Porthole to the Future

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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The young man sat on the pebbly beach, looked out over shades of turquoise framed by pine-studded points of sunlit land, and said to himself, "This is the place to be."

The next minute he noticed around him a couple of cigaret butts and bits of degraded plastic, and wondered aloud, "How can anyone harm nature?" Then in a matter of seconds he questioned who the hell he was to point a finger at any polluters, when he had taken a jet plane and used a car to get to this almost unspoiled spot. It was great to be in the Aegean instead of back in the States, but what was the worth of running around the globe trying to spice things up for a more meaningful life?

"After all," he said to the wavelets a few feet away, "life has to have meaning wherever you are. Anywhere at all, even a jail cell, could be perfect for full self-awareness." Yet he had as much reason as any young person to take an epic trip, when romance had foundered on the shoals of his uncharted life. Dee, Delores to her grandparents, said he was so fun -- except when he was too serious. She left him for an older (and serious) guy who had passed the bar. Now she could go to law school and not have to worry so much about the future, so she said.

He suspected that the future was not only up for grabs; one had to depend on more than formal education and making money. Despite Dee's giving up on him, their two years of urban adventure and forays into the countryside remained for him immeasurable learning experiences. As a couple they never knew where they would be living a few months out. This didn't bother him much, nor did things seem all that tough when certain amenities of life were unaffordable or the stuff of fantasy. To him, these were details along the path of meeting the challenges of the ominous Big Picture. He found out too late to change course, because Dee had sized him up as a wanderer and dreamer. There was a little sting whenever he remembered how much she loved his long hair, and the new Mr. Lawyer had short hair. So, he reflected, this is how it works: most of us go for material security while a few of us see the greater reality of a common future that's hanging in the balance. Or, what if the issue was that he not as psychologically balanced as the more mature Mr. Lawyer?

Perhaps youth fed his idealism. Despite the clash between nature and modern humanity, he often saw the goodness and ingenuity of people, especially when they pursued their harmonious and cooperative potential with creativity. He sensed it especially when recalling projects on the ground, collaborations, and new or revitalized communities. The advantages and benefits went on and on in his mind: the satisfaction of organizational inventiveness, sharing small but tangible successes, a peaceful attitude, and treating nature as a friend instead of a trash bin.

Too bad that his favorite examples and memories of inspiring scenes were too rare in the world for him to believe in a massive wave of positive change on the horizon. He was still young, and had not traveled the whole world, but he knew they weren't prevalent across the planet; indeed the inspirations were all too unknown. It was sad and sometimes grating that mainstream consumers were for the most part oblivious. Or if they knew of inspirations that ran counter to mass-media awareness, such unusual or old-school traditions could be seen as antiquated and objects of derision. He himself had been laughed at by his straight-laced cousins as a tree-hugger, when he had actually done it only once in his life.

Most of the people he had grown up with rejected the less-trodden path out of hand. This fit with the idea that the average person saw no options or incentives for changing lifestyle. Or, none that could easily fit into their routines. He had seen this enough to grasp some kind of commonplace mindset. It was as effective as elite clubs of white old men in hidden suites said to be running the show.

The political and ecological realities gave him frustration as a daily companion. His main disappointment was that beyond a few small measures promoted by the corporate state, such as minor recycling and energy efficiency, further steps -- along the lines of constant composting and depaving one's driveway -- never seemed to gather steam on a mass scale. Such changes in one's way of life were widely considered to belong only to eccentric, tree-hugging, unrealistic activist nuts. Like him.

If the dutiful, struggling wage-slave saw no way to begin living a more natural and thoughtful life, and never opted for simple living, nor sought out neighbors and family members to work together with the land at hand, why couldn't more people be at least taking action to secure future self-reliance? Or did survival really only derive from today's paychecks and owning property? The future of the welfare state was dimming, so everyone in the 99% had to somehow be an individual fortress.

The young man was perplexed, but had seen enough in his 25 years to understand that most people had an extremely hard time changing their ways. Speaking up about matters beyond their own routines and self-interest was like a rare, recessive genetic trait. Logic and rationality were not fully engaged for basic decisions about life, so conditioned habits were maintained without question. Somehow the early training in the home, and the influence of institutions such as public school and the media, produced mostly drones! Except, the term never caught on, he mused; now everyone thought of a drone only as an unmanned bomber. What about the drones in bee colonies? Nowadays there might be droves of younger human drones thinking a bee drone must be named after the unmanned bombers and surveillance planes that are the buzz in the news.

Ian soon found he enjoyed going by Yannis in the Aegean. Was he leaving a routinized life in the States behind, or was he putting off doing what he was really meant to do, whatever that was? He had discovered years ago that he could enjoy a fairly adventurous life, if not satisfying on all levels. Soon after coming of age he found himself skirting the fringes of society while getting a rather practical education. This became more evident while a student, finding school to be of marginal relevance. So he balked at going deep into debt for higher schooling. He dropped out of college and proceeded to get by in an experimental, more or less spontaneous fashion. Part-time work came his way that allowed more thinking than the burger-flipping bottom-of-the-barrell job. Getting by in a group house was sensible, often exciting, and economical because of his few material needs and enjoying pretty good health.

Yet, he sometimes felt like a victim of society, despite his healthy attitude for survival and thriving (almost) in cooperative scenes. A raised consciousness was essential, though usually elusive on a daily basis. Having to struggle to pay for rented housing and food could sometimes not be avoided. He was far from rich, with only tenuous links to the middle class, so he had to hustle. A couple of years ago he was having a blast, what with social discoveries involving sex and partying. When Dee joined him he finally felt like a thoroughly grown-up man, and with her the tougher days were much fewer. Now, without a partner or pursuing a dream, he saw a more stark reality for himself and all those no longer whooping it up with another beer.

Something that one could call enlightened helped keep him going: the idealized age of universal sharing and caring for the bountiful Earth seemed to be dawning. But on what time scale and calendar? Was it Utopia in the totally impossible sense of the word? Could many others ever see what a tiny minority of visionaries had come to understand? It was nothing new for independent minded folk to suspect there is a wall of conventional thinking to conform to. Perhaps it's a plastic veil. But few lifted the toxic façade or parted the curtain of materialistic illusion to really open their hearts out loud:

What have they done to the Earth?

What have they done to our fair sister?

Ravaged and plundered and ripped her and bit her

Stuck her with knives in the side of the dawn

And tied her with fences and dragged her down

- When the Music's Over, the Doors, 1968

Ian was born long after Jim Morrison died and the band broke up. He knew as a younger but more jaded man than the Doors' singer had been, that he wasn't the first to wonder about humanity's lost opportunity decades ago. The magical 1960s beckoned as an historic convergence for really coming together for a cosmic or global awakening. To overcome war and greed, and let freedom reign, was to him the obvious goal, as it was to many he knew. It was simple logic, but was the height of compassion. Sadly, ever since, no cigar. The awakening or revolution was always opposed indelicately, brutally or subtly, by powerful forces manipulating the mainstream. The mass mind, according to the goal of the power structure, was that The Movement must be regarded as quaint at best, and whenever possible smeared with images of fearsome illegal drug abuse, militant anarchy, and sexual abandon. So, time marched on into the uncertain darkness of subsequent decades -- but at least he had those Doors lyrics on his T-shirt for anyone interested.

Meanwhile, with the climate's alarm bells ringing louder and louder, precious time was being lost for avoiding devastating tipping points of runaway heating and weather chaos. No one in his or her right mind could deny the mounting environmental damage from stranger and stronger droughts, floods and storms. Yet, a plethora of distractions often managed to keep the mass mind centered on celebrities, "terror," and the charade of leaders posturing at the top of government. The climate models predicted the already extreme phenomena lashing the Earth, as consistent with higher levels of greenhouse gas emissions. But the real world was frighteningly outpacing the conservative computer models. On top of this, Ian despaired, no one seemed to keep in mind that the measurable changes in climate today were attributable only from past emissions of decades ago; today's levels of emissions would not be manifested for a couple of decades. Before that, the past would catch up with us: a Truthout.org alert warned on Sept. 29, 2013, "A complete destabilization of the Arctic sea ice would be 'game over' for the climate." No wonder that at this stage of the game, many of his friends believed it was already too late to turn things around. So, what can you do? Just live.

Holding this view was also common among the educated but conformist segment of the professional class, Ian fumed. But these citizens -- almost by definition non-activists -- needed money most seriously. If it wasn't to buy a vacation home, send their kids to college and cover potential medical-cost disasters, it was simply to pay modest bills, handle debts, and keep at bay the foreboding, dreaded ultimate nightmare of layoff/foreclosure/homelessness. This lurking oppression dictated that few would ever dare make a meaningful effort for a sustainable future, certainly not "prematurely" when it would count. Beyond trying to reign in waste by spending a bit more carefully, little else was deemed up for changing. Occasionally cheap organic food, when stumbled upon, was a once-a-month or even weekly coup; ahh, so satisfying to the green soul. Ian knew there was much more to try for, but bottlenecks were firmly in place.

After the 2008 financial meltdown there were many economic casualties; Ian knew some personally. A few who had successfully floated upon the funny-money housing bubble now saw unwelcome change -- the other C word -- looming over them like a sword held by a thread. All too many who found themselves without work, or had obtained second-rate jobs, were unfamiliar with thinking ahead imaginatively. Such as, toward a different social structure and relationship with the natural world. The working population seemed to have two main camps: those who knew they were slaves, and those who would much rather work away to revel in spending-money than to think critically. He felt ashamed for being too judgmental with such a view, and he was perhaps deservedly unpopular with many as a result. But sharing his thoughts along these lines did serve to cull from his social interaction those whom he'd rather not be bored by. And it probably had prevented at least one one-night stand with an aspiring Yuppie.

On the plus side, more than putting a happy face on the twin train-wrecks of climate and socioeconomic decline or collapse, Ian sensed there was no end of admirable efforts by dedicated environmentally aware "innovators." A return to traditional stewardship of the land involved mobilizing groups into resilient communities. This was the kind of innovation Ian saw that we needed -- not some hot new iPolluter smartphone, he said bitterly on occasion.

Cool permaculture farms, squats, ecovillages, successful campaigns for a little social justice -- they were on the rise, and to some thinkers of all ages it all indicated the necessary tsunami of positive change. Could it all come together in short order, given a catalyst, or would disaster and maximum deprivation have to first totally play out? Was there something he had not thought of, that could reorient people en masse toward cooperating, to use their local land and water wisely? When would ecocide and population growth be commonly recognized as here and now, thereby stimulating action for today's generation and future generations? Ecocide and population growth might still outpace the mini-trends of depaving, sharing backyard fruit-tree surpluses, refusing to buy long-distance-shipped food products, getting a bike and bike-trailer instead of a second car, etc. But there would be a turn-around. If not, we were cooked.

For now, Ian acknowledged, the challenge seemed to be this: with the constant distraction of wars and manufactured fear, the average follower in the near-stampeding herd didn't seem to take stock of his or her lot, to come together for long-term improvements for the collective good. Perhaps it was a simple matter of too many people alive for there to be a revolution anymore. But austere poverty was looking more people in the face, and to top it off Mother Nature or Gaia was getting pissed off.

Then, on this day on the beach after an indeterminable moment of his usual reveries, as he gazed out at the sparkling sea, Yannis saw it: gliding through the water's surface was a ship propelled gracefully and silently by sails. It was bigger than the usual pleasure craft. It was more substantial than the typical plastic, mass-produced weekender. Such beauty! And here was proof that human works were easily beautiful.

Were not these full sails truly renewable energy in action, with elegance and simplicity? The ship's action, in Ian's wide eyes as it simply proceeded from Point A to Point B, was part of an unbroken chain of proven technology and traditional skills. "Why haven't I hit on this before!" he cried out aloud. "I can't be the only one who sees this."

The prospects and spirit of this possibly unique vessel gave Ian a warm revelation; not an envious appraisal of a probably costly yacht.

The two-masted ship looked to be something over 60 feet in length. Could it not carry tons of cargo, or maybe 20 travelers? For whatever major needs that any peoples really had on a small planet, there was an almost unlimited number of sailboats already serviceable. He couldn't tell anything about the interior of the ship from his pebbly seat about 100 yards away, as to available space or expensive interior woodwork. So he wondered about unused potential. As a student attendee of Bioneers By the Bay, he heard one Dmitry Orlov point out dismissively that if a boat is a yacht dedicated to the land comforts of vacationing spoiled consumers, this reduced the efficiency and safety of the ship along with its capability for the coming post-oil, bioregionally linked community of societies.

Ian saw in such a ship, now slipping beyond the piny point as it headed who knows where, both transportation for people and cargo potential on an essential level. Meaning -- as opposed to mere maximization of trade and travel for profit and gorging to excess -- essential needs could be met. As petroleum supplies were fast acquiring a different, questionable nature after the peak of conventional crude extraction in 2005, trade volumes and passenger numbers would have to plummet some day. Some peak oil buffs thought it would be soon and sudden, while others believed it would be gradual or further off. As far as Ian had been able to surmise, no technological fix was on tap to keep up the consumer economy addicted to growth.

He was disturbed about petroleum dependence in general. His own use was fairly low, but cause for regular personal anguish or even revulsion. This and his "odd" stance for lifestyle change for the sake of the climate thrust him out to the fringes of most guys and gals. They were just trying to make ends meet and relax. But it was more than that: as often as possible they "had to" maximize their diversions and jollies. Driving hundreds of miles for a quick change of scene, or jetting off for a Thai summer in winter, was acceptable according to mainstream society. He was having tormented misgivings about flying to another continent, as he had just done, as it wasn't extremely justifiable. But his caring friend Marc had offered him an attractive, free stay on a Greek island with a free-miles ticket for next to nothing. It was a chance to put his time with Dee into perspective, and reverse his burn-out from some of the activism. The fight they had waged to preserve their squat was intense, but their vibrant and convivial home back in the States still stood. He recalled how Dee was quite a force in the courtroom. Now he had a chance to check out the protest scene that had been hopping in Greece. Marc, meanwhile was in France with his parents instead of in the Aegean this time around.

To fly or never to fly was a major issue to some thoughtful folk, and was part of the larger discussions that a few people had over one's energy use. Even a fair number of the educated who drove SUVs prided themselves on not taking jet trips.

But before they would end up actually flying, as they inevitably did, they never bothered -- that he ever knew -- to see if they could take a sailboat. Why was this? Was buying some credits online for a little forestation really as cool? Ian mused that the calendar and the clock are the real bosses in charge of our civilized lives.

A conscious consumer had to draw a line somewhere, especially if he or she felt guilty about having a massive CO2 footprint with a large house and countless electronic appliances and gadgets. So, the byword was don't jump for a jet vacation. Ian had few such "guilty" friends or acquaintances, and they were almost all his friends' parents. Surely, any energy-concerned consumer could see the need to use a sailing ship rather than a jet. Did this idea now joggling Ian's brain mean he was just a foolish dreamer, destined to fail in the Rat Race? No, he told himself, let's remember Earth is being killed, so if people could not see -- or refused to see -- the imperative to curb their petroleum guzzling, he wasn't crazy; they were! If so, everyone was fated to wait until the oil ran out or was cut off, for conscious sailing to take center stage for our long-term future.

It was the window to the future. Or, rather the porthole to the future. And Ian's new mission in life.

With all these thoughts run through him, he noticed the sun was going down. He shook his revery from mind and limbs, and stood up from the shore. One last thought came, old words from an early activist:

"...yet my mind was not at rest, because nothing was acted, and thoughts ran into me, that words and writings were all nothing, and must die, for action is the life of all, and if thou dost not act, thou dost nothing"

- Gerrard Winstanley, A Watch-Word to the City of London and the Armie, 1649

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By the time his 5-month voyage was completed, Ian had a plan worked out with two of his mates. It was the right time to create a high profile venture that could command attention from the major media outlets as well as policy makers. There were serious choices to be made for a clear business direction, as well as for nurturing the growing sail transport movement.

First was to keep in mind that although sail as a serious method of moving cargo and people was inevitable, and was in evidence in a few corners of the world, a world-class gulf sat between bridging an idea all the way to the ultimate result.

For two years Ian had sought out existing examples of trade and travel by sail, finding them driven by aware captains of varied articulative talents. Before his big voyage, some good sailing coming his way. Eventually, a pleasant difficulty emerged: there were more startups than he could keep track of and visit. So he had to balance keeping track of them and enjoying the essence of sailing. At last he struck personal gold by landing the position of cook for a 5-month voyage on a tall ship.

By the time he was ready to plan a project with global impact, Ian had to realize that the window for energy-intensive investment in large-scale sail transport infrastructure depended on the unknown time-table of widespread economic collapse. At present there still were financial resources available to build almost anything conceivable. Large assets earning interest that could evaporate overnight could potentially be shifted, in part away from mere banking-related, paper-(digital) investment wealth-generation. There were of course more productive, industrial holdings in some Wall Street portfolios, if one excluded prison labor-farms, but manufacturing had "left the building" around the time Elvis had in the '70s. Earning massive amounts of money beyond any actual need was a sickness, Ian felt, because he didn't ever observe it producing happy, enlightened individuals. Making money on money was disassociated from true wealth, definable in obscure Occupy blogs as a healthy plot of land with year-round fresh water.

What the sail transport fleet would consist of in a few years boiled down to one or more of these priorities: (A) use existing vessels usable today, (B) make conversions of all kinds of ships, even freighters, to sailing rigs and with added keels perhaps, and (C) build new ships totally distinct from today's dominant "oil boats." All these possible sail transport vessels could have auxiliary engines, ideally running on renewable energy, or have no engines at all.

That last option of operating was proven feasible, romantically so, by the Dos Muchachos, the schooner brig that regularly sailed across oceans with truly green luxury goods. There were too many sailors volunteering for too few bunks on that joyous tall ship. But once on board, the rewards were immense. Community to the max. And, topping off the voyage was always a successful landfall celebrated by the flow of their own house brand of tequila: Dos Muchachos Sail-Transported True Green Tequila.

It was during one of these festive occasions on the Dos Muchachos when Ian met up with the ship when it docked in Copenhagen. He met Lee, a deckhand. Their conversation was so friendly that after an hour it became a contest of who was more impressed with whom. They stood facing each other with smiles, when Ian said, "Lee, can I take you to a fantastic pebbly beach far away?" She nodded and gave him a kiss.

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- Sept. 30, 2013, Hydra.

Thumbnail graphic from Operation Sail. President Kennedy founded Operation Sail in 1961 to promote unity and goodwill between nations through sail. Operation Sail in Wikipedia

Join the nonprofit Sail Transport Network. A flexible membership structure awaits you.