



Designing Resilient Systems

October 14-17, 2018

Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows Workshop

Cobb Hill EcoVillage

Hartland, Vermont



Photo by Huma Beg

Back Row: Huma Beg, Jenny Williams, Nirmala Nair, Anna Jones-Crabtree, Beth Sawin, Elaine Kohrman, Susi Moser, Newey Kraiwatnutsorn, Jed Davis, Coleen O'Connell.

Front Row: Lynn Stoddard, Dominic Stucker, Nicole Betancourt, Daniella Malin, Mary Finegan, Edie Farwell, Natalie Starr, Nancy Gabriel.

Absent: Ashley Lanfer, Shanna Ratner, Lorie Loeb, Virginia Farley, Don Seville.

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Designing Resilient Systems

Just days after the release of the latest United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, [Donella Meadows Leadership Fellows](#) convened at the familiar [Cobb Hill EcoVillage](#) in Vermont for a 4-day deep dive into *Designing Resilient Systems*. All the Donella Meadows Fellows are well versed in climate science and systems thinking; many of them front-line leaders in addressing the multi-faceted challenges of climate change in the United States and internationally. Fellows came from across the US, and from India, Pakistan and Thailand to gather together again, for the first time since the 2016 US election, seeking reflection, community, and strategy about how, in this worrisome era, to find true leverage to shift the world onto a sustainable path. Already, there was significant concern leading up to the workshop of how to turn around the accelerating effects of climate change. The [IPCC report](#) added a further jolt.

"There is nothing opaque about this new data," said Christiana Figueres, who was the U.N. climate chief when the [Paris Agreement](#) was approved in 2015. "The illustrations of mounting impacts, the fast-approaching and irreversible tipping points are visceral versions of a future that no policy maker could wish to usher in or be responsible for."

We have had 1.1 degree Celsius warming already and the IPCC report asks for us to target 1.5 degree warming (as compared to the Paris accord that asked for 2.0 degrees). With that sobering news as a backdrop, we dove into the workshop, collectively acknowledging our anxiety and fears. And then the wonderful took hold; though our worries were ever-present, the atmosphere of the workshop was predominately about the impact of all the good work being done, the momentum felt around the world for change, and even significant hope. It was inspiring, powerful and much needed. And spoke to the richness of taking the time to gather together in this community of close, trusting relationships where hope and strategy can be nurtured and strengthened.

In the opening circle we framed this moment in history with Donella Meadows' 1990's advice, *"There is too much bad news to justify complacency. There is too much good news to justify despair."* As relevant today as it was in her time. Her words motivated us to use our days together to tackle the intractable challenges of our era.

As the conversation swirled amongst this talented group of people, it was clear that resiliency wove itself into all aspects of our lives – from heating our homes, growing food in a changing climate, surviving in difficult workplaces, to shifting our toxic political discourse, addressing climate change, and personal healing from illness. Questions arose, such as: How do we do this work and stay



sane? What does sanity look like in these times? How do we share where we are in a way that helps people stay engaged? What are the systems we need in place to restore ourselves and our damaged world?

To grapple with these, and many other questions, we collectively participated in a series of sessions, presentations and discussions starting with *Reflecting on Resilience* on Day One, moving to *Building Resilience* on Day Two, and embarking with *Designing for Resilience* on Day Three. We cultivated a systems thinking lens – enabling us to be better systems leaders, to develop systems infrastructure in every issue area we work in, and to create systems innovations.

Experiential Systems Thinking

To set the stage, on the first morning Beth Sawin and Phil Rice from [Climate Interactive](#) invited us into a “first ever” run of their new systems game tentatively entitled “UpGrade”. We were assigned to groups and given roles to [multisolve](#) how to upgrade housing in a given community to meet the goals of a proposed contest. The game invites new ways of thinking to bring about systems change that benefits the climate, equity in housing and related issues.



Photo by Jenna Rice

By multisolving, we move from power *over* to power *with*. Are we disrupting the business as usual pattern? This is the question to ask ourselves as we pursue our own work to bring about a sustainable world for all.

The game brought up the concept of a *fractal* – a simple rule through which a pattern is recreated at every level and scale. The local issues we experience are reflective of large global issues. Likewise, the local work we do is also contributing to the larger global work

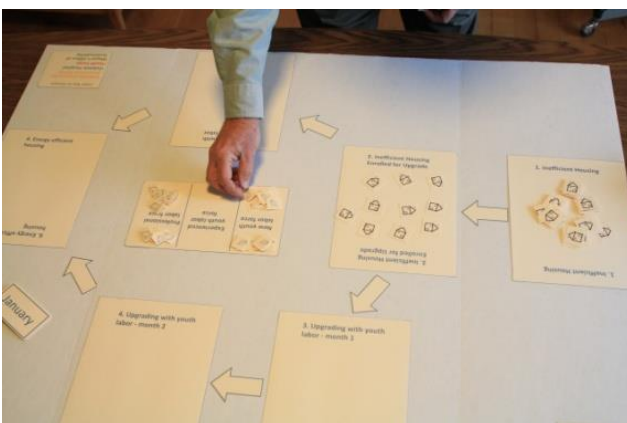


Photo by Jenna Rice

that is happening. The concept of a fractal became a thread that ran through conversations long after the game ended. The fractal framing also helps with feelings of overwhelm when one thinks they are not doing enough. Simply knowing that actions reverberate throughout the system is a helpful grounding principle for our daily challenges and opportunities.

Presentations

Over the course of our time together, many of the Fellows presented stories, challenges, film, and questions that arose from their work. [Virginia Farley](#) shared her work with the National Park Service in building the leadership potential of National Park Superintendents around the country. Park managers are facing challenges such as unprecedented visitation numbers, deferred maintenance, and climate events. At the same time, more diverse populations are visiting parks and previously untold American stories are being surfaced and interpreted. [Newey Kraiwatnatsorn](#) outlined her work with youth in Thailand to build their capacity and support systems as changemakers. A challenge presented by [Lorie Loeb](#) was to create experiences that delight ourselves and others. As her research takes her deeper, exploring the meaning of delight becomes a journey of keen attention and presence in the moment. Because an experience can be better than expected, delight can bring an element of surprise. In these uncertain times, nurturing delight helps build resilience.



The quality of life is in direct proportion... always to the capacity for delight. And the capacity for delight is the gift of paying attention.

– May Sarton

[Huma Beg](#) showed a film clip of her play [Ishq](#) which introduced Sufi art and history through a theater production that was performed in London in September 2017. This was London's first Anglo Punjabi Sufi musical, received excellent reviews, and brought important exposure and understanding of Islamic culture to the British community.

Resilient Health

One of the goals of this network is to inspire and support each other to stay at our sustainability initiatives for a lifetime, and to bring along the youth we mentor. To do this, we need to build our own resilience as health challenges arise so that we can bring our clearest minds and best energy to the tasks at hand. Optimizing health supports one to make thoughtful decisions and perform the most impactful work. [Edie Farwell](#) spoke of the responsibility to take the space and find the tools to care for ourselves in order to be fully engaged and productive. Edie invited each participant to reflect on, write about and discuss what serves and does not serve them as a way to lay a foundation for long-term personal resilience.



[Nicole Betancourt](#) described her own journey with health issues and shared a movie she produced while in the midst of her healing process. The film, [Sing the Water Song](#), highlights Indigenous US women who introduce and share a healing water song that they aim to spread throughout the world. Water songs are found in every tradition and are created mostly by women, evoking questions about how women's health connects to planetary health. Is it possible that we aren't here to find

solutions but instead to find a whole new pathway? Could we build new neural pathways in our brains for a different way to live?

Water, Collaboration and Financing Resilience

On the second evening three Fellows presented TEDTalk style to the larger community, including Cobb Hill and Edie's sustainability students from nearby Dartmouth College. [Natalie Starr](#), a Resource Economist at DSM Environmental Services presented some alarming projections from scientists (including those at the Ocean Conservancy) who estimate that by 2050 at present rate of discharges there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish. This begs the question, what if we were responsible for all the waste our lives represent? Natalie spoke on the concept of a Circular Economy, which is a regenerative system in which waste become resources cycled back into the system. The US has operated more as a linear economy but with China and much of Asia rejecting our recycled plastics and papers, the US must restructure the recycling economy and rebuild domestic markets. Aside from the usual reduce, reuse practices, Natalie reported that putting a fee on plastic resin could be part of the solution.



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[Dominic Stucker](#) of the [Collective Leadership Institute](#) presented on *Enlivening Collaboration for SDG Implementation*, sharing his excitement for working with groups that are moving away from a patriarchal model of leadership to a collective model. In his own words, his passion is convening diverse teams to address complex sustainability challenges. Dominic engaged the audience by asking "What makes you feel most alive?" Pairs discussed the question and then shared their perspectives in plenary. Dominic

pointed out that the feeling and "pattern of aliveness" at the individual level - a fractal - can be deliberately integrated at other levels, from aliveness in teams and organizations to socio-ecological systems. Such aliveness can invigorate our work and – using SDG 17 on partnerships as an entry point – help us make the global aspiration of the SDGs a reality.

Dominic went on to say that we can build our capacity to design change processes that incorporate these patterns of aliveness; a vibrant and robust process leads to vibrant and robust results. Drawing on the work of CLI Founder and Executive Director, Dr. Petra Künkel, Dominic used the [Collective Leadership Compass](#) to describe entry points for cultivating aliveness in our work. Connecting back to comments on aliveness from the audience, he outlined:

- **FUTURE POSSIBILITIES** - Invigorating the human capacity to collectively shape the future
- **ENGAGEMENT** - Engaging the human desire for belonging, identity, and meaning-making through exchange and collaboration
- **INNOVATION** - Building on the human desire to venture into the unknown and create new pathways
- **HUMANITY** - Raising the human capability for reflection in action and the respect for the integrity of all life
- **COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE** - Leveraging the human capacity to thrive on diversity and engage in co-creative dialogue
- **WHOLENESS** - Tapping into the human capacity to sense wholeness and to engage with a bigger picture, the larger narrative



Through two brief cases - sustainable forestry and trade in Laos and enhancing the trade education system in Egypt - Dominic talked about how patterns of aliveness can invigorate "Collaboration Ecosystems" for sustainability transformation. The latter is a system of diverse, connected, and capable actors aligned around realizing a shared vision for improving a particular common good.

Finally, Dominic described CLI's initiative to scale their work in a high quality manner through a worldwide network of "[Collective Leadership Academies](#)" that offer CLI's foundation courses on the Art of Stakeholder Collaboration and the Art of Leading

Collectively. In addition to CLI's offices in Germany and South Africa, Academies are being established in Cambodia, Egypt, Ukraine, and Switzerland. Further resources include: a free and interactive online [Collective Leadership Compass Tool](#) and the "[Art of Leading Collectively Book](#)," published by Chelsea Green Press.



In her talk on *Funding and Financing Resilience*, [Susi Moser](#) challenged us to think about how the often-heard and very real challenges of insufficient funds for resilience building can be addressed. In her study, she tried to disentangle the systemic funding barriers local governments often face and in so doing identify leverage points to help begin addressing them.

Drawing on interactive workshops with local governments all over California, she and her team identified 15 common patterns of finance challenges – which they called "archetypes" – each characterized by typical sets of causal factors, common symptoms, and characteristic consequences for local governments' ability to find the necessary funds for resilience measures. With that better understanding of the factors underlying finance challenges, the interrelated archetypes offer many more intervention opportunities to make a real difference for communities facing the impacts of climate change. For further information, see:

- [Paying It Forward: The Path Toward Climate-Safe Infrastructure in California.](#)
- [The Adaptation Blindspot: Teleconnected and Cascading Impacts of Climate Change on the Electrical Grid and Lifelines in Los Angeles](#)
- [Adaptation Finance Challenges: Characteristic Patterns Facing California Local Governments and Ways to Overcome Them](#)

Some of the many questions that arose were how do we find ways to do the things that we need to do without the money? How might each do this in our work? How do we become smarter in how we accomplish our goals in the face of too frequent insufficient funding?

Sustainable Food Lab

On the second morning, [Don Seville](#) of [Sustainable Food Lab](#) outlined lessons learned from 14 years of global work in food systems. There has been significant progress in terms of awareness of sustainability. Every major food company now has Sustainability Commitments and works with farmers on making supply chains more sustainable all the way through the system. A living wage for farmers, however, continues to be elusive in too many places. As well, Don has found that sustainability work requires a stable foundation. In some countries where he works, the governments lack the capacity for sector regulation, which



presents significant challenges to truly implementing sustainable projects.

We asked Don how he applies systems thinking to sustainability models. The Food Lab was launched in 2014 with the notion of bringing a “strategic microcosm” of diverse leaders together to develop breakthrough innovations. Their learning in that first phase was that there were no silver bullet innovations, but trust was built among people who prior to this



work did not speak at all with one another. That provided a foundation for the longer, slower work of real change in specific farming systems and contexts. No matter the situation, relationships are key.

Following the pathways of relationship down into each commodity is necessary to embed sustainability in most systems. Even relationships with unexpected partners are necessary -- for example, in coconut production in Brazil, there is an animal rights issue with the monkeys who are trained to collect the

coconuts. Some are treated better than others, so for sustainability down the full supply chain, attention to animal welfare is a part of the process.

The heart of the journey is building supply chains with shared values along the chain. There is good progress in the field — longer and diverse rotations in row crops in the US, programs to bring more value to cocoa, coffee, vanilla, and tea farmers in developing countries, and many more examples. Yet all this progress is in tension with the basic pressures on companies in competitive market places to continually reduce costs and the structural tendency of agricultural systems to overproduce, resulting in volatile low price markets for many farmers. The work ahead is to continue to build on the explosion of interest and commitment to healthier food to continue to challenge and improve our agricultural system in ways that work better for farmers, the land, and can also work commercially.

Coaching

Embedded in the leadership experience of these Fellows gatherings is the practice of coaching groups. Each Fellow received an hour of personalized coaching from a small group to delve deep into a challenge they wanted to grapple with in the coaching context. On the final day, Fellows were paired with peer coaches so they may continue this practice post-retreat. Over the years we have found the coaching to be an exceptionally powerful practice that can be adapted to participants changing needs over time.



Embarking

The retreat culminated with the practice of visioning so that each participant had a chance to create a project, initiative, goal, way of being, outcome or the like, to leave with and work towards. This visioning process has been integral to our work. In the 15 years since the first Fellows cohort, many visions that were spawned in these retreats have become realities. It is heartening to take stock of this progress; we celebrate everyone's successes! Before parting ways to tackle our individual endeavors, we asked ourselves these questions:

What do I want to see in the world?

How do I want to show up?

What can I do in the next 6 months that supports my Big Vision?

What is one action I can do in the next week to support my Big Vision?

Through our discussions, deep listening, presentations and reflection, we collectively hatched a brand new batch of visions. To solidify our intention, we parted by tying string to each others wrists, to be ceremoniously removed and reported on when our first action step was complete.

Similar to how we had started, we left the warm camaraderie of the group recognizing, as astrobiologist David Grinspoon says in his book [Earth in Human Hands](#), we are at “a moment in planetary history fraught with peril, but also perhaps rich with potential.” We were rejuvenated and inspired to have spent four days designing resilient systems together to enrich all of our potential.



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