

Relocalizing Eugene

Contributed by Jan Spencer
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Editor's note:

In Eugene, Oregon, Jan Spencer is a well known advocate for culture change. He has transformed his quarter-acre suburban property into a permaculture Shangri-la, attracting many visitors. He collaborates with others on projects for culture change.

He's a fellow depaver and culture change advocate also named Jan -- who also knows some Italian, as I do. But enough of cosmic coincidences.

Jan leads bike tours of permaculture sites in Eugene, speaks at public events and writes articles for publication. His realistic murals have enhanced the urban landscape at many locations around town. Jan is active with his neighborhood association and devotes a good deal of time to his garden and property.

The following is Jan's keynote speech at the Lane County Reolocalization Conference that took place April 27-28 at two churches:

Thank you all for being here. The case for relocalization is historically compelling. This talk will weave a number of strands together that will show how relocalizing the way we live offers profound benefits.

My comments are my own and do not necessarily represent the conference organizers.

We live in fascinating, if unsettled times. Global trends present us with challenges that will not go away just because we are not paying attention. Those same trends offer tremendous opportunity.

First, what is relocalization? It's about taking care of more of our needs closer to where we live. Relocalization implicitly includes reducing one's ecological footprint. It means making thoughtful choices about where one puts his or her time, money and energy. It can mean upsizing one's civic involvements. It means responsible changes in how we relate to food, energy, the economy and our everyday lives.

Historically, we are witness to a convergence of trends including resource scarcity, human caused damage to the environment, increasing global political disruption, and cultural decline in our own country. Relocalization offers a sensible and positive direction for responding to these challenges.

Our current economic system, market based global capitalism, is unable to be a partner in creating the kind of world many of us would prefer. Rather it is severely in the way. Another part of my thinking about relocalization is about culture - the way we live.

On the global scene, emerging competition for resources that are in decline, and cultures in conflict, will translate into much greater political instability, particularly where strategic resources are located.

Culturally, are we manifesting our highest potentials? In important ways yes -- many parts of a far more positive direction already exist and these changes will come from individuals, existing civic organizations, new collaborations and networks, not by way of policy from above.

Also informing my thoughts: What are the key leverage points -- the best places to put our efforts -- for making changes that can lead towards a healthy and peaceful way of life and bring out the best in who we are as individuals and as a community?

Keep in mind how different aspects of culture change overlap and can intersect in design and can mutually support each other.

Regarding market based global capitalism, during this talk for brevity I will refer to global capitalism as "the economy."

The economy is arguably the most pervasive creation in human history. It is the matrix of global commerce, government complicity, manufactured culture and its consequences and support structures. Our very way of life is shaped by this economic system and the majority of the most challenging problems we face are products of this economic system.

Further, there are large parts of the economy at odds with other parts. I distinguish between the multinational

corporations and the regional/local. The interactions between the two are complex, but globalization is almost always at the expense of local communities and local businesses.

Few will question that there has never been a period in human history where so many people have lived in the affluence we take for granted. The economy has contributed enormously to improved standards of living for billions of people in many parts of the world .

Meanwhile, globalization has also left billions behind in poverty and poor health. The rate of species extinction is the greatest for tens of millions of years. Untold positive human potential is lost, distracted by a culture of shallow entertainment.

Let's take a closer look at why the global economy is not an ally:

Profits on doing business are the key to reinvestments for expanding growth in markets, production and consumption. Most jobs also depend on profits.

Hold this thought and join to it the concept of external cost. This means when you pay for something, the actual cash register cost does not cover all the consequences of producing, using and disposing of the product.

Oil present us with lengthy set of externalized costs -- looking for oil, extracting it, transporting it, refining, using it. All cause pollution. Extraction frequently damages cultures and economies. Auto-centric urban design has divided many neighborhoods, and suburbia is well known for its shortage of social cohesion. Fighting for oil has been the cause of war many times and in many places, and has cost hundreds of billions to the U.S. alone. Those external costs are essential for this economic system. Real cost accounting would mean what we buy would cost far far more and many people would not be able to afford the product. No buy, no profit.

External costs exist in many ways:

Vice president Dick Cheney remarked, "The American way of life is not negotiable." He refers to this whirlpool of buying, selling and consuming as being virtually sacred. On behalf of the economy, the government sees fit to spend hundreds of billions each year in the form of military spending. A look at US foreign-policy doctrine clearly shows the direct connection between economic interests and a foreign policy that uses force as one of its primary forms of diplomacy. The US military is a massive external cost both in money and lives.

Consider millions of new type 2 diabetes patients, cardiovascular disease and an epidemic of obesity; the great majority of those conditions entirely avoidable but great for the economy. Also auto fatalities and related public health costs. This is what it takes to turn the mega profit, and not surprisingly the stock market hit an all-time record high Wednesday.

Perfectly good food is fed to livestock while millions are starving. Capitalism goes where the money and profits are.

Limited liability corporations? That's so the individuals who work for the corporation can avoid personal accountability for what the business does. We take it for granted political corruption on behalf of narrow economic interests.

For the most part, our culture has little comprehension or concern for what it takes for it to lead the world in virtually every kind of energy and resource consumption. That lack of connection makes it easy to keep consuming. The economy depends on people not knowing the damage their affluence causes, and it does its best to create profitable distractions. American affluence depends on externalized costs both at home and in the Third World.

Income disparity is grotesque. The 25 richest hedge fund managers combined -- basically paper pushers -- made as much last year as New York City's 80,000 public school teachers did, in three years. A culture reveals its values by how it compensates its labor.

The logic of global capitalism reveals no loyalty to its workers. Labor saving technologies and exploiting cheaper labor elsewhere clearly shows the bottom line is profits and not a healthy partnership with workers or a community.

Without externalized costs, market based capitalism as we know it ceases to exist. That's why there is resistance to meaningful reform from industry and both political parties.

This global economic system cannot be a partner in creating an accountable, compassionate and relocalized world. To assume it will is just time and effort poorly invested. Any kind of meaningful policy reform at the global and national level is unlikely. At the state level there is hope, at the local level more hope. Outside of the official realm -- at home, with friends, our social networks, there is enormous potential. Much of that potential comes to us as relocalization. Let's see:

Economy

A localized economy picks up where market based global capitalism ends. No need to wait! One important principle of a localized economy is that of downsizing many of our resource intensive habits. This is a key leverage point. Reducing what we need and use brings us closer to taking care of those needs from local sources with great benefits to the local economy, the environment and culture change. It also deprives the global economy of revenue.

Also important to keep in mind is that an economy is not only about money. It is about taking care of needs. Many needs can be taken care of without money in creative ways that we are not so familiar with, such as barter, volunteering, local currencies, cooperatives, work trades, avoiding poor investments -- to name a few.

A few easy examples:

Home economics. The home can be an appreciable source of food, energy, water and taking care of one another. Home passive solar design, once built, is essentially free heat. A home with a garden and a bike rider means appreciable transportation energy can come from the back yard. Multigenerational living means young and old can help look after each other. Such a home provides many of its own needs outside the money economy.

Reducing our dependence on automobiles -- a huge key leverage point which can reduce foreign policy misadventures and automobile infrastructure costing hundreds of billions of dollars every year. That money, engineering skill, material resources and youthful vitality wasted on car culture can be redirected with great benefit elsewhere such as environmental restoration, public transit, energy conservation programs, urban redesign to reduce auto-dependency. The latter is particularly vital for local economies. Ending automobile dependence will prevent hundreds of billions in poor investments such as in car-induced public health costs.

Relocalizing will require new kinds of work, skills and services. Many existing products and services will make transitions. Some will disappear. Relocalized economic and civic life will need far greater participation and inclusion from all age groups, social and economic backgrounds. Many people on the social and economic fringes will find niches where their participation will be both welcome and valuable for the entire community. Culture change can lead to a far more inclusive society.

A number of churches have partnered with local farms to help bring them economic stability. This wonderful project, titled That's My Farmer can be a model expanded to other kinds of civic benefit. Imagine community supported health care, community supported neighborhood hardware stores and more. Is that really a stretch? Think of places of worship as community supported faith and inspiration. It's a model with broad application to many aspects of our economy.

There is urgent need to keep money in the community with ways to invest in local people and businesses with creative ideas that benefit the community.

The challenges that are emerging will be hard to miss and can motivate us to manifest our own latent potentials. A community with shared goals and elevated level of cohesion has the primary tools to create a humane economy to serve an uplifted culture and its healthy goals.

Food

We reside in one of the most benign climates on earth. The Willamette Valley is the happy home to great agricultural diversity.

Of all the essentials for survival, food is the furthest along in terms of localization and can be seen as a model for taking care of other needs. At present, there are numerous organizations and advocates calling for localizing and supporting local and regional food production.

One local food group has determined that Lane County can essentially feed itself if current non food crops are replaced with edible crops and diets change to eat substantially less meat. A network of local churches in That's My Farmer actively support local farms in a highly innovative way. Other organizations can make use of this model.

Local food is a key leverage point. It helps keep money local. It also avoids transportation costs and carbon emissions of food from elsewhere and sidesteps many of the uncertainties relating to oil and climate change.

In a localized food system, we can expect more agricultural work to be done by humans. Imagine people from town

spending time on a farm at important times of the season. A new kind of farm/community-participated agriculture.

There are a number of very impressive projects and programs to promote local agriculture such as That's My Farmer, the school garden project, farm to cafeteria, farmers market, community gardens in Eugene, Skinner Urban Farm, my Suburban Renewal Project, the urban farm at University of Oregon, to name several. All of these build a culture of cohesion.

Relocalizing food will mean crop transitions and developing local markets. Crops for local use can provide energy, medicine and fiber as well.

Oregon State University should become a powerhouse of research and development for useful food, fuel and fiber crops for products to replace what now must be brought from a distance and can also research and development for low-tech farm implements. Relocalization is not only for Eugene, as other towns in western Oregon and beyond are having similar discussions.

Agriculture happens in town as well. Since experiencing a drastic reduction in oil imports, Cuba has been forced to relocalize in all areas of economy and way of life. They have gone mostly organic with food production. Remarkable amounts of food are produced within Cuban cities and towns, and the nation has developed the research and education infrastructure to help teach people how to grow food.

Eugene has a similar potential. The city should expand its community garden program and establish neighborhood agricultural centers. The OSU extension office at the fairgrounds is a wonderful resource and could help mentor a city wide network of neighborhood ag centers that could include community canneries and food drying.

We should learn from Corvallis. The city is collaborating with concerned citizens to make inventories by neighborhoods to determine what agricultural assets exist in different parts of town.

Exchanging grass for garden: Food Not Lawns contains enormous potential. Instead of a lawn mowing clientele, I foresee enterprising people making arrangements with property owners to convert all or parts of their properties into food production and share the produce with the property owner. Any surplus would go to a neighborhood market. If you are interested, ask me more, and I would be glad to elaborate on this idea.

People with limited space and mobility can grow food effectively in containers.

Roof top gardens are also a great idea along with open spaces at churches, schools, business and public property with interested people taking care of the plants, trees and harvest.

With a shift in economic circumstance, local food security ideas will become increasingly popular.

Energy

How would energy look in a relocalized economy? First, we should make conservation -- a key leverage point -- an absolute priority. Reducing demand puts managing demand closer within reach. We can avoid much of the need in the first place.

Eugene Water and Electric Board (EWEB) existing energy conservation should be vigorously marketed. Call them to learn more.

Local sources of energy, perhaps in the Coberg hills, could support wind generators. Neighborhood-scale methane gas has tremendous potential, as human waste for several blocks is brought together to the neighborhood bio digester for methane gas to provide cooking fuel and provide great fertilizer as a byproduct.

Architecture and design standards can be a great energy saver. Making full use of the sunny south sides of houses and commercial buildings for passive solar are only common sense. Retrofit existing homes with passive solar. All new construction should be with elevated energy conservation and solar standards with non toxic materials.

Many suburban houses with south facing garages can convert their garages into solar spaces by replacing the garage door with glass and transforming the space inside for more productive use.

Local bio fuels need to be a part of the mix for essential services such as on the farm and for fire trucks, ambulances.

Redesigning the urban landscape along with upgraded public transportation should be a high priority so that the use of automobiles becomes much less of a need.

Neighboring cities and towns can best move in a direction where they develop their own more independent economies so

they are no longer bedroom communities. Bus and train service between towns needs to be upgraded such as between Eugene and Coos Bay, south to Medford and north to Portland.

Imagine: in the 1920s there were twelve trains per day between Eugene and Portland.

Reducing our energy footprint is one of the smartest choices we can make. Understanding why changing the way we relate to energy is vital and will help build the cohesion and consensus for city and regional policies to support goals of relocalizing our energy supply.

Land Use

Land use is an absolutely critical part of both urban and rural relocalization, and is a tremendous key leverage point. Land use is the stage and set for how we live -- intimately related to transportation, energy, public health, the economy and foreign policy.

We should make the best use we can of remaining affordable energy and resources to redesign and rebuild our towns, cities and rural areas to dramatically reduce auto dependence

Relocalizing the urban landscape means making much better use of what is already here. A basic goal is for towns and cities to be more compact with the goods and services people need -- much closer to where they live.

Goals put forth by a culture of cohesion would include an urban space that is attractive, inspiring, a joyful place to live, work and play. Think of edible landscaping, public outdoor meeting areas, smart design to make best use of solar assets and natural drainage, green spaces, community centers, while protecting best soil for food production. Compact and thoughtful urban design reduces the need for cars and can nurture community cohesion.

Towns in the coastal hills and Cascades can develop new products and services such as restoring the forests to ensure clean water. Wildcrafting medicinals from the forests, making furniture and other useful value added products can help restore rural economies.

Relocalized agriculture can stimulate a renaissance. We can look forward to a more labor intensive form of agriculture. That will mean more people living in small towns, agricultural settlements and co-ops. Canneries and processing facilities can become new industries along with local grain processing at places like Thompson's Mill near Shedd

Back in town, block planning offers wonderful potential -- a great key leverage point in land use. Imagine an entire residential block making best use of available space, transforming space currently taken up by automobiles to play-space, gardens, child care areas, small businesses, solar designed bungalows and more. The city of Eugene approves of block planning and should do far more to promote it, in partnership with neighborhood organizations.

Think of attractive multistory, mixed use urban villages built on existing parking lots. Those locations are already commercial, often with existing businesses, bus routes and utilities. The multistory redevelopment can include new goods, services, employment and culture specifically for that location. Rooftops could become gardens to supply the village natural food store. There would be edible landscaping, convenient transit to other centers and downtown.

Think of parking lots at the Red Apple in the Whiteaker neighborhood, at the strip mall just east of Churchill High school, Santa Clara Square, Oak Way Center, Hilyard and River Road, and at the Safeway shopping area on Donald Street. How would they look as green and inviting urban villages you could easily walk or bike to?

Suburban renewal. Suburbia does offer useful assets. Think of turning grass to garden, include solar redesign, rain water catchment, extending the growing season with coldframes, removing concrete, and creating community and fun. There are already well over a dozen suburban renewal projects in Eugene where substantial needs of the residents are met by on site resources.

Land use has the potential for being a catalyst and an enormous key leverage point, for culture change. The jobs created by urban redesign would be great for the local economy.

The community visioning, the cooperative planning, the work parties, the benefits to the environment, our local security, and public health would bring people together like nothing before has.

Culture change

By culture change, I refer to a robust redefinition of the goals of society and how to move towards them. This culture

change arises from two related facts:

First, globalized market capitalism is wrecking the planet's environment, is on thinning ice, and "hits delete" on a great deal of positive human potential. Too many aspects of the global economic system interfere with positive human progress.

Second is an emerging uplift of the human spirit and manifesting of positive human potential. As the global economy staggers and fractures, positive human uplift will increasingly manifest.

One would be naïve to think that this historic change is a simple matter. There are other agendas in our world today that will not embrace the kind of future many of us would prefer. The more we can build a culture of cohesion based on positive values and goals, the better the chances are for a positive outcome.

A peaceful ecoculture's values could come from the Koran, the Bible, the Torah, from Buddhist, humanist or pagan musings and just common sense. Compassion, modesty, honesty, material simplicity, reverence for nature – all are considered virtues in practically every great philosophy. What a difference if those virtues, rather than expensive "cheap thrills," were the basis for a civilization.

Recall when you've had a powerful experience with your higher self. I hope that's easy and that the experience was recent. What were the circumstances -- and let's omit the pharmacology. You probably were not in a hurry. It could have been in a beautiful place, maybe in nature, maybe in a human created space. Could be you were with people you enjoy and have strong bonds with. You may have been involved in some kind of healthy community project or a festival or totally on your own.

Can we take this positive sensation beyond our closest friends. How would it be if we lived in a neighborhood and community where such experiences were far more common because there was a far higher level of cohesion. A place where you knew you had solid elevated ideals in common with many more people around you. In effect, your inner circle of friends was greatly expanded.

This concept is an enormously important key leverage point: healthy, popular and shared values and goals -- a culture of cohesion will make wise choices and moving towards its goals – using its resources and assets in a highly productive way.

Imagine if our economy was defined by a culture of cohesion and that economy was a partner providing the goods and services to support those thoughtful goals and ideals.

How to go from here to there?

Slow down and take some time to assess your life. How can we be faithful to our highest aspirations when we take little time to think about them? Reducing one's financial overhead is highly recommended. Simplifying our material lives -- a self made key leverage point -- means less need to work for money, less impact on the environment, more time for family, contemplation, and community involvement.

Volunteer with a group that resonates with your ideals. Donate money if you can. Join your neighborhood organization. Start a social concerns group in your church. Commit to a healthy local diet. Start a mutual assistance network with friends and neighbors, and then start a block planning project.

Cultivate your own potentials. Learn some new positive and practical skills relating to relocalization both physical and social. Stay closer to home.

How can we best share these ideals and visions with others? Part of the answer is to walk the talk and to have fun. Culture change has to look better than what we currently have -- that should be easy, and it needs to engage our higher selves.

If one tweaks his or her perceptions a bit, we can see many ingredients of culture change are already with us. There are many nonprofits in Eugene already doing important work relevant to culture change. Many people are already part of this culture change and may not even know it. You have company!

Every church, temple, mosque, zendo, and coven should be a generator of positive action. Some already are, but the potential for a much higher voltage is there. Those places already have an elevated level of cohesion by way of beliefs and values. Places of worship should be models and in the vanguard of relocalizing. So should neighborhood organizations, non profits, schools, social service groups and families.

Youth education must be a high priority, in particular to connect kids with the world around them to have contact with nature, take on responsibilities and create their own community projects. That is just the curriculum at the Network

Charter School in downtown Eugene.

Building on existing cohesion is a shortcut towards an expanding culture of cohesion. Popular community values, goals and ideals can multiply the effectiveness and rate of culture change. We can make far more effective use of existing social organizations -- churches, neighborhood groups, service associations, all of which already have an elevated level of cohesion. That cohesion can be amplified and focused with a well-defined purpose: being leaders in the movement to relocalize how we live.

Keep the vision! We should have much greater expectations for what we can do as individuals and as a community. We all have the best renewable energy resource imaginable -- our own imaginations and faith. We can manifest so much more of what we would prefer to see.

Be encouraging to support each other's good works. Don't be shy!

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Jan's perspectives come from a fusion of permaculture, global trends, urban land use, human potential and concern for the natural world. He has travelled to 35 countries, over 5 years and speaks conversational Italian. He now stays close to home, a resident of Eugene for fourteen years.

Jan is active with the Eugene Permaculture Guild, and maintains a healthy schedule of public speaking for culture change. He is currently working on a book describing Eugene thirty years from now. The story describes Eugene at fifteen years into "recovery" after severe global economic decline.

Visit Jan's website to see his place and links to articles:

suburbanpermaculture.org

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More web sources:

Lane County Relocalization Conference, April 27 and 28, 2007:

suburbanpermaculture.org

Eugene Permaculture Guild:

eugenepermacultureguild.org

Network Charter School:

networkcharterschool.org

More about relocalization and localization (Post Carbon Institute, Sebastopol, Calif.):

relocalize.net

Bay Localize:--San Francisco Bay peakoilists:

baylocalize.org