A City of Two Tales

by Louis Cox, Burlington (VT) Friends Meeting

The international Transition Towns movement has been growing rapidly, partly because of its positive, hopeful message about communities becoming more resilient and self-reliant in the face of energy, climate, and economic challenges ahead. As one leader in the movement put it, "We want it to feel more like a neighborhood block party than a protest rally."

Yes, there are many injustices and imminent dangers in today's world that urgently need to be confronted. But eco-psychologists tell us that negative appeals like fear and guilt tend not to work as well as positive ones. The gloomier our prophecies, the more powerless people feel. The more we point the finger of blame, the deeper into denial people descend. The more we resort to us-versus-them rhetoric, the less likely we are to reach bipartisan agreement on workable solutions.

Nevertheless, I have to confess that it has been difficult for me to make a personal transition to an optimistic outlook in the daunting grip of what author Richard Heinberg calls "Peak Everything." Coming of age during the Cold War, I was exposed to many alarms about real and imagined threats to my health, freedom, and safety—atomic attack drills at school, reports of millions of children starving in China, reading George Orwell's dystopian novel 1984 in my teens, etc. And I probably watched too many monster and horror movies.

Several years ago, I went into a bookstore to get another "fix" on my doomsday-scenario interest. I asked for James Howard Kunstler's novel, World Made by Hand. It had been promoted as a kind of a retake on Orwell's 1984, about survivors in North America following global ecological and economic collapse and the breakdown of social order. The bookstore didn't have a copy but I was persuaded by the manager to try another, more upbeat title, Will Bonsall's Through the Eyes of a Stranger.

The setting of Bonsall's upbeat book is a post-collapse society based on Earth stewardship principles, hard work, and simple pleasures. Yaro, a refugee from a neighboring fascist state, observes that citizens of this egalitarian and decentralized society believe in free markets and love to use technology to make life easier, but they keep it appropriate and sustainable. They don't practice any form of organized religion but everyone seems to assume an underlying moral order that gives purpose and meaning to life. They are prepared to defend themselves against invaders, but they keep the peace mainly by being valued trading partners. Social cohesion is maintained through the efforts of a guild of "vision keepers," who remind everyone that the sum of happiness and well-being is greater when everyone cooperates to keep the whole Earth community healthy and in good order.

Bonsall's version of the Peaceable Kingdom sounds a lot like many Transition Town supporters' vision of a just and ecologically sustainable world. While I could fancy myself, like Yaro, adjusting fairly well to such a placid, pastoral way of life, on the whole I didn't find the book's characters or
plot very believable. For everyone to be so ethical, enlightened, and rational didn’t seem natural. While providing interesting food for clarification of values, the plot seemed too contrived and the setting too far in the future to serve as a practical roadmap to the foreseeable future.

Back to World Made by Hand, which I got around to reading a couple of years later: I found Kunstler’s hot, post-petroleum landscape to be chaotic, perilous, and brutal. Pandemics, starvation, and nuclear terrorism have decimated the population. Technology, commerce, transportation, education, healthcare, and communications have been thrown back to the 18th century and beyond. Elected government has been largely replaced by warlords. Confusion and fear have pushed many into the clutches of autocratic religious cults. Enclaves of survivors are scraping out spare livings by manual labor and scavenging.

The only good news, from a Gaian perspective, is that the skies and waters, relieved of the burdens of industrial society’s wastes and "resource" extractions, have cleared up and fish and wildlife populations are rebounding.

One thing I did find somewhat compelling about Kunstler’s scenario is that the general economic and social breakdown looks a lot like what is already happening in many parts of the world today—think of Haiti, Congo, Afghanistan, even Mexico. And many of the book’s characters sound like real people that I have known. What seriously compromises the book’s credibility, however, is its failure to acknowledge any of the countless restorative social and ecological organizations striving to make a difference in the world today (such as the Transition Town movement and 350.org) that Paul Hawken talks about in his book Blessed Unrest. Many of these basically optimistic grassroots efforts are trying to take back local control from undemocratic, globalized systems, either to prevent major collapse or at least ensure a "soft landing."

So I am on the lookout for another work of “future fiction” that might reconcile the starkly contrasting scenarios in these two novels and help me feel more optimistic about life in a “Peak Everything” world. Something from a Quaker perspective might fill the bill. To succeed, it would need realistic characters that readers could identify with and a plausible script. If the setting is a Transition Town, it would have at least one ingredient of an exciting cliff-hanger—uncertainty about whether the future will turn out more like Bonsall’s than Kunstler’s. It might be cleverly titled, A City of Two Tales. As movement founder Rob Hopkins says on page 17 of his non-fiction The Transition Companion, “Transition is not a known quantity. We truly don’t know if Transition will work…. [It] is a social experiment on a massive scale… built around people who are learning by doing…. who understand that we can’t sit back and wait for someone else to do the work. People like you, perhaps...."