

Agents of Change

The other day I was leaving Community Family Medicine, where I had been for an asthma appointment, when Dr. Holt made a point of coming out to meet me.

"I thought I recognized that voice," he said, "How's our pioneer?"

"I'm good," I replied. "Dr. Butler here was just helping me get some arrows out of my back."

We had a few laughs. I got a prescription for a new inhaler. And all was right in the world.

In our small southern town, I'm known as one of the guys who brought biodiesel to our neck of the woods, in Chatham County, N.C. Rachel, Leif and I started brewing biodiesel in my backyard, formed a biodiesel cooperative that became the largest in the U.S., and we went on to create a biodiesel plant that produces one million gallons per year.

We collect used cooking oil from area restaurants and spin it into fuel. We then sell our fuel to a membership community who loves to drive around free of the petroleum grid.

We are in the energy business.

Our company, *Piedmont Biofuels*, went on to spawn a couple of sustainable farming operations, and we anchored an abandoned industrial park that has become an eco-industrial complex with a handful of like-minded businesses inside the fence.

These days, I'm less interested in the energy balance of our cleaner-burning, renewable fuel than I am in the change we have created.

To call our membership Awakening Consumers would be a misnomer. They have been wide awake for a long time, and they completely

get it. They understand that by pumping our yellow fuel into their cars, trucks and tractors, they are liberating themselves from war, climate change and undesirable health effects. They are freeing themselves from little things—like asthma.

For that they pay a premium. And they go out of their way. And they do it deliberately and intentionally, in order to be free of a centralized top-down fossil energy paradigm that they find oppressive. They are happy to join Piedmont Biofuels, to help us escort them into a low-carbon future.

Yet for every consumer who understands our mission, for everyone on our side who Gets It, it feels like there are a thousand others who find us and our message horrifying. Stalwart defenders of the status quo—mechanics and engine makers and cheap fuel loyalists—have a hard time conceiving of how we can possibly exist.

As agents of change, we are both heralded and hated.

What I find intriguing is that we are not alone.

Over in Chapel Hill, N.C., my friend Tim has run into the same problem. He spent some time in Iceland with renowned architect Bill McDonough (the *Cradle to Cradle* guy) and together they hatched a plan to build a skyscraper called *Greenbridge*.

Those of us in the renewable energy space welcomed the news. We loved a built environment that consumed way less energy per square foot than anything else in the region. We applauded when we learned that the investors had forgone residential density in order to accommodate increased day lighting. We saw *Greenbridge* as a potential model for how humans might exist on this garden planet. Awakening Consumers placed deposits in order to reduce their ecological footprint.

Yet Greenbridge has vocal opponents. Those who want the world to stay the same. Some are a handful are anarchists who run around town sticking up “Fuck Greenbridge” signs. A few twenty something anarchists are fighting for the status quo with spray paint, while their parents stay silent. Tim describes those who stay silent as North Carolinians who still “go along to get along.”

If Greenbridge has a million dollar corner condo on the top floor, they are labeled for “million dollar green.” Detractors forget to mention the affordable housing that is built into the project—by design—as a study for how humans might live together.

Greenbridge is much larger than Piedmont Biofuels, but folks love to sling mud and arrows at both projects.

It is impossible for me to reflect on this notion without thinking of my brother Glen.

He is in the wind business in Canada, with his one-man company, *Sky Generation*. When he sold his farm and moved to Lion’s Head, Ontario, he broke our family’s heart. For years we gathered at his place and planted trees, and we were smug as we watched the forest evolve. But Glen sold the place, moved away, and erected a lone wind turbine on the Bruce Peninsula.

He garnered vast community support, demonstrated the wind energy resource, and managed to land bank financing to build two more. Sky Generation showed a little promise, so he developed a site for six more turbines in southern Ontario. He, too, is in the business of energy.

A lot of people believed in Glen, and in his vision of renewable energy. When *Bull Frog Power* came along, and offered to market his “green electrons,” Glen found a partner that worked. Bull Frog has the consumers Glen needs.

Lion’s Head is “cottage country,” and it is a delight to pull into a place like Harvest Moon Organic Bakery and see stickers on the door boasting “Powered by Bull Frog Power.” Lots of people on the peninsula Get It. Lots of people pay a premium for Glen’s electricity in order to be free of the human health effects of coal-fired and nuclear power plants.

When the “big wind” developers descended on his part of the world, with a plan to put in a hundred more turbines, Glen voluntarily helped organize the landowners and the community to see what a big wind project might look like.

Yet for everyone who signs up for change, it sometimes feels like there are a thousand non-believers. Glen has become a target of the anti-wind energy crowd. Some fellow in Miller Lake is busy buying full-page advertisements in the local paper spouting gibberish about the dangers of electricity of wind. His tagline is “What the Wind Tycoons Don’t Tell You.”

So Glen, like me and Tim, gets a turn at the whipping post. All three of us are up against myths, falsehoods, fear, misunderstanding and the entrenched interests of the status quo. All three of us have a just enough hip customers to make our projects succeed. And each of us carries such belief in the low-carbon future that we are willing to take risks on its behalf. Clearly the market will have to shift our way.

It’s not easy being covered with mud and arrows. My preference would be to sharpen a pine tree down at my shop, heat it to cherry red on the forge and thrust it into the gelatinous eye of the myopic status quo.

But until then, I guess I will just remain an agent of change. I’ll reach for my keyboard and my inhaler, and keep putting out suggestions for how the market might awake to a different way of being...