

A Better Way of Making a Living For Humanity

Contributed by Chuck Burr
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We are no more able to find our way forward living as Homo modern as we are living as Homo hunter-gatherer. Both ways are blocked. Living today on the infinite growth treadmill as Homo modern results in the death of our planet. Homo sapiens has exploded our population to a level that we can no longer run back into the forest to make a living like the Mayan did. So what are we to do?

The question is actually, not "what are we going to do?", but "how are we going to make a living?" First let's rule out the obvious: we can no longer make a living as Homo consumer. Peak oil will put an end to our happy motoring and consuming lifestyle before we get the chance to consume the world.

A new International Energy Agency (IEA) report shows the decline of global oil production has been recalculated at 9.1% per year, up from 5.8% earlier in 2008. The weakened global economy will buy us a couple more years, but after that the decline of world oil production will be far steeper than its rise. We started the last century slowly, but we are now running our fossil fuel economy full speed with the easily extracted oil gone and only the hard or impossible to extract left.

The end of plentiful cheap energy will mean a reduction in the complexity of our society so significant that few today comprehend it. I wonder if President-elect Obama has any idea what is in store for us. Watch to see if restoring "growth" is his mantra when inaugurated. This year we saw the end of investment banking and the beginning of the end of suburbia in the form of the mortgage crisis. Peak oil's curtailment of happy motoring has not even kicked in yet.

Next, the experiment of the agricultural revolution fails, as it has created overpopulation and overshoot of carrying capacity via a "food race." The food race drives population growth with growth in food production; every increase in human population is met with an increase in food production.

The agricultural revolution made us powerful, but it has also meant the greatest mass extinction since the end of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. Just when we need earth's resilience in her biodiversity the most, Homo modern is destroying it by converting what is left into human biomass.

Combine agricultural-revolution population with peak oil and you get a nightmare. At the start of the last century, there were only one billion on the planet, today there are almost 6.8 billion. That means that 5.8 billion people are here one way or another because of oil, and oil is about to run out.

The obvious being eliminated, that we are not going to make a living as fossil fuel consumers nor as hunter-gatherers, how are we going to make a living in the future? What if I told you I had a way to make a living that has worked for 150,000 generations and it does not involve running into the forest?

The answer is tribalism, or, as I describe in my book *Culturequake: The Fall of Modern Culture and the Rise of Earth Culture*, tribal communities.

Tribalism is misunderstood by Homo modern as “living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle.” Hunting and gathering is only one way of making a living; there are a million other ways to make a living. The important point is not “what” you do to make a living, but “how” you make a living. Make a living doing what ever you are best at, whether it is on a permaculture farm or fixing bicycles, it makes no difference.

Tribalism has over three million years been the evolutionarily proven form of human social organization. Bees make a living in hives, deer in herds, whales in pods, birds in flocks, and humans in tribes. There is no getting around it. If you think that civilization is the new answer, you are deeply mistaken. In the mere blink of an eye, 500 generations, civilization has brought the world the point of mass extinction. It might be working for a wealthy westerner, but it is not working for the other 95 percent of the human population nor the 30 million other species on the planet.

Tribalism has two primary components that enable the average person to make a living from generation to generation without being stressed out or exploited. First, a tribe is simply a group of people making a living together. Everyone in the tribe does not even have to have the same beliefs; they just have to want to make a living together.

Second, tribe members have a strong incentive to share what they have made or found with other tribal members. This gives everyone else a strong incentive to share as well. There is no one leader or boss as in our hierarchic agricultural revolution culture. Being the main scheduler, for example, is just another job. When food is scarce everyone goes hungry; no one keeps a surplus to him/herself.

Generally, tribes are thought to be fewer than 150 people. British anthropologist Robin Dunbar theorized this number of people to be the limit with whom we can maintain stable social relationships in which we know each person. He suggests that numbers larger than this require more restrictive rules, laws, and enforcement. I suggest this number does not require a hierarchy; everyone can be an equal.

So what should you do? The universal advice I got from older people when I was growing up was “do what you love to do and you will be good at it.” You will make the biggest impact with your life that way. Find like-minded people and find a way to make livings together that you all enjoy.

Based on my experience as an entrepreneur I would also say follow the path of least resistance and watch for serendipity. Try multiple things and see which one gets the most traction. Also, walk before you run. Try your ideas on a hobby, part-time, or club scale to get started. You could start with your neighbors and each could plant a different fruit or nut tree and you could exchange harvests in the fall. Create a micro-neighborhood edible perennial nursery business. The possibilities are endless. Have fun with it.

One idea I am considering is to start by creating a virtual tribal community. We cannot all move in next door to each other overnight, but like-minded people could put their properties into a land trust for the benefit of the community. This would create a patchwork to start with within the existing suburban culture. You could coalesce closer together over time as the opportunities arise.

In regards to finding like-minded people, try hosting a potluck to discuss how things might change toward neighborhood sustainability; see who shows up. Also I cannot emphasis enough about learning about permaculture and even taking a two week intensive permaculture design course (PDC). You will meet your tribe of like-minded people there. See the permaculture resources below.

Have no hierarchy; work from a group consensus. Produce no surplus; make just what you need locally and your population will be stable and will not be in overshoot.

Do this and you give your children a bright future. The one great benefit of a tribal community is cradle-to-grave security. In our Homo modern culture, we “make things to get things.” In a tribal or Leaver culture, you “give support to get support.” It is a completely different story or cultural meme. Memes are to cultures what genes are to people.

Also, by living a better story, we create a new cultural meme that is more likely to be replicated than our current modern cultural story or meme that, “civilization must continue,” and “the world was made for man.” I mean really, how poor a story are these?

A far better story is that our children and we can make a living without destroying most of the other life on earth. The real exciting part is that not only can we survive, but we can thrive! We can thrive amid a riot of cultural diversity among different tribes all making a living differently. We will also be living within the natural carrying capacity of our surroundings; a far greater result than what we have today.

So this is our resolution for the new year: To find “our people” and to make a living together. Maybe being laid off from building pyramids for someone else could be a blessing in disguise as an opportunity to walk away from modern consumer culture.

Postscript: Use this winter as a time to catch up on your reading. Besides reading Culturequake.org, I recommend Gaia’s Garden: A Guide to Home-Scale Permaculture, by Toby Hemenway

Permaculture for Beginners DVD, coming soon from Geoff Lawton at Permaculture Research Institute of Australia

Beyond Civilization, by Daniel Quinn

Dunbar’s Number:

en.wikipedia.org

The Meme Machine, by Susan Blackmore

Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change, by William Catton

Culturequake: The Fall of Modern Culture and the Rise of Earth Culture, by Chuck Burr

Permaculture Activist magazine, edited by Peter Bane(

Visit Culturequake.org to learn more about the Culturequake book and the online Magazine. ©2008 Chuck Burr LLC

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Further reading:

"A Return to Tribes" by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #114:

culturechange.org