

Joshua and Alyssa Smith

Interview by Chhaya Kolavalli at MudPie Bakery in Kansas City, Kansas

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Transcribed by Chhaya Kolavalli

Note: Interview questions are written in bold, respondents' answers are in regular font.

Abstract: Joshua and Alyssa Smith, a couple living in Kansas City, Kansas, discuss their long histories with Christian intentional community. Both graduate students in theology, Joshua and Alyssa briefly lived in a loosely-organized intentional community in Liberty, Missouri. While they attempted to establish an intentional community in Kansas City—Anavah House—they do not currently have enough support to actualize the community. Joshua and Alyssa discuss what attracts them to the idea of Christian intentional living and the difficulties they experienced while trying to establish a community of their own.

Can you give me some background information? Your names, date of birth, place of birth?

Alyssa: My name is Alyssa Bennett Smith, I was born on [REDACTED] in [REDACTED], which is right outside Chicago.

Joshua: My name is Joshua Smith, I was born in [REDACTED] y on [REDACTED] Is that it? (laughs). We've lived in an out of communities for at least as long as we've been married, a little bit longer.

How long have you been married?

Alyssa: It was four years in May.

Did you do any schooling after high school?

Alyssa: I have a bachelor's degree, a bachelor's of fine arts in graphic design and illustration and I'm currently working on a master's degree in theological studies, with an emphasis on peace and reconciliation studies and feminist theology.

Joshua: I got a bachelor of arts degree in English, with a writing emphasis, then just graduated a couple months ago with my master of arts in theological studies with an emphasis in New Testament biblical studies.

So, a couple questions about your faith and childhood—what faith traditions were you raised in? Would you say you were raised in religious families?

Alyssa: I definitely was. I was raised in sort of a nondenominational evangelical tradition—non-tradition, I guess, until I went to college. My parents are both very devout, religious folk. Evangelical. They were both raised in the church. My mom grew up in mega-churches, so that's kind of the churches we went to as a kid. Really contemporary—I didn't use a hymnal until I went to college—like praise-bandy kind of stuff. Pretty fundamentalist, Calvinist theology, up until I went to college and then I sort of developed my own thing. But that was childhood for the most part.

Joshua: My great grandpa on my mother's side was a Methodist minister and he and my great grandma were very religious. But they died when I was very very young. None of the rest of my family is religious. But when I was a kid I started hanging out at the local United Methodist Church, because I grew up in a really small town, and there is nothing to do—you could go smoke cigarettes behind the factory after elementary school, or you could go up the hill and hang out, and they'd give you free food at the Methodist Church (laughs). So I hung out there when I was a kid, and developed kind of a religious curiosity—something that sometimes I wish I could turn off. To this day, mom and dad look at me and they're like "I don't know, I don't know where he gets it." Kind of confuses them I think.

Interesting. This question only pertains to Alyssa, I suppose: since your understanding of Christianity differs from your parents', what led you to that shift in thinking?

Alyssa: When I was a senior in high school I started dating a guy who had not been raised religious, but sort of ended up in the church. And I started reading authors, and getting more into I guess I'd call that the Emerging Church at the time, in 2007, and Christian mysticism and all that sort of thing, so I started reading that stuff too. Then when I went to college I continued dating that guy, and we got involved with the Baptist student center on campus, which is where I met Josh, actually. That community was small—there were, I don't know, less than 20 of us that hung out there on a regular basis. It was just very open to questioning and developing your own ideas—everyone didn't have to agree. I also happened to...my freshman year of college was also an election year, and so it sort of...being of age to vote in a presidential election for the first time sort of caused me to question what I thought about a lot of things. And it just sort of naturally overflowed into theology, and church, and religion, and community, and all of that good stuff, too. I actually remember having a conversation at one point, with either my boyfriend or my roommate, and I said "I'm so tired of having to decide what I think about everything!" It seemed like it was a solid two years of that, I think.

Yeah, it sort of started in high school with being introduced to the fact that there were different ideas. Growing up the way I did I was never really exposed to people who believe differently than me, unless you count Catholics versus Protestants, which in a lot of ways really aren't that different. And so, being exposed to all of that and starting to read and learn and having that forum for open discussion with peers

who I felt in a lot of ways were more educated than me—it really was a healthy environment for me to do that, and led to me developing my own ideas.

Can you remember when exactly you first started thinking about Christian intentional community?

Alyssa: Yes. I was introduced to the concept I think when I was like 20, and then shortly after that Joshua and I started dating and he gave me the book “Jesus for President” and introduced me to Shane Claiborne. And I read that book, and then the summer after my sophomore year of college, I took an internship in Washington D.C. where I worked with a church out there. As a part of that internship I lived in intentional community—those were just my living conditions for the summer. I don’t know that I would call it Christian intentional community, there were nonbelievers and a Buddhist that lived there with us too, so it was a little bit different from some that I have come to know since then. But it was a really beautiful microcosm of what the world should be, I thought. I got to experience it for the first time there, and then came back and started reading “New Neighbor,” or something that was written by Leroy Barber who founded Missioner—it has a lot of testimonials in it of people who have gone through that program or lived in community. I learned from my roommates that summer, and the Baptist student center had apartments in it. So in a sense it functioned on some level as an intentional community, although less intentionally I guess than some other places. That experience kind of all hit at the same time and started introducing me to those ideas.

So what about you, Joshua, when did you first start thinking about Christian intentional community?

Joshua: Well I think it started as sort of a question of what is god like, and if sort of Jesus did and said the things he did and said, what bearing does it have on our ethics and our practice? I think I was maybe a freshman or sophomore in college, and an ex-girlfriend of mine gave me a copy of the “Irresistible Revolution,” and I read about half of it, and it just felt like he started to repeat himself so I never actually finished the whole book. The book that really really completely changed my life was “Jesus for President,” which was I think his second book. There was just something about it that really spoke to me on a political level, on a religious level, and I was like “Wow!” Then I started learning about the Simple Way and things like that. I started spending as much time as I could—I have probably a naïve understanding of “We have to help the poor!” Well that’s sort of a nebulous idea, helping the poor. It’s also kind of...a little bit condescending. I’ve learned that there are other ways to approach it, and I’ve changed quite a bit. That was probably my sophomore year of college. It was around the same time that I started living in a house with four other guys. We lived in this house for a year, cooked each other dinner and hung out together a lot, and that was kind of cool. And then everybody...actually, two of the guys got married, and the remaining three couldn’t afford to pay rent. So, around that time I...we had a really rough winter, maybe in 2007, 2008, maybe around that

time. We had a really rough winter and I had several friends who lived at the Baptist student center in Cape Girardeau at Southeast Missouri State University. We had—actually there was this girl there that I was dating, and I went to visit them and got snowed in. I parked my truck at the student center and it started to ice, and by the time that I came back out my truck had been iced in and I couldn't get my truck out. And so I ended up staying in the student center for about two or three days before I finally tried to walk back home (laughs). And in that time, every evening we would pull all the tables and chairs from all of the apartments in the student center—we'd pull all of the tables and chairs out, line 'em up in the hallway, and everybody would just sort of grab whatever they had in their pantries—macaroni and cheese, TV dinners, stuff like that. And we'd just make this great big feast and we'd feed everybody at the student center. And that was one of the foundational experiences of community. I think since then, maybe..I think it's this way for a lot of people in intentional community. They maybe have similar experiences in college and spend a long time after college trying to regain that feeling, you know. But I lived in the student center for two or three years, I can't remember if it was two or three. I lived with a couple different roommates over the first couple of years, and then Alyssa and I got married at the student center, and she moved into the apartment. This was like, I dunno, a three hundred square foot apartment or something like that.

Alyssa: So small (laughs).

Joshua: So she moved in and we lived there for about another six or eight months. And then we moved out. That was sort of our—we actually moved from there into a coffee shop, it was actually kind of like this place. We moved up to the third floor. The owners—it was in an old house, we were on the third floor—the owners lived on the second floor, and the coffee shop was on the first floor. They roasted their own coffee and things like that. We actually lived there for like six months before moving to Liberty Missouri, because it was a lot closer to where I was going to seminary. My final year of undergrad, I was also working on—it was also my first year of seminary—so I was going to school as an undergrad in Cape Girardeau, and on the weekends commuting a 14 hour round trip from Cape Girardeau to Shawnee, and sitting through weekend intensive classes and then driving all the way back down and having full time undergrad classes during the week. And after a while that got really expensive, and really exhausting...

Alyssa: It just didn't make sense to stay there.

Joshua: That was a pretty tough time. But we moved up to Liberty, and that's where we moved into a small—it was an experiment. I guess we can call it an intentional community.

Alyssa: It was a community, we just didn't cohabitate. There were two married couples and a single woman that lived in a house together, and then we lived in a house, and there was another couple that lived in another house, and we were all

within like three blocks of each other, maybe. And then there were a few people that would come and participate from a little bit further away. We would have weekly meals together, and prayer, and we gardened together, and would do things like that. But it wasn't as high commitment or intentional as probably we would have liked—and some others in the community, too. Just certain situations didn't allow for anything more than what we did.

Joshua: Actually, I forgot to talk about Anavah House. That was—when we first got married, we decided together that what we wanted to do, our “dream as a couple” was to found an intentional community. We actually visited Lotus House in St. Louis.

How did you pick that one to visit?

Joshua: We were in town for a conference. We were involved with the Baptist Fellowship for several years because they were affiliated with the Baptist Student Center, and they were more a more moderate offshoot of the Southern Baptists that left after the “Fundamentalist takeover.” Because the Southern Baptists used to be much more moderate. Anyway, they have a conference every year, a convention I guess, and it moves around city to city. And in 2010...

Alyssa: 2010 yeah, it was three weeks after we got married. It was in Charlotte and we carpooled out there with a group of people from Missouri. They had sort of a college retreat that went along with the convention. And it was focused on intentional community. A part of it was we went and spent the day with a community. We did projects with them, didn't we? And learned about their structure and all that, and why they chose the neighborhood they did. Sort of their history—they've been there for a while now, it started with two married couples that graduated seminary at the same time and decided to go out and do that. It was kind of funny because we had been learning about and, to various degrees, living in intentional community for about a year at that point, and we went with this group of people who were very excited about it but didn't know much about it. They'd be starting conversations with “Have you heard of Shane Claiborne?” (laughs), and we'd be like “Yeah...I read his book two years ago.” So it was kind of interesting to—I don't wanna say we didn't get much out of it, because it was great to go and learn from them directly, but as sort of an intellectual exercise it was a lot of stuff we already knew.

Joshua: I think it was really the first time that we saw stuff that we had read about in our little town in Southeast Missouri—we actually saw it put into practice in a larger city, because you just don't see many intentional communities in Southeast Missouri.

Alyssa: Or any.

Joshua: Right, or any. And so we came back from that—we had actually developed a relationship with some folks at Lotus House in St. Louis. Really fascinating folks. There are several people there who are like PhD students in theology. I know Mark, my friend, studied theology at Princeton.

Alyssa: They're all real smart.

Joshua: They bought this house in downtown St. Louis and put in a chicken coop and a bunch of gardens and they've been there for years. They're wonderful folks.

Alyssa: They're on Lotus Street..

Joshua: So we developed a relationship with them. And seeing how it worked in places, we thought we could do this in our little college town in Southeast Missouri. Even though it's not a very large city, you can still see the need. There's still a sort of, you know, I hate to make it sound this way, but there's still a poorer part of town, a wrong side of the tracks or whatever. But being a small town everything is much much closer together. You've got people who are pretty wealthy right by people who are pretty poor, living right next to each other. Which was also my experience in Alabama, when Alyssa went to Washington D.C. in 2009—I, as part of the same program, was sent to Marion Alabama. It's in one of the 50 poorest counties in the United States. And it's rural, which is really interesting, she ended up in this really dense urban area—

Alyssa: That was on purpose (laughs).

Joshua: And I ended up in this really like obscure, out-there rural town. So these very different experiences of poverty. I grew up in a very poor rural town. So, we thought, well we could do something like that here—so we started working on this idea called Anavah House. And Anavah is a Hebrew word that means...

Alyssa: Love. No, humility...

Joshua: No, it means humility, but it's the kind of humility that recognizes that everyone has the ability to teach everybody else. It's a very mutual idea, it's humility in mutuality. So we came up with this idea for Anavah House. It's like a lot of things we've come up with, we've had a lot of ideas in the past few years that maybe are really good ideas, great ideas, but just don't have the support or technical know-how to put 'em into practice. We actually went pretty far with Anavah House even though it was just the two of us. At the time we were kind of wavering, whether or not we were going to remain rooted in Cape Girardeau or move to Kansas City, so it was kind of like "Well, here we have this idea for a model intentional community that could be in Cape Girardeau or could be in Kansas City!"

Alyssa: Well at the time we were living in the coffee shop and working at it, and the owners were trying to sell it. And we had this grand scheme that we would raise the

money, buy the business, and build the community in that house, because logistically it was really great for that set-up.

Alyssa: And as 22-year old college students we were like “Sure we can raise two million dollars, that’s no problem. We’ll do that!” (laughs). And obviously that was not as easily done as we anticipated.

Joshua: Not successful (laughs). But we have actually—we put together a vision and a mission statement.

Alyssa: We had a one, three, and five-year plan. We petitioned churches for support.

Joshua: The only things we lacked were people and money.

Alyssa: Which are kind of important (laughs).

Joshua: You kind of need those things. There was not enough human interest in Cape Girardeau.

Why do you think that is?

Alyssa: I think it was kind of a mixture of a lot of things. There were people that were interested, but not in the level that they would be willing to commit. Which is a side-effect of being in college, I think. We were 22, 23 at the time? And so all of our friends were that age as well, or a little older or younger. And in the stage of life where they were in a position to make decisions about their future, so they could have committed and were willing to have discussions about it with us, but when it came down to it, it was a lot of wishy-washy feelings about it. And honestly, not many people who go to school in Cape Girardeau wanna stay in Cape Girardeau, so the idea of committing to a certain number of years staying in that place is not attractive to someone who basically has the whole world in front of them at that time. So we did have a lot of people who were willing to help with it, but not a lot of people who were willing to commit to living there, which is what we really needed at the time to move forward with it.

Joshua: Looking back, it was kind of an idealistic and naïve way to sort of go about starting a community.

Alyssa: We didn’t know any other way to do it.

Joshua: Yeah, our friends at Lotus House they went to church together, and they were in like a Sunday school class. And they read “Irresistible Revolution” together and were like “Oh, we could do that,”—

Alyssa: So they just did!

Joshua: Yeah, they maxed out some credit cards or something like that and they bought a friggin house. And they're still there. It's just, some neighborhoods and communities are...

Alyssa: Well, they have had people sort of cycle in and out of it, it's not the exact same members that all moved in. Although, there are sort of the core four or five that have been there since the beginning. It just wasn't the right time for it in Cape, and certainly wasn't from a financial standpoint that was really do-able without more people involved or churches backing. And I don't know that that was something we could have found in Cape Girardeau. The religious climate in Southeast Missouri—being sort of the buckle of the Bible belt—is not so open-minded sometimes.

Joshua: So when you say “We want to start an intentional community,” some people are like “What?” (laughs).

Alyssa: There were maybe a couple of churches that could have gotten on board with something like that, but in the grand scheme of things they would have been like “What're ya'll a commune?”

Joshua: “A cult?” (laughs)

Alyssa: I don't know that it would have gone over so well. They're all over the country so I'm sure it's do-able regardless of that, depending on the model. But the kind of support we needed just wasn't there.

Joshua: We didn't really realize at the time either. I think there's sort of an image of intentional communities that they're sort of notorious for not communicating with one another, they all sort of do their own thing, they're isolated in their neighborhood. So I remember thinking “Oh, we're gonna be the first intentional community in the Midwest!” (laughs)

Alyssa: “Oh, there aren't any out here!” (laughs)

Joshua: And then just sort of realizing, wait, there's sort of this underground network of people—like I know somebody who knows somebody who knows somebody. This place is full of communities.

Alyssa: Case in point, after that fell through we decided to move to Kansas City to be closer to the seminary while we were in school, and we looked into intentional communities in Kansas City, and the only one we could find before we moved up here was Cherith Brook, because they were the only one with any kind of online presence, and that was our only resource at the time. I think we kind of talked to them a little bit, but never really seriously about moving in or anything because the situation just worked out better for us to move up to Liberty, because that's where

all our friends were and a house for us to move into. But, you know, come to find out now that there's probably almost a dozen in Kansas City alone, but we didn't know about any of them before we moved up here. So that's just one example of one city that's like that, we were like "There's only one in Kansas City, maybe we could start another one!" Come up here and start meeting people and find out that there's—

Joshua: Before we moved up here we sent about 30 or 40 letters to different churches in the area—we didn't know anybody, we didn't know any churches, we just thought "Hmm, this seems like a church that might be amenable to helping sponsor an intentional community." So we sent letters to all these churches saying "Hey! Would you help us start this intentional community?" And not surprisingly, we didn't hear back from any of them.

Alyssa: One of which is our church now (laughs).

Joshua: Yeah, kind of a strange twist of fate. We sent a letter to this church, and then three years later ended up moving just a half a mile from there and now we're members there. So we moved to Liberty, and then we spent about a year in a low-commitment intentional community—everybody sort of had their own lives, we weren't together for any sort of grand purpose except to be together.

Alyssa: Yeah, there wasn't an outward focus in a lot of higher commitment communities. Like with Cherith Brook, they have a really strong commitment to the homeless in their community, or urban farming or that kind of thing. I think we all....we all just went to the same church.

Joshua: Most of us. Those of us that went to church went to the same church. And we all lived close together, and we knew each other.

Alyssa: We moved to Liberty because our best friends from college were in Liberty, and they had best friends from the other college they went to that moved in, friends that they had met since moving to Liberty. So we all knew each other beforehand. So we figured, well, if we're gonna live close to one another we might as well give this a try. Some times it worked better than others.

Joshua: It was sort of our first "real" experience, and I hate to even call it "real" experience because that implies that everything we experienced before that wasn't real. It was our first experience where we were like "Oh, this is really fucking hard."

Alyssa: It was really hard. The grand total of participants in that community was probably between 10 and 15. And when you have that many people who, like he said, live their own lives and have different ideas about why they're there and what they're after, it really complicates things. We sort of came together in the summer of 2011, and then that Thanksgiving our best friends who were in the community with us told everyone they were pregnant with their first child. Very shortly after that

we found out that the other married couple that had been in their house had been accepted to grad school in another city, so they were going to be moving around the same time the baby was born. So it just kind of, it almost started to fall apart before it even came together, because we knew the expiration date for it. We knew this couple was about to have their first baby. They intended to step away from community while they tried to figure out their lives as parents, and then kind of reassess if that was something they wanted to do. The other couple was going to be going off to grad school, and the rest of us were already in grad school, so we had maybe four months of full-steam ahead kind of attitude, and then it was like “Well, this is only until August.” So it was weird in that way too. We really didn’t have a significant amount of time where everybody was fully dedicated to it, because we could see the finish line almost as soon as we started. But I think it was a really good experience for everyone. We got to learn what conflict was like in community, and good ways to deal with that, and what it feels like when different people in the community have different expectations of the community or different commitment levels. Or even—we didn’t get to participate in this part of it, but—there were five people that did live in the same house, so it was almost a community within a community. They got to experience cohabitation, and sort of a common-purse idea, and what it is to live in the same space with everyone. We got a little taste of everything, though we never got the full experience that we were looking for, at least.

Joshua: Just personally, I will say that particular time was one of the hardest times in my life that I’ve experienced—on my faith. It was a really really difficult time. I felt a lot of my assumptions challenged—even challenged what I felt it meant to live in community, what it meant to be socially and ethically active. And I think around the time that that community dissolved was around the time that I would probably have identified as atheist. Which is like ah, I had some existential issues going on, that I’m actually still working through, but when the community dissolved, the immediate result of that was that I—I actually changed degree programs. I was in an M.Div. program and I changed to an M.A.—Master of Arts in theological studies, which was a more research-based academic degree. I actually kind of threw myself into my studies and became more of a student. I’ve been in seminary for two years before I actually became a student! So for the last two years, I’ve been doing research and I haven’t spent a whole lot of time actively seeking community...for a while now, I’ve been trying to find ways to fit into existing communities without necessarily feeling the need to move into them. My emphasis is in New Testament Literature, and I’d like to teach biblical studies at like a university.

But I also thought that there’s some part of me that has carried this community thing along with me this whole time. I think one of these days I could live in a community and I could be an academic voice within the intentional community, and also be a voice and an advocate for intentional communal living in an academic setting, too. So be that voice that bridges the gap between the two. That’s a very romanticized view of what it is, I’m still kind of feeling out what that means. I don’t know if I’ll get there, but...for the last few years my life has revolved less around

community and more around my studies, which creates problems all on it's own because I'm graduating now. I'm sitting around twiddling my thumbs. It was shortly after the community dissolved that Alyssa and I ran into all sorts of financial difficulties because of job situations. I was working for Americorps at the time, and what ended up happening was we had to move out of the house we lived in in Liberty because we couldn't afford to live there anymore. So we moved to Kansas City, Kansas. And we've lived there for two years, just the two of us.

When you guys mentioned your plans and mission statements—in your minds, what is an ideal community for you? Can you tell me a little bit more about what your mission statement was, or what you ideally envisioned being a part of?

Alyssa: Well at that time, probably three and a half years ago, it was probably more focused on like a contemplative lifestyle or New Monasticism. You went through a phase where you kind of wanted to be Monk, for like a minute—

Joshua: It's hard to be a monk when you're married!

Alyssa: It is! It is. And so there was a lot, in the original, for Anavah House, there was a lot of talk of common prayer and common study in general, really, of the Bible and liturgy. We had dreams of common work, too—at the time with the coffee house, we had planned that whoever lived in the community would work in the coffee house, and that would be the revenue generator kind of thing.

Joshua: Also I was really into ceramics and I do pottery, and I thought "Oh we could get some pottery wheels in here, teach little kids, have workshops for neighborhood kids."

Alyssa: There was like a little cottage next to the house, so we had dreams of turning that into a ceramics studio. I think now, we've talked recently about being really attracted to tiny house communities. Another couple from the community up in Liberty—those that moved to Springfield to go to grad school, they had the same dream so we talked with them a lot about the possibility of someday buying a plot of land together and farming or growing our own food, and raising animals, and living in separate tiny houses but having a house in the center that was sort of common space—for things like the library, and a large common kitchen and eating area, space for people to come stay—

Joshua: Hospitality—

Alyssa: Yeah, sort of everything but your private living space would be in that center common area. And I think we're still attracted to the idea of common prayer and a lot of the new monastic ideas, but probably not as strongly as we were three years ago.

Joshua: I would say I've still got—it's been kind of a slow-burning passion of mine. Just as a side note, the couple that moved to Springfield, my friend Jay—they both just graduated—he was getting his masters in communications and wrote his thesis on conflict resolution in intentional communities. I have not read it yet, maybe I can get a copy of it for you. He lived at the Dancing Rabbit Eco-village. But to go back to how I got interested in new monasticism, I had completely forgotten about that, my very first class in seminary was...well, I had been interested in new monasticism for a while, I was aware of Shane Claiborne, and Johnathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and the 12 marks of new monasticism that sort of came out of Rutba House. I think I had that book at the time as well. But my very first class in seminary was held at a monastery. And I spent a weekend living at—staying at—Conception Abbey in Northwest Missouri, it's Benedictine Abbey. It was a two-hour drive up there or something like that. On the way back, I remember thinking "Wouldn't it be cool if you could buy an old, burned out church or something? And then have an intentional community in that?" Like you convert the classrooms into bedrooms or whatever, and the church sanctuary could be a communal worship space.

Alyssa: And then six months later we met a community that actually did that, in Kansas City (laughs).

Joshua: Yeah, that was fascinating. Our friends at Oak Park, that's exactly what they did.

Alyssa: Well, it was a functioning church, but the second story wasn't being used and so they moved into it and turned it into an apartment—a really large apartment. They've since recently moved out of the church, but we went and visited them and thought "This is exactly what we want!"

Joshua: It's actually, just listening to us—we don't talk about this very often, I mean together at least—listening to us tell this story it's kind of made me aware of how many people we know, and what a network we have without actually being in an intentional community ourselves, which is kind of interesting "Hey, we know this person, and this person, and this person..."

Alyssa: What happened when we left the community in Liberty, was we did start looking at communities in Kansas City with the intention of moving in with them, especially Oak Park, because we bonded really quickly with the members there and became really close friends with the—at the time there were four of them, when we first met there were six, and then when we moved from liberty there were four. But ultimately, any community that functions with the level of commitment we're looking for is going to expect the same level of commitment from participants. As graduate students, and with Joshua looking at possibly pursuing a PhD, we couldn't commit. So we're sort of these hovering admirers—

Joshua: We're intentional community groupies (laughs).

Alyssa: Basically! We've built friendships with a lot of people on both the Kansas City and Missouri side, through the community of communities in Kansas City. But we haven't been able to actually pull the trigger on moving into any of them, because when it comes down to it, we might be moving a year from now to Texas, or Denver, or Boston or wherever the PhD program is. So it's been more of a hobby I guess. The friendships are real, but we haven't been able to dedicate the amount of time to it that we want to because of our stage in life at this point.

Joshua: I think early on, for me at least, it was a crusade. It was like, maybe in some small way, rebelling against the church that I attended when I was a kid—I went to the Methodist church, and ended up being pretty active in the youth group even though my family wasn't religious, I was really really active there. I remember one time my mom grounded me from attending the hanging of the green service for advent, so I was that kid, the kid that got grounded from attending church functions.

Alyssa: I didn't know that! (laughs).

Joshua: I think maybe in some small way there was this little bit of edgy rebellion against sort of the corny, good country folk religion that I had subscribed to as a teenager. And so, being in an intentional community felt like this really social—very freeing thing to take part in, and it also made me feel really superior. Here was this nice, white, middle-class boy who is saying "We need to help the poor." I dunno, maybe he's still in there rattling around somewhere, but over time I think what happened was...community grew into this, for me at least, this desire to really connect with people. Not that I'm not concerned with economic disparity and social injustice anymore, it's just that over time I've realized I really wanna connect with other people. Especially our experience in Liberty made me realize that I wanna find people who are as committed to me as I am to them, to really know somebody. Maybe I'll feel differently in another five years, but that's sort of where it's been for me. There was another one of these grand ideas—when we were in Liberty I wanted to do this thing...I think in Philadelphia they had this thing called the People's Seminary. It's basically a real basic theological education for free, they get volunteers to come in and teach seminary courses.

Alyssa: Grassroots Seminary.

Joshua: Yeah, that's it. There was the People's Seminary, and the Seminary of the Streets out on the West Coast. So I thought "How about Common Grounds Seminary of Greater Kansas City?" So we could get people together and do these little seminars, and have professors come in, but gear it toward people who are maybe not inclined to pursue a really expensive seminary education, make theology more accessible. And that fell through as well, just lack of interest and lack of support. But all of these ideas—Anavah House, and People's Seminary—they're still floating around in the ether, on the internet somewhere.

Alyssa: We still get calls about Anavah House, I got one three weeks ago.

Joshua: Oh really?

Alyssa: Yeah, at this point we just end up connecting them to other people in Kansas City—

Joshua: We forward them on to other people—

Alyssa: It's interesting the people that contact you about communal living. There's some interesting folks out there (laughs).

Joshua: Actually, somebody contacted me a few years ago about Anavah House, they were like "Dear Joshua, we would like to invite you to our community. We're a small community of King James Only-ists who are waiting for the lord to come back and the world to end, we've begun to stockpile weapons..." (laughs) Uh, maybe the FBI should know? (laughs). But we still want to be around people, and it's been really hard not feeling grounded in other people as we lived in Kansas City Kansas the past couple of years.

I've talked to a lot of people who have lived in communities that dissolved because of conflict—conflict because of vision, plans, ideology, etc. So I'm wondering, in your envisioning of intentional community, is everyone coming to the table with the same ideas about faith, or would you want community members from all across the spectrum?

Alyssa: Personally, I would be bored if everyone thought the same thing. I know I've experienced first hand the conflict that can come from people believing different things, especially when it comes to faith because it plays such a strong role in intentional living. The community in Liberty, the conflict that we had within that community had more to do with differing levels of commitment than differing views on faith. We had some people who were very theologically conservative, some who were theologically progressive. Josh already talked a little bit about his transition that happened while we were in that community, but there was another member who came into that community as an agnostic—he doesn't call himself a Christian. Suffice to say that there were a lot of different ideas about a lot of different things, theologically speaking, but that never got in the way, weirdly. It was mostly like "We're trying to do common prayer and nobody is showing up," or "We're trying to build a chicken coop and nobody wants to help." Stuff like that. It had nothing to do with what anybody thought about god. Part of my studies has been conflict mediation, and my goal—one of my goals—is to do conflict mediation and conflict transformation for intentional communities.

Like I can understand why, If you're in a faith-centered community you would want people to have at least the same basic ideas of what faith is. But I think if you're really committed to the community and to living together and to that relationship

with those people, I don't think that gets in the way as much as "whose turn is it to do the dishes" type of stuff.

Joshua: Yeah, I don't know. On the surface, at first glance I would wanna say "Yeah, everybody come to the table! Who cares what you believe, we'll all just gather around and sing kumbaya!" But I think at the same time, I think originally my understanding of intentional community was "This is what the church is supposed to be." And I know there are other religious movements that are based around that idea—some perhaps a little bit more well-known and established than others, like the Lord's Recovery movement. They have kind of the same idea, but originally I was like "This is what the church is supposed to be like." And I kind of grew out of that, I think that Christianity is a really broad umbrella, and that term applies to a lot of different ideas and different types of people. But at the same time, I can only see—I would be interested in Christian intentional community living. I can see a lot of problems with just ideologically when people are not sort of, of the same mind-set. To use religious terms, in Acts it talks about these little religious communities being of the same heart and mind. I hate to be "that" guy, the religious guy, but I think—my preference would be to be with other people who sort of feel the same way about matters of faith that I do. And I know that sounds boring, but I think there's something beautiful in that. You go to a monastery, and there may be different—there may be people with different nuanced understandings of the same theology, but you go to Conception Abbey and all of the monks there are going to be Roman Catholic. They sort of have that framework of belief—it's a huge step forward to have that foundation, if you're going to be a part of an intentional community, to have that shared practice, that thing in common. But I don't know, that's just me, Alyssa is obviously different.

I have some questions about ideas of social justice in intentional community. It seems to be such a big part of the majority of the communities I've talked to. You mentioned that you were more interested in inward-facing community—does social justice factor into your idea of community, or if not, why did you decide to turn your focus internally, within the community?

Alyssa: I think for me, that would be important. That was actually one of, when we did live in Liberty, that was one of the main issues that the two of us had with the structure of the community up there, we mentioned earlier that it didn't have much of an outward focus, it was mostly about the people that live there. I don't know that I would now be as sort of bent on the idea of...Cherith Brook has their specific ministries for what they do—they have showers, they have meals, they have all these things that they do that are sort of planned activities. And I can appreciate that, and I think I would enjoy living in a community that functioned in that way, but I also have a lot of admiration for communities like Lotus House, where they sort of impact the community just by existing in it. They develop relationships with the people in their neighborhood, and if their neighbor can't pay their electric bill they come to them and help them out—it's not so formalized. Or, systemized in that way. It's a more natural outpouring of the relationships that they have with those people.

Not to say that Cherith Brook doesn't have relationships with the people they help, they absolutely do, but I'm—as an introvert, it is easier for me to function within that systemized structure but it's also easier for me to disconnect from people within that structure. It would be easier for me to go and live with a community that cooked a meal for people every Wednesday night, or whatever. But it would be equally easy for me to use that to appease my conscience and not develop relationships with the people that came to the meal. And so knowing that about myself, I'm more attracted to the idea of living in a community where I actually build those relationships and the service is an outpouring of that love. That's the more important part—the building of the larger community. It's definitely a natural side-effect of any healthy intentional community, which might be kind of a strong statement. I think if you're living among people and you care about them, you're going to be taking care of them and they're going to be taking care of you in the same way. So I would say that it's important to me, certainly.

Joshua: I just wanna be a hermit (laughs). No, yeah, I think I would just echo what she said. You know we had ideas for Anavah House, and it was going to be...I felt like, recently, we had—like a year ago—there was a community of communities gathering in Kansas City. And the topic of discussion was the tension between doing and being, and you see this played out over and over and over again in communities, especially Christian communities. To put it another way, it's the tension between the active life and the contemplative life. And I've always been a little bit more contemplative, even though I started out really active I've been moving more towards the contemplative side. Ultimately I think there has to be a balance between the—Well, the Benedictines call it Ora et Labora, prayer and work. They sort of recognize the need that okay, you spend a lot of time praying the office and deep in contemplation. But then there's also a time when work has to get done in the community, everyone has a job. That informs my idea of how communities should be oriented towards social justice. Which has almost become sort of a cliché term, I think. It's maybe been co-opted, I think maybe liberation is becoming one of those...social justice, liberation, are becoming these code words that have been co-opted by white middle-class males like me. And not that they don't have meaning, still, but I think that anytime you talk about social justice it has to ultimately boil down to a balance between—in communities at least—a balance between the active life and contemplative life. And they don't have to be mutually exclusive. The active life can draw people into the contemplative life, and the contemplative life can light a fire under people's feet to push them to be more active. I've seen both. So I would prefer a life of balance, although, you know, I would like to be left alone out in the woods somewhere (laughs). That's just my preference.

So I think what I'm hearing from you is that the way you improve a neighborhood or community is not by intentionally laying out plans, but by building relationships?

Joshua: Yeah, definitely. I think the former way that you mentioned is very triumphalistic—it's sort of the old way, the old missionary way. You move into a

place and say you're gonna stake out your ground and say "We're gonna help you whether you need it or not,"

Alyssa: —we're gonna fix you—

Joshua: Yeah, we're gonna fix you.

Paternalistic?

Joshua: Yeah, yeah, exactly! It's kind of colonialistic.

Alyssa: Very colonialistic.

Joshua: And I think...I don't even feel the need to...I don't know, that leads into a philosophy of missions, and I don't have very many thoughts about it, I haven't thought about it that much. I do know that I would rather just be with somebody than spend all my time trying to tell them all the good things that I'm doing to help them.

A last set of questions I have is about simple living and gardening, because that seems to be an important facet of Christian intentional living for a lot of folks. It seems to go hand in hand with growing your own food, or recycling your own waste water...you mentioned the idea of living in tiny houses and sharing a garden together. Why is that an important part of living your faith, for you?

Alyssa: I think that all of that, well, okay—the idea of simple living appeals to me from the perspective of the person who struggles with anxiety, and just the idea of being at least somewhat off the grid, for lack of a better word, and providing for yourself and having to rely less on outside sources is attractive. I also feel like, sort of ecological sustainability is a natural extension of stewardship, and sort of the teachings of Jesus in the Bible. The whole idea of community in general, if you expand that to include the environment around you, I just think it makes sense. And just from a rational standpoint, there's no sense in waste at all.

Joshua: There's no sense in every person on your block each having their own lawn mower.

Alyssa: There just isn't! And quite honestly, I don't like gardening but I like sustainability. So I can tolerate gardening. Sort of that idea, like...I like sewing, and domesticity, and simple living. I am not a person that holds on to things. And so that comes more easily to me than the idea of going out and planting and tending to and harvesting things—I'm also just not very good at it! I think it's...the whole idea in general is just really important to me. I wouldn't wanna live in a community that is in some suburb somewhere and is trying to make a difference among a bunch of white middle-class folk. I grew up in that sort of environment and that's not

productive, I don't think. I'm more attracted to the idea of coexisting with people and learning to provide for yourselves—through whatever...I mean, not everybody is gonna be a gardener. Not everybody is gonna be a sewer—I hate the word seamstress—but I think when you come together in a group like that, there are going to be people who have different passions and different skill-sets, and I think it just makes sense to use them.

Joshua: For me, I know this sounds really cliché and cheesy. But I really think everything does come down to Jesus. And I look at Jesus' sayings on simplicity and on in some way being...Jesus was a part of an agrarian society, so all of his imagery comes from farming. Seeing the sort of wonder at the natural world in his language and his teachings, how he refers to the lilies of the field, and the sparrows, and the birds in the air...his use of mustard seeds imagery and stuff like that. Maybe in a romantic way, that's where it comes from for me. Because I do enjoy gardening. I think it's magic. It's like, you put this little thing in the ground, add a little bit of water and sunshine, and then something grows out of it and you can eat food off of it, and it's just so far removed from the way we get food now, which is just going to the supermarket. And that may be a little bit of a romanticized idea, but there's something about that that really appeals to me. Self-sufficiency and knowing—you go back to the creation story in Genesis, and there is supposed to be a cost of feeding ourselves. Like, we're supposed to work at it, which is really far removed from where we are now. A lot of this, we go to work, we sit at a desk and stare at a computer screen or whatever, and go to a supermarket and buy our food. There is an element of, a recognition in Genesis, that you're going to have to work and struggle to survive. I think we've lost sight of that in our cushy, wasteful culture. I used to work at—it really hit me when I started working at the Olive Garden a few years ago, I worked there for two or three years—and I saw just how much food people threw away. As I was scraping this person's dish, all of the food they had left on their plate, I would think about "Wow, I wonder how many people starved to death today." Taking responsibility for that. Simple living has always appealed to me, because I grew up in a rural context, and my grandparents always used to make their own—I have a grandpa right now who's gotten really into making his own butter and cheese. So, when I was growing up we always canned our own food, and now years later it's become this pop-culture thing, you see all the hipsters canning their own food! And, I mean this makes me sound a hipster as much as anybody, but I was doing it back before it was a cool thing to do, just because we lived out in the country. We picked blackberries and came home to make blackberry jelly. We canned jalapenos and produce and things like that. So, maybe there's a bit of nostalgia to it as well. I remember that, when I was growing up. But I really think that anyone who wants to remain authentic and be sincere in their following of this way of life that the Jesus of the gospel offers, they have to seriously consider adopting that lifestyle. Which, to me, I think one of the hardest sayings that Jesus has ever said was give to everyone who asks of you, and don't expect them to pay you back. Which is, that's crazy! That's not the way the world works. And so, in a really complicated life, simplicity is counter-cultural, which I think really appeals to me. Even though we haven't lived in community for the last two years, we can still

live simply. We have our...what is it my grandpa calls it...not decadent, it's basically, we have our vices here and there...

Alyssa: Indulgences?

Joshua: Maybe, yeah, we have Netflix and Hulu and things like that, praise the lord! (laughs).

Alyssa: We buy groceries from the store (laughs).

Joshua: But we live in an 800 square foot house, and we try our best to be as simple and make as much of our own things, our own needs as possible. I went through a phase where, you know Shane Claiborne did this "Oh the clothing companies are evil because they're exploiting workers in third world countries so we need to make our own clothes." So I started making my own clothes for a while, and then after a while I realized in addition to looking ridiculous, I started thinking "Wait, where is this fabric made that I'm making my own clothes out of?" I've cut out the middle-man, but I'm still using this fabric, these textiles, that are not a whole lot better. So eventually I just sort of made the switch to "Okay, I can buy my clothes at Goodwill and not purchase anything new." Which is still a flawed approach, but it's the one I feel most comfortable with these days.

Last question I have—what books, websites, or materials were influential for you when you were forming your ideas about Christian intentional community?

Alyssa: Well, the Mission Year, the program, it's built around the idea of Christian intentional community, it's meant to be temporary—

Joshua: It's about a year I think—

Alyssa: It's a good...just reading up on the program gives you a general idea of sort of how intentional community works.

Joshua: That organization is run by Shawn Casselberry now.

Alyssa: Yeah, he founded it but he doesn't run it anymore. Also, the Ordinary Radicals, the DVD, it's sort of a documentary I guess.

Joshua: It's a few years old now.

Alyssa: It deals with sort of intentional community, but other issues that go hand in hand with social justice and the church.

Joshua: It's actually, a documentary based around the "Jesus for President" book tour. So it's got Shane Claiborne with a bunch of other folks, who basically got in

their veggie-oil powered bus and travelled across the country. The documentary is about the people that they encounter that they feel are living out the kingdom values.

Alyssa: The Catholic Worker movement, too, has been helpful...like Dorothy Day and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and "The Long Loneliness," "Life Together." What are those two books that Jay introduced us to that we bought?

Joshua: I can't remember, the author is Smith. Her name is something-Smith.

Alyssa: That'll help (laughs).

Joshua: "The Intentional Christian Community Handbook," by David Janzen. Gosh, it's so hard to think of them all off the top of my head.

If you think of any more later, just let me know!