Using What We Each Have Inside Us for People Power: Meeting The Challenge for Our Sustainable Future

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Picture an unknown, young Bob Dylan or Leonard Cohen singing at an audition without guitar accompaniment, a standard not written by them. They might have been summarily sent out the door — especially in the case of an older Dylan or Cohen with their now deteriorated and aged voices. In the real world, such famous artists known for their individuality don't appeal to everyone, but each of their lifetime records of success, uniqueness, and diehard following cannot be denied.

You might agree that such singers, in the above hypothetical situation, were either not utilizing, or were not being permitted to use, what they really have, whether their ability was known or unbeknownst to themselves.

But these artists — including perhaps Janis Joplin as another without a typically pleasing ability to perform according to "high" standards — were in reality acknowledged to be extremely talented and creative individuals. Each exploited and enjoyed what he or she had to work with, as any artist or fine craftsperson must. But what if they had previously been too discouraged or had chosen limit themselves, in what might have been a strong interest in which they could excel?

Writ large, countless people today seem to veer toward timidity and anonymity by not using what they really have inside, even though they might greatly please themselves and offer others something of high value. In large and growing numbers today, people are deprived of enough food and clean water, perhaps because they lack freedom as refugees or slaves. But the many people relatively free and more or less thriving often suffer from a root problem contributing to both the entire sad state of the world and personal anguish among alienated or depressed consumers. It is a pervasive hesitancy to step forward with confidence to draw upon one's being. They are somehow not using what they have.

Not only do people not use their power individually, they famously only rarely use it collectively except on historic occasions. When people get together in great numbers with a common focus, they can peacefully replace a despotic ruler, or they might stampede in desperation without a long-term vision.

One can note every day the lost human potential of intelligent, kind, educated people — especially the young — who may get pigeon-holed into dead-end employment. Regimentation sets in when public school serves as crowd-control and de facto training for jobs, or, especially for blacks in the U.S., prison. Standardized education helps stifle original thought and relegate one's dreams to past, truncated childhood. Increasingly, with electronic entertainment from large corporations, Madison Avenue campaigns, and a dumbing down via substances such as drugs and lead, it is no wonder that most young people do not live much of an adventurous, self-liberating life. They rarely pick up a brush to paint their own masterpiece, write a book, learn a useful skill, or attempt an open mic or karaoke gig. Nor, non-artistically but also of value for personal achievement or helping society, do they often form an enterprise or become part of a vibrant collective. Exceptions exist and are inspiring for many today — although largely through passive internet visits.

Yet, without a nurtured, contagious sense of personal power or people power, they may apathetically act like motorized lemmings driving off the ecological cliff while fiddling with cellphones or iPods.

Granted, outgoingness and experimental public projects are not for everyone. Goddess knows we need more sweetness and solid support for and among quiet individuals within families or communities, regardless of one's talent or originality. Fortunately, the low-profile or even introverted style can also be invaluable, whether the individual feels stifled or not, or even if the person is ignorant of world history and its behind-the-scenes skullduggery of the elite rulers.

Self-realization for the "common people" has on occasion occurred to masses of youthful-minded folk in modern history,

such as in the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s. It was a time in the U.S. and in other industrialized countries for countless individuals to begin expressing themselves. They often gravitated to groups of like-minded others, banding together in various ways, evolving toward pursuits and self-images they didn't imagine before. There seemed to be no limit for anyone who grew in consciousness and awareness, provided an effort was made to step outside the confines of what was sometimes called the "plastic society" of plastic — or, to be more accurate, conformist — people.

Getting a college education in those days was only one route of many for doing one's "own thing," whether in terms of self-satisfaction or finding a welcoming peer group. Education — then a low-cost or free option in the U.S. — was likely sought for true learning and even "changing the world," compared to the soon-to-follow Me Generation's tendency to go get a "good job." During the 1960s flowering of human potential, one's feeling part of a growing, underdog movement to bring about peace and nuclear disarmament was liberating, both for the individual and as a gift to others in a spirit of remaking the world toward universal justice. It was both personal power and people power.

Failure to educate oneself, in academia or outside it, is a sure way to leave unexplored and unexamined what's going on today internationally, ecologically, and inside one's head. Yet, if a hobby or skill is still pursued for its own sake, any intelligent person — we are all intelligent in various ways, unless impaired — beauty or excellence is often achieved. This has always been so. But not so when the attempt is not made.

A difficult question: how many more people can somehow feel able and willing to make the attempt to accomplish personal growth — aside from aggrandizement — to serve one's community or protect the embattled biosphere? Many methods and implorations are conveyed, but countless self-help or New Age opportunities may appear suspect or boring, possibly because the person most helped is the founder who may be promoting his or her own enterprise for profit or fame. Similarly, a cult-figure or guru has it all figured out already, and wants followers. As the late John Trudell intoned in one of his radical poems set to blues rock, "No bosses."

One can blame the all-too-common tendency to "do nothing" and live quiet lives of desperation on government conspiracies to stifle movements. This happened in the late 1960s and early 1970s with COINTELPRO*. One can also blame the dominant culture of Western Civilization and its materialism, conformity, religions, media that trumpet success and fashion, and one can find great fault with the enforced narrative of "progress" associated with technological and scientific advances. Another facet of domination has been the suppression of certain knowledge, dating from industrialism and the scientific revolution. Nature-healing was in many cultures traditionally done by women who in Europe came to be attacked as witches (i.e., non-Christian, rural, and outside the rising bourgeois power structure). In Spanish the word bruja in the Americas connotes not only a female shaman or a witch, but to many a healer.

Some non-mainstream commentators and specialized analysts say our existential crisis will not be addressed or solved without complete economic collapse. It would be concomitant with the broad loss of not-quite-replaceable fossil-fuels and the failure of an energy technofix for maintaining the global corporate economy with its billions of consumers. With collapse, the thinking goes, people who survive will have to reinvent traditional village societies, or re-form small tribes, to achieve mutual aid for a cooperative rather than competitive culture. I have been predicting for many years that real change for today's consumer lifestyle will not happen until we all lose the ability to freely use money and petroleum for our real and perceived needs.

It is possible that a billion people may become climate refugees within years rather than several decades. At the rate greenhouse emissions have risen and keep rising, this seems likely to be our unwanted future. Ecological collapse will be even more basic and devastating than economic collapse for humans, when it comes to the challenge of survival — when we need to be able to offer our individual best for a liveable world. To meet our own potential and help others, we also need a maturation of society, a collective growing-up akin to what any responsible young person faces upon adulthood. Happily, a mass education campaign to "Turn 21" was launched last year.

Whether collapse is necessary or inevitable, there remains incalculable human potential both individually and collectively to use what we have — not what we may simply possess materially or quantitatively with information — to live fully in the

present and to bequeath for others, especially the unborn, a sweeter and safer world.

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* COINTELPRO (COunter INTELligence PROgram) was a series of covert, and at times illegal, projects conducted by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) aimed at surveilling, infiltrating, discrediting and disrupting domestic political organizations. Beyond initial targets such as the Black Panthers, the Communist Party, and leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., the anti-war movement and famous rebellious musicians were also targeted, although the case for the latter is not a clear open-and-shut example acknowledged by many inquiring minds today.

References and further reading:

Turn21.org Also see its Facebook page

Grand Bargains: Fixing Health Care and the Economy, by David K. Cundiff. The book lays out a plan to shift the power and authority for health, human services, housing, social security, and job creation from government to private, competing, autonomous cooperatives which democratically determine their own guidelines and budgets. Edited by Jan Lundberg.