



RESILIENCE, COMMUNITY ACTION AND SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION

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People, Place,
Practice, Power, Politics
and Possibility in Transition



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2.1. Transition in Peterborough, Canada

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This chapter reports on my experiences of the challenges to resilience-building in a mid-sized Canadian city.

2.1.1. Local Context

The City of Peterborough, Canada was first called *Nogojivanong* (“where the rapids end”), and lies in the Mississauga Territory of the original Anishnaabeg people.

Our population is 76,000 people, 130,000 including surrounding rural area and villages. Our geographic region was shaped by retreating glaciers into rolling drumlins and eskers generously endowed with lakes and rivers. Some logging and trapping still occur in the northern part of our area, farming in the southern. We are a holiday destination for many. There are three indigenous communities in our vicinity. Our university, Trent, is well-known in Canada for Indigenous Studies. Our economy is a mix of a declining manufacturing sector (with a high percentage of that workforce in ‘Creative Class’ occupations) and a large number employed in service industries and education.¹⁷ Demographically, we have the highest population of seniors in Canada. We also face the most serious housing unaffordability in Canada and, at times, the highest unemployment rate.¹⁸

2.1.2. Personal Bio and Transition Town Story

Myself, I have a small consulting business in the arts of group facilitation. I have also worked in municipal government in Emergency Planning and Housing administration, in not-for-profit direct service social welfare agencies, and at both the Federal and Provincial levels of government.

I volunteer with **Transition Town Peterborough** (TTP). The Transition Town movement is voluntary, not-for-profit groups of local citizens with a passion for introducing resilience

17 Who Works Where: Occupational and Industrial Distribution in Ontario. Martin Prosperity Institute, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, Dec. 2013.

18 Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation stats 2012.

practices in their communities to adapt to the interconnected effects of climate change, the end of cheap fossil fuel energy, and economic contraction. Peterborough was Canada's first Transition Town.

2.1.3. Transition Town Peterborough's Challenges

At Resilience 2013, Suzanne Moser, in her summary mirroring poem 'Maybe...' included a conference participant's phrase "*here be dragons*" to describe the unknown, frightening territory off the edge of familiar maps in the Middle Ages. I've borrowed that image to an extent as a way of naming the **challenges** we face inviting people into the new territory that Transition is exploring: the profound changes of worldview, ideas of comfortable practices and habitual expectations now necessary due to the impacts of climate change.

In one sense, our timing couldn't be worse!

"just when we needed to gather, our public sphere was disintegrating; just when we needed to consume less, consumerism took over virtually every aspect of our lives; just when we needed to slow down and notice, we sped up; and just when we needed longer time horizons, we were able to see only the immediate present."

(Naomi Klein, rabble.ca April 22, 2014)

Challenge #1: How do we get round the socio-cultural-economic privileging of unsustainable lifestyles: the addiction to the privileges and comfort of an affluence based on fossil fuels?

This powerful addiction has everyday social and cultural reinforcements that reach us in the

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pleasure and security/safety centres of our brains. The prospect of giving up even some of these privileges is too scary or unbelievable, and is denied. A local example of addiction reinforcement: one of Peterborough's largest employers, employing some 2000 Peterburians, is a General Motors automobile manufacturing plant, a 45-minute commute away.

TTP's response to this challenge is education and awareness-raising (e.g. through films and discussions), and our quarterly free magazine called the *Greenzine*.

Challenge #2: How do we change deference toward and trust in government and big business into trust in personal responsibility and agency as sources of action?

TTP emphasizes grassroots, community-building action for adaptation. We encourage



Figure 2.1.1 – Transition Town Peterborough. Credit: POF.

individual and small group initiatives. While supporting a vital role for governments, we do not share the deep-seated, historically-reinforced belief and trust in government power and efficacy to act for the good of all and to protect us from the excesses of the marketplace. Successive Canadian senior governments have shifted towards more neo-conservative values in which politics serves and protects the growth-based, fossil fuel extraction economy. Government-business partnerships and technological innovation are often looked to for economic solutions.

TTP's response to this challenge is to work at it (as we do all the challenges) *bit by bit* across several initiatives that are examples of alternatives: by just doing it. A key future initiative of this type is to start neighbourhood-based **Resilience Circles**, also called **Transition Streets**, starting small in building resilience through face-to-face interaction among neighbours. This will require planning and resources we don't have right now.

Challenge #3: the Conventional Focus of Municipal Responsibilities: potholes versus preparation.

How does TTP bring municipal government into true adaptive planning when its main focus is still new roads, keeping taxes low, setting rules for bicycles and attracting big new employers?

The City Emergency Plan is designed, “to ensure the co-ordination of municipal, private and volunteer services in an emergency to bring the situation under control as quickly as possible.” There is no accounting for prolonged emergencies of magnitudes not seen before, for social unrest, prolonged infrastructure damage, paralysis of senior government aid, long-term business stoppage, fuel shortages, interruption of food supply, or other situations that, although unprecedented, are increasingly likely.

Some things we've done in response are:

- › to become the first Champion-level Partner with the City's official *Sustainability Plan* in order to bring our ideas forward
- › to meet one-on-one with City Councillors for the same purpose and (similar to previously mentioned responses)...
- › To offer education and conversation opportunities to learn about banking, money and economy (e.g. film series) and our free quarterly *Greenzine*.

We also search out and seize every opportunity to talk about what we do. Examples include a conference on Urbanism for International Development Students and an information booth at the local Spring Garden Show. We are also ramping up our efforts to use Social Media for information purposes, and host monthly “Meet Ups” open to all at a local pub.

Challenge #4: How to break through a local sense of immunity to world problems?

Peterborough's is a relatively benign climate. Other than a sudden flood in 2004 - the result of a rare, local weather anomaly - we have had no disastrous climate events with long-lasting, disruptive impact. Local government carries on economic development under a 'business-as-usual' model, investing tax reserves in big banks and not convening the vital public conversations on our future. The prevailing story is that Canada is immune to what's happening internationally. Many Canadians feel they weathered the last recession relatively well because government tightly regulates our Big Banks. Our consumer debt load is astronomical. On top of this, there is a local lack of knowledge and/or acceptance among the general populace and politicians of what is coming due to climate change.

Our response to this challenge is, again:

- › to offer education and conversation opportunities to learn about banking, money and economy (e.g. film series) and our free quarterly *Greenzine*.

We also

- › search out and seize every opportunity to talk about what we do e.g. a conference of IDS students on Urbanism and the local Spring Garden Show
- › are ramping up our efforts to use Social Media
- › hold monthly “Meet Ups” open to all at a local pub.

Challenge #5: How do we overcome a focus on single issue interests and pre-determined outcomes?

Potential players in adaptive responses are often preoccupied with their particular turf and planned outcomes in an unpredictable future.

Businesses are focused on the bottom line and outright day-to-day survival. Social support agencies have single-issue mandates and silos of funding. The transition challenge is how to connect them *together* in concerted effort to survive and adapt when *everything* is now driven by climate change in a world where outcomes are less predictable and new possibilities need to be imagined.

TTP tries to “connect the dots” in everything we do among various sectors and players in the nested, dynamic process that is adaptation and resilience-building.

In response, TTP tries to “connect the dots” in everything we do among various sectors and players (business, human services, public and private) in the nested, dynamic process that is adaptation and resilience-building.

Challenge #6: Against this backdrop, you may appreciate TTP’s challenge of conveying the ideas of transitioning to a resilient community, particularly in our main initiative: Economic Localization.

In general, Economic Localization gives preference to local resources, creates employment in locally-owned enterprises, creates local conditions and instruments for giving credit, and strengthens the non-monetized economy, seeking less dependence on external imports.

TTP’s concept of *localization* is difficult for a populace who generally do not understand the meaning of money and the economy, or the role of the banking system. It is challenging to engage citizens in a grassroots movement when they may be inexperienced in terms of previous participation in change efforts or disenchanted by previous attempts via the political system.

TTP responds to the localization challenge in two main ways:

First, it *distinguishes itself from local environmentalism* by this: climate change action plans and energy descent efforts will not be enough unless we underpin them with a local *economic infrastructure* as a key adaptation to climate change. Plans for lower carbon footprints, more green spaces, increased housing density, green building forms, active transportation, food from within 100km, and so on, are all necessary, but if we cannot continue to pay for, produce and supply our life essentials (food, water, energy, culture and health), cannot continue to trade among ourselves in ways that support livelihoods – then we will not be truly sustainable or regenerating communities.

Second, it is trying to *build a local economic infrastructure* in 2 main ways:

- i. Our highest profile economic localization effort is our **Local Currency** called the Kawartha Loon. Over 100 local business now accept it (including a Mitsubishi car dealership). The Loon is a tangible symbol of keeping local wealth circulating in the community.
- ii. We are working toward a **Public Trust**, a fund, seeded by the Canadian dollar reserve built up by the exchange of national currency for local currency. Hopefully, this will leverage other, bigger funds (we're aiming for municipal tax revenues) for investment in energy and the environment.

These are two of what economist Milton Friedman calls the 'good ideas' we want to have well-developed and 'lying at hand'¹⁹ for when the real trouble begins.

Challenge #7: How do we ensure that Economic Localization benefits socially and economically poor and marginalized people? What will our vision mean for people mired in structural poverty created by climate degradation, government-supported globalization and our own governments' social policies and austerity budgets? Will Economic Localization help alleviate poverty?

One of our responses to this challenge is Community Capacity-Building by:

- › A very successful **Transition Skills Forum** for *reskilling* ourselves in essential goods and services (like bread- and cheese-making, repairs, green building, gardening etc.) using local knowledge while minimizing costs through the use of citizen volunteers whom we invite to bring their skills forward for the community. We make these and all our events as accessible as possible by charging only \$5 or Pay What You Can, and holding them in physically accessible places.
- › We partner and network with other local bodies (e.g. a credit union as our first banking agent for the local currency).
- › We address the 'spiritual/sacred/emotional' in coming to grips with climate change in our **Heart and Soul** events.
- › We also invite the community to come together in celebration and showcasing of local abundance and entrepreneurs (especially in the food sector) in our annual Purple Onion Festival and 'Live Local/Buy Local' exposition for local entrepreneurs.

A second part of our response to this challenge is to demonstrate, over time, that a local currency and community/public trust will foster trade among ourselves and keep small enterprises (the backbone of any community economy) in business - hiring people into jobs that may not pay six-figure salaries but do have dignity, and pay enough for decent living – and in this way contributing to a self-perpetuating cycle of renewable, sustainable commerce that supports itself. In this scenario, employment is expected to continue to be *gradually* created: not in the usual way of Big Company descending saviour-like on the community with 200 jobs,

19 <http://theunbrokenwindow.com/2011/04/29/the-problem-with-economics/> Retrieved April 30, 2014.

only for those 200 jobs disappear all at once when it moves to take advantage of cheaper labour opportunities.

2.1.4. Summary

Although I began by saying "our timing couldn't be worse", I believe our timing also couldn't be better:

There is a rebirth of movement into unselfish, collective actions; into the offering of gifts; into work from the heart; into circles and spaces to explore in uncertainty and freedom in distributed creativity.

We are learning to ask new questions instead of having all the answers.

In summary, we are transitioning into resilience through:

- › love of our community
- › working in small groups (though a certain scaling up is also necessary)
- › as much localization as possible in life essentials
- › building momentum and creating demand for sustainable policy and practice
- › inner resilience (of Heart and Soul)
- › nudging away from competitive individualism to supportive community
- › strategic alliances wherever we can
- › being passionate, not scary, in our urgency to adapt to climate change
- › believing in what we are doing and just doing it!
- › and lastly - *Illegitimi non carborundum!*



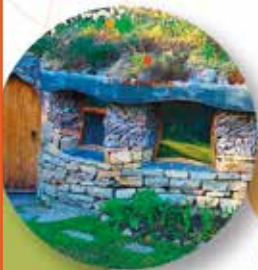
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Resilience has become a familiar buzz word in mainstream politics, most commonly as an excuse for 'business as usual'. Both resilience science and practical experience of community-led action for social change suggest an alternative view, in which resilience implies deep and far-reaching transformation of society.

This collection helps bring that vision into focus through a compelling blend of insights, ideas and action points from community activists, activist-scholars and leading resilience scientists. It includes direct accounts of practical efforts to build resilience at community level, theoretical reflections from a range of academic fields, and calls for collaboration among diverse efforts to create and defend community resilience worldwide.



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