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Oil disasters and the transition to sustainability

After a relatively warm winter, spring came some ten days early this year. Around May 1, early for Vermont, I planted four yellow cherry tomatoes in my garden soil. They are growing well, although I covered them with upturned pots on two nights when we had a frost. My peas, planted back on March 15 in an unusually warm spell, have also grown well.

Since I moved to Vermont in the 1970s, our winters have gotten milder and shorter. Our growing season has become longer by more than three days every decade. The last frost in the spring is on average earlier, and the first frost in fall is coming later. This is the upside of the climate transition that we are facing, and it will help as we move towards growing more of our food locally. There is now a wide range of fresh vegetables available in the spring farmers markets across the state; many started under row covers as early as February.

But in many other ways our society is becoming less resilient and more vulnerable. A small volcanic eruption in Iceland paralyzed air travel in Europe for a week — and the volcano is still erupting. A very few hospitable airports like Amsterdam provided free food, showers and entertainment to those passengers stranded for days; but in many other airports, people were just left to suffer. Commerce was affected as the transport of perishable goods by air stopped. Ironically older turboprop planes are less vulnerable to volcanic ash than modern turbofan jets.

In the past there have been far larger volcanic eruptions that have drastically affected weather and agriculture. The explosion of Mount Tambora in Indonesia in 1815 cooled the earth by 5 degrees and had a global impact. In 1816, the "year without a summer," there were frosts every month in New England and people starved.

The sinking of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico on Earth Day after an explosion and fire is another tragic reminder of the fragility of the environment. The 2009 environmental impact analysis for this rig claimed that this type of accident was impossible. As with nuclear power, it is easy to claim that catastrophic accidents are impossible — until one happens. In reality the issue is simpler: drilling in deep water is a risky technology and, with responsibilities scattered among many contractors and very little regulation, unforeseen accidents do happen!

There are a thousand drilling platforms in the Gulf of Mexico. As we drill deeper into the ocean floor to feed our addiction to oil, oil blowouts are inevitable. And they are not like oil gushers on land — it is much more difficult to repair things at a depth of 5,000 feet, where methane hydrate "ice" forms. In stormy seas we cannot control and mop up oil spills. Once millions of gallons of crude oil have leaked into the ocean, they follow the wind and the ocean currents.

Are we ready to lose all our coastal zones and marine life to feed our SUVs? Blaming the government or oil industry is of little use. Yes, we need much tighter regulation and backup safety systems, but the day of reckoning is coming. If we want a sustainable society, we must prepare for a great transition.

The era of cheap oil is over; oil-rig disasters and climate change are among the undesirable consequences. Our technology has to be managed with care and compassion and laissez-faire capitalism is not management!

Back in late April, Transition Vermont gathered in Montpelier to make community plans for our state. With prayerful song, warmth and a kaleidoscope of views, they faced the many complex and interconnected issues that are before us. It was a glorious spring day — and a joyful occasion. Nothing is more liberating than facing the truth in a trusting, thoughtful and hopeful community.

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