THE TRANSITION – LOCAL GOVERNMENT

transition |tran'zi sh ən; -'si sh ən|
noun
the process or a period of changing from one state or condition to another

The Transition: Local Government

"The Great Transition: The Rude Awakening" (quotations mine) is the inevitable result of a linear growth economy running into the limits of a closed-loop planet. If all the natural resources of the planet were liquidated, it would be equal to about $60 trillion. But why would anyone want to destroy the natural capital and thus totally dissolve the capacity for life on this planet? We are doing exactly that, at a rate 30% faster than the environment can keep up. The planet's ecological capacity to regenerate is losing pace with our capitalist system. Environmentally destructive, positive feedback loops have been set in motion, making it increasingly difficult for the most vulnerable populations to survive.

The damage that we have inflicted upon the environment will take generations to rebuild. We have continued to ignore the warning signs, pretending that our strategies to dominate nature and erode ecosystems are somehow inherently justified. The pendulum has swung as far as it can go. Now we are experiencing the return to balance. For the first time, humanity faces civilization collapse on a global scale. We will witness this transition in our lifetimes, the demise of the current system and the birth of the emerging society.

The Chinese character for "Crisis" is both "Challenge" and "Opportunity". The character for "Transition" should be "Collapse" and "Awakening". The collapse of our civilization is the greatest opportunity for evolutionary awakening. We have an individual and collective choice how to respond. This is our "response-ability". We hold the power to be conscientious stewards of life or unconscious tyrants. Some are holding onto fear and control through domination and violence, while others are creating a cooperative world through justice, peace, and harmony.

Our belief in the survival of the fittest is inaccurate. Nature does not evolve in a vacuum of competitive struggles. It evolves through the emergence of creative anomalies and collaborative solutions. We have operated on the assumption that we are separate beings who need to fight for resources in order to survive. This is both ignorant and immature. The truth is that we are all connected. If we behave in cooperative ways, we ensure mutual survival of all life. This occurs through the intelligent use of resources for the benefit of all species. Indigenous cultures have held this sacred interdependence for millennia. They evolve together with local plants and animals based on relationships of honor and respect. This wisdom is our common birthright.

On the contrary, our modern infrastructure is extensive, but also extremely fragile. Every major U.S. city lacks the capability to evacuate its population in the event of a natural disaster. We lack the multi-modal transportation efficiencies of Europe and Asia. Our global food supply is completely dependent on fossil fuels, lacking natural biodiversity and resilience. Our water and sanitation systems are completely dependent on centralized power grids. Environmental toxins and a food system that traded convenience for quality, constantly threaten our health. As we watch the collapse of the global financial markets, we are experiencing economic insecurity. Despite the formation of the fourth branch of government (the homeland security apparatus), the modern military and police forces have been exploited for corporate benefit of the few to the detriment of the many. It's time to reaffirm our values of 'liberty and justice for all'.

The solution to large-scale collapses of industrial infrastructure is to develop local resilience. Our local governments, cities and counties, were entrusted with the power conferred to them by the states. Through the 10th Amendment to the Constitution, they are responsible for protecting the health, safety, and welfare of citizens. This is the definition of police power. Unfortunately, this power has been abused to protect corporate personhood over the interests of people. We have seen the disintegration of social equity over the past 30 years. All the while, income disparity continues to increase. Citizens' basic needs are no longer being protected.

The average person has less time and fewer resources to care for their families. The poor and working-class are more susceptible to crises and less capable of survival. The Occupy movement has poignantly brought this to our attention. Although, most people don't see the trends occurring behind the scenes. Since 9/11, the security apparatus and military-industrial complex have received untold investments in infrastructure and technology. While average citizens have struggled to make a difference, they have created democracy, social justice, human rights, and sustainability movements, which have well surpassed critical mass.

Instead of purchasing riot-control shotguns and AR-15 rifles, local governments could be developing their communities' capacity for collaborative planning for system-wide resilience. Luckily, many of them have taken their mandate seriously, understanding their duty to develop sustainable solutions. Although green buildings and energy efficiency continue gain momentum, a more holistic approach is still needed. Local governments are devising climate action plans, but these don't address disruptions in food & water supply, transportation, housing, or energy. Local governments should be assessing the resilience of these systems and determining the ongoing barriers to access.

Sustainability has become a catchword over the last 20 years, but this concept was written into the original mandate of local governments. It's time that we as citizens hold our local governments accountable to the needs of the people that they are supposed to be protecting. In order to survive the transition, local governments need to ensure reliable access to basic needs and work collaboratively toward regional sustainability. Buildings not only need to be safe in the event of natural disasters, but local jurisdictions need to become energy independent. Their food and water supplies need to be locally or regionally self-sufficient. Transportation needs to be both effective and efficient both internally and comprehensively across regions.

As a student of urban planning, I have witnessed a discipline devoted to assuring the status quo through piecemeal project-by-project planning. Sustainability is still considered a luxury response, an extra expense, and a secondary goal. A shift in mindset needs to occur. Communities must work together toward comprehensive, holistic, and integrated solutions. An approach that ensures resilient systems for providing basic needs also creates sustainable and thriving communities. With the threat of increasingly frequent and intense catastrophes, we need to overcome the ongoing failure of our institutions to provide a sustainable quality of life for everyone. Imagine a cooperative and functional community where all have access to healthy food, clean water, and adequate housing and we will finally have a "Good Society".