

THIS YEAR, I'LL SPARE YOU THE EARTH DAY FLOGGING

BY DAVID CHERNUSHENKO

It's Earth Day: time for the ritual flogging of modern industrial consumer society. Greedy humans! Polluters! Sinners! Now it's time for the compulsory doomsday list:

- **Climate change:** It's bad and getting worse, faster than anticipated.
- **Water:** It's precious, it's polluted, and putting it in bottles is not helping.
- **Air quality:** It's improving in some cities, but appalling in most, especially in Asia.
- **Agriculture:** Arable land is increasingly depleted, paved over and under pressure by people and the climate. A food crisis is just around the corner.
- **Fisheries:** Most of the fish are gone. Technology can pinpoint the remaining ones. Subsistence fishermen are in trouble.

Need more? I thought not. Sure, every item in that list is true. Some scary things were even left out. Our wasteful society is unsustainable, and we are all guilty of excess, at least occasionally.

But does a public flogging lead anyone to change? Will one more desperate plea to save the planet and ourselves actually inspire anyone, let alone entire societies and economies to adopt the progressive practices required?

Not likely. What might work, though — and this may be our

last big hope — is to inspire people to pursue a better way of living. To show them that they can have more of the good things in life, but that they may just want to tweak their ideas of what "having more" actually looks like and what the "good things" really are.

Convincing people to give something up for the sake of the community runs counter to human nature. Even in wartime it is a tough sell, and only ever works if we see everyone else doing it. What does work — as every marketing agency knows — is to show people that there is something better out there. Better than what you have now. You can have it, too. You deserve it. Such enticement does not rely on intellect. It appeals heavily on the emotional level. It involves getting you to feel, to want. It calls to your senses.

Now what does marketing have to do with Earth Day and saving the planet? Quite simply, it's time for us greenies to re-brand "environmentalism," sustainability and even Earth Day. It's time to focus on how great the future could be, not how bad.

We all want to save polar bears and eat safe food. But do we want to lose our jobs to make it possible? Do we want to spend the winter in wool coats, gathered around a single heater? Do we want to all live without access to a car?

Of course not. Nor should we have to. But that is not the im-

pression many people have.

Whether by poor communication from the proponents of environmentalism, or outright deception from the merchants of the status quo, a myth has been allowed to develop around what a more sustainable lifestyle, a "greener" society might look like. That myth equates a greener future with spartan lifestyles, granola at every meal, and making all your own clothes, from jute sacks. It's about not having fun.

The challenge of marketing green or sustainable living is to boldly counter that myth, with an offer of a colourful, vibrant, rewarding life. With a vision of communities that are safe, healthy, full of human interaction, and art and energy. With a picture of an economy that delivers efficient, reliable products and services, and good jobs that don't pollute.

To sell the possible, we can use the actual: stories and images of people, and things and places that already are. Everything we need exists somewhere already and, as economist and philosopher Kenneth Boulding put it, "anything that exists is possible."

In *The Geography of Hope*, Canadian journalist Chris Turner takes us on a tour of existing places, and introduces us to people who make the world's more sustainable villages and buildings and farms and companies function. From his book — and a spate of simi-

larly inspired books, articles, websites and films — it is no great leap to conclude that human society has all the tools we need to build a lifestyle of permanence, to pursue a world that is "100 per cent good" rather than "less bad."

Once you begin looking, it is startling just how easy it is to find an elegant, efficient and often cheaper solution to a problem, be it a domestic home repair, an industrial process or a municipal transportation challenge. Unfortunately, too many political and business leaders remain convinced that "eco-logical" solutions must be either pipe dreams, too costly, or awaiting some missing technological invention.

When you open your eyes to the cornucopia of eco-solutions, however, an amazing world of ideas and sights awaits:

- Green roofs provide all the protection of a traditional roof, but the plants they hold help to cool the building and surroundings, while retaining and cleaning water and adding biodiversity. Chicago's city hall has one, as do some buildings in Toronto, many in Portland, and thousands in Germany.

- Energy-plus houses actually generate more energy than they consume, selling their excess "clean" energy to the grid, hopefully replacing dirtier energy. They accomplish this by

adding solar and geothermal energy generation to what is otherwise a "normal," but very well designed and insulated house.

- Urban agriculture is on the rebound, in cities such as Los Angeles and London, not to mention Havana. People continue to, or have just learned to, provide a portion of their food needs by growing it themselves, on roofs, balconies, urban gardens, allotted plots or simply vacant land. They report deriving a great deal of pleasure and a sense of self-sufficiency.

- Organic food buying groups formed in cities across Europe and North America to get access to something hard to find. Now major grocery stores have stepped in to make a greater variety of organic foods, at a lower cost, available "to the masses."

- "New Urbanism" planners have brought, or brought back, communities that are designed more for human interaction and local commerce, than for speeding cars.

- The (re)discovery list goes on: the clothesline as a weapon against climate change and a budget cutter; the bicycle as a tool for moving things, getting places and getting fit; the farmers' market as a source of tasty local produce, as well as human interaction; shutters, overhangs and fans as elementary forms of home cooling.

There is no one-size-fits-all answer to anything. All ideas must be considered and understood first, and then tailored as required. What does work everywhere is "solution banking": online, "open source" spaces where people, all over the world, and free of charge,

share what they have done and the lessons learned, in the hopes of contributing to the design of that "100-per-cent good" society and economy.

The "geography of hope" is being built on more than just hope. It is also a geography of inspiration and confirmation. These many green examples can inspire us, excite us, entice us, allow us to dream of something better, and to know that it really is achievable. That sounds like a green marketer's dream. That sounds like a way to make Earth Day one of celebration, not flagellation.

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