

Which Future Will We Choose, or Make?

By Richard Franke
Tompkins Weekly
20 October 2010

This is the latest installment in our Signs of Sustainability series, organized by Sustainable Tompkins. Visit them online at www.sustainabletompskins.org. The sustainability movement has a future vision in which...well, what? Here are two recent contrasting books that may provide an answer. The ultimate pessimist is peak oil theorist Richard Heinberg. In his 2007 book, "Peak Everything: Waking Up to the Century of Declines," Heinberg offers up "A letter from the Future." Written back to us some-how in 2107, Heinberg's letter recalls how we wrecked the planet and ruined the lives of future generations. During the great fossil fuel "party" from the 1850s to 2010 we forgot that "Energy has been the central organizing—or should I say disorganizing — principle of this century," he writes. First came a series of recessions followed by "an endless depression." Economists, thinking in terms of market models, neglected the fact that nothing at any price was capable of replacing the fossil fuels civilization had come to rely on. Photovoltaic panels required rare metals like gallium and indium that became depleted. Nuclear reactors ran out of uranium surprisingly quickly. On top of our misplaced faith in technology, early- and mid-21st century people allowed the global economy to be run like a casino. Sound familiar? Among those making fantastic fortunes, "none ...were actually doing anything useful. Eventually stores were empty, people were out of work, many of the goods people had were things like cars and electronic gadgets that "nobody could

afford to operate anymore," Heinberg writes. People in the U.S. were led by angry politicians to start a series of wars to capture the energy sources of others. Millions died. The right wing demonized poor people overseas. The left continued to mindlessly criticize corporations, failing to see that redistribution was of little value in these new circumstances. Climate change began to interfere with food production. Fresh water became scarce. For some it was the great "die-off." A few survived in "makeshift rural communes," while in the cities people tore up the concrete and grew what food they could. Heinberg, near the end his letter from the future, asks: "Can you change my past, which is your future?" David Korten is a former Harvard Business School professor, current chairman of the board of YES! Magazine and author. In his 2010 book "Agenda for a New Economy" he offers an e-mail from a brief visit to 2084. Ever the optimist, Korten looks backward to see that the world ended up being a middle-class society, with "modest distinctions between the richest and the poorest in terms of income, asset ownership, size of residence, and consumption." In this new society employment and time for family, friends and spiritual development are better distributed; wealth and well-being are measured by health. Suburban sprawl was eliminated as the price of oil made suburban life irrational. Suburban buildings were torn up so the land could be planted in local gardens. Agrochemicals were banned; recycling and composting became the norm.

The big corporations were broken up and sold to their workers or went bankrupt. Gambling, financial speculation and collecting rents disappeared. Most energy comes from wind or direct solar. Cars became rare with most travel by public transit. People take joy in contributing to the care of the environment: "Everywhere I go there seems to be some sort of neighborhood party, potluck, or cultural event," Korten writes. All jobs pay "a family wage," adequate to keep families away from borrowing. Many households have savings accounts on which 2–3% interest accumulates. This money remains in the local community, preventing the concentration of money in the hands of large banking conglomerates. Korten acknowledges "the immensity of the barriers against change." He concludes, "My greatest source of motivation is the knowledge that it is within our collective means to unleash the positive creative potential of the human consciousness and make that [2084] vision a reality." What will the future bring? Or rather, what future will we make?

Richard Franke is a resident of EcoVillage at Ithaca and a member of Sustainable Tompkins.