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Transitions by V.B. Price

American political culture has moved into a period of stagnation that has no end in sight. So has New Mexico's. The status quo won't budge. Nor will the dead weight of the recession.

It looks like we're in for a grinding transition from an old world of cheap energy, stable weather, and clean water, a world that's falling apart before our eyes, to a new situation perhaps of enriched opportunity in crisis -- for those with the capital to take advantage of it -- but also a conundrum of dead ends for the rest of us who work but have little money to keep body and soul together.

I can hear Republicans and fat cats crooning away with a nasty smirk, "Oh that's all just doom and gloom, doom and gloom." That may be so, but how does one be both realistic and empowering at a time like this? The status quo is eating us alive. Ways exist to move it off our necks, but they're all but dormant at the moment.

Nationally, health care reform, despite the prodding of millions of people, will be about as exciting as changing one pair of sneakers for another. The deep misery of joblessness has become chronic. Housing starts are all but dead. Food stamps keep more people alive than ever before. Corporate money controls political discourse and creates fewer and fewer jobs in America. Banks hoard taxpayer money and make virtually no loans. Peak oil looms, and alternative energy founders in mires of investor uncertainty and the petroarchy's relentless PR assault on the competition. We're locked into two wars, and into a war economy, that's grinding down a generation of volunteer soldiers, flattening and terrifying civilian populations in numerous countries, and providing no jobs to speak of for America's unemployed. The cost of education continues to grind down students. Our politics have descended into mad ankle biting; the Parties can carry out no new ideas; Big Business dominates and serves no one but itself. And America, along with most of the rest of the world, won't get off the dime about climate change and widespread environmental pollution, thereby assuring unimaginable suffering for billions of people.

Locally, the status quo is like a big mono and matate, grinding optimism into a fine powder. The recession has clamped its jaws on the state. Major employers are faltering. State government is seriously cutting back on jobs; the state's universities are too. Students are paying higher tuition, and going deeper into debt. The poor are poorer. The building trades are suffering with low housing starts. Businesses across the board are downsizing to keep afloat.

And worse, we have no sense of common purpose. We know the booms of the past won't come again, and yet we keep hoping they will.

That's where the politics of polarization has brought us. Into the pit of a dark transition with no consensus on how to get out.

Is there anything to be done? The old ways that have brought us here are not going to get us out. Where do we look for leadership? Right now, I think, there is only one answer - ourselves.

There is a new reality emerging, a complicated one that's difficult to foresee or totally comprehend. But the keystone of this new reality is emerging from the fog. It has to do with decentralization, personal responsibility, and associations of like-minded people. Individual and small group action is about as decentralized as you can get.

I'm not suggesting some utopian or survivalist strategy of adapting to an uncertain future. I am suggesting that those who conceive of the good life as a tapestry of self-reliance and local community building do not have to wait for uncertainty to lift. We can start climbing out of the pit of this chaotic, malign transition right now.

Decentralization of energy is a telling example. It takes power away from the global corporations and industries. Personal energy resources, for instance - from conservation, to solar and wind power on our houses - contributes to a liberation from the suffocating status quo. All forms of decentralization does. Especially improving local conditions and supporting local businesses, schools and cultural institutions.

Buying locally grown food, cultivating local culture through support of local art, music and literature, keeping out of chain stores and restaurants and buying books, meals out, home repair items, and clothing from local businesses, finding common ground with neighbors, supporting local issue-based organizations - these all nurture local talent, local risk takers, and local advocates without descending into provincialism or succumbing to globalism.

Decentralization is not only a keystone to the future, but also a hallmark and a sign to follow. It's surely not an infallible strategy, but it's probably the least fallible at the moment. Why would anyone trust big banks, big oil, big chem, big insurance, big anything, after the unholy mess they've made for the rest of us. And why would anyone wait for them to revive and rescue us?

We all need to get agile, learn to trust ourselves again, stay curious, look for local solutions we can depend on, and wean ourselves from the cold comforts of the dead-end past, and get in shape to make good decisions in a hurry.