

NEWS FROM KATHY AND PHIL IN OAXACA

January-February, 2016

Dear Friends and Family,

We are back in the Oaxacan Mixteca Alta after our West Coast book tour of California, Oregon, and Seattle, doing presentations of the new book, *“Milpa! From Seed to Salsa”*. We were treated to such warm hospitality in homes, churches, and bookstores and enjoyed good conversations and discussions of the issues this book brings up. Many thanks again to all of you who offered hospitality and your help with arranging these events.

Our goal in this book written in cooperation with campesino friends is first of all to highlight and honor the ongoing work of the women and men of the Mixteca Alta, with their millennial traditions of careful seed selection and saving, planting and harvesting their crops by sustainable methods which enhance, rather than harm, the fertility and conservation of the soil. It is to honor as well the rich and nutritious traditional cuisine and the women who carry on the daily task of preparing these delicious recipes passed down from great-great-grandmothers. Finally, it is to highlight the communal values of this part of our human family and stimulate the imagination of English-speaking readers about the values that can help us to escape the self-made crises of our Western civilization.



Local production of native corn varieties

But indigenous peoples are not totally immune to the same attractions that have created our crises. The massive onslaught of the globalized consumer culture of “new” products is reaching every corner of the globe, attempting to seduce people in traditional cultures to give up their customs in favor of “convenience” foods, cleaning products, etc. With bright and colorful packaging and catchy phrases, these products, including industrialized foods with chemical color, artificial flavor “enhancers”, preservatives, and disposable packaging are luring some villagers, especially the young, to give up farming, go to the city and get a job, in order to have money to buy these things, which no one ever thought of needing before.

And yet we know from the food and agroecology experts that what we will need on this planet to survive the ravages of climate change and to feed a population soon to be over 9 billion is not industrial farming, which deteriorates soils and pollutes water, but rather the small farmers of the world, who currently produce 75% of the world’s food on 25% of the agricultural land, while using a fraction of the water used by industrial agriculture. As well known agroecological scientist Miguel Altieri demonstrated in his presentation at our book signing at University of Berkeley, the traditional Milpa and scientific agroecology working together can meet the production and food sovereignty needs of our 21st century.

Pope Francis arrived here in Mexico just a few hours ago to tour the conflictive areas of this violence-ridden country. With his encyclical letter *Laudato Si*, he brings a message of hope that echoes much of what the “Milpa” book stresses. He writes about the environmental problems of the unquestioning application of a “technocratic paradigm” to our food production and our treatment of the earth and cites the important role

the values of the indigenous communities of the world can play in helping us rectify the value systems that have led the Occidental world to the brink of disaster.

Yet the logic of the current western economic systems, if not radically altered, will take us over the brink. The world's western economies, with the exception of some more independent Latin American countries, have been stagnant for decades. Our political and economic leaders would have us believe that the only way out of this stagnation is an austerity inflicted on the most vulnerable in our societies and an abandonment of the central political expressions of human solidarity, by dismantling the social safety nets that already exist. Yet vibrant economies that meet the needs of the peoples of the world seem to escape our grasp, primarily due to the economic sins of these very leaders. Their sins are three:

1. Concentration of wealth in the hands of a small minority, who feed almost none of that wealth back into productive activities.
2. Encouraging consumptive societies that have maxed out the debt capacity of their populations, causing a constriction in the circulation of wealth.
3. The radical expansion of a financial sector which gambles the world's wealth in wild speculative activities, instead of in productive ones.

The Western powers efforts to drag their economies out of the quagmire with easy credit have backfired and continue to threaten major financial breakdown. War continues to be another favorite economic option, but one with drastic human and ecological consequences. So for current western leaders the question remains, "How to create the money needed to feed a system that requires an elusive growth for its survival?"

The strategies of the international financial and political elite are not imaginative, but are nevertheless devastating to the well being of the human family and the planet: a) privatize public services since they do not funnel money into the money hungry "liberal" economies; b) globalize markets to entice new consumers into the system; c) double efforts to turn the remaining natural resources of the planet into money with strip mining and fracking; d) destroy the last commons of the planet by displacing communal peoples from sacred territories and commodifying their lands and resources.

The attack on indigenous commons of Oaxaca has already begun and has necessitated formation of the Collective for the Defense of Indigenous Territories here. But hidden in the value systems of the mountain communities of Oaxaca and other traditional communities around the world, are some of the solutions for vibrant and sustainable world economies that can benefit our human family. Local economies built upon systems of community responsibility and solidarity, of mutual aid and the celebration of the common destiny of the goods of the Earth, of local production and circulation of wealth, and on a love for our Mother Earth are not only possible, but already exist, often in seminal form here. How do we transition to such economies? Look into "transition towns" at transition.org/home. In our next letter we hope to explore a bit why a "degrowth" movement is growing across Latin America and parts of Europe.

We thank you for your letters, your prayers, and your donations, which continue to help make this work possible. Our principle aim for these letters is to share our view from this little corner of the earth. If you wish to contribute to this work, you can send a much-appreciated tax-deductible donation to:

Instituto Paz en las Americas, 2645 Mountain View Rd. Silver City, NM 88061.

Many thanks, and we always love hearing from you.

Peace and Blessings to you all,

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