A Spring of Inspiration

Our mission is to encourage citizens, through training and support, to be the leaders in forging a sustainable culture. Aware that inspiration is a critical ingredient for this work, this winter and spring we organized three events around the theme of inspiration.

**Journey of the Universe.** In *The Great Work—Our Way Into the Future* (2000), cultural historian Thomas Berry emphasizes a deep sense of destiny for we living humans who happened to arrive on earth at a critical time. “As we enter the 21st Century, we are experiencing a moment of grace. Such moments are privileged moments … transient moments.”

In late 2011, two lifelong protégés of Berry, Mary Evelyn Tucker and Brian Swimme, captured a major theme of Berry’s vision in a book and one-hour documentary, both entitled *Journey of the Universe*. As we explore the scientific story of the physical creation of the universe and the biotic evolution of life, we are filled with gratitude for the incredible events over the last 14 billion years that had to occur for us to be here in this particular moment.

With our premiere public showing of *Journey* in Portland in January, we launched the Portland Great Work Initiative now being developed by a team of volunteers.

**Earth Day in Music and Song.** Much has been written about the commercialization of Earth Day and attempts to co-opt its spirit by major corporations and specific industries. On the other hand, the meaning of the original Earth Day lives on for many who yearn to protect the natural world from exploitation.

In that spirit, on April 20 we organized our annual Earth Day in Music and Song with guest artists including pianist Michael Allen Harrison. As the evening ended, the audience circled up to join in singing “I Walk in Beauty,” accompanied by music from *Sky in the Road*.

**Practice of Hope.** In 2004 we were asked to give an Earth Day talk on hope. Specifically, after working for such a long time to protect the earth, how do we remain hopeful?

In considering this question for the first time, we came to a much deeper understanding of our personal relationship with hope. In May, we conducted an interactive workshop for a capacity crowd, and shared four “principles of hope” for participants to discuss and debate in small groups:

1. Hope is essential. Hopelessness and fear are not.
2. Hope is one’s highest vision of the possible. Probabilities are not pertinent.
3. Authentic hope cannot be based on denial. Embrace; don’t avoid reality.
4. Hope must be an intentional act. Conscious “practices of hope” are helpful.

A favorite practice for us is inspiration drawn from witnessing the sense of wonder flowing forth in a child exploring the natural world. Spring and summer are excellent times for this practice.

Jeanne and Dick Roy, Co-Founders
Agents in the Pews

We train citizens to be agents of change within a “circle of influence.” In this report, we feature centers of faith.

Emmer Holbrook wished to improve access to high quality, well priced, local and/or organic food for her friends in the Hillsboro Unitarian Church community. Her idea: form a food buying club. She put a notice in the church newsletter, sent a note to a few “greenie” friends, and now has 14 families in her Good Food Community club who purchase bulk food from Azure Standard and share tips for purchasing produce directly from local farmers. Beyond food purchasing, club members offer food preservation classes through the OSU Extension Service, lend out community garden plots in the church yard, carpool to pick berries at local farms, and alert each other to fruit gleaning opportunities in the neighborhood.

Michael Hall wished to help sustainability become a deeper core value of his church, St Luke in southwest Portland. After volunteering to chair the Environmental Stewardship Committee, Michael went through a detailed process to inform church leadership, including circulation of a 75-question survey. As its first initiative, the committee chose a very visible project—collection of non-curbside recyclables. Every two months, the entire congregation is invited to bring plastic bags, rigid plastic, appliances, and other odd items to the church in connection with three regular Sunday services. Volunteers then deliver them to reuse or recycling depots. Three times a year, the committee collects styrofoam. This system works so well that Michael is currently reaching out to other churches in the area to expand the practice.

Patty Page and members of her green team at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver became visible when they sponsored a Green Fair in 2009 with 11 stations to promote green actions. A big hit was the locally sourced salad lunch, for congregants and neighbors, made with donated produce and labor.

In 2010, the team organized systems required for curbside collection, reducing trash pickup from a one-yard dumpster to two small carts. It also began composting all food waste, using cloth napkins, and introducing the practice of “Oddments Recycling,” recycling items not collected curbside.

Without resting on its laurels, in 2011 the church voted to pursue Green Sanctuary accreditation, and the green team embarked on a 24/7 Beyond Curbside recycling project. Undercover space in the parking lot

Join a Food Buying Club or Start Your Own

Alternatives for buying food from local farmers include the CSA (community supported agriculture), farmers’ market, grocery store, and food buying club. The latter allows friends and neighbors to purchase bulk foods directly from vendors, usually at wholesale prices, to reduce packaging and to support the local economy.

- Visit www.portlandlocalfood.wordpress.com/food-buying-clubs for a list of Metro area buying clubs. One of our agents, Chris Musser, coordinates Eastside.
- For information on starting a club, see the North Portland Club’s April blog post: www.nopofood.org/2012/04/start-buying-club.
- In the Portland area, Azure Standard (azurestandard.com) sells in bulk to clubs and specializes in local, organic, and natural foods.

Where, oh where, did my sneakers go?
has been filled with recycling boxes for non-curbside plastics, sports shoes, compact fluorescent bulbs, cell phones, eyeglasses, small appliances, and Brita filters. For Earth Day this spring, the green team hosted another Green Fair for the public focused on toxics. Residents of the county were invited to drop off household hazardous waste and medications. Also, the Washington Toxics Coalition was there with specialized equipment to test items, including toys, drink containers, and car seats, for toxic heavy metals or dangerous chemicals.

A unique tradition at the Center is the field trip, reminiscent of time away from school as a kid. What better way to spend quality time with other agents of change than observing innovation and best practices? Recent trips have taken us from a formal office setting in a lofty tower to the windrows of a commercial composting site.

Schwabe, Williamson & Wyatt was winner of the 2011 Sustainable Law Office Award from the Oregon State Bar. High in the Pacwest Center building in downtown Portland, the firm is raising the bar for more sustainable law office practices. Noting with pride the 100% recycled copy paper, printers and copiers set to default duplexing, and family-style lunches with no disposables, our tour guide impressed us with the number of items the firm is recycling—about 16. In individual offices, trash containers have been replaced with very small pitch containers hooked onto the recycling bins for minor amounts of non-recyclable trash. Inspired by the tour, Kurt Burkhart is now investigating the use of pitch containers for compostables at MulvannyG2 Architecture firm. Sheryl Scali, property manager at 200 Market said, “[as a result of the tour] I am now providing those small pitch containers to our new tenants... We’ve been using them in our office and they’re just great. Without that tour I doubt whether I’d ever get around to knowing about them.”

Shedding work ties for rubber boots, our next tour was to Nature’s Needs, the 22-acre Recology composting site in North Plains that takes food waste and yard debris from Portland homes and businesses. The shredded material spends 14 days in windrows where the temperature is stabilized at about 145º to kill pathogens. The material is then moved to a curing zone where the windrows are turned daily by a giant machine. After 45 days of curing, the compost is ready to be sold in bulk at places like Best Buy in Town Landscape Supply. We learned that the biggest problem for the operators is plastic—not only plastic that unintentionally gets into the food, but also so-called “compostable” plastic that does not completely decompose.

**Saving a Great Tradition**

With the 45-year tradition of Outdoor School in Portland Public Schools (PPS) threatened by budgetary cuts, in April the Center took the lead in mobilizing citizens to save this hands-on science program. Open to all sixth-graders regardless of means, the annual residential camp experience has been life-changing for generations of Oregonians, including the enthusiastic high school leaders. Learning that the program was to be cut from the district budget, Center Co-Founder Jeanne Roy organized Portlanders for Outdoor School, which she co-chaired with Center volunteer Celeste Lewis.

In addition to lobbying, marshaling testimony and letters to the school board, and holding countless meetings to line up support, the group has also been seeking new sources of one-time funding outside the school district.

On May 14, as a result of the group’s efforts, the PPS Board agreed to keep some money in its budget if POS could raise the rest. Jeanne had this to say, “We still have some heavy lifting to do to raise the $100,000 we need for next year, but we are optimistic that we can forestall, in the words of author Richard Louv, ‘the last child standing in the woods.’”
Impact Investing Project

Frustrated by the superficial element of socially responsible investing (SRI), a new, more promising movement is underway: impact investing. Because of its potential, the Center has created an impact investing task force to map opportunities for interested citizens in the greater Portland area.

The national Forum for Sustainable and Responsible Investment claims that 12 percent of the U.S. investment marketplace is now involved in SRI. However, a 2004 study of SRI mutual funds by Paul Hawken concluded that SRI is a misleading term because, “SRI mutual funds have no common standards, definitions, or codes of practices.” A key finding of the report: “The cumulative investment portfolio of the combined SRI funds is virtually no different than the combined portfolio of conventional mutual funds.” The report also cited several funds as positive exceptions, including Portland’s Portfolio 21.

As an illustration of concern, a fund may use a “negative screen” to eliminate tobacco, a worthy objective, but the portfolio could be filled with stocks that profit from the sale of soft drinks to children, gambling, clear cutting, and other activities offensive to the investor.

In contrast, impact investing is intended to support businesses having a clear positive impact. Two categories come readily to mind:

**Locally owned businesses.** The intent to invest in locally owned businesses is burgeoning although the practice is not necessarily easy. In Port Townsend, the citizen-created Local Investing Opportunities Network (LION) has placed over 30 loans, averaging about $60,000 each. In Portland, LIONpdx is just getting underway.

**Social purpose.** Another impact goal is to invest in a business or nonprofit with a very visible social purpose. For example, Equal Exchange issues CDs to raise funds for loans to small coffee growers in the Americas. The invested money is circulated seasonally as farmers borrow to put in a crop and pay down the loan as the crop is harvested.

For information on Impact Investing:
- Slow Money: [http://www.slowmoney.org](http://www.slowmoney.org)
- Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE): [http://www.livingeconomies.org](http://www.livingeconomies.org)
- RSF Social Finance: [http://rsfsocialfinance.org](http://rsfsocialfinance.org)