

In Memoriam: My Super-Woke Ideas Helped Kill My Former Girlfriend

By Mark Satin

Last month I had a feeling that something terrible had happened to one of my most beloved former girlfriends, Sherri Schultz. I looked for her on the internet and saw that she'd recently died. A couple of weeks before her 60th birthday.

I was stunned – Sherri was 17 years younger than me. And the fulsome online tributes to her, from her very progressive “Northwest Editors Guild” friends in Seattle, brought me no closure. They all focused on her joyful spirit; none revealed how she died, or why she died so young.



Sherri Schultz in Washington, D.C., 1989 (Mark Satin)

I spent a couple of hours suspecting the worst, then got in touch with one of her friends at the guild. My suspicions were confirmed: Sherri had committed suicide. She had deliberately starved herself to death and died homeless on the street in Eugene, Oregon, where she'd gone to college 40 years before.

Sherri's friend rushed to tell me that Sherri was an adult, that suicide was her "choice," and that it was important for all of us to use her death to celebrate "life" and not focus on the grisly end.

I disagree. Sherri was not just a book editor living a private life; before her death, she had become one of the Pacific Northwest's most ardent advocates of "micro-housing" (living in tiny houses and apartments) and defenders of the lifestyle that goes with it – no marriage, no kids, no car, minimal personal belongings or consumption, and no big-deal professional career. She called it, rather proudly, "Living small."

Living small is a frontal attack on the American Dream. It is, in various versions, what many idealistic young people are up to these days, and Sherri's suicide could act as an alarm bell for them.

For me it is even harder to confront. I think she died in part because of me.

When Sherri and I met, in 1989, I had written an idealistic mini-bestseller called *New Age Politics* and was editing a "transformational" Washington, D.C.-based national political newsletter called *New Options*. Sherri went to work for me part-time, and soon we were in love, though she'd often call me a "laughable old baby boomer" and other uppity things.

What she was drawn to even more than old man me were my ideas. She had described herself to me as "a very young 26" who was

“looking for direction” after a couple of years in the conventional peace movement, and I was more than happy – I was proud as punch – to induct her into my transformational worldview.

She loved my *New Age Politics* book and laughed out loud at the passage where I say the size of American homes had doubled since World War II – proof positive, we both agreed, that Americans are greedy and materialistic beyond measure.

She was floored by my argument (derived from Ivan Illich) that Americans travel only five miles an hour in their cars, if you add up all the time we spend parking them, tending to them, earning money to pay for them, etc.

She totally bought into my love for and identification with the homeless. I had spent nearly two years without a home myself, couch-surfing (and double-bed-surfing) across North America while promoting my book, and of course I stressed the most romantic and anti-Establishment aspects of that to her. She squealed – the only time I ever heard her squeal – when she discovered that Mitch Snyder, Washington, D.C.’s then-famous champion of the homeless, had inscribed a very supportive note to me in a book about his work.

Another thing that impressed Sherri deeply was the New Age’s aversion to high-powered careers; supposedly, they left little room for friendships, volunteer work, spontaneity, and play.

Alas for me, it wasn’t long before the apprentice began outpacing the master – and accusing him of rank hypocrisy.

She couldn’t abide that I’d usually order takeout. When I pointed out that I needed to work 80 hours a week on my newsletter, she asked if I’d ever actually read my book. Wasn’t the New Age about having the time to cook good healthy meals and enjoy every other aspect of daily life on this earth, as I claimed the Native Americans did?

She had a sweet and delicate demeanor but was also whip-smart. So when prominent left-wing military analyst William Arkin chose her over 200 other applicants to be his assistant at Greenpeace, I was thrilled for her. As these things usually go in D.C., after a couple of years Arkin would help her get into public policy graduate school at Harvard or Princeton, and she'd end up having a career at the State Department that was commensurate with her abilities. But after a couple of months, Sherri told me she'd decided to quit – she didn't want to spend her days thinking about “bombs and throw-weights.” When I urged her to reconsider, she exploded. Hadn't Mr. New Age Politics Himself walked away from an all-expenses-paid fellowship to graduate school after six weeks, because he didn't want to become a cog in the System?

When Sherri told me she thought I'd gotten her pregnant and she'd need an abortion, I immediately volunteered to live with her and help support and raise the child. She was aghast – where had that even come from? Didn't *New Age Politics* describe the nuclear family as the perfect transmission belt for the modernistic, thing- and death-oriented “prison of consciousness” we Americans are afflicted with, and are afflicting the rest of the world with?

Sherri and I didn't last as a couple for more than about seven months, and I shut my newsletter down a year later. I felt I had outgrown it. I went back to school, started a much more balanced political newsletter called *Radical Middle*, met the love of my life (a woman my age), and lived pretty conventionally ever after.

Sherri, though, continued down the New Age/living-small path for the rest of her life.

She never married. In 1992 she moved to Seattle with an anti-corporate activist from Haverford College, but the

relationship didn't last. Later there was an environmental activist from Stanford, but that ended after they tried living on a rural commune near the Washington–Oregon border.

She never had children, though she did obtain custody of a sweet and delicate-looking cat from the Stanford guy.

She was content to work as an independent copyeditor of books from mostly small publishers for the last three decades of her life. Because she was soon gifted with money from relatives, she was able to get by while editing only about six books a year. The rest of the time she devoted to nonprofit work around Seattle, including helping to start the Northwest Editors Guild and save a home for elderly women.

Her real passion in her late 40s, I've been told, was participating in Seattle's flash mobs. Dozens of mostly young people would suddenly show up near department stores or at shopping malls and start dancing and singing, then just as suddenly stop and fade away. It wasn't the State Department, but it did supposedly communicate to bourgeois American citizens that there's more to life than consuming, such as spontaneity and play.

Sherri kept her New Age/living-small lifestyle up until her mid-50s. Then an emptiness appeared. None of her friends could tell what was wrong; neither could she. Spooked by reports of climate change and the earthquakes that would surely come, she sold her beloved little condo in an old building on top of a Seattle hill, disbursed most of her already minimal personal possessions, and began couch-surfing at friends' houses. But nothing seemed to stir her.

Finally she had a beguiling idea: She would return to Eugene, her old college town, and live at the Collegian, a dorm-like residential building near campus. It was meant for students, but others were allowed to live there too. Her environmental

footprint there could not have been smaller: Her room was almost unimaginably tiny, and all her meals were provided in a collective dining hall.

This arrangement worked for a while. She blogged about living small, did a YouTube video, got herself into the *Eugene Register-Guard*, and did meetups with local book editors. But after a while the emptiness returned. She had a dispute with management at the *Collegian*, left or was evicted, and started couch-surfing around town. She still had money, but it wasn't money that she needed. After the couch-surfing got old, she ambled off to die. Her X feed has been scrubbed except for the top, which informs us that Eugene is on stolen tribal land. It may be no accident that she let go on the eve of the 4th of July.

Sherri, dear Sherri, had anyone told me you were dying on the streets of Eugene, I'd have flown up there and tried to call you back to life. Or at least, tried to apologize for helping sell you a bill of goods. Since I can't do either now, let me dedicate this article to you. While it does not exactly celebrate your life, it raises the question your life poses for all Americans who passionately want to save the environment and mitigate human suffering: Is it wise to live without an intimate life partner, without having children, without creature comforts, without a job or profession that taxes you to the utmost of your abilities, and without loving your nation? Is it even sustainable?

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