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3 Claim Your Calling and Scale Your Action

Ron Finley, the self-described “gangsta gardener” from South Central Los Angeles, did not set out to start a revolution. “I wanted a carrot without toxic ingredients I didn’t know how to spell,” he says. Tired of driving long distances for healthy food, in 2010 he started planting vegetables in the curbside strip of dirt near his home. The city of Los Angeles issued an arrest warrant, citing the garden as an illegal use of public space. Working with fellow activists, Ron successfully fought back, demanding the right to grow food in the city. He continues to empower residents in the neighborhood to grow their own food and has established the Ron Finley Project to build an urban garden in South Central LA to serve “as an example of a well-balanced fruit and veggie oasis.” He is asked to speak around the world about the importance of urban gardens to community and environmental health.

Finley’s story is an example of the power we can all find when we identify our spheres of influence, redefine action, find strength in numbers, and cultivate emotional resilience. Our sense of purpose will sustain us in our climate work.

Two assumptions can thwart these goals. One is the belief that you must have a lot of power, in the sense of having elevated social,

economic, or political status—the illusion that politicians, religious leaders, or celebrities are the only people whose efforts can make a difference. The second is that your actions need to be measurably impactful and yield immediate results—an expectation that can make you unhappy with your efforts if you don't see change happening.

These assumptions are barriers to resilience. The holy grail of fulfillment is not “happiness,” but finding our purpose or individual calling in life, or *dharma*. We need to discover where our personal power comes from, generate confidence that our individual efforts will make a difference, and explore our role in working with others who are also pushing the “leverage points” within their “spheres of influence”—all concepts I take up in this chapter. We also need to think broadly about what change looks like and how we can think about it at a human scale.

Our realms of adaptation activism will vary widely depending on who we are. As Dahr Jamail and Barbara Cecil, in their exploration of activism in the context of environmental collapse, remind us, “Each one of us must choose the path that is ours. The sum total of this is legions of people taking action in their unique ways, and supporting one another.” Setting a course starts with knowing as precisely as possible which direction you want to go to reach your destination. The earlier you set the right course, the less energy you'll waste.

Ask yourself what kind of work, personal and public, gives you pleasure. Once you start down your path, the positive feelings you need in order to carry on will come. The despair, grief, and anxiety may never go away, but they'll have good company with hope, agency, and resilience. You don't need to feel the good emotions first, and only then act. As Buddhist logic has it, “Right thinking

follows right action,” not the other way around. Find ways to engage that honor your true capacities and passions, rather than some standard defined by the IPCC, your family, your best friend, or Leonardo DiCaprio.

Social movement theory holds that change happens on myriad fronts, not just in individual, spectacular moments of triumph. In the climate battle, the frontlines are everywhere, which magnifies our choices and gives us many directions to choose from, even if it can make impacts less visible. Sometimes, the work we do will be paid, but sometimes it will not. It may take years to polish off the layers of other people’s expectations of us that have covered up the true form of our calling. Learning to focus on what you love more than on what you think you are *supposed* to pursue will help you figure out where to devote a lifetime’s worth of energy.

Tease out your relationship to the work that needs to be done. There is no one-size-fits-all prescription. On the contrary, the task is to do the self-study required to figure out what satisfies your emotional needs and suits your limits and strengths. Any of your own individual responses, no matter how small, “has its own power to shift the balance” in some sphere of influence, says educator Marie Eaton.

We Are Too Small, but Small Is All

You may have grand dreams. They might include an overhaul of capitalism, a 50 percent reduction of the world’s population, universal government subsidies for green technology, or the granting of legal rights to all species. But the scale and scope of these tasks may make you feel small, weak, and defeated, even before you’ve started trying. These sensations may be exacerbated by the

“imposter syndrome”—the feeling that you’re not qualified to do anything meaningful in the first place; young people notoriously feel they have no power, a condition that has been shown to be more intense for females and people of color.

But to be a change agent, you don’t need spectacular results. When you’re feeling demoralized, remind yourself of adrienne maree brown’s tenet of emergent strategy: “Small is good, small is all.” We may feel individually too small, but as brown goes on to say, “Small actions and connections create complex systems.” And gather inspiration from the famous statement attributed to anthropologist Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only that thing ever has.”

My student Ezzie began with small steps. She approached her congregation about making her church’s garden more accessible to her Latinx community. This strengthened her bonds to her church and to her rural migrant community. By making the garden welcoming to Latinx members of the church, not just the white members, Ezzie helped empower her church and community members to take food production into their own hands and express their cultural traditions more freely. It was a revelation for her to realize that she had become a social change agent in her community.

Biographies of social change agents such as Martin Luther King Jr. can give us the impression that only those on impossibly high pedestals can achieve anything worthwhile. Watching the news, we are further duped into thinking that social change is driven by the people who speak the loudest, do the most grandstanding, and bully others into doing their bidding. In what activist and writer Paul Rogat Loeb describes as “collective amnesia,” we forget about the ordinary people—from conservationists to suffragists to

abolitionists to civil rights activists—who participated in grassroots movements and were able to shift public sentiment and challenge structures of power.

If we think that social change happens only by individual feats in triumphant bursts, if we think our power lies in being consumers rather than social change actors, and if we refuse to learn from social movement elders about how they cultivated resilience against all odds, then our collective amnesia will only amplify the scariness of climate change.

The remedy is finding a sense of purpose by gaining the intellectual and emotional confidence to plug in and build relationships with others who are doing the same. This will take cultivating confidence in ourselves as agents of social change.

Find Your Sphere of Influence

Let's say you think the best solutions to environmental ills are to elect new politicians, transform capitalism, or limit your waste stream—changes in one or more of the political, economic, or consumer realms. These structures are inextricably linked with other structures, which opens us up to imagine a wider set of points of intervention. Economist Donella Meadows calls these “leverage points”: “places within a complex system (a corporation, an economy, a living body, a city, an ecosystem) where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything.” Greta Thunberg's Friday school strikes, beginning in August 2018, are illustrative. By no measure could we count one young girl skipping school to protest alone in front of the Swedish parliament as a large event, but the small act snowballed into a global movement, which had already been congealing in myriad places and by great effort by lots

of people around the world. I see students working on all of these seemingly small efforts, pushing leverage points every day, sometimes by collectively planning and organizing—to run a workshop for a community group on privilege in the environmental movement, for example—and sometimes by putting their solitary voices out into the world, as when a student creates a blog for a school assignment and, from the online responses, realizes she’s not the only person who thinks and feels the way she does. The “small” successes reinforce confidence and build students’ sense of being in a community of others. When this happens, worlds start to shift, and sometimes cataclysmically, as we are seeing now.

Leverage points are everywhere, and we already have networks, relationships, and influence that we can put to good use in our climate work. Start by mapping out your “spheres of influence,” as psychologists and organizers call them (figure 4). When you begin to see all the people with whom you have reciprocal relationships, and all the potential points of intervention in the systems in which you function daily, you can recognize the ways that you already have a significant amount of power.

Changing hearts and minds takes work. Changing structures takes work. Changing culture takes work. Changing policy—even the policies that we are directly in contact with in our schools, families, churches, and other communities—takes work. On all of these fronts, we are already doing work, and more work can be done.

Resilience is key to staying the course and remaining effective agents of change over the long term. In *Transformational Resilience*, social systems theorist Bob Doppelt argues that there are three core elements to approaching climate disruption: reducing emissions (also known in the climate movement as mitigation), preparing infrastructure to be resilient to climate change (adaptation), and

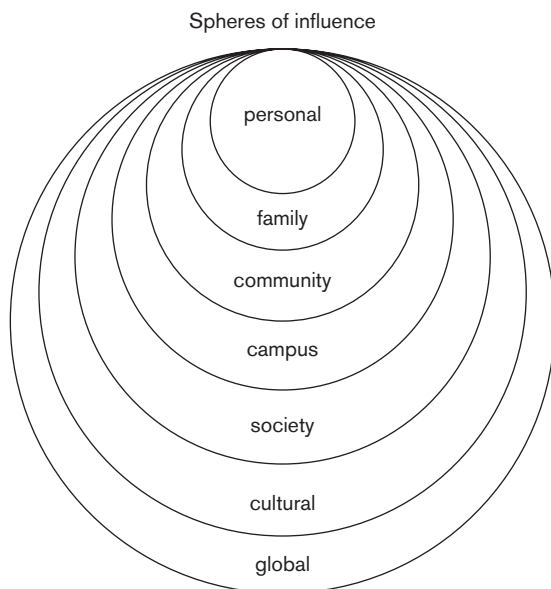


FIGURE 4. Spheres of influence. Reprinted by permission from Abigail Reyes.

“building the capacity of people to cope with the traumas and chronic toxic stresses generated by rising temperatures and use them as catalysts to learn, grow, and increase personal and collective wellbeing, and the condition of the natural environment.” In “Rethink Activism in the Face of Catastrophic Biological Collapse,” journalist Dahr Jamail and organizational change consultant Barbara Cecil similarly posit three domains of activism in this unprecedented historical moment: fixing the mess, mitigating inevitable suffering and loss, and entering the realm of “healing, reparation, . . . and collaboration.” While all of these domains are necessary, we do not have enough models or ideas about how to achieve the third element in these scenarios—personal resilience—which is what I’m trying to

address in this book. Based on my own experiences, I agree with Doppelt: “No response to the climate crisis will . . . succeed unless individuals and groups of all types around the globe understand how trauma and toxic stress affects their minds and bodies, and use skills to calm their emotions and thoughts, learn from, and find meaning, direction, and hope in adversity.”

Our sense of efficacy in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles rests on redefining what we think of as meaningful actions in the world, and what we think of as our role in that work. Let’s start with shifting our perception of what an “impact” is, how big it needs to be, and whether any one of us can make enough of it. “First, we need to believe that our individual involvement is worthwhile,” Loeb reminds us, and “this is as much psychological as political.”

The Myth of Measuring

Social movement theorists, activists, and leaders have long puzzled over the dilemma of whether it is worth doing anything in support of a cause when it is not clear whether that effort will achieve the outcome desired. Why sacrifice so much when there’s no guarantee that the vision will be realized? The journalist I. F. Stone had an illuminating response: when asked why he kept writing critically about US involvement in Vietnam even though no one was listening to him, he said, “If you expect to see the final results of your work, you simply have not asked a big enough question.”

Teachers know that attempting to measure the effects of our actions is a pointless exercise. Although we are required to prove our effectiveness, it is clear that our impacts go well beyond what we can gauge with exit surveys and accreditation assessments, and that all of these impacts may percolate over long periods of time,

outside any reasonable frame of measurement. Author Rebecca Solnit warns us of this fetish to measure impact when she describes, for example, how the events of World War I led, fifty years later, to the 1960s nuclear accord. She sees social change happening in small, often unglamorous, even invisible stages: “It’s always too soon to go home. And it’s always too soon to calculate effect.” We often expect that “for every action there is an equal and opposite and *punctual* reaction, and regard the lack of one as failure.” But change doesn’t work like that. If we need evidence of impact, we will burn out waiting for our utopia to manifest. “The world gets better. It also gets worse. The time it will take you to address this is exactly equal to your lifetime, and if you’re lucky you don’t know how long that is. The future is dark. Like night. There are probabilities and likelihoods, but there are no guarantees.”

Similarly, author and activist Howard Zinn reminds us that “revolutionary change does not come as one cataclysmic moment (beware of such moments!) but as an endless succession of surprises, moving zigzag toward a more decent society. We don’t have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change.”

These seasoned activists’ ideas about social change can relieve us of “big success” expectations, which cause existential suffering. Social change is slow, un-newsworthy, and unspectacular. Being an agent of social change therefore requires humility and offers an opportunity to explore how much our egos motivate our efforts.

Evidence of success has become part of our cultural ethos. In the instrumentalist view, the only efforts worth making are ones that yield immediate, obvious results. While deliverables and metrics produced via evidence-based strategies may be worthy in organizational culture, they probably should not be applied to a life’s work. Social movement leaders from Gandhi to Thich Nhat Hanh know

that instrumentalism is a red herring. Social change is hard to measure. Triumphant moments are the result of the invisible work of scores of unnamed idealists and of forces impossible to track.

This is grounds for hope, not despair. The work, not utopia, is the endgame. Loeb describes the thought process of activists who hold themselves to impossibly perfect standards: “Even when we know better, we sometimes feel we have to tackle everything at once. If our efforts don’t instantly achieve dramatic results, we are quick to criticize ourselves, and doubt that our efforts can matter.” As a solution, he suggests we aspire to being “good-enough activists” who don’t demand perfection or certainty before taking a stand, “realizing that although we may never win the Nobel Peace Prize, our contribution can still make a difference.”

Literary theorist Nicole Seymour argues that environmentalists would do well to recognize the irony that underlies their entire mandate. *Irony*, I believe, is a much more fun orientation to our work than *problem-solving our way out of despair*, which is the dominant—and, in my view, dreary and cynical—environmentalist mode. Social movements that span generations, such as the climate movement, have to have a long view of social change.

Redefine Action

The myopic focus on action at the expense of theorizing, cultivating collective and personal resilience, and even plain-old contemplation is also a kind of anti-intellectualism. It is part of a broader cultural shift away from valuing the world of ideas and thinking about the existential questions of life, and toward making intellectual activities seem frivolous or only of interest to the privileged. In the worlds of environmentalism and environmental

studies, I notice a strong anti-intellectual tendency. Many people want to be problem-solvers and to fix things right NOW. They want less feeling, less thinking, less talking, and more action. The urgency of the situation seems to demand it. But urgency and its sidekick, non-thinking, result in unintended consequences that can undermine our goals.

Actions that emerge from impulse or the “fight or flight” parts of our brain are likely to exacerbate problems, for example, by making it hard to see structural causes and making us want to blame the wrong people. The rapid rise in global refugees and the crisis at the US-Mexico border are powerful examples. It might be tempting to say “fix the problems in your own country and stop coming to ours,” but this approach ignores the larger causes that make people move, such as histories of colonialism and neoliberal trade policies, which aggravate resource scarcity and political instability, or rising sea levels caused by global emissions and climate change, caused mostly by rich countries. Building walls is a knee-jerk reaction; in contrast, thinking through these causes and effects can help us identify structural solutions. We waste a lot of energy and resources throwing up defenses in the wrong places and reacting impulsively to every threat that crosses our bows. Coercive conservation, which I discuss in the next section, is an example of how well-intended actions can go wrong when their consequences aren’t thought through.

Instrumentalism—the belief that ideas are important only insofar as they are useful—also makes it easy to overlook less obvious forms of social change. What counts as a meaningful action is entirely contextual. In a certain situation, action taken might not seem to be enough—but it may be all that is possible. If we follow our narrow definitions of action through to their logical conclusion of meaningful

accomplishment, it would seem that there is never an end; it will never be enough. We can fill a black hole with a frenetic outpouring of effort, but that is not a prescription for lifelong resilience.

Yet there is action in things that we are not accustomed to thinking of as arenas of social change. Is changing somebody else's mind an "action"? Is changing your own mind an action? Is *inaction* ever an important form of action? What assumptions shape our ideas of what counts as meaningful action, and do we want to perpetuate them? For example, adrienne maree brown suggests that the need for dramatic, visible action is a symptom of patriarchy. To fetishize action and reject the less visible and less glamorous work of caregiving, community organizing, or going to meetings is to subscribe to a gendered view of the kind of work that matters.

If urgency is driving your emphasis on action over other priorities, then you might consider rethinking its value. Buddhists understand the interdependence of thought, feeling, and action. The Eightfold Path is about getting the feelings and the thoughts "right" for "right action." If what counts as action for climate justice for you is changing a law or dismantling capitalism, then you may never feel adequate, unless you can break these goals down into next steps that are much smaller and will require exactly the opposite of urgency—patience. Bigger things don't happen without many other smaller and simultaneous changes. Bringing about change is a daily leap of faith.

Seymour lists many actions that the instrumentalist approach to environmentalism overlooks or does not explicitly value:

expressing dissatisfaction or *disaffection* with the environmentalist status quo,
bearing witness to crisis,

enacting catharsis,
raising activist morale,
building community,
serving as cultural diagnoses,
indexing and helping us understand our current eco-political
moment, . . .
mitigating the “partisan divide over environmental matters,”
inculcating a new range of responses to crisis, . . .
modeling flexibility and creativity in the face of crisis, and
inspiring . . . “artful endurance.”

All of these non-instrumental actions are worth doing, and anybody can do them, right now. They broaden our notion of what counts and make it apparent that we indeed do have capacity to act effectively. Anybody who rejects “artful endurance” or “bearing witness” as too passive, minor, or frivolous is missing an opportunity and surrendering their imagination—and their power.

A perception of ourselves as powerless emerges not from our actual inefficacy, but from our ideas of what it means to have the capacity to shape social change. This view is caused by the instrumentalist conceit that the only actions that matter are the ones that make impressive, immediate, large-scale change. The problem is not that we have no power. Rather, the problem is that we don’t use the power we *do* have.

Our sense of powerlessness also comes from the way climate change is framed: as “distant in time and space, invisible to the senses, abstract, and socially far from our influence,” in the words of Per Espen Stoknes. The delayed effects of climate change will continue for a very long time, and mitigating them seems beyond our “locus of control.” But you can scale out the things you do within

your spheres of influence. You may not be able to make every country in the world, much less your own, abide by carbon taxes, but you can build incentives into your own household to pollute less, such as reducing your waste stream. Or you can preserve resources by practicing water catchment at home. These efforts could help you get an internship or a job at a nonprofit that educates people on food waste or promotes household water catchment systems, plugging you into a passionate and supportive network of people who geek out on saving the planet in the same ways you do. By focusing on our skills and joining networks, we can see our actions ripple out.

When we think of action, we assume its lesser opposites are thought and emotion. The emphasis on action prioritizes the “hand” over the roles of “head” and “heart.” But these other two are as important for climate justice as the first. To balance out the bias for action, approach the actions you take with emotional intelligence and strategy.

If we enlarge on our idea of what counts as transformational action, we might imagine ourselves as not only nudging the movement forward, but even providing leadership. In *ReGeneration: Young People Shaping Environmental Justice*, authors Julie Quiroz-Martinez, Diana Pei Wu, and Kristen Zimmerman offer conclusions from the Second National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit (2002), which redefined leadership as founded in facilitation, community-building, and bottom-up organizing, not top-down fixes.

In their view, a leader does the following:

- Facilitates
- Acts as a role model
- Is accountable to the community

- Listens to the people
- Is open minded
- Takes initiative
- Contributes and participates
- Represents the voices of the people
- Serves the people
- Is culturally sensitive to the differences of people and doesn't push her/his ways onto others
- Is organized and wants to organize
- Takes responsibility for his/her actions
- Is honest
- Practices what s/he preaches

We can all incorporate these leadership principles into our day-to-day lives.

Or we may elect to be gadflies. One of my dearest scholar-activist colleagues said to me once, "I want my students to be problem-makers, not problem-solvers." She encourages them to challenge how issues have been defined by mainstream media, and even environmentalists, and to use cognitive tools to examine how problems are intertwined before acting on them. Such "systems thinking" can connect the dots between our efforts to address climate justice and, for example, the prison industrial complex, which relies on both ecological and human disposability.

Slow Hope

Urgency driven by fear can make us do impulsive, irrational things. As an antidote, environmental philosopher Timothy Morton wrote an essay titled "Don't Just Do Something, Sit There!" In it, Morton

argues against the binary of action/thought, and offers “ecological thought” as a *kind of action*: “Reframing our world, our problems, and ourselves is part of the ecological project. This is what praxis means—action that is thoughtful and thought that is active.” Ecological thought—awareness of connection—can “call us from within the grief.” Morton’s concept of ecological thought emphasizes contemplation over simply diving in, which can easily make things worse.

So ignore Nike, and don’t “just do it.” Instead, heed environmental literary scholar Scott Slovic, whose book *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility* stresses the importance of damping our heroic problem-solving impulses in favor of deliberation and thoughtfulness. “We never quite fathom the true magnitude of our influence on the world,” he writes, but the value of “slow thinking” and “moral reflection suggests that the potential for positive, life-sustaining impact is in itself motivation to act.” Christof Mauch writes about the need for “stories of slow hope” to remind us that change is incremental and not always obvious.

Such stories rarely make the news, however. The painstaking effort that was required to protect a particular eelgrass habitat in Humboldt Bay, a nursery for biodiversity and a climate change-mitigating carbon sink, is an example of “slow hope.” It took a long time to create, was unglamorous work, involved few identifiable heroes or obvious triumphs, and is otherwise hard to “see,” because the eelgrass is just still there. Or take the “international outpouring of marine conservation success stories” collected by the Twitter initiative #OceanOptimism, which showcases how people are creatively removing plastics from the oceans, organizing to protect marine areas, and modeling conservation collaborations. Slow down, find stories of slow change, and cultivate slow hope.

Urgency and action without mindful deliberation does not serve our mission. As the racial justice organization Dismantling Racism puts it, a continued sense of urgency makes it “difficult to take time to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, to think long-term, and to consider consequences.” It frequently involves the sacrificing of potential allies in favor of faster results, and undermines the interests of communities of color “in order to win victories for white people (seen as [the] default or norm community).” In the case of climate action, the urgency mode of the problem-solving ethos constrains the movement’s ability to attend to social justice and to be deliberative about negotiating courses of action. Advocates of climate justice, for example, caution against pushing for green jobs without taking time to transition workers in fossil fuel industries to new jobs. In our pursuit of evidence-based impacts, driven by the urgency of the planet’s demise, we also limit our potential to create coalitions in new places, and to solve all kinds of other problems we don’t even know exist.

“Coercive conservation” describes how, in the name of natural resource conservation, communities across the planet have been booted out of their homelands. In the late nineteenth century, conservationists in the United States removed indigenous peoples from areas they wanted to turn into national parks. The “urgency” was that the so-called American frontier had run out, and there was no more open land to act as a safety valve for the social and cultural growing pains of a new, urbanizing, industrializing, diversifying country. In the name of securing permanent spaces for (white) Americans to maintain the unique American concept that open space makes good citizens, the National Park Service was born, at great cost and violence to the people who had lived in those spaces

for millennia. Support for the value of untouched nature by such notables as John Muir made it easy for audiences to demonize those who lived in or used that nature, and to enforce by any means necessary the conditions for cultivating a distinct American national identity.

Urgency and action come from admirable places in us—a desire to help and an awareness of the direness of our situation. But we must be wary of putting all our eggs in the action basket. Reflection, emotion, and deliberateness are good for social justice and effective action-planning—and they will keep us from burning us out existentially.

The Ocean in a Drop

In *Blessed Unrest*, activist and journalist Paul Hawken estimates that as of 2007 there were at least one and possibly over two million organizations worldwide working on issues of environmental and social justice. He calls this the largest movement in all of human history. We are not alone in our efforts.

If we see ourselves working collectively rather than individually, we can rest assured that we are contributing to a larger web of movement, what adrienne maree brown calls “emergent strategy,” spiraling out from even the smallest of our actions—a “relational, adaptive, fractal, interdependent, decentralized, transformative” way to facilitate, direct, and understand social change. Envisioning a compelling future is central to emergent strategy. The conviction that our efforts are multiplied by a larger community that we may have never met emboldens us to keep doing the work and staves off the discouragement we may feel when we look around and see so much destructive behavior. Hawken assures us that the movement

is spreading in every country and through every walk of life, and asks us to imagine that we are in the company of English bird-watchers and French farmers, indigenous tribes in Bolivia and housewives in Japan, as the movement “is taking shape in school-rooms, farms, jungles, villages, companies, deserts, fisheries, slums—and yes, even fancy New York hotels.”

Knowing that we are part of a collective gives us permission to rest. We can recover from our exertions knowing that others, who also have taken care to sustain themselves, can take over the work. We all must take care of ourselves so that we can step up when others need to tend to themselves. The perception that social change happens only on an individual scale creates defeatism. *Of course* we cannot solve the problems by ourselves. It’s worth checking in occasionally on all the engagement and talent out there—what some call asset or capacity mapping—and to gather stories of people succeeding—to surround ourselves with lists of collective achievements. As brown writes, we must “let that work be tangible in a way that shows how the work builds over time.”

Leslie Davenport adds, from the perspective of a psychologist, that “emphasizing the power of collective action builds confidence that change is possible.” Instead of focusing on news sources that show us the terrible sides of humanity, which makes us feel isolated and suspicious of others, seek out stories about how social change is occurring, learn about how movement leaders cultivate community, and treat the tending of relationships as an essential, serious form of social action, not just a personal need. A new phenomenon, “solutions journalism,” has arisen to counterbalance the dominant media’s emphasis on intractable problems with stories of people actively solving problems; the journal *Solutions* and the trade maga-

zine *Yes!* are two that make the work visible. Examples of positive change are elusive not because positive change doesn't exist, but because it does not capture our attention and fails to meet media criteria for news.

There's evidence that our collective efforts can make a greater contribution than material resources to a community's ability to withstand climate change. According to Davenport, "it is social capital, our connections to and caring for each other—not the money poured into infrastructure—that most quickly leads to recovery following a climate disaster." Bob Doppelt similarly points to the "growing body of evidence" that "building personal resilience skills, robust social support networks, and close collaborations among local organizations" are the "keys to enhancing human resilience," more than "physical infrastructure, natural resource adaptation, or post-trauma treatment."

If a dollar spent on building social capital will go farther than a dollar spent on infrastructure, shouldn't we be investing in community resilience and trust over the long haul instead of applying Band-Aids in moments of crisis? We need social capital as much as or more than we need dikes and levies. It feels much more doable to contribute to robust social support networks than to get everyone on the planet to limit their emissions or hold back the rising seas. If we shift our notion of what the solutions are—not simply infrastructure but also interpersonal trust—we can focus on the latter as we mobilize collectively to demand the former.

The myth of rugged individualism undermines resilience by making us think we are alone in our efforts as well as in our feelings of despair. It tells us that our actions, be they good or bad, don't spread beyond our immediate purview, that we are absolved of the

upstream and downstream consequences of our behavior, and that we have no power to effect change. brown turns this around, urging us to “focus on critical connection more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships.” Measuring success by the strength of our relationships is far more likely to result in fulfillment and a salve for our existential isolation.

Cognitive psychologists recognize the importance of being aware that we are part of a team. “People easily feel helpless if left on their own when confronted with the severity of the coming climate disruptions,” Stoknes observes. But “participating in a community or group that works for a common cause is a good remedy (the only one, actually) for this toxic helplessness and passivity.” When my students recognize that they are all in the same boat and that they *need* to rely on each other, to express vulnerability about their anxiety and dread, and to cultivate community morale, they become the change they want to manifest in the world. They spread that uplift to their other classes. Not feeling alone is probably the most important prescription for long-term resilience. When our classes start with building community before learning content, we all have far more energy and passion about the subject matter when we finally get there.

A variety of other kinds of expertise and ways of thinking also emphasize relationality over individualism. Indigenous scholars such as Robin Wall Kimmerer articulate how both scientific and traditional knowledge recognize the mutual dependence of living matter, reflecting a “reciprocity” of actions between the environment and ourselves. Forms of environmental theory like “new materialism,” as described by Jane Bennett and Stacy Alaimo, and “eco-phenomenology,” as described by David Abrams and Ted

Toadvine, insist on our interrelationship with nature, right down to the cellular level. Bennett draws on science to suggest that everything, including things we've been taught are inanimate, like rocks and desks, are in fact "vibrant matter." Buddhists such as Thich Nhat Hanh espouse a notion of "interbeing," which can be a foundation for acting in right relation with the world. Even evolutionary biologists like Lynn Margulis argue that our very bodies are the result of symbiotic relationships among various forms of life. And intersectional activists articulate this insight in terms of the struggle for self-determination. As indigenous activist Lilla Watson said, summarizing the sentiment of Aboriginal activist groups: "If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Seeing the world as interdependent is consistent with Morton's "ecological thought": relation isn't a choice, it's a reality. Why choose to see yourself as one individual facing a world of evil? This perspective is counterproductive both for you and for those around you. Rather than dwell on the ways that climate deniers are different from you, rousing feelings of disgust (see chapter 5), alarm, and righteousness, why not focus your mind on all the vibrant matter—human and more-than-human—with which we are in reciprocal relation? The world you love and rely on is right in front of you; protect it by tending it, not by raging against the things that threaten it.

Powerlessness Is an Illusion

The concept of "pseudoinefficacy" illustrates how we come to think of ourselves as powerless. Pseudoinefficacy is a way of

thinking that we can have little positive impact on the world, which in turn shapes our decisions about where we will devote our energies. In a thought experiment described by philosopher Peter Singer in “The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle,” Singer asks his students if they would feel an obligation to save a child who was drowning in a pond they are walking by. They unanimously say they would. He then widens the circle, asking if they would feel an obligation to save a child in another country who was at equal risk of death, at which point they become more hesitant; from there, he goes on to raise questions about our moral responsibilities for the lives of others. Cognitive and conservation psychologists Daniel Västfjäll, Paul Slovic, and Marcus Mayorga pose a new question: “Suppose, as you see the child go under, you also see, in the distance, another child beginning to drown—one you cannot reach. Would you then be less motivated to rescue the child within your reach?” Their research suggests that because it would not be possible to help both, people are less likely to attempt to save even the first child. This makes no rational sense. Isn’t the incentive—the benefit of a life saved—the same in both cases?

Västfjäll and colleagues use the poet Zbigniew Herbert’s phrase “arithmetic of compassion” to describe how the positive feelings of saving a child are canceled by the negative feelings of knowing that others cannot be saved. In other words, the desire to help fades when we realize we can’t help everyone who needs it. For those in a position to offer assistance, “decisions are strongly motivated by perceived efficacy. Inefficacy, real or perceived, shrivels compassion and response.” Feeling like you don’t have power to do good will deflate your desire to even try. It follows that one’s efficacy, or confidence in one’s ability to solve a problem, is more likely to determine whether one even attempts to solve a problem.

More than having marketable skills or being armed with information and arguments, *believing in your efficacy* will influence whether you try to fix the problems you see. This is the premise of this book, and I cannot overstate how key this concept is for all of the arguments I make here. It will affect how much stress and depression you experience in threatening situations, which in turn affects your motivation to do anything about that situation. “Perceived rather than actual efficacy is often the determinant of behavior,” Västfjäll, Slovic, and Mayorga argue. “The problem of pseudoefficacy,” they continue, “is central to a wide range of important personal and societal decisions motivated by perceived efficacy, such as actions to mitigate climate change or other threats to human health and the environment.” In other words, thinking of ourselves as ineffectual in our ability to address climate change *makes us so*.

In turn, if we feel that our actions will never be big or impactful enough to solve the problem, we are adopting a drop-in-the-bucket imaginary that causes feelings of despair and hopelessness. This insight is hugely important for climate justice advocates. The negative emotions that come with knowing that we cannot fix climate change will reduce the positive emotions we might induce by doing some smaller action. The very *scale* of the problem makes people not want to do anything about it. Considering climate stories through this lens, it’s astonishing that so many climate change advocates still rely on the sky-is-falling approach to getting people to care about climate change. Perhaps they think that heralding the end will propel more listeners to action, and thereby help us avoid that end. But cognitively, it doesn’t work this way, or at least, it won’t in the long term. The bigger the problem, the less fixable it seems, and so the more likely we are to do nothing instead of

something. We are finished before we even start. To fix this, we need to actively combat messages that tell us that the problem is too big to fix, and to remind ourselves that small is all, and that small is enough.

Manifest(o)ing Your Yes

Social change work can be tedious, tiring, and hit or miss. When people who have been doing it for a long time come to talk to my students about how they rebounded from hopelessness, failure, and exhaustion, my students feel energized to dive back into their work, too. Knowing that this is how social change works helps us accept its challenges and find some pleasure in the messiness of it. When Ron Finley came to campus and explained that in South Central Los Angeles, the land of “drive-throughs and drive-bys” (suggestive of the parallels between the violence of fast food and the violence of guns), providing access to fresh food was both a matter of racial justice and environmental health, his story helped my students see how activists have long practiced forms of resilience in order to make better worlds.

The task of combatting climate change seems huge. Your to-do list may already be so overwhelming that your pulse races every time you imagine one more thing to do to save the planet. A strong sense of purpose helps us filter out the tasks we can say no to. Believing that every demand for our attention is worth heeding is a recipe for burnout. Every committee needs more members, every protest needs more bodies, every person we know needs support, every representative needs to be called every day, every turn of events needs your social media exposure, every Facebook thread needs a comment, every email a response. The vast number of

arenas in which we could show up and act is stupefying, and may feel even more so when we accept the principle that the frontlines are everywhere and that you can make differences in all kinds of places. The need for our energy and time is a bottomless pit. What we do have control over is our ability to say no, so that when we say yes, we really know that the work we do is aligned with our mission and will reinvigorate us.

brown advises, “get really good at being intentional with where you put your energy, letting go as quickly as you can of things that aren’t part of your visionary life’s work. Then you can give your all, from a well-resourced place, when the storm comes, or for those last crucial miles.” The self-study required to get good at being intentional with our energy takes time and is not a linear process. It may start with brushing your teeth with your nondominant hand. As we change and evolve, the object of study—our self—becomes a moving target. The first step is simply to take our emotional responses to climate change seriously instead of thinking we “should” be activists or politicians, or that we “should” do more.

I make a practice of asking my students to write their own “manifestos,” or mission statements, some of which are published on a blog called “Critical Hope” that I created for seniors as they prepare to graduate. Everybody should write a manifesto, and repeat as needed as your life advances. I invite you to write one now. Take ten minutes to free-write about why you care about the planet, why you care about suffering, and what you personally are uniquely positioned by skill or passion to do in the world. Your declaration of intention and desire will be a beacon to return to when you feel lost or overwhelmed. The simple act of writing your eco-mission statement can move you in the direction of manifesting it.

Once written, you can ask of every decision you make, “Does this choice serve my mission?” Rather than getting distracted by social media, procrastinating, or sabotaging yourself, you can make daily decisions that will cumulatively add up to creating the future you desire.

You don’t need to love animals or even like being in “nature” to make a difference in addressing climate justice. It’s not a prerequisite to helping save the planet that you be good at math or love gardening. You don’t have to be more powerful than you already are. You can start simply by identifying and using the powers that you already have.

Whether we are “artists” or trauma therapists or students or stay-at-home-dads, whether we work on reducing emissions (the science side) or on voter suppression, gerrymandering, or toxic siting (the social justice side), we have the capacity to address the social structures that create environmental injustice and aggravate climate change. The frontlines are the books we choose to read to our children, the pipeline being laid across our land, the social capital we foster among our coworkers at McDonald’s, the cli-fi novel we have been fantasizing about writing, the campaign to elect a pollution-fighting candidate, meditating, or listening compassionately to somebody with whom we disagree.

Climate justice needs all kinds of help. Scientists are only one part of the groundswell, just as we each are only one part. If the problem of climate change is wickedly complicated, we will need people everywhere and with every type of skill. Following brown, know that “uprisings and resistance and mass movement require a tolerance of messiness, a tolerance of many, many paths being walked on at once.” What path will you walk?

Finding Your Climate Action “Thing” and Doing it Well

- ☐ Examine your spheres of influence, sites of change, and leverage points.
- ☐ Ecosystems thrive on diversity and symbiosis; so does the movement to preserve them.
- ☐ Cultivate a radical imagination.
- ☐ Resist measuring.
- ☐ Accept messiness.
- ☐ Beware of the cognitive trickery of perceived inefficacy.
- ☐ Slow down, find positive stories of slow change, and cultivate slow hope.
- ☐ Know what to say no to, so you can be fully present for what you say yes to.
- ☐ Value quality over quantity in your social investments; critical connection > critical mass.