



The Path Less Taken

by

Joe Symons

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Published by Centripetus
centripetus.org
Olga, WA

Printed in the United States of America

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Foreward

My purpose in assembling the essays in this book is to give the reader a glimpse into my passion for nudging the San Juan County archipelago into a refreshingly updated ecosystem of stewardship, wisdom, harmony and sustainability. While I started on the writing path in the first few years of the 1990's, the roots for my passion were developing in the late 1960's when I first came to Orcas Island. By 1992 my psyche had been fully integrated into the soil, mixing and blending with all manner of nutrients, material and spiritual. Two data points stand out. First, during the 20 years from 1970 to 1990, the population of the county, and proportionally of Orcas, had tripled. Second, in a move I hope he doesn't regret, my neighbor, at the time a member of the governing body of San Juan County (at the time it was called the BOCC; today it is the CC), asked me if I would chair

the Orcas committee to rewrite the county's Comprehensive Plan (CP).

I said, not knowing any more about what I was getting in to than I did when I became a parent, yes.

I had no idea what a CP was. I'd never read one. I'm not sure I even knew they existed, certainly not what they meant, did, or implied. No one else on the committees that were formed did either.

I have been blessed, and cursed perhaps, with a surprisingly sensitive bullshit detector. The same might also be said about my willingness to be an information wolverine, digging into the underbrush for some form of truth. In our first meeting, I recall asking the planners who were leading the CP show what the buildout population for SJC was. They didn't know. I asked them to find out. They demurred.

Hmmmm. That seems odd. The BS detector went off.

The essays that follow riff off of that failure to pass the smell test.

Introduction

There may be a fair amount of duplication in these essays, as I try to expose the dragon by looking at various body parts, hoping that you, the reader, will see an entry point and ask yourself how brave you are feeling, how sharp your sword (of truth) is, whether you gain an insight into how to slay this beast.

The beast you are to slay lies within you. The dragon is one placed in you by the culture. To slay the dragon is to awaken to a new, deeper, richer, more nuanced, more complicated, more subtle, indeed harder to fathom and harder to navigate, reality about yourself and your place. Your place in the culture, your place in time and space (perhaps in the San Juans, tho it need not be). You are your own dragon-slayer in a culture that does not encourage this. Indeed, it frowns on it. You will have to approach this slaying stuff with an open heart and an open mind. You can't actually hurt yourself. The worst that can happen is that you may feel you've wasted your time. Truly I hope that does not happen, as my purpose is not to get

you to see what I see, but to get you to see, deeply and freshly and personally, what you see, unencumbered by a cultural set of truths and presumptions and rules that serve, well, generally, now, in 2017, capitalism, which itself is a product of a deep self-destructive malady which (here's where you'll either read on or throw this away in disgust) goes by the general term "Western Civilization".

Exhibit A in the defense of my argument for this apparently outrageous assertion is the essential arc, denied by some, but more and more accepted as an unsolved "problem", inherent in the Anthropocene; specifically, the creation by our species of a Mass Extinction Event.

Skirting the Edge

<Note: the following essay was sent to the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) as a comment on the emerging problem of their decision to prohibit the Comprehensive Plan (CP) Committees from discussing density during their construction of a new CP based on Washington State's recently enacted Growth Management Act (GMA). A local newspaper reporter, skimming the publicly accessible communications to the BOCC, asked if he could publish this essay in his local paper. When he did, my phone started ringing off the hook (remember, this is basically in the very early internet, dial-up bandwidth, pre-smartphone days). There's a story, yet to be written, that recounts what emerged from his decision to publish the essay.>

Tuesday, January 31, 1995

The comp plan process to date has skirted the edge of the most important issue facing the future of San Juan County, namely, the consequences to all of us of the total number of

people who can, and hence will, call San Juan County their home.

I believe the vision statement is clear on the issue of what could be described as the 'look and feel' of the islands, and that vision is wholly inconsistent with the current buildout population implied by the land use densities on the existing comp plan land use maps.

The county commissioners to date have declared that the existing density designations will be maintained essentially unchanged as the basis for the land use element of the new comprehensive plan.

Thus, in the absence of another review, decision, or idea regarding the buildout population, the commissioners are essentially permitting a future population potential which can not be reconciled with the fundamental tenets of the vision statement crafted by the citizens they appointed.

The purpose of this comment is to alert those citizens who care about their children's future to a fundamental problem which cannot be ignored without a healthy dose of doublespeak. In my view, the comprehensive plan must explicitly detail the buildout population it certifies, and must

demonstrate that this population is indeed consistent with the vision statement. To do otherwise opens the county to not only the charges of hypocrisy and of abusing the efforts of countless citizens devoting literally years of their time to a good faith, serious effort to craft this plan, but to lawsuits.

To the observation that the comprehensive plan covers a twenty year time frame, within which the buildout population will not be reached, and therefore the issue of the buildout population is irrelevant, I respond with the observation that the plan shows a direction, an intention, a purpose, and if that direction is contrary to the vision statement, it must be altered. It is not enough to say that you didn't murder someone because, though you planned to, and put the gun to his head, and pulled the trigger, you missed. Intent is everything in a comprehensive plan; that's what "plan" means.

The land use plan alternatives being considered for the new comp plan show four fairly distinct land use allocations. The comp plan committees will deliberate on these alternatives and choose one. This selection process only chooses the activities that can be done on the property without further approval—the choice has nothing to do with the population

density on the land. However, over 90% of the square footage in new construction building permits issued by the county for the last several years is for single family residential construction. With few exceptions, every land use category permits a single family home outright. So if most of the people moving here are moving to have their home in the country, and not to start businesses that are larger than home occupations, which are also permitted outright, then the land use map selection process is interesting, perhaps, but not really that significant. No one in their right mind moves here to start a farming operation, buying land for 10 to 15 thousand dollars an acre, and thinks they will pay for the land, the equipment, and their living expenses on the crops they grow, unless they're growing something, or ingesting something, illegal.

People are moving here for the reasons codified in the vision statement, and as the population reaches even half of buildout, their choice will have been shamefully betrayed.

The already accepted vision statement speaks clearly of a low density, rural, quiet, traditional way of life, more or less like what people see here and now as they live and move around

on the islands. Most people who live here do not believe that a total population that is seven to eight times the current population would create an environment that is essentially indistinguishable from the one they enjoy now.

What needs to happen is that this issue be brought squarely to the front burner and left there until it has cooked long enough to be understood and resolved. I believe that there is a very strong desire by many comp plan committee members on each island to want to wrestle with this issue, however painful and confusing it may be, until a resolution has been crafted.

What has not happened, to date, is a clear recognition of the importance of this single factor as a fundamental component of the planning process. It has, to date, been ignored, skirted, and buried. I blame no one for this, as the issue is perhaps the toughest one in the whole collection of comp plan issues, and the natural tendency is to avoid the tough ones, hoping they'll either go away or come up later after the incumbents have retired. I think, however, that it will be inexcusable for the county to avoid leadership in responding to this issue, to passively slide under the table the responsibility for our

future, throwing up one's hands, blaming it on the precedent set in 1979.

I am not specifically recommending down zoning. I am only recommending that the county commit itself to the process of reconciling the vision statement to the comp plan, and doing that process with integrity, honesty and an open mind.

I believe there is sufficient energy and flexibility among the people who crafted this vision to generate a way to reconcile the vision with our comp plan development efforts. This energy needs to be recruited, encouraged, honored and protected as it forges a plan that really meets the vision, even if the way that emerges may not be obvious, normal, usual, conventional or status quo. I believe that only the county commissioners can generate, and nurture, that energy through their recognition and insistence that this goal is not only worthwhile but mandatory.

The question then remains, will they and by extension, all who care about the San Juans, seize the reins, take leadership positions, and actively demonstrate a commitment to our future?

Pick up a pen or phone and let your commissioner know that this issue is important to you, your family, your children and your sense of what's right for this beautiful, unique and fast changing archipelago we are lucky, now, to call home.

Regulations

As I sit waiting for my ferry, I notice the white lines marking the lanes. Why were they painted? Surely to help guide the traffic, to provide an orderly means to establish the first come first serve rule which silently regulates the cultural understanding of access to almost everything these days: movie lines, grocery store lines, drivers license renewal lines, phone calls to just about any organization (“all our operators are busy helping other customers..please stay on the line...your call will be taken in the order it was received.”)

Who authorized the painting of the lines? Some faceless bureaucrat approving a purchase order for 50,000 gallons of white striping paint to be distributed among the Washington State Ferry System maintenance department supply lockers? Some WSF lane management supervisor who determines on a yearly basis whether the lines are fading and need refreshing? Are these people regulators? Are the painted lines on the pavement the result of ‘regulations’? Would there be lines if there were no regulations? Would it matter if there were no lines?

There seems to be a strong opposition to ‘regulations’ these days, as if regulations and the regulators who establish them were some evil force that has to be contained if not eradicated. On the other hand, some will argue, maybe even the same people, that regulations are inadequate. It depends on what is being regulated. Thus when several children died from contaminated meat a few years ago, many people called for tighter meat inspections, that is, more regulations on the meat processing industry.

The fact of my life is that I’m steeped in regulations like a tea bag left in a cup of hot water for a week. It’s not just the ferry parking lot lines: every road has lines, and personally I’m glad for them. Of course there are stop signs, and road signs, all of which have a regulation size and readability, and I’m glad that no matter where I drive in America I don’t have to figure out the basic rules of the road. I can get on with my life, get on to my destination, without having to re-invent and re-discover how to do something because I’m in a new venue. There are regulations which affect telephones, so I can dial the same way anywhere in the country; regulations which affect voltage in the walls, so I can safely and efficiently use any electrical appliance anywhere. There are so many regulations which

make my life easier I should welcome them gladly: I certainly would be amazed at what a hassle life would be if they all disappeared overnight. Yet I don't look for ways to encourage my political representatives to spend my tax money on regulating even more behavior. I wish the world were such that regulations weren't so necessary.

So why indeed do we have so many regulations, in so many areas? Is it the price of being so big, so much in demand? Clearly if few called about computer problems you could get right through to a technician without being on hold. If few needed to renew their drivers's license you could walk right in and be served immediately. If no one wanted to see a movie you'd have the theater to yourself and wouldn't have to get there 'early' in order to get a good seat, or, in many cases, a seat at all. So bigness leads to some sort of fair, orderly control, and first come first served seems fair: if we design regulations to enforce that, who's fault is that? Big bad government? It's us.

Of course, another reason we have regulations is to deal with the fairly widespread issue that many people don't have an inclination to "do the right thing". How many would pay their taxes by April 15th if there were no penalty? How many

would pay them at all? How many would drive in the right lane if there were no penalty for not doing so? Or stop completely at every stop sign? Or stay in the back of the line when they'd prefer to go to the front and make everyone else wait? Why inspect meat? Let the buyer beware. Why recall cars? If they blow up when hit, hey, it's everyone for himself. Why have metal detectors in airports? If the plane is hijacked, well, sometimes that happens. Some regulations deal with the few who would disturb the many. Some regulations deal with the many who don't really want to do something they 'should' (like pay taxes, drive safely, put their garbage cans on the street). These types of regulations deal with "third party" effects, where basically innocent people get caught up in someone else's dumb, or bad, behavior (dumb if they litter, bad if they hijack a plane). What are you going to do? Shoot 'em? Get serious. The choice is do nothing or make regulations. Maybe not great but have you got a better idea?

As the population of a place rises, regulations are stimulated for both the reasons presented above: the place is bigger, so a more formal order is required to guide people, and because there are more people, there are more of those who would do dumb, and bad, things, impacting the rest of us. For

example, if the average number of automobile accidents per year is a function of the number of passenger miles driven, then if there are more people on the road, there's going to be more accidents. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that one out. Similarly, if there is an average rate of, say, 1 felonious assault per 10,000 people per year, then if the area grows from 4000 people to 12,000 people, there are going to be more violent crimes, and then there are going to be more regulations, more police, etc.

Land use regulations are really no different, and are stimulated for the same two reasons: guiding a limited resource and protecting the innocent. If my neighbor is 5 miles away, I don't care if he has chickens or a bed and breakfast. He is too far away to disturb me. If he's next door, however, I might be very concerned about the smells, or sounds, or traffic, or, broadly, intrusions on my peace, my air, my land from his (or her) activity. If he (or a lot of 'hims') sucks enough water out of the ground, my well may grow dry. If he builds a high building, I might lose my view. If he drains his 'swamp', I might lose the birds and wildlife which used to roam my property and remind me of why I moved to a rural spot in the first place.

To argue for less regulations while the population grows is to reveal a fundamental misunderstanding of how a society works, and will inevitably prove to be futile. Something will come along to implement a regulation to solve the bigness problem and, later, the 'badness' problem. To argue that people should be 'free' to do what they want will result in the kind of freedom permitted by white lines in ferry terminal areas and metal detectors in airports. Why? Because there will always be a response when disruption exceeds the tolerance level of the system. To not respond would indicate a system plunging into chaos. Imagine whether you would be indifferent if there were no response to the Oklahoma bombing; can you imagine anyone saying "Well, sometimes that happens...you can't do anything about it...you shouldn't even try."

If you really want to keep the freedom from additional regulations you've got now, keep the population small, and smart. Smart is important: a cancer cell is 'free' to grow and has no regulations, but if the cell doesn't pay attention to the consequences of its behavior (which it doesn't) it will kill the host. That's suicide. Whoops!

Pay attention! you might say, Watch Out! But wait: who are you rooting for? The cancer cell? Is that the embodiment of “independence, privacy and personal freedom”, qualities held up by some as oppositional to regulation? No one is independent enough in our society to yell “fire” in a movie theater, private enough to be able to abuse a child at home, personally free enough to build a home without a building permit.

The point is not whether regulations will come; the point is who will be in charge of selecting them. You can either make them now, while you are small (and smart??), when you can choose the scale of the system (and thus the problem set) within which you'll operate, or make them later, under the requirements of a bigger system, where your choices will be more expensive, frequently imposed from the outside, and mandated by an unavoidable response to the bigness and badness problems.

Thus, the real question is whether we can craft regulations together in a consensus mode or whether we'll see each other in the chambers of the Supreme Court. I hope we can work together as a community in a consensus, rather than a confrontational, mode, crafting a mutually-agreed upon set

of policies which minimize the need for rules required by the problems inherent in a bigger system.

Since the number and severity of regulations is a direct function of population size, to keep taxes and the government as small as possible, implement the phrase “small is beautiful.” Aside from keeping taxes and government smaller than it would otherwise get, we get an even greater benefit (and this is the whole point): a smaller, more peaceful community where the private and public intersection points are smaller, more intimate, more personal. The result is less system responses, like helpful white lines (or mandatory jail cells), and more human scale responses (precisely because there's plenty to go around) like "My! Isn't this place beautiful!"

Joe Symons

Chair, District 2

Comprehensive Plan Citizen Advisory Committee

We buy our future

In the ongoing discussion about whether or how to reconcile the vision statement in the new San Juan County Comprehensive Plan with the buildout population implied by the existing land use density map, it may be useful to reflect on the observation that “you get what you pay for.” I believe that any set of strategies and/or policies suggested to bridge the gap between our desire for a tolerable future and achieving it must ask us all, in serious, real terms, to put our money where our mouths are.

Background:

Briefly, the issue before all of us is described as follows: the land use density designation map, developed in 1979 at the time of the creation of the first comprehensive plan for San Juan County, indicates the minimum number of acres required for each residential structure. Thus an R-10 designation requires that each residence be ‘surrounded’ by ten acres. At the time of the creation of this ‘density’ map, those who developed the plan never asked how many residential structures, in total, might be created if every property in the

county were subdivided to its maximum density and had a house on it. When this maximum subdivision occurs, we as a county are said to be at 'buildout'; this means that no more residential structures can be built. Buildout exists, for example, in Martha's Vineyard, another island community on the east coast.

The total population at "buildout" is estimated by taking the average number of occupants per residence, currently about 2.2 people per house for San Juan County, and multiplying it by the total number of residences. For San Juan County, this estimated buildout population is about 50,000 full time residents. This total estimated buildout population does not include the population represented by part time residents and visitors. During peak periods, such as the month of August, the ratio of full time residents to part time residents and visitors has been estimated to be about one to one. Thus, at "peak", for every full time resident, there is one additional person 'in-county' who is either a visitor or a part time resident. Hence an estimated buildout population of 50,000 full time residents becomes, during August, an estimated total in-county population of close to 100,000 people.

No one I have ever discussed this projection with finds it acceptable. Everyone believes that a county population of this magnitude is entirely inconsistent with the vision statement in the Comprehensive Plan, which defines the vision of the county.

The central problem is that while no one likes this scenario, few can imagine a way to avoid it. Some choose to avoid the issue through denial. They would argue that the numbers are impossible, that it will never happen, that all kinds of factors will intercede to prevent it from happening. The theory here is that some 'limit' on total population will occur spontaneously, without any governmental role, regulation or decision; that, in effect, everyone will 'do the right thing' to keep the population at some level which residents today think is acceptable.

The fact that such spontaneous self-control has never demonstrated itself in any small beautiful community anywhere in the world does not diminish their belief that it will occur here, presumably just in time. This is the 'miracle' scenario, and sees the county resident as redeemed by unseen forces. The sub-text is that the citizen is helpless and an altruistic force steps in and 'saves' the county. One might call

this the Bill Gates scenario, in which some wealthy benefactor simply buys up every available lot and turns them all over to the San Juan Preservation Trust. This sugardaddy fantasy allows us who are here now to have our cake and eat it too; not only is it unrealistic, but it reinforces the notion that we are weak, spineless, dependent wimps who have to be bailed out by an outsider since we're not smart enough or dedicated enough to solve our own problems. The scenario assumes we need a hero, not only rich but generous. Get real: anyone that rich isn't dumb. They'll buy the land all right. Then subdivide and sell it for a wad. The rest of us will kick ourselves because we didn't do the same thing and no one will remember that the point was to preserve the place, not trash it.

Others who don't like the buildout population projection choose to position themselves as helpless. They assume that nothing can or will be done. They accept the inevitability of this buildout scenario. They accept a 'citizen as victim' role, blaming both the government for inaction and their neighbors, in general, for selling off their land. These are the handwringers.

Both of these scenarios assume that the problem of too many people cannot be solved by a collective, careful,

comprehensive, consensus-oriented, citizen-constructed process. They paint the problem as insolvable by ordinary means and thus silently imply that our process is fundamentally non-democratic.

To those who say we cannot limit population, recall that San Juan County already has a limit on a maximum estimated population: it is the population based upon the current buildout densities mentioned above. The only real issue is whether this population is acceptable, not whether the legal basis for it exists. As of now, it's the law. Without active intervention, it will occur.

The glass is half full.

Problems can be avoided or faced, the central theme in the Lion King. Simba was a handwringer—he believed his future must be avoided because his past could not be reconciled. He was stuck until Rafiki smacked him on the head, pointing out that there were only two choices: run from the past or learn from it.

As citizens, we can run from our past (avoid the issue) or learn from the experiences of others. We have to start from

the position, as Rafiki did, that solutions exist: they simply need to be revealed.

I believe that we should start our search for a solution by considering the time frame implicit in our purchases. There are few things I can think of where payment for something isn't a payment for one's future. A haircut has a 6 week future. A tank of gas might last me a week or so if I follow my usual schedule. A meal takes me a few hours. No matter what I buy, I buy to use it in my future. I certainly can't use it in my past, and if it only lasts now, right now, it's over as quickly as a breath or a kiss. Nice, maybe wonderful, but gone. I can't use it or have it again tomorrow.

Taxes, like groceries, are just another purchase for my future: they buy police to enforce the laws that someone will break, fire trucks to put out fires that will occur, asphalt to repair potholes that will appear as more and more people drive on the roads. Like it or not, it turns out that the more people there are, the greater the need for these and other public services. Taxes don't just stay the same as people move in, they rise. 'New' population doesn't pay its way, and never has.

Besides raising our taxes, 'new' population also competes for the same services that the old population did: the same parking spaces, the same post office counter, the same movie theater. Lines are longer, you have to get somewhere sooner to get a place to park, you will wait longer than you did until someone builds a new place to compete with the one that used to be fine till there were so many more people. With the new place, for a while, the lines won't be as long, but consequently the town has grown bigger, one new business at a time. The roads are more crowded, parking is less convenient, you can't stop the car to chat with someone on the street because now there is a line of cars behind you.

There's nothing really wrong with this picture. Small places have grown bigger and changed since the country began. 500 years ago, Manhattan was more rural than Orcas. A fundamental question before the citizens in San Juan County is, will this growth process ever stop? Should it stop? Do we care how big the county gets? The underlying choice is: do we want to be reactive, to solve problems after they are serious and require solution (like new law enforcement buildings because we've got a lot more crime than we used to have because, golly!, there are more people here) or do we

want to be proactive, determining that there is a size above which we don't want to grow?

Another way of phrasing this is: do we want to choose to avoid the issue and be dragged into our own future, resisting investments in our county's infrastructure until we're forced into purchasing them (wider roads, more schools, deeper wells, etc.), ever complaining that we want to control our taxes yet welcoming new people who's inevitable consequence will be to both raise our taxes while moving us toward an elitist suburbia like every other discovered paradise on earth, or do we want to choose our future, actually buy our future as thoughtfully as we purchase a new truck, a new home, a college education for ourself or our child?

I believe we should consciously, actively, deliberately choose our future and develop ways to pay for it. We should figure out what it costs to purchase and retire development rights, figure out fair and equitable ways to share the costs among the stakeholders who care about the county's future (current residents, aspiring residents and visitors), and systematically make it happen. I think we can avoid all the uncertainty and anger about property rights if we make it clear that we're simply going to buy the rights rather than "take"

the rights. No one would refuse to sell to Bill Gates. Why then refuse to sell to yourself, your community, your children, your future?

I believe we can, as well, weave choices for retaining the diversity of our population into the tapestry of our future. We can develop methods for encouraging a wide mixture of income and age diversity to sustain and vitalize our county. We can develop methods to encourage a wide mixture of economic activities, supplementing and ultimately replacing our current mix, dominated now by activities that systematically ratchet us toward a future we say we don't want.

To do this, we'll have to develop options, study them, choose among them and pay for them. People do this all the time when selecting breakfast cereal, bathroom tile, college educations, a new home, and cancer therapy alternatives. It's real, it's serious, it affects their future, there is uncertainty, and not making a choice is making a choice. I believe in the vision statement and I believe we can collectively make that vision a reality. What do you believe?

Joe Symons

Chair, District 2

Comprehensive Plan Citizen Advisory Committee

May 1995

Reality Check

San Juan County has been growing at about 5% a year since 1970; for the last 30 years it has been the the fastest growing county in the State of Washington. This is not surprising: the county is a beautiful place and many people want to live here.

Other than certain more or less standard requirements regarding availability of water, adequate sewage processing capability, acceptable topography, etc., the county imposes no unusual building restrictions for owners of legal parcels of land. Simply put, if you wish to move to San Juan County and you have the resources to purchase a legal lot which meets your personal needs, you may construct a home on that lot.

During the process of re-writing their comprehensive plan, the citizens of San Juan County constructed a Vision Statement . This statement was to be a blueprint for the future of the county, and the formulation of this statement was one of the requirements of the Growth Management Act (GMA). The importance of the Vision Statement was underscored in the plan as follows:

The first task ...was to create a vision for the future...The County-wide Vision Statement was formally endorsed by the Board of County Commissioners in December 1993. The Vision Statement ... is the foundation upon which the entire Comprehensive Plan is based.

The GMA was passed by the legislature of the State in order to promote certain fundamental goals for the utilization of state resources. Washington State is a desirable place to live; people have been moving here for decades from other states. The resulting growth has created the usual set of problems: sprawl, traffic congestion, air pollution, a huge rise in infrastructure costs (for example, water and sewer facilities), etc. Growth in the state had been more or less unregulated, as it has been in many states, and the costs of dealing with that growth are high. Managing the growth became important to the legislature in order to save tax dollars, preserve open space, be efficient with limited resources, and maintain a high quality of life which is what residents of the state have enjoyed and wish to continue to enjoy.

One of the provisions of the Act was designed to spread fairly the growth that was moving into the state among the

counties. The Office of Financial management (OFM) was empowered in the Act to determine the growth rate of each county, and to assign a quantity of the growing state population to each county. Consequently, each county's comprehensive plan must show that it has provided space for this expected population growth forecast for it by OFM. In the process of showing that one's county has allocated sufficient space for new people to build houses, the county's comp plan must show that those new planned spaces meet overall GMA goals like concentrating growth in urban areas and avoiding sprawl.

However, although a county's comp plan must be able to satisfy this GMA requirement of showing that it has sufficient planned space for the OFM's estimate of future population, there is no requirement that people actually must move to those places.

Indeed, in San Juan County, which has a large quantity of legal lots that are undeveloped, most of which are in rural areas, there is nothing in either the comp plan or in the GMA to prevent a new resident from buying one of those lots and building a residence on it.

People who move to San Juan County generally do so because of its rural beauty, and consequently they purchase land in either rural shoreline or rural (i.e., non activity center) areas. There is not a lot of incentive for someone to come to one of the san juan islands and move to one of the villages. Indeed, recent meetings held in virtually every hamlet and village in the county have shown a strong preference on the part of the existing village residents to limit severely any new growth in the existing activity center. We have then a push and pull factor working in the same direction: new residents don't want to live in hamlets, and those who already do live in hamlets don't want any more new residents.

That suits the new residents fine, but the consequence is that the basic goals of the GMA are completely ignored. Unless the comp plan is constructed in such a way as to offer opportunities for development (i.e., building permits) in keeping with both the Vision Statement of the County and the GMA, the new growth will occur in places and at a rate that will make both the locally desired future (as expressed in the Vision Statement) and the state goals for conservation and preservation and efficient use of resources (expressed in the GMA) wholly irrelevant. Remember, the plan means nothing if

it isn't followed. Currently, there is nothing in the San Juan County plan which expresses regulations that in fact implement either, much less both, the Vision Statement and the GMA.

There are 4 fundamental elements that describe the future of San Juan County:

1. How big will we ultimately get? (this is the 'buildout' population)
2. How fast will we get there? (this is the growth rate)
3. Where will the new people actually build their homes? (this describes the proportion of new people who will live in activity centers vs. live in the rural areas)
4. Given that the Vision Statement speaks eloquently of community and diversity, what really viable methods will be developed to create a GMA-mandated affordable housing reality?

Because San Juan County has so many undeveloped parcels in rural areas, and because there are no regulations that limit the total number of building permits issued, actual growth in the county occurs based on what lots are for sale

and how many people have the money and desire to get one. There is no reason to believe that the growth rate of the last 30 years will necessarily or significantly change; indeed, there is a lot of new wealth in America, the baby boomers are both inheriting huge amounts as well as being in their prime earning years, and places like the San Juans are rare.

In addition to no restrictions on the total number of building permits issued annually, there are also no restrictions on where in the county those building permits allow new residences. That is, if the only applications for building permits received by the permit center are for residences in rural areas, then the new growth will occur in rural areas, regardless of the intention of either the Vision Statement or the GMA.

The only way the plan can craft a future consistent with both the Vision Statement and the GMA is to only permit growth to occur at a rate and in a place that meets the fundamental principles of these two guiding philosophies. If we refuse to force the plan to so craft our future, it won't. Consequently, the time spent crafting the Vision Statement will have been simply an exercise in window dressing, the comp plan's declaration that the Vision Statement is the

foundation of the plan merely fluff, and the intentions of the GMA for preservation of the high quality of life for state residents will be entirely thwarted.

The great majority of residents who have moved to the San Juans will discover that their expectations for their future, and their children's future, will have been betrayed, and this will occur because they were not informed of the difference between a comp plan in theory and a comp plan in fact. They presume that a comp plan is a comp plan in fact. This is a fair presumption but it is not accurate. It is not even close to accurate. Crafting a plan in theory but not informing the public that it is not a plan in fact is akin to a fraud.

November 10, 1999

Joe Symons

Forthcoming

10/5/2001

Islands Sounder

To the Editor:

On Friday, October 19, the planning commission will hear requests for change to the comprehensive plan which have been submitted by citizens. The request I submitted asks the County to clarify the meaning of the plan. In my request, I said:

"I believe the CP (comprehensive plan) owes far more detail to the reader than it currently offers. It owes a kind of "full disclosure" perspective, a "what the plan means" explanation, and a reconciliation/ explanation of how the CP implements the Vision Statement, which the plan describes as "the foundation of the CP." Many readers cannot or will not read the CP due to its length and inscrutibility. Comprehensive Plans should not be incomprehensible. Simply stating the plan, the current format, is not at all the same as describing what it really means."

In response to the question, "Why is the change in the public interest?", I wrote:

"The concept here would be to assist residents, property owners, visitors and prospective residents of the changes likely to be experienced in the county as the plan as written evolves. There is a 'truth in planning' concept here analogous to a 'truth in lending' or a standard full-disclosure policy. The reader of such a proposed addition to the Plan would be guided to understand the implications of doing nothing as well as the implications of doing something in response to the issues raised, under the explicit theory that "not making a choice is making a choice." The current CP format omits critical information. The changes proposed here improve consistency between parts of the plan by explicitly describing how (or how well) the plan achieves the goals of the Vision Statement. The documents are currently silent on how the plan will achieve the Vision Statement and, as well, achieve the goals of the GMA under which it was written."

Right now, the comprehensive plan does not state how many people can live here, how fast we have been growing, what the likely costs of paying for all the new people will be, where those new folks will live, how we will deal with our

affordable housing problem. We live in a precious place, all the more so because of the events of September 11. We need to protect what we have. We cannot protect it if we don't know where we are going or how we are going to get there. The comprehensive plan should tell us, simply and clearly. You can read the full text of my request at www.doebay.net/forthcoming.html, and you can contact members of the planning commission and the BOCC to tell them that you want the plan, the document that describes your future, to be forthcoming.

Joe Symons

Olga WA

Subject: Synaptic Sparks from the Doe Bay Triangle

Date: Friday, September 12, 2003 4:52 PM

It occurs to me that I've been approaching our issue inappropriately, which means: too indirectly and too vaguely. I started down the trail toward what I thought was going to be an appropriate future for SJC some 13 years ago when I wrote a letter to Tom Cowan, who was then running for re-election. Somehow I was appointed chair of the orcas committee to rewrite the comp plan, and the rest is history. I think I started out thinking I was being given a stately ride down a country road in a one horse wagon along with some other good folks, and have found myself holding on to at least one rein (if not an armful) of what has morphed into a whole herd of horses storming across the countryside more or less out of control; I'm off on an adventure, certainly not alone but with a very small cadre of fellow stalwarts, a tiny few of whom were there

from the beginning, the rest having, perhaps smartly, jumped from the wagon before the careening began.

My approach, then, was simple and, from this vantage, simplistic. I thought the process by which the county's future was to be crafted would be reasonable, logical and careful. I thought the outcomes would be appropriate, the decisions thoughtful and the results consistent with the intentions of the citizens and best planning practices. I thought the GMA would provide the incentive and the rules and would result in a plan we could all be reasonably proud of and then, naturally, our job would be over, the plan would be implemented, and all would be right in the world.

Wake up and smell the coffee would be too wimpy to describe the reality check that has unfolded, and while the GMA was a useful tool, we all concede, even as it has not finished playing out its role here, that the forces for ignoring it are more powerful than the forces that have tried to defend it. This is not to say that our little band hasn't had our victories, far more than our defeats. But the forces ignoring the GMA are not just the commissioners, but the ignorance of the citizens.

I've been thinking about the band of rebels that started this country, and for some reason the Boston Tea Party's slogan (trusting my history is right): no taxation without representation. I am not sure that is the correct slogan for today, but in effect we are being taxed for a future that I believe few truly want. The taxes are certainly in real dollar terms, but they are also in non-dollar qualities that were the critical factors that brought us here and keep us here.

The assumption behind what follows is that our future is going to continue to cost us, but the choices are essentially twofold. We can choose the path that we are on, which is an annual unrestricted, unregulated or even unidentified growth rate toward a buildout population that is arguably multiple times a level that most stakeholders would, today, consider appropriate and consistent with our Vision, or we can choose a path that would alter the growth rate and the buildout population, and likely even the distribution of our planned new population over the essentially unplanned future built into our essentially-thoughtless density map. The costs may be about the same though the consequences would be vastly different

Or so it might seem. But would it fly in Peoria? What if we directed our effort toward a process by which we obtained the best possible resources toward planning our future under these 2 scenarios? What if we got the biggest baddest planners in the country, perhaps competing among themselves for the opportunity to get the job, to more or less “prove” the worthiness (or not) of the smart growth plan or its crafted equivalent, and further that we took this proof (trusting that we would get it) and founded our own form of “Common Sense” with which we infused the stakeholders concerned about the future of this archipelago?

What kind of plan would be involved in getting this idea completed? We don’t necessarily need money, we need the tasks done. What incentives could we devise, not unlike Tom Sawyer and his fence project, to get others to buy into this, either with their skills or their dollars? My sense is that if the stakeholders had an actual plan that showed the tax alternatives, the environmental outcomes, the preservation of community values, the quality of life (read: quality of investment) alternatives of a plan that was likely self-financing or in any case would cost no more than and hopefully less than the costs of our non-plan, they would be strongly

motivated to demand it. We are currently creating an environment hostile to our existing economic bases, to our environmental resources, to our community diversity and to our personal (public) pocketbooks, and we're doing it in the name of ...ah...the great american dream? I don't think we're doing it in any name. I think we're doing it because we have not put any brainpower toward the topic of an island culture moving toward its future, so it is essentially mindless.

Why wouldn't a Bullitt foundation (or pick one) want to support this experiment in true planning? Certainly a pilot project here might reveal enormous benefits for small communities faced with similar growth pressures. And, if the results showed that the least expensive (all things considered) option was to continue to put the pedal to the metal, I'll drop the reins and jump off the wagon.

I think a key here is showing that a real plan would / could be cheaper than what we have, so anyone who wants to see their taxes continue to rise to meet the LOS (and plenty of other) criteria need do nothing. Right now we are being taxed without a sense of what we are buying, and the county has refused to tell us what it has put out bids for. It's a little like getting into Iraq, only to discover (surprise??) that gosh, we

need another 87 billion (that's today). The guy who predicted what it would really cost was sacked by the Bush administration about a year ago.

This idea presumes that good information will lead to good decisions. It presumes that the decisions will come from the ground up, that the commissioners, whoever they are, whatever their party, will implement a plan that will save big money and big hassles. There is always the law of unintended consequences, but we are living under that law now, and its not necessarily a pretty picture.

Work for Nothing

It occurs to me that the time and effort many of us have put into the process of moving the county toward a new relationship with its future (one that is proactive and consciously chosen rather than one that evolves spontaneously with predictable, and undesirable, consequences) will produce, if we are successful, nothing. That is, the result of months of work will be invisible; no one will see or notice anything different.

Here, enormous work is being done to convince the citizens of the county, virtually all of whom already agree with the notion, that collectively we should, basically, keep things (read: the population size) more or less what is here, now.

Usually when an individual or a group chooses to do something, there is a tangible, visible result: men land on the moon; a nobel prize is awarded for literature, a new antibiotic is developed. Here, if we are successful, nothing (much) will appear to change.

What's going on? Why so much work to achieve what people say they want anyway, and if the work is successful,

there's nothing to show for it? Obviously, we (all) have to overcome some powerful impulse guiding us to do the wrong thing. To actually end up where we already are, we have to work hard to redirect our energies away from doing something we apparently want to do, or think we want to do, or actually don't think we want to do. We're chipping away at something, by habit, by not-thinking, where each little chip seems small and inconsequential to the whole but is apparently helpful (that is, not obviously harmful) to us as individuals. A simple example is smoking. For many people it is a habit. If you ask them why they keep doing it, knowing what they know about its health consequences, they'll say they know they should stop and indeed many say that they wish they could stop. I believe them. I suspect that it is hard to stop. Very hard. My mother smoked for 50 years. She got lung cancer and after half a lung was removed, she still smoked. Redirecting that energy is not something one does 'intuitively' or 'spontaneously.'

I am reminded of an article I read decades ago by a professor of engineering at MIT. It was entitled "On the counterintuitive behavior of complex systems". The professor was asked to be a consultant to large companies who were trying to solve manufacturing problems, and every time they

thought they knew what was the bottleneck, located the problem area in their manufacturing process and ‘solved’ it, the system got worse! The article pointed out that complex systems are counterintuitive, that doing what is ‘apparent’ or intuitive almost always makes things worse. The conclusion: spontaneity, ‘natural’ behavior, ‘just going along’, intuition, will take you somewhere, of course, but generally not where you think you want to go, especially if ‘you’ are a system (like a county).

Part of the problem here is the same one faced by Hamlet in his soliloquy on suicide: no one knows, and for certain things, like killing yourself, there’s no coming back to report on what its like. So people often keep doing what they know, since that is easier (or is it merely safer?) than trying something that they don’t know (and might not like). Suicide is an extreme example, since most other things you can recover from. Take food. Do you try that new asian food that you can neither pronounce nor recognize or do you go for the hamburger? If you do try it, you can be fairly sure before you take your first bite that you won’t die. The downside risk is a bad taste. What’s the upside? Something delightful!

Now let's move to something both bigger and more serious. What about redirecting the habitual energy, the nonthinking energy that ratchets us toward a more expensive, more crowded, less diverse, less beautiful community? We've obviously got an impulse to keep on truckin', even if we say that we don't like where we're going! Are we nuts?

No. Like the smoking example, it's hard and we've got no models, no inspiration, no success-stories to help us make the mental transition from one set of habits to another, healthier set.

Journey of a Thousand Meals

Every journey into new territory has to begin somewhere. Generally that somewhere is in the brain, where the idea is hatched and the means to implement it is noodled. But ideas are wisps that disappear like morning fog unless they express themselves in the feet. Redirecting the impulses to chip away at San Juan County does not have to mean destroying lives, ruining economic value, hurting people, or a host of fantasized (but never demonstrated, much less proven) negative consequences. It's not the problem that Hamlet faced. It's more like the problem my mother faced. It might even be

thought of as the problem the diner faced when deciding whether to try a strange food. It's not going to kill you. You might actually find that your secret fantasy ("I've always wanted to go to Japan, see the country, experience what it's like to live there, even eat the food") could be realized, even with a small, tentative start. Rephrasing this, you might actually find that your secret fantasy ("I would love it if San Juan County could somehow stay this small, this beautiful, this special") could, with tentative, careful, and consensual cooperation, be realized.

Your job: take the first bite.

The Next Step

(A commentary on population-related issues of buildout and diversity implicit in the proposed comprehensive plan for San Juan County.)

The vision statement of the draft comprehensive plan for San Juan County states that county residents consider the quality of their future to be intimately tied to a rural way of life, and that this way of life is to be preserved.

It is clear from the sentiments expressed by many people, including at least one of the County Commissioners, that the buildout population derived from the density designation allocations created in the 1979 comprehensive plan is inconsistent with the fundamental vision of the county's future. Specifically, that the buildout population in the '79 comp plan is much much larger than the maximum county population that would still permit the '94 vision statement to be honored.

Common sense and the GMA both require that the comprehensive plan be consistent (in this instance, that one aspect of the comp plan, the vision statement, be consistent

with another aspect of the comp plan, namely the buildout population implied by the density map). Additionally, both common sense and the GMA require that the controlling or determining component in any consistency conflict is the higher order element, and clearly the vision statement is the highest order element in the comp plan. It is the element that serves as the umbrella defining all other elements as subordinate. Thus in resolving this specific conflict, the vision statement is used as the standard to which the buildout population, and by extension the density designations they are based on, must be held accountable.

Two problems are immediately presented for resolution.

The first problem is to determine the maximum population that would still meet the principles expressed in the vision statement. It is clear that as population grows, the “quality of county life” factors expressed in the vision statement deteriorate. At what point in the growth of the county population is the resulting degradation in the quality of life created by that growth no longer consistent with the expressed (i.e., ‘vision’) wishes of the population? Some people claim we are already at a “maximum” size, and that consequently any more growth will result in a county

population inconsistent with the vision statement. Others claim we're already too big. No one has come forth to claim that our '79 buildout population is consistent with the vision statement. (That population, depending on assumptions regarding occupancy ratios, persons per household, and the inclusion of non-permanent residents in the count, varies anywhere from 4 to 10 times the current full time resident county population). For the purposes of the discussion to follow, let us assume that the citizens agree that a buildout population, that is, a permanent resident population, no more than double the existing full time population would meet the standard required by the vision statement. More than double the current population, however, would result in a deterioration of the quality of county life to the degree that it was no longer consistent with the vision statement.

If it is argued that such a determination is “arbitrary”, let it be noted that the selection and determination of density designations which was established for the first comp plan was no less arbitrary—individuals sat down and simply allocated certain areas to be R-2, R-5 and R-10, for example, without any additional input other than the “wishes” of the neighborhood where such allocations were to be applied.

Consequently, the buildout population which resulted from that first effort at density designations was one that was arbitrarily, as opposed to methodically, determined. No one in 1979 actually calculated the total county buildout population based upon the collective results of various neighborhood's allocations, then revealed, discussed and certified that the resulting population which could eventually occur was felt to be acceptable by the majority of the voters of the county.

Those who are responsible for the 1994 Comprehensive Plan are not free to hold such a loose standard. The vision statement, and indeed the process by which the entire plan is being built, is predicated upon a recognition that growth can and does cause consequences and that counties must recognize, account for and prepare for those consequences. To argue and do less is to reveal oneself as incapable of rising to the great challenge of our time, or to suggest that solutions which haven't worked in the past are still appropriate for the future

The second problem is to establish a mechanism to guide the county population growth to be no more than the maximum population as determined by the vision statement standard.

I believe that there needs to be a public/private partnership in order to achieve on the ground the vision that informs our dreams, hopes and plans for this beautiful county. I believe that there can be developed a set of incentives, both positive and negative, which will protect the value, in dollars, of currently undeveloped land without permitting the development rights which exist for that land to be translated into population.

The obvious way to achieve this, in principle, is to arrange for the retirement, purchase or acquisition (by a non-developing entity, such as San Juan County or San Juan Preservation Trust) of existing or potential development rights.

The purpose of this discussion is not to review all the possible incentives or disincentives available, but to structure a plan for the orderly development of the county consistent with the retirement of the development rights “debt”, so that we simultaneously achieve development and achievement of the vision—we create a win win situation for county property holders and county residents.

The development rights “debt” is the excess of development rights over the maximum development rights needed to achieve the buildout population. The size of this “debt” is determined by the degree to which the county commissioners will (or will not) re-examine and modify their position not to make any changes in the existing density designation map for the county.

The fundamental plan is to require development rights to be retired coincident with the issuance of development permits (i.e., building permits) in the proportion that the development rights “debt” exceeds the desired (ie., “vision-approved”) development potential.

For example, consider the following hypothetical situation.

Suppose that Orcas Island has an existing population of 4000. Assume that this population consumes 2000 development rights (there are thus 2 persons per household) and further assume that the “size” of the development right (one household lives in an apartment, another lives on a piece with a density designation of R-20) is irrelevant. Let’s say for the purposes of simplicity of the math needed for this example

that the total development rights available are 10,000. That is, if all the currently platted lots and undeveloped property available to be subdivided were developed to the maximum extent permitted, there would be 10,000 (total) lots, of which we are currently consuming only 2000. The ratio of the current consumption of development rights to the total available is 1 to 5, so we can quickly determine that at buildout, we would have 5 times the current population, or 20,000 people. (This can also be simply calculated as 10,000 development rights times 2 persons per household, resulting in the same 20,000 people).

Now, suppose the citizens of Orcas concluded that to have a total population more than double the current population would be to create a quality of life inconsistent with the vision statement. They wish to establish a plan whereby the population can still grow to be twice as high as the current population (surely some will grumble that this is way too high) yet no higher. Examining the buildout development rights table, they determine that to have another 4000 people (to achieve a doubling of the population) they will need to consume another 2000 development rights. That would mean that, at buildout, 4000 development rights would be

consumed and 6000 would have had to have been retired. The ratio of development rights that are needed for development (2000 more) to development rights needed to be retired (6000) is 1 to 3. Simply put, for every development right which is to be translated into an actual development, three need to be retired. When the vision-statement 'buildout' population is reached, there will be no more development rights available to be consumed or retired. The county will be at its maximum population.

This notion, that development rights are a commodity which can be sold, purchased, relinquished, or donated, leads directly into the notion of the development of a market for such rights. Such a market will immediately arise when the county requires that no new building permit be issued without the applicant's demonstration of the purchase, acquisition or acceptance of three development rights. In order to receive a building permit, those rights must be relinquished to the county or to an approved non-profit non-development entity like the San Juan Preservation Trust. Once retired, the rights can no longer be made available to anyone for development in the county.

This scheme might broadly handle the issue of resolving the “debt” of development rights “given” to the population in the 1979 comp plan. Note that there is no “taking” proposed here. To the extent that all the property rights “given” in ‘79 are honored (and not rescinded by the commissioners in a possible downzone action), there will be that many more rights required to be obtained by any applicant prior to the issuance of a building permit.

There are some observations regarding this plan that should be made. First, it achieves the vision. Second, it achieves the vision in a manner that leaves no economic crash at the end; that is, it achieves the vision gradually. There is time for adjustment. Third, it does not involve a ‘taking’. No one’s rights are denied. They are either purchased or donated (and then retired). Having a development right does not mean an owner has an inalienable right to develop something. It only means he or she possesses something which has an economic value that cannot be “taken” by a government without “just compensation”. People who have development rights will be compensated, tho not necessarily, and not probably, by the government.

While this concept might in principle be used to walk us toward buildout in some rational and appropriate means, we have not as yet addressed the second major issue implicit in the vision statement. The first major issue is “quantity”, i.e., the total quantity of people in the county that would be consistent with our vision. The second major issue is that of “quality”, which could be roughly translated as “diversity”. We want, we desire, we appreciate, we celebrate a diverse population here. We are concerned about gentrification as land prices escalate. Should the above plan be implemented, land prices will continue to rise—short of recommending the county as a national toxic waste dump, there is virtually nothing we can do to stop the rise in land prices. Arguing that nothing should be done regarding the vision statement because a population growth policy will result in rising land prices is irrelevant and moot—land prices will continue to rise and, more importantly, the existing plan already has a growth limitation policy in it. We know we won’t be any bigger than the ‘79 buildout level—the only difference is that it will take longer and the place will be unrecognizable (most would say trashed.)

The challenge, then, is in structuring the incentives and disincentives to favor low and moderate income families to the extent appropriate to achieve diversity. One big direction to point toward is in housing incentives. Perhaps anyone who wanted to build low income housing for himself or as a developer for others would not need to obtain three development rights in order to obtain a permit—maybe only one, or maybe none, depending on the location and income level. Maybe the county could accept donated development rights from individuals who wish to relinquish development rights, get a tax break, and simultaneously designate the relinquished development rights to be allocated toward anyone applying for low or moderate income housing. Individuals who own development rights but have not exercised them might be approached to donate or sell such rights at a lower than market cost for worthy projects. Perhaps the county would waive or modify the requirement for so many development rights to be retired coincident with a building permit for economic development projects that would provide long term (moderate income) employment outside either the construction or tourist industries. Maybe a developer who was exercising a right to develop a piece of

property for speculation would be offered an incentive to donate some of the land to a non-profit housing entity (like OPAL) in exchange for requiring less development rights to be retired up front (ie, the developer might be offered an extended period in which to obtain development rights rather than requiring them to be retired prior to the issuance of a building permit).

There are surely a host of incentive and disincentive plans that can be crafted and experimented with, to achieve both the population and diversity goals of the vision statement, in an atmosphere of good will and mutual recognition of the consequences of failure to honor ourselves and our children. I believe that the process of acknowledging the importance of the vision statement in real population terms and constructing a plan which incorporates a consciously-chosen population ceiling in a real, serious, and immediately-implementable mechanism is essential to honor the trust and expectations that citizens of San Juan County have put in their leaders to guide the county toward its future.

Joe Symons

Chair, District 2 (Orcas, Waldron)

Comprehensive Plan Citizen Advisory Committee

March 1995

Yearning Desire

If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

My dictionary defines “longing” as “a yearning desire”. I speculate that the majority of residents, landowners and visitors experience, if not express, a longing that San Juan County remain pretty much as it is, with untrammelled roads, parks, public spaces, rural vistas: fill in your own words here. The visitors would not come here if their image of the experience they wish to have was not steeped in the tea of rural, quaint, beautiful, slow, timeless, where nature is the dominant feature. If they were looking for an urban experience (plays, movies, bars, nightclubs) they would not be coming here; if they were looking for a shopping experience (malls, box stores), they would not be coming here.

Virtually all of the property owners and residents who are here were, at one time, visitors. There are almost no “natives”, by which I mean those who were born here, or more probably, those whose grandparents were born here, establishing a more or less consistent heritage of identification with the place. San Juan County is, then, inhabited by longers, those whose hearts were captured by an essence and who heeded the call. They walked their heart’s talk. They bought property here and/or moved here to create and celebrate their deep harmony with landscapes, water, air, wildlife, unconsciously expressing a longing for smallness, for integration with, rather than separation from, their biological and ancient cultural impulses: to be a part of a living, unfolding cycle of life, a cycle that has, until recently, been repeated for millennia in every culture in every part of the globe.

Not that long ago, a mere nanosecond in Nature’s reckoning of time, there was no imagination, much less realization, that one species could own, and thus exclusively control, a fundamental element of the commons: land. It may be that the only commons no one has figured out how to privatize is air,

tho a case could be made that access to clean fresh unpolluted air has indeed been privatized. Battles exist today, and have for at least a century, over ownership of water. Indigenous Americans, or indeed indigenous cultures all over the planet, simply don't conceive of the possibility of owning land, water, air and the almost infinite number of species that are contained within this roughly 5 mile thick layer of life on the top of the earth, analogous to the skin of an apple.

The san juan archipelago was inhabited for hundreds of generations of humans who never imagined (and consequently never took any actions) that they could own the water, the fish, the land, the trees, the soil, the birds. For those hundreds of generations the look and feel of this group of islands essentially never changed. Proportionately, it was humans at <1%, Nature at >99%. The U.S. Census began counting people in the San Juans in 1870, and for 100 years the population of humans remained surprisingly consistent, never exceeding (for the entire county) 4000.

Then, almost like an infestation of locusts, beginning in 1970, the population of humans in the county began to swell, and for the next 40 years the county earned several reputations, one being the fastest growing county in the state of Washington. Another was the distinction of having the [greatest gap between the haves and the have-nots](#) of any county in the country.

The locust infestation—and lest the reader want to point a finger, I'll state right here that I was and am one of them, tho, surely like those reading this, never imagined myself one—was one of longing, the origin of which is love. The longing for peace, scale, beauty, connection with one's deepest roots, here on a chunk of land. Not just any land, but an island which has literal as well as symbolic and mythological boundaries. We locusts wanted closure. We wanted to be limited. We wanted not exclusivity and elitism, but the natural equivalent of a bounded community dominated not by us (if you wanted that, you would have gone to L.A.) but dominated by every species but us.

In the context of a failed mythology, which led inexorably to a failed political system, which then led to a failed politics,

leading to a failed regulatory process (we all want to have our cake and eat it too, and when that isn't functional we realize with distress that we have to impose limits on ourselves (Exhibit A here might be the Stop Sign) and few like to do that, so we do it anyway and resent it and call that collective restriction a "regulation"), leading to a failed economic system which has led to what is now brought into consciousness (all the previous elements cited here being largely unconscious or unexplored) as a failed market system. Environmental damage, such as Anthropogenic Climate Disruption, has been called the biggest market failure ever.

How'd that happen? Simple: if one's entire concept of place is framed by an economic system of expenses and income, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that you'll appear to be better off if you can decrease expenses and increase income. If you can dump something you don't want somewhere without paying for the dumping fee, you'll lower your expenses. A three year old can tell you that. The "environmental" battles of the last 50 or so years have circled largely around the addition, or not, of dumping fees, whether whatever it was that was being dumped was in the water, ground, or air. In, as it were, that apple skin. Since the skin is

only so thick, and it is shared by everyone, the more that is dumped there (the commons), the less healthy the skin, and if the skin goes toast, so does everything in it.

Christopher Stone was a clerk for a supreme court justice in the 70's; he wrote a commentary entitled "[Should Trees Have Standing?](#)" Standing is a legal term for having a legitimate place at the table in any legal dispute. No standing, no right to sue. The [article\(*\)](#) is on line, so any one can grab it anytime. It's free. The basic question is whether, like a child, or a disabled adult, who needs a guardian, and has, through that guardian a legal right, say, not to be abused, a tree, who can't speak, like a person in a coma, should have a guardian and be able to be represented in court. Why would a tree want that? Well, if the person who imagines he or she owns the land on which the tree is living wants to cut down that tree, the tree might reasonably object. "I was here first, long before your grandparents were born. What right do you have to take my life?"

I'm not arguing that no tree should ever be cut. I'm sitting in a house pressure soaked in dead trees: furniture, floor, walls, roof, cabinets and heated by firewood. I am blessed beyond

description that I have a house and that I can be warm. I owe those trees more or less the equivalent of my life. I am raising the question as to what you, the reader, feel you might owe those trees, as you too live in a house built on the foundation of their death in service to you.

Where I'm going is obvious: the more people who live in a place, the more trees will die. Please don't dismiss me as a tree hugger. A tree, in this context, is a placeholder for lots of species and attitudes: a WalMart parking lot may be useful for one purpose, but to create it meant destroying not just trees, but all that nature would have had on that land: wildlife, water, fresh air, silence, mycellium, soil, bacteria, and millions of other elements, some material, some aesthetic, that we all appreciate. How do I know we appreciate those things? Because we have chosen to live here surrounded by them.

We also know we live on an island, which, metaphorically, is like a lifeboat. There is a point when the lifeboat will sink if we allow too many people on it. I have friends who point to islands around the world that have 10 to 100 to a thousand or more times more people on them than Orcas or Lopez or pick your favorite here. The question is: is that what we want?

You've all heard the phrase "business as usual". We go some direction, (people often use the term "forward" as if there were a common agreed upon direction and it was overall positive), and we like flecks of snow that are caught up in a rolling snowball, just go along, not realizing that the snowball we've attached ourselves to is part of an avalanche. One thing about avalanches that most people might agree on is: they do eventually stop. And when they do things are not pretty.

If we were a smart snowflake, unlike the bastardization of the term smart as in "smart phone", we might want to consider whether we wanted to join that rolling snowball, having raised our consciousness to the point that we could see where it was going to take us. Suppose we said, ya know, I don't think so. If only one snowflake said this, the snowball would roll over us anyway, as it does every day in this country dumping what we know are forms of truly self-destructive toxicities into every corner of the globe without the bother (and the thought) of paying a dumping fee. If we had to pay that fee, and if it were set right, we wouldn't be dumping anything. What we dump we call waste. This, like the presumption that we can actually own land, is a conceit. No other species on earth would understand the concept. Save for humans, there is literally no

waste anywhere on earth. Everything Mother Nature does is entirely recycled and reused, 24/7 for the last, say, billion years.

We do live, technically, in a democracy and thus that failed political system, corrupted by the have's for their benefit (trickle down economics, sadly, just doesn't work. If it did we wouldn't have the income inequality we have nor, much more to the point, would we have a failed market system), so if enough snowflakes decided that avalanches were actually not so smart, we could, as the drug marketing would remind us, just say no.

Where to begin? My mother used to say "charity begins at home". Right here in SJC we can say, to start, to our fellow snowflakes, or, if you prefer the lifeboat metaphor, current occupants of this limited boat, hey! what's the end game here? What do we want? Business as usual, in which the failed market system will guarantee that those values deep in our hearts that brought us here will slowly evaporate as the morning dew, since more and more snowflakes will business as usual themselves into an avalanche (already underway), or, maybe let's just stop for a second and do something actually

smart, like talk about it. Since my snowflake/locust moved to Orcas some 40 odd years ago, I've seen the population of the county quadruple. That's 4 times bigger. Has the island changed? What do you think? Has that change been for the better? Ooooweeee. That's a tough question. But here we are, 4 times and growing, trucking right along with business as usual. We should not wring our hands about the past, but awaken to our smarter wiser selves, and ask, ok, where are we going? Where do we want to go? Is there a max size to this lifeboat? Five hundred years ago, there were less people on Manhattan (an island) than there are on Orcas today. We could be another Hong Kong!

Is that cool? or does that make you vomit? I'll bet in your heart of hearts you did not come here for that vision, for yourself, or far more importantly, for future generations. You do care about the future, knowing full well that you don't own it and won't live long enough to see it.

What you've read, if you're still with me, is a prelude to a real, on the ground, actionable, meaningful and personal step you can take, now. Not in six months.

Now.

SJC is about to begin a required process for updating the Comprehensive Plan (CP). My guess is that most of you reading this don't know what this document is, or what it means, or have read it, or having read it, understood it, or having understood it, think it is just fine.

As a principle in the authoring of our current plan, and as one of a tiny handful of islanders that challenged the plan as in egregious violation of the Growth Management Act, and having won most of our challenges, I invite you to learn about this document and what it represents, for more than any other single document, this puppy will determine whether there's an avalanche (which, now, to me anyway) there is, whether there is business as usual (oh yeah) and whether the longing that brought you here and keeps you here will be polished or tarnished.

You can dip your toe into the SJC Comprehensive Plan waters at doebay.net/sunshine where you can dive as deep as you wish; there are links that will take you to levels of reality you probably didn't imagine could exist. Don't be intimidated. The tapestry here is rich with complexity. There is a lot of very real stuff under the hood. Ignorance in this case is not bliss.

After that, you can participate in the emerging process in two ways. First, sign up for official notices, which will get you emails about SJC comp plan hearings etc. at

<http://www.sanjuanco.com/list.aspx>

Second, turn off your electronic input devices, find a quiet corner where you can be uninterrupted, and actually write your own vision statement for your future, the future of subsequent generations, your sense of what is truly in the best interests of this precious limited archipelago, knowing about climate disruption and the huge population explosion underway now in western Washington, and share that vision with your family, friends and neighbors (there are many ways to do that: letters to the editors of the newspapers (addresses are in the resources section of doebay.net/appeal; FB; via the few environmental organizations here in the San Juans: Land Bank, Friends of the San Juans, San Juan Preservation Trust) or start a blog.

The most effective way to share that vision is to [send it to the current members of the SJC County Council](#), the 3 elected representatives who literally control the fate of the

Comprehensive Plan. You can do that easily at <http://doebay.net/cpupdate/sjccpemail.html>

For a head start, you can read the [Introduction to the CP](#) available at the SJC link above, where you can read the [Vision Statement](#) that was crafted and ratified by previous commissioners on page 2. That Vision Statement, and yours, must be translated into real numbers, real policies, real actions. Otherwise its window dressing, like Mom, Apple Pie and the Flag. It is talk. Only a translation will turn it into walk. Your walk.

We all need to know what is in your heart. You've got a flavor of mine. Don't let you own business as usual get in the way of your heart. Together we can stop the avalanche.

Joe Symons

Olga, WA

January 2017

(*) The article "Should Trees Have Standing" has been removed from the web. The book of the same title has been updated and is available at [Amazon](#) and other booksellers.

20th Day

I've been surprised at the number of people who have no immediate association with the phrase "the 29th Day". The 29th Day story refers to a pond that, on day one, has one lily pad. Every day the number of lily pads doubles. The pond will be completely covered in 30 days. The question is: how much of the pond will be covered on the 29th day? Take a second before you read the answer (2 sentences hence). You have all the information you need to answer this question easily. The answer: half the pond will be covered. If you didn't get that, take another second to get it before you read on.

The story illustrates the power of exponential growth, and is generally used in the context of unexpectedly fast changes in resource consumption, where what appears to be abundance ("look, the pond is only half full. We've got plenty of time.") is seriously misleading. Many people think that if the pond is only half full it must be day 15, not day 29.

Let's mess with the story's limited purpose (teaching about exponential growth). First, let's go past 30 days. What happens on day 31? Those lily pads don't just stop. They don't

talk to each other and say something like “Time for a break. We’ve been doubling every day for 30 days. Let’s take some time off (like *forever*) before we double again.” Those lily pads are hard-wired to double. Day 31 they double, or try to, and the pond has twice as many pads as there is room for each to have its own spot in the sun. It is a mess of undulating green. Day 32 they try to double again, but now there’s only a quarter of the space they need to thrive, so they don’t. They downgrade from thrive to exist and, if they could talk, they might say they’re unhappy, maybe even suffering. Other things living in the pond, never discussed in the original story, start suffering too. The fish can’t get to the bugs. The oxygen level in the water goes down because the lily pads degrade the air-water-oxygen exchange. The fish start dying. It won’t take long before the pond becomes a swamp. The whole system implodes and explodes. There is dieoff of almost everything, certainly the lily pads and the fish, and some long time later balance eventually returns.

It might return smarter. Those lily pads might start doubling again, but this time maybe they’ve got some wisdom code that senses how close their neighbors are, and if their neighbor pads are too close, they shut off the “let’s keep doubling”

gene. Maybe they go into some steady state. No new pads until old ones die. They don't let the pond get covered. Over millennia they've come to "learn" that everything works best if the pond is never more than $1/8$ covered.

However, it took millennia to figure that out and in the meantime there were a whole lot of experiments whose reports ended up in the crash and burn folder. Nope. That didn't work. Start over.

The pond never gets bigger. The pond doesn't change, so the lily pads have to change. It could be that the lily pads evolve to have little shovels on the edges of their pads, so as they get close to shore they start digging away at the edge to make the pond larger. They also might evolve to create biochemicals that induce rain, so the larger pond space maintains the same water height. Somewhere, though, they might run into rock, so those shovels would have to have little diamond edges to chip away at the rock. Somewhere in here you, dear reader, are going to abandon this fantasy. No matter how clever those lily pads get, they are not going to get past covering the earth, and long before they get that far something else might come along and decide that lily pads are perfect for breakfast.

That's why you almost never (or maybe actually never) see a pond covered with lily pads. It's been "worked out", and we don't have the videotape to show how smoothly that process went over the last, say, 100 million years.

It might not have been all that pretty.

Let's rewind the clock and take another shot at the possibility of a happier outcome. If the pond is covered on day 30, and half covered on day 29, what about day 28? $1/4$ covered. Day 27? $1/8$ covered. Day 26? $1/16$ covered. You don't have to go back very many days to notice that the pond appears to have almost no lily pads. On day 20, the pond is only about $1/1000$ covered. That's like no cover at all, and it took 20 days to get there.

Now instead of thinking that the lily pads represent a kind of unstoppable pestilence that will end on day 31 or 32 in a crash and burn apocalypse (a metaphor for those human lily pads that are spewing carbon dioxide into the atmospheric pond with abandon), let's get up to day 20 with a new idea. In this reframing of the story, suddenly, spontaneously, some human lily pads have figured out a way to talk to the birds, who have (yes) a bird's eye view of the pond, and learn that the pond is

getting covered at an exponential rate. Because of the bird's eye view, these pads are not merely looking at the few of their fellow lily pads already dotting the shore. They're running the numbers. They can see that it took 20 days to get to $1/1000$ of the pond covered but that it will only take 10 more days to cover the whole pond, and further they know that unless they can "talk" to those apparently-few lily pads who are happily and unconsciously doubling every day, the pond is going to get to swamp land fast.

Their conversation does not start out easily. On day 20 only one out of 1000 lily pads is willing to "see the future" and agree to stop doubling. On day 21 there are 2 out of 1000 lily pads willing to change their habits. On day 22 we're up to 4 out of a 1000. The pond keeps getting covered by the other 996 out of 1000 that haven't bought the story. We might have to get to day 27, when just over 10% of the lily pads have bought the story, to have enough mojo to convince, or coerce, the remaining 90% that hitting day 31 or 32 without changing is going to take the whole pond down. Of course, by day 27 the birds are chatting away like crazy because the pond is now really looking different. Some oxygen sensitive fish are floating belly up. Those lily pads that didn't care before are now

smelling rotting flesh and the water is murky. It may be time to listen up.

Rather than see the story as describing an inevitable disaster, the idea here is that the transformation to sustainability will appear to be infinitely small even by day 20. By day 27 about 10% will be on board and by day 30 the transformation will have taken place. Rather than see the lily pads as consuming the pond, the reframed story imagines the lily pads as expressions of environmental wisdom. The goal in this version is in fact to cover the pond with wisdom. The fully covered pond of wisdom means no lily pad takes more than it gives back, and further, that the lily pads have reached a sustainable relationship with all the other systems in the pond. They don't own the pond. They can't live without the pond, and because they are now wise, they know that.

If we translate this teaching story to reality in America today, a day in the life of the pond's transformation to wisdom might be 2 years of clock time. Taking that as a starting estimate, then if we are at "day 20" in 2013 where only one in 1000 Americans "buys" the sustainability story, then by 2015 we'd have two out of 1000 who walk the sustainability talk. By

2017 we're at 4 out of 1000 and it won't be until about 2027 will about 128 out of 1000 Americans be walking the talk. That's assuming that it takes 2 years to "double" the number of Americans who believe we can't just talk about energy but we have to do something serious (which means, actually, that they embrace and realize Zero Net Energy—you give back as much energy as you consume).

It also means that by 2027 just under 90% don't buy the story, so we are far from collectively wise.

What to do? If the story's trajectory has merit, then there are two tasks. One, shrink the doubling time from 2 years per "day" to 1.5 years or 1 year per "day". Two, increase the conversion rate from doubling every "day equivalent" to more than doubling. Maybe tripling.

How to do these tasks?

That's where each of us comes in.

First, each of us has to cross the line to wisdom, even and especially under the pressures of uncertainty, habit and convenience. This is not a job to be done by others. With that

attitude, it will always be someone else's job. One could look at this as sacrifice. One could also look at this as return to sanity. If your starting place is in excess (even though you don't call it that), it will look like sacrifice. If your starting place is "OMG I didn't realize what I was doing!" then it will look like return to sanity.

If you are a smoker, then quitting smoking might seem like a sacrifice OR it might seem like a return to health with the probability of avoiding suffering and premature death. How you look at it doesn't change the fact that you are transforming from one behavior to another, but how you look at it might make a difference in whether you actually walk your talk.

(In reality, each of us is a smoker. We're smoking carbon and producing carbon dioxide. We can't see it and it will take a long time to have its effects, so long, in fact, that those who will get an untreatable and preventable lung cancer are our children and grandchildren.)

Second, each of us has to nudge someone else. That's the "doubling" part. The nudge has two parts. That someone else

has to cross the line to wisdom (which means not just talk but walk) *and* find another someone to nudge.

Then, the next day, we both have to *do it again!* Passing the baton is not the right image. Weeding the garden might be a better image. It's not enough just because there are now 2 of you weeding. Tomorrow there will be more weeds. You'll need 4 of you, then 8, then 16, then...

Wisdom means you accept that. That's the only way the pond will get covered with wisdom. You are doubling, like before, but now you are doubling *the right stuff*.

There's momentum here. The more people in the parade, the more people want to join the parade. On day 20 it seems pretty lonely out there on the street all by yourself. By day 23 there's 8 of you. Not quite so bad. The task is to make it through the first few days; they are the hardest. Pretty soon the parade becomes a party and then wisdom has penetrated the code just like those first smarter lily pads that decided to stop before it was too late. One difference is that we don't have to go through a hundred million years of trial and error.

Do we?

Joe Symons

April 2013



Grampa

"Grampa, tell me about the word *growth*—our teacher told us that people used to believe in it, but I don't even know what it means."

Well, a long time ago, people used to think that "growth" was important. They didn't talk about what it meant, or whether it might mean different things to different people, or whether it might be good in some situations and not so good in others. For most people, growth was used to describe economic activity that would keep on expanding or growing, just like you kids. Right now, you're not as tall as you will be some day. You and I both imagine that you will "grow" to a certain size. Once you get to that size, you'll stop growing. If you didn't, you could become so big you couldn't find clothes that fit, or get through a door, or you'd need to eat and eat and eat all the time just to feed your ever-growing body. You'd feel uncomfortable, probably terrible, and eventually your body would give up and you would die, because it just wasn't designed to keep growing. Nothing but wisdom can continue growing and growing.

Now, people never thought about growth slowing or stopping. Their focus was on making money. They thought that their most important task was to keep making more money each year, so their pile of money would grow and grow. It didn't matter to them how they were making money, or where they were making money, only that the amount of money would grow. The only way they could imagine making more money was to make more things to sell. This meant they needed more and more materials in order to make more and more things. They also needed to get a lot of people to buy those things. This meant they had to find ways to make those people buy all those things they made.

To get more and more people to buy the things, they had to make up stories about how the new things they made were really useful, or helpful, or attractive, or essential. Back then, people came to believe that *things* made life better and so people came to believe that the more things they had, the better life was.

Back then, there were lots of people on Earth. Most of the people did not have a lot of things. They did not have much food, they did not have cars, or good shelter, or education. It



seemed that there were so many people who could benefit from having more things.

The people who made the things generally didn't care about what it was that they made, only that they could sell them and make money. They thought that if they had more money, they could buy things

with that money and the things they bought would make them happy. They thought things would make them happy because that was the story they heard over and over, just like the stories you like to have me tell you over and over. The sad thing is, this story about things just isn't true. That story was made up so they could sell more things. The people who heard the story over and over thought it was true. They would buy things, and for a short while they thought their life was happier. But it wasn't long before the things they bought seemed old, or not as useful, or broke, or there was a better thing that they had to get.

Remember when you were little, when you ate too much candy when Mommy was out working in the garden? At first it seemed like such a wonderful thing, discovering where Mommy had hidden the candy. There was so much of it! And she was outside! So you ate more and more, and for a while it seemed so much fun! Then after a while you didn't feel so well, and after a little more time you started to feel sick. Then you were really sick.

Most people are a lot like that. They think things will make them happy, then when they get more and more of them, they feel less and less happy. The problem is that something new comes along and they think, well, **This Time** when I get this **New Thing** I'll be happy again. And, for a short time, they feel a bit happier. After a while, they discover that they have so many things piled up and they really didn't have the money for them. Because of the Growth Story, they continue to try and grow happiness by getting more and more things. But happiness doesn't grow through things.

A long *long* time ago, there were not many people on Earth. The people who lived way back then led a very simple life.

Things that were made were really practical. For a long time, the number of people did not increase, or grow, much at all. Then, a few centuries ago, they discovered why most people didn't live very long. A fix occurred and the number of people began to increase. About the same time, other people discovered how to make fire much more useful. Soon there were both more and more people and more and more things for those people along with more stories about how those things made people happy.

You're old enough now to know the truth about Santa Claus. But a few years ago, you believed everything your parents and teachers told you about him. About how he knows who is naughty and who is nice. About how at midnight on Christmas Eve he visits every child in the world and brings them presents (which are, of course, things). About his sleigh and reindeer and the elves at the North Pole. When you were little, you loved that story, and you were sad when you discovered the story isn't true. But look at you! All grown up! You're smarter now. The story might have been fun and useful for you, then, but now you don't need it.

It's the same with the story of things. It may have been a useful story for a certain period when the idea of growth seemed to make some sense. Really, back then, it was mostly harmless. Well, actually, many people died and some very bad things were done, all in the name of growth. But people were like kids back then, really like young kids. So, for a long time, just like you when you believed in Santa Claus, the people continued to believe in growth so they could make more money. In general, to them, growth was good. Cities would grow. Businesses would grow. The number of things people did every day would grow. People not only wanted more things, but they wanted to do more things every day. They thought that the more they did every day, the happier they would feel and the more they would get done. Getting things done was very important; the more you could get done, the better you believed you were. What happened then was that people got lost. They were doing so many activities, trying to earn more money, so they could buy more things, that they were too busy to notice that they weren't really that happy.

Of course, there were certain kinds of growth that no one wanted. Back then, there was a kind of growth called cancer that would grow in people's bodies. No one wanted that kind

of growth, because the cancer would just keep growing and eventually it would kill the person it was in.

No one wanted to die, so some people spent a lot of time trying to find a way to stop the cancer from growing. That cost a lot of money, so the people with cancer, or their friends or family, would have to work harder to earn the money to stop the cancer. Someone noticed that there was more and more cancer, and they wondered if all those things, and all those activities, and all that growth might be causing cancer.

People did many things then that they don't do now, because they believed the stories. Unlike you, who grew up and learned that Santa Claus wasn't really real, they didn't learn that the stories about things and activities and growth were really like Santa Claus.

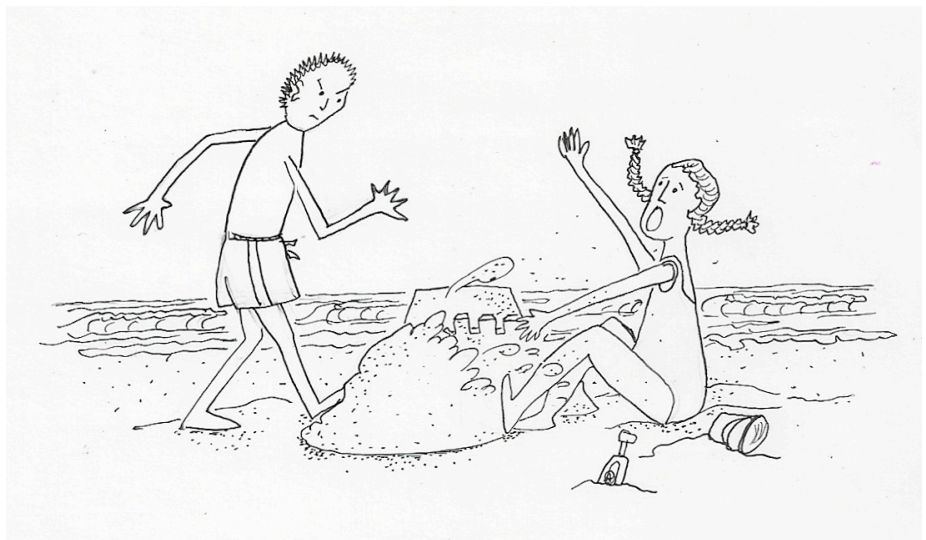
You live in a world where people know what really makes them happy. They know that what really makes being alive wonderful is feeling a part of something big and beautiful and working in harmony. You live in a world where people realize that another story told back then—"The best things in life are free"—is really the right story. For a long time, this story was part of a song. People liked the song, but didn't believe it was

the right story for them. They would have called it a fairy tale, or a fantasy, or idealistic, or a dream—they would have said that it was unrealistic, impossible, or even wrong.

"But Grampa, how did the growth story end? How come we don't know about it now?"

First, you have to know how the growth story began. I told you that a long time ago there were not very many people on Earth. Back then,

a group of people wrote a popular book—the book said: "Multiply and subdue the earth." The word *multiply* meant for



the people to have

more children, because there weren't very many people on the earth, and the story tellers felt that more people would be a good thing. *Subdue the earth* meant take whatever you need from the Earth. If the Earth didn't easily give you what you wanted, then you would use whatever force you needed to

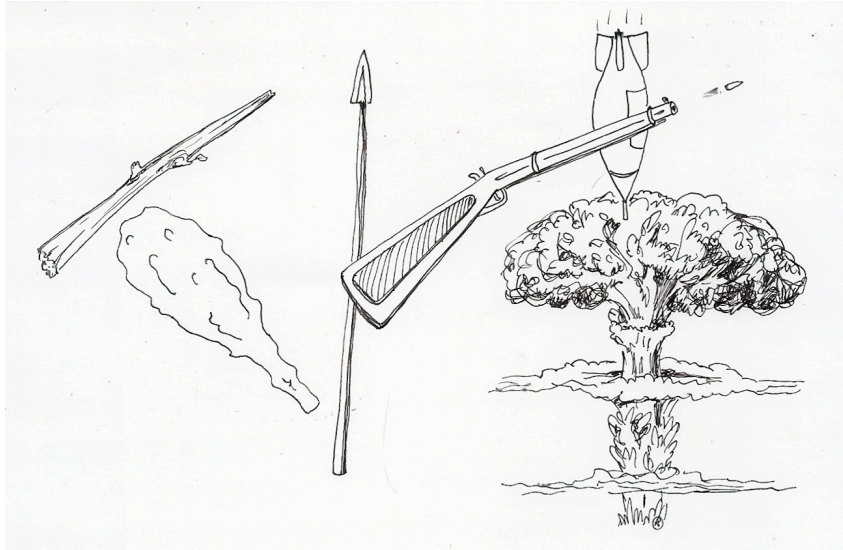
make the Earth obey. The story tellers felt that people were more important than the Earth, rather than, as you now know, that people are part of the Earth, not more important.

Remember, it was a long long time ago and most people did not question stories then. They simply listened. Every now and then a few people questioned the story but the story tellers did not like that so they killed the questioners. They did it in public, to make sure that any other questioners would know that if they asked questions, they would be killed as well.

We believe that it is fine for any story teller to think his or her story is the only true story. But we don't believe that the story teller has the right to impose his or her story on everyone.

Remember the story where Billy wanted everyone to build a sand castle at the beach just the way he thought it had to be done? When Linda didn't want to build her castle Billy's way, Billy smashed her castle. Everyone got in a fight and no one was happy. That was when Billy and Linda were 4 years old. Now they are both 85. Do you think Billy would want everyone to build a sand castle only his way now? What happened? Billy grew up.

So, what ended the growth story? After a long long time when a lot of people were very unhappy, they slowly began to grow up. You might think I am being silly, saying that the growth



story ended when the people grew up.

What I mean is that, now, when most people get older, they get wiser. Back then, when most people got older, they didn't get wiser, because

they still believed the old growth story, which is not a wise story at all. It was story written a long long time ago when no one thought they needed to grow up, and there was no one to make them grow up. Mostly, it didn't matter if they didn't grow up, even if they were often unhappy, because the Earth was too big to care about their squabbles. Eventually, more or less all of a sudden, the number of people who wanted things and the number of things they wanted became really really large. So large that the Earth couldn't give everyone what they wanted. There either had to be less people wanting a lot of

things, or a lot of people wanting fewer things. No one wanted to die, and no one wanted to give up what they had.

To answer your question, the reason you don't know about the growth story now is that it is no longer worth telling. I don't know if you know that a long time ago, people used to kill each other. A really long time ago, they used to beat each other with sticks which they called clubs. Then they used spears, which were long sticks with a sharp end. Then they figured out more and more horrible ways to kill. They used to have something called a gun, which would emit a small hard pebble that would smash through your skin and tear your insides out. They used to have something called a bomb, and at one point they made a really big bomb called a nuclear bomb. A bomb is a small box that explodes, and when it does it wrecks everything nearby—people, trees, animals, buildings, ideas. All these killing things were called "weapons". You can learn about weapons if you want, but we no longer teach you about them because they are ancient. There was a time when people used to wear animal skins for clothing. We don't teach you about that because no one does it now. The same is true about the growth story. It is something people did a long time

ago, when they weren't wise, when they believed that they were better than the Earth.

The growth story was about having more and more physical things. So many things were wanted by so many people that the Earth could not provide it. Growing up meant giving up the growth story and creating a new story, a story about happiness through feelings such as love, harmony, kindness, sharing, compassion, forgiveness, humility, freedom. These words describe intentions and motivations. They have no limitations. You can never have too much of any of them. The more of them you have, the better the Earth. They don't weigh anything, they don't take any effort or energy or parts of the Earth to make, they don't harm anything. If one person has more of them another person doesn't have less.

All the living energies on Earth, besides people, had long long ago come into a slow rhythmic dance with each other. Sometimes there would be more of one living energy, but as it took up more and more space on Earth, other living energies would resist.

No one energy could become the only living energy on Earth. There was movement up and down, back and forth, as tiny

parts of the Universe would reassemble themselves into different forms of living energies. Some of these creations would emerge, almost like seeds popping up from the earth. Others would recede back into the earth. These living energies were called species. People learned that, as time went by, some species were more flexible in their ability to stay in harmony or balance with the other species than others. The ones that were flexible lasted longest.

During the growth story, people had great difficulty learning to stay in balance. Species began to recede quickly—they were not able to retain their flexibility because people were not living in harmony with the Earth. The balance of living things, the slow rhythmic dance, was lost. People, because they were able to subdue the Earth far better than other living energies, and because they believed in the growth story, and because they had never learned to dance harmoniously with Earth, became not just a bully, like Billy was at the beach, but dangerous to the other living energies. They had to learn that they needed those other species, and that if they destroyed them, they would destroy themselves.

It was not an easy lesson to learn. Even though many people had heard of wisdom, compassion, generosity, love, kindness, and other ways of being in harmony, and even though many people could, from time to time, offer those harmonious ways to themselves and other species, the challenge of changing the growth story to the balance story felt like as if they were being forced to give up the things that made them happy. When Billy smashed Linda's castle and everyone got in a fight, the fight ended because Billy's parents, who were much bigger than Billy, picked him up and gave him a big time out. The growth story began to end when the Earth, which some people used to call "Mother Earth", began to change. All the basic life-giving aspects of the Earth began to change. Some places that were cold became hot. Some places that were hot and rainy became hot and dry. A lot of fresh water became salt water which no one could drink. Food wouldn't grow the way people had come to expect. Many changes started happening quickly. Most of the changes caused people to have less food, less water, less of what had seemed to be an endless bounty from the Earth. The subdue-the-earth story didn't seem to be working. No longer was it easy to subdue the Earth.

As the old story seemed less and less helpful, some people started to create the Balance Story. A word they used back at the beginning of this process was ‘sustainable’. They could see that the Subdue Story was causing more and more distress. They could not see how the story could be changed to keep growth going without causing more harm. They began to see how growth led to harm not only to other living energies, but to themselves. The Subdue Story created a separation between all other energies and people—the idea of the story is that people owned everything about the Earth. When you own something you feel like you can do whatever you want with it, including treating it with disrespect. Do you remember what you used to do with some of your toys? When you were angry, you would throw your teddy bear across the room. You didn’t think the bear had feelings, and even if you thought it did, you were bigger and it was your bear—you owned the bear. When you threw it hard against the wall, it didn’t yell at you or leave. If it got torn, you would ask your parent to fix it or get you another one. People had been treating the Earth like that. For a long time, the Earth didn’t yell or throw something back at you. Then the Earth started to change. The Earth is way bigger than people. It started to enforce some fairness rules. It

was as if your teddy bear suddenly walked over to your favorite shirt and tore it to shreds in front of you and said that throwing it wasn't fair or respectful. If you got mad at the teddy bear again, imagine that all of a sudden it would get as large as a real bear, and have real claws! Suddenly you wouldn't feel free to throw it across the room. For a long time it had been tolerant, but now it was insisting on Respect and Fair Play. The Earth was like that.

For humans, changing stories is often hard, but it can be done. People learn to accept the new story and move on, just like you did when you learned that the details about Santa Claus were not true. The old kind of growth, which was the growth of things and caused harm to the Earth, faded off, and it was replaced by a new kind of growth—the growth of respect, tolerance, kindness, compassion and all the other ways of being which bring joy, creativity, inspiration, and cooperation. This is growth of the spirit. It is precious, and it is free! It is abundant! There can never be enough! It can start anywhere from the smallest gesture. You can give it away and never lose it! It's like everyone becoming Santa Claus every day! People learned to replace their want for things with the fun of

bringing happiness, comfort, joy to others and to all the living species on the planet!

Now it's time for you to create a story, in pictures or words or music or however you feel most playful and expressive, of how to bring joy to yourselves and something else today.



For money you can have everything it is said. No, that is not true. You can buy food, but not appetite; medicine, but not health; soft beds, but not sleep; knowledge but not intelligence; glitter, but not comfort; fun, but not pleasure; acquaintances, but not friendship; servants, but not faithfulness; grey hair, but not honor; quiet days, but not peace. The shell of all things you can get for money. But not the kernel. That cannot be had for money.

-Arne Garborg, writer (1851-1924) from: A Word A Day,
2/24/2010

Grampa was written by Joe Symons and illustrated by Anita Orne.

About the Author

Armed with a secondary school education from Phillips Exeter, a B.A. cum laude from Amherst College, a MS and a Phd from the University of Washington, Joe has served as a software engineer for various startups, a professor of Urban and Regional Studies, a 20 year volunteer firefighter, a tenacious advocate for sustainable long term land use planning, an author of a book about Orcas ([Potholes in Paradise](#)), a crystal-glaze ceramic pioneer, a designer and contractor. He has served on the boards of several Orcas Island non-profits and provides incubation, financial and infrastructure support for several island organic farms. He is currently president of the board of [Island Stewards](#). More information is available at [doebay.net](#)