



*A farewell essay from Gary Alexander,
upon completing my term on the
Board of Trustees of the Transition Network*

Building a global family that looks after people and the Earth

*“We’re really, really good at imagining apocalypse... but we’re
terrible about imagining a transformation, at visioning
something... but that’s what we need to do, that’s really where
the power is”*
Rob Hopkins¹

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Welcome readers!

I am just completing a 4 year term as a member of the Board of Trustees of the [Transition Network](#) which I see as a leading part of a broad movement that is working to develop alternative ways of living to our consumerist, environmentally destructive, warlike and socially unjust world. (Do you see yourself as part of this movement?)

It has been a wonderful experience in many ways. As I leave, I want to take this opportunity to address Rob Hopkins’ comment (above) on ‘imagining a transformation’ building on [my work over many years](#), and combining it with what I have learned through the Transition Movement.

My inner critic: Isn’t this just a big ego trip?

Me: I hope not. I am hoping to crystallise what I see as a key aspect of our movement. I see this essay as a contribution to an ongoing conversation. I am a careful listener, and I think my skill is in pulling together, clarifying and ‘seeing the wood for the trees’. But I apologise that in a short essay, I am afraid that I have to make many statements with very limited explanation or support.

Essence of the vision

We are a global movement of people who are coming to see ourselves as part of ‘the family of humankind’, who are learning to collaborate to look after each other and the natural world. Moreover, it is only now that this is becoming possible, as we have the communications technology, the ideas and the need.

This is in contrast to mainstream views, where the market is king, where we are all against each other in every way: nations and firms competing

¹speaking at [Building Resilient Communities](#), Hopland California, Oct 2013., 14 min. into video.

economically, national, religious and ethnic groups opposing each other politically.

For me, this is the key innovation of the Transition Movement and like-minded people although it is rarely the 'one sentence summary' of what we are doing. (From here on, when I refer to the Transition Movement, I will use it as a shorthand for the vast number of groups and projects with an overlapping world view and purpose.)

Often, when I meet people at Transition or like-minded events I feel this immediately. These people are my 'family' in a new sense. We are those who care about the Earth and all its peoples. It is a change in our sense of who we are, such that those who join this see themselves firstly as 'people of the Earth', with our nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, sense of sexual or gender identity, as important but secondary. This is truly a practical, non-mystical 'change of consciousness'.

This is essentially a positive image as in the title of Charles Eisenstein's new book, "[The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible](#)". I will sketch my version of it below and there is much more detail in my book [eGaia, Growing a peaceful, sustainable Earth through communications](#),²

This vision is not a defensive or frightened reaction to climate change, peak oil, or possible economic collapse. It isn't just that we must change because we are destroying the world or that our current ways of living can't continue much longer (although that is true). It really is that we are building a world that will work much better and make all of us happier, that actually would be much better even for those who are now 'privileged' and 'wealthy' although they might not see it that way at present. So, yes, we can criticise the current economic system for its destruction of the environment and for what it is doing to people, but we are also developing and presenting an alternative that is better on its own terms.

My hope and dream is that this could be the 'killer [meme](#)', that once this vision is established to some critical level it could catch the imagination of humanity, and take the Transition Movement to the next level and beyond.

Inner critic: Surely this is just a utopian fantasy. Why not just concentrate on more practical issues like low-carbon living today?

Me: Good question and one that is central to this essay. No, I don't think it is a utopian fantasy. It is both practical and necessary. To anticipate some of the major issues: i) it points to what is important in our current early experiments at low carbon living and community-based enterprises, ii) it is the key to creating a resilient and self-correcting society, iii) it is necessary if we are to have a sufficiently light footprint so that all of humanity can live comfortably within the Earth's boundaries, because it is in principle, vastly more efficient than the present.

Why do we need an image of the future we are trying to grow?

The vision of a global family is one of a collaborative approach on a large scale. It is necessary to enable our productive enterprises – how we get our food, our clothing, housing, transport, stuff – to be organised and optimised for the wellbeing of the people they employ and serve, and the health of the natural world *rather than* organised and optimised for maximum monetary profit. That is the change and re-orientation that provides the benefits.

This re-organisation and optimisation creates the maximum resilience and self-correction, in contrast to today's instability. It is needed to create the lightest possible footprint on the planet, enabling the whole of humanity to live within the natural boundaries of the Earth.

The Transition movement, and similar groups, work in the margins of our current society in the present. For example, as I know from years of trying and watching, local food projects may have great appeal to people with the right mind set, but while there are supermarkets and industrial agriculture, many of these projects struggle to exist, and only some thrive. Similarly the Transition local currencies in the UK are backed by Sterling, as a way of making them more acceptable, rather than acting as an independent means of exchange.

² And while it is not often described in these terms, there is much about this in most related publications from the Transition Movement, Permaculture, and much more.

It is an open question whether Transition can become mainstream while the economy, (and politics) continues to be dominated by competing globalised corporations. I think it is unlikely. I now think that can only happen after a radical economic transformation.

When we think of the economy, we usually include and confuse the real economy (productive enterprises) and the money system, which dominates and massively distorts the real economy. The change we need is one that frees the real economy from the money system so that it can serve people and planet.

This is mostly likely to be possible after a collapse of the money system, which is more likely than a gradual change, because of the multiple instabilities in it.

If we could imagine a future world where Transition thinking is mainstream and look back from its perspective, it is likely that we would see our current projects as pointers to the social structures of that future and evolving towards them, but not as examples of them.

As a useful metaphor, mammals were around long before the dinosaurs went extinct, but lived in the margins. They were small nocturnal insect eaters, a niche where their warm-bloodedness was an advantage. It took the extinction of the dinosaurs for suitable niches to open up for the surviving mammals, who evolved into new forms. None of the earlier mammal groups survived that process.

The Transition equivalent of 'warm-bloodedness' that will enable us to survive and thrive through and after a major crash of the money system is precisely the collaborative nature of our enterprises. It follows that learning to work collaboratively is at least as important in current projects as providing local food or energy, for example.

Thus what in the Transition Movement is called 'Inner Transition', working on yourself, your relationships, learning about effective group dynamics, communication and constructive handling of conflicts, is not

just a worthy add-on to the 'real work' of local food or energy, etc., it is the most important part at present.

Unpacking the 'global family' phrase

Let's unpack the phrase 'building a global family that looks after people and the Earth'. It is a deep change, a new social contract that involves governance, social co-ordination and the nature of production and exchange. I hope it will be clear that such qualities as social justice, appreciation of differences, participation, small environmental footprint all follow directly from it.

Firstly, 'building': There is no point in imagining a future that looks like it might work, but with no route through to it. This vision has to be capable of starting small and scaling up. There are many current starting points, and this essay will look at some possible next big steps.

Secondly, 'a global family'³: I am using the word 'family' as a metaphor for a kind of relationship, where people are 'like us, on the same side, those we identify with and care about'. It brings with it a sense of understanding each other, caring for each other, of treating each other with respect and equality.

It has echoes of human origins, before civilisation, as gatherer-hunters, living in small family-based bands, linked with other local bands into a tribe with a common language and culture. Since there are now 7 billion of us instead of the several million when we were all gatherer-hunters, there is no question of a return to a gatherer-hunter lifestyle. However, that kind of supportive community living shaped the evolution of our minds, bodies, cultures and languages. We evolved as the ultimate cooperative ape⁴. That is our birthright, not being a good market trader.

Next, there is the sense that this global family is looking after each other, serving each other, providing for each others' wants and needs. Clearly

³ Of course, from an evolutionary perspective, all humans actually are a family, with common ancestors, and beyond this, so is all of life on Earth.

⁴ See [eGaia, Part II The Five Billion Year Story](#) for a detailed discussion of evolution where symbiosis is as important as competition, and of human evolution as a cooperative ape.

this is completely different from a market, where people do things for each other in order to get money.

Interlude: Generalised exchange or the 'gift economy'

In a gatherer-hunter culture, people work together to get food, build their shelters, look after the young and ill, join in ceremonies and celebrations that strengthen their social bonds.

There are usually customs about who gets what share of what food, or what is done and who gets what, but this was not a form of barter. In barter an exchange happens only if both parties have something to offer that they see as of equal value. Otherwise, there is no exchange.

Instead, this is 'generalised exchange' (more recently referred to as the 'gift economy') where everyone gives to and receives from a group with whom there is an ongoing give and take relationship. There is an expectation of rough overall balance over time but not at each transaction.

Without the need to balance each transaction, exchange is much easier. There is much less accounting to do, much more flexibility. Especially, things are done for the right reasons: to serve the other, not to obtain something in return.

Our ideas about money are illusions, clouding the collective minds of humanity, that we need to dispel. In our globalised economy, our dominant productive enterprises are optimised to make money, not to serve people. That is their legal purpose. Our cleverest people are recruited to this task. If that means exploiting people or the Earth, as it often does, that is rationalised as 'creating jobs' and as 'market efficiency'.

With the family metaphor, we design enterprises that are optimised to serve people. It is this change in the purpose of an enterprise, and with it how it is organised, that is the key point. For example, much of the dysfunctionality of our industrial food system is because it is optimised for profit, instead of for providing food for the community while preserving the health of the land⁵.

⁵ See for example, [Feeding People is Easy](#), by Colin Tudge.

Finally, and similar to the previous point, it is a family that is looking after the Earth. Again, this means that productive enterprises are optimised and organised for the health of the Earth, not to make the most money at the least monetary cost. That is very different from using government regulation to limit the environmental damage from enterprises optimised to make money.

How might it work?

There are many starting points that try to embrace these principles, perhaps only implicitly: many Transition projects, especially the [REconomy project](#), various of the older and larger [eco-villages](#) and intentional communities, various online '[community exchange systems](#)', experiments with complementary currencies and many more.

What follows is my personal vision of what they might lead to, building upon what I have learned from these starting points and taking them a few steps further.

Internal critic: Right. So this is your fantasy, rather than existing, practical solutions. What's the point?

Me: The point is that by looking ahead we can see suitable next steps and gain inspiration. To help this come to life for readers, I have written fictional presentations in a chapter of eGaia and in Sustainable Diss 2030, a short booklet for my local town to help people visualise it. eGaia also includes more theoretical chapters. Nonetheless, I would be surprised if the future unfolds in quite the way I am imagining, and so the vision needs to continually develop as we learn more.

The question is, 'how can we create a context in which our productive enterprises can be organised and optimised to serve people and planet, not to maximise monetary returns?'

Let's start with what would remain the same. Most production, distribution and services would be done largely on a professional, well-organised basis. This is not an 'everybody bakes their own bread, makes their own sandals, builds their own house' vision, although there might be

more people doing things for themselves and a higher proportion than at present done on a craft basis rather than on a mass-production basis. The quality and efficiency that comes when things are done by people with training, experience and the right tools will be as vital in the future as it is now.

The appeal of the market is its apparent freedom, the apparent autonomy of its components. Individuals and organisations can operate as they see best, as understood from their own perspectives. This vision retains that freedom and autonomy. It does not impose a central control, but rather changes the relationship from competition to co-operation. It is self-organised free exchange based upon individuals and organisations appreciating the advantages of co-operation and mutual support.

The biggest change I envisage from the current market system is from anonymity to ongoing relationship, the essence of a global family. Now we deal with massive corporations whose interests are rarely aligned with ours and where our power is insignificant compared to theirs. They encourage us to spend our money with them, regardless of whether that is really in our best interests. We have great difficulty in telling what really is best for us, much less for the environment.

In this 'family'-based future, I envisage people dealing with relatively small enterprises which they patronise regularly so that there is a personal and two-way relationship of care. However, these small enterprises, set up so they are not in competition with each other, can collaborate and support each other so that they can regain the advantages of very large scales: sharing best practice, support when one has difficulty.

There are three principles that I think are needed for this:

Finding niches to avoid competition

If a business has its own distinctive niche, which may be specialised offerings, or simply a location near its customers, and especially, a sufficient set of loyal, well-satisfied customers, it no longer needs to see itself in competition with similar businesses. It becomes free to serve those customers specific needs, and to collaborate with other similar businesses for mutual benefit.

⁶ Readers who know about [Viable Systems](#) may recognise the principles described here.

They can then work together in an organised fashion to make sure each is working in the most efficient manner, is environmentally sound, and is satisfying its customers as best it can. This co-ordination can take place at many scales: the very local, the regional, and even globally where appropriate.

Using information to replace some of the functions of money

Many forms of information – about what is needed and wanted, about quality, customer experience, best practice, about real, social and environmental costs – will come to guide what people and enterprises do, replacing much of the function of money. (Think of eBay reputations, online user ratings, etc. as starting points.)

Social networks, which already link people and local businesses, could be extended to include a co-operative exchange platform. This could include ratings and reviews by customers so that the public reputation of everyone and all businesses is on display. It could include a new 'real cost' statement, an extension of the energy ratings some appliances now must show.

Our present fixation with monetary cost blinds us to the 'real cost', a concept that is much richer than monetary cost. It can be divided into two parts:

- The physical and biological impact of the object: What materials are required, their impact upon the natural world (e.g. mining, oil wells, forestry?) How much energy, water and other environmental effects are required in its manufacturing and transport and ultimate disposal?
- The human impact of producing the object: How many hours of effort did it take to produce and distribute it? Under what social conditions was it produced?

Autonomy with co-ordination⁶

Essentially the idea is to put as much responsibility and decision making as possible at the lowest levels of an organisation, to the people actually doing the work, but with co-ordination to ensure that they are taking into

account the needs of their customers or clients, suppliers, similar local groups, and the wider environment. The same approach is used at different scales, possibly within an organisation if it is big enough, locally, regionally, nationally, and globally as appropriate. The key words are 'autonomy' and 'synergy'.

At each scale there are the groups or organisations that do the actual work, and also a co-ordinating group, drawn from them, to help them work together effectively. The people handling the co-ordination are not the 'bosses' who can tell the others what to do. Their function is to look at four areas:

1. **Stability:** Each group is monitored to see whether it is functioning well, and support is offered where needed. The information systems need to look at key performance indicators to help with this. In particular, there need to be organised systems for handling conflicts between people constructively, as these arise routinely, and especially, a culture in which people who find themselves in conflict with others feel pressure from their community to find a way to resolve it constructively.
2. **Optimisation:** Here the key is synergy. Are there ways in which different groups can support each other? Make best use of the strengths of each? Keep their respective niches clear? How can the collective resources be allocated for these purposes?
3. **Adaptation:** planning that takes into account the external environment. Developments within and outside of the group of organisations must be monitored, and form the ground of planning activities.
4. **Policy and identity:** Here the co-ordinating group works with all concerned, to ensure that there is agreement on fundamental principles and policies, so all are working to the same goals.

This form of autonomy with co-ordination builds heavily on the information systems, ensures that the niches are clear, and enables the whole group to function as an effective mutual support system, optimising wellbeing for people and the natural world. The stability and adaptation functions are essentially about creating resilience, which this approach optimises.

Money systems that support exchange without dominating

What is important is:

- That money systems don't dominate so that the goals and purpose of an enterprise can be to serve the wellbeing of people and planet rather than to make money.
- That money systems function to enable people to exchange with each other as needed. That is, money should be freely available, not in short supply and money systems should serve the community, not prey on it as at present.

In eGaia, I envisaged several types of systems of exchange, each with different types of money built into them, but these should be seen as possibilities, not prescriptions. In all three cases, the principal social structure was a trading partnership that embodied the sense of family between people with some degree of ongoing relationship.

At the local level, I imagined that people joined relatively small community partnerships that provided most of its members' basic needs: food, energy, transport, accommodation, all kinds of practical and caring services, etc. So some people provided food, while others provided transport or caring services, etc. for all the rest, and without any immediate payment or return.

Thus it used generalised exchange/gift economy principles. Everyone contributed to it and everyone received from it. All transactions were recorded, and were rated and reviewed, so everyone had a clear public reputation to maintain quality. The 'real cost' of all goods were recorded so people had a clear record of their environmental footprint. The records of the transactions replaced any use of money within the partnership.

Working for the community thus largely replaced 'jobs' to earn money for the members. It greatly reduced their need for money of any form, with most people working part-time in several different roles. This provides flexibility, resilience and security, as no-one is dependent on one job.

The 'autonomy with co-ordination' principles featured strongly as some of the tasks provided by the partnership. In particular, there was a strong sense that any conflicts that arose had to be resolved constructively, with people who were trained and available to support that when needed.

The second system of exchange I envisaged was a regional one, for goods and services that were more suitably provided at that scale. Again, people dealt primarily with people they knew or with friends of friends so that there was an ongoing relationship. Again, transaction records included ratings for quality, satisfaction and footprint, but this time there was a regional currency to be used. It was built into the trading system and was a [‘mutual credit’](#) currency so the amount of it in circulation expanded and contracted as needed. In effect, one of the functions of this regional trading system was as a bank, but one controlled by the community it served. Again, the ‘autonomy with coordination’ principles were used to regulate it.

This built-in currency is specifically not ‘legal tender’: it is usable only by members whose reputation and principles are public and is only available for use together with the transaction records that provide additional information.

In this vision, I imagined that exchange would be predominantly local, but also regional where that was more appropriate, but I also expected a global level to be important, if very much less so than at present. Thus the third system of exchange I envisaged was a global trading system with a global currency, the ‘Eco’. Even at this level, people would still be dealing either with people they knew or at least with friends of friends of friends... so there was still a sense of connection and ongoing reputation and relationship. Otherwise, it was organised similarly to the regional exchange.

Thus at all levels there was pressure and controls such that the exchange was there to support wellbeing and need, not to make money, where that existed.

Some next big steps

The vision in this essay suggests some next big steps:

1 Recruitment: Becoming explicit about who is part of this global family

Can we simply encourage people to identify with this vision? To become explicit about being part of a ‘global family that looks after people and the Earth’? This need not be limited to people who are currently active in the

Global Family, by Gary Alexander, January 2014

Transition movement (or its extension to similar projects.) We are looking for people who are looking for ways out of the current system, at least in part. We are also looking for businesses and organisations who want to be part of it.

This probably means identifying a small set of broad principles that characterise it. Then people, organisations, businesses can sign up to them, perhaps on one or more suitable websites. Here’s a first try at this:

1. Relationships: Agreeing to treat all people with respect, acting with integrity. This includes a commitment to handle any disagreements or conflicts that arise constructively.
2. Environment: Appreciating the environmental challenges we are facing, attempting to align our personal lives and business dealings with best environmental practice.
3. Financial transparency and integrity: Giving priority to wellbeing of people and the natural world over maximising money. This includes a commitment to paying fair and ethical prices and wages, and a transparency over profits, wages and salaries so it is clear that these are neither excessive nor exploitative.

In conventional terms, this recruitment could be seen as creating a market. People and businesses who see themselves as part of this should then see the others in it as people they can preferentially give and receive support from, perhaps do favours for, perhaps do business with, or employ. Regular social events to establish relationships are probably a key step at this stage.

2 Setting up exchanges and other support mechanisms

Once there is an identified group of people in an area who would look for ways to support each other, then there is a context for setting up a community exchange. It would need to have means of letting people know what is wanted and offered, which could be a website, or just a physical notice board or newsletter, or even a regular meeting place.

In addition to the usual wants and offers, it would need to have mechanisms to maintain the trust needed for the ‘family’ feeling. That would include ratings and reviews, statements by members to establish their commitment to the environmental and financial principles above.

If people are open to a gift economy approach, it could have a section for exchange of favours, help given without payment, but within the group

where all are giving and receiving. If people are preferentially patronising others within the group, then much of the money in use will be recirculating within it. However, it would also be a good context for a local currency, if wanted.

So, in this vision, the group comes into existence first and the currency is then set up to support it. As well as, or instead of a local currency, the group would be a good basis for a community loan fund or crowd sourcing for people and projects within it.

Finally, even as the earliest parts of this are set up, there need to be people who are able to assist with the conflicts that will always arise, to support the first principle above.

3 Setting up an 'autonomy with co-ordination' infrastructure

My experience with present attempts at community exchanges, or local currencies, is people are asked what they can offer and what they want, with the hope that there will be sufficient offered to make this attractive. The vision I outlined in eGaia and above includes that but is also much more pro-active. It has different sub-groups organising the different basic needs, so it would include groups that seek to provide food, transport, energy, accommodation, services, caring: whatever the group is willing to provide. This not only provides a good range of offerings for people to receive, but also provides lots of opportunities to give. So there are often possibilities to offer services, to help with the food or transport, etc. for people who might not have thought of that as what they could offer.

To the extent that this is done on a gift economy basis, it reduces its members needs for money. To the extent that it is done on a paid basis, it functions as flexible part-time employment, and recirculates money to the community.

From the analysis above, it should be clear that in addition to the practical sub-groups there need to be groups that handle the co-ordination functions (stability, optimisation, adaptation and identity), very likely drawn from the other groups.

4 Creating links with other similar family groups

From the earliest stages it will be important, and very useful to any groups setting up like this to make links with other similar groups, especially

nearby but also at a distance. These would be the beginnings of the regional and global exchange networks described above and reinforce their functions as learning networks and in attracting support and investment.

Relation to Rob Hopkins' 'Five Factors'

In an [excellent recent post](#), Rob Hopkins suggests:

“five factors that would help the Transition movement to scale up in a way proportionate to the challenges of our time. They are:

1. Create a learning network
2. Support and resource core groups
3. Bring forward investment for Transition enterprises
4. Become better storytellers
5. Build an evidence base”

These are all very complementary to the four ‘next big steps’ above.

Creating a learning network is the most important of all, going way beyond my suggestions, as it means the movement is open to correcting its errors. The ‘autonomy with co-ordination’ principles also make this very explicit, and the ‘creating links’ does too.

The co-ordinating groups as described can be seen as an extension of today’s Transition core groups, but with a clear economic function. This gives a strong reason to support them, through crowd funding or grants to enable them to get the trading partnerships off the ground. (And the same applies to bringing forward investment.)

As for storytelling, isn’t the growth of family-style partnerships, linking locally and globally to build a global family a great story to be telling?

And finally, all the active monitoring, all the information systems are the perfect basis for an evidence base.

Inner critic: Is that it? What next?

Me: Yes, I think so. I am feeling fairly complete. Now it is up to the readers to comment, to agree or to tear this apart!