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Introducing The Commons

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Two scenarios for walking to a museum in AnyBigCity, USA.

One: You walk down the sidewalk and come to the corner where you must cross to get into the museum. There is a red light. Cars zip past. You push the pedestrian button on the light pole and soon the light changes. Across the street from you, a light showing an outline of a person walking and a green light come on and you cross the street.

As you go along, you breathe the crisp fall air. Somewhere in your consciousness is the thought that the air you breathe is polluted, but today it seems clear and beautiful. The museum has free admission on Tuesday, and you are happy that your schedule has allowed you to take advantage of it. You go in through the turnstile and before you see the exhibition, you decide to use the bathroom. It is neat and clean, with low-flow flush toilets. Coming out of your stall, you stop at the sink to wash your hands, where the faucet is motion-activated; you use the soap provided and the paper towels. Outside, you stop at the drinking fountain and then, refreshed, you are ready to take in the exhibit.

OR:

You enter the sidewalk near the museum through a turnstile, flashing your FASTRAK card at a machine, which is owned by the corporation that subcontracts with the city to maintain the sidewalks in your community. A GPS monitor on your belt deducts \$2 for every 20 blocks that you walk. (This monitor has the advantage of “keeping you safe” according to the advertisers that sell it, because if you fall or are a victim of a crime, you can press a button to indicate distress and you are easy to locate. Families who have loved ones with Alzheimer’s and dementia are reputed to love this feature.) In high traffic or popular zip codes like this downtown location, you pay a \$2 surcharge. You come to the corner and put a quarter in the meter, which makes the light change. You have 20 seconds to cross the street. A few teenagers and some homeless people take advantage of your quarter and walk across with you, alert for the private security guards that may throw them off the sidewalk altogether since not everyone can

afford a FASTRAK, so they enter the sidewalk between turnstiles or they walk against traffic in the road.

People pass you wearing oxygen masks with various brand names. So far, you have chosen not to buy “fresh air” in lightweight tanks that can be easily worn when you go outside. You are not convinced the free air is that dangerous and today the air seems clear and crisp. The museum entry is half-price on Tuesday, only \$10, but you do have to see advertising throughout the exhibit, which is not present on the other days when you pay full price. Once inside the museum, you pay \$4 to use a bathroom stall that includes a flush toilet, premeasured toilet paper, and a sink for washing your hands with premeasured water, soap and paper towel. The water coming out of the sink faucet is recycled wastewater and a sign says not to drink it. Had you been planning ahead, you would have used the toilet outside, which costs only \$1. It is a chemical port-a-potty-type thing, no sink, but you have some handi-wipes. You are thirsty, but there is no drinking fountain. You can buy a bottle of water for \$6.00 from a vendor who also runs the bathroom concession. You decide to see the exhibit and get a cup of tea at the museum café later.

If the first scenario seems more reasonable to you, then you may be, without even knowing it, a friend of the “commons.” If the second scenario seems absurd to you, you may not realize the extent to which the “commons” is becoming privatized and “enclosed.”

What Is “The Commons”?

The commons is a short, simple phrase that describes all the resources a community has rights or access to, either because it exists all around us, such as sunlight, water, air, and oceans, or because it was built using tax dollars for the benefit of the public as a whole, such as libraries, parks, and the infrastructure that allows us to get around, such as sidewalks, bridges, roads, streetlights, as well as a more hidden and complicated infrastructure of sewers, health inspectors, fire protection, courts, and the like. There are quasi-commons, such as houses of worship or art galleries, which are built and maintained by a core group of people but are generally open free-of-charge and

welcoming to anyone who wants to come in. Some parts of the commons exist for public enjoyment or benefit, but are maintained privately and there may be a fee for their use: symphonies, theaters, botanical gardens.

The commons has expanded with the Internet and all the open-source technology that continues to be created, but the commons shrinks every 30 seconds as another animal or plant becomes extinct. Oceans, wilderness, rainforest, deserts are essential to the commons, even though many people may never see many of these features of the earth. By definition, the commons is supposed to be accessible to the public; in turn, we are expected to take care of the commons so that future generations will have access to them as well. We have previous generations to thank for much of the commons we have now, as they built it or preserved it.

The origin of the word *commons* derives from the time when every English village had a common grazing area. People who didn't own their own pastures could graze their animals on the common one. Those who used the commons were called *commoners*. If the word seems old-fashioned, that's because it is. The commons is sometimes called public space, and the assets of the commons are sometimes called *commonwealth*. *Commons* it is an important word to bring into popular use because it takes in so much, and because it provides an opportunity for that most important of common experiences—public conversation. There may be other words that could capture the same notion of sharing, holding in common, owning together, holding in trust or stewardship, and guaranteeing access to everyone; but *commons* seems to capture it all.

How Is the Commons Threatened?

The commons is under serious threat today for a variety of reasons, three of which I will explore in a moment. Mainly the commons is threatened by the very fact that it is all around us all the time. We tend to take it for granted or not even recognize it. Ask most people, “How do you think we should best protect the commons?” and they will answer, “What is the commons?” Yet our most valuable assets actually lie within the commons. Two of them—water and air—we cannot live without for even a short time.

Threats to the commons come from a number of directions, but there are three main threats: environmental degradation, privatization, and regressive tax policy. These three are related.

Environmental Degradation

The first is probably the easiest to see and understand because it is occurring all around us. Global warming, unheard of by most people as recently as a few years ago, has become so familiar that many people have an opinion about what is causing it and what should be done about it. The popularity of “An Inconvenient Truth” and the interest in the recent talks in Bali and the updating of the Kyoto protocol show that the world is deeply concerned about our environmental future. This, then, is a good time to really promote the notion that the environment is an integral part of the commons.

For millennia we have acted as if the earth’s resources were infinite, particularly two that are essential for life—air and water. Air, in economic terms, is called a “non-rival”—that is, consumption by one person or source doesn’t mean less for another. (Other examples of “non-rivals” are the sun, a scenic view, and television and radio.) Allowing pollution into the air was for years not understood as decreasing the quality of air for everyone. Now we know that the air around us does not have unlimited capacity to support us, to support all life, and to absorb all the toxins that are being dumped in it, although we are not acting with nearly enough speed to reverse the damage we do daily.

Water was for generations seen as a “non-rival,” although now we know that all the water that has ever existed on Earth is present now. There will be no new water created, and as we pollute water, we decrease the amount of water that is clean enough to be available for others to use. Today, the water crisis is so severe that up to 30 percent of the world’s population does not have access to clean water, causing millions of people to sicken and die every year. In many African countries, people (primarily women) walk for hours to get water for their families. In some places, the cost of water absorbs half of people’s income. (Source: [Blue Gold](#), by Maude Barlow). Poorly regulated industrialization in places like the former Soviet Union and China has dumped toxic pollutants into huge rivers and seas, ruining water for millions of people. Realizing that clean water is finite, corporations have bought water rights and made water a commodity for sale. In this situation, we see environmental degradation dovetailing with

privatization. As corporations buy up water rights, people from all along the political spectrum are predicting that water will become as controversial and coveted as oil is now, even to the point of wars being fought over it in the very near future.

Thinking of water as part of the global commons, which must be protected and preserved, rather than as a profit center, leads to creative ways to safeguard and maintain clean water. For example, although not free of water problems, South Africa in its constitution has proclaimed water to be a human *right*. In contrast, when water is seen as a human *need*, then it is supplied by sellers who own it to buyers who can afford it, and is given (sometimes) to those who can't afford it as an act of charity or aid. Seeing the destroying, polluting or wasting of water as an infringement of human rights is a creative way to begin to insure that water cannot be bought or sold for profit and to establishing public policies that insure access to clean, potable water.

Private access to water will always involve fees, as it does today. Fees are charged to bring water into homes or businesses. Over time, worldwide policies will charge polluters or wasters a high tax or even a fine for excess water use, and reward people and businesses for conservation and creative reuse and recycling of water. Drinking fountains in all common spaces will mean that water is available free in public space, and public toilets and showers will insure access to water for all people.

Destruction of the Amazon rainforest, which decreases the amount of clean air available to all of us (both through the loss of oxygen-creating mass and the release of carbon dioxide from cutting); clearcutting of old growth forests, which creates the conditions for erosion and silting of rivers; and destruction of wildlife habitat, which leads to species extinction, are all widely publicized elements of destruction of the commons. Seeing these as commons issues forces us to take a long view. For example, ending the practice of clearcutting in the forests of the Pacific Northwest to save endangered species (such as the spotted owl) cost many people their jobs. Some used that practice to claim that environmentalists cared more about owls than about people's livelihoods. But taking a longer view shows that the loggers would have, sooner rather than later, lost their jobs anyway as the old-growth forest was cleared or as the cost of logging became more expensive than importing logs from other countries. A longer view also reveals that many fishers and farmers lost their livelihoods because topsoil no longer

stabilized by the forests blew away and rivers were polluted by detritus from the logging, which killed the fish. There were other costs as well, including the people who watched their homes swept away by mudslides coming from over-logged and eroded hillsides. The larger view also takes into account the even bigger issues of protection of biological diversity for the benefit of all sentient beings, currently living or yet to be born.

Privatization

Privatizing of the commons has been going on steadily for several decades. Privatization is obvious in some areas and not at all in others, but if you look for it, you will begin to see it all around you. As mentioned, water is one aspect of the commons that has been increasingly privatized over the last several decades

Let's look at some other specific examples. Take public parks, whose benefits are too many to list here: beauty, solace, air-cleaning, breaking up urban congestion, recreation, free spaces to experience nature, to sit, to read, to meet people, to get away from an office or apartment.....

In order to be truly available to the entire public, a park has to be easy to get into, feel safe, be clean, with trails or sidewalks swept and maintained, trees and flowers pruned and watered. All that maintenance costs money, and many cities do not have or allot enough money to budget for those expenses. One option is not to maintain the park; a poorly maintained park is one that is then available only to those brave or desperate enough to go into it, or one that becomes a magnet for illegal activity because of its disuse. This is been the fate of some public parks that have been neglected and abandoned, often in poor neighborhoods. Another option is to charge people to enter the park, thus limiting access to that part of the public who can pay. This is the solution many national and state parks have adopted.

New York City has many wonderful parks and not enough money to maintain them. Like many cities, New York is pursuing a third option: trading off some public access for money—that is, privatizing the park a few days a year.

Over the past ten years, nonprofits have sprung up to raise money privately for all the parks in New York. The rewards to donors, besides nice parks, have generally been minimal—a button, a T-Shirt. But some corporations have given significant amounts of money in return for being able to block off parts of the parks temporarily for private

functions. Manhattan's Madison Square Park, for example, is a small jewel bounded by Madison Ave, 5th Ave, and 23rd St. It is easy to block off, as it is small and surrounded by a fence. Several days a year, this public park is not available to the public because a corporation has 'rented' it for a private function. In itself, this does not seem a terrible thing, but the problem is that the people of New York have not been consulted in the decision of whether this is the way they want their parks supported. At what point will the park begin to be no longer truly public because it is "rented out" for so many days a year?

The Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco is one of the most famous sites in the world. It is the symbol not only of San Francisco, but for many, it marks having come as far as you can on land here in the continental USA. Maintaining this bridge is very expensive. Drivers already pay \$5 to enter San Francisco over this bridge (or riders pay comparable fares on "public transportation"), but there is no other entrance from the North, so thousands of commuters pay this toll every day and millions of tourists pay it every year. You can walk across the bridge for free, and the view of the bridge and from the bridge is an example of a "non-rival" commons: any number of people can enjoy it without diminishing it for others. To help with the cost of maintaining the Golden Gate Bridge, a proposal was recently circulated to let a corporation sponsor it in return for having its logo on the bridge. The proposal was dismissed because the bridge authority calculated that the fees from such branding would not be enough to enable them to lower the per-car toll, and the outrage of the public at "selling" the bridge decreased the number of corporations even interested in bidding in the branding rights.

Poor tax policy

Privatizing cannot really be separated from its evil twin—regressive tax policy. The reasons that cities don't have enough money to maintain their parks is that they don't have enough tax revenue to allocate to park upkeep. Some states have discontinued their Arts Commissions because they don't have enough money for state-sponsored arts and culture projects. Arts, then, becomes defined by what the private sector is willing to pay. Parks and arts programs can seem almost unimportant when compared to burdened social service agencies or "public" schools that have to raise private money to support their libraries, arts and music programs and sometimes even sports programs.

Even if privatization were a good solution, not everything can be privatized. Take libraries. Over the past few years, our worsening economy and Bush Administration budget cuts have caused massive waves of cutbacks at “public” libraries nationwide. According to a 2004 American Library Association study, libraries in 41 states absorbed more than \$50 million in funding cuts in one year. Public libraries from Seattle, Denver and Honolulu to cities in California, Ohio, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Michigan and beyond, have suffered branch closures, staff terminations and curtailment of services and hours due to federal and state budget decisions.

The closure and severe limitation of public libraries is a blow to a democratic society. Not everyone can simply buy books, newspapers and magazines at will—or have access to the wide variety of information available in libraries even if they could afford to buy it. Not everyone has Internet access in their home or even in their school. And not every child has a home in which they have the space and quiet to read and study. Katherine Hadley, Director of the Minneapolis Public Library, summed it up when she wrote in 2005, “Since fall of 2003, when the Library Board faced drastic budget reductions for 2004, hundreds of people in Minneapolis and beyond have written to us about how important the Minneapolis Public Library is to their family, their business, their classroom. The majority of our neighborhood libraries are now open just three or four days a week. This is not acceptable in a city that prides itself on literacy and the right of all residents to fully participate in civic life.”

There are many other examples of privatization than the ones given here. Let’s go back to our second scenario at the beginning of this essay, which reads a little like science fiction. I don’t know of any sidewalks that you have to pay to enter. However, there are many sidewalks that are not public—in gated communities and malls, for example. To be sure, the sidewalks in malls are free to the public, but the intent is to get people into the stores lining the passageways. We have long paid for entrance into museums, and in many cultural institutions, cafes and gift shops are the concessions of corporate vendors. Also many corporate interests sponsor exhibits, just as they do sports events and sports arenas or stadiums. Rarely do we pay to use a bathroom in a cultural institution, but some have found them too expensive to maintain and have simply closed them. Restricting toilet use to “customers” or “ticket holders” makes using the bathroom

a benefit of paying the entrance fee. In essence “Your ticket includes one play, a play program, and unlimited visits to the bathroom.”

Of course privatization and poor tax policy have far more serious ramifications than in my scenario. Here are some: the massively rising number of homeless people; the 25 percent of Americans who live at or below the poverty line, many of whom are children; the fact that working full-time year-round for minimum wage does not provide enough income for anyone to afford a one-bedroom house or apartment anywhere in the United States (Source: Low Income Housing Coalition); the 30 percent of Americans who can't afford health insurance; the reports from food pantries and soup kitchens all across the country that they are inundated with hungry people, most of whom have jobs; and the use of tax money to fund pointless and bloody wars around the world.

All of these social problems reflect a tax restructuring that has lowered taxes for wealthy people and corporations and done little or nothing for the majority of people. Throughout the 1950s (the “Eisenhower” years), America’s very wealthiest people paid more than three times more of their income in taxes than they do today (not clear: their taxes were more than three times higher?). Under Reagan, the tax structure began to be tilted toward favoring?) the very wealthy, and this restructuring continues to the present day. For example, the tax package passed by Congress in May, 2006, saved most taxpayers \$20 each annually; however, for Americans who earn more than \$1,000,000, the savings was \$41, 977—a sum that is more than the total annual income of most of the nation’s taxpayers).

Summary

There is much more to be said about the commons and the threats to the commons. I believe the singularly most important thing to do at this juncture is to popularize the idea of the commons so that people begin to use the word and the concept as a way to begin to notice what is in the commons, what is being privatized, what is being preserved. In future essays, I will explore how this might be done.