

Cheers! 2010 is Our Chance to Create a Sustainable Future

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By Trish Riley



As 2009 draws to a close, I can't help but reflect on this terrible year, and to be heartened by changes that have happened in just the past few weeks.

While many bemoan the scope of the Copenhagen agreement, I choose instead to take [our president at his word](#) – here is a clip from his speech at Copenhagen: “As the world’s largest economy and the world’s second largest emitter, America bears our share of responsibility in addressing climate change, and we intend to meet that responsibility. That is why we have renewed our leadership within international climate negotiations, and worked with other nations to phase out fossil fuel subsidies. And that is why we have taken bold action at home – by making historic investments in renewable energy; by putting our people to work increasing efficiency in our homes and buildings; and by pursuing comprehensive legislation to transform to a clean energy economy.

“There is no time to waste. America has made our choice. We have charted our course, we have made our commitments, and we will do what we say. Now, I believe that it’s time for the nations and people of the world to come together behind a common purpose.

“We must choose action over inaction; the future over the past – with courage and faith, let us meet our responsibility to our people, and to the future of our planet.”

This year I have grown particularly weary of Obama bashers who are coming at us from both sides, those whose obscene business practices are threatened by his more equitable policies (tea baggers, health care providers, insurance companies, chemical companies, big ag, power companies, etc.), and those who fought to elect him, then act as if he’s Benedict Arnold because he has not yet completely transformed our government and lives. [Whoa, folks](#). The guy had a helluva lot of messes to clean up, remember? That’s why we welcomed him into the White House. He continues to need our help to be able to help us.

As I look back over my own life, I realize that nothing happened overnight. I did not simply decide to be an author, and become one the next day. Rather, I realized at the age of nine that I would always be a writer yet I didn’t get my first assignment until I was 32 years old. It paid \$50. It took eight more long years of hard work for little pay before I nailed my first book contract. My career path has taken years, moving forward one step at a time. I had to keep my

eye on the prize to keep from faltering, and I had to maintain my own momentum in the face of naysayers and rejection letters. But I didn't give up, and now I have a handful of books under my byline. Now, I can see new vistas ahead, and will continue to climb.

There is no other means of achieving success. I read a poignant quote by William Arthur Ward when I was a child, and it has stuck with me ever since: "If you can imagine it, you can achieve it; if you can dream it, you can become it." We don't magically get whatever we dream of – we think about what we want and we figure out how to get it. Our thoughts create our reality. When we dwell on our problems, they loom ever larger in our lives. When we focus on our goals, we are putting our creative intelligence to work on achieving them.

One of my earliest mentors advised me to relax when a lone voice complained about a program I'd established to provide arts and educational support to children living in poverty. "The more you step up to make change, the more critics you'll have," Phil Tom told me. "Just continue to do what you think is right."

I've just watched another excellent [Bill Moyer's Journal](#), and listened to two writers criticize the Obama administration and the health care legislation currently under consideration by Congress. Yet, in the end, both writers, Matt Taibi of the Rolling Stone and Robert Kuttner, author of [Obama's Challenge: America's Economic Crisis and the Power of a Transformative Presidency](#), admitted that they're not ready to give up on Barack Obama. "My feeling is, if you vote on this bill and it passes, that's your one shot at fixing a catastrophic and completely dysfunctional health care system for the next generation," said Kuttner. "I would vote for it because the defeat would be absolutely crushing." Taibi said, "It takes a willingness to be radical confronting the elite that has a hammerlock on politics in this country. That's radical. He's nothing if not a work in progress...don't speak too soon. I don't want to totally give up. It's too early to abandon hope."

Sometimes politicians are verified boneheads – and we've certainly seen a lot of that in the past year. But now, we've got a genuine liberal intellectual president who makes no apologies for his positions. When pundits sit on the sidelines and criticize his efforts to move the huge political machine that is the 233-year-old United States Congress, I get a little annoyed. Let these assholes take the seat at the desk in the Oval office, instead of on the TV set of the Fox newsroom.

I have been writing about environmental issues for 18 years, and I can tell you that bringing this information to the public's attention has been a long and difficult task. Until Al Gore won an Oscar for *An Inconvenient Truth*, it was nearly impossible to get newspapers or magazines to carry stories on environmental problems. No one wanted to know about environmental problems when developers, big businesses and governments were making so much money as they created them. But I found ways to help people protect our earth, by tucking important info into travel stories and school coverage and neighborhood association news. I wrote stories about healthy foods, better ways to garden and maintain lawns without sprays, waste water spills, kids' science experiments that created compost from newspapers and energy from rabbit scat. My travel stories always included area parks and natural resources, and I made sure to let readers know about the challenges facing these and the people working to solve them. It has taken a long time to bring this important – essential – information to the public. But the people who understood,

scientists, environmental journalists, and the rare politician, have finally broken through so that now nearly all the world is aware that we've allowed our air, soil, earth and water to be plundered, and if we don't make changes, we will lose this foundation of life.

So while so many pundits and environmentalists are decrying the weak accord forged at Copenhagen last month, I am grateful that so many nations convened and agreed that we must address these problems. While so many are screaming that our Congress has failed us in its passage of health care legislation, I am grateful that we are making progress toward loosening the grip of greedy industries on our ability to access medical treatment. I am grateful that we have a leader who is pushing for these changes, instead of a leader who undercuts the work and values that American citizens bring to their lives. We may not wake up tomorrow living in Utopia, but we have laid the foundation for changes that can lead to a more sustainable future for all of us – environmentally, economically, and healthfully. We have taken the first steps. And we have a path to move forward.

We citizens of America have lived through an horrific year... really, an horrific decade. Yet this past year has brought us hope as we have never known in my adult life – and that's 30 years. This past year has brought unprecedented changes that have been hard to ride, yet I believe they are pulling us toward a more sustainable future. We have adjusted, not by choice, but by force, to buying less because we've had less money and credit to spend. This is a damn good thing – our consumer economy has been [exposed](#) as an unsustainable, unhealthy hoax on the public to support a business bottom line that we have discovered is entirely unsustainable: it was built on a model that sacrificed our environment, health and safety in the name of profit, and coerced us into a mindless struggle to survive as we attempted to keep up with a spiraling economy that demanded evermore from workers while delivering ever less. We watched this economy nearly topple, and stood by as our new government attempted to rescue the highest echelon of our golden ivory towers in a frame-up created as a last ditch gesture by the administration which created a top-heavy economy that paid dividends to the wealthy at the expense of citizens. But even as our last hope for change administration scrambled to stop gap the demise of federal funds, citizens pushed out of corporate chains realized that we can have happiness without those strings that bind us to the status quo. We have been freed of the ropes that we thought would save us from destruction – then unraveled. We realized that time is more valuable than the dollars we were earning. Now free, we have the opportunity to redraft our lives, and to re-vision what work means to us, and what we really need to pay for. A bunch of stuff has gone by the wayside. An economy based on Gross Domestic Product is no longer the goal of the average American citizen. We have learned that we can live on less, and that we don't need to keep running on the endless rat wheels that the economy had pushed us into.

We can create a new paradigm, and the debacle of the 2000's has provided us with the perfect framework to make it work. As nightmarish as this last year and decade have been, we can emerge in 2010 with a new approach to life and work, thanks to the disintegration of the systems of our past.

We have discovered that our lives can be richer when we spend less time working for “the man,” and living our lives instead. We don't have to buy all the stuff we'd been led to believe would

bring us happiness – they don't. We can spend our time with our children instead, nurturing them rather than rueing the inconvenience they pose to lives dedicated to work. Love is what parenting is all about, and love is what parenting needs.

We can spend more time mulling the mysteries of the universe, and perhaps finding answers to the questions that science and religion have failed to solve: why are we here? Where did we come from? How was the universe created? Maybe everyone doesn't wonder about such philosophical questions, but given time to think, and freed of the bonds that our society and economy previously bound us with, we might find the impetus to ponder these issues.

Without money for gas, we can find more sustainable ways to get around, and we might choose to spend less time and money traveling afar. We can choose not to support the mega-corporations that suck dry our resources to promote the financial health of their ivory towers...

Spending more time at home, we might cultivate our gardens to provide food for our families. Knowing now that synthetic petro-chemical fertilizers and pesticides are harmful to our health, we might take time to figure out how to grow our own food without these cheap enhancers, and in the process, we'll be protecting our health and soil and water supplies.

We don't need to support the gross domestic product to achieve the most satisfying lives. We need to support ourselves and our families. As we, and our businesses, embrace these tenets of sustainability, we are moving toward a healthier future. While 2009 has been a bitch of a year, it's been a boon to our future. Three cheers to 2010!

–Trish Riley is editor and publisher of GoGreenNation.org, an award-winning environmental/ investigative journalist and the author of *The Complete Idiot's Guides to Green Living and Greening Your Business* (2007 and 2009, Penguin).

[The Best Behind-The-Scenes White House Photos From Obama's First Year.](#)

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