**The Triumph of the Commons**

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In 1968, Garrett Hardin warned the world of the risks of the “Tragedy of the Commons,” wherein individuals seeking to maximize their own personal gains and minimize their costs could lead a community to expand beyond its shared carrying capacity and thus contribute to its own demise. The ethos of individual rights and limited responsibilities creates a false assumption that one’s personal choices have little impact on others. It is easy to imagine that our little bit does not matter and that simple acts of convenience are insignificant. Such individual actions do add up, however. In fact, each resource used or disposed of can add up quite quickly in our shared commons, such as parks, grazing lands, beaches, fisheries, the atmosphere, or our own neighborhoods.

Recognizing that our individual actions matter is paramount to addressing our current social and environmental problems. From dropping a piece of litter or purchasing a bottle of water to planting a garden or simply voting, everything adds up. Rather than assuming that no one will notice our small actions (or lack thereof), whether for personal gain or for the benefit of others, it is essential to claim the compound impact of each individual action on the collective whole.

In doing so, it is actually possible to invert the tragic phenomenon of spiraling down into negative feedback loops and create a positive spiral up into a “Triumph of the Commons” (van Vugt 2009). The potential for this “Triumph” rests in individuals expanding their view of their place in the world and seeing not only the synergies of their actions but also the rationality of making choices for the benefit of the whole, of which they are obviously a part. Recognizing the roles that we play in our communities, understanding the accumulative effect of our choices, and claiming the reality that healthy and sustainable communities have vital benefits for the individual are critical to nurturing ourselves and the commons.

Yet, how would one define and claim a “commons”? Who or what would be included in this shared space? If one recognizes the interdependence of eco-systems, certainly the community becomes quite large and complex. If one includes the interests and rights of future generations, people would need to significantly expand the variables included in their cost-benefit analyses when making choices. The richness of the creation and sharing of knowledge, resources, and cultures places even greater dimension to the equations. Such changes would likely require a dramatic paradigm shift.

Such a shift could honor the individual but also embrace the larger collective. For example, imagine what the United States would be like if we had a Bill of Responsibilities, in addition to our Bill of Rights. What responsibilities would be included? How would we reframe our choices to recognize the consequences of our actions on others? And, how would we address the inevitable resistance?

It is in the bridge of the commons that we find our unity. When one combines such a paradigm shift with the implied logic of the “Tragedy of the Commons,” the potential for massive cultural and structural change are possible. Indeed, one can begin to envision the steps needed to fuel the spiraling up of positive individual and collective actions. Making more conscious choices in the products we consume, getting to know our neighbors, educating ourselves about the world, volunteering in our communities, supporting local businesses, and finding joy in nature are all places to start. Through such a process, together, I have faith that we can achieve a “Triumph of the Commons.”

**Sources:**

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