

NAVIGATING THE
UNIMAGINABLE PAPER 4



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A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

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**OASIS SCHOOL OF
HUMAN RELATIONS**

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

How can humanity respond to a situation that is as complex and unsettling as this? What is there to do in the face of the disintegration of everything we have come to depend on? In this paper we offer a six point Framework for navigating the potential collapse of our civilisation. Then, in Paper Five we provide some real world examples of initiatives which are already building resilience in the face of potential collapse.

If we act now, in line with this framework we have the opportunity to turn the impending crisis into a renewal of life on Earth. If we fail to act, Business As Usual will take us over the precipice.

As a result of our research we have come to the conclusion that there is a way to navigate what's ahead but it will not be easy and it will not be by continuing on a technological, materialistic path. We have come to realise that three things are essential to help us to change course:

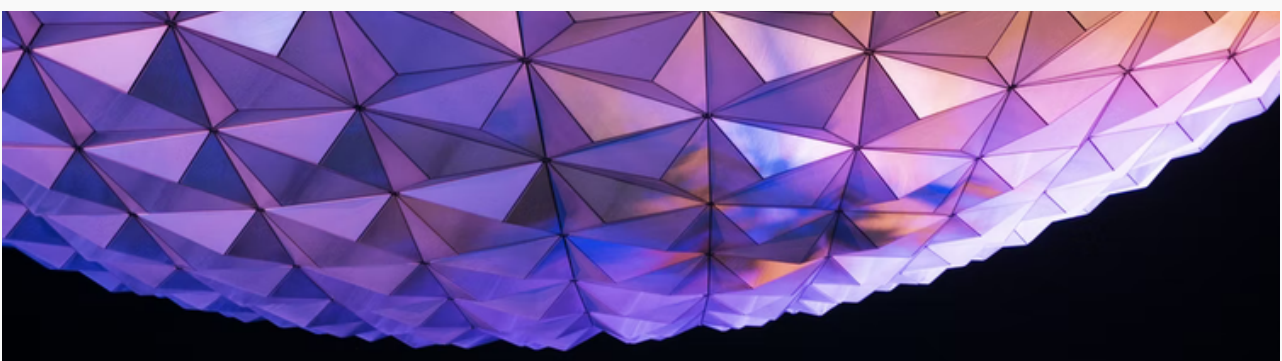
- To have a compelling vision of a human civilisation that lives in harmony with the patterns and cycles of Nature
- To embark on concerted action within a framework that builds immediate resilience while prefiguring (“to show or represent beforehand”) the future world
- To identify and share current examples of this prefiguration so as to inspire collective action and system-wide change.

Papers 4 and 5 seek to address these three points – to show that another world is not just possible but already emerging. We are keen to provide a picture of what's possible, options for action that anyone can contribute to and to share inspiration. We want to overcome both a sense of disempowerment and a sense that individual lifestyle changes are enough. As we show in Paper 2, only systemic change that tackles all four Warning Signs of Collapse will be enough to create a change of course.

TOWARDS A NEW WORLD

When considering systemic change we have found it is always useful to have a picture of where you want to be heading. This is why we shared our vision of a possible future in Paper 1. At the core of this vision is the sense that humanity's relationship with the rest of Nature can shift from being extractive to being regenerative.

What does this mean? Simply that humanity can live in a way that helps to heal and rejuvenate natural eco-systems. This will make a happier, healthier world for all life. The shift is to work in alignment with natural systems and cycles. At present we are working against them, seeing the world as a store from which we keep taking (extracting).



BRINGING THE WORLD BACK TO LIFE

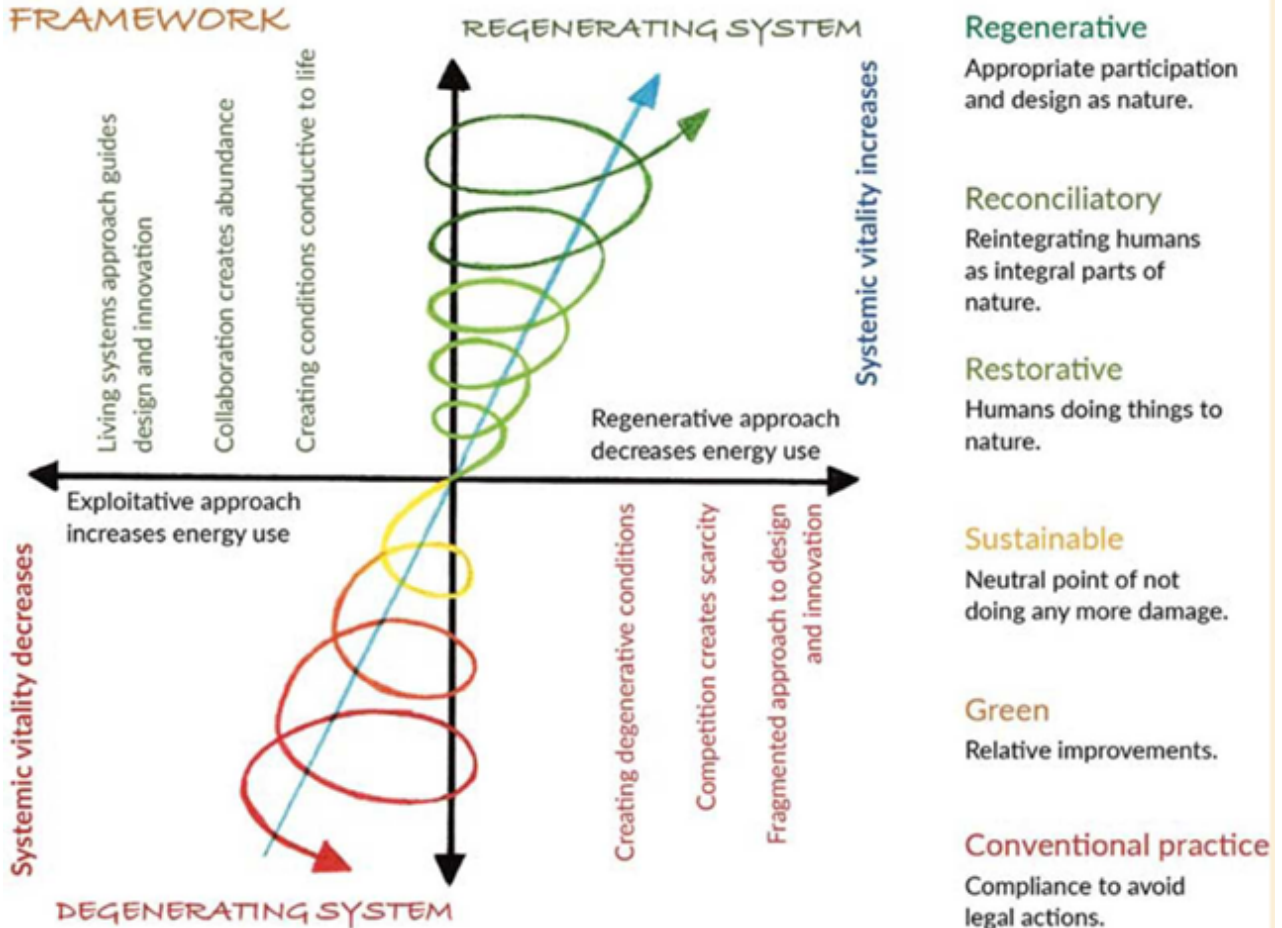
Whatever happens and however it happens, it is clear that what is needed is something radically different. In this report we have used the tag Regenerative to describe this because it captures the need to repair damage, restore ecosystems and build a way of life that is healthy and thriving for all living beings. ([see for example, Daniel Wahl's essay on Regenerative systems](#))


We don't feel that humanity yet has a comprehensive vision of what it means to create a regenerative civilisation. Indigenous cultures have it on a local scale. Many of the initiatives we describe in Paper 5 also embody it in some form. What might this look like globally, written into the DNA of our civilisation? This is the most critical question of our age. Meanwhile, one starting point is Daniel Wahl's work on Regenerative Design (see diagram). This model proposes a significant shift in mindset and orientation for human civilisation. We are asked not just to reintegrate ourselves into Nature but to design our lives and systems as Nature. This begs a whole host of profound questions:

- What is the driving force of nature? What are its patterns, rhythms and "laws" (it's design patterns)?
- How could we place these patterns at the core of civilisation?
- How do we hold to a future course and avoid a return to (self)destructive ways?
- What does it mean to be holistically and globally regenerative?
- What impact would this have on economy, politics, culture, civil society?

These are the questions that sit underneath an inquiry into the future civilisation that we are currently being asked to imagine.

THE REGENERATIVE DESIGN FRAMEWORK





The six point framework set out in this paper is one attempt to suggest an agenda that might move us towards a regenerative future. You may be able to see how you and your organisation could contribute to this agenda. Or you may see interventions that we've missed.

What's important is that collectively our actions are powered by the desire to move towards a new vision of regenerative civilization rather than tinkering with old systems and processes. One approach is radical, free and transformational. The other will leave us clinging to the past.

A NOTE ON HOW SYSTEMS CHANGE

In truth we really don't know how a system as complex as our global economy might change. Complexity Theory and Systems Theory may give us some clues; they suggest that to change a systems you might:

- change the actors
- shift the boundaries of the system
- include what's excluded
- allow the system to see more of itself
- start anywhere, follow it everywhere.

Maybe change starts with the individual, maybe it starts at the margins and spreads inwards. Maybe there are tipping points or acupuncture points. Theories abound but in reality we are now heading into uncharted territory. We have never before tried to shift the operating system of a global civilisation. We have never tried on this scale and this scope to go from extraction, materialism and economy to regeneration, sufficiency and ecology.

We have a sense that there is something galvanising in having a compelling vision for the future – a loadstar that pulls us forwards. We have also found that often we are able to act ourselves into a new way of thinking more easily than vice versa. So we anticipate there is real benefit in practical actions (on whatever scale) that teach us the skills of inhabiting a new civilisation.

And somewhere along the way, we suspect there will be a moment of magic that shifts things in an unexpected way. Micah White, one of the instigators of the Occupy Movement has observed this kind of phenomena. He calls it “Theurgism”, the mysterious movement of a zeitgeist or a collective unconscious field that causes a synchronous transformative occurrence.

You do not have to believe in the hand of a supreme being to appreciate this notion. All it takes is enough humility to understand that we don't fully understand. That and a recognition that at times in our lives we have all had coincidental or mysterious happenings that have turned out to be significant in a way we did not expect. All we know for certain from history is that as a system reaches its integral limits, its hold on the people within it begins to crumble. This opens up the space for emergence and gives power to collective imagination. So collapse brings with it possibility.

Systems Theory recognises the concept of sudden and rapid change - the spontaneous emergence of a force or shift that triggers a new order. The conditions that seem to be required for this to happen have been identified by Fritjof Capra:

- The presence of widespread networks of communication
- Openness to outside influence
- An external disturbance that highlights the need for the system to change.

Maybe the new order that comes to prevail will be the one that is the best connected. This would seem to accord with Malcolm Gladwell's description of the Tipping Point process. This sense of emergent change is also central to the work of Otto Scharmer and others at the Presencing Institute. Their work draws on a long lineage of approaches (themselves drawing implicitly on ancient Chinese philosophies of Wu Wei, or conscious in-action) which emphasise a moment or phase in the change process where space is created for reflection. This is the moment of presencing, where all we know, or think we know is left behind and the future is encouraged to emerge.



This is the moment when what we need most is enough people with the skill, heart, and wisdom to help us pull ourselves back from the edge of breakdown and onto a different path
Otto Scharmer, MIT, Founder of Theory U.

Time will tell what kind of external shock is needed to break through the denial and bargaining. Some hoped that COVID would be the catalyst. It appears this has not been enough. Build Back Better has become synonymous with building back more of the same, just with a little more on-line activity.

Maybe there will be another, even more disruptive shock to the system. Maybe we will create space for spontaneous emergence. Maybe something unimaginable will come out of the blue. Or maybe global change will take place as a result of countless minute local changes which accumulate into a tipping point. The shift evolves from people everywhere thinking globally, acting locally and starting now.

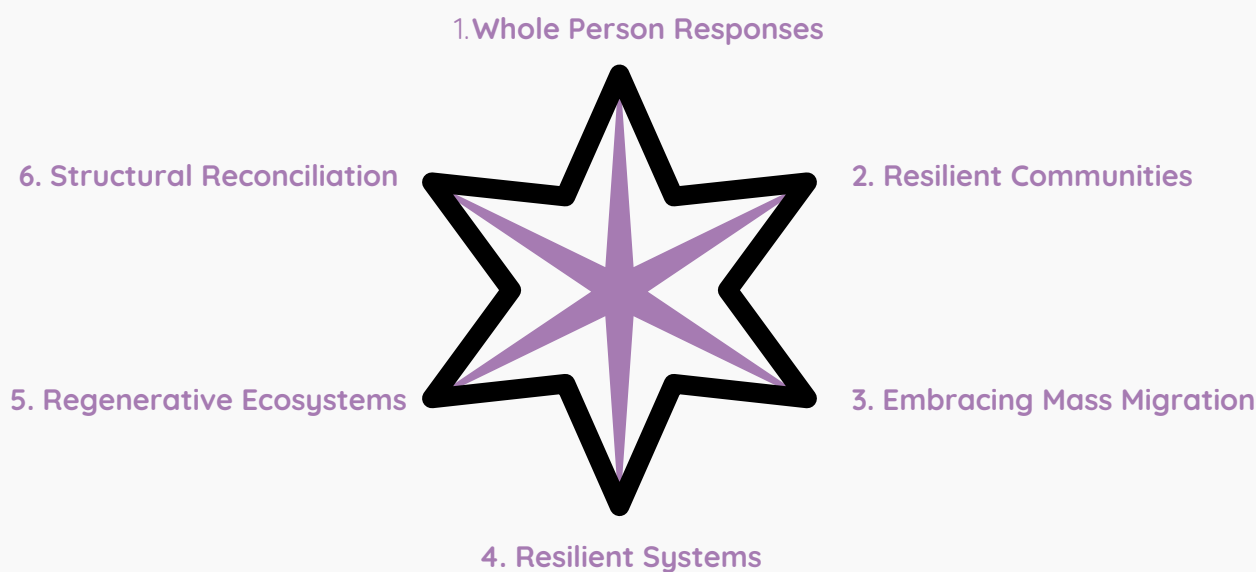


A 6 POINT FRAMEWORK FOR GLOBAL TRANSFORMATION

So how do we develop a plan of action within the context of potential collapse, with regeneration as its driving force and with a nuanced understanding of how systems change? We would like to propose a framework based on six interventions that respond directly to the challenges we face while also preparing the systems and institutions that could form the basis of a regenerative, ecological civilisation. We feel it's important now that our responses perform two functions simultaneously:

- They increasing our chances of surviving potential societal collapse
- They build the infrastructure for a new Regenerative Civilisation.

This is because we see “ends” and “means” as intricately connected. What we do now becomes the civilisation of the future. The six interventions that we propose are shown in the diagram below. They move from the individual, through the collective to the systematic (from “I” to “We” to “The Whole”):



What unifies these six strategies is that they all aim to build resilience - the ability to bear a shock and bounce back again. And they are all focussed on restorative or regenerative approaches - restoring natural and human systems to full health and functioning. Paper 5 contains examples for each of the six interventions. There are examples from around the world, of practical real-world initiatives that are helping to create resilience and change in the face of crisis.

1 WHOLE PERSON RESPONSES



Given what we are already facing, we are going to need to be adaptable, grounded and resilient as individuals. Resilience is born of a number of interlocking features - physical health, emotional robustness, a sense of purpose, strong relationships of support. These are the fabric of a whole person approach - mind, body, heart and soul working together to allow us to deal with the challenges that are thrown at us on a daily basis.

As practitioners in human development we have nearly four decades experience of developing approaches and tools to build and sustain personal resilience. We have found that superficial approaches that build shallow positivity do not last. This is because they tend to side step difficulty rather than facing into it. This does not help to build the “muscles” to cope with adverse events. Something slower and deeper is required – which builds resources, self-awareness and adaptability.

Another feature of the recent rise in self-help has been an emphasis on the individual – the need to develop personal resilience. Again, we have found that this has limited long-term value. Strength and resilience come from relationships. With a network of family, friends and colleague or a community of shared interest, we are much more able to prepare for and weather the storms that life can throw at us.

So at the heart of our own personal resilience is a process of building the strength and adaptability of our whole self within the context of the relationships and community that support us (and that we in turn support).

2 BUILDING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

Local communities will need internal strength and access to resources if they are to survive a civilisational collapse. This is because the national and international systems that currently provide our food and water, energy and services are becoming increasingly complex. This makes them vulnerable to shocks at “pinch points”.

In our work with an economically disadvantaged community in Middlesbrough (UK) we have explored in detail the nature of community resilience. This comprises practical infrastructural elements (which are described in point four below), and also human relations elements – how members of the community work and live together.

Resilience in this context is essentially about a network of mutual interdependence between people – my health and happiness is dependent on the whole, whilst also contributing to it. To break this down a little, resilient communities focus on:

- Making our needs (and secrets) public so others can offer assistance
- Sharing our skills freely across the community, without expecting anything directly in return
- Coming together in the face of tragedy or disruption to enact mutual support
- Collectively recognising and processing pain, grief and trauma
- Enhancing our levels of tolerance and creating a warm welcome
- Building communities of interest – groups and associations with a common purpose
- Creating “community glue” by freely sharing factors such as time, food, kindness, buildings and other resources.

In this way we create the ability to provide locally the essentials such as learning, food, care for the vulnerable, community justice and so on. The web of mutual relationships between people who might otherwise have been “strangers” builds the bonds of community.

All of this will need to be strengthened at a local level to ensure that communities are able to stick together through difficult times. This calls for wide-scale community development processes to build intra-community relationships and strength. We saw many inspiring examples of this during the COVID pandemic: mutual aid groups sprang up everywhere, cafes and bars delivered food to the vulnerable, neighbourhoods held socially-distanced street parties to boost morale.



3 EMBRACING MASS MIGRATION

Some estimates suggest that the number of international migrants will double in the next decade. If the planet warms above 4 degrees some models suggest that only the land in Northern Europe, Canada, Tasmania, New Zealand and the Arctic will be habitable. This will entail massive migrational shifts from equatorial and tropical zones – up to 800 million people according to some estimates.



We must establish a new social attitude, to see migration as a benefit, a necessity for our global survival, not as a threat to our individual privilege.

Colette Pichon Battle



Recent years have seen massive population shifts from war-torn zones and areas vulnerable to the early impacts of climate change. In these situations migrants have become susceptible to exploitation and trafficking. Thousands have drowned on perilous routes across the Mediterranean or been enslaved in intermediate countries.

Upon arrival new migrants face a raft of issues around language, access to social systems, housing and work and often hostility or racism. Imagine these challenges multiplied many times over as 800 million people flee extreme weather events across the world.

Responding to this situation will entail a root and branch overhaul of how we see, accommodate and integrate people moving around the planet. At a local level this might include:

- Providing safe migration routes and minimising human-trafficking
- Safeguarding vulnerable migrants
- Putting in place services for welcoming and integration
- Developing infrastructure for new communities in previously uninhabited zones (such as within the Arctic Circle).

All of this is underpinned by a shift towards seeing migrants as welcome and valuable and perhaps even seeing a world beyond borders where free movement is an absolute human right. While some may have a knee-jerk reaction towards tightening borders or erecting walls, arbitrary historical boundaries make little sense in the face of world-shaking population shifts.

4 BUILDING RESILIENT SOCIAL SYSTEMS

Communities will also benefit from improved access to the practical systems that provide the things they need to survive. These will include:

- Food growing and distribution
- Access to clean fresh water
- Production and distribution of essential consumer goods - clothing, household goods etc.
- The reinvigoration of travelling communities to provide specialist skills that cannot be sustained by a single local community
- Cultural services, arts and entertainment
- Energy production and local distribution.

The more localised, decentralised and dispersed these systems are, the more resilient they will be to shocks at a global or national level. Some of these systems might be able to operate at a community level or a local level – for example micro-grids for renewable energy generation. Others (such as food production) are better suited to (bio)regional level, that's to say at the scale of a natural eco-system, typically an entire watershed.

Arguably an interlocking system of local and regional populations, tessellating at a global level is far more resilient to shocks than the extended global supply chains that currently dominate. Globally we would do well to shift from long and complex linear supply chains to interlocking networks of mutual exchange based upon self-reliant localities.

5 REGENERATING ECOSYSTEMS

For decades the guiding approach to global affairs has been “Sustainable Development”. This is defined as: *“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”* (As set out in the UN's so-called Brundtland Report 'Our Common Future (1987)' [Link here](#)).

It is now clear that this will not be enough. Environmental destruction and climate change have passed the point at which simply doing no further harm is enough. Instead we will need to reverse these processes and start to heal and repair entire natural systems. The damage done by current industrial and agricultural systems will need to be remedied, including:

- Decontamination of land, air and water (to remove pollution which is hazardous to health)
- Returning to organic, regenerative food production (to grow food while improving soil quality)
- Restoring and expanding forests, mangroves and peat bogs (to sequester carbon and to repair the water cycle which itself contributes substantially to global warming)
- Repairing wetlands and waterways, cleaning rivers, lakes and seas (to improve biodiversity and stem species extinction)
- Greening urban landscapes (to improve air quality, reduce stress, enhance mental wellbeing and produce more local food).



Once ecosystems are repaired and restored they will start to operate more effectively, helping to provide food, water and clean air as well as rebalancing the climate globally. As Paper 5 demonstrates this approach has been successful in rejuvenating severely degraded land at a local and regional level – including in desertified areas of China and Ethiopia (See for example John Liu’s documentary *Green Gold*, which gave birth to the Ecosystems Restoration movement) It can now be scaled globally as a driver for repair and regeneration.

This kind of regenerative approach creates sustainable livelihoods at a local level, improves food yields (and other outputs from the land) and will help to tackle global climate change. And perhaps even more important it shows a way for humanity to regain a position of harmonious interaction with the rest of the natural world. This arguably puts us back into balance as a species.



Every dollar spent on ecosystems restoration accrues between \$3 and \$75 in return

Elizabeth Mrema, UN Convention for Biological Diversity
Quoted in New Scientist, 20 February 2021

6 SUPPORTING STRUCTURAL RECONCILIATION

As with all social upheavals, some form of Truth and Reconciliation will be helpful in overcoming anger, dislocation and the potential for violence. It may be tempting to blame rich elites or prior power-holders for our predicament - possibly even the entire “White” race. Patriarchy and by implication men, may also be a target for anger and hostility.

Processing this anger, together with the grief of loss will be an important means to avoid open conflict. It will also help to build new social systems which avoid structural inequalities and oppressions in future. This might well involve:

- Processes of reconciliation and reparation around empire and globalisation
- Restoration of indigenous cultures, lands and the return of stolen artifacts from Western museums
- Creation of a new universal sense of human community, particularly in response to mass migration shifts
- Reconciliation of the masculine and feminine as a response to the demise of patriarchy
- Processes of apology, forgiveness and reconciliation with the Earth and the natural world.

These measures aim to help restore a more balanced relationship amongst people and between people and the rest of the natural world.

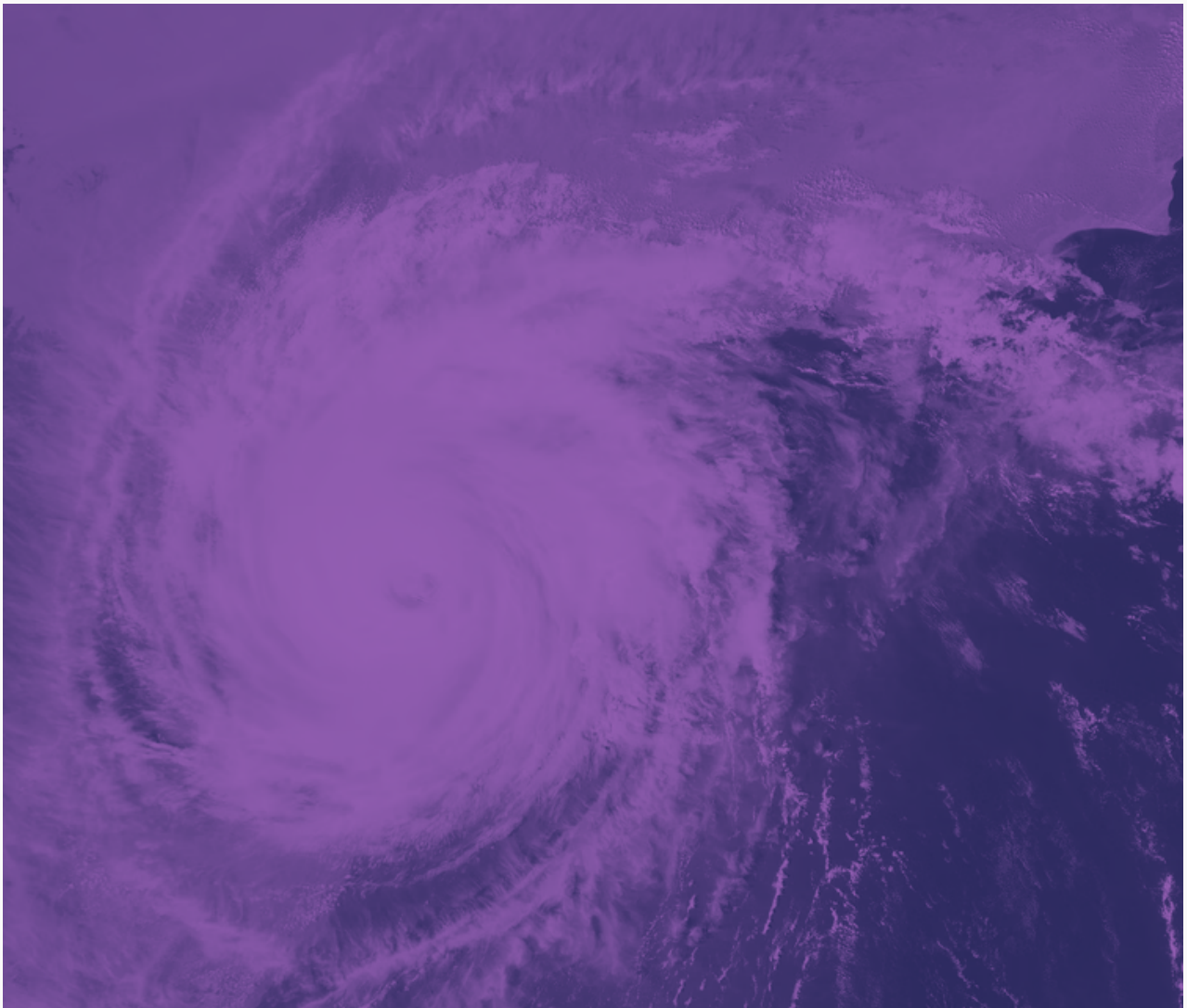
WHAT'S IMPORTANT NOW?

In her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit records a multitude of examples of how communities and organisations have responded to crises in remarkable and unexpected ways. Hurricane Katrina, floods in Bangladesh, 9-11, Mexico City's earthquake. They all brought a response that bound a place together in the quest to survive, to support each other and to find a way through.

In Britain we know it as the Dunkirk Spirit, the collective effort of sacrifice and mutual aid that allows a group to go above and beyond what could normally be envisaged. It's the stuff of miracles. For Rebecca Solnit, it is the public, rather than institutions that make this happen:

"Civil society is what succeeds, not only in an emotional demonstration of altruism and mutual aid but also in a practical mustering of creativity and resources to meet the challenges. Only this dispersed force of countless people making countless decisions is adequate to a major crisis...Disaster often unfolds as though a revolution has already taken place" - Rebecca Solnit, A Paradise Built in Hell, Penguin, 2009

What then is my contribution? The decision, that binds me like glue to other countless people, together working for human survival? What is it mine to do, here and now, in the face of possible collapse? Who are my allies, the tribe I band together with to get done what needs to be done?





GETTING INVOLVED

At Oasis we have nearly forty years' experience of working with the major challenges that have faced humanity. We have worked with communities, organisations and individuals facing AIDS, poverty and disadvantage, conflict and cohesion. In 2004 we helped found the Globally Responsible Leadership Initiative and since then have been working to support the development of change-makers who embody a sense of responsibility in the face of uncertainty. This is why over recent years we have turned our attention to the prospect of major global disruption.

Time and again we have found that questions are the most fruitful way to guide a next step. More often than not, solutions, though enticing have a tendency to be based in the existing paradigm, to arise out of the status quo. Questions on the other hand, lead into open territory. They guide us into the unknown. This is where the future unfolds.

Having completed our research into Collapse, we are left with many questions. Here are a few that excite us. We present them as invitations for collaboration.

1. What does the world on the other side of collapse look like? What can we envision with the most generous and regenerative parts of our mind's-eye?

We are planning an Inquiry process to explore this question. We would love to hear from others who have a yearning or a desire to explore a world where care for the living planet is placed at the centre of a new civilisation.

2. What does leadership look like, that helps us navigate the terrain of collapse and beyond?

We have been exploring Globally Responsible Leadership for over two decades now. We know a lot about what this looks like within the existing paradigm. But what would a leadership look like that can hold and guide organisations through such an uncertain and tumultuous future? What is leadership for radical collaboration in a context that is completely uncertain and constantly shifting?

3. How do we support radical self-organisation?

If it's true that disaster call for countless people making countless decisions, what (if anything) helps to support, coordinate and expand the sphere of radical self-organisation and mutual aid? We'd love to hear from people in networks, communities or movements who are pushing the boundaries of distributed power and action.

4. What more could help refine the Planetary Collapse Index?

The data we presented in Paper 2 is the best we could find using easily accessible information and the skills of committed inquirers. But we are not academics or statisticians. We are looking for a university or a research centre that could take on this framework, refine it and find the critical boundaries (similar to the Planetary Boundaries) that identify the tipping points to Collapse.



5. Can some businesses move beyond extractive and even sustainable approaches to find business models that are regenerative to both people and planet?

We have worked with caring and concerned businesses for decades. We know that many organisations (perhaps most?) are full of individuals who want to make a difference in the world. At the same time we understand that financial pressures, market conditions and competition can constrain the ability of some enterprises to take truly radical steps. Coming to terms with the Collapse agenda means going way beyond sustainability. It means finding business models and forms of production and distribution that are actively regenerative. We are interested in working with organisations who want to explore what this could mean for them. We have experience in Inquiry processes to explore this kind of complex issue and we are experienced in whole-organisation change processes to embed a different way of working.

6. How can we build collapse into the curriculum of educational establishments at all tiers?

Shifting towards resilience and regeneration imply transformative changes in our education and learning approaches. It means changing not just what we teach but how we learn. How far might your educational establishment be willing to go? Could it fundamentally shift the power dynamics between student and teacher? Could it shift its focus to learning from and in nature? Are there ways to build visioning processes and future thinking into the syllabus? What would it mean for courses of study to be co-created, defined by the needs of the students and the challenges of the transition through collapse and beyond?

7. What benefits could accrue from connecting different parts of the emerging regenerative civilisation?

The initiatives set out in Paper 5 largely tend to be localised and somewhat spontaneous. They may share similar approaches and values and they may or may not be aware of each other. Some attempts are being made to bring them together (for example through the Transformative Adaptation initiative spawned by Extinction Rebellion in the UK).

We wonder if more connection, more visibility, sharing of resources and experiences could help to turn a plethora of initiatives into an ecosystem of change that takes on a life of its own.

AN INVITATION

Above all, we invite you to envision the future you want for future generations – your great-grandchildren or nephews and nieces. What is the world you long to pass on to them? What is the world that would do justice to your deepest longings and to their deepest desires?

We invite you to consider your own theory of change. How could things unfold from here to there? What would need to grow and take hold? What would need to decay and compost? What is the miracle you dare not even hope for?

And most important of all, what is your part in the unfolding of that storyline? What is your first next step? There is no right or wrong now, only steps to move into the unknown – tentative steps, feeling our way in the dark. When you have a sense of it, begin. Start anywhere and follow it everywhere.

