

INTRODUCTION

What If Things Turned Out OK?

*One might say that human societies have two boundaries.
One boundary is drawn by the requirements of the natural world and the other by the collective imagination.*

—SUSAN GRIFFIN, ‘To Love the Marigold’

I wake, well rested, in the straw-bale-walled apartment my family and I call home. Built fifteen years ago as part of a sustainable-construction initiative throughout our city, the three-storey-high apartment complex costs virtually nothing to heat, its basement hosts composting units for all the building’s toilets, and the solar panels on the roof generate all our electricity needs. I wake my kids, get them dressed and fed and accompany them to school – a walk that takes us through shared gardens with a diversity of food crops, including young ruby chard whose deep red leaves radiate like stained glass caught in the brilliant sun of this late spring morning. The streets are quiet, due to sparse motorised traffic, and they are lined with fruit and nut trees in early blossom. The air smells of spring. Each bus stop we pass is surrounded by a garden on three sides, part of the Edible Bus Stop network that now includes most bus stops across the United Kingdom. Anyone can graze while they wait for the bus.

In our community, the kids seem to have radically different feelings about school than they did ten years ago. The education department’s decision to eliminate testing, to give ample space for unstructured play and to provide

From What Is to What If

students with opportunities within the community to acquire meaningful skills that enable them to live happy and healthy lives by their own definition means that most kids here now love going to school. My son, for example, recently upped his cooking skills by spending a week at a local restaurant.

My kids and I approach the school through intensive food gardens, planted and managed by the students, and walk into a building where we are greeted by the smell of baking bread and the sound of happy chatter. After we say our goodbyes, I pick up a public bicycle and head into the city on one of our cycle networks. With more bicycles and fewer cars on the road, air quality has improved, and public health along with it. I call into my favourite bakery to buy bread. Launched fifteen years ago on the premise that ‘baking is the new Prozac’, the bakery’s mission is to provide meaningful work opportunities for people who lack housing and job security, and who struggle with mental health.¹ The bakery prioritises local produce, grows a thriving rooftop garden and uses bicycle-powered delivery around town.² With the bakery’s support, many of its employees have launched other successful businesses across the city.

I pass what used to be one of the district’s supermarkets, most of which closed down about ten years ago. The explosion in community food production and rapid shift of community investment led to a withdrawal of support from supermarkets, which precipitated the collapse of the industrial food model over the space of only a couple of years. The building was repurposed and became home to a variety of local food processors, small-scale manufacturing and a training centre linked to local schools. The place is buzzing. Our former supermarket houses a mill that processes locally grown grains, as well as a sawmill that processes locally harvested timber. What had been extensive car parks are now intensive food gardens – modelled on those that surrounded Paris a hundred years ago – and they provide local food for local markets.

I call by the train station to buy tickets for a trip the following week. Bringing the trains into public ownership twelve years ago eliminated the days when every train station looked the same, with the same cafes, chains and shops. Now every station is a manifestation of the local economy – its innovators, its unique flavours and tastes. Ours now has twice the number of outlets as before, and it reflects the cultural diversity

Introduction

of our community. There is even a brewery on the station; you can have a drink, surrounded by the fermenters, while you wait for your train.³ Oh, and the trains now run on time. The many people from other places who arrived here during the times of great migration have assimilated, and now it's hard to remember this community without them. While that transition wasn't without its challenges, the culture, the richness, the enterprise they have brought have much enriched us all.

I call into work. I'm working a half day today, as part of my three-day work week. Adopted nationally ten years ago, the three-day work week, together with the introduction of Universal Basic Income, has resulted in measurably lower levels of anxiety and stress across all income classes. People spend free time working on community projects and enjoying their lives. Some of my colleagues are away today. A scheme was recently launched where up to 10 percent of staff from any company, at any given time, are embedded in the local community, offering managerial, marketing, financial planning and project management skills to organisations that are working in various ways to support residents and make our community more resilient.

I pick up my kids from school and we stroll home down streets where many of the houses are painted with eye-catching murals and mosaics. There are lots of kids playing in the street, a phenomenon that occurred naturally once the number of cars on the road diminished, which in turn encouraged residents to periodically close their streets entirely to motorised traffic, so children can play out; all the neighbours look out for the kids, something made possible when adults began spending more time at home, rather than trapped in long commutes to distant workplaces.

After supper, I head out to a Neighbourhood Assembly meeting. A few years ago, a group of residents, not aligned to any political party, were voted in to run our city government. They altered the city's governance model to enable and support the initiatives emerging at the neighbourhood scale, and to remove obstacles. They even created a Civic Imagination Office to better inspire and support the imaginations of local communities, and to enable their ideas to become reality. About seventy people are at this particular meeting, and we discuss our vision for the future of energy in our neighbourhood, and some other pressing local

From What Is to What If

issues. Policymaking has improved hugely. Thanks to the community-owned energy company set up in 2021, the majority of the city's energy is now locally generated, and most citizens have some kind of financial investment in it; it generates a far better return than the banks do.

When I reach home, I visit with several of my neighbours, who are sitting outside chatting. We hear an owl, and notice the bats swooping overhead. The move to designate our city a National Park City slowed the decline of biodiversity to the point of recovery by reunifying previously fractured wildlife corridors, green spaces, and woods, so that I now regularly notice new kinds of insects and louder and more complex birdsong. With so much around me moving, changing and thriving, I settle down to sleep with a feeling that the future is rich with possibility.

It sounds made up, doesn't it? It is. Mostly.⁴ The story is my imagining of the near future, a story of How Things Turned Out OK.

Of course, this imaginary life isn't perfect. This imaginary community is not Utopia. It still rains, friends fall out and people have bad days. Some impacts of climate change are still felt. And the vision is likely very different to what your story of How Things Turned Out OK would be. But I start with it because we live in a time bereft of such stories – stories of what life could look like if we were able to find a way over the course of the next twenty years to be bold, brilliant and decisive, to act in proportion to the challenges we are facing and to aim for a future we actually feel good about.

I've come to believe we desperately need stories like this – stories of How Things Turned Out OK – because if there is a consensus about anything in the world at this point, it seems to be that the future is going to be awful. And with good reason. In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reported that the world's temperature warmed by 1 degree Celsius over the past century. To avoid exceeding 1.5 degrees, they say, we would need to cut emissions by 45 percent by 2030, and to zero by 2050.⁵ And their findings are actually pretty conservative. Others argue that even staying below a 2-degree increase would, in reality, for 'developed' nations such as those in the EU, necessitate cuts of 12 percent a year, starting now, far beyond the EU's current target of 40 percent by 2030.⁶

Introduction

The longer our inertia persists, the steeper and more demanding that task becomes. As Jim Skea, co-chair of IPCC Working Group III, stated when the report was released, 'Limiting warming to 1.5°C is possible within the laws of chemistry and physics but doing so would require unprecedented changes.'⁷

And of course, we can already see the impacts of climate change (and other ecological destruction) in real time with extreme weather events, the loss of biodiversity and a food system dependent on the use of vast quantities of pesticides and herbicides to coax crops from the earth. More and more people seem to be feeling accumulated pressures in their personal lives as well. There is an epidemic of loneliness, an epidemic of anxiety (estimated to have increased twentyfold over the past thirty years), a mental health crisis of vast proportions among young people, the rise of extremist movements and governments and much more besides.⁸ Looks hopeless, right?

Sadly, it seems far easier to imagine almost any dystopian scenario than the possibility that we might actually still have the competence to act, to create something else, to dig ourselves out of the many holes of our own making. The message that 'it can't be done' is strong and pervasive. As Susan Griffin puts it:

Among those who would seek or want social change, despair is endemic now. A lack of hope that is tied to many kinds of powerlessness. Repeating patterns of suffering. Burgeoning philosophies of fear and hatred. Not to speak of the failure of dreams. Where once there were societies that served as models for a better future, grand plans, utopias, now there is distrust and dissatisfaction with any form of politics, a sense of powerlessness edging into nihilism.⁹

Given the state of the world, the message of despair is pretty convincing. Things look grim. But something about that doesn't sit quite right with me. In fact, there's evidence that things can change, and that cultures can change, rapidly and unexpectedly. And that's not just naïve, pie-in-the-sky thinking. In *How Did We Do That? The Possibility of Rapid Transition*, Andrew Simms and Peter Newell tell the story of Iceland's 2010 Eyjafjallajökull

From What Is to What If

eruption, which sent fine dust into the sky that spread for thousands of miles and grounded most of the world's planes.¹⁰ Then what happened? People adapted. Quickly. Supermarkets replaced air-freighted goods with local alternatives. People discovered other, slower ways to get around, or decided they didn't really need to travel at all. People held business meetings online. The Norwegian prime minister, Jens Stoltenberg, ran the Norwegian government from New York . . . with his iPad. This isn't the only example. We might be focused these days on how we are only nine meals from anarchy, but there are stories from throughout history about how rapid transitions lead to ingenuity, flourishing, imagination and togetherness.¹¹

I've seen this with my own eyes, thanks to an experiment a few friends and I initiated more than a decade ago in our hometown of Totnes in Devon, England (population 8,500). Our idea was a simple one: What if, we wondered, the change we need to see in response to the biggest challenges of our time came not from government and business, but from you and me, from communities working together? What if the answers were to be found not in the bleak solitude of survivalism and isolation, in the tweaking of ruthless commercialism, or in the dream that some electable saviour will come riding to our rescue, but rather in reconnection to community? As we put it: 'If we wait for governments, it will be too late. If we act as individuals, it will be too little. But if we act as communities, it might just be enough, and it might just be in time.'

As we began floating this idea with our friends and the wider community, the term 'Transition' arose to describe the intentional act of shifting from high resource use, high carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, extractive business practice and fragmented communities to communities with a healthier culture, more resilient and diverse local economies, more connection and less loneliness, more biodiversity and more time, democracy and beauty.¹²

As 'Transition Town Totnes', we began asking these 'what-if' questions, and things started unfolding apace in our town. People planted fruit and nut trees in public spaces, grew food at the train station, and connected neighbours who wanted to grow food with neighbours who had unused garden space. We crowdfunded to buy a mill – the first new mill in Totnes in more than a hundred years – to grind local grains and pulses for a range of flours, and we hosted an annual local food festival

Introduction

celebrating food grown in and very near to Totnes. As I write this, Transition Homes is building twenty-seven houses using local materials for people in need, and Caring Town Totnes has developed a network of caregiving organisations so they can work together more effectively. Through it all, we've held community conversations so people could come together to imagine and discuss the kind of future they'd like to create.

In 2013, we mapped the local economy with our Local Economic Blueprint and argued the financial case for a more localised approach to economic development.¹³ Our annual Local Entrepreneur Forum invites the community to support new businesses and has now helped launch more than thirty enterprises.¹⁴ Recently, some friends and I started a community-owned craft brewery, New Lion Brewery, which brews delicious beers using many local ingredients, often in collaboration with other emerging social enterprises.¹⁵ And early on, Transition Town Totnes created the Totnes Pound, a local currency that has inspired many other local currencies around the world. When people asked us, 'Why do you have a £21 note?' we asked, 'Why not?'

Around the same time that we were mapping the local economy, Transition Streets brought together approximately 550 households in groups of six to ten neighbouring households. Each group met up seven times to look at issues such as water, food or energy consumption and to agree on actions they could take before the next meeting to reduce waste, cut costs, and develop community resilience. By the end, each household cut their carbon emissions by an average of 1.3 tonnes, saving around £600 a year.¹⁶

What was fascinating about Transition Streets was that when organisers asked participants what was most impactful about taking part, nobody mentioned carbon. Or money. They reported that they felt like part of the community, they felt as though they belonged, they knew more people, they felt connected. This has been true across the board. More important than any of the actual projects was the sense of connection, of feeling part of something, of the underlying story starting to shift. A collective reimagining of what the future could be. I began to see that our efforts were starting to become, at least in part, a different story our town told about itself. And in the process, our collective sense of what was possible began to shift. We discovered that if enough people came together, we could create

From What Is to What If

an entirely new kind of story from the collective experiences of so many people trying to make good, and better, things happen in our community.

Part of the beauty of Transition is that it's all an experiment. I don't know how to do it. Neither do you. In Totnes, we were just trying to spark something that might unlock a creative spirit, a renewed sense of possibility, a fresh and hopeful way to think about the future, without any thought that it could spread to other places. But spread it did. As early as 2007, Transition groups started popping up in communities in the United States, Italy, France, Japan, Holland and Brazil. The Transition movement now exists in fifty countries and in thousands of communities. Every group is different, and emerges from the spirit and culture of the place. It's a process that, from the outset, has invited and supported people's creativity and imagination. It has also profoundly affected how I think about our world's biggest problems.

What I saw ignite with the Transition movement taught me that we're often looking in the wrong places for the solutions to our biggest threats. Yes, political action is a vital part of democracy, and can lead to very real change, but in addition to thinking we always need to campaign and lobby harder, design bigger and more disruptive demonstrations and rally more people through more online petitions, perhaps we need sometimes to stop, stare out of the window and imagine a world in which things are better. Maybe it's time to recognise that at the heart of our work is the need for those around us to be able to imagine a better world, to tell stories about it, to long for its realisation. If we can imagine it, desire it, dream about it, it is so much more likely that we will put our energy and determination into making it reality. As my friend and mentor the late David Fleming wrote, 'If the mature market economy is to have a sequel . . . it will be the work, substantially, of imagination.'¹⁷

To experience the Transition movement in Totnes and see it take off around the world made clear to me how prescient Fleming's remarks were. Bringing about the world we want to live in, the world we want to leave to our children is, substantially, the work of the imagination, or what educational reformer John Dewey describes as 'the ability to look at things as if they could be otherwise'.¹⁸ It seems a lot of people are reaching a similar conclusion. In 2009 Paolo Lugari, founder of