

The Change We Need; Change We Can Believe Inⁱ

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President Obama was propelled to the Presidency by a message of change. He began his campaign by talking about “change we can believe in.” He transitioned to “the change we need” a few weeks before the election when the Republicans also began to talk about change. He chided his opponents by saying that “change isn't just a word.” He went on to talk about the deep, fundamental, abiding changes that needed to be made to reclaim the American promise of an equal opportunity for all to pursue their full measure of happiness. This is “the change we need,” he said. Obviously, that kind of change has not yet happened.

I have come to the conclusion that most of us don't make deep, fundamental, abiding changes in our lives unless three conditions are met. First, we must become convinced that what we are doing isn't working and isn't likely to work in the future. Next, we must have a realistic idea or vision of what we could do instead that would be better. And finally, we must believe that it's possible for us to make the transition from what we are doing now to what we would like to do instead - we must have hope for something better. Lacking any one of the three, we just keep on doing what we have been doing. We are generally willing to tinker around the edges of our life a bit to nudge it gently in one direction or another. But fundamental change is too difficult and risky to undertake unless we conclude that change is necessary and then only if we have some realistic hope for success.

Admittedly, some people change more quickly and easier than others. Such people may be less adverse to the risks or may even find an element of excitement or even enjoyment in change. Others won't change until external circumstances virtually force them to do so to survive. Regardless, I think we all go through the same basic processes of comparing our current circumstances and some future possibility and changing only when we have hope for something better.

For example, few people go on diets or start physical fitness programs just for the fun of it. Most of us diet only after we conclude our current eating habits are inherently bad for our health in one respect or another. We also have to believe a different diet would make us healthier and happier, and finally, we must find a diet we think we could stick with to achieve the desired results. In the case of physical exercise, we first have to admit we are out of shape, visualize ourselves as fitter, happier people, and finally, find an exercise program that just might work for us. The same is also true for the most profound decisions in life, such as changing our occupation, marital status, or religious affiliation. Lacking any one of the three necessary conditions for change, we just keep doing the same things we have been doing.

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Therefore, I suspect we will not bring about the “change we need” in America until Americans in general conclude that what we are doing now isn't working and isn't going to work in the future. I think most of us have come to that conclusion; but that alone is not enough. We must also have a vision of the kind of America we need instead, a fundamentally better America than we have today. Finally, we have to believe that the change we need is *possible*, even if it's not quick or easy. We have to have “change we can believe in” before we can get “the change we need.”

At the most basic level, the necessity for change in America is being driven by questions of sustainability. Sustainability is not just a buzzword; it is the defining question of the twenty-first-century, for both the *developed* and *developing* countries of the world. It asks whether our current way of life is sustainable - ecologically, socially, and economically. It asks whether we can meet the needs of the present without diminishing opportunities for the future. The question is so pervasive that virtually every major U.S. corporation, government agency, and non-profit organization feels compelled to have a sustainability initiative. These initiatives may deal with issues of environmental protection, social equity, and economic viability. However, when we ask the deeper questions of sustainability we realize that we eventually must change virtually every aspect of our economy, our society, and our individual lives.

First and foremost, we must change our economy. The rates of economic growth that we have come to consider as “normal” quite simply are not sustainable. The economic growth of the industrial era, particularly of the past century, was an aberration in human history. For example, if economic growth rates of only 2% to 3% had persisted over the past 2,010 years, since the year one, a global Gross Domestic Product of one-dollar at that time would have grown into a global economy that would provide every person on earth, all six-and-one-half billion of us, with enough money to spend a million dollars every second of every day of the year. Furthermore, every 30-yr people would have twice as much to spend as the 30-yr before. The US economy of some \$10-trillion obviously cannot sustain growth rates of even 2%-3% for another 2000 or even 100 more years.

The economic growth of the industrial era was possible only because of abundant supplies of easily accessible energy. First it was the old-growth forests, then surface coal, and for the last century shallow deposits of oil and natural gas. But the days of cheap, abundant energy are over. The old forests are gone, tops of mountains are being blown off to get the remaining coal, and most of the remaining reserves of oil and natural gas are deep beneath the ocean floor or in remote corners of the earth hardly touched by civilization. In addition, continued reliance on fossil energy poses unacceptable environmental risks, such as global climate change, that threaten the future of human life on earth. The alternatives that eventually must replace fossil energy - wind, water, photovoltaics, and direct solar - will be less plentiful and more costly than fossil energy. Denial and neglect cannot change the hard, cold facts: the industrial era of economic growth is over.

In fact, much of the economic growth of the past few decades has not added any *real* value to American society. The most obvious example has been the growth in two-wage-earner families. The stay-at-home homemakers weren't unemployed, they just weren't paid for the work they

were doing. Since they weren't paid, they didn't contribute to the economy. When homemakers went to work for money, their work contributed to economic growth. If they hired someone to do the housework they were doing before, that added another job to the economy. Unfortunately, much of the past work of stay-at-home homemakers isn't being done by anyone, resulting in the high social and economic costs of dysfunctional families. There are many good reasons for two-wage-earner families, but their increasing numbers has created an *illusion* of economic growth.

Much of the booming economic growth of the 1990s was also an economic illusion. Admittedly, the new electronic technologies - microcomputers, the Internet, and such - created some real economic growth by facilitating greater efficiency in the use of both natural and human resources. However, much of the growth in the stock market was a result of "irrational exuberance," in the words of Alan Greenspan, former Chairman of the Federal Reserve System. When the "dot.com bubble" burst, the illusion was revealed, the stock market plunged, and the nation fell into an economic recession.

Rather than addressing the challenge of creating an economy appropriate for a post-industrial world, the economic oligarchy created another economic illusion - the financial house-of-cards of the early 2000s. They created sophisticated financial instruments that allowed them to make housing loans that borrowers obviously couldn't afford to pay off - unless housing prices continued to rise. The resulting increase in homebuilding spurred enough economic growth to fuel another speculative illusion. When the "financial bubble" burst, the illusion was revealed, housing prices fell, the stock market fell, banks failed, home foreclosures skyrocketed, and the country was plunged into the "Great Recession."

The only thing that saved the country from financial collapse was a generous government bailout of the large financial institutions and a budget-busting government stimulus program that substituted government spending for the lack of consumer and business spending. Unfortunately, the fundamental problem of unsustainable growth is still not being addressed. A "government spending bubble" has simply replaced the "financial bubble." An economy supported by government borrowing that the people won't repay, by raising taxes or cutting spending, is no more sustainable than the economy supported by housing loans that borrowers couldn't repay.

America is at a crossroads in history. We can continue on our recent road of denial and retreat from reality or we can seize the opportunity created by the current economic crisis to fundamentally reshape and rebuild the American economy. Ultimately we must face the reality that all real economic value must be derived from either nature or society. All tangible things of economic value - our houses, cars, clothes, computers, cell phones - are made of materials that come from the earth, from nature. Society provides the labor, creativity, and entrepreneurship needed to bring forth value from the things of nature, as well as provide intangible personal services, such as healthcare, education, and entertainment. We simply cannot sustain economic growth by continuing to extract natural resources and exploit the American workforce. This is economic reality.

We can't depend on an economy that extracts and exploits to solve problems rooted in economic extraction and exploitation. All economic value is individualistic. The aggregate economy is nothing more than a collection of individual workers and individual businesses.

Economic relationships are always premised on the promise of getting something of economic value in return. There is no economic value in doing anything solely for the benefit of someone else or for the benefit of society in general. Since economic value accrues to the individual, there is no way to realize economic value after we are dead. In addition, life is inherently uncertain; so the economy puts a premium on the present relative to the future. That's why we have to pay interest to borrow money and expect interest when we loan money. Consequently, there is no economic incentive to do anything for the sole benefit of those of future generations. A society that allows its economy to be driven by the relentless quest of economic growth is simply not sustainable. This is economic reality. We may deny it but we can't escape its consequences.

Current individual and corporate initiatives to reduce environmental degradation are necessary but not sufficient. Initiatives to increase the efficiency with which we use fossil energy, likewise, are necessary but are not sufficient for sustainability. Substitution of renewable for nonrenewable energy also will be necessary but not sufficient. Attempts to reduce the negative impacts of economic activity on social equity are both commendable and necessary but will not be sufficient to ensure sustainability. The fundamental problem is that for-profit corporations only do things that in one way or another are expected to increase their profits. There are no economic incentives to do many of the things that must be done for sustainability. As long as resource efficiency and substitution are motivated by profitability, they only slow the rate at which the economy is moving in the “wrong” direction.

We must make deep, fundamental changes, from a society that depends on the extraction and exploitation of natural and human resources to a society that regenerates the productivity of nature and renews the productivity of society, even when there is no economic incentive to do so. We must work together through government to ensure that the basic needs of all are met, fairly and equitably, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their basic needs as well. Meeting the challenges of sustainability ultimately will require that we change virtually every aspect of our lives. This is the “change we need.” This is the change we must have to ensure the future of America and of humanity.

For the mid-term elections of 2010, both political parties chose a message of change. They understood that a consensus for change is at least beginning to form all across America. The call for change resulted in a shift in the balance of political power, confirming a lack of confidence in the changes that have been made since 2008. The basic problem is a lack of common vision among Americans of the specific kind of “change we need,” and perhaps, most important the lack of a common vision of “change we can believe in.” Many people know we need change, and ultimately must have change, but simply do not believe that deep, abiding, fundamental change in America is even possible. Lacking a common vision for a better future, our political leaders tinker around the edges, attempting to nudge the economy in one direction or another, thereby participating in the continuing denial that fundamental change is even necessary.

In reality, the possibilities for a fundamentally better future have never been better, for America and for the whole of humanity. In fact, the father of Keynesian economic theory, John Maynard Keynes, anticipated this time of opportunity back in the 1920s. He wrote, “the *economic problem* may be solved, or at least within sight of solution, within a hundred years. This means that the economic problem is not... *the permanent problem of the human race.*”¹

Man's permanent problem will be “how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares... to live wisely and agreeably and well.” As it turned out, Keynes was actually too conservative in his estimate. The “economic problem” in America was likely solved as early as the 1960s. The challenge for the vast majority of Americans today, as well as the rest of the so called *developed* world, is not to try to restore unsustainable economic growth, but instead to learn to live “wisely, agreeably, and well.”

Keynes warned that “no country and no people... can look forward to the age of leisure and abundance without dread. For we have been trained too long to strive and not enjoy.” He suggested that those who would benefit from this new era of opportunity would be “those people, who can keep alive, and cultivate into fuller perfection, the art of life itself, and do not sell themselves for the means of life.” We need a new vision of a future in which Americans do not feel compelled to “sell themselves for the means of life” but instead use their time, talents, and energy to “cultivate into fuller perfection, the art of life itself.” This is a vision of a better future that is worth the inherent difficulties and risks of deep, fundamental change.

This new and better future is possible only if we are willing to embrace a new and fundamentally different worldview: the world as a giant complex living organism, rather than an inanimate mechanism. We must understand that we are an integral part of earth's natural ecosystem, rather than something apart from it. We must respect the fundamental laws of nature, including the laws of human nature. We must accept the fact that the economy is a part of society and society is a part of nature, and thus, the economy must meet the needs of individuals in ways that respect the basic principles by which healthy societies and ecosystems function. As a nation, we must learn, accept, and respect the essential principles of sustainability.

We must accept the fact that the *temporary problem* of economic sufficiency has been solved. Only then will we be willing to move on to what Keynes called the *permanent problem* of society: learning to live wisely, agreeably, and well. Continuing growth in human well-being has no logical limit or conclusion, once we realize our quality of life no longer depends on economic growth. Today's so-called “new normal” of no growth and slow growth in the economy can then be accepted by Americans, not as a curse but as a blessing - an opportunity to cultivate the true art of living. Americans can then focus on quality of life rather than the quantity of stuff. They can pursue greater material wealth only when needed to achieve harmony among the physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of life.

Even today, a growing body of social science research indicates that beyond some fairly modest level of income there is no relationship between further increases in income and increases in happiness or overall well-being.² Once our basic material needs are met - food, clothing, shelter, health care, - the quality of our life depends far more on the quality of our relationships - friends, family, community, society - than on quantity of income or wealth. Our happiness also depends on our having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Without purpose and meaning, there is no sense of rightness or goodness in what we do. Once our basic material needs are met, the pursuit of happiness is about developing the social and spiritual dimensions of life, rather than striving to acquire more income or wealth.

Admittedly, many so-called “lesser-developed” countries of the world still need to work on the temporary problem of economic growth. However, they need not consume all of the earth's remaining natural resources in achieving sustainable levels of economic development. There are ways of developing their economies without depleting their natural resources or sacrificing their social and ethical values. It's just that the economy has to respect the social and ethical limits to growth. Sustainable development may be slower and more difficult than industrial development, but sustainable development is possible.

The developing nations need not expand their economies to match the American lifestyle. Beyond some very modest level of economic development - the research indicates about \$10,000-\$15,000 GDP per person - there has been no relationship between economic growth and overall quality of life.³ The research also indicates that in nations where people are more equitable economically, where there is less disparity between the rich and poor, people tend to be happier, regardless of their absolute level of income.⁴ Thus developing countries of the future can balance their modest needs for economic growth with the need to build stronger and more equitable societies. Their quality of life also can be enhanced as they fulfill their ethical responsibility to future generations by being good stewards of their nations' natural resources.

Such changes may not be easy, but they most certainly are possible, if people are willing to work together, through government. Government policies can be enacted and enforced to protect natural resources from needless extraction and exploitation in the pursuit of unsustainable economic growth. Such policies need not be imposed by government on the people but can reflect a “consensus of the governed” to accept and support only *sustainable* economic development. Governments can also facilitate the economic transition from dependence on the dwindling stocks of fossil energy to reliance on various forms of solar energy, the only truly sustainable source of energy. Governments will also need to ensure that the individual economy functions within the context of a socially equitable and ethically responsible society, thus enhancing the quality of life of all and ensuring economic sustainability.

During inevitable periods of cyclical unemployment, government policies can provide economic incentives to employers whose employees share the available work among the available workers rather than allowing large segments of the population to be completely unemployed. For example, rather than have 10% of the workforce completely unemployed, everyone could be 10% unemployed. Everyone could go home at noon on Friday, leaving more time to cultivate the true art of living. More enlightened government policies can also promote the development of technologies that employ more people, productively and creatively, in the process of producing less material output. This would simply reverse the priorities of the industrial era where new technologies displaced rather than empowered workers. The focus would be on providing employment adequate for society to pursue the permanent problem of learning to live wisely, agreeably, and well.

In this more enlightened world of the future, global population would not necessarily continue to grow. Peoples' lives would be more socially connected and their old age will be more economically secure. People would also have the knowledge and ability to make logical decisions about how many children they need or want to make their lives fulfilling. Lacking the current social and economic incentives for larger families, global population would then level out

and stabilize at a comfortable carrying capacity for the earth's resources. Increasing population would occur only if and when increases in efficiency of resource use make a larger population sustainable and desirable. Otherwise, there will be no further need for economic growth. The economic problem will be solved not only for the developed nations but for all nations.

Societies and economies of this new world would be organized quite differently from the centralized, consolidated, hierarchal societies and economies of today. Much of the centralized political power could devolve to state and local levels. The U.S. government could then return to its historic constitutional purpose of ensuring equal access to things to which all Americans have equal rights. State governments could then focus on those things that can be and need to be done differently in different geographic regions and cultures within the country. This would leave local governments with the other things that must be done for the common good of society but cannot or will not be done by individuals, families, or other informal groups within communities.

The American society and economy could devolve, decentralize, and re-localize to better meet the needs of a post-industrial, sustainable society. American communities of the future, both rural and urban, need not be economically self-sufficient, but locally owned and operated businesses could meet most basic day-to-day needs of their local community. Local businesses could be sustained by the commitment of the community to support its local economy. Large corporate manufacturers and retailers would then be supplemental or secondary providers of goods and services but would not dominate local economies. Local builders could provide affordable, energy-efficient housing. Energy-generating residences and locally-owned electric utilities could meet most energy needs of the community with wind, water, and solar generated electricity.

In today's local food movement, we can see a glimmer of “the change we need” and the “change we can believe in.” Local foods could well turn out to be much more than a means of restoring freshness and flavor to food, or restoring healthy diets for healthy bodies, although health is obviously essential to physical well-being. Growing markets for local foods could provide both the motivation and means of reconnecting people in both rural and urban communities in meaningful personal and social relationships. Economically viable local food systems could grow into viable local economies. The motivated to preserve and restore the fertility of farmland in local areas could evolve into a motivation to conserve and renew all of the resources of nature. Through local farmers, people could reconnect spiritually with the land and regain a sense of purpose and meaning in life through a commitment to stewardship of nature.

However, none of these good things for the future will be possible unless we abandon our pursuit of narrow, individual economic self-interest and return to the broader pursuit of happiness and quality of life. Obviously, we are physical beings, but the material needs are quite modest and well within the earth's capacity to sustain a regenerative economy. We can't sustain continual economic growth but we can sustain sufficient economic output to meet the basic needs of all, if we choose to do so. We can sustain continuing progress in our quality of life, through harmony and balance among the material, social, and spiritual dimensions of our lives. There are no limits to human betterment, if we cease our striving for wealth and focus on the true art of living.

Admittedly, the prospects for deep, fundamental, abiding changes such these may seem a bit idealistic or naïve, at least at first. However, only fifty years ago, America in many respects was very much like this idealized America of the future. Admittedly, the U.S. economy was not ecologically sustainable and there was still much to be done to carry out the American promise of equity and justice for all. However, the environmental, civil rights, and peace movements defined the decade of the 1960s in American society and set much of the public policy agenda for the 1970s. There was not only hope at that time, there was action. The world we see today is largely a consequence of only the last 30-years of denial and retreat. We need not allow this 30-year aberration to define the future of America. America was once a better America; thus we know it could possibly be a better America again. In this possibility there is hope.

We know that “the change we need” will not be easy nor will it come quickly. It may sound idealistic or naïve. However, we also know that the change we need is “change we can believe in;” it is change that makes sense. In the words of Vaclav Havel - philosopher, reformer, and former president of the Czech Republic: *Hope is not the same as joy when things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something to succeed. Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It's not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out. It is this hope, above all, that gives us strength to live and to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem hopeless. Life is too precious to permit its devaluation by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love and, finally, without hope.*⁵

Creating a new and better America will not be quick or easy, but millions of Americans have already committed their lives to helping make it happen. In their commitment, there is hope. The economic problem has been solved. It makes sense now to turn to the art of living wisely, agreeably. In this there is hope. Admittedly, the defenders of the status quo are powerful and there may be no cause for optimism. But even in the possibility of a fundamentally better America, a happier America, there is hope. Most Americans know they need change. They only need to look around them to see change they can believe in. In this there is hope. Even if we ultimately fail, life is simply too precious to permit it to be devalued by living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love, and finally, without hope.

End Notes:

¹ John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion*, (Miami, FL: BN Publishing – no copyright date) pp. 366-368.

² Ed Diener and Martin EP. Seligman, “Beyond Money, Toward an Economy of Well-Being,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5 (1), 2004, 1–31.

³ For a bibliography of happiness research, visit the *Positive Psychology Center*, University of Pennsylvania, <<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/positivepsychologyresearch.htm> >

⁴ Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level; Why Greater Equality Makes Stronger Societies*, (New York: Bloomsbury Press), 2009.

⁵ Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace* (New York: Random House inc.), 1990, Chapter 5.