...when it comes to climate change, incrementalism and moderation are actually a huge problem. Because they will lead us, ironically, to a very extreme, hot and cruel future. When you have gone as badly off course as we have, moderate actions don’t lead to moderate outcomes. They lead to dangerously radical ones.
Naomi Kline, On Fire, 2019

I WANT YOU TO PANIC, OUR HOUSE IS ON FIRE
Greta Thunberg

The Great Change
by Chuck Wemstrom

Actually, nobody knows when it all started. There’s no date, time or place for when the great transformation began. It’s not even a proper noun. But then again climate change and climate collapse were never proper nouns.

As the infamous pandemic of 2020 began to wind down, and as the riots burst and flared into life and then sputtered, but instead of disappearing merged with the climate action movement, suddenly everybody jumped into action. The Climate reformers and the equal justice folks both merged and continued fighting, gaining strength from the common cause and larger numbers.

They said, “What the hell! We’re all mobilized to fight the coronavirus, so let’s just keep going. All of us, white and black, we’re ready. So let’s just do it. And finally, the time has come, past time, to fight for the well being and health of our home planet, earth.”

And that’s what happened.

The historians have written there were nearly fifty years of plans, blueprints and models to guide them. They didn’t have to reinvent the wheel. They didn’t have to start from scratch.

So they concentrated on the biggies: housing, food, clothing, transportation, jobs and leisure.

The AARP had written a series of essays in their magazine in 2011, 2016 and 2019 about intergenerational living. They wrote that during the preceding 20 years, slowly but steadily under the radar, there had a steady increase in intergenerational living to nearly 20% of all households.

Boomerang kids might be a joke, but they too had become a reality. Dustin was a cartoon character that everyone had made fun of; now he’s a hero. And for years because of college debt, high rents and serf-like salaries, young singles were living
together in many of the big cities. In May, 2020 the conservative NY Times columnist, David Brooks, had written that the nuclear family was a failure and new living arrangements were necessary.

And then all of a sudden in a quiet back street in Galena, in a neighborhood in Chicago, in picturesque Mt. Carroll, in Hanover and Savanna, (more dead than alive), Freeport, Stockton and Rockford (another city which was slowly bleeding to death), across the River in Dubuque and across the state line in Platteville, the transformation simply happened. In the fanciest and in the most run-down neighborhoods, it happened. It happened the same way it was happening in neighborhoods all across America. At first, no master plan, no coordination or even sharing of ideas and strategies. All the master plans came later. Goggling ideas came later.

In Mt. Carroll, Michael and Kathy looked around at their house. They had talked about downsizing, but never seriously and had never actually done anything about it. The AARP articles were an inspiration. They said to each other, “We can do it. The house is paid for; we have Social Security, Medicare and a small pension. We’re set for life.” They talked with one of their neighbors, Joe. He said that as much as he’d like to move in with them, he had been talking with his two grown sons and their wives. The oldest son had decided to take an early buyout which was all of a sudden becoming popular. His son and his wife, their two preteens and her mother were going to move in with him and his wife.

The other son was going to continue working, but was helping to create a small planned community called co-housing, after a popular Danish initiative where he lived in suburban Chicago. But Joe thought that the two neighbors could work together. He said, “Let’s talk later. We can talk about getting more people involved. And there will be time for small projects like combining our back yards.” That was just one of the relationships being created all over town.

Kathy approached their divorced daughter and her two kids. She loved the idea, a widow down the street agreed without a moment’s hesitation and their old friends from college jumped at the chance. Six adults and two kids, it sounded like a plan. The two couples each had their own bedroom and the two single women each had a bedroom. The kids had the basement. There were two full baths and a ½ bath; they worked it out. They shared the cooking, cleaning and the yard work. The pollinator gardens and the big backyard veggie garden were whole house projects. Once a month or so they had a cleaning person do all the stuff that they’d missed (skipped).

People who had winter homes down south or a getaway condo in Chicago or a weekend place in northwest Illinois sold those and moved to Galena or Mt. Carroll full-time. Some sold their weekend places and moved back to
metro-Chicago. Lots of Chicagoans after the pandemic simply decided that big city life was just too much and moved to northwest Illinois, including a few black families who moved to Elizabeth, the Galena Territory or Galena. They felt more comfortable along highway 20 than they did in the more rural areas. Some worked from home. Others started their own businesses. Soon, they all learned that their work lives were going to be completely upended.

Sometimes, people who only knew each other from a social group would hook up and pick one of their homes and depending on the size of the home they’d then recruit other friends and family. Young singles would move in together. Older people would move in together. The only thing they had in common was they were age cohorts.

Bigger homes, old B&Bs, and airbnbs which sometimes had been hard to, to sell just six months ago went quickly. Sometimes, if people had reservations, they’d come and hangout; they’d spend a day or two. They were almost always converted. Sometimes, in the planning stages, people would have a falling out. It wasn’t always smooth sailing. They’d leave the group and often end up happier in another group, but everybody moved forward.

In the city, two bedroom condos which had always been considered just big enough for a couple, suddenly were big enough for two couples. The new foursome would joke, “Remember, we’ve got the lounge on the first floor, the exercise room, on the third floor, the pool in the basement, the roof top deck and roof top garden.” Smiling, one would add, “Actually, it’s almost too much.”

Michael and Kathy reminded people about the AARP articles and suggested that they might want to mix it up a bit—diversify. Kathy suggested age and race. Some did. It was a challenge.

Some people wanted to live together but they didn’t want to live in the same house. They discovered that everybody had their own ideas about the now obsolete garage but some individuals and even couples thought that they would make a great “granny apartment.” Now one or two folks live in the former garage and join the folks at what they called the “big house” for meals and social activities but they can limit their involvement by cutting out the back door and going back to their own place.

Michael and Kathy had an African American doctor who had just recently arrived at the Monroe Clinic in Freeport and was living in Monroe, Wisconsin. During one of their visits, Michael and Kathy were singing the praises of their new community. The doctor said with a strong hint of bitterness, “That’s all well and good for you, but my husband and I wouldn’t be welcome in your very special all-white community.”
Michael said to himself, “Here I go again; there’s my old racist who lives so comfortably in my soul that I forget he’s even there.” He turned to the doctor and said, “Listen, we’ve got an idea. Were about twenty-five miles from Freeport and forty from Monroe and almost fifty from Galena and so that might be too far for you to travel but why don’t you come and check us out? As a matter of fact, our daughter and her young son are moving out, something about love and new beginnings, so you could even move in with us. And there are a half dozen other possibilities.

The doctor interrupted, “You don’t have to apologize. I understand.”

Michael responded, interrupting the doctor, “I just want you to know. We are tying. We’ve successfully integrated about six Hispanic families into our community and we’ve made sure that none of the homes were 100% Hispanic and it did take some work. It was a learning experience for everybody. At one time, if there had been a young Mexican having coffee in my kitchen, I would have assumed that he was with the lawn service but today he’s one of the residents. Sometimes I’m just clueless. But why don’t you and your husband come and check us out?”

They did and the doctor, Anne McGregor and her husband, Charles Crawford, who was a surgical RN, moved in. If they had the same schedule, they’d take the bus, sometimes one might drive and the other would take the bus. After a couple of years, Michael and Kathy and Charles and Anne had a serious talk. Charles and Anne loved Mt. Carroll, they loved the community housing concept; they loved that every house, apartment or condo had a different arrangement. They especially loved that the community was still growing, learning, changing and with their help more blacks were moving in. All of this is exciting, but the travel is a killer, not to mention an environmental no-no.

They had decided to look for a similar group in Monroe. They had found one. They were talking about moving in. It was an integrated house on an integrated block. Anne said, “Now, after living with all of you, we can’t imagine living any other way.”

After lots of hugs and kisses, some tears and a few drinks, Michael said, “Well, thanks to the two of you and Jose and Maria we know have more people of color than Mt. Carroll has had in its entire history.”

Michael and Kathy’s daughter, Megan jumped at the chance to move back in. She and her boyfriend, now husband, had had a child. So now there were four all together. They took the basement and a young man moved in upstairs. That worked out fine because he was a CCC instructor and would be gone for weeks at a time. He needed a place in Mt. Carroll because his girlfriend lived in town with their child and her folks.
But we’re getting ahead of our story.

Part II

We will never change our institutions if we cannot change ourselves The Story of More by Hope Jahren, 2020

Soon whole streets were taken over by these new households. After they fixed up the insides a bit, they turned to the street. They replaced the front lawns with butterfly gardens. They planted more trees—lots more trees. Someone said, “To a bird flying by, this street must look like part of a forest.” They turned their backyards into vegetable gardens. They wanted to turn the alleys into mini parkways. But they had to leave it open for the utility trucks and people who still used their garages for parking. However, most garages became workshops, certified kitchens, artists’ studios which they rented out on the cheap and sometimes granny cottages. And sometimes, when people were feeling a little claustrophobic or that the bugs were just too much, they’d turn their garage into a gazebo. The old tear-down at the end of the block became a community garden. Sometimes the city would condemn an old house, tear it down, prepare the land for gardening and then turn around and lease it to the block club for a dollar a year.

They wanted to close the street, but the city wouldn’t let them. They compromised, no through traffic, just deliveries and emergency vehicles. They put picnic tables and lawn chairs out in the street. Some blocks kept all the outdoor stuff on one side of the street and the other side gave delivery truck and emergency vehicles a straight shot. Some blocks created a zigzag pattern down the street. They remembered that the Fed-ex truck, an ambulance, the fire truck and a squad car all had to be able to maneuver down the block.

Everybody was cutting back on electricity, even with solar panels, and they hardly used their a/c. Just like in the old days, they sat outside at night. They’d all get together after dinner or after a potluck and sit and visit. Someone might bring out a guitar, someone else a banjo or a flute. A little kid would show up with a tin whistle. A man whose wife played the piano had an idea. He asked around, they said his idea was doable and he bought a battery powered keyboard with battery powered speakers. At night, he slowly, carefully rolled it down his old driveway. His wife would start and like magic, all at once there’d be a band and an audience.

Mornings, people would go outside, sit and read or quietly visit over coffee and maybe a homemade pastry. In the past the automobile had stolen their street. They had finally taken it back. The street was quieter, the air was cleaner and life was good and getting better.
They all agreed that the biggest trade off in all of this was that there social lives,
the amount of quality time that they had for their family, especially their kids and
for the people they shared their house with was 100 times better. Early on, one guy,
dumfounded, asked, “Why didn’t we do this earlier?”

When they moved in together they downsized. They had to get rid of stuff to
make room for people. Often people with pets gave them away. They realized that
now with so many close friends they didn’t need and didn’t have time for a cat or a
dog.

They got rid of half their wardrobe. Frayed collars and cuffs are now in. It was a
no brainer—except for shoes, socks and under ware no new clothes. If a guy
showed up in a pair of dress pants he didn’t have to explain to the rest of the guys
that he had an old suit and was wearing the pants.

Good Will had always had lots more donors and now they had lots more
customers too.

The young people moving in together lucked out. Everybody had extra
furniture, dishes, garden tools and the old man’s tool box. And they were happy to
share. The old timers joked with the young people, “You’ll never have to buy pots
and pans, or dishes, wine glasses, beer steins, brandy sniffers, dessert plates
appetizer trays, salad bowls, cake stands, cutting boards, kitchen gadgets and the
list goes on. You’ll never have to worry about everyday dishes and the good dishes
or fancy table clothes with matching napkins.”

Overnight cars began to disappear. At first, people could sell their vehicles and
at least come out even. People would keep one vehicle and sell the older car or
maybe the pickup. But now the car note was worth more than the car. People just
simply drove to the credit union and gave them their keys and the car. Later, they
brought the bank their old, but sometimes like new, riding lawn mowers, snow
mobiles, motorcycles, and ATVs. They told the bank, “carbon footprint.” As the
number of buses, increased the number of cars decreased. Trying to decide what to
do with all the old vehicles was an ecological nightmare. Still a work in process.
Nobody knew what to do with all the old cars, ATVs, pickups, and riding
lawnmowers. Somebody said 250 million old cars just in the US.

Walking became the in thing. The joke was, “Harry, your wife traded in her car
for a granny cart, when are you going to turn yours in for a little red wagon?: And
it was true, most people needed something to help bring home the groceries from
the Pig, the farmers market, the CSA or the community garden. But if you couldn’t
walk to the grocery, you simply took the bus.

Now people took the bus from Mt. Carroll to Elizabeth, sometimes just to visit
friends or to Galena to have lunch with the old mayor at the Green Street Tavern
inside the Desoto house or occasionally to Cannova’s for an old fashioned Italian
dinner. People made doctor’s appointments for when the bus went from their small town to the bigger cities.

Sometimes folks would take the bus from Mt. Carroll to Freeport to get items which were not available in town. They’d go once a month or so and stock up on “the really cool stuff.”

One woman commented, “I am so happy not to have to ‘shop till I drop.’” She continued, “You know sometimes, it felt like all I did was go to work, go to the mall, the super mall, the convince store, Casey’s, order from Amazon turn around and do it again and again… Just ‘getting and spending.’”

But even though some people kept one of their cars, they had more trouble with the mice getting at the wires than anything else. The number of gas stations was disappearing so fast that some people were worried that soon they might not be able to get gas. When they complained their friends would say, “But that’s the whole idea, dummy.”

Electric vehicles were too late. By the time an inexpensive and reliable electric car was available, people had already switched to buses, bicycles and modified golf carts. People would joke with a smirk on their face, “Sorry, Elon Musk, but you’re too late, better luck next time.”

Walking was the new in thing. Kids walked to school and parks, adults walked to work, to the grocery store and to the shops that were opening in the old downtown business districts. Malls, even strip malls, were history.

The older kids would take the younger kids to school. Sometimes a couple of moms and dads would walk the little kids to school. It was a treat for everybody. And now that everybody was into this “learning to see” business, walking to school no matter the weather was an intellectual challenge, a learning discovery and a joy.

One time, an old man said, “You know, today, I saw a mother and father, their baby in the baby carriage and their little six-year-old. They were all headed for school to drop off the six-year-old. You know, just a few years ago parents couldn’t do that. By the time school started they’d be at work. Those parents missed out on a lot. You know, ‘quality time’ was never everything it was cracked-up to be.”

Folks walked everywhere, all the time, winter and summer; morning, noon and night. After dinner, folks would go for a walk. They’d stop and chitchat along the way. They made new friends and reconnected with old friends. Everybody loved talking to everyone.

They were all becoming citizen scientists, self-taught field biologists. They learned the names of the trees, shrubs, bushes and plants on their walks. They discovered and were both thrilled and amazed to watch the annual life cycle of the foliage on their walks. They discovered the Milky Way and the morning and
evening planets, the phases of the moon, the names of a couple of consolations; they watch for shooting stars and they could tell sometimes when the wind and darkening sky really meant rain and when the weather was only playing games.

Some old guy would ask, only half in jest, “Now you do know the difference between a shooting star in the sky and one in the spring woods.”

They simply marveled at the big and small things they had never seen on their walks. They had never noticed the cycle a tree goes through every year from tiny buds, to flower seeds, to baby leaves, to mature leaves and then the leaves turned color and then dropped and just before winter they even noticed the little buds already getting ready and waiting for next spring.

Sometimes in early spring they’d see last year’s bird’s nest and they were always amazed at how many nests they had been walking by or right under and never noticed.

They’d tell a friend, “That bird’s nest I just saw is another reason why I’m not going back to work full time, ever.

People joked, “You know, this bird watching gets to be expensive. First it’s the binoculars, then the bird books, then the bird feeders and the bird seed, then a solar bird bath, and get this, a bluebird trail.”

There was some resistance, especially in the beginning. Some people just were not convinced that things were so terrible that the only solution was a complete, radical and immediate change.

Michael and Kathy’s neighbors, Harry and Anne were leaders in the resistance. At every meeting, from the block club to the community garden, to the new school committee, everything was always “no. simply no.”

Michael joked that their answer to everything was, “No, nay, never no more.” At first Harry argued, “Listen the pandemic is going to end one way or another in a few more months. I’m no scientist, but I do know that modern science is going to come up with a vaccination sooner than later.” Another time, he argued, ‘Look, the economy is already beginning to recover. Right now, the worse thing we could do is panic. The stock market can work things out.”

Michael would answer, “Like everybody else, I grew up believing in American Capitalism. But it doesn’t work. Our kids are worse off than we are. We’re worse off than our grandparents. And under the old system, I don’t even want to think about our grandkids.”

Kathy jumped in, “We’re all doing so much better now. I can’t imagine going back to the old ways.”

Anne said, “Yes, that all well and good, but what about my personal freedom. What about my rights as an individual”
Quickly, Michael answered, “You’ve still got it. You still have your house—all to yourself. You are one of the few who still has a car. You work full time. Make more money that most of your neighbors. What more do you want.”

Harry answered stuttering to keep his temper under control, “I want to live in a country that shares my values. I don’t like living with a bunch of hippies.”

Kathy raised her hands to shush everybody, poured another glass of wine for everybody and said, “Look, in the old days Michael and I were the oddballs. It’s not a happy place to be. So I know where you’re coming from. We think that things are getting better for everybody and the personal sacrifice has been minimal. The tradeoffs have worked in our favorite most of the time.”

Hank finally said, “Listen, we’re just going around and around. And, you know, you can’t show us one example of how things would be better for Anne and me under your system.”

“That’s easy!”

“Bull.”

“No wait just a minute.”

Hank took a deep breath and said, “I’m still waiting.”

Kathy said, “The answer is right before your eyes. Anne and I have talked lots about your kids who are still spread out. And that you’re a bit jealous of so many people in town, our friends, who have been reunited with their families. It’s true some have moved to be with their kids. But a lot of kids have moved back here, back home to be with their folks. And this is crazy; one block over are the Simmons who moved out here from Chicago and then six months later their two daughters and their families left Chicago and they moved in with their folks.

Michael continued interrupting his wife. “If you weren’t so God damn stubborn you let them move in with the two of you. Your house is big enough.”

Kathy said, “Think about it, talk to them. See what they think.”

Anne near tears, “I have talked to them. They want to move home. They want to be part of this grand experiment.”

Exasperated Michael asks, “What’s the problem?’

Hank, nearly inaudible, answers, “Me.”

“What?”

Struggling, “I told them. I said, ‘I raised the two of you to take care of yourselves not to be dependent on anybody, family, friends or the government. Moving in with us would be a kind of freeloading.’”

Kathy, “You don’t understand. Everybody works, everybody contributes. I don’t remember who said it but he was right, ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.’”
Hank and Anne stepping on each other’s words said, “Think about it / I’ll think about it.”
Later Kathy and Michael smiled and said “They must have thought about it, guess who’s moving in?”

Part III

Kathy would tease Michael, “You know for all your great deeds you didn’t make climate change go away. As a matter of fact climate catastrophe seems right on schedule.”
They had to tease each other or get and stay drunk or go crazy. The scientists had warned everybody that even if everyone lowered their carbon footprint and reduced the amounts of CO2 they were still producing, the CO2 already in the atmosphere would continue to create havoc. Just not as much and not quite as severe.
What that meant for Mt. Carroll and the tri-state region was low key but still God awful, nearly inconceivable. It was either too hot or too cold, either too dry or too wet. Spring was either too early or too late, winter was simply weird and summer could be wonderful or unbelievable. On the Illinois side of the Mississippi River the river was taking all the land between the old banks and highway 64. The little community of Fentress Lake was disappearing and then it disappeared completely. People lost their homes. When the marina sank into the muck, the boats that had been safe and secure in their mooring disappeared.
The water came up and then receded but every year the bank eroded sometimes just a few feet and took just a little sand and dirt but other years the River took massive chunks of earth as the whole River widened and shifted east. The trucking terminal and the auto dealership went. The few farm houses closer to Savanna washed away. The old army depot disappeared under water. That wouldn’t have been so bad but all the toxic guck washed into the River polluting everything as far south as St. Louis. St. Louis used to complain, “Someday there’s going to be an accident, all that stuff left from two world wars even some atomic stuff is going to get into the River and we’ll bear the brunt. And they did, but the River carried the poison as far south as New Orleans before dumping it in the Gulf.
The Apple and the Plum, tributaries of the Mississippi as they got closer to the River tore into the landscape. The Apple gobbled up the highway as if was just a licorice twist. Soon there wasn’t enough of the highway worth saving.
Thompson, Savanna, Hanover and Galena had been connected by the railroad. Folks really didn’t mind the lost of passenger service but when the River tore the highway into bits and pieces that was heartbreaking. They knew cars were history
but they thought busses, trucks, we’ll still be in touch. Now it was going to be that much harder. And then they realized that even freight traffic along the River was gone. Probably, gone for good. Some folks had just convinced Washington to do a feasibility study to ring back passenger service between Chicago and the River communities. Michael and Kathy remember that as the most depressing spring ever.

But the rest of the country and the rest of the world were still being battered. The government had set up volunteer corps of people some with particular expertise, some with a strong back and anybody who had a loving heart. When a flood, fire, tornado, hurricane or cyclone struck the corps closest would be called first. Some corps actually had long term assignments helping people from the coasts relocate. Sometimes fifty miles or more was considered best. But people were reluctant to move even after the ocean moved in and took over. Kathy’s friends from Mt. Carroll went to the Outer Banks to help when not only the Outer Banks but miles of shore line went under too. When they got back they told Kathy the saddest part was that so many people just wanted to move a few miles inland. They were encouraged to move to the Piedmont, but most said that they wanted to stay close to the ocean, close to home. One of her friends said, “Hell, I’d move to the Blue Ridge Mts. and I’d love to move to a small town just like Mt. Carroll. Weaverville, NC would be just perfect. But each his own I guess.”

Kathy also thought of the other young people with a sense of adventure. Who were the first to go after a storm or in the midst of a fire. They were excited by the unknown. “What happened? How bad is it?”

Joe’s wife said one time, “You know. We’re lucky. The spirit of St. Francis and Florence Nightingale lives on in these young people. Give me a hippie any day.”

Clothes had always been one of life’s great pleasures and at the same time a terrible task master. Boys learned early, no pink, yellow, orange or purple. However, yellow was OK for raincoats and neon orange was OK for construction workers, road crews and farmers. With brown pants one had to wear brown shoes and a brown belt. With black pants one had to wear black shoes and a black belt. Until Steve Jobs came along, if one wore a suit or a sports jacket, one had to wear a tie. He was rich enough to change that for everyone. Casual Friday had seemed to have come and gone. But now everyday is casual Friday.

There was another set of rules for women. It once was absolutely no bare legs; panty hose with dresses or skirts--always. That had begun to change but now the
A little cleavage is good but not too much. Tight pants are OK but not too tight.

Michael told Kathy one time, “You know a pretty woman is beautiful because of who she is, her personality not her bod, her hair or her clothes and makeup.

Wardrobes kept shrinking and shrinking until it had reached the point that sociologists were saying that the average wardrobe has not been this small since the early 1950s when people were still recovering from the Great Depression and WWII.

Their diets changed. All of a sudden people were healthier, slimmer, and life expectancy had gone way up.

Food was local. In the new world, imported food was too expensive (The environmental cost to the planet was too expensive to ship—remember your carbon footprint.) So no more blueberries from Mexico or South America. No more asparagus from Central America or citrus from Florida or the Mediterranean. But there were exceptions. Americans still needed their coffee and black tea (although they did drink a lot of local herb tea). So coffee, tea, and the whole range of alcoholic beverages were still imported. Lots of folks loved their craft beer and were getting used to their local wines. Lots of folks drank local wine during the week and then for a treat they’d have a little wine from the international market on Sunday.

Some folks would say, “You know if I can’t have my morning coffee, as far as I’m concerned the world can go to hell in a hand basket. But basically their food was local and came from a 200 mile radius.

Now squash, turnips, even beets are part of everybody’s diet. A pumpkin is a food, not a window decoration or a lawn ornament. And families argue will it be pumpkin pie or pumpkin bread or both? People pig out on fresh corn on the cob every summer. They eat tomatoes by the bushel basket. Things they had hardly heard about, things like kale, kohlrabi and bok choy, now are seasonal favorites. People still like a turkey at Thanksgiving and a nice roast at Christmas and some folks just love local trout or walleye for their birthdays and maybe the kids have a wee taste of ice cream on Sunday while the grownups are enjoying a wee taste of Irish (or single malt, or a tiny sniffer of cognac). Michael and Kathy are planning on wild caught, Alaskan salmon for their 25th. Michael said, “Shh, please don’t tell anybody, it’s flown all the way to Dubuque. We have to pick it up there the same day and grill it that night. We haven’t had salmon in years and it is soo good.”

The Sunday brunch is back in fashion because that’s the only time folks don’t feel guilty about bacon and eggs. But even so, odds are that it’s an omelet with cornmeal muffins and a side of oatmeal.
Folks never gave up meat and dairy completely, but it has become a rare treat. Kathy and Michael like to say, “We’re not quite vegetarians but we’re not really flexitarians either. We’re somewhere in between.”

And what’s funny, people will now buy a piece of Parmigiano cheese and grate it themselves, no big deal, but before there never seemed to have the time. All cheese is white no need for dyes and, “What the hell, if I’m only going to eat a tiny bit of cheddar I can get a nice aged piece. No more of that Kraft crap.”

A dairy is moving to Mt Carroll now that a few small farmers agreed to raise a few milk cows, but for a few years they’ll still have to have cheese shipped from Wisconsin from the mother plant. People said, “I should have known that aged cheese means years. Duh!” Hank and Anne son-in-law who had been a big time food chemist is going to learn how to be the cheese maker.

But people will tell you it not just about the food—local—organic—seasonal—grown by farm workers who make a living wage. It’s not just that the farmer and his or her help are well paid, but that the ritual is back. It’s not just that people don’t stand in front of the fridge and graze or eat ice cream straight out of the cartoon. Or they don’t grab a donut and coffee at Casey’s or Dunkin’ Donuts and eat it in the car during their commute. And at the end of the day, they’d open the car door and pour a half cup of old coffee into the gutter. All of that’s history.

It’s a change not in life style—style is just fashion—not in behavior—behavior can be modified, it’s a change in one’s being and the food, the housing, the work and leisure activities are all just manifestations of the inner being’s transformation.

And dinner? Every dinner now is like the grandma’s old-fashioned Sunday dinner. It’s not fancy and elaborate; there’s just plenty of good food and good conversation. It’s leisurely, full of good cheer, camaraderie and stories. Michael and Kathy both love to repeat their story about Thich Nhat Hanh, who could spend forty-five minutes eating a single cookie or and hour and a half sharing a cup of tea. They joke we’re not there yet but that’s the goal. Pay equal attention to the food, friends and family. No TV, no i-Phones, no distractions.

Part IV
Time is no longer money. Time is peace, time is life. Thich Nhat Hanh

The biggest change was work. After the pandemic, people were slow to get their jobs back and it was then that their whole attitude about work began to change. Many people had liked their jobs well enough, but they didn’t love them. They didn’t like the commute. When they were younger, it was tolerable, but as they got older it became nearly unbearable. The workload slowly grew—longer hours and no increase in pay and in many cases no overtime compensation. Many jobs went
from nine to five to available 24/7 via iPhone and computer. Service workers had flexible schedules, some weeks lots of hours, some weeks few hours. Sometimes workers were sent home early, other times they were called and told to come to work right away. Child care was always a problem. Erratic hours made scheduling impossible, a nightmare.

Over the years, workers had lost their rights in the courts, and the ability of unions to protect their workers shrunk and became nearly meaningless. Some people were afraid to change jobs because they might lose their health insurance. Then when they used it, they discovered that the insurance because of high deductibles, co-pays, and prior condition restraints wasn’t so great after all. The joke was “I loved my insurance until I tried to use it.”

They had too many friends and family members who had simply burned out. When you’re young and you hear the expression ‘burned out’ you picture a plane on fire spiraling to the ground, crashing and exploding in a burst of flame, sparks and smoke. Actually for many workers, burnout is a slow debilitating process that eats away first your guts and heart and then it rots your soul. All the while the victim puts up a false front, “Believe me I’m fine, everything is OK.” Until it’s not.

Sitting at home, waiting to be called back to work and even sending out some feelers started them thinking. They started to do the math and talking to their friends

- If they moved in with others or if people moved in with them –housing would be cheaper—they’d save money.
- They’d have fewer phones, fewer TVs, fewer appliances—they’d save money.
- If they got rid of their gas-operated lawn and snow removable equipment—they’d save money.
- If one person lived closer to work and used public transportation they could sell a car. They’d save money.
- If they stopped dressing for success, they’d save money.
- If they only bought what they needed and bought it used, they’d save money.
- If they ate healthy, local and seasonal—they’d save money.
- If wasting food was truly important and if they stopped wasting food—they’d save money.
- With Medicare for all finally becoming a sure thing—they’d save money.

So that was an eye opener and then their friends came up with more ideas. Because of the pandemic there were all kinds of money for medical training: scholarships, housing and stipends. Once one completed medical training there would be lots of jobs available locally. One wouldn’t have to move to metro-Chicago or Milwaukee. They’d be able to work in their own community or a nearby community.
The local utility was hiring part time solar panel installers with on the job training and certification.

The schools were expanding their curriculum offerings and needed part-time teachers, even with temporary certificates.

There were federal grants for energy conservation of new and existing homes. The national and even the international goal was that every home would be energy efficient. More great part-time jobs.

If one knew that a screwdriver was a hand tool and not a popular drink, he or she could be hired and trained for a twenty hour a week job. There was bus service to and from school and then the worksite.

They weren’t intended to be careers but people were needed to convert stores, sometimes a whole strip mall from shopping to residents and nonprofits facilities.

There were more jobs available in community gardens, working at existing or starting a new CSA, becoming a vendor at the local farmers’ market. People joked, “Long summers but leisurely winters.”

State and local parks were hiring like mad. They had ten, twenty years of deferred maintenance and overuse to mitigate. Sometimes you worked with a WPA crew or America Corps workers and sometimes just with other state workers. Sometimes, the modern CCC recruited folks (male and female, white and people of color) to go to northern Wisconsin or as people still like to say ‘out west.’ These new jobs unlike the old CCC had an educational component.

States were on a crusade to buy as much land as possible for new parks or to add to existing parks. Great Plains farmers were happy to sell. Oil companies were abandoning their leases and the states and the feds were adding that land to their new preserves. All at once state agencies were approaching groups like the Prairie Enthusiasts and other land conservation groups for their expertise and to see if they would like to add their land holding to the state system and partner going forward.

Not only were k-12 schools expanding and adding new programs, but community college and universities were hiring. But colleges finally abandoned their inhumane adjunct system. Now, one can teach part time and publish, or teach and not publish and be paid the equivalent share of a full-time professor.

Adult-ed became a big deal. All at once, people needed vocational retraining, wanted to study English as a Second Language (ESL), had always wanted to take a Master Gardeners class, wanted to resume music or voice lessons that they had dropped when they were in their teens or to start now from scratch.

This meant jobs for lots more people who had been abandoned by the corporate world or who only wanted to work twenty hours or so a week.

There were lots of jobs in public transportation.
A friend of a friend recommended that she suggest to her friend, a Buddhist monk, that he might want to visit Mt. Carroll and find an old storefront and open a Buddhist zendo. He came down, liked what he saw, worked with the community to fix up a small building, lived in the back and started slowly. He started with a little yoga, a little meditation and best of all a little walking meditation. And then some classes. He soon had to bring another monk and a nun down from Madison to help him.

Kathy told him, “Look, we don’t want to change anything about you or your life. Michael smiled and said, “Wrong, we want you to come and share dinner with us occasionally.”

And he agreed.

“If we keep working so hard, we will not have enough time to live; we will not have enough time to touch life’s wonders and get the nourishment and the healing we need.”

*Thich Nhat Hanh*

As all the pieces began to fall into place, people stretched, flexed their shoulders, some even touched their toes, looked around, smelled the air, took a deep breath, held it and then let it out slowly.

They turned to each other and smiled. Parents reached down kissed their children and picked them up for the biggest hugs ever; couples squeezed each other’s hands, looked into each other’s eyes and said yes.

At first it was a whisper, then the decibel level rose and rose again and all of a sudden it was a song. Yoga, meditation, kids’ softball, adult softball, tennis, biking, jogging, musical instruments, singing, dancing, art, especially ceramics, reading and then book club, play readers, photography, canoeing and kayaking, woodworking, bird watching, camping, sitting and watching, walking and listening, swimming, basketball, chess, jigsaw puzzles, sewing, knitting, weaving, theater and performance going, volleyball, journal writing, creative writing, and (believe it or not & dare I even say it ) letter writing, waiting for the mail because there will be a letter or two or three from one’s pen pals.

Michael and Kathy loved their yard. There was a big garden, of course, and a small patio mainly for bird watching and quiet time. For them quiet time meant in the morning coffee and in the afternoon a little beer or wine, a little conversation and a lot of bird watching at the feeders. The visitors were always in flux. It was fun to try and predict their arrival. Never spot on. It was harder to predict their departure. Every year when Kathy realized that the white-crowned sparrows had moved on, she was always sad for a day or two. But when there were a half dozen
species or more frolicking around the feeders, splashing in the bird bath and devouring the grape jelly (sadly no more oranges), they were in ecstasy.

Work was yes, something you did. But it did not define your life. People no longer asked, “So what do you do?” And people no longer defined themselves by saying, “I’m a …” Now they defined themselves by saying, “I’m a human being.” They’d continue my race, my gender, my nationality, my age, my years of schooling don’t matter; only my humanity matters.

People are people. They are meant to work to put food on the table, they are meant to help their friends and neighbors and they are meant to have and to be allowed to enjoy personal time, leisure, freedom and to love.