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FEATURE
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The Joy of Living Green

BARRY BOYCE reports on the new environmentalism that celebrates the positive. Because the green life is the good life.

Cop an attitude early and it can be hard to shake. Take growing food. I've always thought of gardening as drudgery. Let's say, though, that my friends Tom and Melissa entice me into joining them for an afternoon of work at a rooftop farm plot—or trick me into doing it by inviting me for "lunch." Maybe, just maybe, once I'm past the boredom and resistance, my attitude will slowly change. I might start to like it a little. I might even return and start volunteering to work there, remembering the loamy smell and the feel of soil in my fingers. I may take home some fresh cucumbers. When I eat them, I'll notice how naturally sweet they are—sweeter than white sugar. When I return to the farm and look around, I'll have to work at remembering I'm in the city, and the map in my head labeled urban may start to change. I'll grow things on my terrace. I'll walk more. I'll get a bike.

When it comes to planet earth, what you do counts more than what you believe. That's the credo for a green movement that has been popping up here and there for many years in a variety of highly visible, hands-on forms: urban farms, green-collar job programs, edible schoolyards, recycling flashmobs, naked nighttime bike rides, cityscapes with natural features and birdsong, and more. Proponents of this movement—sometimes called transformational ecology (because it's about transforming how we see the world)—have been learning from brain science that behavior (what we do) is more likely to change attitude (what we think) than the other way around.

The old green often tries to persuade through piling up frightening statistics and playing out grim scenarios in the expectation that the information will move us to action. It has made great strides in abating many forms of pollution, protecting species, and creating regulatory frameworks. But it has not significantly changed the lifestyle and behavior of the average person. That's the next frontier. Almost fifty years after Rachel Carson's Silent Spring—the ostensible birth of modern environmentalism—our planet is in an ever more precarious state and our rapacious appetite continues unabated. For example, the International Energy Agency announced in May that, despite an economic slowdown in many parts of the world, global carbon dioxide emissions last year rose by a record amount.

Oakland activist Van Jones, author of The Green Collar Economy, says we're in the middle of the era of "third wave environmentalism." To oversimplify, the first wave, in the early twentieth century, espoused conservation; the second, beginning in the sixties, fought against pollution; the third seeks to change how we behave day in and day out and how we see the world.

Many of us think green thoughts and take small actions we learn about in the free eco-mag from our bank, but in general we don't do very much to alter our footprint. Advocates in the new green movement respect how hard it is for us to change, so they're intensely curious to discover how people really do change. Many are long-time environmental warriors and have tired of pounding away at us with logic and rhetoric, and they're being joined by a new generation who will soon be the movement's leaders. They want people to discover that living green is not wearing a hair shirt. It's biting into a tomato that is so juicy and flavorful you have to stop and really enjoy it. To care about the earth, you have to appreciate living here.

"Environmental issues come from separating things into lots of pieces," according to Jonathan Rose, who started the transformational ecology initiative at the Garrison Institute in upstate New York. "For example, we make economic decisions as if they weren't ecological decisions. We need to see the interrelationships and shift our mental model of the world from linear to holistic and interconnected." Rose and his wife, Diana, founded the Garrison Institute in 2003 to bring together contemplative practice and engaged action. Jonathan, a prominent national real estate developer, has been the main convener of a series of annual meetings that brings behavioral science and contemplative discipline to bear on climate change challenges.

"We've learned that within our brains," Rose says, "we have what you might call a 'me system' and a 'we system.' The me is single-issue, single-response. It's not designed to deal with complexity. I'm threatened. I do something about it."

The me system only kicks into high gear if we feel truly threatened. Vague pronouncements about future climate dangers, no matter how shocking and shrill, rarely move us. Advertisements about saving money by energy-upgrading our homes garner a tepid response. "But if you're able to make it an energetic group thing," Rose says, "a neighborhood thing, akin to a barn raising, the we system switches into gear and many more people participate."

Spurring people to act holistically, Rose says, is more about coaxing and cajoling than convincing. Providing good information is clearly part of the picture, but effecting changes in behavior results from paying attention to how our brains tend to work as we make our way in the world. "We used to think," Rose says, "that if we could just convince people to love the environment, they would do all sorts of things differently. Scaring and scolding became the norm. When you scare and scold, though, the me system goes on defense and may even run and hide." Better to invite someone to take part in something that's happening among their peers.

"We now know," he says, "that behavior changes attitudes more readily than the other way around. If you coax someone into riding a bike, recycling, or rooftop farming, the physical act reshapes their brain in a way that starts changing their attitude. At that point their attitude can also begin to reinforce the behavior. Anyone who starts playing the violin, or practicing meditation or yoga for that matter, usually has a pretty strong attitude that it can't be done. With physical practice, that changes."

One of the coaxing mechanisms Rose and others promote is to take advantage of what are called "cognitive biases," mental habits that help us navigate the world but sometimes don't work in either our own best interest or the world's. For example, "the status quo bias" causes us to leave things the way they are in the absence of a strong impetus to do otherwise. Rose offers an example of counteracting the status quo bias. So few people were setting their programmable thermostats that the EPA removed the Energy Star rating from the product. Because his tenants tended to leave their thermostats alone, Rose decided to have all thermostats in his buildings set to green settings (lowering the temperature in winter at times we're likely to be sleeping or out of the house, for example). "We spread this idea through our Climate, Buildings, and Behavior program to dozens of building owners managing tens of thousands of units. Then, I decided to call up a friend at the Home Depot Foundation to see if they would set all the thermostats they sell at a green setting. It turns out they were already planning to do so. Imagine the energy savings."

Rachel Gutter, director of the Center for Green Schools, a project of the U.S. Green Building Council, loves to talk about a grade school with zero-net energy consumption in Manassas Park, Virginia, where green lights tell children when it's best to open the windows for natural ventilation; the students themselves monitor water usage; each wing is designed to reflect one of the seasons; and each floor matches the flora and fauna at the corresponding elevation in the forest nearby. Sustainability is a complex word, she admits, but if students are surrounded by a culture based on the principle, "understanding and actions can become automatic and we don't have to worry about names and labels. I hope that in a generation, 'green school' will be an obsolete term."

Gutter has influence over the footprint left by a large number of buildings. While that's important—40 percent of greenhouse gases come from buildings, and there are about 150,000 school buildings in America—Gutter focuses on the students inside. "We can raise sustainability natives," she says, "which is different from raising environmentalists." While an environmentalist fights to bring the perspective of the earth's needs into everyday life, a sustainability native sees the needs of the earth as integral to everything we do.

"Historically," Gutter says, "an environmentally aware student might have taken environmental education, gone on a camping trip, and learned about ecosystems. That's critically important, but today we're trying to do something larger. Sustainability is integrated into every aspect of the curriculum. The values are supported by teachers, administrators, and parents. And the school building and grounds are sustainable."

Gutter practices yoga and meditation, and is a regular presenter at Garrison programs. "We simply don't sit in quiet enough," she says. "In my own life, my yoga practice is often too separate from the rest of my life. Interweaving sustainability discussions with contemplative practice helps us make better decisions. When we take even a few minutes to sit with the silence, it helps our behavior align with our views and beliefs. We see ourselves as part of a bigger picture."

"When I first went into homeless shelters to make my pitch to work on a farm," Harry Rhodes told me, "I got a pretty strong reaction. People said, 'Are you crazy? I'm no farmer. My family left the south to get away from that. Why in hell would I want to do that?'" Rhodes is the director of one of the innovative programs Van Jones celebrated in The Green Collar Economy. Growing Home was founded in Chicago in 1992 by Les Brown of the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless. Brown, who died in 2005, recruited Rhodes in 2001 to set up a training program for homeless people to work at three sites: the Wood Street Urban Farm, the Su Casa Market Garden, and what is now called the Les Brown Memorial Farm in Marseilles, seventyfive miles south of the city. The produce is sold at a farmers' market in downtown Chicago and at on-site farm stands. It's also served in top Chicago restaurants and distributed in weekly food baskets through a community-supported agriculture program.

A seasoned activist who had tried to get Arabs and Israelis to work side by side, Rhodes was undaunted by the initial response from the homeless people he was trying to recruit. He calmly explained that they would be paid, and after all, it would be something new and different. After visiting several shelters, Rhodes was able to muster a group of six people to take out to the farm in Marseilles. Just as Brown had hoped, they began to like it, and took well to training. "Homeless people are rootless and have trouble finding purpose. There's nothing like working in the soil to give you roots and a sense of belonging. The case manager at one shelter was astounded that the guys would get up at six in the morning for an hour-and-a-half drive, work all day, and come back with smiles on their faces."

Since its inception, Growing Home has provided training and transitional employment for more than two hundred interns. In addition to working on the farm, they tend their own plots in the city and can use the food for friends and family. The program also supplies low-cost weekly vegetable baskets in the Englewood and Back of the Yards neighborhoods. The inner cities of America have been described as "food deserts," where fast-food joints prevail and few markets can be found. Children grow up with no sense of where food comes from or what unprocessed food looks, smells, and tastes like. "Sixty years ago, everyone was eating locally grown food, all throughout the world," Rhodes says. "Now, agribusiness systems bring us poorer quality food from great distances, at a high cost to our planet. On top of that, we have an epidemic of poor nutrition and obesity. People need affordable, healthy, local food."

A founding member of Advocates for Urban Agriculture, Rhodes see lots of positive developments in the campaign: farmers' markets are springing up all over the place, cities across the country are passing ordinances that permit raising livestock and farming within city limits, and programs like his and Growing Power in nearby Milwaukee and the Brooklyn Grange in New York City are getting noticed. "Experiential education can make a big difference. It helps people see food in ways they haven't before. When people come to our farm stand in the inner city, or an open house, or a cooking workshop, they have a hands-on experience. Slowly attitudes change. Our graduates are different people than when they started. Not long ago, one of them said, 'When I first came here, I didn't even know how a vegetable grew. Now I'm growing my own.'"

You never forget how to ride a bike, but you might very easily forget that it's an option for getting where you want to go. Last year, Bicycling magazine named Minneapolis the best city for bikes in America. It has 127 miles of bikeways, more bicycle parking per capita than any other city, the largest bike-share program in the country, and the second-highest (after Portland, Oregon) bike commuting rate—just under 4 percent. Since 2007, ridership has increased 20 percent. "Once you have the infrastructure, which city departments are accustomed to providing, the hard work of outreach and education begins," Gayle Prest, the city's sustainability manager, told me. "You need to focus on a range of audiences and get to know who they are and what motivates them."

Like all cities, Minneapolis has a cadre of hardcore cyclists, but most people will never become spandex-wearing superbikers. You don't need to be ready for the Tour de France to go downtown or to the grocery store, and bikes could be a transportation alternative for lots of people, particularly as cities become denser. Lugging around tons of metal and burning gallons of gas to haul one person to work or on an errand would seem astoundingly impractical. Among the key audiences Prest focuses on right now are women, children (who need to get away from their screens every now and then), low-income groups, and recreational bikers.

The majority of bicycle riders are men, and a number of women say that fear of getting into an accident has held them back. As well, a priority of parents is the safety of their children. So Minneapolis has bike safety classes, and makes cycling more inviting through programs like bike buddies for first-time commuters and bike ambassadors who reach out to as many potential riders as they can. "These volunteers," Prest says, "can give someone the hands-on help they need to feel safe and competent to go biking in an urban environment."

Since sustainability includes equality, Prest says, inequality is unsustainable over the long run. Inequality makes it difficult for a community to pull together. If people with lower incomes feel bike culture is something that doesn't include them, they'll shy away, no matter how many arguments you make about its affordability. "One of the biggest challenges is not having people perceive bicycle riding as an ideological statement or part of an exclusive social structure," she says. "Our promotional materials never show people in spandex. It's not svelte people with high-tech gear on superbikes. We show regular people of all shapes and sizes on upright beater bikes. Some people aren't in the best physical condition."

Minneapolis is blessed with lengthy bike trails that wend their way around twenty-two lakes, so there are lots of recreational bikers. But when it comes to commuting, many of them get in their cars. "We would like to coax them into seeing a bike as something they can also ride to work, including in winter," Prest says. "We want them to see biking to work or going on an errand as a normal thing, something their friends and neighbors would do. We market commuter biking as a mainstream activity."

In my conversation with her, Prest echoed something Rachel Gutter had put forth as a hallmark of new green strategy. You don't overcontrol the message and start lobbying everyone to support your special mission. You find partners. Their passions, when stoked and let free, create something emergent, something you didn't plan yourself. (One of Gutter's key partners is a Tea Partier who feels green schools save taxpayers money.)

Plenty has emerged that Prest and her colleagues didn't create. Minneapolis has crossed a bicycling tipping point, with many repair shops, nonprofit bike recyclers, social media groups and clubs, bike-oriented cafes and bars, filmfests, and art shows cropping up. (Art Crank, a bicycle-themed poster art show, has been exported from Minneapolis to seven other cities, including London). Biking culture surrounds you, which could at times contribute to the alienation that concerns Prest, but fortunately the bike culture is diverse, and when people start cycling, they like it, and judgmental attitudes fall away. She's found that "people begin to surprise themselves—Wow, I can ride for half an hour… I can ride for an hour!—they start to feel healthier and better about themselves."

The Minneapolis bike explosion has begun to affect development patterns. Realtors are paying more attention to the value of neighborhoods where you can readily bike to schools, libraries, stores, cafes, farmers' markets, or offices. On the dedicated bicycle commuter road (a two-lane trench free of car traffic), businesses are opening up along the route to serve cyclists. "When you start to have bicycle-oriented development," Prest says, "you know it's becoming mainstream."

When we live closer together, we use less energy. We use less energy to heat and cool our living spaces. We use less energy getting around. We use less energy because we share more—things like washing machines. One of the reasons for the low housing density in North America is flight from cities. To the thinking of many city planners, we made cities progressively less livable, and with the help of transportation subsidies, living in big houses on sprawling lots on winding streets with a lot of separation from neighbors was seen as desirable. From this point forward, though, we have little choice but to move closer together. And to many people's way of thinking, if we're able to activate the "we maps" we all carry within us, we'll be delighted to do so. It will build community.

When I visited with neuroscientist Richie Davidson recently at the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, in Madison, Wisconsin, he and one of his researchers, Donal McCoon, talked animatedly about doing research using the Happy Planet Index, created by the New Economics Foundation. In a nutshell, the index tries to calculate a society's well-being (defined as life satisfaction and longevity) in relation to its ecological footprint. North Americans have a very high level of well-being, but it comes at an unsustainable cost to the planet. What Davidson and McCoon would like to find out is how people could somehow internalize this information and willingly reduce their footprint— with the confidence that they would not decrease their genuine well-being.

John Rahaim, San Francisco's director of planning, is in the trenches with this kind of challenge every day. He was paying close attention to a presentation on neuroscience during a "Climate, Cities, and Behavior" gathering at Garrison, and afterward I asked him why. "I've spent my whole working life trying to bring about behavioral change in a direction that's positive for the city as a whole," he said. "I'd love to learn anything that could help me do that better."

San Francisco justifiably has the reputation of being one of the loveliest and most livable cities in the world, but most people don't have to work with the whole city in the fine-grained way Rahaim does. There are many challenges in the effort to find common ground in creating a livable, sustainable community together. For one thing, Rahaim sees tech workers in their twenties and thirties who live in San Francisco commuting down the road to their jobs in Silicon Valley. Why can't they work where they live? His department would like to encourage denser housing in parts of the hip new South of Market neighborhood (SoMa), but residents are putting up resistance. As new as many of the current residents are, they don't want even newer residents changing the place. "In the thirty years I've been doing this work," Rahaim says, "it's become more complicated and contentious. The governmental mechanisms we have for reaching decisions together don't work well anymore.

With the diverse people and groups involved and the complexity of the issues, throwing it out to a public meeting where everyone has their two-minute say just doesn't work."

Rahaim and his colleagues, like their contemporaries in other cities, are experimenting with different ways of engaging people, including smaller meetings where a few opinion leaders can be heard for longer, and more intelligent debate and exploration can ensue. As Gutter and Prest emphasized, this kind of work is about finding the audiences that you need to hear from and work with as partners. You can't really learn what makes them tick during their two minutes on the soapbox.

While Rahaim and his colleagues have their frustrations, they keep exploring new ways of helping the public reach decisions that benefit the city, and there are successful community engagement processes that have led to inspiring projects. Among the projects that Rahaim is excited about is the redevelopment of Cesar Chavez Street, a famous thoroughfare that marks the dividing line between the Mission and Bernal Heights neighborhoods. "Cesar Chavez," Rahaim says, "is a six-lane road with parking on both sides leading to a freeway interchange. It cuts right through the heart of some lower-income neighborhoods. It's pretty unsightly. It's really suffered over the years." Various departments were slated to do maintenance and upgrading. Rather than approaching it piecemeal, however, the planning department consulted the residents to find out what they thought about the way it was now and how they would like it to change. The residents told them it was a noisy, industrial, unpleasant place to be—lots of traffic but little city life "

The resulting plan will reduce the road from six lanes to four," Rahaim says. "There will be a median with greenery and a bike road on either side going in opposite directions. Six lanes of nothing but concrete will be transformed into a much more gracious boulevard." Some will undoubtedly complain that the project is slowing traffic on a major thoroughfare, but that's a change the city wants to make. "We think differently about our streets now," he says. "They're not just about moving cars. They're really part of the public environment. At 25 percent of the city, our streets are more than all of the park space combined. We want to make them as amenable to walking and biking and living as possible."

To find the new Cesar Chavez Street, consult your "we map."

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