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**The Transitional Town**  
**Moving Toward a Low-Carbon Society**  
*By Monica Carless*

*'It seems to me that a low-carbon society would be one which remembers that our planet is a unique gift – perhaps the only of its kind in the entire universe – which we are indescribably privileged to be born into. It would be a society that could look back on the six degrees nightmare scenario as just that – a nightmare, one which humanity woke up from and avoided before it was too late. More than anything, it would be a society which survived and prospered, and which passed on this glorious inheritance – of caps, rainforests and thriving civilizations – to countless generations, far into the future.'* Mark Lynas

The process of transitioning to the sort of low-carbon society that UK journalist/environmentalist Mark Lynas describes (left) is the focus of the Transition Movement, founded by British permaculture teacher Rob Hopkins. And Lynas' thought-provoking quote is from Hopkins' book entitled *The Transition Handbook – From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience*.

The Transition Town initiative is one way to address the controversial issue of peak oil and climate change, from a pro-active, not reactive stance. It teaches that small scale is big change in an industrialized world and that individual effort can create a collective harmony between the needs of a community and the will of local government. It is not about survivalism in the usual sense, but about creating change before we are faced with the absolute end of cheap oil.

My exposure to the Transition movement began while browsing through some books in the U.K, in the exceptional book town of Hay-on-Wye, on the Welsh border. As the Universe would have it, the next day, at another book store, nestled in the shadows of Ludlow Castle (Ludlow is the UK headquarters for the Slow Food Movement), I flipped through a magazine and read an article about the very same thing. Curiosity peaked and, always searching for ideas to inspire the community in which I live back here in Canada, I determined to learn more. So I purchased Hopkins' book, which outlines the concept of the Transition Movement and lays out steps for becoming a Transition Town.

Hopkins created the world's first "Energy Descent Plan" for the town of Kinsale, Ireland as part of a project with his permaculture students. Later, this plan was adopted by town council as policy. There are now a hundred or more communities in varying parts of the world working towards becoming Transition Towns – a vision that can be held by any community, as it is entirely achievable following the steps outlined in the book. The primary driving force is the will of the citizens. Although co-operation from town council is desirable and helpful, this movement must be mobilized by the citizens of the area and is not, as voiced by one chairman of a town council, something bestowed upon the community.

Moving from oil dependency to local resilience means that a community can function and hold together in the face of change and while enduring shocks from the outside. It does not mean that outside influence and commerce is not appreciated or even needed in the post cheap oil era, but that a town has increased control of its own economy by scaling down to use as many local resources as it can, and in doing so, reducing its consumption of fossil fuels.

Hopkins' passion for permaculture design is quite obvious within the Transition model. In his *Transition Handbook*, Bill Mollison, considered the founder of the permaculture movement, describes permaculture in this way: "Permaculture is a philosophy of working with, rather than against Nature, of protracted and thoughtful observation rather than protracted and thoughtless labor, and of looking at plants and animals in all their functions, rather than treating any area as a single product system." There are twelve main permaculture principles, some of which are: Observe and Interact, Catch and Store Energy, Use and Value Renewable Resources and Services, Produce no Waste, Use Small and Slow Solutions. Hopkins believes that adapting and applying these principles to living with alternate and reduced fuel resources is a key strategy towards healing our economy and natural world.

It is a design system that holds the key for building sustainable communities and social/cultural structures. Since the advent of cheap oil, we have not had to design our towns based on human relationships and

communal efforts. Cheap oil meant that we were free to focus on economic growth and town expansion, abandoning the basics of good community planning.

On a trip to the community of Findhorn, Scotland, I noticed some features of town planning that we have almost altogether abandoned in North America. Imagine: communal bicycle huts, communal gardens, walking and bike trails as part of essential town design, designated parking lots (where cars are not parked in front of each house...the streets are child friendly), centrally located parks and community centers, child care facilities built free of environmental hazards, green roofs, wind turbines, solar stations, etc. These all seem like common sense but, in reality, we haven't had to think this way, because it has been so cheap to just pile everyone into the car and drive to the local mall for just about everything we need....or has it?

There are four key assumptions of transition initiatives. They are:

- That life with dramatically lower energy consumption is inevitable, and that it's better to plan for it than to be taken by surprise;
- That our settlements and communities presently lack the resilience to enable them to weather the severe energy shocks that will accompany peak oil;
- That we have to act collectively, and we have to act now;
- That 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 our planet.

Instead of focusing on the helplessness of our present environmental situation, the Transition Movement points out that we are free to pull together in a holistic, optimistic, grassroots effort towards recreated communities based on sustainable principles.

Investigating the existing groups within your community that are already practicing and promoting sustainability, you may be surprised to learn how much is already happening that can be pulled together to form a transitional movement locally. Do you have a Zero Waste group, a community garden initiative, an alternative energy project, a plan for more bicycle paths or community supported child care, folks teaching workshops in food preservation or how to build cold storage in the home? Do you eat locally, seasonally and teach others to do the same? Are you and your neighbors using a clothesline or converting lawns to edible landscapes? Guess what?! Your town may already be a few steps away from transitioning! Experts in varying fields related to sustainability live in every community, and many of them are excellent teachers, given the chance.

Living with and progressing past access to abundant cheap fuel is not something that we can ask our government to do for us. We must create the changes that we desire within our mindset and our lifestyle, and the right government will follow. In other words, as Gandhi said: Be the Change!

This idea is one that can unite us within our communities and help us to focus on the possibilities ahead. After watching numerous documentaries about the environmental quagmire we have created, I have enjoyed finding an idea that offers hope spelled out in practical terms. If you have been inspired, learn more and start talking about it within your own town, district, city, county or neighborhood.

I was fortunate enough to live in Poland during the 1960s. The challenges that arose from the government of the time resulted in organized efforts to combat considerable food shortages. Sitting on the back of my grandfathers' bicycle, I rode daily to our allotment garden, where we met with our neighbors. The woods were full of mushrooms and kindling, the hedgerows provided berries, apples and grapes. Laying hens were permitted in backyard gardens and the town market was central to the health of the community. These days, the free and abundant food on wild fruit trees falls to the ground and rots, as food is shipped in from far away. As I look back now, I realize that, although there were many drawbacks to the way things were, I still draw hope from that resilient and resourceful time.

**Learn More** *The Transition Handbook* by Rob Hopkins (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008)  
[www.transitiontowns.org](http://www.transitiontowns.org)