

## **Transition culture, social tolerance and moral courage: Why permaculture activists must work for human rights and social justice**

By Lisa Rayner

Permaculture began as a foresighted response to the needs of energy descent. Initially, permaculturalists focused on food production. As the movement has evolved, it has begun to merge with the Transition Culture movement. There is an emerging awareness of the social side of descent culture among permaculture activists. Transition Culture spurns individualist survivalism and emphasizes the need for neighbors to work together to make our communities more resilient. The Transition movement is rooted in community.

As high-energy societies like ours descend from the peak and experience accelerating levels of economic and political instability, we are at risk of losing centuries-worth of human rights gains. It's a well-known fact that resource scarcity leads to conflict and the mass migration of refugees, which in turn have an unfortunate tendency to inflame xenophobic, in-group/out-group tendencies in human nature, with a resultant scapegoating and persecution of minorities.

Permaculture is well-suited to take on the mantle of human rights in the Transition Era. Permaculture ethics include "Care of People" and "Share the Surplus," which encompass the psychological, social, political and economic dimensions of human life. Permaculturalists have an opportunity to bring to the table new approaches to social justice issues. Permaculture practitioners value diversity and the opportunity to work with the inherent characteristics of all living beings. We understand that to impose conformity is to work against nature. We also know that each function is supported by many (diverse) elements, and that there is much creativity to be found in the principle that the problem (of diversity) is the solution.

Just as the time is now to implement core permaculture strategies such as creating soil, planting trees and building water catchments, it's also the time to work on repairing human relationships at the community level. Ideally, these elements ought to be in place before a local crisis occurs. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 demonstrates the chaos and suffering that can happen when a community lacks such social resiliency.

As we work to make our communities thriving places full of food forests and restored wild landscapes, I want to ensure that all the people who live in those places experience freedom and equality. My vision for the future does not include feudalism, warlords, slavery, pogroms or witch-burnings. I fear a return to a world in which women lack control over their bodies and lives, and where religious, ethnic and sexual minorities are socially shunned, economically marginalized or at risk of physical violence.

My fear is not an abstract concept based on news reports or the academic study of human history. It stems from multiple experiences of exclusion, intolerance, and emotional, physical and sexual abuse. I'm a bisexual, atheist woman who stutters. Throughout my

school years, I was the target of ostracization and bullying by my peers. I endured years of daily fear and depression and survived two suicide attempts when I was 18. As an adult, I survived sexual assault and domestic violence. I will live with post traumatic stress disorder for the rest of my life. As a permaculture practitioner, my vision for the future includes me, as well as others who know what it's like to be a target of victimization and exclusion. Because of the experiences I have lived through, I know that my work to establish a working local food system and a relocalized economy is not enough. I also volunteer my time working for expanded human and civil rights.

## **Our debt to the Enlightenment**

Despite the downsides of the European Enlightenment, such as extreme individualism and global capitalism's valuation of monetary gain for a fortunate few at the expense of exploited peoples and ecosystems, the Enlightenment also brought good developments for much of humanity, most notably a belief in cosmopolitanism -- a philosophy of social tolerance and inclusivity towards traditionally oppressed religious and social groups. The Enlightenment began in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and blossomed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It transformed feudal European societies in which Church and State were a single entity into semblances of democratic ones, however imperfect they continue to be. It ended the religious terrorism of the Inquisition and the bloody, protracted Catholic-Protestant wars of the Reformation. It expanded civil rights and liberties and promoted religious ecumenicalism. It instituted a conception of secular democracy that allowed members of ethnic, racial, and religious minority groups to begin to view themselves with dignity and to dare to envision themselves to someday become full and equal members of society.

The last few centuries has seen the unfolding of a succession of human and civil rights victories in societies which adopted Enlightenment values and political systems:

- freedom of religion, thought, speech, and the press
- the ending of indentured servitude and chattel slavery
- the gradual expansion of voting rights, first for non-propertied Christian white men, then men of color and lastly women
- labor and children's rights

Today the gains continue with the movements for equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, immigrant rights and members of unpopular minority religious groups like atheists and Wiccans.

However, the expansion of civil equality is not inevitable. Martin Luther King, Jr. made famous a quote by 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist Theodore Parker: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." It's a nice sentiment, but civil rights gains have never been given to anyone simply for the asking. Expanded rights have been obtained at great cost to the lives and health of generations of social justice activists. Many of these civil rights movements took decades to come to fruition. Many are not fully completed today. Furthermore, not everyone living in modern secular democracies accepts the cosmopolitan world view. Religious fundamentalists and other ideologues continue to promote belief in the absolute truth of their particular religious or ideological teachings and the idea that their holy texts should be the law of the land.

Moreover, peak oil theorists have pointed out that expansions of human rights happened concurrently with the Industrial Revolution, as Western societies first harnessed coal, and later petroleum and natural gas. The wealth gained from the expanding use of fossil energy allowed an ever greater percentage of people to participate in society in ways heretofore only experienced by members of the aristocratic classes. As they did so, the common people began to demand full inclusion in political and economic life. As remaining supplies of fossil fuels dwindle, the economic pie will contract. Globally, the “haves” will do everything in their power to protect their wealth from the “have-nots.” Moreover, during times of crisis, human beings have a tendency to fall back upon traditional religious and cultural beliefs that are not necessarily supportive of human diversity.

History demonstrates that reversals of rights happen on a regular basis. Wars erupt, political regimes go out of power and civilizations collapse:

- After the United States abandoned Reconstruction in the South, black people lost newly-gained rights like equality in public accommodations. The institution of Jim Crow laws forced blacks into “separate and unequal” lives under threat of race- and religion-based terrorism for another 100 years.
- Jews and gays enjoyed many new freedoms in Weimar Germany, only to end up in concentration camps within a decade after Germans elected Hitler to power.
- The 1994 Rwandan genocide shows how quickly neighbors can turn on one another in horrifyingly violent ways.
- After the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the Bush Administration rolled back numerous constitutional rights and endorsed the use of torture.
- During the first few chaotic days after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, local law enforcement and communications systems collapsed. White supremacists took advantage of the breakdown and shot an unknown number of black men, simply for being black.
- Today, women and girls in Afghanistan and Iraq have lost recently-acquired freedoms to go out in public without a male relative or to attend school. GLBT people are being executed by death squads.

Since Barack Obama became president of the United States, we have witnessed a series of murders by right-wing, anti-government zealots, including the killings of Mexican immigrants by border militia members, a security guard at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the assassination of a high-profile abortion provider, and the killing of random women by a fundamentalist Christian.

The Southern Poverty Law Center reports that, “Almost a decade after largely disappearing from public view, right-wing militias, ideologically driven tax defiers and sovereign citizens are appearing in large numbers around the country. ... A key difference this time is that the federal government — the entity that almost the entire radical right views as its primary enemy — is headed by a black man. That, coupled with high levels of non-white immigration and a decline in the percentage of whites overall in

America, has helped to racialize the Patriot movement, which in the past was not primarily motivated by race hate. ...

“‘This frequently happens when elections favor the political left and the society is seen as moving toward greater social equality or away from traditional societal hierarchies,’ Chip Berlet, a long-time analyst of the radical right at Political Research Associates, said in a June newsletter. ‘In this scenario, it is easier for right-wing demagogues to successfully demonize liberals,’ immigrants and others.”

The need to protect the values of secular cosmopolitanism will be essential during the chaos of energy descent. First, humans have a tendency to associate with others of similar characteristics, interests and values. Throughout human history, it has been easiest for people to identify most closely with kin groups. In today’s suburban car culture, for example, many people have little contact with their neighbors, who may be very unlike them culturally or religiously. Second, swelling numbers of refugees fleeing from war, rising sea levels, drought and other regional crises will lead to increased encounters between groups under conditions of resource scarcity and overpopulation. In *The Human Rights Reader: Major Political Essays, Speeches and Documents from the Bible to the Present*, philosopher Richard Rorty explains, “The tougher things are, the more you have to be afraid of, the more dangerous your situation, the less you can afford the time or effort to think about what things might be like for people with whom you do not immediately identify.” As the unfolding energy transition makes it necessary for neighbors to cooperate with one another to meet basic needs for food, shelter and health care, we will have to learn how to work together despite sometimes deep divisions in our cultural and religious value systems.

### **Community, inclusion and social tolerance**

As champions of rebuilding community, permaculturalists tend to emphasize the positives of closer associations with, and reliance upon, our neighbors. However, it is wise to remember that small, self-reliant communities can also have their downsides if we do not explicitly endorse cosmopolitan values. The necessary return to self-sufficient community life holds two dangers for minorities and women: the persecution of people within a community and intolerance towards strangers from outside the community.

Inside a community, social norms may be narrow and stifling. As people who grew up in small, traditional communities oftentimes know, everyone knows your business and feels entitled to tell you how to live your life. Anyone who stands out as “different” may be subject to ostracism and persecution.

The Amish illustrate the dangers of in-group social policing. First, I want to emphasize that I very much appreciate many of the characteristics of Amish society: their simplicity of living, their care for the land, their pacifism, and their live-and-let-live attitude toward outsiders. However, it is also well-known that the Amish practice shunning against members who transgress their values. If someone is truly violating basic norms of decency, such as abusing a child, shunning may be entirely appropriate. It is good to keep

in mind that the Amish have no formal system of police, courts or law. Shunning is the only method they have to deal with those they view as troublemakers. As we return to localized community life, we, too, may have to revive local methods of social control. On the other hand, shunning someone who simply doesn't "fit in," for whatever reason, is a form of violence. I know from personal experience in school just how emotionally damaging shunning can be. Shunning can kill.

Transition Culture activist Sharon Astyk wrote a March 2009 blog entry on her Casaubon's Book Web site entitled, "The Role of Religious Communities in the Long Emergency." The essay discusses how existing, self-reliant religious communities may serve both as blueprints and disaster response centers during times of crisis. Astyk says that while she and her husband are observant Jews, they have never had a problem getting along with their conservative Christian neighbors in their rural farming community.

"(R)eligious communities are going to have a large and powerful role in the future -- one that ideally, we'd begin shaping and preparing for today. This is one of the reasons I'm never so delighted as when I'm asked to talk to religious communities -- because in many ways, I think that they provide an existing infrastructure that is potentially powerfully adaptable to the life we will be living. The whole project of Adapting-In-Place involves using what you've already got -- and one of the tools we have is religious infrastructure, which provides things that few other institutions in our society do. ... (T)he reality is that there are few secular institutions that are prepared to fill the needs that people have at moments of crisis -- this is what religious communities tend to do very well -- they offer people access to familiar, structural ways to deal with events that change your world."

I agree with Astyk on her first point. Existing, functional communities, of whatever kind, will become centers of learning and assistance during the coming decades. However, I have serious reservations about her belief that religiously-based communities are automatically a good thing for everyone. It all depends on whether or not a group's beliefs include the valuing of diversity and cosmopolitanism.

Some of the blog commenters took issue with this point, too. One commenter stated, "I am actually rather afraid of ending up "the only gay in the village" surrounded by a pitchfork (bible, torah, qur'an) wielding group of people, out for a scape-goat....Is this the flip-side of the coin (community vs. exclusion)? How do you view these fears and what would we need to do to prevent a reversion to earlier forms of religion in case tshtf (the shit hits the fan)?"

I have had both good and bad experiences with religious communities, depending upon whether or not the members hold a cosmopolitan world-view. I have been working for the last few years on GLBT equality. The group of people I work with is diverse, GLBT and heterosexual, religious and non-religious. It has been a joy to work with liberal Christians who worship at "open and affirming" churches (churches that accept GLBT people as full and equal members). On the other hand, our main opposition has come from fundamentalist Christian churches whose theology includes the belief that being gay or transgender is a sin -- and the sin must be hated.

In 2008, the city of Flagstaff held a series of public forums on our group's sample non-discrimination ordinance. I was appalled to hear person after person from these fundamentalist churches get up in front of their neighbors and claim that gay people are perverts and pedophiles and that hiring GLBT people violated their value system. The disgust and hate was palpable. The threat of violence hung thickly in the air. Those of us leading the effort to pass the ordinance watched our backs as we returned home from those meetings.

Our local Planned Parenthood clinic is a target of another group of Christian fundamentalists. They illegally harass patients and employees with bullhorns, stick their heads through open car windows and charge into the clinic waiting room to proselytize. As a permaculturalist, I strongly support efforts to stabilize and lower population through contraceptive use and safe and legal abortion. I also strongly believe in the right of women to control their own bodies. I am among the one-third of women who have had an abortion. I help organize weekly support rallies in front of the clinic. During times when the anti-choice protestors are not present, we hold signs of simple affirmation such as, "I support Planned Parenthood" and "Honk for women's health."

In both cases, I have little trust in such people to treat me in a decent and caring manner, much less as an equal in a democracy. Would they help me in an emergency? If local law enforcement broke down, how would they behave towards their GLBT or non-Christian neighbors if they knew nobody was watching?

People of color experience another form of persecution within their own communities -- racial profiling. In 2007, the American Civil Liberties Union held a racial profiling forum in a Flagstaff neighborhood with large populations of Native Americans and Hispanics. I had heard rumors of police unequally enforcing bicycle safety laws based on race. The forum left no doubt that this was in fact a significant problem. One man described in detail the trauma of being stopped by police and harassed for simply walking back to his own home after dark (a policeman told him he was "walking on the wrong side of the street"). Another speaker confirmed the ubiquitousness of being stopped by police for "WWI" -- Walking While Indian.

There are many examples of the dangers of xenophobia towards outsiders. For example, during the crisis of the Black Plague in 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe, up to one-third of the population died within a few desperate decades. Without the knowledge of modern science, people fell back upon a familiar scapegoat -- the Jews. Jews were accused of poisoning wells in Christian villages. Christians banded together to burn down Jewish villages. Thousands of Jews were murdered. In spring 2009, swine flu originating in Mexico was in the headlines. Here in the U.S., anti-immigrant right-wingers chose to scapegoat poor Mexican immigrants for the epidemic. Never mind that the mutated virus appears to have originated in an American-owned Smithfield Confined Animal Feeding Operation housing nearly one million hogs, with large manure lagoons that provide a perfect breeding ground for pathogens.

## **Incorporating human rights and social justice into our work**

Human beings are capable of living egalitarian lives without fossil fuels. Many hunter-gatherer societies testify to the fact it is possible, though not inevitable. Human nature includes both cooperative/altruistic and competitive/“us versus them” tendencies. Our empathetic and cooperative tendencies must be consciously cultivated in everyday life if we are to create a non-violent, democratic future without fossil fuels. It will take constant vigilance to remind people that diversity can strengthen communities.

Transition Initiatives are taking tentative steps to be socially inclusive. For instance, the 2008 Transition Cities Conference in Nottingham, UK included a Diversity Workshop with the theme, “Connecting beyond the comfort zone.” *The Transition Handbook* author Rob Hopkins summed up some of the key issues that arose during the workshop as including:

- Beyond white, accents, middle class, ‘usual suspects’
- ‘We’ as opposed to ‘them’
- Working with different faith communities
- Social justice, poverty and discrimination
- Discomfort/curiosity
- Celebrating difference

As David Holmgren points out in *Future Scenarios*, we don’t know what the far side of energy descent will look like. We can only work from where we are now and use our knowledge and skills to help ease our communities down the path of Transition in the most humane ways possible. We can begin the process by searching for common ground rooted in a sense of place. Conceptions of human rights as developed during the Enlightenment are sure to change along with everything else. As nations break down into smaller bioregional entities, the burden of protecting the rights of women and minorities will shift from the State to local governments and other community associations, in other words, to *us*. We must learn to stand up for one another and to solve problems without resorting to scapegoating and violence.

This year I have begun to organize people interested in Transition issues in my neighborhood. Naturally, I began by reaching out to people I already knew and liked -- people who share my values. Politically, I know that about 80 percent of the voters in my precinct can be categorized as liberal or progressive. However, the other 20 percent are not. As we work to establish a neighborhood association, we increasingly interact with neighbors who do not share our core beliefs and values. We are learning as we go along.

A few ideas: when you do community organizing around Transition issues, reach out to people with differing religious and political views, of different races and ethnicities and economic classes than you, and especially to stigmatized minorities like immigrants and GLBT people. Make a special effort to include “invisible” people like the elderly and mentally and physically disabled. Include explicit discussions about diversity, inclusion and social tolerance during neighborhood potlucks and other community activities. Don’t

be afraid to admit your own biases and stereotypes. Remind yourselves frequently that you are creating new cultures that draw upon the creativity inherent in diversity.

What human rights concerns are most important in your community? Are racial divisions preventing deeper community ties from forming? Are immigration and border security issues leading to expressions of hate and physical violence? Are the religious “culture wars” creating animosity between neighbors? Are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people legally protected against discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations? Are local permaculture projects inclusive of people with physical disabilities?

It is tempting to focus on similarities and shared interests and avoid areas of disagreement. However, ignoring community divisions is counterproductive. I agree with Mohandas Gandhi that true peace and harmony cannot be attained until a conflict is brought into the open and dealt with in an assertive, nonviolent manner. Authentic community life cannot exist unless people are honest with one another about who they are and refuse to sanction prejudice and discrimination.

During my city’s discussions about the human rights ordinance, the opposition accused advocates of the ordinance of “bringing division and tension to Flagstaff where there was none” -- an emotionally painful lie that intimidates many people from speaking up. It’s a tactic used repeatedly through the centuries to silence supporters of social justice. Don’t fall for it.

One way to ease the process is to help your neighbors learn to differentiate between *ideas* and *people*: It’s OK, even useful, to have vigorous political and theological discussions, something Americans tend to avoid out of fear of offending others or losing a superficial sense of belonging. On the other hand, it’s not OK to stereotype and discriminate against people because they belong to a particular religious or cultural group.

The moral courage to speak up in defense of our fellow human beings requires inner strength. The most difficult acts of moral courage are not those involving a “right” versus a “wrong.” Moral courage is most necessary during situations that pit a right versus a right. Group loyalty is one such right. Many people avoid confronting prejudice and discrimination because it might require the need to transcend group loyalty and criticize one’s own neighbors, friends or family members. Such situations are emotionally wrenching and can put you at personal risk of becoming a target yourself.

Vow to never be a bystander when you witness stereotyping, prejudice or discrimination. The apathy of bystanders can lead to a loss of faith in humanity -- something that is crucial to successful energy descent. Speak up whenever you hear someone making a slur or bigoted comment about a stigmatized minority. Victims of harassment and violence say that knowing that bystanders knew what was happening and yet chose not to intervene is highly traumatic. As Holocaust survivor, writer and human rights activist Elie Wiesel says, “To remain silent and indifferent is the greatest sin of all.”



“Come out” as a member or ally of women and stigmatized minorities. As GLBT people can attest, coming out is not a one-time event. It is an uncomfortable process that lasts a lifetime. However, making yourself visible humanizes you and the group you are defending.

The Southern Poverty Law Center has an excellent publication that discusses how to confront prejudice and intolerance called “Speak Up! Responding to Everyday Bigotry.” It is available for download at [www.tolerance.org/speakup/index.html](http://www.tolerance.org/speakup/index.html).

Lisa Rayner is a permaculturist and Transition Town community organizer in Flagstaff, Arizona. She is the author of the permaculture book Growing Food in the Southwest Mountains, The Sunny Side of Cooking solar cookbook and her latest book Wild Bread, [www.LisaRayner.com](http://www.LisaRayner.com).