



“Blessed Unrest”

– Paul Hawken

Book Review by Terence Jeyaretnam

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Paul Hawken is one of the best-known environmental authors of our time. With *The Ecology of Commerce*, he opened the eyes of business to its impact on the environment, but most importantly, the opportunities available to manage these impacts from a life-cycle perspective. With *Blessed Unrest*, Hawken has again presented an optimistic view. From a social and environmental perspective, it is a book about what is going right in a resource-constrained, polluted, and decadent world.

Blessed Unrest is a book about action rather than words. Civil society is renowned for action, which is no surprise. The surprise the book presents is the hive of activity and activism globally in environmental conservation, social justice, and indigenous cultures' resistance to globalization – Hawken had greatly underestimated the strength of ecological sustainability and social justice movements. Working on this book, “I soon realised that my initial estimate of 100,000 organizations was off by at least a factor of ten,” he confesses. No doubt that figure will surprise many. The undercurrent of activity is heartening—to know that millions of people are acting for the voiceless, those suffering social injustice throughout the world and its poor cousin, the environment.

Focusing on change, the book is carved into easily digestible slices comprising different flavours in the history of the environmental social justice and indigenous rights movement, starting with the indigestible harm caused by world trade and business and ending with the sweetness of immunity and nirvana. A voluminous appendix of common terms and issues in the movement is a useful catalogue for readers who plan to use the information in their work, but will generate little interest for the layperson.

What captures the reader are the historical and present day anecdotes that are ever-present. As an example, Hawken lashes out at the United States by questioning the Iraq War: “How do you describe the American administration that will spend \$1 trillion on winning a war for Iraq oil while refusing to allocate any funds to resolve the dependency on oil? For \$1 trillion, the United States could have catalyzed the replacement of its entire automobile fleet with plug-in hybrid electrics getting 500mpg.” Hawken adds that, “for every dollar spent on UN peacekeeping, \$2000 is expended for war making by member nations”

From time to time, Hawken drops frightening statistics, such as “we have consumed 90 percent of all the big fish in the oceans” and “in 2005, the *Los Angeles Times* devoted one hundred times more coverage to a vandilistic spree by three unaffiliated students who damaged or destroyed 125 SUVs than it did to the landmark UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment.” Regarding business, Hawken notes that “the world’s top two hundred companies have twice the assets of 80% of the world’s people” and “Exxon Mobil once issued directives forbidding the use of the word sustainability in all internal and external communications.”. For those affiliated with large corporations, Hawken lists names of polluters and corrupt lobbyists “that legally or illegally impose their will on indigenous cultures.”

The book is ripe with teachings from leaders and activists such as Rachel Carson, Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Rosa Parks. Revealing the theory behind the global movements for social and environmental justice the *Blessed Unrest* provides context and meaning to the why and how of the struggle for expression and freedom. To me, the book was an eye-opener, offering a glimpse of hope to those despairing in the world’s current state. I could read it again and again, yet my only criticism would be the complex and somewhat disorganized nature in which it is presented. The connections between anecdotes and coverage of the issues, as well as connections between chapters, are weak. Perhaps that’s the way Hawken intended for it to be presented, with a lack of order that is synonymous with the movement and nature that he ever-so-interestingly captures.

A quote from poet Adrienne Rich seems to explain why Hawken sat down to write this book:

“My heart is moved by all I cannot save /
So much has been destroyed / I have cast
my lot with those / who, age after age,
perversely / with no extraordinary power, /
reconstitute the world.”

Thank you, Paul Hawken, for another enthralling and meaningful read.