

Hollyhock: Cultivating the Seeds of Change

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Nature's handprint is everywhere. The sea, the sky, and the forest coalesce to create a palette of raw beauty. The water is pure, the air sweet. Paradise? Perhaps, but paradise with a purpose. Situated on the toe of Cortes Island in British Columbia, this 48-acre educational retreat center was founded to "inspire, nourish, and support people who are working to make the world a better place."

One afternoon last summer, strolling past lush rows of purple delphiniums, fat lemon buttercups, and beds of basil, I asked how Hollyhock got its name and learned the story of the center's serendipitous beginning.

In the 1970s, when Greenpeace International founder Rex Weyler and his friends Shivon and Lee Robinsong were working on the Greenpeace Chronicles in Vancouver, they dreamed of moving to the country and bringing together the various threads of their lives: environmental values, livelihood, art, and family. When Greenpeace relocated to Europe, Weyler moved to Boston to work on the magazine, *New Age Journal*, and the Robinsong family moved to Cortes Island. Weyler visited often, and on a trip in the summer of 1981, a gypsy fortune-teller at the Vancouver Folk Festival told him, "Pitch a personal object into the pot and I'll read your fortune." When Weyler tossed in his ring the gypsy said his future lay in a place where red hollyhocks grow. Shortly afterward, when the Robinsongs were showing him the overgrown gardens at the former Cold Mountain Institute on Cortes Island, the friends came across what Shivon Robinsong describes as "the tallest, reddest hollyhocks we'd ever seen."

Cold Mountain Institute was for sale, but none of the three could begin to afford it. Nevertheless, they dreamed of becoming stewards of the land and creating a place where they could live in community and create a sanctuary for reflection, healing, and learning. They also understood the power of intention. Within a year, the trio had scraped the down payment together, and a year after that, in the summer of 1981, Hollyhock opened for its first summer program, a series of workshops in the practical, creative, and healing arts. In time, the initial group of friends grew into a wider circle of shareholders and board members, and Hollyhock became what it is today: Canada's Leading Educational Retreat Centre, a place for individuals and organizations to come together "to promote vision, personal renewal, strategy, skill development, team building, well-being, and social change."

In speaking about Hollyhock during a recent telephone interview, board member Pamela Chaloult said, “Hollyhock isn’t just another retreat center, and it’s more than a place where people convene for workshops and conferences. It is a center for positive social change. A lot of major influencers go there to do strategy. There’s something at once magical and practical about Hollyhock.”

Part of this “practical magic” flows from the spectacular wilderness setting. Nestled “amidst an infinity of sea and stars, with the forests, fiords, and mountains of Desolation Sound at its doorstep,” Hollyhock is a welcome refuge from what can seem like an overwhelming onslaught of environmental and social problems. There are morning yoga classes and meditation sessions and a sanctuary for private contemplation. A resident naturalist gives evening star talks and leads kayaking excursions and nature walks. As the Hollyhock Leadership Institute explains in its program guide: “We conduct many of our programs at the Hollyhock Center because of its beauty, its closeness to nature, its focus on spiritual renewal, its sumptuous food. Being at Hollyhock allows you to take space from the pressures of work to learn new approaches. The experience of being on the land, connecting in a deep and meaningful way with people of diverse cultures and similar values, can help individuals fulfill their potential and direct their energy toward positive change in their local communities.”

“One of our original dreams was to cultivate a community of global network organizations that work for positive social change as well as on keeping the natural world intact,” says Hollyhock CEO Dana Bass Solomon. One of the ways Hollyhock brings this dream to fruition is by hosting conferences and workshops for individuals and organizations committed to building a more just, sustainable world. For the past 11 years, for example, Hollyhock has hosted the Social Venture Institute, a “boot camp” for emerging entrepreneurs and activists. This five-day workshop, sponsored and run by the Social Venture Network, provides a confidential and supportive environment in which 120 leaders of mission-based businesses and non-profit enterprises meet with high-quality mentors to network and share tools and best practices for running socially responsible businesses. Keynote speakers for this year’s Social Venture Institute, which will be held in early September, include Aqeela Sherrills, the community activist whose non-profit organization has been a guiding force in the redevelopment of the Watts community, and Jeffrey Hollender, president of Seventh Generation and a leader in the community of socially responsible and environmentally aware organizations. Topics will include how to raise second-stage capital, how to overcome sales and marketing challenges, and how to manage organizational change.

The success of the Social Venture Institute (the September conference has been fully booked since early spring) inspired a Hollyhock sister organization, the Hollyhock Leadership Institute, to mount the Social Change Institute in mid-May. This four-day event provided an opportunity

for non-profit executive directors, social mission CEOs, and senior strategists dedicated to eradicating the root causes of social and environmental problems to work together on strategies for building more power in the progressive sector. Speakers included Paul Hawkin; Van Jones, founder of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights; Kenny Ausubel and Nina Simons, founders of Bioneers; and Dave Mowat, CEO of Vancity, Canada's largest credit union. Seeing an opportunity to test some of the new online technologies, the organizers set up a blog (<http://sci.hollyhockleadership.org>) to open a dialogue between those who attended the conference and the broader community of change makers. This site is intended to be a means of extending the dialogue on questions such as: How can we ground our work from a place of compassion and respect rather than anger and condemnation?

Tzaporah Berman, program director for ForestEthics, an organization that has mounted successful campaigns to protect forests in both North and South America, came to Hollyhock for the first time eight years ago to attend a strategy session for people working to protect Canada's rainforests. She found the setting so compelling that she returned again and again, and currently sits on Hollyhock's board. Berman explains the Hollyhock "magic" this way: "There are few places in the world where cutting-edge strategic thinking on sustainability, intentional living, and spirituality coexist with relaxation, renewal, and fun. Being at Hollyhock and being a part of the Hollyhock community feeds my soul and gives me the 'juice' I need to leap into the fray and work to build the world I want my kids to grow up in."

The strategy sessions that drew Berman to Hollyhock for the first time grew into a successful campaign to create a lasting model of conservation in the Great Bear Rainforest, 21 million acres of mist-shrouded valleys and old-growth forest stretching from the northern end of Vancouver Island to the southern border of Alaska. Because it is part of the largest intact coastal rainforest left on Earth, a number of groups—Greenpeace, the Nature Conservancy, the Sierra Club, ForestEthics, and the Rainforest Action Network—were working to protect it. The Hollyhock Leadership Institute brought these groups together, enabling them to work collectively and to present a single message. As Executive Director Karen Mahon explains: "Over the years of the Great Bear campaign, we brought these various groups together to answer questions such as: Where do we agree? What are our areas of disagreement and how can we resolve them? In addition to building alliances, we also provide training and strategic support. There was a lot of negotiating with the big timber companies in that campaign, so we provided the various groups with negotiation training." Much of this activity took place at the Hollyhock Center or grew out of networks and alliances that were formed there.

This is the other side of Hollyhock's "practical magic." As Karen Mahon explains: "Hollyhock is like two places now. One is the retreat center, a place for people who are doing fantastic work in the world to go to rejuvenate and learn new skills. More people are coming back on a regular

basis for this. The other is a state of mind, a sense of peace. People who've been there laugh and say 'I've been Hollyhocked,' and by that they mean the sense of melding the inner and outer worlds in service that they associate with Hollyhock. Or, in the words of Dana Bass Solomon: "Hollyhock is a place that engenders hope for a more positive future."

Hollyhock is also dedicated to promoting the creativity and well-being of individuals. To this end, the center offers a spectrum of programs designed to enliven and inspire. Examples from this summer's schedule include a meditation retreat led by Lama Tashi Namgyal; a drawing and painting workshop with Vancouver artist Lori Goldberg; an integrative medicine workshop with Andrew Weil, MD, and Victoria Maizes, MD; and Singing for Joy, an opportunity to "feel the joy of song and harmony infusing our lives with Spirit," led by Shivon Robinsong.

Not all of the programs Hollyhock supports and promotes are designed for adults. The Power of Hope, an organization formed by one of Hollyhock's founders, Peggy Taylor, brings teens who are concerned about the well-being of the world together for a summer camp on Cortes Island. The art-based program helps participants to find their voice and empowers them to take action on issues they care about. The camp is held at nearby Linnaea Farm, but the kids come to Hollyhock for no-holds-barred intergenerational dialogue. "What is the one piece of advice you can give me for my future?" is one of the questions the teens invariably pose to senior citizens. The adults, in turn, get a chance to ask about some of the things that mystify them about today's youth. Scholarships are available.

Some people come to this beautiful spot on the southern tip of Cortes Island, as I did, simply for a restorative getaway. I arrived last June under a cobalt sky. The immensity of the landscape, the family of blacktail deer trotting down a wooded path, and the woodpecker boring into the tree outside my window filled me with joy. The gourmet meals delighted, as did the many reflective moments—morning yoga in the yurt-like sanctuary, pink-rimmed sunsets over Smelt Bay, an early morning canoe excursion, the late-night soaks in the hot tub. It was satisfying to see Hollyhock's guiding principles etched in every well-thought-out action: from the programs, to the meals, to the care taken to reduce the number of cars on the island through ride sharing, to the solar panels on the lodge, to collecting rainwater for the garden and laundry.

As board chairman, Joel Solomon noted: "Our societies are well designed for profit. But there is much more to life. We need to know how to solve complex problems. We need contact with and reverence for the natural world, to know how to care for our fellow humans, and to retain for next generations that which is most precious and divine." Hollyhock is a place where this "know-how" comes into being and moves out into the world to transform people, politics, and our hope for the future.