Tom Thumb has been writing and telling stories since he was 6 years old.

He likes sunsets, crows, honey, singing, the sea and being in love.

His storytelling and other projects can be found at www.tomthumb.org

Tom’s other books include:

*Hand to Mouth to India*

*Tales of a Road Junky*

*Bozo and the Storyteller*
Somewhere under the Rainbow

by Tom Thumb

SomewhereUnderTheRainbow.org
For all the Rainbow Family.
I’m grateful to many people who offered their time and insights to make Somewhere Under the Rainbow a better book.

I offer my thanks to Aram, Arad, Andy, David, Marie-Anne, Daniela, Jillian and Scott for their comments and corrections. Even Mark found 2 things to say. Fleur kicked the book into shape in its early days and helped me find the right voice.

Joth let me choose among his many amazing photos for the cover and website. Bettina and Carolyn made the book look great.

And, of course, I could never have written this book without the help of the Great Spirit...
Part 1 Rainbow Family – 1
First time – origins and prophecies – on the road to the Rainbow – who are these hippies? - disorganisation and Rainbow politics – scouting – authorities and the locals

Part 2 Rainbow Life – 55
If you see a job it’s yours - seed camp – leaders – the kitchen and supplies – food circle – announcements – magic hat – workshops – shit pits – Rainbow Police – talking circles

Part 3 Rainbow Culture – 111
The main fire – weather – nudity – Rainbow fashion - hugs – music – the songs – hugs and angel walks – sexuality and romance - kids

Part 4 Rainbow World – 159
Crazies – healing – beliefs – spirituality and ritual - Babylon

Afterword – 201
Some meaningful closing words
Lexicon

[Note: I use Rainbow and Gathering interchangeably throughout the book for style reasons. I also use the terms brother and sister largely to avoid having to use people’s actual names. It should also be mentioned that the American Rainbow Family has hundreds more slang terms that just never took hold in Europe.]

Baba – see Sadhu

Babylon – Corrupt, mainstream society; the world outside of the Rainbow including the media, pharmaceutical medicine, government, schools etc

Bhajan – Devotional songs written in Hindi by Indian poets featuring the names of Hindu Gods.

Chai – Any kind of tea but hopefully with Indian spices and milk.

Chapatti – Flat, Indian bread made from just flour and water; a staple of the Rainbow diet.

Consensus – In theory, all decisions in the Rainbow should be made by consensus in a circle convened to discuss the matter. If even one person blocks the motion then it can’t go ahead.
**Connection** – Often heard in the sense of the cry of ‘tobacco connection!’ when someone is looking for something to smoke. But it could also be an offer. One sister told me of her confusion when someone threw a carrot at her as she arrived at her first Rainbow and shouted ‘carrot connection!’

**Focaliser** – someone who is ‘focalising’ or organising a task or in the Rainbow such as the kitchen or magic hat.

**Food circle** – Twice a day we eat in a circle in the Rainbow at wildly-varying times though in theory it should be breakfast/lunch and dinner.

**Magic Hat** – After each meal a musical procession goes around the circle with a hat to collect donations.

**Rainbow Family** – Essentially everyone who considers themselves part of the Rainbow. A particular ‘family’ may refer to people of a particular country who organise Gatherings there.

**Reiki** – A New Age healing technique involving the laying on of hands and channeling ‘universal energy’.

**Sadhu** – a kind of Hindu monk who has renounced the world. Sadhus belonging to a sect dedicated to the god, Shiva, tend to smoke a lot of charas, perhaps grow dreadlocks and camp out in mountain caves, by rivers and wander the land – superficially at least, not a thousand miles away from the Rainbow lifestyle. Hence a quick way for an imitative hippie to give himself a spiritual promotion.

**Shanti Sena** – Literally meaning peace army, the term was first coined by Mahatma Gandhi and was picked up in the Rainbow as a way of keeping peace in the Gatherings. In theory, a sister or brother need only shout ‘Shanti Sena!’ and waves of conflict-resolvers should come running to help.

**Shit pits** – The latrines which are simply trenches dug into the earth at a discreet distance.

**Talking circle** – councils held with everyone sat in a circle and listening to the one currently holding the talking stick which passes around clockwise.
It’s taken me a while to understand why I wrote this book.

On one hand I didn’t have much choice in the matter. Much of it was already written in my head over countless cups of chai around the fire, late night music sessions under the stars and rainy days of huddling under inadequate plastic tarps with other cold and damp hippies, big smiles on their faces. It was just a matter of putting it all onto paper.

I was a little hesitant to do so, however. Although they’ve been going on for over 40 years now, the Gatherings remain something of an open secret. The Rainbow is open to everyone and few leave the same way they came; they rejoin mainstream society with the strange glow in their eyes of a pilgrim who has returned from another world, another way of being. There could never, of course, be an official spokesperson for the Rainbow – there are as many points of view about the Gatherings as there are people who attend them – and yet I felt compelled to share my experience living with the Rainbow Family.

One of the greatest thrills in this life is to be part of something bigger than yourself. Whether it’s a movement, a religion, a project - there’s a certain magic in joining forces with others or devoting your life to something you believe in. It’s as close to the secret of happiness that I know of.
I first felt that sensation as an 18 year old arriving in India in the mid 90's when the freak scenes in Goa and the Himalayas were going strong. There I found a small traveler community where it was the norm to take psychedelics, read esoteric texts, to have chosen another way of life.

Eventually – inevitably – however, the scene dissolved under a flood of development. I moved on to explore the rest of the world but never really found anything like it again. I drifted for a number of years over several continents, not really sure what I was looking for. I got quite lost, fell to pieces, put myself back together again and ended up wandering into the Rainbow Gatherings.

It wasn’t love at first sight. I had to melt a good deal of my skepticism before I found a sense of community and love in the Rainbow Gatherings that was simply the greatest gift I’d ever been given. I made friends in five minutes and companions for life. I got to work on and heal parts of myself that I didn’t even know existed. Eating mushy porridge, hugging sweaty hippies and choking on smoke around fires, I felt more welcome home than anywhere I’d ever been.

The term hippie conjures up all kinds of clichés these days where anyone can stick up two fingers and drawl out love and peace, man in a stoned voice and get a laugh. But there’s nothing funny about living in an increasingly neurotic, lonely world where we spend more time with our computers than with our loved ones. What is there to lose, after all, in hugging a stranger? Or singing all night with new friends inside a tipi?

There is, perhaps, the risk of being loved. Of opening your heart and letting others in. Your expectations of how happy you have any right to be might be threatened when you discover what fun it is to dance barefoot to the sound of a drum.

I’ve been going to Rainbow Gatherings in Europe and Israel for 12 years now and it’s been an incredible journey. I arrived a cynic, more interested in what I could get out of the Rainbow than what I could ever give. Like a pebble in the stream, however, my sharp edges were smoothed as I learned to open up to others and share myself in a way I never could have imagined.

This book then, is an attempt to share what the Rainbow has meant to me.

Somewhere Under the Rainbow, admittedly, relies a lot on anecdote and memory. I might have gotten some of the details wrong or taken the odd exaggerated story at face value. But believe me, even if everything in this book didn’t happen, it could have. Celebrational gatherings or 24 hour comedy shows, the Rainbows are never boring.

May everyone find their true colours.
Rainbow Gatherings are temporary intentional communities typically held in outdoor settings, and espousing and practicing ideals of peace, love, harmony, freedom and community, as a consciously expressed alternative to mainstream popular culture, consumerism, capitalism and mass media.

Rainbow Gatherings and the Rainbow Family of Living Light (usually abbreviated to “Rainbow Family”) are an expression of a Utopian impulse, combined with bohemianism, hipster and hippie culture, with roots clearly traceable to the counterculture of the 1960s. Mainstream society is commonly referred to and viewed as “Babylon”, connoting the participants' widely held belief that modern lifestyles and systems of government are unhealthy, unsustainable, exploitative and out of harmony with the natural systems of the planet. The original Rainbow Gathering was in 1972, and has been held annually in the United States from July 1 through 7 every year on National Forest land.[2] Throughout the year, regional and international gatherings are held in the United States and throughout the rest of the world respectively.
Part One

The Rainbow Family
My first contact with the Rainbow Family was less than positive. I’d arrived at the cocky age of 19 to the tipi village of Beneficio in Southern Spain. At first I was charmed by the place: a long valley with a stream running through the middle of it and shaded by aromatic eucalyptus trees. Homemade geometric domes and tipis blended into the contours of the land and everywhere there were children playing. I quickly got into the spirit of helping in the kitchen and playing music but it wasn’t long before all the hippies began to get under my skin.

The nudity, for one thing. If you’d asked me in a pub my opinion on going naked I would have probably praised it as a natural human right. But face to face with the wrinkled asses, sagging tits and swinging scrotums on display, there was altogether too much skin and hair and fat for me to look at anything else. Everyone there seemed too comfortable with going nude to even mention it and that was my first reason for distrusting them.

Then there were the songs. I joined the children in rolling my eyes and making faces at the bright-eyed inanity of the lyrics and the long droning melodies that seemed to me anything but musical.

‘Thank you for the butterflies, lord, thank you for the butterflies,
They’re healing, they’re healing, they’re healing us,’

This seemed wrong on many levels, musical and factual. And what was this obsession with getting healed? Who said we were all sick? Everyone else seemed to just accept this drivel without question and the mindless conformity left me feeling like the only sane person in the asylum.
Finally, there were the beliefs. It seemed like there was an unspoken spirituality contest in which each successive hippie tried to come out with something even more far-fetched than the last; assertions which, in a more civilised setting might have merited a phone call for some medical orderlies with a strait-jacket.

‘Did you know that when flies are buzzing around you they’re actually repairing holes in your aura?’ one girl asked me with the nonchalant air of one simply doing her duty in passing on little-known esoteric truths.

Then I found myself duped into a small talking circle one afternoon – why we couldn’t just sit and chat I didn’t know but it wasn’t my tipi and I wanted some of the chai that was brewing up on the fire. When the talking stick came to me I shrugged and passed it on to the Alpha Male Hippie whose swollen testicles were no doubt preparing to create yet more single mothers up and down the valley. His current girlfriend looked on with shining eyes as he announced:

‘In my recent meditations I’ve succeeded in tracking down the source of the struggle I feel in my life...I learned that in a previous incarnation I was King Arthur. I still suffer the guilt of having betrayed my people to the Christians, abandoning the Celtic tradition...I...I can’t take back what I did but can only dedicate my life now to healing the damage done.’

You had to hand it to him – he may have been delusional but at least he was ambitious with it. The spread of Christianity in the British Isles and the demise of Avalon were laid squarely on his shoulders. Little had I expected to meet in such humble settings an individual responsible for shaping the course of history!

I felt a deep giggle stir within me but looking around I could see only thoughtful, sympathetic faces, nodding as they contemplated his words. I longed to fart loudly. Or announce that I could pretend to be Jesus Christ or Buddha himself if that was the secret to getting laid so often. Instead I just swallowed my scorn and allowed it to poison my perception of all things hippie.

And yet, as disdainful and judgmental as I was about the whole set-up, I couldn’t deny that everyone seemed to be living the good life. The valley was warm and beautiful, it was easy to make friends and everyone seemed to be a good deal more relaxed than I was. While I looked down on the transparent spirituality of the dreadhead residents, I was vaguely aware that I didn’t have anything better to offer and that, secretly, I might have liked to belong. If only the songs could be jazzed up a bit and people would start making a little more sense.

It took another four years before I crossed paths with the Rainbow again as I got dragged along to a Gathering in the desert in Israel. Everywhere people were sharing food in makeshift shade, white scarves wrapped around their heads and, if you suspended your disbelief about all the East European genes, it almost looked like a scene out of the Bible. What fun it would be to get lost for a generation with a tribe like this! Three weeks of dancing, singing and falling in love by moonlight to hypnotic Indian ragas around the camp fire with endless pots of chai keeping me warm as I stroked the hair of an Israeli girl who’d liked my songs and...well, I had to admit there was something to this whole Hippie Dream, after all.

I returned to Beneficio a couple of years later and had a great time. After that I jumped in a van going to the Italian European Rainbow in Tuscany where we gathered at 1200 metres in sloping green forests and fields. I took my first steps towards taking responsibility in the Gatherings, looking after the Magic Hat and making the odd announcement. I played songs around the main fire late at night as we struggled to stay warm and I wondered if I was starting to be part of the Rainbow.

That particular Gathering was beset by endless rain, however, and within a fortnight had become one giant mud pit. Tragedy struck
one day when someone prepared a private magic mushroom tea that turned out to be dangerously toxic; we thought we heard the sound of the collective Om before food circle and came running with food bowls but saw instead military helicopters landing in the main field to airlift the stricken to hospital.

The unwanted press attention generated by this incident attracted a thousand extra ‘tourists’ in search of the ‘free love festival’ they’d heard about on TV. The sheer numbers and pouring rain created an atmosphere of desperation and at times it felt like we were only one meal away from collapse. Packs of dogs ran wild together, scaring children and shitting close to the water sources. The mild cough I’d arrived with turned into something resembling bronchitis and I stormed out of the Gathering, spitting phlegm and fury, convinced I was turning my back on these hippie refugee camps for good.

The Rainbow always waits for you though. I got lost on the road for a few years before I ran out of places to go, chasing my own tail so hard that I fell quite to pieces. It took a painful 6 months to put myself back together again with the help of a skilled therapist and in the process I learned that my tendency to complain was mostly a projection of my own pain. My criticisms and judgements were just a way of downloading my angst as the world consistently failed to meet my expectations of it. I remembered the words of one brother back in Beneficio who had always said:

‘Anything that you say to someone that doesn’t come from a place of love isn’t about them, it’s about you.’

I wandered back into the Rainbow Gatherings and discovered that for every step I took towards the Family, they took two towards me. I found affection, hugs, friendship and laughter in the Rainbow when I was down and I realised that for all their faults, there were few people on earth quite as positive and giving as the hippies.

But while the Rainbow won my heart, my mind still refused to join in the fun. How could I belong to a class of space cadets who believed cancer could be cured with a few hours of reiki? Or that all their problems would go away if they only smoked hashish in praise of Shiva? I channeled my doubts into song and found that they could be alchemised into humour, changing my own perspectives even as I tried to change other people’s; when I first sang my ironic lyrics around the fire I half-expected to get pelted with leftover rice but instead people laughed and asked for more.

I gradually understood that I wasn’t alone in some of my perceptions. The songs gave people the chance to laugh about taboo topics and not take the whole thing quite so seriously. Then at some point I realised I was no longer laughing at the Rainbow but about it.

A common wisdom in the Rainbow is that if you see a job, it’s yours. It had seemed to me there was sometimes a self-seriousness and conformity in the Gatherings that belied the freedom of spirit everyone aspired to. My job, then, was to make fun of it all and call out the Emperor’s New Clothes each time I saw them.

And so finally, after a difficult beginning, I found my own special colour in the Rainbow.

For some people, arriving at their first Rainbow Gathering is like coming home.

Perhaps they have always dreamed of finding a place where they could belong, somewhere they could be themselves as they really are, not how they’ve learned to be. Yet until they first heard about the Rainbow they never dared believe such a place might exist.
It sounded too good to be true.

A place where people gather in nature for a month, leaving behind alcohol and electronics, getting high only on a cup of tea. A place where there’s no one in charge as people of all nations, ages and backgrounds come together as a Family to cook, work and celebrate in a makeshift village. A society as ephemeral as a cycle of the moon.

And it’s all paid for by magic. Freely-given donations put into the Magic Hat that gets passed around the circle after each meal.

In fact, the only thing they can’t understand, as they stagger up the crest of the last hill and behold hundreds of hippies playing music and dancing in the sun, is how it took them so long to hear about it. They walk down through neighbourhoods of tents of every size and description towards the main fire and are greeted with an enthusiastic cry of Welcome Home! From the very first hug they feel they’ve found their family, the one they always dreamed of having; a family of light and love where everyone shares their food and dances around the fire; a family that doesn’t ask you what you’re going to do with your life but only that you open your heart and care for others as you care for yourself; a family that is happy for your spirit to fly free in Never-Never Land along with all the other children who have no intention of ever growing up.

The ecstatic newcomers may be seen crying in the bhajan tipi, overwhelmed by it all as voices around them lift in joyful, devotional song. Others may even strip off all their clothes before they pitch their tent. Either way, they know they’ve never made a better decision in their lives than taking a chance on following the squiggly directions on that map they printed out from their email...

For others, the entry to the Rainbow is less than smooth. Seeing so many shiny, happy people so at home in nature, they feel stiff and awkward. Their sense of isolation swells up until they feel they shouldn’t be there, that they’re not cool enough, talented enough, beautiful enough to be part of the Rainbow. Feeling excluded and intimidated by the sheer free-spirited anarchy of the whole thing, they may not realise that many of those dancing in the sun before them suffered the same doubts at their first Rainbow.

Their exile ends, however, in the moment that they find the courage to simply join in; taking off their watches, singing a mantra in an unknown language, they find to their surprise how easy it is to be part of it all.

The ride is often rough for those who arrive with expectations. Maybe they’ve read about the Utopian vision of the Gatherings on the internet and are disillusioned by what they find. Or maybe they just get off on the wrong foot when someone shouts at them for using their cell phone by the main circle. Somehow they feel like they just don’t fit and begin to nurse private criticisms about it all. Doesn’t everyone seem to have a slight cultish glint in the eye? What are all these songs to Indian gods about anyway – doesn’t anyone know some Pink Floyd? Despite the cries of welcome home! when they arrive, many feel distinctly unwelcome and complain of the hypocrisy they see: hippie cliques, judgemental attitudes and a lack of respect for the locals.

Sometimes with reason. Any given Gathering is only as good as the people who attend it. There are people at the Rainbow who will judge you for wearing a watch, cosmetics or designer clothing, and won’t hesitate to let you know. When you’ve made the effort to travel for days to get to the Rainbow, taking a step into the unknown to embrace a new way of living, it’s heartbreaking to get yelled at for some novel sin like not washing your hands before you go to help in the kitchen. Or for stepping into the fire pit with your shoes on. Or for calling your family to let them know that you arrived safely and haven’t yet been sacrificed on a burning pyre by all the New Age freaks.

Judged and deprecated, the newcomer then winces when they hear all the songs about unity, family and celebration and feel that everyone’s
full of shit, that the Gathering is anything but sacred. The whole thing feels like a private club for those who talk about healing the planet while doing nothing to achieve it, partying it up in nature far from the society in which they were probably unable to function in the first place.

Sometimes the Rainbow can be close-minded, hierarchical and judgemental of those who don’t seem alternative enough. By having actively chosen another way of life, many hippies do believe they’re better than those who live in the mainstream. But the Rainbow is in no way a closed book; while it might seem that no one has anything on their minds but their last trip to India, reiki and shamanism, offer a workshop on child psychology or physical theatre and in no time you’ll have a circle of eager and curious souls coming along to learn something new.

The conflict perhaps stems from the tension common to many communities between the established and the newcomers, between those who know what’s going on and those who are still finding their way. It gets exhausting to have to explain all the basic principles again and again – don’t use soap in the river! Cover your shit!’ – and it can be a challenge to communicate the spirit of the Rainbow every day again afresh. And sometimes the struggle to preserve it expresses itself with irritability and judgment.

Magic happens when the newcomer to the Rainbow decides to take the decisive step across the boundary that separates the excluding they from an inclusive we. To recognize that each and every person who comes has something unique and special to add to the biodiversity of souls that make up the Rainbow Gatherings. It’s also often true that the more at odds a person feels with the Gatherings in the beginning, the more they eventually come to love the Rainbow and feel part of it.

In the Rainbow, you belong as soon as you want to.

‘When the earth is dying there shall arise a new tribe of all colours and all creeds. This tribe shall be called The Warriors of the Rainbow and it will put its faith in actions not words.’ (Hopi prophecy)

A frequent question heard in the Gatherings is how did the Rainbow start?

Oddly enough, not many people know. There are no charters or official documents, no founding constitution – only the memories of those who were there at the time and, as precious few of them come to Gatherings in Europe, the history deteriorates into hearsay.

If this were a serious journalistic book I would have tracked down the surviving hippies to have attended the first Rainbow Gatherings in the US in 1972 and in Europe in 1983. I would have done exhaustive academic research on the supposed Native American prophecies often cited in the Gatherings to explore whether the hippies really were the foretold Rainbow Warriors.

I might also have analysed the fate of the 60’s counter-culture movement when it met the Nixon Administration and how the Summer of Love and the Be-In Gathering in San Francisco evolved into occupations of National Park land, supported by returning Vietnam veterans unable to return to mainstream society.

But it’s not that kind of book and besides, like many things in the Rainbow, the history is a little fuzzy.

I’ve spoken to people who proudly told me they were ‘founding family’ of the Rainbow and gotten little clarity. With the passing of the decades, the origins of the first Gatherings seem to have blurred with
their own personal mythologies and it’s hard to get much reliable detail. It seemed to me they hoped to cast a spell around themselves as survivors of the 60’s, a physical link back to where the Hippie Dream all began. References abounded to The Living Theatre, Hell’s Angels, the Merry Pranksters and Woodstock. The names dropped thick and fast with the casual confidence of one who was saying *I was there and you weren’t*.

Broadly speaking, there are two schools of thought about the origins of the Rainbow and they tend to overlap: on one hand some consider it the child of counter-culture, a way of ensuring that everything accomplished in the 60’s would not just go up in smoke. Some even see Woodstock as the first Rainbow Gathering and trace the overall movement back to the Beatniks and expressions of American mysticism. The end of the 60’s saw the biggest migration to the countryside in modern times as some half a million disaffected Americans abandoned mainstream society to start communes across the country – they met with almost universal failure but the Rainbow Gatherings held in national parks continued to roll on year after year, powered by hippies and Vietnam veterans, many of whom had dropped out for good.

The other source of the Rainbow is based on mystical tradition. There are supposedly several recorded prophecies of the Native Americans that allude to a new people stepping forwards to inherit the earth and with a touching credulousness, the hippies assumed it must mean *them*. When pressed for details it becomes clear that not many in the Rainbow have much of a grasp on who said what, where and when. What counts is that ancient tribal peoples foresaw a generation of bright-eyed souls who would shake off their own corrupt culture and reconnect to Mother Earth. With a light lit within their hearts these Rainbow Warriors would take it upon themselves to restore peace and harmony to the world.

That many people tend to just accept this on face value reflects the tendency in the Rainbow to go a bit weak at the knees at the mention of anything tribal. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve heard someone tell me that the evils of hierarchy, chauvinism, capitalism and exploitation of the earth all began when tribes first abandoned their nomadic ways 8000 years ago in favour of agriculture and so-called civilisation. Personal wealth accrued, social institutions like churches, banks and jails were founded and people lost touch with all that mattered in life. The beginnings of Babylon.

When we roamed the earth and seas as nomadic tribes, however, we owned no more than we could carry. All were equal around the fire and our lives were lived in communion with the elements. The Great Spirit accompanied us every moment of our lives and we knew how to gather our sustenance from the Earth herself. We knew not to make a permanent home, this life being but a bridge to the next world. Instead we traveled with our animals under enormous skies, following rivers that spoke to us, guided by shamans in touch with our ancestors.

And today, as we roam around in our rickety old vans, hitchhike across continents and unite around a blazing fire at full moon – are we not following the old ways? Our foraging skills might take the form of diving into supermarket dumpsters rather than an intimate knowledge of wild roots and herbs, we might carry cell phones instead of sending smoke signals...but what counts is that the same spirit is alive inside us!

Most anthropologists would likely suppress a smile at such an assertion but beyond the gross romanticising of tribal life – mostly an arduous, hazardous way of life, full of elaborate law, taboo and ritual – there may be something to be said about a resurgence of the nomadic spirit, an innate longing to travel that may be something quintessential human. Likewise the urge to live in nature seems to be something that not even our most spectacular technology can entirely eliminate – has a crackling fire become any less attractive for the invention of the internet and the smartphone?
Of course the majority of people who turn up at a Rainbow Gathering know little about the prophecies and could care even less. It’s enough of a miracle that the Gatherings work at all; people from different countries and backgrounds getting along for a month in nature, cooking together, making music and new friendships, enjoying the simple pleasures of hanging out in nature. A way of life that requires no belief or adherence to any law.

But what’s the harm in a little romance?

Back when the Native Americans were being persecuted, slaughtered and starved by the European colonisers, a number of prophesies are said to have emerged. There’s some doubt about their authenticity but where’s the fun in nitpicking?

This is from the Hopi:  

‘This is the First Sign: We are told of the coming of the white-skinned men, like Pahana, but not living like Pahana men who took the land that was not theirs. And men who struck their enemies with thunder. [Thunder meaning gunpowder?]’

‘This is the Second Sign: Our lands will see the coming of spinning wheels filled with voices. In his youth, my father saw this prophecy come true with his eyes -- the white men bringing their families in wagons across the prairies.’

‘This is the Third Sign: A strange beast like a buffalo but with great long horns, will overrun the land in large numbers. These White Feather saw with his eyes -- the coming of the white men’s cattle.’

1 The Hopi are perhaps the most lovable of Native Americans for their ostensibly wise and gentle ways – allowing us to forget about some of the other more violent tribes. And, as has been observed a little too often, can it be any coincidence that their name sounds almost like ‘hippie’?

‘This is the Fourth Sign: The land will be crossed by snakes of iron.’ [Railroad tracks?]

‘This is the Fifth Sign: The land shall be criss-crossed by a giant spider’s web.’ [Telephone lines? The internet?]  

‘This is the Sixth sign: The land shall be criss-crossed with rivers of stone that make pictures in the sun.’ [Um...]

‘This is the Seventh Sign: You will hear of the sea turning black, and many living things dying because of it.’ [Oil spills? Or perhaps a reference to geo-engineering plans to cool the earth temperature by spreading algae over the oceans to absorb carbon dioxide?]

‘This is the Eighth Sign: You will see many youth, who wear their hair long like my people, come and join the tribal nations, to learn their ways and wisdom.’ [Yey! That’s us – the hippies!]

‘And this is the Ninth and Last Sign: You will hear of a dwelling-place in the heavens, above the earth, that shall fall with a great crash. It will appear as a blue star. Very soon after this, the ceremonies of my people will cease.’ [China launched a new space station in 2011 with more planned soon]

Then we have the Sioux prophecy:

‘There will come a time when the earth is sick and the animals and plants begin to die. Then the Indians will regain their spirit and gather people of all nations, colors and beliefs to join together in the fight to save the Earth: The Rainbow Warriors.’
The Cree and the Cherokee are also said to have similar prophecies and we find Rainbow Men and Women in ancient cave paintings of Spain and Hawaii. Even the Zulu have something like a legend of a Rainbow Warrior.

Read in a certain light, these predictions can seem impressive, even convincing, and there are many within the Rainbow Family who believe them implicitly. Naturally, there are many and varied interpretations and even among the Hopi it’s hard to get a definitive picture – oral mythology is rarely very coherent and different perspectives can be drawn from different stories.

One tale, for instance, holds that the Elder White Brother left for the East long ago and would one day return with a sacred Hopi tablet as proof of his identity. I heard one story that a bunch of hippies took a likely-looking rock to the Hopi elders in 1972 for verification. While they were told that no, this wasn’t it, they were encouraged to go and start the first Rainbow Gathering.

However the Rainbow began, the first official Gathering was in 1972 in Yellowstone Park in the US and they became an annual event, taking place in national parks and exercising the constitutional right to assemble. In 1983 the Rainbow crossed the Atlantic and the first European Gathering was held in Italy. After that it spread like a virus – after all, you only needed a couple of pots, a guitar and a bunch of hippies to make one – anywhere in Nature with a water source would do. Send a few postcards out to likely bohemian hang outs and sure enough, people would come. You didn’t even have to build it first.

The Information Age has changed a lot. Although there is, of course, no official Rainbow website, directions and maps to Gatherings can now spread around the world in seconds. You could announce a Gathering in Tibet and the odds are that a handful of colourful international gypsies would contrive to sneak past Chinese police roadblocks to unite under Mount Kailash to chant *Om Mani Padme Hum*.

And yet there’s still plenty of scope for confusion. The scouts may not know how to use a computer and the directions instead get posted online in a bad photograph of someone’s illegible handwriting. Or they might get dictated over the phone to a brother with shaky English who only types them up after something good to smoke...with the result that the invitation resembles more an enigma to be solved than a set of directions. *Take the second left after the village* might refer to a dirt road just past the last house or a slip road to a highway 20km further on.

In fact, the closer you get to a Rainbow Gathering the further away it can seem. Was that a cairn of rocks to indicate you’re on the right track or just a pile of rubble? Is that piece of cloth on a low hanging countries and hippie hot spots around the world, and then all was left in the hands of the Great Spirit as to who would end up hearing about it.

As word of a Gathering spread, it often happened that dates began to shift, village names were mispronounced and misspelled as the details morphed in someone’s hazy memory, prompting vans of hippies to head off on wild goose chases on little more than Chinese Whispers.

Still, thousands came. Hitchhiking up old country roads or trundling along in old converted buses running perilously low on gas, rumours of Gathering locations were exchanged with anyone seen carrying a guitar or wearing colourful, scruffy clothing, eyes glued to the road for a pile of rocks or a bright rag hanging from a tree to indicate a dirt road leading the way to a month of celebration.

The Information Age has changed a lot. Although there is, of course, no official Rainbow website, directions and maps to Gatherings can now spread around the world in seconds. You could announce a Gathering in Tibet and the odds are that a handful of colourful international gypsies would contrive to sneak past Chinese police roadblocks to unite under Mount Kailash to chant *Om Mani Padme Hum*.

And yet there’s still plenty of scope for confusion. The scouts may not know how to use a computer and the directions instead get posted online in a bad photograph of someone’s illegible handwriting. Or they might get dictated over the phone to a brother with shaky English who only types them up after something good to smoke...with the result that the invitation resembles more an enigma to be solved than a set of directions. *Take the second left after the village* might refer to a dirt road just past the last house or a slip road to a highway 20km further on.

In fact, the closer you get to a Rainbow Gathering the further away it can seem. Was that a cairn of rocks to indicate you’re on the right track or just a pile of rubble? Is that piece of cloth on a low hanging
branch supposed to mark the way or was it just torn from someone’s shirt when they passed beneath? Was that the distant cry of celebration before food circle or a farmer calling in his sheep?

You try asking locals tending their gardens but receive only blank looks in reply, distrust in their eyes as they wonder what kind of gypsy invasion is going on here. Each time you see someone on the trail you wonder if they could be coming from the Gathering – but no, they’re too clean and they’re listening to Rihanna on their cell phone.

Even if the directions are clear and the trail leading to the Gathering is well marked, you still might arrive in the dark with your torch running on its last painful flicker of battery life. You stumble through forest paths, tired and hungry, alone in the dark, thinking only of the warm bowls of soup and rice no doubt being served this moment at evening food circle, only a couple of correct turnings in the labyrinth woods between you and a place by the fire and a warm cup of chai. Instead you run up against another barbed wire fence, sweating badly, mosquitoes homing in on your torchlight as you hike up another hill, hoping beyond hope it might be the last.

And as you try to keep your spirits up, there’s always the nagging doubt that there might not be a Rainbow at all. Perhaps the venue was changed at the last minute (it wouldn’t be the first time) or maybe no one else decided to come. You know that with hippies anything is possible. At one Gathering in Sicily, the brother from the area who was supposed to take care of local arrangements only turned up ten days after the Rainbow started – he was busy busking his way through Italy to pay for the petrol in the van he was travelling in.

The first person to arrive was a German girl with the directions printed out from the internet. When she arrived at the point indicated and found no one in sight, she simply sat down under a tree and waited patiently beside her backpack. Shortly afterwards a Sicilian farmer came along on his scooter and asked her:

‘Ma, che catzo fai qui?’ (What the hell are you doing here?)

‘Um, Rainbow?’ she replied with eyes as big as saucers.

‘Ma, è pazzza, questta!’ (she must be crazy, this one!) the farmer said to himself. He drove off and returned an hour later with some bread and cheese for the lost foreign girl.

Most Rainbow veterans know that getting to the Gatherings is all part of the fun and is sometimes more memorable than anything that happens later on. The adventure begins from the moment you make the decision to go; you fill your rucksack with a sleeping bag, a tent, some warm clothes, a hand drum, your food bowl and emergency chocolate before setting out with the directions scribbled down on a bit of paper in your shirt pocket: a treasure map to another world.

You hitchhike across three countries to get there, dumpster diving on the way to stay alive, setting up your tent each night in a field somewhere trying not to worry about the barking dogs or cows that might trample you to death at dawn, one bed closer to uniting with all the other nomads currently winging their way in from all corners of the continent. None of the drivers who pick you up have ever heard of the Rainbow and eyebrows arch as you wax lyrical about this ephemeral Utopia taking place on a hill in the middle of nowhere. You invite them to come with you. And no, you tell them, it’s not a rave, we don’t even drink alcohol, much less take drugs.

There’s scarcely a soul in the Rainbow who’s not an experienced hitchhiker and however extreme a traveler you think you might be there’s always someone more hardcore sat around the fire. One brother told me he hitched across Europe on the tiniest budget imaginable, eating only white baguettes that bakeries threw out each day. Or when he decided he needed some protein he would invest in a one kilo bag of lentils that he could cook up each night in the forest on his way.
Or what about the family I heard of who had come all the way from Australia without taking a flight? They traveled along with 2 prams, 6 kids and some 20 bags.

‘We travel slow.’ they admitted.

An Israeli brother told me about heading to his first Rainbow Gathering in France: he had just arrived in the first village marked on the map he’d downloaded from the internet and he heard someone yelling ‘Italiano! Italiano!’ and turned to face a man with a white moustache and beard down to his belly button, a mass of grey dreadlocks tucked under a mop of fuzzy white hair. His forehead was splattered with a red painted dot in the Hindu tradition and he was dressed in pink robes.

‘I’m from Israel.’ he corrected him.

‘Ah, Israel, I love Israelis! You’re going to the Rainbow, right? Well, there are no more buses today so we’ll have to camp here. Wait a minute!’ and the improbable character dropped his bag and ran off towards some trees, returning a minute late with a bullet of charas.²

‘Now we have something good to smoke!’

‘Where did that come from?’ the Israeli asked, deciding his luck was changing for the better.

‘I just pulled it out my ass!’

Many will come to the Rainbow together, in a caravan of cars or maybe just one old camper van; a scratched, muddy veteran with too many kilometers on the dial, pots and plates falling down on everyone piled in the back, all ducking down each time they pass a police car, mattresses covered with Indian batik sheets, someone learning the chords for the Magic Hat song while another sister prepares sandwiches for everyone, ingredients falling everywhere as they’re passed around, much to the delight of the dog who then gets decidedly travel sick...

Whether you learn about yourself on these caravans is an open question but you certainly get to know everyone else much better than you could have imagined – or desired. Pressed into a small space with others for a week on the road, minor idiosyncrasies quickly become infuriating habits; the repetitive song that someone hums out of tune, someone’s underwear hanging to dry on a side mirror, the smell of unwashed feet, the panic of one of the less-together passengers losing their passport yet again, requiring that everyone search the van from top to bottom and then drive back to the last camping site to look for it...before discovering it was in their jacket pocket all along.

After days on the road a vehicle of love and light can turn into a pressure cooker of intolerance and bitching, where the last people you ever want to see again are precisely those sitting next to you. And there’s still a few hundred miles to go. Pulling up in the parking of the Gathering everyone grabs their bags and storms out, desperate to regain their faith in humanity by talking to someone (anyone!) halfway normal, vowing to never travel with others ever again.

But then a few days later the collective hysteria passes and when you meet each other round the fire you can’t remember what you were ever so upset about. A hug, an exchange of words from the heart and...you’re busy planning your next adventure.

A van full of hippies might be breaking any number of regulations in Western Europe but in more repressive countries they can be stopped on sight for their unorthodox appearance alone. All the vans and trucks crossing the border into the Ukraine for the 2009 European Rainbow were stopped and searched by the police who struggled to understand just what was going on.

² Hand-rolled hashish from the Indian Himalayas
‘Why come Ukraine?’ they asked in confusion. For all we knew it might have been the unofficial tourist slogan of the year. An open source initiative by the Ukrainian authorities to discover what charms their country might have. As it was the police were mystified by all these long-haired Western gypsies streaming across the border and felt it was their duty to hold them up for a few hours at least.

Some Italian brothers had helped scout for a location earlier in the year and were pulled over by an officer who looked inside their nomadic van with obvious disgust.

‘Passports!’ he demanded, examining the pages with a pretense of close scrutiny and then, scanning the vehicle for anything of value, his eyes fell on the guitars. ‘And where are the passports for the instruments?’ he demanded to know. The driver shoved a packet of cigarettes in his hand and drove off.

The cops in the Ukraine proved to be severe with anyone not carrying ID with them and more than one brother ended up in jail until his friends could come along with his passport. Some in the Rainbow brought it upon themselves though as one brother, tall and gangly with long blonde hair that only accentuated his bony frame, tried to sneak into the country from Poland across a mountain path.

‘The police caught me and asked my nationality. I just held up my palm and told them ‘Gaia’.’

He was a world citizen of Mother Earth. What need did he have of papers?

‘They put me in jail and beat me up a bit. I’m vegan so I almost couldn’t eat any of the food they gave me. After two days I showed them my Swedish driver’s license and they took me back across the border to Poland.’

But more than the wild adventures on the road or caravans with other Rainbow souls, some of the most special encounters can be with ordinary people along the way.

One sister told me the story of how she was on her way to a Gathering in France and left her rucksack outside a public bathroom in a small town in Northern France while she went in to pee. When she stepped out she discovered that it had been stolen: her tent, her sleeping bag, warm clothes and everything else she needed to go to the Rainbow was gone. And she had to hitchhike through all France in order to get to the Rainbow by the border with Spain.

After four days of hitchhiking with just her handbag, she arrived to a small village in the south of France. She thought that she might buy there the basic things she would need to continue travelling. She walked into a few shops but once she saw the prices, she realized that she couldn’t afford to replace anything that she had lost. She had no idea what to do next, so she walked out and just sat down in a doorway and began to cry.

A middle-aged French woman came along and asked her what was wrong, switching to English when she realised she was talking to a foreigner. She heard her story and invited her to come and drink some tea at home. They drank in silence and the French woman seemed very thoughtful until finally she disclosed that she had once had a daughter who had died in her late teens in a traffic accident. Her daughter had loved to go camping whenever she could and though she had passed away some years before, her mother had not had the heart to move her belongings out of her room. Meeting the Israeli girl had reminded her of her daughter and maybe it was an opportunity to move on...

Perhaps, the French woman suggested, she would like to take her daughter’s rucksack, camping gear and some warm clothes?
When I was 18 I went to India and got adopted for a season or two by the old hands who had been hanging out in the East for the better part of 30 years. The spiritual grandfather of the freak scene was the late Finger Eddie, an Armenian-American who had first arrived in Goa in 1965 and had never gone back as far as I knew. When I met Eddie he was already in his 70’s, hobbling through the jungle into Joe Bananas Cafe every day, his skin stretched out on an angular, bony skeleton that gave him a jazz gait all of his own, three fingers on his left hand and not a single grey hair to be seen in his chestnut mane.

‘Eddie,’ I asked him one day, ‘who came before the Hippies?’

‘Well, the Beatniks.’

‘Right, Jack Kerouac and all that. And before the Beatniks?’

‘Hipsters!’ he told me, his eyes lighting up at recollections of the old days.

‘And before Hipsters, who was there?’

He paused for a moment before giving a shrug and replied:

‘Black people.’

I’m conscious that as I use the word hippie I’m playing into half a century of stereotypes. Hippies are unwashed and unrealistic. Hippies want love and peace, inconsequential sex and just about anything else they’re not required to work for. Hippies are a leftover relic from the Flower Power generation, an interesting social experiment that left its mark but ultimately failed as a way of life. Many of those smoking dope and dropping out in the 60’s are now approaching retirement age and vote for lower taxes.

There were times in the Rainbow when the cliché felt all too true. I would stumble awake to the cry of ‘food circle now!’ and, taking my seat in a ring of a few hundred souls dressed in rags I wondered what on earth I was doing there. Messy beards, tangled hair, bodies speckled with mud, the perfume of woodsmoke not quite overpowering the pervasive odour of stale sweat. Then someone would start strumming a toneless guitar and drone ‘Earth Child, start shining, now is the time to open up your heart.’ With malas, beads and crystals everywhere, skinny rib cages and stoned expressions, I couldn’t understand how everyone was so content to be such caricatures of themselves.

My disdain for the Rainbow came to a head at the European Gathering in Bosnia in 2007; I arrived at a stunning location on a clearing surrounded by wooded hills with high spirits and plenty of energy to sing and play but after ten days (and a difficult affair with a Croatian girl who chewed me up and spat me out again in little bits), the whole event lost its charm. The songs were inane, the rituals self-conscious and empty and I doubted whether any of the thousand people in the circle had read a book in the past year – unless it were a treatise on crystal healing or a manual of Mayan astrology. As if we needed another system of astrology to spend hours navel-gazing.

I sat by the fire before sunset, disheartened and exhausted, without the slightest urge to pick up a guitar, start a conversation or dance to the relentless drums that someone’s hyperactive hands just couldn’t leave alone.

‘Are you going to help us serve?’ one bright Israeli girl asked me as she carried up a pot of rice with another brother. Other huge cauldrons of dal and vegetables arrived and as the calls went out for food
I found myself being roped into service, having little will left to resist.

But as I went around collecting plates from hungry hippies I couldn’t help but get into it. Meeting pairs of eager hands and grateful eyes I saw each person I served as an individual again instead of a great unwashed mass of drop outs. The more my spirits rose, the better the interactions got as I joked around reading out imaginary menus and pretending to mix up the plates, reminding me of one of the golden rules of the Rainbow – the more you give, the more you get.

So, refreshed and recharged, I took my seat beside the girl who had been looking after my bowl and as we started to talk I learned to my surprise that she worked as a child psychologist, specialising in helping kids work through experiences of sexual abuse.

‘I work a lot with sock puppets,’ she explained to me as I caught up on my meal, ‘We make the puppets together and then we reenact the scenes of abuse. When children are sexually exploited they feel that their power to decide what happens to them has been taken away. So we replay the scenes with the puppets and let the children choose a different ending. That way they reclaim autonomy over their own lives.’

When people arrive to the Rainbow with preconceptions about the hippie lifestyle they often just see a mass of dreadlocks, feathers and amulets, groups of colourful freaks droning New Age hymns around fires while they make dream catchers out of sticks and all their prejudices are confirmed in a minute. The truth is that, contrary to all appearances, in any given food circle you can find medical students, actors, experts in renewable energy, behavioural economists, carpenters and computer programmers.

People are musical, expressive with their bodies and tend to be good with languages. There are people who can make ovens from earth and clay, mount 10 metre wide tipis without ladders (using only human pyramids to tie the canvas at the top), build their own instruments, cook banquets for a thousand people at a time on a wood fire, construct shelters from nothing more than a few branches and tarps or recite whole volumes of ancient poetry.

It’s just that after a week or more of living in tents, Nature’s brush tends to daub a little Rainbow grunge over everyone. With no hot water to wash with, clothes and hair impregnated with smoke from the camp fires and only each other’s eyes to serve as mirrors, just about everyone ends up looking like a hippie.

Those who tuned in, turned on and dropped out in the counter-culture of 60’s America mostly hailed from prosperous families enjoying the financial boom that followed the second world war. Disillusioned with the material dream of suburbia – the TV blaring commercial messages and oppressive gender roles, the sound of the lawn mower on Sundays, keeping up with the Jones’ next door – the children of conventional families shook off their respectable backgrounds and let their freak flags fly.

The ones who really wanted to leave it all behind travelled overland to India where they found they were sometimes addressed as maharaj (great king). It was supposed they had left their lives of luxury behind to come in search of truth in the East. Had not Buddha done the same thing? Son of a great king, he forsook his noble birth to set out barefoot with a begging bowl in a relentless quest for Enlightenment.

For all the similarities with the counter-culture of the 60’s the Rainbow Family is a great deal more diverse than previous generations. It prides itself on being a tribe of many colours containing a full spectrum of personalities ranging from blissed-out mystics who can only make a rough guess at what month it happens to be, to social workers on their summer vacations; a tribe open to all comers regardless of age, race, class or creed. Yet it doesn’t take an anthropologist...
to notice that the Gatherings are mostly comprised of middle class white people.

In poor countries hippies are notable only by their absence. Living in poverty, the ambitions of the general population don’t stretch much further than to feed their families, afford medicine for ill relatives and educate their children. Dropping out would mean starving to death. It’s only when a society achieves a certain economic stability and the evils of consumerism make themselves felt that counter-cultures spring up. Thus Gatherings held in places like Thailand and India attract very few locals except those who come to stare in disbelief: why have all these white people left Paradise to come and rough it out in the sticks? Even within rich countries the poorer sections of society tend to be aspirational – success implies being able to buy stuff. It tends to only be those who come from relatively affluent backgrounds who see the romance in living on next to nothing.

For me the word *hippie* is more of an adjective than a noun. Or maybe it’s one of many roles we play. In any case I certainly subscribe to the hippie wisdom of having so much fun with so little. We may have only a few coins in our pocket, our clothes may be torn, we may have to all squeeze in the same leaky tent when it rains, but in general we have more fun that anyone else. We have more free time, we live in more beautiful places, we party almost every night and we get laid quite a lot, too. Small wonder hippies are ridiculed in mainstream society. They’re pissed that we’re having a better time than they are.

There are some in the Rainbow who manage to live full-time on the edge of the System without needing to work or declare their presence to any authority. They find food in dumpsters at the back of supermarkets, hitchhike across continents without a second thought, sleep outside or on the couches of more stable Rainbow brothers and sisters, earning what small amount of hard cash they need by busking in the street, selling their artisan works in markets or picking fruit in the autumn.

On such a budget they might even manage a flight to India for the winter and live the same casual way of life augmented by cheap rice plates and a hut on the beach. Their time is their own to spend, they answer to no one and they’re free to roam where they wish. Sharing some chai around the fire, singing ancient, sacred songs together in the forest, falling in love by candlelight on a sheepskin in a shady grove somewhere...the best things in life just can’t be bought.

On the other hand the freedom of the modern nomad can sometimes cross the border into a kind of moral superiority where they believe their way of life is actually better than everyone else’s; they’re not slaves to a computer, they don’t buy things they don’t need and don’t consume the planet’s resources; they’re free of the expectations their parents had of them, free from the economic treadmill that enslaves billions in Babylon every day, and free from the demands of a society that would judge them based on what they can buy.

I once embodied this attitude when at the age of 20 I hitchhiked from England to India with no money. The people who picked me up along the way were stuck in jobs they didn’t like, paying mortgages on houses they would never really own – why couldn’t the whole world just leave it all behind to hitchhike off towards their dreams?

‘Because then there would be no one left to pick you up! Besides, you need them to be in the factories to make your ballpoint pens.’ an old freak in India told me as I wrote the book about the journey (*Hand to Mouth to India*). His sharp rebuke reminded me that my freewheeling way of life was made possible precisely because everyone else didn’t do it. They owned and maintained cars to give me rides, paid rent on the houses where I slept and took hot showers, and worked in factories to produce my clothes, pens, paper and clarinet reeds.

But while there are some in the Rainbow who live off the crumbs of our abundant, wasteful society and bite the hand of Babylon even as it feeds them, they’re in the minority. Most people who come to
the Gatherings have semi-regular work or study somewhere, escaping when they can to recharge and reconnect in the Rainbow. For these souls the Gatherings are like a hippie holiday where they can catch up on the hugs and songs that were in short supply the rest of the year. For others it’s a regular time-out to get some perspective as they go deeper in their studies or professional paths. While for those who manage to live a freelance life – teaching music, doing the Christmas markets, building yurts for sale – the Rainbow is a perfect place to complement their lifestyle and they couldn’t think of a better place to go.

Ultimately though, it makes no difference in the Rainbow whether you’re a bum or a millionaire. You still have to eat the same bland porridge for breakfast – yes, you might have an extra bag of raisins in your pocket to sweeten it up but even these usually get shared out in the end. One of the reasons that people are so happy in the Rainbow is that in these abundant times, scarcity is refreshing; with no running water beside your tent a dip in the stream is like attending the world’s greatest outdoor hamam; you get so hungry waiting for the evening meal that every meal is like a celebratory feast and a single bar of chocolate might pass around a circle of 20 people twice before it runs out.

It brings to mind a Sufi story about a man eating a piece of stale old bread with blue mould growing on it. It was rock hard and dusty from where he picked it up off the floor but he ate it with such evident delight, letting out little ecstatic gasps that finally an observer exclaimed:

‘You can’t possibly be enjoying that!’

‘Oh but I am! You see, I haven’t eaten anything for three days!’

In fact, you get so used to scarcity in the Rainbow that returning to Babylon can be quite unnerving. After a couple of weeks of never quite eating enough in the European Rainbow in Bosnia, sitting in the dark night after night straining our ears hopefully for the distant cry of second time!, I got a ride with some Italians to Padova and they ended up giving me and the other two passengers a bed for the night. That evening we walked excitedly into the pizzeria and ordered a large pizza and a bottle of beer each, hardly able to believe that such abundance was about to be ours.

But when we got back to the apartment, each of us sat in front of the huge circle of pastry and cheese, half liter bottle of beer to the side and stared at our dinner in confusion. What about holding hands and singing first? Couldn’t we break it up into small pieces, let it go cold and then slowly pass it around?

No one managed to finish their plate.

I was once asked by an anthropology student doing her thesis on the Rainbow what could be done to improve it.

‘Nothing.’ I told her, ‘It’s perfect as it is.’

I meant of course that it was perfectly imperfect but it was as near to Utopia as we were ever likely to get. If it was amazing that hippies managed to live so well on a shoestring, it was positively miraculous that we managed to pull it off when we gathered together in the thousands. With no commerce, organisation or backup plan, we still managed to feed everyone, stay warm and (mostly) dry, meeting up all over the world to celebrate in nature for a month at a time or more.

There is no organisation in the Rainbow but there’s still a lot to organise. The only difference is that anyone at all can do it. It might
occasionally happen that a Rainbow will be envisioned, announced and planned by just a few people but most of the time the initial work is spread between the ‘Family’ of the host country. There are tipis to be stored, new pots to buy, finances from the Magic Hat to keep track of and it’s best to spread the load.

A Family is made up of a changing cast of motivated individuals who make contact with local farmers to find land, find cheap sources of vegetables and grain and look after the leftover Magic Hat money between Gatherings. Throughout the year they may meet up for evenings of bhajans and full moon feasts to keep the spirit strong. And even if they live too far apart to meet often, connections are maintained over cell phones and the internet. The initial reluctance within the Rainbow to employ technology has mostly faded away and the planning for the Gatherings at least, has gone digital.

Predictably, the strongest nationality in the Rainbow are the Germans. In ashrams, eco-villages and spiritual communities around the world there’s often a disproportionate number of Germans present – surely testament to their aptitude and love for organisation. When things are going wrong in any given Rainbow, it’s not uncommon to hear someone yell: Where are the Germans?

The Italians also manage to hold at least a couple of Gatherings a year, their gregarious nature inclining them towards any social event and the opportunity to worry and talk about food for at least a couple of hours a day.

The Israelis also make their presence felt in European Gatherings as well as holding a couple of Rainbows each year in Israel itself. With the discipline learned in mandatory military service for both men and women, the logistics of the Rainbow are simple stuff. The idea of belonging to a Cosmic Tribe is also an easy conceptual extension of the more familiar Biblical story.

There are also regular Gatherings held throughout Europe, the Middle East, Australia and, of course, the US, though those have quite a different flavour.3

Families tend to grow and diminish in strength through the years. Sometimes they argue among themselves and then no national Gatherings are held for a while until a new generation comes along and injects a new life into proceedings. Maybe it’s an unintended consequence of globalisation but the Rainbow keeps on spreading. It’s always fun to see a Rainbow announced in say, Taiwan, and to wonder how what kind of homegrown hippies they have there...

Even during periods when I was spending more time in the Rainbow than out, I still needed to take breaks from the Gatherings. I wanted to eat a meal without having to wait for 500 people to finish chanting Om first. Or to go for a wash without encountering hordes of naked people along the way. Or to have a morning coffee without having to hug someone to get it.

Visiting friends in Babylon was an opportunity to get clothes washing-machine-clean, to catch up on email and generally digest the last batch of campfire experiences before making the next pilgrimage to wherever the Rainbow happened to spring up next.

Staying for some days in an apartment in Amsterdam I found myself as usual playing the role of Rainbow Ambassador, passionately explaining to a group of high-powered professionals the magic of the Gatherings. They listened politely as I elaborated on the Rainbow’s decentralised system that precluded hierarchy, the responsibilities shared between whoever was in the mood on that day.

3 See Michael Niman’s book on the American Gatherings, People of the Rainbow, a Nomadic Utopia
One of the people listening, a stock broker who worked in the heart of the financial markets, shrugged his shoulders and concluded:

‘So basically it’s pure communism.’

There are certainly very few groups quite as egalitarian as the Rainbow and the Gatherings are certainly an example of humanity’s potential to share and cooperate. Without anyone telling others what to do, somehow the meals are always prepared, the shopping is done, pots are washed, tipis mounted, wood is chopped and everyone eats. All for a fraction of the cost of maintaining ourselves in Babylon.

Thus inevitably there’s talk at every Gathering of the need to make a ‘permanent Rainbow’ somewhere, perhaps in an abandoned meadow in Southern Europe with fresh water springs and fertile soil. After all, why should such an atmosphere of love and harmony be only an occasional experience? Why not live in light as a united Family close to the Earth, dancing each night in celebration, answering to no one but our own hearts and the Great Spirit?

Great plans are made around the fire, dreams are dreamed, visions are seen, speeches are made but somehow the imagined Rainbow Village never quite materialises and we continue to only taste Utopia for a Gathering at a time.

Although a week in the Rainbow often feels like a month, the time still seems to pass too quickly. The small circles of seed camp expand in the first days of the Gathering and there are cries of joy at each unexpected reunion. More musicians arrive and people stay around the fire for longer and longer each night. Tents start going up on every flat pitch imaginable, and suddenly cooking and serving the food twice a day for the masses requires the planning of a military operation. All too soon we arrive at full moon, a lavish ceremony is prepared, which invariably goes a bit wrong, but it’s still a night to remember. Then we realise with sadness there’s only a fortnight to go. The moon begins to wane, the nights grow darker and caravans are already being planned to rumoured Rainbows elsewhere on the continent. The number of servers needed for the evening meal grows less and less each day, goodbyes are said, email addresses exchanged, until only a hard core remains to keep the circle strong, stoking the embers of the fire for as long as the spirit lingers.

The lesson is probably that the Rainbow works so well because it only lasts a month. Its beauty is in its ephemeral nature; it’s born, it grows and then fades away again until the only traces of the month of mayhem and celebration are a few fertilised areas in the forest and the odd forgotten tent peg.

Lasting only a month there’s little opportunity for any one personality to dominate, no time for deep personal rifts to form and the type of petty politics to be found in almost any long standing community. Any conflicts that arise are just as quickly washed away by the cleansing tide of people flowing in and out of the Rainbow, bringing with them fresh energy, spirit and perspective. Someone who arrives on day 17 of a Gathering has the same right to speak up and get involved as the people who have been there since the first day of seed camp.

By the time the authorities are aware that we’re there we’re often halfway through the Gathering and it’s easier for them to just let us leave of our own accord. Beyond a few trees that might be cut down for tipi poles (and we try to avoid even that) and a little disturbance to nesting cycles of local birds, the physical consequences of a well-organised Rainbow are usually slight. Even if the local shepherds have to find other fields for their herds to graze, we’re gone before anyone knows it and usually little real harm is done.

There are a few who live going from Rainbow to Rainbow through most of the calendar year but for most of us you can have enough of a good thing. For many, even a week of non-stop socialising, heart-opening encounters and eating mushy vegan food are quite enough.
Life is lived so intensely in the Rainbow that sometimes you have to take a break to understand and digest those days and nights packed full of unforgettable experiences. Veterans of the Rainbow learn how to take things lightly enough to be able to last the whole month but almost no one is full power enough to dance naked around the main fire every night.

Lasting for a cycle of the moon, the Rainbow is a transitory bubble containing the best and worst of humanity with the balance weighted in favour of the former. Wanting the Rainbow to last forever is like wanting the sun to never go down, the seasons to never pass and for no one to ever grow old. The Rainbow is created in imagination and hope, lives in joy and struggle and then dies with fondness and longing.

And somewhere, there’s always another one being born.

A Rainbow Gathering begins with looking for somewhere to make it. The call goes out for willing scouts to meet in someone’s house or apartment and the first circle is held; everyone holding hands and chanting a collective Om, expressing intentions for the Great Spirit to guide the journey. It’s remembered that the Rainbow begins right there to lay the first seeds for a healthy and harmonious Gathering.

Sometimes there’s leftover money from the last Rainbow to pay for petrol, other times scouts have to claim their expenses back from the Magic Hat once the Gathering is under way. Scouts set out hitch-hiking or crammed together in cars and vans to follow rumours of promising locations and the whole adventure begins.

Go to a few Gatherings and you’d be forgiven for thinking that there’s a strong masochistic streak running through the Rainbow. Locations are often chosen in places so remote that it takes hours to hike up mountain paths to a clearing that’s baking hot during the day and freezing cold at night. Elevated locations are often chosen, however, less due to a desire to suffer than because they’re commercially worthless and so no one objects to a temporary hippie village springing up for a month. Deserts are also good candidates but then we have to bring in the water by truck and in the Rainbow that inevitably means we go thirsty once in a while until someone gets it together to go and get more. Isolated beaches can work although it’s a location that pretty much guarantees that no one feels like doing anything for the camp. The bottom line for a Gathering site is that it needs to be remote enough that the local teenagers won’t be driving in after the bar in the village closes.

Scouting is often a pretty thankless task. Once everyone else shows up they expect a ready-made Rainbow Gathering and little thought is given to the weeks of driving around and making enquiries that the scouts put in to find the place and get permission. But that’s perhaps always the case with production – it’s only visible when it goes wrong. And in the Rainbow it frequently does. Sometimes it’s just really hard to find a suitable bit of land with an amicable owner. The pressure of the approaching start date of the Gathering begins to weigh heavy on the scouting meetings and the decision-making process gets hasty, even desperate. On other occasions one suspects the scouts got carried away with the magic of exploring hidden valleys and mountains with glorious views, taking every eagle that passes, every halo of the moon or glimpse of a rainbow in the sky as signs that the Great Spirit was guiding them on their way.

And so some Rainbows are up against it from the very beginning and are disasters just waiting to happen. There have been Gatherings held in dry river beds in the desert that, when it rained in the distant mountains, experienced violent flash floods that washed away pots, drums, tents, even cars. Other Gatherings have been held on mountains above the tree line in fierce summer heat with no shade at all during the day and a long hike down the mountain to fetch firewood
to stay warm at night.

There have been Gatherings held in tropical rain forests chosen for their imps and spirits without much thought given to the parasites that crawled underneath people’s fingernails or the ticks that ended up covering everyone’s bodies each night, necessitating lengthy (but bonding?) rituals each morning of removing them from each other’s bodies.

There have been Rainbows held in military regimes where the police have turned up to throw everyone out. When the European Gathering was held in Russia the army arrived and everyone circled to sing songs of love to greet them. But the soldiers just charged through the ranks of chanting brothers and sisters to slice open tents with their knives to steal money, sleeping bags, cameras and anything else of value they could grab before forcefully evacuating the entire Gathering. Even so, the Rainbow simply regrouped and gathered again in a more discreet location and the Russian Family still meets every year.

And yet some would say it’s not always a bad thing to suffer a bit.

There’s a philosophy in the Rainbow that we are there to experience all aspects of life. Instead of avoiding hardships we should embrace them as an opportunity to come closer together. The worst scouting for the European Gathering in recent years was arguably when it was held in England in 2006; a spot was chosen on the Yorkshire moors with barely a tree in sight. Wood had to be bought from the local farmer and much of it turned out to be green, smoky stuff that made everyone’s eyes water and was terrible for cooking. Wind, rain and mist swept the Gathering from beginning to end and there was such widespread misery and suffering that a local charity was persuaded to arrive in a van with extra clothes for everyone.

“We were all so happy!’ one sister told me, ‘Throwing the clothes up in the air in celebration! We all ended up wearing warm clothes that were either too big or too small for us – we looked like refugees!’

But as much as everyone there shook their heads at the terrible scouting, I heard plenty of stories of tight-knit friendships and strong community spirit as musicians united in the kitchen and chai shops to keep a smile on everyone’s faces despite the abysmal weather.

Sometimes though it feels like magic really can enter the scouting process. A couple of scouts for the European Gathering in Bosnia in 2007 had been in search of a mountain rumoured to have a hundred springs flowing with crystal fresh water. The trail went cold and, driving down a dirt road deep in the countryside, utterly lost, they burst a tyre on a sharp rock. It began to rain heavily outside and they felt like they were further than ever from finding somewhere for the Gathering.

They had just resolved to give up for the evening and sleep in the car where they were when there came a knock at the window and a farmer invited them to come and drink some raki at his house. Once they were warm and dry in front of the fireplace he asked them what they were doing in these remote parts and they explained all about the Rainbow. The farmer nodded and, smiling to himself, told them to wait until the morning. They awoke to find one of the most picturesque locations ever found for a Gathering smack in front of them with large, clear fields, surrounded by mountainous forest. Sure, one had to watch out for the occasional landmine and, in fact, while the Gathering was going on a stray cow blew itself up barely a kilometer away – but you can’t have everything.

On other occasions the choice for a site becomes perfect as it goes along. I walked up to the seed camp of the European Gathering in Finland 2011 to find thirty tired and bad-tempered souls standing as close as they could to a smoky fire. I couldn’t understand the long faces – it was the first time for most of us this far north and already I was experiencing the sky as I’d never known it; a slow, dreamy twilight that cast a series of never-to-be-repeated masterpieces on the enormous lakes as the sun playfully dipped beneath the horizon for an hour, teasing us with a night that never came.
Then I put my bag down and started slapping my neck. Everyone knew the mosquitoes would be bad but no one had imagined they could ever be this bad. There was a brief respite for a few hours each afternoon when the sun was strongest but the rest of the time everyone had to always keep one hand free to swat the mosquitoes as they landed. It was something of a futile endeavour, however, as there were always hundreds more in orbit around your every vein. They bit through socks, shirts and jeans, leaving red rings around ankles and necks. Those who couldn’t help but scratch the bites ended up looking like victims of the plague.

Only the most dedicated musicians managed to get through a song without stopping to slap themselves a few times. We wrapped ourselves up like Bedouin or else headed off to our tents early each night to miss the relentless onslaught of the never-ending twilight when the air filled with flying parasites. Prejudice against chemicals went out of the window as cans of repellant were passed around once it was apparent that citronella just wasn’t up to the task. At one point we managed to fill up a transparent plastic bag with dead mosquitoes.

‘Isn’t it great? A Rainbow where you can kill things,’ commented a brother representing one of the darker colours of the spectrum.

I found the whole thing quite funny for the first day until I went to the shit pit deep inside the forest: a Death Zone where the mosquitoes lay in wait in dark, murderous clouds. Squatting on two logs, I couldn’t empty my bowels fast enough to cut short some of the most intimate acupuncture I’ve ever experienced. God knows how anyone ever had the courage to dig the pit in the first place unless they’d done it in frenzied five minute shifts before running to jump in the lake. I came out trembling and whimpering in shock, much to the amusement of the already-initiated around the fire.

‘I’ll never eat again.’ I vowed, half-serious.

Then I found out that the local name for the area we were camped in was Mosquito Bump Bay – go scouts!

There was talk of abandoning the Gathering and making another Rainbow somewhere else. The chaos we would face when a thousand people turned up was unthinkable – people would end up shitting everywhere rather than endure the torture in the forest. No one would gather firewood. We’d see people bringing their tents with them to food circle! Plans were made to buy kilometers of mosquito nets to cover the kitchen, the shit pits, the chai shop...

And then a miracle happened. The sun came out for ten solid days and temperatures rose to a Finnish record of 37 degrees, killing off 80% of the mosquitoes. Or their eggs didn’t hatch. Whatever. Suddenly we were no longer in pain in every waking moment and new arrivals rolling in declared that it wasn’t as bad as they thought it would be.

‘You don’t know what we went though,’ we muttered, shivering at the memory.

One of the first things an alien would notice about the planet is that people aren’t allowed to live on most of it. There’s almost nowhere you can just go and build your house where you feel like it. Most of the land of any value belongs to a small number of wealthy individuals and institutions. There are even places in the world where you have to pay to go to the beach.

This proprietary attitude towards land completely confused the indigenous peoples of the world when the white colonialists showed up. Sure, they had territorial boundaries, hunting grounds and nomadic trails that they would defend with their lives but never did they feel that the land belonged to them. They were as much part of Creation as the grass and the buffalo. Why would anyone ever need to put up a fence?
People in the Rainbow tend to feel the same way. The planet belongs to all of us and no one should be able to tell us where and when we can gather. We’re bewildered when the police shake us awake at night for sleeping on a beach; outraged when we’re fined for camping in the woods. It can seem like there’s no escape from Babylon even in the heart of Mother Nature.

I remember the general indignation at a Rainbow in the desert in Israel when a local nature ranger arrived. He took one look at all of us camped amid the rocks and thorns and declared that unless we agreed to certain conditions he would have to call the army to deport us. Our presence was already deleterious to the lifestyle of the wildlife and by burning the local wood we represented a threat to the micro-ecology of the place.

A talking circle was called and the ranger good-heartedly agreed to this form of negotiation even though he had obviously imagined he would be speaking to a couple of organisers rather than 200 hippies all at once. While most of us tried to make the ranger feel welcome, there were some who reacted furiously to the imposition of an outside authority – who was this guy in uniform to tell us where we could and couldn’t gather? Were we not also part of Nature with as much right to be here as the butterflies and the bees?

Finally, however, one brother in the talking circle settled the debate when he took the stick and exclaimed in exasperation:

‘We’re all gathered here because we say we love Nature and Mother Earth – and yet standing in front of is a ranger, a man who understands more about Nature than all of us and we don’t want to listen to him?’

We eventually assured the ranger that we would ban private fires and continue to only bring in wood from the outside and things passed off peacefully.

Generally speaking, the authorities only ever get to know about a Rainbow Gathering once it’s already started and then it’s hard to get us out of there. The logistics of physically deporting hundreds of hippies are complicated by the fact that we might just come back again and many hundreds more may be on the way.

Nevertheless, for some time there were those who doubted the European Rainbow could ever be held in Germany with its culture of rules and regulations. We’d get thrown out in no time for any number of health risks and sanitary irregularities. We could just imagine the look on the face of a German health inspector when he or she encountered the shit pits.

But, bless them, the optimists prevailed and the European Rainbow went to Germany. The seed camp began well but soon enough the police turned up and demanded to meet the organisers. A collective titter went around at the impossibility of the request and a few diplomatic hippies attempted to explain the decentralised nature of Rainbow leadership. The police returned later that day with the mayor who shook his head at the sight of the makeshift camp but it was already late on a Friday afternoon and he proposed a meeting on the Monday.

Over the weekend the camp had almost doubled and the mayor’s son had passed a couple of evenings smoking chillums with his new colourful friends in a tipi. It was explained to the mayor that although there were thousands of people on the way we would be gone in a month and leave next to no trace. After some thought we were told that he could not give us permission to gather there. It was totally against the law and he would personally be liable if he allowed such a blatant violation of regulations to occur. However, he was about to go on summer holiday and his secretary might be inclined to put our application for the event at the bottom of a large pile of paperwork...

The European Rainbow Gathering went ahead and only when the last stragglers had finished clean-up did we receive the official response:
We were expressly forbidden to attempt to stage our unauthorised event.

In fact, as faceless and uncaring as the authorities are often viewed by those who live an alternative way of life, they’re often quite a bit more human than we might take them for. Consider the European Rainbow in Romania when local TV reported a ‘free love fest’ in the hills and cars of Romanians began turning up to party. The police heard of this development and, learning that alcohol was forbidden in the Rainbow, they began to stop all vehicles driving towards the site and turned back those arriving with bottles of beer and wine.

Sometimes the humanity of the police can be seen in their sheer absurdity as they try to apply their standard practice to something far beyond their grasp. Faced with an invasion of foreigners, the police in Eastern Europe, in particular, sometimes attempt a semblance of control by insisting that everyone ‘register’.

‘At the Bulgarian European Rainbow they set up a desk on the path near the parking to take everyone’s passport number as they walked up the hill!’ one sister told me.

Often it’s up to some of the main local focalisers to go and make peace with the local mayor or chief of police who might be put out that his consent wasn’t asked beforehand. When the European Rainbow came to the Czech Republic in 1995, however, the officials were too much a product of the communist times to take responsibility for authorising the Gathering – each one insisted that only their superior would have to give the final approval.

‘We finally had to speak to the Minister of the Interior in the Czech government and – talk about nepotism – he said we had better ask his brother, the President!’ a brother focalising the scouting back then told me, ‘But that was just ridiculous so we just went ahead anyway!’

Without formal permission to protect the Gathering, the local police turned up early in the morning and, sticking their guns into the entrances of each tent they came across, they confiscated everyone’s passports, returning them only for a handful of cash.

‘That went on for two days until on the third morning we managed to get everyone awake before the police arrived. When they climbed the hill to shake us down they found us in a circle chanting Om. After that the police starting giving people lifts into the Gathering!’

Official permission is always nice to get but most people in the Rainbow believe in their right to gather anyway and trust in that old Rainbow magic to save the day. At one Gathering in India, the police turned up and ordered everyone to move on at gunpoint. The collective response to the rifles was to form a circle and sing bhajans until the police gave up and left.

Although in some countries the police take active efforts to block the Rainbow – in France, in particular, the police have learned to use the internet, too, and have broken up some Gatherings – ultimately the European Rainbow is by its intrinsic nature too nebulous a phenomenon for the authorities to understand or react to. Unlike the enormous July 4th Gatherings in the US which are a beacon for cops to charge in and point guns at naked hippies, the Rainbow in Europe is just too small to get that kind of attention. The European Gathering moves country every year and the smaller ones barely register on anyone’s radar.

Oddly, the Rainbow Gatherings actually end up affording people more freedom to hang out in nature then if they were alone. With no one in charge and no assets to seize, we’re allowed to bend the rules. Even in the driest of summers we always have at least one central fire when anyone else in the country would get a heavy fine. And we can also camp in the woods without worrying about some forest official moving us on or asking to see our ID.
Sometimes though our essential freedom to gather in nature must be defended by an old-fashioned knight. In the European Rainbow in Portugal in 1996, the land used for the Gathering belonged to a farmer who used to ride in every day on a white stallion to see how things were going, quite delighted to see so many colourful people on his hill. So when word reached him that the police were stopping and searching everyone on their way to the village, he took matters into his own hand. Riding into town he reminded the police that not only was the Rainbow Gathering situated on his land, but so were many properties in the village – including the police station. Let the hippies be, he advised, or find yourselves evicted...

Among the considerations of where to make a Rainbow there’s often a lot of talk about the potential of a Gathering to bring healing to an area. In Bosnia, in 2007, for instance, there was the hope that the Rainbow might help bring Serbs and Croats together in reconciliation and peace after the horrendous war of the 90’s. That was perhaps a little overly optimistic but who knew what could happen in a month of hugs and music?

There’s even an annual Gathering in Turkey which, in name at least, is held for that express purpose. The Peace in the Middle East Rainbow is probably the only place in the world where Israelis and Iranians actually meet and live together for a few weeks. What NGO does so much for international relations on such a budget?

Reactions of local people to the sudden appearance of hundreds of hippies is often mixed, however. Particularly if it’s a conservative area, they can be quite scandalised by scenes of naked people frolicking in the river. Or even when a country is quite tolerant of nudity, people still take exception to hippies wandering around the local cemetery in their birthday suit.

Rainbow Gatherings are never publicly announced and so the first the locals know about it is when rickety old vans come trundling into town and out jump a bunch of colourful vagabonds in torn clothes, dreadlocks and guitars on their backs. They play a song or two, share a coffee and croissant between them, ask directions to the nearest internet cafe and proceed to buy all the tobacco and chocolate in town.

The initial appearance of hippies in the woods might even seem sinister to those living nearby. They wonder whether, with our ceremonies around the fire, we might belong to some pagan cult. Maybe we’re even Satanists. We’re sometimes seen in the same light as an arrival of a gypsy encampment or a rave party. Locals brace themselves for a wave of theft, littering and noise. But when curiosity overcomes the initial doubt, they sometimes even walk up the mountain to see for themselves what it’s all about.

Their first stop is inevitably the welcome center; the shelter set up to teach all new arrivals about the Rainbow ways. There will be colourful cardboard signs hanging from bits of string reminding everyone not to use soap in the rivers, to leave alcohol and electronics behind them, to always cover their shit. The welcome center is meant to be a place of acclimatisation, with chai always on the fire so people can sit and take a rest after their long trek up the hill. Some believe that those arriving should be encouraged to camp for a day or two at the welcome center before heading on up to the main Gathering. It’s a place to leave behind the ways of Babylon and enter a new state of mind, heart and body.

Unfortunately as the welcome center is often a fair walk from the rest of the Gathering, after a couple of weeks it often runs out of energy and loses focus. But worse than being abandoned, it can end up as the Rainbow Asylum with all the mentally-unbalanced members of the Family gravitating together. It seems that madness loves company. There might be one Chief Crazy – or even two, fighting for power over the pots on the fire – the kind of fanatic characters who can’t se-
cure an audience in the main circle but can establish their own power base in the little fiefdom of the welcome center.

The net result of which is that on occasion the locals walking up to the Rainbow are met with a group of erratic dancing hippies in loin cloths, busy impersonating animal sounds. Suddenly remembering their duties to welcome all newcomers they run up to give an unwashed and almost certainly unwanted hug.

Should the locals get as far as the main circle without being totally freaked out, they still might not feel entirely welcome. Anyone can join the Gatherings but the sight of freshly-showered visitors wearing laundered clothes, carrying a camera and a bottle of beer, places a strain on the atmosphere. Rather like kids who would prefer that adults didn’t observe them as they carry out their games of make-believe.

The more diplomatic or spontaneously-friendly souls in the Rainbow will walk up and try to bring the locals into the proceedings, encouraging them to take a seat around the fire and accept a cup of chai. They might be invited to come back with their tents and plates and told that the Gatherings are open to everyone. Occasionally a couple of brave souls from the village may even come and stay for the weekend but, especially if they don’t speak English, it’s usually too much of a cultural leap in the dark for them to suddenly grab a tambourine and join in with songs to the Great Spirit.

Sometimes the locals are not so much timid as shell-shocked. I remember looking at a gaggle of boys in their early teens at the Ukranian Rainbow, all dressed in military castoffs from their elder brothers in the army, the only source of employment in the area other than agriculture. They stood together, leaning on each other’s shoulders as they gazed at the scene before them in sheer incomprehension: people sat around with piercings of metal and bones through their noses and lips, thick dreadlocks piled on top of heads, dressed in leather jerkins or flowery dresses, singing, dancing, massaging and meditating, gathered like a collection of cats in costume, each following his or her own inner calling.

‘What long term effect do you think all of this has on them and their view of the world?’ I asked a friend of mine standing by the fire, a professor of behavioural economics.

‘That would be a great theme for a doctorate!’ he assured me.

The presence of the locals was most felt on the full moon night. There was one priceless episode, in particular, with three Ukranian men from the nearby village who sat on a slope drinking their vodka in silence as if they saw this kind of thing all the time. Along came a girl wearing a thin red dress with nothing on beneath; her hair was also a flaming red and she prowled and panted along the ground like a wild creature, oozing sensuality. Her tongue licked the air as she rolled her spine and flicked her hips from side to side like a cat in heat. I glanced over at the locals as they drank and observed not the slightest trace of emotion or surprise on their faces or indeed any indication that they had even registered her presence.

That there’s something a little presumptuous in the belief that the Rainbow can bring light and healing to a place was highlighted in the Ukranian European Gathering. The first visible effect was that the tiny bus used by the locals to get to work in the nearby town was suddenly filled to bursting point with hippies carrying backpacks, guitars and dogs. It can’t have been much fun to commute that month.

And while it’s clearly a positive thing that local shopkeepers should make a good profit during the Gathering as people walk down to take a coffee and buy some extra supplies, in the Ukraine it felt a little too mercenary. Within a week or two of us being there, the locals set up stalls on the path from the parking to the welcome center; little tables every 50 meters with chocolate, tinned food and cake. The tins of pineapple chunks, spam and jars of pickles didn’t sell well but with around
half of those gathered coming from Russia, the stalls moved a lot of beer and vodka. A walk to the village soon meant passing comatose bodies of drunk brothers and sisters of Living Light along the way.

At least the Russians seemed to know how to hold their alcohol and tended to drink in their tents and so we were spared the scenes of mass drunkenness and violence that we feared. But when a stall selling vodka was set up just 500 meters away from the kitchen we asked the locals if they could move further away? They responded angrily, wanting to know who the hell we were to tell them what to do in their territory. To make their point they then moved into the main field and opened a bar.

It did raise some interesting existential questions. Who the fuck did we think we were? Were we humble guests of the Ukranian people or spiritual warriors exercising our rights to assemble on a Free Planet? We maintained the right to preserve the traditions of the Rainbow but if our own brothers and sisters wanted to get wrecked maybe we didn’t know our tribe as well as we thought.

Faced with this existential threat to the Gathering, all we could do was remind everyone at food circle that the Rainbow was one of the only places in the world to gather free from alcoholic vibes – then we made a fire nearby and implored anyone heading in their direction not to buy.

The next evening some local youths mobbed a brother with long dreadlocks when he was walking back to his tent and threw a few punches. Not enough to really hurt him but enough to create an uneasy atmosphere in the Gathering. Earlier in the month, when seed camp was just starting, sleeping bags and other valuable items had been stolen and the week before they had burned down a huge haystack in the middle of the night, sending us running for buckets of water from the stream. I decided that we weren’t all that welcome and left.

Problems with the locals can sometimes be healed or transformed by the power of the Rainbow though. One sister told me about a Gathering she was at where around ten guys from the nearby village arrived boisterous and drunk.

‘Instinctively we all just joined hands around the fire and began singing devotional songs! In about half an hour, some of the men were fast asleep on the ground but others were holding hands with us, looking very quiet and lost!’

Occasionally the Rainbow doesn’t endear itself to the locals by sheer ignorance on our part, camouflaged by a sense of spiritual entitlement. Hippies who don’t respect such things as borders and ownership of land often feel that no one can tell them what to do when they’re living in nature at the bosom of Mother Earth. While we do our best to educate everyone about the dangers of forest fires and not to use soap and shampoo in the rivers, it was harder for people in one Italian Gathering to appreciate that they shouldn’t bathe in the cow trough near the spring. The cows could smell that we’d been there and then wouldn’t drink – resulting in a pissed off farmer.

Even when we take care to be responsible for our own actions, however, and encourage everyone to act with respect to the place and the nearby community, our concern tends to only last for as long as we’re actually there. Only a handful of people usually last the distance from seed camp until clean-up and so most are blissfully unaware of the consequences a Gathering might hold for the locals.

By carrying all of our trash down to the village dump, for instance, we might imagine that we’ve fulfilled our responsibilities in leaving the Gathering site as clean as we found it. But the local community may not be able to deal with the volumes of trash that a European Rainbow can generate. Heaps of trash build up and lie there stinking in the sun, attracting rats and cockroaches. A far stronger memory for many locals than the message of love and light we hoped to bring.
Sometimes they just burn it all, making a mockery of our attempts to sort it all into recyclable categories.

At other times our collective naivety can ignore the wisdom of thousands of years. In the European Gathering in Bulgaria the Gathering was begun in what was thought to be an empty field but turned out to be where the villagers grew their grass for their livestock’s winter feed. Compensation was arranged from the Magic Hat and as a gesture of starry-eyed gratitude for hosting us, a giant WE LOVE YOU was made in the main field out of stones and rocks found around the edges – very touching but wholly oblivious of the fact that a single pebble could ruin the scythes with which the locals cut their grass. They’d spent hundreds of years removing every stone they could find from the field.

Still though, I’ve seen the Rainbow interact with the local spirit in a way that can be quite moving. In a small Tuscan village, people in the street kept walking up to one brother to touch his dreadlocks. They had a hundred questions: wasn’t it dirty? How long had he grown them? Was it something religious?

Sometimes the fact that we simply turn up is enough to win the local hearts. In places like Sicily where the young people are dying to get away to find work and excitement up north, the arrival of a Rainbow can be the event of the year. I remember one Gathering above an Italian village where the locals could only come in summer; there was no longer any work there and so they had to pass the rest of the year in the city. The old people showed us where we could find springs in the forest and told us legends about the surrounding hills. We’ve forgotten it today but it wasn’t long ago that most of countryside in Europe was populated with spirits and imps, nourished by local folklore.

It was with great pleasure on that occasion that we came down to the village one night to fulfill the Rainbow tradition of making a show for the locals. It was only a small Gathering and I was concerned that we might not have enough performers to make much of a concert. The Rainbow often overflows with talent, however and we ended up with African drumming, poetry recitals, belly dancing, a fire show, acrobatics and plenty of music and song.

The villagers were confused to the point of exasperation when it came to dinner. They had cooked us pasta but it grew cold as we held hands to sing and chant Om before eating. But overall we couldn’t have left a better impression. Several of them even opened up their houses to let us sleep on the floor for the night.

Before the evening was over there happened a minor incident that for me embodied the best of the Rainbow spirit; some young people from a nearby village had heard there would be a party and, parking in the main square, they opened their car doors and turned on their stereo to play loud, thumping techno music. I thought there might be the need for some diplomacy, to explain that in the Rainbow we made our own music without electronics but as it turned out there was no need to worry; everyone just put down their instruments and went to dance by the speakers in freestyle Rainbow form – bouncing up and down, limbs flaying like jellyfish, making a human train round and round the car and other childlike choreography that would have embarrassed the crowd in any disco. I realised then that the way of the Rainbow was like water, never opposing or blocking but always going with the flow.
Rainbow Life
There’s nothing quite so courageous as imagination.

All of us are products of our upbringing, our culture, perhaps even of our own genes. We navigate the world through the lens of our beliefs, instincts and past experience. Our hopes and expectations are all framed by what we think is possible. To dare to reach beyond that, to create something new, requires an uncommon kind of boldness. The courage to imagine.

The struggle to take over the script of our lives might also be hindered by those around us. To strike out in new directions is to challenge the choices that everyone else makes. Our example invites mockery, derision, even censure. Our heads are in the clouds, we’re told. Wake up.

Like Jesus and the feeding of the five thousand, the miracle of the Rainbow happens when enough of us believe in it; when enough of us bring wood for the fire in the evening, help chop vegetables in the kitchen and put money in the Magic Hat. Alone, we’re just disaffected refugees from Babylon; together we’re beautiful. For some of us it’s a Christmas spirit kind of thing, a few weeks of goodwill in the summer, while for others the words brother and sister mean the real thing. We’re a Family.

One of the hardest things for people to digest when they first hear about the Rainbow is that there’s no one in charge. Raised in countries with firm laws, backed by the police and courts – institutions to hold the vagaries of human nature at bay – it seems outrageous to expect thousands of hippies to self-govern themselves. With the decline of local communities and the extended family in the Western world, people no longer feel responsible for each other’s welfare. We leave it all to the state.
The Rainbow Gatherings turn the clock back on that score. Our tribe is a patchwork one, undefined by race, language or creed, but we reclaim the power to organise and look after ourselves. Naturally, there are those in the Rainbow who take on more responsibility than others but, as I learned along the way, a Gathering begins with the first person who arrives.

I’d been at a Rainbow in North Italy and saw a bit of paper pinned to a post in the kitchen inviting everyone to gather in Sicily at the next new moon for a Rainbow Healing Gathering – no tobacco, salt or sugar allowed. I flew in to loud, restless Palermo and after a night in a cheap hotel not far from the docks, I took a bus to the center of the island. Then I hitchhiked in the heat through winding roads and hills full of thorn bushes as stubborn and tough as the Sicilians themselves.

An old farmer with his sheep admitted to the presence of some foreigners further down the valley and gruffly waved away my thanks. I walked the last couple of miles looking forwards to a warm welcome after my pilgrimage by plane, bus and foot and instead found seven rather dispirited brothers and sisters sat in a circle eating a meagre breakfast of some crackers and a salad of cucumbers and tomatoes. The current discussion topic was whether we should all just pack up and go and hang out on a beach instead.

Like me, everyone had followed the directions on a flyer or on the internet but had found no one there. There were no tools to build a kitchen but that was okay because there was no car to go to town to buy supplies, and that was okay, too, because there were no pots to cook the food anyway – but that didn’t matter as it happened that there was a fire ban in place until the end of the month. We were gathered by a river but couldn’t drink it as it happened to be salty and so water had to be fetched from a spring 500 meters away. Even more fun was that until the day before I arrived, there had been no one who spoke any Italian.

They had only survived until that point by the extraordinary kindness of the locals. Some university students in the nearby town of Nicosia 20km away had heard there was a bunch of foreigners camping out in the countryside and they came along to say hi. Finding them half-starved and miserable, they returned later that night with a car full of pizza and beer – the Rainbow is alcohol-free, of course and usually vegan – but this was sacred fare and not a drop or crumb was wasted.

To get around the fire ban the students proposed making a fire in the sand by the salt river but they, too, grew nervous when a police car pulled up not half an hour later. Far from coming to enforce the fire ban, however, it turned out that cops were simply delivering a German brother to the Rainbow – they’d found him wandering around a nearby village and decided to taxi him in to join the ‘others.’

Shortly after I arrived someone turned up in a van with a big pot and we got into action. A local farmer suggested another place where we could camp and offered to bring us fresh water by tractor – he even knocked down a fence for us to a field which he then ploughed to make it safe enough to light a fire. We borrowed some tools from another farmer to build up the kitchen and dig the shit pits. We took clay from the river and made chapatti trenches that would be rain-resistant if bad weather struck. Within 24 hours we had transformed a disaster into a functioning, thriving Rainbow Gathering all by ourselves. All it took was a little imagination.

Gatherings begin with the seed camp. The first people to arrive are the ones who take on the responsibility for the immediate logistical tasks: they dig the first fireplace and the shit pits, construct a shelter for the kitchen, mark the trail from the main road. On a more spiritual
level, they’re supposed to plant the seed for the Gathering to come. It’s said that the energy and intentions of the seed camp are the basis for what happens in the following month and so it’s important to begin with harmony and love. Prayers are said, rituals for lighting the first fire might be made, requests are sent to the local spirits for their hospitality and protection.

Preparing a Gathering can be a labour of love, sweat and tears; an undertaking that will probably be overlooked by everyone who turns up afterwards. Often many of those who worked the hardest to establish the camp have already left by the time the Gathering gets underway. Seed camp can be, after all, be a pretty intense experience. The ubiquitous words of peace and love are often put to the test with the nitty gritty of coordinating tasks with a small group of people, some of whom are more concerned with alignments of the planets than in establishing a good connection with local farms. Personality clashes are frequent, tempers run short and just maintaining a positive mood around the fire each night can prove a struggle. There are some seed camps that flow beautifully with everyone’s talents and contributions complementing each other but at other times we sit around the fire bickering and squabbling about where to build the kitchen and what the Magic Hat money should be spent on. We get tired of the sound of each other’s voices, the talking circles become bitching matches and we can’t wait for everyone else to arrive to save us from ourselves.

Disputes in the seed camp take a typically Rainbow shape, however. No matter how angry someone gets or how high voices get raised, they will almost always finish their diatribe with ‘but I love you, brother.’ Both parties in an argument will claim to represent a higher good, an essential spiritual truth being sadly betrayed and let down by their misguided Rainbow brethren. All differences usually fall aside as the Gathering grows though; it’s just too much effort to bother carrying a grudge. The struggle to get along is just seen as part of the challenge of living together. It might even be destined and most probably an opportunity for spiritual growth.

‘I’ll talk to him later today. Or in two or three Rainbows’ time. It’s the same, you know?’ one brother told me after a verbal scuffle with the supplies focaliser over the shopping mission.

Although I’m not the most industrious person, I often arrive for seed camp just because I love to see the Gathering grow by the day, waves of arrivals swelling the main circle as new faces lend energy and vitality to the proceedings. One of the unique qualities of the Rainbow is that someone who has just arrived has as much say in what goes on as those who have been there from the beginning but at the seed camp of the European Gathering in Portugal in 2011, I discovered that the Rainbow isn’t always as free from politics as I had supposed.

Following the directions I’d scribbled down from the internet, I took a series of buses that passed a countryside scarred by wildfires (the locals told me they were set by farmers to provide better grazing for their animals) and I was delighted to find that the Rainbow was set in a forest free from the eucalyptus invasion that had conquered much of Portugal. I found about 30 people gathered and some of them had already been there for weeks. There was the usual heavy lifting work to do as tipis were erected, water tanks were carried along forest paths to the spring, and rocks were hauled over to the main fireplace. The kitchen was poorly constructed and there was almost no money in the Magic Hat to buy food and everyone looked tense and exhausted.

Things were moving along though until a couple of Rainbow veterans arrived. They took one look at the field intended for the main circle and declared that it was unfit for a Rainbow Gathering. There were electricity pylons in view and the sound of ‘demonic’ windmills could be heard in the parking lot, their red lights visible in the distance at night. They did, however, know of a great place 350km away in Spain.

A talking circle was called to make consensus on where the Rainbow should be held and in the discussion that followed we heard every point of view under the sun:
‘Look, we’ve been here for weeks and we can’t let all our work go to waste.’

‘I have been to over 20 European Gatherings. We have never gathered under electric cables and we never will.’

‘People have already bought their tickets to come here. The Gathering starts in 10 days – we can’t move everything hundreds of kilometers just because you don’t like windmills.’

‘We have moved an entire Gathering before. It happened in Bosnia and it can happen again.’

‘I just arrived and I don’t know about the windmills but I would like everyone to feel welcome here – and not just the humans but also the elves and the entities of the forest.’

Rebuffed by the circle that made a consensus to stay, the two ‘elders’ withdrew and it seemed that we could now begin in earnest. I left the Gathering for a few days and when I returned I found another talking circle in process in the parking lot of all places; the same arguments as before were going back and forth but now with most voices in favour of checking out the location in Spain. The ‘elders’ had sat in their van canvassing support from everyone who arrived until they had enough of a power base to make their move.

Too tired to object after walking for kilometers in the sun, I watched in disbelief as a resolution was passed to send 3 cars of scouts off to Spain. An atmosphere of doubt, lethargy and delusion set in during the days that followed – why do anything if we were just going to move camp? It was only after a week passed with no news that we just shrugged our shoulders and got on with the task in hand of building up the Rainbow where we were.

Eventually the scouts trickled back. It transpired that the other location wasn’t big enough and that the ‘elders’ in question had known that all along. Comically, almost as soon as they had left the Gathering they’d begun to fight among themselves and ultimately came home with their tails between their legs. Still, it demonstrated that the Rainbow was not, after all, immune to the influence of a single individual and left a bad taste in everyone’s mouth. All in all it was the worst seed camp I’d ever seen.

But what kind of seed was planted?

The Gathering that followed was one of the best I’d ever been to. The absurdity of the partisan politics was forgotten within days and for the thousands of people who were just turning up, it had never happened at all. For them the Rainbow began the moment they pitched their tent. They found only a fairytale forest whose delights weren’t in the least diminished by a few red lights at night of windmills in the distance. It would have taken a Don Quixote to care.

In smaller Gatherings the seed camps are usually set up by the most active members of the local Rainbow Family and it sometimes happens that just a handful of people end up focalising the most demanding tasks – Magic Hat, shopping and the kitchen – for the entire month. While others make speeches about love and harmony, or make shamanic rites around the fire, a small team of unseen, dedicated focalisers makes sure everyone gets fed.

In the European Gatherings, however, there are so many things to organise – announcements, food storage, the welcome center, signs and information, construction and shit pits – that people often burn out under the strain and we occasionally even need a focaliser of focalisers to make sure there’s always someone to fill the key roles.
When I first came to the Rainbow I didn’t really think I could do anything much to help apart from play a few songs for people cutting vegetables in the kitchen. I didn’t know how to tie tarps to poles to make waterproof areas. I didn’t know how to cook for hundreds of people at a time. I didn’t feel strong enough to dig deep shit pits or chop wood and I was too shy to play music for the Magic Hat.

I learned, however that the Rainbow is nothing if not forgiving. You can try to do something and even if you totally screw it up it’s already forgotten by the next day. If you want to learn a new skill you need only follow a focaliser around and learn as you go. After a couple of Gatherings the chances are that you’ll have picked up enough that there comes a moment when you see for yourself what needs to be done; perhaps you notice that people are getting lost in the forest on the way up from the parking lot so you end up walking around the circle to ask people if they have any bits of rag to spare. You grab a few volunteers to hang cotton strips from tree branches every 50 metres all the way down the path, and before you know it you’ve just done your first bit of focalising.

I eventually realised that even if I didn’t have any particular skills, often what was needed was just someone to connect the dots. At one Rainbow I noticed people were crapping everywhere because they couldn’t find the shit pits. I tracked down some tubes of paint and a brush, found some artistic types to make a beautiful sign and tied it to a tree at the right point along the path. Soon there was a trail of hippies hurrying along after food circle with looks of fierce concentration on their faces.

In fact, Rainbow Gatherings offer such opportunities for learning new skills and taking responsibility that they can resemble a career development course; musicians get to practise every day and cultivate their performing charisma, cooks learn to prepare food for vast quantities of people with the simplest of ingredients, supply focalisers discover how to manage event logistics on a tight budget and announcers learn how to communicate messages to large crowds with limited attention spans.

At times the Rainbow can seem just two steps away from disaster. The Magic Hat is empty, the shit pits are full and dogs are splashing through the main water source – but sometimes the most important lesson to learn as a focaliser is when to let go; taking responsibility in the Italian European Rainbow for holding on to the Magic Hat, I found myself keeping an eye on supplies for the chai shops, too and worrying about who was going to cook dinner each night. It rained continuously for a week and we used up the kitchen supplies faster than the tractor could bring them up the hill. It seemed to me that the entire Gathering was about to fall to pieces.

‘You know, the Rainbow can take care of itself,’ one wise sister told me as she saw me beginning to stress out. I nodded but kept running in circles trying to take care of all the loose ends until I got quite exhausted. My health gave way to flu and I was totally floored for a couple of days, hardly leaving my tent. To my surprise (and slight ruffling of my ego), however, the Rainbow didn’t fall apart at the seams when I was no longer around to get stuff done. Other people came forwards to take on jobs, crises turned out not to be as serious as I thought and the Gathering got along just fine without me.

In time I saw that ultimately, the diversity of the Rainbow is what keeps it going. One focaliser taking a break gives the opportunity for someone new to step forwards and empower themselves. There are few more rewarding sights than that of the transformation of the nervous first-timer; hovering on the edge of discussions, he has to be asked to speak louder when he ventures an opinion; he’d like to get involved but feels quite powerless to do anything to help... then a week later he’s to be seen in the thick of things, motivating a team of workers to construct a storage area for the fruit and vegetables or building a pizza oven.
But it takes some skillful use of prose to put that kind of experience in your resume.

The Rainbow gets along fine without leaders but that doesn’t stop individuals of a domineering nature from trying their luck from time to time. Trailing clouds of glory, illusions of grandeur prompt them to rise to the occasion and take charge. They perceive a great movement lacking only a charismatic figure to show the way. They step forwards intent on gathering the lost sheep of the Rainbow, guiding them towards the light in an unstoppable wave of love to change the world forever!

When would-be leaders stand up in the breakfast circle to address what they perceive as their congregation the porridge becomes even harder to digest. Dressed for the occasion and perhaps with feathers in their hair, they may announce that they are the holders of a sacred lineage, bearing wisdom passed down from Native Americans/Amazonian shamans/Indian gurus and have come to show us the way. Those with a sense of a big occasion might wait until full moon and, at the height of the rituals before the lighting of the main fire, run around the circle with a giant Rainbow flag or burst euphorically into their own private Sermon on the Mount.

Inevitably as the words of peace and love, healing and inner spirit, harmony and transformation come tumbling out, there will be cheers and applause from some sections of the circle, polite nods from others and mystified silence from the rest who couldn’t hear a word that was said. Mostly people just get on with their Rainbow without bothering to judge. For, beyond acquiring a small following of young, starstruck followers, aspiring leaders in the Rainbow tend to find it harder to make an impact then they hope. They might have their moment in the limelight at the opening ceremony but the ripple dies away soon enough and then it’s as though it never happened, leaving them to learn the lesson that, just as in the rest of life, there’s little point in taking yourself too seriously in the Rainbow – because no one else will either.

I remember one brother who felt himself obliged to shoulder the burden of leading a Rainbow in the Canary Islands. A kind of noblesse oblige which he would only inflate with his frequent disclaimer ‘I don’t want to be a Gandhi!’ – a proposition that didn’t seem a very likely dilemma to the rest of us. He would take people aside and offer them advice on how to be a better hippie and there wasn’t a food circle when he didn’t feel compelled to speak up and share a generous portion of his personal knowledge.

Luckily, there was a German sister there who succeeded in taking the wind out of his sails every time with some mischievous ruse; one morning he decided that the circle wasn’t sitting in perfect formation and cried:

‘Family! Family! When the Native Americans sit around the fire they keep the circle open at a respectful distance from the fire!’

At which the German sister broke into singing:

‘If you’re happy where you’re sitting clap your hands!’ and everyone gleefully joined in the children’s song, shaming him into silence for half an hour.

The next day at breakfast he again called for everyone’s attention, pointing at the sky with an eager finger:

‘Family! Family! A quick weather workshop! When the clouds are scattered like that there’s a high chance of rain so-’ But his nemesis had already begun to sing:
‘We don’t need no education!’ and a chorus of the Pink Floyd song spread like a bush fire among everyone who was bored of the pedagogy.

The mistake that those with a leader-complex make at the Rainbow is to assume that because no one is in charge, the job must be up for grabs. But the Rainbow needs a leader as much as the moon needs a flag or the sea needs border controls. Naturally there are those whose voice is heard louder than others, whose opinion holds greater weight as to where the main tipi should go or what to cook that night. Charismatic, powerful personalities can shine and get some attention but the truth is the people who have the greatest influence on the Rainbow tend to be those whose contributions are largely unseen. The humble souls who genuinely see work as love made manifest, dedicating their talents to make sure the light shines everywhere in the Rainbow and not just on themselves.

The main fire might potentially offer an open stage for the opportunist megalomaniac but a month is a very short time to have much lasting effect. The changing demographic of faces around the fire as people roll in and out of the Gathering makes it hard for any one person to run for office as Mayor of the Rainbow.

Besides, the Rainbow is also profoundly anarchistic in spirit. We come precisely because we don’t want to be told what to do or how to live. We’re too much in love with our freedom to ever need a guru. We see it as our birthright to sleep anywhere in nature that we please, we are each other’s entertainment and we answer to no other authority than the voice of our own hearts.

To see the truth of this you need only look out on a Rainbow Gathering on a sunny day; you’ll see people hugging on the ground, juggling clubs, practising handstands, giving massage, preparing pots of chai, playing with children – the movements of each person are about as predictable as those of a cat.

And who could ever get 1000 cats to do the same thing at once?

While there are no leaders in the Rainbow there is something resembling a parliament. And if a week is a long time in politics, it’s even longer in the Vision Council when we gather to talk about the future of the Rainbow and decide where the next European Gathering should be. Usually called three days after the full moon, the Vision Council is held in one of the big tipis and anyone can turn up to share their ideas, reflections and visions.

In 2011 in Portugal it went on for about 12 days.

Among topics up for discussion were marijuana in the Gatherings, the use of Facebook to focus scouting and how the Magic Hat money should be looked after in the meantime. People also shared their personal stories, their feelings about where the Rainbow was going and the likelihood of the end of the world in 2012.

The council began with strong attendance that dripped away over the days that followed until just ten people sat passing the stick around the circle, wondering whether they should give consensus to Slovakia for the next year’s Gathering. There was talk of the Rainbow going to Greece but then almost none of the Greeks actually bothered turning up.

More worrying were the invitations to Wales from all those who believed in bringing the Celtic tribes together once again. I didn’t know much about that but I dreaded the prospect of sitting inside my tent for a month in the rain. They had second sight on their side, however. As one Welshman told us:

‘We were gathered in Wales earlier this year and an American brother came down one morning to tell us about a vision he’d had. He’d
dreamt of a warrior princess riding a great red dragon – and he didn’t know the dragon is the symbol of Wales!’

It wasn’t my turn to speak and I had to go and get some warm clothes before the sun went down, but I was dying to point out that I’d seen the movie Avatar, too.

An outsider would have seen a bunch of hippies sat in a circle shaded by an open tipi, trying to avoid the patches of sharp thorns that went straight through our cotton clothes. But for some of those gathered there, this was an historic occasion and one of the utmost spiritual importance.

‘I woke up this morning and I heard the Goddess telling me I had to get my arse up and to this council,’ one brother told us. ‘I have memories of the ancient times and I’ve been told that it’s time for us to ignite the dragon-lines that begin in Wales and go right through Europe. We can bring that energy up and make it conscious!’

I wasn’t the only one who groaned at the prospect of the European Rainbow going to Wales. We even thought about organising a rota to ensure there would always be someone present to block the consensus should the motion be called. Happily, after ten days of deadlock, a decision was finally reached in favour of Slovakia but the whole process highlighted the quirky nature of Rainbow organisation.

On one slow evening around the fire I listened to an older brother, famous for his passion for detail, as he recounted at length vision councils of the past. There were some gems amid the monologue: I learned how one brother had once blocked consensus for a proposed European Gathering destination for days. Finally, everyone just waited until he had to go to the shit pit one afternoon and passed the stick for consensus while he was gone.

Sometimes the council goes on for longer than the Gathering itself. On one occasion the tipi under which the discussion was held got taken down and packed away before a decision could be reached. As the last 4 hippies stood in the pouring rain, one of them proposed a country for the next year’s Rainbow and the others quickly agreed before making a run for the trees.

At another Gathering a small group decided it was time that the European Rainbow went to Israel – not geographically Europe perhaps, but, after all, it did compete in the Eurovision Song Contest. They came up with the vision at night but, learning that a consensus could only be considered valid if made while the sun was up, they waited until dawn before passing the stick around for consensus. They then walked around the first food circle announcing that we would gather in Israel the following year.

The excitement and confusion lasted until some Israelis had to follow them assuring the circle there would be peace in Jerusalem before that ever happened.

The vision council is also an opportunity to pass consensus on other matters such as prohibitions on smoking marijuana in the Rainbow or using the internet to spread the word of upcoming Gatherings. If you’re wondering how a unanimous decision reached by 15 people in a tipi could have jurisdiction over tens of thousands of other hippies at Gatherings across the world then... well, you’re not alone.

There has been, for instance, a consensus in the European Rainbow against bringing any kind of drugs to Gatherings. But even if you ignore the tobacco and the coffee, probably a majority of people smoke marijuana when they can get it. The remote nature of Rainbow Gatherings means that often there’s not much to smoke but in any case most people see cannabis as a herb, a sacred plant in quite a different category than drugs.

‘But the Rainbow came out of the 60’s and the counter-culture revolution then was fueled by LSD!’ one brother declared at the vision
council in Portugal. Eloquent speeches were made against and in support of this point of view but ultimately everyone shrugged and moved on to the most recent polemic issue.

‘Facebook is a corporation that sells our information for profit! It’s disgrace to bring the Family into cyberspace – we already have a consensus from years ago not to do it!’

Some said the 2011 Portugal Gathering was the first Facebook Rainbow as people headed to town to upload photos before we’d even got to full moon. The less technophobic in the circle pointed out that Facebook was a tool and thus neither good nor bad, it depended on how we used it. Others remembered the good old days of postcards and phone calls being the only way to spread news of Gatherings. Was it really a good idea to make the Rainbow so public? Or should we be trying to reach as many people as possible?

After much lawyerly grunting a resolution was finally agreed upon by all 20 people present to close down the 2011 European Rainbow in Portugal Facebook page. Of course, within a couple of weeks someone opened up the 2012 European Rainbow in Slovakia page and the debate began again – online.

Reading this stuff is a hoot. Internet discussions are almost invariably fractious and spitting but under the blanket of love, light and virtual hugs, there’s something surreal about the online squabbles on the Rainbow pages.

The difference, perhaps, is that many of the people criticizing, judging and mocking each other here online stand a good chance of meeting up one day at a Rainbow.

And will they then resolve their differences?

Probably not. They will have forgotten that there were any.

The one place where you might think some organisation would be required is the kitchen. Just as any army marches on its stomach, the health of a Rainbow often depends on how we’re eating. Gathering firewood, bringing water up from the spring, dancing all night around the fire, singing our hearts out in the bhajan tipis, or just enduring the extremes of blazing sun and freezing rainy nights – all of it asks for a decent calorific intake. For if, at the end of a day of dragging logs through the forest in the drizzle people sit down for a dinner of half a chapatti, a handful of sprouts and a dollop of dal, there’s likely to be mutiny in the air.

The kitchen is at the heart of the Rainbow and for me it’s a place of miracles. Imagine feeding hundreds or even thousands of people with only sticks and branches4 to fuel huge pots of rice or pasta which take hours to come to the boil, all of it vegan and often with a special pot on the side made for those whose meditation practice prohibits them from eating garlic, onion or spices. As cook you can guess only to the nearest hundred how many people you need to feed that morning, your only help are the volunteers who happen to answer the plaintive call ‘help in the kitchen!’ and the sack of wheat flour for the chapattis seems to have mysteriously disappeared during the course of the night.

No sooner have you started to cook than an expert on macrobiotics turns up and decides that his contribution to the whole process will be to follow you around and make helpful suggestions about how you might improve your choice of food combinations. The brother you sent off with the large wok to wash feels the sudden urge to meditate for an hour beside the flowing waters of the river and breakfast is now being served close to sunset, meaning that the dinner will have to be prepared in the dark.

4 except in the desert Gatherings where it’s necessary to cook with gas canisters as firewood is in short supply.
And yet magic happens. Inspired, dynamic, necessarily-creative chefs appear and in no time at all a team of elves is chopping up veggies while a squadron of chapatti angels are bent over the shallow trenches scalding their fingers to produce 1500 flat breads by sunset. Crates of fresh tomatoes are schlepped up the mountain by saintly brothers and sisters just in time to make the salad, and the firewood is dry, despite last night’s downpour, thanks to the improvisation of a genius with two poles and a tarp at midnight. The kitchen may be the only place where there’s any work to do at that moment and yet it’s the busiest hub of the Rainbow as an impromptu jazz session starts up and the resulting crowd means there’s plenty of helpers to bring water, carry pots or keep the fire going.

Of course, occasionally the calls for help in the kitchen simply go unheard. Maybe it’s been raining for a few days and everyone feels dispirited, lying in their tents and wrapped up in their sleeping bags feeling sorry for themselves. Or maybe the weather is too good and everyone is intent on spending their day by the river or on a mountain walk rather than chopping up 20 kilos of vegetables.

One Italian brother explained to me a strategy he had employed on one such occasion:

‘One afternoon there was no one in the kitchen – no one! We called out for help again and again but everyone pretended not to hear and so we said, okay, we made some tea, had a good chat, and later called food circle as usual. Everyone came, we held hands, we sang, we ommmmmed, and then we went around serving everyone from empty pots, serving invisible pasta, invisible tomato sauce and invisible salad – there was even enough for second time!

‘The next day? The kitchen was full of people helping!’

At it’s best the kitchen is one of the happiest places to be. It’s also one of the easiest ways to lend a helping hand (who doesn’t know how to chop a carrot?) and is a great way to make friends as you peel garlic on an improvised table of an elevated wooden plank. The kitchen is also a place where anyone with leadership ambitions can thrive; meal preparations are no place for democracy and there’s always a certain leeway given to a melodramatic, bossy cook as long as the food turns out well. In any case, the best Rainbow chefs learn in time to go with the flow and to encourage helpers through suggestions rather than orders – that is if they want to have help the next time they focalise a meal.

And sometimes the kitchen is a place of magic.

At one Italian Gathering I answered the call for music in the kitchen! and as I unzipped the case of my guitar, I observed a rather fierce debate going on amongst the cooks about whether they should drop the rind of someone’s Parmesan cheese into the soup – an old Italian culinary tradition. It would, in theory, melt and enrich the soup but, leaving aside the fact that the Rainbow is normally vegan, there were those who claimed the rind contained toxic – even carcinogenic – elements! But then one sister suggested that cancer was just a state of mind...

The debate between Italian cuisine and Rainbow tradition seemed like it might never end and so I started playing *What a Wonderful World* in hopes of lightening the atmosphere. A few minutes later a talented Italian violinist joined me and we spent the next half hour going through my limited repertoire of jazz standards. Before we ran out, however, a Belgian brother turned up with an instrument from Mali called the *kamele ngoni*, a kind of 12 stringed harp and started plucking out dreamy melodic rhythms into the morning air. I put away my guitar and took out my clarinet, the sound of which attracted an Italian girl who had recently come back from India where she studied classical bansouri flute and a couple of percussionists followed her.

We jammed for the next hour, various styles of music melting together and we saw the entire mood of the kitchen transform: people
came to dance, a massage train was set up on the grass and a naked brother and sister danced slowly together a few meters away, entirely unselfconscious as they swayed in time to the music. The debate in the kitchen calmed down to a friendly exchange of ideas, the central dilemma of the Parmesan cheese now less a point of contention than a philosophical problem to be solved.

By the time food circle was called, we had arrived at the shore of our musical journey and it seemed as though we didn’t even need the notes any more to be in harmony; we were already on the same wavelength. After we sang the circle songs, we sat down to eat and I discovered the upshot of the morning’s debate – an exception to the Rainbow tradition had been made. I discovered the cheese rind in question in my bowl – in one piece and quite unmelted.

Even the best cooks find themselves put to the test sometimes when cooking up a feast for a multitude. It takes a certain amount of courage to take responsibility for something as critical as feeding the entire Gathering, after all. One Israeli brother who cooked some of the best food I’d ever eaten at a Rainbow told me about his first experience of focalising a dinner:

‘I made vegetables and rice for 300 people and worked all day to get it ready on time. But when it got served out at food circle people started complaining that the rice wasn’t cooked enough. I told them no, it’s brown rice, it’s supposed to be like that, but they kept complaining. Eventually someone went around with the pot and everyone put their food back in to cook it again on the main fire.

‘It was a long time before I went into the kitchen after that.’

I’d also seen instances of rice that refused to cook. At the Italian European Gathering there had been relentless rain for days and the road leading up to the kitchen had gotten so muddy that the tractor couldn’t pass to bring up supplies. Volunteers slipped and slid up and down the hill like ants to carry up boxes of food but it remained touch and go as to whether there would be enough food to eat each day. Then an Austrian couple decided to focalise the evening meal and I found them at sunset gazing at the huge pot of rice in wonder – after three hours of feeding wood to the fire, the water had only produced a handful of bubbles.

Dinner that night ended up being a spoonful of salad and a bit of leftover chapatti from the morning. A murderous mood could be felt around the circle and it wasn’t long before people were walking into the kitchen to grab boxes of food to cook on their own fires. An understandable impulse but one that would have left us with no supplies to cook for the Family the next day. We ended up building a fence around the kitchen and posting a guard.

‘The rice just wouldn’t cook.’ the Austrian cooks observed light-heartedly, more intrigued than embarrassed by this inexplicable natural phenomenon.

Just as in any shared apartment, the kitchen is where everyone’s interests meet in compromise or conflict. Against a soundtrack of growling stomachs, varying agendas, beliefs and needs sometimes struggle to find common ground. Few people have ever shared a kitchen with hundreds of others or considered what kind of logistics it takes to feed everyone twice a day.

Take for instance a sister who feels weak with hunger in the afternoon and observes that dinner is clearly still hours away. She put 50 euros into the Magic Hat the day before and sees nothing wrong in walking into the food storage area to help herself to an apple. Welcome home, everyone had told her when she arrived – so why should she feel hungry at home?
Every Gathering there’s a struggle to communicate to those new to the Rainbow what is to live together as a Family in nature. Raised in consumerist, urban settings where everything can be bought and replaced, and most things under the sun are in infinite supply in exchange for cold cash, it’s not always clear to the new-comer that the Rainbow operates under a quite different paradigm. Imagine, we try to explain, if everyone was to do the same thing – one apple more or less doesn’t make any difference but if all 500 of us went to help themselves there would be no fruit in the porridge for breakfast the next day. Yes, we can buy more but the shops are 30km away. Someone has to drive a truck to go and get them and then the heavy crates have to be carried up the hill to get here. Once in the kitchen there’s no price that can be put on the food.

Piracy of food supplies got so bad in the Finnish European Rainbow that a permanent guardian ended up virtually living in the barn that served as food storage area, effecting a kind of checkpoint that fell just short of demanding to see some ID each time someone came in to get something.

‘Where are you going with that?’ he yelled at an Israeli brother who had picked up a 10 kilo bag of oats to prepare porridge for morning food circle.

‘I’m going to eat it all by myself in my tent.’ he joked.

‘That’s not funny!’ the guardian screamed.

Ideally everything should flow in the Rainbow without the need to police it but you can’t leave the feeding of thousands up to good will alone. At least not when all the goodies are disappearing on regular basis. But though some chefs do sometimes end up storing the raisins, nuts and tahini in a stash by their own tents overnight to make sure they don’t vanish before breakfast, the other side of the coin is that the spirit of sharing is an integral quality of the Rainbow; people break out bars of chocolate, packets of biscuits and cut fruits they’ve brought from town into tiny pieces to share out in impromptu circles.

For sure, after one or two hungry Gatherings you might decide to keep emergency supplies in your tent; perhaps some nuts and cheese to compensate for the lack of protein in the Rainbow diet, and maybe some chocolate as bait to persuade a cute sister to come visit late at night... but sometimes the atmosphere of sharing food communally grows so strong that your conscience won’t leave you alone. After all, It’s hard to stuff yourself with cake in your tent and then walk out to meet a skin and bones hippie offering to share their last half of an apricot with you.

At it’s best, the mood of sharing in the Rainbow calls to mind the old Chinese story of Heaven and Hell: a man has a dream where he’s taken to see both realms and he sees to his surprise that hell is simply a big hall with banquet tables laden with dumplings and noodles and seafood with fine sauces; people are sat down on each side but their chopsticks are too long to bring the delicacies to their mouths! So they suffer in front of the delicious meal, unable to eat a morsel.

Then the man is taken to see heaven and... it’s exactly the same! The hall, the banquet tables laded with a fine feast, the long chopsticks – but in heaven everyone has worked out that they can feed the person across from them...

It’s an unusually healthy Rainbow when we eat dinner in daylight. After a night of singing songs around the fire or star-gazing, people tend to be slow to go and help in the kitchen in the morning and so breakfast is often more like a late lunch. Afterwards people are busy attending workshops, washing in the river or learning new songs before they’re ready to do any work. Even then the first volunteers who arrive to the kitchen generally have to undertake the unenviable job
of taking the big pots down to the river to scrape out the burnt barley in ice-cold water – a task worthy of a Bodhisattva.

It also takes an unbelievably long time to bring water to the boil in large cauldrons. By the time the pasta is ready the cooks often have to drain 50 liters of boiling water in the dark, two brothers on each side with tea towels on their hands to avoid getting burnt on the iron pots, the entire operation conducted by torchlight.

Even when the food is ready it can take so long to form a circle that by the time we join hands to sing the ritual songs, the sun has often long gone. It’s perhaps a tribute to the inertia of the Rainbow that even in the Finnish Gathering where we had 22 hours of light a day we still managed to end up eating in the dark most nights.

In theory, when the food is an hour away from being served, the first call of ‘food circle!’ goes out, followed by another call half an hour later and a final yell of ‘food circle now!’ when the pots are ready to be carried up the main field. People pass on the calls so that even those camped at the margins of the camp are aware that it’s time to eat. The chorus of voices echoing through the valley announcing food circle are the closest thing to a clock that anyone has in the Rainbow.

As the Gatherings draw towards full moon it often becomes harder and harder to get a circle together though. Like in the story of The Boy Who Cried Wolf, those who once came running anxiously at the cry of food circle now! – only to discover that the pots hadn’t even arrived at the main fire yet – soon become blasé at announcements of imminent dinner. The meals get later and later each day until it’s suddenly the turn of the Germans to cook and then half of us miss out on breakfast altogether as it’s unexpectedly served in the morning.

For those with fast metabolisms the prospect of missing food circle is the stuff of nightmare. Though there’s always the chance of finding some leftovers in the kitchen, many’s the time I’ve awoken in my tent as the late morning sun turns my plastic dome into a sauna, and been gripped with the terrible intuition that the vague, distant cry I’d heard in my dreams was actually the call for food circle, and that even now the last of the fruit salad was being scraped out onto some lucky hippie’s plate for second time. I’d jump up and run towards the main circle, dressing myself on the way, toothbrush hanging out of my mouth and guitar strapped clumsily to my back, wildly interrogating everyone I passed if food circle had already taken place – only to learn that they lived on wild berries and sunlight alone and neither knew nor cared whether all the porridge had gone.

Often I experienced the unparalleled relief of seeing the big pots still steaming away in the kitchen but on the few occasions that I found the circle already evaporating, people slapping their bellies happily, praising the long-gone breakfast of the morning, I simply burst into tears.

It only takes one person to start a circle. There’s nothing the Rainbow welcomes as much as initiative and a single person standing up with his hands outstretched, singing a traditional song, will soon find others joining him and a circle forming, expanding as each new arrival answers the call. Eventually there comes a kind of tipping point where those intent on forming a circle command a stronger presence than those bent on chatting or playing music and the arrival of hot pots of food accelerates the whole process.

It get significantly more complicated in the larger Gatherings where there simply isn’t enough space for one giant circle and instead two, three or even four circles are needed. It requires a couple of dedicated Rainbow shepherds to bring the flock into rings that actually connect. Frequently the multiplicity of circles becomes an incomprehensible series of spirals with no definite beginning or end, a kind of spontaneous sacred geometry that would have mystified M.C Escher, let alone...
the poor serving focaliser who has to make sure that everyone gets salad, beans and rice.

The Rainbow schedule is all based around the morning and evening food circles – wearing a watch marks you apart as someone still running on Babylon time – and they are the two occasions during the day when you can find friends, kids can check in with their parents and announcements can be made. It’s also when you find out how many people are currently in the Gathering and a way of gauging the general mood.

The act of circling itself can be a moving experience. Coming from lives in the city where we might live alone, eat alone, work alone and sleep alone, it can be quite overwhelming to suddenly share so much. For some it might be the first time they’ve ever really held hands with someone else since childhood, especially with someone of the same gender, and there can be a kind of foolish joy in the squeeze of a stranger’s fingers as they join the circle.

For many the circles are sacred rituals; that most egalitarian of all shapes, a metaphor for the Rainbow itself, the everlasting circle is one that you never quite leave; depending on each and every link to maintain the current, to preserve and replenish the Rainbow Spirit. A sentiment expressed in the most popular of food circle songs:

‘We are circling, circling together,  
we are singing, singing our heart song.  
This is family, this is unity,  
this is celebration, this is sacred.’

For others the whole thing is just a bit of fun or a necessary evil to get through before the food gets served. Some join in out of peer pressure or just so as not to spoil the party. Those who don’t know the words might just hum along and meekly pass on the kisses they receive on the cheek from the sister on the left to the brother on the right, hoping all the while the food isn’t getting too cold in the middle.

But with hundreds of voices joined together in song, few would deny that the circles really can be a strong opening experience. For some the lyrics of love and harmony might feel a little sententious and tired, especially after hearing them hundreds of times before, but they still hold water. After all, who could say that the words **good night** or **take care** have entirely lost their meaning through overuse? Perhaps more than anything the circles are a statement of just what we’re doing there in the first place. Individually we all have our problems, our faults, our inconsistencies – but together we’re so much more than the sum of our parts.

After even the most persistent of the singers fade into silence, the collective Om begins. Anyone can start and it can be a long, lonely moment until other voices pick up the ancient, holy syllable. Then the first singer is lost in a chorus of low, rumbling drones and bright voices pitched an octave higher, pure soprano voices finding harmonies in the upper register while a few mischievous throat singers warble Mongolian riffs on top of it all.

Then hands are raised, separated into a joint hand salute above the head and – if the purists have their way – a silence falls on the circle as everyone kneels down and kisses the ground. Conversations gently resume as people look for their plates and lay down blankets, sheep skins or plastic bags on the ground as protection against the damp. There’s always a contingent who want to set off a gigantic round of cheering and whistling after the Om though and, like a spark in a dry forest, it only takes one person to give a whoop before everyone follows. The battle between the Silence-after-the-Om traditionalists and the anarchic whoopers is eternal. The latter refuse to hold in their happiness while the former insist that there’s something magical about sharing half a minute of emptiness with a thousand others.

The food circle is the Rainbow at its most ritualistic in the daily routine and I often wonder what it must look like to the curious local or newly-arrived Rainbow Virgin – chanting foreign mantras around an open fire, everyone holding hands and then kissing the ground – who
could not be forgiven for thinking they’d just stumbled across some strange cult? Just what was in that tea anyway? And who will be sacrificed on the fire come full moon?

The first call to break the silence is usually an appeal for servers – volunteers to dish out the food to the circle. The servers might even have their own little circle around the pots, shooing away the dogs who hope to take advantage of everyone holding hands to sneak a hungry tongue into the pot of beans.

In smaller Gatherings, the serving is pretty straightforward and the cooks may go round with the pot by themselves to dole out the portions. In larger Gatherings where a couple of thousand hungry people are waiting to eat though, the serving is practically a military operation requiring planning, instruction and supervision if everyone is to get fed. A focaliser makes sure the servers have all washed their hands, reminds them never to touch the plates with the serving spoon but instead to shake the food loose and let it fall, to avoid raising plates above the pot (in case there’s some dirt on the bottom of someone’s bowl) and to make sure they’ve made a full circle before giving out second time. The focaliser looks at the enormous pots of rice and vegetables and makes an estimate how many spoonfuls each person should get before sending the servers off to the cardinal points of the circle.

But if you want to make the Rainbow laugh just tell it your plans. I’ve been in serving circles where I knew at least half of those present had at best a fragile grasp of English and who just nodded enthusiastically. Then one brother who had been busy counting stars during the briefing proceeded to wander off in the wrong direction with the soup, serving those with the biggest smiles on their faces first.

And so mealtimes can be something of a Rainbow Lottery. I remember sitting at evening food circle in the Ukraine with a bowl full of boiled buckwheat and a dry chapatti, doing my best to summon an attitude of grateful fatalism and be happy that I had anything to eat at all. But after a few mouthfuls I just couldn’t swallow any more and went for a walk around the circle instead – only to discover on the other side large abandoned pots of salad, vegetable curry and beans.

Serving is one of the more fun ways to participate in the Rainbow. Leaving your bowl with a friend to make sure you also get to eat, you head off to haul a pot around the circle, doling out food onto every kind of plate imaginable; ceramic dishes stolen from home, plastic plates bought for 50 cents at a Chinese store, heavy wooden bowls – veterans of many a Gathering – plastic bottles cut in half, metal cups that burn the servers’ hands when filled, wooden logs with a hollow carved out of them, a large, flat rock or, in the most desperate cases, just an outstretched pair of hands.

Serving the Family you become momentarily very popular as you give out the food and when the moment comes to cry out second time! you can feel the waves of emotion filling the air; the elation of those next in line and the desperate, baited-breath hopes of those further along the circle, praying that the food won’t run out even as they hear the fateful sound of the spoon scraping along the bottom of the pot.

It’s not always easy for the cooks to prepare high cuisine for hundreds of people at a time and so after a few Gatherings, the resourceful hippie learns to bring a good supply of salt or soy sauce to liven up a dull dish. Quite often there are bags of salt being passed around anyway, travelling around the circle until they reach the lap of someone waxing eloquent on Mayan astrology. It can take multiple shouts of salt connection! before he descends from the realm of the spirit for long enough to pass on the salt of the earth.

Once the serving is underway, it’s time for the announcements to begin. The food circles are one of the few opportunities to get a message across to the entire Gathering and a whole array of speakers line up to take center stage. At a small Gathering one announcer with a loud voice might be able to get everyone’s attention for a minute or two but
in the European Rainbows it’s necessary to go round and repeat the message 8 or 9 times. Announcements range from requests for more help in the kitchen, to gather more firewood, to give generously to the Magic Hat, and reminders to please, please, cover your shit.

There are also announcements from people offering workshops that day as varied as earth oven construction, 10 day Thai massage courses and contact dance sessions. By full moon in the European Gatherings the atmosphere becomes almost Biblical as a whole cast of ragged, inspired prophets preach to the masses, providing the intermission entertainment while everyone waits for second time.

I’ll never forget the French brother whose tanned body suggested that he didn’t spend much of his life with his clothes on; he liked to walk around the circle naked, pausing every now and then to face us and announce matter-of-factly:

‘Tantra. After food circle in the forest.’

Although I couldn’t imagine anyone taking him up on his offer, I heard he usually got half a dozen followers each day.

The people making announcements are the public faces of the Rainbow and often set the tone for the Gathering. I remember listening to complaints from first timers at the Bosnian European Gathering as every day the announcers rocked up with a long list of prohibitions and warnings: Don’t walk on the high grass – the farmer needs it to make hay! Don’t cut living trees for your tipi poles! Cover your shit at all times or the flies will make us sick!

No one disagreed with what was being said but to hear it again and again each mealtime started to grate on our nerves. It was like being in school again, being lectured to like naughty kids with never a word of praise. We had to laugh though when one Slovenian brother brought a bit of Balkan spirit to the announcements:

‘Look, the next time I see someone has cut a tree for his tipi I give you two choices: or I call the forest police or I burn your tipi down.’ He made it halfway round the circle before a couple of sisters jumped up and just hugged him out of the circle.

The watershed moment came for me with the issue of cars that were stationed in the Shanti Field of the Gathering instead of down in the parking lot. One rather tiresome announcer walked around the food circle morning and night lamenting in a monotone voice:

‘Brothers and sisters! There are still cars in the Shanti Field! We have a consensus in the Rainbow that no cars should be in the Gathering!’

People began to dread his approach and suspected that he might happily go on this way for the entire month. But before that could happen, one bright German brother leaped up one evening, brimming with energy as he cried:

‘Beautiful family! Tomorrow morning we’re going to make a car-painting workshop! We’re going along to the Shanti Field at 7am with all the children to paint all the cars we can find! And then the next day we’ll have a how-to-start-a-car-without-a-key workshop and sell the cars in town to buy lots of delicious food for all the Family!’

The next day all the cars but one were gone. The last belonged to a sister who had broken her ankle and she was happy for the kids to paint all over her vehicle. This example stayed in my heart for a long time to come after that, showing me how a little of the right spirit and humour could accomplish so much more than telling everyone off for being bad hippies.

A couple of years later at the Ukranian Gathering I noticed there was a big communication gap between the Russians who comprised about half of those gathered and the Europeans. Very few of the usual focalisers had turned up that year and despite a stomach full of nerves,
I found myself stepping forwards to address the circle. The Translation Routine is a standard clown double act and, with the help of a theatrical Russian speaker, we ended up using comedy to find creative ways to get the message across; when one sister was bitten by a poisonous snake, we went around the circle and told everyone about *a beautiful brother snake who lives in the high grass* (we layed down and slithered about on the ground) *but who is very shy and runs away when he hears people stamping their feet* (and we rolled off to the side to illustrate)!

Or when one brother was arrested by the local cops for not having his passport with him when he went to the village to buy bread (and spent three days locked up until his friends brought him along his papers), we went around the circle and announced that *we are so lucky to be in the Ukraine with the friendliest police in the world! They’re so hospitable that they will make up any excuse at all – like not carrying your passport with you – to make you come and stay with them for a few days*!

I was sometimes asked to announce up to 7 or 8 different things and, faced with the limited attention span of an audience who really just wanted to eat their lunch, I tried to always arrive overflowing with energy, beside myself with excitement, to tell everyone that the kitchen needed more help and that good hippies take their trash back with them to Babylon as souvenirs of their stay! I’d run and jump and shout my announcements around the circle and spend so much energy that afterwards I sometimes had to crouch down on the ground and shiver for a few minutes to recover.

I saw the attention of the circle as something precious, sacred even, and believed that more than just rules and admonitions should be given in return. I’d read somewhere that communication is 90% about *what’s heard* rather than what’s *said*. If announcements were to work then they needed to be made with dedication and perhaps an almost manic enthusiasm. On a personal level it showed me how to work with crowds, it let me serve the Family with all the energy I had to give and...well, it was a great way to get girls.

The following year in Finland, we took it to a whole other level; we had to remind everyone on a daily basis that due to the unexpected heat wave there was a fire ban in effect and that as we were camped in the middle of a nature reserve, dogs had to be kept on a leash.

The fire warnings in particular quickly grew repetitve and so we were forced to get creative to get the message across. Teaming up with 2 other brothers and a gang of kids, we performed the Rainbow Rap. With baseball caps on the wrong way round and jeans hanging low, we slouched into the circle and began our act:

‘*My brothers and my sisters I need your attention!*
*There’s a few things we think we oughta mention!*
*There’s a little story we think you should know about the 27th European Rainbow!*’

We each delivered our lines with the others backing each other up with hip hop gestures and pseudo ‘in-the-hood’ accents. We were received in complete silence and utter confusion. Undaunted we continued:

‘*I wake up in the morning, want to make some chai,*
*But you can’t make a fire!*
*So tell me why!*
*Coz the weather is hot, the weather is dry,*
*and just one spark could make the forest cry!*’

At which point the kids sang with wagging fingers:

‘*Baby, don’t light no fire!*’ to the tune of the Doors song and suddenly everyone got the idea and burst into applause.
We continued:

‘Dogs are our brothers!
Brother you’re a dog!
But tying them up sure seems odd?
See, we made a promise to keep them on a leash
so the baby birds could be at peace!’

At which the boys dropped to the floor to begin barking as the girls sang:

‘Don’t let the dogs out!’

We finished with:

‘It’s time we started thinking as a Family!
I and I means you and me!
No one can tell me what to do
the Rainbow needs respect, it don’t need rules!’

and the kids sang:

‘We don’t need no education,
Hey, teacher! Leave those hippies alone!’

‘The more that I give, the more I’ve got to give,
It’s the way that I live, it’s what I’m living for!’

The first time I ever heard about the Magic Hat I couldn’t quite believe it. How could a Gathering of hundreds or even thousands of people possibly function on a basis of free donations? If nobody put anything in the Hat how would everyone eat?

Because, as I was informed by smiling faces around the fire, it’s magic.

Money is the point at which many dreams and beautiful ideas meet the real world and promptly fall to bits. Prayers, songs and hugs have, let’s face it, a limited exchange value in the marketplace and the vagaries of finance can seem quite alien to the spiritual path. The need to make a living can appear as one of the fundamental chains of Babylon: to trade time for cash, to dress and behave according to the demands of a faceless employer, our spirits fading away within the bondage of wage slavery when we could be dancing free with Mother Earth beneath our bare feet...

It even rankles with some in the Rainbow that we have to pay at all for things in order to live. With so many houses in the world, why are we charged rent for a roof over our heads? Fruits and vegetables are the natural harvest of Mother Earth so why do we have to buy them in the supermarket? Why should property laws prevent us from living on the land – doesn’t the planet belong to all of us? And why should we have to work to support a system of waste and excess that depends on raping the planet for its resources, turning the developing world into one giant sweatshop? In the Rainbow it seems somehow sordid to even think about how to make a living when it’s self-evident that all the best things in life – playing music around fires, exchanging massages in the sun and making love in forest glades – all come for free...

All of which perhaps explains why most people feel uncomfortable talking about money at all in the Gatherings. There’s no rent to pay in a tipi, after all. As long as the food keeps on arriving twice a day, we can be free of the entire financial matrix, if only for a cycle of the moon. Others might choose to see money as a kind of an energy, the flow of which ultimately depends more on your own karma than anything else. To worry about how to make it would be to lose trust in the
Great Spirit; to forget that what goes around comes around and that, with the right intention, anything can be accomplished in this world, regardless of your material means.

Hence the Magic. After each meal, after the main announcements have been made, a couple of musicians will make the rounds with a borrowed hat, possibly to be carried by a small child, and sing a Magic Hat song. There are few sights quite as touching as a five year old child dedicating himself to the sacred duty of carrying the Magic Hat, sternly reminding people to give kisses or energy if they don’t have any money to put in.

After the calm of sitting down to eat for an hour, the Magic Hat is the call to action and the musicians are generally joined by others clapping hands and singing along, dancing and tumbling along behind in a procession that approaches like a joyous carnival parade, radiating joy and celebrating life even as it collects the cash necessary to keep the whole show going.

There are several Magic Hat songs but the most well-known is an unusually funky number that goes:

‘Deep inside my heart I’ve got this everlasting love
it’s shining like a sun, radiating on everyone,
and the more that I give, the more I’ve got to give,
it’s the way that I live, it’s what I’m living for.’

The Magic Hat marks the end of the meal and is a chance to get the blood moving with some song and dance. It can be one of the most joyous moments of the day and sometimes it turns into a party that lasts until the cries for ‘help in the kitchen!’ to prepare dinner become just too loud to ignore.

For musicians, playing for the Magic Hat is a chance to show off a little and put their skills to some practical purpose. At other times, however, it can be a thankless labour of love; there have been times where I lost all feeling in my fingers playing the same chords over and over for the half an hour it took to get around the circle, waiting for stoned hippies to hunt in the folds of their clothes for a couple of pennies – which they then dropped and had to hunt for in the long grass by the flickering flame of a lighter.

Rainbow finances depend on a strong, timely Magic Hat performance. One rain shower can send everyone running for shelter before the Hat even comes round and that’s half the day’s revenue lost. It’s also true that one brother mooching around the circle droning a dull tune on an out-of-tune guitar will raise far less than a team of musicians and dancers with stars in their eyes, their energy lifting everyone’s hearts to the sky and their hands to their pockets. Donating is often more about impulse than anything else and people tend to give more when they see others giving, too. At its best, the Magic Hat is like a kind of a spell, encouraging everyone to just give it all away, give it all away, to maintain the magic of the Rainbow and feed the five thousand.

Of course even if many people find it too distasteful to think about money at the Rainbow, there’s an economics to the Gatherings and there are focalisers who keep the books and make sure that all debts get paid. But the accounts are generally so haphazardly done, with chaotic columns of monies coming in and going out jotted down in a ragged school notebook, that perhaps there really is magic at work to stop the Rainbow going bankrupt. While you can generally see how much money is currently in the Magic Hat, no one usually has any clear idea what the total revenue of a Gathering might be. That might seem like pretty basic data to have but the question hardly comes to anyone’s mind. It would be like asking a magician how he does his tricks. As long as there’s enough for today’s shopping mission is all that counts. Tomorrow will take care of itself.

I have an idea how much it takes to feed everyone at the Rainbow each day but I’m not going to list any actual numbers. Let’s just say it’s cheap. Even though there are expenditures like petrol for the cars...
doing the shopping, new pots and tools, extra tarps, rope and other miscellaneous costs – a vegan wholegrain diet allows the Rainbow to subsist on a shoestring.

There are, of course, plenty of people who come to the Gatherings who, for one reason or another, never put in a penny. It’s understood that there are times in your life when you might be able to support the Rainbow generously and other times when the Rainbow may support you. Some of those who come to the Gatherings simply don’t ever have any money; by hitchhiking around, living on food found in supermarket dumpsters and sleeping wherever they can, they may spend less than 1000 euros a year or, indeed, succeed in not touching money at all. But regardless of how much they can contribute to the Magic Hat, it’s a given that they’re welcome all the same. The Rainbow puts its faith in trust rather than accountability. As ingenuous as it might sound, if there’s one common sentiment in the Rainbow it’s that all is in the hands of the Great Spirit – and there will always be enough.

An economist who attempted to analyse the finances of the Rainbow would probably conclude that the Magic Hat is largely funded by those attending the Gathering for the first time. Even a modest contribution by the standards of their usual living costs might amount to a generous donation that covers all the other penniless participants. But I’ve also seen brothers and sisters, veterans of Gatherings, who throw piles of banknotes into the Magic Hat with joy when they find themselves unusually solvent after a season of picking fruit or – horror of horrors – a few months of full time work. There’s such love for the Rainbow and gratitude for all it’s given them that they’re delighted to be able to afford that opportunity for others.

There are occasions when the Magic loses some of its spark and the Hat comes back with just a few coins and a boiled sweet in it and in most Gatherings it’s necessary to remind everyone not to get too complacent about the Magic. In extreme circumstances, however, we can always get by on cheap meals of dal and rice.

In the Finnish European Rainbow Gathering when it looked like there might not be enough money in the Magic Hat to buy food for the peak full moon week, I teamed up with a talented Belgian brother – a professional actor – to make a fund raising performance; dressed in homemade hooded robes, he played the role of a professional magician, complete with a pretty female assistant, while I grabbed the attention of the circle.

‘Brothers and sisters! Boys and girls! Hippies and freaks! We have a treat in store for you tonight! Allow me to present, all the way from Azerbaijan, the amazing, the stupendous, Jadooji! And tonight he’s going to show us his special Magic Hat trick!’

Jadooji then made a show of concentrating hard and casting a spell on his Magic Hat – but nothing came out. He then complained to me in ‘Azerbaijani’.

‘Ah! Jadooji says that for the trick to work he needs an ordinary coin or banknote! Thank you! Now, let’s all support the magic by chanting Ommmmmmmmmmm!’ Whereupon Jadooji pulled out a hidden cauliflower from the hat. ‘I don’t believe it, he’s turned money into food! If that isn’t magic I don’t know what is!

‘But we can all make that magic! So please, give generously to the Magic Hat!’

That night 4000 euros went in and the week’s budget was taken care of.

In the European Gatherings the finances need a great deal more care. Not only is it a greater challenge to order food for thousands of people, there’s also a lot more money coming in and out of the Magic Hat.
Rainbow accounts are all transparent and anyone can come and count the money with the focalisers after each food circle when the Magic Hat is brought to them. I once volunteered to look after the cash before and it quickly became something of a burden. I didn’t feel comfortably leaving a few thousand euros in my day bag when I stripped off to bathe in the river and while I could have hidden it somewhere, had it gone missing I knew that there could be a cloud around my name forever.

One solution for the Magic Hat focaliser is to divide the cash up and spread it out among trusted friends who might just hide it under their tents or in the hollow of a tree. But with everyone coming and going it’s easy to forget who had much and where they were camped, necessitating a frantic search for someone called David camped near the river. Or was it maybe Donald?

Worse, though, is the historic handling of cash between Gatherings. On countless occasions the leftover money has gone missing through the course of the year. It’s happened that the person holding onto the Magic Hat simply died and no one was going to trouble his mourning relatives for a couple of thousand euros. On other occasions the money has been lost in casinos, or even invested in marijuana (‘to make profit for the Family!’) – sometimes with disastrous consequences. At other times it’s unclear who had the leftover money in their custody in the first place.

It might seem like a solution to simply find the most incorruptible, financially-stable person in the Rainbow to look after the money between Gatherings. But the mud of rumour gets thrown around all too easily and I was told of a brother who looked after the European Magic Hat finances faithfully for several years before one day absconding and using it to finance militants in Pakistan. I only learned the true story much later:

It happened that every year he drove his bus to India and on this occasion he’d had some repair work done on the engine. The mechanics assured him that as he was a guest in India it was their pleasure to help and there would be no charge. On his return journey, however, he was held up at the Pakistani border and the customs officials discovered a cache of weapons hidden beneath the suspension and he was jailed for smuggling arms. Duped into becoming an unwitting mule he was painfully naïve, certainly, but honest and not a penny of the Magic Hat was ever lost.

Even when the person holding the money is trustworthy there’s still the question of what he’s should to do with it. All money in the Rainbow is supposed to only be spent with the consensus of supply focalisers but once the Gathering is over that becomes harder to coordinate.

‘People kept calling me up to say they wanted to buy a new tipi for the next Gathering. Or new pots. I didn’t even always know who they were. People were yelling at me for holding onto the money and others would have yelled if I had given it away!’ one Israeli brother told me, shrugging his shoulders, ‘Finally I just buried the whole thing and refused to dig it up until the next Rainbow.’

After lunch, the circle breaks up slowly as people heed the call to help gather firewood, mount a tipi or perhaps just make a very personal mission to the shit pit. People drift down to the river to wash, attend a workshop or head into town to buy chocolate.

The balance between work and play is inevitably tilted towards the latter with a prevailing belief that the Rainbow doesn’t live on bread alone. And though it usually works out that enough people feel the urge to actually do something and join the kitchen or firewood crews, from time to time those with a strong work ethic get frustrated at the anarchy of the Rainbow.
‘You know, we’ve all got to shit.’ one hard-working brother patiently explained to each knot of hippies he found sitting around with songbooks or astrological charts, ‘And the pits aren’t going to dig themselves.’

When he noticed that the common excuse of his press gang targets was that they were planning to attend a workshop that day, he asked me, ‘Couldn’t we make a rule to have all the workshops two hours after food circle so we could use that time to get stuff done?’

It was a sensible suggestion and if the Rainbow had been comprised entirely of Scandinavians it might even have worked. But the Rainbow functions in free flow, an organic chaos that escapes any imposition upon it. Proposing a schedule beyond trying to eat twice a day was pure fantasy, no matter how reasonable it might have been.

When I’m in ambassadorial mode for the Rainbow and try to communicate the beauty of the Gatherings to long-suffering friends they often ask me: what do you do all day? For someone unaccustomed to having almost infinite free time it’s a hard concept to grasp. It’s true that your first day or two might drag a little – there’s no email to check, no calls to make, no newspaper to read. But after a while a shift occurs in your internal rhythms. One day you awake with a to-do list of wash socks and learn a new song and feel like you have your work cut out.

Not only do the basic necessities of going to the toilet or having a wash take far longer without running water on tap, the Rainbow is almost relentlessly social. Your day fills up with a hundred conversations, hugs, musical jams, opportunities to flirt, play with the kids and with any number of tiny chores like looking for someone who could lend you a nail clipper.

Just sitting down to eat twice a day can swallow several hours. People can be slow to gather, you hang on for ages hoping there will be second time beans, and you end up dancing to the Magic Hat for an hour after the meal. Or get sucked into a discussion about whether the Americans really went to the moon. Although you can just head off into the forest to meditate alone whenever you feel like it, mostly people find themselves drawn to the never-ending party like moths to a flame.

For those who like to do something more constructive with their time, the workshops are what gives colour to the days in the Rainbow and are often the most enduring memories people take away with them. Usually the only way to hear about the workshops for the day is to wait for the announcements at food circle, for, while there’s occasionally an attempt to draw up a schedule on the free-for-all information board, it’s usually just another attempt at traffic control for butterflies. People announce workshops when they’re in the mood and it’s an unusually-grounded hippie who actually checks if anyone was planning to use the main tipi for anything else than his Past Life Regression Workshop.

The range of activities is tremendous, even if there is a strong leaning towards the New Age. I’ve seen workshops offered on tantric healing, reiki initiations, the Mayan calendar, Rainbow songs, rocket stove construction, yoga and tai chi, gypsy guitar playing, physical theatre, traditional folk dancing, Thai massage and Shamanic Orisha trance dances, among others.

One girl told me she had even seen a workshop announced on How to Fly. An hour later she saw 20 people running down the slope, flapping their arms as they tried to get airborne.

‘People were really disappointed afterwards!’ she remembered fondly.

Workshops tend to be pretty hit and miss affairs. You never really know if the person leading one has just read half a book on the subject and now consider themselves qualified to teach or whether they
have 20 years of experience in the field and are sharing their talents for the love of it.

And it’s a scary step to take when you announce your first workshop. Do you really know enough to teach or will someone turn up who knows the subject much better than you do? Will you make it before or after food circle? Will anyone come or will you end up sitting under a tree looking a bit foolish, trying to seem quite calm about your failure to draw even one attendee?

The first time I tried to make a workshop it was on How to Make a Living From the Internet and Travel Forever! I half-expected people in the circle to throw their rice bowls at me but everyone laughed at the suggestion to bring along their laptops and I went off to the coffee kitchen to see if anyone would turn up. I took a seat at the back and realised that there wasn’t really any space to make the workshop there anyway – a crowd of people were already drinking coffee under the 5 x 5 plastic tarp stretched across a few branches driven into the ground and all the shade was taken up. I decided to pretend that I had forgotten all about it and got out my notepad to do a bit of writing.

‘Ok, shall we begin the workshop?’ the coffee maker suggested and 25 people turned around eagerly, having apparently come along for just that reason.

So I could well recognize the anxiety in the eyes of a Belgian actor when he made his first theatre workshop at the Ukranian Rainbow.

‘I told them to come at 6!’ he complained and shrugged off the suggestion that no one knew what time it was at the Rainbow. ‘If they were serious then they could ask someone!’

I encouraged him to just start doing some warm-up exercises with the 3 or 4 people hanging around and in no time another 20 people came running over when they saw the workshop had started. We had a great time playing drama games and for the next day he reluctantly took my advice to start when the sun was at two hand lengths away from the horizon – a condition met with eager questions from the students: was that two hands with the fingers outstretched or two horizontal palms on top of each other?

Rainbow Time.

In the great collective jumble of ideals, beliefs and philosophies to be found in the Rainbow, if there’s one universal law that everyone could agree upon it would be this: shit happens.

Shit is, of course, something of a taboo topic in the Western world. Not a subject for polite conversation – much less the dinner table – and we collectively pretend it doesn’t really exist. Women don’t shit, for instance (or at least I’ve met few who admit it), neither do movie stars in their films. There’s no mention of Jesus taking a crap in the Bible and speculation about whether Muhammad ever had the runs would probably earn me a fatwah.

The late Italian journalist, Tiziano Terzani, remarked that his strategy for dealing with intimidating officials he had to interview was to visualise them on the toilet. No matter how powerful or terrible the personage, the image of them taking a shit helped put things on a level footing again.

In fact, there are few things more democratic than shit. Old or young, male or female, rich or poor, everyone in the Rainbow ends up at the shit pits sooner or later. Of course, it’s hardly the most glamorous of places – just a couple of trenches with loose earth piled at the sides to cover up afterwards. A particularly efficient Gathering might even

Rainbow Life
have a bucket of ash standing by and a sign reminding everyone to cover their shit with earth and then ash to prevent flies. But humble as they might be, the shit pits are at the heart of Rainbow Gatherings.

Occasionally at some smaller Gatherings no one gets it together to dig a shit pit and everyone just wanders off to a discreet distance with a hoe to dig a hole. But relying on any crowd to be self-responsible is inevitably disastrous. It quickly becomes an unpleasant game of Treasure Hunt when looking for firewood as people end up shitting closer and closer to their tents, covering up with just a few leaves and sticks.

But at the larger Rainbows if the shit pits are overflowing then you can have an impending disaster of medieval proportions within hours. Thus it’s to be hoped that someone reliable takes it upon themselves to be shit pit focaliser and solicits the help of strong diggers to create new trenches faster than the old ones fill up, each location for the pits chosen with the care of a civic planner.

Sometimes, however, circumstances can weight the odds on the side of the shit.

One brother told me about a Gathering he was at in Australia which became infamous for an incident remembered as The Night of the Living Dal. There was a mix up in the kitchen and some lentils from the morning ended up getting served at night after sitting around in the heat through the day. All was well until the early hours of the morning when a collective intestinal rumbling was heard across the camp, followed by a mass stampede towards the shit pit. 69 of the 70 people gathered found themselves squatting over the trenches, groaning terribly, while a Russian brother – the only one not to have eaten dinner that night – was put hard to work digging new pits as fast as the old ones were filling up.

Anyone who has traveled in India is likely to have seen from a train window the liberating portrait of Indian kids taking their morning shit by the railway tracks, emptying their bowels with a dignity appropriate to the occasion. A far cry from the private, perfumed toilets of the West.

And yet in the Rainbow the spirit of collective shitting is also to be found.

I often ask people about their initial experiences in the Rainbow and one brother told me he arrived to his first Gathering and felt a sudden twist in his bowels; asking a sister where the toilets were she responded merrily:

‘The shit pits? I’m going there myself!’ Taking him by the hand, she led him to the trenches where he had the novel experience of taking a crap and making smalltalk at the same time, his new friend squatting a few meters in front.

Privacy is generally given to those who want it and sometimes the Gatherings take a more conservative tone and it becomes the protocol to go one by one to the pits, the others hopping up and down in line at a respectful distance. But there are always the hard-core hippies who believe the pits are there for everyone when they need them and it’s just up to you to deal with it. The psychological damage incurred by these incidents is incalculable. I personally consider myself scarred for life by the sight of certain individuals pulling down their trousers a few meters in front of me and evacuating last night’s dinner with a resounding fart.

Many dread going to the shit pits simply because of the vulnerability it implies. For better or worse, defecation is where our true colours really can be seen. Small wonder then that there are married couples who first met at the shit pits.

‘When I met my first wife we couldn’t bear to be apart for more than a few moments!’ a brother told me around the fire one night, his smile
radiant with the memory, ‘So we used to go to the shit pit together and hold hands as we squatted!’

‘Make the shit pit a beautiful place!’ Announcers at food circles sometimes implore everyone gathered at food circle, ‘Bring flowers with you to brighten the place up! Take a guitar with you to sing a bhajan or two when you’re done for your brothers and sisters taking their turn – shit is sacred!’

It’s important that people use the pits but occasionally there’s someone who takes the matter a little too seriously. I heard of one sister who was asked by a particularly militant brother if she was on the way to the pit and, if so, would she mind shitting on the piece of cardboard he had for her. When she asked why, he informed her that he intended to put it inside the tent of anyone he caught shitting in the forest as a punishment. That was a rare, exaggerated example but the shit pits suffer almost as much extremism as the kitchen. As so many people in the Rainbow have been to India, many have adopted the practice of using water and the left hand rather than toilet paper. It’s much cleaner, they insist, would you use paper if you had shit under your armpit? It saves trees and doesn’t pollute the earth! Naturally it’s not an easy sell. Still, no self-respecting hippie in the Rainbow would be seen dead with a roll of tissue paper and, in the spirit of live and let others know how to live, newcomers sometimes find themselves being jumped on by the Rainbow Police for using it.

I remember my first night in India at the age of 18; I’d been enjoying a first dinner on a restaurant terrace in Delhi with some backpackers I’d met on the plane until an unmistakable rumbling assured me it was time to brave the squat toilet down in my room. A cockroach scuttled out of the way and I filled up the plastic jug beneath the tap as I prepared to touch my anus for the first time in my life. I was understandably anxious – a friend had cheerfully assured me that travelers in India compared the brown stains on the hands with alacrity. I reached around with trepidation and, to my surprise, discovered it to be a unique, beautiful, even sensual experience. I at once resolved to never use toilet paper again.

But I’d been prepared for the experience, I’d contemplated it during the 10 hour flight to India and had already accepted that it was a necessary initiation if I wanted to be a Real India Traveler. For a first-timer at a Rainbow to be made to feel ashamed for carrying a roll of tissue paper with them is an arrogance that borders on cruelty.

If people in the Rainbow can at times seem intolerant or superior at times it’s probably a reflection of our collective insecurity. Some of us come to the Rainbow as a way of rejecting mainstream society and some subscribe to the new lifestyle with all the zeal of new converts. Nonetheless it’s also true that the Rainbow is inherently fragile and unless our culture is protected it risks becoming just another free festival. The Rainbow survives largely by example. There’s no constitution, no membership and no way of keeping the Rainbow way of life alive other than by living it.

With such a loose structure it continually amazes me how much agreement there is about what is acceptable behaviour in the Rainbow. Almost everyone is grateful to be in a space where no one drinks alcohol, everyone understands the importance of not polluting the rivers with soap and no one walks around with headphones on listening to their favourite Mp3’s.

But then there are more nebulous questions in the Gatherings that come down to one’s interpretation of the Rainbow spirit – can you send an SMS to family to let them know you’re okay? Is it okay to use tampons? Can you secretly keep a tin of tuna in your tent for
when you feel your protein levels dropping on a diet of mushy vegetables and rice?

People in the Gatherings tend to just make up their own minds about this kind of thing but they’re usually not done out in the open for fear of being jumped upon. Some things do affect the general atmosphere – I personally have no hesitation in asking someone who insists on making a phone call to go climb a mountain first – but what about if someone lectures a sister on the folly of wearing nail polish?

That we respect certain principles in the Rainbow are part of what makes it such a special place to be. But the moment those principles are seen as rules and prohibitions the door is opened to the kind of legalistic, punitive mentality that we hoped to leave behind in Babylon.

Enter the Rainbow Police.

At the height of the European Rainbow in Finland over half of the people gathered were Finnish and they embodied the polite, respectful behaviour that seemed to me part of the national character. It also meant, however, that they took the Rainbow very seriously and there was such an atmosphere of conformity and obedience that some in the Gathering felt their spirits recoil against it.

‘Okay, so there was a fire ban but we could have had a little fire inside our tipi,’ one Italian brother laughed in exasperation, ‘We’ve been doing this for years. And alright, the owner of the land wanted our dogs to be on leashes but you can’t keep them like that for 24 hours a day for an entire month!’

The Italians in particular felt the atmosphere to be so stifling that on the last day of the Gathering they decided to teach the Finnish a lesson. All of them veterans of many a Rainbow, they bought a hundred cans of beer and sat drinking in the parking lot with the stereo on their van playing loud.

‘Then we let all of our dogs run free and we went about the camp lighting fires,’ one Italian brother told me gleefully, ‘the Finnish came to put them out and we’d light another one a little further along!’

Once again I was reminded how important the biodiversity of the spirit is to the Rainbow. In every culture the figure of the Trickster looms large, the mischievous personage in mythology and art who shakes everything up with his anarchic, free-spirited behaviour. The Rainbow can certainly take itself too seriously at times. There are zealots and fundamentalists within our ranks – and they, too, have their role to play in maintaining tradition – but ultimately it’s not the letter of the law that keeps the Rainbow alive but the spirit we feel inside. And that knows no rules.

Rainbow Gatherings have only been happening for four decades but some of the rituals we use go back millennia. The Occupy movements of 2011 reminded the world of the power of peaceful assembly but that’s old hat to anyone who’s been to Rainbow Gatherings and attended a talking circle. They’re often called when there’s a need to resolve practical issues in the Gathering but can also just be a forum for expression, to bring out into the open what everyone is feeling inside.

Common to indigenous societies as far apart as Native Americans, the Vikings and Australian Aboriginals, the talking circle evolved as the most democratic way for groups to communicate and make decisions. The talking stick passes freely around the circle, staying as long as it needs to with each person and only the one holding it has the right to speak.

When I first heard of the talking circles they seemed as impractical as the Magic Hat – what if someone just took the stick and spoke forever? The Rainbow is a great teacher of patience however and while talking circles have the potential to be as never-ending as their geo-
metrical properties, is there so much harm done if we learn to listen a little more than we’re used to?

Some torturous occasions come to mind though; I remember sitting in the fierce heat of the Bosnian European Rainbow at seed camp when a talking circle was called after lunch to discuss what needed to be done before the official start of the Gathering. 150 of us sat there in the 40 degrees sun, t-shirts draped over our heads, trying to decide whether it would be worse to let the nose or the shoulders get burnt as the talking stick went round at a snail’s pace. It stopped altogether when it reached a German girl who took a deep breath and announced:

‘I’m so happy to be here! I give thanks to Mother Earth and Father Sky and the spirits of this place! And, well, I want to tell you the story of how we came to this beautiful place...’

We passed in and out of a sun-struck stupor, cooking our brains in the midday heat and tuning in only every now and then to hear the warbling monologue continue: ‘And there were wonderful herbs growing in the forest! And the water was so fresh!’ By the time that the sister in question summed up with ‘...we felt like a true Family planting a seed for a Gathering full of light! And well, I don’t want to talk for too long...’ everyone else had already forgotten anything meaningful they might have had to say.

But as protracted and painful as the talking circles can be on occasion, they’re often the most memorable events of the Gathering. It’s when we take time out from the chores and the celebration and really meet each other. There’s never any obligation to speak but often, just the act of holding an old bit of wood can make a magic of its own. Whereas a normal discussion would be dominated by the confident and the eloquent, the talking stick allows us to hear the voices of even the quietest and most timid of speakers whose shy words sometimes go the deepest.

Topics shift with the wind. Perhaps a dog owner feels unwelcome after a clash with parents afraid for the safety of their children. Someone else might admit to feelings of low self-esteem in the Rainbow when encountering so many talented and charismatic brothers and sisters. Others might raise questions about how we can take some of the freedom and harmony of the Rainbow back to Babylon with us.

In a good talking circle, once the stick has flowed around a few times, something quite spooky happens: while waiting for your turn to talk, mentally rehearsing your contribution to the discussion, it frequently happens that the person before you expresses almost everything you planned to say. It’s almost as if a group mind is born simply by the magic of actually listening to each other. No one needs to be convinced of anything or proven wrong, there’s simply a deepening of understanding as everyone puts themselves in the shoes of the speaker. The harmony can grow to such a point that there’s nothing much left to say in the end but I love you family!

At my first Rainbow in the Israeli desert I was so skeptical about the talking circles until I saw one in action; a few cars had just been stolen from the parking lot and fingers were inevitably pointed at the Bedouin who walked in and out of the Rainbow without really interacting with us. There was some pushing and shoving around the main fire that night and the malcontent gave rise to a talking circle the next day.

One brother joked that a little bit of stealing was just part of the traditional Bedouin way of life. Their concepts of ownership were rather more...flexible than ours. An observation not without its basis in fact. Another sister remarked that although we were gathered there to unite with all the colours of the Rainbow, yet there remained a good deal of fear and mistrust of the Bedouin among the Israelis gathered. Why had we not invited them to join this circle, for instance? Why did we not greet and hug them when we met them in the camp? Why did they not come to eat with us at the food circle?
With this open forum to express the rage, confusion and fear held within, the talking circle did a lot to bring us closer together that afternoon. Inspired by the discussion, that evening I went to sit with the Bedouin who squatted around a small fire that they replenished by ripping branches of wild bushes from the ground every few minutes. Their jeep stood a few meters away.

I received a warm welcome and we spent a pleasant hour drinking tea and chatting in a mixture of Hebrew and English. I learned that although they had embraced many benefits of the modern world (moving around by jeep rather than by camel, never going anywhere without their cellphones), still they felt most at ease with the basic pleasures of life that they found in the desert: the stars, the sky, the wind.

Then one of them received a phone call. There was a quick exchange among them in Arabic and then they all turned to me, thanking me for my visit and wishing me a good night. I took the hint, thanked them in return and then walked back towards my tent, pleased with myself for having made what was surely an important cultural gesture.

A few moments later, however, the camp was thrown into panic as two Israeli army jeeps came thundering between the tents, hippies throwing themselves out of the way just in time. The patrol split to the left and right, one of the jeeps passing me with a searchlight mounted on top and a soldier in the back with his gun at the ready. When they had passed I heard another engine start and the Bedouin sped out through the middle of the camp with their lights off. The Israelis wheeled around to give chase and everyone huddled together as we heard the sound of gunfire not far away.

I suddenly understood that the phone call had been a warning. The Egyptian border was close by and as the Bedouin had made a living for centuries in this part of the world by smuggling, I was left only with the question: what did they have in the back of the jeep?
The more I found myself at home in the Rainbow the harder it became to make a life outside of it. When each Gathering ended I’d make my way to the train station, ignore the turned-up noses of the locals who could apparently smell me from across the waiting room (you only get so clean washing without soap in icy river water) and wonder where the hell to go next. Back in Babylon I’d feel like an alien observing a foreign race; the air was polluted with chemical scents and tinny commercial music, no one made eye contact in the street and everything seemed to be for sale.

Sometimes I would try and follow up on the faded, scribbled addresses that I could still read after the last rainstorm had made a mockery of my cheap tent and drenched everything I owned. My clothes never quite lost that musty smell until I next got to a functioning washing machine. But even if I found a warm welcome somewhere it only ever took a couple of days to realise that laundered, rested and fed, I still didn’t have a life of my own to speak of.

Occasionally I’d visit a Rainbow girlfriend but that rarely worked out for long. Even friends I’d got to know around the main fire were harder to connect with once they were back in their usual routines. Confronted with a world of homes, jobs and ambition, my life seemed about as complicated as the contents of my rucksack. While everyone around me struggled with their relationships, their families, their employers, I felt like Peter Pan.

I had a small passive income from the advertising on www.roadjunky.com, an alternative travel guide I’d been running for several years, allowing me to work just by logging on once in a while at an internet cafe. It brought me in just enough to catch Easyjet flights or a hostel bed when the weather was too bad to sleep outside but my economy
only really functioned by spending time in several Gatherings a year. It was cheaper to live in the Rainbow than outside of it. It was also so much simpler. I didn’t have to pay any rent to pitch my tent in the forest and with no shortage of friendly camp fires my social life took care of itself.

It was also true that I had such high times in the Rainbow that everything else seemed a bit flat. As pissed off as I sometimes got with the spiritual fundamentalism, the mushy food, the days of bad weather and the inane songs, I was never happier than arriving at the main circle to cries of welcome home, a cup of chai and a roaring fire. Each Rainbow would hold new lessons and challenges, opportunities for laughter and joy, sadness and understanding. I would meet old friends, some of whom I might not have seen for years, but mostly I met new faces, novel pieces in the great human puzzle and wondered how it was we all fit together.

There were times when I despaired and wondered if we were all just avoiding life, playing truant while everyone in the world was growing up. But then there were moments of such magic and joy that I couldn’t understand why everyone didn’t come to the Gatherings. Either we were totally wasting our lives or else we were part of something meaningful and beautiful. Maybe both.

At times I felt like I was living in a hippie refugee camp, slumming it with the flotsam and jetsam of the counterculture, sharing head lice with the kind of people who thought airplane trails were poisoning us with mind-controlling agents. But the Rainbow is such a free-flowing place that by the next day I might decide I was the luckiest soul on earth to be with people so full of optimism, compassion and zest for life.

It’s strange but it’s somehow easier to tell stories about all the crazy, disastrous, chaotic stuff in the Rainbow than about all the inspiring, harmonious, healing moments I’ve experienced. Then again, even Dante made hell sound so much more interesting than heaven. I wondered if someone reading this book will be put off or motivated to go to a Gathering. For me, the Rainbow really is a Divine Comedy and the measure of its health must be how easily we can laugh about it all. Spirituality surely dies the moment we take ourselves too seriously.

What I can say is that I scarcely remember a day in the Rainbow that went by without a multitude of giggles, tears, whoops of celebration and meditative moments. Where else in the world was I going to find a place like that?

Much of the Rainbow life takes place around the fire. The focal point of diverse cultures and tribes since time immemorial, the dancing flames and flickering light remain as engaging today as they ever were. Now that we spend much of our time hypnotised by the cold glare of a computer screen, gathering around the glow of the main fire gives us a way to reconnect to the past.

We’re burning sunlight when we light and heat our homes but that lesson is so much clearer when sat in front of a smoking red fire, the hungry jinn demanding more wood to feed its insatiable appetite; our senses engaged by the crackling wood, the aromatic smoke – it’s better than television.

Sitting around the fire in the Rainbow I’ve often wondered if people used to die young as a result of breathing in so much smoke. One bad gust of burning wood to your lungs must have the same collateral effect as puffing through ten cigarettes. It doesn’t help that many people in the Gatherings don’t have much in the way of forest skills either and so a lot of green wood and rotten old logs get thrown onto the fire, producing thick clouds of noxious gases. Some of the older hands in the Rainbow try to pass on their wood-lore but the education of newcomers is a continual process.
At other times the smoke is the least of our worries as resinous wood
spits out sparks like a machine gun. Floating embers alight on woolen
shawls, sheep skin rugs, people’s hair and get rapidly swept off – if
anyone is awake enough to the danger.

‘I woke up around the fire one night,’ a brother told me, ‘and saw the
sister opposite me was trembling where she lay on the ground. At first
I thought she was just cold but then I looked in her eyes and saw that
she was in shock – some sparks from the fire had melted her sleeping
bag onto her skin!

‘I ran to the river and brought back cold clay to put on her. She re-
covered without any scars but was too weak to lift anything for days
afterwards.’

Sometimes the state of the fire in a Gathering can be an indicator of
the general mood. It only needs everyone present to bring a few sticks
with them to make a roaring blaze. But as most of us come from a
society where heating and cooking happen at the flick of a switch,
people don’t always realise that the wood doesn’t arrive to the main
fire by itself.

The fire was particularly weak in the European Ukrainian Gathering and
I had a theory it was connected to the inordinate amount of nail polish
the Russian sisters loved to wear. They seemed reluctant to damage
their nails by going to the forest to gather wood. The guys then stuck
around the camp to drink tea with the girls with the result that each
night there were 200 people shivering around a fire big enough for 20.

Some of the veterans tried to set an example by bringing in logs to
make such a blaze that the circle had no choice but to expand and let
everyone get closer to the fire. But on other nights we just gave up
and went back to make chai at someone’s private camp. When we
heard a distant cheer from the main circle someone speculated:

‘Maybe the didgeridoo player just donated his instrument to the fire.’

At other Gatherings fire is a political issue and we have to negoti-
ate with the authorities to be able to have one at all. In countries
where summer gets so dry that even a cigarette can destroy a for-
est its understandable that the locals get nervous about the presence
of hundreds of hippies getting stoned around camp fires. There are
plenty of people who come to the Rainbow for the first time and don’t
know just how combustible pine trees, for instance, can be. Or that
you need to put a stone bottom to any fire lit in a forest if you don’t
want to create a root fire that can smoulder for months underground.

Typically, however, there are those who declare it all to be Babylon
Paranoia and insist that they know what they’re doing – even as the
branches of the tree above them are drying out by the hour and pre-
paring to burst into flame. Sometimes we have to put a ban on private
fires altogether and even tell people not to light candles (the perfect
fire-starter) in front of their forest camps. But no one likes to be told
what to do and as no one has any more authority than anyone else it
can be an uphill struggle to avoid a forest fire.

The risk of destroying a forest can seem like an abstract fear, the kind
of thing that would never happen to you. Until it does. At a Rainbow
in the Golan Heights in Israel, one sister tried to burn her toilet paper
with the idea that it would be more ecological than just burying it.
Unfortunately she ended up starting a fire that destroyed an ecosys-
tem that will take 30 years to come back.

Although there’s always a small element of risk, a fire is central to
the Rainbow experience and it’s there that we get to kick back at
night. The drama of food circles is over and, beyond preparing a pot
of chai, there’s not much more work that can be done for the day. It’s
when the musicians can find a crowd, the drummers can get everyone
dancing, storytellers can spin a yarn; a place where you can strike up
conversations with new friends. The fires draw everyone in from all
corners of the camp and gather the energy dispersed during the day. Often you have no idea who’s even sat around the fire until a new flame lights up all the faces with the warm, forgiving glow that takes a few years off of everyone.

Symbolically the fire is at the heart of the Rainbow and for some it’s of immense ritual importance. Those who fancy themselves as Indian sadhus, in particular, often snort and scold newcomers for throwing a bit of orange peel into the fire or – god forbid – a cigarette butt. The ash is seen as the fire’s sacred gift to us and is used to wash pots in the kitchen and the hands of the servers before food circle. Even in the heaviest rain we try to keep the fire in the main circle burning throughout the Gathering for, whether it’s a life-saving warmth on a rainy night or a smoky nuisance in the morning sun, there’s a sense that it’s the same fire that’s always been burning.

For tens of thousands of years tribes have been sitting around fires, contemplating and celebrating life, and many in the Rainbow feel the same spirit burns in us today.

Whether the fire has mystical value or not, there’s no doubt that it lights up something inside us even as it heats our skin. Which is perhaps why it’s rare to find a fire without instruments and voices lifted in song. Music is the lifeblood of the Rainbow. You have only to walk out of your tent and hear a guitar being strummed, a drum tapped or a voice raised in song. Music lifts everyone’s spirits on a rainy day, brings people together to sing and dance, and provides the basis for just about all the celebratory aspects of the Rainbow.

Time was that a musician was welcome anywhere in the world. Before the advent of gramophones or radio the sound of music was the exception rather than the rule. Way back when instruments were scarce and most people worked too many hours to ever find the time to learn to play, a musician had an almost mystical status, channeling sacred melodies flowing through the air, a latent grace needing only a vessel.

I had a taste of what it might have been like in the old days when I traveled in Iran in 1997. The Ayatollahs had ruled that music was un-Islamic – presumably because it led to dance and the illicit mingling of the sexes. So when I hitchhiked in and began to practice my clarinet in a public square there quickly gathered a crowd around me. I apologised and explained that I wasn’t giving a concert – I’d only picked the instrument up for the first time a few weeks ago. But no one cared. They were so starved of music that even a stumbling rendition of *Hit the Road Jack!* received thunderous applause.

A musician in the modern world has a far harder time standing out. Not only can everyone’s brother ham out the chords to *Knocking On Heaven’s Door* (or God help us, *Stairway to Heaven*), but we’re deluged by music in an audio assault unprecedented in human history. People awake to radio alarm calls, Musak plays in elevators and on customer service helplines; to go shopping for clothes in a store is to be subjected to the latest repackaging of *I Can’t Live Without You, Together Forever, You Have To Be All Mine Until The End Of Time* blazing through the overhead speakers; childhood toys come equipped with happy melodies at the push of a colourful button; it’s a rare cafe or bar that doesn’t have the radio or a favourite playlist going and the advent of ring tones have condemned us to hearing 5 second snatches of classic songs from the past everywhere we go – would James Brown today *Feel Good* about his voice being used to irritate people on buses and trains all over the world?

The cellphone itself has become the modern ghetto blaster. New social fault lines emerge as people see no reason not to impose their musical taste on others in public – but are the discreet headphones any better? Witness a generation withdrawing from the world, cruising around town in a private audio universe, sharing the songs they’re
currently listening to in ‘real time’ on Twitter while they’re unable to hear the call of someone in the street who needs to ask directions...

There will always be a demand for live music but value tends to come from scarcity. Every musician knows the letdown of telling friends about a new song or melody they’ve written, only to be invited to add it to the collection of 50,000 other songs they have on their hard drive. So when musicians come to the Rainbow it’s like a return to the old days. Arrive at a fire with a guitar and a cheer might go up. Pull out a violin or a clarinet and you can feel the buzz of anticipation in the air. Not only is music cherished in the absence of any electronic media but it’s also enriched by the context; lying on the grass in the sun or huddled around a few burning sticks under the stars, a good jam session can become the stuff of memories that may never fade as long as you live.

Guitars dominate, naturally. Rising to prominence in the 20th century, they became the instrument of choice for the modern nomad for their versatility and portability. They’re loud enough to get a crowd dancing, are easy to learn and can accompany anything from bhajans to reggae to Balkan swing. And while the low-entry requirements for guitarists occasionally mean that a Gathering is condemned to listen to 3 chord specials all through the night, in general, the level of musicianship in the Rainbow is extremely high and sometimes downright astonishing. There arrive bards fresh from studying ragas in classical music schools in India, accordion players who instigate all-night reggae sessions, djembe players who get everyone shaking their stuff barefoot around the fire, entire impromptu jazz bands with trumpets and a double bass groove in secluded forest glades in the afternoon, ouds and balalaikas cast Arabic spells over late night chai shop sessions and there are singers that change the way you think about the human voice forever.

It’s true that the isolated location of Rainbow Gatherings limits which instruments can be brought in, but I remember one time in the mountains of central Italy when we really understood what it meant for a will to find a way; the walk up the mountain path had sorely tried us and even the road access that we used to bring up supplies required a jeep and a bold driver. Nonetheless, gathered in a clearing in the forest, I remember our smiles of disbelief when a brother walked up and announced:

‘Ragazzi, don’t ask me how but there’s a grand piano in the middle of the food circle!’

At first we thought he must have found some magic mushrooms that had sprouted after the recent rainfall but we soon discovered that if the piano in the middle of the field was a hallucination, it was a collective one. That night as we sat on the damp ground, dining on mushy pasta and the occasional splash of sauce, we felt like we were sitting in an expensive restaurant; with light piano jazz accompanying our meal we felt almost bourgeois.

Musicians have, let’s say it, a pretty good time in the Rainbow. We’re welcome everywhere, get plenty of attention and our craft is such an important contribution to the Gatherings that we don’t have to feel guilty about not chopping vegetables in the kitchen. We can just go along from time to time to play for those who are preparing the meals.

But it can also be real work. There are times when I awoke to the sound of rain on my tent and could already imagine the sorry mood in the camp outside. People bailing out leaky tents and the cooks struggling to make damp firewood burn. Brushing the sleep from my eyes, I would find myself grabbing my guitar and heading out to try to lift the spirits in the kitchen with a session of ecstatic singing.

Or there were occasions when I felt spent and empty, with only enough energy left to raise my bowl to the food servers coming round. Then
I realised that no one else had brought a guitar to the circle and it was up to me to play for the Magic Hat or there would be no money for tomorrow’s shopping mission.

Musicians can find their fingers freezing on the frets, their voices might go hoarse from breathing in smoke and yet on some nights around the fire sleep just doesn’t seem to be an option. Songs both old and new are sung, the light of the flames dancing in everyone’s eyes, the moon passing overhead until it finally gives way to the approach of dawn. The firewood runs out and people wrap themselves up in blankets, staring into the embers as the guitarist conjures up old, forgotten songs. Then as the sun comes up, the session fades with the night and everyone slowly wanders back to their tents to catch a few hours of repose before food circle.

There are sessions which will stay in my mind forever; nights when ghostly mist floated in and the flames reflected in glimmering wisps, the horizons shrinking until we felt like we were the last island of humanity at the end of a vanishing world, drawing closer to the warmth of the fire and with no choice but to believe in the rhythms of the reggae guitarist promising that morning would eventually come, even as his beard disappeared and reemerged from view in a mystic aura of fog.

Or *pizzica* jam sessions going on for hours after Magic Hat in Italian Gatherings, everyone dancing around the guitars and concertinas as though we were forest gypsies that had been doing this for countless generations, vaguely aware of the cooks’ plaintive cries for help in the kitchen and watching the balance slowly shift between the desire to celebrate and the need to eat.

Or a procession of dancers crowding around a small tightly-knit group of musicians who had transcended song to lead everyone in ecstatic prayer, leaping up to the sky as one, then crouching down to hug the earth, loosing our spirits in wild chorus, ending with a collective Om and opening our eyes to a world reborn.

‘I love you, family!’ One girl had wept on that occasion.

‘Hmm, I need a shower!’ someone else commented, reminding me of how differently each person experiences the Rainbow.

Music at the Gatherings is frequently a far more engaging experience than anything you might hear at a concert or festival. With no stage we play wherever we happen to gather. With no schedule we play when and for as long as we feel like. And with musicians of every style and origin turning up, there evolve unique and wonderful collaborations; North African rhythms merge with Indian bansuri flutes, classically-trained voices improvising angelic melodies on top.

Sometimes, however, it goes the other way and the very freedom for anyone to join in can result in some painful moments. It’s hard to tell an enthusiastic brother who has recently taken up the hand drum that he’s destroying your ballad with his pounding bass. Normally, musicians just shrug and accept that it’s all just part of the flow of the Rainbow but sometimes the lack of awareness can drive people to extremes; I remember listening to one Slovenian brother in the Bosnian European Rainbow who conjured from his guitar what I can only describe as a *river* of sound – we had never heard anything like it. But when a Russian guy came along and began to blow randomly into a harmonica in the wrong key, no one knew how to ask him to stop.

This kind of insensitivity became such a regular occurrence in that Gathering that eventually the best musicians ended up meeting secretly in the kitchen at night to jam together. Lying there on the ground, gazing up at the moon and stars performing their silent theatre against the stage of the night, I heard some of the best music of my life for as many hours as I managed to stay awake.
Most people arriving to the Rainbow for the first time come with an open mind. They look forwards to spending some time in Nature, meeting new people and seeing what the Gatherings have to offer.

But then they hear the songs.

Singing together is an appealing notion to most people but when it comes to lyrics like *Your beauty is now radiating in the temple of my heart*, many wince at the whole New Ageness of it all. Just because they’ve turned up at a Rainbow Gathering doesn’t mean they’re ready to rename themselves Cosmic Nymph and walk barefoot across the earth. And yet, as they sit around the fire at night and voices lift in song around them, they might find that slowly, shyly, their lips start to move. They join in despite themselves and, what’s more, it’s the most fun they’ve had in ages.

Most people believe they can’t sing. If they try they might find their voices coming out in a terrible squeak or drone that confirms their worst fears. But as any singing teacher will tell you, babies and small children have no trouble in projecting their voices loud and clear! We all had a voice before it got choked with all our unresolved emotional baggage. Singing for hours and hours in the Rainbow, some of that original freedom returns. It doesn’t matter if you’re a little off-key, either – the Rainbow isn’t a concert. It’s the joining-in that counts.

Beginning deep down in the belly, passing through the throat and echoing in the cranial chamber of our skulls, the voice is an extension of our breath, connecting our heads to our bodies. When we speak, or sing we project ourselves into the world, which is why emotion can be heard so easily in the voice. There’s even a diagnostic branch of Chinese Medicine focusing on speech. So it’s perhaps not surprising that more than the hugs, the rituals and the talk of a *Family of Living Light*, it’s the singing that opens people up in the Rainbow, no matter what the words are.

Take bhajans, for example: huddled inside the bhajan tipi, a pot of milky hot chai on the fire, arms wrapped around each other’s backs and swaying to the guitar, people sing the Hindi verses and express how they feel deep down, beyond the filter of language and thought. As the words of mystic Indian poets flow through their lips, people find themselves singing the story of their lives; the buried hopes in the heart, their sense of wonder, fear and joy in being alive.

‘But would you sing “Jesus is a friend of mine?”’ I used to ask people when I first arrived to the Rainbow, quite missing the point. I winced each time I heard someone sing praise to an Indian god, especially in the middle of a rock and roll jam around the main fire. I frequently ended up grabbing my guitar and walking away in annoyance. Why was everyone so anxious to adopt a foreign culture’s religious symbols? The gods may have had blue skin, the stories may have been more exotic, but wasn’t it religion all the same?

In fact, sometimes it seemed to me that Shiva, the Indian deity of destruction, was the unofficial god of the Rainbow. Granted, he was considerably cooler than Jesus, but did we have to be quite so anxious to pray to anyone at all?

After some years, however, I came to accept that the Rainbow would never change. In fact, the Rainbow would never live up to anyone’s demands or expectations. It could never be anything but itself. Any judgments I made about it were my problem, no one else’s. Was it reasonable to ask a sister with stars in her eyes why she sang to Krishna all night? Maybe she didn’t have a coherent philosophy
about it but seemed much happier in that moment than I was. My spirit was weighed down with too many heavy opinions to ever fly as high as hers.

An old Sufi story:

A dervish was walking alongside a lake one day when he came across a man who was mispronouncing a sutra from the Koran. He stopped, corrected the man’s prayers and then continued on his way, feeling pleased with himself for setting another Believer straight on the Path. He rounded the lake and then, hearing a voice behind him, turned to see the other man walking across the water as he called:

‘Pardon me, brother, how should the verse go again?’

There are some Rainbow songs that have a groovy feel to them, defying the graveyard monotony of much of the standard canon and there are some that have genuinely inspired lyrics.

‘To see you in love is to see you in me.’

or:

‘I am as God created me, in the love, in the light, in the glory.’

or:

‘Mother Earth is a great big ship that we are sailing on!’

For many, the truths they live by are hard-coded into the Rainbow songs and the meaning of a line might still catch them by surprise years after they’ve been singing it. When we sing together we remember why we come to Rainbow Gatherings in the first place. We look around and see each other as simply a vessel of spirit, across the ocean of life. We’re no longer alone.

But all too often someone grabs a guitar and out comes another droning Age tune, almost inevitably in A minor. The words are inevitably a jumbled plea for healing, for opening, for rebirth, invoking mother earth, father sky, grandfather fire and any other number of cosmic relations.

‘So write new songs!’ a sister told me on my first Rainbow when I complained about the inanity of the tunes around the fire. The Rainbow motto is, after all, if you see a job it’s yours.

I took her words to heart and discovered that it’s actually pretty hard to write positive, life-embracing songs. Sure, Bob Marley turned them out by the dozen – ‘One heart, one love, let’s get together and feel alright!’ – but he was a genius. Most of the time when I tried to write Rainbow anthems they sounded too cheesy to be true. That foxed me for a number of years and so I stuck to writing parodies, mostly plagiarising famous songs like You Can’t Always Get What You Want in reference to the unappetising porridge at morning food circle.

Ten years of writing these kinds of songs eventually culminated in writing the Rainbow musical for the European Gathering in Portugal 2011. I turned up with 20 photocopies of a script and set about organising rehearsals with a view to performing on full moon, a fortnight away.

The musical (the script and video can be found on the website) was the tale of a man who sees a bunch of hippies who seem far happier than he is and so he leaves his life behind to ‘go and join the caravan of love’. He sees them all chant Om before eating and wonders whether he’s discovered some kind of cult; he’s initiated into the merry horror of the shit pits; he’s jumped on by the Rainbow Police for taking photos, and he falls in love with the first girl to give him a
deep hug. He worries that he might not be accepted by all these wonderful hippies but then learns that he doesn’t need to grow his hair, pray to Shiva or believe in angels to belong to the Rainbow – it’s only what we have inside that counts.

Attempting to coordinate around 15 actors, singers and musicians to turn up at the same time to the same place each day was ambitious to say the least. Even if we met directly after the first food circle, the camp was so spread out through the forest that many people didn’t hear the call and missed out on lunch altogether. Even when the momentum began to build in the last few days before we were due to perform, the entire show was Rainbow through and through.

‘Where were you?’ I demanded to know of one of the narrators when he failed to show up for the dress rehearsal. He shook his head sadly. ‘I’m sorry – I consulted the I Ching this morning and I got the reading The Abyss – do not move! So I stayed in my tipi all day.’

My experience with creative projects is that it’s like pushing a train. First of all, it’s just you and your wild plans and if your enthusiasm is contagious enough, eventually a couple of early supporters come along to help push, too and the train starts to inch forwards. By the time you gather some momentum, people are coming out of the trees all around you to lend their energy until you have more talent than you know what to do with. I had written the songs and dialogue for the musical but it would have fallen flat but for the dancers who came in to work on the choreography, the musicians who brought the songs to life, the actors who helped direct and bring out the best in each person taking part, the singers who learned the words to the songs and delivered them to the crowd surrounding the stage at all angles of the compass. There wasn’t a soul in the musical who didn’t contribute something and once again it was confirmed for all of us that together we are beautiful, indeed.

We had promoted the musical for a week at the food circles and on the day of the first performance there were over 600 people gathered, chanting together: We want the show! We want the show! The energy was higher than I had ever seen in a Rainbow and was an overwhelming reward for all the work we had put in. As the audience watched the story of the newcomer as he encountered the Rainbow ways, they were reminded of their own personal voyages into the Gatherings, striking countless nerves and drowning the dialogue in peals of laughter.

When we finished with the Rainbow theme song that had come to me while hitchhiking in Denmark the year before, the crowd rose to their feet in a standing ovation and the forest seemed to tremble with happiness. It was a celebration of our culture, our way of life, a mirror for why we traveled so many miles every year to gather together under the Rainbow.

It was one of the most unforgettable moments of my life.

*The Rainbow’s for you and me,*  
*The Rainbow’s where we can be free all the time,*  
*The Rainbow’s for me and you,*  
*The Rainbow’s where we’ll be true,*  
*to who we are inside,*  
*The Rainbow is, a catalyst for change in who we are,*  
*The Rainbow can be, a sacred key to open up our hearts,*  
*Rainbow in the sky,*  
*Rainbow in your eyes,*  
*The Rainbow is the place for you and me!*
We have such a good time at the Rainbow Gatherings that I ask myself why so many of my good friends around the world are reluctant to come. There’s so much fun, so much love, so much nature and good music, all for a small donation to the Magic Hat – who wouldn’t want to be part of that?

The weather helps me remember why.

At an Italian Gathering in the Alps one summer, I caught 3 buses to the last village on the map, I followed the directions up the mountain and an hour and a half later found myself in total despair. I was vaguely confident the winding path up the hill was the right one but my rest stops became more and more frequent and still I hadn’t seen a single hippie. The straps of my rucksack bit into my shoulders, damp mist wrapped around me and every time I stubbed my toe the hole in my shoes grew a little larger.

When I eventually arrived at the top of the mountain and saw the first tents, I stumbled forwards and collapsed in the middle of the camp like a corpse. I had to admit it was a beautiful location: a clearing in an Alpine forest with views of nearby hills. The kind of place hikers would pass through, take a photo and move on – but where we intended to live for a few weeks.

The next day it began to rain, however and didn’t stop. I was camped under a tree for shelter but my cheap tent allowed a steady drip to enter through the seams. I had pitched it at a cunning angle though so that the water collected in a corner and I could soak it up with an old sock.

Dinner ended up being a big pot of spaghetti with olive oil poured on top and we considered ourselves lucky to have that. With a storm overhead that left the sky dark and opaque, and torrents of rain that filled a cup in minutes, there was no question of making a circle in the open and so we all gathered in the kitchen area to eat. The plastic tarps overhead collected pools of water that had to be dislodged very few minutes with long poles. The floor was already too muddy to consider sitting, even if there had been space. We stood or squatted, urging everyone not to push as they made their way to the pot to get food. There stood servers with the patience of angels, doling out spoonfuls of spaghetti, the entire operation conducted via torchlight.

My belly full but my feet wet despite the plastic bags I’d wrapped around them inside my shoes, I crouched by a nearby fire on a piece of torn cardboard that was a little drier than the ground. The tarp tied to some branches above us sent down a steady drip leaving few dry places by the fire and although no one said it, I could hear the unspoken hope on everyone’s minds – that they wouldn’t need to go to the shit pit until the morning.

Over the next week it didn’t stop raining for more than a few hours and in the end no one had any clean clothes left. Few had the courage to go to the river to wash. I decided to vote with my feet and went off to the Rainbow in Portugal instead and later heard that it continued raining for the entire month. A new stream even began to run through the middle of the main circle. It dawned on me why the Rainbow isn’t for everyone. Who would want to spend their summer suffering like this?

It’s an often-heard cliché that there can be no Rainbow without a bit of rain but bad weather can really put Gatherings to the test. If the shelter over the kitchen is a bit leaky then few feel motivated to cook and mealtimes end up being late, miserable affairs. If no one has collected firewood and organised a dry place to store it then starting a fire becomes a quite thankless task. If there are no communal tipis or chai shops set up then heavy rain kills the celebrations for the evening and everyone goes back to their tents feeling a bit lonely.

It’s bad enough if you have only yourself to look after as you try to get your clothes dry around a smoky fire without burning holes in your favourite top, but for those with families the rain can be a
real challenge. Suddenly the kids aren’t comfortable anywhere, they catch colds and never stop sniffing and crying.

The egalitarian nature of the Rainbow shifts a little with the rain as it suddenly matters how good your tent is – if you have one at all. The people who turned up with just a flute and a blanket find themselves woefully unprepared for the cold and wet. Shivering miserably, they might try to talk their way into someone’s tent or lay next to other homeless for warmth in one of the communal tipis.

Fortunately, however, spirituality comes to the rescue even of poor hippies. One sister told me how, after a few days of rain, she saw a girl walking by one morning with a sleeping bag on her shoulder and a smile that leapt off her face.

‘I told her she looked really happy today and she replied, yes, because she’d been too cold to sleep the past few nights and had prayed and prayed to the Great Spirit for help – and that very morning she had found a lovely new sleeping bag hanging on a branch of a tree across her path!

‘I tried suggesting to her that someone probably left it there to dry a little but no, she knew a gift from the Great Spirit when she saw one...’

Though I sometimes suspect they’re the same people who believe all illness is good for you (it’s an opportunity to heal), there are some who genuinely look forward to the rain. An often-cited example was the European Rainbow in England where, with no trees for shelter up on the Yorkshire Moors, the wind and rain made it one of the toughest Gatherings in memory.

‘But it brought us together, too!’ one brother told me, ‘We got really close, playing music for everyone in the kitchen and sharing everything we had. Only the people with real Rainbow spirit stayed – all the weekend hippies went home after a couple of days of rain.’

One sister told me about a Rainbow she attended in Greece where it rained for a full two weeks. It was a small Gathering and everyone huddled together in the main tipi, expert fire makers working hard to dry the wet wood before the flames died out. She seemed like a resilient character but she confessed that eventually even her spirit had cracked:

‘There came a moment when the rain started again that I just couldn’t take it. I just burst into tears! But then a beautiful Greek sister drew me a sun on a piece of paper with crayons and I could laugh again!’

With swollen rivers, eventually the army had to come to rescue them.

Faced with really bad weather some people in the Rainbow resort to the supernatural for protection. In a Gathering in the Swiss Alps the forest rangers turned up to tell us we’d better vacate as a storm with 100kmph winds was coming our way. A few duly began to pack up but the majority response was:

‘Let’s make a ritual to keep the storm away!’ The storm arrived anyway, sweeping away tents and pots but the spell makers were unfazed, insisting that the winds were less powerful than the might have been thanks to the power of intention.

Bad weather might be a test for the spirit but a few days of rain can turn a thriving Rainbow into a disaster zone. You have only to hear the cries of celebration through the camp when the sun comes out to know what most people prefer. It’s in the sun that we lie on the grass and play music, dance around the fire and run workshops. When the weather is good, children can run and play where they please and lovers meet in the woods to consummate passions in leafy glades.

On the other hand, at some Gatherings the sun can be so intense that everyone walks around with scarves or shirts tied around their heads, and as we wait for breakfast our brains could be served as second
course, baked in our skulls. Fruit in the kitchen shrivels up and vic-
tims of sunburn and sunstroke lie around the Healing Tent in agony.

‘It was so hot at the Gathering in Germany I decided to make a Rain-
Dance!’ one brother, famous for hating the sun, told me. ‘And then
we had two weeks of non-stop rain and people were actually angry
at me!’ he grinned.

Good weather is generally necessary for hippies to live up to their
reputation for going naked like any self-respecting child of Mother
Earth.

In fact, only a small percentage of people at the Rainbow go around
unclothed all the time while others may only do so when bathing in
the river or just to appreciate a ray of sun after a few rainy days. But
coming from a society where the most commonplace glimpses of the
human body in all its glory are in images of airbrushed models on
billboards and magazines, the sheer amount of physical flesh in the
Rainbow can be quite overwhelming.

I can safely say that there have been moments of such spectacular nu-
dity in the Rainbow that they’ve burned themselves onto the memory
circuits of my brain forever. I’ll never forget a girl who stood in the
middle of the food circle at the Bosnian Gathering while we were eat-
ing, wearing only a loose summer dress. She stood there shyly, one
hand on her cheek, when a breeze came along and lifted the fabric of
her skirt up and revealed her vagina for all 500 people gathered to see.

There are other less appealing memories. Like staggering awake
at the call of Food circle now! and stumbling out of my tent, grab-
bining my bowl and hurrying over to sit in the circle— I just wasn’t
ready that morning to face the swinging testicles at head level of a
hairy granddad who doled out the porridge. Who could blame me if

I picked through the oats before eating to make sure there were no
stray pubic hairs...

Sometimes it feels like it’s only the guys who are running around
without clothes and it can resemble a kind of regression. A desper-
ate cry for attention. Maybe even the first indicator that someone
is flipping out. Certainly from an aesthetic point of view it can be
challenging.

The right to go naked in the Rainbow is considered something sac-
rosanct, however, and it would most definitely be considered uncool
to complain about having to look at someone’s shriveled genitalia,
goosebumped from the cold, while you’re trying to enjoy a cup of
tea at someone’s camp. But there’s no denying that not everyone is
as comfortable with it as might be thought— we once held a talking
circle on sexuality in the Rainbow (a hot topic which drew around 90
people) and many of the women present spoke of the glorious free-
dom they experienced in the Rainbow where they could reveal their
bodies to the sky, the wind and the sun, walking through the forest
like native creatures of the land, free from the endless and unwel-
come male attention that plagued them back in Babylon.

By contrast, many of the men in the circle spoke of their confusion
and frustration as they saw tits and asses everywhere and couldn’t
think of anything else day and night. Was it okay to look? Would it be
alright, one brother asked, to compliment a girl on the shape of her
breasts? A question that drew a predictably mixed response...

And just because some choose to discard their clothes doesn’t mean
that all their fears have been shed at the same time. I heard one story
about an attempted rape where a young sister came walking naked
down a forest path was jumped on by a naked brother hiding in the
trees. It turned out to be another case of Rainbow Radio, however, as
I heard the true story a year or two later from an old hand who had
witnessed the whole thing.
'She was dancing down the path, looking quite gorgeous with the sunlight shining on her, and a naked guy was taking a piss in the trees just up ahead. He came out, shaking off the drops and then went to hug her – she screamed and ran away! The guy was stupid, yes, but not a rapist!'

Even if only a minority of people in the Rainbow go naked on a regular basis, almost everyone else would certainly defend their right to do so. All, bar the shy teenagers, strip off when they go to bathe in the river. It can be a genuine relief not to have to worry about always covering up. Clothing being one of our primary masks and shields, we’re never more ourselves than when we take it all off. It’s perhaps a tribute to the Rainbow that people are genuinely comfortable in their own skin – and hence with themselves. There’s a vulnerability in the naked body that we often reserve only for lovers and to share it with a crowd can be a liberating experience.

And there is something inherently magical about seeing the human body in its entirety. Not for nothing have painters and sculptors fixated on the flesh for centuries – even in the ancient cave paintings of our distant ancestors and the crude figurines they carved we can see a love and veneration for the human body.

Yet the sheer volume of physicality can amount to graphic overload: a litany of drooping tits and erect nipples and saggingasses and hairy backs and swollen bellies and shrunkenn rib cages; bodies that could grace the pages of a magazine and others that resemble famine victims. Bodies that glorify the human form and others that are witness to the cruel ravages of time. Bodies that glow in the sunshine and others so white you can use them to find your way in the forest at night. Bodies that arouse desire and others that you would rather never see again.

Bodies seem to speak the secrets that their owners normally keep under wraps. Seeing someone naked you understand them in a way that belies their conversation, their beliefs and charisma. Buried emotions manifest themselves in the posture, the pallor of the skin, the shape of the bones. All the processes going on behind the scenes, deep in the unconscious or in the graveyard of our personal history, they all express themselves somehow in the body. Or perhaps it’s just that other people’s bodies are a mirror for our own psyche and that’s why they fascinate us so.

Either way there’s so much information conveyed by the naked body that it’s often not sexual at all. There might be a beautiful body in front of you but the shape of a toenail or the prominence of a hipbone might prove too distracting to ever arouse. In fact, the only time bodies seem overtly sexual in the Rainbow are when first timers in the Rainbow halfheartedly get into the spirit of things and strip down to a bikini: a sight which seems almost pornographic.

Nudity is still a touchy issue around most of the world. Even in the indigenous cultures so loved in the Rainbow it’s rare to find an example of a tribe that goes without clothing at all; even when they wear just the flimsiest bit of cloth around the genitals it’s considered extremely shameful be seen completely naked. There are instances though of cultures where girls are traditionally distinguished from married women by not wearing any clothes. And no man will have seen footage of the naked stick fighting of Ethiopia without wincing...

Nonetheless many in the Rainbow regard nudity as a universal right and clothing as an enslaving shackle of Babylon – why can’t the whole world just let it all hang out? Forced by the law of the land to cover up even on the hottest days, for many, a return to the Rainbow is a return to the natural state. And so there are occasionally individuals who, following a Higher Law, insist on walking into the nearby village naked as the day they were born.

This doesn’t always do wonders for relations with the locals. In a Gathering in Serbia a naked guy walked a few kilometers over to a nunnery, climbed the walls and, once inside, announced that he had come to ‘free you all!’.
On another occasion in a Gathering in Thailand a naked brother chose to run up and embrace a Thai policeman who came to check out the camp. An unforgivable transgression in Thai culture and a gesture he presumably came to regret.

Perhaps the oddest reaction was at the Finnish European Gathering when the national press took an interest in the Rainbow. Planes flew overhead to get aerial photos and photographers began to sneak around the camp to get some juicy snaps. A couple of days later someone came back from town with newspapers featuring us on the front page with headlines like:

NAKED HIPPIES IN THE FOREST!

MASSAGE AND STRANGE RITUALS!

THE WOMEN ARE ROLLING OVER THE MEN!

The reporter had seen a tantra workshop and a session of contact dance in the main field one afternoon and drawn his own conclusions. Beyond the tabloid headlines, however, the articles actually portrayed the Rainbow in a rosy light as the locals interviewed were overwhelmingly positive in their reactions. Even the police were astonished at how peaceful things were and hailed us ‘an example to the nation’ as we didn’t even ‘break a single branch of a tree’ to make our fires.

As for the nudity?

No one could have cared less. This was Finland, after all, the home of the sauna. People saw each other naked all the time.

People in the Rainbow are no less interesting than when they dress up. Hippies can dress with great spontaneity and style and yet all too many adopt the image without really getting the essence, simply conforming to what is ultimately another kind of fashion.

‘Are you in the Rainbow or just on a walk?’ one sister asked me in a Gathering in the Italian Alps. Without dreadlocks, colourful clothes or amulets she wondered whether I was a trekker just passing through the camp.

Whether we know it or not, all of us are sending unconscious messages about who we are through our posture, our language and, most immediately, how we dress. The counterculture has developed a varied but recognizable look over the last 40 years and in the Rainbow Gatherings the whole range of quirky, ethnic, rebellious, carefree and inventive fashion can be seen. You can wear what you like in the Rainbow and still be respected for who you are but sometimes newcomers to the Rainbow may even feel excluded for not looking the part. You certainly don’t turn up wearing designer clothing. In some ways the Rainbow can be as conformist in its fashion as Babylon.

‘Maybe it’s just coincidence but it became much harder to get girls when I cut off my dreadlocks,’ one brother told me ruefully.

Some will dress only in natural materials, others adopt indigenous costumes of India or Morocco, while some wear only the clothes they found in dumpsters on the way to the Gathering. While making notes for this book, I sat down by the fire one day and just wrote down all the kinds of clothing and accessories I could see:

Beginning with the feet there are sandals of every description, flip flops and Moroccan slippers, bare feet grimy and muddy, rings around the toes and bells on the ankles to announce the owner’s arrival ten paces before they get there. There are trainers so dirty the brand name is unrecognizable, walking boots and military footwear that ensure powerful aromas when they’re removed, rubber boots in the rain and plastic bags wrapped around the feet to keep them dry.

Surprisingly, there are few jeans to speak of with a bias towards loose cotton trousers, Thai Fisherman’s pants, shorts or long, multi-lay-
ered skirts trailing in mud and ash, a lungi wrapped around the legs (with sacred Indian symbols below the waist that would outrage any Hindu), belts of every kind – leather, kung fu, buckles with dragons, torn scarves holding trousers up. Utility belts with plates and cups hanging on, knives in scabbards, guitars strapped to backs, the occasional watch a clear sign of a newbie. Bags hanging off shoulders, little sadhu bags from India, backpacks containing bottles of water, straw mats, instruments.

T-shirts with silly slogans, smart silk shirts that badly need an iron, vests that your grandfather might wear, linen and velvet jackets, leather jerkins, waistcoats and woolly shepherd’s jerseys. Moroccan djellabas, Punjabi shawl kameez, Chinese suits. Some make do with a blanket or table cloth draped around them. Bare chests, belly buttons pierced, sleeves cut away to reveal a world of tattoos.

Tattoos covering arms, shoulders, backs, though few radical enough to cover the face; images of dragons, Celtic knots, elves and snakes, Sanskrit symbols and Chinese or Arabic calligraphy, Buddha eyes and Indian gods, some bodies so covered that you can hardly see the tattoos for the ink.

Amulets around the neck for good luck, protection, identification with totem animals. Necklaces and bracelets sporting semi-precious stones, crystals, fossils and bone. Rings silver, plastic and wooden.

Piercings through the chin, lips, cheeks, nose, eyebrows and tongue; some looking angry and defensive, others sexual and provocative, some even resembling shamanic trophies and charms.

Little in the way of cosmetics except for eyelids painted or outlined with black kohl, a practice adopted also by men affecting the Krishna look. Some faces painted with tribal markings, Indian pooja marks, covered with ash. Little goaty beards, twitching walrus moustaches, beards that have been growing all month, others since the turn of the century, beards hanging down in one long dread, braided with beads. Beards of virility, beards substituting for wisdom, beards showing passage to manhood.

Past the necklaces of coral, the malas, the amber earrings and onto a world of dreadlocks; some golden coils of snakes, others matted old rope, sadhu-style, tributes to Rasta, some badly needing repair work, others in obsessively good condition, all living in mortal fear of head lice.

Braids, colourful hair wraps, Japanese top knots with chopsticks and everywhere feathers, even more than flowers – a better shelf life perhaps?

Some dressed like refugees, others as though they were never loved, some seem colour blind in their choice of hues; others have special outfits – pixie uniforms, ninja suits, Indian holy man austerities, even some who wear nothing but a suit pasted on with mud...

‘We’re not better than anyone else – but we do give better hugs,’ I once heard a philosophical brother conclude.

If, in our daily lives in Babylon, we’re bombarded by a sensory assault of sounds, images, tastes and smells, then there’s often one sense that’s quite missing from the picture: touch. It seems that as societies get richer everyone gets lonelier. We live alone in quiet apartments. We work alone with only a computer for company. We drive to work alone in our cars and make eye contact only when absolutely necessary with the people working in supermarkets, restaurants and shops who serve our needs.
Touch becomes a luxury, a privilege extended only to our family and those with whom we have romantic relationships. Touch survives in protocol – the handshake, the kiss on the cheek, the play-fighting of men who meet at a sports game – but in general, whether they know it or not, most people are desperate for a hug.

Some cultures preserve physical affection between friends but for most of the Western world, at least, the realm of touch is a social and psychological minefield of personal frontiers, sexual borders and unspoken cultural rules that frame our fear and need; a woman hugs a guy but doesn’t want to give him the wrong idea and freezes up if he holds on for too long; two guys negotiate an awkward bear hug, slapping each other’s backs all the while just to emphasise that they’re not gay.

There are few places on earth where people are as comfortable with touch as at the Rainbow. You can almost guess how many Gatherings someone has been to by how well they hug. If someone is unused to physical touch you can feel them counting the seconds until it’s okay to let go. But there are others who you meet for the first time and hug for five minutes before you even ask their name.

Physical touch may be one of the most healing things there is. For all the variety of therapies found at the Rainbow, from channeling of Universal Energy to reflexology, at least part of the beneficial effect is probably just to have someone else place their hands on you. The hugs help people open up as the border guards of the skin desert their posts. In a real hug you’re held without judgement or expectation. You don’t have to reciprocate, only receive. You become aware of how much pain and tension you hold inside. Your body just begins to let go and years of suppressed emotion begin to melt away.

The opening magic of touch can perhaps best be seen in the Angel Walk. Generally organised at night, two lines of people are formed, chanting softly as each new walker enters slowly, ever so slowly, into the corridor of bodies, the eyes closed and trusting in the Angels to guide the way. Outstretched hands reach out to stroke, caress and squeeze you as you drift down the line. You receive hugs and kisses, sweet words of affection whispered in your ears as you go by.

It might take ten minutes to make the walk with Angels on each side giving you all the love and affection you’ve been looking for all your life. Walking as if in a dream, waves of tenderness splashing over you, it’s not uncommon for people to break down into fits of tears. Then, if you’re still in one piece, you take your place at the end of the line and you, too, can become an Angel for someone else.

Yes, hippies might believe in anything. Yes, we might take seriously the words we sing, that Angels really are singing in our soul, but when all is said and done, we give better hugs than anyone on the planet.

The question arises of course, when is a hug not a hug?

‘It got to the point where I just walked around the circle at a Gathering in Australia asking if anyone wanted to get it on with me!’ one particularly candid sister told me. She was self-confident, blonde, in her early 30’s and yet though there were hundreds of guys around, she just couldn’t get laid.

Free love and hippies might be a cliché but surprisingly, some people find that there’s almost too much love in the Rainbow for it to ever get sexual. Hugging a whole crowd of people every day, sharing the moments when you eat, when you wash, when you work – maybe even when you shit – there’s sometimes a lack of the privacy that helps romance to flourish.

Some people also fly so high in the Rainbow, soaring on new-found thermals of the heart, that sex is just too earthy a passion to be realised.
The feelings of love they experience too universal to be channeled into a single encounter. All of which can prove torturous for some of those who are feeling horny. With nude bodies everywhere, hugs and kisses at every turn, it can be a case of water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink.

Of course there is sex in the Rainbow, just not as much as you might think. Cold nights and rainy days, for instance, can send everyone retreating into their necessarily-celibate sleeping bags. The lack of personal hygiene some people exhibit can also dampen the mood. But, all in all, the Rainbow is such an intrinsically transient place that there is the chance for some romantic encounters with no strings attached.

It does require you to tune into a new wavelength and adapt to a new set of social protocols and courtship, however. I remember sitting with a pretty Czech sister at a Gathering in Switzerland as a French guy tried to hit on her in the most two-dimensional manner imaginable, using all the lines and tricks that one might learn from a book or the worst kind of movies.

He began by showing her his digital watch.

‘It’s got a satellite connection to tell me what the weather is!’

‘Why don’t you just look up at the sky?’ she asked in disbelief.

Not at all fazed, he then went on to tell a lengthy dirty joke involving bestiality, just to bring the conversation around to sex, apparently. Receiving only a yawn in response, he decided to pull out his trump card.

‘Do you know Monte Carlo?’ he asked.

‘Vaguely.’

‘Well, it just so happens...that I have a house in Monte Carlo! I’ll give you my card. We can meet for lunch!’

‘I don’t think so.’ she yawned.

‘I didn’t invite you to my house...yet!’

How that wannabe playboy ended up on top of a mountain in a Rainbow Gathering was beyond us. But we couldn’t help but feel sorry for him so far out of his element. He was lost among hundreds of hippies who couldn’t care less what kind of car he drove or how big his company was. If he came in search of some free love he was sorely disappointed.

I’ve heard many men of my generation express their regret at not having been earlier to enjoy the free love of the 60’s. Liberated by the Pill and a revolution of sexual attitudes and values, by most accounts it really was an easy time to get laid. That all changed with the arrival of AIDS, however, and suddenly sex was no longer a casual pleasure but a biological threat with potentially fatal consequences. Under a storm of public health warnings and media panic, the emphasis shifted to ‘safe sex’ – sex without risks, sex under controlled circumstances. In a short space of time the waves of government propaganda infiltrated the most intimate, vulnerable adventure two people could embark upon. No longer was sex fun, a fundamental expression of one’s identity – now it had become a risky enterprise, a game of chance where individuals played with their lives in the pursuit of pleasure.

In the Rainbow, however, there’s more just a natural tendency to forget about the outside world and enjoy the moment. Many people do use condoms but there’s nowhere to buy any and somehow after an evening of singing songs about God and Eternity by the fire, gazing up at the stars and tuning into each other’s aura...well, it hardly seems the moment to bring up the possibility of catching a contagious virus.
Moreover, as people explore all kinds of personal, social and spiritual frontiers, their attitudes towards sexuality sometimes become more flexible, too. Young women arriving to the Rainbow for the first time seem to be particularly vulnerable; overwhelmed by the love, the harmony and the colourful cast of Rainbow characters so clearly in their element, it’s often easy for them to bowled over by an older brother with dreadlocks, a guitar and a charismatic personality. All well and good until it comes to getting naked and she suggests using a condom, only to be patiently told:

‘Sister! A condom is not organic. It is an invention of Babylon. Where there is love, there is trust. This is the way of Tantra...’ And so on until she feels distinctly unspiritual to worry about catching a disease or getting pregnant.

While the propaganda surrounding HIV may have traumatised an entire generation’s sexuality and the rate of its spread in the West has been much slower than initially feared, it’s still a terrible disease to catch. Even though the odds of contracting it on a single encounter in the West are slim, the chances obviously increase the more you sleep around and it’s not as if HIV is the only health risk.

Talk about this kind of thing in the main circle, however, and many people will shake their heads and wonder why you don’t trust more in the Great Spirit? The negative connotations of words like ‘disease’ and ‘infection’ rebound around the speaker and, in short, bring everyone down.

It’s certainly easy to get swept away by the moment in the Rainbow as many single mothers around the fire can affirm. Riding the waves of love and celebration, people often get together who might not have much in common under other circumstances. All is well until the Gathering ends and the first argument begins about who has to cover the petrol costs.

Romantic encounters in the Rainbow may not usually have much future but there’s no denying their magic. Maybe you meet someone dancing around the fire one night, flames lighting up their face. Or perhaps your hands meet shyly while singing bhajans in a cosy tipi with the rain pattering on the canvas outside. Then you walk off to make love in a forest glade with a stream playing the background music. Or perhaps you grab your sheepskin and go to make your bedroom on top of a moonlight hill, king and queen of the Earth.

On the other hand you might just settle for your plastic made-in-China tent, attempting to create a boudoir among the flecks of mud, biscuit crumbs and dirty socks. Should passion survive under these circumstances then the entire tent swiftly becomes a sauna, droplets of sweat forming on the roof, drowning insects falling onto your back, the entire structure shaking rhythmically to your gymnastics, providing a fun show for anyone camped nearby.

Sometimes it’s surely the conditions themselves that prevent the Gatherings from being an all-out Love Fest. I remember my first Rainbow romance in the Israeli desert back in 2000. We spent several evenings in a row in each other’s arms, swaying gently to the all-night ragas played by an Austrian duo who had just come back from studying music in Varanasi. The desert was luminous blue in the moonlight and she, like me, was struggling to make sense of her life after several years in India. We had grown steadily closer and closer and were both anxious to make love but as we were in the desert water was in short supply. It had been so long since either of us had had a decent wash that the conditions didn’t exactly lend themselves to intimacy. After a few awkward attempts, we eventually decided to wait until we got back to Babylon where there were hot showers and washing machines.

Thus the Rainbow Gatherings demonstrate that nature isn’t necessarily an aphrodisiac. Sometimes bodies are too badly-sunburned to be touched. Maybe there’s a really cute sister you have your eye on but she seems to scratch her head a lot and might have head lice? Or
perhaps it’s been raining for days and the sheer effort of trying to stay warm, dry and fed leaves everyone in such a state of physical exhaustion that sex is the last thing on anyone’s minds.

Then there’s the fact that there are different sexual protocols in the Rainbow. People touch each other so much that first-timers can be left quite confused – was that just a hug or something more? There are some in the Rainbow who will hold you close for half an hour, run their fingers through your hair, kiss you on the neck...and then when the hug is over there’s such a look of pure friendship in her eyes that you’re embarrassed to have felt anything sexual at all.

A few sisters have told me that they sometimes have trouble setting borders with guys in the Rainbow. How to share universal affection without giving someone the wrong impression? Hugging and cuddling up to stay warm on cold nights, it’s easy for the message to get confused. Especially when everyone calls you ‘brother’ or ‘sister’ all the time so that you end up feeling vaguely guilty of having incestuous thoughts.

There are some in the Gatherings who are quite confident of their sexuality though. Rainbow Butterflies fly from flower to flower, making love under the stars and breaking hearts by dawn. It’s hard to justify feeling jealous when someone you’ve just spent the night is seen rolling around with someone else the next day – didn’t they meet you with the same ease? When were any promises made?

But there can be few experiences quite as painful as tracking down the tent of a sister or brother you’ve spent the night with only to hear the voice of their new lover through the plastic walls of their tent as you approach.

Overall, the Rainbow probably does more for international relations than any other movement or organisation out there. And it’s not bad for international relationships either, even when couples don’t speak the same language. I know of a brother and sister who didn’t have any words in common and had to communicate only with sign language and affection until she slowly learned English. Now they have a child together.

Even if the only words you manage to pick up in the local language are ‘let’s go to my tent?’ there’s still a wealth of nonverbal interaction to leave you with pleasant memories of Gatherings abroad. Words are only a small part of our communication, after all.

‘What is it with hippies and massage?’ an Indian girlfriend once asked me when she first came across the Rainbow. ‘It’s just a way to get laid, right?’

Well, not just. But, yes, offering massage is a good way to get close to someone and gives them a chance to see what you can do with those hands of yours; it is, let us admit it, a rare and beautiful sight in the Rainbow to see a guy giving massage to another guy.

For those looking for some free love in the Rainbow, it helps to have some kind of way to stand out; musicians and dancers attract their fair share of attention, so do those who run the kitchen, hold workshops and make announcements; playing for Magic Hat is a good way to get noticed, as is dressing up in feathers, bones and sporting tribal tattoos; shamans, healers, teachers and general Rainbow warriors powered with the charisma that comes from a deep faith in the Great Spirit also do better than the average hippie.

Other strategies include reading palms, doing someone’s Mayan horoscope (might prove less effective after 2012) and offering a private reiki healing session. It also doesn’t hurt to have a good supply of chocolate back in your tent for guests.

It helps, too, to have a tent that’s larger than your own personal needs — a good one when it starts to rain — but not having one is no barrier
to your amorous exploits: At an Italian Gathering I walked up the hill where I had camped to get a sweater and noticed that the door to my tent was open. Approaching curiously I was met with the unusual and unexpected visage of a vagina, legs sprawled lazily open. Less appealing was the pair of hairy testicles lying beside her belonging to the camp lunatic – he had somehow managed to convince an impressionable girl to accompany him for an afternoon love-making session in a nearby tent. Mine.

Overall, it’s probably true that the Rainbow isn’t the best place to find true love. Travel plans of Rainbow nomads tend to be erratic and the very winds that brought you together might separate you the moment the weather changes. Or maybe you’ll lose your heart to someone committed to living in Stockholm and you just can’t bear the thought of the long winters.

Moreover, most people come to the Rainbow as a retreat, looking for new experiences, perhaps transformation. A holiday from their everyday reality. They’re taking time out to tune in and maybe hang out with you but only for as long as the spell lasts. They might have a relationship back home that they left up in the air or they may be enjoying the fresh air of freedom, looking only to dance to some drums, go to a reiki workshop and occasionally meet up with you for moonlight trysts.

There’s also so much going on in the Rainbow that it’s hard to focus on one other person. There are so many musicians to listen to, workshops to attend, jobs to be done and people to meet, that maintaining any kind of emotional intimacy is a challenge. Even happy couples who come to the Rainbow very often go into crisis within a few days; whether they live together back in Babylon or not, it quickly becomes apparent that a tent is a very small space to share. Fierce arguments break out about whose stuff is taking up all of the space inside, about who left the door open in the rain or whether it was selfish to finish all the biscuits for breakfast before the other even woke up. There’s nothing like camping to bring out the pettiest side of everyone.

There’s also a whole new routine to deal with. All at once couples run into each other 25 times a day and no longer know what to say. They can sense the liberating atmosphere of the Rainbow all around them and want to fly free but can’t escape the feeling that they have a shadow, a sense of obligation weighing them down and holding them back. Naturally, they ask themselves if that’s something they really want?

And then there’s the jealousy. For all the high spiritual ideas of detachment and personal freedom everyone aspires to, there’s nothing like watching your sweetheart hugging someone for a little too long to ignite the green-eyed monster inside. It’s often long term relationships that prevent people coming back to the Gatherings as their partners suspect (possibly quite shrewdly) that, with so much inconsequential loving around, temptation might be too strong.

And if a couple should break up at a Rainbow then a circle proves to be a very small place. I remember a sister telling me:

‘And then he met someone a few days later. I wished him all the best, with all my love...but it was very tough, you know? To see them sitting together at food circle, hugging and kissing...’

While the death rate of relationships at Rainbows must be incredibly high, a couple that does manage to survive a Gathering probably has something very special going on. A couple that finds their internal harmony in the Rainbow can provide for each other an equilibrium, a safe place to return to and a point of reference in the storm of experience that a Gathering can bring. Such couples are admittedly uncommon but the ones who manage it may continue to come even after they have children, bringing their babies along with them so that the Rainbow becomes part of their childhood.
What kind of Rainbow Family would we be without children? Singing, laughing, joking, playing, living in the moment, the kids embody the spirit that we all aspire to. They’re literally the products of love.

And yet there often aren’t as many children in the Gatherings as might be expected. When freewheeling nomads have kids it’s something of a game-changer. No longer can they hitchhike hundreds of miles without waterproof clothing, sleep behind hedges and wait for the Great Spirit to lead them to their next meal. Suddenly they have to make plans, be prepared and always but always have enough food.

‘Children are God’s joke on humans!’ an old Belgian hippie once told me. From glorious nights of love beneath a full moon, poetry and music in the air comes...nine months of morning sickness, relentless mood swings, and agonising labour. All to produce a crying, laughing, shitting, pissing, vomiting ball of love and joy.

New parents in the Rainbow are of course just as enchanted with the miracle of life they hold in their arms as anyone. But the social challenges begin at once.

‘Would you believe people were looking at us in the street with pity?’ one Italian brother told me. He and his wife had chosen not to use a pram but instead to carry their baby in a shawl wrapped around their shoulders, just like mothers do across much of the world, keeping the baby close to their warmth and heartbeat. ‘That’s why we chose to spend the first three months after the birth on top of a mountain in an abandoned village.’

All Rainbow parents know that, in Babylon, babies are business. There are clothes and outfits for all occasions, baby carriers, prams, cots, disposable diapers, creams, shampoos, milk supplements and any number of squeaking, squeezy, fluffy toys of every description with flashing lights and noises, buttons to press, electronic sensors to trigger, eerie recorded voices of branded cartoon characters. And all of this for 2 year olds.

‘His favourite toy is the power adapter,’ one brother in a van told me, pulling his crawling infant away from the plug for the tenth time that day. ‘Why would he need toys – does he look bored to you?’

And of course the baby in question looked quite content. A variety of stimuli and his loving parents’ attention was all he needed to be happy. But that’s something a lot less marketable than cuddly toys based on American TV shows, produced in China.

Childbirth is where those with their heads in the clouds find themselves dragged down to earth with a bump. Few people in the Rainbow would want to have their baby in a hospital, fearing a sterile atmosphere with blinding lights and arrogant doctors. Will loved ones be allowed to attend? Will the obstetrician even look the mother in the eye? Will the baby be given to the mother after birth to suckle or will she be too out of it having been pressured into taking an epidermal anesthetic?

While these kinds of nightmare scenarios are changing as perspectives broaden in Western medicine, still most pregnant women in the Rainbow are likely to opt for the natural approach; essential oils and Bach Rescue Remedies, Hopi chants and Tibetan incense, reflexology and a safe, comfortable environment to bring new life into the world.

Unfortunately a desire to do things in a cozy, supportive environment is sometimes coupled with what can only be called a dangerous ignorance. While it might seem a magical experience to give birth in your tipi up on the mountain, any experienced midwife knows the importance of being able to get to a hospital quickly in case of complications. It might sound obvious but when a baby is being strangled by its own umbilical cord, it’s too late.
umbilical cord you need an obstetrician, not a shaman. I doubt there are any studies available on infant mortality within the Rainbow Family but I’ve heard enough awful anecdotes to convince me that it’s not good.

It’s when the children grow that things get more complicated as the authorities back home want to know when your kid will go to school. I’ve seen numerous cases where die-hard nomads had to hang up their shoes when their kids reached the age of 4 or 5. There are still the holidays, of course, but the whole process of schooling and just making a living to provide for the kids mean that few families can stay that long on the Rainbow circuit. There are some single mothers on the road with their kids but, aside from a few hardcore adventurers, most of them tend to have a generous social security system back home supporting them.

Bringing kids to the Gatherings can be expensive (hitchhiking long distances isn’t really an option any more) and it can require a lot more preparation than just tossing a sleeping bag into your guitar case and a bag of peanuts in your pocket. Parents can go to the kitchen and take food for their kids but sometimes a raw carrot and a few sprouted beans aren’t what it takes to get a child to stop crying.

I often look at parents in the Rainbow and wonder how they do it. When the sun’s out and the kids can go and explore the forest then the entire Gathering is like one big playground. There are no cars to worry about and everyone around will keep an eye on the children and come to help if they’re in need. There are fires to make, animals to watch and playful adults to fool around with.

But when the rain comes and one of your kids has fever in the tent while the other has diarrhea and needs to be escorted to the shit pit, and you’re trying to dry at least some of their clothes by the fire in the nearby tipi, and the biscuits have all run out – then parenting would seem to take the patience of a saint.

In the absence of a sink, central heating and a washing machine, looking after babies in particular can be a real challenge in the Rainbow. Recent parents often stick close to their vans where they have some of the bare necessities on hand. As the kids get older though, coming to the Rainbow can actually be a relief for the parents as they run off to play with their friends and just come back to check in at food circle. There’s still the worry that they’ll get lost in the woods without a jacket and torch, necessitating frantic search parties late at night but, generally speaking, parents can take a break, play some guitar and have a holiday.

Not that they’re entirely free though.

‘I was just talking to a pretty young sister from Austria when my daughters stuck their heads out of the tent and called “Hey dad!” and the moment was somehow lost...’ a single father of two complained to me one afternoon about the limitations on his sex life.

When kids first arrive at the Rainbow it might take them a few days to get used to things. The resourceful parent will have bags of goodies for low moments but otherwise the children have to get used to mushy bowls of porridge for breakfast instead of fried eggs on toast; a plastic camping mat and sleeping bag instead of a comfy mattress and duvet at night; there are bees flying too close, spiders that climb up your back when you’re not looking and slugs that crawl in your tent if you leave it open. But as long as there are other kids to play with, they’re soon having the time of their lives, enjoying a freedom unthinkable back home.

Once Rainbow kids hit the teenage years things become difficult again. Too old to find endless entertainment in fighting with sticks and making daisy chains, but too young to fit in with the circles of adults talking and flirting in the sun, not many adolescents voluntarily come to the Rainbow. Just the prospect of their parents bathing naked in the stream might be enough to put them off – it’s hard for
them to forget that however acceptable such behaviour might be in
the Gatherings, it would be social suicide elsewhere.

But despite the challenges that come up, the Rainbow Gatherings
offer children the adventure of a lifetime. The Finnish European
Gathering of 2010 was surrounded by lakes dotted with uninhabited
islands, save for the occasional bear taking shelter for the winter. The
waters mirrored the endless twilight of the summer skies and borrow-
ing a boat was the only way to get a brief respite from the mosquitoes.

A gang of girls aged from 7 to 13 got permission from their parents to
go and camp for a few days on one of the islands, a perfect castaway
spot in the middle of the lake about 200 hundred meters in length and
100 metres at its widest. There were rocks to sit on by the water and
enough trees to give shade and a little firewood. They were rowed
out to the island with their sleeping bags and bags full of bread and
cheese, fruit and chocolate and then left there to begin one of the
greatest adventures of their lives.

I paddled out the next day with one of the mothers to check on them
and though they appreciated the visit, it was equally clear they were
anxious for us to go again so they could get back to their fun. That
evening, however, a storm blew in from nowhere with howling winds
that tore down tarps across the camp and pelting rain that soaked us to
the skin in moments. We shuddered to think of the girls on the island
with the winds crashing on the shore, the branches of the trees shak-
ing overhead and not so much as a tent to keep them warm and dry.

While they were happy enough to come back to the Gathering the
next day, they had, in fact, survived the night remarkably well; it
happened that they’d been working all day on making a shelter out of
branches and leaves that they’d managed to gather. When the storm
began they all huddled inside and told each other stories, staying
mostly dry and warm.

In some parts of Babylon allowing children to go and camp by them-
selves might be considered reckless endangerment of minors. A case
for social workers to get involved and assess the competence of the
parents to take care of their children.

But what a time they’d had! How independent and proud of them-
selves they’d felt! Who could ever deny them such an experience?
Part Four

Rainbow World
The whole world is Rainbow – they just don’t know it yet!’ a veteran of many Gatherings told me.

Yet walk around the main circle and you’ll have a hard time finding two people who agree on what the Rainbow is, exactly. For some we’re a prophesied tribe of many colours who gather to change the world. For others we’re simply an eclectic mix of people who try to live with our hearts wide open. But whatever we believe and whether we’re meeting each other for the first or the thirtieth time, when we gather in deserts and forests, on mountains and beaches, we know we’re in this together as Rainbow Family.

We relate in quite another level in the Gatherings. It’s common to know someone for weeks without ever finding out what they do back home, if they even have one. What you do for a living is far down the list of questions most people will have for you. Someone may open their heart to you, you may laugh and cry together, look after their children, depart with the fond farewell of see you in five minutes and never see them again. The Rainbow is made up of a million moments where, as the Indian saying has it, what’s not here is elsewhere and what’s elsewhere is nowhere.

When the Gathering ends most of us will go back to our own lives in Babylon. We might host or surf the sofas of Rainbow friends from time to time, but they’re largely two different worlds. We share our bread in the circle but not our bank accounts. We celebrate as one around the fire but we don’t move in together. And yet when we bump into each other in the street or on the road somewhere there’s always the familiar warmth in recognizing a kindred spirit who carries the Rainbow in their heart.
We’re not all dreamers in the Rainbow. There are cynics and activists, spiritual warriors and tourists. Some of us sit around the fire playing music all night, never getting to sleep before dawn; others have already done an hour of yoga before the sun comes up. To walk around the circle is to stroll through the full spectrum of ages, personalities and backgrounds and yet there we are once again, following old Rainbow traditions and having the time of our lives. Our diversity is what gives us our unity.

In many ways the Rainbow is where we get to see our potential realised; most of us have a hard time putting into practice the beautiful spiritual truths we read and hear about; they often don’t seem practical in a world of survival and compromise. In the Rainbow it feels like we have the chance to live by a higher law, to listen to our hearts and make universal love a reality rather than just a concept.

I’ve read mystical texts from all over the world that seem to suggest that from a certain perspective, we’re all ultimately the same person. We’re obliged to fill our own lungs with air, our own stomachs with food and so we labour under the illusion that we’re separate from everyone else but fundamentally there is no me and you, just the I and I. What’s beyond doubt is that in the Rainbow there are many who try to live as if that were true.

Throughout history one of the most dreaded punishments was to be banished from your community, excommunicated, exiled. What is shame, after all, but the fear of being rejected, excluded or denied love? In all my years around the world I’ve never come across a more welcoming and supportive atmosphere than the Rainbow Gatherings, a place where I could come as I was to join the Family.

There are very few saints in the Rainbow, however. Despite our best intentions we’re as human as anyone and our high ideals quickly get put to the test when we confront those who live at the margins of the tribe and even of their own sanity.

It almost resembled a lynch mob. A brother who had been luring sisters into the forest (and then refusing to let them go) was being thrown out of the Finnish European Gathering and it wasn’t a pretty sight. The crowd herding him out threw a couple of punches and kicks as he went and there were those who wanted to beat him up to make sure he never returned. He had been crafty, not actually assaulting the girls, just using his superior strength to hold them a little, so he couldn’t be charged with any crime. But the previous night he had sat by the edge of the forest with a burning fire stick in his hand and an imbecilic look on his face; in the hottest summer Finland had ever experienced and with fires devastating the forests across the border in Russia, even an unspoken threat of arson was taken seriously by the authorities.

The police declined to enter the Gathering though, insisting that we should bring him out to where they waited by the entrance to the main road. The unbalanced brother in question took one look at their uniforms and made a run for it through the forest. The police followed with dogs and once they caught him, he was taken to a psychiatric ward to be held under observation.

Three days later he walked back into the Gathering with a big smile on his face. He’d been as good as gold while under scrutiny and though he was supposed to be taken to his embassy for potential repatriation, he’d just walked off and hitchhiked back to the Rainbow. Over the next few weeks he was thrown out again, and again, and again until finally the police decided he was enough of a risk to send in a team to remove him from the Gathering by force and deport him.

The fate of one troubled individual had preoccupied, divided and drained us to an unbelievable extent. There were some who insisted that he just needed healing and love, while others believed he was only selfish and manipulative, set on taking advantage of the Rainbow’s
good nature. In some ways the whole process of getting him kicked out had been more trouble than just having him stick around.

In the Rainbow Gatherings where everyone is welcome and no one is in charge, it’s something of an open question as to whether and how someone should be made to leave. It’s generally agreed that when a person becomes a physical threat to others they should go but it’s also protocol to get consensus on the matter by calling a circle to discuss it. And then you never get consensus. Those who favour forming a quick vigilante group to throw someone out meet a peacenik opposition who insist that every problem can be solved with love and support.

Those who want to eject the troublemaker argue that it’s irresponsible to allow a known threat to not only ruin the mood of the Gathering but also to potentially scar someone’s life forever. We’re gathered for a month in nature to let our spirits shine, not to be terrorised by some psychopath with a knife. Occasionally a small group just goes ahead and escorts the culprit to the parking lot with their stuff and tells them it’s time to go. In the event that they come back, efforts may be made to contact their family if they have any or, failing that, their embassy. In the worst case scenario it’s been known for a couple of tougher-than-average brothers to physically throw the trouble maker out.

Such an approach appalls many in the Rainbow. If we behave like that, people ask, then how can we claim to set a better example than Babylon where people are punished and imprisoned for breaking the rules?

I was told of an incident in a hippie community where an Eastern European guy was accused of raping a woman in the forest. He was grabbed by a bunch of angry brothers, slapped around a bit and then locked in a car while they decided what to do with him. Should they call the police or simply break his legs so that he would never come back again? Into this mob walked one of the founders of the community, an Earth Mother in her 50’s who walked around naked at all hours of the day. To give you an idea, she was once seen to pick a little creature out of her hair, examine it sympathetically and then pop it back in again.

‘Stop!’ she cried, ‘What this man needs is love!’ She pushed the men aside, opened the car and took the rapist to live with her in her tipi for the next couple of weeks. I don’t know if her response was appropriate or effective but no one could doubt her sincerity and dedication. For all we knew, that could have been the first time he was ever given any love or affection. It might have been the single most important encounter in his life.

Stories abound in the Rainbow of the problematic individual whose only strategy to get attention is to be hostile and destructive. Desperate for love, they settle for hate. They may have no friends but at least they can be sure everyone is talking about them. There are brothers (and they’re almost always men) who knock over pots of food, who shout and yell, break instruments and kick around the coals from the fire so that sparks fly in everyone’s faces. They may appear to be out of their senses but that’s usually far from the case – after all, they traveled for hundreds of miles to get to a Gathering, following vague directions on a map downloaded from the internet...just how crazy can they be?

Often it’s up to the women to resolve the problem. I’ve seen guys who were yelling and swearing, threatening people and picking fights with any brother who tried to calm them down – only to collapse in tears when a team of sisters surrounded and embraced them in a group hug. These are some of the most memorable moments in the Rainbow when nothing but good old love can totally transform a situation that looked to be out of control.

I’ve also seen snarling, aggressive men go quite meek and subservient the moment a stern, grey-haired sister marched up to give them a good talking-to. We rarely discover the back-story of the trouble-
makers, what terrible things they had to endure as children or what kind of lives they have outside the Gathering. Often all that’s really needed is a mother figure to convince them that they can and should be good again.

‘There are enough people here who know how to heal, who work with this kind of thing back home,’ one brother pointed out to me after we threw out the would-be arsonist in Finland, ‘But everyone wants to be on holiday. Anyway, if he goes someone else will go crazy to take his place.’

One of the indications of the health of a society might be the number of people who cannot function within it. When a country has large numbers of people in prison or asylums, homeless or on psychiatric medication, it’s probably symptomatic of deeper fault lines within the culture. There are also plenty of people who are not quite troubled or dangerous enough to have their freedom taken away from them but who struggle to fit in anywhere. Just like in activist camps and community squats, Rainbow Gatherings often end up being a kind of default social service for those who struggle to find any human contact elsewhere.

Neither do they immediately stand out in the Gatherings where the line between eccentric and crazy is a fine one. In fact, the atmosphere in the Rainbow is so free and unstructured that it’s common to see people’s psyches gradually unravel over the course of a Gathering. Some are simply borderline schizophrenics who have run out of their prescriptions, sending them into paranoia and delusion. For others the liberty and forum for self-expression in the Rainbow is a dangerous whirlpool. They drown in the same water the rest of us swim in.

Whether someone starts talking to themselves all day or decides that everyone is reading their mind, it’s often the case that they’ve simply lost all point of reference. Whereas in their daily lives they may have the structure of friends and family to help them keep their feet on the ground, in the Rainbow there are no such border controls on anyone’s reality. Someone might paint himself blue, walk around naked with cow dung on his face pretending he’s a chicken and the worst that will happen is that no one will want to sit next to him at the food circle.

Maybe he forgets to eat at all, sleep becomes a thing of the past and he floats away higher and higher, a dangerous glare forming in his eyes. He begins to see symbols and portents everywhere, meaning in every overheard word and snatch of song until he eventually comes to the unmistakable conclusion that he’s the Messiah come to save us all! Or else that the entire world is nothing but a figment of his imagination. A solipsistic daydream.

The Rainbow is a loving, caring community where we share and help each other but it’s also a place where people take responsibility for themselves. While counseling and healing are often available, most people don’t want to give up their three weeks in the sun to babysit someone who’s gone adrift from their psychological mooring. I knew one sister though who spent most of her Gathering in Turkey with a brother who most people considered to be pretty scary, if not dangerous.

‘I learned a lot from him, really! And you know, we only have to live with these kinds of people for a few weeks every now and then – they have to live with themselves all the time!’

That’s the kind of compassion that keeps me coming back to the Rainbow.

Sometimes people lost the plot in the Rainbow but come back down again once they return to society. There were two guys in the Finnish Gathering who followed this pattern; the first was a brother who I met in seed camp and, while he had always had a manic sense of humour,
he seemed to basically have his act together; after a few weeks of almost constant daylight in the Scandinavian summer, however, he stopped sleeping and his expression darkened. Like a tape playing too fast, he began to ramble incessantly and one day he walked up to me and asked in all seriousness:

‘Tell me, Tommy, do you think you are the devil?’

I met him again in a Rainbow a year later and after keeping my distance for a day or two, I observed that he seemed much calmer now and I asked him if he remembered the things he had said the year before.

‘Me? No, no, you must be thinking of something else.’ he insisted.

The second was an Iranian brother who had walked naked into the center of the evening food circle, shouting loudly. The Finns, with their naturally respectful character, called for everyone to hush and give focus to the speaker. The hairy-assed prophet began to expound on a vision for love and peace, freedom and harmony, the excitement in his voice giving way to anger and exasperation as people lost interest and returned to their meal.

I happened to be hitchhiking through Denmark a month later and bumped into him in the street: he was dressed normally and pushing along a pram with a small child inside. He greeted me like a long lost brother and offered to give me the keys to his apartment as he was going away for the weekend. With a family and a home, it appeared that in Finland he had simply taken a vacation from sanity, trusting that there would still be food twice a day and a fire to keep him warm.

I remember myself when I was living in India at the tender age of 21 and had been taking mammoth quantities of LSD to fuel all-night sessions of dancing on the beach to the light of the moon and the music of the waves. I had discovered a marvelous dimension of dance. A psychedelic playground of movement where my body seemed to be connected to the wavelengths of the universe. A realm where thought bypassed words and translated itself straight into movement.

The trouble was that I began to let my moonlight sessions spill over into my daily life, too. In cafes and people’s houses in Goa I let my hands and fingers trace patterns in the air, moving to a quantum beat – for what was the essence of Reality but one Cosmic Dance?

‘That thing you’re doing with your hands is just weird!’ Someone finally told me. Indignant as I was at the slight on my sacred choreography, I did begin to ask myself if it was really in my interest to spontaneously dance to no music in public places. Gradually I understood that, whatever fun I might be able to have in my own private universe, there was no need to freak everyone out and I began to tone it down.

The mentally-disturbed are usually the last people to leave. Turn up at the end of a Gathering and you might get the impression that most people at the Rainbow are a bit unhinged. At one spectacular location in the mountains of Switzerland it was proposed to extend the Rainbow through the whole summer but I later heard the plan didn’t quite work out.

‘In the end there were more crazies than the rest of us.’ one sister told me, shaking her head. ‘It was like we were only there to cook for the asylum.’

But while for some the Gatherings represent an opportunity to let go of the burden of sanity for a month and still get fed, for others the mental instability can go much deeper. I remember in my first Rainbow in Israel, I was one of the last hardcore group of 20 hippies who continued to camp in the desert for days after everyone else had
left. One of the girls there, a blond sister in her early 20’s with a far-away look in her eyes, began to go around topless – nothing unusual for most Rainbows but uncommon in Israel, partly due to the presence of Bedouin men in the camp.

In fact, one of the Bedouin had begun to hover around her, hardly daring to believe his luck when she let him kiss her. But even he seemed a little fazed by the vacant expression she wore and he eventually wandered off. When it was time to strike camp, we made sure that she got a ride back home in someone’s car and we hoped that she would return to her senses once back with her family.

I later heard that she returned shortly afterwards, however, in search of a lost scarf that had suddenly become very important to her. She hitchhiked to the nearest kibbutz and then walked out into the desert in the vague direction of where several hundred hippies had been camped a week before. She wandered through the dust and rocks for several hours until eventually she stumbled on the Egyptian border.

I could just picture a handful of young Egyptian soldiers sweating it out in a lousy desert posting, the glare of the sun reducing the horizon to a dizzy haze. Then one of them saw her through his binoculars, pinched himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming and then called out to Allah for protection (or thanks) at the inexplicable mirage approaching – an apparition of a tall blond girl walking through the sands, her long skirts flowing and perfectly-formed breasts glowing in the sun...enough to make anyone stop smoking dope.

In the event the soldiers were very nice to her and called the Israelis to let them know that one of theirs had gone astray...

In addition to the challenges to your mind in the Rainbow, it’s also common enough for your body to get sick. With no bathrooms people might go days without washing their hands, hygiene in the kitchen can be questionable and living in such close proximity it doesn’t take much for a bug to go around. In my experience, however, the worst thing about getting ill in the Rainbow is all the people trying to cure you. I remember being hit by a virus at a Gathering and barely having the strength to walk more than 50 meters before stopping to rest. I was heading slowly but surely along the path towards the shit pits when a brother saw me leaning against the hill, out of breath. He asked me:

‘Are you ill?’ I nodded and he frowned, thought for a moment and then proceeded to pull down his trousers. ‘I show you something that can help – but it’s nothing sexual!’ He began to urinate and then cupped his hands together. ‘What you do is you take not the first part of your piss and not the last but the middle bit, understand?’ Weak and helpless, I watched him gleefully slurp down his urine and learned the lesson that, no matter how bad you feel, someone can always come along and make it worse.

On another occasion at the Italian European Rainbow it rained so relentlessly that a tickling cough developed into a noisy chest infection that left me exhausted and irritable. It was impossible to get warm and dry and my cough frequently kept me awake at night. One well-meaning sister insisted on feeding me every day a plate of raw carrots and brown sugar on the premise that it would help me if I believed it would (its lack of effect was, naturally, a result of my skepticism). Another brother, an acupuncture student, vigorously rubbed crystals against the back of my neck and was about to thrust in some needles until I reminded him it was traditional to ask the patient’s consent first.

Ultimately it’s up to everyone to choose the treatment they think best for them but sometimes there’s an alarming lack of awareness of the limits of alternative medicine. I heard about one Gathering where a sister ran up to the kitchen, quite out of breath, to ask if anyone
there knew reiki? Someone had gotten badly burnt and, rather than fetch water, look for a doctor or call for an ambulance, her immediate thought was this person needs universal energy! Luckily there were some Israelis there who switched straight into military mode and got the patient down the hill and to hospital at once.

At other times it can be almost pitiful. I knew one brother who traveled everywhere with his two dogs who were closer to him than some children are to their parents. He had photos, for instance, of when they took their first solid food as puppies. He had, however, recently begun to find dark skin eruptions forming on his hands but instead of consulting a doctor, he kept trying different combinations of essential oils. I couldn’t help but think he’d probably just caught a parasite from his dogs that slept beside him, ate beside him and lived in the same little tipi.

At the average Rainbow Gathering it seems like every second person is a healer. Everyone seems to practice reiki, massage, aromatherapy or chakric healing. People are to be seen reading books on raw food diets, Ayurveda and shamanism. At every food circle there can be heard drawn-out discussions about what kind of foods and in what combination are healthy to eat. And a sizable number of the workshops are about how to heal others and stay healthy.

Even the songs heard around the fire harp on the theme:

Thank you for the butterflies, lord, thank you for the butterflies, they’re healing, they’re healing, they’re healing us.

Until you feel the rising urge to yell: since when were we all so sick?

The answer might come that as long as we’re not living in love then we have healing to do; buried anger, unresolved grief, addictive behaviour – most of us have stuff to resolve. Some might say that we never do resolve it all, that there’s always new issues coming up and that healing is a lifelong path.

For many the Gatherings represent part of a decision to change their lives and find themselves on their own terms. Their bodies may have been somewhat neglected temples until now but they’re sacred none the less and in need of attention. And if all illness begins in the heart then what better place than the Rainbow to be healed?

A cynic might point out that the whole field is a little self-absorbed, however. The modern assault of self-help books and therapies seem inextricably tied to a degree of narcissism. Hypochondria is perhaps second only to astrology when it comes to endlessly obsessing about ourselves. Someone who is ‘sick’ gets attention and sympathy, while someone who ‘heals’ enjoys prestige and gratitude. The meeting between the needy and the needed is a match made in heaven.

There’s also an alarming lack of facts in the theories heard at the Rainbow.

‘Only vitamin C oxidises!’ one medical student laughed quietly at one food circle, after the cook announced that all the vegetables for the salad would be given out uncut that day as otherwise the vitamins will all evaporate. I must admit to rather gleefully collecting the responses of doctors in the Rainbow to things they’d heard; one French doctor cracked up when she heard someone describe how his massage popped bubbles of cellulite stored within the bones. Another pointed out to deaf ears that while ash might be sterile, it certainly wasn’t antiseptic and there were better things to dress a cut.

In the European Gathering at least, there’s always a healing area with a tipi and there’s usually one or two actual doctors in the Family who keep an eye on things. There are stores of common herbs, sterile dressings, pain killers, antihistamines and other useful medicines. People who are ill can come and get a consultation, rest by the fire and drink some tea. Although the doctor(s) might want to be on holiday in the Rainbow, they often feel it as their calling to help remove ticks, treat infected cuts and give out pills for allergic reactions.
Their presence is a blessing for the larger Rainbows. When a few thousand people get together for a month, immediate medical attention is a godsend when it comes to things like burns from the fire, bouts of gonorrhea from all the free love, concussion from falling beams in poorly-constructed shelters, poisoning from eating the wrong kind of mushrooms, deep cuts when chopping wood with an axe, strong fevers, asthma attacks and bizarre infections that cause limbs to swell up. For, as much as Nature nourishes and heals us, it’s also often trying to kill us.

In the Portuguese Rainbow Gathering of 2011 one sister got bitten by something – possibly a water snake or scorpion – and her arm began to swell at an alarming rate. We drove her to the nearby town and the doctor took one look at the blue discolouring on the skin and insisted that she be taken to hospital by ambulance. She spent days on an antibiotic drip in a ward with the television on at all hours. A long way from hanging out with hippies in the forest.

I took a couple of days out of the Rainbow to visit her in hospital, sleeping at night in a park on cardboard boxes until she was well enough to leave. To kill time during day I had fun quizzing the nurses on what to do if the water supply at the Rainbow got contaminated. They rolled their eyes when I gleefully informed them that no one would consent to adding iodine to the water tanks.

While most people do recognize the value of Western medicine in some cases, in general it has a pretty bad rep in the Rainbow. I’ve often heard it said that a cold, reductionist approach based on industry-funded research can never hope to understand something as essentially holistic as health. Babylon would have you believe that your health is not in your own hands but the business of a professional elite; that illness is due to random distribution of malfunctioning genes rather than repressed emotion; that your body and spirit have no power to heal themselves but must instead submit to a bombardment of antibiotics and mind-changing drugs.

And small wonder.

We live in an age where big pharmaceutical companies are indeed doping large sections of the population, inventing a media environment where any divergence from ‘normal’ behaviour is considered dysfunctional and a case for medication. Doctors are bribed with free dinners, presents and even holidays to prescribe the latest drug on the market. Go for a consultation and the general practitioner will give you only a few minutes of their time, unconcerned by what’s going on in your life but only paying attention to the data they can discern from your x-rays and bodily fluids.

Part of the attraction of alternative medicine may be in its comparative simplicity. Whereas Western doctors explain illness in terms of bacteria, viruses, cells and parasites too small to be seen (and in the Rainbow, seeing is believing), many alternative therapies are easier to comprehend. Based on the idea that the body only gets sick when there are unresolved emotional or spiritual issues, alternative practitioners frequently work with the kind of intuitive diagnosis that can be learned in five minutes. You have an acidic stomach? Maybe there’s too much fire in your system – better drink more water! An eye infection? There’s probably something in your life that you don’t want to see...

Likewise, when it comes to actually treating someone many healers will insist that their therapy is effective whether the patient gets better or not. If they do, then the treatment worked! And if they don’t then the patient was blocking it. Or perhaps it had to get worse before it could get better...

The urge towards simplicity is understandable in a world that has grown too complex for anyone to fully comprehend. As biologists sequence the genome, clone organisms and even reduce the brain itself to the status of an organic computer, the instinctive response is to run for the hills in search of sunlight, human touch and cosmic energy. The result is that in the Rainbow anything that is Eastern, intuitive...
and *natural* is good, while all that is *Western, analytical* or *chemical* is suspect, to say the least. When people come to the Rainbow they often choose to leave behind anything with the taint of Babylon, preferring to take health into their own hands. If hit by illness, it’s more empowering to believe it’s due to an energy block than the presence of some merciless pathogen.

While most in the Rainbow acknowledge the usefulness of antibiotics and anesthetics in some cases, there are others who believe all pharmaceutical medicine is the poison of Babylon. Only love can bring real healing. All is in the hands of the Great Spirit. You just need to believe.

That many people in the Rainbow aren’t aware of the benefits of Western medicine and public health measures, is perhaps part of the luxury of living in an age where most of us don’t have to face nasties like syphilis and smallpox, cholera or tuberculosis. It’s a commonly heard theory in the Rainbow that vaccines cause autism but if people seem less afraid of contagious diseases it’s simply because, well, we’re not dying of these things any more.

Now that our lives are no longer at risk from something as common as an infected cut, it’s easy to look back at the good old days of herbalists, alchemists and witches. Yet it wasn’t spells or herbal balms that drastically reduced infant mortality and vanquished the diseases that have killed millions since the beginning of history. It was vaccines, penicillin and the germ theory of disease. Just be careful how loudly you say that around the main fire at a Rainbow Gathering...

Faith in alternative medicines might at times be a little simple-minded in the Rainbow, yet health may well be something more than what shows up in laboratory results. I was struck by a talk I once heard from a famous acupuncturist from China who declared that 90% of the healing happened before the needles ever went in. What counted was the resonance between the patient and the healer and the ability of the latter to listen with attention and empathy. When the patient felt they’d been heard and understood the healing process had already begun.

Research studies, statistics and biological examinations have done wonders for the world in curing some of the really nasty illnesses out there. But there’s no test in existence to measure the shine in someone’s eye, or the spring in the walk, or the ease with which a smile comes to their face after months of sadness. Just being at the Gatherings, sitting in the circles, hugging and touching, singing from the heart and being part of something greater than yourself – only the most reductionist of minds could deny its potential for healing.

‘Oh, do you believe in that?’ one brother asked me after I told him if he wanted to drink from my water he should do so Indian-style and not touch the bottle with his lips.

Bacteria. He wanted to know if I believed in bacteria. He then explained to me how Babylon wanted us to believe there were germs that made us ill but really it was all inside our minds. He himself had once cured his own gum infection by working through the real spiritual causes in deep meditation and thus avoided a trip to the dentist. In fact, in his 25 years on the planet he had suffered no diseases and therefore why should he believe they existed? Look around in the Rainbow, how many seriously ill people did I see?

I went blue in the face for the next two hours trying to explain to him that the millions of children who die in Africa every year from diarrhea and malaria are victims of virulent pathogens, not blocked emotions. A recurrent cough might indeed be a symptom of repressed grief but 100 million people hadn’t died of the Spanish Flu
in 1919 because they were feeling sorry for themselves. Far from being close-minded, however, he seemed genuinely interested in the matter. Mostly because he’d never thought about any of it before. In the simple, happy world he lived in, people got sick because they didn’t take responsibility for their own feelings and happy, spiritual people would always be okay. I was too exasperated to think of telling him about all the great mystics of history who died of cancer or that Buddha himself was said to have died of food poisoning.

Sometimes having a sense of logic can leave you feeling a little lonely in the Rainbow. Rather than subject a claim to a critical analysis, most people will instead believe something if it feels intuitively true. With such a subjective lens they can have a hard time seeing the bigger picture. For instance, when poor hygiene in the kitchen sends waves of people running to the shit pit with diarrhea, reactions tend to be ambiguous.

‘But I didn’t get sick.’ one sister objected when I mentioned that many had suffered after the previous night’s meal. She thought it more likely that there were other more cathartic causes for everyone’s loose stools. They were processing something spiritual, not intestinal. With all the factors involved – the relative immunity of each person’s bowels, concentration of the pathogens in the food, how much everyone ate and from which pot – it was much simpler to simplify it to they needed to get sick.

Everyone is free to believe what they like but it can be a little galling to crawl out of your tent 5 times a night and stagger up the path by torchlight to the shit pits – and then be told don’t worry – it’s healing! If getting sick is good for you, I sometimes reply irritably, then death must be the best medicine of all?

In the Rainbow trust is often seen as more important than knowledge. Although self-responsibility is an essential part of the Rainbow ethos, there’s also the safety net of affirming that all things are in the hands of the Great Spirit. I saw this in a Gathering in Italy when a brother stood up and begged everyone not to bring wild mushrooms to the kitchen but instead to show them to him or any other fungi expert first.

‘But yesterday I gathered some mushrooms and couldn’t find anyone who knew about them,’ one sister responded, ‘So I took them to the kitchen and trusted in the consciousness of the cooks!’

And if the cooks trusted in the consciousness of the mushroom gatherers? One poisonous mushroom could have hospitalised us all.

Trusting in our feelings may be a good tactic in many cases but is perhaps not the analytical tool of choice, especially when our intuition lets us down. I met one Israeli sister who, having succumbed to the condoms aren’t organic speech, had had sex without protection at a Gathering and now believed she might be pregnant.

‘So I asked my body, are you pregnant? and my body said yes!’

Her pregnancy lasted the time it took for her friends to persuade her to get a test from the pharmacy. It came out negative.

The degree of credulity in the Rainbow takes my breath away at times. Admittedly, rationality is boring but it comes in useful when trying to separate correlation from causation. Thousands of children with autism were vaccinated! Yes, but so were the millions of children who don’t have autism. One might as well say that mother’s milk is responsible.

But it gets wackier still. Take those who believe we can live on sunlight alone.

‘Food is the greatest addiction of all!’ I heard a brother explain one afternoon. He’d heard of certain saints, past and present, who claimed to
live without food or even bodily excretions, and, as the idea appealed to him, he’d decided to believe it. He might even have seen a film with real scientists wearing white lab coats affirming it was possible. In the Rainbow it often takes only a passionate documentary, book or workshop after food circle to convince someone of almost anything.

People mostly go to the Rainbow for all kinds of positive motives – to enjoy nature, find community, get perspective – but it can’t be denied that there’s often an element of escapism involved. On the run from the contaminating influence of corrupt, poisonous Babylon, there’s a tendency to feel threatened by all kinds of invisible threats to our health, even in the most innocent sources.

‘You let the tea boil – it’s carcinogenic!’ a feisty Italian sister once told me in between puffs of her cigarette. She’d read it somewhere, apparently but couldn’t remember where. She also thought my biscuits caused cancer because of all the additives though it didn’t stop her eating some.

Many beliefs about health in the Rainbow are based around the potential of ubiquitous toxins in the urban environment that are bound to give you any number of diseases, cancer topping the paranoia charts. I’ve heard people obsess about the vapour trails left behind by jets, fluoride in toothpaste and sodium lauryl sulphate in soap, wireless internet networks and even the theory that no one dies from AIDS but only from the drugs they’re given to treat it!

Under siege from food stuffed with harmful preservatives, cellphone towers that fry our brains and carcinogenic chemicals even in our laundry soap, there’s clearly no safe place in the world except in the Rainbow. Sitting all night around camp fires that churn out carbon monoxide – a known cause of cancer if there ever was one.

You could fill a book with the bizarre beliefs held in the Rainbow by just walking around and eavesdropping on conversations. I remem-ber sitting by my tent and joking to a friend that most hippies didn’t believe the Americans ever went to the moon.

‘They didn’t in the 60’s!’ an American brother walking by interjected, ‘But they did afterwards. Then they went to Mars. They have people there right now!’

We nodded and just about managed to wait for him to leave before cracking up in laughter.

Conspiracy theories flourish in the Rainbow and you have only to find out that someone doesn’t believe in vaccination to know they also think 9/11 was an inside job and AIDS doesn’t actually exist. It’s been said that those who believe in conspiracy theories are seeking the reassurance that there is actually someone in control of the world, rather than the runaway disaster it appears to be. Beyond the wooly thinking though, these beliefs also hint at deeper resentments towards any kind of authority; scratch beneath the surface of many a happy hippie and you’ll find scowling adolescent rage; echoes of the years when they rejected everything and got facial piercings just to piss off their parents.

But it’s also a lot of fun to believe. I suspect the success of the Harry Potter franchise was due to a deep longing in its readers that the world really was a little more magical. Thus in the Rainbow you can find people who believe in astral travel, totem animals and every kind of astrological system under the sun; they believe in the Age of Aquarius, ancient Mayan prophecies, the lost legacy of Atlantis and the Violet Flame – the spiritual spectrum beyond the physical where karma can be healed on the atomic level.

There are those who believe in David Icke’s warnings of lizard overlords from another dimension, Hindu gods who guide them in their dreams and populations of elves and entities who live in the forest. And let’s not even get started on aliens and crop circles....
It’s only a fraction of the Rainbow that subscribes to these fringe creeds with any passion, however. Most people tend to profess a kind of consenting agnosticism where they don’t get too excited about praying to the spirits of the lake but don’t consider it a waste of time either.

In my early years in the Rainbow the wacky beliefs drove me nuts. Time and time again I found myself in heated ontological discussions around the fire about things that a child would dismiss as nonsense. Gradually, over the years though, I realised that logic would get me nowhere in such exchanges; when their wild claims were challenged, people felt under attack and dug themselves in even deeper. Instead I learned to become more flexible and see it all as part of a cheerful Theatre of the Absurd, a creative expression of our search for meaning and identity. When I learned to tune out the words, the feelings behind what people were saying were often beautiful and inspiring.

It’s the extremists who make good stories though.

I was having breakfast one morning outside my tent at the European Rainbow in Slovakia when a Spanish brother walked past and wished me good appetite. I struggled with my conscience for a moment or two and then invited him to join in my meal of bread and cheese. He accepted gratefully and told me he’d missed dinner the night before as he had been to town to send off the last draft of a book he’d written.

‘What was your book about?’ I asked, my professional curiosity roused.

‘Well,’ he began, sizing me up with an earnest look, ‘Three months ago I awoke and understood the Answer to Life, the Universe and Everything. So I wrote it down to help my friends and family.’

I considered asking him what the Answer was, having spent many years myself in the search for Ultimate Truth in vain. But I had only been awake for half an hour and hadn’t even had my tea yet.

Or take the Finnish guy who believed in animal liberation. Literally. He traveled through Europe setting free animals in farms wherever he could, causing complete mayhem on his way. He was hiding out in the valley of Beneficio in Southern Spain, on the run from the police, and saw it as his duty to free some chickens in a coop there. The owner was furious at having to spend all morning to get his chickens back and went looking for the culprit. A man in the parking lot was identified as being from Finland and he ran up to him and shouted:

‘Do you believe in liberating chickens?’

‘Well, um, I suppose so.’ the Finnish man replied philosophically and was promptly punched in the face. He turned and ran with the angry Spaniard hot on his heals.

‘Wait! Wait! That’s not him! It was another Finnish guy!’ some bystanders shouted in alarm.

Although he presumably got an apology and maybe a free omelet, I tried to imagine that the poor guy must have said when he went home and was asked about his time with the hippies in Spain.

‘Nice people but very passionate about their animals...’

If there’s an apparent fondness for the esoteric in the Rainbow it may be because most of us have grown up in a world without religion, myth or ritual. Science has become the dominant source of knowledge and its rational explanations for the origins of the universe have gradually supplanted the creation myths of the sacred texts. Despite the rise of fundamentalism in certain areas of the world, the general trend is towards a profound skepticism regarding the religious institutions whose priests, imams and rabbis seem a little too human to be emissaries for the Divine.
And yet as societies all over the world have always structured their lives around ritual, it’s reasonable to suppose it’s something essential to the human condition. In the West we still manage to get enough enthusiasm up to exchange gifts at Christmas, celebrate the New Year, maybe send a card on Valentine’s Day and pull practical jokes on April 1st – but often it feels like we’re just going through the motions as passive consumers, pathetically grateful for whatever drops of meaning we can squeeze out of these heavily-marketed occasions.

The mythologist, Joseph Campbell, concluded that in ritual ‘we celebrate the Eternal in the transitory’. As we rush around trying to get the most out of our lives, ritual offers us a chance to reflect on where we’re going and what it all means. We remember that we were born, we grow up, we belong to a community, we may invite another to share our lives, and eventually bring life into the world to be loved and nurtured, even as we mourn those who have departed.

In ritual we have always honoured the elements that shape our lives; the passing of the seasons, the miracle of fertility, the planet that sustains us, the celestial bodies that light up our world, the importance of the essential elements of fire, earth, air and water.

‘Now let us thank Grandfather Fire Energy!’ one English brother insisted before bringing in another hot rock into the sweat lodge. ‘Oh Grandfather Fire! Thank you for giving us heat and helping us sweat out our toxins.’ Then he broke into a rumbling Native American chant appropriate to the occasion.

It’s at this point that the skeptics say, ‘Whoa, time out!’ and wonder what the hell they’re doing at a Rainbow in the first place. Have we really gone through centuries of scientific enlightenment, casting off and debunking millennia of superstition, only to suddenly regress into credulous paganism once again, seeing gods in candle flames and gusts of wind?

One of the obstacles to experiencing wonder in the modern world is that we’re spoilt. Whereas the ability to make and preserve fire was once a skilled, sacred task, entrusted to a fire-bearer who kept the embers alive under pain of death, now you can buy a box of matches for pennies. Our houses are heated with the twist of a dial, our rooms lit at the flick of a switch. Whereas tribes once roamed hundreds of miles to follow the rains, or built cities beside great rivers considered sacred as the Source of Life, now we have all the water we need on tap.

Neither does the earth itself arouse any great awe in most people. The mysteries of how our nourishment arises from the soil is now the consideration of professional farmers, familiar with nitrogen capture and modern irrigation techniques. As long as the tasty produce continues to arrive in the stores we don’t trouble ourselves too much to ask how it got there. And in a world where almost everything is made of plastic and synthetic materials, anything fashioned from wood or stone seems almost quaint.

Once, we looked up at the sky for guidance, scanning the horizon for news of other tribes, movements of animals, the arrival of the rains, burning offerings to the spirits for insight, assistance and protection. Now we have claimed the airwaves for ourselves, communicating at great distances, sending packets of data through the air, controlling objects from a distance – performing any number of miracles that would have seemed great sorcery to our ancestors.

In the Rainbow there is something of a return to these basics. Whether the moon is out or not affects how you move around, where you gather and how long it takes you to get back to your tent. Without fire, the nights are lonely and sad. We gather around the burning wood and recognize something of the spirit within us in the dancing flames. We have to walk to get our drinking water and we find it in its own domain: gathered in a lake or tumbling down a mountain slope on its patient journey towards the sea. We sit on the earth and are cooled by its grass, pricked by its spiky plants, shaded by trees. We’re affected
by the weather in ways that would never matter living inside a house – beyond a flimsy layer of plastic or canvas, the sky is the roof we gather under.

It’s a testament to our feckless times that we take the essential elements of life for granted. What was once sacred is now simply low-tech. In an age bordering on world-changing advances in robotics, stem cell technology and digital communication, we increasingly look to the scientists and engineers to astound us with miracles and revelation. And as we invest more and more of our lives in the internet, so that to be disconnected will soon be a thing of the past, it appears we’re leaving the real world behind to make our home in the digital.

And yet for all the scientific advances that make the news and cause us to scratch our heads in wonder, the novelty doesn’t last long. We absorb each innovation with nonchalance and then get annoyed when, for instance, our video call to someone else on the other side of the planet gets interrupted by a flaky internet connection. As scientists break down emotions into chemical formulas and explain our behaviour as genetic strategies, there’s a sense that it can all be explained and understood – even if our own eyes might glaze over by the second paragraph. If it can all be reduced to numbers, physics and chemicals there’s no longer any real sense of mystery. Before the ineffable, transcendent nature of life itself, few people any longer feel a sense of awe.

At the heart of it all, however, we still want to believe.

Now that the world has been mapped and measured, analysed and explained, we yearn all the more to look out of eyes full of wonder and joy. As fast as technology changes our lives, there will always be a backlash as people feel the urge to return to the simple pleasures. We intuitively understand that no amount of data and explanations will change a thing about how we live, that there’s more to life than what we can ‘know’.

Tuning again to Joseph Campbell:

‘People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. I don’t think that’s what we’re really seeking. I think what we’re seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonance within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive. That’s what it’s all finally about.’

The information age is characterised by a deluge of facts, theories and opinions where there’s far more noise than signal and it’s hard to know what to think about anything. Increasingly, we can’t remember the past, we can’t imagine the future and we sure as hell don’t understand the present. Unless you have a PHD in economics, biology, history, politics, physics, psychology and mathematics how could you get any grasp on a world as complex as this?

Hence part of the appeal of the Rainbow Gatherings. There, in the heart of nature, people can find refuge from the overwhelming tide of technology and the confusion of Babylon. It’s a return to simplicity and innocence. A place where there’s nothing to learn other than how to listen to your heart. Discrimination goes out the window as people praise the Great Spirit, Hindu gods, Candomblé deities, Pachamama – whatever name the Divine is given, it’s considered to all be One.

In a certain light it might seem like a weird regression to a discredited animistic past. Particularly when someone walks past dressed in feathers and face paint, confident in the belief that he’s a shaman humbly bearing an ancient tribal heritage. But do we need it?

‘This is my first Rainbow and I’m having a great time,’ a psychology student from Mexico told me at one Gathering, ‘But couldn’t we just have the music, the fires and the girls without all the spiritual stuff? I mean, come on, It’s all just make believe!’

Well, maybe it is.
But maybe all of life is. Who are we anyway? Are we the same person we were ten minutes ago? Ten years ago? Where did we come from and where will we go when we die? Perhaps our very notion of self, this ‘I’ that we use so frequently in conversation, is little more than a necessary illusion. A psychological projection. A ghost.

This kind of existential doubt doesn’t trouble most people in the Rainbow though. It’s generally held as self-evident that the Earth is our Mother and that we have the Divine inside. Holding hands, singing together, burning incense, making giant medicine wheels in the Healing Area; people do it because it feels right. Just listen to your intuition and all will be well. Too much thinking leaves you chasing your tail in circles.

Any yet the Rainbow is far from being a sect. While the Gatherings do attract their fair share of bigots, fundamentalists and zealots, if there’s one thing that characterises Rainbow spirituality, it’s tolerance. I’ve seen workshops announced on Orthodox Christianity or even Islam and people simply nodded politely before continuing with their meal. The Hare Krishnas sometimes turn up and though everyone’s happy enough to eat the sweet halvah they prepare, when it comes to singing hymns to Krishna – and Shiva, Ganesh and Rama – people prefer to go and do it in the bhajan tent. So while evangelists might see all the lost souls in the Gatherings as prime candidates for conversion, the Rainbow is ultimately too free-spirited for religion to have much impact.5

The full spectrum of beliefs and cosmologies are covered in the Rainbow but there are some commonly-held principles that give a basis for community. We can safely say that most people believe in the power of love and speaking from the heart; that a life lived only for yourself is a life lived in vain; that we’ve lost our way in the modern world; and that no matter which colour of the Rainbow you represent, together we are beautiful.

In general, however, Rainbow spirituality is a magpie mix of rituals, mantras, teachings and beliefs harvested from a variety of sources as disparate as Aboriginal Australians and New Age Prophets. People wear amulets and charms, carry cosmic wish lists in lockets around their necks, daub themselves in oils to invoke their Higher Self, give a little chai to the fire before serving themselves, chant Indian mantras, practice Tantra, universal healing and auric cleansing – all without subscribing to any particular belief system. If someone around the main fire proposes, say, to conduct a ceremony they were taught by an indigenous tribe in Guatemala, the general reaction will be enthusiastic and willing. The Rainbow Way is not to block anything as long as it does no harm. The feeling is that the Great Spirit speaks in a thousand voices and can be found in a thousand ways.

There are some, of course, who have chosen a particular path: Candomblé dancers who invoke Orisha spirits when they dance, yoga practitioners who perform pranayama breathing exercises for hours each day or fast for a week at a time to purify body and soul, dreadlocked babas with all the trappings of Indian holy men, ash daubed on the forehead and as grumpy as sadhus when someone passes the chillum the wrong way or points their feet towards the fire.

There are those who dress up as shamans, complete with feathers and bones and incantations, self-realised spiritual teachers in search of converts, and any number of charismatic healers offering initiation into ancient, sacred traditions of medicine and wisdom, each certified by es-

---

5 (An exception might be the Gatherings in Israel where a whole generation of hippies have ended up turning to Judaism for the answers to the mystic questions on their minds. The Gatherings are fertile recruiting ground and singing Jewish hymns around the main fire (with the odd Rainbow anthem mixed in so they can’t be accused of conversion) is a good strategy to get others to ‘Return to the Answer’)

6 Aspects of God as understood in the Yoruba animistic tradition of West Africa which has spread around the world taking root in Latin American countries and the Caribbean in particular.
oteric origins deep within the mists of time. But the dominant sentiment in the Rainbow is something of a DIY approach. Each person collects their own eclectic patchwork of practices, rituals and beliefs that can all be followed in small portions, filling their plate with a variety of helpings from the spiritual beliefs on offer. People are happy to sing songs in Arabic, Hebrew or Hindi, as long as it’s all praising the One.

The Rainbow rituals themselves are also open enough not to require any kind of belief. Some singing, holding hands, chanting Om together if you want to – it’s all a bit weird in the beginning and you might wonder what you’re getting into. But few can deny there’s something powerful about a thousand people holding hands in a circle, singing together and then falling silent before they eat.

It’s awfully lonely to always be a skeptic, after all.

In some ways the Rainbow is a tribe that forms its identity based on its diversity of backgrounds and temperaments, anarchic nature and traditions rooted in indigenous cultures. At other times it seems that we’re simply a reaction against all that we reject in corrupt, mainstream society – Babylon.

You can recognize people from Babylon at the Gatherings quite easily. They tend to arrive in groups and stay close together for security. They may carry bottles of alcohol with them and have a startled expression on their faces as they watch everyone sharing food and hugs. They probably check their cell phone every few minutes and may even isolate themselves from the world with a pair of headphones and an Ipod. They might wear watches, cosmetics or designer clothes, maybe even hairstyles that require the support of a well-equipped bathroom. By the awkward way they sit on the ground it can be deduced it’s the first time they’ve done so since school and they’re too shy to lift their voices in song. They have pockets full of pills for different ailments, worry about distant events and politics they’ve heard about on TV and they eat processed food, fortified with vitamins and minerals.

And while they’re very welcome at the Rainbow (everyone is, after all), visitors can be an uncomfortable reminder of just how fragile the Gatherings are. However beautiful and powerful it can be, we know that the Rainbow is essentially something of a bubble: beautiful, hypnotic and terribly vulnerable. A single loud drunk can disrupt the harmony of the main circle. It also takes constant and patient education of newcomers to preserve the Rainbow Ways; if we let tradition slide too much then before long the Gatherings are just a bunch of people standing around a fire in a field wondering who’s going to cook dinner.

The Rainbows are located deep in nature for this very reason. The forests, hills and fields between us and the city are a kind of buffer protecting us from Babylon.7 Behaviour common in an urban setting suddenly seems out of place in the Rainbow where we establish our own norms and it becomes uncool to drink beer, talk on the cell phone or eat meat.

While it might be acknowledged that a town or city may have its good points – a place someone can make a home, study or work – in general the Rainbow is anything but in favour of the urban. High rises, flushing toilets, neon signs, congestion and polluted air are the un-

---

7 The use of the word Babylon comes from its popular usage in Rastafarianism, most commonly heard in the songs of Bob Marley. Rastas refer to it in the context of the corrupt Western society that they would eschew in favour of Zion, most likely located in Ethiopia. That no one ever uses the word Zion in the Rainbow probably has most to do with the unpopularity of Zionism and the Israeli occupation of Palestine.
mistakable hallmarks of Babylon, a place of ignorance and vice, an anathema to the human spirit.

Babylon is where people work their lives away doing jobs they hate to buy things they don’t need; products made by corporations whose factories pollute the planet. Babylon is where you’re only beautiful if you look like the people on TV, layered with cosmetics and wobbling around on high heels. Babylon is where people prefer to drive than walk, buy everything new and throw away the old. Babylon is where people conform to whatever fashion, beliefs and lifestyle is expected of them rather than live life on their own terms.

Babylon is where you can neither grow your own food, build your own house or educate your children. Babylon is where you must carry proof of your identity, where the police can stop and search you for sacred herbs and where you must give away a portion of your income to buy bullets and bombs for the army.

Babylon is where your first question to a new acquaintance is what do you do for a living? It’s where couples meet under the influence of alcohol to deafening nightclub music, and where people prefer to speak to you via a screen than in person.

Babylon is where you’re bombarded by thousands of images every day on the television, internet and billboards, desensitising you to scenes of death, torture and violence, programming your sexuality, disseminating desires for consumer products and programming you with beliefs, attitudes and opinions, even as you think you find them all by yourself.

Babylon is where there are chemicals in your clothes to retain their colour, chemicals in your beds to safeguard them against fire, chemicals in your food to make it last weeks on the shelf without rotting. There are chemicals in the water you drink to make it safe and let’s not even get started on the chemicals in the air.

Babylon is run by immoral religious institutions and corrupt governments in thrall to ruthless corporations which own most of the land, exploit the ocean and buy up everything from the airwaves to human genes.

Babylon is populated by normal people who have forgotten the taste of fruit picked from the tree, the smell of air fresh off the mountain, the embrace of friends. Instead they are sucked into the illusion of consumer culture, doing their best to survive in a spiritual desert where, if love, friendship and happiness don’t yet have a price, you can be sure that someone is working on it.

And yet most of us grew up and live in towns and cities and we generally go back to them when the Gatherings are over. While we might aspire to buy or squat a piece of land someplace where we can live outside the system, the realities of work, study and family commitments tend to draw us back to urban environments. Once the Gatherings are over, whether by thumb, a battered old van or Easyjet, most of us are going back to Babylon.

In its worst light the Rainbow appears to be in a state of denial. A reaction against the excesses of Babylon rather than a viable alternative. Those in the Rainbow who are most vocal in their condemnations of the modern world tend to be those who have most trouble functioning within it; furious with their parents, they come to the Gatherings where no one can tell them what to do; struggling to find their professional path in life or too broke to put their dreams into practice, they sit around the fires complaining about a capitalist system where an honest living can’t be found; failing to fit in anywhere else, they come to the Rainbows where every colour, no matter how blurred around the edges, can find a place in the circle.

At its best, however, the Rainbow is a beautiful example of how people can live together in peace. A portrait of harmony and celebration almost unimaginable to anyone who’s never been to a Gathering.
While there are no rules as such, there are fundamental freedoms that we respect and it’s these that make the Rainbow a special place to be; with no alcohol, we’re free to celebrate consciously and playfully without losing awareness of our surroundings; without electronics we’re free to unplug from a world of constant stimuli and just follow our own breath; without communications we’re free to unplug and just be where we are with the people we’re with; with no buying or selling in the Rainbow, we’re free from economic hierarchy and the daily treadmill of making a living.

The special environment created in the Gatherings allows us to find ourselves in a new context, liberated from the roles we’re used to playing. The Rainbow is like a laboratory where we can experiment with unfamiliar aspects of ourselves. Maybe someone has always been painfully shy but now finds themselves speaking up in a talking circle. Or maybe someone has always been a loner but now they spend all day chopping vegetables in a laughing, singing crew of helpers in the kitchen.

In the Rainbow our borders expand and become more porous, our opinions and judgements about others melt away and we begin to recover a relationship with intimacy, community and touch. Meeting everyone else, we find ourselves once again.

But then we return to Babylon. We might find that we have opened up so much that we’ve become too fragile altogether; the first angry glance from a passing skinhead, or an impatient comment from the ticket inspector on the train can shatter the magic aura of the Rainbow in moments.

Was it was all just some beautiful dream? Rubbing up against the sometimes harsh, unforgiving face of the city, we realise that it takes more than a few weeks of singing and dancing in the woods to keep the magic inside alive – how can we bring the Rainbow to Babylon? is a common question that comes up in talking circles.

It can seem impossible. Returning to a cramped apartment, many sigh and just endure a conventional life through the winter, making the best of it until the first Gatherings of the spring when their heart can come out of hibernation and they can dance in the flowers once again. Others simply avoid the question by jumping on a plane to India or the Canary Islands to hang out on a beach with other hippies. Or maybe they find an eco-community in Spain or Greece where they can pass the winter months on the edge of civilisation.

But while there are a few rare and resourceful souls who achieve a degree of self-sufficiency, growing their own food in permaculture lots, living in tipis and yurts, almost everyone depends on the System to some extent. Babylon may be wasteful and decadent but that’s what allows a disaffected population to live in the cracks of the consumer society. Whether we busk in front of restaurant terraces to make some money, harvest food from the dumpsters at the back of supermarkets, or hitchhike across continents in the cars that other people have bought and maintain, we, too, enjoy a lifestyle afforded by the modern world.

Hippies living in vans manage to escape the rent trap and so cut their living costs in half but they still need spare parts for their vehicles and a capitalist economy to produce and deliver cheap fuel. Even the enterprising souls who rig their vans to drive on leftover fat begged from the kitchens of McDonalds depend on the restaurant economy to keep them on the road.

We condemn the heartlessness of Western medicine but are happy enough for the emergency wards to be open when our cars crash. We might see the police the armed guard of the Powers That Be but it’s certainly useful to be able to call them on the rare occasion that someone really dangerous turns up at a Gathering. We despair at the cruelty and exploitation of globalisation but almost everyone has a cellphone in their backpack with components sourced from murderous warlords in the Congo. Even our tents are mostly made in sweatshops in China.
The ironic fact of the matter is that capitalism serves hippies very well. A strong bohemian class is only usually found in wealthy countries where there are enough crumbs falling from the table for an alternative class to live on. In countries where people are still worried about having enough to eat, hippies tend to be thin on the ground. It’s when economies improve that people have more time on their hands to question the way they live and the freedom to change it.

We live very cheaply in the Rainbow but the thousands of euros that go into the Magic Hat to buy food were all earned somewhere. Or given by governments as benefits to those unemployed or who have children. Despite the unjust laws, the vested interests and the occasional persecution from the authorities, life is pretty good in the West. With hippies flying in from all corners of the world with rucksacks full of instruments and pockets full of cash, ultimately it’s Babylon that makes the Rainbows possible.

There are some in the Rainbow who believe that our way of life is better; morally superior, more spiritual, more in touch with nature. Wrapped up in their subjective experience of living in Rainbow Gatherings, eco-villages and squats, they make the simple-minded assumption that the same model could be extended to 7 billion souls across the planet.

Admittedly, it is funny to return to Babylon and see everyone spending so much energy, time and money to make friends, have fun or get laid when we have it for free in the Rainbow. But it’s either a naïve dreamer or arrogant idealist who insists that everyone should walk the earth barefoot, cooking pots of dal on wood fires, living in tipis.

It’s at that point in the conversation I find myself wishing for an internet connection to Wikipedia so I can explain about the improved use of fertiliser and pesticides in the 20th century that prevented billions of people from starving to death. Or that if the entire world was to burn wood to stay warm there would soon be no forests left.

Sometimes it amazes me in the Rainbow how quickly the past has been forgotten. One need only pick up a novel from the 18th century to read about the incidence of infectious disease, childhood mortality and smog-filled skies. Should we go back to pulling out teeth with pliers? Amputating infected limbs? The good old days weren’t as good as the Rainbow Romantic tends to think and with a world population that quadrupled in the last century, there’s simply no way back.

Another world is possible. A fairer, more just place where each takes according to their needs and gives according to their ability. But unless the power of visualisation is as effective as is claimed, it seems unlikely that the hippies will be the ones creating it – at least not the ones who spend all their time in the Rainbow. Real change in the social, ecological and financial crises we face requires hard work, innovation and struggle and it must be done in Babylon if anywhere.

So rather than bringing the Rainbow to Babylon, the real question is perhaps how can we keep the spirit of the Gatherings alive inside ourselves once we return to the city? Whether we like it or not, most of us eventually realise that the world isn’t going to change any time soon just to suit us. Since the first days of human society there has been social hierarchy, injustice, slavery and war. But there has also always been community, art, education, spirituality and great human kindness. Anyone who would want to change the world must surely accept it first.

Ultimately, however magical or transformative our experiences in the Rainbow might be, it’s how we apply it when we get back that counts. It’s easy enough to get high on life at the Gatherings where the food arrives twice a day, people bring wood for the fire and musicians provide atmosphere at night – but when we come home it’s up to us to hack out our own paths by ourselves. The return to society can feel harsh and unwelcoming after a month of love in the Rainbow but in many ways it’s a test. How much of that spirit can we bring back with us?
A few years ago, after a summer of Rainbows I found myself living in Tel Aviv, in Israel. One day I met some friends in the street carrying spare mattresses to the local community center where some Sudanese refugees were temporarily housed. I went along and met these tall, humble men who quietly replied that everything was fine, thank you, when we asked how we could help. Most of them had just walked from Sudan to Israel and had been imprisoned, harassed and beaten and now they were adrift in a foreign country without carrying a single coin or speaking a word of the language.

I went with one of them for a stroll around town and showed him where he could pick up vegetables from the floor of the market at closing time and even get free bread. He nodded politely but only showed emotion when we arrived at the beach. His face filled with a kind of breathless wonder, his eyes drinking in the scene with awe. It was the first time in his life he’d ever seen the sea.

That evening I called up a couple of musician friends from the Rainbow and we went to visit the Sudanese to make a small concert. They were a little shy at first, but finally we got them singing along to some Bob Marley songs and then they grabbed a drum and started playing some of their own rhythms. By midnight they were dancing, singing and laughing for perhaps the first time in months. We didn’t know how to help with their economic, legal or logistical situation but a little Rainbow Spirit in the right place went a long way.

This, of course, was nothing next to the efforts of those who ran the daycare centers for the children of the thousands of illegal immigrants and refugees living in cramped, congested conditions in the worst neighbourhoods of the city. They also took on the task of educating the public about the plight of those from Sierra Leone and Eritrea who were beginning to arrive in Israel in large numbers, fleeing political persecution and war at home.

We’re not going to save the world by sitting in a field and praying for world peace. We’re not going to heal the planet by planting handwritten wishes for a golden future of harmony and love. And yet we do have a part to play in making the world a better place; thousands of people come to Rainbow Gatherings every year and have deep, moving experiences that force them to consider what kind of lives they lead. The Gatherings are catalysts for change in individuals who then go back out there and make all kinds of magic.

Peace on earth might be a cliché by now but most of us in the Rainbow recognize that it can only begin with peace within. Then, whether working for change, pursuing an art or a craft, serving others or bringing your own magic to the world in your own particular way, the Rainbow Spirit echoes that of Gandhi.

‘Be the change you want to see in the world.’
Sometimes I worry about becoming an old guy around the fire in the Rainbow; my bones aching in the cold, struggling against dementia to remember the words to songs I wrote hundreds of moons ago. At other times I can’t imagine a better way for things to end up.

All of us have our paths to walk, our own personal challenges to overcome, but in this fickle, unpredictable world there are no guarantees of love, warmth and intimacy. What and who we cherish most might be taken from us in a single breath. Nor can we hope for constancy in those who we hold closest – as my therapist once told me, *if you want unconditional love – marry a dog!*

We can, however, practice a steady compassion for ourselves and those around us. We can learn to wake up each morning in gratitude for another day of life. Yes, that might be the kind of cliché seen hanging on someone’s bathroom wall but it’s also a way of being, one that I’ve seen reflected countless times in the eyes of people at the Rainbow.

I try to take that inspiration and invest it into my projects, my relationships and my daily life; yet each time I go to a Gathering I remember how much I’ve forgotten. If life is a desert, as the Sufi poets say, and it should be crossed in a caravan of kindred spirits, then the Rainbow is where I usually find them. If only for a month at a time.
As much as I hope one day for the government to ignore the fact that I’ve never worked for a living and give me a pension, I rely also on the Rainbow always being there. Even if life goes terribly wrong, if I end up alone and lonely, poor and forgotten, I trust that, somewhere under the Rainbow, the Family will be there waiting to welcome me home.