A Social Awakening Depends on Balance of Activism

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Our tall ship inches toward Copenhagen where it will dock near Christiania, the semi-autonomous village in the Christianshavn quarter. Apart from the job of getting the engineless ship into port where we deliver 8,000 bottles of French wine, there is much for an ecological and social activist to reflect upon.

Sometimes when Nature's energy is high on the sea, with a fury, or when we are in the tender embrace of the water, air and sun that calms and becalms us, we get a slightly new perspective on our place on the planet. I should not have to add: that place is not about money or other narrow goals.

That this crew is a tight community is food for thought. Besides the imperative of cooperation for survival, it is simply easier and more natural to operate within a collective. Yet, in that situation one still finds oneself in serious personal contemplation on one's intentions, dreams, and grappling with vexing questions about modern living.

Such as, how can people emancipate themselves from the trap of wage slavery and the separateness fostered by competition in the capitalist economy? Or, how do you get people to join an optional revolution and feel & act closer to the Earth? Perhaps Hollywood could depict author Daniel Quinn's prescription for a tribal way of life in today's mainstream; his favorite examples were a circus or a newspaper. It does not matter what people are doing for their mutual aid, as long as they are doing it together (and it is not a predatory or exploitative scheme). Not everyone can live in a tall ship and share a purpose on the high seas. So I am fortunate to be on board as we together inch toward the Baltic on an August night.

If we have to rely on Hollywood or a Daniel Quinn to guide the mass of humanity in this time of frightening crises, we're in trouble. We need to keep focusing on the questions of our lives on a fragile planet, and involve everyone we may reach. To fall back on the certainty of eventual change and restructuring after collapse is to give up on the power of imagination and hopeful possibilities. The thoughtful individual wonders how billions of people can utilize their power to enjoy harmony and solidarity -- for this is the alternative to needless struggle for basic necessities.

Resources have been plentiful in people's locales both in past times of healthy environmental conditions and with the advent of the global economy. We are losing both, thus entering a doubtful new era that appears to promise things will get worse before they get better. In considering this reality -- denied by the corporate media and politicians -- we may be openly active or privately coping day to day, hoping for the best.

The key seems to lie in the balance between satisfying personal needs while giving to the world, such as to one's neighbors in the common interest. Even for the hard-core activist, the private concerns of family life or individual health, or artistic creation, are undeniable priorities that can

impinge upon the chosen life-commitment to educate and agitate to make the world a better place.

Yet there is little support for achieving this balance. We are on our own, if individualism and fear have taken over our lives. So, combining our talents and energy in a cooperative project for the common good -- e.g., the constructing and commissioning of this schooner brig -- is imperative. The separation between individuals particularly in U.S. society is at its height, thanks to the unequal American Dream and pervasive techno-whiz gadgets that have substituted for intimate, direct communication. In contrast, in the late 1960s in various parts of the modern world, "the Movement" enjoyed growing participation and a shared spirit. Despite repression and creeping alienation from nature and from one another, the Movement did not really go away. It has evolved, as we saw the Movement's evolution result in a resurge during the Occupy protests last autumn.

For one's balance of personal versus collective action to be achieved and maintained may be the big question for some, but most people have not opted in. Beyond having to get daily food and shelter, or paying the bills in a more affluent stratum, one's spare time and opportunity for community involvement appear to be nonexistent. But the time and opporuntinity do exist. Reaching people requires getting their attention ideally before social upheaval arrives with a vengeance. At the same time, some sub-communities -- either ethnic or communal -- retain and build solidarity in the face of societal pressures. We need to look at how many, many more people can opt in.

The level of contribution to our common cause is not so crucial as the fact of actual participation. For we can be, and are often are, happy for whatever amount of giving or sharing that we do. Polls indicate rising concern about economics and ecological reality. But "final check-out" on our purchases during the faltering American Dream is at hand. It can still play a large role in shaping lifestyles, such as "green" shopping (better yet, non-shopping), along with more food-gardening, bicycle use, and other renewable energy investment on the decentralized, local scale.

It should not be so hard for us to increase our involvement in some transition for joining the inevitable collective transformation. There are so many possible steps, significant without being huge, to ease the strain of workaday pressures. Routinized living has its attractions, but is stifling -- not to mention foolish in a time of rapid change and environmental danger.

Perhaps a case study can illuminate: an office worker for a European military agency impressed me with her grasp of the financial sea change rocking people's boats. The trend she lamented most is more austerity, followed by deprivation. Yet, despite her spot-on analysis of people's denying the disappearance of the average person's wealth, she had a wall between her concerns and any adjustments she and her family might make for a more secure lifestyle in the long run.

Maybe my suggestions

and observations gave her impetus to take a step to act. The encounter I had with her was a dance party, where inhibitions, formal behavior and free thought loosen a bit. My reflections after I left took the form of a song that I went below decks to write.

I share this anecdote because it illustrates that the task of reaching people is often best achieved when communicating one on one in a relaxed setting. But failing that, it is sometimes accomplished when finding our hearts have opened through some meaningul music or poetry. Either of those routes can move a person to take a chance on change, and find the intimate community of solidarity we all really crave. It could be a ship, a commune, a circus, or a Christiania. However, when options have closed off, and "The army's on the road" (Jethro Tull, Aqualung), the ideal course is probably out of reach.

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Written August 10, 2012, in the Skagerrak Strait, between Sweden and Denmark, on the Tres Hombres tall ship.

For the flavor of the voyage, read one of the weblogs I sent via satellite from sea, on the Fair Transport website.