



CENTER FOR WHOLE COMMUNITIES

## Creating Whole Communities Through Food Justice

Given by Peter Forbes

New Jersey Food Systems Retreat, Knoll Farm, July, 2010

I recognize how my own life has expanded and contracted in direct proportion to my courage, so I want to acknowledge this moment and the courage and humility all of you have expressed in this chance to come together for this retreat. This group looks and feels like a collective action I want to be part of.

What an important time to be together. Never before in our lifetimes has there been such focus and dialogue on the health of our food system and the way it touches all facets of our lives. There's an opening, a fertile bed if you will, for change.

Markets for local and organic and pastured food are the fastest growing segment of the industry. Farmers markets are popping up like mushrooms on a warm spring morning. While we still have twice the number of prisoners in America as farmers, for the first time in more than a century the number of people counted by the USDA as farmers has *gone up*, not down.

Michael Pollan's books on food have been on *New York Times* bestseller lists for more than 200 weeks. Americans everywhere are now having a conversation about food. Before getting elected President Obama actually said these words: "*our entire agricultural system is built on cheap oil.*" We've all heard about the White House having a garden, but did you know there is also a presidential bee hive?

Here's a *Harpers* Index of sorts for you to consider:

**23.5 million** the number of Americans who lack access to a supermarket within one mile of their home. There are four times as many supermarkets in predominantly white neighborhoods compared to predominantly black neighborhoods.

**30% more** the number of liquor stores in low-income neighborhoods as compared to higher income neighborhoods

**1%** Percentage of American population that farms

**57** Average age of the American farmer

**9.7%** current US unemployment rate

**11.0%** current NY metro area unemployment rate

**9%** the percent of families in the New York/Philadelphia foodshed who are food insecure. Translates into 800,000 households

**25% under 5** In this foodshed area, 25% of children are under 5 and live in poverty.

The 100-mile radius of the New York-Philadelphia metro area is the densest foodshed in America with over 1,000 people per square mile (average is 85 people per square mile)

This leads me to conclude that the essential skills today are relational, not transactional. I agree with the social critique bell hooks who asks "How do we create a culture of belonging that feels empathy for the earth and for one another?"

We're all flying on instruments, trying to carefully observe the terrain even though there's no clear map. I feel pretty sure, however, about three things:

- 1) The essential skills today are relational, not just transactional.
- 2) A whole community is still a land-based community.
- 3) All we need to succeed; to create a healthy, whole food system is already at hand.

I recognize this sounds simplistic and Pollyannaish, but it's actually the only practical response that's available to you. There's a common critique about solutions that

aren't bold enough and it goes like this: "the *Titanic* is sinking and all you're talking about is re-arranging the deck furniture."

Whole communities work is *not* about re-arranging the deck furniture on the sinking *Titanic*; it's about taking that deck furniture, lashing it together, and making a raft. It's about using what's already at hand rather than relying on outside solutions.

We are talking today about building that life raft not only for our communities but also for our landscapes because the health of one directly affects the health of the other.

This retreat is about how to engage across sectors and differences to build relationship and connection that more fully utilizes the assets that are here, then to re-imagine and create a new story about a healthy, whole food system.

Today, we will explore what stands in the way of a healthy whole community: cultural divisions between city and countryside, political divisions between hundreds of separate governments, specialization and fragmentation between food advocates, environmentalists and human rights advocates, the difficulty of seeing whole a global system that rarely respects local places, and business as usual capitalism.

Add onto this the separation created in America by our history of race, class and privilege. All of these forces of isolation and fragmentation make creating healthy whole food systems really hard. Of course, if it were easy we would have done it already.

Let me speak for just a moment to the conservationists who are part of this retreat this week.

Because of my respect for what you do, I'm going to be as forthright as I can be. You are very successful people. You work exceedingly hard and you do exemplary work, but it alone is *not sufficient*. Even though you are brilliant and strong, you are not strong enough to do the work of conservation in isolation of other movements and other human needs.

First, the challenges to the land and to biodiversity are too complex and far outpace what can be accomplished by laws or buying land.

Second, your past successes will be challenged more and more until you can effectively make the case that your mission of healthy land and biodiversity is relevant to someone like this man: Brahm Ahmadi of Oakland who founded Peoples Grocery to bring healthy food to urban neighborhoods where liquor stores stand in place of

grocery stores. Or this woman: LaDonna Redmond of Chicago, who is blending public health, land conservation and food security on the west side. Or Paula Garcia of New Mexico, who is conserving culture through conservation of traditional waterways. They care deeply about land and biodiversity too, but, to be honest, they do not see themselves as conservationists. They don't see themselves in the story of conservation.

How is it that those of us who care about protecting marginalized people and those who care about protecting the land have ended up today isolated and divided from one another?

Why does it matter that conservation in our country includes far fewer people of color than whites?

My biggest change in thinking is on this idea. The health of the land is inseparable from the health of the people.

Now, let me talk more directly now to those of you here whose lives are dedicated to the health of people and community.

Here's an example of the same problem, but seen through the lens of public health (go to video).

An article in the *New York Times* explains the issue in more detail: "Seven and a half months into Ta-Shai Pendleton's first her child was stillborn. Then in early 2008, she bore a daughter prematurely.

Soon after, Ms. Pendleton moved from a community in Racine that was thick with poverty to a better neighborhood in Madison. Here, for the first time, she had a full-term pregnancy.

As she cradled her 2-month-old daughter recently, she described *the fear and isolation* she had experienced during her first two pregnancies, and the more embracing help she found 100 miles away with her third. In Madison, county nurses made frequent home visits, and she got more help from her new church.

The lives and pregnancies of black mothers like Ms. Pendleton, 21, are now the subject of intense study as researchers confront one of the country's most intractable health problems: the large racial gap in infant deaths, primarily due to a higher incidence among blacks of very premature births.

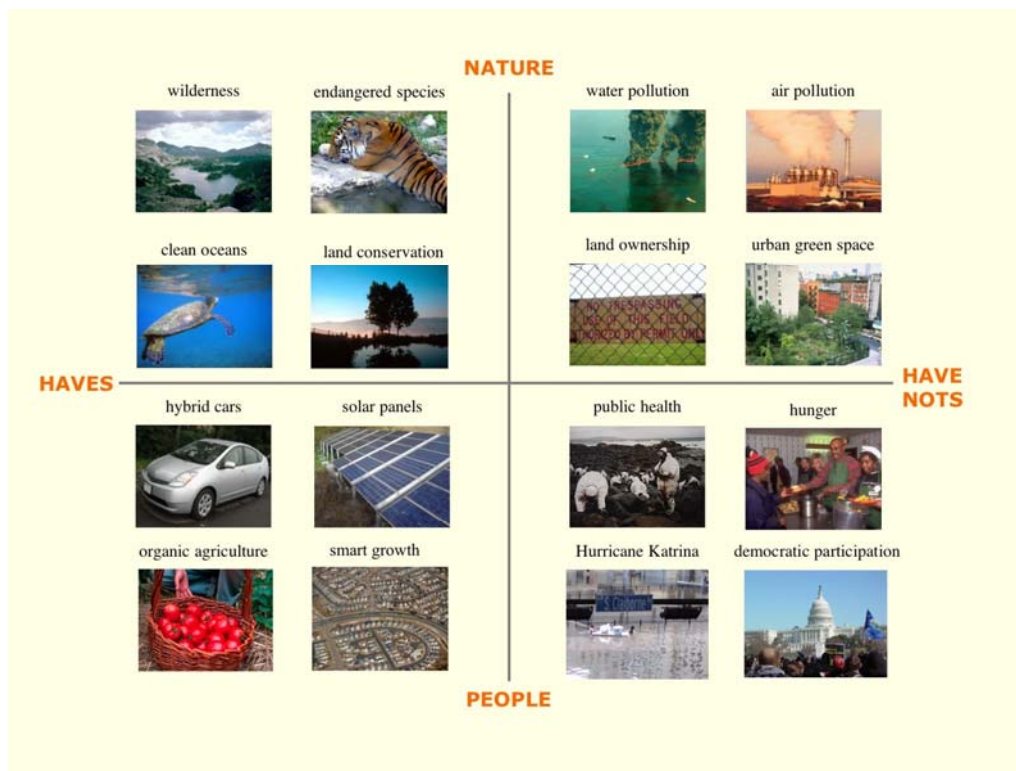
The best explanation for the high infant mortality rate is *isolation*. Take this in: *Isolation and lack of community is the strongest determinant of Para-natal death.*

And, for many people of color, inequitable access to healthy food is also a major contributor to health disparities. For example, adult obesity rates are 51% higher for African Americans than whites, and 21% higher for Latinos.

The other great challenge of people that deeply affects the land and our food systems is our nation's increasing fear of the other. Call it racism or whatever you want. But I can tell you this: those fastest growing areas in America are also the most segregated. Areas with a more than 6% growth rate are all overwhelmingly Balkanized racially. The writer Rich Benjamin calls this phenomenon "whitopia." Benjamin says, "what happens is a nation incapable of compromise when people lose touch with those who think and act differently from themselves." This is corrosive to our democracy, to our land, to our food systems and our communities.

And, sadly, it's mirrored in our movements for change. Let me show you more specifically the damage this has created.

We call this the Whole Communities Framework:



It's not a map of the way we would like the world to be but a map of the way we think the world is today.

(●) First, there is the divide between those who care about people and those who care about nature.

(●) This divide is worsened by the fracture between those who have privilege and those who do not.

(●) If you have financial resources and care about nature, you may be interested in these types of issues.

(●) If you're privileged and focused on people, these very well may be your concerns.

(●) If you have little privilege and care most about people, perhaps you are interested in public health, structural racism, democratic participation, and hunger.

(●) Lastly, if you have little privilege and care most about nature, you may be interested in clean air, access to parks and urban greening.

Our point is this: all of these concerns are critically important to creating a healthy, whole food system, and none will succeed without the other.

Sure, those who care about endangered species aren't going to make enduring progress without those who care about Katrina. And those who really care about a just food system need access to land. Without real alliances across the quadrants, the game-changing work that needs to get done is impossible.

That's hard. My generation was never trained or equipped to move across this map and create new alliances. Honestly, a lot of my friends got into environmentalism because, frankly, they preferred nature to people.

Some are already referring to this call to engage with people and community "mission creep", but I would call it creeping into our mission. Creeping into the future. It's the form of leadership that transforms conservation to continue to be relevant.

This map should piss you off. One point of this retreat is to learn the leadership skills to transform our change efforts and do away with these lines.

The goal of whole communities work is relationship: to reweave and strengthen our communities, and strengthen our movements for change, by giving leaders the tools and the courage to reach out beyond their quadrant of the map to create new alliances and a stronger narrative.

Every successful social movement for change has shared three common characteristics: 1) compelling call to moral vision and action, 2) easily understood symbolism and story, and 3) inclusiveness. These are critical to creating a healthy whole food system, and we'll take up all three of these in this retreat.

This week is about learning from one another what it will take to collaborate and what parts of our vision are shared and to begin to taste what emerges that is compelling.

Visioning and dreaming is hard to do for lots of reasons.

The biggest is this: most of us have been trained to critique, *not to create*. And yet what is most compelling in acts of social change are the dreams of a different way of living. Dr. Martin Luther King said, "No social movement can succeed without painting a picture of the future that people want to go toward."

The significance of vision to creating change is enormous, but many contemporary efforts at change have reduced dreams to action plans, strategies and tactics. May I remind us that Martin Luther King did not say, "I have a *plan*." He said "I have a *dream*," and he spoke of his deepest values without offering strategy and tactics about how we might get to his dream. He knew that if he could reach people with a shared story for how they might better live.

So, there's a very strong relationship between vision and story.

Stories help us to see through the eyes of others and to cross the borders that separate us from one another.

What these three things - compelling moral vision, story and inclusiveness - add up to is something we call Transformational Leadership. This is distinct from Transactional Leadership, what is what I was raised on.

Here's what can happen when we do this work together:

We can build power. Power is built from the soil up by helping individuals to take their next best steps toward one another. We help organizations conspire together. Literally to breathe together. This is about about making allies, being a good ally.

We can help one another to grow. Personal transformation ain't enough today. Our goal is for our alumni and us to understand how and why their success is bound up entirely in someone else's success.

We can experience Emergence. Emergence is what happens in a whole community that is more visionary, more inclusive, more dynamic and more powerful than any individual part. We'll spend considerable time understanding emergence and creating the conditions for it to occur.