

Much of the environmental news is dire, and its bearers can be pessimistic; people who are tired of bad news are apt to turn the channel or the page before the depressing statistics can ruin their breakfast.

But pessimism is not what you get with Carolyn Raffensperger. The executive director of the Science and Environmental Health Network sees opportunities to improve our lives around every corner. Here some of the "Can you imagine?" possibilities she shared in an interview in May:



By Small Dog Productions 722-2693

Can you imagine ...

... if we directed the gifts of shopaholics toward the community instead of toward themselves?

"I think that the shopaholics — the people who are maxing out their credit cards — probably would have been hunters and gatherers," Raffensperger said. "Those are the women who would have known where the rabbits were breeding, where the deer were and when they had babies, ... they would have known the roots, they would have known where all the morels were ... and instead, we've made this pathological ..."

"(What if) you gave those women \$50 and said, 'A family's had a fire, and in 24 hours, they're going to need an entire house with these sizes and these colors. So we want cranberry and sage green and forest green. We want dishes that match for eight and a turkey platter and so on. Here's \$50.'

"Can you imagine using those skills for the community?"

... if we had a community solar food drier? "We could use a whole lot of food from the student farms, we could be drying apples, we could be drying corn ... A lot of people who are really struggling financially don't have a lot of freezers like I've got that are dependent on electricity. Could you imagine supplying dried apple snacks ... for the kids in school?"

... if we had a recycling center that was free where college students heading out of town could drop off their half-used laundry soap?

... if we had a lending library of children's clothes and bassinets?

... if we had a community seed bank to which we could donate our leftover seeds each year?

... Iowa's agriculture policy was focused on feeding the Midwest first and fueling the Midwest first?

... if we had lending libraries for tools in our communities just as we have for books, so not every person needed to purchase every tool?

... if we expanded the commons — the things that are our common wealth and support our common health?

... if farmers had to report to the government the number of eagles that hatched on their property in addition to the number of bushels of corn they grew?

"You know how thrilled Ames was when we had this eagle nesting. We were ga-ga. Britney Spears had nothing on this eagle in our town," Raffensperger said. "If we counted her well-being and health as an indicator of our well-being and health, we'd go a long way."

... if we said we'd help farmers transition to organic agriculture?

Our farm policies are set up to defend an industry that we no longer need — as if we're buggy whip manufacturers, for example. "When do we say, 'You're on the wrong side of history. Your kind of agriculture is on the wrong side of history. AND we need to eat. AND we need energy. AND we want you on the land. How do we do that? Are we so dumb that we can't raise our own food without destroying the water?'"

... if our goal was to increase pollinators in the state of Iowa?

... if all presidential candidates got beyond all the silly things we're arguing about with the courts and asking how we're going to position the courts to protect the life and well-being of future generations?

... if, instead of assuming that we're all going to do a little damage, assume that we're all going to do a little good?

— Heidi Marttila-Losure