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2020 Hindsight (Part 2)

"Through mutual suffering and dread, we have finally come to realize that, truly, we are all in this together. Our future remains perilous, but we must try to... What the...? Oh, my G...!" – President Al Gore's Last Words, Riyadh Summit, 0 Spring 0 NE (March 21, 2010 CE)

FORT NAPANOCH, Rondout Cooperative Authority, 10 Spring 85 NE (June 14, 2020 CE) – In the latter half of the 20th century, two extreme visions of “the future” predominated. First (riding post-WWII optimism), was a pristine, pastel technoparadise, a *Jetson* Futurama of personal flying cars, meals-in-a-pill, servile (if sarcastic) robots, and jobs that involved nothing more stressful than putting feet up on a desk. Followed (in post-Vietnam/Watergate cynicism) by dark, gritty techno-dystopias in which soulless machines get the upper hand, or threaten to (*The Terminator*, *The Matrix*, *Blade Runner*). Neither view came remotely close. Even the brilliant *2001: A Space Odyssey* (which was semi-plausible when filmed in 1968) got little right in retrospect: no moon bases, no Pan Am shuttles to orbiting Hiltons and Howard Johnsons, no Ma Bell, no BBC12, no HAL.

Which confirms the old jape, “The future ain’t what it used to be!” Except, ironically, *our present is*, for most people in many ways, more like “what it used to be” in 1850 (or, alas, 1250, or even 12,500 BCE, depending on where you live!) than even how “it used to be” just a mere 20 years ago. The isolated and defensive enclaves of *Mad Max* and Kostner’s *The Postman* actually seem to have come closest to hitting our mark: when a complex network of critical resources unravels, larger formal structures wither, and smaller, self-contained ad-hoc social units form and evolve to match local carrying capacity.

We, in our Valley, were relatively lucky – we’ve avoided the worst of the ever-rising coastal floodings and their ensuing infections and rot; our warmer winters and less humid summers have reduced heating/cooling needs (and we had enough trees for heating and power generation to get us over the transitional hump); our abundant water resources have been well-rationed and efficiently used; we had ramped up our local organic agriculture before oil-and-gas-based fertilizers and pesticides became scarce; we were able to harness sufficient wind, water, and solar energies with lower-tech “home-grown” devices (when the hi-tech systems became unavailable) to keep a viable, albeit down-scaled, infrastructure operating. Today’s air is even cleaner!

We patched together a new and eclectic system of economics and social organization that still doesn’t have a name, because it is still evolving, although *cooperative* comes closest. Terms like *capitalism* or *communism* just seem meaningless, given our new realities. The whole concept of *profit*, or endless *growth* (what was once called *economic development*) seems alien and absurd now; we can only support a certain amount of people and livestock in our immediate community or bio-region, so our goal is a stable and sustainable balance, rather than a manic striving for *more!* We aim for just enough surplus to

trade some with neighboring regions, or to get the few available specialty needs that come from further afar.

After we gathered up all the *useful* books and data and transferred them to the Fort, we set our best researchers (many of whom no longer had their old jobs to go to!) to scour them for the practical skills and wisdom we had jettisoned in our oil-soaked addiction to “modernity.” We had to relearn pre-petroleum farming, animal husbandry, health care, architecture, transportation, sanitation, even simple excavation and lifting without cheap oil-power.

We drew on a variety of historical self-sufficient community models: monasteries, Amerindian tribes, Israeli Kibbutzim, 19th and 20th century communes, Western frontier towns, Greek city-states. Re-enactors from Plimouth Plantation and Colonial Williamsburg, and others well-versed in pre-oil living, became our mentors. The federal government – greatly reduced in size and power, becoming, mostly, a maintainer of post/parcel services, internet and telecommunications, essential resource allocation, and critical production – sent Amish and Cuban trainers to qualifying *triaged* communities like ours. (After *Hurricane Fidel* – the world’s first Category 6 storm, ironically striking a week after Castro died – forced final evacuation of Guantanamo, then leveled Havana and Miami, the US embargo was lifted, expat Cubans returned home to help rebuild, and relations finally normalized. Years of isolation, then the Soviet collapse, had forced the Cubans to learn how to make-do without medicines and McDonalds, and to keep 50-year-old cars and machines running; now, *we* were begging to have an army of “peoples’ doctors,” mechanics, farmers, and community organizers, help *us* cope with less.)

In 1900, over 30% of Americans were engaged in farming; in 2000, it was under 2%. Today, *everyone here* farms to some degree, by need and mandate; after security, water, and sanitation, it’s our greatest concern. Our most valuable medicinal herbs and crops are cultivated within Fort Napanoch’s gardens, though individuals with special needs usually grow their own supplies. Greenhouses and rooftop/sunroom gardens allow for some year-round production. Since all pitch in, it’s only 15 hours/week of productive, low-stress labor that connects us more with the earth, leaving more time for homegrown art, music, and study.

All land has been re-allocated for best community use, primarily for growing basic greens, beans, grains, herbs, and fruits; some land is set aside for sorghum, hemp, kenaf, bamboo, switchgrass, flax, papyrus, etc., for essential fibers, or oils and alcohols for vehicles and heating (although our few non-electric or non-pedal vehicles mostly run on ammonia produced by windmills; geo-thermal retrofits do most heating/cooling). We use far less paper and cloth than before, and the above plants, plus fast-growing trees, suffice.

Chicory and bechnut brews have replaced coffee, though a variety of locally-grown herbal or root teas are the beverages of choice. Who’d imagine we now actually *cultivate* dandelions for low-maintenance greens and wine?!! And the huckleberries are back!

All in all, we are leaner, healthier, and less prone to heart disease and cancers than our 1990’s selves! And, with fewer *things* to buy, or *places* to go to, we spend less time at empty *jobs*, and more time enjoying and helping our community and neighbors. Having just reached the mandatory retirement age of 70, *I* plan to do even more biking, writing, and enjoying!