

# Thanksgiving for our Precious Resources

by Rosemary Wilkie

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Giving thanks – gratitude – is something many of us feel and express every day. Most often for help from others, to acknowledge a kindness, and occasionally when we experience what seems to be the work of angels or enlightened souls.

However it is hard to be grateful when we look at the papers or TV. What is happening in the world is too frightening, so we cling to what is familiar, trying to preserve the status quo and wondering why some higher power does not intervene.

It is worth remembering that journalists are taught to focus on bad news, conflict, death and celebrities, because that, sadly, is what sells. If the bad news was universal, it would not be news! So the good news seldom hits the headlines. But it is there.

## New ways of thinking and doing

It tends to be in turbulent times, such as these, that new ways of thinking and doing things emerge and transform society. Numerous groups are wrestling with fresh ideas and insights. Sometimes current ways of doing things loom so large that we do not even realise they are there – the elephant in the room. For instance, the bulk of the world's resources are under the control of governments or private enterprise.

This has not happened overnight. As early as the Middle Ages, enterprising merchants, bankers and politicians were laying claim to 'vacant' land or commonly managed resources. This trend came to a head with the Enclosures Acts in the 18th century. Labourers lost their grazing rights over common land, and small-holdings were consolidated in the hands of

rich landowners who could then improve yields with drainage, crop rotation and new equipment such as threshing machines. Landowners were required to fence their land – hence 'enclosure.' By the end of the century most good agricultural land was enclosed, and labourers had little choice but to go to the towns and become workers in the Industrial Revolution.

We rightly remember and express our gratitude to those who have died in wars to defend us, our freedoms and beliefs. It helps to remember that upheaval and misery in the lives of some groups have facilitated, over time, much better and easier living for most of us. How could we not be grateful?

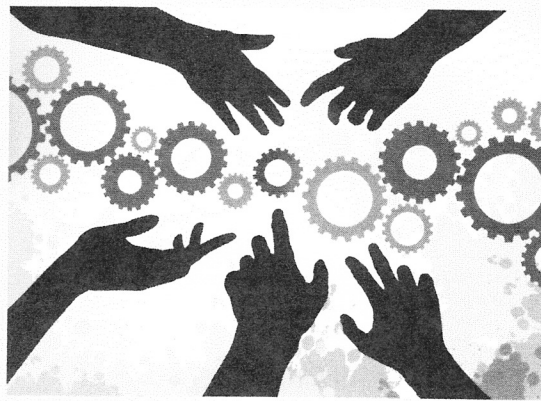
The trend towards enclosure spread across the world to extract resources from peoples unable to defend them. In every area of our lives we see bigger holdings and control by fewer people – public or private. Think of oil tankers waiting at sea until prices go up, supermarkets replacing small shops, and the biggest farms getting the most EU money.

## Our precious collective resources

One very exciting new idea is 'Commons'. Elinor Ostrom, co-recipient of the economic sciences Nobel Prize in 2009, spent decades researching what happens to our freedom and creativity when private interests own rights and properties that belong to all of us in common. The international political analyst and advisor, James B Quilligan, has extended the theory and principles to a global scale. These cutting edge thinkers point to the tragedy of enclosures, the

relentless extraction of the finite resources of the planet for profit, and the state or corporate ownership of basic resources. Commons include fisheries, forests, water, minerals, living creatures, land, fuel, the airwaves, seeds, our stores of culture and knowledge, both indigenous and scientific – the list is endless – resources that are the basic support systems of life.

Many of these are irreplaceable, and the unlimited economic 'growth' model – fuelled by consumption of finite resources – is unsustainable. Individuals in both public and private sectors are beginning to



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realise this, yet rather than focus on this, they see climate change as the danger. Although this has led to many good initiatives, public and individual, to reduce consumption, it does not question underlying assumptions about government and private ownership of common resources.

In earlier times, communities made up their own rules for the use and maintenance of local resources. Commoners – ordinary people, tribal people – have profound knowledge of their own area and its resources. Many grass roots initiatives are rediscovering this. The Transition Town movement is a great example.

Meanwhile we just see the symptoms of what is wrong. We fear the effects of recession and complain of over regulation and the increasing complexity of our lives. When I was young, the possession of a cheque book proved your financial worthiness. Now we are harassed by the need for cards, pin numbers, passwords, and personal 'memorable' data. We sigh with relief when a live person replies to an organisation's telephone. Frustrating.

## Human creativity

But there is another way to look at this. The ability to handle a greater level of complexity marks a higher level of consciousness. Evolution. Growth.

Human creativity is extraordinary. Look at all the objects around you. We live in a style that the most powerful and richest people in the past did not even dream of. Something else to recognise and be grateful for. I believe that it is this extraordinary human creativity that will lead us through what feels like impossible complexity to simplicity and a higher level of consciousness for the many.

Meanwhile let us give thanks for, and include in our prayers, the ground-breaking thinkers who discover and reveal the assumptions that loom so large in our lives that we haven't even noticed them. No doubt their work will be challenged by state and private vested interests, and take a long time to realise, but the Commons movement is here to stay and grow, now that we have seen the elephant in the room. ☒