

BECOMING COLLAPSE-ABLE

Alice Loyd*

In the past five years my writing has moved away from educating about humanity's onslaught of the natural world and my advocacy away from proposing resolutions to that onslaught. People who have been paying attention—people who care—have been advised. My interest has shifted now to helping privileged North Americans prepare to deal with the ecosystem's responses. We have been part of the era of damage; now we are in the era of surviving the consequences. In particular I want to help younger people see the decline of a far-from-perfect system through a wider lens, one that includes not only such experiences as a person of my age might offer, but also the perspective of non-industrial cultures today and throughout human history.

In addition, I am less concerned now about what is happening in national politics, and more focused on our power to act within a smaller circle. In my view our current opportunity is to reorganize our lives so that we can meet our true needs and those of our neighbors with our own strength and knowledge. There are less exploitative ways to do most of the daily tasks that make our lives comfortable. We can learn these ways, as thinkers and planners have been urging us to do since the 1970s, when the most visible threat to industrial progress was peak oil.

John Michael Greer captures the enthusiasm of the visionaries of those days.

In the world of the twenty-first century, appropriate-tech mavens argued, the chief abundant energy and resources that supported the extravagant machinery of twentieth-century industrial nations would inevitably run short. Before that happened, a new breed of technology had to be invented and put into production. The new technologies they hoped to pioneer would use energy and resources sparingly; they would work with the cycles of nature rather than against them; they would meet human needs without placing unsustainable burdens on the biosphere. All over the world in those days, you could find little non-profits on shoestring budgets and small companies run by basement entrepreneurs hard at work making that dream a reality.¹

These people hoped to create the means to move smoothly from industrialization into ecological civilization. They envisioned a world that, while it was marked by observing limits, could power the essential aspects of modern life. I am looking at a 1975 compilation of such projects now: a book in which twelve pioneers discuss their own

* Alice Loyd's forthcoming book, "Collapse-Able: Three Handbooks for Living Now and Later," is the basis for this article.

¹ John Michael Greer, *Green Wizardry* (Gabriola Island, BC Canada: New Society Publishers, 2013), viii.

designs for small-scale energy systems to use sun, wind, water, methane gas, and wood to produce energy to power the home.² I was part of that movement, though as an adopter, not an inventor. My library was filled with books on passive solar construction, organic farming and gardening, and manual tools such as a bicycle-pedaled water pump and the “two-woman saw.” I studied alternate energy resources in order to advocate for them with politicians and utility commissioners.

Fifty years ago there was time to think big about new technologies. I believe we have lost most of that opportunity. We have not yet lost the ability to examine our situation, however, and we can invent new patterns that will make our lives more tranquil as now-common amenities disappear. The primary power we now have, as I have said, is in our own hands. We can move from being consumers toward becoming producers, and we can work in partnership with nature rather than in the mode of exploitation.

The preparation, then, for moving with power into a time of economic, social, and environmental decline begins at the most personal level. First, we need a spiritual foundation that will carry us through adversity. If you have lived through hardship earlier in your life, you may have found that level of anchorage. Now is the time to strengthen spiritual muscles and align more strongly with the forces of life. We are not born and then abandoned by the planet that birthed us. We have roots—however you may name them—that bind each of us to the core of existence. We are inextricably tied into the flow of life in this universe, even if the humans around us fail to mirror that connection. We need to find these roots now, in order to be ready for whatever comes.

Second, we need human agents who can demonstrate the connection on the physical plane. A human is meant to live in the company of other caring humans from birth to death. Just as the other-than-human Earth web is intricately interwoven with a role for each member—none more worthy than another—so also the human community must be woven if humans are to thrive. The emphasis on individuals in our culture is an aberration, an abnormality in the history of the race. For a child to be normal within the ancient pattern, it must be nurtured in a nest of human guardians and teachers; and for those adults to behave trustworthily toward a child or toward each other, they must have had the same upbringing. The results of generations of more modern, “civilized” child rearing are not pretty. If we often do not feel safe among our fellow humans, this is one explanation.

But we can create safe alliances. Humans come with forty thousand years of aptitude for cooperation and caring. The past several thousand years marked by societal distrust have not erased the tendency to draw toward each other, as every disaster proves. It will take re-training and then practice for most mature Westerners to bond firmly with others in common cause, but this is exactly what we must intend and then accomplish if we are to manage the upheaval that will accompany the disintegration of economic and

² Carol Hopping Stoner, ed., *Producing Your Own Power* (New York: Random House, 1975).

natural environments. We will need each other more than ever, even as threats to social cohesion accumulate.

Third, we could be facing a world without either the services we are accustomed to having others perform for us, or the internet where we watch Do-It-Yourself YouTube videos. Only in the affluent nations of the Global North have typical humans lost the knowledge to grow food, obtain water without expert assistance, and manage sanitation, for example. In the near future, I think most of us will need to take more responsibility for the day's ordinary survival tasks, and while we will benefit by exchanging services with each other, I think we will lose the option to remain ignorant about how to meet basic bodily needs. One of the attractions of the intentional community where I chose to live is the nearby folk school,³ where old skills are taught by practitioners committed to preserving them.

This part of adaptation will be a hard adjustment in developed nations, where most people will meet it with fear and resistance. Speaking as an octogenarian raised in the Great Depression and World War II, I have to say I am puzzled at the attitude toward work considered menial that I find in many of my same-age peers. It is as if the post-war 1950s advertisements, with their glamorous depictions of labor-saving devices and chemicals, caused two generations of Americans to aim to rise above the duties that accompany being a human animal. Instead they were glad to put on Sunday clothes every day to go to the office or leave home to operate or repair machinery in someone else's shop, factory, or farm. They preferred to "get a job" so they could pay others to attend to anything regarded as lowly.

That stance is appropriate for people with serious physical limitations, but for able-bodied, mentally competent adults to disdain the ordinary work done past and present by most of the humans on the planet falls into some category of pretentiousness.

To thrive in this era of disruption we will need strong hearts and spirits.

The people who see the difficulties ahead and yet feel prepared may not be the ones with a year's supply of food in metal cans or a shelf with rotated bottles of water. The old man who sits by the window in his wheelchair may live with that degree of serenity, or the tired nurse, rushing each day to catch the morning bus. They can face hardship without living in fear because they have spiritual strength, which is an internal possession. A strong-hearted person with deep inner resources is ready to deal with either prosperity or adversity. For that person, a collapse in the exterior world would certainly be disturbing, but it would not be an insurmountable event.

³ Vicky Eiben, "A Brief History of Folk Schools," Folk Education Association of America, Spring 2015, <https://folkschoolalliance.org/a-brief-history-of-folk-schools/>.

If you put your soul against this oar with me,
the power that made the universe will enter your sinew
from a source not outside your limbs, but from a holy realm
that lives in us.⁴

So spoke Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Rūmī, thirteenth-century Persian poet, Islamic scholar, and Sufi mystic. All of the resources of an endlessly creative capacity are here to sustain us. Our society has not encouraged us to explore the intangible features of ourselves or of nature, partly because prevailing philosophy has maintained they do not exist, since they cannot be quantified. Their existence is an internal phenomenon to be observed only by the one who experiences them.

As a result of this atmosphere of denial, our spirits may be atrophied. To strengthen them we must enter their realm and explore it for ourselves. When we do, our spiritual leanings will remain superficial if we merely accept the ideas others have offered. If your path can be labeled, it is probably someone else's path, not your own. Someone else's path is fine as a starting place. From there you can find out for yourself the implications of that teaching.

I shall speak of nothing of which I have no experience, either in my own life or in observation of others, or which the Lord has not taught me in prayer.⁵

St. Teresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic and reformer, wrote those words over four centuries ago. As she did, I am encouraging you to explore your spirit's capacities for yourself. To the extent you do, your spiritual orientation will not merely be intellectual assent; it will arise from your unique journey. No matter where you start, if you continue to follow your heart, you may find yourself outside the boundaries of the tradition in which you began.

The understanding that has become the foundation of my own spiritual life came while I was sitting in church when I was eight years old. Unrelated to anything happening around me, I suddenly realized that fairness was something that did not have to be seen to be real. I saw with certainty that while I might not be treated fairly myself, fairness was a real thing that could not be destroyed. Through that one insight—that fairness is firmly in place despite appearances to the contrary—I knew that the world is good and that its goodness will endure, no matter what.

⁴ Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Rūmī, "That Lives in Us," in *Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West*, trans. by Daniel Ladinsky, Poet Seers, <https://www.poetseers.org/the-poetseers/rumi/1-2-2/>.

⁵ Teresa, Saint, of Avila, Prologue, *The Way of Perfection*, trans. E. Allison Peers, <https://cat.xula.edu/tpr/works/perfection/>.

When Thomas Berry was twelve years old, he had an experience similarly formational.

It was an early afternoon in May when I first looked down over the scene and saw the meadow. The field was covered with lilies rising above the thick grass. A magic moment, this experience gave to my life something, I know not what, that seems to explain my life at a more profound level than almost any other experience I can remember.

This early experience, it seems, has become normative for me throughout the range of my thinking. Whatever preserves and enhances this meadow in the natural cycles of its transformation is good; what is opposed to this meadow or negates it is not good. My life orientation is that simple.⁶

Aldo Leopold offers the same standard in *A Sand County Almanac*: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”⁷ This measurement of good and bad does not answer all questions, of course. What might seem to help one part of the biotic community might hurt another, and I lack the knowledge to know always how my actions might affect the entirety. In most cases we know toward which direction an act “tends,” though, to use Leopold’s term, and our commitment to the world’s innate goodness can guide us through many perils.

To make the turn, we will also need the support of community.

The problems our society faces are immense and complex. My path through complexity is to look for fundamental causes, and in my view the absence of deep connections underlies most of the problems.

- The perception that humans are more worthy than the rest of nature—loss of connection—has resulted in a way of life that harms nature.
- The perception that some humans are more worthy than other humans—loss of connection—has resulted in a way of life that harms other humans.

To repair the harms, humans must realize our unity with all other humans and with other-than-human nature—and deepen our connections.

Every human I meet is the product of an ancestry we share. All the people of our world were formed in the deeps of time by the same evolutionary process. Anatomically

⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Great Work* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), 13.

⁷ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Ballantine, 1970), 262.

modern *Homo sapiens* has been present on planet Earth for at least 300,000 years.⁸ For almost all that time we survived as what anthropologists call immediate-return hunter gatherers, meaning we lived on current, not stored, food supplies. During this period we evolved the basic traits that make us human. We traveled in small bands where virtues like altruism, sharing, and the preservation of nature were essential to group survival. Our societies were sustainable and egalitarian. We still have it in us to live that way. We are human.

I begin with the research because I have needed reassurance about human beings, and the findings on this front are positive. For several decades scientists have been documenting, through experiments and close examination of real-life events, that *Homo sapiens* from the first months is oriented toward helpfulness and co-operation. In 2020 Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods, researchers at Duke University's Center for Cognitive Neuroscience, published *The Survival of the Friendliest: Understanding Our Origins and Rediscovering Our Common Humanity*. In it they conclude, "Cooperation is the key to our survival as a species because it increases our evolutionary fitness." They write,

What allowed us to thrive while other humans went extinct was a kind of cognitive superpower: a particular type of friendliness called cooperative communication. We are experts at working together with other people, even strangers. We can communicate with someone we've never met about a shared goal and work together to accomplish it. . . . We develop all these skills before we can walk or talk, and they are the gateway to a sophisticated social and cultural world.⁹

Cultural training can put limits on this native altruism. Neoliberal politicians believe that free market capitalism is right, and if government regulates industry in order to protect humans and the rest of nature, they oppose that policy. When a religious teaching says homosexuality is wrong, an adherent might rescue a gay man run over by a car but vote against laws that safeguard that same person's employment status.

In industrialized nations many of us lack everyday experience with great depth of interconnection. But there are still people in North America who have grown up within solid community, and in Zimbabwe I frequently met Africans who, when I said, "Good morning, how are you?" answered, "I'm well if you're well."

Our individualistic culture has isolated us from each other to such an extent that I could answer "I'm fine" speaking as only myself, without acknowledging that this is not

⁸ Jean-Jacques Hublin et al, "New fossils from Jebel Irhoud, Morocco and the pan-African origin of *Homo sapiens*," *Nature*, <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-018-0166-3>.

⁹ Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods, *Survival of the Friendliest: Understanding Our Origins and Rediscovering Our Common Humanity* (New York: Random House, 2020), sample pages on <https://www.amazon.com/Survival-Friendliest-Understanding-Rediscovering-Humanity/dp/0399590684/?asin=0399590684&revisionId=&format=4&depth=1>.

possible. It is not possible for me to be fine as an individual if others are not fine. Not only are we not separate from the rest of what we have been taught to call the environment—not only could we not breathe one breath without its presence and support, neither are we in reality separate from any other human. For this reason, I believe our preparation for the next period includes acknowledging these ties and beginning to live from this embeddedness. As I try to remember that I am a part of the air, water, and land of Earth, likewise I try to be aware that when I rise in the morning, a part of me is in the house of my neighbor, and in some unavailable-to-the-senses way, she is in mine. Or something like that.

This is what Thich Nhat Hanh is saying in his poem “Please Call Me By My True Names,”¹⁰

the rhythm of my heart is the birth and death
of all that are alive.
I am the frog swimming happily
in the clear water of a pond,
and I am the grass-snake
that silently feeds itself on the frog.

“I’m well if you’re well.” Most Indigenous cultures cultivate a sense of mutual obligation and responsibility from a young age. In sub-Saharan Africa the perspective generally known as ubuntu (the word for humanity in the Zulu language of South Africa) says that “none of the community members would be what he or she is without the community. Thus, naturally the community takes precedence over the individual without underestimating individual personal rights.”¹¹

For those of us born into an individualistic culture, the mores of communalism must be learned. I may want to live in community, I may believe village-mindedness is the best way to relate to my neighbors, and yet my words and actions may make it hard for me to realize that goal. Wanting to play fair, trying not to ruffle feathers, and meeting the world with a smile are not enough. We are products of a culture that has not treated people well. We have good genes, but we carry wounds.

In *The Different Drum*, Scott Peck describes his experiences working with groups that wanted to come together in a closer way. He reports that invariably they begin with the best of intentions. Participants greet each other, find subjects in common, and begin to get acquainted. But after this period which he calls pseudo-community, they run into trouble. They encounter seemingly irreconcilable differences. They are not as happy,

¹⁰ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Call Me by My True Names: The Collected Poetry of Thich Nhat Hanh* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2001).

¹¹ Joe Teffo, *The Concept of Ubuntu as a Cohesive Moral Value* (Pretoria South Africa: Ubuntu School of Philosophy, 1994), 12, referenced by Leonard Tumaini Chuwa, *Interpreting the Culture of Ubuntu*, <https://dsc.duq.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1421&context=etd>.

they do not know how to proceed, they may be sorry they came. He calls it the period of chaos—impasse. At that point he would tell them they were getting nowhere toward their goal of closeness. He would use the term emptiness for the state each would have to attain before the group could move together into real community. He writes, “I tell them simply that they need to empty themselves of barriers to communication. And I am able to use their behavior during chaos to point out to them specific things—feelings, assumptions, ideas, and motives—that have so filled their minds as to make them as impervious as billiard balls.”¹²

The barriers to communication Peck mentions include:

Expectations and preconceptions: trying to fit others into a preconceived mold

Prejudices: judging people before we know them

Ideological or theological rigidity: feeling superior based on categories of belief

The need to heal, convert, fix, or solve: assuming that differences are unacceptable

The need to control: trying to insure the desired outcome.

Distancing habits arise as defenses, and I believe we develop them only because at one time they were needed. A child comes into the world without affectations; they are acquired in order to manage real conditions. Once we become adults we need them in fewer situations, and yet they are not easily shed. Peck writes, “Giving them up is a sacrificial process. Consequently the stage of emptiness in community development is a time of sacrifice.”

Child-rearing practices that Americans consider appropriate, such as making behavioral demands, may nevertheless intimidate the developing human. We can contrast typical upbringing in our society with reports of researchers studying contemporary hunter-gatherers’ treatment of children. Peter Gray writes,

Their treatment of children is very much in line with their treatment of adults. They do not use power-assertive methods to control behavior; they believe that each person’s needs are equally important; and they believe that each person, regardless of age, knows best what his or her own needs are. Moreover, just as is the case with adults, children are not dependent on any specific other individuals,

¹² M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988) viewed at Chapter V, <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.111/45e.6eb.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/The-Different-Drum-Chapter-5.pdf>.

but upon the band as a whole, and this greatly reduces the opportunity for any specific individuals, including their parents, to dominate them.¹³

The most helpful strategy I have found for moving toward others respectfully was developed by Marshall Rosenberg. He calls it Nonviolent Communication or NVC, and says the goal is “to strengthen our ability to remain human, even under trying conditions. . . . All that has been integrated into NVC has been known for centuries. The intent is to remind us about what we already know—about how we humans were meant to relate to one another.”¹⁴

Even within our current circumstances we should be able to form a mini-village—an alliance that has the potential to hang together through hard times. If things start coming down all around and customary public services begin to fail, I think it will take a group of nearby others to help us meet our daily needs. In every neighborhood there are likely to be a few people willing to pool resources and look together for ways to deal with the worsening circumstances. We can prepare ourselves to become valuable members of such informal alignments. A group like this can be a realistic step toward avoiding social breakdown.

I want to belong to a village whose members use their differences to work as equals toward mutually chosen goals that will take time and effort to achieve.

Self-provisioning offers the chance to live in greater harmony with the rest of nature.

If we have developed a sound spiritual practice and formed alliances in which belonging and helping others offer the social and emotional sustenance humans must have from cradle to grave, then we are positioned to take the third step of preparation to live well amid radical upheaval. We are ready to acquire the knowledge of how to provide basic life requirements for ourselves and our neighbors.

In a period of economic and ecological contraction we will do more work that directly meets our most pressing needs. We will do this not only for the lack of money but due to the absence of humans ready to do tasks for us—because those humans will be busy taking care of their own needs. If we are wise, we will of course exchange services, but based on relationship, not money. In such a situation, we will be more bound together than before, due to our need for what others know or have the strength and talent to do. We will share not only out of desire for physical support but also for pleasure and social satisfaction.

¹³ Peter Gray, “Play as a Foundation for Hunter-Gatherer Social Existence,” *American Journal of Play* 1, no. 4 (2009): 508, <https://www.journalofplay.org/sites/www.journalofplay.org/files/pdf-articles/1-4-article-hunter-gatherer-social-existence.pdf>.

¹⁴ Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life* (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015), 3.

In developed countries most people who can afford it have been paying someone else to grow their food, bring water to their homes, and take away sewage, garbage, and recycling either from their residences or a nearby convenience center. These services meet basic human needs, and yet I would guess at least two of the three functions are almost complete mysteries to many readers. Food comes from the store, water comes through faucets, and excrement goes out through toilets. End of knowledge.

Most of the rest of the world is not so ignorant. Outside industrialized countries—and inside many of them—people know how to obtain food other than from the grocery store, find water other than at the home sink, and manage toilet functions other than by peeing in potable water. If the day comes when “someone else” is not there to take away the trash, or if the food grown “somewhere else” is not accessible, or if the pipes no longer bring in water and take away sewage, I want to be ready to do it myself. I must, in order to remain healthy. These are basic human skills.

We may have an interval in which to study and acquire knowledge about how to live without the machines, materials, and services of our present circumstances. If we are wise, we will spend part of that learning period seeking out information about how nature manages to accomplish so much, squandering nothing. Only by aligning ourselves with this biological reality will we be able to move toward a stable future for ourselves and other living creatures.

People will find it much easier to manage if they have moderate purchasing power, adequate time, access to suitable land, and favorable climatic conditions—and neighbors who share the predicament and the desire to cooperate. Fewer and fewer will have all of these advantages as circumstances deteriorate, however, and this is the point of trying to become “collapse-able”—prepared for a larger measure of self-provision. By definition an era of decline will put into a state of need many who have been accustomed to individual adequacy. Going forward we will likely have to survive with less than we thought we had to have, and we may find we did not have to have it.

And if additional troubles arrive to make everything harder than we can predict, and yet somehow we must manage the essential tasks of producing food, obtaining clean water, and providing sanitation, we will need strong spirits and deep relationships to sustain us. We will need all the assets humans have developed through millennia of evolution.