

CHAPTER 19

*Perspectives from Creative Spaces
Transforming Climate Distress through
Creative Practice and Re-storying*

Jeppe Graugaard

**Introduction: Being Young in a Time
of Planetary Change**

In late 2008, I had an experience that changed my outlook on life for good. I was 25 years old, and my interest in politics, anthropology, cybernetics, and chaos theory had led me to enter a master's program on climate change. I remember sitting at the desk in my study, when I first came across the collection of graphs produced by Steffen et al. (2004) for the report "Global Change and the Earth System: A Planet under Pressure." The graphs show how human activities have become the main driver for change in the Earth system and illustrate trends in greenhouse gases, resource consumption, and habitat destruction between the years 1750 and 2000. Looking across all of the graphs, it was clear that all of these trends were accelerating exponentially. Extrapolating the trends to 2008, I felt physically overwhelmed. The thought that living in the twenty-first century is like riding a megatrend of accelerating destruction sent me to bed. I didn't get out until days later.

Processing the emotional shock of understanding those graphs took years. It was a very lonely process in the beginning. Speaking to my friends about it felt alienating when they told me that everything will turn out ok – or deflected the topic altogether. I needed long breaks from thinking about it so as not to reenter an emotional sphere which was overwhelming and uncontrollable. But as I began research for my PhD on grassroots innovation and societal transitions, I found a group of people with whom I could have a different kind of conversation. The Dark Mountain Project began as an endeavor to start a literary movement that could confront being "trapped inside a runaway narrative, headed for the worst kind of encounter with reality" (Kingsnorth & Hine, 2009). In the

events and conversations that sprang up around the publication of the Dark Mountain manifesto – a publication that invited readers to join the Dark Mountain Project – a space emerged in which people could speak freely and openly about how they experience the climate crisis. By partaking in the conversational mode that formed within that space, something surprising happened to my feelings of despair and anxiety: they eased and, eventually, gave way to a sense of acceptance and, later, belonging.

As more and more young people become aware of the climate crisis and have to deal with the psychological consequences of facing an increasingly uncertain future, it is important that young people, those who work with young people, and those whose work affects young people, have access to a broad spectrum of approaches to help them deal with the psychological, emotional, and spiritual complications that emerge from growing up in a time of global climate crisis. Here, there is ample inspiration to draw from creative spaces – spaces where people bring their full attention and creativity to bear on whatever they are doing, individually or collectively – which explore the relationship between humans and more-than-human nature. In such spaces, people freely exercise a creative state of mind of the kind David Bohm says “is always open to learning what is new, to perceiving new differences and similarities, leading to new orders and structures, rather than always tending to impose familiar orders and structures in the field of what is seen” (Bohm, 2004, p. 21). Creative spaces can take the form of a creative practice, such as a craft, an art form, or body work, but they can also exist in collective learning environments, such as a class or a game. As such, creative spaces are not defined spatially or temporally but by the mindset of the practitioners.

In this chapter, I will outline some of the findings from my research on the transformative potential of creative spaces on the distress arising from growing awareness of the global climate crisis. I have used this approach in my work as a folk high school teacher at Ry Folk Highschool in Denmark, where I have taught a course on global ecology and alternatives to consumer society for the last six years to young people in the age group 18–25.

Making Sense of Systemic Global Crises

A seminal insight from cross-disciplinary research related to the history of human-made climate change is that global warming is best understood not just as a consequence or output of material systems but as a cultural predicament (Capra & Luisi, 2014; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021; Lent, 2017; Latour, 2018; McKibben, 2019; de Oliveira, 2021). To understand the roots

of climate change it is necessary to move beyond questions that merely focus on the material and technical aspects of societal evolution and instead ask questions such as: “how do societies that normalize waste and toxic by-products emerge in the first place?” Overconsumption, pollution, and unsustainable ways of life are not the result of separate environmental, social, and economic crises but rather part of an interconnected problem-atic with deeper roots in the worldviews, cultural values, and social structures connected with modernity and late capitalism (Jackson, 2021; Moore, 2016). This perspective opens up and invites the opportunity to reenvision the ways in which we imagine and enact our relationship with the surrounding world as a way to ground and resituate our social roles within the places we inhabit. Transitioning towards more just, equal and sustainable societies involves transitioning the worldviews and ways of being of people living in high-consumption societies. This change can be conceptualized as a transformation of the epistemological and ontological frameworks that guide individual lives and collective action (Graugaard, 2014).

The crux of such an “onto-epistemological transition,” understood as a transformation within personal and collective ways of knowing and being, is a shift in foundational beliefs and meaning-making. Beliefs about the structure of the world and how it is known guide our interactions and relationships (Larson, 2011; McIntosh, 2008). Meaning gives form to perception (Bohm, 2004) and meaning-making imbues lived reality with cognitive “patterns” and “restraints” (Bateson, 2000; McGilchrist, 2009). For example, if I understand the world to consist primarily of material objects where individuals compete to optimize their preferences and choices, I will perceive and experience life differently than if I see the world as made up of a variety of living beings who play different roles, and have different histories and functions, within integrated ecosystems and habitats. How we understand and make sense of the world, and of the global climate crisis, affects what we consider to be meaningful action. Putting *meaning-making* at the center of addressing social and environmental problems can help us understand how particular activities or interventions open up or close down new avenues for thinking and acting. To this end, it is helpful to look at the ways in which narratives of climate, nature, sustainability, and the future develop and function within interpretive communities and how mutual narration of these topics can reframe the storyline and give rise to new meanings and actions within narrators’ lives.

Narratives are both “recipes for structuring experience which direct us into the future” (Bruner, 2004, p. 708) and a form of “wayfaring” where *storying* is in itself knowing and storytelling is bringing what is known

Table 19.1 *Examples of cultural metaphors that guide how we think about our subjectivity*

The human body:	The body is a container/The brain is a computer
Time:	Time is money/The future is approaching
Money:	Money is power/Money makes the world go around
The economy:	The economy as a market/The invisible hand creates equilibrium
Nature:	Nature as wilderness/Nature is red in tooth and claw
History:	History is a river/History progresses
Evolution:	Survival of the fittest/The selfish gene
The universe:	The universe is a clockwork/The billiard ball universe

to life (Ingold, 2011). They can be seen as integral to the “framework of people’s reality structures” (McIntosh, 2012, p. 235) and this framework is partly revealed in the central metaphors that are employed to give stories their meaning: metaphors help us make sense of one thing in terms of another and thereby bring particular imageries, values, and ideas to the story. Metaphors focus attention on certain aspects of the wider movement of life and privilege certain ways of understanding over others with real social and political consequences. In his in-depth study of the role of metaphors in shaping cultural values and social relations, Brendon Larson (2011) describes how preexistent metaphysical and cultural suppositions have come to be accepted as “facts” in scientific and social discourse through the way metaphors connect, feed back, and resonate with each other. “Framing metaphors” form a web of meaning which place thought and language in living context and structure the experience of reality. For example, you are bound to think and feel differently if you take our current situation to be one of “being onboard Titanic” or see it as a phase of “humanity coming of age.” See Table 19.1 for examples of some key metaphors that frame how we think about the world and our place in it within Western cultures.

In this way, narrative inquiry offers possibilities for resituating the narrator within their lifeworld and opening up new ways of thinking and acting. Ten years ago, working with the stories we tell about the systemic crises connected with global changes in the Earth’s climate system – including what our role as a species has been in creating those changes and how we confront these circumstances on an individual level – seemed to provide an opening for reframing the sustainability challenge and reimagining relations between human and more-than-human worlds. Today, new concerns regarding the story of global crises have emerged – and these are perhaps even more pressing as global media (largely) have stopped sowing

doubt around climate science and more and more young people become aware of the severity and scale of the crises we are dealing with. Faced with the terrible facts of climate catastrophe, mass extinction and extreme weather, how do we as parents, teachers, health workers, community activists, policymakers – from any position of authority – enable young people to become whole, healthy, and resilient human beings? How do we establish interpretive communities where young people can make sense of global crises and receive support for the cognitive and emotional processes they are going through? And how do we create spaces where young people can transform a direct experience of the regenerative force within nature into their personal lives and outlook?

Research within various disciplines which consider the effects of creative practices and nature experiences offer important insights into these questions – not just in terms of the potential of narrative inquiry as a way to engender new ways of thinking and being but also with regard to the transformative power of practicing convivial skills and relationships.

The next section outlines some of the findings from my research with the Dark Mountain Project on the ways in which this particular interpretive community helped individuals come to terms with the consequences of climate change through collective narrative inquiry and meaning-making. The research project investigated how alternative worldviews are imagined and embodied in grassroots innovations through an in-depth ethnographic study of the Dark Mountain Project.

Researching the Dark Mountain Project

In the years following the publication of “Uncivilisation – The Dark Mountain Manifesto” (Kingsnorth & Hine, 2009), I followed different offline and online conversations, talks and events curated by the Dark Mountain Project. The manifesto was authored by the British writers Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, who decided to launch their own journal in response to a perceived lack of literary and artistic expressions that grapple with the realities of interweaving ecological, social, and economic crises. The project quickly attracted a growing number of participants and initiated various public debates about environmentalism, social-ecological collapse, art, and cultural narratives. The first issue of the Dark Mountain journal was published in the summer of 2010, showcasing a range of “uncivilized” essays, short stories, poems, interviews, and images authored by “mountaineers” from across the globe. The Dark Mountain website and associated Ning platform became fora for online discussions that spilled

over into the blogosphere and other virtual social networks while a series of festivals, book launches, public debates, local meetings, and artistic events became the basis for offline interactions around the ideas of the project. Local groups sprang up across Britain, America, Australia, Sweden, and a number of other countries.

The Dark Mountain manifesto presented a perspective on global systemic crises which had not yet found its way to the mainstream in 2009: we live in a time of ecological and economic collapse and the foundations of global civilization are falling apart. This outlook calls for a different kind of conversation about the crises we are facing – and how we got into them:

And so we find ourselves, all of us together, poised trembling on the edge of a change so massive that we have no way of gauging it. None of us know where to look, but all of us know not to look down. Secretly, we all think we are doomed: even the politicians think this; even the environmentalists. Some of us deal with it by going shopping. Some deal with it by hoping it is true. Some give up in despair. Some work frantically to try and fend off the coming storm.

Our question is: what would happen if we looked down? Would it be as bad as we imagine? What might we see? Could it even be good for us?

We believe it is time to look down. (Kingsnorth & Hine, 2009, p. 15)

The manifesto is an open call to join the discussion and contribute words and images to the Dark Mountain journal. The ambiguity and openness about the uncertainty of what would come of the project, combined with the poetic imagery of looking at socioecological collapse as a “journey,” an “expedition,” or a “climb up the Dark Mountain,” provided the reader with different possibilities for joining in. By opening a space for a discussion about the future with the premise that socio-environmental crises cannot be “solved” – but rather are realities we have to come to terms with – the Dark Mountain Project became a platform for a wide range of conversations about how to confront the prospect of “changes so massive that we have no way of gauging them.” As one person put it to me, encountering the Dark Mountain Project “was a realization that I wasn’t alone and that there is a way of being that can somehow cope with this” (Graugaard, 2014, p. 138).

The manifesto opened up a lacking perspective on the mainstream framing of the sustainability challenge. Adams (2014) has observed that the narrative of Uncivilization occupies a space between two dominant narratives about climate change: one about consequences and catastrophic loss, another about solutions and averting crisis. Drawing on Rosemary

Randall's (2009) work on the psychological cost of this "split" mainstream narrative which "projects all loss into the future making it catastrophic and unmanageable, denies the losses that have to be faced now and prevents us from dealing with them" (p. 127), Adams suggests that the Dark Mountain Project provides a new narrative framing which lies outside both business-as-usual optimism and apocalyptic defeatism. For many, "Uncivilization" presented a necessary break with mainstream narratives and, perhaps more importantly, a meaningful countermeasure: creating a different reality by finding new stories about life within civilization. Kingsnorth and Hine's (2009) critique and "questioning the foundations of civilization, the myth of human centrality" (p. 28) went hand in hand with a call for creative explorations of other ways of seeing and being in the world. The creative responses to this call became an important way for many participants to work through the overwhelming thoughts and feelings connected with climate catastrophe.

Creative Practice as a Way of Confronting Existential Uncertainties

In the gradual development of the Dark Mountain Project into a more or less coherent cultural movement, which provides a platform for a different kind of conversation about systemic global crisis, creative practice became a way not only to articulate a critique of the origins of this crisis but also to begin embodying alternate ways of seeing and being in it. This can be seen as acts of "re-storying," which is also a core theme in the manifesto:

Words and images can change minds, hearts, even the course of history. Their makers shape the stories people carry through their lives, unearth old ones and breathe them back to life, add new twists, point to unexpected endings. It is time to pick up the threads and make the stories new, as they must always be made new, starting from where we are. (Kingsnorth & Hine, 2009, p. 12)

The various forms of practice that participants in the Dark Mountain Project engage with include writing, painting, photography, crafts, storytelling, performances, installations, game-playing, music, body practices, dialogue, theatre, improvised rituals, and contemplative exercises. The journal exhibits a wide range of creative expressions in print format while the festivals and events have included a diversity of workshops, skill shares, and performances. In many of the conversations, events and activities I took part in, there was a clear sense that engaging in creative practice is a means of inhabiting a different mindset, seeing the lifeworld differently

and experimenting with new metaphors and imagery (examples of what this means and looks like in practice can be found in the Dark Mountain journal and on their website).

Besides the potential therapeutic effect of creative expression, the experimentation with different creative practices in the context of the Dark Mountain Project should be seen as an endeavor to actively re-story and reexperience human–nature relations through imaginative exercise. As McGilchrist (2009) points out, the imagination plays a central role in the process of forming personal identities: it is in the imagination that the meaning of a particular image or story falls into place within the larger web of metaphors or structures of the mind. By imagining what a story is like in lived reality, it subsequently becomes possible to enact this within the lifeworld. As one participant described it to me: “While reading stories we are not trapped in thought, we are. We exist imaginatively within an alternate set of conditions, not stuck within our present conditioning. We leave the finite limitations of what-has-been-conceived. We expand our view” (Graugaard, 2014, p. 174). In opening up a space for imagining a different kind of reality, art and creative practice can support both envisioning and enacting new worldviews. Because art springs from and is grasped through the imagination, it is a space that provides direct access to other ways of seeing. In creating a poem, a piece of writing, a painting or picture, a practitioner has to remain open to the ambiguity within what is created in order to let the work emerge and take form. And, if a work of art tells a particular story, the artist becomes familiar with the people and things that inhabit that story: in storying, we imagine how plots unfold and how people and objects relate (Ingold, 2011).

By exploring and practicing a different way of seeing or being in the imagination it becomes possible to begin to embody that different way of relating to the surrounding world and articulate what it is like. However, this process is impossible to control or force. One participant used the metaphor of “a snake shedding its skin” to describe how the shifts in perception and meaning-making are organic processes that cannot be willed. Reason can help us identify concepts or ways of thinking that (de)limit the imagination, but actually probing into what the world might be like outside of past mental constructs involves other faculties than thought. That is why *attitude* emerged as a theme in both written and live conversations during the research. Paul Kingsnorth described to me that “at the heart of Dark Mountain is an attitude ... to life and an attitude to reality and to one’s situation” (Graugaard, 2014, p. 141). One participant described her understanding of this attitude as “a stance of humility, navigating with

uncertainty instead of the desire for security, or the even deeper desire to “be right” (Graugaard, 2014, p. 143). Part of the effort to “make the stories new” involves a letting go of the old systems of meaning – and in the absence of a master narrative it is necessary to “accept the chaotic as the only way past our condition,” as another participant put it (Graugaard, 2014, p. 143).

To “navigate with uncertainty” it is necessary to be attentive to the present moment and to develop the ability to respond to whatever the moment brings. These skills are honed within creative practices, play and experimentation. As a skill of unrehearsed action in the face of unanticipated circumstances, *improvisation* became another theme that ran through many of the conversations in or around the Dark Mountain Project in the first years. Many of the performances and workshops that took place at the festivals and events featured an element of improvisation. Dougald Hine has proposed that improvisation offers a radically different principle for social organization to what he calls “orchestration” because it involves learning to partake in complex relationships without continually having to arrive at an expressed agreement or consensus (Hine, 2011). For many of the participants whom I interviewed, improvisation is a life skill, which opens up new perspectives by learning to be attentive to what is going on in the moment, and getting to grips with how to respond creatively to that through detachment from outcomes, attention to means, and openness to the surrounding environment.

Creative practices, which enable the practitioner to confront uncertainty without being overwhelmed by feelings of dismay or despair, can thus be a way to learn to confront the existential uncertainties that open up in the face of climate catastrophe. But more than that, engaging creatively with existential uncertainty can help to find new ways of re-storying both individual and collective futures. There was a shared recognition among the Dark Mountain participants I interviewed that we live “in between stories” and that, in such a time of both letting go and opening up to new ways of storying a life, it is necessary to actively create alternate realities, which enable meaningful and good lives in a time of global crises.

Re-storying as the Creation of Alternate Realities

Looking at the big issues of climate change, biodiversity loss, global pollution, and social upheaval that frame our time is disconcerting and provokes existential questions both at the personal and collective level. It also invites questioning of the modern narrative of progress and development

because, in the light of global crises, the future clearly does not look like an upgrade of the status quo. The dissolution of particular narratives implies a period of not knowing or “being without reason,” a threshold state where clarity and meaning are absent or obscure, and identities and social positions are momentarily suspended. Anthropologists describe threshold or “liminal” states as “characterized by the dislocation of established structures, the reversal of hierarchies, and uncertainty regarding the continuity of tradition and future outcomes” (Horvath et al., 2009, p. 3). A degree of liminality is inherent to transitory situations or events where participants stand at a threshold between worldviews (Szakolczai, 2009). It is a state where social structures are temporarily interrupted and from which new relationships can emerge (Turner, 1974). Being “between stories” – conceived as a situation or time where established ideas and identities give way to new relations and ways of seeing – is implicit in many of the writings, conversations and performances inspired by the Dark Mountain Project.

In combination with the approach to creative practice, and grounded in the attitude towards uncertainty described above, working actively with renarrating or re-storying one’s own lifeworld was integral to personal participation in the Dark Mountain Project among the participants I interviewed. This process involved an extended period of feeling in between stories – a state which is necessary for finding something “outside” of existing frames of reference or understanding. Here, being part of a community of interpreters was crucial in terms of both emotional support and integration of new meanings. In the gatherings I attended, there was an explicit focus on “holding the space” for the inquiry and conversation in a way that engendered trust and conviviality. Establishing a secure ground for transformative conversations is perhaps one of the most important aspects – and learnings – of the Dark Mountain Project, and it has to a large degree depended on the skills and capacities of its participants: it involves a willingness to “unlearn” habitual modes of interacting, to becoming comfortable with not constructing answers or solutions, and to being prepared to sit with the incompleteness of a broken narrative about one’s lifeworld. When this approach to mutual inquiry worked, it opened up the possibility of experimenting with other ways of seeing as well as offered support and inspiration for personal practices and questioning of engrained preconceptions.

Re-storying – as a process of revisiting, reflecting, and renarrating one’s own story of who we are, why we are here, and where we are going – can be seen as a way of recalibrating the meanings and metaphors that shape a life. By organizing events, characters, and plots, as well as contextualizing

perspectives, relationships, and actions, narratives position narrators in relation to the wider universe and give meaning to the complex phenomena of the lifeworld. Communications theorist Walter Fisher (1987) explained how narratives are “meant to give order to human experience and to induce others to dwell in them in order to establish ways of living in common, in intellectual and spiritual communities in which there is confirmation of the story that constitutes one’s life” (p. 63). Recognizing narration as a process of meaning- and identity-making in which the narrator positions herself interactively within a wider field of relationships, Bamberg (2004) describes participation in locally situated narrating practices as potentially emancipatory: by situating subjectivities differently to positions given in a cultural meta-narrative, the narrator creates a possibility for a transformation in her onto-epistemological outlook. When her role shifts within the narrative, so does her worldview and relationships. Viewing narratives as “landscapes for the perception of different possibilities,” renarrating one’s own life-story can be seen as a process of opening up for new realities to emerge.

From his experience with creating the campaign that led to the community buyout of the Isle of Eigg in 1997, Alastair McIntosh (2001) describes how what was initially deemed impossible became reality through “constellating an alternate reality.” This involved working actively with the stories that constituted “the fabric of social reality” and “alter[ing] the co-ordinates by which reality was mapped and reset them” (p. 166). Such transformation entails a repositioning of the involved human actors within their wider social relations, allowing people to envision and enact a qualitatively different reality: “At the deepest level of the psyche this transformation has got to be cosmological. It has got to position the human person more meaningfully than before in relation to the universe” (p. 166). This approach to re-storying was implicit to many of the stories and meetings, and much of the art, that were produced in the context of the Dark Mountain Project (McIntosh is a friend of Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine and a contributor to the journal). As a critique of the narrative framing of progress, the project invites participants to experiment with “constellating alternate realities.” As one participant put it to me: “we don’t change the meta-narrative by sitting around thinking up new stories. We do it by getting out there. By not only seeing in new ways, but living in new ways. By being the subjects for those stories. More than that – by being the stories” (Graugaard, 2014, p. 164). Participants in the project experimented with re-storying in a variety of ways: through the various creative practices mentioned above, through

contemplative practices, nature rites and experiences, dialogue and collaborative inquiry as well as a wide range of craft and DIY projects. These different experiments did not necessarily grow out of the Dark Mountain Project – the project became a place for people to converge and find support for their experimentation with establishing new relations between people and the more-than-human world. As I experienced myself, re-storying may start out feeling like something that requires a particular mindset or space but the real work is to integrate the new story into the life that is lived.

Working Creatively with the Frameworks That Delineate our Lifeworlds

At least two aspects of the creative spaces that emerged in connection with the Dark Mountain Project are particular to Dark Mountain – and the learning that has grown from the project should be seen in the context of the narrative of the manifesto and the evolution of Dark Mountain as a cultural movement. First of all, the acceptance of collapse as a framing of the present global situation can be both unsettling and disorienting; it can create a turbulence within familiar ways of thinking, which is both emotionally difficult and psychologically disconcerting. But the disruption of the narrative framing of progress allows for giving up hope or expectation – at least momentarily – and come to terms with the reality that cultures, languages, creatures, and habitats are disappearing at a rate that has very few precedents in Earth's history. While this is not an easy process, it is an important psychological experience with parallels to Randall's (2009) work on dealing with loss. In this way, the framing of collapse opens the door to grief and mourning. *Collapse* implies a dissolution of a particular imagination of the future and the gradual cessation of associated concepts, meanings, and beliefs. In this way, collapse is also a breakdown in the validity and meaning of some of the concepts and constructs that have previously made sense of reality and shaped a course of life. This also applies to the wider cultural realm where concepts and narratives framed by progress are increasingly failing to explain the course of history as well as individual lifeworlds.

Secondly, the explicit rejection of anthropocentrism and the embrace of animism and ecocentrism gives nature "centre stage, not as a receptacle for human activities, emotions, or narratives, but as itself, on its own inhuman terms," as Greer puts it in the first Dark Mountain journal (Greer, 2010, p. 7). Ecocentrism is not only an ethical outlook, it is connected with the

view that stories are constitutive of reality, which, in the words of the manifesto, "remains mysterious, as incapable of being approached directly as a hunter's quarry" (Kingsnorth & Hine, 2009, p. 10). This approach supplements the narrative of collapse with a narrative of re-enchantment understood as "a reconceiving and a re-seeing and sensing of this wild-flowering world as something that cannot ever be fully objectified" (Hine & Abram, 2011, p. 64). It is this element which brings the authors of the manifesto to speak of *hope beyond hope*: "The end of the world as we know it is not the end of the world full stop. Together, we will find the hope beyond hope, the paths which lead to the unknown world ahead of us" (Kingsnorth & Hine, 2009, p. 19).

With these aspects of the research in mind, we can now consider how learnings from the Dark Mountain Project translate into suggestions for the significance of creative spaces in working with young people who experience distress in response to climate change and systemic global crises.

The Role of Creative Spaces in Learning to Respond to Climate Distress

It is important to underline that feelings of distress, fear, anxiety, and dependency in relation to climate change and global crises should not be considered wrong or unwanted but are actually healthy responses to being confronted with a predicament with no easy solutions. These seemingly negative psychological and emotional states are not the end station but important places along the way of dealing with the existential issues that arise in the wake of becoming aware of the consequences of planetary change. However, if these states are not addressed adequately – and young people who are experiencing climate distress often need help and guidance – they can present a psychological impasse, which can lead to more serious feelings of meaninglessness and depression. The climate crisis should be seen as a call for new meanings and values which will aid us in building lives that do not cost the Earth but support the continued flourishing of the community of life. In the shift towards low-consumption lifestyles, we may lose some sense of ease and comfort, but life becomes more meaningful as we build new relations between people and the more-than-human world within human-scale, post-industrial societies.

To support young people in coming to terms with climate change and finding ways to build flourishing lives, those who work with young people, or who have responsibility for young people, should look across disciplines that explore the relation between humans and more-than-human nature to find their own personal approach and resources for offering

guidance, counsel, and inspiration. There are many places to look for resources of this kind: from nature writing and the literature on ecoliteracy to outdoor learning activities and contemplative practices. A focus on human–nature relations offers possibilities for working with the kind of onto-epistemological transformation that can “position the human person more meaningfully than before in relation to the universe” (McIntosh, 2001, p. 166). Enhanced eco-literacy and attention to the living world, combined with actively working with narrative inquiry and re-storying, can support each of us in redefining some of the parameters that define our life and outlook. In addition to the above descriptions, I would like to highlight some observations from my research with the Dark Mountain project, which have general cogency and may help others in establishing the ground for a personal practice or collective conversation that grapples with global crises and planetary change. I have used these insights in my own courses, which deal with global ecology, politics, and climate change. Some have to do with the framing and dynamics of the creative space and some have to do with content and relations.

In group-work it is imperative to establish a safe space where young people can be themselves without fear of being wrong. The space itself affects what kind of interactions and transformation is possible. It is important that those who are responsible for holding the space pay attention to both setting and maintaining a frame that allows the participants to feel ownership and build trust. To create a common ground that is generative for shared inquiry and dialogue, it is helpful to encourage reciprocity, respect, and openness between young people. The mode of conversation is different to a discussion or debate, so it is necessary for young people to accept whatever comes up instead of trying to push a certain viewpoint or agenda. In relation to issues that are sensitive and personal, it is crucial that all contributions to the conversation are welcome and that there is space for whatever emotions arise in the flow of the conversation. All thoughts and feelings are valid! It is essential that young people feel supported, but it can be counter-productive to “comfort away” any difficult thoughts and feelings. For such emotions to be transformed they need to be acknowledged and accepted rather than pushed aside. In general, it is the questions, not the answers, which hold the transformative potential.

As a young person, it is also important to feel part of a wider community that supports the work. The support can both be “active,” as in direct feedback or interim meetings, and “imagined,” as is the audience an author is writing to. But the key is *perception* and to arrange the creative space so that the young person is able to “listen at the edge of her understanding,”

as mythologist Martin Shaw puts it (Graugaard, 2014, p. 188). This frame of mind requires the young person to be attentive, aware, and sensitive to her inner and outer worlds. Entering this mindset can be a practice in itself, which centers on perceiving the world without preconceptions – much like practicing mindfulness or meditation. The creative expression of this encounter can be immaterial and fleeting or physical and lasting. This is where improvisation, and an attitude that embraces uncertainty, plays an important role. Whatever arises becomes the locus for renewed attention and experimentation. Examples from my own teaching are writing courses, conversational group seminars, improvisation classes, sensory training, and meditation exercises.

With the right frame of mind, and a creative space to practice within, young people can experiment with meaning-making and cognitive repositioning within their wider field of relationships. By deepening the awareness of one's personal relations with more-than-human nature, it is possible to expand the experience of reality, to become more sensitive to the mystery of existence and to realign with the living world. Such an enhanced sense of belonging provides an antidote to the alienation or separation from reality, which people can experience in the state of despair that often follows when looking at the state of the planet.

Conclusion

In describing the way meaning-making, narrative inquiry, and re-storying can affect onto-epistemological transformation through creative practices, I have suggested that this kind of experimentation can support young people in dealing with climate distress. Although the effects of this work may be therapeutic, I want to underline that I have worked with this topic as a question of learning in my work as a researcher and teacher. In holding the space for others to learn and to be creative it is important to acquire the attitude of humility described above: Embracing the uncertainty of what happens in a creative space requires the teacher to accept that she is as much a learner as the rest of those in that space. This means taking seriously that, as a person of authority, the teacher does not “have the answers” and that young people are capable of taking on responsibility for their own and our common future. The global crises in our midst are not just a socio-technical quandary, they challenge how we think about and carry out education and mental healthcare. To relieve the mental distress connected with the global perspective of climate change, it is necessary for educational and health perspectives to be integrated. These fields can help

young people to approach sustainability as an integrative personal process rather than a mental abstraction of a future goal or state of the world.

The findings outlined here may transfer to other learning environments more or less easily. The participants I interviewed for my research tended to be middle class and white individuals aged 30–50, while the student cohorts I currently teach are middle class and white individuals in the age group 18–25. While some students have experienced significant climate distress, they tend to be stable characters with a strong support network. Where other personal complications enter the picture, it may not always be advisable to add further weight to the situation. It should always be assessed on an individual basis whether a young person who experiences significant mental and emotional distress is able to benefit from this kind of work. There is a strong cultural inclination to this work as it has been developed within groups of people who have become disillusioned with globalized Western culture but who tend to live relatively comfortably within Western societies. In working with other cultural groups, the conversations, practices, and framing metaphors will have to be appropriate to the culture they work within and the language they use to describe their experiences. Youth living with significant stressors, such as housing instability and poverty, may well have more pressing existential worries than climate change to attend to.

For most people who experience increasing emotional distress in the face of climate change, there is a seeming dilemma in the prospect of dealing with the affliction: Do I choose to enter deeper into distress or should I ignore or suppress these feelings so I remain functional within my everyday world? As I hope to have shown, establishing creative spaces where young people feel safe to explore different ways of seeing or being may offer new ways of creating alternate realities which enable meaningful and good lives in a time of global crises.

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