

Business-as-Usual is the Enemy

Peter Bane

PERMACULTURE ETHICS OF EARTH CARE, People Care, and Fair Share stipulate restraint in consumption and limits to population. They also enjoin us to conserve species, habitats, and soils, and to improve access to land for all through land and tax reform. Earth Care would mean respite for the land from pollution, overproduction, and sprawl. Care for People means self-reliance and self-responsibility within smaller communities, and this speaks to shifting the basis of our economy from global supply to local provision. This is bad news for global capital, but potentially good news for ordinary citizens. Real care for people would involve a retreat from overdevelopment and the many stresses of a hectic life of consumption.

These ethics are a rational response to the global environmental and resource crisis. Thirty years of looking at the problem have not made it go away. What impedes society from implementing them? The culprit is business-as-usual: the momentum of corporate interests, the organization of economic activity around the pursuit of profit to the exclusion of other values, a religious belief—constantly reinforced by advertising and media, that growth based on increased consumption is necessary to well-being, and government that muddles along without long-term vision attempting to deliver some of the scraps of economic growth to the voters, whom it is believed insist upon it. Do you? It did not help that the national administration was hijacked by a bunch of thugs eight years ago and the country dragged into war on false pretenses, but that is another part of the story.

Slow down or die

Although there will no doubt be a substantial short- to medium-term body of work and investment needed to convert the basis of the economy to a steady state—e.g., retrofitting houses for energy efficiency, establishing sustainable food systems,

creating renewable power generation, rebuilding the railroads, and more, adopting permaculture ethics across society would ultimately shrink the GDP. You could see it as adjusting gracefully to the inevitable. With diminishing fossil fuel reserves and levels of energy production, it can only decline anyway. Sustainability—meeting our genuine material needs without diminishing the capacity of nature to provide for other species and our posterity—and the demands of climate stabilization require the same economic contraction, and with extreme

urgency. Humans have been living beyond the annual yield of global ecosystems since about 1987. Fossil energy and the resilience of natural systems have enabled us to carry on for some years like the cartoon character Wily Coyote, determined to catch the chimerical Roadrunner (whom we could aptly call, “just a little more”), our feet spinning in air as we have hurtled over the cliff. Both fossil fuels and natural systems

are in decline. Belief in growth today is akin to Coyote’s not looking down to see that the ground has disappeared beneath us.

Each passing year drives us further into the condition of overshoot, for which ecologists recognize only one resolution: crash of population to a level which the diminished system can then support. Sometimes the resource base recovers and population may again rise. Often, it does not. In the case of humanity this may mean as many as 2-3 billion premature deaths accompanied by a dramatic fall in living standards worldwide. In the almost unimaginable chaos that this would entail, most higher carnivores and many species of birds, mammals, and reptiles would go extinct. The fragility of industrial agriculture places us a great risk, but so do heat waves and rising sea levels. If we do not wish to be among those sacrificed on the altar of growth, we should begin now to shrink our carbon footprint. Please note dear Reader, that I do not place any credence in salvation by technology, and neither, if you value your life or your children, should you. Neither electric cars, nor coal-to-liquids, nor



biofuels, nor nuclear power, whether fission or fusion, will replace the declining output of petroleum. Pray to angels if you will, but do not ask to go on driving and eating TV dinners. We have a great deal to do in a short time and the odds are not in our favor. Permaculture ethics and design principles can be understood as offering guidance for the challenging path of Energy Descent.

Still, this bullet may yet be dodged, but I would argue only if we act now. We should look at the prospect of the steady state as a great and hopeful opportunity to be embraced. The Growth Machine has scarcely been a benign master. It has delivered us an epidemic of cancer and degenerative diseases. We have cheap food and unaffordable health care. The two are of course linked, though fear of death and religious belief in technology have enabled medical experts to aggravate the problems stemming from poor diet and unhealthy lifestyles. Most North Americans also have large unmet needs for spiritual health: by objective measure and subjective experience they lack for vacation, time in nature, friendship and family nurturance, community service, and pursuit of creative endeavors, to name only a few possible sources of non-material well-being. Surely we could do better.

Clearly, there is both a need for and would be a real benefit to most people from a contraction of the economy. It is also far more likely to happen than not. Above about \$10,000 per person per year, there's no correlation between income and happiness. Why then is no one in this year of political frenzy talking about contraction as a solution and a prospect of good news?

Politics follows worldview

The U.S. election of 2008 is a great drama about change, with both parties adopting some variant of that mantra in their rhetoric. Yet neither candidate is calling for an end to the growth economy. They don't dare because the public hasn't awakened to the need for it, yet. For most voters the prospect of welcoming economic decline would seem perverse. Nevertheless, one of the aspirants to national office will likely preside over the beginning of irreversible contraction regardless of rhetoric or promises, and voters might well consider which of them would be more likely to soften the blows to family pocketbooks and expectations that will accompany a permanent fall in real incomes. (Inflation-adjusted incomes have been virtually stagnant since 1973.)

The American electorate (and, it might be noted, the Canadian electorate, which is also going to the polls this fall), seem little prepared to embrace economic contraction. Small wonder. Probably most people are confused to some degree. There are widespread and justified apprehensions about the future of industrial society, but like a zombie, the world of advertising and media keeps hyping consumption and growth as the answer to all our problems. Even though growth (or anyway the belief in it) IS the problem! Moreover, the political systems of both countries are poorly prepared to manage a shrinking economy. In such a world, the notion of trickle-down as justification for rewarding the rich is a non-starter. Increasing numbers of hungry and homeless people will be thinking instead about eating the rich. How can political systems used to muddling through by offering

everyone an extra nickel from an expanding purse deal with questions of redistributing wealth or of increasing envy? At what price of gasoline does automobile travel revert to the sole privilege of the wealthy as it was in 1920 or for much of the world still is? And when, if history is any guide, might we see the reemergence of highwaymen as translators (redistributors) of wealth?

Structural problems we must address

No, our North American politics mostly avoid decisions about absolute values (such as just levels of wealth or of carbon consumption). When confronted with issues of principle: should gay people be allowed to marry, or should abortion be legal, fo

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example, we fall all over each other, going in two directions at once: yes-no-yes-no. We prefer to argue instead about processes: how to equalize opportunity rather than equalizing wealth, for example. Or alternately, we treat every issue of justice as one that involves redistribution of the spoils of growth. Unfortunately, policy outcomes now matter intensely and the old way of muddling will no longer do. (To the credit of the Canadians, I note that the Liberal party is running this year on a platform of taxing carbon. They call it the Green Shift, and it makes the unusually explicit judgment that carbon-based fuel consumption is bad for society and should therefore be taxed, not unlike alcohol or cigarettes, with offsetting decreases in personal income tax. This is a dramatic departure for a mainstream North American political party. However, the Liberals are behind in the polls, out of power, and short of money. Meanwhile handsome and charismatic Conservative prime minister Steven Harper, making the most of his minority government status, grandstands in the Arctic, stirring echoes of empire and vague promises of further resource extraction under the oddly Canadian rubric of enforcing environmental law. The conservative press are making

hash of the Liberals' modest and eminently sensible proposal, and it will likely be several years before anything like it is adopted. It's simply a hopeful indicator of political evolution at this point.) North and south of the 49th parallel, these societies of the Great Frontier are deeply rooted in cornucopian assumptions: There will always be more; the tide will come back in, and it will float all boats. But it will not this time, and hard choices will have to be made. Before that, however, a great deal of thrashing about, denial, and obfuscation will be seen, with further delay in doing what needs to be done and consequently greater damage to the prospects for future generations.

How, then are advocates of permanent culture in North America to act?

Society is undergoing an epochal transition that has already begun, mostly unrecognized. Helping people to adapt to adversity is good common sense and compassionate to boot. My friend Sharon Astyk has written a wonderful book of advice on just this subject, *Depletion and Abundance*, recently published, and I would recommend it to everyone making less than a quarter million dollars a year. It would make a good playbook for the next administration, and I will draw a few suggestions for public policy (below) based on its sage advice.

Leadership for change

However, there are yet more valuable ways for permaculturists to serve the common good than one-by-one, helping our neighbors and friends learn to garden and conserve energy in their homes. People can mostly do this on their own or with the help of friends, family, and neighbors, and given the scale of the need for it, will have to manage as best they can. For 30 years permaculture teachers, writers, designers, and enthusiasts have been leading in the effort to shift worldviews. Besides grassroots education and research into sustainable systems, which we have been doing, it would help now to rail against growth, mock it, point out all of its failings (which are many), hold politicians to account, and demonstrate a different way of living. If the body politic can be awakened to the madness of the growth economy and the imperative for a steady state, then we will, by degrees, drag our reluctant and befuddled political leaders around to what they must do on our behalf.

William Ophuls, in his little known but brilliantly prescient work of 1977, *Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity*, used the term *metanoia* to describe this much needed conversion experience. Once people learn to see the world differently, as a delicately balanced web of life in which humans are embedded and fully dependent, then political and economic reformation is assured. We are not there yet. North Americans have been groping and muddling their way towards such a new worldview by fits and starts for the last 30 years in much the way their ancestors were reaching toward a vision of political independence in the pre-Revolutionary era. When that vision became visible to a large enough segment of the population, efforts to throw off the yoke of empire began to gain traction, and the Declaration of

Independence crystallized a movement. In a similar manner will the growth economy come to be seen as anachronistic and oppressive. There are now and all along have been plenty of losers in the capitalist game of development. Once the Ponzi scheme of perpetual growth falters sufficiently, a majority will see through it, and it can then be toppled. Lend your efforts to burying the ideology of growth. The communist version of this meme is six feet under. Now it's time to put capitalism in the grave next to it. Tom Paine, where are you now?

The "Come to Jesus" talk

Metanoia leads to reverence for nature but this attitude must be anchored also in a utilitarian and informed view of the biosphere. Permaculture provides the intellectual and practical bridge between reverence for nature—a necessary but not sufficient condition for sustaining humanity—and the redesigned use of biological goods and services, which will form the basis of the new steady state of mutual provision. The green churches and others concerned for the environment have been pioneering the

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first half of this effort for the past generation, teaching a new ethic of care for creation or nature, if you will. Their American parishioners, being a pragmatic people, are wondering what next, and how will we heat the sanctuary when fuel oil climbs to record price levels? Ecological design is poised to offer useful suggestions about greening the church and the landscape as well as the catechism. Church congregations could make conservation mainstream.

Make it fun

To amplify the power of our message—which is essentially that humans belong within nature's limits—we must both invoke and demonstrate that a lower standard of living can result in higher levels of satisfaction. For over 50 years a substantial body of scientific work has shown that economic downturns result in improved health and quality of life for the population (no

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kidding!). Somewhere in there lies a clue to the message we must hone and deliver. The re-emergence of household and local economies can be a wonderfully creative endeavor. We need Victory Gardens, but the war this time is with our beleaguered, addicted, and oppressed lesser selves which have been running in the squirrel cage of the global economy, chasing scarce and vacuous dollars, shekels, and yen. At the very least if we learn to slow down and eat home-grown, our health will improve and we may be spared the misery of medical bankruptcy. Rob Hopkins' *Transition Handbook* offers some humorous suggestions: reality TV shows in which celebrities compete to grow the best garden, biodiesel stations reluctantly converting to hay and horseshoeing.

Stay home and garden

On a practical note, there is a need for much transformation of private housing stock if we are to stay home and garden. The statistics on recession and well-being obviously do not cover a period in which many Americans were thrown out of their homes by unemployment or mounting costs, as is now occurring. The

sub-prime mortgage crisis has not yet peaked. Sharon Astyk makes this point abundantly clear: whatever it takes, as long as it is not a material disaster (e.g. Katrina victims), hang on to your home. A number of approaches come to mind. Habitat for Humanity has successfully harnessed community spirit and generosity to extend home ownership to many. The model of voluntary labor and donated materials could be adapted to a home retrofit process. If Pat Murphy's pointing to the German passive-house concept (thickening exterior walls to nearly a foot of insulation) is to be implemented (and not much less will provide real cost/energy savings in the long run), people will need help since this requires a virtual rebuild of the structural envelope.

Learning to share

Households will also need to get bigger: Two-point-seven people and a dog just doesn't make economic sense in a post-petroleum world. There's not enough labor to get the work done—and not enough hands to make it fun. On Astyk's suggestion, and following traditional models of adaptation to economic hardship, home occupancy will likely increase as people take in relatives, friends, neighbors, and boarders. This should be understood as a good thing: an opportunity to enrich our lives with relationships, get help for the necessary tasks. In the long run we should expect the nation's housing stock to shrink to accommodate a stabilized and slowly declining population amidst a glut of overbuilding (from the last 20 years). Let us assist that process now, with the aim of retiring and recycling the components of the least well-placed, most poorly constructed, and least efficient buildings first. Youngstown, Ohio is leading the way by decommissioning streets, sewers, and whole neighborhoods which have emptied out on the urban fringe. Public policy could help here. The next administration will likely have to craft some legislative relief for homeowners facing foreclosure. Making energy efficiency retrofit and increased occupancy (Is it justifiable to house two people in 3000 square feet? I think not.) a condition of federal mortgage assistance makes sense. After all, if people have gotten in over their heads, they need to be helped to downsize their housing consumption. Let them stay in their home of choice and avoid the disruption of moving house, but insist that they share. Extra income can help make the payments. If that means renting out a room or a floor or a wing of the house, then small grants to make the necessary conversion would make more sense than a less-focused interest subsidy. Informally, this process is called slumming, according to Jane Jacobs, one of the most trenchant observers of the urban scene in the last century. Immigrants did it to reduce rent and save money while bootstrapping themselves into the middle class. A side benefit is greater density for transit, livelier streets, and lower crime rates.

Remember the Maine! (and who profited from its being sunk) Speaking of crime, just as that false flag operation launched the U.S. overseas empire in 1898, we have had another episode recently of state-sponsored violence orchestrated to mislead the public into war. The 9/11-reified War on Terror must be


denounced for the fraud that it is. Getting government and politicians to tell the truth is a key aspect to changing the political consensus. Right now we are living amidst a massive lie. Not only is growth killing us, but both Terror and Drugs are being used as code words and cover for wars to control oil and other natural resources. War is not only the ultimate environmental pollutant, but the military is the nation's biggest user of oil and one of its greatest sources of soil, water, and air contamination. No wonder Dick Cheney promised endless war—at this point in history maintaining armed forces on the scale that the US does, let alone using them, virtually requires that we go after oil. What a colossal waste of resources that are needed for economic transition! The sooner we can stop not only the war in Iraq but the one in Afghanistan and all such future follies, the better off everyone will be. Peacekeeping, disaster assistance, and environmental cleanup should become the main work of the Department of Defense. Oh...and energy conversion. The only real basis for national security would be a dramatic reduction in fossil fuel consumption.

The moral equivalent of war

In the face of Nazi aggression and Japanese attack, Americans enthusiastically backed a government that rationed food and fuel, imposed blackouts, shut down civilian automobile production, and marshalled millions of men and women into national service. All this happened in a matter of months. I don't want to make light of the threats to national security in WWII, but the dangers we face from climate change and peak oil are of another order of magnitude altogether. And among those dangers is fascism—of the homegrown variety. Failure to curb our appetite for fossil fuels has already cost us dearly. We were warned in the 1970s that shortages were coming and our response was to build nuclear power plants. Now we shall have to guard that waste for longer than humans have lived in settlements. If war for oil continues to be the main instrument of national policy, we will continue to make enemies, and some of them will be us. Internment of Japanese-Americans was one of the national policy decisions we lived to regret. Let us not blunder into the kind of extreme circumstances that make it easy to seek scapegoats; we have already crossed over that line since 9/11 and it is time to


grow up and draw back. Intemperate people (and our appetite for oil is intemperate) can never be free.

We need a real sense of urgency to move us into the changes that must be made, but we also need a light touch and the enthusiastic involvement of millions of ordinary citizens. Most of the changes that need to happen involve decisions that can be made at the household and community level. I have talked national political matters because it would be enormously helpful if government began telling the truth to people and taking steps to reign in the fossil fuel economy. But we can't wait for that, we simply have to urge it on our public officials and get on with changes that we can influence immediately.



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Work outward on a controlled front

The ethics of conservation get a workout in our Indiana household, but complacency seldom visits. In the last three years we have relocated to a supportive community, retrofitted our home for energy efficiency, lowered our dependence on natural

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gas and electricity, gotten out of debt, and expanded our household numbers. We've planted an edible landscape and built a lot of water storage. We write for this publication and others, speak on radio and to public meetings and conferences, teach permaculture at home, across the region, and elsewhere, and I serve on the Bloomington Peak Oil Task Force, helping the city to craft policy for Energy Descent. On smaller scales, we conserve water, cycle the water heater on and off, recycle greywater and all organic matter, have virtually eliminated landfill, cut back on automobile use, stack functions on all trips out, and have entered into

partnership with our neighbors to raise chickens. We've smashed down through the US average, but our carbon footprint is little better than European, and we know that carbon credits, which we buy to offset travel and household energy use, help but are not the long-term answer. We wonder what next?

A woodlot to raise our own firewood with some open ground for tree planting would help us offset our remaining fossil fuel use while meeting our needs for space heating. More determined efforts toward food self-reliance, including more storage would cut the grocery budget (almost all of which goes to

our local coop or the farmer's market already) but would probably require fencing the yard against deer. Another structure (natural materials and self-built of course) on the lot with a mother-in-law unit to increase our household population would meet several needs but can we manage the effort next year? A rural property shared with friends for farm and forest yields might address many needs, but can we find common ground and then locate land nearby? How much time will we have for that? Should we get a scooter to replace more car trips? Would another bicycle work better and would it be safe on the highway by our house? Is solar electric energy economical or would it be better to invest in something else? How about solar hot water? Which should come next?

Should I curtail my teaching work to reduce travel and greenhouse gases? We've already given up flying and make long distance travel by train wherever possible. How do we manage the personal transition to old age, soon upon us in some form or other? Is it ethical to expand the business? Is more carbon involved in travel for teaching or for shipping books? What about long-distance work by phone and on the Web? How can we help create a local currency? How much outreach and education is needed in town and how much time can we give it?

Maybe we're unable to get our politicians to tell us the truth, maybe we tolerate their corruption and doubletalk because we're not telling ourselves the truth, maybe not willing to look hard at the consequences of our own actions. Breaking the addiction to fossil fuels isn't easy. It takes help in the form of community support, and it takes lots of individual choices, one day at a time. It's hard work, but the world looks a lot better once you start. And it puts a lot of meaning into life.

Begin the process now. Start talking with the ones you love and the ones you're with. Together, we can figure it out. Δ

Peter Bane lives in Bloomington, Indiana with his partner Keith Johnson and their homestead assistant Rob Archangel. He would like to hear stories of other people's efforts toward creating a steady state economy.

