

SERMON: Turning a Crisis into Opportunity: Our Changing Economic Times & Local Environmental Sustainability

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We are being bombarded with plenty of bad news about economic decline and the collapse of the businesses and industries that have come to form the foundation of our economy. But what if we started to look at this crisis as a golden opportunity? How might our economy look if we pushed now for profound transformations? What would it mean for Hamilton if we called for a 'blue to green collar' transformation? This is an idea that is worth considering. Imagine what green economic development could mean for the future health and well-being of Hamiltonians, for the environment around us, and for our local economy. My talk will provide an introductory exploration of these possibilities and what they could mean for Hamilton.

Introduction:

Thank you. I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to speak to all of you today as part of your Earth Day Service. I know it won't be news to anyone here today that we are facing extremely challenging times right now. But with challenges comes the potential for profound change.

So, I am going to speak to you today about the economic crisis that continues to unfold around us and why a growing number of people, myself included, are starting to view this crisis as an opportunity to heal our struggling planet (not to mention all of us who call Earth home).

I believe our current crisis can open the door to profoundly transformative societal change – it's an ideal opportunity for all of us, as inhabitants of this planet, to take some time to reflect on where we've been, where we're currently at, and where we appear to be heading. Hopefully you'll all agree with me that we would be wise to alter our current course if we have any hopes for a viable, liveable future. I'd also add that it's that much more urgent for all of us in the developed world world to engage in such reflection and change because our impact on the earth has been so much more extensive to date. I firmly believe that, unless we take steps now to embrace the transformative change that will move us towards a sustainable future, our very survival will be at risk.

I also want to underscore my belief that the economic crisis pales in comparison to the environmental challenges that continue to unfold around us as I speak. The climate change crisis continues largely unabated, imposing planetary modifications that human populations are ill-prepared to handle. The planetary supplies of non-renewable fuel sources that we have all become so dependent on are running out (or peaking). These two challenges alone justify the need for transformative societal change.

But - it is the economic crisis that has the public transfixed and that's no surprise because it is hitting home in a very direct manner for more and more of us. At the same time, it is our current global economic systems that are fueling the environmental crises that are looming over us

So – with all of that doom and gloom, how can we possibly view this crisis as a Golden Opportunity?

We need to start to talk about a reformulation of our economic system – into a system that takes into account the environmental crisis, the need to meet the basic 'needs' (before the material wants) of all human beings, and the need to develop an economic system that is a sustainable, resilient one when considered from a combined economic, environmental and social point of view.

Our current economic system has failed us on all of these fronts – I feel far more comfortable making this statement publicly today than I did even last year – and fewer people would argue with this statement today.

Consider these statistics:

- The Earth is in overshoot - In 2008, the worldwide human population used up 140% of the resources the earth is capable of generating in a year. In other words, we did not use the earth's resources at a sustainable level last year. We borrowed resources from 2009 to get through 2008. We hit what some now refer to as Earth Overshoot Day on September 23 of 2008 - this is the day of the year when we hit 100% consumption of the earth's available resources for that year. 1986 was the first year that overshoot happened– and Earth Overshoot day continues to come earlier and earlier in each subsequent year.

- Meanwhile, according to the World Bank, nearly half the world's population—some 2.8 billion people—subsists on \$2 a day or less (if subsistence is even possible at this amount!). So, as these statistics make so obvious, there are huge inequalities amongst the human population when it comes to resource utilization.

OUR CURRENT GLOBAL ECONOMIC SYSTEM IS CERTAINLY NOT ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINBLE. Think about the statistic above and what so many people have been convinced will address our economic woes – just buy more! If everyone on the planet lived as most North Americans do, we'd require 5 planets to support this lifestyle! And so, you can see that our current system is also so very far, far away from being socially equitable. IN FACT, THE GAP BETWEEN RICH AND POOR CONTINUES TO WIDEN. WE'RE SEEING THAT GAP GROW WIDER HERE IN CANADA TOO.

Before I move on to talking about turning a crisis into a transformative opportunity, I wanted to share this excerpt from a Treaty on Alternative Economic Models developed by the International Non-Governmental Organization Forum in Rio De Janiero in 1992

The fundamental purpose of economic organization is to provide for the basic needs of a community, in terms of food, shelter, education, health, the enjoyment of culture, as opposed to a concentration on the generation of profit and on the growth of production for its own sake. Economic life must also be organized in such a way that it enhances rather than destroys the environment and safeguards natural resources for the use of future generations.

So, back to our current reality. We are being bombarded with plenty of bad news about economic decline and the collapse of the businesses and industries that have come to form the foundation of our economy. There is lots of fear and uncertainty about what the future holds for us.

Finding viable solutions is no easy task. Many people wonder whether attempts to bolster existing sectors, such as the automotive industry, make sense over the long term. Are we simply throwing good money after bad? What if we used government bailout money to implement other, more sustainable solutions? What could we be doing differently now to initiate a move in a new direction? Is it time for transformative change?

It's one thing to say that change is needed – but what kind of change??
And, further, how do we start to make this change happen?

I'll make a very preliminary start here today by touching on three possibilities for change - two of them newly emerging - that I find inspiring in these troubling times and how these possibilities are relevant to our own community. And I'll close with a call to action that I hope you'll reflect on and, ideally, consider acting on.

1. The possibilities for change:

The Green Collar Economy

I love this one – this notion of a transformation from a blue to green collar economy sends such a powerful message in a community like Hamilton. It's a message of hope – the notion that we can begin to transform our economic base to something greener and more resilient. The notion of a green collar economy has gained huge momentum in the United States through the work of community leaders such as Van Jones, whose efforts in Oakland, California have helped to provide hope and jobs to at-risk youth and progress on sustainability in this community. He is now working as the Green Jobs Czar for President Obama. Jones defines a green –collar job as:

- Blue collar employment that has been upgraded to better respect the environment
- It is family-supporting, career-track, vocational or trade-level employment in environmentally friendly fields
- Examples include – electricians who install solar panels, farmers engaged in organic agriculture, construction workers who build energy-efficient green buildings, wind power farms, solar farms.

He refers to the emergence of the Green Collar Economy as a new wave of environmentalism with principles that include:

- Equal protection for all;
- Equal opportunity for all; and
- Reverence for all creation.

And, the new administration in the US is investing dollars in this approach, acknowledging the huge potential it holds to provide decent work for

Americans - decent work that contributes directly to a more resilient economy and a sustainable future.

Relocalization/ the Transition Town Movement

Dovetailing nicely with many of the ideas of Van Jones and other green economy advocates is the concept of relocalization, a notion that is embodied in the growing global Transition Town Movement.

The concept of relocalization acknowledges the need to unravel globalization to some degree in order to enhance community resiliency – especially in light of the current economic and environmental challenges we face.

It is defined as:

“...a strategy to build societies based on the local production of food, energy and goods, and the local development of currency, governance and culture. The main goals of relocalization are to increase community energy security, to strengthen local economies, and to dramatically improve environmental conditions and social equity.”

Efforts to operationalize this notion of relocalization – have blossomed globally through a movement called the Transition Town Movement, which started in the UK. Many of you here are likely aware that community members in Dundas have initiated such an effort – which they refer to as DO-iT (an acronym for Dundas Ontario In Transition).

A very recent feature article from the NY Times describes Transition in this way:

Transition is about “building resiliency” — putting new systems in place to make a given community as self-sufficient as possible, bracing it to withstand the shocks that will come as oil grows astronomically expensive, climate change intensifies and, maybe sooner than we think, industrial society frays or collapses entirely. For a generation, the environmental movement has told us to change our lifestyles to avoid catastrophic consequences. Transition tells us those consequences are now irreversibly switching on; we need to revolutionize our lives if we want to survive.

Transition initiatives are described as being based on four key assumptions:

1. Life with dramatically lower energy consumption is inevitable, and that it's better to plan for it than be taken by surprise.
2. Our communities currently lack the resilience to be able to weather the severe energy shocks that will accompany peak oil (the reduction in availability of conventional fuel).
3. We have to act collectively and we have to act now.
4. By unleashing the collective genius of those around us to creatively and proactively design our energy descent, we can build ways of living that are more connected, more enriching and that recognize the biological limits of the planet.

Just imagine the potential for transformative change that this kind of approach could bring to every neighbourhood in our city!

Voluntary Simplicity/ Circles of Simplicity

Finally, I wanted to touch on transformation at the individual level. In this realm, many people have embraced the famous mantra of Mahatma Gandhi:

“Live simply so that others may simply live”

The notion of voluntary simplicity is a powerful one – especially today. Learning to live simply means a lower impact on the planet and a better ability to ride the storms of an unsustainable economic system. This approach also sets a new, transformative individual course of action that involves leading through lifestyle change. We need more of this – because we live in a society that is incredibly reluctant to discuss the need for lifestyle changes where material wealth is concerned.

In conclusion - my urgent message to you is this:

- Take a close and critical look at the approaches to economic development and the efforts to boost the economy here in Hamilton and beyond, right to the federal level. Consider whether what is happening at all of these levels is contributing to the problematic status quo or working for change. Particularly important for all of us as potential agents of transformative change, is our local economy. If you haven't yet, consider taking the time to

learn more about how our municipal government approaches economic development. The city of Hamilton has, for the first time that I can recall, opened up its economic development strategy process to the broader public. We're being asked to provide our input. Take a look at the strategy and, after some reflection on the state of the planet and the state of our economy, decide whether you are satisfied with proposed approaches to boosting our economy. Speak up for yourself, the planet, and future generations.

- Get involved. If you're in Dundas, find out more about Dundas Ontario In Transition. If you don't live there, consider starting a Transition Town effort in your own neighbourhood.

- Finally, give some thought to your own lifestyle. Are you living beyond the earth's means? What kinds of changes could you make in your own life to help to alleviate the pressure on the planet?

Do what you can to turn crisis into opportunity.

Thank you.