

The Earth's Immune System

When we consider the state of the Earth--its environment, its injustice, its economics, and governance--its difficult to retain hope. But there are many hundreds of thousands of nonprofits around the world actively working to change those conditions, to raise our consciousness and rouse our attention. The whole is much greater than the sum of its parts. Earth's Immunity gives us reason to hope.

Over the past several years, I've been writing a lot about death: the deaths of millions of children around the world, the deaths within our environment, the deaths from militarism, the million small deaths from consumerism, the death of our economic system, and so on. And while I've tried to hold on to hope (sometimes even successfully), much of me has leaned toward despair. I really haven't seen any way out of this morass that is even remotely possible. The essential vision, as I've seen it, is to support justice around the world and to save the Earth from the depredations of our consumer culture.

In order to do that, several things have to happen. Western societies must significantly curb their consumerism, very significant changes must happen within the economic system, corporate structure and behavior must be modified, and government policies must support each of the previous changes. The essential problem is that consumerism, the economic system, corporate structure and behavior, and governance are so deeply intertwined and reinforcing that little change is possible in one without taking on all at once, an impossible task. I've come to the end of my faith that our rational solutions will solve our problems.

I've recently become aware of some new possibilities, however, that give me hope.

I first came to Washington DC in 1983 to practice medicine in the inner city. One of my goals was distinctly political: to encourage health care providers and American voters to see not only the necessity but also the possibility of providing care to the indigent. Perhaps middle- and upper-class physicians were shying away from such work because they didn't really know how to organize it or relate to such a different culture. Perhaps voters and government didn't know the true circumstances of the poor but might be taught. Hopefully the clinics and other projects I worked in were not only "pilot projects" to encourage others but also revelations of the need and a demonstrations of the possibility. I began speaking frequently at medical schools about the health problems of the poor and our clinics' responses to them.

From today's perspective those were, pretty obviously, naïve presuppositions. Most doctors weren't that interested in indigent care because they had other—especially economic—concerns: poverty wasn't very high on their priority list. This was also during the Reagan-era's "War on the Poor" when increasing numbers of Americans blamed the poor themselves for their poverty. Government services decreased. I became discouraged about widespread change.

There were two significant exceptions, but I must confess that, at the time, I underestimated their importance. When I joined Dr Janelle Goetcheus at Columbia Road Health Services—a small, church sponsored neighborhood clinic for the indigent in Washington—there were relatively few such facilities in the entire country. And ... that's changed. When I spoke to medical students twenty-five years ago, there were usually only a few who were deeply interested, already involved in volunteering at small "free clinics." They planned to provide care for the poor in their later practices. Over the years, however, medical students became more and more interested. Although their numbers are small compared to the need, there are now not only quite a few doctors but even national organizations dedicated to the care of the poor and homeless. Lectures on poverty and the right to medical care are now standard parts of medical school curricula. And there are hundreds, if not thousands, of clinics for indigent care across the country. There has been no national leadership, no ideology driving this. Local groups just saw the needs in their community and responded to them. All of it happened so gradually, so organically, and so dispersed around our country, that I never really noticed.

The other exception brought something I thought I'd never see: city-funded, comprehensive, indigent care for the entire District of Columbia, thanks in part to Janelle's work with city officials. Since she began here in 1978, Janelle has never had a formal role with the DC government. There was no large organization or even a movement that lobbied for health insurance for the indigent. But those in positions of power within the city recognized that Janelle had no other agenda except good health care for the poor, which generated trust among all sides of the local political debate about medical care for the poor. Her dogged persistence in pushing city health officials ultimately led to the formation of Unity Health Care that now has almost 200 physicians offering care to the impoverished in shelters and clinics across the city. Eventually, it led to the city-funded DC Healthcare Alliance that—from my experience helping people get coverage—actually does provide what it says it does: good medical insurance for everyone in the city who can't otherwise afford care.

After my initial naïveté, I was, for many years, skeptical that such individual, local programs would make much large-scale difference. In fact, I wrote and spoke frequently about the conflict between charity and justice. Charity—voluntary good work *providing* health care—is different

from justice—the right to
health care. Charity is certainly good, I believed, but large-scale change would require
centralized, government action.

But I'm changing my mind. I've begun to see the national spread of clinics for the indigent and the existence of the DC Health Care Alliance as hopeful examples of a movement that is both broad and deep, a movement whose whole is much greater than its parts, offering us radical possibilities.

In his book *Blessed Unrest*, environmentalist Paul Hawken writes that the late 18th century “[a]bolitionists were the first group to create a national and global movement to defend the rights of those they did not know.”

[\[1\]](#)

Since the founding of that single organization, he estimates on the basis of his research, the number non-governmental organizations around the globe engaged in the struggle for justice and environmental sanity has grown to well over one million. These range in size from one-person and no budget to large staffs with billion-dollar budgets. The subtitle of Hawken's book is:

How the Largest Movement in the World Came Into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming
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A number of recent books [\[2\]](#) on the environmental crisis have recognized that any relief from the multiple crises confronting us will require a widespread broadening and deepening in spiritual consciousness. But, “[w]ould we recognize a worldwide spiritual awakening if we saw one? ... What if there's already in place a large-scale spiritual awakening and we're simply not recognizing it?” [\[3\]](#) What if those thousands of poverty clinics around the country and the DC Healthcare Alliance are part of it?

True, the environmental/justice “movement” today is not really a movement at all because it has no ideology, no leaders and little coordination between the groups. Not infrequently, there's actually conflict among them. What keeps them from being what they look like: tiny, scattered, and hopelessly outmatched?

Well, for one thing, of course, there are hundreds of thousands of them. Hawken likens this loose network to the human immune system. The immune system has usually been characterized in top-down military images, but, in fact, there's nobody in charge. There are

different parts to the immune system that actually work independently and within each of those parts there are millions of individual elements that do their job with considerable independence. The immune system is more like the Internet: minimally coordinated and comprising diverse, disordered and imprecise entities without which we'd die in a matter of days.

Like the immune system, these countless organizations in this global network have little power individually to cure the earth's sickness, and it'd be tempting to think that their uncoordinated efforts would also have only minor effects given the vast and powerful array aligned against them—government, corporations, huge trade organizations, powerful institutions and wealthy individuals. But, in fact, the whole may be much greater than the sum of its parts.

This isn't the greatest image, but these hundreds of thousands of organizations may be something like an ant colony. [\[4\]](#) No single ant grasps the big picture or needs to direct the group's effort, but following a few simple innate principles (for instance, "follow the strongest pheromone trail") the shortest route to the food source is located. The anthill is built. Perhaps the few simple principles of the global movement include: loving others, having compassion for your neighbor, prioritizing the poor, and including everyone.

Its grass-roots origins and its dearth of ideology and coordination give this movement a resilience that no top-down organization could ever have; you can't kill it by getting rid of or co-opting the leadership because there isn't any. Its use of modern communications technology give the whole a power never before available to dispersed groups. The movement constantly grows and renews itself; one organization may disappear because of whatever, but others take its place. Those that are small with few resources by necessity use those resources efficiently. They work primarily on the basis of observation of the local conditions and whatever works rather than ideology, so they're much more able to modify their activity in response to the actual conditions on the ground. Any organization with fixed ideas eventually fades out when the ideas no longer match the reality. In contrast, most movement organizations can make mistakes, even disappear, without affecting the whole. Like many of you reading this, I have worked in a few of those organizations; we know that individuals called to small local projects are usually deeply committed and willing to dedicate enormous amounts of time, energy and money to pursue their objectives. This energy and commitment draw others to the work ... on the basis of their own calls and commitment, not remuneration. This gives them potential for amazing transformation.

An example of their flexibility is found at Joseph's House, a permanent home for homeless men with AIDS that I (with others) founded in 1990. Before the availability of effective medications, we were primarily a community. We guaranteed our residents a home as long as

they lived, an important factor in the peaceful workings of the house. We took men in when they were just beginning to need medical support, and they lived with us for an average of about a year before dying. Hospice care was almost incidental. But with the new medications that began appearing about 1995, conditions changed. People with AIDS began living longer, sometimes much longer, and could engage in normal activities. If we'd continued bringing in new people just when they were beginning to get sick, guaranteeing them a home until they died, we would soon have collected a houseful of well people, not exactly our mission. So we changed, gradually, to become a hospice admitting only people who appeared near death. The conditions changed; being small and shunning an ideology, we changed, too.

Because, like Joseph's House, these many organizations around the world are trying to respond to the needs they see around them, they are not working from a fixed, overall blueprint for how the world should be. Rather, their overall vision—if they think of it as an “overall vision” at all—comprises simple values: a world whose operative principles are love for others, compassion for all, inclusion of everyone, prioritization of the poor, and reverence for the Earth.

Hawken writes:

You can try to determine the future, or you can try to create conditions for a healthy future. To [determine the future], you must presume to know what the future should be. To [create conditions for a healthy future], you learn to have faith in social outcomes in which citizens feel secure, valued, and honored. [\[5\]](#)

If more and more people embrace these values—and thereby withdraw their support from the dominant order—that old cannot survive without deep transformation.

An example of such transformation: For at least the last half century, no large country has successfully colonized another through militarily power alone. [\[6\]](#) Small, indigenous citizen organizations refusing to cooperate have withdrawn their support from the would-be colonizers and prevented it. In the war in Afghanistan, for instance, local Taliban units can disappear into the general population where they become unidentifiable “villagers,” hidden by the people they know. Because of its firepower, the US military wins virtually every major military battle ... but it won't win the war because of the thousands of small, indigenous units fighting against it. War has changed, and suddenly the old kind of power has little military success.

Now, writes Hawken, it's true that

[t]he state of our world today suggests that, given the number of organizations and people dedicated to fighting injustice, the movement has not been particularly effective. The counterargument to this claim is that globalization's predations have had a nearly five-hundred-year head start on humanity's immune system. [\[7\]](#)

And there've been countless small victories ... remember Janelle Goetcheus and DC's comprehensive health care.

And remember, too, that the proliferation of these small organizations dedicated to justice and environmental sanity began only 225 years ago, and their numbers are exploding.

I've believed for so long in a top-down governmental approach to our problems that I've actually not paid nearly enough attention to this grass-roots movement. I'm still not sure if I'm convinced that it can adequately influence the powers of wealth, corporations, or economic and political systems stacked against it enough to move us toward greater health, but at present it seems the most hopeful alternative. Perhaps this diverse, uncoordinated immune system collectively has the vision for the earth that—improbable though it may seem to my rational intellect—can topple the giants. Worker-owned, customer-owned, and community-owned businesses, for instance, have already begun to chip away at an economic system currently based on large, powerful, shareholder-owned public corporations. [\[8\]](#)

My own tendency toward pessimism and despair in the face of the multiple crises facing us, I think, is that I doubt the possibility of newness. "There's nothing new under the sun." "History is an unbroken continuum." But, in fact, history is full of radical new beginnings unimaginable just a few years earlier: the conformity of the 1950s, the spiritual and cultural awakening of the 1960s, the Reagan era, the election of Barack Obama, or the World Social Forum.

Something new is happening in this powerful, new worldwide movement. We tend not to see it precisely because it *is* new and doesn't conform to our own beliefs about how change occurs. Perhaps it's time to open our eyes ... and our hearts.



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