



Practical Visionaries

Elizabeth R. Sawin
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This year my nine-year-old daughter has been studying inventions and inventors, and I've been learning about them through her. She particularly likes the stories about accidental inventors who were trying to do one thing, made a mistake, and recognized, sometimes years later, the usefulness of what they had done. She finds something very satisfying in these stories. With the unlimited opportunities a child has to make mistakes – fractions, spelling words, and irregular verbs – it must be thrilling to read about grown-ups who made mistakes and became famous and (sometimes) rich in the process.

She is drawn to the mistakes, but I, from the vantage point of middle age, am drawn to the aspiration. How did Bell dare to believe in the telephone or Edison in electric light? Or the Wright brothers – what made them crazy enough to try to fly?

One of her books is a photographic history of the Wright brothers. As we looked through the book together, I first noticed the airplanes, fragile-looking creations of canvas and wood. Then I noticed the pilots, strapped in place with nothing but ordinary clothing between their tiny, vulnerable human bodies and the ground hundreds of feet below. With each flight they must have risked death; the book shows one

photograph of splintered wood and torn canvas, all that was left of a crash that badly hurt Orville and killed his co-pilot.

We looked through this book on a day when the news was full of reports of melting polar ice and ocean dead zones and slower than expected recovery of the ozone hole, and there was something in these photographs that raised my spirits. Without doubt many of the products of our inventive spirit – from the atomic bomb to the internal combustion engines that fill our atmosphere with more pollution than it can tolerate – are causing grief all around the world, but these old photographs renewed my hope that our species may find its way through these dangerous times of our own creation.

It was the yearning visible in almost every photograph that raised my spirits. It reminded me that, for all the trouble we've gotten ourselves into, there is something beautiful about a species whose members are willing to risk death or injury on the basis of a dream. And it all seems to have been about the dream for the Wright brothers. Orville is quoted as saying, "I got more thrill out of flying before I had ever been in the air at all – while lying in bed thinking how exciting it would be to fly."

Today the challenge isn't how to escape the Earth's gravity, but rather how to live good lives knowing that we can't escape the Earth and can't survive without it. Today the challenge is to embrace that reality with a global population of over six billion, horrible wars on most continents, declining ecosystems, and simultaneously rising consumption and poverty.

And, though the media don't always showcase them, our world is full of practical dreamers, people who are already dreaming of how exciting it will be not to overcome the pull of the Earth but to give into it.

These practical dreamers are people like my friends Stephen Leslie and Kerry Gawalt, organic and biodynamic farmers who feed people while improving the fertility of the soil. Or like John Todd and his colleagues who create 'living machines' that purify water while producing food and flowers. Or like my friend Dayna Baumeister and her colleagues in the expanding field of 'biomimicry' who turn to nature as a design teacher for everything from energy efficient pumps to self-cooling buildings in the tropics.

There are also the social and economic inventors, people like my friend Jan Passion who with

many others goes to areas of conflict around the world and works for peace and conflict transformation. Or like Jessica Prentice who is building a worker owned co-operative 'community supported kitchen' preparing nutritious local food and connecting consumers with farmers.

What all of these visionaries all have in common is the dream of partnership, the dream of fitting in. If we are to survive that is the dream that must replace the old dream, the dream of domination, which has fueled the industrial growth society for too many hundreds of years.

Like the dream of flight, the pursuit of sustainability in the midst of a system that doesn't reward it is a risky business, requiring unending perseverance and stamina. And even with the endless, dream-driven labor of these practical visionaries, some of their creations will never come to full fruition. But some of them will. And when they do, they will transform our world in ways I'm sure we cannot imagine today, no more than anyone alive in 1903, the year of the Wright brothers' first flight, could imagine that sixty-six years later human beings would walk on the surface of the moon.

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