Adrianne Matlock
Sociology Graduate Student at the University of Kansas
Interview by Chhaya Kolavalli at the Kansas Union in Lawrence, Kansas
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Transcribed by Chhaya Kolavalli

Note: Interview questions are written in bold, respondent’s answers are in regular font.

Abstract: Conducted in June 2014, this interview focuses on Adrianne Matlock’s 5-year experience living in Christian intentional community in Kansas City, Kansas. Matlock—a 29-year-old graduate student in Sociology at the University of Kansas—no longer lives in intentional community, but provides valuable insight into how and why some of these communities disband. Other interview topics cover day-to-day life within intentional community, logistical considerations of intentional living, and philosophies of intentional Christian life.

To start off – could you give me some background information? Name, age, date of birth, place of birth? Tell me about where you grew up, maybe?

My name is Adrianne Showalter Matlock, and I am 29, my birthday is July 26th, 1984. I currently live in Kansas City, Kansas, but I grew up in Houston, Texas. I’m currently working on my PhD in Sociology at KU.

So you grew up in Houston in an urban area, I’m guessing?

Kind of? It was in Houston proper, but it’s a huge sprawling city so—I know this isn’t a technical term—but I think of it as semi-urban? The neighborhood I grew up in is middle-class to upper-middle class. It was originally a suburb back in the day, but now it doesn’t feel like it’s a suburb because it’s in a city.

So, a couple questions about your faith background. What faith tradition were you raised in, and did you feel like it was satisfying for you?

Yeah, I grew up in the church of the Nazarene, and I’m still part of the church of the Nazarene, and I’m actually a district-licensed minister. The Nazarene denomination was originally kind of broke away from the Methodist church just over a hundred years ago, and it is evangelical-ish, and I definitely—I’m still a part of that church, and I appreciated growing up in that faith and I went to Nazarene University for college and studied theology and cross-cultural ministry, so it’s a really big part of my life.

The denomination is very – there’s a lot of variation within it. And it generally tries to be pretty moderate as far as it’s structure and the official stances that it takes, but it thinks of itself as moderate but it’s definitely on the conservative side. A lot of the people in it would be the kind of people—like religious right sort of people—that
would say it's definitely in-line with various republican ideals. But, like I said I went to Nazarene University and studied theology with Nazarene professors and all this. So that setting is kind of the other side to the moderate puzzle—terrible analogy! So, one of the main things that I learned in my University experience—we talked a lot about social justice and things like that. And that was in the Nazarene context. So there’s a lot of diversity. It’s not like a huge, wide range of diversity but there definitely is some variance.

**Is there a history of intentional living within the Church of the Nazarene?**

Not with the intentional community sense. It’s very historically...it’s a holiness denomination, and that was part of the turn of the century context that it was begun in. So historically the denomination places a lot of focus on personal piety. So most of the 20th century that meant no drinking, no dancing, no smoking, no gambling. And for a lot of Nazarenes today it still means exactly that. As in, yesterday in Sunday school one of the elderly women was like “This is what the Nazarene church used to be and still should be.” And so, a lot of emphasis on abstinence from certain behaviors, right? So there’s that level of intentionality—how you live. But not like intentional community, which means communal living, or anything like that.

**So what got you first interested in Christian communal living or intentional community?**

Well, when I was in college I was a ministry intern at an inner-city church, and that church was mostly people who were homeless or very low income from the neighborhood around where the church was. So I went to church there for five years and it was one of the most formative experiences and times of my life. I started out being like “I wanna go and help these people,” and just over the course of time I got to know people and we ate meals together all the time at church, and visiting people in their homes and coming to realize that homeless people are people in the same way that I’m a person. They’re not this different kind of person that I need to go and help—we’re all just people. At the same time I was also majoring in sociology, I was double majoring, so I was studying sociology and learning about social structures and seeing first hand how its really not just about people’s personal choices that they wind up in extreme poverty, and also learning about it in school, and also learning this very theological basis for it in my theological training and what not, from the denomination. So that was like really the foundation, and then right around that time I went to a conference and Shane Claiborne was a speaker there, and so I was really fascinated by him, and got his book—Irresistible Revolution. So I read that—all along with all the other intentional community people. That just really resonated with where I was at in terms of—’cus I was also on the board of directors for a nonprofit in Oklahoma City, where I went to college, that did a men’s drug and alcohol recovery program, they had a food pantry and thrift store. They, I think actually paid for the meals that we served after church every week. I was in the nonprofit sector, serving on the board, and later as a volunteer, and just really interested in finding ways that brought together all the
things that I valued and cared about—like helping the poor, but not in a top-down sort of way. So, learning about the New Monasticism sort of stuff really made a lot of sense because they talked a lot more about like being a part of a community and the neighborhood that they’re living in, and like sharing life with people and not being like the ones with all the answers, helping the people who have nothing…yeah.

**So what do you think—in terms of these social justice issues and concerns that you’re talking about—do you think that Christian communal living puts you in a better position to address those concerns?**

Well, I think part of it is that it’s…part of the problem isn’t that there are poor people, it’s that our whole culture…I think part of why the whole thing is appealing or why it mobilizes people in the way it does is because it’s partly about helping people and partly about like changing yourself, that part of the problem is white middle-class lifestyle of consumption and things like that—that it draws attention to the ways those lifestyles on a broad scale perpetuate oppression of a people. They’re embedded in capitalism that promotes oppression and poverty. And so I think part of it is kind of learning how to let go of a lot of those things that are a given for a lot of people, like that are raised middle-class. Being able to live without consuming as much and having your personal, private space or belongings that are just yours and drawing a circle around that.

**So have you lived in an intentional community?**

Yes, I have.

**Can you tell me a little bit about that experience?**

Yes. So my husband and I lived in South Africa after we graduated from college for 14 months, and we were volunteering with our church denomination, and then we came back here—we moved to Kansas City for grad school. Let’s see—basically right around that same time that we were like about to be moving back, and like getting settled in and all that, we were talking about possibly wanting to live in or start an intentional community. And so, on our way to Kansas City from South Africa we visited some friends and family in Oklahoma City, and we stayed with two of our friends we had gone to college with and were married, and Brian—my husband, had actually grown up with them, they’re all from Idaho. And so we stayed with them and we were talking to them about our idea, and they were planning to move to Kansas City soon, also for graduate school. John was going to seminary at the Nazarene Seminary in Kansas City. And so, we were like “Y’all should move in with us!” We were not sure if it was like actually going to happen or not. Shortly after we moved into our house in Kansas City my husband decided to just send out an email to a handful of people who we knew, and we also sent out emails to the Nazarene Universities—there’s like eight in the U.S.—and every year there are at least a handful of people who are graduating from there and moving to Kansas City for the seminary. So we sent an email out to the Universities, and we just said “If
anyone is coming for seminary and they want to live in intentional community, they can give us a call.” We actually heard back from a few people, but only one person who came—he ended up staying with us when he visited Kansas City before moving there. At that point, we initially—’cus our house we had bought, and we were living in, is very small and we were like, of course we wouldn’t start an intentional community in this house. We would need to buy a different, bigger house. There was one that went for sale a block from where we lived, and we were looking at it and it was awesome, but we were not sure who all was gonna go in on it with us. So then we couldn’t be like “Oh, we’re going to buy a new house,” because we didn’t have enough money. It was too up in the air. So this guy that was from one of the Nazarene Universities, he was like “Well, it’s too up in the air so I’m just gonna get an apartment or whatever.” So that was in the spring, and in the summer we had again kind of followed up with the couple from Oklahoma City. They decided that they wanted to move in with us, and it was actually kind of funny—we never figured out when they were gonna move in. Then my husband and I went out of town, and when we got back in town we got a voicemail from like when we had been on the plane—you know, your phone is off—and it was them calling to say they were at our front door, that they had moved in that weekend (laughs). They had just gotten into town. That’s kind of funny. So they moved in—that was in July of 2009—and then we were just still like...we talked to another guy that we’d gone to college with, who was originally from Kansas City and was thinking about moving back there, and he was a good friend of ours. So we were talking with him, and my husband went to church with a friend of ours and met some guy there who was our age. My husband and Wes—this other guy—really hit it off, they made that plans that day to go for coffee later that week, they were just instant friends. Then, later we were like “You should come live with us!” So by—John and Joy moved in in July, and then Joey and Wes moved in in October, 2009. So we decided, you know, since we can’t like decide to like buy a bigger house, we’ll just kind of work with what we’ve got, and so that is what we did. So yeah, what else do you want to know? That’s how it started.

Something that I noticed when I worked with Cherith Brook—they all pooled their finances, and they all had like set prayer times and did some things together, had some activities planned together. But other intentional communities—their idea of intentional community was “We buy houses within this radius, and have a house church together.” They didn’t pool their finances or have planned activities. So I guess I’m asking what exactly was the structure of your intentional community? Could you run me through a typical day or week?

Yeah, so it changed over time, but when we first were all living together we had started out by doing like, in the mornings—I think we were doing Monday through Friday in the mornings—we would have like times where we would read the bible together and pray together in the morning. As far as finances go, we started out—like when the Sutter’s moved in, it was the two of us, Matlock’s and them. We just split who was paying for what—as opposed to them paying us as renters. So they were paying for all of groceries and the internet, and we were paying the mortgage
and utilities. Then when Wes and Joey moved in, they just each paid—one of them each paid one of us couples. So Wes was paying us, and Joey was paying them. Probably, maybe like a year in, we got a joint banking account. And we tried to get it at the credit union but they didn’t have a form that had six lines for to sign (laughs). So we got a joint banking account, and that was the house account. So every month everyone paid into the house account. We had different arrangements at different times. For a while, Wes was in charge for paying all the bills. So everyone would pay in at the beginning of the month, and he would pay all the bills from there and then we all had a debit card to that account, so we were on an alternating system for groceries, of like who was buying groceries. It was on a three-month rotation—the Sutters, then the Matlocks, then the two single guys. We had house meetings but it was like—we kind of tried to do it once a month. At some point we went from doing a lot together and it kind of dwindled—at the beginning we were meeting in the mornings and also once a week we did some kind of like, spiritual formation time, where we would be having a discussion about something or sharing something we read, or we’d watch a video series together—which wound up being like, too goofy for us to take it seriously. So then we also figured out, “Okay, we need to not have a house meeting every time we’re doing this,” because it became too long and it became cumbersome to be like discussing business or whatever. But we wound up having meetings about once a month-ish, it was never really strict or regimented. And at the time, especially I was really adamant that we not give ourselves a name—’cus they were like “What’re you gonna name yourselves?” And I was like “We’re not a thing, we’re just people deciding to live in this way but we’re not an organization or an institution”—very post-modern or whatever, slash anarchist! So over time then we also switched so that whoever’s grocery month it was, they were also just paying the bills that month out of the house account. A couple other things—we kind of were paying in based on how much we could afford. And we were living really cheaply, it was like 1200 dollars a month for all six of us, including groceries. The mortgage on our house is really cheap, so that was pretty awesome. But Joey was working as a nurse, and he—the first part of when he was living with us, he was working full time. And he was making so much money compared to the rest of us. I think he was literally making more money than the rest of us combined, because I was in grad school—getting the TA stipend. My husband was in grad school at the seminary at that time, but he was—we were just having to pay for his grad school, there were no scholarships or anything. John also was in the seminary. Joy was working as a preschool teacher—she was trying to get a job as a kindergarten teacher because that’s what she’d done before, but she was having trouble finding work so she was working as a teacher’s aid. And then Wes was just like working a couple part-time jobs—one of us except for Joey were making that much money. Joey was paying a little more, and we found out at some point—it wasn’t like a scandal or anything, we just found out—he had actually offered the Sutter’s to pay part of theirs as well. So he was actually paying even more than anyone. But that was kind of part of the deal, and at different points when different things would happen—as far as how much money people were making—we would adjust, so that whoever was making the least, then...and also the Sutter’s had huge school debt, and the rest of us didn’t really have school debt. They were making the least amount.
We had so many conversations about the grocery budget, because that was really the only expense that was a shared expense, other than mortgage and utilities, which you don’t decide how much those are gonna be, they just cost a certain amount. So many conversations. We literally never actually came to an agreement about how much the grocery budget was going to be. Over four years time, we never came to an agreement. So obviously we were like—we had some sort of functional agreement, but it was constantly up for debate and trying to live simply and therefore not spending very much on groceries. But Joey is an avid cyclist, so he needs tons of food and calories, and then also for a while Wes got into weight lifting as a hobby (laughs), which Joy and I always gave him a really hard time about. But he was like “We need more food!”

But the other thing that we did from the very beginning, and is still going on to this very day, that we started once a week for dinner having rice and beans. And we had envisioned it as being like a community meal, and people in the neighborhood would come and it would kind of be like Cherith Brook’s Thursday night dinner. And so we still have rice and beans once a week for dinner, every week, and part of it was also again, kind of limiting food costs, and then also that it would like serve as a reminder that there are a lot of people that live on subsistence diets and have just rice and beans to eat, and kind of a reminder of them. I think in the beginning we would frame it as kind of “in solidarity with the poor.” I’ve gotten some kind of harsh critiques from a couple friends about that—kind of the superficiality of saying that you’re in solidarity with the poor, just because you opt into this or that practice, “Oh you eat rice and beans once a week? That’s nothing like being poor.” I’m trying to take some of that to heart and think about all of that. So I don’t frame it like that as much as I used to. Interestingly though, as soon as everyone moved in, my husband and I had been getting to know a lot of our neighbors—that stopped immediately. Not altogether, but we had so many people crammed into our little house, it really wasn’t a good space anymore for hosting. We did have people over for rice and beans a lot, but—this is my unofficial analysis—we wound up, it wound up being our friends. So John was going to seminary, and Brian also. Joey would bring back friends from work. And then also, our neighborhood is not that low-income, it’s mostly working class. And so, we didn’t have connections with people who would want to like get a free meal once a week (laughs). And that always really bugged me, because I had really envisioned a lot of our communal life looking a lot like that church that I had been in ministry at for five years through the college—spending time with homeless people, having them come and live at our house, having them over for meals and things like that—a lot more like Cherith Brook. I did my thesis research at Cherith Brook and was learning a lot about it. It kind of became this like image in our collective imagination and conversation that we all had different feelings about—Cherith Brook. I was like, “That’s what I wish we looked like,” and everybody else was like “That was not what we wanted to do!” (laughs). So there was a lot of like disappointment on my part especially.
But, for us—and I think we all had missed expectations that never came to fruition, or just whatever—we all kind of decided for the most part what was...we didn’t wanna put ideals over the people we were actually living with. So if it just didn’t work out to do things a certain way, or just really didn’t fit with what somebody...we wanted to actually just love each other and support each other and have some level of commitment of actually caring for the people around us. And that was one of the things too—Cherith Brook chose to restrict how much time they spend on other things, like working. But I was in grad school, and I’m naturally kind of a high-energy person, so I was like “Oh, I’ll just do grad school and live like Cherith Brook” (laughs). But basically just me and Wes were that type of personality—more high energy and extroverted, and don’t mind people being around all the time. Everyone else was introverts, so they were like overwhelmed by just having to live with five other people, so they were not like trying to sign us up for lots more things. So then over time a few things changed.

Also...about a year after—less than a year—after they moved in, my husband became agnostic (laughs).

**How did that go over?**

Um, well...so he wasn’t, it wasn’t an all of a sudden sort of thing. It wasn’t a big surprise, but there definitely was a kind of point in time where he was like “Okay, I’m just at the point where I’m not gonna keep like saying I believe these things, I’m a Christian.” He’d been having doubts for a long time, people do, but sometimes something happens and they’re like “Oh, I do believe after all.” So he just did that, but in the other direction. And so he decided he wasn’t going to go back to seminary the following fall. At that point—he didn’t have a lot of animosity or anything against Christianity or the church, but he didn’t wanna keep doing morning devotions and things like that. So there was some tension, especially Joy—one of her missed expectations was that she had thought that it would look—our intentional community would look—more like house church. It would be like having church together maybe instead of going to a church somewhere else, which we were all doing—different churches. And just like, more of that like kind of spiritual formation and devotions together. So then it was like—Brian was like “I don’t wanna read the bible with y’all anymore.” I remember at one time he proposed maybe we could take turns—we would take turns being in charge of morning devotions, like a week at a time, and he said “On my week we can read Marx.” Which makes for terrible morning devotions, even for Marxists (laughs). I was thinking—I wanted to be understanding—I was thinking I would probably be fine with somebody sharing something meaningful to them, even if its not Christian or whatever. But John and Joy in particular were like “No...we’re not cool with that.”

So there’s a series of events. That happened, that was in the spring basically, as the school year was finishing up in 2010. And then I did my research at Cherith Brook that May, right after school got out. That was also a growing period where we were all sort of figuring out in detail what ideas we all had, and how they didn’t jive with
each other (laughs). Then, in July Brian and I went on vacation to visit his family in Idaho. While we were there, I had planned to stay for the rest of the summer and help take care of his grandmother. I had been having some problems—like I had been having some, sorry for the graphic detail, some blood in my stool and pain in my hips. And I’d seen the doctor here at KU about it, and she told me to go see a GI doctor, and that doctor told me it’s probably just hemorrhoids, but go have a colonoscopy done. And then I was diagnosed with cancer in July of that summer, while we were on vacation no less. So that was kind of a crazy turn of events. So let’s see...basically, through that summer and most of the rest of that year it was kind of like we disbanded the morning devotions and things like that. We were also not living together—I stayed with my parents in Houston for the first half of my cancer treatment because MD Anderson Cancer Treatment Center is down there and it’s a really good hospital. I was like I don’t know what’s going on or what’s the best thing to do. I went there and was there for like four months basically, maybe three months, then came back for a month after finishing radiation but before leaving for surgery. Brian came to stay with me for like a month, but we were running out of money so he decided to go back to Kansas City and he was able to get a job again at the Kansas City Rescue Mission where he had been working. That’s another reason in particular why Brian did not want our house to look like Cherith Brook, because he was working at the homeless shelter, he was getting really overwhelmed with serving.

Then I came back after having surgery in November, I came back in January after the holidays. So then after that, it was more like we were all just satisfied with living with each other and caring about each other and still sharing things and trying to live simply as far as not being wasteful—we had even set up our sink so we could do grey water, have you heard of this? So you can flush your toilet, a regular toilet, by dumping a bucket of water into the toilet bowl itself. And I totally read this off of the Simple Way website or whatever. But to save water—because you use clean water to flush your toilet—you can put a bucket, like a five-gallon bucket, under your sink in your bathroom and when that bucket has only one gallon of water in it then you can flush your toilet with the sink drain-off without using any clean water. And that was this kind of almost—it does actually conserve water—but it was this symbolic thing, we’re trying to have this identity of being in an intentional community and this is what people in intentional communities do. And we had a garden, but it was never extensive—especially Joy and me and a little bit John, we were like “We need to have a garden so we can grow our own food so we can not be using food from far away.” Which is funny in the sense that like we never grew that much food. I still grow vegetables in our garden, but I don’t take it very seriously. It’s more like a hobby than an effective means of feeding ourselves.

It’s a lot of work to grow your whole diet!

Yes, it really is! So yeah. I’m trying to think if there’s anything else that we did, that was like us being like this is what we’re doing because we’re intentional. We did have a retreat once, and that was basically like a year after I was diagnosed with
cancer. The other crazy thing was that, within a month of being diagnosed with cancer, our now adopted teenage daughter was taken into state custody and we were told about that by our friend in Oklahoma.

**Tough time.**

Yeah, it was a hard year for all of us (laughs). So she was a friend of ours from that church that I went to in college. She was eight at the time. When she was taken into state custody, right after I’d been diagnosed with cancer, she had just turned 13. So we heard about this from a friend who’s still at that church and was in contact with her. And she was like—she had like always been really special to me, ever since she was small. She would come spend the night at my dorm, and was super stinkin’ cute little girl with an Eeyore voice. I had known that her family was like having a lot of issues and she and her brothers—her brothers especially—had a lot of behavioral problems at church, and we knew that it wasn’t great. And I just remember thinking “If she ever got taken out of her home, I would want her to come live with me.” That was like eight years running. And then like I get this call, from our friend Kristen, and I was like “Yes, she should come live with us. But I’m not sure if I’m going to be alive nine months from now, so we should probably wait and see how this whole cancer thing goes and then she can come live with us” (laughs). That was also happening that year (laughs).

I came back in January, this is now 2011. And Brian and I signed up for foster parenting classes, which we had to do for her to come live with us. Wes also attended those classes with us, went through the whole thing. But it was also a big source of drama or tension in the community because I think John and Joy—Joey was always like trying to withdraw from any sort of conflict altogether—but John and Joy I think were just like very shocked that we were like “I’m dying of cancer, by the way we’re going to adopt a teenager!” (Laughs). And then also Brian had been very depressed while I was going through cancer treatment, so all these red flags they were like “What, why are you actually considering doing that?” So they were not excited. And then also, furthermore besides being like “I don’t know if that’s a great idea for y’all,” we were living together. And so they were like “What is that gonna be like for us? You have this teenager coming to live with you, are we going to be the ones needing to take care of her?” Just lots of worries but maybe not really knowing how to raise them. So then like, I remember one house needing in particular when it all came up and Joy just seemed really upset. She just raised all these questions, but they were things that I felt like we had already thought through and talked about as best we could. I was like “Okay, you’re really upset but we’ve got this!” But—in the end it was fine, and they were really supportive of Shelly. It’s super awkward parenting with other people living in your house. They had a baby while they were living with us—they moved out when he was about one. I think they also kind of experienced that—man, you feel really self-conscious when people are around all the time when you’re interacting with your kid and learning how to parent. It all worked out okay in the end.
So how long after you brought in Shelly did the community fall apart—that people moved out?

Let’s see...so Shelly moved in right after her 16th birthday—July 30th or 29th or something like that, of 2011. And then Wes moved out I think in September, maybe sometime in August? But it was not really because Shelly moved in. It was because Wes and I had developed feelings for each other, then when I decided to talk to Brian about it he was really upset (laughs). Which you might imagine. I’m able to laugh about it now because we went through a year of hell trying to work through it, and finally did succeed in doing that. But yeah, we never did anything like we never had sex or kissed or anything like that, but we definitely had just kind of developed a relationship at a level that was more kind of emotionally intimate than I would like to have with someone who is not my husband. And so I had been kind of trying to think through it—this was also when I was going through the last part of my cancer treatment. I was back in Kansas City finishing up the last bit of my chemotherapy. But Brian was working a lot—but I was, like I had nothing to do because I took the year off grad school and was trying to take it easy. But then that also meant that I was like really, wanted to be around people. I mentioned I’m an extrovert so having to spend lots of time at home alone was just torture for me. And Wes, also being an extrovert was always up for talking and hanging out and we did a lot. We just became really close friends, but I was trying to sort through what the deal was with this relationship, and trying not to judge myself for having a male friend in general...I think in the church that I grew up in, that sort of thing would have been like “Men and women shouldn’t be friends.” So I was trying to think through some of my decisions and reasons, stuff like that. When we started to have feelings for each other I was like “Is this a reason not to spend time with somebody?” at the same time we were just being really good friends. So then I had been going to counseling for the cancer, and then I talked to my counselor about it ‘cus I was going to talk to Wes and be like “I’m worried about our relationship.” She was like, don’t do that—you’ll just have a really meaningful conversation about things and it won’t actually help you draw more boundaries...you should talk to Brian about it. And I was like “Okay...I guess you’re right!” (laughs). That made me really nervous, but...so Brian, who had been really struggling with depression and had been withdrawn all year—not that that’s an excuse, but it was a definite reality of life that year. He had been struggling with a lot of insecurities about whether he was supporting me enough as my husband, so it was the worst news ever to find out that I had developed feelings for this other person. I was never considering leaving or anything like that, but it just was not very good news to get and not good timing. I talked to Brian and he freaked out.

So then eventually within a few weeks after that—this is all in the summertime before Shelly came to live with us. So then Brian talked to Wes and we all agreed—I was really frustrated overall with how the whole thing was handled, because I would’ve done things differently in hindsight. We kind of agreed for the time being that we—Wes and I wouldn’t speak to each other—which is humorous because we live in a small house. Our house is kind of bungalow style, where you walk in and
you’re in the living room. It’s a skinny house, then there’s three bedrooms directly on the living room. The back of the house is the kitchen and the bathroom, and then there’s stairs going down to a walk-out basement. And Brian and I lived in the basement, and everybody else lived upstairs and Wes and Joey shared a room. But like everything, other than like laundry and our room—downstairs—we were all upstairs just on top of each other. So it was so crowded. So yeah, I actually was really relieved when we were like lets just not interact, and it takes the pressure off like “What’s he thinking? This is my friend that I care about, but I don’t wanna hurt Brian.” I was just so relieved when we just like decided we won’t talk, we’ll just give each other the silent treatment or whatever. But for everybody else it was too uncomfortable or awkward or whatever, and Wes was like “I’m just gonna move out.” So that’s what happened. So that’s how one person moved out.

So Shelly moved in at the end of July. I talked to Brian about Wes just a few weeks before she moved in. Also this was right after we went on the retreat. It was so tragic because we went on this retreat and it was really good, it was a really good time, there were a lot of long overdue conversations about how people are feeling or if they’ve had their feelings hurt, just really good communication. Then right after that all the shit hit the fan. Then right after that, Shelly moved in and it was like this silent treatment period, and then Wes moved out. It was kind of a worldwind, but we had a daughter now and plenty to focus on. So it was like that was the end of the year that I had cancer, ‘cus I was like deemed cancer free, June 28th was when I did my last chemo, and Shelly moved in July 29th. But that whole year was crazy again, because that was when Brian and I were working through all the stuff that had happened. But we got through it, we survived.

So Shelly moved in, and then in March—nine months later—Jovan was born, John and Joy’s baby. And that was super fun having a baby in the house, especially one that you don’t have to take care of all the time. You just get to appreciate how cute they are. Basically exactly a year later after that, Joey got married to a friend from work, and she already had a five year old daughter. He moved in with her. And he, also, he’s like the most introverted of anybody. He just kind of like….he likes being around people but only a certain amount. So he was kind of like “I’m not really sold on this intentional community thing anyways.” But there was no hard feelings or anything. He also, it kind of drove me crazy a lot. He was kind of just living with us until he got married, from the beginning. This was before he had any intention of marrying this person—he didn’t wanna live back at home with his parents, he didn’t wanna live by himself because he’d be too isolated, he really wanted to get married. He kind of was never sold on the idea. And it also drove me crazy because there’s also—there was a very clear gender division of labor, amount of labor, and he was like the worst culprit. The husbands were both—they probably did the most, definitely the most out of all the men. At different times they were actually doing even more than Joy and I, and Wes would go through spurts of being really dedicated to doing his chores or whatever, but Joey was the worst of them all. He would refuse to even try to cook, he said he didn’t know how to cook, and I was like I’m going to kill you, I didn’t know how to cook two years ago either!
John and Joy moving out was a little sad, because I still to this day don’t have a clear understanding of why they moved out—I may have 85% clarity. But like, they were—I think it was a little stressful for them, because even though it was shared space it was our house that we owned. And we tried to be really accommodating and emphasize that it was a shared space, but I know there were different times that they were—it would be like them feeling like they needed to ask us if it was okay with us if they painted their room. To me that was like of course not, you don’t even need to ask if it’s okay to paint your room. But when you’re living in someone else’s house that they own, you still feel that obligation. And then just—for the most part I think we did pretty well with accommodating. When they had a kid we got the house all kid friendly, covering plugs and things like that. But I think it can be tiresome to feel like you’re always requesting that over and over again from people. So yeah, I think that was the main thing. And they also have been, for like two or three years now, this constant state of trying to find John a job as a prison chaplain—which he has a part-time job doing that in Leavenworth, but he’s trying to find a full-time position anywhere. So they’ve been in this limbo state of “We might be moving soon.” So at the time, like, this house had come up for rent that our church owned and they were like “Well we’re only gonna be here a few more months anyway,” and that was two years ago, three years ago. And so they just moved. It kind of caught us by surprise, they were like “We’re moving in two weeks!” So there was definitely some sadness about that, because it never was clear. But maybe that’s like the point. They were moving, therefore we weren’t trying to be a community anymore so they didn’t feel obligated to hash it out.

And we’re still friends with everyone, and Wes bought a house across the street from us. And he and Brian are good friends again, they’re like best friends. I’m very proud of them.

So I wanna get back to something you sort of brought up—this idea of a vision of what the community was going to be. So you said the church you worked at for five years was first kind of your vision, and then it was Cherith Brook. Were there any other influences? When you sat down with your husband to talk about community did you make a game plan, or when these things came up did you just handle them?

Couple comments come to mind—one, I know my husband has mentioned from the beginning and then again, thinking about...his envisioning was community political involvement. Like, if there was rallies going on, or other kinds of ways of getting involved with the community in that regard of like activism. So that was kind of what he was thinking, and he always talking about picturing having this big tack board and we would put these fliers on it of upcoming events, and everyone would see it, and we’d be like “Okay, you go to this one, and we’ll go to that one!” or whatever. We never did anything close to that—but that was some image he’d had in his mind.
Another thing is—I guess, similar to the issue with our name—our stance was, we've never done this before and we don't know what it's gonna look like or what we're going to encounter, or what exactly to expect. We did, from the beginning, have a pretty fluid intention that we would figure it out as we went along. So we had a few kind of values or goals, and they were super vague, but we felt like we all had them in common enough to be like “Let's work together and try to pursue some of these values.” And those were like simplicity, and hospitality, and spiritual formation, and then I don't know what the other one was. It was never like a “thing,” nothing was ever written down and there wasn’t a vision statement or anything like that. And so yeah, we had that—oh, community. I think that was the other one. Which all can be interpreted so many different ways (laughs). It was kind of like—with the house, not buying a different house and just being like “Let's use this house and see how it goes. If it grows from here then we'll buy a different house.” Brian is like the visionary personality, and he also was like “Yeah it’d be cool if we’d all get houses on the same house, and live by each other, and support each other, and some people would be foster parents and other people could help out.” So that was another vision someone had at some point. But it was pretty open ended.

**It sounds like the intricacies of life make intentional living so hard. Was this time spiritually fulfilling for you? Did it change how you thought about your faith, or how your faith was lived?**

I think, again, because I was hoping for more involvement with the poor that it was not—like, as far as like spiritually fulfilling, not so much. Because for me, that is so important to me and it is something I really feel like god is calling me to do to live my life in such a way that I’m encountering the poor in my daily life, and not just in a “I’m helping them” sort of way, but so I can be shaped by those personal relationships with people who are different from me. I came to terms with it, but I was always disappointed about that. And still to this day I’m like “Okay, once I’m done with grad school...” I’m just always biding my time until I can hang out with some homeless people again (laughs). I’m like, should I quit grad school so that I can go work as a homeless case manager because I can’t figure out any other way to hang out with homeless people? (laughs). Otherwise, I think it was a really growing experience. For me, my experience of my spirituality is like I feel like “Okay, I have a personal relationship with god, and that's just a part of my life.” If I am struggling in relationships with other people, then that's something that I pray about and I try to be shaped by my faith and times of prayer and things like that. In a sense, everything that I do in life is like part of my spiritual formation, just because that's how I understand my spirituality. In that regard, yeah, I was living life and like going through hard times, learning, growing, going through new experiences and good times. I just, you know, kind of walk with god in the metaphorical sense all the time. In that regard, sure, it was spiritually fulfilling because that's just what spirituality looks like to me.
And I do think that there’s something inherently valuable about learning to get along with other people, and learning…you know, as much as a setting like that helps you to empathize with other people and understand where other people are coming from, ‘cus even if you think “Oh we’re generally the same people because we’re white, middle-class, whatever,” you live with someone and you find out all the things you do not have in common. You think that they’re crazy because of this or that. Then, learning to empathize and understand other people is really meaningful to me.

I know that the idea of living in community has deep roots in Christianity, but why do you think that there’s such a wave of like young Christians wanting to live in intentional community today?

Hmm…that is a good question that I have also tried already to answer in my own research. Partly, I’m still curious about the extent of it, which is always a big question with intentional community research—it’s so hard to measure, and all that. Also, when I was interviewing Eric Garbason from Cherith Brook I asked him that question and he was like “Well, there’s been a lot of people doing this for a long time, it’s not really new.” And then he was citing all these different intentional community things that had started in the 70s, and then he was citing all these historical examples. But, I guess maybe just from a more personal example or experience—I remember the conference that I heard Shane Claiborne speak at, I was on a trip with all of the seniors in college who were also ministry interns, so they were also studying theology and ministry. So I attended that—it was like a breakaway session or whatever where you had all these different ones to choose from, and one of my classmates attended that with me. And I was just like enamored, and like “Oh my gosh, this is like putting together all the sociology and theology pieces together!” And it just. Made so much sense, and I was like “Oh he is totally right.” But this classmate that attended it with me did not like it. And he was—I think he disagreed with what seemed to be preferential treatment of the poor, and then also the hinting that like in order to live rightly as a Christian that you need to change your lifestyle in such a way…you know, voluntary poverty and all of that.

So I was sitting there thinking “This is the best thing I’ve ever heard,” and we were talking about it as we left and he was kind of frustrated, or like offended or annoyed. He was like “I don’t know about that, that was too radical or too judging people that don’t wanna minister to the poor or live in that way.” So its made me wonder why did all of that make so much sense to me but not to some of my peers who—we all went to college together, and had similar classes, except I was studying sociology also and working at the poor church. Everyone was ministry interns, but at different churches—some were wealthier churches. I think I came from a wealthier background than all of my classmates in college, so I don’t know if I had more of a guilt complex about being wealthy, because I was more towards upper-middle class and most of them were middle-class, maybe lower-middle class? And so the “You have so much more than other people”—maybe that resonated with me more? So
yeah, I guess I think about all the people who aren’t doing it and that also raises questions for me. It resonates with a lot of people because it’s drawing from principles of Christianity like caring for the poor and—it’s not an uncommon message of “You should do something about things that you care about.” I don’t know. I don’t wanna over-sociologize on it…but it’s like lifestyle…expressing your identity through lifestyle is like a big thing in general in Western culture right now, in the last past century. I think that’s part of it—if you really care about something you’re supposed to be it, or embody it. It’s like your identity. And so…I don’t know, the whole embodiment narrative is a really big one that I have encountered a lot in intentional community stuff. I think that, for similar reasons, really resonates with people. It’s a way of saying “Take this really seriously. Embody it, be it, live it out in your life with your actions.” Like I know a lot of intentional community stuff in general is kind of reacting against middle-class urban lifestyle or whatever, but in a way that I don’t really understand, because I don’t see—people talk about the suburbs as sucking the soul out of you. But my growing up wasn’t soul sucking—it was really awesome and fulfilling. I don’t think that a lot of the young people who grew up like in middle-class backgrounds who joined intentional communities, I don’t think they necessarily had a terrible experience themselves. But maybe it’s more just that they like being in them and encountering people who are different, people who are lower-class. Maybe it’s just really eye-opening to have been hearing these narratives about poor people being lazy or this and that, and then have personal experiences where you’re like “Oh my gosh, they’re just people.”

Back to something else you brought up earlier—there’s so many different words to interpret the term “community.” What does the term “community” tangibly mean to you?

This is funny, because you know I’m teaching a class called “The Community” right now? (laughs). First of all, just—I definitely use the word community in different ways, so there’s not necessarily one specific way I use a word.

So maybe in the context of your faith, when you speak of community…?

I think, I think of it in terms of maybe like the ideal of way of interacting with people as far as like those qualities of caring for other people, caring for the collective beyond just being just an individual and caring about yourself. Dedicating yourself to helping meet other people’s needs. I think that—just from my own faith perspective—that is an important part of faith and Christianity, that like…we talked a lot in our undergraduate theology classes about the fact that god is trinity, so even when we think about who god is, god is a community of persons in and of gods-self. Inasmuch as we’re called to be godly people, that it’s not something that we do on our own but that we pursue god along with other people and by encountering other people. I mean, that’s…drawing from scripture again—as the church, in a very vague, broad sort of way, people that are pursuing Christ in their lives they were called to be the body of Christ. There’s this whole metaphor of the church having many members, and they’re all different parts of the body working together. Like,
Christ was here, in the flesh, and that literally—Jesus doesn’t live on the earth anymore, but we are the manifestation of Christ, but it’s not just like I am, but we are as the body of believers. But yeah, that’s how god is at work in the world, is through people and through people working together and yeah.

**Last question—is evangelizing very much a part of intentional community, was it at all a part of yours?**

No it was not, partly because we were all figuring out what intentional community was while we were doing it. We weren’t trying to get people to do what we were doing since we didn’t know what we were doing (laughs). I think Joy probably had a lot more like maybe traditional evangelical thought of you know wanting to share your faith with other people so they can become Christian, but that was more kind of like her perspective that she had brought into it anyways. And of course Brian became agnostic, so he wasn’t trying to convert anyone.

For us, it was such a learning process and kind of an experiment that we were never trying to convince other people, or thought of ourselves as being cohesive enough to entice another person to do it too (laughs). In general, I really value interacting with people in non-coercive ways, so that really shapes my approach to interacting with other people about my faith. I have values that I value, and I try to live them out because I like them and I like to do that, I think it’s right. But it’s so complicated—everyone is coming from such a different place, and I can’t account for another person seeing what I’m doing and it making sense to them. Some people just look at it and they’re like “That’s ridiculous.” And then also, like in talking to people who are coming from a less privileged background, for them to be like “That’s ridiculous,” I take that to heart even more. I appreciate that perspective, because to what extent are you fetishizing your lifestyle? Like, fetishizing living the right lifestyle, at the cost of being effective? For me, I think everybody who is in intentional communities, for the most part, are pursuing it in a really genuine way. I don’t think anyone is like “I’m out for myself, and I wanna make sure I’m living the right way, above reproach, and I don’t care what happens to other people.” That’s not it, either, but I think that is a danger. Intentional communities have been a constant part of American history the whole time. And so it’s like, what’s with that? I don’t know. They’re always around, but never growing to the point of a widespread community thing.

**Parting question—what resources have influenced you and shaped your ideas of what intentional communal living means to you?**

Irresistible Revolution, by Shane Claiborne. Then another really awesome resource is the Conspire magazines. It’s a quarterly publication produced by the Simple Way, and they are these little...people sharing stories from their own lives, pictures, and artwork. They’ll have a different theme for each issue and they are all written by members of intentional Christian communities, all the contributions. And so that is a really neat resource and would give somebody a really good picture of intentional
Christian communities. The other thing is, in the more Catholic Worker strain of things—The Long Loneliness by Dorothy Day is a really awesome book, as well as Loaves and Fishes, that is also written by her and is about Catholic Worker. The Long Loneliness is her autobiography. Those are both really awesome.

**Is there anything else you’d like to add?**

One of the things—this partly goes back to the patterns of mobility issues that I was talking about—that was another aspect of what we envisioned that intentional community would look like, of like it being where you are specifically dedicating yourself to a geographical neighborhood area. And it wound up being a really ill-fitting value to have in the context of our intentional community because there were so many of us in grad school, and so we were travelling to other parts of the city all the time for class. Like when I mentioned we started the weekly dinner—it drove me crazy that it had turned into like us inviting our friends, because I had hoped that it would be a source of connection with the immediate community around us. But because that was something that I just kind of assumed or that was an assumption I brought in—nobody else really caught that vision. So we had a lot of discussion about it, like, is there something inherently good about restricting where you go or where you spend your time? Just trying to specifically be a part of a community at the expense of like, say, developing relationships with classmates and then going to hang out with them? So that was something we would discuss or debate, that to me, that was more important. But everybody else was like “Eh, I don’t know about that.” It was like...obviously I didn’t value that in and of itself to the point of quitting grad school, because I’m like commuting to Lawrence multiple times a week. But in my mind, school is kind of an exception—that’s what I’m doing, I’m in school, and KU is far away. I’ll just do that one thing, and then in the rest of my time I’ll just try to be in the area. I think it’s something that I do value, but kind of just take it with a grain of salt. So yeah, I just wanted to add that.

Also, I think maybe the only other thing is like I am still interested in living in an intentional community. But, I think it would look a lot different. My husband is less interested than he was before, especially just the level of commitment of like Cherith Brook sort of intentional community, which I would still be totally fine with living in a community like that. So just accommodating each other as spouses, having to navigate that and deciding what works for both of us. I think we would still like consider having somebody come to live with us, and then seeing where it went from there.

**Would you consider joining an established intentional community?**

I think so. I mean, it’s partly hard to think it out because we don’t have any intentions of moving anytime soon. We have built connections in our community, and with the neighborhood association and things like that, that help us feel like we’re connected and that we’re making a positive difference where we are because
we have been there for five years. But if we were to move to a new city, I think we would. I would be interested in looking into it. We would have to figure it out.

We got a lot of flak from our families about it that was one other thing that I forgot to mention. I mean it wasn’t like a lot a lot, but they definitely were like “What is with that, why are you doing that?” They seemed to think it was an immature like, you aren’t growing up so you’re living with other people. My mom, which, I can kind of agree with her on this, she said that she felt really disappointed in our community, like when I was going through cancer, she thought they didn’t do enough to take care of Brian and me. Especially when the Sutters first moved in, Brian and I just have low-standards for our living conditions and we had just moved back from living in South Africa and being around lots of people who are living in extreme poverty. So we moved to the basement, and we were like “John and Joy do you want to live upstairs in the big upstairs room, or in the basement, because that’s the other big space.” And they were like “Uh, we think we’d rather live in the upstairs room,” because the basement was unfinished. And we were like “Okay!” And we just moved down there. And some of our family were like “What are you doing, you are living in your own basement in this unfinished house, and letting these other people live in this master bedroom?” But yeah, even just a couple months ago I went to lunch with my aunt, and she said something about “Yeah, you tried that and it failed, and now you can move on to something else in your life.” And I was really hurt by that. It was partly very patronizing, just dismissing the value that I had put into that. But also it—A, I don’t think of it as a failure, and B...yeah, it just really came across as her judging it.

Even my grandmother who I’m not close to at all, she has a lot of strained relationships with our family, she’s like “Yeah I’m really glad that you don't have all those people living with you anymore,” and several of our family members said something like that. That always made me sad, that people didn’t understand. They thought it was weird, like we were in a weird hippie commune. We just really tried to distance ourselves from the words hippie and commune because they have such a stigma! But yeah, that was kind of the vibe I got from other members of my family.