

INTRODUCTION

Another World Is Possible

*Another world is not only possible, she is on her way.
On a quiet day I can hear her breathing.*

ARUNDHATI ROY

This is a remarkable time to be alive. We are in the midst of the most widespread, rapid changes that have ever happened in human history, and not surprisingly, no one seems to know quite how to react. The threats to human survival are real. We are facing what some call the *triple crisis*: global climate change, reaching the limits of easily accessible key natural resources such as oil and water, and increasing economic chaos. The devastation that humans are wreaking on the lifeways of planet Earth are also well documented: the unprecedented rate of species extinction and the toxic pollution of air, water and soil.

In addition to these critical environmental problems, there are equally pressing social and economic issues, such as massive cultural disruption caused by wars over scarce natural resources, increased urbanization and terrible inequities between the impoverished majority and the powerful super rich.

This book is about the unfolding of a compassionate human response to these dilemmas—about choosing a very different future based on social justice, wise use of natural resources and a greener, more satisfying way of living at a local level. Just as the problems are so deeply rooted in the dominant culture and so intertwined

as to often seem insoluble, the solutions have even deeper roots in the values of indigenous cultures and in appropriate uses of modern technology. Interestingly, the solutions are also remarkably intertwined, so that a solution in one area may have cascading positive effects in others. Between facing the problems and their possible solutions, I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that we are at the most important choice point in human history.

In 2008, our species made a quiet but remarkable transition into new territory. For the first time in human history, over one half of our population now lives in cities. Many of the city dwellers are rural, often indigenous people who have been pushed off their land and can no longer make a subsistence living farming or fishing. While cities can provide an oasis of cultural, intellectual and economic vitality, the world's largest cities often include slum districts that are cesspools of vast human poverty and suffering. These megacities also produce most of the world's pollution.¹

As the global economy makes inroads into the most remote corners of the earth, local cultures suffer. These cultures, previously sustainable over hundreds of years and frequently in careful balance with their ecosystems, are often seriously damaged within decades of exposure to corporate media and the dominant industrial worldview. Helena Norberg-Hodge described her firsthand experience seeing these changes happen in Ladakh, a high-altitude desert in northernmost India that until recently was isolated from modern society. She observed that the local economy was traditionally based on self-sufficiency, cooperation and trade and that when the area was opened to tourists, media and public education, the Ladakhis began to lose their sense of pride and feel instead a cultural inferiority complex.

In 1975, I was shown around the remote village of Hemis Shukpachan by a young Ladakh named Tsewang. It seemed to me that all the houses we saw were especially large and beautiful. I asked Tsewang to show me the houses where the poor people lived. Tsewang looked perplexed a moment, then responded, "We don't have any poor people here." Eight years later I over-

heard Tsewang talking to some tourists. “If you could only help us Ladakhis,” he was saying, “we’re so poor.”²

Norberg-Hodge further pointed out that “Media images focus on the rich, the beautiful and the brave, whose lives are endless action and glamour... In contrast to these utopian images from another culture, village life seems primitive, silly and inefficient.”³ Increasing alienation, often violent frustration and an exodus to cities should be no surprise in a world in which three quarters of the human family lives on a real income of US\$4 per day or less,⁴ and in which the disparity between this lifestyle and that of the affluent minority is glaringly obvious through movies, television and the Internet.

Humans are an intensely social species. Our babies are born with no ability to survive on their own, and we learn almost everything through interacting with other humans. Until recently we never lived alone, but like our primate ancestors, lived in small groups which helped one another. This is no longer the case, especially in developed countries such as the US, as the growing number of households of single people and single parents testifies.⁵ Our modern lives make it hard to find a sense of community. In many cases, people in the US live fragmented lives: we sleep in bedroom communities and commute long distances to work, to school, to shopping and to recreation. There is very little time for civic engagement or for getting together with friends. “Community is perhaps the most valuable and most essential resource on this planet,” said Michael Brownlee, head of Boulder Relocalization, “Community has also become our scarcest and most threatened resource.”⁶

Not only are we starved for community, we are also rapidly losing our connection to nature. In his bestseller, *Last Child in the Woods*, author Richard Louv wrote about the staggering divide between modern children and the outdoors, and directly linked the lack of nature in the lives of today’s wired generation to some of the most disturbing childhood trends, such as the rises in obesity, attention disorders and depression.⁷

As a human species we are very rapidly hurtling towards a cliff—from an environmental, economic, social and spiritual perspective.

Will we, like the hypothetical mad lemmings, rush off this cliff into a freefall of chaos and destruction? Or are we capable, as an amazingly adaptive species, of learning how to fly? We may not know the answer for several more decades. What we do know is that if we want to survive and thrive as a species it will take all of us, working together, to turn around the predominant industrial, exploitative paradigm of a globalized economy and culture.

A New Worldview

There is a new, emerging worldview that is almost the opposite of our current experience. It values cooperation between people and respect for all life. It holds community as a sacred trust, and values equal access to resources such as food, shelter, meaningful work and healthcare. This worldview believes in providing nurturing support for the old, young and sick. It celebrates diversity. It focuses on place-based identity and honors ecosystem health. It takes care to clean up and maintain our precious natural resources of earth, water and air.

There are seeds of the new culture springing up wherever we look. In Paul Hawken's book, *Blessed Unrest*, he estimated that the largest citizen movement on the planet is emerging, consisting of over a million grassroots organizations, working towards ecological sustainability and social justice.⁸

In the United States, this movement is growing rapidly. Duane Elgin, a well-known futurist, said,

Based upon three decades of research, I estimate that as of 2009, roughly 20 percent of the US adult population, or approximately forty million people, are consciously crafting Earth-friendly or green ways of living. These lifeway pioneers are providing the critical mass of invention at the grassroots level that could enable the larger society to swiftly develop alternative ways and approaches to living.⁹

In addition to individual actions, the immediacy of global climate change has begun to jog us into collective action. Where national

policy is lagging, the initiative of some local and state governments is beginning to pick up the slack. Around the US, 1,042 mayors have now signed the Mayors' Climate Protection Agreement to reduce greenhouse gases.¹⁰ Higher education has followed suit, with 673 colleges committed to the American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment.¹¹

At the same time, grassroots groups have created popular educational and political campaigns, such as 350.org, a campaign started by environmental writer Bill McKibben to awaken the public to the scientific understanding that we must reduce the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere from a current level of 387 parts per million (ppm) to no more than 350 ppm—or face a catastrophic tipping point of climate change. This movement, largely organized online, spread virally in 2009. October 24th, 2009 was called “the most widespread day of political action in the planet’s history,” with more than 5,200 events in 181 countries.¹² The citizens’ movement it unleashed had a real impact on the 2009 United Nations climate negotiations in Copenhagen, with admiration acknowledged by many leaders, despite the fact that their governments were only able to reach a weak agreement. The organizers planned even more activity in 2010.

Another online organization, MoveOn.org, has mobilized 4.2 million progressive Americans to speak up strongly on a variety of environmental and social justice issues.¹³ There is a growing relocalization movement, which seeks to consciously revitalize local economies and cultures.¹⁴ And the rapidly growing Transition Town movement, which started in a small English town in 2005, has already garnered official commitments from 265 cities and towns around the world to create “energy descent plans,” community-based endeavors to plan for the effects of climate change and peak oil.¹⁵

All of this activity—from the global to the local—is exactly what needs to be happening. We need both top-down and bottom-up strategies, and we need to affect change on all levels—from the personal to the community to state and federal levels in the US. And we need to do it now!

The Power of Real, Living Examples

This new movement is infusing new values. As values change, there are places where the new paradigm begins to shine through the detritus of the rotten old one. In some places there are pockets of new growth that are growing like mats of deep green moss. In these areas the new, cooperative culture is clearly visible. It is inviting and appealing. In fact, living on one of these green islands, it is hard to imagine another way of life, because it is so deeply soul-satisfying.

Ithaca, New York is one of these mossy patches where the new, green culture is beginning to shine through. Ithaca has become a kind of gathering place for people who are ecologically minded. Despite its small size (about 30,000 permanent residents, with another 26,000 students) it has often been singled out for its quality of life. *Mother Earth News* named it the first of “Twelve Great Places You’ve Never Heard of” in their August 2006 issue. Ithaca ranked second in “Best Green Places to Live” by *Country Home* magazine in April 2007 and third in Relocate America’s “Top 100 Places to Live in 2007.”¹⁶ It’s amazing that such a small metropolis could garner such acclaim!

This is not to say that Ithaca does not have its share of problems — like cities anywhere it faces racial tension, deep-seated poverty and the uneasy juxtaposition of rural, traditional values with an urban, cosmopolitan outlook, sometimes leading to a volatile mix of cultures. Despite its cloudy climate (second only to Seattle, Washington), steep hills, harsh winters and the dismal economy of upstate New York, what makes this small city work so well? Certainly if people can create a wonderful quality of life here, there is hope that they can do it in many other places.

Choosing a Sustainable Future looks at what makes Ithaca an exciting place to live and its efforts to create a thriving, sustainable community. It examines all aspects of the emerging new green culture, introduces successful innovators and looks at examples of great ideas that can be replicated elsewhere. It describes what works and what doesn’t work. But most of all, it offers a taste of another possible future — the inspiration and the tools to build sustainable communities anywhere.

Perhaps more than anything else, the world needs inspiration. We need to know that a different way of life is not only possible, but that it already exists and that it works. There is a tremendous power in working models, especially when these examples combine to form a whole system.

I have seen this power at work during my 19 years as co-founder and executive director of EcoVillage at Ithaca (EVI) — an educational nonprofit that has developed a living laboratory of a socially and environmentally sustainable community — one whose residents enjoy an exceptionally high quality of life while using 40% less resources than typical US citizens. Our nonprofit project owns 176 acres of land just two miles from downtown Ithaca. Ninety percent of the land is preserved as open space for organic agriculture, wildlife habitat, recreation and beauty. Two, soon to be three, cohousing neighborhoods form a small, densely clustered village. Homes are modest duplexes built with environmentally friendly materials. They are all passive solar and superinsulated, and many generate their own electricity from the sun. Two on-site organic farms supply vegetables, fruit and berries to EcoVillagers and the surrounding community alike. EVI's educational partnerships with Cornell University and Ithaca College allow a forum for reaching hundreds of students a year, and over a thousand people come from around the US and other countries for tours every year.

Like any human endeavor, EVI is not perfect, and our project is filled with contradictions. While we aim to be part of the broader Ithaca community, we are somewhat isolated on a steep hill two miles out of town. As environmentalists we are still largely dependent on our cars. While we try to live simpler lives, living in community is quite complex. We often struggle with interpersonal conflicts, some of which take many meetings to resolve and can leave bruised feelings. Some people do more work for the community than others, and there is often resentment of those who do less. Despite longstanding efforts to keep our housing affordable, our newly constructed homes carry price tags that reflect the relatively affluent Ithaca housing market. We strive to be a diverse community, yet most of us are white and middle-class.

Our saving grace is that we keep trying. When we have conflicts, we encourage each other to talk things through, with a mediator if needed. To keep houses affordable in the short and long-term, our planned third neighborhood is building small homes that will use very little energy, and almost no fossil fuels. Over time, we are becoming an increasingly diverse community which welcomes the differently abled, people of all ages, races, sexual preference and income levels. We are constantly engaged in trying practical measures to solve our problems, and our efforts have largely succeeded. The level of community camaraderie and ecologically friendly lifestyles is something that we as residents take for granted, but it is often a welcome surprise to visitors.

As someone who leads group tours of EVI on a weekly basis, I've noticed a magical moment that often happens. At some point, after walking down the winding, pedestrian street, visiting passive solar homes and talking with a resident, the energy of the group shifts, people relax and their eyes brighten. One woman expressed it beautifully. She said, "You are showing us the future."



Like EcoVillage at Ithaca, the greater Ithaca area is filled with amazing, on-the-ground examples of one possible future. I hope this book conveys both the joys and the challenges of these working models and gives you a glimpse of the transformative power of people taking action based on their deepest values.