The World Turned Upside Down

Contributed by Rafiq Hilton
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Over here in the UK I have been following the programmes of Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, a TV chef with a difference. As he has journeyed into self-sufficiency over the past ten years at his smallholding River Cottage, his programmes have charted that journey... whilst he himself has been involved in and even started several campaigns regarding organic eating and self-sufficiency, mostly aimed at showing how anyone can do it.

His latest programme, River Cottage
Autumn, has featured a number of initiatives springing up over here lately (among them Guerrilla Gardening and Transition Towns) in between Hugh cooking up feasts foraged from the countryside around him and laying on quirky menus at the recently opened River Cottage Canteen. The newest project of his was revealed here on his most recent series. It is called Landshare.

At present the Landshare project is just a website seeking subscribers. In the vein of Guerrilla Gardening and aspects of the Transition Town movement it hopes to get people growing on unused land and allotments, whether you live in the town or the country. For example, one person featured on the show lived in a flat with no space to grow things. Through the Transition Town network, she got together with someone in her community who has a garden and they now both eat freshly grown vegetables. Whilst these other projects incorporate other aspects or approaches to dealing with peak oil, Landshare focuses on this one vital aspect.

Currently, you join by categorising yourself as one of four things: a Grower (one who seeks to grow but has nowhere to do so); Landowner (those with land to share or offer, whether its a back garden or even a rooftop space); Land-Spotter (people who might know of unused, derelict-looking land that may be available to grow on or that is owned but might become available if the owners are willing); or a Facilitator (those able to offer any kind of general help from helping the elderly and others having trouble getting involved with Landshare to paperwork, meetings, computer skills and, of course, advice on growing fruit and vegetables). The project is looking to launch properly in early 2009, having garnered support of those who sign up to get involved now, whatever category you fall into.

This is another of several projects that extends the ideals of co-operation and empathy to those in your community. These days we are often left at a loss for what we can do to positively affect the outcome of a seemingly unsurpassable world situation, but with projects such as this we are enabled once more. Apart from meaning that we interact with our community more and can make a concerted effort at leaving a lighter footfall on the planet, whichever way the cookie crumbles, there are undoubtedly hard times ahead. Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall has drawn upon the idea of government ministers of wartime Britain who urged the public to 'Dig for Victory' to provide themselves with healthy food in a time when mass produced goods were rationed.

I personally do not doubt that we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg with regards to food shortages in certain countries around the world now and that the current financial situation and global climatic condition could present problems greater than where we get our food from. But what better way to try and deal with now than this kind of activity? It gets you meeting people in your community for the specific purpose of helping one another, you get fresh air and exercise, you do something soulful and earthy (in every sense of the word!), you learn new skills, and you get to eat (and probably share) the end result!

Ideas such as Landshare, Transition Towns or Guerrilla Gardening all started as just that – ideas. They are great examples of simple grass-roots organisation, meaning anyone can start one or get involved in one, anywhere. It is the sort of thing that has ridden on the back of the success of the permaculture movement, which has managed to apply its principles to numerous diverse situations and contexts around the globe. Yet it all seems like a little bit of history repeating ... or should that be history evolving? As mentioned, the Ministry of Food's nationwide campaign during the scarcity of wartime Britain succeeded in encouraging people to be more self-sufficient. But this also smacks of agrarian brotherhoods of the much yonder past – namely, the seventeenth century "Diggers", who organised in protest against land laws and what was effectively a redistribution of common property of the time. By planting and working on common ground, the Diggers formed what were essentially communities on this common land as a reaction to rising food prices, drawn together in adverse times for survival.

Many of us are not quite yet facing such shortage and adversity, in the West anyway. But many of us are so detached from our earthly skills and abilities, alienated from nature and community themselves, that it needs refreshing. With the help of technology like the Internet, projects like Landshare give us hope of nurturing that which is slightly less technological. They can enable small ways in which everyone in fringe, alternative communities and those more mainstream can reconnect with the Gaian cycles of the planet. It is an excellent site of where the spiritual and material intersect, and the skills and knowledge in both areas could prove utterly necessary if we are headed towards times of greater scarcity.

Just imagine (and I offer this partly in speculation, for further discussion) if we got a strong foothold of common land now. The idea of land belonging to and providing for many people could prove invaluable if a situation similar to that which caused the Diggers to react as they did arose again in our future. The period of British history in which such a defiant declaration of common rights became necessary is often associated with the phrase "The World Turned Upside Down", which appeared in all manner of literature and culture of the times. Maybe our world will get turned upside down. Maybe it is being. At least we will be firmly rooted to the earth.

River Cottage TV program

The Landshare Project : landshare.net

guerrillagardening.org

Transition Towns - wikipedia.org

Diggers - wikipedia.org

World Turned Upside Down - realitysandwich.com