

UP AGAINST THE LIMITS:
SHIFTING TOWARDS A NEW HUMAN COMPACT WITH MOTHER EARTH
By Movement Generation
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THE FUTURE OF HOME

The visibility of ecological crisis is increasing everyday. Humanity is up against the limits of nature's ability to tolerate globalized industrial production. The exponential nature of the 'growth without limits' imperative – which serves as the engine for modern capitalism – has led us into an untenable situation.

In this context of increasing ecological instability we are seeing the Earth's systems beginning to undergo dramatic transformations – changes that we don't yet fully understand. Acidifying oceans. Retreating glaciers. Super storms. What we do know: Systems change will be the defining feature of our century. And if we stay on our current course, that change will manifest as collapse.

This change, however, could be our opportunity to bring about an intentional transition - a *Great Turning* as Joanna Macy calls it - towards a healthy, fair, and ecologically resilient world. So how do we take this Great Turn? How do we *return* to a proper management of home? How do we organize our relationships and human settlements so as to take care of place and each other, once again? How do humans resolve the dilemmas we've unleashed unto the planet in the last 200 years and *return* land, life and labor into a balanced web of stable relationships? How do we bring about a collective societal transition anchored in shared values of real democracy, ecological sanity and social equity?

Tackling these questions with clarity may be the biggest and boldest challenge our species has ever faced. An organized, visionary, and strategically aligned push – *by thousands of social movements across the globe* – is the task at hand. Yet most of our social movements have not connected the dots in a way that provides this clarity and compels people from all walks of life into action. And the clock is ticking. We need to make new meaning out of this pivotal moment in planetary history. We need to expose the crisis for what it is and generate profound proactive transformation. We can no longer tinker around the edges of a fomenting crisis.

The nature of the coming economic and social reorganization required by this era of tremendous transition will depend entirely on who is positioned to lead and guide it. We cannot assume that the next world system will inherently be "better" in terms of social conditions or ecological stability. Only collaborative, transformative action that values sharing over hoarding and restoration over exploitation – led by the communities most impacted by the crisis - will get us there

Here are some important strategic frameworks that we think will help us achieve this *Great Turning*:

Harnessing *Shocks* & Directing *Slides*:

Instability has become a defining feature of our times. In many ways, this instability is the new landscape of social struggle. It is useful to classify the economic and ecological disruptions that make up this “new normal” of instability into two groups: *shocks and slides*.

Shocks present themselves as acute moments of disruption. These are, for example, market crashes, huge disasters and uprisings.

Slides, on the other hand, are incremental by nature. They can be catastrophic, but they are not experienced as acute. Sea level rise is a slide. Rising unemployment is a slide. The rising costs of food & energy are a slide.

While they share a set of root causes, the scale, pace and implications of shocks and slides differ and, therefore require different responses by social movements. One of our key roles, as social movements, must be to harness the shocks and direct the slides – *all towards achieving the systemic, cultural and psychic **shifts*** we need to navigate the changes with the greatest equity, resilience and ecological restoration possible.

Shocks

As just stated, shocks come as acute moments of disruption. They are the Deep Water Horizon oil spills, Hurricane Katrinas or 9/11s. While they may be decades or centuries in the making, they explode onto our consciousness in a short, sudden burst. Like a punch to the face, they can stun, hurt and even outrage us. Different social forces typically jockey to frame what meaning people make of these moments in order to advance their particular interest. Too often, progressive social movements are caught off guard, disabled by the shocks, without the infrastructure or access to shape public response. Meanwhile, regressive and dominant social forces seize the space and use the shock to advance their profit-based interests; what Naomi Klein has dubbed, “Disaster Capitalism.”

In the aftermath of the 2011 Earthquake, Tsunami and Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan, there was fairly widespread shock and horror, but little organizing to reveal the true cost of extreme energy¹. The moment could have opened up new space to rise up against nuclear power, but it instead was framed effectively in the mainstream by elites as a “natural disaster,” “unpredictable,” and “unique.” Further, information of the disaster and impacts was vented to the public much the same way as the radiation was vented; slowly, so as to make the catastrophe appear less acute and easier to absorb. We are still not aware of the full impact of that ongoing disaster.

That said, the disaster was completely predictable. Japan is born of the Pacific Ring of Fire, home to 90% of all earthquakes and 80% of all severe earthquakes. *Tsunami* itself

¹ EXTREME ENERGY: We define Extreme Energy based not on a particular set of technologies, but upon the risks and impacts of energy development on communities. Extreme energy goes beyond “unconventional” energy, such as Tar Sands, deep water drilling or gas fracking; it includes all ecologically destructive, centralized, and undemocratic forms of energy extraction. Conventional oil and coal are extreme forms of energy if you live in Occupied Iraq or Appalachia; just as mega-dams are for river dependant peoples.’

is a Japanese word that means, “Harbor Wave.” There are even ‘warning stones,’ as old as 600 years, warning future generations of where it is not safe to build on coastal Japan. But ancient wisdom and place-based knowledge are routinely forgotten or ignored in the interests of industrial development. There was some forward momentum in Japan to question nuclear energy and some changes in the European Union as well; but these attempts were not able to draw into question the larger problem of industrial development, the growth economy and extreme energy.

Shocks – Acute Moments of Disruption

- industrial environmental disasters, i.e. Fukushima and Deep Water Horizon
- extreme weather, i.e. Katrina and 2010 floods in Pakistan
- price spikes in food and energy
- epidemics, pandemics and disease
- market crashes and bursting bubbles
- military invasions, coups and covert operations
- terror attacks

To spring into action, social movements must first anticipate the coming shocks and pro-actively prepare for them. Shocks are, in a sense, easy to predict; but they are hard to organize around. While the timing of shocks is hard to know, they are certain to occur. Despite the dominant framing of shocks as unpredictable, anomalous or ‘out of our control,’ they are actually inevitable consequences of the

political economy. There is no drilling without spilling. There is no empire without blowback. There are no economic bubbles that do not burst.

Yet it is not enough for us to point to shocks as inevitable. Knowing about and even feeling the intensity of shocks does not automatically spark social action. Rather, our social movements need to be asking questions like, *“What kinds of leadership, organizing, infrastructure, skills and planning are required to prepare for and utilize these ‘shock’ moments as key opportunities to articulate both the nature and scale of the crisis; as well as our solutions?”* And, *“What are the material and cultural shifts needed to address the root cause of the problem?”* We believe that networking communities to identify and pro-actively build the infrastructure to mount a ‘peoples’ response’ to the shocks is needed. This includes ‘rapid-response’ infrastructure.

We know, for example, that weather is becoming more extreme and unpredictable, which means there will be stronger, more frequent storms, floods, droughts and fires. We also know that the corporate state does not have the capacity or interest to respond to these disasters in an equitable way. We must prepare by creating the peoples’ relief infrastructure that can provide support rooted in a visionary analysis. We also know that there will more oil spills as oil becomes harder and harder to produce cheaply. Organized communities in “spill zones” should be supported in “springing into action,” to demand a ban on, for example, deep water drilling, fracking, nuclear power, or tar sand extraction.

Thankfully, this form of organized ‘Disaster Collectivism’ is already taking form. It showed up in New York recently, when Superstorm Sandy hit: Communities Against Anti-Asian Violence (CAA AV) and Occupy Sandy both mobilized quickly to provide

massive, direct, and real relief to the most vulnerable communities – the ones FEMA and the Red Cross chose to ignore – and did so while bluntly stating that Sandy was not a natural disaster, but the obvious consequence of an economy based entirely on exploitation of both humans and the natural world.

Slides

In contrast, slides are incremental by nature. As described earlier, they are not experienced as acute even though they can become catastrophic. Once set in motion, they are hard (sometimes impossible) to stop. Slides may be slower, but this does not mean they are not serious.

Take sea level, for example. We will not wake up one morning to find we are all washed away. Because of the sheer mass of the ocean (and the planet), the amount of energy it takes to increase the temperature and volume of the oceans is enormous and this process takes time.

Yet - once set in motion – **it will continue for hundreds** (even thousands) **of years**. So we will not likely *experience* significant impacts of sea level rise in California for at least twenty more years. Yet every day we delay in changing course seriously magnifies the *future* problem. The “landing” (or collapse) down the line for vulnerable communities in coastal areas around the world will become more difficult and dramatic if we don’t effectively address the slide *now*. More importantly, the timescale for ecological recovery (reaching some new level of balance in the system) will take longer - on the order of millennia.

Another slide, the predicted “collapse of California’s agriculture,” as it is often called, will not happen in a single, swift moment, but over time, as well. This “collapse” refers to the economic disruption that will result from the degrading productivity and viability of large-scale mono-cropped industrial agriculture, as seen in the Central Valley of California. This is an agricultural system that is over-consuming water and fossil fuel, destroying topsoil, addicted to toxic chemical inputs, and dependent on the exploitation of immigrant labor and surrounding communities. Key components that drive the trends in food production are fairly certain: rising energy and farm-system input costs, increased instability of weather due to climate change and dramatic reductions in available water supply. These realities form a slide: it will change what food we can grow, where we can grow, how much we can grow and how we process and distribute what we grow.

Slides – Incremental by Nature

- sea level rise
- desertification
- deforestation
- rising costs of food and energy
- collapse of industrial agriculture
- rising unemployment

How we manage that slide, where it lands, and the path it takes is not certain. Will California agriculture transition to smaller-scale farming methods based on perennial crops, poly-culture management, drought resistant tree-crops and long-term sustenance? Or will larger public subsidies and more violent water ‘grabs’ continue to temporarily prop-up the madness of industrial agriculture? Will we be able to transition

“wine-country” into “food-country” in order to strengthen regional food security, or will we import ever more canned, GMO, irradiated and processed food from far away? With the central role of California agriculture in the nation’s food system and the economy, the stakes are high both locally and nationally. Setting the agenda for the ‘outcome’ of this slide will continue to be a key political struggle in the coming twenty years. It cannot be the sole responsibility of sustainable agriculture activists, small farmers and farmworkers to lead on this front of struggle. Nor will we resolve the problem with small-scale urban food production (though it is important). We will need a new rural-urban political, cultural and economic alliance to direct this slide toward regional sustainability and ecological justice.

Shocks and slides are, of course, related, and often accompany each other. Shocks can trigger slides and slides can have their shocks. Fuel prices have been rising steadily (a slide), but have also experienced spikes (shocks) from disaster or military actions. While sea level rise is a slide, the shocks of unpredictable weather are made worse by incremental sea level rise (such as floods), which, in turn, can be made worse by other shocks, such as the collapse of major portions of the Antarctic ice shelves.

No More Status Quo

It is worth restating that this new era of increasing instability signifies that there is no longer a status quo. This means that all social forces – left and right – progressive and repressive- are attempting to create shifts that solidify or improve their position. For the dominant forces, the pretense of stability and the predominance of “there is no alternative” are key to enabling large numbers of people to accommodate the disruptions we experience. If a disruption cannot be explained as “normal,” and “benign,” then it is dismissed as “an aberration.” Economic downturns are talked about as “natural cycles” or the result of “a few bad apples.” In addition to this maneuvering in the cultural and public discourse, dominant forces are looking for structural ways to take advantage of the changes. For example, as the ecological means of production continue to erode, new speculative finance models are emerging to “commodify nature.” Couched as the “green economy” or “climate action,” we are seeing further moves to capture & control nature via *financialization* - from the privatization of fresh water sources to the creation of markets that ‘measure’ carbon capacity of forests. More and more components of the natural world are being given a price to be bought, sold and traded.

So our challenge is to both: 1) Clearly name the shifts we want and work towards achieving them, while also 2) Anticipating and exposing the ‘false solution’ shifts being promoted by corporate profiteers and their political allies.

Shifts: Obtaining What We Truly Need

We define a shift as social, political, economic and/or cultural transformation. From our perspective, we want shifts in the direction of ecological resilience and social equity, as an imperative. We believe that shifts can emerge from collective ‘aha’ moments when social movements awaken the popular imagination to new possibilities and spark social

action. And we are arguing that the coming *shocks* and *slides* – if we anticipate and prepare for them properly – can be key opportunities to spark these ‘aha’ moments.

The Occupy Moment is a strong example of a collective ‘aha’ moment in which social action opened up new cultural space – most notably, a significant change in how wealth, corporate concentration and power are talked about in the mainstream. The early actions of Occupy, as manifested in the camps, attempted to model a better way to meet people’s needs. Occupy then evolved into diverse expressions of community resilience, resistance and self-governance.

Shifts also result from well-organized communities creating new institutions that meet peoples’ needs as responses to the shocks and slides *better than the dominant systems can*, such as food sovereignty projects, collectivized housing systems, cooperative economics (time banks, worker co-ops, food shares, community-based restorative justice projects, etc.)

A few other recent manifestations of pro-active shifts:

In 2000, the attempt by the multinational corporation Bechtel to privatize municipal water systems in Bolivia was a *shock* that catalyzed a shift in social movements led by indigenous peoples that not only overthrew corporate rule successfully – it also ushered in a new government in that country.

In Detroit, the *slide* of de-industrialization and the economic shocks it engendered became fertile ground for transformative organizing based on the principles of self-reliance and social inclusion. They helped spawn a shift to the greatest density of urban growing of food anywhere in the country, as well as innovative projects - such as a prison to urban agriculture rehabilitation program.

The shock of the foreclosure crisis, which has been effectively capitalized on by Wall Street and Washington, also created political space for social movements. *Take Back the Land* and the *Right to the City Alliance*, among others, engaged in creative direct action to meet peoples’ needs for housing through high-profile housing occupations, as well as eviction and foreclosure defenses. Several communities have created “foreclosure

Shockwaves

From Russian Wheat to Arab Spring -- How Ecological Drivers Create Economic Impacts

As we approach the edge of our ability to “mine for calories” from the soil through intensive, industrial agriculture, the perfect storm of climate-driven droughts and fires mixed with market speculation will most likely continue to result in major shocks to the global food supply. These shocks have far reaching social, political, economic and ecological implications.

Many analysts, for example, have noted that the massive fires in Russia in the summer of 2010 provided one of the sparks that catalyzed the Arab Spring of 2011. Fire that decimated Russian wheat crops, combined with market speculation on wheat prices (to take advantage of that shock) drove up food prices, exacerbating the existing instability caused by already high unemployment and political disaffection in North Africa and the Middle East. The shock was harnessed towards a shift, most noted in the case of Egypt. How systemic, far-reaching and permanent the shift is, remains to be seen, but there are useful lessons on the interrelationship between

free zones,” in which neighbors commit to supporting each other in defending their right to remain in their homes. In turn, these direct action efforts recently inspired the municipality of Richmond in California to declare eminent domain on underwater mortgages. In doing so, the city plans to seize mortgages on foreclosed homes from the banks so as to truly refinance them at reasonable values with evicted and at-risk homeowners. These actions are the kind of organizing we hope can define the shocks proactively and point to the shifts that we need. The shift in this final example being towards cultural consensus and application of the value of “housing as a human right.”

Getting There from Here: New Approaches for Shocks and Slides

For reasons of ecological resilience, social equity and movement strategy, we believe that we need to:

- (1) Remake governance to maximize direct participation by people in the decisions that effect their daily lives in the places where they live;
- (2) Remap the geography of governance by rejecting arbitrary, rigid, political borders and embracing ecologically informed, permeable, fluid and interdependent boundaries relevant to the particular arena to be governed. For example, the governance maps for water-sheds and trade-sheds and energy-sheds are all different, for different places; and they overlap in different way creating sets of interdependent relationships.
- (3) Innovate on our existing movement strategies to more effectively respond to shocks and slides while simultaneously implementing a Just Transition out of the existing economy.

In all probability, future shocks will get more frequent & intense, and the slides will get steeper. Given this, we must move quickly to develop shared goals, narratives and strategies - to help us make sense of, respond to and be resilient in the face of change. We must be grounded in a common vision while also naming & exposing the minefield of well-resourced false solutions that currently predominate the popular imagination.

We believe that this work of responding to shocks and slides while cultivating shifts will best be done at the local and regional levels. Of course, state, national and international struggle will remain necessary as we seek to solve different problems at various scales, redistribute resources to communities, and act in solidarity with other peoples and places.

Yet, when transforming our relationships to food and water, for example, the most strategic boundaries for organizing (and, ultimately for governance) must be drawn at an appropriate bioregional scale (i.e. foodsheds and watersheds). The scale and scope of the reach of any strategy – whether at the neighborhood, city, county or multi-county level – will be different depending on the place and the objective.

Said another way: the scale of the problem does not dictate the scale of the solutions. Climate Disruption is a planetary problem, but the necessary solutions are at the ecosystems scale.

That said, for our solutions to be effective we must understand how they relate to larger economic and environmental systems and must create enough counter-pressure to stop false solutions moved at the state, national and international levels. For example, when addressing food insecurity in a local community, real solutions depend on understanding global food supply chains, and industrial agriculture systems. Otherwise, the false solutions, such as big-box retailers in poor communities, become the easy solutions. If we want to lower energy consumption at the local level, we have to understand and confront private utilities that rig the systems to ensure that centralized, dirty, costly energy is privileged over local, clean, community controlled energy. If we are committed to restoring local creeks to bring the salmon home, we have to also understand their relationship to the whole of the watershed, from the headwaters to the ocean. We have to understand how disruptions at various stages effect the soil, water and fish.

When we start to think at regional scales and begin imagining resilient, democratic governance of our primary resources, our conceptions of community and place also need to change. When working to transform a foodshed or watershed towards bioregional equity and resilience, rural small farmers are suddenly part of the same “impacted community” as poor and working-class food-insecure urban communities.

The current shocks and slides of peak water, energy, and food create opportunities to build new bioregionally-based relationships. These alliances will not be easy to build or “comfortable” culturally, but they are necessary if we actually intend to govern. Currently, political borders and market-based economics separate rural communities from urban communities, though they are fundamentally interdependent. This false-separation has allowed us to imagine cities as independent, self-reliant spaces, when, in fact they are not. Further, we have created cultural isolation between urban and rural residents; something that integrated, “short-chain” food systems and interdependent economic activity breakdown. Corporate intrusion into the food system on every level, from seed and soil to tongue and table, is made easier by the lack of bioregional organizing. Building these urban-rural relationships and alliances will benefit both communities.

In addition to being *strategic*, we know that the ecologically and socially responsible way to re-organize governance and economy must be bioregional. At the bioregional scale, the tendency to over-exploit, over-produce and over-consume resources has more immediate checks and balances. The actual ability for a people to assess the consequences of their activity – and to govern their own solutions – is greater (and the impact more visible) at scales defined by resources and relationships. Without the concentration of these resources by power-hoarders who are able to use their concentrated power to both externalize consequences on communities and ecosystems *and* insulate themselves (temporarily, of course) from the consequences, we would not be experiencing planetary level changes. This is one of the key reasons that we must re-localize primary production and consumption; doing so places us in a much more

direct relationship with the consequences of our actions, particularly those that are ecologically and socially destructive.

A shift to relocalization and bioregional economics and governance does not mean that we must become isolated or that trade will end. Quite the contrary, trade and migration will continue – and become even more precious – as we begin to constrain what we produce and how many people can live where to our regional resource base. Trade up and down the Pacific Coast will continue, as it has for thousands of years; but over the next several decades trade *across* the Pacific, which is incredibly resource intensive and unsustainable, will need to contract. Trade over the Sierras will diminish some, and trade over the Rockies even more so. At the same time, the populations of the Southwest, such as Phoenix and Tuscon, living off of rapidly depleting water resources that depend on huge amounts of energy to divert and push uphill for thousands of miles to desert cities will have to move.

Of course, *local* does not inherently mean *democratic*. We are already seeing the rise of eco-fascism throughout the South and Southwest of the US, most visible in repressive immigration politics and intensification of privatization of formerly public services, resulting in fewer and fewer services for those in greatest need. The intended result is a contraction of the population and a consolidation of control over resources by white, nativists. Re-localization must be constrained by equity and democracy for it to be truly ecologically resilient.