What Will You Eat If Vermont Secedes?

Amy Shollenberger

This essay was originally delivered by Rural Vermont Director Amy Shollenberger as a keynote address at the November 2008 Vermont Independence Convention, held in the legislative chambers of the Statehouse in Montpelier.

What will you eat if Vermont secedes?

This is a good question to ponder whether or not you support secession. In James Howard Kunstler’s recent novel, World Made By Hand, food becomes a kind of currency after the governmental and economic infrastructure collapses. People in this story are forced to eat locally because they have little access to the outside world.

Although secession is a much different scenario, it is worth considering what types of questions would need to be answered and what areas of the food system might need to be built up for Vermont to have true food security, and even food sovereignty.

In a July 2008 article in Seven Days, Bill McKibben suggests that the secessionist movement should “focus less on opposing tyranny and more on counting calories.” I would suggest to you that these two focus areas are actually the same. We will not be able to count our calories more locally and regionally, and then dismantle the tyranny of our corporate-industrial food system — which is supported by our government.

McKibben listed a few of the many folks here in Vermont who are working to build our local food system. However, as he mentions only briefly, the state Agency of Agriculture and the federal government are, in the best cases, supporting these efforts with little enthusiasm, and in the worst cases actively opposing efforts to build our local food systems.

Earl Butz, secretary of agriculture for Richard Nixon, reshaped America’s food and agricultural policy when he urged farmers to “get big or get out.” Even before that, however, a movement toward consolidated, industrialized food production was well underway.

In 1906, Upton Sinclair published The Jungle, a novel that exposed corruption in the U.S. meat-packing industry. Although Sinclair’s focus was on the labor conditions in the slaughterhouses and packing plants, the novel led to sweeping regulatory reforms focused on food safety.

These reforms did achieve a certain level of food safety; however, they also had a consequence of creating a system where small abattoirs and locally available meat are scarce because of the capital investment required to comply with all of the safety standards — which are designed to deal with the problems that occur when meat is processed quickly and on a large scale.

A similar history can be found in our country’s milk-production system. In his book, The Untold Story of Milk, Ron Schmid shows us how competing interests fought to ensure the safety of our milk supply.

Two doctors, responding to the real safety issues caused by the industrial revolution, came up with two different approaches. One created standards and certified farms to ensure the farmers and animals were healthy, the cows were on pasture, and basic hygiene and sanitation were routine. The other boiled the milk to kill any germs that had contaminated it. Because pasteurization had the added benefit of extending shelf life, it is worth considering what types of questions would need to be answered and what areas of the food system might need to be built up for Vermont to have true food security, and even food sovereignty.

Vermont Commons is a print and online forum for exploring the idea of Vermont independence — political, economic, social, and spiritual. We are unaffiliated with any other organization or media, and interested in all points of view. We welcome your letters, thoughts, and participation.

—Heraclitus

Spring highlights our natural cycles of change, renewal, new life, and new work. What we plant now and properly cultivate will determine what we later harvest. Our contributors are working hard, planting the seeds of change in their communities and through these pages. Our common goal remains to foster and explore independence, broadly defined. We have a lot of work to do.

It has never been more apparent that as individuals, communities and a state, we need to become more self-reliant. And now. We can choose to embrace change and uncertainty as opportunities for independence and happiness, or we can choose to allow perceived challenges to intimidate, scare, and defeat us. Becoming independent is a personal and community journey that begins in exploration and is related to our ability—our choice—to thrive and adapt in a rapidly changing natural and economic environment.

How can Vermont become a model of sustainable independence? What do we need to do now to prepare for the next season? The next decade? The next century? How could decentralized, small-scale, and equitable energy and enable livelihoods. What is needed is a new vision for our communities. A new vision based on sustainability and equity. A vision that allows us to thrive and adapt in a rapidly changing world.

But a more fundamental design question still divides the citizens of our state: Should our systems be based on centralization, or decentralization? What do we need to do now to prepare for the next season? The next decade? The next century? How could decentralized, small-scale, and equitable energy and enable livelihoods. What is needed is a new vision for our communities. A new vision based on sustainability and equity. A vision that allows us to thrive and adapt in a rapidly changing world.

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Contributors
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Ben Falk grows food and fuel in the lower Mad River Valley, and develops post-petroleum human habitats with Whole Systems Design, LLC.
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Chellis Glendinning is a New Mexico psychotherapist and the author of five books (including *My Name Is Chellis and I’m in Recovery from Western Civilization*). She is the newest member of the Second Vermont Republic Advisory Board.
‘The Greenneck’ lives and writes in the rusted-out shell of a one-ton Chevy pickup somewhere in Cabot.
Monica Kimball is the coordinator of the Onion River Exchange (ORE) in central Vermont.
Robin McDermott is a co-founder of the Mad River Valley Localvore Project. She and her husband, Ray, operate their business, QualityTrainingPortal, from their home in Waitsfield, where they also grow much of their own food.
Ron Miller has written several books on progressive and alternative education, and is currently editor of Education Revolution magazine a member of the Vermont Commons editorial board. He has taught at Goddard, St. Michael’s, and Champlain colleges, and established the Bellwether School in Williston.
Lisa Nash a meditator and yogini from Westminster West. In her spare time she works as a chiropractor, movement educator, and herbalist.
Kirkpatrick Sale, editor-at-large and author of a dozen books, including *After Eden: The Evolution of Human Domination* (Duke University Press), is the director of the Middlebury Institute.
Amy Shollenberger is the director of Rural Vermont, a statewide advocacy organization promoting policies that strengthen family farms and small rural businesses and communities (http://www.ruralvermont.org/).
The energy and economic needs and resources of the Alaska economy are much different from that of Vermont or Iowa or Florida. So any continental or global approach to policy and investment with a "one size fits all" mentality will fail. Then it will need to be bailed out – and thereby contribute to more resource depletion in an accelerating downward spiral. This same relationship applies to education, health care, social services, and the like.

So it is clear that we need to take responsibility for creating our own personal and community independence. We need to dare to redesign our own local and state systems, based on proven sustainable and democratic models. This responsibility will not be given to us by Barack Obama or anyone else. We must we take it, with exuberance.

Thank you for supporting and contributing to this journey and,
FREE VERMONT!
Gaelan Brown
Business Manager and "An Energy Optimist"
blogger, Vermont Commons

Letters to the Editor

RETHINKING "TAX AND SPEND" NUMBERS

Editor, Vermont Commons:
Prof. Ohanian makes some excellent points (neo-libertarian) about the smoke-and-mirrors federal tax system (“Tax Time,” Vermont Commons No.28, Mud Season 2009), and kudos to him for citing the authoritative Tax Foundation. But his analysis omits some key aspects and tosses off unsubstantiated rhetoric as fact – for example, “trillions of our tax dollars” for the Iraq war. Actually, trillions have been spent, using wealth not yet created, on bailouts, earmarks, and pet projects (Sanders, Leahy, et. al. guilty as charged) that would never pass the smell test if considered on the merits.

"Trillions" haven’t been spent on the Iraq war, nor the Afghanistan war, and you can combine the two and still not equal "trillions." (Sidebar: Ohanian speaks to Postal Service expenditures. They would be much lower if the USPS was allowed to close and/or consolidate money-losing local post offices, but Vermont’s congressional delegation, in tandem with the postal unions, prevents that from happening in your state. It’s all about whose ox is being gored. Multiply that by the other 49, there’s your answer. But that’s a drop in the bucket compared to the bigger picture, mixed metaphors notwithstanding.)

Ohanian’s main argument for lower taxes in a Republic of Vermont seems to be based on not paying federal taxes, especially the small percentage that goes to defense (the vast, overwhelming proportion of Your Tax Dollars At Work goes to entitlements, recurring appropriations, and debt service, not bombs, guns and armaments).

He fails to argue how Independent Vermont would compensate its citizens for federal entitlements and promises lost as encapsulated in Social(ist) Security, Medi(non)care, Medic(can I get a medic)aid, AFDC, veterans’ benefits, and myriad other transfer payments (spread the wealth around, as President God-King puts it). Once Vermont goesindy, all that disappears. Then what?

That aside, Independent Vermont may need a constabulary. It may need a militia. Perhaps it may need a "national" guard. It might even need a small standing army. You won’t have federal aid to support them. As an independent entity, Vermont would stick out like a sore thumb, the North American equivalent of pre-war Albania, a tempting target for terrorists, drug cartel warlords, gangs, and other outlaws. Would an Independent Vermont be so naïve as to think it’ll be immune from foreign intrigue? Do you think you’ll be an idyllic oasis in a dangerous world? Think back to last summer’s Russian aggression against the Republic of Georgia, then ask anyone from Georgia about the small and weak being safe against the large and strong (and I know some highly placed Georgians who’ll gladly "re-educate" you).

Nope. Every country needs some level of defense. So even an Independent Vermont will have at least some degree of "military" spending. If you go independent, what’ll you do if the USA demands return of military equipment, weapons, and other public property? Will you rely on pitchforks and blunderbusses? Or kumbayah, Wicca, and "come, let us reason together"?

Lower taxes in an Independent Vermont is wishful thinking. According to a study released [recently], Vermont sits atop the 50 states as having the nation’s highest per-capita tax burden. Yay for you; you worked hard for that dubious distinction all by yourselves. Almost all of it is due to excessive state and local spending and concomitant heavy taxes imposed by the socialists you keep electing at all levels, not your federal share. You’re already ruled by ultra-liberals who love to redistribute your money. What happens if you go independent and are ruled by radical liberals, who want to confiscate? Talk about taxes! Learned Ohanian, re-calculate your calculations.

JEFF HOLLMINGSWORTH
Washington, D.C.
Hans Ohanian’s response can be read at www.vtcommons.org.

%#*&! THE BANKS; USE CREDIT UNIONS

Editor, Vermont Commons:
In light of the recent financial crisis, it’s easy to get angry. Since the first $700 billion bailout was proposed in September, I’ve been liquors. I phoned our congressional delegation demanding that they oppose it, and organized a rally against the bailouts. To no avail: the first round of bailouts passed, and they’ve been metastasizing ever since. Now we’re at a point where the federal government is casually throwing around the “trillion” word when referring to the deficit, and the Chinese are openly discussing the possibility of replacing the dollar with a new world reserve currency. We need to do something.

After a few months of feeling angry but powerless, I hit upon a way that we as individuals can
I have been getting e-mails, phone calls and even a note from our mail carrier about proposed federal legislation titled H.R.875. This bill, introduced by U.S. Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) and with 40 sponsors, is titled the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2009. People are freaking out about the sweeping controls included in the bill – and rightfully so based on what people on websites, in blogs, and even in our local newspaper are saying about it. One note that I received said that this bill will “eventually get rid of organically grown food, farmers’ markets and potentially home gardens and orchards.”

Numerous organizations that I respect (Slow Food USA, Organic Consumers Association and NOFA – the Northeast Organic Farming Association) have warned against a hysterical reaction. Dave Rogers, the policy “dude” at NOFA-VT, sent out the following in response to a fellow Localvore’s question about the bill:

H.R. 875 is not going anywhere – its proposal to split the FDA into two agencies has no support.

Each of the bills in Congress (there is more than one bill focused on improving food safety) has some unacceptable or troubling aspects; ironically, H.R.875 is viewed by those who have actually read it and the other bills, to be the LEAST damaging to small farm interests. It certainly does not “criminalize” organic farming or threaten to make growing food illegal!

Sweeping food safety legislation is not likely to emerge from Congress anytime in the near future (a year or more in the opinion of many) – meanwhile we are joining with other organizations who are working to make sure that the interests of small farms and local markets are recognized and accommodated in the legislative process.

We are working with the other NOFAs in the Northeast and other organizations to get funding to develop a program to address food safety concerns as well as the interests of small farms and local markets.

The sad truth is that our mainstream food system is a mess; it is a house of cards that is starting to crumble. No longer is the potato salad at the church potluck our biggest concern when it comes to food safety. Now we need to worry about peanut butter crackers from a vending machine, organic spinach, any burger that hasn’t had the life cooked out of it, and now, one of my favorite wild-card foods, pistachios!

But what do all of those foods have in common? They are all products of the industrial food system. What is most scary to me about the solutions that are being discussed at the highest level of our government is that they are usually one-size-fits-all regulations. So, our local farmer, Dave Hartshorn, would have to treat his spinach exactly the same way that Earthbound Organics has to treat theirs. But, the two processes are completely different. Dave produces a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of what Earthbound produces, and has just a couple of helpers. He harvests everything by hand and sells it to his customers within a day of taking it out of the field. In addition, Dave sells his spinach directly to customers who, for the most part, live within a 30-mile radius of his farm, so that it is easily trace-able back to his farm. But the best safety measure of all is knowing that Dave is eating the same spinach that I am. I can’t imagine better quality control.

There is a real and serious problem with food safety in the United States and something needs to be done about it. In my ideal world, everyone would wake up tomorrow and realize that local food is the solution to the problem. But it will probably be a hot day in Yakustsk, Russia, before that happens.

What is really needed is scalable regulations that are appropriate to the size of the operation, the complexity of traceability, and the number of people who could potentially be affected by a fault in the system. There are examples of scalable regulations in many other governmental arenas and they work well. For example, I have to comply with a different set of regulations as the driver of a passenger car than the regulations that the captain of a 747 jet must comply with.

What’s that? You say I am comparing apples to oranges? My point exactly! •
Secession Is In Our Bones
Chellis Glendinning

When I discussed secession on WDEV’s Free Vermont Radio program last fall, Kirk answered the question about how he came to favor secession, speaking of it as a political strategy with solidly argued economic, social, and political foundations. Asked the same question, I found myself speaking from intuition about a knowing that resides within the human soul. As a child caught in the chaos of a violent household, I came up with a plan: to secede to an island with my friends. Secession was my first original political thought.

Domestic/child abuse of the kind I endured does not stand alone. Rather, it mirrors the institutional abuse perpetrated and sanctioned in public, and the result – mass technological civilization, what Native people call the “dominant society” – could not exist without both levels of control. In an essay drafted 50 years ago, “Prologue to Our Time,” social critic Lewis Mumford observed this propensity to social control and predicted that a “dominant minority” – the masters of technology and accumulated wealth – would forge “a uniform, all-enveloping, super-planetary structure, designed for automatic operation.” He was on target, and in this context today’s re-emergence of secession as political strategy becomes a choice not only for renegotiating controlling power relations, but for re-creating human-scale community, sustainable economy, and homegrown culture.

I never did secede to an island per se. I live in the opposite kind of ecosystem: the wide-as-the-eye-can-see upland desert of northern New Mexico. But a template of an idea was formed in my child’s mind and has served me many times since.

Evidence suggesting that humans were meant to thrive in face-to-face, knowable communities abounds.

When the Black Panthers arrived on the UC Berkeley campus circa 1968, their post-civil-rights strategy to build a base that was completely their own was not foreign to me. In the 1970s the feminist movement pulled away from the male world in order to define itself, re-member female cultural values, and forge its own definitions of power – and I was right there. At the start of the bioregionalism movement in the ‘80s, Leopold Kohr and E.F. Schumacher alighted on my psyche with the same “A-ha!” And as hundreds of peoples succeeded at breaking off from nation-states in the post-World War II decolonization struggles (Ghana, Algeria, Cuba, Uganda), and hundreds others are still making the effort (Cataluña, Scotland, Kashmir, Quebec, Puerto Rico), I have cheered them on.

I’d have to say, secession is in my bones. But am I unusual? I doubt it. Rather, I propose that the qualities promised through small democratically run groupings are built into our expectations through millennia of evolution, and that the recent empire-built aggregations with their impossible tangle of bureaucracy, militarism, and mechanization are anathema to all that we are.

Yet, in a world where we become trapped by untenable survival Catch-22s, our psyches’ ability to muster defense mechanisms works to protect us from the pain of awareness. After generations of acclimatization to the demands of mass society, we will defend its ways and values – even in the face of blatant destruction of people, cultures, ecosystems, and the planet itself. “But we can never go back!” we insist. “I need my Blackberry! . . . my 200 TV channels! . . . my hedge fund! . . . my nuclear weapons!” The earliest defense mechanisms of repression, numbing, and denial, originally fashioned for immediate self-protection, have been re-configured for evolutionarily unheard-of situations.

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There is good reason why a movement for local autonomy and self-reliance, the focus of this publication, is arising at this moment in history: Quite simply, civilization as we know it has entered a serious crisis and appears to be on the brink of disintegration. While political and corporate leaders and the mainstream media address each looming catastrophe – global climate change, peak oil, food and water shortages, and, by the way, the total collapse of the global economy – as discrete problems to be solved with technology and money, more astute observers are seeing the big picture, and they’re telling us that a shift of historic proportions is underway.

Over the last several months a torrent of books, blogs, and films has sought to explain this historical moment and alert the populace to the coming transformation. From Joanna Macy and David Korten, to Derrick Jensen and James Howard Kunstler, to filmmakers Tim Bennett and Sally Erickson, and emerging authors such as John Michael Greer and Sharon Astyk, some very bright and perceptive people are conveying a similar message: “The party’s over,” as Richard Heinberg proclaimed in the title of his groundbreaking work on peak oil. The age of mass consumption, industrial empire, and corporate conquest is coming to an end, and our lives are about to become radically different. Re-localization – economic, cultural, and political independence – is not some ranting ideology, but a sensible strategy for survival in the age that is at hand.

Pundits call these concerned observers “doomers” for their loss of faith in modernity, but many of the interpreters go well beyond sky-is-falling alarmism and argue that the collapse of modern civilization is actually a much-needed opportunity to positively transform humanity’s relationship to this planet. All these authors assert that it is now time for our species to grow up, to leave its irrationally exuberant childhood behind and live as a responsible and mature adult member of the community of life.

According to systems theorist Graeme Taylor in *Evolution’s Edge: The Coming Collapse and Transformation of Our World* (2008, New Society), humanity has reached a “bifurcation point” unprecedented in our entire history: The current crisis will result either in evolution to a more holistic civilization better integrated with natural processes, or societies will fragment and regress into utter disorganization. The outcome depends on how deliberately and consciously we choose to accept the enormity of this historical shift with all the uncertainty, stress, and even horror that it entails. The choice is either to deny the inevitable and try (futilely) to prop up the existing system, or to fully accept the enormity of this historical shift with all the uncertainty, stress, and even horror that it will entail.

Taylor’s book is a useful primer for grasping the magnitude of the problems we’re up against, their underlying causes in the belief system of industrial civilization, and paths toward transformation. Taylor argues that conscious evolution will require a comprehensive strategy – a holistic worldview that appreciates the interconnectedness of the cosmos and all life, a commitment to massive social activism to produce fundamental restructuring of our economic and political systems, and new technologies and design strategies that operate on principles of biomimicry and respect for ecological limits. I have found this to be a helpful undergraduate textbook, because it cogently introduces the coming global crisis while offering students hope that all is not yet lost, if we get to work redesigning our culture from its deepest foundations.

Another book in this genre has just appeared, written by one of the wisest, most perceptive observers of the impending collapse, Dr. Carolyn Baker. She is a psychologist and historian who combines meticulous research with a keen sensitivity to the human condition. She has been reporting on the coming transformation on her blog Speaking Truth to Power and, having recently moved to Vermont, is now blogging for Vermont Commons. Her new book (it is her fifth) is called *Sacred Demise: Walking the Spiritual Path of Industrial Civilization’s Collapse* (published by iUniverse). It is a powerful, fascinating, and very important book that provides a deep, holistic analysis of the present situation.

Baker surveys the ecological and economic disasters in the making, and concludes that, without any doubt, modern civilization is coming down. There is no longer anything we can do to prevent this; our choice is either to deny the inevitable and try (futilely) to prop up the existing system, or to fully accept the enormity of this historical shift with all the uncertainty, stress, and even horror that it will entail. Baker’s central point is that the death of our cultural identity can be a spiritual opening for us, an opportunity to cast off our egocentric way of being.
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of living (we are a “culture of two-year-olds,” she says) and reclaim the ecocentric awareness of our indigenous heritage – a life in harmony with the pulsating vitality of the earth. This is the only way of living that has intrinsic meaning and purpose, that is spiritually and existentially nourishing, and the time has come to reconnect with it.

As with all major transitions in life, this “quantum shift” in consciousness will be psychologically difficult; the loss of “much of what we have held dear in civilization” will engender disorientation, distress, and deep grief. Sacred Demise is essentially an invitation to surrender to this emotional upheaval, to learn from it and allow it to deepen and mature us.

Baker describes personal and communal practices we can use to turn cultural disintegration into a collective rite of passage, through which the limitations and mistakes of our immature worldview may be purged and transformed.

Sacred Demise draws on the wisdom of deep thinkers from various traditions; Carl Jung’s insights inform much of her discussion, as do the indigenous African teachings of Malidoma Somé, the research of Jared Diamond, and the spiritual opening for us, an opportunity to reconnect with the wisdom to reclaim a life in harmony with the pulsating vitality of the earth.

Baker’s central point is that the death of our cultural identity can be a spiritual opening for us, an opportunity to reconnect with the wisdom to reclaim a life in harmony with the pulsating vitality of the earth.

I brought many urgent questions and anxieties to my reading of Sacred Demise, and Baker addresses them with uncanny directness. She writes with an extraordinary empathy for her readers, acknowledging that these are frightening times and modeling the courage and clarity of vision we will need to get through them. While the book is fortified with relevant quotes, references, and serious intellectual discussion, it remains throughout a personal conversation between a wise, deeply engaged elder and those of us who are seeking to grasp the enormity of the impending cultural transformation. Even though Baker unflinchingly discusses the most difficult and disturbing topics — massive social upheaval and the possible extinction of humanity — the book reads comfortably, like gentle advice from a caring friend.

One additional book deserves mention in this context. Charles Eisenstein published The Ascent of Humanity (Panentheia Press) in 2007 and has followed it with a continuing series of brilliant essays on the website realitysandwich.com. Like the others reviewed here, Eisenstein lays out a holistic worldview that will supersede the stale materialism and reductionism of recent times; he explains how this worldview is emerging in postmodern physics, mathematics, and biology, giving us a dramatic picture of an interconnected, collaborative, creatively self-organizing universe, in which we play an essential role.

Taken together, these ideas strongly confirm that the colonizing structures of the modern corporate state — the money and financial system, the concentration of political and economic power, the use of violence and intimidation to suppress dissent, the deliberately sedative effects of media and entertainment, and so much more — are on the verge of failure. We are about to experience a catastrophic transformation.

Clearly, reconnecting with the wisdom to be found in local, traditional, indigenous, and communal ways of being is essential work if we are to come through the imminent collapse to achieve transformation on the other side.

modernity’s problems; he traces the existential separation of humanity from nature that began with the rise of agriculture and accelerated with the scientific and industrial revolutions. He examines the essential meaning of technology — the attempt to manage and control the natural world that lies outside the alienated human ego — and paints a magnificently thorough picture of how this control plays out in every aspect of our lives. Eisenstein covers intimate details of life, from children’s play to our medical practices, from standardized schooling to the role of entertainment, and much, much more. He concludes that modern life is deeply unsatisfying because it is essentially unreal, purposeless, detached from the wellsprings of meaning.

The Age of Separation, Eisenstein argues, has reached its apex. The culture of abstraction, monetization, management, and technique has by now colonized the world, and definitively proven that it cannot provide the leisure or security it has promised for centuries. Its time is up. As it disintegrates, a new Age of Reunion is emerging, with humanity rediscovering its humble but meaningful place in a purposeful, evolving cosmos. Like the other authors, Eisenstein lays out a holistic worldview that will supersede the stale materialism and reductionism of recent times; he explains how this worldview is emerging in postmodern physics, mathematics, and biology, giving us a dramatic picture of an interconnected, collaborative, creatively self-organizing universe, in which we play an essential role.

Sacred Demise, the research of Jared Diamond, and the spirituality of Thomas Moore and Eckhart Tolle, among others. Baker brings in many relevant and moving poems, and suggests a series of exercises for self-reflection. Weaving these elements with her own insights, Baker has given us a beautiful treatise, Eisenstein gets to the deepest core of
How quickly can Vermont create enough community resilience that we can weather economic turbulence, interruptions in energy supplies and other shocks, while maintaining what we value?

Part of the answer lies in how fast the great re-skilling occurs. The great re-skilling is Transition Townspeak for widespread learning of the practical skills needed to thrive where one lives, with significantly less economic exchange with the outside world.

Practical skills include those of the 19th century, like spinning and weaving, and those of the 21st century, like installing solar panels. The skills are more complicated and difficult to learn than driving a car or riding a bicycle. They are more like learning to maintain a car – at least the old kind, that could be maintained by a shade-tree mechanic without a computer – or at least maintaining a bicycle.

At a recent re-skilling gathering in Montpelier, called “Feeding Our Communities,” groups were asked to find ways to speed the spread of specific, food-related skills. As a once-and-future backyard chickener, I joined the group on backyard chickening. Most of the other participants were novices and primarily interested in learning the basics of backyard chickening from the skilled chickener in the group, John Hall, who has a flock of 30 layers at his home in East Montpelier. It was hard to turn the discussion to helping others learn backyard chickening.

I suppose that reluctance to organize is natural enough. You don’t need to know how to do something to organize ways to help yourself and others learn it, but it sure helps. If you’ve never had a flock of chickens before, it’s hard to know whether the novice course should include raising chicks from eggs (probably not), or even whether the birds need a special ration or can just be raised on kitchen scraps (not a good idea unless you really know what you’re doing and you have just a few birds and/or a large kitchen).

One rooster can service about 10 hens, ensuring that their eggs are fertile. How many novice backyard chickeners can one experienced chickener teach?

The March training for Transition Town organizers in Montpelier was sold out. Find out more about Transition Town events at www.transitionvermont.info.

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Building Inner Resilience for “The Long Emergency”

Lisa Nash

By now it is abundantly clear to most of us that we are into what James Howard Kunstler called “the long emergency.” Radical changes in our livelihoods and lifestyles are imminent, impelled by the convergence of peak oil, global climate change and global economic contraction. This is a critical moment, for it appears that we still have some time to decide whether we will cooperate with the inevitable transformation or whether we will go kicking and screaming, clinging to what we are bound to lose and doing great, perhaps irreparable, harm to ourselves and other life on the planet in the process.

Many have concluded that resilience is the key ingredient in not only surviving but also thriving through the challenging transition period that’s upon us. Resilience refers to our ability to adapt to the unexpected – having enough options that we can respond creatively and humanely to diverse, rapidly changing circumstances that are beyond our control. Local food production and distribution, local manufacturing of essential goods, recycling and reuse of resources, intensive energy conservation and renewable generation, and interdependent, supportive communities all contribute to resilience.

Internal resilience will likely be as critical as growing food or building with local materials in the years to come.

But resilience has internal and largely intangible, as well as external and concrete, dimensions. Internal resilience has to do with our ability, as individuals, families and communities, to face ourselves and our demons honestly and compassionately, to communicate with each other skillfully, and to navigate stressful circumstances and interpersonal conflict in ways that strengthen, rather than weaken or destroy, relationships. Such skills will likely be as critical as growing food or building with local materials in the years to come, and yet we tend to underestimate their value and importance. How many pages of books like The Long Emergency or publications like Vermont Commons are devoted to calls to develop such internal resources or information about how to do so? Compare that with the number devoted to building external resilience, and you’ll see what I mean.

Our bias toward external, active, tangible responses to crisis is not surprising: it is part and parcel of our American cultural habit. We have always been a culture that prizes action above contemplation, and even now we have great faith in technological fixes. It is easy for us to believe that if we simply pour our resources into greater innovation, better planning, and more intelligent design, solutions to our self-created problems will emerge. We tend always to forget that our existing technologies, and the ways we have deployed them, are products of our consciousness; if we don’t transform that consciousness, we are likely to recreate the same problems, albeit in slightly different form.

We are also a culture that has elevated the individual over the collective to a historically unprecedented degree, and which has enacted that value in profoundly atomized, privatized lives. Consequently, we still tend to think of solutions to our current dilemmas in individual terms first: putting solar panels on our roofs, growing our own fruits and veggies, buying a Prius or riding our bicycles to work. Many folks who analyze our current predicament conclude that well-being and perhaps even survival in the coming decades will require us to live in tightly integrated, interdependent communities, but most of us have absolutely no experience in living that way. Indeed, we are so isolated that many of us now see “community” as a panacea for all our ills. We have little understanding of — and less expertise with — the considerable difficulties entailed in community life.

We would do well to heed the words of Karen Leflin, a researcher from the University of Washington who has spent years studying ecovillages around the world. “‘Eco’is at least as much about the social and personal dimensions of life as it is about nature. So far as I know, no community has ever failed because it lacked solar panels or composting toilets. What causes communities to collapse is almost always interpersonal conflict. We like to think that the primary value of our modern lifestyle is its comfort and convenience, but perhaps even more significant is the extent to which it prevents us from having to actually deal with other people. A commitment to community . . . means really facing others, and therefore facing aspects of oneself that might be occluded in a more individualized setting. And this requires a commitment to authentic communication. How easy it is to fool ourselves about who we are when we can so easily retreat into our privatized lives! How much harder it is when decisions about food, work, living space, money and children are collectively taken” [emphasis mine].

We recognize that building external resilience requires skills, and that cultivating such skills takes time. No one builds a beautiful home when they’ve never handled a saw before; no one can make good herbal medicine without spending considerable time learning to identify plants and understand their qualities. While our changing world won’t require us all to become master builders or herbalists, it is likely that many more of us will need to know the basics, and thus many of us are practicing now. Similarly, our changing world likely won’t require us all to be masters of internal resilience; most of us will need more skills in this area than we currently possess, and so we need to practice now.

“‘Long term’ another matter entirely

We might have the idea that we don’t need to practice the skills for dealing with uncertainty, hardship, and conflict in advance, because “crisis brings out the best in people.” We may remember that people in New York City were extraordinarily courageous, friendly, and cooperative in the wake of 9/11 and assume that the long emergency will call forth similar qualities in us.

However, there is a profound difference between short-term crisis and long-term crisis. In short-term crisis, there are typically many immediate, tangible tasks to be done, and every reason to believe that, no matter how terrible things are at the moment, they will soon improve. In long-term crisis it may not be clear that anything we do makes a difference — we may well not live long enough to witness substantial change for the better.

Evolution has equipped our species beautifully for the former type of crisis, but not so well for the latter. Generational poverty here at home and the situation of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are examples of long emergencies. While some extraordinary individuals respond to such sustained challenges with astonishing bravery, compassion, and endurance, many others respond with despair, addiction, and violence. As we descend more deeply into our long emergency, we will have great need of people—the more of them the better—who have cultivated their ability to meet hardship in creative and compassionate ways.

We may also have the idea that the long emergency won’t require extraordinary inner resources because while some familiar comforts may be lost, those losses will be outweighed by gains: greater intimacy with nature, renewed self-respect, and closer family and community ties. Americans have always been big fans of “positive thinking,” and I sense that many writers and organizers think that if they don’t give people reason to continue on page 19
Herbalist Annie McCleary is the director of the Wisdom of the Herbs School in Woodbury, Vermont. The school offers experiential learning programs focusing on wild plants, holistic health, and sustainable living skills, including harvesting and preparation of wild edibles and herbal home remedies. Studies also include ecology and natural history. The Wisdom of the Herbs School website explains, “The emphasis is on integration of the intuitive and scientific, in a relaxed, magical and grounded atmosphere.” The following interview for Vermont Commons was conducted by Kayleigh Blanchette.

What do you see as the role and work of Wisdom of the Herbs School here in Vermont?

Annie McCleary: At the school we focus on local, wild, edible and medicinal plants, holistic health, and sustainable living skills, which I see as essential knowledge and tools for living on the Earth in these changing times. We offer a unique blend of perspectives including ecology, natural history, healthy lifestyle practices and making herbal home remedies, plant-spirit communication, and even the role our thoughts play in our health and healing. Our programs are hands-on and experiential; we dig, wash, chop and blend, and of course, eat! We encourage learning from the heart as well as the head. A strictly scientific approach to plants can be dry and boring, and a purely intuitive approach can be ungrounded. I find the combination of the two very powerful.

How did you come to be involved in this work?

AM: I have been working with wild edibles and medicinal plants for over 25 years now. In the beginning, I studied medicinal herbs to learn how to improve health and vitality naturally. I founded a small herbal extract business, which I’ve since passed on to a student. When I lived on an organic farm in the Northeast Kingdom I cultivated Echinacea and goldenseal, and wild-crafted yellow dock, burdock, dandelion and St. John’s Wort for my herbal extract business. In 2003, I founded Wisdom of the Herbs School, now located here in Woodbury. I’m currently focusing on wild edibles, a truly basic bit of knowledge that everyone these days would benefit from having in their toolkit.

Who inspires you?

AM: Farmers. Organic farmers, to be precise. Farmers possess a wisdom of the earth, so to speak, a brand of intelligence, and an understanding of life that I respect. I want to be a farmer when I grow up!

How do you apply your expertise to your own life?

AM: I think it’s more that my life informs my expertise! I am a fairly intuitive person, and I tend to study-up after inspiration has struck.

What do you love most about food and cooking naturally/locally?

AM: There is something really satisfying, and, well, primal, about gathering local wild food, growing your own, and eating with the flow of the seasons. It’s really only relatively recently, with the age of oil and reliance on transportation, that we have not eaten primarily local foods. Last fall, I became particularly enamored of the wild and cultivated apples on this land. It was a great apple year. I put up 14 quarts of applesauce and made a great many really good apple crisps! We know the trucks will eventually stop bringing in food from afar, so it’s not only satisfying, it’s necessary that we learn to eat what grows here, whether its wild or cultivated food.

What would you say is the hardest part about living off of all-locally grown foods and medicinal plants? Are there setbacks to this way of life?

AM: We are a culture currently accustomed to eating foods and using medicines from all over the planet. It will be quite an adjustment to switch over to primarily local food and medicine. For one thing, many people in our culture are addicted to processed foods, packaged foods, and non-foods, which usually contain refined sugars. Refined sugars and processed foods are not only a psychological habit, but are actually addictive to the body. Refined sugars create an acid condition in the body, and the body’s attempt to regain balance results in the loss of important minerals including sodium, potassium, calcium.
and magnesium. Constant rebalancing from this overly acidic condition causes stress, and stress causes disease.

Once the shift to local food is made, we will become, I believe, a much healthier people.

It takes a fair amount of determination to give up refined sugars and deal with the social as well as physiological pressures involved. I recommend giving up refined sugars and processed foods now, rather than waiting until these items are no longer trucked in and being forced to go cold turkey under what may be difficult circumstances. Once the shift to local food is made, we will become, I believe, a much healthier people. Shifting over to primarily local medicine presents major challenges as well, because, again we are accustomed to having a huge range of remedies, drugs, and procedures at our fingertips. Whatever our opinion of the current major medical system, the fact remains that many in our communities rely on this high-tech, pharmaceutical, and surgery-based system, and some people are dependent on this system for their very lives. The medical system in turn relies heavily on unsustainable petroleum products.

Pharmaceuticals and medical materials are, by and large, made from petroleum derivatives, and access depends heavily on transportation. High-tech medical systems, tests, and lab work depend on tremendous amounts of energy. We would be wise to shift our health care needs over to a much lower-tech, localized system, incorporating local plant medicines and simpler healing techniques. Yes, it’s a huge task, and to use a phrase I have been hearing a great deal these days – now is a good time to start.

What is the most important thing you do at the Wisdom of the Herbs School?

AM: I think we humans have gotten ourselves into this crazy, untenable state of affairs by seeing ourselves as separate from nature, rather than a part of nature. The changes we are going through will bring home to us what our relationship to the Earth and all beings is really about – that we are just one species among many and we need to live in harmony and balance with all beings. At Wisdom of the Herbs School our students have the chance to immerse themselves in this emerging paradigm.

How is the Transition Movement of Montpelier making a difference for your cause?

AM: The Transition movement is acting as a spark, a catalyst, for folks who see the profound shifts coming in the face of peak oil, climate change, and economic instability, and are working toward resilience, relocalization, and reskilling in their communities. The experiences and tools that we offer at Wisdom of the Herbs School are an excellent foundation for this profound time. Just knowing about wild edibles alone is an absolutely core skill. Our programs are filling up quickly this year and I am sensing excitement and urgency in those who are signing up for our classes.

What makes you truly happy in life?

AM: Many things please me: working in the gardens, harvesting wild edibles, contra dancing, hanging out with friends and taking a gentle canoe ride across the pond. I am deeply grateful to be alive and to be in the hills of Vermont during the changes. And I am greatly encouraged by the efforts to become resilient that I see in the communities around me – to grow our own food, put up our food for winter, and generally move beyond fossil fuel and relocalize our lives.

But happiness? Happiness is an inside job!

Do you support Vermont nonviolently seceding from the United States and becoming its own independent republic?

AM: I can easily see Vermont as an independent republic, and I sense that this will evolve without our effort as things fall apart. So at this point in the process, I prefer to put my energy toward the Great Re-skilling, to use the language of the Transition movement – relearning basic skills that our grandparents took for granted, that are needed to survive and thrive in the post-oil era. That’s where I am putting my time and energy.

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Ben Falk

“We’re going to build a green home that’s totally sustainable.”

I listen to the voice on the other end of the phone. He continues: “Everything my wife and I want to do there is going be green . . . the roof is going to be covered in solar panels and the building is going to be airtight . . .”

The man finishes describing the couple’s plans and I ask him to tell me a little about the location for the building. “Where is it? Which way does the land face? What’s there already? How big will the building be, and how large is the landscape?”

“It’s in a spruce forest on a north-facing slope, about half a mile up a private drive off of a long steep dirt road. The building is going to be about 6,000 square feet. The property is about two acres of pine forest and some wetland.”

You know the rest of the story. The couple builds their dream house, they move in, and live the same life they lived before the project, only now feeling a lot greener. Neither the place nor the people end up any more sustained as a net result. And as oil inevitably becomes more expensive and other realities of the post-oil age of debt surface the couple ends up little more secure than they were before their ‘green home’ project.

I help people design and build sustaining home and community places for a monetary living. We identify strategies for sustainable land development – from where to locate a house or a pond or an orchard, to how the site’s soils can be rebuilt, to where access into the site could be constructed most economically. With each passing month I am increasingly approached by the kind of client described above, as well as another group of people, each at different points of could be called the “peak oil transition paradigm.” I’d call the first view the buy sustainability approach and the other view the cultivate sustainability approach. Each group embodies a way they believe will advance them toward a more sustaining, secure, and healthier lifestyle.

The “buy sustainability” approach implicitly assumes that by replacing current consumptive technologies with greener systems, such as swapping an oil furnace for solar hot water, passive solar design and a ground-source heat pump, the movement from an unsustainable lifestyle to a sustainable one will be achieved. This is the cornucopian view so prevalent today, which assumes we can adjust the science and technology involved to equal a sustainable outcome. This group uses the words “efficiency” and “green” often, and uses the word “sustainability” to imply a destination and a goal that can be achieved/accomplished. This group of people tends to envision a future where most of their daily activities will be similar to what they are today, but the tools they use will be different – e.g., I’ll drive a Prius on my 60-mile commute instead of an Audi.

The “cultivate sustainability” group tends to believe that the movement toward a more livable future both locally and globally will involve not only a major change in technologies but an equal or greater reformation in the daily lifestyle itself: in skill sets and knowledge, goals and attitudes, habits, diet, allocation of time, and for some, even in the way one makes a living. Pursuing a more sustaining lifestyle, the first group often starts by calling an architect or solar energy provider or by trading in their SUV for a hybrid. The second group often starts by planting a vegetable garden, getting chickens, or weatherizing their home.

The buy sustainability approach fails to be meaningful under a variety of conditions, always relating to the lack of capacity within that approach to maintain and evolve the resource systems that are...
In the 21st century Great Re-Skilling, hand tools, human energy, and local materials emerge as paramount.

ben falK

implemented. If you have the money it’s easy to create a passive solar home, a cultivated field, or a renewable energy system. But without an ongoing capacity (or interest) to live on less energy, to weed the crops and top off the batteries, to build healthy soil, to keep the snow off the solar panels, and a few dozen (or hundred?) other regular tasks, the reality of a more sustainable and secure life is elusive. Meaningful and lasting sustainable developments start with holistic planning and evolve over time through ongoing cultivation; their real value does not exist at the outset but arises from the level to which the capacity of the living human-land-technological system evolves over time. Sustainable, regenerative systems are complex – not only including buildings and electrical components, but biological systems such as plants, fungi, water, soil, people and other animals.

Future columns on this subject will go into depth on the primary components of sustaining land-based systems. This one concludes with an outline of those components, broken down by the aspect of the system involved: human, land, technology. Consider it an eight-step plan to getting off oil, beyond debt, and into community. This is a long process, so best to start now.

**Human**

1. **ReSkill**
   - Master something people need (food, clothing, shelter, energy, information, tools, wellness, inspiration).
   - Re-educate yourself and those around you. Ask yourself, “What parts of my skill set will be most relevant in the future, and where are the gaps?”
   - Become basic-tool literate: In a solar society there are few people who would not know how to put a keen edge on a cutting tool.

2. **ReValue**
   - Evolve, if necessary, your concept of what’s most meaningful and enjoyable to align yourself with the conditions of a rapidly changing world. E.g.: You can enjoy tending a garden as much as you enjoy hopping on a plane to the Caribbean. One of these values will be more useful than the other.

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life, it allowed the milk to be shipped greater distances – and the rest is history.

Now, it is very difficult to process milk on a small scale (even if you want to pasteurize it), and even more difficult to sell it without pasteurizing it, because of the regulatory system that is in place and the costs associated with compliance.

In an October 12, 2008, open letter to America’s next president published in the New York Times, Michael Pollan notes that, “After WWII, the government encouraged the conversion of the munitions industry to fertilizer . . . and the conversion of nerve-gas research to pesticides. The government also began subsidizing commodity crops, paying farmers by the bushel for all the corn, soybeans, wheat and rice they could produce.”

This eventually led to Butz’s encouragement for farmers to consolidate and to value production and efficiency above all else, and thus to monocropping and petroleum-based farming.

Pollan notes that we have a real opportunity right now because of a double crisis in food and energy. You probably have heard all about the energy crisis, but did you know – as Pollan reports – that in the past several months more than 30 nations have experienced food riots?

At this moment, there may be a chance to shift our policy and create a new food system. Pollan suggests that we move from a petroleum-dependent system to one that uses sunshine, which he calls a “new solar-food economy.”

I agree with many of Pollan’s suggestions, including expanding farmers’ markets, creating agricultural enterprise zones, developing a “local meat-inspection corps,” establishing a strategic grain reserve, regionalizing federal food procurement, and creating a definition of “food” that focuses on nutrition rather than on calories. Pollan’s ideas are good places to begin for America’s new president.

**Shaping Vermont’s food policy**

But what about us? Here in Vermont, what will we eat? What will our food policy look like? How can we work toward a secure and independent food system?

I think we need to begin working on our state-level policy right now, in the same way that Michael Pollan suggests working on the federal system. Whether you want to secede and have Vermont be an independent nation, or whether you’re not quite ready for that to happen yet, I would urge you to get involved in shaping Vermont’s food policy.

This past summer Rural Vermont conducted an online survey for consumers who were interested in local food. More than 200 people took the survey, and the overwhelming majority were interested in being able to buy local food and support local farmers. One piece of data that stood out to me in the survey results was that the overwhelming majority of people taking the survey believed that the number-one way to support local farmers was to buy their products.

I strongly agree that this is an important thing to do if you want to support local farmers (or any local business). However, I think it’s also important to make sure that the policies that are in place encourage local production and processing on a reasonable scale, and also ensure that the farmers get a fair price for their products, so that they can make good choices for their farms, their land, and their families, rather than for their banks.

Here in Vermont, despite the amazing efforts of hundreds of people who want to support local and regional food systems, we still have gaps – gaps in poultry- and meat-processing capacity, gaps in food-storage capacity, gaps in some crops that could be grown here but aren’t, gaps in research and development, gaps in milk-processing capacity. Although we are slowly filling in the gaps in our agricultural system, it is in spite of the policies of this state, rather than because of them. Where there has been success, it is largely because of the creativity and perseverance of the folks working on these issues, rather than the vision and foresight of our policy makers.

There are exceptions, of course. There have been good successes with the Farm to School...
Andrea** is a busy, working mother. For her, time is not always in abundance. Andrea loves her garden and had a last-minute improvement on her September to-do list: transplant her strawberries. This year, she was not able to find the time to indulge in her hobby. Instead, she called up Kurt and asked if he could give her a hand.

Kurt lives 20 minutes away from Andrea, two towns over. Kurt is not listed in the Yellow Pages for transplanting strawberries. Yet he came down to Montpelier on a beautiful late-summer weekend to help Andrea out. Both Andrea and Kurt are members of the Onion River Exchange (ORE), a time bank project in central Vermont. Andrea compensated Kurt for his time, but not in U.S. dollars. Not in two hours of labor at Kurt’s home either. She gave him “Community Credits” – one for each hour he was working in her garden.

Time banking as a social system seeks to revitalize and strengthen a community’s fabric.

In a time banking network like ORE, the cost of services and goods is based on time, and one hour equals one hour regardless of the value in dollars and cents. A time bank benefits from an entire community’s services pooled together, as opposed to a typical barter exchange where two individuals trade services. In an ORE exchange Kurt can earn Community Credits for transplanting strawberries for Andrea and he can spend them on plumbing, a massage, a ride to the airport, entertainment for a party, legal consultation, Spanish lessons, or website construction.

A social system

Dr. Edgar Cahn introduced the idea of time banking in the 1980s after he was in a debilitating accident. Cahn’s accident awoke him to how it felt being dependent on social services and charities. He knew that he was still capable of helping other people, and resented the limitations of the market economy. He created a new form of currency, Time Dollars, which offers a new approach to addressing some of the problems our society faces. He based his strategy on five core values: everyone has something to contribute, redefining the idea of work, helping works better when it is reciprocal, networks are stronger than individuals, and every human being matters.

Time banking as a social system seeks to revitalize and strengthen a community’s fabric, be it a town, neighborhood, school, or senior activity center. By connecting members of a community to each other through exchanges of valuable services, a time bank breaks down fences between neighbors one exchange at a time. These networks ask that everyone in a community be involved, so people often meet individuals they would not meet otherwise. In the Onion River Exchange a teenager might clean gutters for an elderly citizen, an electrician might receive a Reiki healing session, or a Montpelier resident might work at the LACE craft gallery in Barre.

Time bank programs have been started around the world. From the United Kingdom to Jerusalem to Rio de Janeiro, time banks are being implemented to alleviate the isolation of being a minority, elderly, young, impoverished, or simply part of our increasingly disconnected society. In the U.S. there are time banks from coast to coast, including three currently operating time banks in Vermont: the Burlington Time Bank, the Middlebury Time Bank, and the Onion River Exchange, central Vermont’s time bank. Each time bank was created in a different way and is designed to fulfill different needs in its community. Time banks are also being formed in the Barnard/Bethel area and in Brattleboro.

Time? I don’t have any more time!

We can find time bank members to perform the chores and errands we are not able to do, do not like to do, or do not have time to do. Time bank members spend their Community Credits to get chores done, and they save their time to spend doing the things they love. When someone weeds your garden you have an extra hour or two to play with your kids, enjoy one of your hobbies, or just stop and take a breath. If you have an open hour because a time bank member mowed your lawn, why not earn credit by doing one of your hobbies for someone else? You earn time doing things you enjoy or which are easy for you; you spend time through other time bank members helping you do something you detest. Imagine: “saving time” and “spending time” are redefined!

“I just saved hundreds of dollars by having my decrepit porch dismantled by time bankers. Next spring I’ll have a brand new, safe patio thanks to the Onion River Exchangers!” — Time Bank Member

What can I offer?

Many people say that they have nothing they can offer, but that is never the case. Many people, aside from members who offer their professional services, simply lend a hand to members who need it. Can you fold fliers for a nonprofit? Can you give someone a ride or provide advice for gardening, computers, or education? Can you prepare a dish for someone who hates cooking? These are all extremely valuable services; time banking values them in ways the market economy does not. Many people are already engaging in time bank-like exchanges with family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. Time banks like ORE simply seek to strengthen those connections and create new ones.

The nuts and bolts

The Onion River Exchange, like many of the larger time banks, uses on-line software that allows each member to manage his or her own account, much like on-line banking. The software has an on-line marketplace where a member can view the requests and offers of other members, like the Yellow Pages. The software is useful, but all continued on page 21
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For those of us with an ability or desire to ease our way from the clutches of mental defense, evidence suggesting that humans were meant to thrive in face-to-face, knowable communities abound.

To begin, using the most conservative archaeological/anthropological data, we might posit that humans have existed for one million years. Imagine that stretch of time as a basketball court — approximately 100 feet long. For the majority of that period we humans lived in land-based, small-scale groups, and our brains, bodies, and expectations evolved in synchronicity with that experience. Only in the last fifth of an inch of that 100-foot stretch have people lived en masse in technological civilization, with its gigantic hierarchical techno-politico-economic structures.

What are the assumptions about life that hail from the other 99 feet 11-plus inches? Evolutionary psychologists posit that our expectations and behaviors were fashioned in synthesis with our ancestral environment, the natural world, and our ancestral ways of surviving, in small self-determining groups. We humans have a marked capacity for cooperation in small groups, can keep up intimately with about 13 people and casually recognize — ballpark — 3,000. Rather than accepting cruelty we feel wronged, and each of us has an innate sense of justice. Psychological well-being thrives not amid machines, concrete, and guns, nor while barraged by electromagnetic waves — but rather in the company of others in nature.

Aside from regaling ourselves with such instructive works as Mark Nathan Cohen’s Health and the Rise of Civilization, Jean Liedloff’s The Continuum Concept, Paul Shepard’s Nature and Madness, and Marshall Salihin’s Stone Age Economics, I find that a good way to refresh a dulled memory is the encounter with those who know.

Here in the Indo-Hispano village of Chimayó, the urge to place-based sovereignty has survived into the age of globalization. After stealing the common lands from the villages of what became New Mexico, the U.S. government sent the Forest Service to oversee the mountains... and the locals clipped its barbwire fences, burned down its cabins, and used the land for traditional wood gathering and deer hunting anyway. One year a bank rebuilt the old shed by the apple coop into an ATM... and the men got out their hunting rifles and shot the machine to shreds. If I go to a meeting in a village other than my own I am welcomed... but I have zero authority to offer an opinion.

Read: sovereignty defines both possibility and boundary.

Lessons

A telling vignette about cultural knowledge comes to me via anthropologist Frances Harwood. “Fiz” was doing her field work in the Solomon Islands in the 1960s, and one day an assemblage of village leaders came to address, Francis transported a Native man to the city of São Paulo. As the two men made their way through the sooty streets amid the traffic jams, they came upon a bank. Standing at the entrance were two stern guards, each with Gestapo-like boots and a loaded machine gun. The Native was puzzled at this spectacle. Francis tried to explain, saying the bank was a “house” where the “chief” kept his “riches” — to which the Native declared, “Well then, if he needs this much guarding, he cannot be a very good chief.”

Read: social control and democracy are not made of the same cloth.

The essence of true democracy resides in scale. As Austrian philosopher Leopold Kohr put it, “When something is wrong, something is too big.” The typical size of a tribal village throughout prehistory was 100, while a band had between 15 and 50. Our villages in northern New Mexico vary from a few dozen in Servietta Plaza to 3,000 here in Chimayó.

Read: the fewer people, the easier it is to consider, discuss, decide, and enact.

In an age of mass-society sovereignty the older standards — cultural participation, consensual leadership, and face-to-face democracy — may seem wispy as actual experiences, but such qualities do reside within our expectations. Why else would people continue to risk their lives for self-determination? Why, throughout the U.S’s history of exploitation and expansion, do themes of social justice, democracy, regionalism, and ecological protection swell up again and again and again? Why, after centuries of colonial control, have people all over the world batted for sovereignty in the decolonization movements? And why, despite backlash to the point of genocide, has that process continued to this day?

My answer? Efforts to revitalize ways of life that are human-scale, in harmony with the natural world and truly democratic, spring from within — and still and always. Their rekindling at this moment is a historic event worthy of our participation — and a reiteration of the urge to re-member, downsize, and live as who we truly are. Scession is in our bones. •
The educational alternatives movement is inspired by many visions of cultural renewal. Because standardized schooling embodies many of the destructive qualities of the industrial/technocratic worldview, such as hierarchy, competition, and reductionism, it breeds dissent and mutiny among all sorts of sensitive people who are exploring various cultural and philosophical alternatives. There are libertarians who challenge the inflated authority of large institutions, progressives trying to build more democratic community life, child-centered developmentalists (some would call them romantics) who celebrate the “natural” rhythms of growth and learning, and still others who have found more hopeful worldviews in ecological principles or spiritual teachings.

While all these perspectives offer insightful and essential elements to a holistic critique of modern schooling, I am focusing here on the last one, specifically on a spiritual teacher who devised a remarkable analysis of power and authority in the modern world. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was a philosopher, scholar and mystic from what was then Austria-Hungary who wrote and lectured extensively in the early years of the twentieth century. He inspired the development of Waldorf education, biodynamic agriculture, and various other cultural initiatives. Although I am not a follower of his complex, esoteric system of Anthroposophy (to be honest, I find most of it bewildering), I have always been intrigued by his theory of the “threefold” social order: his suggestion that a society is healthiest when its three primary functions, or spheres – economic, political, and cultural – are allowed to maintain their own integrity, without interference from the others.

I find this model to be a refreshingly radical analysis of our technocratic empire. It raises profound questions, which generally remain unasked, about the proper uses of power. The threefold approach is essentially a strategy of decentralization, analogous to the separation of powers written into the U.S. Constitution, suggesting that there are natural limits to the concentration of authority in society. Steiner argued that each of the three spheres has a distinct function in the social order and can only fulfill its purpose by remaining independent of the other two.

The economic sphere, Steiner maintained, is concerned with the production and distribution of commodities, or more broadly with the relationship between human society and the material world. The political sphere is the domain of justice and human rights, or the relationships between people. The cultural sphere, represented by the arts and sciences, religion, and the practice of education and the healing arts, involves the spontaneous creative activity of the individual human mind. Each of these spheres operates according to its own inherent principles. Economic activity, which involves differential and fluctuating material values, should not influence political judgment, which must be based on absolute equality of legal rights, and neither of these modes of social endeavor should interfere with the creative freedom of the artist or scholar, educator or healer.

Economic and political endeavors use categories and criteria that are adequate and appropriate for dealing with the material world and social relations, respectively, but they cannot fathom the deeper sources of our ideas or emotions, our existential or spiritual striving. Trying to apply economic or political criteria to our intellectual, creative, or intuitive capacities, to our efforts to find value and meaning, can only reduce or distort these vital dimensions of our humanity. This is why the principle of academic freedom on
In Steiner’s terms, education has been engulfed by the economic sphere, which turns into a commodity, a soulless object to be bought and sold.

As Steiner saw nearly a century ago, in modern society economic enterprise has spilled over its appropriate boundaries, and the result is that every aspect of our lives, including education, has become a commodity—something with a market value rather than intrinsic value. He commented that people in modern society are “so used up by the economic life that [they] can no longer feel [their] existence to be worthy of a human being.” That is to say, an authentic human existence is rooted in realities far deeper and more mysterious than the mechanical workings of the marketplace, and when we allow essential elements of our culture to become commodified, we lose contact with these existential and spiritual sources.

A primary source of the empire’s power is the alliance between the corporate state.

Renewing “organic” learning

There is a grassroots revolution taking place in education today, which seeks to return teaching and learning to the sphere of freedom and creativity. The educators, parents, and young people who have left public schooling for independent alternative schools or home schooling are not simply out to privatize the educational system, for this is still to treat learning as a commodity in the marketplace. Rather, they are intuitively responding to the awareness that Steiner articulated a century ago, that genuine learning is an organic, spontaneous, and deeply meaningful encounter that requires autonomy and more than mere conformity to the political and economic forces that have taken over public education. They have watched as children’s minds and hopes are consumed as fuel for the global economic machine, and they dispute the authority of the corporate state to do this.

There are many dedicated teachers in the public schools, many schools with strong roots in their communities (especially in Vermont), and many idealistic citizens and leaders who believe that a publicly funded system is the only equitable and democratic way to provide learning opportunities to all. But a more penetrating analysis, such as Steiner’s “threefold” model, reveals that this system has become increasingly dominated by forces that are not truly educational, and it has become more and more difficult to realize the public school ideal in a technocratic empire. The principle of noninterference between the distinct functions of society suggests that the corporate state is not the proper provider of a truly nourishing education. School and state need to be separated, just as church and state were separated, to preserve the autonomy of each.

This separation raises complicated questions about how society will provide educational opportunities to everyone. In the current economy, independent schools cost too much to be accessible to all, so in contrast to the original ideal of public education, they appear elitist. Steiner’s response was profoundly radical: He envisioned the economic sphere freely supporting the cultural sphere, with no strings attached; funding for education would not be an investment but would reflect authentic generosity toward this vital element of our common social life. Imagine an educational system fully supported through benevolence and generosity, accountable to young people and their families and communities, replacing a system that serves as an economic venture accountable to investors and technocrats.

Of course we have a lot of rethinking and planning to do to make such a system a reality; the transition will not be easy. But I am convinced that the path from corporate empire to a revitalized, locally rooted society demands this fundamental redesign of public education.

for hope, we will be overcome by despair and thus fail to take actions that are both possible and necessary. I share the view that there will be positive aspects to the changes that are imminent, but I am convinced that, as Rob Hopkins (permaculture teacher and founder of the Transitions movement in the U.K.) puts it, “if you don’t find [the prospect of peak oil and climate change] scary, you haven’t really got it.”

It seems inevitable that this transition is going to involve a lot of loss: loss of cherished forms of livelihood and recreation, loss of familiar comforts and conveniences, and, most probably, loss of life as well. Whole populations may experience trauma similar to that of those dwelling in an occupied country during wartime, and again, there may be no end to the “war” for several generations. To deny that there is going to be immense hardship entailed in this transition is as foolish as denying that global climate change is happening and that human activities are largely responsible for it. Such denial is harmful in at least two ways: first, it prevents us from taking the steps we can to mitigate the risks, and second, it prevents us from putting the powerful energy of emotions like fear, grief, and rage to the service of our transformation. Again, though, if we examine our automatic responses to such emotions, we find that they are largely unproductive; it takes a lot of practice to build the inner resources to work with them in creative, innovative ways.

How, then, do we cultivate inner resilience? How do we learn alternatives to our habitual reactions to uncertainty, loss of control, and loss in general? How do we learn to face ourselves and deal with other people?

Mindfulness meditation and other contemplative practices are profoundly helpful in this regard, as are some psychotherapeutic techniques. Moving meditation forms, such as T’ai Chi, Chi Gong, and yoga, as well as somatic education practices like the Feldenkrais Method, Body-Mind Centering, or the Alexander Technique offer us the ability to practice maintaining awareness of our internal dynamics even as we act. Indigenous ceremonies powerfully reveal our habits of seeing the world as a collection of objects and enable us to experience it instead as a communion of subjects. All of these practices tend to spill over into our communications with others, but there are also numerous practices that directly address interpersonal communication — Marshall Rosenberg’s Non Violent Communication (NVC), for example.

Happily, Vermont is rich in resources for developing inner resilience. When Richard Heinberg spoke in Brattleboro last April, he talked about the need to identify, honor, and support the people in our communities who already possess expertise in various aspects of external resilience — people who know how to grow food, repair things, provide effective low-tech health care, etc. I would suggest that we also need to identify, honor, and support people in our communities who already possess expertise in various aspects of internal resilience — meditators and mediators, therapists and healers, teachers of martial arts and yoga — people who have demonstrated their ability to “absorb disturbance and reorganize while undergoing change,” as one group of authors defined resilience.

There is a tendency for action types to see such folks as self-indulgent and basically irrelevant — and a tendency for those who have spent years cultivating inner resilience to feel undervalued in, and therefore isolated from, traditional political movements. We simply can no longer afford to harbor such divisions in our communities here in Vermont. We urgently need to put all our skills and resources — internal as well as external — to the service of creating a livable future.
program and Vermont FEED. Farmers’ markets are strong, and many of them have EBT machines for food stamp customers.

Last year, Vermont passed the “chicken bill,” which opened up possibilities for farmers to direct-market farm-slaughtered poultry at farmers’ markets and to restaurants. A law may go into effect this April that will allow customers to contract with farmers to raise livestock and slaughter those animals on the farm for the customers. We’re slowly expanding farmers’ ability to sell raw milk directly to customers.

A local vision
But these are relatively small steps. Rural Vermont has a vision for Food with Dignity – a Vermont local food system which is self-reliant and based on reverence for the earth. It builds living soils which nurture animals and people with wholesome, natural products, supporting healthy, thriving farms and communities. These communities in turn work to encourage and support current and future farmers, continuing our Vermont heritage. This abundant and generous way of life celebrates our diversity and interdependence.

We want to achieve this vision because we believe farmers should have the first rights to local markets and community members should have the first rights to locally produced food. We believe that farmers should get a fair price for their products, and we believe that when these things happen, we are all healthier and happier.

Michael Pollan says we need to rebuild America’s food culture by changing habits and diets, because we are used to “fast, cheap and easy food.” Pollan suggests that in addition to working on food policy, we must work on food culture.

We think that the new president should lead by example. He should take five acres of the White House lawn to plant an organic farm, which should be overseen by a farmer who would be selected with as much care and attention as the White House chef.

Pollan also suggests planting gardens – lots of gardens – all over America. He wants us to plant gardens in every primary school, as well as at our homes, like the “Victory Gardens” promoted by Eleanor Roosevelt.

I agree that we should do these things; we should do everything we can to have more food produced in our home state, and I believe that these things are a matter of policy as well as culture.

The state will need to create policy that encourages composting so that we can capture our nutrients and have fertile gardens. Towns could encourage residents to create neighborhood food councils the way we are now creating neighborhood energy teams.

The Second Vermont Republic could form a food council, too, to begin developing the ideal food policy for the new nation, if Vermont were to secede. This council could then work to have this policy implemented, whether we secede or not.
time bank members do not need to be computer users. ORE, for example, offers an internet buddy system. In fact, many time banks use a paper ledger system!

Members browse the service directory like the phone book, using categories to separate the various services offered. Each member then contacts the service provider they are interested in “hiring” for Community Credits. Once the exchange is complete, the provider of the service submits the hours that were exchanged.

**Weaving social fabric**

The web of relationships that form because of individual exchanges is one of the great things about a time bank. In the Onion River Exchange, Paulette makes quilts – beautiful ones! She made a quilt that took 40 hours for Eleanor. Those 40 hours of Paulette’s were spent on fixing up her quilting room: Jane installed bright overhead lighting (13 hours) and Rachel raised her quilting table a few inches to make it more comfortable (two hours). Rachel also earned hours from Paulette by laundering quilts in her own washer/dryer (six hours). Rachel spent all those Community Credits she earned on a piano teacher giving her grandson piano lessons!

On another occasion, Kevin earned Community Credits as a member of a nonprofit board of directors. This nonprofit is an organizational member of a time bank. It encourages its members to be active in the time bank by offering them Community Credits for typical volunteer duties: posting flyers, bulk mailings, outreach, and even web design. Kevin also increased his account balance by helping to set up and selling ice cream sandwiches. Kevin spent his Community Credits receiving complementary health consultations: a Thai yoga massage, a chiropractic analysis; he even had a quilt made from old T-shirts.

Aside from all the cash that was saved, these time bank members formed relationships with the person with whom they have done the exchange. It is this network of trust that is the groundwork for other complementary currencies.

The nonprofit organizations that are members attract new workers and participants. The Central Vermont Community Action Council spends Community Credits to find members to staff their craft gallery at the LACE storefront in Barre, and offers classes in business and finance to earn Community Credits.

The Montpelier Parks Department used ORE members at its recent Enchanted Forest fund-raising event, as did Food Works at Two Rivers at the Garlic Festival. The time bank encourages people to help at nonprofits, and it also gives nonprofits a way to compensate volunteers.

These layers of city government, nonprofits and businesses, neighborhood and individuals, are all connected through the time bank. Each exchange that occurs is another thread spun to strengthen our neighborhoods and our communities.

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*All names have been changed to protect members’ identities.*

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Ah, spring. The snow slowly receding to reveal the scattered detritus of his life. Loops of baling twine. An old tricycle. The half-handle of broken garden spade. A pipe wrench, gone to rust but salvageable. If you can read a person’s life in their garbage, what can you discern from the etcetera emerging from the snow around their home? Perhaps not everything. But perhaps everything that matters.

It’s never been his favorite season, for reasons he can’t fully define. Sure, he appreciates the return of sun and heat, the feeble-legged lambs nuzzling for a milk-rich tit, the onion shoots straining upward, bent toward the light because they know that, after all, we are all merely children of the sun. The first bicycle ride, the first motorcycle ride, the last ski. The piglets. He loves the piglets beyond reason. Yes, these are all good things. But in spring, more than any other season, the implications and repercussions of what he does and doesn’t do right are at their heaviest, and his energy tends toward the frenetic while his attention, none too steadfast to begin with, is teased into frayed strands. Northern lore suggests that autumn is the season of frantic preparation, but Northern lore seems strangely ignorant of the truth that everything that happens in autumn is dependent on the complex orchestration of April and May. Seeds must be sown according to myriad needs of sun and water and soil temperature. The maples must be tapped in time to catch that first sweet, heavy run. The critters must be monitored and, if necessary, aided through the year’s freshenings. Compost, the rich loam that’s become of last year’s shit and hay, must be spread. Firewood shall be cut, split, stacked. He thinks, not for the first time, that the folks who declare spring the season of renewal have got it backwards. Spring isn’t renewal; spring is everything you do so that you might achieve renewal six months hence, that you might be blessed with yet another winter of abundance or, at least, survival.

He doesn’t mean for all this to sound burdensome. Clearly, he’s chosen this path; clearly, one does not shoulder these loads year after year after year if they truly feel like loads. These things, along with the two fine, sturdy boys he puts to bed each night, the woman who so willingly forgives his many failings, and the sweet piece of earth he’s been entrusted with, aren’t merely tasks to be completed, chores to be checked off a list so that he might get on with his life. They are his life. For that, he is deeply, fantastically grateful.

So he’ll spend this spring the way he spends every other spring, running from one project to the next, reminding himself, between footfalls, to pause now and again. To breathe deep the wet, loamy scent of snow-bare earth. To trust in himself and everything in his view: the boys, hauling brush to a smoky bonfire, his wife, dropping pea seeds into the cool soil, the cows fat with calf. Spring, so quickly and faithfully, has come. And just as quickly, it will be gone. •

Even this team of work horses can’t claim to be “zero-emissions,” but they do consume renewable fuel. Are these — the engines of yesterday — also the engines of tomorrow? Ben Falk

Homestead Security, continued from page 13

3. Cultivate community
   • Ensure that you are developing a way to “be in this together” with a great group of people. It will be a lot more fun and productive.

Land

4. Establish land base
   • Ensure long-term tenancy to a piece of the living Earth you can cultivate.

5. Initiate biological systems: build soil, plant, and cycle fertility
   • Compost, mulch, char
   • Plant, plant, plant – focus first on nutrient density and storability
   • Animals – start small (chickens/ducks); continue toward grazers if applicable
   • Grey water, ponds, swales, water capture and storage

6. Make food and fuel
   • Vegetables
   • Small nuts and fruits
   • Tree nuts and fruits
   • Foraging and hunting
   • Animals
   • Fuel crops
   • Grains

Technology

7. Develop passive shelter
   • Small
   • Highly insulated, thermally “massive” for heat-storage
   • Wood heated – ideally mass-based and hydronic
   • Solar accessible
   • Water capable via gravity and/or hand pump
   • Food store-able – root cellar
   • Work-able – shop space
   • Durable for a changing climate

8. ReTool
   • Transition your tools (from mobility to culinary to shelter to landscape) to be solar powered, high quality and impeccably maintained – e.g., trading the cheap gas-powered lawn mower for a hand-made scythe, a propane furnace for an efficient woodstove. •
act together to push back: a bank users strike. If the banks and their politicians won’t accept the consequences of their recklessness we should stop patronizing their institutions. Now, this would be a tall order if the only alternative to the for-profit banking system were the space between your mattress and box spring. Lucky for us, that’s not the case: we have credit unions.

For those of us who see the benefits of local economies, joining a credit union is a no-brainer. If you’re buying local food, you should be using a local financial institution. Additionally, credit unions are consumer co-ops; as a depositor you own the institution. Not only does this mean that the profits are redistributed to local members via better interest rates rather than being shipped off to distant shareholders, but the boards of directors are voluntary and elected by the member-owners. This structure means the interests of the board and the members are aligned, and, as such, credit unions lacked the incentive to vigorously participate in the speculative frenzy that has forced our economy to its knees. Indeed, the rate of mortgage delinquencies on credit union originated loans in 2008 was less than a third of that of loans originated by banks.

I urge you to visit www.bankstrike.org and sign a pledge to divest yourself of the banks and join a credit union. On July 1 we’ll be having a rally and mass withdrawal of funds from the banks; it seems no number of protests and votes can change the kleptocratic course of our political economy. The one thing they pay attention to is dollars. I say we no longer let them use our hard-earned money as poker chips in their speculative games, and instead take responsibility for the financial system ourselves.

Matthew Cropp
Burlington

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Letters, continued from page 3

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FILMING VERMONT’S FUTURE

Editor, Vermont Commons:

We are a group of young folk (filmmakers, teachers, a town constable, a writer, a photojournalist, and a couple of organic farmers) converging to produce a film on the many re-localization efforts underway that are helping move Vermont toward renewed economic independence and self-stewardship. Green Blooded: Vermonters at a Crossroad will be a film about the grassroots movement of Vermont residents taking ownership over the methods and means of our collective survival. Told with the voices of our farmers, homesteaders, seed-savers, craftspeople, poets, professors, government representatives, teachers, and community members of all stripes, this will be a film that listens to and documents the many stories that comprise the rich fabric of Vermont and reveals the commitment and integrity that will shape our state for the better.

This endeavor can only reach fruition with the collaboration and support of people and organizations with a vested interest in the increased awareness this film will bring to communities all across the state. Thanks to an arrangement with Rural Vermont, a nonprofit organization dedicated to thriving farms and healthy communities, any financial contributions to help with production, post-production, and distribution will be tax-deductible. We’d like to extend an open invitation to your readership to offer suggestions and ideas for how we can best create and share this film with Vermonters and across state lines.

More information is available on our website at www.longshotproductions.org/greenblooded.html
To our future!
Teo Zagar, Producer/Director
Barnard
No surprise, but Obama and the Washington establishment have messed up in a truly grievous and calamitous way.

Given a once-a-century chance to save the nation from the ravages of global capitalism into which it had plunged itself, the Democrats and their bureaucratic allies have given us more – staggeringly more – of the same. Instead of turning the entire economy around so that it could provide real salvation from a world facing economic meltdown, unstable currencies, global warming, peak oil, industrial pollution, starvation, depleting freshwater, over-fishing, rising oceans, overpopulation, the perils of overgrowth, and the collapse of civilization as we have known it – our last chance, surely, so to do – instead of even thinking about that, they have decided that unchecked corporate-financial capitalism, now “stimulated” by enormous funds loaned to us from Asia and the oil sheikdoms, would fix what it had broken.

How deep the madness penetrates:
The man dying of strychnine poisoning quaffs another cup of it.

I’m not just saying that the packages and bailouts and a $3 trillion budget will essentially fail and that we will have depression with us for a good long time. That’s an opinion held by most people not deluded by the asinine liberal consensus. I’m saying that those measures ignore all the overarching world-threatening perils that the nation and the world now face.

Global warming is real; its effects will be disastrous. Its basic cause is human activity promoting economic growth, consumption, materialism, higher living standards, population increase, longevity, infrastructure expansion, and urbanization. Those are, mind you, the evils that will bring on the perils of increasing greenhouse gasses, desertification, starvation on a global scale, unchecked migrations, introduced diseases, drowning cities, unbreathable air, unbearable heat, chaotic storms, and severe population die-off.

And yet those evils are the very things that global capitalism is all for. Those are at the heart of the very economic life we have created, where, basically, every one of the seven deadly sins, including sloth, is celebrated. Those are what the American way of life has been all about – and, if anyone were sentient enough to see it, those practiced in excess were what brought about the current economic crisis.

And those are what we, and the rest of the industrial world, are supposed to restore and enlarge and improve and extend under all the policies and proposals now being advanced. What amounts to something like $2 trillion is scheduled to be spent in the next few months in the United States in aid of this cause, the greatest public works and spending project in the history of the planet.

How deep the sickness has gone, how deep the madness penetrates. The man dying of strychnine poisoning quaffs another cup of it.

If you wanted to pick one single element of American society contributing the most to the present predicament – I don’t mean just the economic ones to collapse, but all the rest – it would be gas-powered vehicles. They are responsible for considerable amounts of direct pollution, not just in the driving but the manufacture, plus that associated with building the highways, bridges, parking garages, and all else they require. They are the principal guzzlers of gasoline and diesel, that huge download in our national budget. They are the main reason for urban sprawl and suburban sprawl, and all the houses (and mortgages) that get built for their drivers there. If you wanted to do something serious to get our society going in the right direction, you would, for starters, work to eliminate cars and trucks, end the federal highway program, promote high-speed rail and battery-operated minivans, provide white bikes in every city, and above all create localized economies with minimal transportation needs and very little shipped in. And stop building houses and subsidizing people to buy them and get to them by car.

But that’s not what Obama & Co. ever stopped to think about. No, they have done everything possible to coddle the American automobile and its attended needs. The Democratic Congress authorized a $25-billion plan to retool and modernize auto factories in 2008, then another $24 billion for GM and Chrysler, and then Detroit came back for $17 billion more. The stimulus act goes on to provide at least $180 billion for building highways and other infrastructure, and another $70 billion for states to spend largely on infrastructure. In addition, Big Oil also is getting some $20 billion in tax breaks and subsidies, and fees to the government for offshore drilling will continue to be waived. And the budget provides no less than 1,321 earmarks for transportation, few of them for the good kind.

Not just more of the same, but lots more of the same. They blew it.

Somehow nobody in or near power has any sense that the fundamental problems are a result of growth. That growth, which is the engine of modern global capitalism, is the cause of pollution, waste, global warming, war, and empire, and all the rest of our surrounding perils. It simply can’t go on, gang, and at this time of implosion we had a chance to establish some controls and limits to ensure a safe and measured path away from it and toward a stable, sustainable, small-scale, steady-state economy.

In addition, though no one is talking about this, the stimulus bill and the subsequent budget display the same relentless commitment to empire, and the military might to sustain it, that has been the essential cause of our excess spending for the past 20 years. Obama is upping the “defense” budget to $644 billion, including $200 billion to go on fighting the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – just as though he was elected as a hawk rather than peace president – and the “intelligence” budget to $65 billion. And in case you missed it, he has installed as head of the State Department’s crucial Office of Policy Planning a certified imperial hawk, Princeton’s Anne-Marie Slaughter, who wants to impose American-style “democracy” around the world.

In other words, at a moment when the U.S. could realistically draw in from its overstretched and over-costly worldwide reach – at least 750 bases in 130 countries, plus eight fleets with 280 ships on permanent active duty, with two active wars – the Obama team has decided to go on as if nothing had changed, or needed changing. And paying for it as if we actually had the money. The opportunity was at hand, given the economic mess, to start dismantling the unnecessary empire maintained by an unnecessary military force that is more bloated than all the rest of the world’s armies put together, and to put that money and the soldiers back into American life.

But no, Obama & Co. aren’t interested in that, either.

The essential problem is that no one in positions of power, or advising them from lobbies, universities, or think tanks, has any conception of a third way, a way beyond failed corporate capitalism and government-sponsored socialism. It’s not that no one has thought of what that way would look like, for a great many critics of industrialism and the global economy have proffered many choices for a century and more: the Distributists, Catholic Workers, Agrarians, Country Life and back-to-the-land movements, Georgists, anti-globalists, anti-petroleumists, communitarians, green planners and builders, and a wide variety of community-centered, anti-big-government thinkers and writers in this country and England. But they have been ignored.

Alas. For it is now more than ever that this country needs to, has the chance to, chart itself a new course, built on the idea of small, thriving local economies, human-scale communities, self-sufficient food and energy production, the development of local talents for local needs. That is the only way to escape the looming tragedies that capitalism and global capitalism are preparing for us.

We had a chance. But Obama & Co. blew it.