How bad or hopeful is our situation as a culture and species?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
14 November 2011

Publisher's note: On the occasion of "The 2011 International Conference on Sustainability, Transition & Culture Change: Vision, Action, Leadership," held at a retreat east of Traverse City, Michigan a few days ago, I provided the following essay in the spirit of the conference's explorations. I had to cancel my speaking engagement for the conference, due to new commitments on the East Coast, but the essay went in my place. - JL

A message for Local Future conference participants:

Greetings friends,

A key question often asked unofficially, often over beers, is something like this:

How bad or hopeful is our situation as a culture and species?

I believe there are two urgent areas to consider: how hopeless our social relations and collective sanity might be, amidst overpopulation and record toxicity, and, more importantly, how dire our lot is ecologically. (I phrase this in the negative, feeling the need to first put aside the hopeful aspects of our collective situation, despite good developments of late in the social arena.)

As this culture's true design -- demonstrated by society's purpose of controlling the population in any possible way -- precludes a redirection for basic principles of peace, justice, respect and love, we should face the possibility that modern culture seeks nothing more but to dominate the herd. The few herders who call the shots (literally and figuratively) are content to callously or blindly run us all off a cliff known as the ecological precipice. Along the way many have been trampled by injustice and greed.

Those not facing the above-described reality include many optimistic progressives in and around the Occupy movement. The bulk of its participants hope for limited reform of the industrial, materialist consumer society, chiefly financially. But to meet this goal, no matter how dire the need, involves an attempt by now too late -- even if it succeeded. How nice it would be, for example, for there to be a constitutional amendment to deny to corporations the rights given to individual Americans (a Missoula, Montana referendum voted for this by 75% on Tuesday). But it's even too late for a complete restructuring of society -- unless a complete culture change occurs concurrently and very soon.

A society can change much faster than a culture. But for our predicament, which can be terminal because of our ecological mess, only a rapid and radical change in values and behavior will save our species (and fellow life forms we're rapidly losing) from going extinct in the relatively near future. Several degrees of warming of the globe in a matter of decades will see to that. There's also the potential consequences of nukes and perhaps the plastic plague.

Only a total, immediate curtailment of fossil-fuels combustion, along with all out tree planting involving the whole world, plus other practices to sequester carbon and save soil, water and endangered species, can possibly salvage life as we know it. A runaway greenhouse effect is our present course, and we don't know if it is already too late.

A just society will be required to pull this off. No dictatorship -- even a benign one -- can do the job. Our responsibility as individuals, taking action cooperatively, must be the collective answer. This is cosmically possible, even if it is hard to see through today's fog of despair, illusion, waste and conditioning. But the question is, "what can get us there?" Increasingly, it seems that total collapse of the dominant order is required for seeing sufficient change. The Occupy movement at this stage is not ecologically oriented, nor does it seem to grasp or embrace fundamental healing. One reason is that any reconfiguring or expansion of the movement's goals could lead to fragmentation, widespread disapproval, or violent suppression. [Update: heavy-handed suppression cranked up around the U.S. since this essay was written.] My gambit to suggest a nature-based and food-security oriented "Occupy The Land" aspect to the Occupy movement may be a snowball thrown in a blizzard. Or it may take off in Santa Cruz first. Likewise, the "20-hour work week maximum," that I've promoted here and there such as at Occupy Santa Cruz, might be stuck in the category of reformism that's too late -- if indeed it got adopted as a demand and actually came about.

Considering everything needing attention by a vibrant social movement that could miraculously pull off a peaceful and eco-logic revolution, common ground as it exists today is far from where we need to be for Mother Earth to benefit from the best scientific and ethical wisdom. May your compassionate and fearless energy as a group guide us all.

Love, Jan
Nov. 12, 2011

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The live streaming is of course over, but material can be had from the conference's Facebook page and speakers' websites:
Albert Bates distributed his, noting "[This] is the archive of the livestream of my extended hour long talk in Michigan if you have interest and/or bandwidth. It is more autobiographical than my usual talks so be warned. It was well received so I thought it with circulating."

Guy McPherson may put his talk on his website

Tim Bennett, writer of the documentary What a Way To Go, placed his conference message The River of Vision – The Vision of River on his website.

See Culture Change prior posting Local Future: peak oil and vision for culture change, Nov. 10-14, Michigan

Missoula, Montana referendum on revoking corporate personhood

"Occupy the Land" How The Occupy Movement May Be Off-Base, and How It Can Evolve