

Building the new world

Creating a life lived around your true values

By Jason Angell

I've taught *Introduction to Sociology* at Bronx Community College (BCC) for a number of years. It's a class I love to teach because it's about everything in America that shapes our lives -- capitalism and consumerism, democracy, modern culture, our spiritual beliefs, and the many different types of inequality that largely divide us from each other.

We had just finished a discussion of the history of colonialism and how the never-ending hunger for economic growth and wealth drove Western European countries to colonize to secure more and more resources. That hunger still largely explains why so many of our lives today are shaped by economic exploitation, corrupted democracy, racism, and an empty consumer culture.

The vibe in the room felt very dispirited, very much like discussions of climate change after you're on the receiving end of all the accumulated data and scientific evidence documenting how truly fucked we all are.

"This shit seems hopeless," a student named Carl said. "All we do is talk about what's broken. Most of us know that, live that. What do *you* think? How are we going to build a better world?"

I've thought about that question a lot and built my life around experiments to come up with solutions. But for some reason answering that question honestly has always been very difficult. Maybe I was just always scared of sounding too radical.

Hope-less. I looked out at Carl and the other students, 95% of which are Black, Hispanic and on the receiving end of a way of life where it's getting more and more difficult to get ahead.

"I'll work on my answer to that," I promised them and went home and began to write this.

Time to get real

There are so many important things that people don't talk about in life. Often the truest things. Maybe we don't say them because we're worried people will think we are abnormal or that our true thoughts will offend. But I want to say some true things to you, thoughts that are like trapped birds flying around inside of me. Because you asked.

People often wait until death is approaching to say the true things out loud to each other, if at all. Maybe the looming fact of death causes all the other things that stop us from expressing ourselves fully to get smaller and smaller until they eventually disappear. And the birds fly free.

Don't worry, I am not dying, not yet. But here's the first true thing I want to tell you: I know our way of life is dying. People are becoming sick, mentally and physically, in larger numbers. We are killing the natural world that supports our lives. Dead things -- money, shares of stock, consumer goods, virtual reality -- rule our lives.

If you're reading this, you are not dead yet either. There's still a chance to live differently, in ways that are better for you and better for all other living things. Realizing our way of life is dead is the beginning; the rest of the journey is building a new way of life to replace the old one. And it will be a life's work which is creative, fun, and might free you to live life on your own terms.

So I want to tell you a few things I've learned about how to live differently and share a few ideas about how we might make a better way of life available to more people. It's my answer to your question of "how to build a better world." I don't claim it's the only answer; there will be many answers to this question, lived out across the lives of the many pioneers that strike out to help build a new world. I hope a few of you are among those that get free.

Are you free?

We live in a country that was founded on the idea of freedom. Sure, that freedom didn't originally extend to many large groups of Americans, but our country's history can be read as one long, continuous struggle to keep extending freedom to more and more of us. I believe that we're still all very much involved in that struggle today.

What does freedom mean to you? Many of us probably think of freedom as it's superficially defined by commercial culture and the institutions that order our lives today: by flying the American flag, saying the pledge of allegiance, supporting the war, getting to vote every few years, buying a house with the white picket fence, and building the biggest bank account.

For me, I know I am free if I'm spending my time on the things I most value in life. Our time is the most limited, precious resource any of us have. While many wiser cultures keep the sureness of death present in their teachings, our western culture mostly wants to avoid the issue altogether -- celebrating youngness in commercials and movies, retiring elders and dying out of view, and promising that there will be another, eternal life after this one.

Maybe there is another life after this one, I don't know, but it doesn't seem wise to bank on it. We should treat the time we have in this life as the only time we will get -- no one else can give me more once it is all spent.

Am I spending what precious life time I have on the things I most care about, on those things I value? If not, how can I begin to?

Where are we right now?

Let's get on the same page about where we are right now. Because you never know, maybe a lot of people out there think the way life is right now is just great. Maybe they're sitting pretty with a big stock portfolio and don't have to work for a living or maybe all they want out of life is to drive a nice car, watch a big screen, and live life for the weekend.

But that's not where I'm at. That's not the life I see around me. If I had kept walking down the status quo path laid out for me, I saw a life where someone else controls my time, where work is mostly a drag, where going into deep debt for basic life essentials was normal, where I would have little time to raise my own children, where my parents would grow old spending most of their days alone, where most of my "relationships" would play out online, where my whole life would be spent separated from nature, and where my life would support so many systems that go against my personal values. I saw a world where my spirit would die.

And I'm privileged! I grew up in a family that never had to really worry about money. I went to the good schools. I had good jobs that paid a good salary. But what if you're poor or non-white or otherwise unconventional living in this life? All of the stresses are even greater.

The good news is I believe there are many of us that can't help looking around and wondering -- Why is the world like this? How can we make it better? We feel it in our bones, the nagging hope that a more humane, meaningful, free and joyful life is possible.

We may think we're alone, but we're not. We just don't speak this hope to other people out loud very often, for fear that we'll be told to "grow up" and just accept the world as it is. But we have to start speaking this hope out loud, for time is against us. We need to find each other. And we need to begin living our best hopes for our lives into reality.

Where do we want to go?

I hear people say all the time that the "system is broken" -- they might be talking about how we make our laws, who reaps the rewards of our economy, who gets opportunities, or how we grow our food. But the fact is that these systems aren't broken -- they're working exactly as those in power intend them to, with consequences that are often good for the few and bad for the many.

For some reason when you bring up the subject of values, a lot of people freak out or get bored. Maybe thinking about values -- about what's most important in life -- is just plain hard work, so most of us don't want to do it. Maybe it's just too threatening or

that discussion makes us feel judged, because there's a pretty wide gap between the things we care about and the way we live our life.

But we must do this work, for what we value the most must serve as the map towards the future we will build for ourselves. If we don't do this work, someone else already has and we become sentenced to live a life according to the things *they* value.

And I think their values are pretty clear by now. They want good workers, the cheaper the better. They want less benefits and regulations, the bigger the profits for shareholders. They want to own all of the things that have economic value and turn things that were free into things we must pay for. They want to use nature, not be responsible for looking after it. They want to write the rules and choose the rule-makers. They want us to keep spending our pay-check on the things they're selling us. They want us to learn how to be obedient and shut up. They want to keep us divided, so we don't have the numbers to force change.

What do you value the most in life?

While we walk around in an America today where difference means so much, I think most people's answers to this question would be surprisingly similar. People care about their families and having a home. They care about having work that they enjoy doing and might contribute good to the world instead of harm. They care about having enough.

We all wish we had more control over our own lives and the freedom to spend our life time on the things we value. In a world of plenty, these things for all people should not be impossible to achieve. But we've got a lot of work to do in order to free ourselves from this current world.

Take a deep breath

We're going to need to suspend the way we think about what's possible. Usually, when you want to go somewhere you start with two points in mind: where you are (point A) and where you want to go (point B). You draw the most direct line between the two points and get moving.

But I don't think that approach is going to work here. Where we are right now is just too far in the shit. There's a lot of structures around us that are too rotten to build on. We're going to have to abandon the idea of getting to the future we want using the old ideas and ways of doing things that brought us to this low-point.

Take a deep breath. Accept the idea that the way most of us live today is just the result of past acts of imagination. Humans have lived on this planet in many different ways with each other over thousands of years. This version of life we've created will pass on for another, hopefully a better one.

Let this version of life, which is beginning to decay under the weight of its own greed and superficiality, die away. Treat it like it's dead and prepare to leave it behind. We can and must create the world anew.

My own experiments in repurposing life

Ok, we've got to pause for a second. I know I didn't talk much about my personal life during the semester, but that's because of an old teaching belief that it's best to keep your personal life out of the classroom.

But my views on how to build a better world are very much based on my own personal experiments in repurposing life, an effort over the past decade to redesign my life around what I value most. I guess I'm telling you this because I want to bolster your confidence that it can be done.

Jumping into the void

I was just over thirty years old, living in Brooklyn with Jocelyn, my girlfriend at the time. I was the Director of the Center for Working Families, developing social justice ideas that were being turned into laws by the Working Families Party. It was the job I had worked towards for a long time, the place where my dreams for a better society could become reality.

But as I came into the office everyday to craft more powerpoints, papers and emails, was I happy or fulfilled or convinced that any of this would lead to a better world? There I was, back to that old unhappy place again: waking up in the middle of the night with sweat soaked sheets, smoking cigarettes first thing in the morning, calling in sick and binging Netflix all day.

Life in the city was expensive, so both I and my partner Jocelyn had to work full-time. The whole cycle of needing to make more money or take on debt to pay for the “good life” felt like a trap to me, like I was signing my life away without reading the fine print.

So one rainy Sunday afternoon, Jocelyn and I took \$6,000 from our savings and put it into a bank account we named “Argentina”. A few months later we quit our jobs and got married. We told everyone we were “Honeymoving” instead of “Honeymooning”. Since we didn’t want a bunch of stuff because we didn’t have any apartment or home to put it in, every gift on our registry became a cash contribution to what we had begun to call our freedom fund.

As the plane wheels left the ground and we began to bank South over the Atlantic ocean, New York City began to grow tiny and finally disappeared over the horizon. We had jumped into the void with no other real plan but to buy ourselves some time to figure out a different way of life. My mind and heart felt for the first time in a long time the great joy and liberation of not knowing what lay ahead.

Stumbling on a new way to live

After three months, we left Buenos Aires behind; while beautiful and romantic, as a major city it offered the same life model that we had left in New York City. Without work, we were spending our freedom fund down rapidly.

Jocelyn found a small cabaña for rent on an online blog post located on a farm called Chacra Millaen, in the town of El Hoyo in Patagonia. At \$200 a month, it would make our money last.

When we finally pulled our sputtering, half alive Volkswagen Gacel through the wooden gates of Chacra Millalen we had entered a magical world. We drove past massive walnut, apple, apricot and cherry trees and rows of purple lavender that filled the air with their perfume and parked by a small creek running through the

property. We would call this farm home for the next year, learning and being inspired by the family that had run this farm sustainably for 20 years.

We woke up every morning as the sun rose over the ridge of the valley, making it just warm enough to run across the cold tiles to turn on hot water for coffee. Each morning, I took a small chair and journal down to a grassy spot in the sun by the creek. For the first time in many years -- if ever in my life -- I spent hours thinking about what I cared about in life. What were the things I truly loved to do?

At the same time, in the afternoons I began to work in the garden and around the farm. I loved the work and it caught me by surprise. As a kid, I spent a great deal of time inside, watching television for hours.

I loved using my body farming, having spent the better part of adulthood in front of computers busy creating products of the mind. I loved seeing the tangible evidence of my work in the living world around me, a freshly weeded bed or the starting construction of a new greenhouse. I loved working myself towards physical exhaustion, which drove much of my moodiness away and let me forget myself for long stretches of time. And I loved feeling connected to the natural world, working alongside of it instead of against it.

Living in El Hoyo also exposed us to a much larger sense of community than any we had experienced in New York. We were eating and cooking together. A lot of neighbors bartered, trading vegetables for having a car fixed for example. Large jobs like hauling wood for the winter were collective and people relied on each other more. Everything was treated as invaluable, so was cooked, canned, preserved, and fixed until the bitter end.

A friend I fished with once told me the thing he really loved about fishing was standing in the middle of a river, but if he did it without holding a fishing rod people would think he was crazy. Farming provided a practical way to live outside of the normal way of life in modern America.

We had stumbled into a new way of living, one that would involve farming and trying to build the same kind of connected

communities back home. We packed up our little cabaña and headed back home to start our own farm.

Building a life on Longhaul Farm

We moved back to family land in Garrison, NY, in the Hudson Valley sixty miles from New York City, to start Longhaul Farm. We began to build a new life from the ground up.

While in Argentina, we had the time to make a detailed plan for building the farm when we got home. We knew one very important thing: the farm wasn't going to provide all of our income. Not only was the economic model of farming difficult at the smaller scale — the price of food is cheap and you need a lot of land and expensive equipment to make it financially work — but we wanted to purposely leave room in our life for the other things we wanted to spend our time on.

We spent the first year putting in the growing space, a back-breaking process of clearing the land of thorns and rocks and “double-digging” 100 vegetable beds. Double-digging was the method we learned in Argentina, which meant loosening the soil in our beds down three feet. It allowed us to plant our crops three times closer than conventional tractor farms, which meant our vegetable growing space produced three times as much as land farmed conventionally.

The second year we launched our Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program with 15 full shares, where local residents pay an up-front membership fee in return for collecting a weekly share of fresh vegetables over the course of the season. Now we have 30 shares serving 50 local families on half an acre of growing space. In addition, we raise laying chickens, chickens for meat, turkeys, and pigs.

By any account, the farm doesn't make much sense as a purely economic endeavor given the amount of hours we devote to make it work. The farm generates about \$20,000 a year in gross revenue plus a reduction in property taxes of \$6,000 because we're farming commercially. In addition, it cuts our food bill by 70%.

But our farm is not about money, it frees us to live the way of life we want to. It gives us the pleasure of growing and eating our own

food. It allows us both to raise our children ourselves and to help take care of my parents as they get older. It allows us to be in nature and directly feel the weather and changes between seasons. It makes us largely our own bosses, allowing us to control our time. It makes us more free.

We haven't built society to support this way of life because it really doesn't serve the economic goals of those in power. To win this freedom, we've had to reduce the cost of our lives by refusing to buy things that we don't need and by doing many of the things that we might have paid others to do.

Instead of getting a pay-check for a full-time job that takes up all of our time, we've gradually built a life supported by many income streams doing the different things we most love to do. Both Jocelyn and I are adjunct professors, which allows us to build relationships with young people and supports a flexible work schedule. We host farm dinners, which brings in additional farm income and lets us share our love of cooking. And we founded the Ecological Citizen's Project (ECP), a non-profit organization that allows us to participate in the larger political work required to transform society.

While this way of life may never make us wealthy, it makes us both happy and free. And we've found what's good for us can also be good for the world around us, reducing our participation in a system that is the cause of so much bad in the world.

The way forward

Starting a farm changed my life in many ways that I am deeply thankful for. I don't think everyone wants to become a farmer and I don't think there is any one way to live free. I expect that everyone's version of what a free life looks like will be different. But based on the lessons I've learned from Longhaul Farm, I do think that certain conditions can help our free lives to flourish.

There are some things that we have the power to fix by ourselves and some things that we'll have to work together with others to fix because they are beyond our ability to change alone.

We must begin by taking back power where we can right now. We have to prepare for the tough journey ahead of us; it will be one where we are swimming against the current of the life laid out for us. Here is my advice on how to prepare yourself before the journey of collective work begins:

Get to good health

We've lived our lives up to this moment in a culture built to achieve *their* values -- more profits, bigger market share -- and it has decimated our mental and physical health. We eat bad food largely devoid of nutrition, our entertainment is often isolating and increases our self absorption, and the lack of physical exertion in modern life leaves our bodies weak. I'm not speaking from on high here; it's a constant struggle to maintain strong health in this culture we've created. But we'll need to be at our best to take on the challenges ahead, which will require energy and clarity of heart and mind.

Self trust

I think that every person that realizes that they reject the value system of the "unjust structure" has a great deal of work to do to self-determine their own value system. It's hard, difficult work that requires a great deal of reflection, thinking, and, ultimately, self-trust. I use the word self-trust because I think those who endeavor to create a life outside of the current system -- a life of freedom, happiness, responsibility and caring -- will need to nurture a belief in themselves to swim against the current; a belief that we can come to know what is best for ourselves.

Once a person has done the work of defining what they consider to be the most important things in life, then the challenge -- the experiment -- becomes trying to construct a new life around that value system. How to make it work? The plain truth is that for some individuals it will be easier than for others -- there are differences of inherited privilege, class, and race at play here. But the fact is that every individual has an option to reject this form of social organization and try to build another one.

Occupy your spiritual side

I've never been a member of an organized religion; growing up my family never went to church regularly and when I did go much of

what was happening their didn't create any feeling in me. So for most of my life I called myself "non-religious" and ignored any exploration of my own spiritual beliefs. But as I've gotten older and began to feel our way of life today is not for me, spiritual questions have become more persistent -- Why are we here? Is the physical world we see around us all there is or is there something more behind it all that connects us? What do I believe in?

Throughout my life, I've had spiritual moments when I'm deeply a part of nature: on a canoe trip far from people paddling into a full moon or camping alone in the salt flats of the badlands in the desert as coyotes howled around me. These moments lifted me beyond myself, helped me escape my trap of a mind with relief, allowing me to feel connected to all living things. These moments are a blessing and connect me to a living force that is true reality and that we all share in common. It fills in a gaping sense of loneliness that can open up inside of me in this weirdly connected-all-the-time-but-always-disconnected culture we've built.

So I've begun to try to cultivate this feeling more regularly by learning to mediate in a quiet spot outside for fifteen minutes a day. We're all busy with life, but we can all set aside a small portion of time each day to contemplate these questions. There is no prescription: for some it will be organized religion and for others it will be something self-made. But we must occupy our spirits and reconnect ourselves to the invisible, deeper currents of life that make us more humble and grateful for the lives we have and give us energy to live them to our full potential.

Make a plan

You cannot achieve a different life for yourself until you create a more detailed vision of what a different future might look like. Humans can change the world through brave acts of imagination; our species are like moths drawn to the light of visions of the future that are drawn clearly enough to take root in our imaginations and grow. You must create a plan for yourself that gets as specific as possible: what marks progress towards your goal over the coming months and years, how much time and money will it cost to support your transition, and how will you sustain yourself financially in this new life?

Learn to cook

In the past, most people knew how to do many more things for themselves: heat their home, take care of the children, fix an engine, mend their clothes, put a good meal on the table. As we left the farms and small towns and women entered the workforce en masse, many of these skills we once had as a nation have been lost to services we pay others to perform. I'm not blind to all we have gained by modern conveniences and arguing that we should return to the past, but I do believe the loss of these skills make us more dependent on the exploitative economy and make the cost of our lives more expensive.

Re-learning how to do simple things for ourselves is an act of rebellion in this economy that seeks to de-skill us so we become more dependent on paying others to do things for us. Sure, it makes sense to pay others to do things where real expertise is needed --I'm not saying start performing brain surgery on yourself. But each time we become reliant on a service, we pay for that new reliance with more of our life time we have to invest in earning wages. A \$5 latte? \$3 bottled water?

So start with the simple act of teaching yourself how to cook a good meal from fresh ingredients. This is one way to take ownership over your own health, feeding your mind and body with high quality food instead of the manufactured stuff whose first goal is to turn low quality into a profit.

Find your tribe

The ideas and values I'm putting forward here are outside of the mainstream. But we have to remember that most people who first feel the inner call for change to the status quo are "outsiders" - like those who first argued the earth was round or that slavery was a moral corruption of all. The world has never moved forward without a community of people willing to express a vision for a better world out loud knowing that the majority of others would meet it with ridicule. So if you feel the pull towards a better world, become brave in saying it out loud to your friends. If they don't feel it, find new friends. To weather the storm, we'll need to find our tribes of support as we rebuild our lives forward.

Look for love in the right places

Ok, I know it's weird for a professor to give you advice on love, so I'll make this one as short as possible so we can move on with it.

For most of my young life, finding love felt like the most important job. I got it wrong a few times because I wasn't always looking for the most important thing. Yes, physical attraction is important, shared interests is important, fun is important. You should have all of them. But if you're looking to build your best life, you'll need a partner that shares the same values as you do. When times get rocky -- as they will -- sharing the same compass to get you through to the other side will be important. There, I've said my piece.

Save for yourself

As we discussed in class, in our modern economy we all make a trade-off: we trade our precious time in return for money paid for our work. Besides sleeping, we all will spend the majority of our lives working. For most of us, the work we do now is not the work we would choose to do if we were free. But how do we create the space to transition our lives to something different when we're so caught up with making ends meet in the present? We'll need to save up a personal "freedom fund" to sustain ourselves through the change ahead.

Everything about the culture we live in will try to stop you from saving for yourself. As we've learned, two-thirds of our modern economy depends on us continuing to spend any surplus income we have into the economy. We know continuing to do that benefits *their* goals, but does it benefit *yours*? While we may not be able to control what this exploitative economy pays us for our precious time, we can control what we pay it.

Open up a bank account and name it after your freedom goal. Cut out all the expenses you don't need and begin saving for yourself. This is your jail-break money.

Don't give them your money

This seems a bit repetitive, but it's worth emphasizing: don't give them your money.

Most things we buy online or in a big store are made by massive corporations that move jobs to where pay is the cheapest, fight efforts to reduce poisons in their products, and make it impossible to compete as a small business. If we keep our money in one of the top ten private banks, they turn around and make profits by lending against our deposits -- usually to projects that deepen economic inequality, environmental damage and mass exploitation.

We have to think of our money as direct extensions of ourselves and our values. If our money is wrapped up in something that causes climate change, we cause climate change. If our money goes towards paying people unlivable wages, we are a part of keeping them hungry and oppressed. Don't give them your money. Resist the temptation of cheapness, because that cheapness most likely comes from some sort of harm. Support businesses in your community. Keep your money in a community bank that lends money within your community. Spend your money on things that will ultimately improve your self-productivity instead of the things that will prolong your oppression.

We'll need a social movement

The good news is that we don't have to wait for anybody else to act before taking the first steps towards building lives of greater personal freedom that do less harm to the people and world around us. We can reduce our own contributions to the exploitative economy and its culture -- both with our money and the expenditure of our life time -- right now by buying fewer nonessential things, doing more for ourselves, and investing in our own health and communities.

But the reality is that we can't do everything by ourselves. We are facing centuries of law-making, discrimination, and institutional development that supports and tirelessly works to maintain the status quo. When the way things are successfully make this much money and hoard the good life for the powerful few, they're certainly not going to want to change it.

A few weeks ago, I took my two kids to the Hayden Planetarium at the Natural History Museum in New York City. We zoomed out from planet earth, hurtling through an exploration of the known universe. If there is one true principle of how our universe operates, it is that it is never still — we are all constantly moving, swirling around in clouds of flux and change. Anytime we think “this is the way life is and always will be,” we are wrong, falling for an illusion of permanence created by our narrow view of time from our ant-like individual life perspectives. But if we zoom out just a bit more, we see that change is the constant.

The organization of life as we know it today will change. For those who are unsatisfied with the way life is at the moment, this is good news. Our lives don’t have to be lived this way, but we’ll have to work with many others to build a movement for real alternatives.

Creating Liberated Zones

Ideas are not enough. Writing, speaking and making art is not enough. Voting for the right politicians to do the work for us is not enough. Time is against us. Rising social inequality and all of the sickness it produces are starting to boil over in hopelessness, hate, and further isolation from each other. The ravenous, insane greed of our economy is eating away at the life systems that support us.

Our lives must become an embodiment of our values. If parts of the system make us live against our values, we must destroy those parts and build them anew. People will need islands of inspiration that prove that there are different ways to live. We’ve begun to think of these islands as “Liberated Zones”, a concept which Ed Whitfield describes this way:

It is a place of freedom that exists alongside the existing exploitation system. We don't have to wait for it. It does not destroy exploitation, but it is available as an escape. And when the existing system weakens, dies, or collapses under its own weight from its internal contradictions, the liberated zones are examples of a more humane, more just, more ecologically sustainable way to organize our lives. The liberated zones are places for building and practicing full scale freedom, a laboratory for a better world that can come to be before freedom is widely available and fully replaces exploitation.

To get to freedom for all, we're going to have to imagine new ways of organizing society -- of making decisions, of sharing the profits from work, of building a new energy system, of caring for each other and other living things -- and begin demonstrating them into reality.

Who's steering the ship?

As we've discussed this semester, I believe a fundamental source of most of the problems we face are rooted in ownership -- owners get to steer the ship. If you aren't in control of your own time, don't get to see any of the profits from your work, have no say in the conditions of your job, make interest payments to banks so they don't take back their house, you are not in control of your own life.

When the first Europeans landed in what they dubbed the "New World", they were amazed that American Indian tribes living there were willing to sell their land. For American Indians, who believed that the land or other shared natural resources could not be owned by any single individual forever, the craze of Europeans for signed pieces of paper must have been very strange.

Modern history is nothing but a tragic tale of the harms caused by the hoarding of ownership and power by our society's wealthiest and most powerful individuals, with greater and greater advantages passed from generation to generation until we find ourselves living in a land where opportunity is a luxury reserved for a smaller and smaller number of people.

The American Revolution was an effort to shift the power of government from the few to the many. In many cases, it did not go nearly far enough -- it mostly served to widen the circle of the governing elite while leaving the majority of people far from any real decision-making power. We need a second wave of the American Revolution, one that expands democracy within our governing system and extends democracy to our economic lives.

We need to rethink and change patterns of ownership across our society. I can hear it now -- "Socialism!", "Communism!" they will cry. But that is always what they cry if you threaten the unjust advantages they have hoarded for themselves. I am not saying that

the government should own things, I am saying that we can not live in a world any longer where the few own and control the lives of the many. Don't let the commercials fool you, most of us are living in a state of enslavement not liberation.

The new world will be built upon very different ownership structures, all of which are compatible with Capitalism. But it will be a Capitalism which is actually sustainable -- it won't use up humans and other living things to the point of collapse -- where everyone benefits from ownership and where profits may be smaller but freedom and well-being are shared by all.

Rethinking home

In starting Longhaul Farm, we adapted a more simple lifestyle because we knew that lowering our overhead was necessary to afford our freedom. But we also benefited from the privilege of being able to start the farm and build our new lives on family land which we did not have to purchase or pay a big mortgage on. This freed up our time to be able to build new lives.

A home is more than the materials that are used to build it, more than a place to put our stuff. It is the place where we can organize our lives around our values, the things we care most about. It should be the foundation of our freedom, where we feel the security that comes from having control over our own lives.

But instead, paying for a home has become one of the greatest obstacles to people's freedom. The cost of housing - either in covering rent or the mortgage bill -- makes up the largest part of people's life overhead today. Across America, affording a home eats up 30%-50% of people's income. It's a large reason why most homes have both parents working full-time to make ends meet.

If we understand that our income is the same as our life time (because we must trade one to get the other), imagine being able to get a significant portion of that 30%-50% of your life time back! In order to free people we'll have to make homes and land drastically more affordable.

There's a lot of complicated reasons that the cost of housing keeps going up: the size of homes we're building, more and more people are competing for less and less land in and around our major cities, and the fact that the system is set up to treat housing as more of a

way to build wealth than build a home. But if we rethink housing in fundamental ways, we can drastically reduce its costs and reduce the great pressures that paying for housing puts on people's lives.

Every home we live in, whether an apartment in the city or home in the suburbs or country, is built on land. Whoever owns that land gets the benefits when rents or the value of land goes up. Many Americans try to get in on this action -- it's the core of our American Dream after all -- but often end up in a life-time of debt obligation to banks, who really own our homes. The rest of us are stuck trying to cover rising rents as we build other people's wealth.

One of the best ways to make housing more affordable is to take land out of the market and to build smaller homes. In many places facing the sky-rocketing costs of housing, communities are creating Community Land Trusts which place land in a non-profit organization to be owned collectively by the community permanently. This means that the land is no longer primarily a path to creating profits, but a protected resource to ensure people have to an affordable home.

Our non-profit organization, the Ecological Citizen's Project (ECP), plans to demonstrate the benefits of rethinking land ownership by creating a Community Land Trust in the Hudson Valley, NY in the coming years. We believe if people are given the opportunity to reduce the greatest cost, they'll free up the necessary time to create new lives.

The next energy system will be community owned

If we view land and the natural resources that sustain life as the common property of all present and future living things, no one individual or corporation should be able to own these resources or exploit them for maximum private profit regardless of the negative public consequences. While fossil fuels have been one of the greatest sources of private wealth creation in human history, the necessary transition to renewable energy creates a unique opportunity to make the next energy system community owned.

Given that our reliance on fossil fuels is causing environmental breakdown which is triggering the world's sixth mass extinction, why aren't we moving faster towards renewable energy? The first reason is that fossil fuel companies are doing everything they can

to stop the transition; they have too oil and gas in the ground that they want to turn into profit. I think the second reason is that too many American's are locked in the economic struggle to just get by; doing something for the environment becomes a distant priority.

When we talk about renewable energy, we've got to talk about how it's not only good for the environment but can be an important step towards our economic liberation. Community ownership of energy in America is not a radical nor a new concept. Alaska owns the state's most valuable oil fields, collects rent for companies to use them, and returns the resulting dividends to Alaskan residents in a check for a few thousand dollars every year.

While "community renewable energy projects" are growing, for the most part they're still financed and owned by private companies due to the costly upfront investment. But there are a few examples of community owned renewable energy systems that are actually owned by community members, including the Brooklyn Army Terminal project in New York City, University Park Community Solar project in Maryland and the Clean Energy Collective's Mid-Valley Solar Array in Colorado.

Community solar experts project that a 1 MW solar farm developed on 4-5 acres would cost \$1.5m to develop, could provide renewable energy to roughly 200 local homes, and generate roughly \$60,000 per year in income. As part of its Liberated Zone experiment, the ECP plans to develop a community owned renewable energy project with low/no interest loan philanthropic investments. In addition to more affordable homes, the extra income from community owned renewables becomes another support of a more free life in the future.

We're the boss in an employee-owned economy

Most Americans experience work as a system where we have little say over decisions, don't share in the rewards from hard work, and bear the brunt of corporate profit hoarding in the form of stripped-down benefits, longer work hours and increased job insecurity.

While in 1970 70% of households supported themselves with a single wage-earner, today nearly half of all homes have both parents working full-time in order to support themselves. It is no

wonder that more Americans report deep unhappiness and stress trying to balance work and life: taking care of their children and elderly relatives, maintaining their mental and physical health, and participating as engaged community members. In so many ways, the average American has subsidized corporate and Wall Street profits with the declining quality of their personal lives.

We need to build an economy that reflects our highest democratic principles: one that gives people more of a say over the business decisions that affect their lives and more equitably shares the gains (or losses) of work. Today, over 15 million Americans work in employee-owned businesses that give them a real role in decision-making and shares of annual profits.

Research reveals that employee ownership greatly improves people's lives: employee owners have 92% higher median household wealth than non-employee owners, 33% higher median income from wages overall, and are much more likely to have access to work benefits like flexible work schedules, retirement plans, parental leave, tuition reimbursement, and childcare benefits.

As part of the Liberated Zone demonstration, the ECP will establish an employee-owned business where participating members hold shares of the company, participate in management decisions and get an annual cut of profits shares in profits. When we're the boss, the work place will change in order to make space for people's personal lives.

It's time for people to lead themselves

The status-quo way of doing things in the American political system has given people and corporations with money the power to pick representatives and set the agenda. As politicians and political parties compete for power, they fail to come up with big solutions that can really improve people's lives.

In many ways, American democracy has hit rock bottom -- which presents an opportunity to imagine new ways of being a citizen in the twenty-first century. Over the past two years, the ECP has been developing the Community Congress initiative, which provides opportunities for community members to share ideas about how to strengthen their community, identify top priorities

through a community-wide vote, and come together to make change happen.

In the first two communities that have participated in the Community Congress process, over 2,250 people have voted and 1,400 people have volunteered to help turn the things they care about into a reality. Now, residents are working together to call on their government to provide affordable housing, create jobs for young people, build biking and walking paths, protect their immigrant populations, and look after each other in times of emergency. Communities are really coming together.

It's time to grow up. Our current form of government listens more to big business and big donors more than it ever listens to regular people. We're going to need to build a whole new kind of democracy where people have real political power. If regular people were calling the shots, I don't think a community would vote to make it easier to pollute itself, pay poverty wages to its workers, or let the wealthiest pay fewer taxes than the poorest.

Sure, it's a bit scary to imagine people with that much power. I know many of you are worried that "other people" are just too dumb or bad intentioned to handle the responsibility. But what's the alternative? Our democracy has been corrupted. We'll have to teach people to really think for themselves and give them the power to lead themselves. We need to learn to trust each other more, because we'll need to come together to get to the other side of this mess we've created.

What to do next?

My hope is that after reading this, you create some space in your own life to really think about what you care about and what you want your life to be lived for. We're living in a time that needs heroes — brave pioneers that are willing to walk away from this way of life that is the cause of so much misery and destruction to build a better one.

If you have read this far, I imagine the call to build a more free life resonates with you. Over the past few years, my wife and I have begun to gather young people from our classes on our farm every

summer so we can inspire each other to move forward. If you're interested in joining one of these events, please email me at jason.angell@ecologicalcitizens.org. To our future.