

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Peter Schwartzman

2009: The Year for Giving

What a year 2008 was. Olympics in China. Uncontrolled fires and youth uprisings in Greece. Major earthquake in China. Economic downturn. Gigantic government bailouts for banks and other large corporations. First person of color elected U.S. President. And of personal, and certainly trivial, interest, Nigel Richards, from New Zealand, wins both the U.S. and World Scrabble Championships.

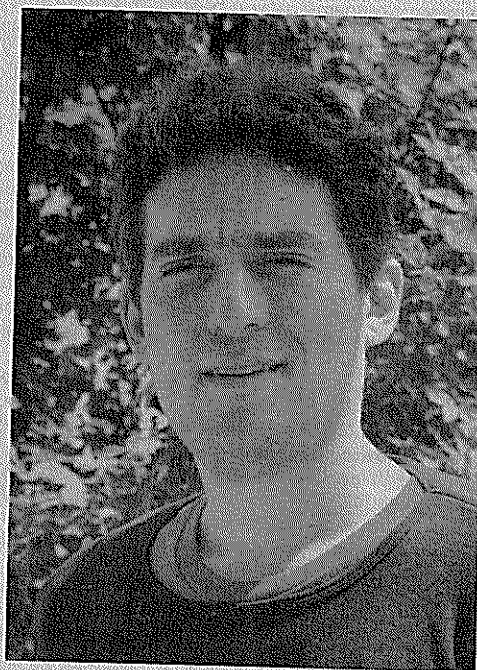
Yet, in all this commotion, how many of us gave back to society? Certainly there are many people who are extremely giving with their time and money over the past year. However, at the same time, the prevalence of consumerism and individualism in our society is well-entrenched. Giving and taking seems to be out of balance for many, with too much of the latter and too little of the former. Such imbalance is very destructive to earth's life systems and many millions of humans are also suffering as a result. We need to shift this imbalance. The pendulum definitely needs to swing to the other side.

What type of year will 2009 be? In the spirit of the New Year, let me advocate that it should be the Year for Giving. Serious economic challenges face most of us in the immediate and near-distant future. While many face hardships directly via the loss of a job or financial investments, others suffer from the general malaise that permeates a culture enduring these difficult times. And it is at times like these that many feel that giving isn't possible. Yet this seemingly logical conclusion stems from two very powerful assumptions found in our society. Once we reveal the limitedness of these assumptions, we can openly welcome the wealth of opportunities that exist for all of us to give. It is also important that we focus on giving now because the benefits are many and the time couldn't be better.

We too often work from the position that giving involves (or requires) money. Many of us support organizations and causes we believe in. Yet we do so largely, if not exclusively, with our pocketbooks. It feels good to send money to a group that actively works on an issue/problem that we care about. Sending checks to distant addresses (often located in New York and Washington, D.C.) has become a common way to give. A considerable number of local chapters of national organizations also garner our monetary support. But, during times when so many of us are strapped for cash, we need to find other ways to give. (It goes without saying that many organizations are in greater need now than ever before, so if you can give financial support, please do.)

Developing local systems of monetary exchange is another way to give. When one buys things from a national or multinational company, the money spent is usually sent out of the community. On the other hand, when you pay a neighbor to mow your lawn, weed your garden, or babysit your children, the money spent is more likely to stay in the community and support its fabric and local institutions. This is especially true if other locally-owned businesses and companies also become the recipients of these dollars. Fundamentally, this process of exchanging things with other local people has the potential to provide positive feedbacks and build mutually-beneficial and sustainable economies as well.

Giving money to others isn't bad but it is only one way to give. Fortunately there exist numerous other ways to do so. And during a time when money is short, we can benefit mightily by exploring other ways. There are obviously a huge number of local charities and organizations that could use more support. People can volunteer their time or donate materials to such organizations



and one can also introduce others to them as well. "Reading buddies," who are adults that come into the schools to read with children, is but one example of the positive ways local people are giving. Connecting with local groups is a great way to build and strengthen a community as well.

Giving can also take the form of political action. We often hear that we live in "the best democracy in the world." Yet, how many of us participate actively in the political process? The more voices contributing to the decision-making process the more likely that locally-sound and inclusive (as opposed to exclusive) decisions will be realized. Participating in the political process can take the form of writing letters to political leaders, attending and speaking up at PTO, school board and/or city council meetings, serving as members (or leaders) in organizations, and/or partaking in acts of civil disobedience or protest.

One can give as well by improving biodiversity as well. Beautifying yards with flowering plants, prairie grasses, and trees (preferably native ones) can greatly increase the variety of organisms that we find locally. By modifying treelawns (the strips of grass that separate the sidewalks from the streets) we could greatly enhance places for birds, bees and butterflies to flourish; some ordinances restrict use of treelawns for this type of thing, so check local laws and work to change them if they are too restrictive. Recent declines in honey bees and dwindling habitats for almost all other animals makes these changes more urgent than in the past. Growing edible plants in one's yard hasn't been so valuable (economically) in awhile and if done organically, one can benefit from the healthy quality of both the food and yard. And compared to lawns, gardens are very diverse and ecologically advantageous as well.

The second destructive assumption that we live by concerns our overemphasis on individualism. Way too often we focus on ourselves and turn a blind eye on those around us (humans as well as non-humans). We act as if unemployment doesn't matter as long as we keep our jobs, toxic pollution in our cities is acceptable as long as we are upwind of it, and the elevated STD levels among the local youth is unremarkable as long as we don't have children. In reality all of these things affect us. Since more unemployed people result in lower tax revenue, toxins never just flow in one direction, and STDs increase federal funding needs preventable illness, we are all influenced by these negative aspects of our communities. As such, it behooves us to care what is happening to others as well. And it is this recognition that others matter

that makes giving so much more desirable and meaningful.

The statement, "It takes a community to raise a child," is one of the most succinct expressions embodying the mutual connectivity between all humans. If we truly believe its sentiment then we need to act on it in more intentional ways than we currently do. Coming to terms that we are all part of a larger system where harm to a few hurts us all isn't easy. And, it isn't something accomplished overnight. However, if we don't have goals for change then we probably aren't going to move as quickly and purposefully as we need to. Thus, let 2009 be the year that we all try harder to give more and take less so that we can move in the direction of a healthier,

better-connected, more caring community. Perhaps a year from now, we can all share, as letters, our efforts to adhere to this challenging New Year Resolution.

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THE KNOXVILLE JOURNAL

Peg Bivens

I resolve...

Drop off news items at Lacy England Agency or email to lacyengland@grics.net

"Ring out the old, ring in the new," These words were written by Alfred Lord Tennyson in 1850. The theme of change still runs through the lists of New Year's resolutions. Though an Internet search of top ten New Year's Resolutions yields over 2 million hits, the subject matter of the lists is remarkably similar worldwide, and not far removed from Tennyson's themes in 1850.

"Ring out the grief that saps the mind, for those that here we see no more; ring out the feud of rich and poor, ring in redress to all mankind."

Spending more time with family and friends is near the top of everyone's list. Reflecting on the year just past often brings to mind opportunities and loved ones lost to illness and death, coupled with a resolve to seize what remains: patching up broken relationships, reconnecting with old friends, finding that perfect soul mate. Each year the City of Knoxville sees an increase in families reserving the pavilions at James Knox Park for summer reunion picnics.

Ring out the want, the care, the sin, the faithless coldness of the times;

Ah, self improvement. Shedding bad habits and embracing good ones: quit smoking, quit drinking, lose weight, exercise. Kuk-Sool-Won and Dee's Toning offer structured regimens, but walking is probably Knoxville's most popular exercise activity. Quiet residential streets and well-lit sidewalks down Main Street entice pedestrian traffic. Barber shops, and beauty shops, and therapeutic massage abound for self pampering. Chiropractic, medical and dental clinics are here if you need a little help addressing health issues.

Ring in the love of truth and right, ring in the love of common good.

There seems to be a sincere desire to help others, to make a difference in the world around us. Knoxville offers lots of opportunities for community service through churches and civic organizations, as well as serving in the leadership of the city, itself. Municipal elections are coming up in April of this year, with the filing period for nominating petitions beginning January 19th.

Ring out the narrowing lust of gold
Many New Year's resolutions center

around money: saving money, sticking to a budget, reducing debt, finding a better-paying job. All are noble endeavors. Knoxville residents are feeling the pinch, though, and digging in their heels to weather some hard times. Knoxville has two banks downtown eager for business for those needing a loan or with money to deposit into savings.

Ring in the valiant man and free, the larger heart, the kindlier hand, ring in the love of the land,

Seek to know a world broader than your own backyard through travel and education. Check out Carl Sandburg College for class offerings for adults and seniors as well as traditional college credit. Knoxville is part of this junior college school district and a portion of the property tax goes to support the college. Explore tour opportunities through bank and club groups or consider foreign service work through church affiliated missions.

And when might you have time to put these resolutions into place? Answer: You'll first have to stick to your resolutions on time management and getting organized, of course. The new year of 365 days breaks down further into 525,600 minutes for micromanagement of the year.

What if your resolve weakens? Well, you won't be alone. It is commonly reported that as high as 97 percent of those who make resolutions will break them. 70 percent will make it a full week, but dropping out by the third week in January.

Those who make resolutions have made an important step by accepting personal responsibility for some of the fortune and misfortune that will come their way. Some folks will engage in New Year's customs mired in superstition and aimed at driving away evil spirits, like burning scarecrows (Ecuador) and breaking dishes (Denmark) as well as cooking and eating a variety of foods thought to bring good luck: grapes (Spain & Italy) pancakes (France) sauerkraut (Pennsylvania Dutch) and black eyed peas (Southern USA)

I personally have been subjected to both the sauerkraut and black eyed pea remedies. My theory is that you are lucky, indeed, if your stomach can tolerate those foods after a New Year's Eve of drinking and carousing.

Happy New Year. Be always at war with your vices, at peace with your neighbors, and let each New Year find you a better man.

—Benjamin Franklin