CULTURE|PULSE

IF WE WANT A JUST TRANSITION, WE NEED TRANSFORMATIONAL CULTURAL STRATEGY

By Alexis Frasz

When I started working at the intersection of culture and climate[1] six years ago, there was a small but growing part of the environmental movement interested in arts and culture. It was fueled by the frustration of scientists and activists at the insufficient public response to climate change, despite overwhelming evidence about the urgency of action. Cognitive scientists suggested that the problem was that climate change impacts were just too abstract, slow moving, and far off for people in the U.S. to get how it will impact their day-to-day lives. The technical and data-heavy language of science compounded this sense of abstraction, we were told. In response, some scientists and activists began turning toward culture and storytelling to help make climate change feel more personal, salient, and "emotionally resonant." The idea was that speaking to the heart would motivate people to care more about climate, which would drive the political will for change.

Things are different today, though it may have less to do with any particular advocacy approach and more to do with the progression of climate change itself. Many people now have personal, visceral experiences of what climate change means for them—unprecedented hurricanes, apocalyptic wildfires, regular hundred-year floods, devastating crop failures, and dangerous heat waves are becoming our "new normal." We have a growing sense of foreboding that this thing that we've been warned about for decades is no longer some other country's or future generation's problem to worry about.

Now people are waking up, and as they do, they are scared. Three quarters of Americans now believe climate change is real, and a third are "very worried" about how it will impact their own lives. Belief and worry is even greater among people under 35—regardless of political party, fully three-quarters of young people see climate change as a "serious threat" to their future. "Eco-anxiety" and "climate despair" are on the rise, and a new field of "eco-psychology" has emerged specifically to treat climate-related mental health issues.

And yet--prior to Covid19 forcing the global economy to come to a halt--carbon emissions and ecosystem destruction were continuing to grow yearly.[2] It turns out that awareness and worry aren't enough to actually create change. As a recent Greenpeace

---

[1] My definition of both "culture" and "climate" is broad. Culture includes the variety of ways people express identity and make meaning—fine arts, pop culture, personal creative practices, cultural traditions and folkways. Climate includes biodiversity, food, pollution, water, land use, waste, and the socio-economic and political dynamics that influence outcomes in all of these areas. For more see https://www.artplaceamerica.org/view/pdf?f=/sites/default/files/public/pictures/environment.pdf
[2] Economic growth is the biggest global driver of emissions, on personal or national levels—the richer we are, the more we produce and consume, regardless of political party, geography, or ideology. Global emissions have only meaningfully decreased when the economy has contracted.

report notes, "If concern alone would trigger climate action, present awareness and concern levels about climate change by the middle class people around the world would be sufficient to achieve the political and societal changes necessary."[3] But more knowledge can have the opposite effect, triggering fear and avoidance, especially when we don't know what to do—or don't want to do what it takes.

So, what *is* needed now to catalyze the action we need to "flatten the climate curve" and protect our ability to live on earth? And what role can and should artists and culture play in this process? We have no time to waste. How, and how soon, we move toward a just transition matters greatly to the outcome, especially for the most vulnerable among us and future generations.

> " Culture is powerful, and there is enormous potential for artists and culture to contribute to a just transition—but it is also easy to mistake motion (a proliferation of expressive content) for progress (effectiveness). "

is nothing less than radical transformation of ourselves and society, on inner and outer levels.

Accepting the facts about climate while only supporting actions that are inadequate to address it is, in fact, a kind of denial. Unlike the outright denial of science, which gets most of the attention, "implicative denial" is also common among believers and even activists. It is also the operating mode of our global political system, as self-described climate champion Diane Feinstein demonstrated when she called children begging her to do something to save their future "unrealistic." Our global economy and consumer way of life is fundamentally unsustainable on a planetary level and incompatible with justice and a livable planet. And yet we are consistently unwilling to explore solutions to climate change that might impede economic growth or jeopardize the way of life of middle class people in privileged nations like the U.S. Truly accepting the reality of climate change means, as journalist Naomi Klein says, being willing to change everything--what we eat, how we work and earn money, where and how we live, how we consume, how and why we travel, our political landscape, and, most of all, the assumptions underlying our economy.

Culture is powerful, and there is enormous potential for artists and culture to contribute to a just transition—but it is also easy to mistake motion (a proliferation of expressive content) for progress (effectiveness). To date the majority of climate focused arts and culture has been focused on trying to wake people up, based on the premise that if enough people wake up and just *care more*, things will change. We now know that this theory of change is wrong. Those of us working at the intersection of culture and climate face a moral imperative to become more strategic in our understanding of the change we need, how change happens, and the effective application of cultural methods to the task. We must go beyond trying wake people up to supporting the process of *actually making change*.

First, we need to be honest that t**he change that is required**

So, even if we are excited about what a more sustainable future could look like, which I am, we must come to terms with the fact that parts of the journey will be hard. **We must embrace hard** and not let that stop us from going forward. Hard does not mean undoable or hopeless. In fact, most of us have faced challenges in our lives that may have seemed unimaginably difficult, perhaps we have even had to do something to save our own life or the life of someone we love. There are ways to meet these kinds of

---

[3] The growing global youth movement and Extinction Rebellion are exceptions—and reactions— to this widespread social inertia, as well as the long-standing leadership of frontline communities who are dealing with the impacts now.

challenges with courage, integrity, and strength, especially if we have the support of others. And, anyone who has made it through these trials knows that, despite their difficulty, there are often great gifts to be found on the other side.

The parallels between Covid19 and climate could be its own piece (and is, [here](#) and [here](#)), but a few relevant lessons I am taking from it now include:

- We are part of nature and are subject to its laws, whether we acknowledge them or [not](#);
- The [sooner and more aggressively we act](#), the more likely we are to avoid the worst outcomes;
- In order to save our lives, we may need to radically change our way of life—and we can;
- Our systems are not built to respond to fast-moving, multi-pronged crises and will be easily overwhelmed if we are not prepared;
- Poor people and people of color will inevitably suffer first and worst unless we proactively work against that outcome; and,
- **When we need to, everyday people, businesses, and governments alike can coordinate to do incredible, seemingly impossible things.**

Secondly, we have to **recognize that although waking up can happen in an instant, transformation is a process.**

It took us many years to develop and internalize the world views, structures, systems, and ways of being we have now, and it will take time and effort to change them. We are talking about making a profound *cultural change*--a shift in values, norms, beliefs, and behaviors. We must begin to understand waking up as the first step in a journey of transformation—a precondition for change, but not the destination.

What excites me, and gives me hope, is that supporting transformation is one of culture's most ancient, essential, and enduring societal roles. In fact, all cultures and wisdom traditions have rituals, practices, myths, and guides to help

people make sense of and navigate moments of disruption and change.

In every transformational process there is a moment when we have left the shore of the familiar and the old structures have broken down, and yet the new way of being has not yet been established. Anthropology calls this the "liminal" phase where we are "betwixt and between" what was and what is to come.[4] This phase is typically defined by fear and disorientation, a loss of identity and solid ground. But there is often also a powerful creative energy that can be harnessed and directed toward change—it is a realm of pure possibility. There may be a desire to turn back and cling to what feels familiar and safe, but the old world no longer exists to go back to. Sound familiar? The liminal stage, I believe, is where we are now. A critical role of rituals and guides in transformational processes, therefore, is to *keep us moving* until we get to the other side.

So, how might culture (in the form of artists, cultural strategists, rituals, creative practices) meet people at this threshold and help us get to the other side of a just transition? There are some essential stages that appear repeatedly across cultures and disciplines that study transformation—anthropology, sociology, psychology, and wisdom traditions. I offer my interpretation of these, not as a prescription, but in the hope that they might spur those of us working in and through culture to begin having deeper and more strategic discussions about how we might support the full process of cultural change.

These stages—waking up (covered above), feeling and healing, imagining, and creating the new—are non-linear and iterative, and it may be appropriate to engage with a particular one at different places and times. My goal is that, as a loosely defined field of cultural workers dedicated to the better world we know is possible, we become adept at "cultural acupuncture," intervening at whichever stage is most appropriate at the time to keep the energy moving.

---

[4] Anthropologist Victor Turner coined this phrase. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/liminality-the-threshold-_b_13845666

1. Feeling and Healing

To transition to a more just and sustainable society, we will need to be able to feel and heal the harm our system has caused and continues to cause, especially to poor people and people of color. Our economy relies on "sacrifice zones," places where resources can be extracted, polluting industries can be located, and people can be exploited for cheap labor. Stopping the harm is the first priority, but it is not enough. Creating space for frontline communities to heal, on their own terms and as part of a larger society-wide process of acknowledgment and reparations, is also necessary if we want to move forward together in a way that is just in process as well as outcomes.

But it isn't only frontline communities who are harmed by imperialism, industrial capitalism, and neoliberalism. Even among middle and upper-class citizens of the U.S (ostensibly the "winners" in this system) there is a widespread "epidemic of alienation," manifesting in declining happiness, lack of trust in other people and institutions, social isolation, depression, anxiety, addiction, obesity, gun violence, crippling debt, widening inequality, and deaths of despair. These are merely different symptoms with the same cause—a deeply inhumane and alienating economic system that perpetuates inequality and separation by design. Over the past several decades we have become more and more disconnected from each other, from land, from our bodies and from our own deeper humanity—and our outer environment reflects this inner wound. Climate change is merely a symptom of this much larger collective trauma.

We have to begin to heal our psyches and our communities so that a different consciousness can emerge from which we can create a different future. Otherwise, we are certain to replicate the same kinds of dysfunctions with many of our so-called solutions. As Einstein famously said, you can't solve a problem from the same mindset that created it. In fact, we already are seeing perverse "solutions" emerge: massive renewable energy farms that destroy ecosystems, lab grown food that doesn't

satiate and has unknown long term health impacts, governments that achieve their "green" goals by exporting their waste and emissions to poor countries, and eco-fascists who blend environmentalism with a desire for racial purity and sometimes violence.

Finally, we need to find a way to acknowledge and work with the feelings that arise as we begin to let in the full reality of climate change and its implications. Sociologist Kari Norgaard calls this a "cultural trauma." [5] According to eco-psychologists, feeling depression, anxiety, grief, vulnerability, and/or guilt about the climate crisis is not pathological, but actually a "sane, healthy response." In fact, it is the repression and denial of these real and appropriate emotional responses to the situation we face (often because we feel like it is the only way we can keep going) that compound our anxiety and prevent our acting in alignment with reality. Seen this way, creating the space and societal permission allow these feelings is not a sentimental distraction from the real work of solving climate change, but a necessary part of the process.

How can culture help?

Culture is a powerful tool for healing and navigating uncertainty. People have always told stories to help make meaning out of chaos, and interpret and convey moral lessons across generations and communities. Sometimes and for some people, culture can be the only socially acceptable place to grapple with and process pain. Culture is a way we grieve, and is how we acknowledge and lift up what we value, what we love, and what we hope to carry forward. It provides languages for paradox and complexity, allowing us to express and experience seemingly contradictory things, like joy and pain, at the same time.

For communities that are already experiencing land loss and migration due to climate change, finding ways to preserve and pass on cultural traditions linked to place is urgent. Organizations like the Bayou Culture Collaborative in Louisiana and Re-locate

---

[5] Of course, a sense of ontological security and protection from knowing the true cost of our system is itself a privilege. This kind of trauma therefore may be most acute in middle and upper class people and white people, who benefit most from the status quo. For many people of color and poor people, the status quo is already a crisis.

Kivalina in Alaska are helping their communities document and pass on traditional life ways as they are forced to resettle. For some communities—including African-American, Native American and immigrant groups in the U.S.—climate continues and intensifies a historical pattern of disenfranchisement and forced migration. In these instances, cultural practices have long been a lifeline to simultaneously stay connected to tradition and adapt to change.

Moreover, to navigate the changes we face in ways aligned with justice, we will need to reconnect to our ability to have empathy and care for one another, especially because the impacts of climate change will not hit us all equally or at the same time. Addressing climate change will require us to come together and coordinate across ideological and geographical divides. Culture can help us connect with each other and our own deeper humanity, and can be a critical tool for building bridges. Artist projects like the Water Bar, which uses storytelling and conversation to engage people with different, even opposing perspectives, can help create relationships and enable people to find common ground.

2.   Imagining
_____

For a more just and sustainable future we will also need a radical imagination that goes beyond the boundaries of our current socially constructed reality. **We must conceive of a new way of living, and living together, that is different in almost every way than what we know or have experienced.** There are few rules or guidelines to follow because most of the principles that undergird our current society are at the very root of the problem.

Some of the most problematic assumptions of our culture include: land and natural "resources" can be owned and profited from, money equals worth, growth is always good, we can predict the future, technological advancement will always improve things, etc. As Donella Meadows points out, these

agreements about the nature of reality have "utterly dumfounded other cultures, who thought them not the least bit obvious." If challenging some of these norms seems impossible, it is partly because we forgot we made them up. Instead, we relate to our economy and social system as if it were a fixed, inevitable and objective reality, and we are merely living in it. The late, great Ursula le Guin urged us to remember: "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."

Large parts of the climate movement have embraced the idea that the lack of public imagination about how things could be different is one of the biggest barriers to change. In response, the last few years have seen a proliferation of solutions-focused communications and positive visions of what a more just and sustainable future could look like. While visionary ideas may help break the trance of the status quo, inspire hope, and expand the Overton window, we must be careful not to imply that addressing the climate crisis is a matter of some lifestyle tweaks and techno-fixes that leave the basic features of our way of life and economy untouched.

In fact, rather than an appealing vision of any *particular* future, what we need most is to remember and reclaim our ability and our responsibility to re-imagine society. We have to understand ourselves as *creators* once again, while having the humility and wisdom to understand the true scope of our human power— which happens to be both more and less than we think.

How can culture help?

When people in non-arts sectors are interested in working with artists it is often because they are seeking creative, boundary-pushing ideas. Artists *are* specialists in imagination and have expert skills at rendering creative ideas in tangible ways. But while artists may be helpful guides to the creative process, imagining our shared future cannot be the domain of specialists, be they artists, engineers, or politicians. We need the power and confidence to imagine something new and better to be *widely*

distributed, held by all people and in all communities. We need creative people power, something that organizations like Springboard for the Arts, the Village of Arts and Humanities, Cornerstone Theatre, and the US Department of Arts and Culture are building through supporting the creative agency of everyday people. And we need to build cultural power--that is, the ability to organize and exercise our collective influence to shift society's dominant norms and values.

Over and over again, we have seen through our research and the on-the-ground practice of many grassroots groups that people reclaim their imaginative capacity through engaging in artistic creation. Even when the creative act is "purely" artistic—like making a mural or a play—just the act of making something new sparks a sense of agency that translates to other areas of life as well. Frontline community organizers understand this, and it is one of the reasons they often embed arts and culture in their work. Environmental justice groups like El Puente, UPROSE, Movement Generation, and PUSH Buffalo all embrace culture as an integral part of their work towards a just transition.

3. Creating (and iterating) the new
_____

We can wake up, heal our wounds, and imagine something different, but ultimately, for a just and sustainable (or regenerative) future to become a reality, **we have to actually *behave* in new ways, as individuals, as communities, and as a society.** We need to reinvent and rebuild our systems and structures so that they embody and reflect different values and mindsets -- values and mindsets we may only be able to discover through living into them. In other words, we have to create a new world before we know exactly what it is. We have to make the road by walking it.

This stepping out into the unknown is truly challenging, and often terrifying. When I began this work, I naively expected that someone out there in the "environmental sector" knew what we

needed to do and where we were going, and all we in the arts needed to do was to align with them. That couldn't be farther from the truth. What I've learned in my years working on this issue is that climate change is not predominantly a technical or scientific challenge, where we know where we want to go and we just need to figure out how to get there. It is a truly creative challenge, in the sense that we are making something up and we don't yet know what it is. Of course there are cultures that have known how to live in ecologically and socially harmonious ways in the past (even some manage to do so in the present, despite the pressures of global capitalism), and we can and should learn from their practices. But there is no example of a society as large, complex, diverse, and globally interconnected as ours that has managed this kind of massive transformation at the speed and scale we need now.

How can culture help?

This might be one of the greatest gifts that culture can offer right now. Not because artists have *the* answer, but because the creative process is about confidently walking into and through the unknown, again and again, and coming out on the other side with new ideas, new insights and new pathways to pursue. The creative process involves active experimentation, testing, and iteration, paying attention to subtle feedback from the environment and making adjustments in response. There is no reason why this process and these skills cannot be applied to re-making the "real" world, and indeed some artists are already embracing a "world-building" role, often in collaboration with specific communities. Perry Avenue Commons, the Mississippi Center for Cultural Production, and Utah Diné Bikéyah are examples of place-based cultural interventions that seek to fundamentally shift dominant paradigms of how things work by pre-figuring how things could be different.

Often these creative prototypes of new systems and ways of living are small and local, leading some critics to dismiss them as not enough for the scale of the problem. But climate change has global causes and local impacts, so local adaptations might be

just what we need to flip the paradigm on its head. Moreover, who knows which of these local experiments might have the seeds for the next system inside of it, seeds that can germinate and spread? Even if they don't, we need more and more of us to practice living in new ways, in order to rewire our brains and our culture and build confidence in possibilities beyond what currently exists. This is why even forms like speculative fiction can catalyze change—we temporarily click into a different world and worldview that is not bound by the logic of our current one –and we emerge changed.

and offerings from teachers like Charles Eisenstein and Joanna Macy, are resources for people of all backgrounds to engage the inner and outer dimensions of transformation.

Finally, engaging in culture allows *all* of us to feel and heal, connect to each other and the world around us, and feel empowered to imagine and make change in our own lives and in the world. It activates the creative and cultural power we need to be both *resilient and visionary*, able to both respond to what this moment is demanding while we create a better future.

Conclusion

Collectively, we are beginning to wake up to the implications of climate change—increasingly by experiencing its destructive effects on our own lives. Climate change and our adaptation to it will change almost everything about how we live and who we take ourselves to be. This is a much more disruptive *cultural* transformation than most of the environmental movement has admitted to date. While the path ahead of us has no roadmaps, the stages of transformation I've outlined here—waking up, feeling and healing, imagining and creating the new—appear repeatedly across traditions and fields that study change.

Adapting to new conditions and remaking society will also be a profoundly *creative* process, which is one of the reasons why I believe that artists and culture can be particularly helpful in helping us navigate this transition. We need cultural guides, shamans, death doulas, healers, priests, teachers, and midwives as well as communicators, agitators, problem-solvers and visionaries. To play these myriad roles, artists and cultural leaders must also be authentically engaging with transformation, on both inner and outer levels. Programs like Julie's Bicycle's Creative Climate Leadership program and the Banff Centre's Cultural Leadership Program are emerging to support cultural workers as leaders in civic contexts.[6] Programs like Movement Generation's Justice and Ecology retreat, Deep Adaptation events,

---

[6] Full disclosure: I teach in both of these programs.