Beyond Red and Blue: The State Sovereignty Movement Ignites A “Wildfire Across America”

Harold Thomas

“The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the states, are reserved to the states, respectively, or to the people.”
— Tenth Amendment, Constitution of the United States

Since the beginning of the year, 39 states have introduced state sovereignty resolutions in at least one house of their legislatures. Of those (as of July 28), seven have been enacted (Alaska, Idaho, Louisiana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Tennessee), four (including New Hampshire’s) have either been defeated or are expected to be defeated; and the other 23 are still under consideration. Not all of them are “red states”: Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania lean Democratic or are highly competitive.

Why are so many states introducing such resolutions?

One reason is that the federal government is raiding state treasuries to run its programs. State legislators know this better than anyone. Here’s the dirty little secret: There is no such thing as “federal funds.” “Federal funds” and “stimulus money” are the tax dollars you and I send in by April 15 every year. Some of that money is taken out to pay for national defense and the federal bureaucracy. The rest is returned to the states as grants—with strings attached. State governments find it politically impossible to turn them down, because the end result would be to give away their taxpayers’ dollars to a more compliant state. In this way your dollars are being held hostage by Washington to carry out its will.

It doesn’t end there. Most federal grants come with a requirement for matching funds—that come from your state tax dollars! Now, state governments face a dilemma: do we try to qualify for federal grants, or do we try to carry out our own priorities, such as education and public safety, without raising taxes and further depressing the state’s economy?

In addition, a growing number of state officials are becoming alarmed at federal intrusions on the rights of state governments and the citizens. For example, proposed federal laws restricting ownership of firearms are meeting resistance from the legislatures of Idaho and Montana. Missouri is chafing under expansions of abortion rights, and Michigan doesn’t want Real ID. The USA PATRIOT Act and other federal legislation in the years since 9/11 have greatly narrowed the rights that are reserved to the states and to the people.

Historically, we have relied upon the U.S. Supreme Court to protect our rights under the Constitution—but when it fails to do so, and the Congress fails to do so, and the White House fails to do so, what is left? Thomas Jefferson answered that question in the Kentucky Resolution in 1798. When all else fails, the state legislature can put itself between the federal government and the people. It can “interpose” itself by ordering the federal government not to enforce offensive laws that exceed the Constitutional powers granted to it within that state’s boundaries.

A Vermont yankee proposes “personal responsibility.” American Flatbread founder George Schenk’s provocative placard on Mad River Valley’s Route 100. Read his reasoning at www.vtcommons.org.

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• Vermont Independence - Summer Festival 2009 Report (Tyler Wilkinson-Ray)

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Editorial

“The Great Re-Skilling” Inventing a 21st Century Vermont

The future is not what it used to be.
Paul Valerie

The best way to predict the future is to invent it.
Alan Kay

Transition Handbook author Rob Hopkins, co-founder of the international Transition Towns movement, uses a phrase to describe the collective process required to move Vermont from a 20th century state powered by oil, natural gas, and other forms of cheap and abundant fossil fuel energy, to a 21st century state powered by a more diverse portfolio of energy sources – biomass, wind, solar, hydro, along with the deployment of energy conservation and efficiency measures: “The Great Re-Skilling.”

It is a phrase I have grown to like – suggesting a broad and inclusive process by which Vermonters re-learn and remember (literally – to re-attach) place and community by rediscovering older and more traditional ways of doing things, and combining them with the best of 21st century wisdom – all in the name of powering our homes and businesses, growing our food, and moving ourselves across our beautiful and rugged Green Mountain landscapes.

The Great Re-Skilling is not some quaint, romantic, or naïve notion.

It is a vital and hopeful phrase describing what must happen in our Vermont communities right now, as the world confronts the reality of Peak Oil, the impending collapse of the Dollar, and the implosion of the United States as the richest and most powerful Empire in world history.

The 21st century, in other words, is shaping up to be very little like the 20th, and far-sighted Vermonters from all walks of life, all political persuasions, are beginning to embrace the Great Re-Skilling as a necessary and promising path toward a more sustainable and healthy future for our once-and-future Green Mountain republic.

The signs of inventing Vermont’s future are all around us, and we’ve covered them in the pages of Vermont Commons: Voices of Independence news journal for more than four years now.

At the state level, grassroots organizations – the emerging Transition Towns movement, village energy committees, the Localvore effort, Rural Vermont, NOFA, Peak Oil Awareness, and dozens of other organizations – are providing Vermonters with the information and skills we’ll need for a successful Great Re-Skilling going forward. Our annual food and energy conferences, county fairs, and events like Earthwise Farm and Forest’s Northeast Animal Powered Field Days (see their event ad in this issue) remind Vermonters of the importance of reconnecting with more traditional technologies (in NEAPFD’s case, draft animals as energy sources). Members of our school and select boards and the state legis-

Perhaps our biggest asset in the Great Re-Skilling are longtime Vermonters themselves, who harbor a wealth of knowledge and skills we’ll all need moving forward.

Contributors


Jared Carter is a 2009 graduate of Vermont Law School and the executive director of the Cuban Art Cooperative, a nonprofit that seeks to provide contemporary Cuban arts to the Vermont community.

Mark Estrin is a novelist from Burlington.

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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.

“The Greenneck” lives and writes in the rusted-out shell of a one-ton Chevy pickup somewhere in Cabot.

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 as well as 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.

Thomas Naylor, economist, businessman, and author, is co-founder of the Second Vermont Republic.

Kirkpatrick Sale, editor-at-large and author of a dozen books, including After Eden: The Evolution of Human Domination (Duke), is the director of the Middlebury Institute.

Harold Thomas publishes “The Ohio Republic,” a blog advocating state sovereignty, at www.oherepublic.info. He is a resident of Columbus, Ohio, and is working for the passage of Ohio’s state sovereignty resolution. He can be contacted at oherepublic@davrie.net.

Rob Williams, editor and publisher of Vermont Commons, is a teacher, historian, writer, and musician. He lives in Waitsfield.
Letters to the Editor

LET'S GET POLITICAL

Editor, Vermont Commons:

September marks the beginning of the next political cycle in Vermont. With it comes the opportunity for members of Vermont’s independence community to bring their values and ideas to Vermont’s politics.

While we dream about Vermont independence, achieving that goal may realistically be an ongoing project. In the meantime, we can bring our human-scale and local values to politics. We can prepare the ground for independence by supporting political efforts that complement our goals.

One way to influence politics for people who have limited spare time and money is to join a party. Vermont’s political parties reorganize themselves every two years. These “biennial reorganizations” begin at the town level and progress to the state level.

Town chairs will post “warnings” in newspapers and town halls for organizational caucuses that will meet in September. A caucus is simply a political meeting, which according to my dictionary was originally an Algonquian term for “counsel.” Registered voters will “meet in caucus” in their towns to form town party committees. They will elect new officers and delegates to county committees.

In October, the county committees will meet and elect new officers and delegates to the state committee. In November, the state committee will reorganize itself, too.

Vermont has six statewide parties. The major parties are the Democrats, Liberty Union, Progressive, and Republican parties. The minor parties are the Constitution and Libertarian parties. Each party maintains a website with varying degrees of useful information that are easily found with a web search.

The Vermont Secretary of State’s Election Division maintains a website www.vermont.gov/elections, which did not see the coming of electricity until the 1940s, I am surrounded by neighbors who can peen a scythe or sharpen a two-person lumber saw just as easily as they can reassemble the two-stroke engine on a Husqvarna Ranger or fix the intricacies of a New Holland baler belt. Having co-owned and worked on a yak farm for more than one year now, I am nothing if not grateful for their wealth of knowledge, patience, and good humor. Their families have lived here for generations, they know how to make the land produce, and most of all, perhaps, they understand the importance of community; their generosity and good will on behalf of neighbors, much of which happens under the radar and with very little fanfare, is inspiring.

And, as the political season approaches yet again, we’ll need committed individuals to run for local and state offices, Vermonters with the courage to speak honestly and hopefully about the realities this new century is bringing, as well as the willingness to work on solutions that will help Vermont to thrive in the decades ahead.

“The best way to predict the future,” computer wizard Alan Kay suggested, “is to invent it.” In the months ahead, we at Vermont Commons are deeply interested in publishing stories about how you and your Vermont communities are involved in the Great Re-Skilling.

As you invent Vermont’s future, keep us posted. Free Vermont! Long live the UnTied States.

Rob Williams
Editor/Publisher
The independent country store in Vermont is rebuilding its place in Vermonters’ lives.

More than three decades ago, George Seddon introduced the concept of “a sense of place” as he tried to understand Australia’s forbidding Swan Coastal Plain. What could be so compelling about such austerity, he wondered? For its residents, Vermont also has a strong sense of place – a geography that holds a special meaning for us, an authenticity of both hardship and welcome.

But we have also become commodified as a faux Vermont of images and objects that are high invisible outside the dewy camera lens and their reproduction on the glossy leaves of tourist magazines.

We who live here – even short-timer residents and those who live in our small cities – know the real Vermont as a culture of villages and neighbors free of metropolitan dominance. We are not a suburb of New York, Boston, or Montreal. Despite two interstate highways that fork their way northward through the Green Mountain State carrying tourists aplenty, we remain isolated.

That isolation harkens back to the settling of Vermont, when mountaintops and river valleys became home to farmers and traders. Settlements cropped up a day’s journey from each other along primitive trails. Eventually the trails widened and commerce grew, and traders settled down to establish the businesses that ultimately became today’s country stores.

Today, despite the gauzy camera lens, country stores are NOT nonprofit museums of some imaginary culture’s lost past.

Success was hard to come by. Nothing diminished the harshness, and as time passed – turnpikes of the 1800s, the summerless 1816, sheep of the 1830s, railroads of the 1840s, the Civil War of the 1860s, the Long Depression of the 1870s, the quarries in the 1880s, the silver crash of the 1890s, fires year after year, electrification, more wars in the 20th century, the Great Depression of the 1930s – the character of Vermont’s people was carved in hard work, gain and loss. Its village stores reflected struggle and need. One store offered groceries, another dry goods, a third farm supplies. The post office was found inside one, and conversation in all.

It might have remained an isolated outpost of farmers and traders and granite workers, but Vermont was the first state with a tourist bureau. What we endured, outsiders admired, which generated a good bit of head-shaking. Roads were paved, the passenger railroad expanded. The Great Depression barely touched us, true, but afterwards came the fruits of its recovery: the Civilian Conservation Corps and the ski trails and the Long Trail with its inviting route to the vistas of Mount Mansfield. Vermont became a destination.

The stores prospered again, if briefly. Improved transportation brought visitors, but also encouraged both consolidated school districts and consolidated stores: the supermarkets. Profits drained away, and village-based country stores shrank from three to two, sometimes to one. The inviting supermarket atmosphere where customers could pick and choose goods was irresistible. Some country stores dug in. Those who were flexible survived with goods the supermarkets could not carry, with personal service, and with that eternal conversation that began at dawn and ended past sunset.

The second half of the 20th century sent more economic shockwaves. Convenience stores blossomed at the ends of Interstate access roads and cropped up in towns in the 1970s, taking the bread and butter – or rather the bread, milk, beer and gas – that sustained the independents. More family stores closed; others responded with local products that served a new clientele of down-country immigrants who had followed the routes carved by the Interstates. Towns such as Windsor cut themselves off from change, and their downtowns shrank, starving their country stores into oblivion.

In the 1990s sprawl was redefining Vermont’s northwest, with greater Burlington achieving the dubious status of the state’s only “Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area.” Country stores lost their original purpose in a culture of shopping malls and invented suburbs. Combined with the construction of big box stores, forces again conspired to dismantle family-owned businesses. Country stores reached out with technology – FedEx pickup, ATMs, faxes, and Internet access – and products unimaginable in village stores a generation earlier were offered: wine collections, exotic coffees, and organic foods.

“Do we still need them?”

Not every village or general store is a haven. Storekeepers have been notoriously grumpy over the generations. After all, there is little more exhausting than being a family entrepreneur in Vermont – effectively self-employed and subject to the vagaries of government and trade. There is little respect and just as little money. “Eben has never made more than a living,” wrote Walter Hard about his fictional storekeeper in A Mountain Township. Mornings begin before sunrise and continue until the paperwork is finished.

And today, despite the gauzy camera lens, country stores are not nonprofit museums of some imaginary culture’s lost past. Yes, stores may have added coffee from Brazil and Indonesia and Ethiopia and wines from Chile and Australia and France and put up their old jars and cans and advertising posters for that friendly old-fashioned look, but few if any are politically correct. White bread, beer, candy, and snacks own the prominent...
shelf space, and many stores maintain their buck pools, reporting stations, and gun sales.

Indeed, the Vermont cultural divide of the late 20th century could be read in the stores, so many having given themselves over to tourism and its profits – and its false image of the Old Vermont – with others having shunned the passing visitor to offer clear-eyed local service. Yet survival was no longer guaranteed as tourists bypassed the stores without trinkets ... and locals bypassed the stores with them. So as familiar stores shuttered in Bethel and Woodbury and Shaftsbury and a dozen other villages, townspeople were beginning to look around and ask, “Where did my store go?”

In 2001, a group of store owners founded the Vermont Alliance of Independent Country Stores, the first organization to ask not only “Where did my store go?” but also “How do we save them? Do we still need them?”

Made up of a cross-section of Vermont’s population, the Alliance’s founding members were searching for both profit and meaning. The environmentalists and anti-sprawl storekeepers wondered if protective regulations enacted to preserve Vermont had backfired and caused village culture to collapse under the weight of paperwork. Paperwork that chain management might file once for its dozens of stores became more long hours at the end of a full day for family-run businesses. Regulations that a chain could easily apply across the corporation were breaking the back of small businesses. A bathroom to serve a handful of customers was becoming an expensive luxury to maintain compared to those serving big box stores – and more expensive in the face of engineering expenses. Inspectors were flocking in to examine store delicatessen counters and two-table cafés and cooler installations, the legislature was adding taxes that pushed patrons across the Connecticut River, and enormous credit card fees were sapping the profits from small sales. The “organic” movement was co-opted by well-intentioned regulators who quantified the term unrealistically; a recent New York Times article on chocolate reveals how big corporations welcome complex regulations that obliterate small farmers and cooperatives who cannot afford to meet them.

Meanwhile, customers in the Internet age wanted more and wanted it now. A customer once

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I have to admit that when I first heard about the campaign to plant a vegetable garden at the White House I saw it as a token gesture that was a nice idea but wouldn’t really make much of a difference. So when I heard about a similar project taking place at the Vermont Statehouse, I had similar thoughts. What difference could one little garden make?

The folks who are behind the vegetable gardens at the Statehouse (they call themselves the Association for the Planting of Edible Public Landscapes for Everyone, or APPLE Corps for short) picked the right year to approach the state about planting some vegetables on the grounds of the state capitol. Because of deep budget cuts, the flower beds that are usually lush with annual plantings were going to remain fallow this year to save money. With support from several legislators, the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, the Center for an Agricultural Economy, the Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont, and the Barre Community Gardens, the project was unanimously approved for a one-year trial by the office of the State House Capitol Complex Commission in late April of this year.

The group was given permission to plant vegetables in the two narrow 80-foot-long crescent gardens on the front lawn of the capitol, on the condition that the vegetable garden design match the grandeur and beauty of the flowering annuals that are usually planted in those beds. This stipulation helped APPLE Corps select what vegetables could and could not be planted in those gardens. Any vegetables that had the possibility of becoming messy were not good candidates for the garden. This meant that unruly and rambling tomatoes would not be designed into the garden. However, there are many vegetables that do work in this type of tailored garden, and by mid-June the group harvested more than 36 pounds of vegetables that were delivered to the Montpelier Food Pantry. A second harvest about a month later yielded another 66 pounds of food that went to the Montpelier Food Pantry and the Bethany Soup Kitchen. As vegetables are harvested more are planted, thereby tripling or quadrupling the productivity of the gardens. Many of the seeds and seedlings that have recently been planted are for winter storage vegetables such as carrots and beets.

So, what difference can one little garden make? With more than 100 pounds of food already produced from gardens that have existed for years, but have only been for show, the APPLE Corps has proven that edible public landscapes can play an important role in our ability as a state or a republic to feed ourselves and reduce our dependence on imported foods, whether they be from across the country or around the world. When we are assessing our food resources in the state, we need to remember that vegetables are not just grown in large flat fields and cultivated with gas-guzzling tractors driven by farmers who have dedicated their lives to producing food, but also by individuals and small groups who have access to little patches of land and some hand tools.

The Statehouse vegetable garden also demonstrates that growing food can be just as beautiful as growing flowers. As APPLE Corps head gardener Joann Darling observed in an entry on the group’s blog, “My visit to the gardens today reaffirmed my amazement of how beautiful vegetable plants can be. The subtle, yet vast shades of green and deep rich burgundies are greatly complimented by the beautiful white blooms of the Spirea bushes [that line the gardens].”

For those who say they have no space for a vegetable garden yet tend decorative flower beds each year, the Statehouse garden is an inspiration and a model of how you can have an “ornamental garden” and eat it too. And for those who have even the smallest swatch of grass that demands weekly mowing and possibly dangerous chemicals to keep it lush and green, perhaps the garden will encourage them to convert some of that lawn into a useful space without the neighbors complaining that the place is going to hell.

The Statehouse gardens prove once again that a grassroots group of citizens can make a difference in our human-scale state. The APPLE Corps has created a model for what can be done in public spaces throughout the state. One little garden – in the case of the Statehouse vegetable garden just 420 square feet – can make a difference.
In 1898, Teddy Roosevelt and his band of U.S. Marines known as the “Rough Riders” galloped up Loma Vista in eastern Cuba in a final push to rid the island of Spanish colonialism. For more than a century, Cuba had been the playground of Spanish colonialism and policies that had vanquished the native populations and decimated the island’s resources. Despite the appearance of altruistic motives, the story of Roosevelt’s triumph is remembered in Cuba as the moment Cubans freed themselves of colonialism only to fall victim to imperialism. While the U.S. newspapers featured countless stories of how Roosevelt had saved the day, there was scant coverage of the decades-long insurgency Cuban rebels had fought in an effort to free themselves from the tentacles of a foreign power.

If you ask a Cuban the story of their struggle against Spain you will get an account that goes something like this: After a heroic struggle by the Cuban people against Spain and the Herculean efforts of famed Cuban generals like Antonio Maceo and Carlos Manuel de Cespedes, Roosevelt and los Yanquis came in and stole Cuba’s destiny. They will point to the fact that even though the United States preached an independent Cuba, U.S. diplomats refused to attend the ceremony where Spain granted independence to Cuba. If you ask a Cuban, he or she would remind you of the infamous Platt Amendment which allowed the U.S. Congress veto power over anything the Cuban Legislature did and granted the Navy a perpetual lease of the now-notorious Guantanamo Bay for a whopping $4,800 per year (yes, the entire naval base is leased for less than most of us pay each year for a studio apartment). Famously, Castro has not cashed a single one of the lease checks since he gained power in 1959. Rumor has it they sit in a neat stack in his desk. The point is that from the day that Roosevelt rode into the Cuban history books until the triumph of Castro’s Revolution, Cubans have felt as though they were cheated out of their independence.

So what does this history lesson have to do with Vermont? In its own way, our little Republic has carried on its own siege against the scourge of what I like to call domestic imperialism. Many of us know that Vermont began as an independent Republic and we are proud of this heritage. The fact that Vermont led the way in outlawing slavery for example, gives us pause to reflect on how influential our little state can be. Another example of this can be found in Vermont’s localvore movement. Vermonters understand that not only is it of great economic and social benefit to our communities if we eat and buy locally produced products, but it is also the only sustainable way for human existence as we know it to continue. Like the Cubans, independent-minded Vermonters get it. They understand, for example, that we cannot continue to rely on cheap oil to import food from abroad.
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The resolution then asserts Oklahoma’s claims to sovereignty under the Tenth Amendment over all powers not otherwise enumerated and granted to the federal government. It then calls on the federal government to:

- “As our agent . . . cease and desist, effective immediately,” mandates that are beyond the scope of the Constitution;
- Prohibit or repeal compulsory legislation that directs states to comply under threat of civil or criminal penalties or require states to pass legislation to avoid loss of federal funding.

Finally, the resolution directs the Oklahoma House clerk to distribute copies of the resolution to the President of the United States, the President of the U.S. Senate, the clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, the speaker of the house and president of the senate in every state’s legislature, and to each member of Oklahoma’s congressional delegation.

The mainstream media have been fond of describing the resolutions as promoting secession, being careful to invoke a Lincolnesque contempt of the whole idea.

Oklahoma’s resolution is no call to arms – certainly no call for secession, as some of the media are suggesting. It is simply demands that the federal government do what it should have been doing all along – protect the American people by obeying our Constitution.

Strong words from the Granite State

New Hampshire’s resolution is much more radical. It was introduced by Rep. Dan Itse to put teeth into its demand for Tenth Amendment rights. The resolution begins with quotations from the 1784 New Hampshire Constitution and the statement accompanying its ratification of the U.S. Constitution. In that statement, New Hampshire asserts that “…all Powers not expressly & particularly Delegated by the [U.S. Constitution] are reserved to the several states to be, by them, Exercised.”

In the resolves, New Hampshire quotes six paragraphs almost verbatim from Thomas Jefferson’s Kentucky Resolution of 1798: “the several states composing the United States of America, are not united on the principle of unlimited submission to their General Government;” and expressing the principles of limited federal government already noted. The resolution also urges communications by “committees of correspondence” with other states, asserting the right to nullify within their borders federal actions that fall outside Constitutional limits.

Finally, New Hampshire’s resolution makes one of the boldest statements against federal authority ever made: “That any Act by the Congress of the United States, Executive Order of the President of the United States of America or Judicial Order by the Judicators of the United States of America which assumes a power not delegated to the government of the United States of America by the Constitution of the United States of America, and which serves to diminish the liberty of any of the several states or their citizens shall constitute a nullification of the Constitution of the United States of America by the government of the United States of America” in which “all powers previously delegated to the United States of America by the Constitution of the United States will revert to the several states individually” (emphasis added).

These conditions constitute what might be called a “secession trigger”:

1. Establishing martial law or state of emergency in a state without the consent of its legislature;
2. Requiring involuntary servitude or government service other than a draft during a declared war, or in punishment for a crime;
3. Requiring the same of persons under age 18, perhaps referring to proposed “community service” requirements for high school graduation;
4. Surrendering any power delegated or not delegated to any corporation or foreign government (such as the North American Union or the “New World Order”);
5. Any act regarding religion; further limitations on freedom of political speech (“Fairness Doctrine,” absolute prohibitions on religious activity on public property, or forced silence by candidates for a specified period before an election); or further limitations on freedom of the press;
6. Further infringements on the right to keep and bear arms, including prohibitions of type or quantity of arms or ammunition.

House Democrats defeated Rep. Itse’s resolution by a party line vote of 216-150 [Itse is a Republican]. South Carolina’s resolution, modeled on New Hampshire’s, has passed its House, and is under consideration by the state Senate.

Democratic legislators have almost unanimously opposed these resolutions. They argue that, in a time of crisis, the federal government needs the support of the states, not their opposition; and that such resolutions are an attack on the Obama Administration. One Idaho Democrat described their resolution as “sticking a pencil in the eye of the federal government.” They wish to portray this as a red state/blue state thing. The mainstream media have been fond of describing the resolutions as promoting secession, being careful to invoke a Lincolnesque contempt of the whole idea.

This line of reasoning raises some interesting questions. Should the Constitution of the United States remain the supreme law of the land? If it should, and the federal government is violating it (examples of which have been extensively docu-
Free Vermont Media: Skulk-ing About 9/11: Fighting Fiction With Fiction  
Marc Estrin

Editor’s Note: This month marks the eighth anniversary of the September 11, 2001, tragedy. During our first year of publication, Vermont Commons: Voices of Independence devoted our entire September issue to exploring unanswered questions surrounding the events of 9/11, and in subsequent years we have invited writers and scholars to critically consider the meaning of 9/11 in broader social and political contexts. Here, Burlington novelist Marc Estrin reflects on his novel Skulk as a tool for fighting fiction with fiction.

After seven years, the resistance to 9/11 truth studies continues to astound. Many very smart people – lefties, political activists, people who did not believe one word of what anyone in the Bush Administration said – for some reason believe every word of their (and now Obama’s) preposterous official version of 9/11. Unlike any other blather from Washington, this seems to be the story they want to believe. When I have tried to raise the subject, they will “not go there.” “Not going there” always involves the same hand gestures: both arms raised from the elbows, palms out, slightly in front of the face, blocking passage to the ears.

What’s going on? It’s not as if these people have no political analysis, or bold worldviews which won’t tolerate 9/11 truth investigation. A standard explanation is that some truths are so destructive the most common defense is total denial. When I tried to bring up the subject, one woman actually said to me, “I don’t want to live in a world where such things could happen.” Well, if openness to thinking about 9/11 necessitates suicide, I can understand her reaction.

But there are many kinds of suicide. In my case, there is the suicide envisioned for me as an author by my usual publisher, and a possible secondary suicide of his or any publishing house for associating themselves with an author who might be perceived as a tin-hatted conspiracy wacko. In the case of themselves with an author who might be perceived suicide of his or any publishing house for associating by my usual publisher, and a possible secondary there is the suicide envisioned for me as an author understanding her reaction.

Thinking about 9/11 necessitates suicide, I can say to me, “I don’t want to live in a world where such things could happen.” Out came my novel, Skulk: a post-9/11 comic novel.

But I started thinking about 9/11 fiction after writing an early review of David Ray Griffin’s first book, The New Pearl Harbor (http://counterpunch.org/estrin05252004.html). In 2004, there were still so many unanswered questions, and so little speculation itself is often best done by creative writers. So while Griffin and other investigators pursued their work, why not ask my fellow fiction writers to think about clues?

I put out a call to the small circle of writers I happen to know, angling for 9/11 short stories for a possible anthology. I was surprised to see so few come in, and of those few there were even fewer that were well-written enough to be published. So I abandoned the anthology project, and thought, “I’ll just do it myself.” Out came my novel, Skulk.

Skulk was a pleasure to write. It was fun actually having fun writing about 9/11! The book contained many of the playful/serious elements common in my writing:

• inventing an Ann Coulter-ish heroine capable of transforming into Bernardine Dohrn;
• a political attack on the concept of Santa Claus;
• the difficulties of making a quill pen in contemporary America;
• how to smuggle pot past Homeland Security;
• a short history of Bleeding Kansas;
• Jesus and political weirdness in Mulinville, Kansas;
• instructions on trailing, evading, and bugging 101;
• a Kansan Indian anthropologist on PC towards Indians, Kansas Indians, and a Norwegian story of the devil;
• a Middle East address attacked by yarmulka’ed clowns, and descending into melee, with lab experiments in the latest methods of crowd control;
• some advanced writing on learning skydiving, based on ACTUAL AUTHOR EXPERIENCE;
• flight-training software from Sadosoft, a pedagogical breakthrough.

I thought such a book might actually make an end run around the censorship on the topic.

I submitted it enthusiastically for publication, and submitted it again, and again. No one would touch it except for John Leonard at Progressive Press (at the kind suggestion of Webster Tarpley). As John had not really worked with fiction before, and because the fiction market is quite different from his usual one, we decided it wasn’t a match. But after a year of further, unsuccessful submissions, I embarrassingly turned to him again, and we decided to take the gamble together.

We shall see. There remains the question of how to reach beyond the initiates who are already looking for the kind of books Progressive Press puts out. This is a general problem beyond that of publishing 9/11 fiction. As activists, we all have to spend time to find ways to speak and educate beyond the choir. 9/11 truth! As Dick Cheney so pithily observed, “So?” So the government is trick-

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Morning chores. She heads to the barn with milking paraphernalia and the boys in tow; he visits the pigs, the chickens, the sheep, in that order. Food, water, a scratch behind an ear or horn. It is usually light, or just getting there, the last fragments of night slowly dispersing under the pressure of the coming day.

Most mornings of late, it has been raining. Or it has just rained, or it is just about to. It has gotten to where it all feels the same, and that sameness feels like jeans soaked through from walking in tall grass, or like slipping in the mud (or what he hopes is mud) of the pigpen, or like the side of a rain-streaked cow, warm no matter how cold. How wet.

He has come to accept the rain, in part because he has come to view it as a sort of liquid absolution for all the wrongs of his kind. This is silly, he knows. Rain is just rain. It is just the condensation of atmospheric water vapor, which, having overwhelmed the atmosphere’s ability to absorb it, has no choice but to fall. It is not absolution. It is not forgiveness. It is just rain.

But how can he help it? He watches, at once transfixed and helpless, as the ones who have more get more, as they wring trillions from the system, snatch ing it directly from the calloused palms of those who can least afford it. Why, if he weren’t a good, patriotic American, he’d think they were gaming the system. That they know full well the dice have been cast and that now is their last, best chance to load them up. And with the O-man playing by their rules... well, now. How’s that Everlast song go? “You know where it ends, yo, it usually depends on where you start.” True dat, Ev. True dat.

For those that have waited, it is here. To be sure, it is still mostly hidden from view, like an emerging day at 5 a.m. on a rainy July morning as he slogs to the pigs with buckets of milk. But it is here. For a time, he fretted over this truth. Now, he focuses on the tasks at hand. He focuses on building little bridges to those around him, and he sees the ways in which others are doing the same. He trades a few dozen eggs for use of the neighbor’s hay wagon, all the more pleased for it being the neighbor’s suggestion. He collects the waste milk from the dairy farm next door; he will feed it to his pigs, and in the fall, he’ll stop by with few pounds of bacon and some chops. M comes up to move some stones with his great, hulking tractor, and refuses money. “Bring me a few of those broilers when they’re ready, instead.”

He is not naïve. It will not be this easy. These transactions work for the simple, incongruous fact that the parties involved still have money to spend. There is no desperation at play. No, not yet. For now, they are not a solution. For now, they are merely pillars in his bridge. For now, it will rain, and the rain might wash him clean of the day’s dust, might slake, for a brief moment, his thirst. But that is all. And that is enough. •

Vermont’s country stores, continued from page 5

would ask and receive in good time, but the old storekeeper response of “I can have it for you on my next delivery” was obviated by the age of Amazon.com.

But contemporary customers also wanted both uniqueness and community – why else live in Vermont? some would ask – and in that desire the stores once again found their survival and growth.

The country stores’ Alliance brought publicity to the stores through CNN, NBC, New York Times, Boston Globe, local and regional cable news, magazines

in Vermont and around the world, and even in-flight video. But the storekeepers themselves reversed the trend that discouraged local shopping by bringing in more local produce, condiments, traditional and artisanal cheeses and breads, syrup, soda, microbrew products, and even artwork.

More happened. Certainly the store in the village was useful for Vermont’s first 150 years when transportation was difficult, but today the high price of gas and the hard work of storekeepers have conspired to keep folks closer to home and interested in their local stores again. It’s a long way back from stocking souvenirs and snacks to offering a panoply of Vermont products and solidly stocked shelves, but village culture works both ways: Local producers save fuel by selling locally; coupled with Vermonters’ increasingly diverse tastes, the country and general stores can be more fleet-footed and locally focused than their chain counterparts.

Life remains uneasy. A community public follows the path of least resistance to access-engineered “C-stores” (convenience stores). And supermarkets’ loss leaders were invented to draw customers away from the honest labor of the mom-and-pop business.

But a sense of place – indeed, a matter of place – does not come riding on four rubber tires. It is grounded.

There is an answer to the question, “Where did my store go?” It didn’t go. It’s there. Walk in. •

Coupled with Vermonters’ increasingly diverse tastes, the country and general stores can be more fleet-footed and locally focused than their chain counterparts.

How’s that Everlast song go? “You know where it ends, yo, it usually depends on where you start.” True dat, Ev.
Michael Wood-Lewis is the founder of Front Porch Forum, a social and community-networking website primarily serving Chittenden County. The following interview was conducted by Vermont Commons Editor/Publisher Rob Williams.

Thanks for talking with us, Michael. How would you describe Front Porch Forum for the average layperson?

Michael Wood-Lewis: In this era of super-busy people, Front Porch Forum (FPF) offers a way for folks to connect with their actual neighbors and build community. FPF hosts a network of 130 online neighborhood forums that blankets Chittenden County. Since our launch in 2006, more than 15,000 households have signed up, including 40 percent of Burlington, the state’s largest city.

By conversing online with their clearly identified nearby neighbors, FPF members feel more tuned in to local goings-on, know more people better, and often get more involved in community events. Any resident of Chittenden County (plus Starksboro!) may sign up for this free service at http://frontporchforum.com

So, I have to ask. Why do we need Front Porch Forum in the era of powerful social networking sites, like Facebook?

MW-L: Facebook is huge, and like most huge things it is powerful and does some great stuff and some not-so-great stuff. More than 90 percent of my neighborhood subscribes to FPF and 40 percent of Burlington. I think Facebook has about one-quarter of the United States signed up, which is amazing, but not amazing enough. FPF is not elite; that is, we want everyone who lives in a town or neigh-

Front Porch Forum is designed to promote face-to-face time among people who live near each other, with the hope that that will lead to stronger and more vibrant real communities — the bedrock of our democracy.

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Front Porch Forum is designed to promote face-to-face time among people who live near each other, with the hope that that will lead to stronger and more vibrant real communities — the bedrock of our democracy.
“The nation that destroys its soil destroys itself.”
-Franklin D. Roosevelt 1937

Inheriting Subsoil
The State of Vermont soil maps say that I live on land composed of 6 to 12 inches of silty loam underlain by gravely clay subsoil – not prime farmland but pretty great stuff for growing fruit and nut trees and agreeable to raising vegetables with proper fertility management. Yet, for the past five years I’ve been gardening and planting trees across this site and have found only pockets of silty loam soil a few times; it’s just clay, boulders, and more clay.

Where’s all the topsoil? Are the maps wrong?
Local elders in their 80s who have tended farm animals on this hillside have helped me to complete a picture that should not be surprising, for it’s the story of 75 percent of Vermont’s landscape: land clearing for timber extraction during colonial times, then potash production with the remnant forest combined with the sheep craze (2 million-plus sheep in Vermont). Add to this a ravenous diet of 10-30 cords of wood per house for heat, followed by hardscrabble grazing in the early half of the 20th century to polish off the rest of any remaining topsoil. Overgrazing sparsely vegetated, sloping land yields predictable results: massive transport of topsoil from the hillsides into Vermont’s great storm water detention basin – Lake Champlain.

Vermont’s soil story is similar to the rest of the country, with the Gulf of Mexico catching the topsoil washing off the exposed heartland of America at a rate of about 1 billion dump-truck loads per year. Only a comet or large asteroid collision with Earth has ever destroyed so much biological capital so quickly, and it’s likely that only one other potential event qualifies to be on this short list of globally catastrophic happenings: large-scale nuclear conflict.

The Great Soil Erosion of the last two centuries represents the most massive transport of material on Earth since the last ice age. My small 10 acres on which, say, about eight inches of silt was lost amounts to roughly 12,000 tons of topsoil, or about 350 dump-truck loads. Standing at the sunset of the cheap-energy era, we now have to build a renewable society starting with about 200 million less dump-truck loads of soil than the first European settlers to this region had. Strangely, for the past 50-80 years few have noticed the missing topsoil – except organic farmers and scuba divers in Lake Champlain, who have reported depositional zones of soil 10 to 30 feet deep across wide areas of the lake bottom.

Amazingly, most farming seems to go on as usual. We’ve managed to keep a small group of crops producing by trucking our fertility in from afar. As we begin to transition out of the cheap-energy era the reality of Earth’s missing topsoil will be felt more deeply than we might imagine. Healthy soil is, of course, the foundation of any agriculture and culture; food can only be extracted from land via fossil fuel fertilizers and pesticides temporarily, at best. Societies have long existed without highways and electrical grids; it’s when the soil and water give out – or the climate shifts...
quickly – that civilizations collapse. This collapse may continue to be delayed for as long as fossil fuels can be substituted for soil, rapid climate change is nascent, or until fresh, potable water becomes scarce.

It’s becoming clear that the most direct way humanity can triage the soil-climate-water emergency is through rapidly building topsoil, as soil is the lever for the triad. As we begin to digest the news about the role of topsoil as lynchpin in ecological health and human resource sustainability, we are waking up to a world of new possibilities, including global carbon negativity, agricultural yield improvements (while simultaneously reducing inputs), flood mitigation, and biodiversity rehabilitation to name a few.

And only topsoil formation does all of these things with the amplitude to matter. Building topsoil is a deep solution that doesn’t create a multitude of new problems while attempting to solve the original one; in contrast, it actually solves many, synergistically. Disenchanted with the failure of each silver-bullet techno-fix, humanity is beginning to realize that the resource-generating system we need most has already been invented: photosynthesis is the production and soil is the storage. If being the “toolmakers” sustained humanity through the last epoch, evolving into soil makers and water restorers might just get us from the oil age into a true solar age.

What is soil?
The more we learn about the living matrix underfoot, the more we understand it as a vast, synergistic composite of ingredients and processes. Although soil is composed of known substances such as minerals and particles from the underlying bedrock “parent material,” organic matter from plant and animal tissues, and water, we have just begun to understand the almost magical existence of living soil born from non-living matter.

Despite its many mysteries, we do know that soil is several things:

• It is the principal in our trust fund with Earth (yes, she gave us a trust – the assemblage of species and water are all part of that inheritance).
• It is generative; along with water, it is the living medium from which life stems (with the influx of sunshine).
• Its quantity and quality set Earth’s thermostat. Soil is where most of the carbon is: 2 percent organic matter (carbon) in the top foot of soil represents more carbon than has been produced on the planet since the Industrial Revolution began. This amount of organic matter can be built in one growing season, easily, with sound land practices. (That’s the really good news).

Societies have long existed without highways and electrical grids. It’s when the soil and water give out – or the climate shifts quickly – that civilizations collapse.

Soil to oil
Solar photovoltaics, wind power, hydrogen fuel cells, smart grids, nanotech, clean coal... But what if the best news in humanity’s prospects for a more livable future is not these and other new technologies manufactured from factories, but ages-old living material manufactured by water, fungi, wind, and plants from this planet’s bedrock? (And how much more effective would our efforts be if we focused on soil creation at least as much as we do on developing new technologies?)

How will soil (and biological systems in general) again become our baseline resource-generator and storehouse? How can we enhance the soil system to sustain humanity’s resource needs while at the same time sopping up the excess carbon we’ve left in the atmosphere during the Great Fossil Fuel Party?

Back again: oil to soil
A century ago we began producing our resources with oil instead of soil. Now, we’re beginning to realize just how bad a deal this was; we needed the soil not just to produce our resources renewably but to temper our climate, sustain biodiversity, deal with drought, and repair our health. But how can we possibly rebuild, say, 3 billion tons or 100 million dump-truck loads of soil in Vermont alone, maybe 1,000,000,000,000 (yes, a trillion) dump-truck loads in the heartland of the United States? It takes a “natural” system hundreds of years to make just 1 inch of topsoil, so we need a way to make soil that’s a thousand, maybe ten thousand times faster than the historical rate of soil formation.

Is this possible? There’s only one way to find out. Due to the sheer volume of matter needing to be converted into topsoil, any system that builds soil rapidly will utilize the most abundant and potent resources at hand, including:

continued on page 18
Letters, continued from page 3 -elections.org/ with useful information about the parties and the rules of the game in Vermont.

If your town and party do not have a committee already – and many towns don’t – you can form one. You only need three registered voters of the town to form a town committee. If you and two friends would like to form a new town committee, contact your county chair before August. They will be happy to help you. Parties are always looking for members. It’s best to contact them soon, so you will have time to “warn” your meeting.

Once you are on a committee you will have access to your elected representatives. Politicians and party committees enjoy a shotgun marriage arranged by law. Politicians, the husbands, need party committees, the wives, because by law their parties (the marriage) cannot exist without the committees. Politicians have their own needs and ideas. They work hard for the privilege and right to implement them. Like any marriage, if you want the politicians to help you, you will need to help them or nag them.

Politicians need money and votes. There are often two political organizations in a town: the official one, the wife, and the financial one, the mistress. The politicians are acutely aware of and listen to the financial organization. You won’t find this organization listed on the party websites! If you and your committee have limited means – and you most likely will – then you can still provide networks, forums, letters, and boots on the ground to support your politicians.

Being a member of a political committee can be a lot of fun. You meet nice people with similar interests and play an important role in your community. I look at it as a public service. To achieve it, our independent-minded community needs to get in the political game. We may not always win, but over time we can bend our society in the right direction. Let’s Party!

Tom Lackey
Stowe

THE CIRCUS: A MODEL COMMUNE?

Editor, Vermont Commons:

Your last issue [Vermont Commons, Summer 2009] has a letter from Bill Morancy (“What Circus Smirkus Teaches Us About Secession”) about his experience touring as a concessionaire with the circus. He writes about the challenges and lessons learned from living in close quarters with a diverse group of adults and what it means to be a member of a compact social society.

The idea for Circus Smirkus came into my head in the early ’70’s when I performed with traditional circuses throughout Europe. I was impressed by the multi-cultural, borderless, hierarchical structure of the circus as a sustainable, self-contained working commune. The model is not without faults. But the circus is a fascinating example of a subculture of society, where everyone from roustabout to bosses understands their role, and where dreams of advancement are dependent upon one’s skills, ambition, work ethic, and ability to accept the internal laws of the communal lifestyle.

Different from the typical commune, which essentially is made up of like-minded people, circus reflects the strata of society: hooligan, drifter, day-jobbing roustabouts, cooks, artists, managers, and bosses. The community works primarily by the paradoxical nature of self-reliance dependent on the trust of others, where a handshake is a binding contract. You don’t have to like your neighbors, but coexistence is understood as imperative to functioning. Circus Smirkus exists by its symbiotic relationship with the communities it enters, with a mission to nourish the idealism of youth.

The children of circus professionals also impressed me. Spared the age segregation of public schooling, it is not uncommon to witness a mature 10-year-old kid debating convincingly with adults, speaking several languages fluently, with an understanding of geography better than most Americans. Kids work alongside their parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents. It is the apprentice model of learning, an extended home schooling with the advantage of acquiring skills from professionals in a communal setting. Diversity, cultural tolerance, play, hard work, and physical challenges contribute to the depth of life experience here. To grow up in this environment is not such a bad thing, I thought. Why didn’t more young people run off to join such a culture?

Smirkus is the only touring international youth circus in America. It is a circus based on the global model, yet small enough to play in rural Vermont towns. Beyond all this social philosophy, there is the magic of the circus itself. Only through the dedication of the whole company – Smirkus is a traveling commune of 80 people – does the event take place, and it is a ridiculously hard effort. And yet this odd subculture on the fringe of society is a model of a communal lifestyle that works, one that creates a product of laughter and pure joy as an antidote to the propaganda of mass culture and the overdose of cynicism in the modern world.

Rob Mermin
Founder, Circus Smirkus
www.robmermin.com

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I was inspired by Barack Obama’s campaign for the presidency. When I read The Audacity of Hope, I was convinced that he was a genuine visionary, one who might lead us beyond the stale ideologies of our time. I thought my colleagues in the Vermont independence movement were a little too cynical to dismiss him as yet another, more slickly packaged, builder of empire. Sadly, except for a few history-jarring moments, such as his speech in Cairo, I’m coming to believe that their skepticism is justified. Nothing has driven this home to me more than the imperial educational policy that he and his technocrat secretary of education, Arne Duncan, have unleashed on American youth. They call it “Race to the Top.”

“We need to ask, as Wendell Berry once did, what are people for? and the question that should follow from it: what are schools for?”

This argument exploits — indeed, deepens — every parent’s anxiety about their children’s livelihoods, and our society’s (spotty) commitment to equality of opportunity. Without standards, it is claimed, young people will struggle in life, and the poor and marginalized will struggle the most. Surely we don’t want that. But we need to deconstruct this argument. We need to ask, as Wendell Berry once did, what are people for? and what are schools for?

Education By Design: “Race to the Top” — Or “Something Closer to the Heart”? Ron Miller

National educational policy is one more reason why we need to challenge the burgeoning power of the U.S. Empire.
Vermont and Cuba, continued from page 7

must re-double our efforts to lead the United States down a better path. For all its faults, there is some truth in the words of Supreme Court Justice Brandeis when he opined that a vibrant federalism allows each state to be a Petri dish of ideas, without damning the whole nation to a policy that may not work. Despite its small size and population, Vermont, just like Cuba, has been a leader in the move toward change. At first blush the similarities between Cuba and Vermont may appear to be mere coincidence, but on closer examination it becomes clear that our state has led the way in preserving and growing a real connection with the Caribbean nation.

I was first introduced to this remarkable and improbable connection three years ago when my wife and I moved to South Royalton to attend Vermont Law School. My wife, who was born and lived much of her life in Cuba, began to search the Vermont community in hopes of finding other Cuban-Americans here. Thousands of miles away from Cuba, in cold and snowy Vermont, we hardly expected much of a response. To our surprise we stumbled upon not only a Cuban-American community in the Green Mountain State, but also discovered a strong and growing relationship between Vermont and the Republic of Cuba itself. In a short period of time, we became involved with a study-abroad program between Burlington College and the University of Havana, and we had met with Lt. Governor Brian Dubie, the leader of several Vermont trade delegations to Cuba and an avid supporter of changing our policies toward Cuba. On a cold winter night, we stumbled upon a lively salsa band in Woodstock made up of Cuban-Americans from my wife’s hometown of Santiago de Cuba. We even met and became great friends with Vermont Commissioner of Education Armando Vilaseca – who, surprise, is also a Cuban-American. Not bad in a state that boasts a population of just over 600,000.

Vermonters don’t care what the policy wonks in Washington, D.C., say about “foreign policy interests in our sphere of influence,” or what a dwindling number of old-school Cubans in Miami have to say about the dictatorship of Fidel Castro.

A natural connection

At first, we did not fully realize why Vermont had such a connection with Cuba. However, as time passed and we got a better sense of Vermont’s independent streak, we came to realize how natural it was for so many Vermonters to be interested in and actively promote a stronger relationship with Cuba. Vermonters don’t care what the policy wonks in Washington, D.C., say about “foreign policy interests in our sphere of influence,” or what a dwindling number of old-school Cubans in Miami have to say about the dictatorship of Fidel Castro. Vermonters want to do what’s right and Vermonters want to learn and experience things on their own. To put it bluntly, Vermonters don’t like to be told what to do.

From that perspective, the Cuban-Vermont connection is only natural. Cubans don’t want to bow to the wishes of foreign powers, and Vermonters... well, we’d rather have vibrant local economies than see our hard-earned dollars get shipped down to Sam Walton’s Wal-Mart headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas.

In the face of an economic blockade enforced by the United States, Cubans have developed a fierce sense of independence and resistance that is reminiscent of some of Vermont’s struggles against corporate greed and influence. As the only state that can boast of having a capital city without a McDonald’s, Vermont is full of citizens who treasure their independence. While so many of our brethren states have caved in to the instant and unsustainable gratification of strip malls and box stores, Vermont has, to a large extent, struggled to resist. Ever under attack from the outside forces of an unsustainable system, Vermonters have gallantly moved to maintain their independence. We have worked tirelessly to preserve Vermont’s downtowns, as well as to protect our agriculture and societal heritage. In this regard, the people of our state are very similar to the citizens of Cuba who have resisted decades of hostile aggression by outside forces.

This is not to say that Vermont should be like Cuba or that Cuba is a utopian society. Like all societies, it most certainly is not. However, Vermonters have always been resistant to ideas imposed on it by outside forces; as such, it is not really a surprise that Vermont has looked for ways to engage with our Cuban neighbors who are similarly minded. We understand that just as Cuba can learn much from our engagement, our southern neighbors also offer a unique insight into how a future of local production and sustainability can be accomplished through resistance and resilience. This is the essence and importance of Vermont’s relationship with Cuba.

In Cuba, a daily reminder.
When internationally known peak oil educator Richard Heinberg visited Vermont last year, he described two types of people he met in his travels. Some people read all the latest news about peak oil and climate change and become “glum plums.” Others keep up with that news, too, but focus on acting to change their world and prepare, and they walk around with big smiles on their faces. He was inspired that people in the second group could live with some of the most dire news that a society can face, and yet be so cheerful in their actions.

Transition Towns help bring people together to change their world—and to smile. And this sort of optimism attracts people to join. Yet current information on the urgency of change is important to keep focused on the whys of Transition, and it’s helpful in pulling in new Transitioners. When the U.S. government spends billions on a Cash for Clunkers program that subsidizes individuals’ purchases of 18-mpg SUVs, it’s clear that we need a lot more people talking about the latest on the three primary reasons for Transition: peak oil, climate change, and economic collapse.

If you want to spend most of your time on action, here are some places where, with just a modest amount of effort, you can keep up to date* on the latest information.

**Peak Oil**
Weekly newsletters are published by the British Oil Depletion Analysis Centre (www.odac-info.org/newsletter) and the U.S. chapter of the Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas (www.aspo-usa.com). Take your pick. The references to the original stories are live links, and therefore easier to follow, in the ODAC newsletter.

**Climate Change**
The most prominent climate scientist in Vermont’s discussions of climate change has been Alan Betts. He introduced me to www.realclimate.org (“Climate science from climate scientists”). The blog at the main page is too wonky for the person who wants an updated overview, but check out the links at the top of the home page for the index, the Real Climate Wiki, or the “Start here.”

**Economic Collapse**
This is a tough area to recommend resources. Economics tackles a more complicated subject than petroleum geology or climate science, so it’s easy to find widely varying opinions on where we are and where we’re going. Also, the majority of mainstream economists don’t recognize resource limitations to economic growth. That’s true even for most economists who foresaw the current collapse of the housing market and financial sector, and their drag on the rest of the economy.

Jeff Rubin, author of *Why Your World Is About to Get a Whole Lot Smaller*, would be my candidate for regular blog updates – if he had a blog. Look for interviews of him.

“The Automatic Earth” blog (www.theautomaticearth.blogspot.com) comes close to capturing the spirit of financial analysis that I think animates many in the Transition movement. While the mainstream economic press exaggerates the prospects of “green shoots” and ignores still-flashing warning signs, “The Automatic Earth” keeps an eye on the warnings. Sometimes too much so; the writers have predicted more dire events than have occurred. Still, I think it provides a good antidote to the conventional business press, and the primers on the right side of the main page are full of good sense.

If you want regular updates on peak oil, climate change, and economic collapse, these sources are useful. If you find yourself being sucked into watching collapse happen to the exclusion of working to Transition, you’ll probably be happier ignoring the updates and just preparing your household and community.

* For introductions and more in-depth reading on peak oil in particular, see my blog posts of December 8, 2008 and January 11, 2009 at http://www.vtcommons.org/blog/carl-etnier
• Subsoil (mineral source)
• Atmosphere (carbon dioxide and nitrogen source)
• Water (oxygen source and nutrient delivery)
• Sunshine (energy source for converting plant matter into soil organic matter)
• “Wastes”: manures, crop residues, woody biomass, food scraps, rock minerals, sand, and other available soil components (nutrients and organic matter)
• Tools for optimally utilizing the above resources, to measure soil formation, and to provide continual feedback (technique improvement over time)

Strategies are emerging for combining these ingredients to make fertile topsoil with great speed. These strategies include nutrient cycling/composting; cover cropping; intensive, tall-grass grazing; subsoil plowing and keyline agriculture; deep-rooting perennials; biochar and re-mineralization; and bacteria and fungi inoculation. Most if not all of these strategies can be combined. Some are suitable only on the farm scale, while others are more suitable at the home scale, and strategies vary according to the type of landscape in which soil formation is applied.

The next edition of this column will highlight ways of applying these strategies on the small farm and homestead scale. In the meantime visit the following links for more information:

- http://www.carbonfarmersofamerica.com/
- http://www.biochar-international.org/biochar
- http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1lI-znogTk

1 Rough amount of topsoil volume for 10" of soil lost on 2 million Vermont acres.
2 Topsoil formation represents the most likely significant action we can take for land repair, although ocean repair is equally needed. However, there is nothing we know of yet that can heal oceans like rapid topsoil formation can heal land.
In the same way, I would like Skulk to simply put the materials of the 9/11 Truth movement into circulation. Skulk does not argue, it does not prove, it assumes the reader knows all about it. And on some level, I do think that many denying Americans do know. It needs only to be brought into legitimate discussion. 9/11 fiction may be another, possibly successful, doorway to that discussion. •
It’s Time...

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www.northbranchvineyards.com

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www.charlottevilagewinery.com

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www.lincolnpeakvineyard.com

Champlain Valley Winery
www.northriverwinery.com

Shelburne Vineyard
www.shelburnevineyard.com

Boyden Valley Winery
www.boydenvalley.com

Grand View Winery
www.grandviewwinery.com

Snow Farm Vineyard
www.snowfarm.com

Fresh Tracks Farm Wines
www.freshtracksfarms.com

Putney Mountain Winery

For Vermont Wine.
www.vermontgrapeandwinecouncil.com
So philosophically, it sounds like you are running in the opposite direction of Facebook.

MW-L: We are. Philosophically, Facebook’s mission seems diametrically opposed to FPF’s. Facebook and most Web 2.0 social media sites are designed to maximize screen time for people; they want as many hours of your life as you’ll give them before you shake off this mortal coil. FPF is designed to promote face-to-face time among people who live near each other, with the hope that that will lead to stronger and more vibrant real communities… the bedrock of our democracy. It would be difficult for FPF to succeed with its mission in a Facebook environment where you were encouraged to piddle away another hour via other Facebook bells and whistles every time you checked in with your neighbors.

And what about ownership of content?

MW-L: Exactly. Facebook owns all content produced on its platform (or it will whenever it decides to assert that ownership). FPF wants to own its content and it doesn’t want to be in the business of aggregating neighborhood-level content for Facebook to use at a later date for some other purpose.

Any other thoughts here?

MW-L: Facebook can reinforce clique-like behavior. Facebook is good for renewing old contacts and strengthening existing ones, but doesn’t do much for meeting new people who live near you. And, finally – bottom line, too – Facebook is the opposite of local; it’s the online equivalent of Wal-Mart and Starbucks. Facebook (and Craigslist, Twitter, Angie’s List, Freecycle, etc.) is a huge international corporation that feigns local. In addition to dollars, the online economy is really sustained on contributions by participants and by readers’ attention. Facebook and its ilk suck online eyeballs and postings from other truly local internet-based services (like Seven Days online, iBrattleboro, FPF, etc.), driving them toward extinction. Decentralized control of media, information, and communication is one of the great promises of the internet. Facebook works directly against that hope.

So currently, how many neighborhoods are using Front Porch Forum in Chittenden County?

MW-L: Every neighborhood and town in Chittenden County uses FPF now, some more vibrantly than others. In some places we may only have a dozen subscribers and hardly any postings. But in others, FPF is full to bursting. To date, it’s been left to each community to breathe life into their own FPF neighborhood forum. For example, the towns of Huntington, Westford, Starksboro, Richmond, and Hinesburg all use FPF mightily… Burlington and South Burlington too.

Okay, so can you give us some specific stories illustrating how FPF has helped to build community in neighborhoods in Chittenden County?

MW-L: Lauren Curry wondered if her town of Westford had a food shelf. So she posted a note to her neighbors on Front Porch Forum (FPF).
Vermont Libre: Wanted: Vermont Patriots To Run For the State House

Thomas Naylor

In spite of the fact that a UVM Center for Rural Studies survey found that more than 75 percent of the eligible voters in Vermont believe the U.S. government has lost its moral authority and that nearly 50 percent think the U.S. has become unsustainable (politically, economically, militarily, and environmentally), none of the 180 members of the Vermont Legislature have ever been willing to introduce a resolution calling for Vermont independence.

This is even more amazing when you consider the fact that not only is the U.S. government teetering on the brink of financial collapse, but it condones illegal wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, record-high military budgets, more than 1,000 military bases worldwide, unconditional military support for Israel, multi-trillion dollar budget deficits, endless Wall Street bailouts, corporate greed and fraud, and a culture of deceit.

Undaunted, Governor Jim Douglas, the entire council of state, and all of the members of the Legislature remain loyal to the American Empire, which is arguably the largest, wealthiest, most powerful, most militaristic empire of all time. Vermont state government officials are to the Vermont independence movement what the Tories were to the American Revolution.

So steeped in the culture of the Empire is the Vermont Statehouse crowd that they will never change. They must be replaced by younger, more open-minded Vermont patriots who believe that it’s high time to tell the Vermont Democratic, Progressive, and Republican parties that enough is enough.

This is a call for bright, young, energetic Vermont Patriots to run for the state legislature in 2010 as unabashed advocates of Vermont independence.

Long live the Second Vermont Republic.

Dispersion, continued from page 27:

Department of Justice has issued an “open letter” warning arms manufacturers in Tennessee and Montana that they should not obey acts that those states’ legislatures passed earlier this year (with large majorities) freeing them from federal restrictions. The acts, it declared, “conflict with Federal firearms laws and regulations, Federal law supercedes” the acts, and all provisions of the National Firearms Act “continue to apply.”

The legislatures have so far not responded – the letter was issued in July, when most legislatures are on vacation – but it will be interesting to see how far they will go to protect their rights and interests when they reassemble. Because when nullification runs smack up against federal resistance, the logical – nay, inevitable – next step is… secession. Don’t Tread on Me.

It happened that way twice before. The American Revolution of 1776 was, of course, built on the principle of secession, as was the so-called “Civil War” of 1861-1865. The second of these two historical moments didn’t turn out so well for the secessionists, as you will recall, but might does not in fact make right. This time, as with the 1776 Revolution, the right may prevail.

Calling All Vermont Musicians!

Send Us Your Music!
When she learned that none existed currently, she reached out again via FPF to form a steering committee. Then it was through FPF yet again that they found food, cash, space, volunteers, and, eventually, recipients. Her neighbors delivered on every count! Now, one year later, the food shelf is critical in the lives of many town residents affected by the recession. And no government, foundation, or corporate money or leadership has been needed.

Lauren wrote: “Thanks to FPF, having a community-wide conversation about how to address our local hunger problem was a cinch. With the help of rallying neighbors, we got our food shelf up and running in no time. Not a community meeting — or practically any public-oriented conversation — goes by without FPF being tossed into the mix. What a wonderful gift.”

Indeed. And you are anticipating my next question a bit here. In an age of Internet Web 2.0 “bells and whistles” — vlogging, podcasting, Wiki-building — Front Porch Forum is awfully low-tech. Can you comment on this?

MW-L: FPF uses the best technology available to achieve its aim. That is, we want everyone in each community on board FPF. The most ubiquitous online channel is e-mail (by a long shot), so we stick with e-mail as our primary distribution tool. We don’t just want a slice of the population (e.g., just college kids, or just techies). We want everyone. We also favor simple plain text e-mail because many of our subscribers have old computer set-ups and/or slow dial-up internet connections, so we use the lowest common denominator, which is plain text e-mail. Our service is also available through our website and we’ll add other channels and tools as it makes sense.

What have been the biggest obstacles to deploying Front Porch Forum more widely?

MW-L: We created FPF first as a tool to help build community in our own neighborhood in Burlington’s South End. Then we expanded it to Chittenden County in order to share the value of our service with more people and towns, and also to strengthen our larger community. Now that it’s clear that FPF brings real value to many, many people, places and businesses, we are eagerly taking on the challenge of expanding our service region. We set up shop in Starksboro about five months ago, and already one-third of the town is making great use of FPF. We are negotiating with another Vermont county and are exploring several other opportunities to bring our service to other parts of Vermont.

So what do you see in Front Porch Forum’s future three, five, 10 years down the road?

MW-L: We’d love to see Front Porch Forum grow across North America and beyond, region by region. We’ve been operating our service in our flagship neighborhood for nine years and more than 90 percent of the 400 households subscribe. People here say things like ‘I can’t imagine our neighborhood without FPF.” It’s simply become part of the infrastructure... like sidewalks, the newspaper and the corner store. I’m eager to achieve that level of success in many, many places in the years ahead.

Thanks for talking to us, Michael, and good luck with your important work.
“If we don’t have it, you don’t need it.”

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Vermont Alliance of Independent Country Stores
www.vaics.org
Empire. It is the way of community, stewardship of place, and human scale. It is the way of decentralized power and authority, of partnership, not domination.

In recent decades, in response to an increasingly technocratic and authoritarian system of schooling, many thousands of educators and parents have sought to practice this understanding by starting alternative schools or turning to home schooling. Young people thrive in these learning environments, and come out brimming with self-confidence, multiple competencies, and a strong sense of purpose. They consistently prove that abstract, rigidly imposed standards are not necessary for equipping youth with essential life skills.

A few years ago, an idealistic teacher named Tal Birdsey started such a school for young adolescents in Ripton, Vermont, called North Branch School. He tells its story, with delightful wit and penetrating insight, in his inspiring new book *A Room for Learning*. We see how an authentic teacher builds a caring, loving community of learners. Every page, every incident and observation Birdsey relates, is a gentle but firm repudiation of technocratic schooling. “The first parents gravitated to the school,” he tells us, because something entirely different could be made. . . . (C)urrent political debates about accountability or state funding fell far short of meaningful discourse about the education of children. These parents, no matter their income, education, or political views, were seeking education that involved something closer to the heart. In particular, they seemed to want something more creative and free . . . in contradistinction to schools tethered to right, standards-based approaches or school officials bombarded with federal mandates to test (pp. 31-32).

*A Room for Learning* shows exactly what “something closer to the heart” looks like in education. Birdsey sees each of his students as whole persons, with their own challenges, inclinations, learning styles, quirks and insecurities. Most of them have been “wounded by school” (as Kirsten Olson systematically documents in her recent book by that title); they are afraid of ridicule and rejection, suspicious of adults who judge them and of peers who band together in cliques to exercise power. They are reluctant to open themselves to others, to test their own limits or pursue their deepest dreams. Birdsey tells how he created a safe, nurturing space in which these young teens could find and test their best, authentic selves. “I asked them to embrace the personal pronoun I so that we might come closer to what was sacred inside of them. Those truths – their truths – would bring us closer to what mattered” (p. 59). Ultimately, what really matters to Birdsey and his students is a community where everyone feels cared for, a community rooted in love. This, not triumph in the corporate race, is what people are for.

Educational policies based on standardization, authoritarian control, and competition for abstract goals only support the continuation of empire. People don’t much matter – systems do. Education dictated by corporate and political elites is oblivious to the lived reality of children and youths struggling to define themselves and find their place in the world. “Race to the Top,” like “No Child Left Behind,” and every other federal educational mandate, imposes a brutal efficiency on schooling that has no place for visionary educators like Birdsey, who honor the essential personhood of their students.

One vital goal of Vermont independence is an educational culture that respects and encourages learning on a human scale, that supports caring and loving communities of learning. National educational policy is one more reason why we need to challenge the burgeoning power of the American empire. Because Vermonters value genuine democracy, treasure individuality, and hold as precious the local land and community, we ought to decline the federal government’s inducements to participate in any “race to the top.”

References

Also visit www.northbranchschool.org .

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Something momentous has happened this year that the mainstream media have paid practically no attention to. It is the rise of a “state sovereignty” movement that has led to the consideration by no fewer than 37 state legislatures of measures distancing themselves from the federal government and affirming their Tenth Amendment rights.

(For those of you who have forgotten the Tenth Amendment – and with some reason, since it hasn’t been enforced for a century or so – it declares that “the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.” In other words, Congress does some things for the country, the states do all the rest.)

The movement probably has its recent roots in the widespread protests that greeted the Department of Agriculture’s plan in 2004 for a National Animal Identification System that would force all cattle (initially) to be tagged in a way that would enable Washington to identify and locate them. The expense for this, naturally, would fall on individual farmers, and on the states to monitor and enforce it, but the feds would provide no funds. Many states objected and forced the Agriculture Department to make it all voluntary (at least at first, so it says), and Kentucky passed a law specifically forbidding the state to enforce it. The expense for this, of course, would fall on the people within their bounds.

This bit of Big Brother folly was followed in 2005 by the REAL ID Act, requiring states to provide licenses or IDs for all the people within their boundaries (legal and illegal), again without making any funds available (which Congress had also done previously in the No Child Left Behind intrusion). This was so blatant a combination of federal snoopyry and unfunded-mandate onerousness that all 50 states refused and got “extensions” from enforcing it. In 2007 the government postponed enforcement across the country, but two years later 23 states still defied the government and refused to have anything to do with it. The Department of Homeland Security has suggested that it wouldn’t ask for enforcement until 2011.

These two examples seem to have outraged and emboldened many state legislatures and there came to be increasing talk about how to assert state sovereignty. That burst into flame with the creation of the financial-bailout government of the late Bush and early Obama months, topped with the quasi-fascist “stimulus” packages earlier this year, suddenly creating a Washington-run behemoth so big that nobody knew how to control it or where it was spending its money. The image of Obama’s financial kitchen-cabinet creating an enormous $3 trillion expenditure of taxpayers’ money for the benefit of financial institutions, and having the government take over banks and car manufacturers in an out-and-out Soviet display of centralization, enraged many in the state houses.

The result was the outpouring of bills in those 37 state legislatures – three-quarters of the states – seeking to assert, one way or another, the Tenth Amendment rights of state governments in defiance of federal intervention and imposition. As The New York Times was forced to acknowledge in June: “There’s a states-rights movement that is picking up steam across the country.”

Let me quote from one bill to give you a sense of these resolutions:

“1. That the State of Arizona hereby claims sovereignty under the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States over all powers not otherwise enumerated and granted to the federal government by the Constitution of the United States.

“2. That this Resolution serves as notice and demand to the federal government, as our agent, to cease and desist, effective immediately, mandates that are beyond the scope of these constitutionally delegated powers.” — Arizona resolution

When nullification runs smack up against federal resistance, the logical – nay, inevitable – next step is… secession.

Bills were also introduced in Alabama, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, Nevada, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington, Wisconsin, and West Virginia; but so far they have not been brought to the floor in those houses. Resolutions have been defeated in Arkansas, Montana (by votes of 51-49 and 50-50), and New Hampshire. You can see from the wide diversity in the political leanings of these states that the issue transcends politics, and that is what makes the movement so interesting and important. True, the states that passed the bills are largely Republican (only Oklahoma and Tennessee had Democratic governors), but the states where the bills have been introduced go right across the spectrum. These are places not expressing partisan politics – their anger, after all, is aimed at both parties in Congress that get together to amass increasing powers to themselves – but rather a fundamental deeply American federalism, in which the states should get to decide for the most part the kind of government their citizens want to live under.

The real importance of all this is that it almost automatically leads to state legislatures voting to negate (“nullify,” technically) certain federal laws that they don’t like and defying the feds to enforce them. In fact it has already happened: the Montana House of Representatives unanimously passed two bills nullifying the REAL ID Act in that state, one of which stipulated that “the legislature of the state of Montana hereby nullifies the REAL ID Act of 2005, as it would apply in this state.”

There it is: nullify. It’s an idea that has a long tradition in this country, going back to the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions of 1798, which the majority of those who fashioned this country thought would always be their best tool against the central government’s exceeding its delegated powers. If it is restated now, it will be a sign that the states are serious in protecting their Tenth Amendment rights and willing to defy the federal government to assert them.

Nullification acts will always be fought by Washington, of course, because it has believed for a long time that the commerce-regulation clause of the Constitution provides that anything Congress passes, and the Presidency carries out, trumps anything that the states may wish or do. It is the reason that the government has acted against the 14 states that have passed laws legalizing medical marijuana, for example – it needs to believe that whatever it decides to do is paramount. In fact, in two recent cases the...
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