

Therapeutic Community: A Century at Gould Farm, Boston

By Steven K. Smith

It was a warm August morning at Gould Farm's Roadside Store and it promised to be a hot, busy day. Though it was only mid-morning, beads of sweat were forming on my brow and my cooking apron sported half-dried blots of pancake mix. This morning I was assisting a client (or "guest" in Gould Farm parlance) I'll call Jeff as he made an omelet. Both Jeff and I were hoping, after weeks of practice, that this day Jeff would make his public debut on the grill.

Diagnosed with a major mental illness, Jeff had come to the Farm several months before. He had not started in the stressful environment of Roadside, but rather began developing basic work skills by raking leaves, tending a greenhouse, making maple syrup, or participating in one of dozens of opportunities Gould Farm made available.



Like most guests, Jeff was likely referred to the Farm by a psychiatrist. While at the Farm Jeff, like all guests, had contact with one of several social workers who lived on the Farm, learned about medications from the Farm's registered nurse, and saw one of two psychiatrists who regularly visited the Farm. But his contacts were not limited to professional and administrative staff. Jeff would have worked with individuals his own age, perhaps a volunteer with Brethren Volunteer Service, or from another volunteer agency, with no professional training in mental health. He may have worked with a recent college graduate interested in organic farming, which Gould Farm practices. Gould Farm guests benefit from both those who are clinically aware of their problems and those who relate to guests as peers.

Work and social skills were often lost to those, like Jeff, stricken with mental illness in young adulthood. Re-learning or learning those skills for the first time was and is the essential gift the Farm imparts extraordinarily well to its guests. The Farm's Roadside Store was the next-to-final step within the Gould Farm agenda, before one considered moving on to the Farm's more independent, Boston-area programs.

A guest's first Roadside job was usually washing dishes or waiting tables; then later, for some, working the cash register—or possibly working the grill. Making anything, but particularly an omelet, on a small grill in a quick-paced environment, is a precarious enough balancing act, especially when cheese, sprouts, and other ingredients are added. What ingredients are added first? Last? For anyone, but especially for those with major thought disorders, producing an item to be consumed and purchased could be overwhelming. Many customers in August came from among the thousands of tourists from Boston, New York, and elsewhere, who fled the cities for the Berkshires to enjoy Tanglewood, Jacob's Pillow, and other venues for the arts and culture. A Hollywood actress was said to frequent Roadside. At times (although this was far from the case) it felt like the store was catering to all the tourists at the same time!

The store is located on Rt. 23 a few miles outside the village of Monterey, and about two miles from the Farm's central hub. While a 2004 issue of *Bon Appetit* had cited Roadside as having one of the best breakfasts in the country, its reputation was already well established in the region. Thus, there was not only a reputation to maintain but also, within the Gould Farm enterprise, a mission to accomplish—assisting primarily young adults to cope with persistent mental illness.

Gould Farm acquired the Roadside Store in 1976, but the Farm itself had a much longer history. One of the nation's oldest, if not the oldest, psychiatric rehabilitation facilities, it was founded by William and Agnes Gould and several of their close family members in 1913. Informed by a Christianity that was neither sectarian nor doctrinaire, yet steeped in the Sermon on the Mount, the Goulds had finally realized their dream, attempted about seven times earlier in as many sites, to establish a haven for those suffering in mind and circumstance. First, inner city children arrived on the Farm, followed by others with different and at times more severe situational or addiction-related conditions. The 1950s ushered in the advent of psychotropic medications that allowed a seriously impaired population to meet the minimum requirements of work and community, skills that they may not have had without these medications. (I thank Anna Melinda Duhon's 2003 Harvard Bachelor's thesis for this insight.)

To its credit, the Farm decades later did not forget inner-city kids when it invited African American youngsters from the Atlanta area to live at the Farm for a number of weeks during the turbulence caused by the Atlanta Child Murders (1979-1981). Further back, the Farm had helped Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s and, back even earlier, German Jewish and other refugees during the 1930s and 1940s. Most recently, the Farm hosted a family that lost a loved-one in Iraq. Indeed, the Farm has a distinguished history responding to world crises while helping those at the Farm.

For almost 100 years Gould Farm’s relative “success” addressing the needs of its guests, like Jeff, has been due, I believe, to avoiding a monolithic approach toward treatment while embracing meaningful work and social engagement in a community setting. As a former Executive Director put it almost 30 years ago:

The mode of our life together is “working with,” “playing with,” “celebrating with,” “eating with,” “sharing with,” “suffering with”—all of the things that happen when a number of people live in close proximity. We do not see ourselves as therapists, but we consider our life together as “therapeutic” in the deepest sense of the word—tending toward healing and new and independent life. We do not have work-therapy, but we work; we do not have occupational therapy, but we make things and learn skills; we do not have music therapy, but we sing and play instruments... We do not have therapies as compartmentalized activities, but—by intention at least—the whole life of the community encapsulates what is meant by the term therapy.¹

The therapeutic power of intentional community (or any environment with strong social ties) is that it attacks a major byproduct of mental illness: social isolation.

Before I continue with the story of Jeff and the omelet, I need to back up and add a couple historical and personal notes. About a year before working with Jeff I had returned to Gould Farm as a full-time staff while studying law part-time in Springfield,



¹ Smith, Kent D. “Gould Farm: Rehabilitation Through Intentional Community.” Paper presented at the International Association of Psycho-Social Rehabilitation. May 29, 1981.

Massachusetts, about 60 miles east. I had grown up at the Farm in the '70s and '80s when my father was its Executive Director and my mother, the Farm's psychiatric nurse; both left in the early 1990s. I returned there thinking I knew the place intimately. The Berkshire Hills were as exquisitely beautiful as I remembered them decades past. About 500 of the Farm's roughly 650 acres were still wooded and wild, with the remains of old stone walls running through the woods, disappearing then reemerging like the veins in the weathered hand of a New England farmer. One could still lose oneself in the seclusion of the woods, yet with a short walk in any direction find a familiar landmark.

The roughly 100 acres of cleared land still hosted the Farm program; its nucleus was still the 200-year-old behemoth of a colonial house (with additions added through the years), called Main House, which housed the administrative offices and kitchen and in which people still ate and square danced together. Clustered around Main House were the maple syrup house, the dozen or so cabins tucked in the woods, and a sauna. Indeed little physically had changed. Programmatically there were some differences. Community lifestyle changes, however, were happening in front of me.

How a community like the Farm adapts to outer cultural and societal change is a phenomenon that fascinates me and one I try to understand. How, I would ask myself, does a community pass on traditions and which traditions does it choose to pass on, and why? How was the Farm allowing cultural and societal changes to affect its program? Whatever the answers, the Farm seemed to be carefully synthesizing the old and the new or, with sensitivity, replacing old ways with new ways. I came to believe these changes were not jeopardizing the Farm's therapeutic model.

For example, the standard five-days-a-week evening, family-style meal I remembered was now down to a couple days a week, the rest being buffet style. This change in itself may not have been programmatically significant, but communal meals were significant in maintaining a family-like atmosphere in which people felt welcomed and were missed if not at the table. Sociologist Henrik F. Infield noted the importance of communal dining at Gould Farm in the 1950s: "All (Gould Farm) activities are essentially optional, including work as well as attendance at regular Sunday morning services...*The only regularity that, for obvious reasons, must be insisted upon is attendance at meals.* [Emphasis added.] These are all taken in common, with the exception of breakfast which some of those who live in the cottages may arrange to have at home. The seating of the guests is not left to chance, but is planned with some care, especially in cases that need attention."

² Infield likely saw that the consistency of the family-style meals distinguished the Farm from "any mental hospital or sanatorium."

² Infield, Henrik F. 1955. *The American Intentional Communities: Study on the Sociology of Cooperation*. Glen Gardner, New Jersey: Glen Gardner Community Press. Pg. 79.



We did not lose our communal soul by changing from primarily family-style to buffet-style meals. We were still eating together and guests and staff still found fellowship at meals. Did perceptions of efficiency and convenience lead to implementing more buffets? Did buffets threaten semblances of family cohesion and order often found around the dinner table? More buffets may have brought benefits that I did not appreciate. Personally, I missed more family-oriented meals, but realized there might have been demands on the community that required this and other changes. I also began to realize, from actually living in community, the obvious: that a community cannot be, and does not remain, static. New ideas are often implemented, perhaps discarded, and sometimes reincorporated in more meaningful ways.

The appearance of outside consultants is also a somewhat new phenomenon at the Farm. Perhaps changes in Executive Director tenancy (now more trained in fields other than theology) has allowed this trend to emerge. My sense is that these developments are not in themselves problematic. Indeed, an outside perspective is often needed and sought. But such perspectives bring challenges. The Farm witnessed the removal of after-dinner desserts based on one consultant's perceptions that the Farm's kitchen staff was overstretched. What this consultant might not have predicted was that shorter meals, as I and some others thought, may have meant people spending less time together in an important community function. Despite some mild protest, community members desired this change, noting the health benefits of having fewer sweets. Desserts were eliminated from evening meals, yet today, without desserts, community members do in fact still socialize around the dining room tables long after meals formally end.

Wider staff participation, beyond the Executive Director, in administrative decision-making has been more pronounced recently than in the past. This, I believe, is a healthy trend, a moving away from what some may have considered a more vertical or hierarchical model. Where once the Executive Director, with the Board's backing, made

policy decisions, new ideas are now often circulated between committees. Differing views are reconciled in committee then, after further vetting, given back to the Executive Director. But “horizontal hierarchy” poses its own challenges; groups, rather than an individual, may then speak for an institution and be as prone to inflexibility as their “vertical” counterpart.³ Gould Farm, like many organizations, has tried different styles of leadership depending on the challenges confronting the Farm at any given time. What has worked or been thought to have worked in the past may not be appropriate for the present.

Another challenge Gould Farm now faces is the loss of an elder population. The last remaining elder died in March 2010, at age 99; she had come to the Farm in 1930. Executive Directors in the past had often drawn from an elder’s wisdom that, until about 20 years ago, was as rich and diverse in background as the Farm’s general population. The term “elder,” when I was a child at the Farm, was typically reserved only for those who arrived at the Farm before about 1940. I am thinking, fondly, of two women who came to the Farm before Will Gould’s death in 1925. Both died on the Farm in 1985. (Their children and grandchildren now sit on the Gould Farm Board.) The Farm’s present elder population arrived at the Farm in the late 1970s or mid 1980s, a still notable tenancy; most had little contact with the early Gould Farm pioneers.

The diminishing of this population may deprive a community of guidance through difficult times; without them, new leaders lack an important source of organizational history. Elders remind us that what we think is new has actually been tried before; at the same time, elders sometimes look backward instead of forward. Nevertheless, they often encourage leaders and others to take new routes toward organizational goals consistent with a community’s mission. Their passing may also jeopardize multi-generational dimensions of community. Gould Farm, I believe, understands the implications of fewer elders and is responding accordingly.

Another challenge for any community is handling staff expectations of the meaning of “community.” What Gould Farm *is*—or what some think the Farm *was*—varies beyond its 1992 Statement of Mission which, in part, reads:

Steeped in the tradition of social service and spiritual fellowship envisioned by its founder, and reaching out in an ever changing world to those suffering in mind and spirit, Gould Farm’s mission is to help the people who come here find the inner strengths and outer resources needed to meet the challenges that life imposes. The Farm seeks to provide a family-like community within which all members can find respite and draw strength while respecting the individuality and dignity of all.

For some staff, the Farm is the embodiment of a long-sought ideal of community, while for others, illusions of “community” are shattered when the Farm fails certain of their

³ See Browning, Don S. “Religion and Civil Society” in James Luther Adams, Abraham Kuyper, and Catholic Social Teachings. *Criterion*. Spring/Summer 2010.

communal or therapeutic expectations. Such expectations sometimes, though infrequently, lead toward personal discontent and dissent leading to departures. Cycles of enthusiasm and disillusionment concurrently repeat within any community, something familiar to those acquainted with community dynamics. (It is during times of change that elders may be especially important in maintaining and interpreting an organization's mission.)



Any institution that revels in past glories or accomplishments while ignoring current realities fast becomes obsolete. Gould Farm does not so revel, but remains rooted in its past. We are not without our own challenges but we are addressing these challenges. We rightfully cheer, with a healthy sense of pride, that we are the oldest therapeutic community in the United States, but this means little if we are not creative in our endeavors or if we fail to maintain what so many observers and community members notice as our signature, communal value: kindness.

Both the academic and therapeutic worlds and the popular press have recognized Gould Farm's approach toward treating those with persistent mental illness. *Bon Appetit* has acknowledged our pancakes at Roadside and Dr. Oliver Sacks has noted our therapeutic programs in the *New York Review of Books*.⁴ In 2005 Former Gould Farm Nurse Nancy Smith and current Gould Farm Director John Otenasek helped launch Crossing Creeks, a therapeutic community in Rockingham County, Virginia, inspired by the Gould Farm model. Although that project was short-lived, Harrisonburg-based Mennonite visionary and activist Ron Copeland helped a nonprofit acquire Crossing Creeks and, under a

⁴ Sacks, Oliver. "The Lost Virtues of the Asylum." *New York Review of Books*. Vol. 56, No. 14. September 24, 2009.

different name, it is still used for a similar purposes. Former Gould Farm Treasurer Virgil Stucker has initiated successful programs inspired by Gould Farm in Virginia, Michigan, and, more recently, CooperRiis, in North Carolina.

The late Gould Farm Director and Harvard Divinity School professor, James Luther Adams, noted this about Gould Farm: “[A] community of this sort cannot grow in wisdom and stature without taking inventory from time to time... In the Gould Farm of the future there will be, as in the past, new treasures as well as old. Indeed, without new treasures, the old ones are themselves likely to disappear... Gould Farm cherishes its past, but it also moves venturingly into the burgeoning present.” This balancing and synthesis of the past and present remain challenges for Gould Farm.

So, what finally happened with Jeff and the omelet? The heat of that August day did not disappoint. As noted earlier, we had spent the prior weeks in “training,” during which time Jeff and I had broken down the omelet making process into small steps. Now it all came together and Jeff later that day did make breakfast, without assistance, for a satisfied customer. In so doing Jeff, despite his illness, was able to function in a highly stressful environment and was able to take the skills he learned at Gould Farm with him to the Farm’s Boston program. Community, committed staff, expectation of work in increasingly demanding settings, and plenty of support all made this possible, and make this possible every day at Gould Farm.



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