

CHAPTER 7 LIFE AFTER GROWTH

There is more to life than increasing its speed.

— Mohandas K. Gandhi

I made the decision to write this book with some trepidation. After all, the world economic system is held together largely by the belief and faith that it will continue to grow. It's a confidence scheme, in the purest sense. Publishing a book arguing that growth is now effectively impossible (except in limited instances) undermines the belief, faith, and confidence that bind investors, lenders, and borrowers together in a functioning system. It makes a financial-currency crash more likely, and the victims of such a crash would include not just bankers, but nearly everyone.

My staying quiet could help buy time for us all. But there is no assurance that the time so purchased would be used to fix the problems we have been discussing. In fact, governments and central banks have already bought time — several trillion dollars' worth — but are doing very little to make fundamental changes to our economic system so that it can function in the post-growth era.

Our collective global conversation about the economy needs to change. We need to be thinking and talking about how to adapt to the end of growth. I don't know how to help catalyze that conversation without first pointing out some inconvenient facts — starting with the fact that our economy currently is set up to fail under the kinds of circumstances that are unfolding around us (resource depletion and catastrophic

environmental decline). If political leaders and voices in the major media are unwilling to consider the possibility that growth is ending, then at least this information should be available to receptive individuals and communities so they can prepare themselves for what is coming. This was the argument for publication.

Even so, there is irony and risk. The strategies that individuals should be pursuing to prepare for the end of growth (disengaging from consumerism, getting out of debt, becoming more self-sufficient) are things that — if everyone did them — would keep the economy from recovering and would push us further into recession.

When the short-term interests of the economy conflict with the long-term interests of communities, a majority of individuals, and the natural world, we have a dilemma on our hands. In some respects, it is not an entirely new one (this conflict was implicit in Marx's critique of capitalism), but it is becoming acute and more difficult to hide. Resolving the conflict in favor of the economy is no solution when individuals, communities, and nature are imperiled to the point that economic growth cannot continue in any case — which is exactly the situation we face. Resolving the conflict entirely in favor of individuals is no solution if this results in a substantial reduction in the integrity of the social bonds the economy knits together: that is, if we are reduced to a random collection of seven billion humans, each scrambling for survival in the absence of functioning currencies and governments. In that case, the result would be universal chaos, confusion, and suffering.

Somehow we have to prepare individually for the ending of growth (a process likely to be accompanied by economic and political upheavals) while at the same time preserving and building social cohesion and laying the groundwork for a new economy that can function in a post-growth, post-fossil fuel environment. It's a tall order, but nothing less will do.

Setting Priorities

As someone who has for several years been speaking and writing about the consequences of impending energy scarcity, I'm often asked for personal advice. "Where should I live in order to avoid the worst impacts from Peak Oil?" "What career should I prepare myself for?" "What should

I invest in?" I'm generally uncomfortable answering such questions. I'm no prophet, merely a trend spotter. The trends I see are broad and deep, but the details of their unfolding could be surprising to everyone, myself certainly included.

Nevertheless, these are legitimate questions, and it is possible to extend some general advice. After long consideration, I've decided to put that advice for individual adaptation to the end of growth on a website (TheEndofGrowth.com) rather than include it in this book. That way it can be frequently updated as I hear from readers.

At the same time, it's important to recognize that there is only so much that individuals can do on their own. Some of the disruptions we may be facing would not be of short duration. A few weeks' worth of stored food and water, though essential, will be of only temporary help. Over longer time frames, our most valuable personal assets will be functioning local communities composed of people who, despite their differences, are willing and able to work together to solve problems and maximize opportunities.

The maintenance of social cohesion must be our single highest priority in a future of mounting economic and environmental challenges.

The challenge of building or maintaining community solidarity will be greater in some places than others. Rebecca Solnit's book *A Paradise Built in Hell* cites examples showing that in crisis people often re-discover community and what is intrinsically important in life.¹ However, Lewis Aptekar's *Environmental Disasters in Global Perspective* adds layers of complexity: People's responses to crisis seem to depend on the duration of the crisis, whether it can be blamed on other people, and on pre-crisis social and economic conditions.²

During the past few decades North Americans created a way of life in which people moved frequently, saw their homes as investments rather than just as places to live, and learned to ferry children around by van and SUV to soccer games and ballet lessons rather than encouraging them to spontaneously organize their own outdoor pastimes. The result: throughout the vast, sprawling suburbs of the US and Canada, most people simply don't know their neighbors. Any of them. At all. This is a bizarre situation, and it will probably be a dangerous one in the case of crisis.³

It's hard to emphasize this point sufficiently: Get to know your neighbors. These may be people with whom you share very little in terms of politics, religion, or cultural interests; that fact is beside the point. When push comes to shove, these are people you may need to depend on. Find ways — perhaps innocuous ones at first, such as a discussion about pruning a common shade tree or the sharing of surplus summer garden vegetables — to make contact and to begin to build trust.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to suggestions for what you can do to help your community become more resilient and better able to weather the approaching storms.

Transition Towns

Given the looming energy and environmental threats outlined in this book, it's evident that something like the following is called for. We need a grassroots movement that educates people about these challenges and helps them develop strategies to reduce their dependence on fossil fuels. It should aim to build community resilience, taking account of local vulnerabilities and opportunities. Ideally, this movement should frame its vision of the future in positive, inviting terms. It should aim to build a cooperative spirit among people with differing backgrounds and interests. While this movement should be rooted in local communities, its effectiveness would increase if it were loosely coordinated through national hubs and a global information center. The work of local groups should include the sharing of practical skills such as food production and storage, home insulation, and the development and use of energy conserving technologies. The movement should be non-authoritarian but should hold efficient meetings, training participants in effective, inclusive decision-making methods.

That may sound like a tall order. But here's some good news: that movement already exists. It's called Transition Initiatives, and communities that have one of these initiatives often call themselves Transition Towns.⁴ The "transition" that's being referred to is away from our current growth-based, fossil-fueled economy and toward a future economy that is not only sustainable but also fulfilling and interesting for all concerned.

Transition Initiatives got their start in 2005 in Britain through the work of a Permaculture teacher named Rob Hopkins. In his *Transition Handbook*, Hopkins tells how he came up with the strategy, and sets forth a range of useful guidelines for groups.⁵ Nearly all of Rob's prose is saturated with irrepressible optimism:

Transition Initiatives are not the only response to peak oil and climate change; any coherent national response will also need government and business responses at all levels. However, unless we can create this sense of anticipation, elation and a collective call to adventure on a wider scale, any government responses will be doomed to failure, or will need to battle proactively against the will of the people.... Rebuilding local agriculture and food production, localizing energy production, rethinking healthcare, rediscovering local building materials in the context of zero energy building, rethinking how we manage waste, all build resilience and offer the potential of an extraordinary renaissance — economic, cultural and spiritual.⁶

Hopkins is careful to call Transition a "research project"; in a "cheerful disclaimer" on the Transition website he points out that there is no guarantee of success, because what is being attempted is unprecedented.

We truly don't know if this will work. Transition is a social experiment on a massive scale. What we are convinced of is this:

- if we wait for the governments, it'll be too little, too late
- if we act as individuals, it'll be too little
- but if we act as communities, it might just be enough, just in time.⁷

Hopkins lives in the old market town of Totnes in the southwest of England; with a population of 7,444, it is the most advanced of all Transition Towns.⁸ There, over 30 projects have started and nine themed groups meet regularly to discuss food, buildings and housing, arts, transport, and education, among other topics. In 2009, as a result of Transition efforts, Totnes was awarded a grant of £625,000 for a program called "Transition

Streets," a street-by-street approach to energy efficiency, community building, and domestic micro-generation. Totnes now has its own local currency, as well as a *Renewable Energy Society that is charged with owning and profitably running the renewable energy generating capacity of the region*. The Totnes Food Hub is a co-operative, member-owned alternative food distribution system; members can order fresh food from local producers at affordable prices and have it delivered, ready for collection, to a convenient location in the center of town. Transitioners also host clothes swaps, based on the idea that most of us have in our closets new-ish clothes that we never wear and that others may be able to use. One of Transition Totnes's biggest accomplishments was the development of a town-approved Energy Descent Action Plan—a multi-decade staged plan for reducing dependence on fossil fuels in all significant areas (transport, food, home heating, etc.).

After the successful "unleashing" of Transition Totnes in 2006, the idea spread rapidly (though the pace seems to have leveled off in the past year); there are now 350 recognized Transition Initiatives in over 30 countries, with about 80 in the US (and about 150 more groups in America now forming). A team of trainers travels the globe offering help in getting Initiatives started, and thousands of people in over a dozen countries have taken the two-day Transition Training.

In Whidbey, WA, the local Transition Initiative features a Local Economy Action Group (a community think tank for creating a sustainable economy on Whidbey Island), a Clean Energies Cooperative (that focuses on alternative-fueled transportation), a Whidbey Citizens Climate Lobby, a Local Food Action Group (with subgroups that map the island's food resources, glean and distribute surplus fruit, and prune trees for better yields), a bi-weekly discussion group on Alternative Building, and a support group for people who want to discuss how the economic crisis is impacting them.

There are limits and obstacles to the Transition strategy. In the worst instance, Transition can manifest as merely another talk shop for lefties and aging former hippies. However, Hopkins recognizes that it must be something very different from this if it is to succeed, and that Transition must address practical matters having to do with infrastructure and practical economics. In a recent essay he noted:

The infrastructure required for a more localized and resilient future, the energy systems, the mills, the food systems and the abattoirs, has been largely ripped out over the past 50 years as oil made it cheaper to work on an ever-increasingly large scale, and their reinstallation will not arise by accident. They will need to be economically viable, supported by their local communities, owned and operated by people with the appropriate skills, and linked together.⁹

Hopkins went on to list the various infrastructure elements required to enable a town-sized economy function. At least Transition sees what's needed, even if it's not yet entirely up to the task.

Common Security Clubs

In addition to Transition Initiatives, something more is called for. As we work together on getting beyond oil and other fossil fuels, we also need to find mutually supportive ways to deal with immediate impacts from the fracturing of the economy. Joblessness, home foreclosures, and business failures are leaving a wake of destruction in communities, neighborhoods, and families. How are we to cope? Must we shoulder these losses household by household, or does it make more sense to get together with friends and neighbors to find shared ways to come to terms with the economic impacts of the end of growth?

Once again there is good news. A program already exists called Common Security Clubs with exactly this mandate.¹⁰ The program was started by a team of economic justice and ecological transition activists connected to the Institute for Policy Studies and On the Commons, who put together a pilot curriculum in January 2009. Over 55 clubs have followed the suggested program, while another 100 or so groups have been inspired and informed by it and have adopted other names. The Clubs have a three-pronged strategy:

Learning together: Using popular education tools, videos and shared readings, participants deepen their understanding of economic issues and explore questions like: Why is the economy in distress? What are the ecological factors contributing to the economic crisis? What is our vision for a healthy, sustainable economy? How can I reduce my economic vulnerability? How can I get out of debt?

Mutual aid: Through stories, examples, web-based resources, a workbook, and mutual support, participants reflect on what makes them secure. How can I help both myself and my neighbor if either of us faces foreclosure, unemployment, or economic insecurity? What can we do together to increase our economic security?

Social action: Common Security Clubs recognize that many of our challenges won't be overcome through personal or local efforts. State, national, and even global economic reforms are needed. What state and federal policies will increase our personal security? How can we become politically engaged so as to further those policies? Many clubs, animated by "break up with your bank" and "move your money" reform efforts, have relocated personal, congregational, and other funds out of Wall Street and into local banks and credit unions.

The Common Security Clubs website offers tools for facilitators who want to start a group, as well as stories from existing Clubs.¹¹ One story is from a "Resource Sharing Group" in rural Maine started by Connie Allen.¹² Connie writes: "I knew several people who were living with limited income either because of unemployment, under-employment, retirement or voluntary simplicity. And I thought, if we put this group together, we could all benefit from it. It would make life easier for all of us."

And she was right. But what she didn't expect was how much fun they would have. "We used to meet in the basement of the local library, about twelve of us, each week," explains Connie. "The librarian was always asking us what we were laughing at. Somehow we just always had a lot of fun when we met. And we helped each other in all kinds of ways."

"We would bulk shop together," Connie says. "And we'd tell each other about sales and ways we had saved money and time each week."

The group shared lawn mowers, books, and tools; helped one member set up her new office; organized a yard and craft sale for forty people; set up a website to share information and list items to sell; offered tutorials in a variety of subjects; brainstormed job possibilities; met for potlucks; and shared inexpensive recipe ideas and savings tips.

They even kept an "emergency jar" at the center of the table. People would often put 50 cents or a dollar into it at meetings, though it wasn't

required. The money didn't get used very often, but much like the group itself, it "provided a sense of security just in knowing it was there."

Common Security Clubs could gain effectiveness if they were supported by a national PR campaign—but who would pay for it? Certainly not the Federal government, which continues to spin the fiction that our national goal must be to return to a life of carefree motoring through anonymous suburbs. It is only as that ideal fades, along with the government's ability to continue bailing out banks, that necessity might conceivably lead to support for what is essentially a no-cost partial solution to burgeoning household financial crises.

Putting the New Economy on the Map

As important and helpful as Transition Initiatives and Common Security Clubs are, they share an annoying shortcoming: they tend to be invisible to the majority of people even in the towns and cities where they happen to be flourishing. Transition Los Angeles has been holding meetings since 2008; by all accounts it is a successful Initiative that is now spinning off a series of smaller and more localized chapters in the dozens of towns that make up the greater Los Angeles conurbation. Still, one wonders what proportion of the overall populace in that region has any awareness whatever of its existence: if the figure exceeds one percent, that would be pleasantly surprising. Even fewer Angelinos are likely to know they have the option of forming or joining a Common Security Club.

This suggests one more wrench may be needed in our post-growth toolbox—a way to make elements of the new post-growth economy visible and accessible to the community at large. The following is a strategy that you personally may not have the means to fully realize. But you could work with others to pursue it, and it is an idea that could be taken up by existing community organizations (including Transition Initiatives, Common Security Clubs, or Community Action Agencies).¹³

Why not rent a storefront and give the new economy a presence on Main Street? Here's the rationale. As America adjusts to the New Normal of tight credit, chronically less-affordable energy, high unemployment rates, rising levels of homelessness, and steeply declining tax revenues,

strategies will be needed to help swelling ranks of low-income people adjust and adapt. National policies designed to ease credit, lower mortgage rates, or provide basic financial assistance (including extended unemployment benefits) may help over the short term, but over the longer term many needs will be better met locally by largely volunteer-driven non-profit organizations, co-ops, and hybrid public-private agencies and programs.

Many of these kinds of organizations already exist, but (like Transition Initiatives and Common Security Clubs) they are largely invisible. What's required is a way for them to become persistently recognizable. What better way than to plant them together right in the middle of town?

Even the earliest towns had a center, which was usually occupied by an open plaza where people could gather informally, a market, a ceremonial building, and a civic building of some kind. Everyone knew where the center of town was, and it was there that the life of the community came to focus. In many modern industrial cities (particularly in the US), the downtown has withered. Shopping malls, government complexes, and mega-churches are distributed throughout the city and its suburbs, all connected by hundreds of miles of highways. Nevertheless, the center of town still has symbolic and historic meaning, and as cheap transport fuel becomes a thing of the past city centers may regain their former importance.

If the new economy is to have much chance of taking root, it has to be planted in an identifiable location. Imagine the transformative potential of a loosely coordinated national network of locally-based Community Economic Laboratories (CELs), each equipped to help citizens solve practical problems arising during the breakdown of the old growth-based, fossil-fueled economy and the evolution of its replacement.¹⁴

The mission of a CEL would be to increase personal and community resilience by bringing together in one place the essential elements of a new local, resilient economy.

While for most citizens goods and services have traditionally been delivered by way of market relationships based on jobs and commercial interactions between individuals and for-profit businesses, even in good times some individuals occasionally (others chronically) require special

assistance, which is usually provided by non-profit service agencies or government programs. In especially hard times, large numbers of individuals and families lose jobs and incomes, and therefore access to the goods and services that the market economy formerly provided them. At the same time, tax-starved governments are hard pressed to step in to make services available to rapidly expanding rolls of unemployed. At such a time, it could be helpful to explore new and innovative ways of fostering self-sufficiency through the coordination of a variety of cooperative, non-profit, market-based, and government-led ventures that spring from, and are adapted to, unique local conditions.

The CEL would be a local multi-function hub consisting of a number of independent organizations and businesses dedicated to helping people impacted by hard times, and to providing the armature around which a new economy can be woven. It would offer a variety of services, as well as opportunities for self-improvement, learning, enterprise incubation, and community involvement. Some possible examples of participating organizations and businesses:

- A food co-op
- A community food center, including commercial food-processing, food-preserving, and food-storage facilities available at low cost (or on labor-barter basis) to small-scale local producers¹⁵
- A community garden with individual beds available for seasonal rental, as well as communal beds growing produce for soup kitchens
- A health center offering free or inexpensive wellness classes in nutrition, cooking, and fitness
- A free (and/or barter) health clinic
- Counseling and mental health services
- A tool library, or an open-source customizable set of industrial machines¹⁶
- A work center that connects people who have currently unused skills with needs in the community—work can be compensated monetarily or through barter
- A legal clinic
- A credit union offering low-interest or even no-interest loans (on the model of the JAK bank in Sweden)¹⁷

- A recycling/re-use center that turns waste into resources of various kinds—including compost and scrap—and into re-manufactured or re-usable products
- A co-op incubator
- A local-currency headquarters and clearinghouse
- A local-transport enterprise incubator, possibly including car-share, ride-share, and bicycle co-ops as well as a public transit hub
- A shelter clearinghouse connecting available housing with people who need a roof—including rentals and opportunities for legal organized squatting in foreclosed properties, as well as various forms of space sharing
- A community education center offering free or low-cost classes in skills useful for getting by in the new economy—including gardening, health maintenance, making do with less, energy conservation, weather-stripping, etc.

Many communities already host one or more of these services, businesses, and organizations, but typically they are scattered throughout town. This is a disadvantage: individuals and families who have recently become jobless or homeless may be disoriented and less mobile, and therefore unable to access a variety of geographically dispersed opportunity centers. Commercial space in the downtown areas of many cities is already abundantly available due to the recession; if a CEL were able to obtain use of an iconic vacant building formerly housing a bank or department store, such an edifice would lend architectural validity to the efforts of community members to come together in providing for their neighbors.

Like a shopping mall, the CEL would be most successful if “anchored” by two or three substantial enterprises—such as a food co-op, community service organization, credit union, or transport co-op. One possible “anchor tenant” (or, in ecological terms, “pioneer species”) would be a Sustainable Commercial Urban Farm Incubator (SCUFI) program, designed to train aspiring commercial urban farmers, assist with startup financing, help secure land, and provide them with technical and business support.¹⁶

Uniform national “branding” of CELs would be much less important than each community’s sense of ownership of its unique, successful co-lab-

BOX 7.1

Investing in Sustainability: A Letter from an Eco-Entrepreneur

As stocks of non-renewable resources deplete and flow rates decline, society will need to better steward stocks and flows of renewable resources. My company was built around rebuilding stocks of topsoil while producing a commercial agricultural crop.

To finance this endeavor we formed an investment fund. This structure allows individuals or institutions to place their financial capital with us, which we use to purchase farmland and convert it organic. We recognize that not all land investments are equal, and that investments in conventional farmland where soil stocks are not being rebuilt will yield diminishing returns—and quickly so in the absence of commercial fertilizer inputs.

Profits, while important, are only one of many metrics with which to evaluate a business. We are certified as a “B-Corp,” which provides a standardized way of measuring how business practices are supporting environmental and social values. (We’re proud to have received the highest B-Score yet of 183.)

Unfortunately, funds such as ours are legally restricted by the Securities and Exchange Commission to “accredited” investors (i.e., individuals with at least \$1 million net worth or \$200k in annual income). However, anybody with a retirement account may be able to talk to whoever manages their money and ask them to place more emphasis on investments that rebuild natural capital instead of depleting it.

There are many ways to make a difference outside of the investment world. Reducing household expenses, developing a more self-reliant home economy, and reaching out to others in your community to share skills, equipment, and time in an informal way or through local currency systems are all rewarding options. If the financial system is going to become less reliable, then we will need to make other support systems more robust.

—Jason Bradford (*Manager, farmlandlp.com*)

oratory. Nevertheless, a national network could help quickly disseminate best practices, success stories, challenges, and other relevant information.

The CEL idea is not entirely new, and there are already several existing projects that have at least some of the characteristics described above:

- Social Innovation Center in Toronto (socialinnovation.ca)
- Working Centre in Waterloo, Canada (theworkingcentre.org/wscd/wscd_main.html)
- Bucketworks in Milwaukee, WI (bucketworks.org/about-bucketworks)
- Springboard Innovation Centre in Torfaen, UK (springboardinnovation.org.uk)
- The Hive in Portland, OR (leftbankproject.com/hive)
- The Plant in Chicago (plantchicago.com)
- Citizen Space in San Francisco (citizenspace.us)
- ShareExchange Project in Santa Rosa, CA (shareexchange.coop)

The last of these is in my town and just opened; it already hosts a Made Local Marketplace, the Sonoma County Timebank (an alternative currency), the Green Bough Health Cooperative, and the Work With Lounge (an entrepreneurial co-working space and micro-enterprise business incubator).

What Might a Sustainable Society Look Like?

Are these strategies sufficient to smooth our way through the economic and environmental crises of the next few decades? Unfortunately, no: It's going to be a bumpy ride in any case — though a lot bumpier if we do nothing. As I have emphasized already, much work needs to be done in terms of national and global economic and environmental policies (the kinds of responses discussed in Chapter 6); yet even if needed national and global monetary and energy reforms were to be enacted — and this would be no small accomplishment — we would still face decades of perilous environmental, economic, and social challenges.

Still, it's useful to contemplate a best-case outcome. Assuming we do everything right, what could we achieve? How might the world look as a result?

What the facts require is pretty clear: The best-case scenario we come up with, if it is to be realistic, must fit several non-negotiable criteria. The

economy of the future will necessarily be steady-state, not requiring constant growth. It will be based on the use of renewable resources harvested at a rate slower than that of natural replenishment; and on the use of non-renewable resources at declining rates, with metals and minerals recycled and re-used wherever possible. Human population will have to achieve a level that can be supported by resources used this way, and that level is likely to be significantly lower than the current one.

But these criteria leave many details open to conjecture. What technologies could we develop and use under these conditions? Exactly what size of population would be sustainable? The two questions are related: the level of population that is sustainable will depend on what kind of technology we are able to develop and use. The supportable population size will also depend on how much we degrade soil, water, and climate *before* we achieve a condition of sustainability.

Some of the best recent writing on futurology is contained in John Michael Greer's *The Ecotechnic Future*. Greer, ever the historian, manages to be both realistic and hopeful:

The generations that grow up in a world after industrialism will face many of the same kind of challenges that their ancestors did in the dark ages that followed other high civilizations. Some of those challenges must be confronted as they emerge. It may be possible, however, to counter or even forestall others by drawing on the resources of industrial civilization, to hand down valuable tools and insights to those who will need them. While Utopia is not an option, societies that are humane, cultured and sustainable are quite another matter. There have been plenty of them in the past; there can be many more in the future; and actions we can take today can help make that goal more accessible to the people of the ecotechnic age.¹⁹

When looking to the past for clues about how our lower-energy future might look and feel, it's hard to avoid becoming fixated on images from movies and television programs like *Little House on the Prairie* or *Brother Cadfael*. Some people find these depictions of a simpler life in bygone days attractive; others bristle at the thought that our descendants might have

to do without computers, cell phones, and personal automobiles, busying themselves instead with plows and axes, herbs and chickens. Will the march of history pry our electronic toys from our cold, dead hands? How far back down the trail of complexity and technological sophistication might we have to retreat? Can we surrender cars, highways, and supermarkets, but still keep cultural exchange, tolerance, and diversity, along with our hard-won scientific knowledge, advanced healthcare, and instant access to information?

That last question deserves considerable thought. During the past couple of centuries, energy consumption (and, more recently, debt) increased along with population and nasty environmental impacts. Social, cultural, and human benefits also proliferated. All three trends were closely related, with energy growth being the primary driver. In the decades ahead, available energy will decline. This will probably lead to declining population. It might or might not lead to declining environmental impacts (that depends on how we handle the transition: if we burn every last lump of coal, every last tree, and every last ton of tar sands, all in an effort to keep the lights on and the economy growing, then we might alter the energy decline rate at the cost of laying waste to the planet; on the other hand, if we reduce fossil fuel consumption proactively to protect the climate, we might preserve more of the biosphere at the cost of driving the energy curve down more sharply). But what about social and cultural benefits? Will they inevitably wither along with energy consumption?

This, I believe, will be one of the great questions and challenges of the coming century. As was argued in Chapter 6, if we focus on maximizing social and cultural benefits rather than on increasing GDP, we could actually come out ahead in some respects — enjoying, for example, the sense of security that comes from knowing that the skills one learns today will still be relevant in twenty years, or from knowing that species one sees today will still be around for one's grandchildren to see as well.

Sometimes questions about what is possible can be answered with an experiment. In this case, the relevant experiment might consist of a community trying to build a sustainable post-hydrocarbon economy while maximizing social and cultural payoffs. Dancing Rabbit Ecovillage is precisely such a research project. Founded about 15 years ago by a small group

of recent West Coast college graduates, Dancing Rabbit is an intentional community of about 50 people set amid the hills and prairies of rural northeastern Missouri. The stated goal of its residents is "to live ecologically sustainable and socially rewarding lives, and to share the skills and ideas behind that lifestyle."²⁰ Members of the community explore natural building, ecological food systems, and consensus decision-making; they have a vehicle co-op, a co-op healthcare fund, and guest space for visitors. By all accounts, the experiment is going well.

Having lived for years in intentional communities (back when I was younger and had more time on my hands), I know the challenges — and the rewards. It's not a lifestyle for everyone. It requires effort to start a community or to select and join one, and more effort to hash out all the rules and the conflicts that always come up in community life. Many communities fall by the wayside. Only a tiny fraction of the global population is involved in ecovillages or intentional communities, so we can't realistically expect this strategy to solve the world's problems. Nevertheless, thousands of such projects are making a go of it, and yielding useful knowledge and experience in the process.²¹ The future may not look exactly like Dancing Rabbit, but it's easy to imagine worse outcomes and perhaps hard to think of much better ones.

Apart from intentional communities, there are thousands of organizations, companies, and individuals devoted to finding a path to sustainability — a way of life that will work not just for us, but for the seventh generation hence. These groups and individuals are active in nearly every city and town. You can usually locate them on the Internet with search words like Transition, permaculture, renewable energy, and appropriate technology.²²

If there's anything to be known today about a positive future that may await us, it comes from the real-world efforts of people like these to solve practical problems — not from armchair forecasts based on current market trends.

Perspective

We are living through the fifth great turning in human history.²³

The first was the harnessing of fire nearly two million years ago. Fire enabled us to stay warm in forbidding environments, cook our food (lead-