GRLI Special Supplement

By
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Hope in the time of collapse

> *The world is highly vulnerable and the situation is getting steadily worse*

In case we were in any doubt, the IPCC's latest report has made the situation abundantly clear:

'Approximately 3.3 to 3.6 billion people live in contexts that are highly vulnerable to climate change (high confidence).'

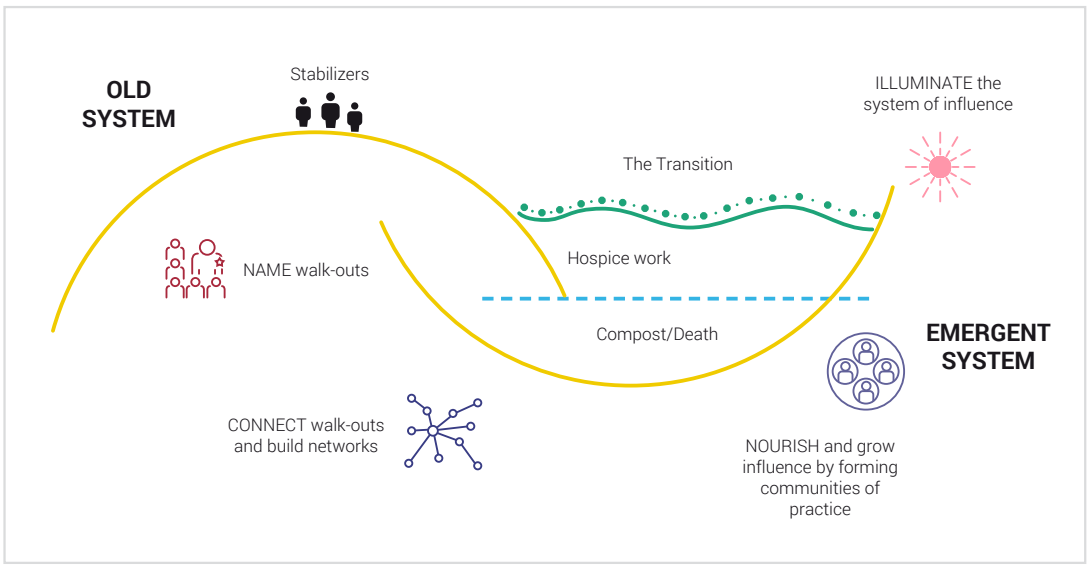
This is half the world's population – 'highly vulnerable'. The emergency that so many in the rich world have felt was somewhere off in in the future, is here. Now. It's just somewhere else. To be blunt: It's experienced by people of colour. It is felt most directly by people whose lives, lands, and loves have been colonised, robbed and trashed during the past five centuries.

The world is highly vulnerable and the situation is getting steadily worse. We believe we are heading for a train wreck that is likely to result in the demise of the global system as we know it. But we do not expect every person reading this article to agree with us. We ask only that you open yourself to the possibility that the chaos around you may mean that the world is changing irrevocably. Surely we can all agree on that?

We are meeting increasing numbers of folk, from all walks of life, who have come to this conclusion. It can be a disorientating, overwhelming position to find yourself in. For those readers wanting to find a way out of overwhelm, we offer here a framework that we have both found useful.

We believe that our world is currently in the Transition between systems, the difficult, turbulent place where things are uncertain because what is familiar is dying and what is emerging is not yet clear. It is a difficult, painful space but it's also incredibly fruitful and creative. (This process of collapse and transition is described on a microsite hosted by Oasis entitled Navigating the Unimaginable.)

In this transition a number of roles are useful, even crucial. (See https://afternow.today/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/sites/14/2017/09/TwoLoops.pdf). We'd like to describe the ones that in our experience have been helpful and which we guess will be increasingly necessary in coming years. It can be summarised in the following diagram from the Berkana Institute. (https://berkana.org/home/) Here's an overview of how the model works:



Two Loops Model (Berkana Institute)

As a system reaches its peak, **Pioneers** begin to notice something new is needed. They innovate in a myriad ways. Some realise the system is dying and **Walk Out**, they start to build their version of a new system from the ground up.

As the transition becomes more obvious it becomes clear that institutions and approaches are dying. This is where **Hospicing** starts – the process of helping things to die with grace, to heal the wounds of those involved and those left behind.

At the same time, other things, happening spontaneously, tended by the Walk Outs, are starting to be born. Here too help is needed in the **Birthing** process. First to assist the delivery and then to connect, nourish and network the new.

> *As one system collapses it creates room for a new one to grow. There is always something wanting to be born*

Four tell-tale signs of a system in collapse

No system lasts forever. Cities, civilisations, dynasties, and empires all have a shelf life, which is usually determined by their make-up and their relationships with other neighbouring states. The difference now is that for the first time ever we live in a single global system. This time round, system-change means global holistic change.

So, how do we know the phase of transition described in the diagram is actually upon us? The consensus amongst historians (See, for example, https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190218-are-we-on-the-road-to-civilisation-collapse) seems to be that four factors are common during this phase:

1. Climate change
2. Environmental degradation
3. Growing Inequalities
4. Increased complexity

A detailed analysis of these phenomena is contained in the Oasis Foundation paper on *The Evidence for Collapse*, so we do not intend to rehearse the data analysis here. Suffice to say, if you can feel the overall pace of these four trends accelerating, you know we are heading for radical change – either voluntary or involuntary.

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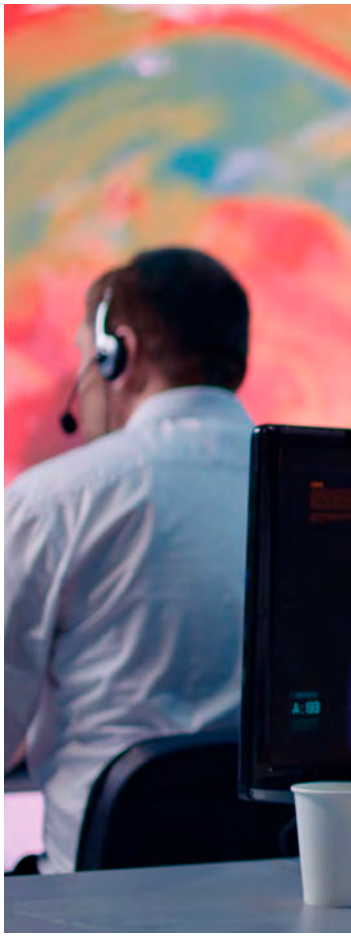


Birthing the new

As one system collapses it creates room for a new one to grow. There is always something wanting to be born. We have been asked what this new system is. In answering we must be careful not to come to any firm conclusions too soon. By its very nature the process is emergent: the precise nature of what's forming will not be clear until its birth. Before then is a long period of trial and error. In the space left by a collapsing system, all manner of experiments emerge. Some survive, others do not. Many grow and transform and merge together.

That said, we can with some degree of probability make a broad statement about the nature of what is wanting to be born. This is based on the patterns of new initiatives we are encountering and also on our interpretation of the trajectory of human history. Our current system is severely testing the ecological boundaries of the planet. We are stretching every boundary our ecosystem has. And things are beginning to creak, buckle, and break. In doing this, humanity as a species is trying clumsily to learn a lesson: What might it mean for humans to live in alignment with the planet and for both to thrive? We call this an Eco-centric Civilisation.

In virtually every field of human endeavour we see the emergence of projects, initiatives, systems and processes which are moving towards eco-centrism. There is an explosion of organic and regenerative agriculture, the re-emergence of local micro- breweries, bakeries, crafts, and arts. New organisational models are supporting self-organisation, distributed power, and horizontal decision-making. Peer-support models are evolving in nearly all areas of welfare from physical and mental health to criminal justice and substance misuse.

We could go on, but the list is growing endlessly. And the real question is how would you know whether what you're doing (or imagining) will turn out to be on the right side of history? Here are three guiding questions we think will help:

1. Is my work aligned to thriving life?
2. Are we healing the future or stealing the future? (This question comes from Paul Hawken's *Regeneration: ending the climate crisis in one generation*, Penguin Random House, 2021).
3. Does what we're doing build strength through diversity?

If your answer to any one of these is negative, we suggest you take time out for a redesign. Only initiatives based on all three propositions will be enough to see us into a healthy and thriving future. Everything else is part of the dying paradigm.

The art of connecting

While we have used the metaphor of 'birthing' as described in the Berkana Institute's model, like all metaphors it breaks down a little under closer inspection. What we're birthing right now is not an individual, like a baby, a calf, or a kid. What we're doing is growing an ecosystem – a new and complex set of relationships between a vast array of social systems and patterns.

This is why the model emphasises the creation of networks, the building of relationships, communities of practice and 'systems of influence'. We all intuitively understand that any system is more than the sum of its parts. The connections, relationships, and spaces between components are as important as the parts themselves.

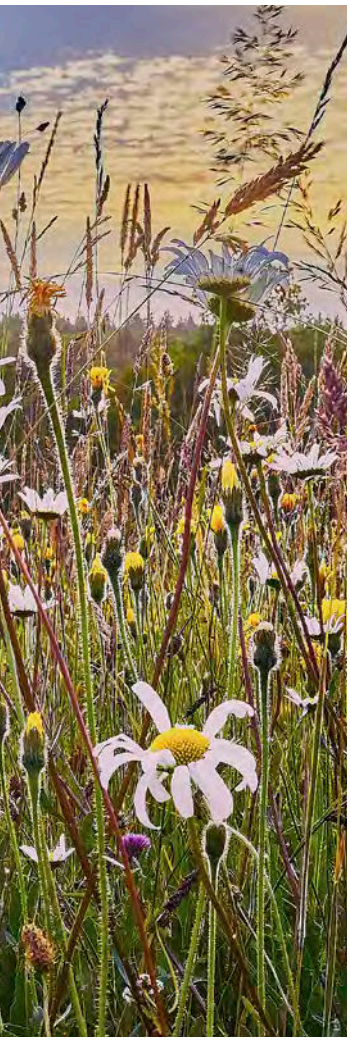
So another crucial role is that of **Connector** or Relationship Builder. Perhaps we all have a role here: To look up form what we're doing, notice who else is doing what, and reach out to them. In an ecosystem each part feeds another: Dead salmon fished out of the stream by a bear feed the riverside trees; mycelium bring nutrients to plant roots. So it will be with the emerging system – parts will feed each other, create unforeseen symbioses, build into diverse and evolving systems. By connecting the dots we are helping to support an ecosystem that will overgrow the outgoing system.

Hospicing the old

Death can be a challenging process – especially if it feels like there is "unfinished business". This can raise all kinds of dynamics. Despite this I (Chris) have repeatedly witnessed people adopt a range of strategies to provide someone with a peaceful or graceful death. This is even the case between people who were not previously on the best of terms.

I have seen people bury the hatchet, leave their differences behind, and agree to have a good enough relationship at the end. I have seen people make simple, seemingly nonchalant yet profound apologies for the way they have treated others. And when it's too painful I have seen relatives stay away rather than risk causing a scene at the deathbed. All of these strategies and more are likely to be needed at a systemic scale as we transition from one system to another.

When we consider the process of systemic collapse, we are interested in the role of the **Stabilisers** (sometimes also called the Settlers). These are folk who up to now have taken great pride in making the system work smoothly, effectively and in a timely manner. Lately they may also have been involved in trying to shift the system towards a fairer or more sustainable direction. In doing so they have amassed great skills of organisation, efficiency, and the ability to embed practice.



These skills will certainly be needed in the future, once the new global order becomes clearer and more widespread. We wonder if there is a way to reframe their role slightly: from Stabilisers to **Stewards**. It feels like this allows people more scope for change. It recognises their role in taking care of systems and processes while also giving them a role of protection. Could this become about protecting the future rather than stabilising the past?

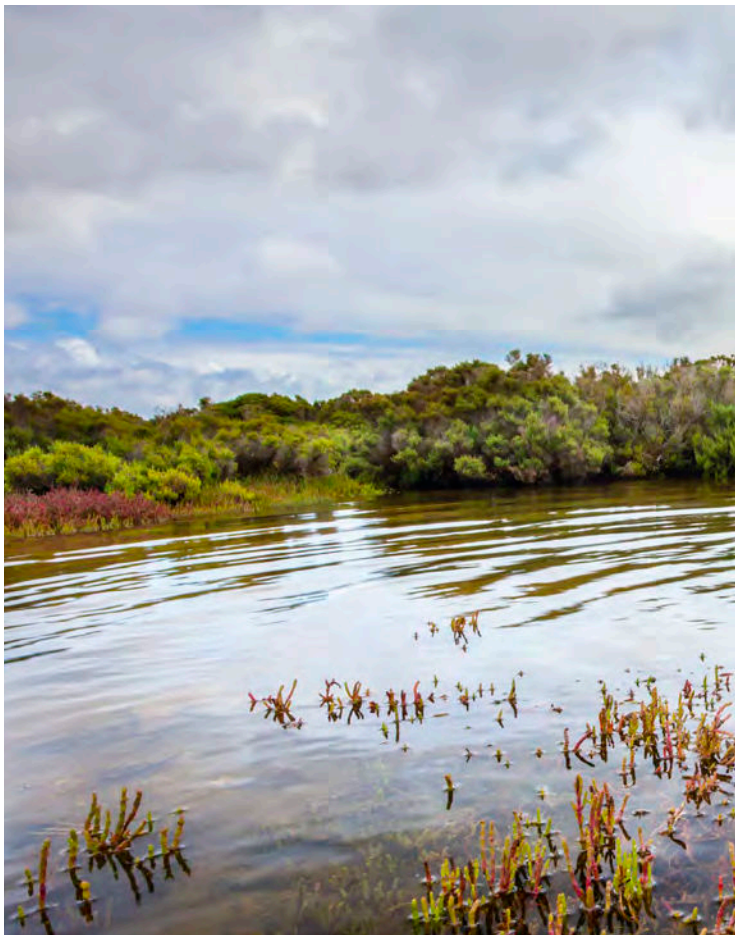
We would like to think that this shift from Stabiliser to Steward can be facilitated by the way we engage with people. Here are a few things we've found useful in this regard:

- Approach each conversation with curiosity – being curious about another's views, drivers and attitudes opens the door to collaboration.
- See everyone as a potential teacher.
- Seek out people three steps away in all directions – the ones three steps forward will stretch your sense of what's possible, those three steps back will teach you what's needed to bring everyone along, and those on either side are your tribe, the support network that will keep you well resourced.
- Think about what voices are not being heard and explore ways to include them.
- Start from a place of healing intentions and compassionate invitations.

These approaches have consistently helped us to engage with and learn from people whose perspectives are different from our own. By doing so we have both broadened our own view of what's possible and helped to identify common ground from which to move forward together.

What's wanting to die?

So, to the next part of the model. Perhaps this is the most controversial bit. What exactly is wanting to die so that a new Ecocentric civilisation has room to grow? This is controversial because we are all to a greater or lesser degree invested in the old order. We have all spent our lives working within it, trying to make it more humane or sustainable or ethical. And our livelihoods are still bound up in it. This may make it hard to let it go.



So what is it that's dying or needs to die? Let's try this by way of a compassionate invitation to you, the reader. Here are three questions to answer, to help for you to capture what's bubbling up for you. When you look around at the world today, at global events, at your work-life, your community, and home:

- What is it that does not serve thriving life?
- What does not create a more whole, more healed future?
- What does not promote the inclusion of all perspectives?

These are the things that are dying and will continue to die over the coming decades of transition.

A note on composting

This is where the notion of **composting** is useful. In nature, the decaying matter of plants and animals becomes the soil for future growing seasons. Humans have developed the amazing ability to speed up this natural process of decay through composting. If done well, composting is not only quicker at creating soil it can also create much richer soil which is teaming with the microbial life that feeds plants of all types.

The important thing here is that we are a long way from throwing out everything about the dying system. First we harvest whatever fruits we can, then we clear away the dying matter and carefully digest it until it becomes the fecund soil for new growth. Admittedly this involves the complete disintegration of what came before but it is precisely through this process of deliberate dismantling, mixing, cooking, and tending that the richest soil is produced.

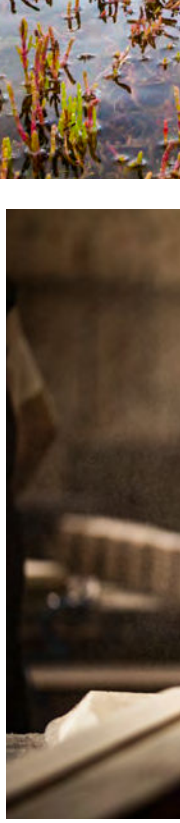
Conclusion

So what now? How might any of this impact on you, your life, your work? Where do you find hope in the face of collapse? How can your life contribute towards a safer, more equitable, more regenerative world?

What we're suggesting in this article is a number of steps we can all make along the journey. They might go something like this:

Locate Yourself in Transition - Find a way to locate yourself within the model – what would it mean for you to more fully step into the transition space between global systems?

Become Your Purpose - Become clear about what you are birthing and what you are helping to die.



Heal the Future - Explore ways to make the hospicing work essentially about healing: How can you help to heal the wounds that have been created by the old order and offer compassion to those on the deathbed of history?

Steward Life – to be regenerative, the future will be about valuing life, nourishing it and stewarding the well-being of the planet. You can make this your orientation now, use it to guide your decisions, your actions, your state of being.

Act like it's already so – be the future now. Step fully into the state of Stewarding Life and act from this place. From here we are acting *for* something not *against* something; we are creating not reacting.

Nourish Yourself – you too are life, the greatest gift you have to give the world. Nourishing life means being kind to yourself, showing compassion towards your own wounds, past decisions, hopes, fears, and dreams.

Will this be enough to see us through the coming turbulence? Who knows! The survival of the human species hangs in the balance and with it the future of millions of other species. A path is emerging from extraction and domination into regeneration and thriving life. The outcome is not yet certain. But what's clear is we can all make a difference. Creating a space for thriving life is worth doing either way.

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About the authors

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