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The World We Choose

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ECO NOTES



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Did you ever walk by a new building and scratch your head wondering what was there before? As someone interested in cultural and historical preservation, I wrack my brain sometimes trying to remember the history of a place, what came before, but I find that I so easily adapt to what's in front of me. We humans have an incredible capacity to acclimate to our surroundings. This was probably an evolutionary device to enable us to respond to rapidly changing circumstances. Evolution has also given us the ability to react to threats swiftly, yet has left us unprepared to respond well to long-term problems that don't pose obvious immediate threats. In man's early days, we never had the need to think about concerns years down the road. Now we do.

Our society is hinged on a world model that's based on endless growth. We evaluate our economy based on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which assesses our nation's growth of goods and services. We value our own net worth based on what we own and our ability to buy more stuff. We base the future of our community on its ability to build more homes, more roads, and more shopping malls. We rarely get to see what our system of nonstop growth means to our resources. Sometimes we get an inkling when we pass a landfill overflowing with the stuff we bought last year, or travel through West Virginia and see the 500 mountains that have been blowup to sustain our way of life, or go to our grocery store and see the cost of food rising due to depleted stocks of fish, produce, and other commodities that can't keep up with our demand.

We've been living in tough financial times for a couple of years now and that's left me wondering. What if the Great Recession was not just a stage we're passing through but a sign that our economic system and our natural resources are all hitting a giant brick wall? We tend to approach today's world like compulsive spenders might approach their budgets. They've lost their jobs and are living off the interest on their bank accounts. Which means every time they buy food, the next IPOD, a new smart phone, they need to spend more of the principal in the bank. If someone was to look at their lifestyles from the things in their homes, we might say, "Hey, Joe is doing just fine." And all appearances would suggest he is. However, once his principal is spent, he's headed for the homeless shelter.

Joe is living the life that many of us live: depending on resources that have a finite existence. Our electronics are produced from rare earth minerals that are being rapidly depleted. Our energy comes from fossil fuels that they aren't making any more of. Our new homes are built on land that's running out. To all outside appearances, everything is fine. Yet we're smart enough to know its not.

As 2011 comes to a close, it's customary to commit to resolutions for the New Year. Here are a few suggestions for 2012: 1) Count how many streams you drive by on your way to work or shopping and endeavor to learn their names, where they lead, how they're used. 2) Think about where your food is coming from and endeavor to buy at least 10% that's grown locally. 3) Look at your utility bills regularly and think about where that energy comes from and how you can reduce your use. (Hint: 60% comes from coal, 32% from nukes.) 4) Consider working with your local environmental group this coming year, in an area that you care about, to protect the place you love.