

## Editorial One Planet, One Family, One Future

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As I type this editorial during the Thanksgiving weekend here, the journal *Science* is reporting a study that looked at Antarctic ice cores that shows current carbon levels in the atmosphere are the highest they have been for 650,000 years. Even knowing that carbon dioxide acts as a greenhouse gas, trapping the heat from the planet's surface, we can't begin to fathom what these concentration levels will translate into as we move into an uncertain future.

It is way too easy to allow this increasing crescendo of negative reports to smother us in pessimism. As activist and writer Rebecca Solnit (2004) so eloquently writes:

*Causes and effects assume history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water wearing away a stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension. Sometimes one person inspires a movement, or her words do decades later; sometimes a few passionate people change the world; sometimes they start a movement and millions do; sometimes those millions are stirred by the same outrage or the same ideal and change comes upon us like a change of weather. All of these transformations have in common is that they begin in the imagination, in hope. To hope is to gamble. It's to bet on the future, on your desires, on the possibility that an open heart and uncertainty is better than gloom and safety. To hope is dangerous, and yet it is the opposite of fear, for to live is to risk.*

*I say all this to you because hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. I say this because hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope. At the beginning of his massive 1930s treatise on hope, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch wrote, "The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong." To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable. (p. 4-5)*

What we do know from our limited scientific understanding is that we are

brewing a recipe for disaster unlike any we have yet seen. So no doubt environmentalists of differing stripes will commence selling their individually wrapped solutions to policy makers and the public with a renewed urgency. The *Electronic Green Journal* will be a source for some of those. The media may or may not give these much coverage, preferring to give entire sections of the newspaper or local news to coverage of sports rather than our long-term future as a species. Greenpeace, NRDC, Sierra Club, Environmental Defense and other mega-environmental groups will pump up their mailings and propose that if we only send another check for \$25-\$50 we'll convince the powers to be to make the right choice.

While searching for powerful solutions is indeed important to our future, I want to propose another approach to consider simultaneously. There is no magic bullet for the mess we have created for our children, our grandchildren, and ourselves. Spending countless hours, days and years arguing about the best way forward seems almost inevitable, but we should try many approaches. If the bottom line is we need to remove carbon from the atmosphere we have two basic approaches:

- \* Put less into it!!! - Ultimately this means reducing fossil fuel consumption and decreasing agricultural and forestry techniques that release carbon into the atmosphere

- \* Sequester more carbon from the atmosphere – this is primarily through plant life

We need to tackle this on individual, community, and regional levels. The developed world needs to take the lead on this because we are the per capita kings of carbon. While we are arguing over “cap and trade” systems, investments for a wide array of renewable energy sources, or policies that encourage the reduction of carbon in our atmosphere, we, as individuals simply need to drastically address #1 and #2 above immediately! We residents of the U.S. especially, like to think that we can create big fixes to big problems. The amount of time that goes into big fixes is a luxury we may not have. Meanwhile what seems simple and of little value easily outshines the biggest technological fixes because when multiplied by the number of actors in a community the impacts are sizable. Instead of thinking “either/or” we need to switch to “both/and” thinking.

At my university, for example, I often ask students who are now required to have their own computer, how many have desktops or laptops. Desktops use typically an average of 120-150 watts for computer and monitor while laptops use 25-45 watts. In typical surveys this semester I find that roughly 60-70% of students have laptops - the reverse of just two years ago. Nonetheless, when I ask them how many have their computers running back in their rooms

as we sit in a classroom the response is again 60-80%. While the 25-150 watts doesn't seem like much, I show them that based upon averages, if they represent the 15,000 other resident hall students, we are needlessly consuming nearly 1,000,000 watts an hour, almost all of it wasted. The cumulative effect shocks them, as it did me the first time I ran the calculations. And of course when I add in the remaining 40,000 members of our university community those numbers almost triple.

The point I am trying to make is that each of us needs to be more mindful of the impacts of our everyday choices. We can reduce the release of carbon to the atmosphere without any reduction in our quality of life and without waiting for technological improvements. Yes, we need to use the best science to help us understand the impacts of those choices we make everyday so we can get our carbon diet under control. Creating technologies that are more efficient, pollute less, last longer, and can be assimilated into another use when their current usefulness is at hand need supported.

Each of us can do better. Each of us must. We need to see where we are mindlessly wasting and share what we learn as quickly as we can with as many as we can. We need to walk our talk. While it is easy to ridicule Hummer owners, that approach will not reduce our carbon footprint now. We need to support others taking their own small positive steps. We are much more likely to adopt changes in our behaviors when we are supported with positive conditioning rather than with guilt. We need to create a culture of norms that make waste and needless consumption an issue of environmental and intergenerational justice and a historical relic.

We do not need ten more studies to tell us this. We simply need the will to start right now. Look around. What within your limited sphere of influence is on that does not need to be? Lights (some or all), office equipment, microwaves that we use once a day or less? What are we using to transport ourselves and how essential is the need to move from point A to point B as much as we do? Is the food we're eating seasonal and local or is it transported thousands of miles using additional fossil fuels to keep it fresh? These simple everyday choices matter. Markets will respond to them as citizens consider their actions with a new sense of responsibility.

I confess, I am not able to make all the changes I might overnight. But if I adopt a new practice every day, I will come closer to the matching the aspirations I have for myself as a global citizen - a member of the human family who hopes to hand off a planet to my heirs that affords them at least the same opportunities as I have enjoyed. I am less concerned about building wealth than I am about building the "commonwealth" that can be shared by the global citizenry. We need to build networks that support investment in the

commonwealth. Those who are concerned about building their own wealth at the expense of the commonwealth need to reconsider the costs of that approach. For we are one family, with one planet, and one future. As Solnit (2004) writes:

*I want to illuminate a past that is too seldom recognized, one in which the power of individuals and unarmed people is colossal, in which the scale of change in the world and the collective imagination over the past few decades is staggering, in which astonishing things that have taken place can brace us to enter that dark future with boldness. To recognize the momentousness of what has happened is to apprehend what might happen. Inside the word emergency is emerge; from an emergency new things come forth. The old certainties are crumbling fast, but danger and possibilities are sisters . (p.12)*

## **References**

Solnit, R. (2004). *Hope in the dark: Untold histories, wild possibilities*. New York: Nation Books.

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