

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT THROUGH GRASSROOTS ACTION: A STORY OF BUILDING PERSONAL AND LOCAL RESILIENCE WITH THE TRANSITION TOWNS MODEL

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Abstract

Nils Palsson and Virajita Singh have partnered in telling Nils' story of his personal and professional journey with the Transition Town movement - its thought leaders, philosophy, practices, and relationship to the partnership/domination paradigm shift. Through his participation in the grassroots Transition Town movement, Nils found, cultivated, and ultimately shared with others a sense of local empowerment. In his rural home in California's Lake County, Nils found community, following great personal transformation in his life with the passing of his father. He learned about Transition Towns, permaculture, and other concepts dealing with local resilience, grassroots empowerment, and regenerative and holistic systems and lifestyles. He and others employed the Transition model, as described in Rob Hopkins' *Transition Handbook* in transitioning Lake County. In 2015 he became Communications Director of Transition US. In this position, Nils has come to see that the world of Transition is much larger than he had imagined, with citizen-leaders and change agents in Transition Towns working toward environmental justice for all.

Keywords: Transition Towns; Personal Resilience; Community Resilience; Permaculture; Valley Fire

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INTRODUCTION

Nils Palsson and Virajita Singh have partnered in telling Nils' story of his personal and professional journey with the Transition Town movement - its thought leaders, philosophy, practices, and relationship to the partnership/domination paradigm.

NILS PALSSON'S STORY: BUILDING PERSONAL AND LOCAL RESILIENCE THROUGH THE TRANSITION TOWN MOVEMENT

As an American millennial coming of age in the days of the George W. Bush presidency, and being in my twenties for the Obama era, I have had the distinct discomfort of witnessing gradual ecological degradation, an accelerating climate crisis, ongoing wars, and a widening wealth gap, alongside a long-standing observation that so many of these woes, while obvious, were simply *not actionable*. Numerous experiences led me to feel frustrated by a national political system and global economic system marked by deep social, racial, economic, and environmental inequality and injustice.

This is the story of how, through my participation in the grassroots Transition Towns movement, I began to find, cultivate, and ultimately share with others a sense of local empowerment unlike anything I had ever experienced. It is also an account of how people acting in partnership can create a movement that brings real change on the scale of the lived - that is to say, changes in local daily existence and lived experience as opposed to changes in national/international policy. In an era of what I see as dawning fascism, a growing climate crisis, exaggerated concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few, and an unresponsive and corporation-influenced political system, this Transition Towns movement now stands poised to serve people on a massive scale, as we come together and take action at a local level to build thriving, resilient communities and embody greater harmony and integrity with our planet and each other. In the parlance of partnership studies, Transition Towns represent the emergence and activation of a new way of acting in response and resistance to the unsustainable, unsuccessful, and antiquated domination paradigm that has brought about such immeasurable suffering in our world.

THE PATH TO DISCOVERING TRANSITION TOWNS

In the summer of 2007, in the waning months of the Bush Presidency, I was a year out of college, back home in the San Francisco Bay Area, and beginning to consciously

identify as a “peaceful revolutionary.” I heard of an upcoming event in Atlanta called the United States Social Forum (USSF), a gathering of the domestic progressive resistance that was fashioned after the World Social Forum (which was the global grassroots social movement’s response to the World Economic Forum meetings, in which mostly wealthy white men in suits meet behind closed doors to determine the economic fate of the working class and the planet we call home). The USSF was an assembly of the many-dimensional people’s movement, a weeklong gathering featuring workshops, keynotes, demonstrations, solidarity-building, resource- and inspiration-sharing, and networking to grow the progressive movement to build a better world. Ready to amplify my part in the emerging revolution, I travelled to Atlanta.

Perhaps reflecting my own frustration and anger, the first USSF was filled with people who had had enough of war, empire, pollution, climate change, class inequality, white supremacy, patriarchy, xenophobia, and other forms of bigotry and oppression. The solutions were not yet clear, but at least we were finding each other and connecting. It felt affirming. Other people saw the need for big change and were trying to do something about it.

Personal, Political, Mystical

The next couple of years were marked by great personal transformation in my life. Shortly after graduating from NYU and moving to Harlem to write and make revolution, I learned that my father had been diagnosed with advanced leukemia and would be undergoing chemotherapy. I returned to California to be by his side for his final eight months. During this time, being visited by what I now refer to as the ‘Angel of Death,’ I began to more deeply question the meaning of life and undergo the beginnings of a spiritual awakening. After he passed away, I travelled briefly to the Twin Cities to march on the 2008 Republican National Convention (where police, enhanced with millions of dollars of military equipment, brutalized my friends in the street), and ultimately returned home to the Bay Area. I got an apartment, got a job, and began to face more directly the difficulty of adult life in a modern capitalist economy.

Then came another powerful initiation. In the midst of my nascent spiritual emergence, I felt the persistent sense that I was wasting away and needed to take decisive action to free my mind and retrieve my soul. I quit my job, enrolled in a school of holistic healing, attended a powerful men's initiatory ceremony, relocated to the rugged mountains of Northern California's Lake County, and ultimately found my way to Sacred Valley of the Incas and the deep jungles of Peru to integrate my mind, body, and spirit.

Mystical experiences are difficult to put into words, so I'll just share the result of my journey: I returned from the jungle feeling strong, increasingly healthy, committed to serving life, and aware of my purpose. About a week after I returned from Peru, in the summer of 2010, the second US Social Forum was about to commence in Detroit. I had already booked my ticket.

Local and Global

In my new, rural home in California's Lake County, about two hours' drive northeast of San Francisco, several small and sparsely populated towns lay scattered loosely around California's largest lake, Clear Lake, and in the surrounding volcanic mountains and valleys. I was new to the area, initially searching more for solitude than community, but in those first few months, I had gradually begun to find my people.

Before travelling to Peru and then Detroit, I had started attending "Second Sunday Cinema," a monthly documentary screening at a Methodist church hall in the economically depressed town of Clearlake. I found that even in this mainly conservative, agrarian county, there were pockets of progressivism. It was the era of the Occupy movement, and its paradigm-shifting ethos stretched from the urban canyons of Wall Street to the rustic expanses of Lake County. I announced to the group at the movie screening that I'd be journeying to Detroit for the 2010 USSF. I was approached later that night by Shannon, the petite but powerful elder who had organized the monthly film series. She placed her hands squarely on my shoulders, looked me in the eyes, and commanded me: "Find out about Transition Towns!"

I had never heard the term before and wondered: *What was a Transition Town?* I filed it away for later, packed my bags, and flew to Detroit. At this USSF, perhaps reflecting my own state of ongoing inner transformation, I noticed something very different from the 2007 gathering in Atlanta. There was still a great deal of outrage and frustration present in the voices of the thousands of people convened there, but there was also a dawning sense of hope, a feeling of possibility, and a recurring refrain: if we want to change the system, we need to begin by changing ourselves.

I also found out about Transition Towns, permaculture, and a whole slew of other novel concepts dealing with local resilience, grassroots empowerment, and cultivating regenerative and holistically healthy systems and lifestyles to “*be the change*” we were all seeking to create in the world around us.

Permaculture, a word created by combining “permanent” and “agriculture” (or “culture”), represents a conscious design ethic that seeks to create sustainable systems by working with, instead of against, nature. It traditionally applies to farming and homesteading in a way that mimics natural patterns – for example, planting food forests and other multi-crop ecosystems that enhance the soil over time instead of destructive monocrops requiring heavy use of land-depleting chemical-based fertilizer and pesticides. Yet, permaculture is not limited to homesteading and growing food. It can be applied on any scale, from cultivating a resilient *inner* landscape, to building homes and villages in ways that honor the land and work with nature (natural building, passive solar, rainwater catchment, humanure composting, etc.). It can even be applied to re-designing our communities, towns, and economies from the ground up. The three core ethics of permaculture are care for the Earth, care for people, and a fair share for all. These, I realized, were also core ethics of the revolution I had been fighting for all along – ethics of acting in partnership with the earth and with each other.

At the 2010 USSF, I learned of Rob Hopkins, a permaculture teacher in the United Kingdom whose students had taken up the project of applying the permaculture lens to

the wider community of Kinsale, Ireland. Conscious of peak oil, climate change, and economic instability, the class produced a citywide Energy Descent Action Plan to get the town off fossil fuels by building local food, energy, and economic infrastructure toward this revolutionary notion of resilience and being able to bounce back from unexpected changes. The students presented this plan to the local government, and the city adopted it. Hopkins soon returned home to Totnes, Great Britain, and in 2007 the first official Transition Town was born.

Over the next few years, with help from Hopkins' instructive *Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependence to Local Resilience*, the Transition Towns model spread quickly. It was an idea whose time had come. Hundreds of fully autonomous Transition Towns popped up in dozens of countries, including a growing number of initiatives in the United States. And as I sat in a Local Resilience workshop in Detroit, led by a Transition organizer from Amherst, Massachusetts, and later read the handbook and conducted my own research on the web, I was blown away by countless examples of people starting small and taking action at a local level to change the world.

Back at the first USSF in 2007, I had read Paul Hawken's *Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Social Movement in History is Restoring Grace, Justice, and Beauty to the World*, and I was blown away by evidence of the millions of grassroots organizations around the planet, of people coming together to transform the world on a variety of interrelated fronts – peace and anti-imperialism, women's and LGBTQI rights, labor and economic justice, racial equality, indigenous rights, ending the prison-industrial complex, improving education and public health, combating climate change, and creating environmental justice for all. It was a true 'Movement of Movements.' Now, as I explored Transition Towns, I was seeing countless shining examples of this "blessed unrest" in action in communities across the country and around the world. Not just rallies and protests (of which I'd had my share), but transformative projects that were healing the planet and changing the way we live in community.

I learned about watershed and foodshed restoration projects, local currencies and time banks, energy co-ops and ride-sharing groups, community asset-mapping and re-skilling, and countless other practical projects that were happening in towns around the world without people waiting for government approval or expecting corporations to do it for them. The Transition Towns model provided not only a holistic ethos of local change from the ground up, but also a toolkit of strategies and tactics, replicable and adaptable models, and an evolving pattern language of solutions and best practices that could be implemented anywhere, harnessing the power of vision, cooperation and inspired action. In this way, the Transition Towns model embodied partnership between people in local communities and across the globe, organizing and mobilizing groups and positive action rooted in partnership with each other and the planet.

APPLYING THE TRANSITION MODEL

I returned to Lake County with a copy of the *Transition Handbook* and a burgeoning enthusiasm for community organizing. Second Sunday Cinema was screening Michael Ruppert's iconic documentary *Collapse*, and I arranged with Shannon to promote the event as a "film followed by discussion," where I would report on the Social Forum and share the long-awaited gospel of Transition Towns. Watching a movie like *Collapse* can be depressing, looking into the stark reality of what we've done to our climate, the house-of-cards economy we've allowed political and finance leaders to create for us, and what is likely to ensue from decades of the short-sighted pursuit of profit and endless growth. Those who were paying attention to the current state of affairs had many reasons to feel discouraged. But if *Collapse* revealed the inflammation and irritation of a world on fire, the Transition model seemed just the balm needed to heal the burns of capitalist modernity.

When the film ended, we did a quick rearrangement of chairs into a circle, and I convened the discussion. My report on the USSF was brief, my introduction to Transition Towns relatively cursory. Mostly, I listened. I asked those gathered what they cared

about – what reality they wanted to create – and I took notes with marker on a large sheet of butcher paper taped up behind me. Unsurprisingly, people wanted things like clean water, healthy food, housing and prosperous livelihoods, education, health care, strong community, and a feeling of empowerment in the face of such tremendous woes as global warming, war, and systemic injustice. The group wanted a voice, a sense of agency.

It was getting late, so we set a meeting for two weeks later without a movie – just people coming together and building on this vital discussion. I again briefly introduced Transition Towns, then we went around the circle of about 30 people to refine our shared vision for a thriving, abundant and resilient community. At the end of the meeting, we spontaneously raised over \$250 for me and another community member to travel to the nearby community of Willits in Mendocino County, to attend a Training for Transition (since renamed LAUNCH Training), in which two Transition Trainers, veterans of community organizing, spent an intensive weekend initiating a few dozen local citizen-leaders in the background of the local resilience movement and strategies for adapting the Transition model to our own communities.

The training was held at the Willits Grange, an exemplar of the “Green Grange” movement, in which old-fashioned agrarian social halls (“granges”) were being revamped and employed to serve the wider shift to a sustainable and regenerative culture of peace and justice. This grange building had community grain silos recently installed out back, which were filled with local, organic, non-GMO grains like wheat and quinoa. The training included delving into research from Richard Heinberg and the Post Carbon Institute, sharing in deep “inner transition” exercises from Joanna Macy’s *Work that Reconnects*, practice in collaborative community organizing using Open Space and World Cafe meeting technology, and many other participatory activities that facilitated creative visioning and strategizing toward effecting meaningful change in communities.

Upon returning to Lake County, I celebrated my 25th birthday by hosting our very first “Potluck with a Purpose” in a small park in the town of Kelseyville. Transition Towns represent an open-source experiment in social technology, in which practitioners are actively encouraged to borrow what works from other groups. I proudly borrowed the term “Potluck with a Purpose” from nearby Transition Santa Cruz. I’ve subsequently learned that the phrase has co-evolved, or been stolen and repurposed, in several other geographically distant but philosophically kindred communities across the country.

If the ancient aquatic body of Clear Lake was represented as a clock, and the eponymous lakeside town of Clearlake, home of Second Sunday Cinema, was situated at about 4:00, the nearby town of Kelseyville would be located at about 6:30. We hosted our potluck at the centrally located Pioneer Mini-Park, and roughly 40 people showed up, co-creating a respectable spread of mostly organic fare. Soon, we got to talking Transition.

Typically, the Transition model is applied to individual towns. But due to our shared identity across the lake, the county’s relatively manageable overall population of less than 67,000 people, and the minuscule populations of our individual towns, it made sense to formulate our Transition initiative as a countywide effort. That evening, as the sun set over Kelseyville, *Transition Lake County (TLC)* was born.

Twelve Ingredients and Social Technology

The Transition model, as described in Hopkins’s original (now out of print) *Transition Handbook*, is framed around 12 Ingredients, which we began to employ inexpertly in the experiment of transitioning Lake County. The first ingredient, or step, calls for participants to set up a steering group and design its demise from the outset. And so we began. The group had its initial interpersonal challenges as a few powerful egos collided, but with some coaching from group members skilled in the art of partnership, we were able to gain stability and move forward. In keeping with a movement-wide critique that continues to challenge the Transition Towns community in the US, our

steering group was mostly elders, mostly white, and relatively affluent. That was who showed up.

The second and third ingredients, raising awareness and laying the foundations, were helpfully already in place. Projects like Second Sunday Cinema, the local community radio station, and the Lake County Community Co-Op (a multi-farm CSA that provided people with access to delivery of local organic produce), had been gathering community and raising consciousness for years. In relatively short order, we advanced to the fourth step, organizing what Hopkins calls a great unleashing (a launch event).

Fortuitously, we decided to employ the sixth suggestion, using Open Space, to guide us in organizing this widely publicized launch event. The event proved to be a shining example of the benefits of bottom-up, grassroots organizing. Open Space, described in detail in Harrison Owen's *"Open Space Technology: A User's Guide,"* is a remarkable mode of bringing people together to organically self-organize around the topics that most interest them. The rural community of Lake County had – and still has – what I think of as a 'frontier mentality,' embracing a combination of community, self-sufficiency, and a rugged "git-'er-done" outlook that favors action over talk, and choice over being told what to do. The Transition model of building local resilience – and perhaps especially the Open Space mode of supporting the community to self-organize based on the passionate interests of participants – seemed ideally suited to the local population.

The late-August Transition Lake County Open Space Meeting and Potluck with a Purpose was held in Lakeport, situated at 9:00 on the Clear Lake clock. More than 125 people came, a respectable turnout for weekend community organizing in this area. As folks gathered into affinity circles based on their shared interests, we found ourselves implicitly beginning to fulfill the fifth ingredient of the Transition model: forming working groups. A local energy team convened about forming a green energy cooperative. A lake group formed to strategize about protecting the water from

industrial runoff and pollution from a nearby superfund site. A local economy group emerged that began discussing the possibility of a local complementary currency and, instead, ended up forming the successful Time Bank of Lake County. A local food group began meeting to discuss ways of expanding our county's food sovereignty beyond the produce co-op and revitalizing the defunct "Local Food Round Table" of organizers committed to ending hunger countywide. A "heart and soul" group formed to unite and support people in the all-important work of building inner resilience. And this was only the beginning.

The seventh ingredient in Hopkins' model invites Transition groups to develop practical and visible manifestations of the project. We began to do so right away in the form of work parties. One of our first hands-on events was a creek cleanup in which dozens of locals showed up with gloves, tools, and trucks to remove nearly a ton of waste, including several discarded appliances, from Adobe Creek in Kelseyville. Projects like these helped us demonstrate the impact of our initiative, showing the wider community that our monthly potlucks and other meetings actually produced tangible results.

As interest in the movement grew, we gathered enough local stakeholders to host our own Training for Transition, inviting the same pair of Transition Trainers I had met in Willits to join us in Kelseyville for a rainy December weekend. The training was held in the legendary barn of Ann Card, an eccentric and beloved elder from the UK who had become a fixture in the community, known around the lake for the monthly drum circle held in her barn.

From there, our projects and local visibility really began to grow. The working groups formed at our early Open Space meetings continued to meet. We brought a permaculture design course to Lake County, in which dozens of local resilience-builders deepened our knowledge and skills in natural building, homesteading, and regenerative design. We also restored and re-launched two granges, one in Clearlake Oaks (located at 3:00 on the lake clock), and the other in Scotts Valley (at about 10:30). Each of these

new green granges would later host our recurring Potlucks with a Purpose, along with organic garden bed installation demonstrations and other skill-sharing workshops.

Transition's eighth ingredient, facilitating the "Great Reskilling," was perhaps TLC's most effective project. We began to host annual re-skilling fairs, gatherings in which the collective genius of the community is liberated as the knowledge and skills of local elders and other talented people are shared with the community at large during day-long events featuring community-led workshops on all sorts of topics. Rainwater catchment, recycling grey water, natural building, food canning, hide tanning, knife sharpening, bicycle maintenance, wild foraging, preparing herbal medicines, basic home energy efficiency, composting and growing soil, cultivating mushrooms and other crops, yoga, t'ai chi, and many other topics were the focus of the workshops.

These wildly popular skill-sharing events, which harvested the wisdom of those who were alive before today's "disposable generation," was one of the ways in which we observed Hopkins' tenth ingredient, honoring our elders. We also applied this ideal by showing respect to, and building community with, the tribal elders of the area's indigenous Pomo Nations. As is the case across the US and in many other places around the world, the community of Lake County was built on land stolen from indigenous people in brutal wars of conquest. Clear Lake was the stage of the historic Bloody Island Massacre of 1850 in which hundreds of native people, including women and children, were slaughtered. According to local legend, eight-year-old Lucy Moore and her mother survived the assault by submerging themselves underwater for the duration of the attack, staying alive by breathing through the tubular straws of the local tule plants.

Lucy Moore's grandson, Clayton Duncan, now an elder himself, has held a yearly forgiveness ceremony at sunrise on the anniversary of the massacre, often attended by dozens of indigenous people and non-Native allies. The TLC community vocally joined and supported this healing effort, and I eventually teamed up with Clayton to co-create another annual sunrise ceremony, Hands Around Clear Lake, to bring people together

in the healing of the lake itself. This ongoing water-protection ceremony is now in its sixth year. We also established an affinity group, We Are Konocti, which has begun raising awareness around the toxic legacy of white conquistador and rapist Andrew Kelsey, for whom the town of Kelseyville is named, with the long-term goal of changing the town's name.

Many social movements have experienced the so-called “donut hole effect,” in which the group's energy disperses from the initiating core group into projects and working groups, leaving a gap in the center. This is a common story in many Transition initiatives, and TLC was no different. The Time Bank of Lake County grew to include hundreds of members trading thousands of hours, and was now having its own monthly potlucks around the lake. The food co-op grew and local food projects expanded to include a very energetic group of community members fighting to label, and ultimately ban, genetically modified foods and crops countywide. Local Transition pods were forming in individual towns around the lake. And this was all good. As Hopkins' eleventh (my favorite) ingredient suggests, one of our main jobs was to get the ball rolling and then let it go where it wants to go.

PERSONAL TRANSITION

Meanwhile, I was going through a transition of my own. I was engaged in the founding of an eco-village on a 40-acre former trout farm called Rainbow Ranch. I was also becoming a father. As my innate provider mechanism kicked in, I began substitute teaching to earn a more secure living, and ultimately decided to earn my teaching credential. Soon, my daughter, Satya Rose, was born on the ranch. We hosted a TLC potluck and Hands Around Clear Lake there, and began to form a new grange in the ranch's majestic and dusty old barn. I also began hosting “Wake Up & Thrive,” a show on our community radio station, KPFZ. The year was 2012.

Then, the following year, we lost Rainbow Ranch, becoming part of the ninety-plus percent of intentional communities that end up failing and fading into memory. We had been renters on the land, hoping to raise the funds to buy it, when our wealthy neighbors made an irresistible offer, became the new owners, and forced us out. As I dealt with the exile, I continued doing my best to convene TLC potlucks and organize other local gatherings. In my daughter's first two years, we saw two of our most popular re-skilling fairs at a biodynamic farm called Ancient Lake Gardens, where the shore of Clear Lake meets the slopes of the holy Mount Konocti. But it was all too much. I had to gradually step back from TLC and allow the projects – including the now thriving Time Bank of Lake County – to lead the way.

A powerful thread that has emerged in the wider Transition movement over the last few years has been that of regional and bio-regional organizing. From New England and the Mid-Atlantic to Puget Sound and Northern California, Transition leaders from local initiatives have begun to gather with other nearby Transitioners to learn from one another, share resources and inspiration, and support each other in this common movement. Around the time of the loss of Rainbow Ranch, I attended my first bio-regional organizing meeting with folks from nearby watersheds in the counties of Mendocino, Sonoma, and Napa. At one of these bioregional meetings, I met the crew from Transition US (the national 501(c)3 nonprofit serving as the national hub of the global Transition Towns movement), which was headquartered in Sonoma County and had a staff of three.

I crossed paths with Transition US again at the 2013 Building Resilient Communities Convergence at the famed Solar Living Institute in Hopland, CA, home to the nationally distributed Real Goods solar catalog. It was there that I finally met Transition founder Rob Hopkins, who had made a rare exception to his no-air-travel rule and embarked on a Transition Tour of the United States. He shared a stage that night with Julia Butterfly Hill, whom I had sat next to on an airplane as a teenager, stranded on the tarmac in Chicago for hours, pretty shortly after her epic and well-documented 738-day sit in

Luna, a thousand-year-old coast redwood tree. As I listened to Rob, and as my research into the growing international phenomenon of Transition Towns continued, I was struck more than ever by the scope of this grassroots response to the urgent challenges we face as a global humanity and community of life. This transition was happening all around me.

Potential Action

The year 2015 saw several life-changing developments in my world. I turned 30, I began testing the waters to run for U.S. Congress (the topic of another article for another time), I joined the staff of Transition US as their new Communications Director, and, just over a month into my new job, I was displaced from my home by the historic Valley Fire, which raged through my community destroying hundreds of homes and achieving the distinction of the second most destructive wildfire in California history.

In the sections below, I'll turn to what I've witnessed on the national and global scale of Transition Towns in my two years working with Transition US, but I first must give pause to honor the dramatic experience of the Valley Fire, and the role the Transition Lake County community played in the immediate response to the disaster, and continues to play in the ongoing healing of the people and the land.

Community Resilience = Emergency Preparedness

When I was evacuated from my home, there were no announcements from the authorities, no evacuation sirens, just a wall of smoke and flames advancing rapidly across the wooded mountains on a windy September day. All we had were our instincts and each other. After bailing out a buddy from the path of the flames and making it down the mountain to safety at another friend's house, we turned on the radio only to find that KPFZ was playing a repeat music show in what should have been a live slot. There was no local reportage of this disaster-in-progress. So we headed to the station and began what would evolve into weeks' worth of round-the-clock community coverage and response to the blaze, sharing important information and announcements,

helping resources reach their destinations at the relief shelters emerging around the lake, and taking calls of grief and prayer from countless community members. As we collected information during the blaze's first days, we began a Google Doc of important resources, which dozens of people contributed to, and which we published and distributed to relief shelters days before the county authorities had any meaningful information guide to offer the thousands of frightened and displaced citizens huddled in cots and tents at local high schools and churches. The role the community radio station played in the relief effort was covered widely in the national and global media, from BBC Canada to the *Los Angeles Times*.

It bears noting that the majority of the people who showed up to support this healing and emergency response effort were the same people who had showed up for TLC potlucks and work parties. We may have known, in our years of Transition organizing, that we were building resilience and cultivating our ability to care for ourselves and each other, should the proverbial truck ever stop coming over the hill. But I don't think any of us ever expected a trauma like this. Throughout the disaster, and since, I've begun to see that the work we were doing all along – from strengthening our local foodshed and economy to skill-building and community-weaving – had been unintentional work in emergency preparedness.

TRANSITION TOWNS IN PARTNERSHIP

In my years organizing with TLC, I had done some cursory web-searching on other Transition efforts, but since joining the staff of Transition US, I've come to see that the world of Transition is much larger than I had ever imagined. As I connect with other organizers from across the country and around the world, I feel like a mountain-climber who has spent years doggedly trekking terrain, one foot in front of another, and who is now suddenly in an airplane, soaring over the peaks and valleys I had traversed and seeing that they are mere foothills in an entire and far-reaching mountain range that stretches as far as the eye can see. I now track the work of, and place myself in service

to, resilience-building initiatives all around the country. What I see from this vantage is immense, and potentially just what we need in these increasingly urgent and epic times.

In my time with Transition US, I've directly witnessed the work of over 160 official Transition initiatives nationwide (along with over 1,200 initiatives in 50 countries worldwide) engaged in transformative local projects including – but by no means limited to – tool lending libraries, seed banks, local entrepreneur forums, healing circles, crop swaps, community-supported agriculture projects, learning gardens, public transportation projects, recycle-a-bike programs, solarization campaigns, free stores, elder salons, victory garden blitzes, edible landscapes, local currencies, time banks, village-building convergences, permaculture guilds, granges, dialogues across differences, and re-skilling fairs from sea to shining sea. One of my personal favorite success stories has been Transition Sarasota's Suncoast Gleaning Project in Florida, which has saved over 250,000 pounds of food from going to waste by harvesting fallen fruits and veggies, canning them, and donating them to local food pantries to serve those in need.

Another favorite example from the growing Transition movement is the internationally renowned Transition Pasadena "Repair Café," in which visitors bring broken items from home (including clothes, furniture, electrical appliances, luggage, bicycles, toys, and more) and, with the help of local experts, repair them and save them from the landfill. As one attendee famously reported, "I can't believe I just had my toaster fixed by someone who worked on the Mars Rover." This replicable model is now part of an international Repair Café movement, with community fix-it days happening in towns around the country, from the Rockies to the Catskills (and around the world, from Ghana to Egypt, Frankfurt to French Guiana).

There is no end to the creativity and adaptability of the Transition model to meet the needs of local constituencies. In Belfast, Maine, home of some of the iciest winters of

the continental US, Transition organizers have collaborated with other citizen-leaders to open a Community Warming Center during power outages, a place where people can gather, socialize, break bread together, rest, do homework, and keep warm amidst freezing outdoor temperatures. Which raises the question, how might Transition's toolkit of local resilience-building ideas serve your community?

There are, of course, countless local projects to build thriving resilience that are *not* official Transition initiatives. As a matter of fact, even my own beloved Transition Lake County wasn't an official initiative: we never bothered to fill out the form. But that's the grassroots and open-source nature of the movement, network, and resource treasure chest that is Transition. Nothing is required. Nothing is prescribed. There are just a bunch of awesome people doing awesome stuff – and their stories, ideas, successes, and challenges are shared freely and offered to the collective as potential inspiration to grow an even stronger, broader, deeper, wider, and scaled-up movement to build thriving resilient community at every level. One needn't call it "Transition." We can drop the capital T, or describe it with other words entirely. This work to build a better world is happening all around us. As Shakespeare might say, "Transition, by any other name, would smell as sweet."

The Transition Town movement was one of several solutions, along with permaculture, that was depicted beautifully in the recent César-award-winning French documentary film *Demain* ("Tomorrow"). The film, as described by director Cyril Dion, is a story that describes a future world and includes initiatives that pioneer and reinvent the fields of agriculture, energy, urbanism, economy, democracy, and education. Prominent among the luminaries interviewed in this film is Rob Hopkins, placing Transition in the wider lineage of culture-shifting projects that are transforming our world from the ground up.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In the spring of 2017, I was honored to attend the Transition International Hubs Gathering in Santorso, Italy, where more than 50 people from 24 countries gathered to

share with one another, build community, and grow the global movement. My heart was blown wide open, as I met my global family and observed my own local experience reflected in the faces and voices of people from Japan, Chile, Slovenia, Brazil, Sweden, and elsewhere. It was becoming increasingly clear that our movement, like the universe itself, is fractal and relational. Like atoms in tissues in organelles in cells in organs in organisms in communities on planets in galaxies, individuals come together to form local initiatives, local initiatives form regional hubs, regional hubs constitute national hubs, and national hubs come together to form a global movement. A world *in transition*.

That summer, here in the US, we took the major step of convening the first-ever Transition US National Gathering in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. Over 300 people came together, representing Transition initiatives and kindred projects from around the country, to participate in five days of intensive trainings, keynotes, workshops, Open Space and bioregional meetings, and other community-building activities to strengthen our movement and deepen our work together. Featured presenters included Post Carbon Institute senior fellow Richard Heinberg, Standing Rock elder Phyllis Young, Community Rights advocate Paul Cienfuegos, Move to Amend founder David Cobb, and a multiplicity of voices from throughout the movement. This gathering demonstrated a sense of partnership, community, and shared purpose, a movement taking shape to truly transform our country, hopefully just in the nick of time.

As the gathering came to a close, Transition US also hosted a historic grassroots leadership retreat and movement strategy session. For the first time ever, Transition staff, board members, regional hub conveners, and local initiative leaders were in the room together, consciously collaborating in the evolution of our shared movement. The results of this meeting included an increased sense of community and trust among participants, as well as several newly formed national working groups and communities of practice. As Transition matures, there is a palpable shift toward doing more “heart

and soul” work, in addition to continually engaging our heads and hands. There is also an ongoing thread of taking meaningful action to address some of the aforementioned diversity issues within the movement, taking a stronger stand on social justice, and more explicitly recognizing the truth of intersectionality and the manifold ways in which the Transition movement is situated within a wider and multi-faceted Movement of Movements with shared ethics and aims that include, in permaculture parlance, care for the earth, care for people, and sharing the surplus.

The future of Transition is becoming ever more collaborative. While the national nonprofit maintains a small staff working to serve the local initiatives nationwide, the network and movement are increasing in resilience and growing in the paradigm of partnership. Local Transition leaders from around the country have convened a Collaborative Design Council to advise Transition US and to coordinate mutual support among kindred people and projects in different regions. We hosted our first-ever National Online Summit in October, 2018, and have another in-person Transition National Gathering planned for the summer of 2019 in Pittsburgh, PA.

As the Transition Town movement scales up, our work in partnership continues to be enhanced by the use of Sociocracy, a flexible, transparent, consent-based framework for organizing harmonious and effective social structures, as well as other tools in dynamic governance. Transition US is making more explicit than ever the linkage between community resilience and emergency preparedness, with the forthcoming *Ready Together: A Neighborhood Emergency Preparedness Handbook* being piloted in communities across the country in 2019. As municipal, regional, national, and supranational governments look to fulfill commitments to reducing reliance on fossil fuels and achieving renewable energy goals, and as communities come to embrace the dawning ethos of stewardship and equity, the Transition model with its wide-ranging toolkit of diverse success stories and replicable models for transformative change sits poised to become an increasingly familiar concept in popular consciousness.

Citizen-leaders and change agents in Transition Towns are finding our place in the wider movement to co-create social, racial, economic, and environmental justice for all, and finding greater partnership with each other – and solidarity with others – as we advance together through this Great Turning and pioneer this sacred path from Me to We.

Recommended Readings/Viewings

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Nils Palsson, MFA, is a father, author, community organizer, and interdisciplinary educator. He serves as Communications Director for the national sustainability and resilience-building nonprofit Transition US, national hub of the global Transition Towns movement. He has spoken and facilitated workshops around the world on community resilience, emergency preparedness, and growing the movement for social, racial, environmental, and economic justice for all. He currently serves as a social science and civics mentor at Quest Forward Academy in Santa Rosa, CA, where he resides with his daughter Satya Rose and their dog Phoenix. Nils has previously served as a radio host, an integrative anatomy instructor, a certified first responder and emergency preparedness teacher, and a two-time candidate for United States House of Representatives in California's 5th District, where he was also elected to be a delegate for Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic primary. Nils earned dual Bachelor of Arts degrees in English and History from New York University with honors, completed the Teacher Preparation Program at Dominican University's School of Education and Counseling Psychology, and most recently earned a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Writing and Consciousness at the California Institute of Integral Studies. A San Francisco native and world citizen, Nils relocated to Sonoma County following the 2015 fires in rural Lake County, where he initiated Transition Lake County, a grassroots movement to build resilient community. His passions include integrity, peace, justice, and transformation, and his pursuits include holistic health, yoga and parkour, exploring nature, climbing trees, writing, making art and music, studying mythology and shamanism, building learning communities that foster authentic personal growth, being the best dad he can be, and co-creating systemic change that benefits the whole.

Virajita Singh, M.Arch, is Assistant Vice Provost in the Office of Equity and Diversity at the University of Minnesota, where she brings her expertise in design thinking, public interest design, and partnership studies to catalyze and support equity and diversity work of colleges and other academic units across the University. Trained as an architect, Virajita is also Senior Research Fellow and faculty in the College of Design where she leads the Design for Community Resilience program she founded at the Center for Sustainable Building Research which provides sustainable design assistance to greater Minnesota communities. From 2011 to 2015 she began and led Design Thinking College of Design at the University of Minnesota a collaborative group that worked with the creative potential of individuals and organizations across sectors to innovate in fulfilling their mission using the emerging field of design thinking. Her current academic work is focused on exploring the applied intersections of cultural transformation theory, partnership models, and design thinking as a strategy particularly as it applies to higher education context.

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