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Transition and Translation in the Greening Process

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It's 9:35 a.m. on a Thursday morning. I'm ticking away at the computer keys, trying to polish a first draft to the point where I can mail it off to my editor. Haven't talked to him in weeks, and this is the first time I've written for his mag. I'm "on-assignment," but our agreement was made over the phone. No written contract - and this article represents a month's pay. Feels slightly shaky. Better get this draft to him to keep the connection solid.

Click - on goes the tape recorder. Got to play back that quote once more, type it out accurately.

On, yeah. I *did* get that c.v. from Anthony, the photographer, in the mail a few days ago. Better remember to fax that out to Anne today. I'd really like to have Anthony be the photographer on that land-trust piece. Where'd I *put* that c.v., anyway? Wonder if it's under that pile of printouts and receipts saved for the tax people. As soon as I print this draft, I'd better find the c.v. and write Anne a cover letter....

Rrringg! Oh, dear. There's the phone. Wish I didn't have to stop now, I've got good momentum. But, phone calls do lead to more writing work. Got to have work.

"Hello?" It's Hans, out in Toronto. Did a story on his eastern-Canada architectural-glass work last year. What's he getting at? A story on him for a Japanese magazine? "Yeah, keep in touch. I'd probably have time to do a piece like that in a couple months. Good to hear your voice, Hans. Take care. Bye."

Ah, who really cares about architectural glass when our planet is headed toward being unfit for human habitation? Oh, well. Buck up. I can still hear birdsongs drifting in on sunbeams through my office window.

Ought to be able to print out this draft by 11:30....

There's work, and then there's "the real work.".1. Each makes a valid, separate appeal for our time and energy, unless we're among that fortunate few, "the independent of means" -

or among that other fortunate group, those employed in some sort of green occupation, those for whom work and ideals coincide precisely.

We've entered the '90s, the "turn-around decade." The public focus will likely continue to shift more toward matters biospheric and ecological. This is reasonable to expect, because some acute problem areas are becoming ever more widely and indisputably recognized - things like CFC's and the ozone, pulp mill effluent and estuaries, CO_2 and global warming. Policies for dealing with these will propel changes throughout industrial society, with a possible long-term end-result of the transcendence of industrial society as we now know it. Through all, people and workplaces will maintain continuity by the art of adaptation.

Yet there is an important distinction to be made between changes in social and economic patterns that are *compelled* by circumstance and those that are *chosen* voluntarily by a populace. *Who* will decide to change, and *why*? These continue to be thought-provoking and open-ended questions. Still, I feel nineteen years of involvement with lifestyle experimentation and with environmental work, in both local and wider spheres, have demonstrated to me some things that are pertinent to the very important realm of voluntary change.

For one, structural realities of the system in which we live in North America - social, cultural, and, not least, *economic* realities - resist our attempts to change lifestyle patterns on the household and local or regional levels. To observe that "things are slow to change" is to acknowledge a certain stability. Ironically, what I'm pointing out is perhaps a little like a given ecological community's inclination toward stability within the larger biome. Or again, as an artist might understand the principle, a picture's overall composition can limit the alterability of isolated elements.

I admit the aforementioned parallels, while perhaps useful, could be misleading if they suggest (as I wouldn't wish to) that social and economic patterns *can't* change; history clearly tells us they can and do, in response to technological transition, for instance. In the early '80s, Paul Hawkin, hopeful about certain aspects of the emerging economy, with its sophisticated "post-industrial" technologies, wrote: "In the information economy, learning will be essential for all healthy economic activity. This learning results from paying attention to the feedback provided by the environment to the economy.".2.

Nevertheless, here's a specific example of the difficulty presented by the current "big picture." A major impediment to succeeding in establishing that most excellent of institutions, a land trust, is the often outrageously inflated cost of the land that such a non-profit group (a land-trust society) might wish to put into trust. The *big* reality - that land has been viewed as a commodity for so long in North America - can make placing lands in trust difficult, though I certainly don't suggest impossible.

Besides this structural sort of problem, a second problem area is that we in the more deeply committed environmental movement tend (at times, anyway) to feel there is a gulf in ethos or point of view between ourselves and the "unconscious multitudes" in our society. (I don't really wish to sound condescending, but in our moments of candid conversation most of us green activists do discuss this problem of a still-sleeping majority.) There is a troublesome communication rift.

Activists speak a different language from ordinary folks, one with different concepts and jargon. It is one that has developed within the environmental movement's sphere of action and concern, and this language is indicative of a different focus, of different values and preoccupations. Too often we environmentalists spend our time among ourselves, thus missing opportunities to stay in touch with the concerns and interests of people outside of our circles. How often do you hear people in your community at large talk about "restoring land"? Or about "hydrogen fuel cells?" Or about how it finally became clear to

them one evening that "free-market economics dominated by multi-national corporations" is the source of countless social dislocations and ecological problems, and that "a decentralist economics of greater regional self-reliance" is the way to go? Yet such is the stuff of routine conversation among environmentalists. The gulf between the "greens" and the less ecologically focused among us is real enough, and the current popular conceptions of "green consumerism" cannot change this. A recent book edited by Christopher and Judith Plant, *Green Business: Hope or Hoaz*?.3., explores this topic, and I recommend it. I want to point to the fact that while our social/economic vision of the "should be's" and the "could be's" develops, life goes on pretty much as usual for the average wage earner, or even businessperson. The current big-picture structure acts to hold the pattern of people's lives (at the individual, household, and community levels) in familiar configuration.

If green consumerism, household recycling, economizing on electricity consumption, and other near-at-hand practices are necessary but insufficient (and there have been many who have made this case over the last decade or two), the question becomes *how do we get from the sort of society we now have to the sort of society we can envision*? This question is pragmatically addressed in the vital area of "transitional strategy" are the countless actual goal-oriented, situation-specific, and hopefully flexible strategies. Actual strategies must have these characteristics, because various aspects of our current dilemma must be approached in differing ways. As well, within diverse existing communities it isn't possible to begin transitional processes in identical ways. While it is possible to conceive of a great wave of change in social/economic perspective sweeping over society, as happened in some respects from, say, 1965-75, it remains for specific regions and communities to actualize substantial changes, to establish them as the enduring reality of everyday life. Economics immediately enters the dialogue.

It is easy for those of us somehow able to make a living through a means that puts us at a step-or-two's remove from heavy industry, big finance, or multi-national corporations to forget that we are not so different from the rest of the people in our society. Our society is a system, though of a different order than a purely biological system,.4. and as economic beings we can't help but be part of society's system. (One merely needs to ask oneself, "Do I spend federally issued currency?") Kirkpatrick Sale put it provactively in a recent essay when he wrote, "[Our ecological crisis] is the inevitable by-product of our modern industrial civilization.... Nothing less than a drastic overhaul of this civilization and an abandonment of its ingrained gods - progress, growth, exploitation, technology, materialism, humanism, and power - will do anything substantial to halt our path to environmental destruction....".5.

Sale raises many points here, proffers many topics for debate. To be sure, some will say that not all his dark "gods" are well chosen, that his view is too narrow, his judgement dire. (I would say his strong assertion is worth considering.) But implicit in Sale's declaration is the recognition that virtually none of us lives outside this dominant and destructive system, (and certainly, *mea culpa*, not the present writer, who occasionally is obliged to write on readily saleable topics). "We have seen the enemy, and it is us," said Pogo a couple of decades ago, in a phrase that's become a modern dictum. Once when an interviewer queried anthropologist/poet Gary Snyder, a seasoned and very influential ecological activist, about how one could make a living in these times and still remain beyond the system's taint, Snyder pointed to this same fact. "We just have to keep as clear a head as possible and steer away from the worst of it [i.e., the present system]," he advised. "But everybody's involved in it.... Making a living is to connect with the economy.".6. Ironically, in the industrialized world, we all currently depend on the very system we must change.

Still, if we weren't enmeshed, our search for strategies for change might truly be in vain - for "pure" and reclusive theorists or activists are definitely outsiders. There is, I feel, an inherent strength in the "average guy" role (please don't think that I'm excluding women -

I'm not sure what the female equivalent of the "average guy" should be). Moreover, we can see where organizational concepts of a "vanguard" have led in twentieth-century history: first to detached theorization, later to power struggles, purges, and, eventually, entrenched power elites. Better that we discard any illusion that we're part of a vanguard living beyond "the System," and accept our actual place in the habit-shackled, motley, struggling human family.

I'm not simply speaking of rejecting a hypocrisy in relation to our rhetoric - a situation where we're not living up to that rhetoric, not "walking our talk." I'm referring to many instances of contradiction *within green rhetoric itself*, where in this rhetoric we allege that it is possible to live beyond the system, while in fact the system's life flows through our veins (yes, admittedly some of us spend more money than others). The problem with a good deal of the thinking of the green movement is not that it is short on visions of reality-as-possibility, but that it is estranged form reality-as-lived. Yet the recognition and acceptance of actual situations (many of which are *typical* situations) can lead to feel closer to others living within the system, people whom we might otherwise tend to perceive as "them" in relation to "us." The ecofeminists have done a splendid job of revealing to us just how pernicious is such a perception of an "other" regarded as an alien inferior; it limits both our sympathies and what we are capable of hearing in terms of information.

There was a time when I was living in Vancouver, BC and working in a book store. I had a regular pay cheque and could write in my spare time. With residential rent rates relatively high, and my wages relatively low, I lived in a shared house. Tim, who held the lease on the place, decided financial realities were such that he needed to rent the vacant front bedroom. Cliff, a contract faller who worked on a have-gun-will-travel basis for various large Coastal logging companies, moved into the room.

So there we were, the environmentalist and the logger. I guess we were both doing more or less what we chose within the system as it presented itself to us. We were both in need of the Canadian dollar, to be sure. And because we were willing to accept each other as people, stuck together briefly by circumstance, we were able to learn something about each other. Of course, some people would say I was "fraternizing with the enemy." But it was quite valuable for me to hear Cliff's knowledgeable and articulate insights into the darker side of the British Columbia logging industry. The interesting thing was that I could talk to Cliff about how we each made a living, and how we had in the past. Perhaps some common ground was provided by the fact that, among other things, I had for a time been a carpenter, a blue-collar.

Remunerative work is a valued common denominator in industrialized societies. Not long ago, I was researching some topics in the American Southwest. At one point a man I was chatting with in southern Arizona grumbled mildly that all too many environmental activists, when you learn their circumstances, turn out to be "trust-fund babies." Fair or not? I happen to be of the opinion that the common right-wing image of environmentalists as either people utterly dependent on public money or as people of independent means is inaccurate. But too often, in activist circles, talk of money-making is a source of embarrassment. I think it may come back to the fact that environmentalists are consciously wrestling with the dilemma of at once needing to make a living, *in this present system*, and being able to visualize the sustainable social/economic system in which they would like to live.

The topic of how we *actually* make a living (rather than how we might like to, in that envisioned future) tends to be conspicuously absent from much of our literature, our essays and books. Each of us, however, *has* made an adaptation. And that adaptation, more often than not, tends to involve some sort of compromise. After all, in life it is a practical necessity to come to terms with the present. That's so for everybody.

Acceptance of universal humanity and common lot, however, isn't enough for activists. We do, after all, seek change. Few of us argue for accepting supposedly "necessary evils" like the multi-national corporation or exploitative modes of industry. But because we reject these things, it becomes necessary to roll up our sleeves and develop a hands-on relationship with the substance of our theories - our positive visions.

"Transition" has at least one thing in common with making a living. Just as planning in the world of work is taken a step at a time, transition requires that we see quite clearly where we are and where we want to go next. We can't let our long-term ecological social visions (those resembling, perhaps, the sort of societies broadly sketched by Sale in *Dwellers in the Land*,.7. or painted in multi-faceted detail by Ernest Callenbach in *Ecotopia*).8. entrance us to the point that we are blind to the next step in a pragmatic sequence. I certainly don't mean to stifle dreams; I enjoy sharing mine and hearing or reading those of others. But there is the danger that in seeking our holy grail, we will career and stumble along rather blindly over the path now under our feet - the one, through the world of daily reality, on which genuine steps can be taken.

The pragmatic approach which I favour, instead, can be applied to countless circumstances. Here's an example. While a long-term goal for a region might be to greatly reduce the size of its largest city, to deconcentrate the population somewhat, an appropriate near-term goal might be to convince the municipal government to install a new sewage-treatment plant, so that primary-treated sewage isn't being pumped into the nearest large body of water. Call this a "stopgap measure," if you like.

Though worth pursuing, encouraging a population exodus from the city is an enormous task, one with many complex dimensions, including economic ones. There can be no doubt that it is far easier to simply savour that long-term *vision*, to dream that dream, than to take the steps necessary to induce a municipal government to invest in new sewage-treatment facilities. For the latter sort of goal, achievable though it may be, requires a pragmatic, flexible approach - and dogged persistence.

While not abandoning the more distant goals, we need to develop plans of action that can work with graspable situations. As well, we need to publicly honour steps actually taken, even though these may seem imperfect in certain respects and the gains, at any given time, seem small.

To come back to an earlier point, the kinds of large-scale regulatory changes that will be required to deal with the more glaring biospheric and ecological problems will undoubtedly generate social and technological change. I don't expect government-enacted policy changes to be enough, in themselves. But if we were to attempt to force changes too rapidly (had we that power), we would produce, in individuals and social groups, undue resistance to change; more rapidly still, and we'd surely produce social chaos - again, *had* we that power. Our problems are obviously systemic, and their remedies must be systemic, as well. The idea of a turnaround *decade* is a good one, for people require time to adapt. Generally speaking, at a given period we can only go so far, as individuals, households, and communities, before we run into the limits posed by the system.

As in other areas of life, communication is an essential factor in facilitating optimal change. Part of the process of developing transitional strategies is learning to identify where our experience, concepts, and jargon, as environmentalists, are different from those of "average people" in our society. Then we can take this into account in our community work. I refer to this as the process of "translation." Maybe a few examples of communication impasses would be useful.

We activists have been known to offer bulk quantities of free advice. But, for instance, how can someone who has never known the financial burden and insecurity of trying to make a living at farming advise other people about how they should organically manage

the farmland on which they depend for a livelihood? Or how can those who have never worked in the logging industry (said to be statistically the most physically dangerous profession in North America) advise those who do work in it as to what specific methods they should use? It is obviously not enough to have given such sorts of work "a try" for a week or a month or a season. It is veterans of these professions who know what they're really about, and year-in/year-out experience makes the veteran.

I'm not saying we shouldn't endorse and encourage such things as organic farming or alternative logging practices. Far from it. Rather, my point is that if we want to foster these things, we had better either know, with a good deal of intimacy, what we're talking about, or be able to enlist the help of those who do. And if we fulfil these prerequisites, it may remain to develop a common language, a mutually agreeable set of concepts, understandings, and terms meaningful to both the environmental community and those working in specific fields.

Reality as possibility makes rash assertions, like "We can live without plastic containers." Reality as it is lived says, "Yes, but almost none of us do." *At present*, the former statement is too broad, and thus unrealistic.

For at least the last couple decades, there has been much discussion of the idea that people should be engaged in work they find meaningful, work that provides them with more than merely remuneration. Yet it is clear a large proportion of people in our society don't find their jobs all that meaningful. Many are actually quite dissatisfied, simply doing something their region provides as an opportunity: building tract houses; waiting on barroom tables; driving a semi for a soft drink company; working in a typing pool; dispatching taxis; wrapping food in a packing house. "It's a job," is the phrase. A man or woman's waking life is structured around that job. From the proceeds, s/he tries to build "a decent life." *Do* these people have their "druthers"? If so, in what degree?

If we want to operate from a place where we're not talking to ourselves, ever more informedly and cogently rehashing the same basic insights among our activist friends and critics, then we had better build bridges between ourselves and such people, our fellow community members. We will clearly be able to advance our environmental objectives more readily if we can put into our equations their perspectives and legitimate aspirations. That is, we need to develop visions that can be meaningful to the wage-earners and small-business people around us, and then speak a language that they can understand.

Assuming we *have* explored some aspect of life and learned some "new way to do it," that we truly know whereof we speak, we must still endeavour to share our experience and insight with other people in a way that will make sense to them - make sense not only conceptually, but also "in the gut," in terms of their lives. From a strategic perspective alone, this is the way to garner greater substantial support, to build a broader foundation for action within the community.

Some of the more recently published books on greening the household and community (those by Deborah Dadd,.9. and Jeremy Rifkin,.10. for instance) exemplify, on a certain level, a pragmatic, open-ended spirit I admire; they tell you many constructive things you can actually do in ordinary circumstances and, importantly, impart both information and the required knack to go further. And that is how tangible "dreams" are manifested: like new growth buds burgeoning from twigs that were themselves buds not long ago. By no means do I say there is no volitional factor in the way things evolve, but I do believe that each new stage grows out of the last. A language, a dialogue develops in this same organic way, and it is an integral part of the transitional process. New and truly appropriate technology - one form of "progress" we now need - will have something to offer us in our efforts toward more responsible, sustainable ways of relating to our planet. So will a more informed and motivated populace. But I think we must put a great deal of attention into new economic visions that can hope to re-fashion our patterns of working

and living. I'm referring to new economic visions, imbued with realism, capable of leading the way at the local and regional levels. In connection with such place-specific visions lie remarkable challenges for transitional strategies and for the development of dialogue.

Surely it is true that without a theoretical sense of direction, various strains of activism can work at cross purposes; the net benefit can be reduced. Thus the merit of delineating "deep green" values and visions. Yet unless our guiding visions can take the day-to-day dimensions of life into account, and value them, these visions are worse than useless: they're deceiving. Activists should keep attuned to the theoretical, yet theory should never lose touch with the lives of ordinary people.

Notes:

1. "The real work" is a phrase coined by ecological activist Gary Snyder to refer to the planet-saving endeavours necessitated by our times. He gave a volume of his essays and transcribed interviews this title (*The Real Work*, 1980, New Directions, New York). The phrase has gained much currency in bioregional circles.

2. Hawkin, Paul. *The Next Economy*, 1983, Ballantine, New York, p. 119.

3. Plant, Christopher and Judith Plant, *Green Business; Hope or Hoax?*, 1991, New Society Press, Santa Cruz and Gabriola Island, BC.

4. In *Cities and the Wealth of Nations* (1984, Random House, New York) Jane Jacobs notes some of the similarities between healthy regional economies and ecosystems. For a brief, critical discussion of some practical distinctions between ecological systems and the industrial system, see "The Biosphere, the Industriosphere, and Their Interactions," by Charles Hall, in Emmel, Thomas C. *Global Perspectives on Ecology*, 1977, Mayfield, Palo Alta, CA. For lengthier discussions, see, for instance, McKibben, Bill *The End of Nature*, 1990, Doubleday, New York, or Devall, Bill and George Sessions *Deep Ecology*, 1985, Peregrine Smith, Salt Lake City.

5. Sale, Kirkpatrick, "The Trouble with Earth Day," in Plant and Plant, *op. cit.*

6. From "Tracking Down the Natural Man," in Snyder, Gary *The Real Work*, 1980, New Directions, New York.

7. Sale, Kirkpatrick, *Dwellers in the Land*, 1985, Sierra Club Books, San Francisco.

8. Callenbach, Ernest, *Ecotopia*, 1975, Bantam, New York.

9. Dadd, Deborah, *Nontoxic, Natural & Earthwise*, 1990, Jeremy Tarcher, Los Angeles.

10. Rifkin, Jeremy, *Green Lifestyle Handbook*, 1990, Jeremy Tarcher, Los Angeles.