

## Wisdom of the Past or the Ideology of the Future?

[Timothy Boston](#)

*University of Tasmania, Australia*

.....

Earth Day 2000 is a symbolic date. Aside from being the first Earth Day of the new millennium, for thirty years, people have marked April 22 as a day to honor the sacredness, complexity and beauty of the Earth. Since 1970, environmentalists of various stripes and persuasions have set aside this one day of the year as a symbol of hope for the future. As Green researchers, policymakers and advocates, we rely on hope and dreams. We dream of a future filled with cultures of concern, and concrete expressions of intra/intergenerational equity and justice - a world where our children and their children's children are demonstrating a life of peace and harmony with each other, other peoples and the natural world. But, in looking to the future, we need to remember past patterns, processes and mindsets. We cannot construct futuristic ecologies without first exploring our personal, sociopolitical and ecological histories, and honoring our past.

In a technocratic, Western world where new is better, and the old is relegated to the waste paper bin, we need to begin by reusing and recycling past concepts and visions. Though, such attempts will not come without a struggle. For years, I have had to endure great fits of laughter from some colleagues for suggesting that, for example, alternative transportation in a "developed country" actually might include horse and buggy. My position is that if there are Mennonites who can retain this element of the past even in the face of modernist obstacles, why should we not encourage a future of horses and stables in cases where this is possible however bizarre this may seem? My godmother who was born in 1899 once described to me how life use to be. As a young child growing up in Montreal, she told me of a time when she use to ride to school in the mornings, joyfully waving to other children from her carriage. She spoke of the bonds that her family had with their horses, and the community webs that were created by this relatively environmentally-friendly and socially-cohesive mode of transportation. For some communities, such a long forgotten and romantic concept may be a real, viable and pragmatic policy option. Indeed, if we abide by strong animal rights measures, as living beings; horses would be more energy efficient and ecological than most current forms of transportation. Yes, again, I recognize that I am putting forth one unconventional policy option! This said, embedded within the above example is a question for those who are opposed to the idea: how socially and individually resistant do we feel towards past ideas and techniques?

For the most part, the Western system rejects or forgets the old, the past and rushes for the latest packaged goods and services. It separates the generations - the old from the new, allows our children to wrongly learn that new means better, and in the world of academia, calls for more up-to-date, cutting-edge research (how many times have you heard that a book is outdated?). This system insists upon new news and fresh manufactured material. It also conditions us to believe that the words future and new are undeniably connected. And, certainly this is how the modern, Western system keeps its hold on societies - by saying that no you cannot go back to the ways of the past, or reuse ideas and materials - you have to manufacture something new, bigger or better - this we are told is proper futuristic thought (or so it is suggested). We certainly cannot go back to the days of horse and buggy!

Though, this is not to say that we should embrace every bit of the past. Clearly, there are problematic histories. Patriarchy, Eurocentrism, Militarism, and Classism (and with it poverty/destitution) are concepts and practices that should be left in times past. Moreover, there are many new and positive inventions, formulations and discoveries in e.g., medicine and technology. There are recent developments in Western science and development that have proven to be socially and environmentally fruitful. For instance, the latest prototypes of the bicycle and train are not only technological marvels but are widely seen as part of a sustainable future. We can also look at the wonders of solar energy and wind power, or the improvements in information and communication systems.

In short, I am not advocating the abandonment of modern technologies. I simply wish to make the argument that Earth Day should be a celebration of the past as much as the future (and not be simply a time to promote the latest developments in environmental business and technology - which I understand has born true with a number of regional celebrations). We can dive into the past and call upon our elders to describe a time when organic farming was the norm, when pesticides and other carcinogenic chemicals did not exist, and when community cohesion far surpassed individual gratification or personal profit. This I believe is the challenge in a modernist system that liberates "newness" and asks us to abandon our histories (in the case of aboriginal cultures, has in fact erased and continues to remove or ignore traditional indigenous knowledge in an effort to incorporate aboriginality into the modern monoculture). We must honor our past. At the same time, we can look to the benefits that humanity has received from socio-culturally sensitive and ecologically sound technological innovations, and progressive visions. We can celebrate the best elements of all times (literally), and it is in such spirit that we look upon this issue of the

*Electronic Green Journal* to inspire and guide us in our celebration of the warmth, logic and strength of the Earth and humanity in all its diversity.  
**Happy Earth Day!**

Timothy Boston <[tboston@postoffice.utas.edu.au](mailto:tboston@postoffice.utas.edu.au)> Riawunna Center for Aboriginal Education, and Center for Environmental Studies, University of Tasmania, Australia.