A “New” Energy Path for Our Times

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Culture Change Letter #233 - The revolution just about to begin in earnest is not one that people are familiar with. Previous revolutions had the effect, unintended or not, of perpetuating civilization. This revolution will be about saying goodbye to civilization as we know it. If this does not sound very optimistic, consider that our species will be lucky to survive this century.

Strife will soon boil over as issues of inequity and greed, and painful shortages, reflect desperation over food and water. But the direction of history has changed, as expansion has reached its end. Goals will no longer be cornucopian or industrial, but rather to overcome deprivation and recover from the culling of the petroleum-fed population. Regardless of technological efficiency improvements that would have staved off a more messy than necessary collapse, we are faced with a severe return to simplicity. The Agricultural Revolution and the Industrial Revolution have played themselves out.

How can we be arriving at such an historic condition when we’re surrounded by technology and other trappings of modern progress and abundance? The answer is energy: the cheap bonanza is gone, while our rusting infrastructure is hard-wired for petroleum. So when the financial collapse that followed record oil prices started taking its toll, and lay-offs mount on an unprecedentedly massive scale, the undoing of economic growth can only continue, accelerate and solidify.

What does "a 'new' energy path for our times" mean? It not only means rejecting the already failing fossil-fueled, nuclear-powered approach that tried to defy nature; a 'new' energy path also means we get realistic over the alternative, renewable energy systems that are supposedly so promising.

At this point the financial ability to pull off massive projects and employ people as before has waned greatly. Every day the news on the economy shows it's winding down or collapsing. When the cargo ships stop altogether, it’s all over.

Meanwhile, the average driver on the road thinks he or she is lucky to have a car. That’s the problem. Still the price of fuel or of cars is of more concern than what they do to our world.

Another perfect expression of "the problem" is that overpopulation is “off the table.” But for far more people, it was far more important for impeaching Geo. W. Bush to not be “off the table.” How many of these activists contemplated how "small is beautiful"?

U.S. society and the modern world are at both a watershed moment and teetering over a precipice. As the economic growth machine grinds to a halt, and we glimpse that life is going to be very different henceforth, there are choices to make. The status quo intends to keep up the same discredited approach, and the elite wants above all to maintain privileges and control. But their success has little chance. It will be interesting how change-resistant they will be, even as order fails and we all must pursue new survival strategies.

More critical than any of the foregoing is the ecological basis of everything -- obviously deteriorating quickly. So far the economy's failure is not seen as a signal to start respecting nature as our key to survival. The excuses are many. Some say, "people will always want cars." Or, "It's going to be coal or nuclear power." Because of these ingrained assumptions

and the big money behind them, the rejection of "hard path energy" (Friends of the Earth initiative of the 1980s) is seen as Utopian.

So a compromise has been underway for a few decades, based on the "soft path energy" (ibid). To compete with the big boys, and leave behind the anarchistic/hippie roots of back-to-the-land, "appropriate tech" and the Whole Earth Catalog, major-scale renewable energy systems have been developed and hyped. But they cannot replace what cheap oil accomplished, nor can they step in, because of energy limitations and the scale required to substitute significantly to pull us out of petrocollapse.

The suppressed reality is that we will all be adopting the small-scale, bioregional or hippie systems for local needs. There's little "big money" to be made in this approach, and little corporate news-media interest, but what if this is the future? Take the example of Cuba, which went through petrocollapse in the early 1990s. They had to go small-scale organic in farming, take to the bicycle mucho, and put in small-scale solar power installations. In other words, the overbuilt industrial world is about to join the "Third World." USA, join the human race.

Resisting the inevitable

This sounds reasonable or inevitable, given the economy and political power structure we are used to:

[Energy Secretary] Chu made clear that he sees public education as a key part of the administration's strategy to fight global warming -- along with billions of dollars for alternative energy research and infrastructure, a national standard for electricity from renewable sources and cap-and-trade legislation to limit greenhouse gas emissions. [Feb. 4, 2009, Associated Press]

But he's way off on what's feasible. Most people tied to the dominant paradigm can't picture simplicity or collapse -- although Chu seems to warn of the latter when he admitted in the same interview the threat of climate disaster: "we're looking at a scenario where there's no more agriculture in California".

With all the evidence that's in, it is perplexing that fundamental change is not being pursued by more than one in a thousand modern people. Several in a thousand are concerned, but are perplexed that they can't have a giant green economy.

The New York Times headlined this on Feb. 4, 2009: "Renewable energy hits credit wall" Subheadline: "Economy: Sales of solar panels and wind turbines fall without access to capital". Another news story proclaimed 2008 was the top all-time year for renewable energy investment worldwide. Too little, too late.

This is what petrocollapse looks like. We are seeing mostly unexpected ricochets from the high oil prices of recent years that peaked last summer.

The "new" energy path

Apart from financing, the feasibility of energy systems must conform to common sense: decentralized, simple systems that are not based on petroleum/petrochemical processes/parts/delivery/replacement.

Additionally, the question must be asked, "What do we need the energy for?" If it is for continued waste, whereby the U.S. uses a quarter of the world's energy even though we are 5% of the population, then there's really no justifiable need. Running multiple machines and gadgets per family is a function of our lack of cohesion at the family and societal level. Catering to continued overconsumption is folly.

No doubt, we need some energy. So, what are the reasonable forms and systems to take us from this house-of-cards petro-economy to a sustainable culture? The answer is along these graceful lines: bicycles and sailboats. They can be fancy, energy-intensive products with a high price tag, or they can be simple and foolproof. The wind is free with a sail, but not with a high-tech wind turbine. Bikes can be salvaged and restored for the foreseeable future. One can hook up carts and trailers to the bikes. We moved our entire Auto-Free Times office across Arcata in 2000 with a few bike carts in one trip thanks to the pedal power of a few stalwart volunteers, a sight I'll never forget.

At a tense hearing last week at Portland, Oregon's city hall on the matter of a proposed 12-lane bridge over the Columbia River, a pro-engineering type walked into the unexpected. When he asked what future generations would do if the bridge is not built, the crowd on the left side of the room boomed "Walk!"

The main energy we need is from food. But the food growing and delivery system is still terribly petroleum oriented, despite clear indications of oil's peaking in global extraction. Organic farming is not necessarily the answer, as it may involve stripping the soil instead of building it, if chicken manure, for example is trucked in and there's no attempt at mulching or composting on site. Permaculture as well as cooperatives and tribes will tackle the food question.

Energy for moving machines or powering do-dads will be quite secondary. Commuting and computing will be history, as they are energy drains and do not contribute directly to the community. Besides food, we will have little to concern ourselves as to energy. Transportation? With alcohol fuels and hydrogen revealed as a net waste, we have our feet, bicycles, boats, horses -- and little else guaranteed for the post-petroleum future.

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Stephen Chu on climate change: “Wake up,” America, “we’re looking at a scenario where there’s no more agriculture in California”

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