

Excerpted from Swedish Bulletin, Fall 2008

# Author Alan AtKisson tells how sustainability can make life worth living

Sweden has a well-earned reputation for leadership in sustainability going back 40 years.

TEXT: ERIC PAGLIA

A new book entitled *The ISIS Agreement: How Sustainability Can Improve Organizational Performance and Transform the World* is out this autumn, authored by the Stockholm-based American environmental entrepreneur, musician and author Alan AtKisson. Swedish Bulletin's Eric Paglia had a chance to speak with Mr. AtKisson, well-known



in the sustainability community for his previous work "Believing Cassandra".

## **What is the main message of *The ISIS Agreement*?**

That transformative change for sustainability is necessary, possible, and very, very rewarding. I'm trying to give people a highly readable, even entertaining "tour" that takes them from our contemporary confrontation with massive problems like climate change and corruption, to massive solutions and accelerated development, or more accurately, redevelopment.

## **Who is the target audience?**

Anybody who is serious about trying to change the world. These days, there is a growing group of "sustainability professionals", but I'm also writing for a wide audience of leaders, managers, teachers and students.

The ISIS Agreement is the second in a planned series of three books, with the general structure "past, present, and future." *Believing Cassandra* was about the past: how we got into this mess, what the "Cassandras" of previous years (scientists

mostly) were trying to tell us.

The ISIS Agreement is about the present. For the next several decades, we will be facing that "what do we do now?" question on a daily basis. The answer is summarized in the phrase "sustainable development. This is a battle, a race to the finish line, and we have to win it. We have no choice but to win it.

## **Why do you use figures taken from mythology in your book titles?**

Myths endure because the stories capture something universal in human experience. They give us a sense of our place in history, yet they also reflect things that are happening to us now -- Cassandra's curse of knowing where things were headed, but not being believed; Isis's task of reassembling Osiris and making him whole again, to make the future possible.

## **How is the ISIS Agreement connected to your sustainability consulting company *The AtKisson Group*?**

The heart of the book is a process we call the "ISIS Method" -- ISIS is short for Indicators, Systems, Innovation, and

"In Sweden, sustainability thinking is more a part of daily life in some ways: words and concepts like "lagom" and "kretsloppstänkande" are known to children in day care."

Strategy -- which we have found to be a powerful way to address the challenge of sustainability in concrete, practical, and innovative terms.

We use the ISIS Method intensively in our consulting, as well as the set of tools built around it called "Accelerator." The tools and method have been steadily spreading around the world, in training programs, corporate sustainability programs, education systems and the like. Our clients range from the UN Environment Program in Asia to the US Army, from major brand companies to cities and small NGOs. We're quite a small company, but we are very global and diverse in our practice.

## **Has Sweden been a good place to be based for your work?**

It's been wonderful. I came here for personal reasons, but I had the additional luck of ending up in one of the world's centers for sustainability thinking and practice. Sweden has a well-earned reputation for leadership in sustainability going back forty years.

In Sweden, sustainability thinking is more a part of daily life in some ways: words and

concepts like "lagom" (having or using exactly the right amount of something, and not more) and "kretsloppstänkande" (cyclic thinking) are known to children in day care. And climate change is part of the weather report.

## **How did you go about adapting to life in Sweden?**

Total immersion. I came to test life here in November-December 2000, not the high summer. If I could take the darkness, I figured, I could take anything. And I was a very determined student of Swedish life and language. I fell in love with the country when I fell in love with my wife Kristina, whom I met through our work (she is also a sustainability expert). She helped me tremendously, as did everyone around me; and I used every trick in the book -- set my mobile phone to Swedish immediately, studied comic books, learned the drinking songs, read poets. I even created a funny accent for myself, when going around town, so that people wouldn't hear the American accent and switch over. And I still love it here. But I'm finally becoming Swedish

enough that I think the dark winters are not so fun, instead of thinking of them as cozy".

## **Has Sweden changed much in the years you have lived here?**

Creeping individualism and consumerism are starting to creep all the faster. Shopping seems to be more and more important. People seem to have less and less time. But that's a global phenomenon. Despite that, the core of what it means to be Swedish seems to be intact. Long live the six-week summer vacation!

## **What do you like to do when you are not busy saving the planet?**

Be with my family, first and foremost! And play guitar, write songs, watch movies, pick blueberries, swim ... and just stand outside and look around. This is an amazingly beautiful planet, and we in Sweden are fortunate to live on particularly beautiful piece of it.

The older I get, the more important it seems to "just look around." Get to know what it is we are trying to preserve. Or as we say in Swedish, "bara vara" -- just be. ■