GROWING A LIFE-PLACE POLITICS

Peter Berg

The most obvious conclusions sometimes disguise the most mysterious situations. Ask city dwellers where their water comes from, for instance. Most will answer with something like "The faucet, of course. Want water? Turn the tap handle." But the faucet is only the last place water was, not where it came from. Before that it was in the plumbing, and before that in the mains. It got there from a reservoir, and from an aqueduct connected to a storage lake. "So tell me the name of the lake and I'll know where the water really comes from." Finding out the name and, even better, walking on the shore of that lake is definitely a start toward acquiring a sense of care and gratitude. But even that lake is just another place where water was. It got there as runoff from rain or snow that fell from clouds. Where do clouds come from? Evaporated ocean water? Two weather systems meeting? Whatever forces are involved in making any particular cloud, the source of every particle of water in it remains a deep mystery. If anything can be said about the ultimate state of water, it is probably that it doesn't begin or end anywhere but is constantly cycled through one form and location to another.

Here's another easy observation: We all live in some geographic place. And here's the accompanying mysterious and very critical situation: the places where we live are alive. They are *bio*regions, unique life-places with their own soils and land forms, watersheds and climates, native plants and animals, and many other distinct natural characteristics. Each characteristic affects the others and is affected by them as in any other living system or body. And bioregions are all different from each other. Not just "mountains," but Appalachian Mountains or Rockies. Not just "river valley," but Hudson or Sacramento.

People are also an integral part of life-places. What we do affects them and we are in turn affected by them. The lives of bioregions ultimately support our own lives, and the way we live is becoming crucial to their ability to continue to do so.

Knowing that water is always cycling has a lot of practical value (regardless of how frail our sense of every station in the cycle may be). It means, for example, that simply dumping water that is dirty with sewage or chemicals won't really get rid of those pollutants. They'll just be carried along to the next station wherever it happens to be, to the water intake of a town downstream, perhaps, or through the ground to later seep into a well. Since water that we've used has a good chance of quickly becoming someone else's, limiting what goes into it and treating it before sending it along becomes a realm of social responsibility and reciprocity. That's the basis of what could be termed "water cycle politics," and it's serious business. Most town, city and country governments have official departments to oversee water supplies and sewage, and questions of water quality and use can arouse some of the most serious public debates.

What's the practical response to knowing that we share in the lives of bioregions? If what we do degrades them, how does that fit with our concepts of social responsibility and reciprocity? What is a life-place politics?

Rootstock

It's probably best to begin by looking at the actual conditions that exist where some people live. Doing this may run the risk of over-par-

ticularizing, but at least it won't deliver the kind of over-generalization and abstraction that can turn political thinking sour with ideology.

Right now I'm in a clearly defined sixty-mile-long watershed that empties into the Pacific Ocean on a fairly remote stretch of the northern California coast. I've been teaching Shakespeare's Sonnets ("When I consider everything that grows...") at the small high school my daughter attends here, work-learning about fruit trees from a local master pruner, and helping with some community projects. A borrowed cabin provides heat by woodstove and light by kerosene lamps. Water comes from the same creek that later flows through salmon-rearing tanks tended by self-taught homesteaders who are trying to bring native fish back up to their historical levels of population in the river.

Living here has never been especially prosperous. Fifth-generation families still cut and haul firewood, maintain excellent gardens and home-can everything from cherries to salmon. So do many of the new settlers. Much of the work that requires more than one person's labor is carried out on an informal exchange or volunteer basis that is held together with good-willed neighborliness. (People's skills and the services they can make available are wide-ranging and sometimes astonishing.) A volunteer fire department garage is the most visible municipal institution in the nearest town, a small post office is the only sign of a distant national government. If police are ever called, they will come from the county sheriff's office two mountain ridges and an hour and a half away. "Folk anarchism" wouldn't be a bad term for the social ethos that guides generally respectful relations between this valley's residents. Most of them are here because they like it that way.

"You make it sound too idyllic," remarks my pruner friend. "I live here but I'd move *there*, the way you're describing this place. You've left out the mentality about doing anything you want to on your own land even if it means destroying it. How about bickering over water rights or the other personal grudges that can go on for years?"

There's all that, but a visitor who has any interest in reversing the degradation of life-places couldn't help but be struck by seeing the rootstock for sustainable inhabitation in the future that exists here. Plentiful local renewable wood for heating fuel, good water from springs and creeks, natural building materials, varying but workable soil, and some natural provision of food from fish are native resources. Human resources include broad skills, a spirit of informal mutualism, serious work on natural preservation and fishery enhancement projects, and a growing ecologically-centered culture.

Actually achieving a workable harmony with natural systems in this valley is another matter, however, and much more difficult than it would appear to be to a casual visitor. For one thing, it would require acceptance of a political perspective that is different from anything that most people here (or elsewhere) have known.

"Restore natural systems, satisfy basic human needs, and develop support for individuals: those are the most fundamental requirements for sustainability and should be the goals of watershed-scaled bioregional politics."

Let's start with the place itself, which hasn't been treated very well over the last century since settlers arrived and native inhabitants suffered extermination or removal. Cattle and sheep overgrazing (with forest-burning to create larger pastures) and brutal logging have scarred most of the hills. Subsequent erosion carried away vast amounts of soil, caused huge landslides and filled the formerly pristine river with gravel bars. A sustainable future would first of all have to be based on a local commitment to restore and maintain the river, soil, forests, and wildlife that ultimately support inhabitation here.

Next would come developing means for meeting human needs in ways that are both sustainable and self-reliant. Current food production, although more evident than in some other places, is really only minimal. Even hay for animals often comes from outside the valley. Energy needs, now partially met with local wood, could be completely filled by using alternative techniques and other renewable sources such as solar and micro-hydro power. Gasoline is presently one-fifth more expensive here than it is just outside the valley. Nearly all manufactured goods are carried or shipped in from outside. There are a few health practitioners, but complicated cases (or even ones requiring

eyeglasses or dentistry) have to travel outside the watershed limits for care. And public transportation is non-existent.

Finally, there is the problem of earning a living in a place where there is little regular employment. Income from the present boom in marijuana cultivation (which also exists in many other deeply rural areas) is in perpetual jeopardy from law enforcement zealots. Even if marijuana became legalized, the most effective long-term economic solution would be to build on other existing activities that are more boom-and-bust proof and compatible with restoring, rather than further depleting, natural systems—natural enhancement projects, education (especially in sustainable fishing, forestry, grazing, and farming practices), visitor services, and local crafts and culture. The internal need for cash can simultaneously be reduced through community undertakings that "make money by not using money"—some large commonly-held farms, tool and machinery sharing co-ops, labor exchanges for new improvements like refitting homes for energy efficiency, a local currency or system of credits for trading goods and services, a transportation sharing system, and other formal ways to heighten social interdependence.

Restore natural systems, satisfy basic human needs, and develop support for individuals: those are the most fundamental requirements for sustainability and should be the goals of watershed-scaled bioregional politics in the valley. Achieving these is already a concern among some of the people, and their numbers could easily grow in the future. Even so, those who have been involved the longest feel they won't see full fruition in their lifetimes. How many generations might it take to restore the valley? (For that matter, has it really ever happened anywhere else before?) How self-reliant in regard to food, energy, manufacturing, education, and health can this place ever become?? How much continuing outside support is needed, and under what terms should extra-watershed support be secured? As for increasing social interdependence, what political means can enable all the individualistic and differing personal beliefs that exist here to coalesce in formal co-operation without losing the free-souled spirit that the valley nurtures now?

Closer to hand, there are plenty of issues that need immediate attention. There should be a moratorium on logging the few stands of first-growth trees that still remain. A full recycling program should replace hauling away unsorted garbage from the local dump. A valley-wide alternative energy plan should be mapped out and put into action. Watershed education, although featured at the small high school, should be a concern of the larger elementary and junior high schools and should be offered to adults as well. There's a lot to keep everyone busy before politics can be largely framed by the principles of restoring natural systems, filling human needs and developing support for individuals.

Evolving Watershed-Scaled Governments

Growing the politics for a life-place has to be based on the reality of living there, and it's necessary to remind ourselves that no facts are established without evidence. Someone has to do something that is consistent with the vision of fitting into on- going natural processes before any reasonable person will support the vision.

No outside agency proclaimed that salmon enhancement should begin in the valley, for instance. A desire to see past numbers of salmon running the river again led a few people to investigate how this might be accomplished and inspired them to commit time- consuming labor (with frustratingly numerous false starts and mistakes) that eventually led to some small success. They communicated their vision to other people, involved them in the project, and consequently increased their chances for success. Now that more neighbors are involved, the threats to restoring salmon—such as loss of fish habitat through further logging, overgrazing, overfishing, and stream destruction—are becoming more widely exposed and understood issues. If it becomes a generally shared ethic, "Don't do anything that could hurt the spawning cycle" could lead to profound changes here.

Bioregional politics originate with individuals who identify with real places and find ways to interact positively with the life- web around them. Involving close-by watershed neighbors creates a "social-shed." This seed group is and will remain the most important unit of bioregional political interaction.

Several socialsheds of neighbors working on a wide variety of different projects (co-ops, community gardens, renewable energy, bioregional education, recycling, and many others) can easily join together to form an organization for the broader local community. In effect, it would be a

watershed council, rightfully claiming representation for the closely shared place itself. A watershed council is the appropriate forum for directly addressing present inhabitory issues and also for stating new objectives that are based on the principles of restoring natural systems, meeting human needs and supporting individuals. It can effectively contend with the closest institutions of government (town, city and county) to secure positions. These established governments may be arbitrary units in bioregional terms, with unnatural straight-lined borders or control over a patchwork of different natural geographies, but their policies hold for parts of real life-places and must be dealt with while the council presses for eventual self-determination in the watershed.

Whole bioregions are usually larger than one watershed and are overlaid with equally arbitrary and even more powerful governments—several counties, state(s), national departments and agencies—too many, in fact, to serve as practical institutions for resolving bioregion-wide problems. Rather than seeking to influence anything higher than local governments, watershed councils must band together to form an independent body in order to represent their entire bioregion. A council from the valley, for instance, while holding positions on town and council issues, would also join with similar northern California (Shasta bioregion) groups in a federation or congress.

Watershed councils and bioregional congresses have, in fact, sprung up in parts of North America reaching from Cascadia in the Pacific Northwest to the Lower Hudson estuary in New York. One might ask (as even the environmentalist establishment does) whether these new groups are really necesssary. Couldn't the goals of sustainability be reached through existing forms, and wouldn't it be better if those forms were made to work rather than cranking up something that is probably going to be seen as unacceptably radical anyway? And how about places other than remote valleys—areas that are more populated or nearer to metropolitan centers?

It goes without saying that creating a new political framework is difficult and that it will inevitably be seen at first as too radical (with some justification, considering the snaggy, frustrated and boilingly ambitious types it may attract). The only reason to bother is to gain something that is absolutely necessary but can't be achieved through existing means. The question becomes: Is there any other way to preserve life-places? Aside from immediately local ones, governments and dominant political parties aren't open to accepting sustainability as a serious goal. They seem barely able to hear outcries against obvious large-scale destruction of the planetary biosphere from merely reform-minded environmentalists now, and aren't likely to take bioregionalists seriously until the District of Columbia itself becomes totally uninhabitable. Government has forfeited defense of life-places to the people who live in them. Watershed councils and bioregional groups are necessary to secure inhabitory rights.

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Is sustainability really necessary? Rather than reviewing all of the colonialist, resource-depleting and environmental horror stories of the twentieth century that continue in the present and which without opposition will definitely extend in a compounded form into the next century, let's simply look at who we want to be. Do we want to degrade ourselves by participating in the degradation of humanity and the planet? And don't both of these processes begin where we live? *Un*sustainability simply isn't a lifesome alternative. Struggling for sustainability is necessary if we want to achieve it, like freedom.

As for abstracting from the situation in a northern California valley to other places, won't that be committing the same error that earlier was said to turn political thinking sour with ideology? Frankly, yes. No two life-places are the same, for one thing, and the differences between back-country, rural, suburban, and city environs are enormous. Are there any similarities? Yes to that, too. Every site of human inhabitation is part of some watershed or other and exists within a distinct bioregion. The goals of restoring natural systems, meeting human needs and supporting individuals that are appropriate in the valley apply wherever else people are living. The problem lies in searching out how human activities in any lifeplace are ultimately rooted in natural processes and discovering how

to fit into them.

A more populated rural area, for instance, may share the same watershed as a nearby urban center. This is the case for most of the agricultural country near cities on the Atlantic seaboard stretching from Boston to Atlanta, although the population-dense coastal edge is commonly seen as one long megalopolis and the connection between each city (usually sited on a river or at the mouth) and its watershed of support is virtually ignored. This natural continuity must be restored to our consciousness, and recognizing the differences between whole bioregions that lie within the territory separating the Atlantic Coast and Appalachian Mountains is an important initial step toward developing sustainability in that part of the continent.

In the Great Plains, however, cities are much smaller and often already identify with the country surrounding them. The problem there is that agricultural use of the land has supplanted native features nearly completely. Mammoth farming operations exhaustively mine soil and water and export it in the form of grain and meat to places as far away as the Soviet Union. The Great Plains (like the great valleys of California) is a resources colony for global monoculture and is rapidly being stripped of the basic components of sustainability. Watershed councils and bioregional groups in this increasingly endangered part of the continent advocate restoring the native prairies, non-abusive farming methods and greater diversification to relieve dependency on mono-crop agriculture.

There's tremendous diversity among bioregions, from Sonoran Desert to the Gulf of Maine, from the Great Lakes to the Ozarks, but the schema for growing native life-place politics starting with socialsheds of neighbors, joining these in watershed councils, and proceeding to the creation of bioregional federations or congresses can fit them all.

Green Cities

Cities don't hover on space platforms. They are all within bioregions and can be surprisingly dependent on fairly close sources for food and water, at least. All of them can become more responsible for sustainability by lessening their strain on the bioregions where they are situated. Urban life-place politics can be expressed through Green City programs for whatever aspects of restoring natural places, meeting human needs and supporting individuals are realistically possible. And there are more ways to do this than a typical city-dweller might think.

Processing urban sewage into fertilizer that can be returned to farm land would reciprocate directly with provision of food, for example. Establishing neighborhood common gardens and orchards would partially relieve the outlying countryside while helping to make a city more self-reliant. Energy demands could be sharply reduced by public projects to retrofit buildings and homes for alternative sources and heat efficiency. City governments can help facilitate starting new neighborhood food cooperatives, and establish centers for lending tools and equipment. (Public libraries for books are an impressive precedent.) Neighborhood- scaled recycling programs could be established. Cities can sponsor urban-rural exchanges to trade labor for agricultural produce. They can create wild-corridor parks so that native creeks, vegetation, birds and other animals can pass through and provide a natural presence. Bioregional arts programs and city- wide celebrations of total life-forms are projects easily begun.

Some of the points in a Green City program may seem similar to current environmentalist proposals but there is a fundamental difference between them. From a bioregionalist perspective, people are *part* of a life-place, as dependent on natural systems as native plants and animals. Green City proposals aren't based on simply cleaning up the environment but rather on securing reciprocity between the urban way of life and the natural life-web that supports it.

On the surface there seem to be few ways to demonstrate bioregional connectedness to city people. They don't see the actual sources for their food, for example, and often don't know where they are. But that doesn't make the life-place link any less real; it just confirms the need to expose it. Since cities are educational, cultural and media centers, the means for exposure are already there. Green City programs can emphasize natural underpinnings by proposing curricula and art that communicate with everyone from school children to theater audiences. They can promote appearances by speakers and cultural groups from outside the city to bring a sense of bioregional partnership. Green City "bioregion reports" could readily become an aspect of daily news. When these and all the other urban informational possibilities are considered, developing life-place consciousness in

cities may not be so difficult after all.

North American Bioregional Congresses

What makes sense after the watershed council and bioregional group (now including a Green City program) levels of life-place politics? Representation of these at larger naturally-scaled assemblies seems to follow, and just as there are currently dozens of watershed-bioregion groups, there was in May, 1984, the first North American Bioregional Congress. But the air becomes thinner at this level, and it's good to take a deep breath before climbing up.

The intent of such an assembly should be to extend whatever links have been previously made between groups, make new ones, prepare mutually-felt statements on continent-wide concerns, and decide on an effective course of action that all of the different groups can taken in common. Some of this was accomplished at the first Congress. Representatives met each other, information was exchanged, there were statements on some positions, and a few working committees were established.

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The continental air is thin because it's difficult enough to understand one's own watershed and then fit it into a larger bioregion, but much more so to "think like a continent." For one reason or other, many attendees at NABC I were basically unfamiliar with bioregional ideas and activities. Some had come to learn what these are. Some others came to represent their own different movements. North America as a living entity in the planetary biosphere was eventually understood and celebrated, but how bioregions interact with each other, what neighboring relationships might be, how groups can assist with real projects in different places, and other matters that presumably should be covered were hardly touched on.

To overcome the thin air, future continental congresses will have to be more definite about their identity and intent. Crucial discussions and decisions should be framed in terms of their usefulness to active representatives of life-places, and there should be more addresses by those who can assist in "thinking like a continent," an array extending from geographers and water basin specialists to story-tellers and poets. A North American Bioregional Congress is an important new political forum, and there is much needed work that it can do. National and state governments persistently maintain destructive policies toward the continent's life-places. A Congress that authentically represents North America can claim authority to initiate beneficial ones. It can confront the problem of arbitrary (and multiple) government power over bioregions. It can select priority issues to bring attention to situations in particular life-places (such as ruinous diversion of rivers in desert Sunbelt areas) and organize exchanges of expertise, work parties and cultural events to support member groups. It can eventually stand as the main voice for a large continent-wide movement.

We've come a long distance from a remote northern California valley to the North American Bioregional Congress, and have picked up new long-term struggles at every level along the way. Restoring the valley will take several generations—the Shasta bioregion several more. How many for the continent? Meeting basic human needs of all its people? Creating means of support for them? They're hugely challenging goals, but undoubtedly worthwhile since they are ways to retrieve the future and offer a definite vision for what is vaguely termed "post-industrial society." Achieving them is the work, the *do*, of bioregionalism.

A Basis For Alliance

There are opportunities for life-place political alliances at all the levels from a local watershed to North America (and eventually with other continents' assemblies). Only a fanatical mind-set would dictate that the basis for these should be to convert everyone else into a bioregionalist, and that would make a travesty of the terms for coalitions. Let's go back to the work of fitting into real natural processes to find more legitimate terms.

Active bioregionalists don't merely raise their hands to vote on issues but also find ways to interact positively with the life- web around them. They work with neighbors to carry out projects and build a bioregional culture together. Put another way, they are the working practitioners of

what academics and others term "a paradigm shift." There is a very wide range of ways to express life-place consciousness and no need to exclude anyone's creativity in doing so, but bioregionalists do share a common interest in actually applying their convictions to local situations (in addition to having opinions about more distant ones). Their political activity is an extension of the work they do. They have a hands-on identity that is compatible with the goals of restoring natural systems, meeting basic human needs and creating support for individuals.

Some other groups have a natural affinity for these same goals. Native Americans are an obvious example. Renewable energy, alternative technology and permaculture (sustainable agriculture) proponents can easily share support on many issues. Earth-spirit women's groups, radical conservationists, natural living advocates, and deep ecology adherents envision a similar bio- centric future. It wouldn't even be too difficult for many current environmentalists to fit their causes into a longer-range bioregional perspective.

Less apparent, perhaps, is the basis for alliances with progressive movements that are aimed at affecting policies of existing large government structures and political parties. Disarmament, non-intervention, anti-nuclear, and other movements with a more distant focus than on the immediately local level leave little room for sharing direct support. Bioregionalists don't want nuclear arms or power facilities where they live, of course, and would certainly join with specifically anti-nuclear groups to make those places nuclear-free. Whether or not a watershed council or North American Bioregional Congress should endorse positions of every group or movement that each representative at those assemblies finds deserving is another matter. Some positions will be found in common, but the bioregional movement has its own character and own concerns. Without these it wouldn't be worth much as an ally anyway.

There has been some confusion about the relationship between life-place concerns and "green politics" ever since the first North American Bioregional Congress. A few participants at that event have even stated since that there is no difference between the two. The distinctions are very clear, however, and should be understood so that genuine bioregional goals can be realized.

First of all, green politics attempts to cover a more extensive range of areas, but where there are similarities, bioregional directions are much more definite and specific. This is obvious in a statement of definition from the initial Green Organizing

...Ecotopia Emerging...

As the membership of the Survivalist Party increasingly abandoned hopes of rational government in Washington, Vera Allwen felt as if she were coming to live in the shadow country of Ecotopia, rather than in "the old country," as her associates had now begun to call the United States. Nonetheless, she was startled when a visitor to the Green House announced that he was a representative of the Quebec government and wished to discuss establishing an official diplomatic mission.

"But we aren't a country. You can't maintain diplomatic relations except with countries, surely?"

"We are not particularly concerned with official labels," said the emissary. "Our desire is simply to establish a close relationship. We feel a certain kinship with you, after all, since you are striving to defend yourself against the rest of your country, just as we have been against the rest of ours."

"I can understand that. We might have ideas to share."

"We might be able to help each other."

"That seems unlikely—you're three thousand miles away."

The Quebeçois smiled. "But we are only a few hundred miles from New York. If another oil crisis comes, New York will be needing our hydro power to keep all those air conditioners running."

A few days later, a small building across the street from the Green House was sandblasted down to its original brick. It had once been a corner cafe for warehouse workers, featuring chili dogs, beer and juke-box music. Now the flag of Quebec, bearing four crisp white fleurs-de-lys, flew over its front door...

Planning Meeting:

Green politics interweaves ecological wisdom, decentralization of economic and political power whenever practical, personal and social responsibility, global security, and community self- determination within the context of respect for diversity of heritage and religion. it advocates nonviolent action, cooperative world order, and self-reliance.

Some of the words are the same, but the sense of them is very different. Bioregionalists have a specific direction for "ecological wisdom:" they want to restore and maintain watersheds and bioregions. Those are the places to which they want to decentralize and where they wish to practice self- determination. Their "personal and social responsibility" is to meet basic human needs and create ways to support individuals in life-places. As for extending their goals to "global security...co-operative world order," bioregionalists may well choose to ally with groups and movements which develop effective ways to apply that sentiment, but their own primary effort is to solve problems where they live. (And that may be the best locale for rooting a planetary perspective, after all.)

The most critical difference between the movements may lie with their actual ecological orientation. How much "ecological wisdom" are they really prepared to accept? Bioregionalists answer, "All we can get!" They see their lives as intertwined with ongoing natural processes, part of the life of a place. From their biocentric viewpoint, human society is ultimately based on interdependence with other forms of life. They follow that conviction to make choices about which kinds of work to undertake and to oppose Late Industrial depredations.

It is not established that followers of green politics are similarly committed, and questionable as to whether they will become so. Theirs is a multiplicity of concerns (Ecological Wisdom is only one of ten key values listed), and among many Greens, ecological awareness is limited to an older environmentalist perspective, attempting to reform industrialism instead of aiming to replace it. Some bioregionalists who are also active in green politics feel that they can reach members of that movement and change its direction. No doubt some will be persuaded, but wishful evangelism isn't a good foundation for building coalitions. Truly relevant life-place politics will originate from watershed councils, bioregional groups and the North American Bioregional Congress. When support for the positions of these naturally-scaled groups is sought, Greens may yet prove to be very strong allies regardless of their different emphasis and direction.

The Mystery Remains And We No Longer Deny It

More environmental agencies won't ultimately relieve our situation. They would only be further appendages of a political core that is welded to industrialism itself. We need a core based on the design of Nature instead, from watershed to bioregion and continent to planetary biosphere. Is it self-defeating to avoid established governments other than immediately local ones? Not if we want to anticipate a society whose direction already lies outside those institutions. We need to uncover and follow a natural design that lies beneath industrial asphalt.

What about world spheres of influence, global economies and other international considerations? The whole planet is undergoing the severe strains of the Late Industrial period now: chemical plagues, wholesale mechanical removal of landscapes, disruption of the most major river courses, accelerated destruction of ecosystems, and overnight disappearance of habitats. Couldn't we tame that suicidal appetite by adopting sustainability as a goal? If we become bioregionally self-reliant won't that be a large step toward taking the strain off the rest of the planet's life- places?

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On a farm in the country or in a city apartment, we're all completely enmeshed in the web of life. We can't know all of the details of all the connections. Bioregional politics doesn't try to overcome the mystery, it is aimed toward making a social transition so that we can live with that mystery. Can we stop tearing the web apart and consciously build a role as partners in all life? We'd better, and we can, by beginning where we live.

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