

Speaking Our Truth: A Dialog on Hope and Agency in Education and Life

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Abstract: The authors engage in a written dialog about their experiences with and understanding of hope and agency in the context of higher education happening in the midst of many converging crises of sustainability. The authors discuss their personal and professional views about teaching sustainability and about leading and collaborating in sustainability-oriented efforts. They consider sustainability and sustainability education efforts as both internal processes that take place within the person and external processes oriented toward others and the world. They explore questions of leadership and authority in relation to hope and agency and discuss the importance of making and communicating honest appraisals of the current situation of humans and the biosphere as a basis for fostering clear-eyed hope and agency in themselves and students.

Keywords: clear-eyed hope, agency, authority, institutional leadership, collaboration, authenticity, teaching, Anthropocene

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Initiating the Dialog

This article began with a conversation Tina initiated with David about hope and agency in the context of higher education. From that initial conversation, the two authors developed the idea of engaging in a several months long reflective conversation about hope and agency as experienced in their teaching, in other areas of higher education engagement, and in their lives more generally. Tina posed a series of questions to David who responded by e-mail. Tina reflected on each of David's responses and added her own thoughts to the ongoing written dialog.

The act of articulating their own truths through this conversation has reinvigorated and inspired both authors in their educational and personal work. Through engaging in deep reflection, listening, and conversation, both authors have clarified their own ideas about hope and agency and created stronger foundations for engaging these concepts and practices in their work. Following is a transcript of their conversation.

Conversation and Reflection on Hope and Agency

Tina: *Evidence of climate change is all around us, and the atmosphere now has a CO2 concentration at 400 parts per million and rising. How do these daily realities affect you personally and your work with students and others? What are hope and agency to you in such a social and ecological context?*

David: First I want to thank you for inviting me to think with you about hope and agency. Off the bat though, I would say that climate change is a symptom, albeit a mega-symptom, of a much bigger and more complex problem of social and ecological devastation, and that I think it's problematic to focus on one mega-symptom without contextualizing it in its network of underlying and contributing causes, as well as related issues.

So, let me first rephrase the question: *what are hope and agency to me in the context of my "one wild and precious life" on this endlessly beautiful and problematic planet?* I don't want to evade the urgency of climate change, I just don't want it to overwhelm hope and agency, which are human concepts—from the humanities—that predate climate crisis and that will persist in even the most catastrophic future. I do want to talk about climate change, but first let's say something about hope and agency and where it comes from for me, regardless of the crisis *du jour*.

I guess ultimately, what is important to me about hope and agency, is not just my personal connection to these themes, but the fact that we have the power to challenge one another with the question at all. We need to remind each other, as you are doing for me, that we have access to hope and agency. And with that access comes a responsibility to actually embody hope and agency—not just by thinking about these ideas as intellectual exercises—but by enacting them as a way of being. And that, I think, is the real challenge: acting on what we truly believe in. There are so many forces, internal and external, that work against that, including paralyzing narratives of doomsday, as well as the politics of academe, the place where this journal is produced and read.

I think, like a lot of people, I live my life in and out of tune with hope and agency. I go through phases where I have it, and phases where it's really hard to access. What gives me the most grounded and lasting sense of hope are really the old truths that poets and mystics talk about—the larger sweep of the old human journey of life, and the natural cycles behind the political pressures of the present moment. And speaking of climate, I think I experience these truths most vividly by paying attention to the changing of the seasons, and also by what I learn from other people in community and in social movements.

Springtime in particular energizes me with an amazed sense of renewal and possibility. Here where I live in the forest north of Lake Superior, ice and snow cover the land for about five months out of twelve. And then every May and June when what I call the glacier finally recedes, the earth that had been dead frozen begins to breathe again. Ridiculously bright warblers return to the woods with their music and flashes of color, and wildflowers, ferns, leaves, and grass suddenly push out of land that for so long lay dead in a killing cold. And it's not just spring. The more I pay attention to natural cycles, the more I understand about how my own life is part of this great round of being and change: birth, growth, maturity, decay, and death and renewal again. This makes me feel closer to the earth, to creation and its patterns that are beyond and yet part of human culture and politics, and this gives me a sense of hope for being alive, hope that fuels my action in the world of people.

And it's not just “the natural world” that gives me this hope. It's also people, communities, and social movements. Just like the frozen ground can finally thaw and burst with the lush fragrances of procreation, people—and even the calcified intuitions we inhabit—can surprise us with an incredible capacity for change. Evidence for this is everywhere. I was really inspired by the overwhelming victory in Catholic Ireland for same sex marriage, for example. Here is an issue that has really divided people in the past and still does in some places. But wow, there has been a real sea change and clearly public opinion supports more gay rights.

Of course, these kinds of changes don't happen fast enough for us, especially for the people suffering most from oppression. But we do demonstrate an undeniable capacity for change. And these changes are the result of people exercising their hope and agency, forming coalitions, and challenging the power structure. This seems to be happening everywhere. It is the history of social movements and social transformation and we now enjoy some of their victories. So, I'm not a huge fan of Barak Obama because of his neoliberal, status quo policies; similarly with Hillary Clinton. But wow. The first black president potentially followed by the first woman president? I'll probably vote for Hillary for that reason alone. Another example: Canada just completed a Truth and Reconciliation Commission report that was the result of six years of listening to nearly 7000 witnesses about the experience of cultural genocide of Aboriginal, Inuit, and Métis communities in Canada's residential schools. Now sure, I can argue the point that governmental processes like elections and truth and reconciliation commissions and formal apologies are empty rhetoric, and that a female and black presidents do not the end of oppression make. After all, we still have Ferguson, Missouri, endless sequels to colonialism, and male dominated cultures of rape. But we continue to witness significant change in our culture and these changes mean something. They mean we can change and hope and act for change.

Canada's recent and overdue truth and reconciliation process sheds light, for example, on the continued silence in the U. S. about its role in the genocide and oppression of Native and African Americans. While these few examples may not represent the total liberation that we might

imagine, they do represent a major revolution that can be achieved and that needs to be pursued with a sense of hope and agency.

Would you like to bring us back to your original question now about climate change? I'd like to get back to it.

Tina: David, thank you for participating so thoughtfully in this conversation, and thank you for your own work in hope and agency, both personal and public. First let me offer my thoughts in response to yours.

Yes, I agree that observing and playing parts in large-scale cycles and movements, both within natural systems and within social movements, serve as great reminders that we are part of systems and processes that extend well beyond us in both time and space. Remembering this, for me, generates humility and a sense of patience that extends beyond my own life. Especially as I age, I gain perspective on my life's work – *there's no way that it will be "complete" within my lifetime!* In this recognition, instead of being a "problem solver," I become a participant in a larger web of knowing and doing, in both ecological and social senses. Hope and agency become collective and participative rather than individual and heroic. In my own work, though I have maintained a long-term, social perspective with regard to sustainability-oriented change, my focused agency has continually shifted toward fostering agency in others. I seek more and more to contribute to building a social movement and somewhat away from focusing on specific projects that could come to fruition during my own lifetime.

That said, my work with food, and particularly fruit trees, can literally bear fruit in the reasonably short term (a few years). Still, planting a tree is also a statement about the continuity of nature and the human experience that both includes and transcends individuals. It is a statement of faith, not in specific outcomes, but faith in the capacity for a shared right livelihood between people and nature. It is also an enactment of a shared human/nature reality. Most fruit trees today are, in part, human creations – grafted plants that thrive best with regular human care. Yet they, and we, participate fully in ecosystems. This process is emblematic of the capacity for people to participate in ecology, to make changes on the land without destroying ecologies. As Wendell Berry, Jeannette Armstrong, Dennis Martinez and many others have noted, this potential is within us, and it has been and is being enacted in many cultures and communities. This human potential is not lost, though it is suffocated in large measure by the current political economy, the linear and wasteful industrial production paradigm, monetary structures that require economic growth, and cultures that enforce destructive engagement with nature and society as the very means to short-term survival.

I agree with you also that climate change is a symptom of these larger illnesses in mainstream industrial culture's relationship with all others who serve as fodder for its socio-ecology of destruction, including "other" people and nature. It is to me, however, the symptom that is likely to be in our faces more and more on a daily basis as "global weirding" transforms our weather patterns and unleashes devastation, even sheer obliteration, on communities worldwide. These visceral, grief-laden experiences will continually challenge our personal and collective sense of hope and our capacity for agency. In saying this, I recall bursting into tears simply seeing a picture of vast acres of lodgepole pine in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, all dead due to climate-influenced infestation of pine beetles. At the moment, the immediacy of climate change is more tangible and experiential than for some other less visible aspects of ecological and social damage and destruction that are "out of sight, out of mind," at least for some of us.

Additionally, climate change can be socially destructive in less visible ways. Because they will be more at a loss regarding what to do in the face of climate change, I believe that those who lack an explanatory framework for how we got to this point are likely to find these events and changes more difficult to deal with than those who can trace their historical roots. They may be more likely to feel cheated and betrayed and to seek someone or some group to blame for their losses. Or, perhaps some will simply feel abandoned by their faith and paralyzed. These notions are based on my conversations with family and friends who sometimes blame themselves for their economic struggles and on my students' thoughts regarding the empowerment that they have derived from developing clear-eyed hope. Clear-eyed hope (named so by David Orr) is based in 1) a rigorously developed understanding of the destructive aspects of human civilizations, historically and currently and 2) knowledge of and experience with the amazing creative and compassionate capacity for individual and social change.

As you mentioned, the movement for lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgendered people's rights has made incredible strides of late, and this sea change is extremely heartening. Since you wrote to me, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled for marriage equality, a significant step in social equity for the LGBT community. I honestly did not know if I would see this change in my lifetime because the resistance has, in many cases, been so entrenched, vocal, and vicious. Of course, the resistance is not gone. Still, as is typical of social movements that expose through critique the failures of a society to live up to its own ideals (equity in this case), the LGBT movement has crossed this extraordinary hurdle, and in so doing, has reminded all of us of the vast capacity for social change.

Thank you again, David, for engaging in this conversation. It is truly reinvigorating for me to discuss hope and agency with you. Now, I'd like to ask you to consider another question related to our recent phone conversation that led up to this article: *You noted recently that you have been quite focused on inner and expressive work related to sustainability as well as on the intersections between this work and outer work in the world. How do you see these relationships between inner and outer work developing/changing over time (for yourself and perhaps others as well)? What insights might you share about these relationships, and how might these insights relate to hope and agency in the current time of converging socio-ecological crises?* Of course, please also feel free to respond to my contributions above.

David: Wow Tina, thank you for your thoughtfulness. It inspires me, and it strikes me how rare it is in our field, at least for me, to have conversations that are slow enough (it's been about a month since you wrote me) to access the multiple dimensions of our own experience—like the experience of humility and the need for patience. So many of my interactions are so narrowly end-focused; it becomes really difficult to hang on to and nourish a fuller sense of self when it's rarely spoken of.

Yes, I have always felt that outer work is intimately entwined with inner work. Ultimately, the distinction between inner and outer is probably another unhelpful dualism. But my work lately emerges from my experience of the inner being too long neglected both in myself and in most of the academic discourse surrounding environmental and sustainability education. I feel like I'm in the midst of a conversion experience that has been a long time coming. It's something like the move from big, conventional agriculture to smaller scale organic, or even biodynamic. I'm going to go back to the basics to recover what is most real to me.

A couple of years ago at AERA in Philadelphia (2014), I sponsored a “Fieldtrip to the Inner Landscape.” For me this was a recovery of a piece of the work I have been meaning to pick up since I proposed my dissertation. My first draft of my dissertation on “place and education” was supposed to have a chapter called “Reading and Writing the Inner Landscape.” Well, that chapter never got written. I became so engrossed in following the ideas and politics around landscape and place. It was amazing and overwhelming. At some point I saw that in order to finish my degree, connecting it all to the equally vast inner landscape would have to wait. Putting off a meaningful and deep exploration of our interior lives—I think this is pretty typical in the culture of work in any field, but in education, where the self is obviously constantly implicated, pushing the self to the margins is simply untenable. Lots of us think so, but our voices are still pretty marginal, which is okay with me, as long as I have access to this rich life of this margin, and I do.

So at AERA about 30 of us from the Environmental Education SIG walked away from the hotels to this cool neighborhood arts space called Philadelphia’s Magic Garden (<http://www.phillymagicgardens.org/>). What you see there is a stunning indoor-outdoor continuous mosaic made up of broken tile, mirrors, bicycle parts, fragments of our daily lives. Our facilitator for the session was Jenny Finn, another Prescott PhD grad (2014). Jenny, whose dissertation and personal calling are about “shadow work,” told me that she didn’t know what to expect from our group of academics, but when she walked into the place and saw it was made beautiful from what had been broken and discarded, she knew she had come to the right place.

It is disheartening yet interesting to me that for all our posturing in the field about fighting oppression and saving the world, we rarely communicate about what it’s actually like to be an embodied person. We speak words about reality as if it were all a set of ideas and political agendas, and not something that is actually lived imperfectly at a visceral, psychic level by all of us. There is a problem here I think in our mode of discourse—how we speak to one another—that I want to talk about later. But this more fundamental neglect of the inner is something that came up for me big in 2012 when I suddenly found myself in a hospital gown helplessly awaiting a heart procedure. Facing my worst fears (I’ve always been afraid of heart disease because of a strong family history), facing my mortality in my late 40s really woke me up to what I’ve always known, but because of ambition and busyness and fear never paid enough attention to. And that is this: yes this world is messed up we need to step up to change it—but life is more than that—it is astonishing, full of miracles and contradictions, and above all fleeting. Such a lived realization (and this is very, very old in our species) is for me not a departure from the movement work we are both committed to, it is an expansion of the movement’s terrain. If part of our collective work is to realize more and more our inter-relationships and to act on such awareness, then we really need to make room to explore the complex ways the self exists in relationship. It is far from straightforward. To oversimplify, I am a physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional being. I have a rich inner life that needs my attention and that wants to be expressed.

I like that you raised Orr’s definition of clear-eyed hope. What’s missing from it though, and from politicized discourse generally, is how fleeting clear-eyed hope can be, at least for me, in everyday life full of competing hopes, fears, and obsessions (ours and other’s). For me there is something around the time-is-running-out desperation to fight climate change that is becoming another kind of bandwagon that is strangely and unintentionally silencing other important questions of what it means to be human and live an embodied and richly-textured psychic life in

relation to others. Especially as we face the reality of a changing planet, we cannot afford to put these questions off for later as if they were luxuries. How do we want to live right now? What is our experience of living and learning actual like? These are important questions that get lost in the crisis rhetoric of climate change. From the perspective of people and communities, there is more to hope and activism than confronting the politics of the ruling discourse. Sometimes I think that rhetoric about owning our privilege or working to end oppression and ecological ruin has itself become a kind of ruling discourse (Foucault promised this would happen) that limits conversation and creativity about what it means, or could mean, to live right now, in this moment. This does not mean turning away from movements for social justice, peace, ecological sustainability, and Indigenous and civil rights. It means expanding our terrain.

So for the last several years I've been trying to recover my commitment to looking at living and learning more holistically—all in relation to the changing outer landscapes of our lives. Now, the question of what it means to be “human” or “whole” can easily be dismissed by intellectuals with words like “essentialism”—but such questions are the foundation of diverse wisdom and cultural traditions worldwide. For the last two years I've been teaching a grad seminar called “holistic education,” which is of course another vibrant educational subfield with lots of crossover with “sustainability.” One of the things I've realized in teaching this course, which has become a favourite of mine and of my students, is that traditional academic discourse (even of the kind I'm using now) is a blunt instrument for summoning a wider range of lived experience. Also, academic routines like reading research articles, building arguments, and writing research papers are simply inadequate tools for probing our interior lives and expressing them outwardly, to ourselves and others. Like Hamlet said, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,/Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” I am more and more interested in forms of expression that invite a deeper and wider range of emotional investment and psychic creativity. In my classes and in my own writing, this has meant creating more space for personal narratives and for the arts, particularly poetry. The arts and all the humanities are very familiar with the linkage between inner and outer work. I feel like that's where I'm finding my deepest learning and my edge. I continue to witness—in my students, in myself, and in my colleagues—how the rational discourse of academe (even the best political critique) somehow contributes to ways of being and knowing that narrow rather than open our possibilities for engagement. The arts have a lot to say about this, and it begins by connecting us to more of ourselves, and awakening the interior realms of experience.

Tina: Thank you so much, David, for sharing your thoughts and aspects of your struggles and your journey. I appreciate very much this slow discussion that allows me to think deeply about what you share and about my responses and related ideas. I will respond with a few thoughts that were sparked when I read your response to my question about inner and outer work. My ideas here will center on the process of homemaking, a notion I've been developing for some time but have only named here, perhaps as an offshoot from Wendell Berry's *Home Economics* and definitely informed by Jeannette Armstong's work.

I agree with you that questions about what it means to be human and be whole ought to be engaged by people and communities and that this seeking serves, and has served, as fount for wisdom embodied in cultures and spiritual traditions worldwide and throughout human history. Though the specific responses to these questions vary (and even include the response by some that the questions themselves are meaningless), it would be hard to deny that the asking of these questions is an essential part of the human experience. Beginning around age two we ask why?

Why? WHY??? until later when many of us come to accept the status quo as a rationale for its own self, and the question of *why* gives way to questions of *how*.

When, as a society and culture, we ask only how, we usher in instrumental rationality disconnected from a context of interrelationship. We become fragmented and falling apart as we attempt to disconnect ourselves from harms inflicted on other people and nature. Through these disconnections, we lop off parts of our larger selves that are our relationships. As wounded, incomplete beings, we diminish our own potential to connect with others and the Earth through a powerful process of homemaking, a practice comprised of interconnected aspects that lie both within and beyond our individual selves.

So, for me, the question of climate change becomes not so much about time running out. After all, time and the Earth will continue with or without us. Instead, to me, climate change becomes a question about our humanity, individually and collectively, as embodied agents living in a natural world that is our home and source of life. Climate change ignites a conversation about the character of our humanity. How can we live rich, satisfying lives that foster rather than diminish the potential for others to do the same? The potential for such lifeways has been embodied in many past and current cultural traditions, including in many indigenous lifeways and in permaculture-based thought and action. Through embodying this potential, we might experience a living paradox of tangible limits combined with limitless potential for deep relationship. We could experience our smallness and our vastness at the same time and, perhaps in time, become comfortable with this paradox. We might become less attached to specific outcomes while, through our actions, expressions, thoughts, and feelings, we would become increasingly capable of nurturing and supporting life itself, rather than depleted of these capabilities.

We in industrial societies are a long way from realizing such a vision. There is also no single path to follow to get there – and perhaps no path at all that would actually lead to such an end. But there are paths we can build as we walk that can lead us at least part way home in the sense that I have described here so that, in our lifetimes, we can continue to inspire others in their homeward journeys. For me, this journey is meaningful and motivating, even if it is fraught at times with disappointment and discouragement. It is embodied in authentic listening, gardening, political action, teaching, learning – anything that is an expression of love for others and life.

I agree with you also that knowledge and arguments can become reified things decontextualized from their meanings and implications for the health and integrity of others and nature. But I still see reasoned thought as a powerful pathway for uncovering and creating meaning, especially when undertaken within a wider process of homemaking. I have found reason, used in this context, to be a powerful vehicle for in-depth understanding of complex challenges and a source for deepened empathy. Rational exploration of Wallerstein's world-system theory, for example, has greatly assisted me in understanding diverse perspectives on modern industrial society, and this understanding has allowed me to connect empathetically to those on the losing end of globalization. When one sees that the struggles individuals face are localized manifestations of much larger systems of social and economic power and not the result of personal failings, empathy is awakened and reinforced.

I often say to my students that sustainability is about putting back together that which has been torn apart. As you so articulately express, we need to unite our inner and outer landscapes. Neither can thrive without the thriving of the other. Of course, there are many pathways for doing this work, and no one of us can walk all of them in our lifetimes, but through our

relationships, we can glimpse experiences through the eyes of others, hear diverse views, and strive to develop wisdom as social creatures.

Of course, all this stuff is challenging to share with students – I find it challenging – but it is possible, if one has courage and a chance to be around the same students for a fairly extended period of time. I am fortunate to have those opportunities in my current position.

Now, I'd like to pose another question to you: *You and I recently discussed how your relationships with authority figures have changed over time, making your work with institutional and other leaders a growing source of hope and agency for yourself. Please share your ideas about why and how you think these changes have occurred and about how your changing relationship with social power might affect your own sense of hope as well as your work as an agent of change.*

David: Yes, our relationship with authority as agents of change—this is a potent hinge between the inner and outer landscapes of our lives. I'm reminded of the poet David Whyte, who defines work as the "opportunity to shape the space where the self meets the world." And as you've said Tina, this is the perpetual task of homemaking. All of us, I believe, are trying to find our way home in our work to where we feel we belong and matter, and our relationship to authority, in my experience, contributes mightily to this process.

For a long time I experienced authority mainly as a barrier to change. Even now, all my heroes are social critics and iconoclasts. And it's true: people in positions of power and authority tend to work to conserve those arrangements. But I think that as a younger adult I was still pretty much living out, and am probably still living out, an extended phase of adolescence. Two powerful mentors in my learning—Paul Shepard and Bill Plotkin along with many others—basically argue that agricultural and industrial cultures reproduce an ego- rather than eco-centric worldview and reinforce an extended adolescence that blunts our ability integrate others into our worldview. Key works here that have influenced me include Shepard's *Nature and Madness* and Plotkin's *Wild Mind*. The dominant experience of the egocentric adolescent is not one of power over others, but rather one of fear and defensiveness—fear that we will not be loved and accepted, and defensiveness that we are misunderstood and underappreciated. I think that earlier in my life my relationship with authority was colored by these fears. Psychologically, such fear is then easily projected onto authority figures, whom we then blame for the uncomfortable "status quo" along with all our insecurities and incapacities to act. Nothing stifles hope and agency like fear, especially fear that remains hidden and unexpressed. This kind of fear makes homemaking very difficult and lonely, and I think it is the cause of a lot of people's suffering, including my own. Further, as I've been hinting at, in academe and institutional life generally, talking about our actual psycho-spiritual experience is very rare and is even often dismissed as "emotional baggage" that we are not supposed to have. Such restrictive environments force us to repress our actual experience and develop defenses that encourage others to do the same. It's pretty nasty!

This is not to say that those who hold institutional power should not be questioned and held accountable, or that institutional power is not itself unproblematic. What's at question here is our relationship to authority and taking responsibility for our part of that relationship. In the past, I think I came at authority from a place of fear and defensiveness and all kinds of unexplored baggage that made me want to blame authority and cast it as the enemy. The critical tradition itself reinforces such positioning. Check out Foucault's language in his statement about the appropriate political task:

It seems to me that the real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions, which appear to be both neutral and independent; to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence which has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them. (Chomsky and Foucault 1971, 171)

On the one hand, this is really inspiring transformative discourse; on the other, the language of violence (criticize, fight, attack) is reproduced and implicitly directed at authority figures. Further there is an arrogance here that needs to be interrupted: the “real” political task is probably more socially complex than Foucault allows.

I guess the question of our relationship to authority depends to a certain extent on the contexts in which we work to create change. How well does the shape of our vision fit into the space we occupy and how flexible is that space? No one context, as you’ve suggested, is better than another in this generational work that will morph and extend way beyond our own lifetimes. Whether people are working against--or with--the current within institutions, or against--or with--the current outside of institutions, all of it is important movement work. I think what we all want is to feel effective, to feel like we have the capacity to shape the spaces we occupy with the contours of our vision, to influence authority and even become authoritative (not authoritarian), rather than merely criticising or attacking “power.” As I’ve aged I also have realized the toll it takes on me and others when I position myself against the current. This makes for unhealthy homemaking, strained relationships, and burnout.

Yet I am also aware that I have myself become somewhat of an authority figure and have even sensed some of my colleagues’ suspicion that I may have been co-opted in working to ally myself with senior decision makers in change projects at my own university—working with the current. I’m sometimes suspicious of myself in this regard. As I’ve said, in the past I frequently felt like I was swimming against the current of authority, and I now see this, in part, as a likely combination of my own insecurities and inabilities, coupled with hierarchical structures that reinforced my self-perception as someone without authoritative power. While I acknowledge that some of my effectiveness in acting as an agent of change within the university power structure is due to my status and reputation, I really believe that the key has been to stop projecting the archetype of the ogre/tyrant onto those that hold power. Instead, I try to engage with people in power with the assumption that they are looking for good ideas, good energy, and competent partners with which to actualize those ideas. I guess you could say I’m trying to co-opt their support, but my intention is to build authentic longer term relationships. It is very hard to build an authentic relationship if you attempt to enter into it with mistrust and buried grudges.

Earlier, Tina, you mentioned two themes that are very important here: patience and participation. I think that as I have gotten older I am more comfortable with the reality that the work of change is generational work that requires a lot of patience and a participatory attitude—an attitude that includes a stance of openness and eagerness to work with those in positions of power and authority. This attitude has, in fact, led to some very satisfying relationships that I never would have imagined from a position of defensiveness and perpetual cynicism.

Writing this I feel like I’m starting to get a picture of a felt tension between my need to swim *with* some current somewhere in the project of change, and my need to be honest about my transformative political intentions. I don’t think it helps anyone to simply criticize and attack.

This is also a matter of strategy. I don't have to like everything about the boss in order to feel good about the pieces of the work that we can embrace together. Yes, university leadership is often caught in the act of responding to and reinforcing neoliberal narratives that work against sustainability. Yet, university and other institutional leaders are people on their own developmental path. They need us to educate them about the possibilities, and we need them to help turn our possible visions into meaningful and lasting actions that create real change.

Stepping back a bit, it seems like what I'm suggesting is that within institutional life, revolutionary transformation based on critique and attack are unlikely, and that evolutionary change, through relationships, can be pretty revolutionary. I'm curious about your experience here Tina.

Tina: I really enjoyed reading your thoughts on this question, David, and I find a great deal of resonance with my own experiences over time.

Firstly, you express a great deal of affinity with the critical tradition that parallels my own. For me, as a young teen in junior high social studies class, I had my first exposure of any depth to the rich tradition of social criticism. This experience entailed learning about the social injustices of the robber baron era in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and the dawning of the twentieth. I read Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and subsequently learned of the many amazing reforms undertaken in the U.S. that addressed issues such as workplace exploitation and hazards, child labor, filthy food processing -- and a central source of these social problems: power concentrated in the hands of early industrialists and bankers. These and other stories of liberation were and remain incredibly inspiring to me, and I learned from them important lessons about systemic exploitation as a foundation for economic and political power and also about the power of people to effectively resist that power and transform society.

My affinity with the critical tradition also revealed itself in my scholarly and teaching work. In my Ph.D. studies, I concentrated heavily on social theory in developing a critical social theory of sustainability based in the Frankfurt School tradition and in other critical traditions associated with environmentalism, sustainability, indigenous worldviews, and social justice. This work culminated in the first few chapters of my book *Occupy Education: Living and Learning Sustainability* (2012), the very title of which invokes the systemic critiques offered by the Occupy Movement in the midst of the Great Recession. An important aspect of this work entailed developing theories that identified and analyzed the entrenched and self-perpetuating power of the status quo in social systems while also articulating a countervailing theory of agency, both of which I hoped could serve as powerful tools thinking that things might be different and for social transformation itself. These ideas and commitments form the foundation for the meaningfulness that I experience through my sustainability education work. I think you and I share much in this regard.

I have also followed a similar trajectory to yours in my relationships with authority in the institutional context of my work in higher education, moving from an outsider position to working well with people both inside and outside the channels of authority that govern the shape, purposes, and actions of institutions over time. Early in my professional career, I tended, like you, to see myself as an outsider. My first language in this situation was often that of critique, though I was also a strong coalition builder who collaborated with colleagues -- though not usually those in relative positions of authority. I also believed authorities should not feel threatened or ruffled by my critiques or those of my colleagues -- after all, they had the power!

As you described from your own experience, I periodically felt underappreciated and undervalued when those in power didn't listen to or act upon my critiques.

It took me years to learn, as you have, how to broaden my vision regarding possibilities for collaboration. For me, this approach takes shape in authentic relationship building. This relationship building entails remaining open to and listening for things that I can support – ideas and actions that resonate with my own principles and transformative projects. I also find it important to consciously acknowledge and respect the needs and motivations of authorities, to the degree that I can know them. This empathetic stance encourages the kind of nonviolent communication described by Marshall Rosenberg that calls upon all involved to bring forward their best selves in discussion and collaboration, rather than to adopt a fighting stance from the start. This approach is not manipulative, but relational and potentially transformational to everyone involved.

Insults are often met with retaliation that limits negotiation and increases the possibility that we will be ignored or shut us down. In some ways, being shut down can serve as an easy way out of engaging in the murky process of social and institutional transformation. When we're shut down, we don't have to compromise. We can maintain hardline purity and consistency in our ideas and beliefs, and remaining on the outside, we also avoid the risk of co-optation. On the other hand, when we engage authentically with differing perspectives, we must take them seriously and respect the people who hold them. By engaging with others authentically, we put at risk our staunch beliefs and ideas – and in a larger context, we might even change our minds. As you discussed when citing Foucault, this sort of “real” political task” is complex. A line between co-optation and compromise within a process of collaboration can be difficult to recognize, and I'm far from certain of a fool-proof way to delineate the difference. One gauge, though, can be the servant leadership test described by Robert K. Greenleaf in *The Servant as Leader*. Greenleaf calls upon leaders to ensure that their actions primarily benefit others and to ensure that, at a minimum, their actions do not harm the least powerful people affected. Because this litmus test for servant leadership urges us to reflect upon the motivations for our work and to act with integrity, it can be very useful in charting one's path forward when acting with authority.

The processes of inner and outer dialog entailed in authentic engagement with authority figures constitute a paradox of social transformation that challenges the integrity of all involved: we must simultaneously engage in actions founded in our principled visions *and* in open, authentic, and respectful dialog. All we can do is do our best to move forward between broadly set guideposts on a path toward sustainability, guided our own consciences and remaining intensely alert to the motivations for our choices and commitments.

Another important aspect of building effective working relationships with people in authority is the mutual respect that grows through shared work. When acting within a context of respectful engagement, one must sometimes walk a tightrope, seeking to support, or at least not embarrass, others while also at times challenging them to consider alternate perspectives or paths forward. This balancing act is not easy, and it embodies serious potential for co-optation. I certainly have no simple answer to dilemmas that can emerge. I do think that helping leaders to act with integrity and also avoid losing face in difficult situations can often be the best approach to collaboration. In egregious cases of malfeasance and injustice, though, sometimes relationships must be sacrificed as a matter of principle.

Of course, authentic communication and relationship building strategies don't always work well, and at times one can still be misunderstood. I think the easiest assumption to make associated with highly motivated people – and I count myself as one of these – is to see them as careerists who are out for their own advancement alone. In a world where we're taught to compete in a seemingly zero-sum game, this is an easy assumption to make -- and it's an assumption that makes authentic communication and collaboration difficult. As one means to address this challenge to authentic communication, I find it helpful to focus my discussions with colleagues and institutional authorities alike clearly on students, academic programs, and institutional and social goals and benefits. This approach is natural for me because the goals of my work are indeed much larger than myself and because I am committed to them for reasons that transcend personal recognition or remuneration. I believe there are many others in higher education who have a similar view of their work, and some of them are institutional leaders.

David, you and I are about the same age. You discuss how your perspectives continue to change and how you have gained a more mature perspective on your professional self. I, too, am beginning to see the real benefits of my long-term engagement with the dynamics of leadership in my professional life. Perhaps this evolution is similar to the process of becoming an elder in a traditional society. As I grow older and recognize that “my work” is not really mine but part of a longer-term social process, there is much less to “finish” or to prove about myself in relation to the project of sustainability-oriented social transformation. I see myself more and more as a helper of others in this process -- a colleague, friend, and sometimes mentor -- and I believe this perspective is a humanizing to myself and to others with whom I engage. It also creates a strong foundation for relationship building and collaboration that can come from a place of personal confidence and empathy. I think, as some of us mature, we come less and less to expect perfection from others, or even from ourselves. Losing this expectation paradoxically seems to open space for the self and others to blossom.

Thanks so much, David, for stirring these thoughts. It's so interesting to see how much we share in our experience and perspectives on hope and agency with regard to our institutional work.

Related to the issue of authenticity we both discussed above, I'd like to pose a final question: *some sustainability educators believe that, if we are truthful with our students about the realities of the converging socio-ecological crises we face, we will send them directly into a passive, shutdown mode. It seems to me that, by deliberately minimizing the problems in our classrooms and communications, we put at risk our capacity to build trust and foster empathy -- both of which I see as foundational to solidarity and agency. Can we reconcile authenticity and truthfulness with generation of hope and agency in our students and others? If so, how? How do you cultivate hope and agency among your students, faculty colleagues and others?*

David: I have strong feelings about the excellent final question you have posed. It suggests so much.

You stated: “some sustainability educators believe that, if we are truthful with our students about the realities of the converging socio-ecological crises we face we will send them into a passive, shutdown mode.” I'm tired of this argument. I'm tired of it first because it misses the obvious point *that students already know that things are really bad*. If you are awake and attuned at all to media, it's pretty obvious that the world is in flames. How can we build trust, as you suggest we should, with our students if we don't name the obvious? Second, most of us walk around much of the time half shut down and half in denial already. I don't think there is much real risk of the

citizenry becoming less engaged; witness the contemporary popularity of the Zombie Apocalypse as an entertainment genre. I think we simply must face up to the fact that western industrial civilization is a series of train wrecks with many more on the way. Not until we acknowledge suffering can we build empathy, and not until we can admit that we've had it wrong will we, collectively, move to change course.

For as long as I've been in this work I've observed people pitting "gloom and doom" discourse against more positive and hopeful messages for our students. This tension is complex because there is a time and a place for all kinds of learning. For example, I agree with David Sobel in his excellent book *Beyond Ecophobia* that we need to "allow children to love the earth before we ask them to save it." This is one powerful way to nurture empathy, and throughout the lifespan it makes sense as a kind of principle worth following. I have myself just returned from a pilgrimage to Walden Pond where I felt a surging sense of renewal coming up from Walden Woods, Thoreau's legacy, and what it has meant in my own development as a sensitive, nature-loving human being. Thoreau loved the world and he was its fiercest critic.

But Sobel's beautiful aphorism about loving the earth first is just one idea among many others that need to be considered, and if taken literally as gospel, it could reinforce false dichotomies, for example, between exploration and activism, or between negative and positive messages for our students. I think we need to turn this conversation around. Let's forget about our students for a minute and bring this home to ourselves as educators. There is a great reluctance, maybe an incapacity, for a lot of educators to acknowledge the extent of the interrelated crises we face, and the extent of our own malaise and complicity. This is the hidden curriculum of silence. But hopelessness and pessimism are not necessarily all bad. Paul Hawken said is best:

When asked if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same: If you look at the science about what is happening on earth and aren't pessimistic, you don't understand the data. But if you meet the people who are working to restore this earth and the lives of the poor, and you aren't optimistic, you haven't got a pulse.

In other words, pessimism and despair are most definitely not something we should work to avoid: they are real as facts about parts per million. In fact, entire religions have been founded on the hard-to-disprove assertion that life is difficult, flawed, imperfect, full of darkness, and at the very least known to cause lots of anxiety. But, as Hawken insists, that is not the whole story. Everywhere I look someone who has experienced some kind of suffering is working damn hard to improve the situation. This is the history of the environmental movement since the at least the 1960s as chronicled in the interesting film, *A Fierce Green Fire*. People who have suffered and known the truth (about environmental racism, for example) do inspiring things. One way to get over the unhelpful dichotomy between positive and negative messaging is to realize that people are doing positive things about negative situations everywhere, and that this movement is growing.

It has been a pretty big week for the widening environmental, social justice, Indigenous rights, civil rights, anti-racism, non-violence, and peace movement. Last Friday, November 6, 2015, President Obama, at long last, did the right thing and rejected the Keystone XL Pipeline. This is an important victory for all of the diverse grassroots organizing that mounted and kept up the political pressure on the White House for seven years. Bill McKibben should get the Nobel Peace Prize. Obviously rejecting Keystone wasn't the Obama Administration's idea, though I want to believe that people in that administration do actually understand the need for policy that

will help us transition to a carbon-neutral energy economy. Keystone was rejected because millions of people who know the frightening truth about climate change and related issues, and who are angry and afraid, translated that energy into hopeful activism. You can say the same thing about the recent forced resignations of the President and Chancellor of the University of Missouri. They were called to account by black students who have suffered racism and who were fed up with their school leaders' incapacity to acknowledge racial problems like white supremacy and to do something about it. These students in turn were supported by others in the black community who have also suffered and who have brought their pain and their demands to the streets with the Black Lives Matter movement. These students don't need to be shielded from the truth. They are the ones demanding that we, the educators, stop hiding behind the shield of denial.

The lesson I take from these recent successes for both social justice and environmental activists is that, like their historical precedents, they are far from complete victories. That is, unless more pipelines are not built, and unless most of the carbon stays in the ground, we're screwed anyway; or more precisely, the people with the least privilege are screwed anyway, again. On November 6, Keystone was stopped. But it is not hard at all to imagine this pipeline being resurrected when oil prices go up again, or if, god forbid, Republicans win the White House in 2016. Here in Canada, lest we forget, the new young and hopeful liberal Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, responded to Keystone's defeat with disappointment in Obama's decision and a firm commitment to Canada's energy sector: read the tar sands have not been defeated, nor have the myriad of fossil fuel projects in the U.S. and worldwide.

But I love it that Keystone is called Keystone. In ecology a keystone species is one that has a disproportionately large effect on its environment relative to its distribution. In architecture, a keystone is the final stone that locks all the other stones in position. It seems to me that the current defeat of Keystone could be, in the sweep of history, a turning point that helps bring into place more of the activism, resistance, and creative visioning and leadership that we currently need. It certainly inspires me to ask of myself, ok, now what more can I do? It could be a turning point in our collective dependence on fossil fuels and our collective inability to confront the truth about what that means for our biosphere as well as for the failures of capitalism in all our institutions. It could become a keystone event that illustrates how people can take on the most powerful political forces in the world and win.

So, how do I reconcile truthfulness, hope, and agency in my work? I look at what other people are doing and I get inspired. Then I look myself in the face and ask, what am I moved and willing to do, and who am I surrounding myself with to support a collective effort? We have to act even if we might lose. It's not even about winning and losing, ultimately, or about hope versus despair. It's about what we are called to do, and there is so much that needs to be done. Rather than worrying about doom and denial which are everywhere, we have to ask each other what we are called to do and then support one another to do it. I think we are smart enough to see that things are bad and act anyway. Artists, poets, and philosophers have always known this; it is the heart of tragedy. Long before our current crises, in the height of the American Depression, F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote:

The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless yet be determined to make them otherwise.

We all do this every day. Our own lives are not sustainable. Every one of us is going to die, and we all know it. But we keep on living.

I have really enjoyed our correspondence Tina. And I hope it serves to keep us connected in the work we share.

Tina: Thank you so very much, David. I resonate strongly with your ideas on the importance of being truthful with our students, friends, and colleagues. I also resonate with your thoughts on the enduring value of collective action based in a realistic understanding of the situation we're in and led from the heart -- the place where knowledge can become wisdom that transforms us and can transform others and the world.

Like you, I am uncertain of and deeply concerned about the ultimate outcomes of the sustainability challenges we face for people and for other living organisms and natural systems. I am convinced, however, that to turn away from what you have identified as our collective calling means to walk away from our own humanity. While we can't as individuals turn around the historical trajectory of industrial society nor live lives that are entirely consistent with our values and dreams while we inhabit social systems built on destructive foundations, we can do the best we can and, as you point out, become capable of living with paradox while engaging our vision, empathy, creativity, and love toward sustainability-oriented social change. As you suggest, our students need to know that we have faith in their abilities to cope and to do these things. We must share what we know and encourage them in their pathways as agents of history at this crucial time.

An essential part of our support for students entails acknowledging that feelings of anger and even despair are entirely normal responses to the deeply troubling news of our times. Another essential aspect of our mentoring relationships with students entails helping them to recognize pathways for channelling their concerns into meaningful action, with the accompanying knowledge that action doesn't necessarily end in success. Through experiencing directly the joy of meaningful collaboration, students may come to see sustainability is a process in which we engage that affirms our humanity, not thing to be attained.

I have greatly enjoyed our conversation, David, and I very much look forward to staying in touch as we continue our shared work. To you and your students, travel well!

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