

From the age of plenty to the age of austerity without returning to caves

“The joyride is over. What remains is the question of how we can make a transition to a saner way of living.”

James Howard Kunstler, *Geography of Nowhere* (1993)

Of course only a small minority of the world's people have enjoyed the age of plenty. But what's this new 'age of austerity' people keep talking about and what does it mean for us? Are we all going to be living in a cave with the TV switched off?

Or are there opportunities for achieving real quality of life in very low-to-no-carbon economies and societies?

This has been a sobering year. One in which we've suddenly had to grow up (or at least contemplate sober adulthood). After decades of partying like there's no tomorrow, financial meltdown has exposed how far we've been living beyond our means and a barrage of environmental evidence shows how far we've eaten into the planet's ecological capital.

Austerity has suddenly become a buzzword everywhere from political speeches to fashion magazines. But not much is changing yet. Rather than being the first person to turn down the music and start clearing up, there's lots of arguing about whose turn it is, who spilt what and who's going to pay for the damage.

Little attention is being focused on what happens after we've finished indulging in our last big blowout. We're waiting for technological solutions to save the day, but there's a growing realisation that whilst clever engineering may help smooth some rough edges, the trajectory we're on is so wrong that nothing less fundamental than a profound shift in the way we live is going to cut it.

Climate models suggest the carbon cycle could be brought back into balance (and runaway global warming avoided) if we each had a carbon footprint of around 1.5 tonnes per year – a global 'fair share'. For us Brits with an average footprint of c.10 tonnes this means substantial cuts (now enshrined in national law).

So what does this mean? Will a 'sustainable lifestyle' require us to live in a cave with the TV switched off? If so, it's human nature to turn the music up and keep dancing.

Should we be holding on so tightly to what we know?

Years of technological advances have given us comfort beyond our ancestors' wildest dreams. But we've long since passed the point where better material circumstances improve our wellbeing and happiness. Frankly, for all its pizzazz the way we organize our lives right now doesn't seem to be doing us much good: as a nation we're getting fatter and less healthy; we're increasingly alienated and yearn for a sense of belonging. We're concerned about our impact on the planet and fearful of the legacy we're bequeathing our children.

As Wendell Berry says, "The idea that freedom and pleasure can last long in a diseased world is preposterous".

At Beyond Green we're regularly asked "what can I do to save the planet?" - hence the (ironic) title of this series - and the brutal answer is the planet itself will probably ultimately be fine whatever we do. The real challenge is to minimise the havoc we're wreaking so the planet survives in a form that's comfortable – even endurable – for the human species, to allow the complex web of life to recover its equilibrium, and to develop a way of living that's in balance rather than at battle with the natural systems we depend upon.

Designing our places, communities and way of life with the planet in mind is a new way of thinking and will require some ingenuity and application, but it's not rocket science. And it's not all about privation and hardship. Whilst major and urgent change is needed, the new way of living could actually be rather wonderful.

Our homes and other buildings will be a bit different, but not space-age; natural lighting and decent insulation will make them comfortable and cheap to run. They'll be powered by energy produced locally with minimal emissions or loss in transit, providing us with an income when we use it sparingly and the excess is sold on. Roofs will become prime real estate, hosting a beautiful productive mix of energy generation, food production and habitat areas.

Our kitchens will be stocked with food grown more locally and eaten in season, so it's fresh, tasty, economical, nutritious and minimally packaged. Rising fuel and food prices won't seem so alarming when we're growing more ourselves - in gardens, allotments, community farms or window boxes. Our lives will be less cluttered – we'll seek out things we love and make them last, rather than housing an endless stream of stuff.

We'll spend more time closer to home, in neighbourhoods containing the shops, facilities and services we need day to day, or served by decent home deliveries. At work (perhaps downstairs or around the corner) we'll reap the full benefits of technology to connect, transact and exchange to the full in the 'glocal' economy.

Daily walking and cycling, more time with our families and in a real community and less time stuck in traffic should leave us fitter and happier and make our streets places to play, thrive and dwell rather than carnageddon hell. When we need to go further we'll enjoy public transport that's inviting not insulting, and well organized electric car clubs will seamlessly fill the gaps when private wheels are really needed.

Sure we'll no longer be able to roam distant parts so often or so fast – stag weekends in Iceland and New York shopping trips will become tomorrow's historical quirks, but maybe we'll realise weddings are romantic closer to home and clothes attractive in our own high-streets. We'll need to rediscover the art of slow travel and make time for big once or twice in a lifetime journeys, and meanwhile seek luscious leisure closer to home so we no longer hanker for cheap airborne thrills. Relaxing with a book on a proper 21st century rail network we may well wonder how Easyjet and baggage carousels kept us bewitched for so long.

Above all, perhaps our values will change. Maybe we'll get prestige and fulfillment from winning arguments in the pub, flying a kite elegantly or cooking the most generous dinner rather than blowing the most cash on the most stuff. Living more of our lives in the public realm (literally and figuratively) maybe we'll reap the benefits of reducing the space for private difference to breed one-upmanship and mistrust and making room for social complexity and difference. Who knows – perhaps we'll rediscover the value of beauty, delight, vivacity and quiet contemplation.

Sound utopian? This stuff's already happening. Communities around the world are adapting to 21st century realities – from Copenhagen bike culture to Tokyo roof gardens. Nowhere's yet brought it together in one joyful blend yet, and now's the time to start. Let's get it together – let's plan a really enduring way of life.