Continuity of family for sustainable culture

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The growing interest in sustainable living is partly attributable to preparing for petrocollapse and a subsequent lower-energy society. Even without the certainty of global oil extraction peaking now (or very soon), quite a few back-to-the-land hippies have for decades emphasized "Earth skills," communal living, and other forms of living lightly on our ecologically stressed planet.

More than ever, thanks to the "peak oil craze," all sorts of people who are concerned about resource depletion and climate change are establishing or strengthening networks and developing useful skills. The most oft-discussed topic may be the design of food-gardens and farms that use a minimum of outside inputs.

In Eugene, Oregon last month, I attended a Permaculture slide-show of a depaved, sun-optimized garden home I visited. The property owner Jan
Spencer speaks and writes about his workshops under the title "Culture Change Series." Getting new adherents for such activities has always been the challenge. But Spencer has noticed that the peace & justice movement is getting more interested in life-style change, the longer war-over-oil drags on and Peak Oil becomes common parlance.

Criticism of the government mounts, and the focus is not limited to policies. The entire system, including corporate economics, is increasingly questioned as folks acknowledge alarming climate change and never-ending militarism. Yet, activists still should
court the conscious public servant and politician – especially the local ones – just in case an awakening or small victory is possible. Meanwhile, attaining food security and a reliable community beyond the nuclear family are surging, whether as goals or worries.

In the short term, we find it hard as ever to "live the change we want to
see," as paying our bills and debts takes up most of our days. So it remains a tiny but growing segment of the U.S. population that thinks and acts toward long-term survival and a better life. In the back of many peoples' minds, they think a massive crisis like a "national New Orleans" won't
happen in their lifetime, so it doesn't have an in-your-face priority. Or maybe the wealthier folk have "too much to lose" to start living less wastefully. Getting to a sustainable culture – safely, if possible – may be costly, but is priceless. But are we really doing all we can to get there? How healthy are our family-relations and our minds, when it comes to assuring continuity of house-holding and bridging

generations?

Where's Grandma?

One little-discussed topic for the sustainability movement is the continuity of families. Protecting generations and family lines comes down to security of one's family home. If family members lose contact either by distance, enmity or death, it is like one's leg being cut off. When people lose their home, especially if they have depended on the surrounding land, this "collateral damage" or economic oppression (or other form of theft) can guarantee the breakdown or dissolution of family simply due to members being no longer able to stay together.

One of the main characteristics of advanced Western Civilization is the loss of homeland, the jump in individual homelessness, and much moving away from the family home, for those of us who had one to begin with. (See Culture Change magazine Issue 19, "Family Cohesion Challenged by Sprawl and Greed") One factor is population growth and the loss of common land and open space. But materialism, greed, individualism, and violence may have done the most to uproot people. The Enclosure in the late Middle Ages in Britain comes to mind.

Sustainable living as discussed today often mentions a "sense of place." There have been books, often spiritual and nature-oriented, on sense of place and the importance of one's home. It is often taken for granted that families will be staying together in eco-villages, for example. But just as often these intentional communities are full of individual joiners and people without much family cohesion. How many times have extended families moved into communes or into other collectives? They didn't need to, because they already had community.

Yet, as large cities become increasingly vulnerable to petrocollapse or even turn into giant concentration camps, large, close families are also seeing the need to probably relocate to rural areas or to emigrate. Access to land isn't thought of by many of today's consumers who bleat for their next dose of fast-food.

Whether we are ensconced in a low-populated place that naturally supplies its own food or are urban dwellers, rich or poor but still over-dependent on petroleum, an essential element of survival is having one's blood relations at hand. Perhaps the only country in the world that would question this is the U.S., where people farm out the youngest and oldest members of their families to be cared for by strangers. Additionally, the U.S. also has much domestic abuse, so people are glad to stay away from one's relatives. Substitute-families are formed, as friends nurture each other and can share values not shared back home. A fine example of city-living solidarity among random friends is the story in the musical Rent, although it was typical that the characters had no consciousness on the unsustainability of consuming.

However, if Grandma, for example, isn't there with her children and grandchildren, this equates to a makeshift home at best. It is true that a new home may be established, with hope, competence, love, and a semblance of security. But why is Grandma gone, assuming she is alive?

It is Grandma's and Grandpa's stories, not their possessions, which need to be valued most. This is the way we evolved and learned so as to survive and develop. For those who don't feel a love bond between family generations, one can at least admit that elders often possess vital information for sustainability – even if traditions are scoffed at by the most modern among us. Few U.S. mainstreamers are taking the time to learn from elders, but respect and warmth for the old ones may return – mostly because, unfortunately, necessity will require it.

It is almost a given that nursing homes are unfortunate and best avoided, although many who agree with that statement still go that route. But just as often the grandparents and great-grandparents are alive, but are elsewhere and may or may not be institutionalized. And, of course, some are lost – as soldiers, miners or victims of industrial poisoning/disease.

Come together

A big family means more protection for the members, if many are together making a household. This does not mean people need to have more children, at least in this overpopulated age. What has to happen is people coming together.

Coming together is culture change. John Lennon, an exponent of culture change, had a hit song with the Beatles called Come Together. Some listeners may have thought old John was just referring to sex. Be that as it may, people have to get together and support each other, the community, or the tribe. The family has been the prerequisite for larger social "organization" (organism, preferably). The nation-state is a relatively recent form of organization, and it may not endure strongly after petrocollapse.

Coming together as a planet – i.e., virtually all people feeling more or less the same – may yet happen, as may have happened in the not too distant past. This will be possible again when greed is checked by "new" culture. As long as someone can amass wealth, it is at someone's expense. This is why certain practices and institutions must go. In the Spanish Republic in Barcelona, landlords were publicly educated in not being allowed to continue exacting any rents.

A beautiful story about both the family-factor in continuity, and about the survival-ramifications of greed, is a 1963 book by Hal

Borland. In When the Legends Die, a Ute family in the Southwest U.S. is forced through conflict to escape capitalistic enslavement by returning to wild nature. The reader wants to see the triumph of the heroes living in the wilderness because of the author's gift of evoking the universal yearning for oneness with other creatures and the seasons.

In Primal Tears, a new book by Kelpie Wilson, the story surrounds a cross-species character who is half human and half bonobo. A major theme of this lively tale is continuity of family through closeness despite a species difference. The book cleverly advocates environmental protection and animal rights, using as its main setting the mountainous Siskiyou-Kalmiopsis wilderness region in Oregon and California. It is clear from the first pages that the story's family needs healthy nature and a secure home for continuity, although the absence of large, extended family is remedied by very close friendships.

A healthy mind is not a given

In these stories and in our hopes and efforts, it is assumed that people are basically healthy and sane. Alas, a poisonous and harsh culture has compromised or ruined millions of minds and souls, including some of those who might like to form community. Many folks are mentally ill, helping to separate themselves from family they need. Petrochemical drugs, bad food, the sedentary lifestyle, isolation, and alienation from nature all contribute to mental instability.

There is lack of clarity in cause and effect: Are people ill due to the culture? Will their health and social contribution improve when they land in a more natural setting? Or is it more a matter of these crazy people – many of whom function effectively by most measures, including politically – being the big obstacle to a "new" sustainable culture?

Some insane people are not diagnosed as such, but they are destructive to themselves and others. In U.S. society, among friends there may be much less emotional baggage compared to family situations. But among friends especially in urban areas, there is plenty of needless friction, perhaps stress, or superficiality due to busyness. Uptight or disturbed people in the today's troubled U.S. often bother, badger, criticize and abuse their loved ones the most. This may result in absent loved ones. How can there then be continuity or a sustainable blood line? Although the accepted mainstream American story does not feature tragic loss and dislocation, it happens often – especially with poor minorities.

It happens for educated, wealthy whites too, when the stakes are high. An example is my mother Mesa Lundberg’s loss of both home and freedom, separating her from family and comforting surroundings in her older age. Mesa is the widow of “the Oil Guru” Dan Lundberg, who started Lundberg Survey Incorporated, a firm I ran for a time that enriched her. The

overall reason for this great-grandma’s involuntary absence from her family
today is the overarching culture of materialism. But illness of various kinds, manifested as selfish actions by various people in and out of the family, has struck this family hard. This has resulted in
fragmentation of the family and doubt for its future.
Falsely labeled as incapacitated, Mesa has value as a wise elder who retains knowledge regarding her connections to the soil, for example.

Conclusion

Perhaps these dilemmas can be largely solved when people are forced toward cooperation through the sudden, clear need to obtain sustenance from subsistence farming, gathering and hunting. No doubt the mental and "spiritual" health of a population finding its way in this historic transition will be attended to as best we can. As to issues relating to justice, people must be treated well by respecting their self-determination as it relates to common interests. And, basic human rights must rest on the continuity of family in a healthy and healthful environment.

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Further reading:

Culture Change magazine article: "Family cohesion challenged by sprawl and greed"

http://www.culturechange.org/issue19/familycohesion.htm

Culture Change Letter: "Sustainability Starts With Family Solidarity"

http://culturechange.org/e-letter-13cont.html

Jan Spencer's webpage

http://www.efn.org/~spencerj