

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A World That Takes Its Environment Seriously

Find your place on the planet, dig in, and take responsibility from there.

— GARY SNYDER

♦ Recollections ♦

I grew up in a small town amidst the rolling hills and farms of western Pennsylvania. As towns go it wasn't much different from hundreds of others throughout the United States. There was a main street with shops and stores, a funeral parlor or two, four churches, a small liberal arts college, and perhaps two thousand residents give or take. It was a "dry" town filled with serious and hard-working Protestants and a disconcertingly large number of retired preachers and missionaries. It was not a place that quickly welcomed Elvis and rock and roll. The prevailing political sensibilities were sober and overwhelmingly Republican of the Eisenhower sort. The town would have seemed stuffy and parochial to a Sherwood Anderson or a Theodore Drieser. And it probably was. By the standards of the 1990s, the town, the college, and its residents would have failed even the most lax certification for political correctness. It was a man's world, neither multicultural nor multiracial. The sexual revolution lay ahead. And almost everyone who was anyone in town bought without question the assumptions of mid-century America about our inherent virtue, economic progress, communism, and technology. J. Edgar Hoover was a hero. Boys were measured for manhood on the baseball diamond or the basketball court. It was also a place, like most others, in transition from one kind of economy to another.

Typical of most small towns, the main street of New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, still reflected bits of the nineteenth-century agrarian economy. There was, for example, a dilapidated and unused livery stable behind the main street where a funeral parlor parked a hearse. On Main Street, Mr. Meeks operated his watch repair shop and Mr. Fusco had his shoe repair shop. There were locally owned and operated businesses, including two grocery stores, a hardware and plumbing store, a good bakery, an electronics/appliance store, a dairy store, a bank, a dry goods store, a magazine and tobacco shop, a movie theater, a building supply store, and a butcher shop. The train station was located two blocks from main street. A half mile to the south a local entrepreneur operated a tool-making plant. A quarter mile beyond lay the town dump on the banks of Neshannock Creek.

The small-town, repair-and-reuse economy was predominantly locally owned and operated. My mother bought groceries from the store on Main Street. She bought vegetables from local farmers, including the Amish who went door to door selling everything from farm fresh eggs to maple syrup. Milk was delivered daily in returnable glass bottles by a locally owned dairy company. Soda pop also came in returnable glass bottles from a bottling plant eight miles distant. Broken machinery could be repaired in town. Dull saws could still be sharpened for a dime. Hand-me-down clothing was standard, and as the youngest I was the last stop for lots of items. And some of the best Christmas presents I ever received were made by hand.

The forces that would undermine that sheltered world of small-town, mid-century America were on the march. But I knew nothing of these as I joined the great exodus of self-assured and expectant young people leaving their hometowns for some other place thought to offer greater opportunity and more excitement. Few of us could say with certainty why we were going or where we were headed other than that it was somewhere else. Nor could we have said what we were leaving behind.

Looking back, I can see that even then things were changing as the larger industrial economy began to undermine local economies nearly everywhere. We bought our first television set the same year that Congress passed the Interstate Highway Act. I recall the lights on the big shovel at the strip mine across the valley burning into the night. The contractor for whom I worked in the summer went out of business shortly after I graduated from college. The farmer who gave me part-time employment, and was thought to be the most progressive in the county,

by advertisers' hawking messages about "living better electrically" and "progress as our most important product," which we accepted without much thought. We were good at detecting the benefits of technology in parts per billion and did not see until much later what it would cost us. Nor could we see the web of dependencies that was beginning to entrap us. The same "they" who would somehow figure it all out were taking the things that Americans once did for themselves as competent people, citizens, and neighbors and selling them back at a good markup. We were turned out into the world with the intellectual equivalent of a malfunctioning immune system, unable to think critically about technology. If we read Faust at all, we read it as a fable, not as a prophecy.

Third, had we known our place better, and had we been ecologically literate and technologically savvy, we still would have lacked the political wherewithal to be better stewards of our land and heritage. Our version of small-town, flag-waving patriotism was disconnected from the tangible things of livelihood and location, soils and stewardship. We mistook the large abstractions of nationalism, flag, and Presidential authority for patriotism. Accordingly, we were vulnerable to the chicanery of Joe McCarthy and J. Edgar Hoover, and to Lyndon Johnson's lies about Vietnam, Richard Nixon's lies about nearly everything, and Ronald Reagan's fantasies about "morning in America."

My classmates and I are, I think, typical of most Americans born and raised in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Ours has been a time of cheap energy, economic and technological optimism, lots of patriotic huffing and puffing, and "auto-mobility." We are movers and we move on average eight to ten times in a lifetime. We were educated to be competent in an industrial world and incompetent in any other. We did not much question the values and assumptions of the industrial "paradigm" or those underlying notions of progress. Those beliefs were givens. We were turned out into the world, vulnerable to whatever economic, technological, or even political changes would be thrust upon us, as long as they were said to be economically necessary or simply inevitable. We were not taught to question the physical, biological, and psychological reordering of the world taking place all around us. Nor were we enabled to see it for what it was.

New Wilmington, Pennsylvania, is still a nice town. Having little industry, it has not suffered the rusting fate of the nearby industrial cities. It has also been spared some of the uncontrolled growth that has desecrated many other regions. Housing developments outside town, though,

are now filling up what was once good farmland. Aside from the Amish, the local farm economy is a shadow of what it once was. The effects of acid rain are beginning to show on trees. To make ends meet, the region is increasingly dependent on tourism. New Wilmington, like most small towns, is an island at the mercy of decisions made elsewhere. It has been spared mostly because no one noticed it or thought it a place likely to be profitable enough for an interstate mall, mine, regional airport, a Disney World, or a new industrial "park." Not yet anyway. In the meantime, it too has become a full-fledged member of the throwaway economy, and its young people still depart in large numbers for careers elsewhere.

If New Wilmington has so far gotten off lightly, other towns and regions have not. Within a few miles, New Castle and Youngstown are industrial disaster areas. The landfill on the outskirts of my present hometown sells space for garbage from as far away as New York City. In southern Ohio, the nuclear processing plant at Fernald has spread radioactive waste over several hundred square miles. The same is true of Maxey Flats, Kentucky; Rocky Flats, Colorado; and Hanford, Washington, all sacrificed in the name of "national security." Urban sprawl and decaying downtowns afflict hundreds of other towns and cities throughout the United States. Large chunks of footloose capital ravage other places. In northern Alberta, Canada, Mitsubishi Corporation has invested over \$1 billion to build a pulp mill that will impair or destroy an ecosystem along with the indigenous culture. One hundred thousand square kilometers of rain forest will be destroyed to supply Europe with cheap pig iron from the Carajas mine in Brazil (Carley and Christie, 1993, p. 24). The resulting devastation will not show up in the price of steel in Europe. Nor will the devastation from the other mines, wells, clear-cuts, or feedlots around the world, which supply the insatiable appetite of the industrial economy, be subtracted from calculations of wealth. The annual gross world economy now exceeds \$21 trillion, and we are told that this must increase fivefold by the middle of the next century. That same global economy now uses, directly or indirectly, 25% of the earth's net primary productivity. Can that increase fivefold as well?

♦ A World That Takes Its Places Seriously ♦

Custodians of the conventional wisdom believe that economic growth is a good and necessary thing. Growth, in turn, requires capital mobility, free trade, and the willingness to take risks and make sacrifices. For the

sake of growth, whole regions and entire industries may have to be sacrificed as production and employment go elsewhere in search of cheaper labor and easier access to materials and markets. Such sacrifices are necessary, they say, so that "we" can remain competitive in the global economy and so that the things we buy can be as cheap as profit-maximizing corporations can make them. Conventional wisdom also holds that "transnational problems cannot be managed by one country acting alone" (Haas et al., 1993, p. ix). Proponents of the global point of view often cite the Montreal Accord and subsequent agreements that phase out chlorofluorocarbons as proof positive.

The first bit of conventional wisdom denies the importance of place and environment in favor of global vandalism masquerading as progress. Its more progressive adherents believe that environmental improvement itself requires further expansion of the very activities that wreck environments. Devotees of the second piece of conventional wisdom ignore the political and ecological creativity of place-centered people, wishing us to believe that the same organizations that have ruined places around the world can be trusted to save the global environment.

On the contrary, a world that takes both its environment and prosperity seriously over the long run must pay careful attention to the patterns that connect the local and the regional with the global. I do not believe that global action is unnecessary or unimportant. It is, however, insufficient and inadequate. Taking places seriously would change what we think needs to happen at the global level. It does not imply parochialism or narrowness. It does not mean crawling into a hole and pulling the ground over our heads, or what economists call autarky. While we have heard for years that we should "think globally and act locally," these words are still more a slogan than a clear program. The national and the international are still accorded a disproportionate share of our attention, and the local not nearly enough. I would like to offer five reasons why places, the local arena, and what William Blake once called "minute-particulars" are globally important.

First, we are inescapably place-centric creatures shaped in important ways by the localities of our birth and upbringing (Gallagher, 1993; Tuan, 1977). We learn first those things in our immediate surroundings, and these we soak in consciously and subconsciously through sight, smell, feel, sound, taste, and perhaps other senses we do not yet understand. Our preferences, phobias, and behaviors begin in the experience of a place. If those places are ugly and violent, the behavior of many raised in them will

also be ugly and violent. Children raised in ecologically barren settings, however affluent, are deprived of the sensory stimuli and the kind of imaginative experience that can only come from biological richness. Our preferences for landscapes are often shaped by what was familiar to us early on. There is, in other words, an inescapable correspondence between landscape and "mindscape" and between the quality of our places and the quality of the lives lived in them. In short, we need stable, safe, interesting settings, both rural and urban, in which to flourish as fully human creatures.

Second, the environmental movement has grown out of the efforts of courageous people to preserve and protect particular places: John Muir and Hetch-Hetchy, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas and the Everglades, Horace Kephart and the establishment of the Great Smokies National Park. Virtually all environmental activists, even those whose work is focused on global issues, were shaped early on by a relation to a specific place. What Rachel Carson once called the "sense of wonder" begins in the childhood response to a place that exerts a magical effect on the ecological imagination. And without such experiences, few have ever become ardent and articulate defenders of nature.

Third, as Garrett Hardin argues, problems that occur all over the world are not necessarily global problems, and some truly global problems may be solvable only by lots of local solutions. Potholes in roads, according to Hardin, are a big worldwide problem, but they are not a "global" problem that has a uniform cause and a single solution applicable everywhere (Hardin, 1993, p. 278; Hardin, 1986, pp. 145-163). Any community with the will to do so can solve its pothole problem by itself. This is not true of climate change, which can be averted or minimized only by enforceable international agreements. No community or nation acting alone can avoid climate change. Even so, a great deal of the work necessary to make the transition to a solar-powered world that does not emit heat-trapping gases must be done at the level of households, neighborhoods, and communities.

Fourth, a purely global focus tends to reduce the earth to a set of abstractions that blur what happens to real people in specific settings. An exclusively global focus risks what Alfred North Whitehead once called the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness" in which we mistake our models of reality for reality itself, equivalent, as someone put it, to eating the menu, not the meal. It is a short step from there to ideas of planetary management, which appeals to the industrial urge to control. Indeed, it

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sit before computer terminals—examining words and numbers, moving them, altering them, trying out new words and numbers, formulating and testing hypotheses, designing or strategizing. They also spend long hours in meetings or on the telephone, and even longer hours in jet planes and hotels—advising, making presentations, giving briefings, doing deals. (Reich, 1991, p. 179)

Symbolic analysts seem to be a morally anemic bunch whose services “do not necessarily improve society,” a fact that does not seem to matter to them, perhaps because they are too busy “mov[ing] from project to project . . . from one software problem to another, to another movie script, another advertising campaign, another financial restructuring” (pp. 185, 237). They are, in Reich’s words, “America’s fortunate citizens,” perhaps 20% of the total population, but they are increasingly disconnected from any interaction with or sense of responsibility for the other four fifths (p. 250). People educated to be symbolic analysts neither have loyalty to the long-term human prospect nor are prepared by intellect or affection to improve any place. And they are sure signs of the failure of the schools and colleges that presumed to educate them but failed to tell them what an education is for on a planet with a biosphere.

The world does not need more rootless symbolic analysts. It needs instead hundreds of thousands of young people equipped with the vision, moral stamina, and intellectual depth necessary to rebuild neighborhoods, towns, and communities around the planet. The kind of education presently available will not help them much. They will need to be students of their places and competent to become, in Wes Jackson’s words, “native to their places.” They will need to know a great deal about new fields of knowledge, such as restoration ecology, conservation biology, ecological engineering, and sustainable forestry and agriculture. They will need a more honest economics that enables them to account for all of the costs of economic—ecological transactions. They will need to master the skills necessary to make the transition to a solar-powered economy. Who will teach them these things?

ECONOMIES OF PLACE

Taking places seriously means learning how to build local prosperity without ruining some other place. It will require a revolution in economic thinking that challenges long held dogmas about growth, capital mobility, the global economy, the nature of wealth, and the wealth of nature. My views about capital mobility and related subjects were influenced, no

doubt, by growing up near a now derelict industrial city, a monument of sorts to mobile capital and failed ideas. Even the prosperous city of my memory, however, was an ecological disaster. On both counts, could it have been otherwise? What would “place-focused economies” look like (Kemmis, 1990, p. 107)?

Historian Calvin Martin (1992) argued that the root of the problem dates back to the dawn of the neolithic age and to the “gnawing fear that the earth does not truly take care of us, of our kind . . . that the world is not truly congenial to sapient Homo” (p. 123). Perhaps this is why most indigenous cultures had no word for scarcity and why we, on the other hand, are so haunted by it. Long ago, out of fear and faithlessness, we broke our ancient covenant with the earth. I believe that this is profoundly true. But we need not go so far back in time for workable ideas. Political scientist John Friedmann (1987) argued that in more recent times

we have been seduced into becoming secret accomplices in our own evisceration as active citizens. Two centuries after the battle cries of Liberty, Fraternity, and Justice, we remain as obedient as ever to a corporate state that is largely deaf to the genuine needs of people. And we have forfeited our identity as ‘producers’ who are collectively responsible for our lives. (p. 347)

What can be done? While believing that “the general movement of the last six hundred years toward greater global interdependency is not likely to be reversed,” Friedmann argued for “the selective de-linking of territorial communities from the market economy” and “the recovery of political community” (pp. 385–387). This work can only be done, as he put it, “within local communities, neighborhoods, and the household.”

But communities everywhere are now vulnerable to the migration of capital in search of higher rates of return. In the case of Youngstown, after the purchase of Youngstown Sheet and Tube by the Lykes Corporation and eventually the LTV Corporation, its profits were used to support corporate investments elsewhere (Lynd, 1982). This money should have been used for maintenance and reinvestment in plant and equipment. Eventually the business failed, taking with it many other businesses. The decision to divert profits out of the community was made by people who did not live in Youngstown and had no stake or interest in it. Their decision had little to do with the productivity of the business and everything to do with shortsightedness and greed.

From this and all too many other cases like it, we can conclude that

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one requisite of resilient local economies is, as Daniel Kemmis (1990) stated,

the capacity and the will to keep some locally generated capital from leaving the region and to invest that capital creatively and effectively in the regional economy. (p. 103)

This in turn means selectively challenging the "supremacy of the national market" where that restricts the capacity to build strong regional economies. It also means confronting what economist Thomas Michael Power (1988) called a "narrow, market-oriented, quantitative definition of economics" in favor of one that gives priority to cultural, aesthetic, and ecological quality (p. 3). Economic quality, according to Power, is not synonymous with economic growth. The choice between growth or stagnation is, in Power's view, a false one that "leaves communities to choose between a disruptive explosion of commercial activity, which primarily benefits outsiders, while degrading values very important to residents and being left in the dust and decay of economic decline" (p. 174). There are alternative ways to develop that do not sell off the qualities that make particular communities desirable in the first place. Among these, Power proposed "import substitution" whereby local needs are increasingly met by local resources, not by imported goods and services. Energy efficiency, for example, can displace expensive imports of petroleum, fuel oil, electricity, and natural gas. Dollars not exported out of the community then circulate within the local economy, creating a "multiplier effect" by stimulating local jobs and investment.

Power, like Jane Jacobs in her 1984 book *Cities and the Wealth of Nations*, argued for development

built around enterprising individuals and groups seeing a local opportunity and improvising, adapting, and substituting. Initially, these efforts start on a small scale and usually aim to serve a local market. (p. 186)

This approach stands in clear contrast to the standard model of economic development whereby communities attempt to lure outside industry and capital by lowering local taxes and regulations and providing free services, all of which lower the quality of the community.

The development of place-focused economies requires questioning old economic dogmas. The theory of free trade, for example, originated in an agrarian world in which state boundaries were relatively imperme-

able and capital flows stopped at national frontiers (Daly, 1993; Daly and Cobb, 1989, pp. 209–235; Morris, 1990). These conditions no longer hold. Goods, services, and capital now wash around the world, dissolving national boundaries and sovereignty. Labor (i.e., people) and communities, however, are not so mobile. Workers in the developed world are forced to compete with cheap labor elsewhere, with the result of a sharp decline in workers' income (Batra, 1993). For previously prosperous communities, free trade means economic decline and the accompanying social decay now evident throughout much of the United States.

In place of free trade, World Bank economist Herman Daly and theologian John Cobb recommend "balanced trade" that limits capital mobility and restricts the amount that a nation can borrow by importing more than its exports (Daly and Cobb, 1989, p. 231). To restore competitiveness where it has been lost, they recommend enforcing national laws designed to prevent economic concentration (p. 291). To build resilient regional economies, they recommend enabling communities to bid for the purchase of local industries against outside buyers. To the argument that international capital is necessary for the development of third and fourth world economies, they respond that

we have come, as have many others, to the painful conclusion that very little of First World development effort in the Third World, and even less of business investment, has been actually beneficial to the majority of the Third World's people. . . . For the most part the Third World would have been better off without international investment and aid [which] destroyed the self-sufficiency of nations and rendered masses of their formerly self-reliant people unable to care for themselves. (pp. 289–90)

Daly and Cobb believe that economies should serve communities rather than elusive and mythical goals of economic growth.

Why does the idea that economies ought to support communities sound so utopian? The answer, I think, has to do with how fully we have accepted the radical inversion of purposes by which society is shaped to fit the economy instead of the economy being tailored to fit the society. Human needs are increasingly secondary to those of the abstractions of markets and growth. People need, among other things, healthy food, shelter, clothing, good work to do, friends, music, poetry, good books, a vital civic culture, animals, and wildness. But we are increasingly offered fantasy for reality, junk for quality, convenience for self-reliance, consump-

tion for community, and stuff rather than spirit. Business spends \$120 billion each year to convince us that this is good, while virtually nothing is spent informing us what other alternatives we have or what we have lost in the process. Our economy has not, on the whole, fostered largeness of heart or spirit. It has not satisfied the human need for meaning. It is neither sustainable nor sustaining.

THE POLITICS OF PLACE

Taking the environment seriously means rethinking how our politics and civic life fit the places we inhabit. It makes sense, in Daniel Kemmis's (1990) words, "to begin with the place, with a sense of what it is, and then try to imagine a way of being public which would fit the place" (p. 41). I do not think it is a coincidence that voter apathy has reached near epidemic proportions at the same time that our sense of place has withered and community-scaled economies have disintegrated. As with the economy, we have surrendered control of large parts of our lives to distant powers.

Rebuilding place-focused politics will require revitalizing the idea of citizenship rooted in the local community. Democracy, as John Dewey (1954) observed, "must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (p. 213). But neighborly communities have been eviscerated by the physical imposition of freeways, shopping malls, the commercial strip, and mind-numbing sprawl. The idea of the neighborly community has receded from our minds as the centralization of power and wealth has advanced. But neither vital communities nor democracy are compatible with economic and political centralization, from either the right or the left.

We need an ecological concept of citizenship rooted in the understanding that activities that erode soils, waste resources, pollute, destroy biological diversity, and degrade the beauty and integrity of landscapes are forms of theft from the commonwealth as surely as is bank robbery. Ecological vandalism undermines future prosperity and democracy alike. For too long we have tried to deal with resource abuse from the top down and have pitifully little to show for our efforts and money. The problem, as Aldo Leopold (1991) noted, is that for conservation to become "real and important" it must "grow from the bottom up" (p. 300). It must, in other words, become fundamental to the day-to-day lives of millions of people, not just to those few professional resource managers working in public agencies.

An ecologically literate people, engaged in and by its place, will discover ways to conserve resources. Like citizens in Osage, Iowa, they will learn how to implement energy-efficiency programs that save thousands of dollars per household. They will discover ways to save farms through "community supported agriculture," where people pay farmers directly for a portion of their produce. They will limit absentee ownership of farmland and enable young farmers to buy farms. They will find the means to save historic and ecologically important landscapes. They will develop procedures to accommodate environmentalists and loggers, as did the residents of Missoula, Montana. They may even discover, as did residents of the Mondragon area of Spain or the state of Kerala in India, how to successfully address larger issues of equitable development (Whyte and Whyte, 1988; Franke and Chasin, 1991).

We are not without models and ideas, but we lack the vision of politics as something other than a game of winners and losers fought out by factions with irreconcilable private interests. The idea that politics is little more than the pursuit of self-interest is embedded in American political tradition at least from the time James Madison wrote *Federalist Paper 10*. It is an idea, however, that tends to breed the very behavior it purports only to describe. In the words of political scientist Steven Kelman (1988), "Design your institution to assume self-interest, then and you may get more self-interest. And the more self-interest you get, the more draconian the institutions must become to prevent the generation of bad policies" (p. 51). Kelman proposed that institutions be designed not merely to restrain the unbridled pursuit of self-interest but to promote "public spirited behavior" in which "people see government as an appropriate forum for the display of the concern for others." The norm of public spiritedness also changes how people define their self-interest. This is, I believe, what Vaclav Havel (1992) meant when he described "genuine politics" as "a matter of serving those around us: serving the community, and serving those who will come after us" (p. 6). The roots of genuine politics are moral, originating in the belief that what we do matters deeply and is recorded "somewhere above us."

Is it utopian to believe that our politics can rise to public spiritedness and genuine service? I think not. Evidence shows that we are in fact considerably more public spirited than we have been led to believe, not always and everywhere to be sure, but more often than a cynical reading of human behavior would show (Kelman, 1988, p. 43, notes 38-41). On the other hand, it is utopian to believe that the politics of narrow self-

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interest will enable us to avert the catastrophes on the horizon that can be forestalled only by foresight and collective action.

♦ Conclusion ♦

Western civilization irrupted on the earth like a fever, causing, in historian Frederick Turner's (1980) words, "a crucial, profound estrangement of the inhabitants from their habitat." We have become, Turner continued, "a rootless, restless people with a culture of superhighways precluding rest and a furious penchant for tearing up last year's improvements in a ceaseless search for some gaudy ultimate" (p. 5). European explorers arrived in the "new world" spiritually unprepared for the encounter with the place, its animals, and its peoples. American settlers' discontent spread to native peoples who were caught in the way. None were able to resist either the firepower or the seductions of technology.

More than just a symbol of a diseased spiritual state, that fever is now palpably evident in the rising temperature of the earth itself. A world that takes its environment seriously must come to terms with the roots of its problems, beginning with the place called home. This is not a simple-minded return to a mythical past but a patient and disciplined effort to learn, and in some ways, to relearn the arts of inhabitation. These will differ from place to place, reflecting various cultures, values, and ecologies. They will, however, share a common sense of rootedness in a particular locality.

We are caught in the paradox that we cannot save the world without saving particular places. But neither can we save our places without national and global policies that limit predatory capital and that allow people to build resilient economies, to conserve cultural and biological diversity, and to preserve ecological integrities. Without waiting for national governments to act, there is a lot that can be done to equip people to find their place and dig in.

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