

Healing by the *community spirit*

It's the story of the largest movement the world has ever seen. A movement with no charismatic leader; that follows no unifying ideology; and which politicians, the public and the media don't recognise. But it has the potential to heal the Earth. **Alexandra de Blas** examines *Blessed Unrest*, a book by Paul Hawken, soon to start production as a ground-breaking film.

'There is another super power on Earth' says Paul Hawken. Students, volunteers, monks, businessmen, farmers, poets, biologists, indigenous people, artists, and refugees are all part of it. This, 'the most diverse movement the world has ever seen', can be viewed as 'humanity's immune response' to toxins like political corruption, social injustice and environmental pollution. Paul Hawken is an environmentalist, entrepreneur and author and his thesis grew out of his observations and experience in working with environmental and social issues across the globe.

His *New York Times* bestseller is evocative, compassionate and accessible. The poetry, heart and complexity in Hawken's writing here hark back to the style of *The Ecology of Commerce*, written before *Natural Capitalism* which he co-authored with Amory and Hunter Lovins.

'He weaves such a coherent picture of where the movement has come from and how thinking has evolved,' says Molly Harriss Olson, Convenor of the National Business Leaders Forum on Sustainable Development, which brought Hawken to Australia, as a keynote speaker, in 1999.

'The way he likens human social evolution to the immune system rising up and fighting back is incredibly empowering for people who have been struggling on the front lines for so long. It's a tonic for the soul.

'It certainly gave me the sense that with so many people trying to solve these problems at a local level, all pulling in the same direction, that, these ideas maybe powerful enough to change the world.'

'Would we recognise a worldwide spiritual awakening if we saw one?' Hawken asks, or rather is this awakening already in place and we are simply failing to recognise it? The industrial revolution went unnamed for more than a century because no one had the schema to categorise it.

Blessed Unrest places the movement in its historical context which grounds it in a solid foundation. In tracing its roots from 18th century biology through to later concerns about environmental health, social justice, indigenous rights and responses to the abuse of corporate power, Hawken eloquently captures the scope and scale of the movement's task.

There is no escaping the social injuries and environmental scars that must be healed, but he inspires a confidence that we have the compassion, intelligence and wisdom required to do it.

Hawken's telling of Rachel Carson's secret battle with cancer, as she stood up to the might of corporate America, drives home the remarkable nature of her achievement – an example of the power at work in this global movement. He shares stories of other extraordinary people who have endured hardship.



'Be the action. Be the film. Change the world.' – the book the *Blessed Unrest* and its *WiserEarth* website, which have galvanised environmental groups globally, will soon be followed by *Blessed Unrest: The Film*.

Wangari Maathai was beaten unconscious while standing up for her Green Belt Movement of African women; before winning the Nobel Peace Prize. But this is not just a book about shining lights, it encompasses the millions of people and groups affecting change in a multiplicity of ways.

It is easy to romanticise this

global band of do-gooders. How can a movement so diffuse be effective? Anyone who has worked within the NGO sector has encountered flawed individuals, let alone, structures and processes. Hawken acknowledges that, 'humans are frail and imperfect' and 'clay feet march in all protests'. But he answers these criticisms with

a question ... are 'the underlying values of the movement beginning to permeate global society?'. Then there is the matter of intent. 'Inspiration ... resides in humanity's willingness to restore, redress, reform, rebuild, recover [and] re-imagine. If citizens ... can rise above their difficulties and act with a clear intent to confront exploitation and bring about restoration then there is something powerful afoot.'

The theme of connectivity, and its power, is developed on many levels; between humans and nature, within the internal workings of the immune system and in the personal stories that link the movement's key players. Henry Thoreau's jail sentence in protest against poll tax prompted his book *Civil Disobedience*, which inspired Gandhi, who in turn influenced Martin Luther King Jr. Rosa Parks refused to stand up on the bus in Alabama in 1955, which sparked a chain of events that changed America.

The book was written in tandem with a database and website www.wiserearth.org which link thousands of environmental groups across the globe. When it launched



Blessed Unrest author Paul Hawken is an environmentalist, entrepreneur and author whose other popular books include *The Ecology of Commerce* and *Natural Capitalism*. www.paulhawken.com

in April 2007, it was the first searchable and editable community database online. WiserEarth aims to connect people and groups in the environmental and social justice space and to help them collaborate. More than 109 000 organisations are listed on the site and 3077 of those are Australian.

'The site has great potential for environmental collaboration,' says HARRISS OLSON, who is working with WiserEarth to utilise the site's infrastructure for the Earthmark project – an initiative designed to create trust within the global market place of sustainability and climate change by identifying products with integrity. It is driven from Australia but is currently being piloted in New York.

Here in Australia the Our Community website has been building capacity within the community sector for eight years. Co-founder and Chief Operating Officer, Denis Moriarty says, 'community organisations are the fabric of the nation and they need to be strengthened'.

Our Community was the first body in the world to have a portal for every facet of managing a community organisation. Of the 700 000 community groups in this country, 55 000 of them are connected with the Our Community website. 'It's a model that WiserEarth members could draw from and adapt to their respective countries,' says Moriarty.

Meanwhile *Blessed Unrest* and its WiserEarth website have had a low profile in Australia to date, but this could change with the start of production of *Blessed Unrest: The Film* in late November. It will be the world's first global participatory film and will profile a year in the life of the movement.

If the 12-minute short is anything to go by, the film will be passionate, provocative and highly motivating. Its slogan is: 'Be the action. Be the film. Change the world'.

Micro-communities will form to work together or edit online. Anyone can take part in the film making process. The production team will provide a library of footage that can be utilised by the participants and

material shot by contributors can be drawn upon by others. All footage will be automatically translated into six languages: Mandarin, Spanish, Portuguese, English, Bengali and Hindi.

This technology enables untold stories to leapfrog to the big screen, but it also democratises the film-making process by providing access to free footage and editing facilities. The feature film will draw on the edited material from around the globe.

No doubt there will be many obstacles to overcome as the project finds its feet, but that is the nature of this evolving movement. If all goes according to plan you will see *Blessed Unrest*, at a cinema near you, in the first quarter of 2010.



Kikuyu women from the Muranga district, Kenya, celebrate the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 to Green Belt Movement founder Wangari Maathai, who endured physical attacks for speaking out on the environment before her work was recognised globally.

Alexandra de Blas

More information:

WiserEarth website, www.wiserearth.org

Blessed Unrest: The Film website, www.blessedunrestthefilm.com

Our Community website, www.ourcommunity.com.au