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Sustainable Systems

Sitting outside the last few weeks on glorious sunny days, watching the leaves fall, I have been reflecting on the natural cycles of life. This October mirrored in many ways the spring transition that I talked about back in May. Nature delays the first frost as long as possible. When the forests are green, they are transpiring water, keeping the air moist and providing vapor to form clouds. Clouds and water vapor (a greenhouse gas) blanket the earth. This reduces nighttime cooling, so temperatures before sunrise can stay in the 40s. Dew may form, but there is no frost.

In September the nights get longer and the sun drops lower in the sky. The earth cools until one night cold dry air blows down from the north, and the temperature falls until frost forms. Our summer vegetables die, and our forests recognize frost as a signal to prepare for winter. The leaves turn, and transpiration falls dramatically.

The air gets drier, cloud cover diminishes and so frosts become more frequent.

Nature goes through a cycle of growth and decay. The forests grow slowly and respond to the supply of nutrients, water and sunlight. All parts of the system - soil, roots, tree, leaves and air - are exchanging and communicating with each other. There is a balance, with a complex network of regulatory controls providing stability.

Sure, I harvest some trees for fuel and compost some leaves to feed my garden in the spring. But if I am wise, I do so in moderation.

Contrast this with our human economic and financial system. Against all evidence, we believe that we have unlimited material and financial resources. We think that we can grow our economies, our wealth and our debt without limit, with less and less regulation and control ... and without proper information flows and feedbacks to keep the system stable. What arrogance! Blinded and driven by greed we have created an unstable financial system that grows like a cancer until it collapses, most recently into a bottomless sea of "toxic debt." Trillions of dollars of complex financial instruments (think "virtual money") have sucked all the real wealth out of business. We don't know how to uncouple one part of the financial system from the whole. We have not built in a way to "compost" this toxic debt and separate it from the basic banking system that we all need for commerce. We got drunk with greed, and failed to notice we had coupled the real world, which has real limits, with our virtual world of limitless leveraged debt.

With so much money and ideology at stake, no one wants to discuss the reality of the mess and admit the truth, especially in an election season. And it is silly to expect economists and financiers to sort it out. It was their false assumptions and dishonesty that created it in the first place. Ecologists understand sustainable systems much better - we should listen to them!

A sustainable society is not just a slogan; we know better and could do better. So this winter in all our communities let's plan a better future, where the rules are designed to work for us, the earth and the whole of creation! There are many places to start. Here is just one, with a rich thirty-year history.

The Institute for Local Self-Reliance has proposed we develop a set of new rules that restore human-scale politics and economics and rebuild our communities. These rules represent an extension of the "localism" movement which has been discussed on these pages. They embrace three principles:

n Decisions are made by those who will feel the impact of those decisions.

n Communities accept responsibility for the welfare of their members and for the next generation.

n Households and communities possess or own sufficient productive capacity to generate real wealth.

These seem like common-sense principles, but they symbolize a radical shift from the unregulated global financial system, which accepts no responsibility for communities or for the earth. We feel its impact, but it is by design out of control.

Contrast the rapid rise of the local food movement in Vermont, which meets a real need, is under local control and generates real wealth in our communities. You could feel the excitement and satisfaction last weekend when the Rutland winter farmers market reopened in the old Strand Theater.

What would it take to transform our communities so that our citizens and entrepreneurs are active and informed, with the skills to generate real wealth and the authority to be self-governing? We have still a little precious time, and one rich, unlimited and sustainable resource in our spirit and collective wisdom. Here lies the source of our faith, honesty and trust. But our expertise has been scattered and weakened by a sea of deception. Across Vermont we need to gather together in groups in our communities to collect ideas and inspiration, and then get to work.

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