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Finding Grace and Hope in Community

by Martha Kirkpatrick

If you look at the science that describes what is happening on earth today and aren't pessimistic, you don't have the correct data. If you meet the people in this unnamed movement and aren't optimistic, you haven't got a heart. What I see are ordinary and some not-so-ordinary individuals willing to confront despair, power, and incalculable odds in an attempt to restore some semblance of grace, justice and beauty to this world.

Paul Hawken, Blessed Unrest (2007: 4)

The past several months have made me more aware of the community that is outside my door here in Waldoboro where I live. Like everyone else I know, I see dollar signs every time I get into my car. So, I think about what I need to drive to. Instead of driving to the Y, I walk downhill to the Medomak River boat landing and back for my exercise.

Skyrocketing gas prices and home heating oil costs have everyone re-thinking things. As the environmental officer for the Episcopal Diocese of Maine, I get many calls from churches around the state about how to conserve energy. With invaluable assistance from Efficiency Maine, they are looking at everything from on-demand hot water to the use of space; geothermal, solar and windmills; Sunday carpools, coordinated committee meetings, and Sunday services held somewhere other than their high-ceilinged sanctuaries from January to Easter. They are collaborating in multi-faith efforts in their communities.

Some of these changes are small, at little or no cost and a slight change in behavior, and others are costly and require different habits of mind and thought. That major adaptations and lifestyle changes are even on the table signals that there is more going on here than rising prices. The confluence of action that both saves money and is good for the environment is proving enabling, if not compelling.

For students of environmental policy, something deeper and more profound is at work. In the early 1970s, the environmental movement exploded into a sweeping series of laws enacted by Congress that imposed new regulations, established new bureaucracies, and broke new ground in intergovernmental relations. But it is now apparent that concern for the environment is not confined to the public sphere or to the realm of specialists, public officials, or institutions. Environmental problems reflect our deepest attitudes about who we are, and the meaning and purpose of our lives. The environmental crisis, now also becoming an urgent economic one, reflects both an alienation from the natural world and harmful habits of thought. To get to the other side of this crisis, we need to evolve new ways thinking. In 1998 Vaclav Havel wrote,

What could change the direction of today's civilization? It is my deep conviction that the only option is a change in the sphere of the spirit, in the sphere of human conscience. It is not enough to invent new machines, new regulations, new institutions. We must develop a new understanding of the true purpose of our existence on this Earth. Only by making such a fundamental shift will we be able to create new models of behavior and a new set of values for the planet (Havel 1998: 30).

Sustaining healthy, vibrant human and natural communities will take major changes in how we view the world and in what we value. This evolution of consciousness has been recognized by some of our deepest thinkers and those most familiar with the scale of the challenges we face (Speth 2008). Of the several habits of thought and dominant cultural perspectives that are ripe for reexamination, I highlight three of particular interest here.

- From seeing ourselves as separate from nature to an understanding that we are intricately bound up in a web of life and subject to the laws of nature, and we must live within its limits. Everything affects everything, and there is no “away.”
- From hyper-individualism and social isolation to strengthened community, one in which diversity and social justice are valued.
- From materialism and consumerism to an emphasis on personal and community relationships and overall wellbeing.

These habits of thought are showing signs of change here in Maine: there is a renewed emphasis on community. The high prices for home heating oil and gasoline and the financial crisis are causing people to look for ways to work together at the community level as they explore options from carpooling to co-housing, from heating oil assistance to community gardens. The availability of organically and locally grown food is taking off, and fishery and food co-ops are springing up. Local community action program agencies, nonprofit groups such as Habitat for Humanity and the United Way, and area churches and municipalities are finding ways to team up on weatherization projects for the most vulnerable. Cities, towns, and community groups are largely where these activities are finding their locus, for they can be designed to human scale and adapted and adjusted if they don't work well the first time.

In the face of these challenges, there is much that state government can do. First, it can foster a vision for community-based action. A return to community is not invariably a good thing; without good, positive leadership, communities in difficult times can become insular and suspicious of difference. State government can provide positive leadership that draws on healthy and forward-thinking community values and energy. One-size solutions are tempting, but their ease of implementation and apparent equity are often deceptive. It is worth the upfront investment of time for the state of Maine to note what community-based initiatives and efforts are underway, to identify opportunities for coordination, to find out what is working well, and to

make that knowledge and opportunities more widely available. Ultimately such pooling of resources would enable greater leveraging of dollars, time, and effort, and optimize local communities' ability to respond with greater speed and efficiency.

State government can thoughtfully examine which services should be automated and centralized and which depend on face-to-face contact, specific community knowledge, and engagement. With the latter, the state might look more intensively at co-locating agency services in down-town community “storefronts.” The Maine Department of Transportation (MDOT) has long recognized that transportation policies have a profound impact on community life. MDOT might explore creative ideas to reduce carbon emissions and encourage community-based solutions, such as providing plug-ins for electric vehicles at park-and-rides, supporting van ride-shares, and providing short-term rentals of low-emission, fuel-efficient cars. The Maine Municipal Association, Maine's community colleges, and other organizations that have long been working at the community level are valuable sources of skill, knowledge, and ideas. Maine's Wabanaki tribes have much to teach us about living in right relationship to the earth. Some creative brainstorming with these and other community leaders is needed.

If all of this sounds rather quaint, a kind of potluck-supper solution to a global crisis, it helps to step back and take a global view. Fifteen years ago Paul Hawken gave the world a new vision of sustainability with his landmark book *An Ecology of Commerce* (1993). In his recently published book, *Blessed Unrest* (2007), he chronicles successful grassroots, community efforts all around the world. He shows how people with imagination and conviction are coming together to address environmental degradation and bring about greater social justice. These efforts work because people are able to form fluid, ad hoc partnerships and address real problems holistically.

One cannot ignore that we are a global civilization in crisis, and nothing short of an evolution in consciousness will create the transformation we must undergo. It will not be easy or painless. We can't get there simply by “buying green.” And yet, there is much cause for hope. The solutions to the profound

challenges facing us are not only to be found in the halls of government, or in research labs, or through some new technological or scientific discovery, though, God willing, these endeavors will help. With creativity and imagination, people are finding new ways to live and work and build our common life together.

In all of this, Maine can be seen as well-positioned. We still have many places where there is strong community identity, where we see ourselves as citizens, rather than consumers. We still have many people directly or indirectly involved in farming, fishing, and forestry, which means that understanding our dependence on a healthy environment has not yet been erased from our memory. We are resilient and resourceful. We make relationships and personal credibility a priority. We are small enough to try things on a human scale and to adapt and adjust them as needed. 🐟

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