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MEDIA REVIEW

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE: THE TRANSITION MOVEMENT AND PEOPLE OF FAITH

by Ruah Swennerfelt

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Reviewed by Ann Amberg

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In her landmark book, *Rising to the Challenge: The Transition Movement and People of Faith*, Ruah Swennerfelt shares with us an exciting ‘report from the field’ highlighting a growing Transition movement. Since the birth of the Transition Town movement in the UK in 2006, groups are working together at the grassroots, community level to creatively take up the challenge of building social, economic, and ecological resilience for future generations. Swennerfelt draws from interviews with Transition organizers worldwide to explore how towns and cities are creating awareness and taking action—exploring renewable energy sources, creating an ‘energy descent’ plan in response to the realities of peak oil, and encouraging economic relocalization. What could it look like if the places we call home have intentionally prepared for a post-fossil fuel era? How can people from differing backgrounds and belief systems work in partnership to foster local community resilience?

Transition founders have underscored the importance of sharing and holding a positive vision for change, and addressing head-on the obstacles that inevitably arise. Naresh Giangrande, co-founder of Transition Totnes, UK:

The challenge for our times is how to create the Transition. My vision includes a re-localized economy and living more simply with reduced mobility. But what

excites me is how to create system change, how to move from where we are to where we need to get. The vision needs to be informed by hard science as well as our feelings and our intuitions. (Swennerfelt, p. 35).

Permaculture principles shaped the early Transition movement. Permaculture refers to “permanent agriculture,” and in a larger sense, “permanent culture”. The three central tenets of permaculture align with a partnership worldview: 1. Care for the earth; 2. Care for the people; 3. Return of surplus back into the system (fair share). (p. 25). The holistic systems view of permaculture design informs the way Transition groups organize, how diverse groups can move toward inner and outer change, local infrastructure planning for sustainability, and how growing and recycling food can be carefully designed for diversity, resiliency, and maximum productivity over time. Permaculture values are also partnership values, and encourage inner as well as outer transition. *Rising to the Challenge* relates how the movement is blossoming into organized networks, and how groups are creatively embracing challenges as diverse as the issues and solutions in their hometowns.

Transition groups are fostering local initiatives that are partnership-based responses to very real threats of climate imbalance, social and economic injustice, food insecurity, systemic economic collapse, and environmental degradation. They are discovering that it’s possible to envision a satisfying way of living together despite an uncertain future; they are cultivating a strong sense of belonging, and affirming that everyone’s contributions are valued. They are getting to know their neighbors, and learning how to scale down, use renewable energy wisely, organize in mutually beneficial ways, eat delicious locally grown food together, have fun, and thrive!

Meet Transition leaders who are sowing powerful seeds of change:

Murad Al Khuffash is a Palestinian Muslim who created a successful permaculture farm (“an oasis of green in a dry land”) on his family’s farm of ten generations. Murad is

devoted to utilizing resources wisely and teaching others how to use his rainwater irrigation system.

Joanne Poyourow is a leader of Transition Los Angeles. Founded in 2008, it supports a central city hub that generates smaller local citywide initiatives (called “pods”). Joanne is the author of a book that promotes permaculture as a transition strategy, and she envisions citywide food gardens forming a foundation for local resilience.

To become free of dependence on oil imports, Sweden is committed to being the first oil-free country. **Anton Adreasson** founded Transition Alingsås, Sweden in 2009. The group hosts a weekly Transition Café, and have created an online social network, supporting people in staying focused locally on transition for change.

Swennerfelt traveled to Brazil and met **Isabela de Menezes**, a member of Transition Granja Viana, near São Paulo. Isabela is connected with the unique Transition initiative of economically challenged Brasilandia, which borders an urban forest supplying 80% of the water for São Paulo. A core part of the work of this group is to promote the value of the forest and constrain development that threatens this vital treasure.

Richard Heinberg, an American expert on peak oil, observes, “There is something different about the Transition network—a sense of excitement, possibility, and engagement, perhaps powered by their ongoing development of a replicable strategy for harnessing the talents, vision, and goodwill of ordinary people” (p. 43). Swennerfelt reflects:

Transition is growing up. It is about becoming relevant to the community, creating livelihoods and a sound economic system for the post-oil world. The people in each Initiative have to figure out what works for them. Each location has its own challenges, culture, and environment. There isn’t one blueprint that fits all. (p. 37-38).

Our local Transition initiative on Whidbey Island, Washington, where I live, featured in its early phases a weekly potluck and informational gathering, relocation and re-skilling workshops, building local food resources, and a wealth of project proposals such as establishing a local cooperative credit union, a local currency, a farm school for young organic farmers, pedestrian-friendly streets, solar power solutions, and more.

Rob Hopkins, a Buddhist and founder of the Transition Town movement in Totnes, UK, sees faith-based communities as important sources of inspiration for the Transition Movement. Our Transition Whidbey gatherings were held at the Methodist church in my town, a congregation that has a long record of social justice and environmental activism. In recent years, the Whidbey Unitarian Universalist Church has organized a committee to support climate change activism.

Ruah Swennerfelt is a founding member of Transition Town Charlotte, Vermont, and a leader of the Burlington Friends Meeting (Quaker) community. *Rising to the Challenge* highlights the vital leadership role of faith-based groups in supporting communities adopting a lower-impact, sustainable way of life rooted in a local sense of place. Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Buddhist, Catholic, Quaker, Protestant, and Jewish religious traditions (among others) have presented declarations and official statements on climate change. The book suggests that faith leaders are uniquely positioned to nurture and support the inner and the outer work of transition, bringing communities, both secular and religious, together with hope and a shared purpose to care for people and for the earth.

Swennerfelt introduces several Transition leaders who draw on their spiritual faith as a source of energy, inspiration and guidance. **Rani Jayakumar**, a Transition leader in Palo Alto, CA, shares how her vision of a positive future and the passion and joy of her Hindu background intersect with her Transition work. She recalls festivals in India that brought together villages to share fresh local food, song, and stories that celebrated the seasons. She honors her Hindu tradition as a way of life that respects the earth as sacred and brings families together to share the abundance of their local place.

Shifting our worldview away from domination, inequitable economies, and unsustainable resource use, and establishing a working foundation of partnership with our neighbors and our bioregion is a good first step in planting seeds for change as we prepare to work together, ‘power down,’ and respond to the realities of a post-carbon future. As Rob Hopkins states in the book’s Introduction, “Transition focuses on the art of finding and nurturing common ground with those around us.” *Rising to the Challenge: The Transition Movement and People of Faith* celebrates the power and the “miracle of human faithfulness.” Swennerfelt: “There is a first step each of us needs to take—we need to find our connection to Earth. We need to feel that connection which will motivate us to stand up and work for her survival” (p. xx).

References

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Ann Amberg, MCS, is a leadership and holistic learning design consultant with 20 years of professional experience in corporate and non-profit organizations in the US and UK. She is the Associate Director of the Center for Partnership Studies, and teaches online courses for K-12 teacher activists. She facilitated residential courses at Schumacher Collage, an international school for ecological studies in Devon, Totnes, UK, where she studied permaculture, ecospirituality, and holistic science, and met the founders of the Transition movement. She served as a Board member of Transition Whidbey, where she currently lives in a small island community north of Seattle.

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