

An extract from the book 'KITEZH: a Community approach to raising children in Russia' by Dimitry Morozov

In June 2007, Kitezh Children's Community in Russia celebrated its 15th anniversary. Kitezh's main achievement in that time is the fact that it still exists at all. Still an experiment, Kitezh has at the same time acquired unmistakable features of reality, has become a home and a source of inspiration for 50 adults and children. A second children's village, Orion, was started in 2004 and will be home for a further 50 adults and children. The vision to build a network of therapeutic villages for Russian orphans is becoming a reality.

Kitezh's second achievement, which sets it apart as unique in the international experience of child-raising, is that it combines the advantages of the family construct with a collective form of social organisation and child-raising.



The foster parents of the Kitezh Community have together conducted a unique educational experiment. We provisionally called our organisation a "community" because it is simultaneously an educational complex, a social experiment, a form of local administration and an absolutely real way of living.

The basic unit of Kitezh is the adoptive family. In Kitezh there are currently ten families. All the families share a common financial source, legal protection, common household management, and a united approach to education. Every adult fulfils a variety of functions, managing the community or in education, at the same time as being a foster parent or guardian. The combination of adults of various professions and the involvement of the children in the day-to-day work (e.g. teaching in the school, working in the kitchen, chopping wood) allows us maximum efficiency in the use of human and financial resources.

The highest legislative body is the Council of Members of the Non-Commercial Partnership. The highest executive body is the Head of the Community, elected annually. All questions relating to the children's education and upbringing are decided by the Teachers' Council, of which all foster parents and schoolteachers are automatically members. In practice, it is the Teachers' Council that has the deciding word, as, however Kitezh may be lacking in other respects, of prime importance is the children's upbringing.

I am often asked how I first conceived of Kitezh, and indeed, what is Kitezh? Is

it a cooperative community of foster families, an attempt to revive the Russian tradition of the community, an effort to change our way of life or some kind of spiritual venture?

I'm not sure I really know. It took some years for the idea of Kitezh to grow within me, as gradually and naturally as a shoot sprouting from the Earth. Time passed by and the tiny seedling germinated, the sprout burst through to the light, broke away from the seed and began to grow according to a law unto itself, revelling in the sun and getting battered by the rain and the wind.

At first I dreamt, or rather I sensed, that I would not be able to give my life to the fight for material wealth; that possessing things, a career and even happy idleness would in essence be a waste of effort in the brief snippet of the Earth's journey that is my life. I felt then, and know now, that there is nothing higher for a human being than to see himself as a part of the cosmos, to love and to be loved, to do good by learning and making an effort. I felt that I would not be alone on that path, because after all these are simple truths and, however cloudy they may seem, they are to be found everywhere and by everyone who looks for them. You only need to create the conditions for your life to become a path that can embody the will of the Creator.

It is not competition but love that should become the main source of creative energy. Once we have arrived in this mir, our community, we should establish within it service to God, in the company of others, not as a form of escape, but by deepening our involvement with His laws. To serve God means to create, to work, to carry out a plan that is invisible to us. The goal that I set before the community was therefore the most fundamental that there is on Earth: to raise orphaned children.

At the beginning in Kitezh there was an empty field and the idea was a blank slate. Just what you need to create a new world. The idea was to create ideal conditions for the development and education of abandoned children. To do this we needed people to come and live with us who were ready to serve the idea. And for those people the first things we needed were houses, roads, and electricity.

Why was a community the best form to create a developing environment? Because it is precisely this type of social structure that demands from a person a consciousness of doing good.

Whenever I talk about the first years of building Kitezh, I am always struck and surprised by the common consciousness we have developed. My narrative comes from the most fresh, recent layers of my memory. In fact I find myself recounting not what actually happened, but I repeat the most successful parts of previous accounts. And so I do not even remember very well what actually happened. This is how myths start. Our adults and children hear these stories and pass them on, referring to the "wonderful first years of construction", turning mythology into a heroic epic.

Creating the community against the background of contemporary Russia

Everything seemed so simple. We used psychological tests to select community members from those who expressed an interest in living with us. After a trial period, a group of people was formed who were to become the teaching staff. Every community member became a foster parent, a teacher and a mentor. The most difficult task was to raise enough money to build houses, dress and feed the children.

Of course, in any period in Russia, raising money for charity has never been a simple matter, but I really didn't imagine that I would be investing my life's savings into setting Kitezh up, nor that what I wanted to do would be going against the mindset of society, the economic reality or flawed human nature.

For the first year, things went considerably smoothly. We acquired 40 hectares of land in the Baryatino region of Kaluga district. We had a number of volunteers who heard my inspired call to arms on national radio and came from all corners of Russia to start a new life in the name of higher aims. We were even donated enough money and building materials to construct our first houses. We got up early and worked till late, hurrying to get the roofs on before the snow started, and we sang songs around a campfire surrounded by our tents, making plans about how we were going to live as one big family, raising children, reading books, making beautiful artefacts, in harmony with nature and the environment.

That was more or less how fifteen people, adults and children, spent the winter up to January 1994, in one finished and two almost built houses. And at our New Year celebration, there were thirty seven people, including those who had helped out in the summer and abandoned their cosy Moscow and Kaluga flats to be with us. How happy we were! Surrounded by uninhabited snow-clad forests and fields, we truly felt like creators of a new world. We were delighted to be together and that our efforts were starting to bear fruit. Golden candlelight flickered in windows frosted over with ice.

And then there were the humdrum working days, when John, a great optimist and a master with his hands, took to drink, not from despair or disappointment, but simply from an inability to deal with deep emotions. This was something new for us. The farmers in the local villages drank in a truly Russian way: many drank regularly and from despair. Their lives really were without the slightest cause for joy, without higher aims. We couldn't imagine that this epidemic could infect our community. Another Kitezhan, Nikolai, who had worked as a businessman in St Petersburg, could not keep his enterprising nature to himself. Suddenly we discovered that he had been selling trainers from the back of a lorry at the local market. He was not a bad person. He simply could not understand the importance in the community of consulting the others before acting. For the locals, Kitezh was a strange creature. They saw us as foreign and incomprehensible, and they used to spy on us. And then suddenly: "Kitezhans involved in black market trainers!" The conditions for our existence demanded extreme awareness and support of one another. You cannot build a new world with the tools of the old one.

Then other things happened. We genuinely did not have money, often not even enough for food. Sometimes we had to trade a bottle of vodka to borrow a tractor, haggle with local peasants to help us put the roof on a house or build a chimney. We were also borne of this world, and to break away from its laws was no easier than it is for a blade of grass to break through asphalt. Fortunately, I understood then the importance of learning to wait. The time comes for everything: for every person and union of people, for every community.

Kitezh has grown organically for the last 15 years. In essence it was a community first and a professional facility for orphan children second. We now see the opportunity to move on from this position and have for the last six years actively sought to establish a sound professional base for our work. This was always the aim but we had to start somewhere.

We started to build our therapeutic community and take in children inspired by the idealistic concept that a child needs nothing more than love from his new parents and a normal environment with kind and intelligent people around him. But true to the Russian custom, we plunged headlong into battle and only started to learn the practical methods of raising children as we went along.

We came to realize that our common sense and life experience gave us little assistance with children with developmental problems, and that it was necessary to seek more reliable models for foster parents, that were provided by appropriate theories and specialists with the ability to show us how better to put theory into practice.

We are yet to find an all-embracing theory that will shield us from the multitude of problems we face. Within the community we create our relationships, develop our educational framework and construct our houses based on the priority of serving the children's developmental needs rather than serving the needs of adults. The practical task of raising children dictates the direction of our development.

In the first 15 years of Kitezh's existence, there have been two questions the answers to which remain elusive:

- what do we want to raise our children to be like?
- what are we building in Kitezh?

We have discovered that it is essential to create a special developmental environment for children who have psychological problems. This is an environment that helps them to develop in accordance with their instincts and compensates for their problems and shortcomings. By 'environment' we mean not only the natural world, but also material, spiritual and cultural phenomena that are influential in society and that can both reinforce and negate parental influences. For example, good poetry aids development, whereas little poems made up by criminals have the opposite effect.

The Kitezh developmental environment consists of three elements:

- The foster family, which gives the homeless child that which is most important, namely a sense that he is needed and loved. This perception is essential if the child is to develop properly.
- The community of competent adults, which provides the child with a safe environment in which he can develop the ability to live and work as part of a collective, and which at the same time recognises the right of each and every person to their own individuality.
- The natural environment and the architecture, which benefit the child spiritually, guide him to look for beauty and harmony, reduce psychological distress and provide surroundings that are conducive to therapeutic work.

Communication between an adult and a child is a creative process, based on love and inspiration. We consider that raising a child is an art that is impossible without love, compassion, inspiration and other artistic attributes. Only then can professionalism play a positive role. No foster parent can manage without both.

Children learn from adults, or perhaps it would be better to say they intently observe their world view, trying it out against the laws of life, testing its integrity and validity. If the Kitezh worldview seems to be shared by all the adults, and if it is self-explanatory and not contradictory, then the children will be able to accept it sub-consciously, while continuing to put it to the test periodically. But if children hear one thing in their lessons and then something completely different at home (for instance, overheard through a closed door), then they will simply refuse to believe in the adults' values and will readily form their own alternative subculture.

Therefore, the first condition that we seek to fulfill in Kitezh is that there is an inner harmony among the adults and that they have a common conviction in the truth and integrity of the values they teach. In our therapeutic community we ask all the adults to adhere to one, uniform value system. The 'world view' should be one that is shared by everyone and as such it should represent the democratic will of the community as a whole. This does not mean however that members of the community can act in an anarchic fashion or even succumb to the desire that can naturally arise in a democracy to say whatever you want without being accountable for your words.

Building a social organism is in no way similar to building a car or a house. The main problem is that people have free will and the ability to develop. They don't want to fulfill one and the same function year in year out, but rather they aim to fulfill their own ambitions. The stumbling block for many people in the community is the need for a 'common vision'. Because Kitezh is a therapeutic community, a place where children receive treatment for emotional problems, Kitezh residents must recognise a certain limit to their democratic freedoms. To bring up children whose entire value system has already imploded once and who need a holistic reliable,

consistent and safe world, it is essential that adults observe certain principles in their interaction with others.

When I planned Kitezh, I thought that the organisational structure of the settlement would roughly respond to the task of creating a united teaching collective. It was an enticing idea: everyone works together and rests together, and owns the property communally. There would be no competition or conflicts. Naturally, my view of an ideal community was that it should be a collection of consciously well-educated people.

Kitezh is above all a therapeutic community. Here people don't as much live together, as work together. Work includes creating a developing environment for children with a history of no parental guardianship and who were abandoned in crisis situations. This work is the moral backbone of our existence as well as a profession. In practice, it means the adults are constantly involved in everything that is going on. They must be in contact with the children on all levels, nurturing empathy and encouraging openness. Our adults have to be professionals in everything they do, which means constantly developing new skills.

Raising children is an art. It is a permanent spiritual state. Only by intensively feeling sympathy and by sharing his children's fortunes and troubles can an adoptive parent or teacher in a therapeutic community really identify with them and picture their inner world. Intuition is as important for a teacher as for an artist. It is a special talent that opens up in a person. It can be reached by different paths: by immersing oneself deeply in ones inner world, by meditation or psychoanalysis. The main thing is to learn to reach an inner peace that opens the door to empathy, or identification, with other people.

A therapeutic community is a place for healing. Working in a therapeutic community means accepting the importance of inner work, being able to accept help and criticism from colleagues, the teachers' council, and the elected director. A colleague who has not resolved his inner problems and complexes cannot be a good teacher and psychologist. Being ready for lifelong development, a good-hearted nature, inner peace, clarity and purity of mind: all are essential qualities that earn someone the right to work with the inner worlds of children.

Therefore, we can only accept into our community people who are genuinely ready to open themselves up to those around them and who can share their real inner world and not some abstract ideal. It is difficult and painful. You have to have a strong will, determination and discipline.

Every adult in Kitezh agrees to try to meet the following demands on them as members of the therapeutic community:

- They should discuss all problems of relationships with children and other adults openly with other adults. They should put the unity of the community and the interests of the children before themselves.

- They should avoid remarks and actions that could prompt the children to form a negative view of the world.
- They should involve their feelings in their work and continually exchange ideas and information amongst the group.

In Kitezh, adults are able to spend more time with the children, and more intensively, than in other educational establishments and so every child is subject to a more intensive educational influence in countless informal situations every day. Every step forward is a step into the unknown. Moving to Kitezh means giving up one's former, easier life, to part with old convictions, stereotypes, hopes and fallacies. We need courage to look in the mirror at our own mistakes. We need will power to overcome our sluggishness, our indifference, and our reluctance to exert ourselves. This movement forward could not be possible without support from around us.

This is what makes our community so natural and full of life; it is what gives us hope that we can create an even more humane, universal developing environment for our children.

It is creative people that we seek. We need creative adoptive parents, creative bakers, and creative farmers. The common wealth depends on everyone involved, and so does, more importantly, the general atmosphere in the community. Everyone chips in with building houses, taking decisions, moulding the contours of our common future. We all have to be able to perceive problems as they arise, to find creative solutions and harmonise our vision with that of everyone else in order that the turns and twists don't topple over our common ship.

You must realise that in Russia for many years there were no alternatives to State provision. Also, because of our history, the problems in our country with regard to orphaned children were possibly the biggest anywhere in the world. The term "orphan" in our country describes children whose parents have died as well as what we call 'social orphans' who have been removed from their parents for their own safety. 95% of all children in institutions are social orphans, with at least one living parent. Kitezh is a distinct move away from a system which has been creaking and crumbling for decades and which takes little or no account of the spiritual or individual needs of the child. Kitezh is small, believes strongly that education is an essential therapeutic tool and believes too that the very fabric and rhythm of our daily lives is our therapy. Kitezh adults share fully with each other the raising of all children and the therapeutic leadership in which our young adults now share is very real and very powerful.

A most encouraging and unusual phenomena is taking shape. The first wave of young adults who spent a number of their formative years in Kitezh are playing an active role in the life of the community and in the therapeutic task. They participate in a highly intensive, well-supervised and consistently applied programme of mentoring and group discussion. Members of the 'Small Council', consisting of five

15 to 18 year olds, are gradually being inducted into practising the skills with younger children that have so far eluded some of the adults.

The physical environment: If you were to find yourself in Kitezh right now, you would see log cabins with turrets, pine, carved porches and ornamental carved window decoration. You would also see delicate little wooden bridges. It is just as if a picture by the Russian artist Vasnetsov had come to life. We are proud of our 'fairy tale' architecture, as we believe that it plays a vital role in enabling children to be receptive to fairy tales. Why this interest in fairy tales? Simply, it is only in the world of fable that metamorphoses, miracles and transformations are possible. Strictly speaking, the settlement that we have built functions as a mere physical instrument, which allows us to work with the sub-conscious. The very name of our settlement is taken from folklore. Kitezh is a mythical invisible town that was transformed by the will of God into a vessel of spiritual energy.

The traditional Russian architecture makes the child conscious of the good and equitable world of fairy tales. It allows him (or her) to feel a sense of affinity with his native land and people and it reconnects him with his 'roots', thus helping to prevent him from feeling lonely and lost. The style of the architecture, the pictures on the walls of the houses, our tradition of dressing in embroidered Russian shirts and singing folk songs on festive occasions all have their part to play in alleviating emotional problems. We turn to the most deeply embedded images from folk culture, and to fairytales and myth to build up a picture of the world. We are no more inclined to talk about Jung's theory of the collective unconscious than a fish is to analyse the water in which it swims. Nevertheless, there are grounds to believe that this collective unconscious is an extremely powerful force that is worth harnessing for the benefit of the developmental environment.

What lies at the heart of most of our beloved fairy tales? It is the idea that magical transformations are possible! And the most important thing that happens at Kitezh is the magical transformation of our children....

To create a permanent natural background that testifies to the existence of beauty and order in the world, we draw upon the charm of the lime-tree lined avenues of the ancient park, the calm of the shady ponds, the carefully laid out and well-kept paved paths and the flower-beds around the houses. The children participate actively in the creation of this beautiful environment, and in doing so they discover a simple truth: that it is within their power to change their world and that they themselves can fill their lives with beauty and order. Thus the foundations are laid for feelings of love towards one's native land. At the same time the children learn to draw energy from their everyday physical surroundings.

Every normal person can expect at least once in their life to experience the curative force of nature, the way that it sharpens the senses and quite literally satiates one's being with energy. Sometimes the ability to contemplate beauty and to feel at one with the mighty forces of the sky and the earth becomes a means of survival, a way to maintain a healthy state of mind.

The main objective of Kitezh is to help children establish a new view of the world. We do our best to offer the children a holistic model of the world that is based on goodness and fairness. The personality of an individual will only develop successfully if that person feels a connection to another person, and through this a connection to mankind as a whole. Our fields, park and forests are more than just our habitat and the basis of our material survival. They are also a source of our inner strength. They remind us of the great and endlessly changing flow of life and provide welcome signs of the everlasting nature of the world of which every Kitezh resident feels they are part.