Awakening to Responsible Community Membership for Earth Day: Turning 21

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Since it is the 21st of the month, and this is the 21st century, we have a handy reminder -- at least 12 times a year -- that it is time to grow up and face the music. Whether as individuals coping with hardship and injustice in materialistic society, or as a people reacting in many ways to multiple crises, we find ourselves in a fast-changing world that is less and less likely to offer security for all, unless we bring about fundamental change soon.

Is Bernie Sanders addressing fundamental change? Is following him, or another appealing reformer, all that we need to solve the environmental crisis that worsens daily with the unbroken political power of industrialists, financiers, and developers?

This depends on whether Sanders' followers believe that there is such a thing as honest government, or whether a peaceful redistribution of income is possible when one person feels justified in owning far more wealth than a million common people do.

We suspect that the Sanders movement believes in material fulfilment for an overpopulation of consumers, as long as the pie is divvied up fairly. Unfortunately, the energy reality of dwindling nonrenewable resources has gotten through to very few people, politically progressive or not. The technofix for continuing the global consumer economy is not being questioned, because of the label "renewable energy." Sounds good indeed! Unfortunately, there is no comparable substitute among fuels or technologies to approximate conventional oil's prior abundance and high net-energy yield in extraction. Peak oil happened worldwide for conventional reserves in 2005.

This has "Yuge" implications for all sectors. Putting transportation aside -- ignoring the problems of car dependence and wasteful land use for asphalting good soil -- the two threats to the continuity of consumer culture are (1) petrochemical agriculture and that has come to feed and breed billions, and (2) petroleum-powered distribution for not just food but world trade: 90% of all goods sold arrive via cargo ships that are hopelessly dependent on the dirtiest oil for propulsion.

It takes an open mind, and maturity, to see that certain dilemmas lie in the path of simple solutions for universal, middle-class bliss. But if we do have this society-wide discussion, we can collectively plan a softer landing when the consumer economy crashes harder next time. Let us recognize that denial if rife with otherwise-intelligent adults, and with scared children.

Challenges: healthy minds and compassion

Are people grown up, in terms of daily actions and a set of values, just because they may have some grey hair? Not necessarily. They may have hateful personalities developed back in childhood, or perhaps they just never got exposed to community solidarity on a family- or neighborhood-level.

Do people really think? In other words, do most people react emotionally, without thinking through a problem or a perceived threat? Small children have basic needs for their parents' loving presence, for food, shelter, and warmth. They cry when they don't get one of these essentials. They may grow up either imbued with understanding and in a patient environment, or frustrated and disposed to throw tantrums. They may even be abused, uprooted, or routed from poor schooling to prison. Some of these unfortunates may end up thinking very well, despite it all. Most pitiful is the "educated" and advantaged, privileged citizen who can only think of him/herself, or has a problem putting the brain in gear whenever any form of red flag or hot-button pops up.

In the prevailing minimum-community culture of the U.S., there is an array of personal or household habits and practices that are essentially short-sighted: they are harmful to other people and other species. To not consider the consequences, due to failing to think, is clearly childish. To act in a way to "get away with something," perhaps because it is commonly done, may be pursued openly or in a way to try to hide something known to be wrong. This is all too "adult," but in truth is childish. To be somehow identified as engaging in selfish, unfair acts rarely changes such individuals. Although, standing up to them -- perhaps through protest or criminal prosecution -- is essential, even though confronting bad actors or, say, City Hall, is considered by non-confrontational people as "negativity" or, ironically, childishness for its quixoticness.

To turn twenty-one as an individual is to grow up emotionally and put a good mind to better use. But this has psychological implications. A bright teenager who is getting liberally educated, and who is not just out for fun and kicks via cash and techno-toys, can turn the last corner in his or her maturity and embrace adult, civic responsibility. Or, a midlife-crisis careerist can wake up and realize that there is more to life than making more money and surrounding him/herself with the trappings of success: "having" a family, getting ahead, giving nothing back to the community or to the Earth. Some of us instead arrive at simple living, exhilaratingly so, with more time spent in nature as essential to both personal and planetary health.

It is no small obstacle for a mass "turning 21" that a member of modern society has often had a rough time, whether economically, health-wise, or emotionally perhaps in a love-deficient family-upbringing. It is not a given that respect is engendered for all people and other species, so, severe selfishness and defensiveness rule the attitudes and decisions of millions of Americans. This may involve racism, sexism, xenophobia, or religious bigotry. Rather than one's being able to take the step of finally growing up (to turn 21), there may be in the person's background some severe mental handicaps: arrested development, insane jealousy, and even criminal violence, as well as drug abuse of the legal and illegal varieties. Such people are still considered by society as sane and valued, as long as they go to work, pay taxes (or, spectacularly evade taxes), wave the flag for (or not object to) never-ending war, and perhaps give lip service to better government and making the streets safer for dutiful shoppers and commuters. So, to "turn 21" is initially for those who have done some thinking in a compassionate way, and are able to see their own interests linked to everyone else's -- what a concept!

In the absence of one's wanting to in effect "turn 21," denial is a standard method of trying to keep things in place, even it it is a house of cards being undermined by a toxic upwell. A game of pretend is played, as to what constitutes a responsible, decent citizen. The challenge for the Turn21 movement is to bring along the reluctant, obstructionist, and enraged, reactionary element of society, while appealing to everyone else's sense of cooperation and coming together cooperatively. A mature approach to our common problems involves recognizing scientific fact regarding our climate, and the need for a "moral economy" as expressed by Bernie Sanders and his bro the present Pope.

The Dalai Lama says "Kindness is the best philosophy." Today, in a world of perhaps unprecedented migration due to wars, and much more of it to come due to climate chaos, kindness is sanity. Why? Stop-gap "solutions" to erect barriers to suffering people fleeing violence and devastation only serve, at best, to show how bad things have gotten under the current paradigm. Without compassion and understanding, there cannot be peace. Although sharing is essential, it is eventually a failed approach when restructuring society and changing the culture are continually put off. Yet, without sharing compassionately, a new system cannot be established with sustainability. Hard choices are ahead, and require cool heads with heart. Those of us who simply want what we want right now will have a hard time -- or give everyone else a hard time -- adjusting to the bursting bubble of material splendor that was already out of reach for 99% of us due to engineered inequality.

Cultures with tight family cohesion and a tradition of community will do better, post-energy-exuberance and post-consumer-affluence-through-debt, than the U.S. with its nuclear family tendency of not being close to the relatives and not knowing one's neighbors. So, keeping the grandparents under the same roof as the children, and getting to be good friends with the neighbors, is a form of "turning 21." For it is community strength that is our evolution that gave us resilience to survive.

To make it though the minefield of carcinogens, police brutality, bankruptcy, taxation for unending war, and expensive education, the U.S. citizen has to do better than point a finger and demand more money from Wall Street. Taking responsibility means acting in creative, sustained ways to organize, not just in opposition but for a viable alternative.

As we have touched on mental health in this essay, let us generalize that physical health is actually one's own cross to bear: no one else can give it to us. Someone may help us to heal or recover from an accident or illness, but we each need to take care of our body. It can be joyful, and good health also serves to help our loved ones so that we don't become a burden prematurely. To simply have medical insurance and "go to the doctor" is not the same as actually healing. When pressed, an MD who does almost nothing but dispense pills or perform surgery will admit that the patient has to want to heal and take necessary steps. Taking this line of reasoning further, nature heals, for without it we are only cogs or wage slaves subject to larger forces that deny our personal power.

To change the culture is to turn 21: Culture Change's role

What is Culture Change doing for the Turn21 movement? We were delighted to be chosen, along with Sail Transport Network, as one of seven organizations featured for Turn21 activism in recent weeks. Each group has been showcased in Turn21.org's newsletters. Why did our enthusiasm for Turn21 happen in the first place? Answer:

We keep our eyes open for any promising concepts or campaigns that can be game changers. Our first was the Conservation Revolution, back in 1989. Next was the Alliance for a Paving Moratorium, in 1990. The Auto-Free Times magazine came out of those efforts, starting 1993. Pedal Power Produce, the Sail Transport Network, and Culture Change each followed as our best hope for having an impact. We haven't only promoted our own ideas: depaving, permaculture, civil disobedience for protecting ancient forests -- we found them to be essential contributions for any successful ecological movement. Turn21 is the latest. We were delighted that the group felt the same way about us. Here is their recent newsletter featuring Culture Change and Sail Transport Network, voicing our latest positioning on the world stage to bring about fundamental change.

How did the U.S. get to stalled adolescence?

As the U.S. came out of World War II victorious and proud, aided by massive resource extraction and a burgeoning consumerism, the new American came into an age of good times -- so went the prevailing thinking for the advantaged and the up and coming -- the Whites, the educated, and go-getters. The "age" of the new American was adolescence: "What's in it for me? How can I have more fun? I'm going to suck the marrow of life and revel in the new progress of a way of life centered around pleasure, and having more of everything."

This was offset in part by an idealistic awakening that questioned war and mutual annihilation. The youngest president in U.S. history, Jack Kennedy, managed to turn public opinion around to rejecting the nuclear arms race. Racial segregation was being successfully fought. A youth culture of longer hair, rebellious pop music, freer sex, and new expressions in the arts, all told us that a bright new dawn was here. The first Earth Day, in 1970, was such a manifestation. Earth Day did not just appear as a marketing campaign or media event, as it has mostly come to be. It was rather a culmination of Mother Nature's numerous warnings and a growing concern. The new environmental movement had initial impetus from books as Moment in the Sun, by Robert Rienow and Leona Train Reinow, published in 1967, and Silent Spring by Rachel Carson in 1962.

In the 1960s we could stand up for what's right and, thankfully, also have that two-car garage and color TV if we chose. Fossil fuel-related wealth, whereby the industrialized world came to be using "ten Earths," was calculated and poetically termed "exuberance" by the late William Catton in his seminal 1980 book Overshoot. Our amazing material progress

colored national policy as well as attitudes about other countries and cultures, and added to a sense of superiority as Western Civilization seemed to culminate in the U.S. post-WWII. Even today, despite military defeats such as in Vietnam and lowered rankings among other developed countries in health and education, U.S. leaders adhere to U.S. "exceptionalism" that translates to being the Cop of the World. (This does make a lot of money for the military industrial complex.)

Are bullies -- global or schoolyard -- naughty children in need of learning lessons about life? Perhaps, but since we're all in the same boat, we are all out of time. Isn't it time to turn 21?

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