

# EarthMatters

*Inspiring people to take responsibility for Earth.*

VOLUME 18, NUMBER 2

Winter 2012

## WHO'S BUILDING THE DO-IT-OURSELVES ECONOMY



*By Sarah van Gelder and Doug Pibel*

Corbyn Hightower was doing everything right. She worked long hours selling natural skin care products, flying between cities to meet customers, staying in posh hotels. She pulled down a salary that provided her family of five with a comfortable home in a planned community, a Honda SUV, health insurance, and regular shopping trips for the best natural foods, clothes, shoes, and toys.

Then the recession hit. Her commissions dried up, and the layoff soon followed. Life for Corbyn, her stay-at-home husband, and three children changed quickly.

First the family moved to a low-rent house down the street from a homeless shelter. They dropped cable TV, Wi-Fi, gym membership, and most of the shopping. Giving up health insurance was the most difficult step—it seemed to Corbyn that she was failing to provide for her young daughters. Giving up the car was nearly as difficult.

As our economy goes through tectonic shifts, this sort of adaptation is becoming the new normal. Security for our families will increasingly depend on rebuilding our local and regional economies and on our own adaptability and skills at working together. At the same time, we need government to work on behalf of struggling families and to make the investments that create jobs now and opportunities for coming generations. That will require popular movements of ordinary people, willing to push back against powerful moneyed interests.

So how do we create an economy that provides dignified livelihoods to all who are willing to work, without undermining the natural systems we, and our children, rely on?

A real solution requires a vision that is both humble in terms of the material wealth we can expect and ambitious about the fairness, mutual support, and quality of life we can build.

Here is a three-part plan for building real prosperity in an age of limits:

### 1. Local Economies, Local Ecosystems

The corporate economy has failed to offer economic security to most Americans and has undermined the environment and the living standards of people around the world. Strong local and regional economies are the way to a sustainable and resilient recovery. Small businesses actually create more jobs and innovation than big corporations. And entrepreneurs with long-term stakes in their local environment and economy have both the means and the motivation to protect them.

Buy local. By buying goods and services locally and regionally, we keep money circulating in the Main Street economy, where new jobs are most likely to be created. Shop at a big box store, and the money goes to corporate headquarters almost immediately. Buy local food and your money stays home. State and local governments, too, can strengthen their economies, and

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# MIKE'S MESSAGE

A NOTE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**Setting an example is not the main means of influencing others; it is the only means.**  
— Albert Einstein

Recently I had a phone conversation with Lena Rotenberg, NWEI volunteer and co-founder of Simplicity Matters, an NWEI Partner Organization operating near Washington, DC. During our conversation, she relayed a message that was music (mostly 70s rock) to my ears: "95 percent of my actions geared toward sustainability can be traced directly back to the influences of NWEI. The other 5 percent are inspired by my friends."

Who among us doesn't want to hear positive affirmation on the value of our work? In addition to Lena's choices to reduce her personal impact, her actions include co-founding Simplicity Matters, which has engaged thousands of people in NWEI discussion courses. She also recently co-founded a food co-op in her neighborhood. She indicated both of these experiences were inspired by her participation in NWEI programs. Lena, like thousands of other NWEI "alumni", has magnified her impact. The ripples caused when joined with others serve to amplify the effect each of us can have in creating change.

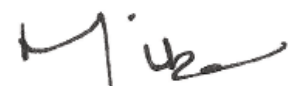
Working with our board and staff, NWEI has spent the better part of this last year in a strategic planning process. We have been exploring what it would take to make Lena's experience the norm for every NWEI participant. Our metrics of impact indicate a large majority of NWEI participants experience new ways of seeing and acting in the world following their discussion course or EcoChallenge involvement. Those who stay engaged with us over time are likely to have an even larger impact on the world. Yet, our dated paper registration process results in our not having contact information for 80 percent of our discussion course participants. The math is pretty simple; having a more effective registration process alone will enable us to inspire greater impacts amongst the 6,000+ people each year who participate in an NWEI course but don't receive any follow up from us as an organization. Being able to reach back out to participants would allow us to provide them with additional resources, engage them in further action on behalf of the planet, and engage new members and donors.

We want to strengthen results with current participants, as well as continue to engage a younger audience (those who are or will be the future agents of change

in our communities). One way we can achieve this is by upgrading our programs to be compatible with today's online technologies. This doesn't mean we leave behind the quality hard copy course books we are best known for, but it does mean we are challenged with integrating online tools to enhance our work. A number of simple online tools and processes will help us build greater awareness of NWEI's programs, simplify the experience of organizing discussion courses, promote the availability of quality content in audio and video forms, and create more opportunities for advocacy and connections amongst NWEI members and course participants.

We will double our impact and reach 20,000 people each year. Just imagine 20,000 people like Lena out there positively influencing others to live a simpler, richer, and better life! Keep an eye out in the months to come for more details on how our plan will unfold and how you can be part of its success. Here is to more and more of us setting an example and influencing others!

Warm regards,



Mike Mercer

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**DO-IT-OURSELVES ECONOMY**, *cont. from page 1*

ultimately their tax bases, by buying as locally as possible.

Bank local, too. Capital is the lifeblood of enterprise. When banks are located in the community, they come to know local businesses and what sorts of loans are likely to work. When banks hold the loans, rather than sell them, they have an incentive to make wise loans. Credit unions, community-rooted banks, and state banks invest in the local economy, instead of siphoning off our bank deposits to use for global speculation.

Start with strengths. Under the old economic development strategy, communities compete with each other for jobs by offering corporations ever greater tax breaks and concessions on health and safety regulations and union rights. A more successful strategy is to build economies from the grassroots up, starting with existing assets. For some communities, their primary asset might be a vibrant local arts scene. For others, it's a natural resource, like forests or farmland. Or it might be a hospital, university, high-tech enterprise, or other "anchor institution" that isn't going away.

Start by finding ways to turn these assets into sustainable livelihoods. Then look for ways to link these core enterprises to local customers, vendors, a skilled labor pool, and so on.

Use wasted resources. Instead of demolishing and landfilling obsolete buildings, local entrepreneurs are creating jobs by disassembling them and selling components. Other common wastes: used clothes and books and repairable appliances. Unharvested fruit trees. Church kitchens that sit empty most of the week but could be health department certified for food processing start-ups. Methane from landfills, which could heat homes instead of the climate. Front yards that could be farmed. Each wasted resource could be transformed into a job.

Do it cooperatively. Well-paid workers are a community asset,

and even more so when they own their workplaces. Home health care workers, house cleaners, grocery store clerks, and laundry workers have all become worker-owners of successful cooperatives. These workers tend to spend their paychecks, and with a steady family income they are more able to contribute to the well-being of their community.

Allow communities to control their resources. Community-controlled forests are more likely to be sustainably managed than corporate-controlled ones; sustainable agriculture is more labor-intensive but less polluting.

Keep ownership human. When owners are workers, customers, or the community at large, an enterprise can operate in accordance with multiple values, such as human well-being, the good of future generations, and ecological health. Corporate owners are constrained by law to put profits first.

## **2. Redefining Middle-Class**

Building the local and regional economy will create real prosperity and keep the benefits circulating among ordinary people. But we are approaching the end of an era of cheap energy and seemingly limitless growth. To live within our means, we'll need to produce and consume less stuff. That may mean less paid work available, at least in some sectors of the economy, so it makes sense to share those jobs and work fewer hours.

Many Americans work too much and are starved for downtime. A shorter workweek could benefit them while opening new jobs for the unemployed. Productivity increases when workers aren't overstretched. Profits now going to the wealthiest could be distributed to workers so they could afford to work fewer hours and have more time for the rest of life.

Working less also means we have more time to do things for ourselves.

Learning new DIY skills and building relationships with friends and neighbors builds greater self-reliance and offers

opportunities to develop multiple facets of ourselves.

And frequent exchanges among neighbors help reweave a community fabric that has been badly frayed by overstressed lives. All this means we can live with less money, so we can afford to spend less time at a job, which also becomes less central as a source of identity. And these rich networks and practical skills enhance our resilience as we face an uncertain future.

## **3. A Movement to Rebuild the Dream**

We are still a wealthy country. We could use our tax dollars to put Americans to work replacing obsolete energy, water, transportation, and waste systems with infrastructure that can serve us in the resource-constrained times ahead.

We could invest in universal health coverage, which offers people the security to risk launching new businesses and helps make shorter workweeks more feasible. We could fully fund education and job training.

We could save money by cutting the bloated military budget, oversized prison populations, and the drug war. And we'd have the money if everyone—including the wealthiest Americans and large corporations—paid taxes at the rates they paid during the Clinton administration.

To get these sorts of changes, we need the American government to work for all of us, not just for corporations.

Powerful moneyed interests won't willingly give back the power that has allowed them to acquire most of America's wealth. We need strong people's movements to get government to work for ordinary Americans. That's the way American workers won the 8-hour day, women secured the right to vote, and African Americans ended segregation.

Enlightened politicians may cooperate with these movements, but few will lead them. We the people—through unions, community associations, advocacy groups, and local

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Photo by Stacy Bender



# Knowing Your Place: Thinking Like Aldo Leopold

By Richard Kyte

This morning I'm sitting on the patio of a home in Colorado Springs looking west at Pikes Peak. The mountains stretching to the north and south of the Peak make up part of what is known as the "Front Range." It's a beautiful view, and the patio on which I am sitting is designed to take advantage of it.

The view is not without discomfort, however. The casual visitor to the area cannot help but notice what many of the residents seem to overlook; namely, that one of the mountains, just a little east and north of Pikes Peak, has had its top third removed, so that it presents to the viewer a large flat surface, like an upturned face, geometrically inconsonant with the neighboring peaks. An inquiry to my host reveals that a mining company holds a lease on the property, and that the mountain was strip mined to acquire a pink colored rock known as "Pikes Peak granite," used for landscaping in the region. In fact, the patio on which I am sitting is bordered by this very same rock, which may have been mined from the mountain we are viewing.

This is the sort of thing Aesop might have written a fable about: building a house to look out over the mountains but destroying the mountains to build the house.

Most of our assaults on the natural world are not as directly illogical as this, but many are close: using boats to catch

fish in the Gulf, but killing the fish with the oil used to power the boats; creating a resort in the wilderness, but cutting down the forests to make room for more lodging; building a cabin on a remote northern lake, only to discover that the lake has more weekend traffic than the street at home; putting up feeders to attract birds because we've destroyed all their natural food sources with herbicides.

What kind of ethical obligation do we have towards mountains—or lakes, rivers, streams, forests, and meadows? In Aldo Leopold's famous essay, "Thinking Like a Mountain," he describes the thought that came to him while working for the U. S. Forest Service in Arizona: our efforts to shape the natural world to our liking are often done out of narrow-minded interests and an inability to appreciate the far-reaching consequences of our actions. What results is frequently counter to our own interests.

He recounts the time he shot a wolf and her cubs on the side of a mountain, a common practice at the time in the effort to increase the size of the deer herd: "I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes - something known only to her and to the mountain. . . I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. And perhaps

with better cause, for while a buck pulled down by wolves can be replaced in two or three years, a range pulled down by too many deer may fail of replacement in as many decades."

Leopold's enduring lesson for us is that the basis for living ethically in the world is to see fully—and accurately—the relationships among things. In *A Sand County Almanac* he sums it up this way: "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

Selective perception comes easily to most of us. We tend to see what we want to see and not to see the things that are inconvenient. What really requires effort is unselective perception—seeing what is actually there to see. It's hard because it may force us to change the way we live. But that's what we do when we love someone—or something. We adapt ourselves to preserve the relationship, and ultimately our lives are richer because of it. ■

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Richard Kyte is Director of the D. B. Reinhart Institute for Ethics in Leadership at Viterbo University in La Crosse, Wisconsin. He writes a regular column for the La Crosse Tribune titled "The Ethical Life." This piece was originally published in the La Crosse Tribune August 1, 2010.

# NWEI Community News

## Are you hungry for change?

We are pleased to announce the launch of our newest discussion course, *Hungry for Change: Food, Ethics and Sustainability*.

*Hungry for Change* offers you an opportunity to dig deeper into our global food systems and the parts we play in them. In a flexible four to six session format, this discussion course challenges participants to examine their roles, not only as consumers of food, but also as creators -- of food, of systems, and of the world we all live in.

Whereas *Menu for the Future* focuses on the "you" in our relationships and roles in food systems, *Hungry for Change* focus on the systems. The course sessions emphasize the complicated interconnections among politics, health, social justice, ethics, and environmental impact in food systems, while also examining how we contribute to and what we can do to change these systems. Also, the new course features action plans and suggested group activities, which further help participants to connect to these larger

issues and take action for good. As one participant has commented, *Hungry for Change* has a "different flavor" than *Menu for the Future*, one that takes conversations interesting places they haven't gone before!

You can order your copy of *Hungry for Change* for \$21 by calling us at 503.227.2807 or by ordering online at [www.nwei.org/order-form](http://www.nwei.org/order-form).

## North American Gathering Recap

In September, NWEI hosted its bi-annual North American gathering in Port Townsend, Washington. This year's theme was "If Not Me, Then Who? Building Healthy Communities and Local Food Systems One Conversation at a Time." With over 90 people in attendance, the gathering was an opportunity to connect, reflect and act on creating healthier communities and more local and sustainable food systems. Workshops explored permaculture, youth involvement in the sustainable food movement, discussion course organizing how-to's, a sneak preview of NWEI's newest food, ethics

and sustainability discussion course book *Hungry for Change*, as well as water, zero waste and local investing opportunities. Keynote speakers were Kurt Hoelting, author of *Circumference of Home: One Man's Year Long Quest for a Radically Local Life* and Will Allen, founder and CEO of Growing Power, a farm and community food center in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Allen's talk "The Good Food Revolution: The Power of Community Agriculture" drew some 500 people and came on the eve of the local Washington State University Farm Tour. For a full recap, visit our blog where guest conference blogger Shelly Randall offers her day-by-day recap of what was an inspiring weekend for all: <http://blog.nwei.org/category/the-north-american-network/north-american-gathering-2011-blog-series/>.

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## DO-IT-OURSELVES ECONOMY, cont. from page 3

political groups—will have to set our own agenda and insist that government respond.

### The Do-It-Ourselves Economy

Corbyn's family has not had it easy since they slipped into poverty. They sold their SUV to cover rent and other necessities, and Corbyn blogs about the challenges of biking in the rain and in the blistering heat of the Sacramento area. But she also celebrates getting in shape, saving money, and the discoveries she and her children make when they travel at a slower pace.

Her 12-year-old tells Corbyn she loves her life. Who wouldn't want chickens in the backyard, long bike rides with the

family, and picking apples to take to the homeless shelter?

When Corbyn Hightower's financial world fell apart, a ragtag community came together to show how a lively neighborhood grows new livelihoods.

"I think we have to reinvent 'poor,'" Corbyn says. "Most everyone in my life is enduring new poverty. ... It's an unfamiliar and scary leap. ... And if it turns out that some of these changes feel good, well, then it's a win-win. The Great Recession is a watershed time for my generation, possibly the era that will live on to define us."

Many of us have stories like Corbyn's from our family histories or maybe from right now—stories of hard work,

stubborn resilience, and neighbors helping neighbors. Stories of people waking up each day doing what had to be done for the children.

Our descendants need those qualities from us—not acquiescence to powerful interests or passive acceptance of a no-longer-tenable status quo. Our descendants need us to be as radical and as tenacious as our ancestors were. ■

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Sarah van Gelder and Doug Pibel wrote this article for *New Livelihoods*, the Fall 2011 issue of YES! Magazine. Sarah is executive editor and Doug is managing editor of YES!

# Reflecting on a very successful 2011 EcoChallenge!

This was a record year for our EcoChallenge. A total of 1,533 individuals participated—more than 3 times the total from the previous two years combined! As always, we were amazed and inspired by the stories of change, and thought we'd share a few of the insights we enjoyed this year:

In his challenge to spend less time in front of the computer, college student Benjamin Guy found that "screens just seem to occupy so much of our livelihood. We need to be able to maintain a certain amount of distance so that we can appreciate the things around us instead of images of those things."

EcoChallenger Susan Joseph Rack found an unexpected insight in her transition to CFL light bulbs: "Some time ago, I noticed a pang of impatience when I turned on a light and the CFL bulb hesitated a second before going on. Now I hardly notice it. I find that that brief hesitation slowed me down a bit, has

taught me that rushing is not necessary. A simple blessing from a CFL bulb."

And new bike commuter Greg Karpicus discovered that "there is a big difference between preaching about going green and actually following through. One makes you sweatier but it is so much more rewarding."

We are particularly grateful for the incredible participation by Multnomah County employees – in all, 565 individuals from 50 different Multnomah County teams took on the EcoChallenge!

We also loved sharing the insights, humor, photos and recipes of our Featured Bloggers – Courtney Carver, Bill Gerlach, Shelly Randall, Stacey Ho, Lauren Savaglio and Kathleen McDade. Visit the Featured Bloggers page to explore their words of wisdom.

This year's challenge brought home the power of story in helping to shift our individual and collective behaviors toward the future we aspire to. Stories



Mark Lyles installs a rain barrel as part of his EcoChallenge

make change more personal, more doable and—in the end—shape our culture and become the norm for how life can be lived. Thank you to all who participated in the EcoChallenge for your inspiring work and we're looking forward to creating more stories of change with each of you!

If you were not able to join us in the EcoChallenge this year, mark your calendars for October 1-15, for EcoChallenge 2012. ■

## 2011 EcoChallenge Facts and Stats

- 1,533 people participated in the 2011 EcoChallenge.
- 190 Teams took on the EcoChallenge.
- 56 Fundraisers registered to collect pledges during their EcoChallenge
- Oregon's Governor, John Kitzhaber, and first lady, Cylvia Hayes, took on an EcoChallenge to ditch disposable bags, cups and water bottles.
- Multnomah County, Oregon engaged 565 County employees in the EcoChallenge.
- News stories on the EcoChallenge were featured on KATU's evening news, Oregon Public Broadcasting, the Oregonian, and The Portland Tribune.
- Over \$20,000 in EcoChallenge pledges were raised by NWEI's volunteers, board and staff!

## Many Thanks to Our 2011 EcoChallenge Sponsors!

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Store, Whole Foods Market, YMCA of the Columbia-Willamette

## And a Very Special Thank You to Our EcoChallenge Fundraisers!

The following people raised \$20,995 for NWEI by participating as fundraisers and collecting pledges during their EcoChallenges:

Bonnie Altshuld; Tami Boardman; Rich Bruer; Carolyn Buckner; Lacy Cagle; Sarah Cleveland; Carrie Ella Farrar; Tobey Fitch; Crystal Glanz-Kreutz; Marian Hammond; Jeffrey Harvey; David Haslip; Kimberly Hauze; Stacey Ho; Todd Hutchinson; Kathy Jubitz; Erin Lakin; Elise Lind; Kerry Lyles; Mark Lyles; Bradford McKeown; Deb McNamara; Mike Mercer; Leanna Murphy; Rob Nathan; Eric Park; Monica Pham; Doug Rich; Roseanne Rivers; Alysa Rose; Erin Simons; Kim Smith; Linda Smith; Carolyn White; Charlie Wilson; and Linda Wolff.

## NWEI Partner News:

*Ann Deupree, former co-chair of the South Durham Green Neighbors, an NWEI Partner, submitted this update on the work happening in their community:*

Last spring several members of the South Durham Green Neighbors in Durham, NC, took the NWEI course *Discovering a Sense of Place*. Only one of us grew up in this area, and we were all inspired by the chapter that required us to learn more about our local resources.

Our interest in our own source of drinking water was aroused.

When our co-leader Leanna Murphy Dono volunteered to attend the NWEI North American Gathering in September and to make a presentation, she had an opportunity to meet the authors of a course called *Our Watershed* from the WSU Cooperative Extension. This course focuses on the Pacific Northwest, but much of the material is relevant to any geographical region of the US. We are now enthusiastically researching

resources to adapt this course for our Falls and Neuse River watersheds, since Durham includes a ridge dividing these two areas.

We have the support of the Public Education Coordinator of the Public Works Dept. of the City of Durham. A UNC-Greensboro grad student is rounding up materials for us to use. Our group plans to take the course next spring, using these materials to learn more about the water that flows through our faucets.

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Many thanks to all of our donors and members who contributed to NWEI this summer and fall!

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