Waiting for culture change or something like it

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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A personal journey/an open book

You are not alone in wondering when the obvious is going to be openly recognized:

When will the affordability of providing for basic human needs be widely compared with the towering waste of militarism and aggression, in the U.S. and beyond? When will caring for our planetary home, which only makes entire sense, be Job Number One? How many more Sandys and Fukishimas are necessary before the screaming global alarm is really heard?

If you have adopted simple living and sharing, when will you no longer be marginalized? Why should speaking about central issues of our time still be so unpopular among the mass of otherwise intelligent people?

Whether it's just a new calendar year or a new age, most of us find it is good to stop and reflect on what each of us is doing in our own particular stage of our lives. More and more of us question our roles as modern humans as the climate spirals us into worse than dire straits. How can one person do more to help all fellow beings? Could your latest creative project for the common good finally make a big difference, this time? Or is there an organization or movement convincingly promising to deliver the change we need to see?

At Culture Change we have for nearly 25 years gone around and around the debates on what is sustainable and doable. Environmentalists inevitably dwell on root causes of fossil fuel dominance, ongoing deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and the conundrum of unwise population growth. The whole movement tries to also emphasize the positive, both to buck up ourselves and our audience, but also to find the Holy Grail to positive change for all society.

But let us not forget the syndrome of "getting more funding" -- the perversion of what was once known as "the (all-encompassing) Movement" four and five decades ago. This has led to a wholesale cry to create more jobs and expand technology, a not so new approach that brought a lot of problematic baggage. Even disregarding the baggage, it's impossible to keep pursuing this ersatz grail in the same way as before.

Unusual experience, to arrive at a dream

So I decided I should try to offer up my best essay ever. I have written and published hundreds, but cumulatively they have not been enough of a contribution to even begin to "save the Earth." The projects of Culture Change may be more lasting than its reports, but since we're unsure of having guaranteed much success, we don't give up our attempts to meet our mission. So our on-the-ground (or on-the-water) efforts, as well as our best new ideas, need to be written about anew.

This week out in the garden I literally took pen to paper -- for better conceptual flow than typing into a computer -- and started jotting down ideas. Happily, I may have achieved what I wanted for an essay, "Waiting for culture change." It follows, with the new, more humorous title above (drawing from a Firesign Theater album of over four decades ago). First, here are a baker's three-quarter dozen thoughts that came to me in reflecting on my past year, or upon the ending of an age, as we face an ever-dawning world:

• Paradoxically, this is a time of minimized solidarity -- when we need it most.

• It is undermined by the cherished notion that the world -- nature's womb -- is forever our playground for individual gratification.

• Right livelihood -- lifestyle change away from consumerism -- is unrewarded except perhaps in karma or Gaia's appreciation, if you will.

• Hitting hard with the truth that one has found is not necessarily appreciated by many people, despite creative efforts coupled with compassion, assuming you can get to them at all.

• The sharp distinction between the Earth-engaged person and the material world-engaged man or woman has not lessened, despite momentous forces and trends becoming more clear. There are the few who, while not being perfect human beings, live for more than just themselves, as they share their vision and go up against corrupt power. But the greater number of citizens just look out for themselves, being taken advantage of by the subset of sociopaths extending institutional conditioning to predation.

• A grand injustice inflicted on a front-lines "spiritual warrior for peace" and his family is nowadays only another outrage, a blip, in a world of hurt. Time was, supportive people might have rallied around such an activist, even if it were not about an issue as central as oil.

• Another paradox: as I get older and run out of time, I get slower and act more deliberately.

• If such action is not cunning and inclusive of self-interested parties, the chance of success of any given scheme or program is low. So the actions I can only do may only be dreams, if we are really ending nature's garden and exiting life. Fortunately, dreams have power.

Waiting for culture change

I frequently get boxed into dwelling too much on "When or how can Culture Change (the group) really succeed?" -- when what we really want is for culture change, the idea, to succeed. It is the latter that must remain in focus, even when the former is our specialized work carried out with total devotion. That is, when we aren't partying.

Growth of the typical separate organization and its budget, along with its publications and other projects it can boast, have become essential to operating with visibility. Unfortunately, meeting these objectives tend to take precedence over breakthrough efforts at collaborating and sharing within a movement.

When I started the Fossil Fuels Policy Action Institute -- now Culture Change and founding sponsor of the Sail Transport Network -- it was 1988, going on a quarter century ago. The basic model I had was my concept of what I had perceived of "the Movement" (RIP, circa mid 1970s).

I had joyously discovered the Worldwatch Institute in Washington, D.C. when I was serving the oil industry at Lundberg Survey in the early 1980s. Worldwatch seemed like an exquisite example of expertise, data and policy -- to emulate, I soon decided. It is only now with two and a half decades' perspective that I note: Worldwatch began in the mid-70s

when the Movement had all but lost its momentum; no mere coincidence. As I recruited an advisory board for Fossil Fuels Policy Action, that included Norman Cousins, I met an interesting executive at World Resources Institute. He told me that the 1960s Movement represented in his mind the historical zenith of American promise, which made me smile with hope for our current movement. However, he later forbade me to quote him on that.

By the early 1990s I had noted that separate, often competing organizations -- only occasionally working together for the environment -- depended totally on corporate funding; foundations have their Wall Street portfolios for ongoing financial growth. This money became by the 1980s the only avenue for many an activist wanting to "contribute to the cause" (or have a career) over the long haul.

This weakness of lacking grassroots power means, for our twin dilemma of out-of-control climate change and "$ociety's" inability to take decisive action, that funded organizations can only lament the fact that the more extreme climate-change models are turning out to be the most accurate.

Many groups trying to be independent and pure of vision may not realize they unwittingly offer mere reformism for a "greener" but unworkable status quo. The climate thus becomes an abstract concept to address off into the future within realpolitik. One of the exceptions among groups today is Bay Localize, of Oakland, because of its grassroots ability to put all the pieces of the puzzle together and have some guts.

Although groups such as Culture Change are all about looking for good news involving new ways of addressing the global problem, there's a serious funding handicap: we are of the biocentric camp. So funding and growth have been secondary when it comes to taking stock of the multi-crises, tragic state of violence afflicting the world. Regardless of our certainties and commitment to ecological health -- the only answer that addresses our chances for survival and social justice -- I for one do not have "the Answer." At least, not an answer that enough people are getting behind fast enough to save life as we know it. Yet.

Fortunately, the prospect still exists for inspirational progress and breaking away from the lethal growth syndrome of Western Civilization. Envisioning a nurturing ethic rather than this culture's individualistic, competing aspect is still the shining hope that a good many of us have glimpsed. Each day we say to ourselves "there must be a way of getting the word out more effectively!"

I am probably typical in feeling spread so thin that it's getting to the point of my doubting my efficacy. Except, there is one project giving me hope that I'm helping to move along. I have been thinking for almost two years that this project or movement will eventually characterize a new age of economics and global interconnection: sail transport. [Please see SailTransportNetwork.org later.]

While the Sail Transport Network was still dormant, after a slow start that began in 1999, in 2004 I joined the fledgling anti-plastics movement. I saw it as Culture Change's best opportunity to make our points about petroleum dependence and consumerism. Our efforts paid off with San Francisco's historic plastic bag ban. My part of the campaign seemed to help in the creation of the city's peak oil commission, on which I served.

These activities at Culture Change were soon overshadowed by our petrocollapse message. It was not a doom-and-gloom analysis meant to depress people, as we never ceased offering tools and models of sustainability. We've tried every known lever, including music. (Petrocollapse conferences included our music.) But most of the levers we have tried, including eco-rock music, end up taking a back seat to one main campaign or project. Arts with social meaning are usually as unfundable as organizations calling for hastening the end of BAU (business as usual) -- even though the "negative" is part of the "positive," i.e., to speed us on our way to a sustainable culture.

If Culture Change laid an egg, so to speak, and failed to inspire and enlist collaborators, it has been the involvement of its founder and executive director in a legal case involving his family and Big Oil money. This aspect of my autobiographical book, Songs of Petroleum, has been oft criticized as detracting from the basic story of my 180-degree career change. But my exciting/unsavory family background gave me more than some analytic expertise on petroleum price & supply and the fragile cheap-oil infrastructure: I have been on both sides of privilege.

In my mid-30s I had completed my reluctant, well-paid service to industry and government, and undertook the adventure of fighting for a clean environment -- come what may with my income and social status. I soon was finding out step by step that the energy/environmental challenge was not so much one of policy or politics, but rather of a floundering culture's hang-ups with ideas of civilization. Where this realization eventually leaves you is at the edge of the wilderness -- in both the negative and positive connotations of that state.

"A voice in the wilderness" was what my former chief editor at the Lundberg Letter, Mark Emond, said to me when I told him of my career change away from industry. He was a Buddhist who had previously toiled away for the National Petroleum News, a thoughtful man who was most happy hiking in the forest (with a hunting rifle).

Another negative reaction was from a new colleague. Jay Harris, a grant-maker fond of electric cars, was the backer of the historic 1986 econometric model and book Beyond Oil: The Threat to Food and Fuel in the Coming Decades. Jay partially undermined the work by publishing a summary booklet on it that sought to refute or soften the original message: that there are no comparable, high-net-energy substitutes for easily replacing conventional petroleum. Before I had understood his purpose, he surprised me by telling me in one of our many conversations that he would not significantly support the newly founded Fossil Fuels Policy Action -- "because you were wrong to start your organization when you have young children and you don't stand to make much income." (Simultaneously, I was getting encouragement, such as from ex-Congressman Richard Ottinger, a very effective demand-reduction energy activist.)

Jay's view of my income prospects was partly his self-fulfilling prophecy. But I was thrilled then as I am now to be on the right side of the struggle to save the planet. "Having stuff" and property were my boring past. To focus on more possessions or wealth would encumber me in my mission.

I must admit, though, that I had assumed that my family had a secure, permanent home back in L.A., and that we would all get along in some fashion. Being completely wrong about that, there soon was no conventional security to comfort or ease my eventual non-privilege status. The materialistic society I was beginning to understand and eventually critique and challenge, via Culture Change, was something I needed to perceive in a more personal way through personal, family struggle. My learning came to be more from the perspective of an outsider to privileged society, in order for my gift to you and Mother Earth to fully take shape.

The Gift Economy is a real concept that I subscribe to. I hope that my personal trivia as told above help fuel efforts, mine and those of my broad circle of which you are a part, to encourage culture change all the sooner -- no matter what happens with a gift-offering known as Culture Change!

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Note: this article's second to the last paragraph was edited down in January, 2013.

Further reading:

New Year's Resolutions For a More Simplified and Peaceful Life

by Jan Lundberg