CHAPTER 1

Introduction

It was 2:20 p.m. on a cold, bright winter day when I reached the gate of The Farm. After a five-hour drive from Marion, Illinois, where I spent the night in a small motel near the highway, I was too excited to feel tired. “Finally, I’m here,” I thought, but at the same time, I asked myself, “What on earth are you doing here?” I started driving slowly along the main road (Figure 1.1). Having spent the past eight months reading about The Farm and watching many videos available online, I had a good
idea of what the place looked like. Still, it was different from how I had envisaged it: It was far more spacious and peaceful than I had ever imagined.

There was a large meadow to the left of the road, and on the right lay a forest. While driving, I noticed several buildings, a stable with horses grazing next to it, large solar panels, and old grain bins beautifully painted with images of colorful mushrooms, clouds, and what seemed like an indigenous woman holding a torch in her hand. A couple of people were walking next to the road and they smiled and waved at me as I passed them. I thought they must have confused me with someone else, but later I understood that greeting strangers was the norm around there. On the fence of one of the few houses on the main road, I saw a flag with the peace sign in its center next to two gold ornaments of that same sign (Figure 1.2). “I’m probably in the right place,” I thought.

Forty minutes later, I was at the community center, waiting for people to gather for a “Dance of Universal Peace” session. Although I had just arrived and had not even taken my bag out of the car, I took my hosts’ advice to attend the session in order to start interacting with the

1.2 The peace sign as an ornament.
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community and maybe recruit some interviewees for the study I was hoping to conduct. Several musicians were preparing for the session in the center of the small space, but there were very few attendees. Later, I learned about “Farm time,” a term suggesting that punctuality is not a primary value around there.

I sat down on one of the wooden benches next to the wall and observed the people gradually showing up. The majority were older adults, and many of them were pretty slim and wore colorful clothes (including a couple of tie-dye items). Most men had a ponytail or a braid, and most women had not dyed their hair. Still, I could easily imagine how they looked when they first arrived at The Farm, almost fifty years earlier. They all hugged and kissed each other when they met, and some approached me and introduced themselves. One of them, who later became my first interviewee, took me by the hand and introduced me to the others.

At 3:20 p.m., there were enough people to get started (about thirty, not including the musicians). Nicholas – who led the event – taught us the lyrics of each song we were about to dance to. The words combined different languages, including English, Hindi, Hebrew, and Arabic, but the contents were all about love and peace. Next, he taught the melody and only then demonstrated the steps. Occasionally, his spouse stepped in and explained the meaning of a specific word or movement. Putting our palms together and then “pouring” what was in them over our heads, for example, meant “bathing in love.”

The dances were simple and involved a lot of mutual touch, such as holding hands or putting a hand on the next dancer’s shoulder. The atmosphere was positive and even humorous at times. Often, the participants laughed at their dancing skills, and one even asked if Mother Earth – the theme of one of the songs – could pay his bills. However, most of the time they were pretty focused and intentional, often closing their eyes while dancing and taking a deep breath between the dances. Because my first name means “wave,” and I was there to conduct a study on aging, one of the participants asked Nicholas to include a “Grandmother Ocean” dance for me. I was touched. In another dance, participants were split into couples and had to switch partners after each repetition of the song, so eventually, we each danced with all the other participants. The words of the songs were, “I accept you just the way that
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you are, I accept me just the way that I am…” and while singing these words, we all looked into our current partner’s eyes. After several rounds of that dance, I realized I was smiling.

Fifteen months later, during a long walk in the park near my house in Tel Aviv – something that I had started doing daily upon my return from The Farm – I thought about the “daily mix” by Spotify that I was listening to on my mobile phone. It occurred to me that the app’s algorithm must have concluded that I am an old hippie, as that mix only included American rock created between 1965 and 1975. Amused by my musical preferences in the past year, I started making a list of how The Farm and its people had affected my life, and the list was long. It included items such as starting to eat organic food and even growing most of it, adopting new leisure activities such as walking and qigong, and going back to reading spiritual texts such as A Course in Miracles. However, the most dominant impact may be described as a profound change in my “new-day aspirations”: I no longer wake up in the morning thinking about the data I am about to analyze or the article I will write. Instead, I contemplate how I can be a better person and do good in this world.

My interest in aging hippies began in 2013, when my family and I spent the summer in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. One day, while having coffee in an outdoor café next to one of the canals, I noticed an older couple walking by, holding bicycles in their hands and talking to each other. Although I have seen many older couples on the streets of Amsterdam, this one drew my attention: Both had long white hair, were wearing tie-dye clothes, and had beads around their necks with peace signs as a medallion. Suddenly it hit me: Some hippies have remained hippies to this day!

The hippies were the most salient countercultural movement that emerged in the United States (U.S.) during the 1960s. Opposing the war in Vietnam and rejecting the mainstream American lifestyle, this movement originated on college campuses but quickly spread throughout the U.S. and many other countries. I am not sure why I assumed that the hippies, at least the original ones, had all adopted a mainstream lifestyle after the heyday of the 1960s counterculture was over. I think it may have had to do with an Israeli song that I liked as a teenager. The song described the hippies most romantically but ended with the following verse:
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Bill took 30 pills, and John works with his dad,
Jean has a child from Woodstock or Canada,
Norman has a store for natural foods and dairy products,
he took Katy to be his wife
and will pay a mortgage all his life.

Born in 1968 in a rural area in central Israel, I did not witness the hippie movement in real time, but I can clearly remember the first time I saw men with long hair. It happened on a bus ride with my mother to the nearest town. I was only four years old, so I could not understand that there was something different about them. My mother, however, thought that their long hair was hilarious and even sent me to ask them why they did not tie their hair in a ponytail.

Growing up and having learned about the hippies from various media content such as the film *Hair,* I could easily see their effect on me and my generation in Israel. My friends and I were all pacifists, we all attributed great importance to music, and thought that psychedelics promoted spiritual growth and that free love was part of being a free spirit. In addition, many of my friends, myself included, were vegetarians, had a relatively developed awareness of environmental issues, and generally opposed consumerism. Accordingly, we wore clothes bought in flea markets and experimented with walking barefoot until the Israeli sidewalks, burning in the Mediterranean sun, taught us otherwise. As we all ended up living rather normative lives that included having careers and families, I assumed that the hippies had done the same.

Seeing the hippie couple in Amsterdam made me wonder, for the first time, where all the hippies from the 1960s had gone. I was flooded with questions: What did they do for the rest of their lives? Did they become, as I believed, part of the mainstream and abandon all their ideals and dreams? How are they doing now as older adults? Do they still believe in love and peace? Do they meditate and practice yoga all day? What about sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll? Is anything of their somewhat wild and rebellious lifestyle left? Did they come up with a new, creative, and better way to age? What do they think when they look back and reflect on their lives? Do they believe that their generation changed the...
world? Are they happy with the world in its current state or do they feel they have failed? Do they still consider themselves hippies at all?

Wondering if anyone had ever dealt with these questions, I checked several bibliographic databases to see if anything had been written about aging hippies. However, I could not find any in-depth inquiry into this group. I marked it as a topic for future research, but it took six years before the opportunity to do so presented itself. I was at a conference in Canada when, in a casual conversation, a colleague of mine mentioned The Farm. He described it as an intentional community of hippies located in Tennessee and said it still existed as far as he knew. As soon as I got back home I started learning about The Farm. Eight months later, I was there, at its gate, with a rented car and great curiosity.

THE STUDY

The purpose of the study described in this book was to explore the aging experience of people I initially described as hippies who remained hippies. By using The Farm as a case study and examining issues related to identity, daily activities, and wellbeing, the project sought to discover how such individuals considered later life, whether and how they preserved the hippie ideology and lifestyle in old age, what changed and why, and to what extent their unique characteristics supported their aging process.

The Farm is considered the largest commune out of the thousands of countercultural experiments in communal living during the 1960s and 1970s, and it is one of the couple of hundreds that still exist today. The people who founded The Farm in 1971 were predominantly hippies, or at least were described as hippies in numerous media reports that covered The Farm’s story. Accordingly, it offered an excellent springboard for research on aging hippies.

The study’s primary source of information was in-depth interviews with forty people who were either among the founding members of The Farm or joined it during its early days (in the early 1970s). During my visit at The Farm, I interviewed founding members currently living there, either continuously since the 1970s or those who had left for some time and then returned. After realizing that many of the early members who
left The Farm were still in touch with the community, visited it, donated money to its various actions, and so forth, I decided to expand the study to include such former residents and explore if and how the years they spent at The Farm connected with their present identity, daily activities, and wellbeing. Eventually, therefore, the study included three groups of founding members:

1. Lifelong residents – thirteen individuals (seven men, six women) who have lived at The Farm for most of their adult lives, such as Cindy, who has dedicated her life to preserving nature and educating about it, and Nicholas, who guides Dance of Universal Peace sessions in and outside The Farm.

2. Returning residents – nine individuals (five men, four women) who joined The Farm in its early days, left it for an extended period (more than twenty years), and then moved back, such as Shirley, a lawyer and a Zen master, and Sam, who serves on the community’s Board of Directors and plays guitar in a rock-n-roll band that performs covers of the Grateful Dead.

3. Former residents – eighteen individuals (nine men, nine women) who joined the community in its early days, lived there for several years (mean = ten years), and then left it and lived elsewhere, like Charlotte, a certified midwife who advocated legalizing lay midwifery and now serves as an “end-of-life doula,” and Jeff, one of the most influential scientists worldwide exploring the medical qualities of cannabis.

Study participants’ ages at the time of the interviews ranged between 66 and 78 (mean = 72.1), and the majority (32 out of 40) were retired or semi-retired. Thirty-three were married or in steady relationships, but as many as 24 interviewees had been divorced at least once (eight had been divorced two to four times). All study participants but one had biological and/or adopted children (mean = 2.88), and some also mentioned involvement in raising their partners’ children. The majority (33 out of 40) had at least some higher education; five of these had MA degrees, and five had MD or PhD degrees. A comparison among the three groups suggests that they share very similar backgrounds. Still, those who left The Farm reported a higher incidence of divorce and consisted of a
somewhat higher number of individuals with master’s or MD/PhD degrees. For more details about the study participants, data collection, and analysis, see the Appendix.

To protect study participants’ privacy, I changed their names to pseudonyms and deleted many details that might have indicated their identity. However, when reporting about specific businesses and non-profit organizations that they established, titles of books they wrote, and the like, I used their original names. For example, when I wrote about Nancy Rhine, a former Farm resident who became one of the most influential women in internet history, I used her name, but I used her pseudonym in other parts of the book. By so doing, I protected the more sensitive information that she and all other study participants provided during the interviews.

Several sources of information were used to support and add to the insights arising from the in-depth interviews:

1. *Participant observations.* During my stay at The Farm in February 2020, I had numerous opportunities to observe daily life and participate in formal and informal community activities (Figure 1.3), including two sessions of Dance of Universal Peace, a yoga class, two-hour Zazen meditation, drum circle, potluck, campfire, community meeting, and board meeting of one of the non-profit organizations operated by The Farm. I also had dinner with one of the couples I interviewed, visited one study participant at his workplace, and was given a private tour of The Farm by another. In addition, I had many conversations with my hosts and other community members (including younger and new members, as well as candidates for membership). My impressions were documented in a journal using thick description.

2. *Online observations.* As soon as I heard about The Farm, I registered for its monthly newsletter and reviewed its contents for a year and a half. Later, I joined one of the community’s Facebook groups called “Friends of The Farm Tennessee,” which has more than 6,000 members, and visited it weekly for a year. In August 2020, I also participated in an online Sunday Service led by two study participants. All online observations taught me a lot about the community, but I mainly documented content related to later life in and outside The Farm.
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3. Review of materials shared by study participants. Some study participants shared with me books and articles they had published, photos and videos, print materials (e.g., brochures, copies of newspaper articles), and links to websites related to The Farm or to organizations in which they were involved. In addition, during the interviews, many of them mentioned events, books, films, and even terms I had never heard before. To complete my understanding of their world, I read everything they shared with me and watched quite a few films (e.g., *American commune*, *Fantastic fungi*, *Crip camp: A disability revolution*). I also looked up every term they mentioned that I was unfamiliar with (e.g., “nutritional yeast”).

Applying a triangulation’ approach, I integrated the findings yielded by the various secondary sources with the results stemming from the primary one (i.e., the in-depth interviews). This integration enabled the creation of a consistent, reliable, rich, and hopefully clear and inspiring report of the study's insights.

1.3 The gazebo in The Farm’s central meadow, where some community activities take place.
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THE BOOK

After twenty years in academia, I was clearly “programmed” to academic writing and was comfortable writing for a small audience of scholars and students interested in my work. While conducting the present study, however, I felt that it would not be appropriate to restrict its insights to academic circles. The reason for this is, first and foremost, the fact that there is an entire generation in the U.S. and many Western countries that identify with the hippie movement and its values or at least sympathize with them and may be interested in the study’s results. Second, even without any personal connection to the hippies, I think that we all have a lesson or two to learn from them about aging well physically, psychologically, socially, and spiritually. Accordingly, I decided to write this book in a reader-friendly style that will make it accessible to academic and general audiences alike. While the content remained the same, I have tried to use easy-to-follow language. I have also added many notes to clarify various terms and provide more information about events mentioned in the text. Moreover, I have tried to limit all theoretical discussions to the introduction and summary of each chapter.

The two post-Introduction chapters of this book set the stage for the present study. Chapter 2 briefly reviews the hippie movement’s history and ideology. It also summarizes the literature exploring where all the hippies went and what legacy they have left the world. Chapter 3 offers a brief history of The Farm community. Using published books about The Farm and materials posted on various websites, this chapter also relies on the stories shared by the study participants. It thus provides a somewhat hybrid version of The Farm’s history that enables understanding of what it was (and is) all about from the perspective of the people who were there from the very beginning.

Chapter 4 deals with matters of identity, one of the central research foci. Specifically, I was interested in learning whether older hippies still consider themselves hippies. If so, how do they negotiate the seeming contradiction between being a hippie – a term commonly associated with youth (as reflected in its synonym “flower child”) – and being old.9 Distinguishing between essence, behavior, and look and suggesting various continuums of hippiedom, this chapter sheds light on the identity work