

WHAT A REAL, LIVING, DURABLE ECONOMY LOOKS LIKE

by Bill McKibben

I've spent the last twenty years of my adult life writing and thinking about global warming. I can tell you about hydrogen, hybrid cars, solar panels, wind turbines, green building, carbon offsets, carbon sequestration, carbon credits, and on and on and on and on.

And here's what I think the outcome boils down to: hyperindividualism versus community. If we can build a society where a community farm, a community radio station, a community bookstore make sense, then we have a fighting chance. I know this seems an unlikely solution, far less hard-headed than some technological prescription.

But consider: the average Western European uses *half as much energy* as the average American. Not because they have some secret technology, and not because they're leading degraded lives, but because they've built society along subtly different lines. Half is a lot. They've built public transit systems, and cities that draw people in, not spin them centrifugally out. It's no wonder, in fact, that Portland is the one American city whose carbon emissions are declining – more than any place else in the country. It's begun to make European choices.

Food is a good example. If we eat locally, we use a lot less energy – back East, where I live, a calorie of that California lettuce takes 36 calories of fossil energy to grow and ship. That why it's good news that farmers' markets are the fastest growing part of the food system – in Oregon, the number of farms has doubled in the last decade, partly because Portland eats so much local food. If we could do the same thing with energy, and with timber, and with the other commodities of our lives, and if we could do it around the country, we'd be making great strides.

But can such solutions really spread fast enough? Or is the momentum of the Wal-Mart simply unstoppable? A few years ago I'd have answered gloomily, but working on my new book, [Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future](#), has convinced me we've got at least an outside shot. And for an odd reason. Because people are finally starting to ask the most basic and most subversive question about our economic system: Is it making me happy?

In the past ten years, economists and sociologists and psychologists have begun to tackle this in a way they never have before. (The economists always used to say that "utility" was the answer – you could tell what made someone happy by what they bought.) Their data shows clearly that Americans are neither very happy by world standards, nor anywhere near as satisfied as they were 50 years ago, despite relentless economic growth. It's as if we've run a controlled experiment, in fact, on whether money buys happiness, and the results are now in.

But why? The answer seems to be: We feel an incredible lack of community. And if you think about it, that makes sense. More money meant we could live in bigger houses further out in the suburbs – i.e., that we could be more isolated. It meant we could embrace technologies- the endless parade of screens – that keep us occupied by ourselves. As a result, Americans have far fewer close friends than they did a generation ago. We spend far less time with friends and neighbors and relatives.

Here's the good news, though: The cure for this is the same as the cure for some of our environmental woes. Let's say you go to the farmer's market; on average you take ten times less energy to feed yourself. But, as a team of sociologists discovered a few years ago, you also have ten times as many conversations as you would at the supermarket. An order of magnitude of less energy, and an order of magnitude more community. Those are numbers that might start to add up.

The local bookstore, of course, is the paradigmatic example of what I'm talking about. It's more than a place to buy books – it's a hub, where ideas and plans and projects brew and hatch. And when it disappears, there's a hole in town. We've seen too long a decline in local farms and bookstores and radio stations – we've seen the Cargills and the Clear Channels ruling too much of our economic life, with

their relentless focus on treating us all as consumers, not as citizens. Certainly not as neighbors. One of my favorite bumper stickers comes from an eatery here in Vermont, a place called the Farmers Diner that serves only locally grown food: “Think Globally, Act Neighborly.” Indeed.

And if you still doubt whether all this can add up to enough, one final anecdote. In January a few of us launched a website called www.stepitup07.org. We wanted to trigger the first national protests against global warming – to build a people’s movement to help shape a debate that’s been left to experts for too long. Instead of a march on Washington, we asked people to organize in their own hometowns, to go the places that mattered to them on April 14, and hoist a banner. We thought, optimistically, that we might get a few hundred, maybe two hundred, local organizers that might take on such a task.

We thought wrong. By mid-February, we were closing in on seven hundred actions. It’s clear we’re now organizing the biggest environmental protest in the country since Earth Day 1970 – and that our co-conspirators are living in retirement communities, and in sorority houses. They’re in churches across the country, and on farms. Some are painting blue stripes in our coastal cities where the water will come if we let the sea level rise, and some are skiing in formation down the dwindling glaciers of Wyoming and Montana, and some are holding underwater demonstrations on endangered coral reefs.

They’re asking Congress for national action – cuts in carbon emissions of 80% by 2050. But they know that those reductions will play out close to home, changing the shape of everyday life. Changing it for the better, as we learn once more to rely on those around us. As we learn what a real, living, durable economy looks like.