

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

Chapter 1

Go Light

“Hope is not optimism, which expects things to turn out well, but something rooted in the conviction that there is good worth working for.” – Vaclav Havel, Irish playwright

Last June, while visiting with Wes Jackson and his wife at the Land Institute, in Salina, Kansas, Wes said something, almost casually, over a lunch of salad and ham sandwiches that has been on mind ever since. He said: “We live at the most important moment in human history.”

I assumed that Wes meant we live at a decisive moment of *action*. That the various challenges confronting humanity – climate change, species extinction, energy depletion, soil erosion, ecosystem service decline, global poverty, population pressure, water and food shortages, plus many more – now require, like a long line of airplanes waiting to land at an over-busy airport, attention – *immediate attention*. Time is short. Hurry up.

I wasn’t surprised, therefore, when Wes told us that after a commencement address he had given the previous month at Washington College, in Maryland, in which he told the students they were “the children of depletion” and warned them of the inevitable contraction of American society upcoming, the president of the college came rushing up to him after his speech sputtering: “You can’t say those things!”

Indeed. That’s the trouble with calls to action these days – they can’t avoid the umbra of doom-and-gloom. I’ve been there myself. In fact, I’ve heard the mantra of ‘Trouble Coming’ so often now that I’ve begun to suffer from the early signs of what I call “Future Fatigue.” A dispiriting affliction that often results in listlessness and apathy, if not caught quickly, usually by sticking one’s fingers in one’s ears, it can spread quickly, sometimes disabling whole families and communities.

But when I read Wes’ commencement address two months later, reprinted as an article titled “The Next 49 Years” in the Institute’s quarterly Land Report, I understood his comment to be less a call to arms than a meditation on our moment in time.

“In painting you this bleak picture, I hope you understand that I am honoring you as adults,” he told the students. “You were born on the up slope of energy and economic growth, but much of your life is likely to be on the down slope in the use of nonrenewable energy.”

That’s because we’re depleting the “five pools of carbon” – soil, wood, coal, oil, and natural gas – at an unsustainable rate, Wes writes. We’ve burned up, for instance, half the planet’s known reserves of oil – 1 *trillion* barrels – in less than a century. Technology is not likely to ride to the rescue either. Energy, after all, cannot be created or destroyed – according to the First Law of Thermodynamics – just transformed. So, when sources of energy-rich carbon go into decline, as they will, we either we find a suitable replacement – and we haven’t yet – or society goes into decline too. On this point, Wes is not sanguine.

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

“Down-powering won’t be easy. It will require sacrifice,” he goes on to say. “Realize that [us old farts] won’t be around to experience the consequences of reduced energy and climate change. Most will be dead, you won’t. You will be going through the greatest and most important transition in human history.”

In January, 2008, I had a chance to query Wes once more on this topic, this time publicly as part The Quivira Coalition’s Annual Conference. “What,” I asked him, “did living at the most important moment in human history actually *mean*?”

“It means we have to practice restraint,” he replied.

“That’s not something humans do very well, of course. But it’s something we’ve got to learn or things will get much worse.”

Restraint.

Good luck. Two generations ago, during an era of privation and global conflict, restraint was not only possible but often well-practiced. Gas rationing. Victory Gardens. Meat twice a week. Prudence and frugality ruled. But everything changed after World War II, as we know. The arrow of Progress tipped upward dramatically. We were encouraged at all levels to be unrestrained in all that we did, whether it was how far we traveled, how much we ate, what we built, or where we sprawled. “Just Do It” was the unofficial motto of my generation, courtesy of an ad agency.

Progress, we were instructed, had no limits and no consequences. Enjoy the party – there won’t be a Hangover. As a result, excess was hard-wired into our culture, which is why I’m not hugely optimistic about the chances of restraining ourselves now, at this crucial moment in history. Hopeful, yes – because we’ve got to restrain our appetites sooner or later – but optimistic, no.

Instead, I’ve had another “r-word” on my mind: resilience. For a while, I wasn’t sure what the word meant exactly. All I knew for certain was that the word ‘sustainability’ had worn me out. It is used so frequently and in so many different ways, for so many different purposes, that I had no clue any longer to its meaning. Worse, I developed a growing suspicion that ‘sustainability’ has come to mean ‘sustain’ our excessive way-of-life. Were exchanging light bulbs or driving a hybrid car really acts of sustainability? And don’t even get me started on the word ‘green.’

Frankly, these words describe little more than the tweaking of the margins of our lifestyles – followed by a prayer that we earn a different future as a result. But as Einstein famously quipped, doing the same thing over and over while hoping for a different outcome is a definition of insanity.

So I went looking for another word.

I found it among the language of land health. I love the words range professionals use to describe the elements of ecosystem function: integrity, diversity, resistance, thresholds,

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

transitions, recovery, and so forth. That's where I found resilience. It describes the ability of a community to recover from change or misfortune – how it handles surprise, in other words.

And Nature is full of surprises. How a community of plants or animals 'bounces back' from an unexpected flood, drought, disease outbreak, fire, hurricane or other perturbation depends largely on its health – its ability to resist degradation while the event is occurring and its capacity to recover once the surprise has ended.

Resilience applies to humans too, of course, and not just our physical well-being. It applies to social, cultural, and economic lives too – think about bankruptcy, or a crippling snow storm. In fact, the idea of resilience came to me in the aftermath of Katrina's devastating blow to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. Would those communities be able to recover their former vibrancy? Were they resilient? Were *we* resilient where we live? Could we bounce back from a similar shock?

The reasons for wondering should be obvious by now – climate change, Peak Oil, water and food shortages, etc. – I won't go into them here. Let me just say I believe we're entering *The Age of Consequences*, in which we are already grappling with consequences levied by our 20th century profligacy. I have little doubt that *The Age of Consequences* holds many surprises in store for us, most of them unpleasant I suspect. Therefore, as we move farther into the 21st century I think this question of resilience will become increasingly important.

Restraint. Resilience.

There's one more "r-word" that's been on my mind: recovery. I like the word because much of what I've been doing over the past decade with The Quivira Coalition is to help people recover important parts of our lives that have been lost to industrialism: grassfed food, herding, healthy riparian areas, collaborative relationships, a place in nature and so on. This fits with the dictionary definitions of recovery, which include: regain, reuse, restore, to find again, save from loss.

It doesn't mean 'return' or 'go back' to something preexisting. Rather, it's a form of rediscovery, as well as an updating. Grassfed food is a good example – humans ate grassfed meat for most of our history, until the corn industry convinced us that a steak tasted better if the animal spent time in a feedlot. But research indicates that grassfed food is better for you, for a variety of reasons. So, 'recovering' grassfed food means regaining an important part of ourselves.

It means, I believe, recovering what is "normal" about being human – what worked for millennia and therefore is hard-wired into our essence. What we're experiencing right now is not "normal" in many respects, as I think we're beginning to discover, thanks principally to the amazing infusion of fossil fuel energy into our lives over the last century. Our notions of "normal" – including the idea of Progress – have been turned on its ear in very short order. That's why some folks, such as organic farmers, have been "opting out" of the system for years, to use Joel Salatin's term, preferring to 'recover' what worked before, only different.

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

I like to think of it as a new agrarianism, but with laptops and cell phones.

James Kunstler, author of *'The Long Emergency'* describes this issue in starker terms, when he warns us that when the contraction of society hits we'll be rooting around in the dustbin of history in an attempt to recover things we need – such as railroads and a sustainable agriculture. And he thinks we need to move quickly – he declared 2007 to be officially the start of the Long Emergency.

Restraint. Resilience. Recovery.

I think these Three R's will dominate our lives in the 21st century. I could be wrong, however. Perhaps nanotechnology will save our hides, but I'm not betting on it. Nobody knows what's coming precisely. That's why I've decided to start a Chronicle: to track this important moment in human history – and to leave a record behind for my children, and their children, about what happened.

In the meantime, I'll borrow the poem that Wes Jackson used to close his "The Next 49 Years" essay. It captures this moment in time perfectly – as Wes would no doubt had in mind:

For the Children, by Gary Snyder (from his collection *Turtle Island*):

The rising hills, the slopes,
of statistics
lie before us.
The steep climb
of everything, going up,
up, as we all
go down.

In the next century
or the one beyond that,
they say,
are valleys, pastures,
we can meet there in peace
if we make it.

To climb these coming crests
one word to you, to
you and your children:

stay together
learn the flowers
go light