

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING Peter Schwartzman

What are we really thankful for?

Today feels like a November day. Sleet falls intermittently with cold rain. A brisk wind brings chills to one's neck and ears. It is supposed to be a bit chilly and rainy during November—the moistest month from October thru February. Though this it isn't a day that one can enjoy being outside, I am thankful that autumn has finally arrived and its unusually warm entrée has finally ended.

In other "news," the stock market is booming. Since the beginning of 2005, the Dow Jones is up over 22% and NASDAQ is up over 20%. In 2006, Exxon Mobil recorded profits of \$36 billion, Chevron \$14 billion, Wal-Mart over \$11 billion, and Citigroup close to \$25 billion. The U.S. unemployment rate is under 5%, after being above 6% as recently as the summer of 2003. Stores are full of merchandise, groceries are stocked with food, and one can find almost anything for sale on eBay. Unfortunately, all this "good news" doesn't make me happy or very thankful.

Yes, my retirement accounts have grown with the stock market and I am blessed to have a good paying job that brings me much personal satisfaction and enjoyment. Yes, my wife is also employed in a position that brings her great pleasure and a sense of fulfillment. And, yes, our family has access to many choices along the full aisles at local (and distant) merchants. So, why then am I not blissful?

I don't find solace in the fact that I personally am doing well when I am aware of the hidden truths behind all this "good" news. When the oil companies are most profitable corporations in the world, it comes at a great price. Alternative energy sources won't take off like they should (because they will be "swallowed up" by Big Oil). Alternative transportation options, such as mass transit or electric cars, will not get the invigoration (for among other reasons, huge multinational corporations will do what they can to nix them, as they have done in the past). At-the-pump prices will continue to rise which makes it harder and harder for low income people to commute to work. And, attempts to monopolize petroleum resources (at any price) will continue. According to Michael Klare, a scholar that has studied world resources extensively, we "should expect an increase in the use of military force to protect the overseas flow of oil" over the next several years, independent of which political party is running the White House.

Stores full of petroleum-based plastics and fibers (such as nylon, acrylic, and polyester) may make for colorful, "clean," easily-washable materials but not for healthy or sustainable ones. The multitude of cleaners selling in stores (you know the aisle in the grocery where one can hardly breathe because all of the chemicals oozing from "closed" bottles) are almost all unnecessary because non-toxic forms are easily made from simple substances, like baking soda, lemon juice, vinegar, etc. (see websites below for instructions and ideas). Who needs 40 different brands of bread or 100 different types of soda when almost all of them contain high fructose corn syrup—a substance bad for one's heart (via cholesterol), one's blood sugar (via high glycemic index), and one's teeth (via cavities). Sadly, bread or soda isn't better when it contains this and similar compounds, but it is cheaper to make (and more profitable). Sadly, we now drink more water "carbonated in soda" than we drink "from the tap" (Ryan & Durning). We may be the richest country in the world but we certainly aren't the wisest when it comes to using toxic cleansers or consuming



Angus cattle graze near some of the 27 wind turbines at The Bluegrass Ridge wind farm near King City, Mo.

photo: Huy R. Mach/St. Louis Post-Dispatch/MCT

(unnecessarily) unhealthy foods.

So, it is hard for me to get all excited about the "news" pumped to/through us each day by the mainstream media. However, I do derive a great deal of hope from the hordes of people that are trying their darnedest to make this world a better place. And since it is the end of November, let me take a moment to identify those people and organizations that deserve recognition for the leadership and resolve that they exhibit. Surprisingly all of the ones I name here live right under our noses.

People that deserve thanks and support: Phil Willis, physics teacher at Abingdon High School, for educating our youth about the viability and benefits of renewable energy resources and working arduously to get wind turbines erected in Western Illinois; Jane Johnson, local activist, for her continuous stream of encouragement and her multi-decade effort to keep unsustainable strip mining and large-scale animal confinement out of Knox County (and neighboring counties); Norm Winick, producer of this newspaper, for creating and maintaining a media platform where any member of the community can have a voice and be heard (a requirement for any healthy democracy); Anna Sophia Johnson, a native of Knox County, for her dedication to protecting local lands from destruction and profiteering; Daniel Smith, local organic farmer, who despite still being in high school, spends several hours each day making peace with the land through sustainable crop production and animal grazing; Isaac Yoder, engineer and resident of Galesburg, for organizing several local Step It Up events (stepitup2007.org) which are paving the pathway towards averting future climate change; Jamie Bjorkman, for being one of my most avid readers and voluntary providers of wonderful reference materials and challenging perspectives; Peter Schram, for restoring native prairie plants in our neighborhoods and farms; Judy Gorham, local realtor, for working tirelessly to protect our trees and rid the

city of dangerous train noise; Ted Tourlentes, local environmentalist and artist, for his unwavering commitment to protecting native plants and capturing their beauty in photographs; and, Rev. David Parker, for creating a "Green Team" (www.fpcgalesburg.com/263357.ihtml) to assess potential ways for his Presbyterian church to become more environmentally-friendly.

Organizations that deserve thanks and support: FARM (Families Against Rural Messes) (www.farmweb.org), for demanding better laws which protect people and environments from hazardous animal waste, noxious odors, and polluted lakes and rivers; Illinois Stewardship Alliance (www.illinoisstewardshipalliance.org), for promoting family farming, nutritious and sustainable food, and ecological security; University of Illinois Extension, for orchestrating the development of several urban gardens in Galesburg and hosting a conference on "Local Foods"; Knox College, for creating and maintaining one of the oldest restored tall grass prairies in the United States (~40 acres located near Victoria, Ill.); Knox College students, for their recent commitment to a "Green Fee" which will raise money to fund activities to support sustainable practices on its campus; Habitat for Humanity and its volunteers, for building affordable housing for residents; and, WING (Western Illinois Nature Group), and especially Opal Murray and John Yeager, for making Blackthorn Hill (blackthornhill.org), a new nature preserve located within 10 miles northwest of Galesburg, a reality after many years of dedicated effort.

This list of names is obviously far short of all-inclusive. I suspect there are many others in our community working for a peaceful, healthy and unpolluted world. We can be so thankful that there are.

Non-toxic alternatives (for household chemicals):

Eco-cycle: www.ecocycle.org/hazwaste/recipes.cfm

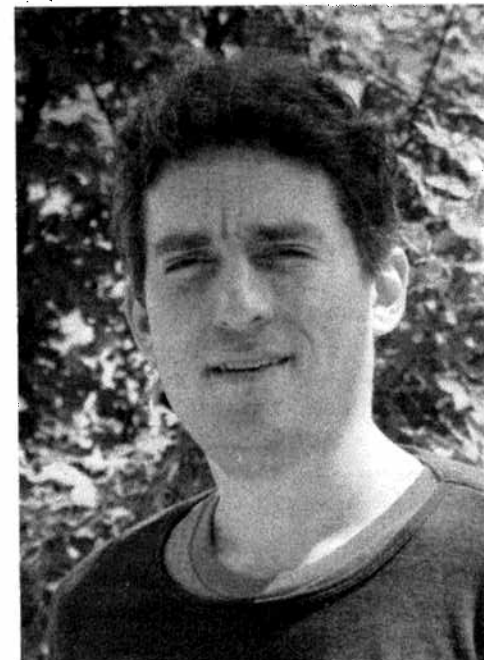
StopWaste: www.stopwaste.org/home/index.asp?page=585

Earth Easy: www.eartheasy.com/live_nontoxic_solutions.htm

Earth Friendly Products: www.ecos.com/WorksCited

Klare, M.T. (2007) "Beyond the Age of Petroleum." *The Nation*, Nov. 12, 17-22.

Ryan, J.C. & Alan T. Durning. (1997) *Stuff*. Seattle: Northwest Environmental Watch, 86 pp.



Peter Schwartzman (email: wordnerdauthor@gmail.com) is associate professor and chair of the Environmental Studies Program at Knox College. Father to two amazing girls, Peter hopes that their lives will be lived on a cleaner, more just, more environmentally-aware planet. A nationally-ranked Scrabble® junkie, he is also the founder and maintainer of websites dedicated to peace, empowerment, and environmental well-being: www.onehuman.org; www.blackthornhill.org; & www.chicagocleanpower.org.