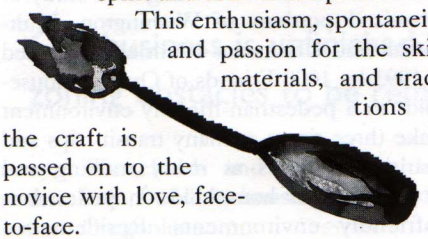
Heroes of Local Knowledge

by Mary Anne Harmer Allen and Joseph R. Conrad

We called him the Vegetable Man. His tomatoes, eggplant, and basil were sweet and beautiful–the finest produce around. Frank shared these garden jewels with all his friends and neighbors, offering advice as to the best way to prepare and cook them. He spent hours thinning, weeding and watering the lush growth. He claimed his success with vegetables was a result of his Italian heritage and the traditional gardening skills passed down by his father. We knew it was that and much more. It was his passion for the earth, the delicate seeds, and the simple tools of gardening that had been used for generations that made the difference. Frank loved his garden–treating each cucumber, radish, and pea with respect and tenderness. He kept up on the latest trends in vegetable gardening and somehow knew when and how to incorporate new methods with traditional ones, blending the two to create innovations in gardening. Watch the care, nurturing, love, and passion a master gardener has for the soil, his seeds, and the green growth around him. You cannot learn that from a book. This is local knowledge at its finest, when it reflects the spirit and soul of the practitioner.

This enthusiasm, spontaneity, and passion for the skill, materials, and traditions of the craft is passed on to the novice with love, face-to-face.



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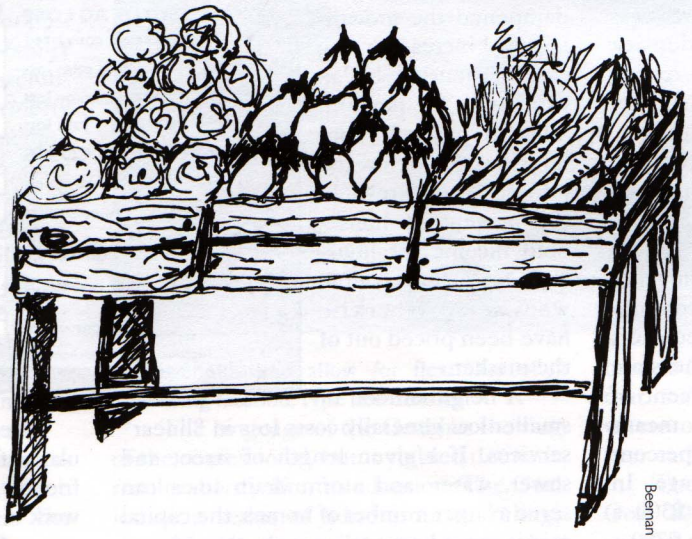
That Vegetable Man is gone now, and there is no one around who can come close to growing the quality of produce that Frank sold from his small fruits and vegetables market. Customers now purchase pale tomatoes wrapped in plastic year round from the nearest large supermarket. We think about Frank, often wondering about the traditional vegetable grower and other highly skilled professionals and craftsmen who for so many years successfully used local knowledge and contributed so much. Where are they today? Has their local knowledge and expertise been passed on? Are these individuals valued today for the traditional foundation they bring to new knowledge and technology? Does anyone care? Does respecting local knowledge, passed on through generations while learning and adapting new techniques, represent true evolution and hope for a more authentic, healthier community? Should it not?



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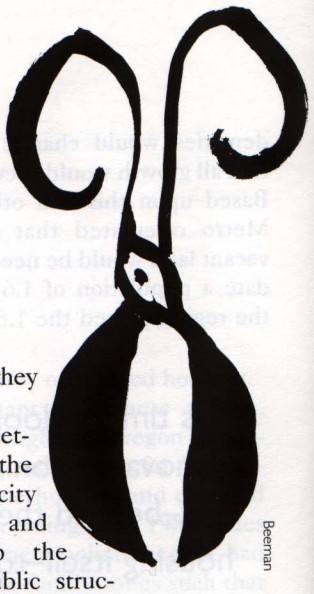
Each of us can identify warning signs in our own communities:

- Is the local logger still employed?
- What about the local fisherman?
- Is the local sawmill still running?
- How many cabinet shops and furniture builders are still around?
- Do the builders around town carry contracts, not tools, and attend meetings for permits, instead of working with their hands on the site?
- Does the tile setter know where or how tile is made, and do the roofers understand where shingles come from and the subtleties of each material with which they work?
- Do stone setters laying the steps of city buildings and putting up the walls of public structures know the origin of the stone they are using and how it got from the quarry to the worksite?



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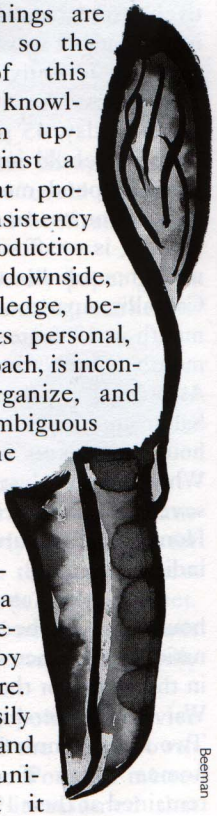
In considering these questions, it quickly becomes apparent that the best way to understand and promote the appropriate use of local knowledge–that set of skills and information held by individuals in a given location or culture–would be to learn from the heroes of local knowledge we meet each day in our communities.

These heroes of local knowledge are the keepers and tenders of an honorable garden of knowledge. In the past, this was a powerful and important role–a role respected and appreciated. Today, however, we seem to value things, not how things are made. And so the keepers of this garden of knowledge swim upstream against a society that promotes consistency and mass production.

On the downside, local knowledge, because of its personal, slower, hands-on approach, is inconvenient to store, organize, and describe. It can be ambiguous and vague. On the upside, local technology brings with it years of emotions, feelings and sensitivities associated with a specific locality–a special place identified by the people living there. It may not be as easily quantified, packaged and dispersed as more universal models, but it



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belongs to the community.

As a second generation stone cutter, I (Joseph Conrad) strongly feel that some elements of modern production, technology, and economies of scale


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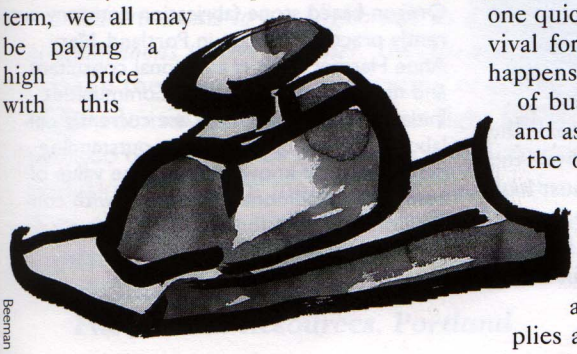
have caused our industry to sacrifice local models. Technical knowledge, so easily accessible today from books, magazines, and the Internet, can lead to a richness and expansion of knowledge; but it can also contribute to a dilution of local traditions and technologies. As a craftsman practicing a trade passed on for generations, I now learn through global technology to use standardized models. The resulting products, whether created or produced in my hometown in the Pacific Northwest, in Europe, or in New York soon take on a "common" look; everything looks the same.

This is not an urban phenomenon. Sadly, our friends in small towns throughout the country tell us that the warning signs are already showing up in their rural neighborhoods. There is not more support for heroes of local knowledge in rural locales. Without a change in attitude, these small-town professionals and craftsmen will follow the same destiny as their urban brothers.

As the local cabinet maker tells us, "Our customers demand the latest style or trend for our industry as seen in national or international magazines. They forget about the local creativity based on traditions and materials originating in our own backyard. It is important to remember that a sense of history provides the necessary connection to local material sources and traditional processes that can then be utilized to maximize the potential of new trends."

Perhaps, in the short term, standardized products are of value to business owners looking for savings reaped through consistency and mass production. Long-term, we all may be paying a high price with this approach. As technology moves society toward the use of universal models, there is a loss of creative diversity that reflects the local place and its traditions. If we do not use and pass on our parents' and grandparents' expertise, it will die with us. No one will be left to teach or pass on the skills that we learned from generations past. No one will be able to take the best of local knowledge and adapt it to new technologies.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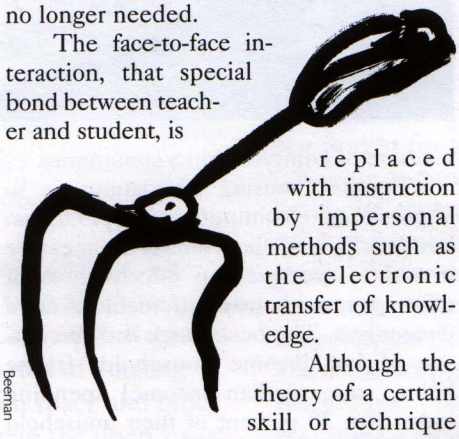
Again and again, professionals and craftsmen using traditional methods communicate a sense of loss. Loss accompanied with a challenge, a hope that this trend can be reversed. Preserving local knowledge is becoming a common cry heard across many, many disciplines. It is a cry for survival–for the continuation of the best of the past made better through the technology of the future.

When we do not honor, respect and acknowledge local knowledge, forsaking it completely for technological knowledge, we soon lose the human touch. The intimacy of daily personal relations is no longer needed.

The face-to-face interaction, that special bond between teacher and student, is replaced with instruction by impersonal methods such as the electronic transfer of knowledge.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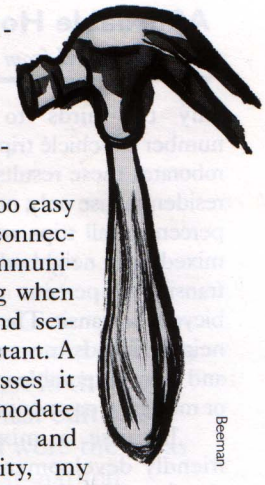
Although the theory of a certain skill or technique can be communicated electronically or by a book or magazine, you certainly lose the small nuances of how to hold a saw or how to pick grapes at their peak flavor. This learning is best gained through observation, personal experience, and practice–taught by someone with respect and passion for the trade.

As one thinks about how we make purchases as individuals or as businesses, one quickly understands the threat to survival for the local hero of knowledge. It happens as the corner pharmacy is put out of business by large drug-store chains, and as the local hardware stores, where the owner helped and encouraged us to slowly browse through the inventory on Saturday afternoons, is replaced by large self-serve hardware stores–the fast and efficient way to sell home supplies and hardware. These are all signs that communities are slowly moving away from local knowledge. Rather than using it in conjunction with new technology, it is discounted all together.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It has become too easy for people to lose connection with their communities; they stop caring when people, products, and services become too distant. A local builder expresses it this way, "To accommodate more customers and enhance productivity, my services are not viewed uniquely, but 'lumped' into common categories for ease and efficiency. Consequently, we use design principles that are considered universal with more legal codes and standards and construction regulations that will not accommodate exceptions. Finally, there are elaborate bureaucratic and operational procedures that reinforce mass production. Thus, an original idea or skill, with roots in local knowledge, is stretched, pulled, and forced to fit common standards. The result is the sacrifice of local knowledge and creativity. My structures are just not as unique as they used to be."

It is very difficult today to go against the tide. Practitioners of local knowledge know this, but we can make it easier for them. If the community–if individuals–will support them, they will utilize the advances of technology to further local knowledge. It is a win-win proposition. Practitioners of local knowledge will selectively capitalize on the advances of technology while staying connected to their tools and materials–staying connected to the customer.

The cabinet maker, the fisherman, the stone cutter and so many other skilled professionals and craftsmen are the foundation of our communities. They bring creativity, sensitivity to the environment, and sound economic value to our cities and towns. They represent the synthesis of ideas, the tools or technology employed, and the material selected for use. The integration of all of these elements can only lead to more creativity.


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Creativity does not operate as an independent vision; rather, it is within the holistic context of local

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Affordable Housing

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only two-thirds to three-quarters the number of vehicle trips. A Metro survey corroborates these results: in neighborhoods of residential use only, not served by transit, 89 percent of all trips are by automobile; in a mixed use neighborhood served well by transit, 40 percent of trips are by foot, bicycle, or transit. The better design in these neighborhoods can mean lower living costs and more disposable income to apply to rent or mortgage payments.

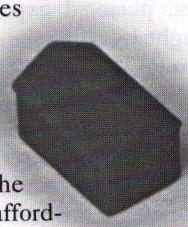
Because a mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly development pattern can reduce the number and length of trips, it can reduce the need for cars. In fact, people who live in neighborhoods of this design own fewer cars. A study in Sacramento revealed that residents of compact neighborhoods own 1.3 cars per household; residents of low-density neighborhoods own 2 cars per household. If a two-car household can get by with one in a well-designed neighborhood, the household can save $6,465 each year, the annual cost of driving a new car 15,000 miles for the year, according to the American Automobile Association. This household can apply the savings–$450 to $500 a month–to a mortgage or rent payment and have enough left over to pay for a transit pass or rent an extra car when needed. More Oregon households (the households being formed by our children) can afford dwellings in mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods.

The American Farmland Trust study of cities in the Central Valley of California, mentioned earlier, is one in a growing body of literature showing that more compact development costs less than low-density development. The Central Valley study revealed that, for Central Valley cities, low-density development is a drain on local government finances, while compact development produces net revenues to local government. If this were to hold true for Oregon communities, then there is an important implication for social equity: low-density development requires a subsidy; compact development subsidizes sprawling development.

That is, low-density development may impose a hidden tax upon residents of compact neighborhoods. Oregon communities should develop the capability to evaluate the costs of various development patterns so they can act to remove subsidies and move closer to equitable taxation, fee assessment, and resource allocation.

One way to address this subsidy is to reduce systems development charges (SDCs) for compact development. SDCs are fees charged against new development to cover some or all of the costs of certain service systems, such as sewers. Cities could reduce SDCs for dwellings in a compact development pattern if, as is often the case, the dwellings are less expensive to service. This could restore at least some measure of equity within a community.

Because housing affordability is so important to community welfare, Oregon has developed a "benchmark" to measure it and to measure the effectiveness of efforts to make housing affordable to more Oregonians. The benchmark is: "Percentage of low income households [those below state median income] spending more than 30 percent of their household income on housing." For the last three years, the Oregon Progress Board has declared this benchmark to be one of the few "urgent" benchmarks highlighted for special attention. Unfortunately, data for Oregon communities indicate housing has become less affordable, following West Coast trends.



Oregon can get its second wind in the struggle for housing affordability, but it will take a broader strategy than the one that opened the zoning door to the marketplace over the past 20 years. The new strategy must look to community design and to compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly development patterns as the context within which the marketplace can operate.

Richard Benner is a graduate of the University of Oregon Law School and of Princeton University. For 12 years he was a staff attorney for 1000 Friends of Oregon. In 1987, he became the first Executive Director of the Columbia River Gorge Commission; he directed the preparation and adoption of a management plan for the National Scenic Area. Mr. Benner became Director of the Department of Land Conservation and Development on November 1, 1991.

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and traditional tools and materials, accompanied by inspiration, that creativity, unique form, and innovation emerge.

This is the power, strength and ultimate hope of local knowledge. Nurturing this process and incorporating it into new technology is absolutely critical to our creativity, to our environment, to our economy. Local knowledge helps build healthy communities. If we do not use it, we lose it.

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Joseph Conrad is a Northwest sculptor, second generation stone cutter, and owner of an Oregon-based stone fabrication company currently practicing his art in Portland. Mary Anne Harmer Allen is a national consultant and director of the Healthy Communities Initiative in Portland. They are currently collaborating on a book profiling outstanding heroes of local knowledge and the value of connecting traditional technology with contemporary innovations.