

Transition Town Media: *Small is More Fun*

WHERE'S OUR WORLD HEADING? Try to imagine your life five years from now. Think—if it's not too much—about climate change, unstable food and energy costs, rising economic inequality, and infrastructure decay. How will these affect you and those you love? We've had 6 damaging weather events in the Philly area in less than 3 years. Was your power out for days during one of them? Do you even know any of the nearby neighbors also affected? Hamstrung, it seems, by the pervasive influence of big money, our larger governmental agencies appear gridlocked in ineffectual partisan struggle. The real question becomes: are the services upon which your life now depends likely to remain available to you at a cost you can afford to pay?

People respond in different ways to this threatening question. More than a few emulate the ostrich. It's easy enough to keep heads buried in the endless sands of overly busy daily lives. Just don't think about it. Behind this lie either tacit feelings of hopelessness, or vague notions that technology will somehow fix things. If you become more attentive, what first confronts you is opposing attitudes. You can go with shrill activism (*wake up, crusade, fix the big things now, it's already almost too late!*), or settle into spiritual bypass (*Earth's always been a mess, I'll live for an actual or meditative heaven*).

But, just southwest of Philadelphia proper is an outstanding instance of a very different and growing

response to this world of scary decline. Look, it says, on the local scale, we're not that happy being emotionally isolated "consumers" anyway. Jobs and families grow more distant, we barely know who lives next door. We embody in our lives the same loss of connectedness and consensus that, on the larger scale, threatens this decline. So why don't we just take all this as an opportunity to rediscover the joys and strengths of cultivating local community? The science of permaculture suggests that we can have abundant, connected, actually happier lives converting now to low-energy, low-consumption ways. And, if this or that chunk of the wider world doesn't work anymore, we'll most certainly do better together than we would alone.

This local model of that different response is called "Transition Town Media." Founded in 2009, it's a largely self-organizing, volunteer organization that tries to apply concepts of permaculture to creating resilient local community. This goes beyond things like community supported agriculture to a time bank where people exchange hours of work, a swap page on Facebook, and groups active around energy, food, health, the local economy, inner transition, and re-learning various practical skills (also, called *re-skilling*).

But while a great many folks in Media, PA embody this positive, "let's have fun rebuilding local communities" approach—they didn't originate it. In 2004,

a permaculture designer named Rob Hopkins set his students in Ireland to do an analysis of life in the probable near future. They modeled a community afflicted by large-scale climate instability which was at the same time "descending" from the high-consumption, cheap-energy luxury of peak oil production. In such a world, they concluded, E. F. Schumacher's notion that "small is beautiful" became something more like "small is inevitable."

Permaculture arises from the application of systems theory to ecosystems. "Resilience" in this science means the ability to adjust and recover quickly from various shocks or changes so as to remain functional and stable. And this, it turns out, depends upon a diversity of smaller, modular systems that are quick to sense changes and begin shifting to account for them. But the economic and agricultural monocultures of globalization destroy both diversity and modularity. Everything is done the same way, and only two or three big monopolies are doing it.

And outsourcing to cheap labor, third world countries—along



with globe spanning supply chains—mute the immediate feedbacks necessary for resilience. If your lifestyle denudes the forests outside your home, your eyes open quickly. But if it creates deserts and collapses rainforests half a world away—will you even notice? So, good science says—the mainstream systems that now support us are the opposite of resilient. That means fragile.

This analysis sparked the coming together of the first ever “transition town” in Totnes, England, and then the formation of TransitionNetwork.org, which supports similar efforts around the world. The impressive success of the effort in Totnes has everything to do with the inspired approach taken by Hopkins. It’s quite evident in his manual, *The Transition Handbook—From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*. Split into three sections, entitled “The Head,” “The Heart,” and “The Hands,” this excellent book explains why local resilience is as important as conservation or cutting carbon emissions, emphasizes the crucial importance of a positive vision, and then offers tried and true methods for getting buy-in and organization started in any community. An excellent, hour-long video introduction to the subject is “Transition 2.0.”² Two concepts are key here. One is that local areas should envision, design, and implement “energy descent action plans” to proactively transition communities away from over-reliance on fossil fuels. The other is that our lives in a post cheap-oil era can be richer, happier, and more connected. Today’s consumer culture is based on the myth of perpetual growth. That myth fosters alienation, vast inequalities, wars, and terrorism.

Why pay this kind of price for coddled, alienated lifestyles that aren’t really that much fun? A great many people in Media, Pennsylvania have taken both of these concepts to heart.

Sari Steuber, a quiet, hardworking co-initiator of Transition Town Media (TTM), considers the Time Bank (200 members) and the Facebook group “TTM Share, Swap, Sell, Buy, and Meet” (880 members) as key elements of the effort’s success. Equally committed members, Marie Goodwin and Ellen Morfei, spearheaded these two projects. Through these, TTM’ers point out, people are not just trading locally both services and things they would otherwise throw out. They are building strong, supportive relationships that support and enrich their lives. They are learning who their neighbors are, what they like, what they need, and what they have to give.

A look at the calendar and blog posts on the TTM website only underscores this insight. There are monthly potlucks with food, economy, healthcare, re-skilling, energy, community, and awareness raising themes. A recent “Happiness Week” starting on Earth Day this year featured around 30 different free events for children as well as adults. These ranged from bird and wildflower walks, to yoga and concerts, to workshops on happiness and healing.

And giving, or “gifting” is another an important aspect of TTM’s culture. Goodwin is also project coordinator for Charles Eisenstein, author of *Sacred Economics—Money, Gift, and Society in the Age of Transition*. A well-researched and impassioned argument for a restructured economy that supports

and connects people, this book comes from a basic premise: gifts strengthen emotional relationships in a way that anonymous monetary transactions don’t. In addition to “gifting potlucks” (where people bring something to give away), TTM will have as of June, a “free store.” This is literally a leased space in Media where people can bring things they don’t want so that others can “shop” for them at no cost.

As communal, grass-roots initiatives, the 150 recognized US transition towns set out to relate amicably to local governments, and remain so far pretty much a-political. Media TTM’ers talk happily about a project in which they are cooperating with the borough to fill certain public planters with edible plants—as opposed to the decorative, low-maintenance, otherwise useless trees or shrubbery that occupy most such spaces. This is related to a wider “yardens” (“yards as gardens”) movement. If energy costs and climate instability raise the prices of food from distant monocultures—do we really want to devote huge amounts of tillable land to creating what is more or less an outdoor rug?

If this interests you, and you don’t live near Media, you can learn more and look up other efforts at transitionus.org. Time banks are springing up everywhere. Yes, you can face at times the problems of achieving consensus and avoiding burnout in volunteer organizations. But the Media experience suggests that the rewards are immediate, even life altering. Small is not only beautiful, and perhaps inevitable—but healing. Small saves. And small is more fun. ▲

¹<http://transitiontownmedia>

²<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFQFBmq7X84>