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Special Online Feature

My Geography of Hope:

Derek Masselink's Fall Fair Speech (Pender Island Fall Fair, August 28, 2004)

I want to thank the organizers of the Pender Island Fall Fair for giving me the privilege of speaking to you today. When I was first approached by the organizers they stated that theme of this year's fair was 'Come Grow With Us—Buy Locally' and as such they encouraged me to speak on the subject of 'going local'—the growing notion that living and satisfying one's needs closer to home is better for one's personal health as well as the ecological, social and economic health of the surrounding community. While this is a topic that is very near and dear to my heart, recent events in my life have encouraged me to expand the focus of my talk.

Today I will speak about hope: specifically as it relates to local community health and prosperity in an increasingly globalized and ecologically compromised world.

I think that most of us would agree that we are living in an age of massive change. Since the beginning of the 20th Century we have witnessed an almost unimaginable advancement in the areas of science and technology. And while this advancement has produced many benefits, some of which have greatly improved our lives, it has also resulted in a number of negative consequences. One only has to watch the news or read the morning paper to get a sense of this.

In spite of all our technological advances, and our vast and ever increasing store of knowledge, we have yet to adequately address issues such as overpopulation, species extinction, habitat destruction, war and famine. In fact our technological progress, fuelled and guided by our greed, has accelerated or amplified many of these issues and created new one's, such as holes in the protective ozone layer, and climate change. From the way in which we conduct our daily affairs it would appear that we are a society that values profit and individual benefit

above all else. In our pursuit of the bottom line we are selling off our children's birthright and in the process sacrificing the health of our families, our neighbours, our communities and ultimately the health of our planet. Our society, no our species, is in a crisis situation.



Those of us involved in the environmental and social justice movements are confronted by and reminded of this reality every day. When we pick up the paper, butter our toast, take out the garbage, go to town—you name it—we have an understanding that our simplest actions come loaded with consequences: many of which are hidden; most of which are ultimately detrimental to the environment and to us. This knowledge is a heavy burden to bear. It is easy to

understand why many lose hope.

Even for those of us who aren't consciously aware of these issues the very idea that there might be a crisis makes us extremely uncomfortable. Perhaps because the problems seem too large, too complicated for us to understand. Or perhaps we just don't want to have to deal them. I mean really, if we were able to understand them what could we possibly do? And so we do what we humans do best, we ignore or avoid them. Sure we may alter our lifestyle a little, either to ease our conscience or fit in with our friends. You know, recycle our cans and bottles, bike more and drive less, buy organic food—but ultimately we don't really change our behaviours and we continue on in our lives in pretty much the same way—pushed along by the pressures of our lives, following our desires and meeting the perceived demands and expectations of society.

So when I attend events such as the Pender Islands Fall Fair I can't help but think that in the grand scheme of things they

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seem to some to be...well, how should I put this... insignificant. I mean really, what difference can events like this make? Sure they're educational. They remind us of how far we've advanced as a society. They're lots of fun, especially for our kids. But really they're, 'Yesterday, man.' Much of what they showcase is old news—it's an outdated, romantic vision of the past that's not practical for tomorrow much less today.

I can understand why many might feel this way. The manner in which our increasingly technocratic, face-paced modern society promotes and pursues progress suggests that the loss of this way of life is inevitable, perhaps even desirable. I believe it is this feeling of inevitability that extinguishes much of our hope for a better future or at least one that includes small, viable, rural communities like ours.

And that's too bad because celebrations like this give me hope—real hope. To me they demonstrate a type of human ingenuity; a way of being that is both beautiful and ecological. An ingenuity that is connected and committed to one's community—to one's landscape. The technologies, practices, and skills on display at fairs like these, though out-of-date by today's standards, are of an appropriate scale and of a quality that far exceeds that churned out by distant machines and factories. The skills, products, livestock, songs and stories shared and compared at these events are both beautiful and appropriate because they are of this place. They are by definition ecological. They suggest the possibility of an economy—of a way of living—that puts quality, connection, love and health before personal profit.

According to Dr. Jerome Groopman in his recently published book, *The Anatomy of Hope*, hope can be defined as the elevated feeling we experience when we are able to see in our mind's eye a way to a better future. True hope acknowledges significant obstacles and potential pitfalls but unlike false hope or optimism, true hope is rooted in reality; it has no room for delusion.

I believe that we as a society have placed our hope for a better future in the advancement of knowledge. In doing so we overlook or avoid the increasingly visible repercussions and cumulative effect that our consumptive behaviours are having on the health of our children, our families, our communities and our planet. We act and behave with no restraint, like there is no tomorrow. If we do, more often than not, we hope and possibly pray that our ingenuity—our growing body of knowledge—will be sufficient to address these overwhelming issues.

According to Dr. Groopman's definition this is not true hope but rather an optimism masquerading as hope. In spite of all the knowledge we have gained, all of the technology we have developed, evidence is mounting that suggests we have put our planet in what amounts to a death spiral. We are victims of our own propaganda—of our own hubris.

We need new way of being in this world—a way of being of living with one another and with the environment that results in health and not harm, a way of being that provides real hope.

Fortunately, we do not have far to look to find this way of being. It exists within recent memory, it can be found within most of our communities—particularly those that are small and intimate; those that have been able to maintain a connection to the land through the maintenance of cultural practices, viable farmland and wilderness. The products and skills on display at this fair suggest that this way of being still exists here on the Penders—if not in practice at least in the hearts and minds of people in this community. True hope I believe is present here.

Thirty-four years ago, Wallace Stegner, the great North American writer suggested in a letter to the US Government that there was a need to protect wilderness for no other reason than for the sake of wilderness itself—that the American people would benefit psychologically and perhaps spiritually from setting aside untouched wilderness areas thereby demonstrating an ability for restraint. In closing Stegner referred to these wilderness areas as becoming a part of the "geography of hope."

While Stegner did not elaborate on this idea I believe that he was referring to a larger geography—a landscape that included people, their communities and their economies living in balance with the wildlife and natural riches found within and around these remnant vestiges of wilderness. His inclusion of the word hope indicates that he thought that society would benefit from having living reminders that demonstrated an ability to live more in harmony with nature.

Wallace Stegner was not just calling for the preservation of wilderness, he was suggesting a change in the manner in which we and our economy interact with the economy of nature.

Communities existing in this way, within a geography of hope, would necessarily understand themselves as a community of interest. In the words of the poet, writer and farmer Wendell Berry, there would be a recognition of 'a common dependence on a common life and a common ground.' There would also be an understanding that the success of the community could not 'be divided from the success of its place, its natural setting and surroundings: its soils, forests, grasslands, plants and animals, water, light and air. The two economies, the natural and the human, support each other; each is the other's hope of a durable and liveable life.'

The last bit is critical. We need to develop economies that are placed, that remember and respect their connection to the land, and work to reinforce that connection through each and every transaction. One of the great downfalls of our current, modern economy is that it is placeless. Goods and services have been completely separated from their origins. In the process our understanding of the consequences or costs associated with their procurement has been lost. It is this placelessness that enables you or I to purchase a New Zealand apple for less than one grown in our own neighbourhood.

Today it is not enough for us to protect our communities,

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farmland, or wilderness. We need to develop local economies that emphasize self-sufficiency and health while respecting and supporting the natural economy; allowing people and communities to live and thrive in place.

In Greek mythology Pandora, the first mortal woman, received from Zeus a box that she was forbidden to open. This box was said to contain all the human blessings and curses. Temptation overcame her restraint, and Pandora opened it releasing into the world all the curses, and all the blessings—all except one: hope. The myth suggests that without hope, mortals could not endure.

I believe that our modern economy is the Pandora's box of our day. Our inability to show restraint, to remain committed and placed has unleashed a multitude of blessings and curses on our society. And while some might disagree it appears as though the curses have the upper hand. For me, and I think many others, true hope remains in communities such as ours where individuals and groups have committed themselves to becoming 'native' to their place.

The challenge I believe before us now is to resist the siren call of the modern economy and make a conscious effort and commitment to invest ourselves at home: to support the development of local economies. This is easier said than done

and will require a great deal of commitment and sacrifice. But it will be good and work and like the effort made to bring this event possible, if done together, it will undoubtedly involve fun.

My hope for the future is in places, communities and celebrations like this. In the people, skills, memories, songs, stories and love shared here. Not only are they a testament to the diversity and depth of commitment, talent and ability that still exists within our rural communities but they also remind us what can be accomplished through hard work, focused and collective effort, creativity, kindness, commitment, and concern. We've got a hell'uva lot going for us. We don't have to go off island to find solutions.

But—and there always is a but—it will require us as a community to put aside our differences, recognize the need for a strong and vibrant local economy, and make use of each other's gifts and abilities to meet it. If we accomplish this, this place will stand as a beacon of hope to the world.

My geography of hope now includes the landscapes, people and celebrations of this place—of the Penders. Thank you.0

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