

NAVIGATING THE
UNIMAGINABLE PAPER 3



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COMING TO TERMS WITH COLLAPSE

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RECAP

Our world is being transformed. In every country, on every continent, ordinary people are doing extraordinary things. They are greening cities, bringing diverse communities together, growing food regeneratively. They are supporting each other through the pandemic, building local renewable energy grids, running repair shops and grief cafes.

Together, these initiatives are building a new human civilisation, from the ground up. This is a civilisation that cares deeply about people and planet. It dares to dream big and act small. It is the future. Here and now. This is an emerging civilisation based on the exchange of gifts, the regeneration of land, air and water and on harnessing the raw human potential in each and every one of us.

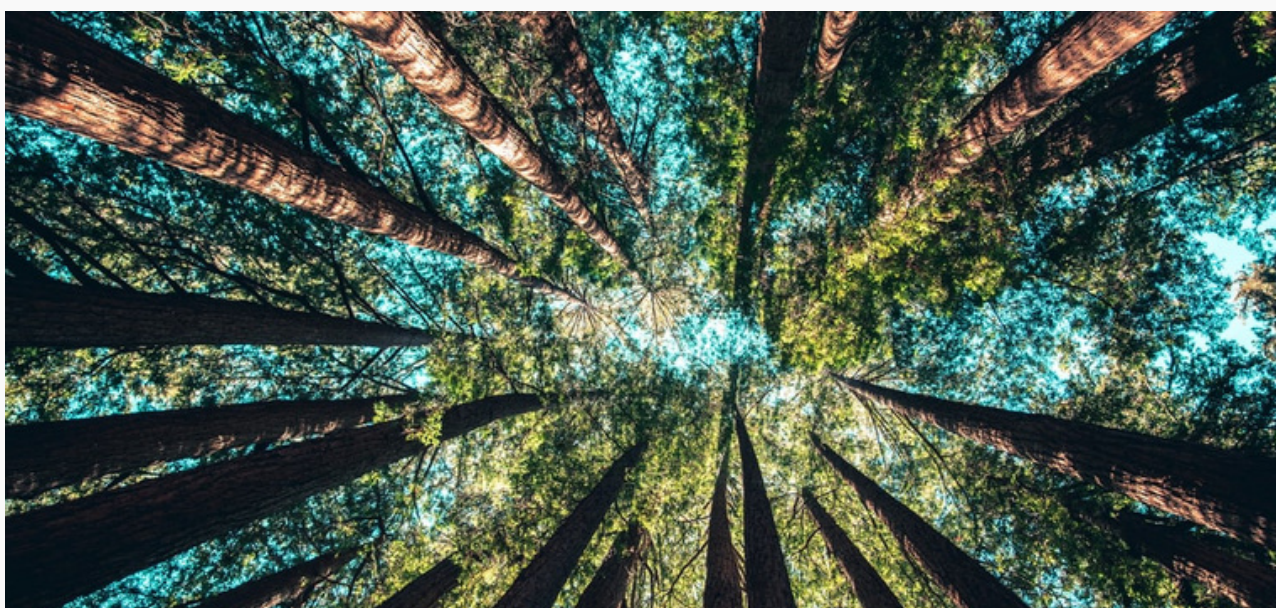
At the same time, something else is happening. A rapacious economy beyond political or social control is steadily destroying life on Earth.

As the pursuit of profit and economic growth speed ever faster, our window of opportunity for systemic change is shrinking. It is becoming clear that the Business As Usual path will risk the collapse of civilisation as we know it.

Yet this does not mean it risks killing off the grass-roots initiatives that are building a new world. Because they are local, decentralised and self-organised they are resilient enough to survive even the collapse of the out-going civilisation.

What's more, anyone, everyone can contribute to building the new world. Now is the time to join the movement of the future. Think Global. Act Local. Start Now!

Where is your place in the transformation?



INTRODUCTION

There's a strange thing that happens in the human mind when we think about death. Or more specifically when we are faced with our own mortality. We have an automatic avoidance mechanism. It's been called Self-Specific Death Denial. Researchers have found that *"we shield ourselves from existential threats, or consciously thinking about the idea that we are going to die, by shutting down predictions about the self, or categorising the information as being about other people rather than ourselves."* ([quote from here](#))

It seems that faced with the prospect of the possible collapse of our entire civilisation, something similar may be going on. When faced with immediate danger, this arguably helps self-preservation: if a sabre-tooth tiger is lurking in the bushes the last thing I need is an existential breakdown. But when facing longer range threats like climate and ecological breakdown it may benefit us to face directly into the dangers ahead.

At the same time, prolonged exposure to psychological crises such as grief or trauma can leave us feeling overwhelmed, powerless and immobilised. This can become a cycle that is hard to break - a bit like an addiction (See for example, *Waking The Tiger*, Peter Levine's book on trauma (North Atlantic Books, 1997). So how do we face into what might be ahead without spiralling into a vortex of depression and overwhelm? Without facing it, we risk denial. Facing into it without care we risk powerlessness.

In this paper we want to present a number of frameworks which we feel can help to come to terms with the possibility of collapse of the world as we know it. We have found these frameworks to be useful for individuals and collectives (teams, organisations, communities). First we look at three frameworks that help us to come to terms with and fully acknowledge the possible collapse scenario. Then we move on to some factors that help us move from this position to one of action, agency and resilience.

THE FOUR R'S OF DEEP ADAPTATION

Deep Adaptation is a term coined by British Professor Jem Bendell. Having taken a sabbatical year to dive into the science of climate change, Jem became convinced that we are heading towards the collapse of civilisation as we know it. As a result he advocates putting our collective energies into adaptation - radical efforts to ensure the survival of as many people as possible.

Along the way Professor Bendell did a lot of soul searching to explore how we might accept what he sees as inevitable. One of the tools he developed is a set of four questions which guide us through a thought process of acceptance and adaptation. These questions are:

1. **Relinquishment:** what do we need to let go of, so that we don't make matters worse?
2. **Restoration:** what do we need to preserve or bring back?
3. **Resilience:** how do we strengthen systems and resources to help us through?
4. **Reconciliation:** with what or whom can I make peace, in the face of our shared mortality?

The first two questions reflect a common approach when addressing change: what to preserve or take forward and what to leave behind. There is an old adage that there is no change without loss and no loss without change. It is often when we are reluctant to let go of something that we feel additional distress around change.

These questions work just as well for individuals as they do for collectives. If we as a species are facing the collapse of our current civilisation, we can usefully explore what we want to let go of and what it will be useful to try to preserve or re-establish.

The third question really speaks to the preparations we can make now to ease the adaptation process as it unfolds. If existing systems collapse, how can we pre-empt this by building locally resilient ways to look after ourselves.

And finally, the fourth question invites us to consider the relationships we might want to pay attention to. There may be places where we need to make amends or to bring closure. The following table breaks these questions down into a form that you may wish to work through with your loved-ones, your organisation or community.



	INDIVIDUAL (I)	COLLECTIVE (WE)	SYSTEMIC (ALL)
RELINQUISHMENT	<p>What am I attached to that I may not have if society collapses?</p> <p>What mindsets, pattern of behaviour or relationships are holding me back from accepting change?</p>	<p>What about the way we work now will not help us through major change?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How decisions are made • How power is shared • How we see ourselves • How we get the things we need 	<p>What is it about the current system that drives collapse?</p> <p>How do we start to let go of these things?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mindsets • Systems and structures • Economic drivers
RESTORATION	<p>What might I gain instead? What's been missing in my life?</p> <p>When my life was at its best what was going on and how can I get some of this back?</p>	<p>What in our history will help us through change?</p> <p>What will be part of the future come what may?</p> <p>What does our lineage or history contain that is eternal – could survive anything?</p>	<p>What clues are there in the past to a society that avoids boom and bust?</p> <p>What can we learn from societies that have lived in harmony with Nature?</p>

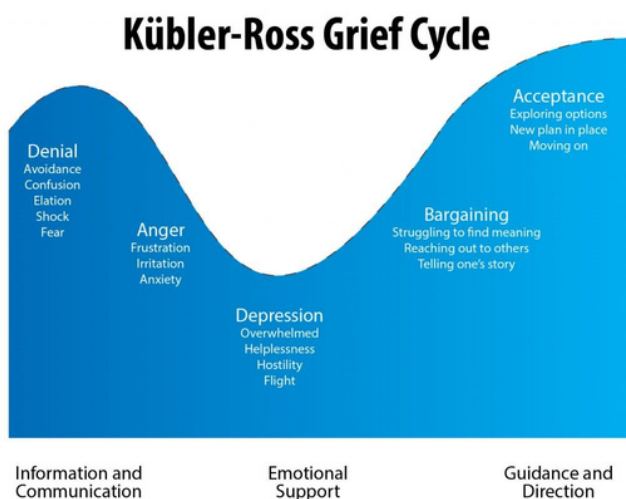
	INDIVIDUAL (I)	COLLECTIVE (WE)	SYSTEMIC (ALL)
RESILIENCE	<p>What can I put in place now that will help me face whatever comes?</p> <p>How can I build resilience of mind, body, heart and soul?</p> <p>What are my strongest relationships? What new ones might help support me?</p>	<p>What can we put in place that will help us face whatever comes?</p> <p>How can this organisation/community become stronger and more self-reliant?</p> <p>What network of relationships will help us face turbulence?</p>	<p>What can we put in place that will help us face whatever comes?</p> <p>How do we build greater mutual dependence and mutual support?</p> <p>How do we foster self-reliance and shorter supply chains?</p>
RECONCILIATION	<p>If I were to die tomorrow, what relationships would I want to rebalance today?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People I have fallen out with • People I have neglected • People I need to let go of • Non-human relationships (pets, the natural world etc.) • Issues and events in my past 	<p>Who is not fully included in our organisation/community?</p> <p>Has our organisation prospered at the expense of others?</p> <p>How could we address this? What past events, mistakes or tragedies do we need to make amends for, grieve for or otherwise address?</p>	<p>Who are the people or things that have suffered as a result of our actions?</p> <p>How can we make amends?</p> <p>What else do we need to reconcile ourselves to?</p>

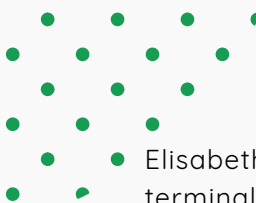
THE GRIEF CURVE

First, a word about grief. Why are we even seeing civilisational collapse as a grief process? In our experience, grief is a near-universal response to any loss. It occurs around death and also around relationship break-up, the ending of a group or process, virtually anytime we say goodbye to anything in life. It might include feelings of sadness, loss, regret or wanting things to return to how they were.

So we posit that it is also already applying to the process we are in. The early warning signs of this can be seen in emerging psychological responses such as Climate Anxiety – the overwhelming sense of powerlessness and foreboding in the face of worsening climate disruption. And for many, the loss of natural habitats and species extinctions are cause for a felt-sense of loss and sadness.

THE STAGES OF GRIEF





Elisabeth Kubler-Ross noticed this process of grief unfolding during her research into terminal care during the 1960s. Watching people approach death, their own and that of loved ones, she saw a common pattern of responses.

The field of Eco-Psychology has emerged to chart our responses to the ongoing destruction of our living planet. Some within this school of thought suggest that as collapse plays out, we may all be subject to movements along Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' grief curve.

It starts with denial. The unwillingness or inability to accept what's ahead - no matter how inevitable it seems from the outside.

How will this play out at a community, local or global level? Are some of us in denial, others angry, yet others depressed? Do we move along the line as individuals or somehow is there also a collective process involved? Denial is familiar enough. We categorise some people or groups with this label - climate deniers. Yet how many of us have fully come to terms with the prospect of losing everything that makes us feel safe and secure?

Anger too can be easy to see around us - in the protests, the emerging phenomena of Climate Anxiety. We can focus our rage on other people - the rich, the powerful, world leaders unable to come to agreements, the media for failing to take the situation seriously. One question is whether there is more anger to come. As the situation worsens will anger erupt socially, arising in unexpected ways that seem to be unrelated to the global situation - for example in crime, violence, suicide or social unrest?

Moving along the curve, anger often gives way to a phase of bargaining. This is where we try to negotiate our way out of a tight corner. Whether we agree with them or not, many "green" responses can be seen as part of a bargaining process. The Green New Deal, Carbon Capture and Storage, Carbon Trading, renewable energies as a whole, could all be seen as attempts to fend off the inevitable, to bargain our way out of collapse.

Of course it's possible that one or other of these technologies might work. It's possible also that to the extent that they leave the underlying system of overconsumption in place, they will do nothing to change our course away from collapse. When all possible bargaining positions fail, acceptance becomes the only viable option to exit the cycle of grief and anger. But before acceptance there can be a tendency to fall into depression, overwhelm or exhaustion. We sometimes need a dark night of the soul before we can come to terms with an unpalatable truth.

The table below may help you to place yourself, those around you or your organisation on the Grief Curve. Are you moving? Are you stuck or going round and round between phases unable to find the acceptance that allows you to move on?

Phase	Common Thought Patterns
Denial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's not as bad as all that • These are just doom-mongers • The scientists aren't united on this • Well, according to so-and-so it's only going to have a much lesser impact • Maybe it will happen, maybe it won't, either way I'm just going to have fun
Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If only the fossil fuel companies would change • I blame Big Business! • Bloody [insert country here]. They're the worst! • If only past generations hadn't been so profligate. • I blame the government. They're useless!
Bargaining	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What if we all went vegan? That would sort it. • New technologies will save us, won't they? • If I adjust this aspect of my lifestyle, maybe that'll be enough... [e.g. buy an electric car, stop flying etc.] • If the future collapse is inevitable I'll live my life to the fullest and have a blast.
Depression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is all too big. I don't know where to start... • Whenever I think about it, I start to cry/feel overwhelmed/get gloomy. • I just can't face bringing a child into this world. • Whatever we do, it seems we're doomed. There's no point even trying. • I feel immense sadness for all the people, animals and forests dying.
Acceptance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is what it is. • I cannot change the world on my own. • If I accept the grief I feel, then I can move on. • If I am to respond healthily who can I join forces with?

The beauty of this model is it gives us points of reference for our own emotions. If either individually or collectively we notice a strong feeling arising or dominating our life we can often place this somewhere on the curve. This allows us to notice where we are in the process, to know that this is OK, it's natural and then to think through how we can move along the curve.

This in turn helps overcome a sense of stuck-ness. Perhaps in truth it's more of a cycle than a linear curve. We can go through the phases numerous times. The more awareness we can bring to our position on the curve, the more able we can become to moving onwards towards a state of acceptance and engagement.

THE WORK THAT RECONNECTS



The notion of a cycle (or spiral) of responses is also built into the Work That Reconnects, a practice devised by ecological campaigner and Buddhist scholar Joanna Macy. Originally designed as a methodology to reconnect people to the wider natural world, this approach has become a transformative way to recognise the severity of our situation and work out how to respond. ([this section has been taken directly from this website](#)).

The Spiral moves through four steps, usually undertaken in a group process:

- Starting from Gratitude – what do we appreciate about the world, our life, those around us. This helps to ground individuals and build trust within a group.
- Recognising Grief – by opening our heart to the pain we are (possibly unconsciously) carrying for the world, we start to realise how interconnected we are with the rest of existence. And we see how others are affected too – that we share more than we thought.
- Seeing with New Eyes – as we embrace our interconnectedness we begin to see the world afresh and ourselves as part of the web of life.
- Moving to Action – from here we can move to action in a way that is more effective because it is more heart-felt and grounded.

We then move forward into the actions that call each of us, according to our situation, gifts, and limitations. With others whenever and wherever possible, we set a target, lay a plan, step out. We don't wait for a blueprint or fail-safe schemes, we learn as we go, finding new perspectives and opportunities. Even when we don't succeed in a given venture, we can be grateful for the chance we took and the lessons we learned.



Figure 1. Image by Dori Midnight



RESILIENCE BUILDING

Each of the preceding three frameworks in some way help us to build our resilience – that ability to adjust and adapt to disruptive or shocking situations. Crucially, they all ask us to stare into the face of what’s coming rather than to ignore it or bargain our way out. This is why they tend to acknowledge grief and find ways to respond to it.

Over the years Oasis has had a great deal of experience in developing resilience in individuals, organisations and communities. In the course of this work, several important insights have been gleaned:

- **Bounce-back** – it’s not just about being unaffected by what’s going on. It’s also about the process of bouncing back and returning to a centred position.
- **Embodiment** – it helps (a lot!) to have an embodied experience of your centred place. When have you felt really grounded and at peace? How did this feel, where in your body was the centre? This makes it much easier to return to a resilient state.
- **Adaptability** – the feeling of dissonance or disruption is often prolonged by the act of clinging to the past or to a desired future. When this is lost we experience grief and go through the entire grief cycle. If we let go of expectation and instead stay open to whatever comes, we short-circuit the process. Non-attachment is helpful.
- **It’s more than personal** – much of the Western literature on resilience has a tendency to see it as a personal state which we either have or not. This is an illusion. While the three approaches above can help us as individuals their true power is when applied collectively. Real resilience only ever comes from relationship. When we have strong reciprocal relationships we are personally stronger, more able to process what’s going on and we have resources at our disposal to help each other.

These points are as true for organisations and communities as they are for individuals. The fourth point is particularly pertinent. As individuals, communities and organisations we are strongest, healthiest and most resilient when part of an ecosystem of mutual interdependence.



REFRAMING COLLAPSE

John F Kennedy once said that the Chinese character for crisis comprises two images: danger and opportunity. The key to navigating a crisis is thus to fully appreciate the danger and then to find within it the glimmer of an opportunity.

Throughout this collection of papers we have used the term collapse to describe humanity's coming future. This is because we believe that what's coming is likely to result in the disintegration of the systems that underpin our current social paradigm. We are in the midst of the collapse of civilisation as we know it. And the scenario presented in Paper 1 shows the potential dangers this could involve.

At the same time, we might ask, what is the opportunity this situation presents? What opportunities might it present to redesign our towns and cities, our energy sources, our patterns of consumption? Is there the possibility here to find livelihoods that are more fulfilling and a lifestyle that nourishes human creativity, happiness and compassion? What might we gain from closer relationships with nature, the food we grow, the landscapes we live in?

Given the dangers we face it can feel superficial or cold to reframe collapse as an opportunity. Nonetheless, the coming decades have the potential to be seen as a transition from one mode of civilisation to another. Whether this happens will depend on our actions over this period. And arguably on whether we embrace the notion of opportunity within danger.