

# Building a New Way: DIY

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The last six months have changed everything, haven't they? They've made it undeniably clear that the way we have been living with each other and the earth is not just unsustainable, but horribly, traumatically broken. So clear that building a *new* way is now urgent.

As unsettled as things are, I don't know how *Building a New Way* is going to play out in the wider world, especially in the next week or two, but I do know something about building in general, thanks to my father and grandfathers.

My mother's father was a self-trained engineer, and served as chief engineer on the dredge that built Tangier Island in the Chesapeake Bay. He also built industrial power systems all over the NE. One time he asked me if I knew how a rotary-dial telephone works, and when I said "not really" he said...sleep at night. From him I learned that every system can be understood, with curiosity and persistence.

He and grandma raised their two daughters in an abandoned cider mill and restaurant, which they slowly converted to a comfortable home. They were do-it-yourselfers before the term existed. He also taught me all the awful epithets for various races and ethnicities, not because he thought I should know them, but because that was just the language he used all the time. I share this about him to remind myself that no one is purely saintly or sinful; our forebears are human, including mine.

My father's father was an electrical engineer for the NY Bell Telephone Company where he worked his entire career. He supervised the first installation of telephone trunklines in New York City. During the great depression, he supervised pulling them all out again for scrap copper. Afterward, he put them back in again. He was drafted during World War II, but didn't go because the company threatened the draft board that if their last engineer went off to war they'd have to shut down all phone service in NYC. From him I learned the value of consistent methodical effort. He also valued tradition for tradition's sake, and opposed me changing my name when Ann and I married. I changed it anyway. He unintentionally taught me that some traditions aren't worth keeping.

My father is an inter-disciplinary engineer. He was the project manager for the blood-chemistry analyzer in the ISS and he designed high-speed photo printing machines for Kodak. He is also an avid DIYer. My dad built a two-story solar heat collector on the south side of our old farmhouse. He and my mom had completely stripped and remodeled the house, starting when I was about ten. None of that work

was hired—we all pitched in. My parents back then were inspired by the Whole Earth Catalog; they bought wheat in 100-lb sacks, ground their own flour and peanut butter, made bread and yogurt, chopped firewood, raised chickens, and on and on. • I was the only kid in the cafeteria with homemade brown bread, and I was so jealous of my friends' soft, socially-acceptable white bread.

My dad did all the repairs on our cars and appliances. *This summer*, at 83 years old, he personally laid 250 paving stones, sixty-pounds each, on the new patio he built for himself. My dad taught me that anyone can build or fix anything once they understand the principles involved. He has also spent much of his adult life predicting and preparing for global disruptions, an obsession that has made me kind of impatient with him, until this year.

So when I was a young father, and Ann and I realized living in our hippie bus wasn't going to work for our growing family, we bought an old barn in rural Ohio, and spent the next 13 years slowly converting it to a comfortable home. The best part is that our kids can say "Why yes, I *was* raised in a barn!" (That little kid, by the way, is now a UU minister, preaching for York PA right now, from Chicago!). When we started, it still had manure in it. We did almost all the work ourselves, from heavy lifting to painting, and we literally cooked on a camp stove and slept on the floor for years on end. That building still has no shower, and a cattle-trough is the bathtub. We were about half done when we moved to Harrisburg, and the half that we finished is truly beautiful. Now our son has taken it on, and of course it will be different from what we envisioned.

The thing about a barn conversion is that your vision for it is limited by what's already there, and what's already there is never ideal. Barns and old houses are rarely square or plumb; One time I had to cut three sides off a piece of drywall because all four corners were different angles. But the advantage of a conversion is you can live in it while you build. Building on bare ground is easier, but you can't live in it while you work on it.

I think building a new way for our society and our planet is now urgent. I see three choices:

We can convert this manure-stained barn of a society into a welcoming inclusive sustainable home.

We can burn it down & start over with bare ground.

We can do nothing and watch it collapse on its own rotten foundations.

Take the pandemic as an example. It's not a random outlier. The incidence of new infectious diseases has steadily grown as our supply chains have gone global, since around 1950. Why? Well I'm gonna read from the transcript of a New York Times documentary. It's some dialogue between author David Quammen, who researches

and writes about pandemics, and journalist Jonah M Kessel.

Do you own a cellphone?

“Owning a cellphone makes you a customer for a mineral called coltan,”  
When coltan is refined it makes tantalum. And there’s a trace amount of it  
inside that phone or computer you are using. Problem is, it’s only found in a  
few remote places.

“One of which is a highly diverse forest area in the eastern Democratic  
Republic of The Congo.

“So when I buy a cellphone, I’m a customer for tantalum and I’m sending a  
miner into a forest area in eastern Congo. And that miner is probably going to  
eat bushmeat. So I own a little of the responsibility for the jeopardy that that  
miner may come in contact with a new virus and spread it to others.”

“What we eat, what we wear, all the other kinds of things that we buy,  
whether we have a cellphone or not, how many children we have (if we have  
children), how much we travel — all of those choices put varying degrees of  
pressure on the rest of the natural world.

It’s that simple. We’ve created a world where it’s impossible to make choices  
that don’t impact the natural world.

“The more we disrupt wild, diverse ecosystems, the greater jeopardy we have  
of contacting all of the very diverse viruses that wild animals carry.”

The documentary gives other examples: the palm oil in your peanut butter, your  
toothpaste, and shampoo, which got there by clear-cutting rainforests in India and  
Indonesia, which meant millions of bats had to relocate to areas where fruit trees  
are near massive pig-raising facilities, so that bat feces fall onto the pigs, carrying  
wild bat viruses straight to human workers who butcher the pigs. That’s how the  
Nipah virus happened.

My own suburban neighborhood, which replaced Penn’s Woods with lawns,  
preferences vectors like deer and mice while pushing out predators like foxes,  
coyotes, and weasels. That means the high incidence of Lyme disease, and the ticks  
that carry it, is a direct result of my purchasing choices, my suburban lifestyle.

Like new viruses, climate change is driven far more by my consumerism than by  
government policies, though they, too, are a reflection of our collective sense of  
entitlement.

A global society is much harder to understand than my grandfather’s rotary-dial  
telephone, and *trying* to understand it is keeping some of us up at night now as the  
foundations of our society crack ominously. I’m thinking about my dad’s lesson that

anyone can fix anything if they understand the principles involved. What principles make up the foundations of our society? There are a lot of them, but I want to lift up just four that seem particularly problematic right now.

Individualism: the notion that individuals can live independent of society, that they make their own fortunes without contributions from others, or from the earth's commons.

Consumerism: the belief that possessions are fulfilling, and that wealth involves accumulating goods and services for oneself and one's comfort.

Dominion: the belief that the world exists for us to use and abuse as we wish, that it's *ours*.

Supremacy: the idea that some people are more deserving than others to be comfortable and to have their needs and wants met. It's not only white supremacy; *every* American citizen benefits from a system that extracts materials and labor from colonized people and landscapes all over the world. It's money supremacy.

Ann and I, with our measly school-teacher salaries, are in the global 1% by income, earning 20 times the median! I'm pretty sure most of the households in this congregation make about what we do, or more, so ... welcome to the 1%. In this country we waste 40% of our food supply, 40 million *tons* of perfectly good food goes into landfills each year in the US. That's 219 lbs per person. If you've seen *The Story of Stuff* you know that our consumerist economy *requires* a quick trip from store to landfill for consumer goods.

It is insane to think that anyone has ever pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, and yet I act like I did every time I go all hesitant about reparations, or assert my ownership of land here in North America.

It is insane to think we can have unending consumer growth on a finite planet, and yet I act like we can every time I book a flight, buy a new phone, eat factory-farmed meat, or switch on the A/C.

It is insane to think that my safety is somehow disconnected from your safety, and yet I admit I'm more alert in certain neighborhoods, and I've been too "polite" to speak up to people who don't wear masks in crowded places.

It is insane to think my lifestyle, which was built on those principles, is somehow separate from environmental policies, policing policies, global politics, and the destruction of the earth. Every time I act in accord with those principles, it is MY knee pressing on the world's neck, as the planet and its people struggle to say "I can't breathe."

My ancestors say: Any system can be understood with curiosity and persistence.

Some traditions aren't worth keeping. Anyone can fix anything if they understand the principles involved. Fixing our broken society means replacing those rotten principles with more durable ones, but that almost certainly involves some discomfort for people like me. Probably for you, too. Am I ready to be uncomfortable? Am I willing to live in a building under construction, to make the sacrifices, to sleep on the floor, to do the heavy lifting of building a new way?

Our democracy is crumbling around us, but this is no time for righteous indignation—the police this, or the corporations that, or what's the President done this time? No, it's time to acknowledge that it is *my* lifestyle, *my* entitlement, *my* consumerism that drives the system. And that system is the knee squeezing the life out of the world. It is not the president's fault I consume twenty times my share of the global pie. It's not Amazon's fault that I keep giving them money. It's not the police's fault that people like me call 911 on "suspicious-looking" people, or that people like me are somehow rarely "suspicious-looking."

This is also no time for guilty sulking, feeling ashamed of myself, giving up, or giving away all the resources I currently control. This is a time for humbly but actively using my resources—my time, talent and treasure—to the best of my privileged ability for the common good. To acknowledge that all ownership is a fiction, and that I am only the steward of those resources for a limited time. To get myself off the neck of my human siblings and my non-human neighbors, not only because it's the right thing to do but because *I need them to thrive* so that my children and grandchildren can, too. To do that, I have to stop consuming twenty times my share, and I've got to stop acting like I deserve full-time comfort. It's time for me and my fellow Americans, especially white ones, to be less fragile and more resilient.

Ann and I have barely begun that process. Our electricity is from 100% renewable sources, but we still heat with gas. We are slowly replacing our cars and gas-powered tools with electric ones, when we replace them at all, but we still mow most of our yard, and I still don't know why.

My reading list is strong on writers of color and progressive thinkers, but I'm slow to change my behavior. We hang-dry most of our laundry, and I grumble the whole time about it. We are shifting to local sources of produce and meat, but we're still eating a fair amount of meat. We mostly do night-cooling in the summer, but still run the A/C some nights in August when we could just be hot, like most people who live in this world. Baby steps may no longer be good enough.

That word "principles" is familiar to UUs. The seven principles of the UUA are quite a contrast to the principles I mentioned earlier, and they would make a good blueprint for building a new way, whether it's a barn conversion or a bulldoze job. Am I ready to *live* them as well as *espouse* them? Let's see...

- 1: The inherent worth and dignity of every person; (ooph - easier said than done)
- 2: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; (Long way to go there!)  
*lifestyle violates it!*
- 3: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; (Hmm. Hard but doable.)
- 4: A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; (Check? Not perfect, but on the way.)
- 5: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; (Getting there, but big challenges)
- 6: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; (Oh, my.)
- 7: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. (Not a chance. I've barely begun.)

Hmm... all these are easier said than done. Notice: nothing about freedom from discomfort. Nothing about preserving my standard of living. Nothing about high-speed broadband. Not even much about politics! Sure they have political implications, but they are mostly about how I approach my relationships with you and the natural world! And these principles are hard-core, when you come right down to it. I mean, the inherent dignity of that smelly drunk guy with his hand out by the bus station? Really? Really. How do we do that? It won't be comfortable.

Once Ann and I had developed a vision for the barn, for where we wanted walls and windows and floors, then we knew what to cut away from the existing structure. I think many of us are approaching it backwards. We can see what we want to cut out, but we're not as good at seeing what we want it to look like when it's done, and that has to come first. And that visioning process is not inherently political. It's personal. It starts in our own hearts and minds. What do we want for the grandchildren? Not OUR grandchildren; THE grandchildren; all of them. Are we living and learning and shopping in a manner that will create that? Are we making out our wills and estate plans to reflect that? I think we could do worse than to be guided by that bumper sticker that goes "Live simply that others may simply live." We Americans aren't doing that, not like we could.

From those to whom much is given, much is expected. The hard truth is, it wasn't given; it was taken, and it's still being taken to meet *our* demands for comfort and entertainment. It is time to expect much of ourselves. We can do this. We are teachable and resilient, and we have the benefit of immense resources.

Any system can be understood with curiosity and persistence. Consistent methodical effort works. Some traditions aren't worth keeping. Anything can be built or fixed, if we understand the principles involved, even the human heart. Even mine. Today, on this Grandparents' Day (in Australia), let's gather up some tools and get

uncomfortable, building a new way, and doing it ourselves. Let's do it for the grandchildren.

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**Parting Words/Benediction:**

**Call to reflection:**

Take a minute, right now, to reflect and write down at least three things you can do *today*, this week, to reduce your knee-print on the world and its people. Maybe brainstorm ten, and then pick a few to actually do. If it involves collaborating with people who look or sound different from you, extra points. Big or small, doesn't matter; what matters is picking up some tools and gittin' it done.

**Parting Words/Benediction:**

Let this be the first day of a new world, a new way of *being* in the world, a way built one person at a time, ourselves, and let it begin with me.