Here's some good news: Those who are best comprehending The Problem are making alliances with those who are best comprehending The Solution.

I base this hopeful observation on a mailing I just received [writing in mid-summer 2005] announcing the Second U.S. Conference on Peak Oil in Yellow Springs, Ohio scheduled for this fall. I was pleasantly surprised to see that one of the featured speakers at the conference will be Liz Walker, the director and a co-founder of EcoVillage at Ithaca in New York State.

The Problem being addressed is that the praxis of our civilization is unsustainable. The Solution is to move in the direction of living more locally and more lightly.

How to effectuate such a transition is, of course, a major debate of our times. I think the inclusion of Liz Walker as a presenter at the Peak Oil conference is indicative of a growing recognition that, to foster ecologically and socially responsible behavior... it takes a village.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * 

"There is more recycling here than you can reasonably do individually. It's easier to do these things with it being an accepted rather than exceptional practice. Common meals are usually healthier than I will bother to cook at home."

- a resident of Southside Park Cohousing in Sacramento, CA

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

The movement for social change must, of course, be comprehensive and multi-dimensional, and in no way do I wish to minimize the good efforts of those who focus on electoral activity or direct action or counter-institutional work. I'm aware that, in fact, there is no simple Solution and no single Best Way to get "from here to there."

But I do think there has recently been a shift of sentiment regarding where and how our efforts for social change are most likely to be rewarded. Individuals and families, increasingly atomized within mass society, lack the resources and leverage to have that much of an impact. At the other end of the spectrum, the institutions at the "commanding heights" of our society (corporations, government agencies, even the large universities, non-profits, etc.) possess institutional inertia to a degree that frustratingly impedes change. The milieu most conducive to transformative activity may be that intermediate level of human association we refer to as 'community.'
Two Different Ways of Human Life

Until relatively recently, from the perspective of natural history, the vast majority of humans lived within a communitarian social context—tribes or villages or small towns—characterized by (a) familiarity with/interdependence among neighbors, and (b) identity with a particular place-on-earth. Social and territorial domains of life were local, bounded, human-scale, and knowable (until just several hundred years ago, outside of cities, communal familiarity often was such that surnames for people and street numbers for houses were not felt to be necessary). Under those circumstances accountability and responsibility tended to be immediate and direct.

About ten thousand years ago, for reasons that are debated by historians and anthropologists (though there is consensus that increasing dependence upon agriculture was a factor), a radical alteration of lifeways took hold in selected areas of the human diaspora. Aggressive cultures driven to “development” and expansionism suddenly confronted autonomous tribes and villages as an external, destabilizing force. The indigens tried to resist the aggressors and in most cases resisted pressure to transform their own ways of living. But the vernacular communities were almost always, eventually, overwhelmed by the empire builders.

With the spread of this phenomenon, Neolithic culture in general trended toward the "new ways"—toward a labor-intensive, neo-militaristic organization of life preoccupied with acquisition and productivity. Engels and others have written about the rise of the state, patriarchy, and the concept of private property. The seeds of the modern Leviathan can be traced to this momentous transition from one way of life to another.

Withering of community within the Leviathan

During the millennia since the Neolithic Revolution, social resources have increasingly been allocated away from local communities toward urban-centric institutions and state-sponsored development / commerce / militarism. Lewis Mumford wrote about how, since antiquity, commercial interests and the state have constituted an interlocking juggernaut ever-promoting the ideology of progress and technological development. We’ve now arrived at a point where life has become almost totally dominated by the hypertrophied institutions and technologies of mass industrial society. The mega-states and multinational corporations have become remote, self-aggrandizing power centers. In the "free market democracies" people can "participate" by casting votes for representatives or buying shares of stock, but effective control is wielded by elites who are the beneficiaries of unprecedented concentrations of wealth and power.

Under these circumstances community has withered. Personal life has become atomized and hyper-individualistic. Families reside in consumption-oriented "bedroom communities" characterized by high rates of mobility. Material standards of living ratchet up along with competitive pressures. Social capital dwindles while stress on people (and the planet) increases.

It’s no wonder that Edward Goldsmith wrote about the need for a "Great U-Turn." He didn’t mean it in a literal sense, of course—we can’t "go back" (nor is there any claim that life within a communitarian context ever was or ever will be idyllic). The point is to recognize the stark alternatives we are now confronting. One path before us continues the unsustainable, unsatisfying status quo. Another leads in the direction of what Ted Trainer calls The Simpler Way—toward reclaiming equilibrium, balance, and social sanity. The latter means scaling down and slowing down, learning to live more lightly. Individuals and families can do their part, but such a major transformation of lifeways—entailing cultural change as extensive as that of the Neolithic—requires the aggregated power of social movements and collective efforts.
We need to make change together

A key aspect of the movement for a new society will be fostering the emergence of intentional communities committed to taking an integrated approach to addressing the problems of ecological degradation and social dysfunction.

People need to make change together, ideally at a scale where they feel empowered and consequential. We all could benefit from having the inspiration and appreciation of valued Others who are simultaneously colleagues, comrades, and ... neighbors. We need to have the pleasure of company and co-participation, the motivation of peer appraisal (and praise!), the sense that we are engaged in significant common enterprise and shared goal-achievement. It is in community, through joint action, that we have the best chance to improve our quality of life while making significant strides in the direction of sustainability.

* * * * *

Liz Walker says as much in her book *EcoVillage at Ithaca: Pioneering a Sustainable Culture*:

"What do ecovillages have to offer the world? I see us as incubators of a new culture, one that values cooperation in the most profound sense: cooperation between diverse peoples and cooperation with nature ... We learn from each other how to better work, play, resolve conflicts, make decisions, support each other, and celebrate."

Walker and Joan Bokaer founded the EcoVillage at Ithaca project (EVI) in 1991 and have been instrumental in guiding it toward realization of its initial vision: A multi-neighborhood cohousing community modeling innovative approaches to ecological and social sustainability. The setting is a 175-acre site overlooking the city of Ithaca, NY to the east and bordering the Coy Glen Nature Preserve to the west. On-premises is an organic farm, an education center, and natural areas (over 80% of the land is preserved or has been restored as green space). The residential component of EVI is currently two (eventually to be three or four) clustered cohousing neighborhoods surrounding a shared commons.

EVI's Web site (http://www.ecovillage.ithaca.ny.us) says: "Education is an essential component of our mission—we seek to collaborate with others in evolving sustainable social and physical systems and to share the lessons we are learning with others." Toward that end Liz Walker has set down, in this book, the story of EcoVillage at Ithaca—its goals, challenges, conflicts, struggles, and achievements. Her account is highly personal and engaging. She offers an abundance of detailed vignettes and instructive anecdotal material, but at the same time the book's essential theme reverberates page after page, chapter after chapter: this is the way human beings need to learn to live.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

"The folks at EcoVillage have learned more than a little about creating an Earth-friendly community. Today, an ever-growing number of people are coming to the conclusion that our society is on a collision course with madness; they long for a way of life less alienating and more natural than the prevailing direction of our culture, but do not know where to turn."

- John Robbins, author of *Diet for a New America*

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
Psychological/characterological health is dependent upon having a place and a status within a comprehensible social world. Disorientation results from trying to negotiate within domains that effectively lack boundaries and limits; from trying to succeed confronting standards associated with steeply pyramidal status hierarchies (Donald Trump wrote a book for aspiring entrepreneurs advising that they learn to *Think Like a Billionaire* - "Everything You Need to Know About Success, Real Estate, and Life").

We're given the impression that we are fortunate to be presented with near-limitless sources of stimulation, choice, and opportunity. But psychologists are discovering that such an operational milieu is, in fact, confusing, distracting and anxiety-provoking. In our globalized mass-production / mass-consumption / mass-communication reality, human scale long ago ceased to be a value. All has gone "hyper": too much, too fast, too far, too big; too synthetic and overly complex. Ours is now, indeed, a civilization of disorientation and discontent.

The lesson to be learned is that social pathology invariably results when a society becomes unmoored from a basic grounding in natural sensibilities of limits and balances. Avoiding a "collision course with madness" will require more than technological panaceas, corporate constraints, or governmental regime change. We need to restore the human scale in all aspects of life. We need to reconstitute real community. We need to find our way Home.

**Collective support fosters personal responsibility**

So the Peak Oil conference will focus on depletion of resources, but, to its credit, will incorporate a holistic perspective regarding the achievement of full sustainability, both ecological and social. The banner atop its Web site reads: "What are we going to do as the oil runs out? The solution is in the community."

Concentrations of wealth and power must be reduced, no doubt; corporations and governments must be held accountable; political systems must be opened up; democracy must be enhanced. But the key to "saving the planet" may ultimately lie more at the micro level than the macro. Family / extended family / community is the age-old social context conducive to personal responsibility and healthy behavior.

The eco-communitarian Solution points in the direction of locally-oriented, humanly-scaled lifeways characterized by familiarity, stability, interdependence, and knowledge-of-Other. Such is the basis for respect, love, and care ... care for each other and for the earth. Cohousing and ecovillage communities will serve as models (and base camps!) for the broad global movement working to Green our civilization and set it on a path toward sustainability. Liz Walker's timely book is a chronicle, manual, and inspiration for that movement.

---

Steve Welzer is a Green activist residing in East Windsor, New Jersey. He is a co-editor of *Green Horizon Quarterly*. 