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Intelligence and Resilience

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I have been reflecting this winter on environmental intelligence, defined as that blend of natural science, social science and indigenous knowledge that helps us humans understand how to interact constructively and creatively with the living natural world. Our limited environmental intelligence has been apparent for years. Now we have a central government that is so deficient that its primary interest is exploiting the natural world to increase the profits of its corporate sponsors. The tacit assumption is that both current and future costs can be dumped on the poor, the indigenous, our children, and of course the Earth itself. In sharp contrast, the well-being of the planet, and our democracy, depend on how soon we the people recognize that we are all an integral part of this one Earth; and that we are being exploited by rich demagogues.

It won't take much to bring our proud society to its knees. Everything changed overnight on Puerto Rico when Hurricane Maria destroyed the power grid last September. Nearly five months have passed, and in the regions still without power, it is still day-to-day basic survival with little or no potable water, no refrigeration, no schools and no industry. Infrastructure including key bridges have not been rebuilt because the economy is bankrupt. Our financial system that exploited and pushed the country into bankruptcy, accepts no liability. Our government treats Puerto Rico as a now-worthless colony of foreigners that can be ignored, because they don't make large donations, and they certainly don't have a vote. This neglect of its own citizens is a measure of how far this once proud nation has sunk.

But desperate circumstances force us to return to community values: human disasters we can all understand. The community support here for my daughter's family who came to Vermont as refugees from Puerto Rico has been amazing and joyful to watch. Instinctively we remember that we cannot survive disasters as isolated individuals, only as a caring community.

Yet underneath, the creeping disaster to the planet threatens all our treasured values. Perhaps some of you made New Year resolutions to speak out for reality and the truth, which are now precariously intertwined, and essential for our survival. This year we need a conscious and determined effort to strengthen our communities and democratic values, and resist an economic and political system that would rather manipulate us as lonely individual consumers in the thrall of advertising and the media.

On a national level, the executive is trying to suppress the freedom of the press, as it struggles with pathetic desperation to create the first American dictatorship. The truth is rebranded as fake news, and puppet news media spread fabrications. Science and evidence are suppressed

as dangerous, while the EPA dismantles environmental regulations related to clean air, clean water and mitigating climate change. Fortunately the Climate Advisory Panel that was dissolved last August was recreated in January by the Earth Institute of Columbia University and the State of New York. Cities, States and businesses want access to reliable information to adapt to our changing climate, as they intend to keep our commitments to the Paris climate agreement.

This is a good time to reflect on Franklin Roosevelt's State of the Union address in January 1941, before the US entered World War II. He described how the US stood for four essential human freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear - everywhere in the world. We must stand up for these American values in the face of efforts by the current administration to bury them all.

Our communities are our strength and our resilience. I have been reflecting on how the towns of Rutland County came together in the days after Tropical Storm Irene isolated many of them. Some towns had no power or cell service, so the local community simply met every morning to help those in need; while those with equipment started rebuilding washed-out roads. Some had to climb mountains to find cell service, but soon the flow of information across social networks reconnected us all, so we could collect and move food, water and resources across rough terrain. We rush to do this in crises: now we face ongoing crises which need the same courageous determination.