



## resources

# Creating a Green and Just World in Times of Economic Uncertainty

written by Ashley Lubyk

The current economic crisis has created a lot of uncertainty for many of us but, despite what some critics are saying, abandoning our hopes of a green and just future is not required to weather the economic storm. It is during these tough times that we have the opportunity to reevaluate our lives; to examine what is necessary, what is extraneous, and what makes us happiest.

Our grandparents grew up in times of great economic uncertainty and hardship and although it was not a choice for them to live frugally, it forced them to develop entirely different relationship with people and their possessions. Thrift and resourcefulness were highly respected qualities and waste was all but forbidden. Today, the focus has shifted to the accumulation of goods and this is having a disastrous effect on the planet, on communities, and on us.

For many of us, the steadfast pace of modern day life is having a toll on our health and our quality of life. Between work, television, and shopping, it can be hard to find the time to even prepare a home-cooked meal anymore, let alone reflect on how things were or how they might be in the future. But the truth is, our current way of life is unsustainable – economically, socially and environmentally. If we are to have a future, we must reconcile these points. If not, we risk creating a world that is economically unstable, environmentally depleted, and socially unwell.

It will be necessary to shift from the current system of waste, to one of prudence. The qualities that our grandparents once embodied - thrift, frugality and self reliance – will have to reenter the social consciousness. We must focus on creating simple, meaningful lives that emphasize the things that are most important to us - our friends, family, health, free time, and rest. These are the things that contribute to our wellbeing, not simply the accumulation of “stuff”. Melody Beattie once wrote, “Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into a friend.” This sentiment is our hope, our opportunity, and there is no better time to start than today.

We have the opportunity to live long, happy lives without creating great harm to people or the planet. This will surely take some work but I believe that it is within each of us to create a future that is fulfilling and fair, one that respects other cultures and places, and one that does not rob future generations of their right to experience a planet as rich as the one we were born into. The following list of Actions for a Just Planet should help in meeting this challenge. It is by no means exhaustive but it is a start. I'm sure others have ideas on what it will take to make this transition possible - ideas that I've missed - and I'd be happy to hear about them. If you have something to share, please do so. You can send me an e-mail at [ashley@greencalgary.org](mailto:ashley@greencalgary.org).

## **1. Support local businesses.**

By supporting locally owned businesses we are contributing to the local economy. In contrast, when we buy products from businesses that are owned by people in other countries or at the other end of the world, our money disappears into the pockets of shareholders all over the world. By spending locally, we increase the likelihood that our money will be used to strengthen our local community.

## **2. Buy local products and services.**

Although no region produces everything we desire, there are many ways to increase our use of local goods and services. We support our local economies when we buy from local artists, musicians and authors, many of whom shape our lives by reminding us of our roots, reminding us of the uniqueness and beauty of our region, while also drawing attention to timely and important issues that affect our daily lives. Local farmers benefit when we eat food produced in our region, reducing the need for our food to be shipped great distances. The Alberta Farmers Market Association is a great place to learn about local markets.

## **3. Make a point of asking about how products are produced.**

It's not always easy to ask questions like, "are the eggs free-range?" or "does this product contain recycled material?" but it lets the retailer know that their customers care about what they are selling. It also draws the attention of other shoppers. Comment cards are also a great way of communicating your concerns. Let retailers know that you'd be willing to pay a bit more for a product if you can be assured that the product was produced in a sustainable manner.

## **4. Consider the environmental impacts of producing a product.**

Pesticides and chemicals are used in the production of many of the products we buy today. For instance, 25% of all pesticides used globally are used in cotton production. By purchasing organic cotton you not only protect the environment but also the individuals working in cotton fields. Organic and locally produced products are widely available in Calgary. Be wary of heavily processed products that claim that they "organic" or "natural". Many multi-national companies sell a small amount of "organic" products next to their conventional products in order to capitalize on what they see as a fad. Many of these companies work tirelessly to water down organic principles so that more of their products can qualify. For more information visit the Organic Consumers Association.

## **5. Think about where the product will go once you are finished with it.**

Stores are overflowing with cheaply made products that are made to be thrown out when they break. Most are so cheap that we often don't think about it, but these products come at an extremely high cost to the environment. Buying durable products that are intended to last and that can be repaired are far better for the environment and usually our wallets.

## **6. Consider buying second-hand.**

Many things that we are looking for can be found second-hand. Sometimes this can take a little patience but it can be very entertaining and often second-hand items are found at incredible buys. Supporting second-hand stores is often to the benefit of local, community-based charities, while giving items that would otherwise be landfilled a second chance. Goodwill Industries, Women in Need Society and Value Village offer excellent second-hand shopping opportunities, stocking everything from clothing to furniture and house wares.

## **7. Support fair trade.**

Fair trade is a form of trade that guarantees producers a fair price for their product. Fair trade also educates consumers on the importance of paying a fair price for products and works towards environmental sustainability. Fair trade coffee, tea and chocolate are becoming more widely available across Canada. Certain stores such as Ten Thousand Villages sell only fair trade products. Ask for Fair trade coffee or tea at your local café and if you're shopping for a gift, consider buying one that is fairly traded. The gift has more meaning if it comes with a story explaining where the product is from, who made it, and that the gift itself is a gift to the person who made it.

## **8. Consider the transportation required.**

Products often travel thousands and thousands of kilometers before they end up on store shelves. Today, the average meal travels 2000 kilometres from field to plate. Many consumer products including electronics, small appliances and furniture come from Asia. All of this transportation comes at a tremendous cost to our environment and usually at the expense of our local economies. Supporting locally produced goods not only supports a healthy local community but it drastically reduces the costs associated with transportation. Additionally, thinking about how far we travel to purchase items can also make a noticeable difference. Traveling across town to buy a few items at the big box store wastes precious time and resources. Consider walking to the corner store or hopping on your bike if you only need a few items. You'll have exercised your body, while saving time for more important things.

## **9. Cook at home.**

Eating at restaurants, especially fast-food outlets, requires much more of the earth's energy than eating at home. If you eat out, support locally-owned restaurants whose owners contribute to the local community. Although home cooked meals take a bit more time, sharing meals with friends and family at your own home can be a truly nurturing activity.

## **10. Plant a Garden.**

Gardening is a great exercise that is great for the earth and for your body and mind. Growing your own food is perhaps one of life's greatest joys and it isn't particularly difficult or time consuming. Replacing a small patch of grass in the yard for some veggies is easy to do and teaching children about seeds, soil and where their food comes from is a great learning experience. If you don't have a yard, consider joining a community garden. Visit the Calgary Horticulture Society (<http://calhort.org/gardening/community.aspx>) to learn of community gardens in your neighbourhood. The Horticulture Society is also a great place to learn about what it takes to start a community garden if there isn't already one in your area.

## **11. Reuse things.**

Fix things that are broken. Instead of throwing something away and buying new, try to fix it first. If you can't fix it yourself, try taking it to a handy friend or a local tradesperson to fix it for you. It may be cheaper to fix and you'll also be helping reduce waste. If you have things to get rid of, consult Green Calgary's Reuse and Recycling Guide to find the best reuse, recycling, or disposal option.

## **12. Rent or borrow from friends.**

Often times there are things that we need but we know they'll only be used once in a while. Perhaps you're heading out for your annual ski trip. Instead of buying new ski gear, consider renting it. It's far cheaper to rent and you'll save a great deal of storage space.

## **13. Use the library.**

Instead of buying a book that will sit on the shelf after its read, consider taking it out from the library. Libraries also have great selections of magazines, movies on VHS and DVD, as well as thousands of music CDs. For \$12 a year it doesn't take a genius to see the value in a library card. Visit a Calgary Public Library branch near you to find out about the incredible resources offered.

## **14. Don't get sucked in by advertising.**

Every year companies spend \$1500 on each and every Canadian trying to convince us to buy things that we don't really need. The average Albertan watches over 19 hours of television a week, with nearly 5 hours of that time watching advertisements. Billboards, newspaper ads and television commercials inundate us with products and services that promise happiness and status. But research tells us that most people place an unreasonably high expectation on what a product will do for them and their level of happiness. Most people soon feel remorse and the thing they purchased hasn't given them the pleasure they dreamed it would. By resisting the newest fads or trends you'll spare your credit cards and the planet, while helping to create a more accepting world for people who can't afford all the latest goods.

## **15. Buy less stuff and be willing to pay a bit more for what you do buy.**

This will take discipline but it could be the most important action you can take. Try not to buy things on a whim, especially if those items do not support sustainable activities or if they are disposable. By limiting our purchases we can use the money we

save to pay a more appropriate price for what we do buy. Don't just look at the sticker price. Many cheap products also have a high social and environmental cost, and many do not support the local community.

## 16. Beware of “The Diderot Effect”.

When the French writer Denis Diderot received a fancy velvet robe as a gift, what followed were a series of events that nearly put him in financial ruin. The robe was so elegant that everything else he owned looked shabby by comparison. One by one, he started to replace his furnishings to match the richness of his new robe. After all was done, surrounded by his bright and modern furnishings, he deeply regretted giving up his old robe. He resented the new robe for “forcing everything else to conform with its own elegant tone.” Today, the Diderot Effect continues to find its way into our lives. A new home purchase leads to buying new furniture. A new pair of shoes needs a new skirt or pants to set them off. A renovation in one part of the room might spur multiple renovations in areas that are still perfectly livable. The crux is recognizing this phenomenon, while working with what you have to create a rich, yet simple, lifestyle that leaves time for the things that really matter in your life.

## 17. Invest your money locally and ethically.

Dr. Ellis Jones, in his book *The Better World Shopper*, ranks banking as the #1 essential change that a person can make for a better world. When we put our money in the bank or invest in mutual funds, this money gets loaned to others in exchange for interest. Many of Canada's big banks (RBC, TD, Scotiabank, CIBC and BMO) fund mega projects like the oil sands, the construction of nuclear power plants or mining activities, projects that we may not personally consider as “ethical”. Unless we demand that our money be invested ethically, we cannot be sure that our money is being used for the betterment of society. Citizen's Bank, a subsidiary of VanCity, has become Canada's first “carbon neutral” bank and donates hundreds of thousands of dollars to fund local community projects. Their shared interest credit card helps to fund non-profit initiatives worldwide by contributing \$0.10 to the fund each time your card is used, while Amnesty International and Oxfam Visa cards go to supporting those organizations directly. Ethical Funds ensure that your money is used to support activities that are socially responsible. Credit unions (First Calgary, Inglewood Savings & Credit Union, et cetera) are member controlled and often support community development on a local level. Ensuring that your money is used for socially responsible activities will help to change the world for the better.

## 18. Stay happy, be kind, and remain committed.

Know that everything you do, big or small, makes a difference. And instead of getting bogged down by cynicism, heed the words of Scott Nearing who said “Do the best that you can in the place where you are, and be kind.”

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