

A DECLARATION OF INTERDEPENDENCE

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April 20, 2008

OBSERVATIONS OF AN ENTOMOLOGIST

From *Grasshopper Dreaming* by Jeffrey A. Lockwood (professor of entomology at the Univ. of Wyoming, specializing in ecology and management of rangeland grasshoppers. He is a member of the UU Fellowship of Laramie, WY)

The prairie is a creation of the grasshopper. These insects have sculpted plant communities, cycled nutrients, hosted parasites, fed wildlife and distributed fungal spores. Upon colonizing the grasslands of North America as the glaciers retreated, the grasshoppers co-evolved with the soils, plants and other animals. Understanding the challenges of bitterly cold winter and blistering summers, they committed to an unseen vision, a way of life that drew them forward perhaps through the sheer power of their reproductive potential...or the staggering diversity of their forms (there are 112 species of grasshoppers in Wyoming alone, more than the species of resident mammals, fish, birds, reptiles and amphibians). The grasshopper became a whole region of fecundity and diversity, a creation of the entire Great Plains.

Using the gifts of science, we too must find ways to become native to this place. On a planet with nations having staked out every piece of land, there are no frontiers, no place to go. I have listened to the land and I know that the prairie is mute when we kill too many grasshoppers, that some must be there to sustain the soft breathing of the grasslands. I have spoken aloud to the grasshoppers before and during a summer's work, asking their permission, explaining my intentions, apologizing for my mistakes, and listened for their reply. They do not resent my work; they accept that the birds, ants and humans will thin their numbers. But their ten thousand years of evolutionary wisdom in this place demands our respect.

We need to listen.

** REFLECTIONS **

Consider an average day in the life of the average urban American.

You get up in the morning and the house feels a little cold. You shuffle to the thermostat and crank the furnace up a notch. Within minutes the temperature is within tolerable limits. A twist of the wrist and the kettle is quickly filled with sparkling clean water for a fresh pot of coffee or tea.

You open the front door and, as always, a newspaper lies on the stoop, protected from the elements by a snug plastic sleeve. After a few bites of breakfast and a cursory review of local and national events, it's time to head for work. Pulling out of the driveway, you notice that your neighbor's paper is still lying on his sidewalk, and it occurs to you that your paths haven't crossed for weeks.

On the way to the office, you fail to notice that since yesterday, street crews have repaired those annoying pot-holes created over the winter and that your commute today is smoother and less stressful.

After work, you have to stop at the bank before heading for the grocery store to pick up a few items. Pulling up to the drive-in window, the teller greets you with a friendly "hello" before asking if you'd be interested in setting up an on-line account. I'll think about it, you say. At the store, you pick up cold-cuts, bread and salad greens, all pre-cut, pre-portioned and handsomely presented to the hungry shopper.

Back at home, you look forward to a quiet evening with the family, each member happily interacting with his or her own computer, I-pod or TV program. You wonder whether perhaps, for a change, you could all sit down together for dinner - something that hasn't happened for awhile.

Darkness falls, but your house - like most others on your block - glows softly from within and feels snug and secure - a self-contained little island amidst thousands of others.

The foregoing account is not meant to be a parody. With subtle variations it represents, I suspect, the daily experience of many people in this room, myself included. My purpose in sharing it is to highlight the degree to which the mechanized, automated, individualistic civilization we've created undercuts the natural and unavoidable fact of our interdependence.

With each passing year it has become more and more difficult for urbanized or even semi-urbanized Americans to appreciate how the world really works - how both nature and communities function. We enjoy light, heat, water, food, security, mobility, amusement in great abundance. Each day

they miraculously make their appearance; merely flicking a switch or turning a key puts them at our disposal.

Don't get me wrong: for the most part this is a good thing and I am certainly not complaining. If there is a downside, it is that the "magic" of our technology, the ease with which we now are able to satisfy our needs and indulge our wants has rendered us largely oblivious to the root sources from which we draw our sustenance. We are able to live with the illusion of self-sufficiency and to blithely ignore the long-term consequences of our choices.

At one point in *A Sand County Almanac*, **Aldo Leopold** points out that warming one's shins before an open fire, the wood for which one has cut and split oneself, generates a feeling of gratitude that is largely absent when the gas furnace kicks in and the warm air begins to flow. In the former instance, the individual is completely cognizant of where the heat comes from and what it really costs. There is an immediate, intimate connection between the consumer and the object consumed, and real insight into the principle of interdependence. With a natural gas furnace the costs are largely hidden, the relationship blurred. The consumer has much less cause to feel connected to and responsible for the resource.

So much of what sustains us nowadays is invisible: the person who delivers our paper at 5:00 a.m.; the animals that provide us with fish sticks and McNuggets; the much maligned public agencies that repair our streets, pump our water and protect our homes; the neighbors who might be a lot more neighborly if we gave them more than a moment's notice. Although we may intellectually grasp the concept of interdependence, experientially we are at a loss. It doesn't register in our guts and is thus relatively easy to ignore.

Unfortunately, this trend shows little sign of reversing itself. Almost every time I stop in at my bank for a transaction, I'm encouraged to use their on-line services and each time I decline. On-line banking is probably more efficient, but I prefer working with a live teller. And besides, if every customer accepted his offer, that teller would probably be out of a job.

The increasing anonymity built into so many of our systems worries me. For all its benefits, our technology is pulling us apart, alienating us from each other and our environment and reducing our ability to respond to the serious challenges facing our world. Without an acute and active awareness of the fundamental fact of interdependence, **Edward Hoagland** recently wrote:

...we burn through entire galaxies of other life,
unimaginably interlinked and unmapped - amputating
ourselves from the rest of creation, whether destroyed
or still undestroyed. The risks are unfathomable.
And if you don't find this tragic, open your heart.

We are often assured that the environmental and social
problems confronting us today can be readily solved simply
by the right technology. That is probably true, but it is
not the whole truth.

We do not lack for know-how. Just one example: for a
couple of weeks now our Environmental Action Committee has
been demonstrating a very simple solar cooker out on FUS's
front lawn. Widely distributed, such appliances could
supply tens of millions of families in poor countries with
sufficient energy to cook their meals and purify their
water. No need to cut down scarce trees, pollute the air
or pay the utility company. Concentrated solar power was
first used by the Chinese almost three thousand years ago,
and until the discovery of cheap oil in the Middle East,
was seen as a promising means of producing power in this
country. Today, energy entrepreneurs are revisiting this
ancient technology. It is estimated that non-polluting,
water-thrifty solar thermal plants covering merely 92
square miles of Southwestern desert could generate enough
electricity for the entire United States.

We know what it would take to reduce greenhouse gases,
stabilize human populations, halt the decline in species
diversity and meet the challenge of "peak oil." Our powers
of invention are clearly up to the task and the costs are
hardly astronomical. Where there's the will, there's a
way. What we most lack, however, is the will.

The late **Kurt Vonnegut** was being a bit cynical when he
said, "We could have saved the earth but we were too damn
cheap," but in a way he was right. We do know how to atone
for past mistakes and secure the future, but so far we've
been criminally slow to do so. If we understood, at a deep
enough level, the essential truth of our interdependence I
think we'd do better.

Two hundred and thirty years ago, a group of passionate
patriots got together and drafted a Declaration of
Independence founded upon certain self-evident
propositions: "that all men are created equal and are
endowed by the Creator with certain inalienable rights:
life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." What that
landmark document needs is a 21st century supplement - a

Declaration of Interdependence that reminds us of our indissoluble connection to, and responsibility for, the human and biotic communities in which we live, move and have our being.

Without a dramatic shift in attitude most Americans will never become serious about stewardship. We've been so conditioned to "look out for Number One," have emphasized individual rights over social responsibility for so long, have extolled the pursuit of private self-interest so often that our skills of collaboration and cooperation have atrophied. "The technology we need most badly" if we are to prevent grave ecological and social consequences, **Bill McKibben** writes, "is the technology of community."

Our sense of community is in disrepair at least in part because the prosperity that flowed from cheap fossil fuel has allowed us all to become extremely individualized, even hyper-individualized... Our problem now is that there is no way forward...that doesn't involve working together to make changes deep enough and rapid enough to matter.

McKibben's words are echoed by **Wendell Berry** in the most recent issue of *Harper's Magazine*. "The work now most needing to be done - that of neighborliness and caretaking - cannot be done by remote control with the greatest power on the largest scale."

There is, in other words, no magic bullet to be found, no technology new or old that by itself that will cure the planet of what ails it. What's required is, in **David Korten's** words, a "great turning," - the clear, convincing recognition that we are our brother's and sister's keepers and that it's time to take better care of each other.

We can begin by retiring what community and environmental activist **Van Jones** describes as a "disposable mindset."

...disposable products, disposable species, disposable people. To me (Jones writes) it's no surprise that the country that has the world's biggest pollution problem also has the most people in prison.

As Earth Day approaches, we've been inundated with information about how each of us, as individuals, can contribute to the "greening" of our community and our planet. The good news is that with each action we take, our resolve strengthens and our commitment to

neighborliness and caretaking increases. And while we can't do everything, each of us can do some very simple things that do really matter. Let me mention just a few.

We can eat less meat. Americans eat on average 8 ounces per day - twice the world average. If we were to reduce meat consumption by merely 20% it would be -- from a water, energy and greenhouse gas standpoint -- the equivalent of switching from a standard mid-size sedan to a Toyota Prius.

Second, we can take fewer short automobile trips. 50% of all auto trips in the U.S. are less than three miles; 25% are less than a mile. Engines running cold, **Eric Sorensen** tells us, burn fuel far less efficiently, produce four times the carbon monoxide and twice the volatile organic compounds of engines running hot. Furthermore, pollutants continue to evaporate from an engine until it cools off, whether the engine's been running for 5 minutes or 5 hours.

A bicycle, on the other hand, is the world's most energy-efficient vehicle, emits zero pounds of carbon dioxide and is a blessing for your wallet, your legs and your heart. They are wonders both for what they do for you, and what they don't do to the environment. As British author **H.G. Wells** put it more than a half-century ago: "When I see an adult on a bicycle, I do not despair for the future of the human race."

Third, we can reduce your dependence on factory farming - one of the most cruel, wasteful and ecologically destructive activities in the modern world. We can make better choices. Make a commitment to farmer's market and community supported agriculture. Experience first hand the diversity of products and people that these markets attract. Enhance your connection to the interdependent web by supporting local producers and learning what sustainable, as opposed to industrial, farming is all about.

Fourth, become politically aware and politically active. Today, **Van Jones** says, "The warmongers, the polluters, the clear-cutters" all are amply fed from the public trough. "The solar engineers, people who are growing local and organic produce and other problem solvers get very little support from any level of government." Putting men and women in office who appreciate the gravity of our situation, who possess a long-term perspective and who have the gumption to oppose powerful vested interests is absolutely critical. During the 21st century, the challenges we face with respect to the environment are

likely to dwarf all others. We desperately need better leadership and more responsible policy-makers.

Fifth and finally, declare your interdependence. As a society, we can no longer afford the free-booting, free-wheeling, "free to do whatever I please because, by God, this is a free country" ethos that has placed us on our present predicament. Freedom is fine, and as much as anybody I appreciate mine. But, as **Wendell Berry** points out, we have distorted the concept and defined it as "escape from all restraints." Etymologically, however, "Free" comes from the same Indo-European root as the word "friend" and thus implies loyalty, faithfulness, connection, affection as well as liberty. Unaccompanied by a clear sense of interdependence, freedom and independence lead only to chaos.

But words are cheap and knowing their etymological origins isn't enough to restore a severed relationship. For the truth of our interdependence to sink in, we need sustained exposure to the untranslatable language of the whispering trees, laughing streams, of cicadas and Sandhill cranes. We must take the time to enter nature with open senses, an empty mind and a receptive heart until we can clearly hear, as the poet **Mary Oliver** has, "the world calling to us, like the wild geese, harsh and exciting - over and over announcing our place in the family of things."