

Letter from SI

Sustainability Institute • Summer 2008

All the progress we've seen and all we're promised for the future -- to what is it progressing? (Donella Meadows, *Two Futures, One Hard, One Easy*, Voice of a Global Citizen, 12/28/1995)

Notes from Place



Inside the hoop house

Well, I did it. I ordered sweet potato plants that take twenty days longer to mature than our dependable-but-don't-push-your-luck Georgia Jets that mature in 90 days. In Vermont, you can get a decent crop in 90 days if you warm the ground with black plastic, but not 110 days. On top of that, the new variety of sweet potatoes will arrive two weeks earlier than is recommended for my planting zone. But I'm not worried, it may turn out OK — all because of a little creative use of plastic, electrical conduit and 2x4's.

Elliot Coleman, author of *Four Season Harvest*, is an eloquent advocate of locally and carefully produced food in cold climates. His thesis is that we can grow and then harvest fresh vegetables through the cold winter months even in Vermont.

The art is in choosing cold-tolerant varieties of vegetables and having a way to affect the very local conditions — the microclimate — where the plants are growing. By selecting from among the many cold-tolerant varieties of plants and using solar energy and smart shelters, no

additional energy inputs are required. So, last year I built one of Coleman's smart designs, a small green house on long rails.

My family and our next-door neighbors share the 14 ft. x 19 ft. growing space. When you account for the space given over to walkways, the hoop house encloses 200 sq. ft. of useable garden space that is similar in climate to southern Connecticut. Depending on where you live that may not sound like much, but in Vermont that is a big deal. And it means I can try my luck with these new sweet potatoes.

The new variety, called Nancy Hall, is a yellow-fleshed potato that was popular in the 1930's but no is longer grown commercially. Last year we harvested about 8 pounds from a test crop and they were a hit with the whole family,



Outside the hoop house

necessitating precise division into equal shares for the kids. It is a good thing when kids squabble over who gets more vegetables. This year, with a large portion of the nice warm growing space devoted to sweet potatoes, I'm hoping for 20-30 pounds. Sweet potatoes are among the most easily stored crops coming out

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of our garden each fall. The other good keepers are outside-grown onions, potatoes, carrots, garlic, beets and leeks.

It is harder to produce fresh winter greens from a garden this far north, which leads me to the real reason for the hoop house. Remember the rails? The greenhouse sits on those rails and can be moved across two planting beds. Right now the adjacent outside bed is planted with green shell peas, another favorite of my kids. The pea plants enrich the soil and we enjoy the peas as a snack. We eat them right off the vine or serve the pods at meals for shucking as a raw vegetable. I once made the mistake of shelling them and steaming them lightly only to endure horrified looks that I



Inside the hoop house

could even think to cook them.

After these short-season peas are done in mid-July we'll plant a portion of the outdoor space with winter-harvest crops and

early spring crops. The winter-harvest crops are cold-tolerant varieties of greens such as kale, spinach, mustard, lettuces, and parsley. We will start them in open cold frames. Why grow them in cold frames in July? Because it is an exercise in frustration and a challenge to marital bliss to try putting a cold frame around plants once they have grown big. As fall and frost approaches we'll put the lids on the cold frame to protect these winter greens from frost damage. By the end of September they will be nearly mature.

As the fall progresses, we will plant the remainder of the outdoor bed with a crop of greens for the early spring. Our goal for these plants is to get them big enough to hang out, ready to begin growing again after the light and warmth return enough to support growth.

Around mid-October when tomatoes are suggesting it is time for them to quit and frosts are more frequent, we will slide the entire hoop house off of its summer location and onto the adjacent winter bed, now home to a mix of big and little greens. The ends of the hoop house are removable, allowing the whole structure to slide down the wooden rails without knocking over cold frames or the taller plants. We'll remove the anchor bolts that hold the hoop house down in the wind, wax the rails and push the hoop house onto the bed of winter and spring greens. Once

we replace the ends and seal up the air gaps we can begin harvesting greens that will last from November until March or April when we can plant outside once again.

Last winter was our first chance to try this mobile greenhouse design. We have been eating salads of kale, collards, spinach, romaine, claytonia, mache (corn salad) and mizuna. When the kale bolted, we ate the flower stalks in salad and stir fired them in dinner.

As if the vegetables weren't enough, much more comes out of our hoop house: satisfaction of creating something of value, exercise, economic gain by growing over \$700 worth of produce, quality of organic food, lowered carbon footprint, the sense of connection to the process of producing food, and the pleasure of walking down to check out what is happening in the hoop house. Perhaps most satisfying is the reassurance of how much food can emerge from 200 square feet of soil, a little sun, some water and some warmth.

As I write these notes, the greens that fed us over the winter are getting pretty tired now as it heats up in the hoop house which is good because the sweet potatoes are here and need to be planted ...

-Phil Rice

Reflections on Power and Culture Change in Sustainability Work

The United States has only 4% of world population but emits 25% of green house gases -- this statistic is commonly known and quoted by environmentalists concerned about climate change. At a recent talk Van Jones, founder of Green For All, shared a less commonly known statistic - the U.S. also has 25% of the world's prisoners. He suggested, "somebody thinks we have a disposable planet and disposable people. Our economy is based on destroying things."

The remainder of Jones' speech focused on the opportunity that this moment presents to create the social and environmental systems we want. He urged us to use a language of hope not fear and of possibility and vision not crisis and doom. He sees the social justice and environmental movements converging and noted the interest in both movements to work together to co-create the future.

Jones' talk resonated deeply with me. I have been collaborating with others at SI and with an external group of diverse colleagues to create a climate change leadership and action project aimed at strengthening a diverse network of leaders engaged in building a post-carbon society with social justice at its core. Through this program, these leaders would explore the connections

between the societal and environmental challenges we face and co-create projects that would be the basis of a socially just and environmentally sustainable future.

The theory of change for this project is based on the assumption that complex, interrelated problems like climate change and poverty are too big for any racial or cultural group, movement or sector to solve alone. Therefore, creating a just and sustainable future based in connection, interdependence and equity requires groups that have not traditionally worked together to do so in new and creative ways. The success of any such coalition will depend not only on understanding the diverse perspectives and realities in America today, but also on understanding the role that power and privilege play in our current economic, social and political systems.

Learning from others and based on my own experience, I believe that the extent to which you have power and privilege is largely defined by your race, class, and economic status. These same factors are often significant barriers to meaningful participation in policy and decision making bodies. As a result, when policies such as those addressing climate change mitigation or adaptation are being made, the voices of many less powerful groups are silent and

their insight, wisdom and knowledge absent. I believe this is one reason that many efforts at complex systems change do not have the impact the organizers hope for.

In my own experience designing environments that foster learning and innovation, the "invisible" aspects of the system such as the role of power in the group, is often overlooked, at least by those with power. As a white facilitator it is easy to assume that the "visible" diversity in a room creates a level playing field for all participants. However, bringing together diverse stakeholders from across the system can easily recreate existing power structures within the group unless the power differential is openly acknowledged and addressed. If issues of power and privilege are ignored, it not only inhibits the possibility of the kind of innovation needed for systemic change; it may result in projects that despite the best intentions perpetuate the status quo.

As a result, I think that it is important for SI to partner more with communities other than our own to design processes that integrate the experiences of all. As we embark on designing a climate leadership and action project aimed at creating life-sustaining (not destroying) social and economic structures,

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project collaborators have been exploring the conditions necessary for creating diverse networks and innovative coalitions. How do we design projects in ways that don't recreate the existing power structure? How do we acknowledge and validate the injustices of the past and not let them get in the way of creating the future? How do organizations with power and privilege like SI, understand the power and privilege it has and leverage that position to change the status quo?

Throughout this design process I have frequently asked myself if I am the right person to be initiating this project. Is SI the right organization? By its very nature, it is a project that must be co-created by a diverse team. At the same time, it is through privilege that I, a well educated, middle class white person, have the time and resources to initiate such an effort. This is one way that our power and privilege show

up - because SI and its staff aren't dealing with issues related to our day to day survival or that of our communities, we have the time and resources to convene a project like this. And here lies one of the conundrums I face - how do I and SI use our time, resources and connections as leverage for systemic change but not define the agenda just because we have the power to convene? The agenda must be one that is truly defined by the diverse group, even if the group chooses a path unusual for SI.

There are times when these many questions stall me and I worry about doing it wrong. I also know that if I am too hung up on getting it right, I won't be able to move forward. My hope is that this effort has the potential to be one example of how to move power and privilege toward shared vision and action for the future across race, class, culture and economic status. I expect to make mistakes.

I know that there will be times when I don't see my privilege. So, I enter into this work with humility.

Recent headlines about the global food and energy crisis and the growing impacts of climate change demonstrate the urgent need for projects that cross issue lines and contribute to a growing movement finding strength and power in connection and focused on creating a new way. That urgency reinforces my resolve to help carry this work forward. I am actively seeking partners, opportunities and resources to join this work. Please contact me if you would like to learn more.

-Nancy Gabriel

Green For All (www.greenforall.org) is a national organization dedicated to building an inclusive green economy strong enough to lift people out of poverty.

Puppets and Climate Change: reflections on a collaboration between art & science for sustainability

“Sustainability, at its most visionary, is about creating new and better ways for humanity to meet its needs and to live well on this planet without destroying either the beauty or the integrity of Nature. If we don't live that way now, it is because our culture has not taught us how. Changing a system at the level of its

culture is making the most profound and long-lasting possible change.”

Dana Meadows wrote those words on the Sustainability Institute's first website. But how do we change a system at the level of culture? ... and who does this?

This past winter, Our

Climate Ourselves program co-director, Beth Sawin, and local artist, Jay Mead, explored the terrain of culture change with an original shadow puppet show, *Turning*. Jay describes shadow puppetry as a very old medium. Think about sitting around a small fire in a cave long ago. How did people tell stories then? The same

way kids with a flashlight do when they are camping — hand shadows. In *Turning*, silhouette figures project their forms onto a sheet lighted from behind. You don't need fancy equipment; you do need people, both as puppeteers and as audience, and a compelling story.

The collaboration between Beth and Jay grew out of the wish to engage citizens in addressing climate change — both reducing future carbon dioxide levels and adapting to the changes already underway.

Most public discourse on climate change starts with the science, learning the numbers and understanding what may happen to climate as a result of human choices — fuel consumption, land use, etc.. But as we learn about the scope of our impact on the climate we can become frozen in despair. We despair because we don't see how civilization can continue without the current practices. As a friend recently said, "we might as well crawl under a compost pile." What is the way out of despair and into constructive action?

One premise of SI's climate work is that learning how to envision a desirable and possible future moves people from despair to action. Beth points out that "people get engaged by visioning what their community would look like after successfully addressing climate change. Artists do this for society — create visions of what is possible." This is at

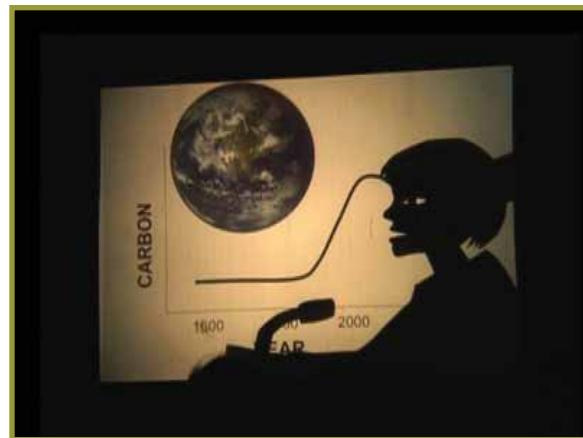
the heart of the puppet show project — to harness the power of the arts in service of sustainability.

Beth and Jay co-developed the script. The performance took its name from the teachings of Joanna Macy about "the Great Turning" — the present moment of shift from an industrial growth society to a life-sustaining civilization.

As part of the effort to help create a culture that teaches us how to, "live well on this planet without destroying either the beauty or the integrity of Nature," the show is set in the future. As a child, the narrator lived through the devastation of a climate change disaster. Now she is a grandmother and the mayor of a large city that has recovered from the disaster. She has a good news announcement for the people of the city — atmospheric carbon levels have stopped rising. In this future time, the public at large knows enough to understand the significance of that event and the announcement is met with jubilation. The mayor's granddaughter then asks her what folks did "back then," when grandma was young, to create that change. The grandmother's story is the story about our present time — how we are confronting climate change now and over the next decades. In response to the question "do we have enough time to turn things around?" *Turning* gives the same answer Dana Meadows used to give: "just enough time."

The power of story

The first public performance of *Turning* was given during an SI



Images from the shadow puppet show "Turning"

workshop featuring Joanna and Fran Macy early this year. The puppet show followed a presentation about the facts of climate change. After the puppet

"It is something to be able to paint a particular picture... but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look."

—Henry David Thoreau

show, people cheered. "We needed that!" It was a relief, in the wake of the hard-hitting presentation on the science and current trends, to have a chance to imagine an enticing and joyful future. Visioning hope is central to the work of creating a sustainable future.

Offering *Turning* along with a presentation on the science gave the audience a chance to think in two modes: the left-brain investigation and analysis of climate change, the right-brain exploration and visioning of possible futures. As Jay said, "This is about art occupying the same space and time as the science. We know information in one way (science) and we imagine how we could create the future to look different."

It is not so easy to see what "doing it right" could look like when we talk about confronting climate change. In part, this is because our imagination has atrophied; we need help learning to exercise the vision "muscle." For the audience, having the scientist step away from

the Power Point slides and become the voice of the narrator had a big impact, allowing them to see that no one person or profession is expert; we all are citizens involved in this act of re-invention that is, at its root, culture change.

Does story telling impact

is possible.

What next?

Jay Mead would like to do more issue based, collaborative story telling. What could solutions look like? He says, "The kind of art I like to do empowers people to engage with the world around them." Jay

draws on current issues, looking for both the mythic and the contemporary elements of the story. This is community art. It is not about entertainment; it is about communication — to touch people's hearts, to give hope and inspiration. Perhaps there is a children's book in Jay's future. It is likely that *Turning* will show up on You Tube.

Beth Sawin would like SI to commission other artists do pieces that express the challenges of sustainability,

that call citizens to action, and that explore the beauty of the possibilities that lie ahead of us.

In an email about an earlier collaboration between SI and an artist, Dana wrote to the following to choreographer Carol Langstaff in 2000.

"Why does the Sustainability Institute see fit to harbor a dance



Images from the shadow puppet show "Turning"

the story-teller? Does collaboration affect the collaborators? Yes! The artist becomes immersed in issues critical to our time. The scientist becomes story-teller. The team effort required to script and put on a production like *Turning* has an impact on all those involved. The collaboration of art and science creates a different type of dialog about the future and what

troupe?

"Because we believe that the transformation of human society into one that is harmonious both with the human spirit and the natural world requires more than "fiddling at the controls." It requires more than, say, a carbon tax, or more efficient cars, or

a green certification process for lumber — all of which are changes we strongly support. Above all, a sustainable world requires a deep change in culture, toward one that emphasizes life instead of money, relationship instead of separation, and nonmaterial satisfactions instead of material ones.

"What would a culture of sustainability look like? We don't know. But we are happy to support and house cultural innovators of many types, in order to find out."

- Diana Wright

LINKS:

For more information, please visit:

- Our Climate Ourselves: <http://www.sustainer.org/oco/>
- Turning puppet show: <http://cobhill.org/Spotlight.html>
- Joanna Macy's work: <http://www.joannamacy.net/>
- SI's Jan 2008 workshop report: <http://sustainer.org/fellows/MacyReport08.htm>
- Artist Jay Mead traveled to Instituto Visao Futuro, an eco-community in Brazil, to offer his talents in the creation of an environmental theater piece with giant puppets. (December, 2007) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGDtprvp94Y>

Notes from the Past...

Alan appointed me the final speaker [at a Balaton meeting] with the topic "Have we got enough Time?" (To get onto a sustainable track before ecosystems and our social worlds collapse.) I went through our world model and other such models to look at how much time they say we have (30-50 years) and started to get into what, technically, "running out of time" looks like on a global level. Then, in a surprise for everyone, I had Betty interrupt me with an emergency "fax," which asked us all to close our eyes, listen for the sound of the bell, and catapult to the year 2097. Posing as a speaker at that future conference, I concluded:

I think those early and obviously clueless, but really rather sweet Balaton members of 1997 came closest to a breakthrough when they took to heart the realization that the difficult transition ahead of them required not only their minds and rationality, but also their hearts and souls -- and their ability to act in community and with love. I wanted to cheer whenever words like SOLIDARITY and SELF-DETERMINATION and COMPASSION and HONESTY went up on that strange little projector they used. I was moved above all when they began to take the discussion to their personal lives, when they realized that they couldn't fight

against the abuse of time if they themselves abused time, just as they couldn't counter the abuse of resources while they themselves abused resources. I was amazed at how often, throughout the meeting, they spoke of balancing "inner" and "outer" work, of trying to become living examples of the kind of world they so passionately wanted to bring into being.

Of course we know now that this embracing of all human faculties was indeed the central key to the sustainability revolution. Even now, for us, in a culture that encourages inner and outer balance in every way, it is a constant challenge to maintain our equilibrium.



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What's New:

- New OCO article available at http://sustainer.org/oco/oco-writings/archive/009_keynote_love_concern.html. The article is a transcript of Beth Sawin's keynote address to the 2008 Sustainable Energy Summit, Amherst, MA
- 2007-2008 Fellows arriving in July for their 3rd workshop. Look for the report in August!
- New booklet "The Changing Vocabulary of Food Purchasing" available for download at: <http://www.sustainablefoodlab.org/article/articleview/17174/1/2373>
- The Food Lab and SAI platform together launched a graphical mapping database of sustainable agriculture and healthy value chain projects. View at: www.sustainablefood.org/agriculture-search

Notes from the Past (cont)...

Imagine how much harder it was for them, leaving their meeting and returning to their world of rushing vehicles and ringing telephones and no cultural respect for quiet time or even family time. They probably all forgot their good resolutions and went back to their over-hectic pace within a week. But, having made those resolutions once, they must have had opportunities now and then to remember them, to take them up again, to share their struggle with others, and maybe even to carve out small places and times in their homes, their workplaces, their lives where they worked on balance and tried to

encourage others to do the same -- paving the way for social acceptance of the far better trained and more personally realized leaders that we know came in the very next generation.

Well, that was fun and magical. The whole group followed up with a long discussion in which they kept themselves in the 21st century and talked about how they felt, looking back on that 100-years-ago meeting. Somehow talking about themselves as if they were distant observers allowed them to open their hearts in a way we never before achieved in these meetings of mainly scientists

from many cultures. And pretending to look back on a successful sustainability transition forced a positive frame of workability, of real problem-solving. It was a great rare moment -- I was afraid to breathe, for fear that I'd either break the mood or burst into tears.

When Alan opened with the 2097 game (which was the idea of Joanna Macy), I remember thinking, "wow! He's going to Go For It!" -- meaning push us to make the meeting more than an intellectual exercise, more than a fun time, something intended to go beyond *Gesture* into Real

Difference-Making. So I ended in the same vein, grateful for the reminder that there's never any excuse, in any activity, not to Go For It.

-Donella Meadows, excerpt from Dear Folks letter, September 21, 1997