follow the light and you can go there, and find shelter, and then the candles, and you can take your own candle and take it out to the world...it just seemed like, I don't know...I don't know if it was planned that way. But it just seems like a great thing to do. So somehow it seems...it's pretty amazing, I think they do really well with what they can, being sustainable. And maybe in the future they can be more sustainable, but for me I don't think that's the point, I think the point

is you know giving people who are lost out there, a place of refuge and a little bit of help through something in their life, and then they can go back out into the world and bring their light to other people.

It's such a tiny little place, in the middle of nowhere, but I think they can really do great stuff for the world. (laughter) It's pretty amazing that just a few people living on an island living in stone cottages can...I really walked out of there feeling like, I felt something really shift from within...

Perhaps even more strikingly, Sophia, the island focaliser and a member of three years, states

I would really like to apply whatever we've learnt here to there, and get people interested, and sow the seeds and do our little bit wherever. I do believe we are all supposed to come here for a little bit, give what we need, take what we need, and then go off and try and carry it on.

Sophia's comment relays quite accurately the complex and often contradictory feelings of the members: many came to realize that Erraid may not be the right place to settle in the long term (for several years), but this idea did not diminish the work they put in to making the island more sustainable in the hopes that they could stay longer.

The tensions located between the aspirations of the members and the purpose of Erraid questions the Foundation's capacity to answer to the desires of sustainable alternative lifestyles. Indeed, due to their low numbers and the structures of Erraid, members experienced "frustrated freedom", were overworked and consequently could not always adhere to the very ideal that brought them there (such as love in action, for example). Although living in community creates an environment that is conducive to transformation, the lack of privacy also hindered the human sustainability of Erraid and affected the capacity of the members to live their values.

Sophia also questioned the meaning of "community", and wondered what it

really entailed:

And do people really want to live in community? Really? Because if it means true community, then you don't have privacy, and you don't have belongings, and yeah...what does it mean? I'm still trying to figure out what true community means...because would you do anything for anybody, do you give yourself to everything or is it about...really about balance? And uh...you have to work to get it here, balance for yourself, for your family, for your community, your spiritual practice, your well-being, everything is a constant balance, and often it goes in favor of community needs to make the business run first.

Here Sophia summarizes incredibly succinctly many of the practical, spiritual and philosophical tensions that arose on Erraid in attempting to make it more sustainable. She concludes by suggesting that it is the business that tends to come first, and indeed, this resonates with all of the challenges they are experiencing. The fact that Erraid is a business affects the range of possibilities and freedoms experienced by the members and guests. To "run" Erraid on a small number of members also reveals how their current predicament is not conducive to the lives they seek to live by their own and the Foundation's spiritual standards. Sophia's questioning of the act of production, both in the facilitation of the consumption of Erraid as a particular experience and the production of their own aspired lifestyle (which is meant to surpass or overcome consumption) is weakened on its very dependence of it (Joseph 2002).

As I have suggested earlier, most agree that Erraid is not "failing" in so far as it will continue to have members and host guests. However, I argue that the community seems to be surviving and not thriving. The "survival mode" (being overworked) is hindering their ability to live the lives they desire. The act of serving through hosting is one of the many ways that seems to be creating and perpetuating the retention issues experienced by the members.

## **Chapter Five – Conclusion**

Though my initial hopes for a study of Erraid revolved around challenging the dichotomy of nature and culture, I must admit that I was happy and relieved to come to the realization that I could accept Archie’s question of why it seemed so difficult for people to stay long term on the island. For some reason I had avoided this question from the start, though it was posed to me, as I thought that I held no more information than the island’s longer-term residents did. What I have attempted to produce then, with this thesis, is a succinct reflection of the answers I saw them as articulating and demonstrating. And I must say that I remain humbled and honored to have taken on this most precious concern and to have written about it to the best of my ability. I only hope that this is helpful to those who read it!

Starting with the members’ desire for human sustainability on Erraid, I drew from my ethnographic data and my own experience to show in Chapters Three and Four how issues of privacy, the low number of members, and “frustrated freedom”, to name but a few, revealed the tensions that exist between members wanting to live love in action, and how in practice this ideal was in fact difficult to achieve.

Erraid and Findhorn are businesses that depend on the wider society to survive. They offer a product, so to speak, an experience that one is charged to attend, which is meant to provide the opportunity for self-transformation through various practices and living in community. Once one becomes a member, and has devoted time, money and energy to participating in the community, it seems to be much harder, on Erraid anyway, to practice these ideals. This conclusion is tied to Joseph’s (2002) thesis that under capitalism, communities continue to exist in ways that serve

the latter. Indeed, I have found that many of the tensions present on Erraid derive from organizational structures and certain values that are embedded within capitalism. The requirement of Erraid to host guests is at once a cornerstone of the Foundation's mandate to educate and spread knowledge to change the world (one person at a time), and yet to experience difficulties in offering a sustainable alternative in the long term weakens this mandate. Human sustainability is difficult to achieve in a community that offers an alternative to a system that it actually depends on.

It remains important to note that this desire to live (not only visit) in the community of Erraid, "away" from the big and small cities, shows that there is *something* that works and that remains appealing about this community. This "something", I argue, has to do with the Foundation's philosophy, spirituality and mandate where they create the environment in which individual transformation is able to occur. Although this transformation is at the individual level and thus does not comply with most theories of social change, and does not challenge many of the large structures that govern most economies and lives (such as capitalism), a significant majority (I would say at least 80%) of the people I met on Erraid felt that the experience had done them some good, had changed them, and had fulfilled its role as the environment and community in which personal transformations could occur.

The "outside" world is quite simply not this same environment. While some are happy to continue living outside the community with the tools and skills they received from Erraid, others firmly believe that Erraid is simply more conducive to these aspired lifestyles precisely because of the environment that it tries to create and often succeeds in being. In practice, I showed that it is difficult and challenging to

create and maintain this ideal environment, but the desire and the hope that Erraid is “on to something” is a very real motivator in trying to make a long-term life on Erraid work. Issues such as privacy and ownership challenge the sustainability of Erraid because they are important values to certain individuals, and they play an important role in their ability to exercise their agency and in their capacity to attain and maintain their well-being (Fischer 2014). Though privacy and ownership might seem at odds with the Foundation’s mandate, they are values that are of critical importance to Erraid’s human sustainability. These values are also an interesting example of the complexities of the individuals on Erraid who struggle between their own “western values” and the desire to live alternatively.

The desire for privacy and ownership might also help to explain the significant amount of people (in the hundreds) who have built houses surrounding Findhorn, and who have chosen to establish their own homes, businesses or practices, and yet remain closely attached to the Foundation, though no longer in it. On different occasions, and from different people, I heard that couples and families were more comfortable residing and working outside of the Foundation (and privacy was one of these drivers). The Findhorn community (outside of the Foundation) warrants its own research projects and I believe can reveal many more interesting reasons for why the Foundation is not always an appropriate organization to attach one’s self to in the long term. Moreover, because Erraid is owned by the Dutch family, the capacity to build more cottages or for someone to have their own personal home, is not feasible at the moment.

Consequently, I find it difficult to offer suggestions or changes to the

community of Erraid, as I know that there continue to be members who reside there, both old and new. For the two members who have since left, and whose many concerns I dealt with here, a somewhat unsatisfactory and jaded response is that they were looking for something that Erraid could not offer them in the long term: that Erraid is not what they wanted it to be.

But can significant changes occur to Erraid in order to lessen “frustrated freedom”, increase privacy, and provide reasonable pay and fair control to members over their working conditions and affairs? I believe so. If the family of four is provided with privacy, I argue that a couple (which I also consider a family) should be given the same opportunity. To address their frustrations regarding work conditions and control, there need to be more concrete discussions between the members, the Dutch family and the Findhorn Foundation to clearly identify Erraid’s purpose and meet the needs of both short-term and long-term visitors. I also think that the low number of members ought to be a major priority for the Foundation: the Foundation (and not only Erraid’s members) should take an active role in promoting and recruiting members.

As I attempted to explore in the previous chapter, I ask again: what is Erraid’s purpose? What does it have to contribute to human relations and scholarship? Though many would argue that the Foundation is not necessarily changing society at large, in terms of grand bureaucratic structures and the capitalist system, their stance and their very existence has endured because of a certain need of a percentage of the world’s (though heavily Western) population. My focus on Erraid led me to discover that the island community and its relation to Findhorn and the Dutch provided them

with the environment in which they strove to live out their ideals. Even though this was not done perfectly and without challenges, for some, it remained better than the alternative, at least for a few years.

In many ways, Erraid simply offers a better way of living for certain individuals. It is difficult for me to come to any generalized conclusions, simply because since my departure, the two married members with their two children remain on Erraid, while two have left, one is contemplating leaving, and Lukas remains a trial member (if he has not achieved membership yet). Last I heard, there is also at least one other member residing with them. Thus, the island has not necessarily failed, nor might it seem as if it has failed from the perspective of the Foundation.

As the previous chapter can attest to, April (as well as most others), have profoundly meaningful experiences when they visit the different Foundation sites. My experience on Erraid was nothing short of awesome. I am very thankful to all the people I encountered, all the challenges that came my way, and the opportunity to experience a more community-oriented lifestyle. I have no doubt that I shall return, even if just for a short time.

## Appendix A

# Common Ground

FINDHORN  
FOUNDATION  
COMMUNITY

In service to spirit, humanity and the earth  
we hold in common the following Principles, Essence and Guidelines

### Principles

Deep inner listening

Co-creation with nature

Love in action

### Essence

We live in clarity and integrity, and seek nothing less than truth.

We live in openness with deep listening, and seek nothing less than communion.

We live in gratitude and open-heartedness, and seek nothing less than love.

We live in courage and willingness, and seek nothing less than our soul's path.

We live in cooperation and shared vision, and seek nothing less than alignment with Spirit.

We live in awareness and responsibility, and seek nothing less than peace.

We live in acceptance and surrender, and seek nothing less than freedom.

### Guidelines

#### 1. Spiritual Practice

I have an active spiritual practice to align with spirit and support me to work for the highest good.

#### 2. Service

I bring an attitude of service to others and to our planet, recognising I must also consider my own needs.

#### 3. Personal Growth

I am committed to the expansion of human consciousness and my own personal growth. I endeavour to recognise and change personal attitudes and behaviour patterns that are limiting.

#### 4. Integrity

I embody congruence of thought, word and action. I take responsibility for the spiritual, environmental and human effects of my activities.

#### 5. Respecting Others

I wholeheartedly respect other people - their differences, views, origins, backgrounds and issues. I respect all forms of life and the Community's and other people's property.

#### 6. Direct Communication

I use clear and honest communication with open listening, heart-felt responses, loving acceptance and straightforwardness. I talk to people rather than about them. In public and in private I do not malign or demean others. I may seek helpful advice but do not seek to collude.

#### 7. Reflection

I recognise that anything I see outside myself—any criticisms, irritations or appreciations—may also be reflections of what is inside me, and I commit to looking at these before addressing others.

#### 8. Feedback

I am willing to listen to constructive feedback and work with it. I offer feedback to others in a caring and appropriate way to challenge and support each other to grow.

#### 9. Nonviolence

I do not inflict my attitudes or desires on others. Where appropriate I step in and stop violence, manipulation or intimidation of myself or others, or at least say that I would like it to stop.

#### 10. Perspective

For the benefit of the whole Community I may need to put aside my personal issues. I acknowledge that there may be wider perspectives than my own and deeper issues than those I am immediately aware of.

#### 11. Cooperation

I clearly communicate my decisions to others who may be affected by them, and consider their views respectfully. I recognise that others may make decisions which affect me, and I respect the care and integrity they have put into their decision-making process.

#### 12. Peacekeeping

I make every effort to resolve disputes. I may call for an advocate, friend, independent observer or mediator to be present, and will use and follow the Community's grievance procedures as necessary.

#### 13. Agreements

I respect the law of the land, keep agreements I have made, and do not break or try to evade any Community guidelines.

#### 14. Commitment

I bring the spirit of this statement of Common Ground to all my dealings.

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