Trajectories: A Smithsonian Ramble

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Trying to come to grips with what function this ramble is intended to serve in a Convergence on Zero context, I have concluded that I am sort of like the Woman on the Edge of Time, to borrow Marge Pearcy's term — someone who has journeyed to the future and come back.

That is what drew me to the communitarian movement: wishing to live in the future, rather than the past.

However, coming back from the future and reorienting is not so easy. Like the later conquistadors trying to retrace the route of Francesco de Orellana into the Amazon, one quickly finds that even the best guide is soon bewildered, lost, and under attack. The landscape has utterly changed, the people and places are gone, or become hostile, and the prevailing expansionary logic of an earlier time is totally bankrupt now.

I guess if there was some benefit to having lived at the Farm through the changes of nearly 40 years, it was that we were able to hunker down in one place and the world came to us. We changed more slowly than it did, though change we did.

My advantage has been in cross-disciplinary synthesis. Living at the junction of two worlds, there has been an edge effect. So, for instance, in 1972, when I joined the Farm I had no way of knowing it was then the apogee of the hippy communes. The Wall Street Journal put the number then at some 5000 in the United States. With the theme music from Woodstock drumming in our ears, we had packed our collections of Mother Earth News and our Whole Earth Catalogs and gone up to the country. Watergate, the Vietnam War, the various liberation movements, and even the OPEC oil embargos would soon be distant memories as we got it on with the dirt, made babies, and learned to put up sorghum molasses, eggplant pickles and tomato salsa for the winter. Little did we know that we were, at that very moment, at Peak Hippy.

As Peter Harper has described, there were learning curves to be mounted and sacred cows to be slain. We now wear some leather, raise bees for honey, and don't try to make methane from household wastes. But we also became competent in many forgotten vocations, reviving the crafts of the ferrier, smithy, orchardman, midwife, and town crier. Many of these were married to modern analogs, creating hybrids like our Beatnik Bell phone system that ran public announcements as a dial tone to serve as town crier, or the equipping of our midwives with state-of-the-art Doppler fetoscopes and single-sideband radio.

My edge, in 1972, was crossing from graduating law school into commune life, and becoming a horse trainer, brick mason, flour miller, and whatever else might be needed. This was the year Limits to

Growth came out, and we assumed people would hear that message and green on up. We are still waiting. Our edge in 1982 was erecting the Appropriate Community Technology exhibit at the Knoxville World's Fair and filling it with some of our inventions, including concentrating PV arrays, solar cars, sophisticated electronic controllers, and novel insulation retrofits to the old Victorian mansion that we rescued from demolition to claim as our pavilion on site. Call that outreach.

Our edge in the years immediately thereafter was membership in and rotating leadership of the Fellowship for Intentional Community, National Coalition of Alternative Community Schools, National Historic Communal Studies Association, Midwives Alliance of North America, Tennessee Environmental Council, and Southeastern Permaculture Teachers Association, to name a few. This was the time of the Bruntland Report, and we assumed people would hear that message and green on up. A decade later we would be part of the founding leadership of the Ecovillage Network of the Americas, and then the Global Ecovillage Network. Today we are part of the Transition Towns movement, and the larger efforts of relocalization associated with Peak Everything.

Turning to what the future holds, I don't think that any reasonable homo sapien can look at the situation now and conclude that there is a high probability for human survival if we go to 6 degrees or 12 degrees or 18 degrees, whether that takes one century or several. Earth, meet Venus.

There is a hopeful note, and it abides in the abilities of humans to change, react, adapt, and invent. Whether there is the will to do that, and that it will be found in time, or whether we are so numbed by GMO High Fructose Corn Syrup, Bovine Growth Hormone or Brittany Spears that we will just go quietly to oblivion are open questions now, in 2009. The odds do not favor us, at least from the standpoint of all the warnings we have missed.

From this experience of 40 years, I have seven Future Trajectory Predictions to share with you and they are these:

1. We have had incontrovertible evidence of global warming for at least the past 120 years.

What is the prospect that the climate talks will succeed in bringing global warming under control in 2009? The signs are not good.

2. With the discovery that the Alberta tar sands have about as much energy as a baked potato (by

unit mash), the center of the world's wealth will shift to Ireland and the UK. New wars will spring up in regions of the world that have been historically known for potato production. Ever wonder what that row in West Ossetia was all about?

3. As a condition of taking federal bailout money, PC's and Macs will merge, creating a new, all-powerful computer brand, PC-Mac, which will eliminate all of the tables and cords we have been hassling with here.

Now, when you get a blue screen, it will have a frowny face, too.

4. In a desperate attempt to thwart climate change, everyone will shave their heads in order to increase the Earth's albedo, reflecting more sunlight back towards space. Pliny Fisk and David Orr have once more shown themselves to be ahead of the rest of us in making this transition.

5. Sea level rise will claim some historic structures, and one has to begin to wonder about the subject of succession.

Personally I am imagining that unbeknownst to us the dolphins have already begun to blog on the subject of Peak Human.

6. The population problem will be solved by the Singularity, whereupon all dedicated followers of fashion will become nano foglets and waft off into space, their brain-computing power growing exponentially…

7. …while the hot Earth is left to small bands of Luddites, who promptly plant enough trees and bury enough biochar to make it habitable again.

If there is a lesson in this, it is that we can learn all something from the hippys. Green technology is not everything. It is going to be more about lifestyle change.

And that is a happy ending.

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Further research: www.greenmanreview.com/book/book_piercy_woman.html