

Waking Up to Hope

Marjorie Kelly

I once taught a class at Schumacher College in southern England titled, "Can the Earth Survive Capitalism?" If I were to teach that class today in the U.S., I might title it, "Can Young People Survive the Collapse of Their Future?" A lot of things are falling apart these days, economically and ecologically, and many of us are afraid about whether we'll make it through. There's a sense we're heading for collapse – that was the word I remember hearing bandied about in hallways and over dinner at Schumacher College a few years back. Certainly we are headed for rough times. We're already in them. But as I told my students then, there are two possible visions of where we're heading. One is a view of total social and ecological collapse. The other is a view of transformation – not the advent of utopia, but a kind of muddling through to a new social order that arises out of the one we have.

It's transformation that I'm betting on. We will come through. And this is not something that I think; it's something that I know. I take confidence, in large part, from systems thinking, an emerging new scientific worldview which teaches us that crisis is a natural part of how systems evolve. Living systems have the ability to make sudden, creative leaps into novelty, reorganizing themselves into something wholly new. They do this when they're undergoing intolerable stress. At critical points of instability, some new way of organizing things emerges. This is something we talked about midweek in that Schumacher class, as we took a field trip deep into a nearby forest, where we sat in a clearing beneath a leafy canopy and listened to a lecture on deep ecology by the college's resident ecological scientist, Stephan Harding. He asked a question that would stay with me a long time.

What kind of economy is consistent with living inside a living being?

It was a question he himself could not answer, he said, but he hoped we could begin to do so, because it was a question on which the future of life on earth depended.

I'd come to Schumacher after 20 years in the field of corporate responsibility, where the talk is all about making "the business case" for responsibility – showing how ecological improvements, for example, can make companies more profitable. In the world of corporations and Wall Street – which is to say, in the dominant worldview of our economy – profits are the highest goal. All social and ecological concerns have to fit themselves into that frame.

But that isn't how the founding generation of America began. They didn't tell the king that caring for the peasants would improve his return on investment. They articulated truths they held to be self-evident. That's what Stephan did in that forest.

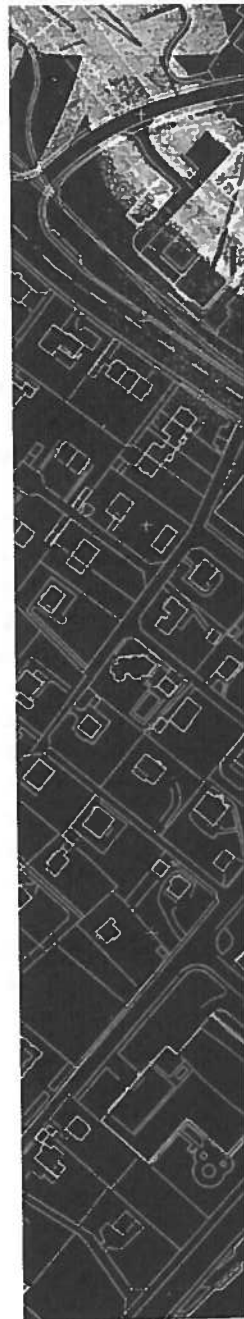
He said simply:

*"A thing is right when it enhances the stability and beauty of the total ecosystem. It is wrong when it damages it."*¹

The sustainability of the larger system comes first. Everything else has to fit itself within *that frame*. The perspective from which Stephan spoke is the perspective of the whole. That is basic to systems thinking, which stands upon a fundamental insight:

There are no separate systems.

This insight was key to the radical re-visioning of science that physicists confronted in the early 20th century, when systems thinking was first introduced. In the mechanistic worldview of Descartes and Newton, scientists saw matter as made of separate particles. But at the subatomic level, physicists encountered a strange new



world, which confronted them with the wrenching necessity of constructing an entirely new view of reality. Physicist Fritjof Capra wrote:

In their struggle to grasp this new reality, scientists became painfully aware that their basic concepts, their language, and their whole way of thinking were inadequate to describe atomic phenomena. Their problems were not merely intellectual but amounted to an intense emotional and, one could say, even existential crisis.₂

They realized, in the end, the universe isn't made up of things at all, but of patterned flows. "What flows is a mysterious, non-individualized something we call energy," Ervin Laszlo wrote in *The Systems View of the World*. Some of the energy flows twist themselves into relatively stable patterns, allowing "things" to emerge, "like knots tied on a fishing net," he went on. These are the particles of matter. Whirling energy appears in the relatively stable patterns of electrons, which join to form patterns called atoms. Atoms twist into chemical molecules; molecules



photo credit: Coop Himmelb(l)au

form cells. Cells build into organisms, and organisms join in “superorganic communities,” both ecological and social – such as forests, towns, corporations. These living communities unite to form the global system of Gaia, the living earth. The whole has “the character of a vast system of balanced energies,” Laszlo wrote, “acting in some discernible form of cohesion.”³

This dramatic shift in worldview led Thomas Kuhn to the notion of *paradigm shifts* – when the concepts by which a community describes reality are deeply rewritten. Expanding on Kuhn, Capra spoke of a *social paradigm*, the constellation of concepts, values, and practices shared by a community that forms a vision of reality around which the community organizes itself.⁴

The paradigm now receding, Capra went on, consists of entrenched ideas and values – including the idea of the economy as a mechanical system, of life as a competitive struggle, and of progress as unlimited economic and technological growth. “Last but not least,” Capra wrote, is the notion that it’s natural that “the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.”⁵

Paradigms, values, and worldviews are not free-floating concepts but become embedded in institutional designs. A paradigm shift in capitalism faces us today. The signals are everywhere around, in financial and ecological crises. Yet the old worldview remains entrenched in the ownership designs of corporations and capital markets. Mutely, these designs enact the view of economic activity birthed with the industrial age: a view of business as a machine, feeding in “natural resources” and “human resources” in order to output goods and services. In capital markets, the view is of corporations as objects owned by shareholders, their purpose the churning out of endless streams of profits.

This design is hooked on growth. And it left me wondering: what would a company look like that had moved beyond growth? In search of possible answers, I set off to visit an old friend of mine, John Abrams.

The Island: From Growth to Sufficiency

As I steer with one hand, I hold John’s e-mailed directions with the other. Left after Kingdom Hall, three-tenths of a mile on a dirt road, left at the Red Arrow Road sign on the tree. Turning onto the dirt road, I find myself driving through a forest that feels odd, but it takes a moment to realize why. These oak trees are clearly not young, but they haven’t

grown tall. They retain the height of youth, yet bear the gnarled, wizened countenance of age – their adaptation, my host will later tell me, to the winds on this island of Martha’s Vineyard and to the sandy soil in which they grow.

I pull into a gravel parking lot, beyond which stands a cluster of two-story, cedar-shingled houses, weathered to that comfortable New England gray. Sixteen of these are nestled in the forest, with porches facing in to a central courtyard. But “courtyard” is too fancy a name for this unmanicured common area, with a dirt path meandering down the middle. It lends the place a palpable air of ease and serenity.

John steps out of his house and strolls with me, showing me around. Neighbors call out greetings as we pass, and kids ride by on bikes. “Even three-year-olds can be left to play here on their own,” John says, “because there are no vehicles in the inner space and so many eyes looking out.” This is Island Cohousing, the community where John lives, and which his firm, South Mountain Company, built.

Some homes are reserved for low-income residents, while others are market priced, but I can’t tell the difference. Each house is constructed substantially from salvaged and certified sustainable wood. Some have solar panels. And all are tightly insulated, John explains, which means they’re cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

“They all have composting toilets,” he continues. “It was one of the riskiest decisions we made in building the place – would people buy houses with no flush toilets? Would authorities approve them? The answer turned out to be yes.” The houses are sized for comfort rather than ostentation, the largest about 1,700 square feet.

John takes me through the common house, a shared space, he says, “that allows us to have smaller homes.” Here, community members throw parties, put up out-of-town guests, and host potluck dinners and yoga classes. The ostensible purpose of my visit is to see South Mountain Company, one of the rare companies I’ve found that consciously practices slow growth. This tour of Island Cohousing seems a sideshow. It is only later I realize it is in fact far more.

Enough

The next morning, I drive to South Mountain Company, which occupies the same 36-acre plot as Island Cohousing. Soon the headquarters of this \$8 million,



photo credit: South Mountain Company

36-person business comes into view—a two-story cedar-shingled structure that looks less like an office than a lodge. Its interior has an air of relaxed comfort, with rugs over wood floors and high ceilings with exposed beams of blond wood. The table in the conference room, I notice, has legs in the original shape of branches, stripped of bark and sanded but

not otherwise industrialized. Outside John's office sits an overstuffed leather chair that invites me to sit.

As I wait for John, an employee comes in and stops to chat with the front desk person, saying he's been in the parking lot listening to the end of an interview with Lawrence Ferlinghetti. He describes

that interview at length. It is 9:15 am, and no one seems concerned this person is “late” to work.

John and I sit in his office and talk a long time, the sun streaming in. He points out the wind turbine the company put up, which—along with solar panels—supplies 90 percent of the firm’s electricity. At lunch we drive to see places the company built, including a zero net energy house, and “Jenny Way,” the first set of LEED-certified platinum, single-family affordable homes in the nation (LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and

dot to indicate their preference.

When everyone stepped back, most dots clustered near the center, a significant number scattered to the left, and several were in the middle. The consensus, John wrote in his book, *Companies We Keep*, was, “We should back off on the accelerator a little, adjust ourselves to our recent growth, err toward caution, and slow down a bit.” South Mountain could take this approach because it was employee-owned and employee-governed. Serving the needs of employees was more important than maximizing profits for shareholders.

The real issue isn’t growth or no growth; it’s the relationships we have with each other and with the living earth.

Environmental Design). One source of wood for homes like these is logs salvaged from the bottom of rivers – “sinker cypress.” John calls it.

In this resort community where real estate is extraordinarily expensive (I saw an ad for a “two-bedroom walk to the water” priced at \$5 million), the company uses profits from building high-end homes to create affordable houses. It offers employee housing assistance and led the development of the nonprofit Island Affordable Housing Fund.

Most compelling to me are the company’s unorthodox policies on growth. These originated in 1994, after the firm took on projects that doubled its revenue and meant adding employees. As John describes it in his writing, “The company was shot through with anxieties, dissatisfactions, and stresses. There seemed to be a general sense we had grown too much, too fast.” To gauge it better, he called a staff meeting. He hung a chart on the wall and drew a vertical line down the middle labeled, “Maintain present size.” On the left it said, “Decrease Size.” and on the right, “Continue slow growth.” Employees were asked to each place a sticky

That philosophy was put to the test after the financial collapse of 2008, when new work began to slow down. To avoid layoffs, the company turned to furloughs, wage cuts, and employee skill building. But ultimately five employees had to be laid off. As the company reinvented itself – shifting to smaller jobs, doing more renovation and energy work – John wrote, “we came to realize that we wanted to get smaller even if we didn’t absolutely have to.”

This was a company deeply committed not to an endless more, but to enough. Another word for enough is *sufficiency*, wrote Thomas Princen in *The Logic of Sufficiency*. It’s different from the industrial ideal of efficiency, which is the notion that more, faster, cheaper, is always better. Sufficiency, Princen said, is “the sense that, as one does more and more of an activity, there can be enough and there can be too much.” Sufficiency is natural in living systems. It arises as an operating principle in this company because ownership is rooted in the living hands of employees, and because governance gives controlling voice to those employees.

Rebuilding our companies, our economy, and our lives around sufficiency is part of the “metaphysical reconstruction” that E.F. Schumacher said would be needed to make it through the crises we face. The real issue, I came to see, isn’t growth or no growth; it’s the relationships we have with each other and with the living earth. The bedrock importance of community was part of the new reality physicist confronted at the turn of the last century, when they recognized that subatomic “particles” are not things at all but *interconnections between things*. As one scientist put it, an elementary particle is “in

essence, a set of relationships that reach outward to other things.” What we call a part is simply a pattern in a web of relationships. “The shift from the parts to the whole can also be seen as a shift from objects to relationships,” Capra wrote; a shift from *me* to *we*.

A world focused on profits, fundamentally, is a world all about me – how much wealth I can amass for myself. It is a world that can never be consistent with living inside a living being, because it is a world designed with no sense of limits.

At South Mountain Company, and even more at Island Cohousing, I glimpsed another world. On the night I’d first arrived, I had dinner with John and his wife, Chris, and was struck by the simplicity of the home where this company president lived. The following day, he took me past the house where he and Chris had previously lived, which had been larger and more valuable than their cohousing home. That home, tucked into the forest community, was simple. I remember seeing a staircase post made from one of the wizened oak branches on the property, stripped and sanded but not otherwise industrialized. There was a single rug on a bare wood floor, some simple furniture. That was it. John and Chris didn’t have a glitzy lifestyle – not because they couldn’t afford it, but because they didn’t want it. In relationship and in community, they had found what they sought. That’s sufficiency at work – a genuine sense of having enough, feeling satisfied. Another term for sufficiency is happiness. ■

Adapted from Owing Our Future by Marjorie Kelly (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2012).

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1. He was quoting loosely from Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” Also Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).
 2. Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1996), 5.
 3. Ervin Laszlo, *The Systems View of the World: A Holistic Vision for Our Time* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 1996), 61-63.
 4. Capra, *The Web of Life*, 6.
 5. Ibid.