

Rebuilding Regenerative Society: A Benediction¹ for 2022



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Nature has a powerful voice and so does culture. At this time, we're stuck between these two powerful voices, trying to discern a path forward that's life-giving.

Extraction

We're deeply invested in a competitive and extractive society, culture, and self-view.

21st century society is:

- built on the idea of progress through economic growth that, for the most part, is rooted in extraction;
- founded on consumerism which, in turn, is tied to the extractive economy;
- based on competitive, self-determining individuals who are maximizing their potential.

These views are all intertwined, all insatiable, and all unsustainable. Without the counterbalancing forces of regeneration, gratitude, and belonging, we are facing the deepest crisis in the history of humanity.

We're in the midst of a devastating climate crisis and extinction event that threatens much of planetary life. Our species may not become extinct but our social, cultural, political, systems, and our individual sense of well-being will be utterly devastated if we can't navigate these crises and commit to a regenerative future. To foster that better future, we need a degree of social coherence that is currently deteriorating, not strengthening. How do we navigate this time?

We thought our political and economic structures would foster a democratic future, with the promise of opportunity for all and a degree of protection for those harmed by abuse or malfunction. But these ideas faltered on the extractive practice of using others of equal worth as our property or our right to dispossess, along with the sanctioned accumulation of enormous wealth by a few at the expense of the whole society. We have to take account of this or get mired in the 'good stories' that we tell about ourselves that prevent our seeing reality clearly.

Over the last sixty years, and starting in the US, an economic ideology called neo-liberalism has spread to Canada and around the globe. In an astonishingly short time it has propagandized and consolidated the acceptance of a set of core ideas that are now taken as economic gospel: Get government out of our lives, trust the market to sort out the economy, and we're individually responsible to determine our own fate.

This neo-liberal ideology is neither new or liberal, and it does not benefit the vast majority. However, it's powerfully reinforced by popular ideologically-motivated media, and has penetrated the psyche of Americans in particular but also Canadians to a lesser degree, leaving us much weakened in our democratic institutions, and easier targets for demagoguery that inflames rather than diffuses the discontent. It has created an enormous wealth gap – a new 'gilded age' of the phenomenally wealthy – and it's hinged on weakening governments' capacity to regulate and mitigate disruption in the wake of change.

It's too complex to detail all of the structures that accomplished this, but a key point is that it was not the 'hard work' of the wealthy but tax structures that favour the accumulation of wealth. The current wealth gap is the worst it has ever been.² It has harmed hundreds of millions, likely billions of people

around the planet. The victims know they've been harmed, but they can't penetrate this opaque ideology to identify the cause.

A curious but common reaction is to kick down and blame others in the same or worse circumstances. Immigrants and racialized people are most susceptible to this misplaced revenge. It's the common play-book of demagogues to exacerbate these feelings, but we forget between these historic intervals that we're being manipulated.

The one possible good news element is that this radical change over a very short period of time opens the possibility that a compelling and truthful counter-message might bring people back to the political centre with the same amazing speed that they left. We can hope.

Regeneration

While extraction is based on alienation and entitlement, regeneration flows from love and belonging. The word 'regeneration' is most often used in the context of agriculture to describe practices that focus on the overall health of the ecological system, versus getting higher crop yields at the expense of the system (i.e. extraction). We can apply this same principle to many other aspects of our economy and our lives. But first we need to deal with a well-known pattern of human thinking called 'negativity bias'.

We have a negativity bias when we pay more attention to negative information and experiences than neutral or positive. It's life threatening when we can't see the big picture in times of crisis. And the crisis deepens when we pull apart rather than join together. When we read the climate reports, and the extinction reports, and reflect on the overwhelming justice issues of our time, it's hard not to fall into negativity and place blame.

What provides a basis for optimism is the belief that, beneath our distortions and woundedness, we are fundamentally good at heart. I base my belief in this on a compelling 'spiritual' experience forty years ago that rocked my world. In a few brief moments, I felt a crippling depression give way to a state of joy that led to deep physical and emotional healing. The most indelible element of that experience was a conviction that, at the core of my being, I am good and that this is true for all of us. I believe our true nature is love. I don't always live up to that aspiration, but I don't forget it either.

What can we do to activate that love? Paraphrasing Albert Einstein, the most important question facing humanity is whether the universe is friendly or unfriendly. If we think it's unfriendly, we build bigger walls and weapons. If we think it's friendly, we build tools and models to understand it better. I think this same logic applies to our relationships with each other and with the earth. If we see other humans as outside our social/ political/ ideological/ national/ racial bubble, we ruminate on differences, look for who is to blame, and feel justified in extracting what we can for ourselves. If we think they're friendly and hold the same aspirations, we put our resources towards inclusive well-being. If we see nature as friendly and the source of our life, we love nature and act to protect its cycles and systems.

These are regenerative relationships.

Of course then, the most important thing we can do is develop attitudes and practices that promote friendliness, kindness, and caring in as wide a circle as possible, starting with ourselves and moving out in more inclusive circles, until we believe enough in ourselves, each other, and the beneficence of nature to risk love.

We must support collaborative restructuring of our economy and vote for courageous leadership. It's an overly tall order to dismantle capitalism to solve the climate crisis in the time available. But we can reform it and we've done it before. Canadian social thinker and journalist Seth Klein, author of *The Good War*, urges us to tackle the climate crisis like we tackled WWII. Governments in the US and Canada mobilized their economies to win the war, and they were willing to pay whatever it took. We've had a contemporary lesson in how quickly governments can respond to a crisis in the COVID

pandemic. If we can successfully come together, it will be the most profound display of resilience and stepping back from the brink that humanity has ever accomplished. And if we can, we should.

Most people are somewhere in the middle of the polarized extremes, and we need these people to build a solid majority. They are concerned about some of the things we cherish and we can find alignment with some things they want. We can't affect change unless we're also willing to be changed. That includes admitting when we're wrong. People are amazed and appreciative when we admit we're wrong or unsure. It softens hearts and opens common ground. Somewhere deep down, we know we can find the basis for loving one another if we want to. And if we want to, we should.

To help build collaborative coalitions, we need to do some of our personal work. That sounds hard and perhaps it is, but it's also rewarding to bring friendliness to our inner and outer life. It's a maturing process that balances the inner critic³ that creates most of our suffering. We need to bring friendliness to that voice too – but not give it the keys to the car. Friendliness can hold hands with the critic and do a better job at coaching us to not give up, to try again, to keep practicing the good, to believe in ourselves, to care about the well-being of all life. If we can treat ourselves with kindness, we have a blueprint to treat others with kindness. And if we can, we should.

Eldering

And the role of elders? It's not different from the role of other age groups, but has some particular characteristics to highlight. It's important to embrace uncertainty. Most of us will not live to know the outcome of this particular historical period we inhabit. That's a deep sorrow, but we can let go of needing to know and give ourselves wholeheartedly to gratitude for being here in this time, for being one of the elders called to also embrace wisdom.

Cultivating wisdom is not a weekend endeavor. But we already know the key ingredients from our life experience and from the influx of changes that happen with ageing. We know time is short, life is precious, and our biggest mistakes in the past were focusing on the small stuff while the deeper currents of life passed us by. We actually can decide to arouse love, because natural events in our ageing are fostering that already.

Stop and listen to the sounds of children at play and let your delight warm your heart. Let your warm heart spread to your entire body. Befriend your body and give more of your mind over to the wisdom of the body. The big body of Nature that sustains us is our most profound elder in cultivating wisdom.

Believe in yourself as an elder and offer that to the youngers in your life and to those courageous youth taking up the gigantic issues of our time determined to struggle for social and climate justice. Don't criticize them. Be astonished at their resilience to face the changes they'll experience in their lives with a commitment to a regenerative future. I'm moved by the elders in Victoria, BC who formed a bond of support for youth fighting to save the last valley of old-growth trees on southern Vancouver Island. They give their time, their money, their physical presence, and their love to these brave youngers and the youngers give back the love and respect that fuels the elders to keep faith with them.

The extractive mentality pulled the plug on elder wisdom some decades ago and essentially said, "We don't need you, so enjoy your retirement, travel, and otherwise entertain yourself – and when you're gone, your family will miss you, but we won't, because you don't have a role."

Let's use 2022 to refocus gently on a regenerative future for elders with a dignified purpose, and keep faith with that vision.

Notes

1. A benediction is a blessing, either a formal one that you might hear in a church service, or an informal one that you might utter when you take any leap of faith. It means literally ‘to speak well of’.
2. Wealth inequality in the [United States](#), also known as the wealth gap, is the unequal distribution of assets among residents of the United States. In 2019, the top 10% of households held 70% of the country's wealth, while the bottom 50% held 2%. It's gotten worse since then.

In [Canada](#), according to the Parliamentary Budget Officer 2020 report, the top 1% of Canadian households hold 25.6% of total wealth in the country, and the top 0.5% of Canadians have 20.5% of the total wealth.

3. The trance of the autonomous self conflicts with the intuition that we're all connected, which leads to an inner unfriendliness that we call the ‘inner critic.’ You may think you don't have one of those but most likely you do. Advertising culture depends on a sense of inadequacy to promote a great many products. The beauty industry globally is worth over US\$280 billion. And lest you think that it is women spending all that money, men spend slightly less but are similarly concerned to compensate for flaws in our appearance. Self-help books and workshops are a smaller but impressive market aimed at compensating for our other inadequacies. Our inner critic is so culturally sanctioned that it's not readily in our awareness. While it's a human trait, Westerners are noted for being particularly self-loathing. Think on that for a moment.