

Seed Exchange and Soil Fertility: What More is Needed to Vision Our Shared Future

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Growing up in Austin, Texas, Christine developed a strong connection to the natural world at an early age. Today, Christine aspires to become a sustainability education artist as she works with many organizations across the United States seeking to transform their practices and rethink our approach to change. Christine holds a doctorate in Science Education from the University of Maryland and has over 25 years of experience as an environmental and sustainability educator. Within her work, Christine has a passion for transformative learning, collective impact and complex systems thinking. Her work includes the creation of the Midwest Regional Collaborative for Sustainability Education—a three-year 220-member community of practice dedicated to employing a transformation pedagogy, supported by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. She now calls the shores of Lake Superior home, as she enjoys skiing, kayaking, and the mastery of three-month agility gardening. Christine proudly began her career as an elementary school teacher to which no other career can compare. Christine can be contacted at chrnkelly[at]earthlink.net.

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This time of year I am always itching to break ground on a new vegetable garden—one that will overflow with juicy strawberries and blueberries; bright green spinach, kale, and broccoli; plump peas, pumpkin and potatoes; all varieties of peppers, onions, tomatoes, beans and squash to please any palate; and of course herbs galore. (As a northern Wisconsin gardener transplanted from Texas, I am still learning the ins and outs of our short growing season. Up north, it is not uncommon for the tomatoes and broccoli to be planted just weeks apart; plants that are grown whole seasons apart where I grew up.) While I am very tempted to just dig a hole in the ground and throw in some seeds, I know I will regret that decision when the battalion of quackgrass quickly overcomes my tiny savory Bloomsdale spinach seedlings quietly, desperately reaching for the sun.

For tenured gardeners, a new garden begins long before the seeds ever touch the ground. Often it doesn't even start in the backyard, but rather with a learning journey through image filled books and seed catalogues as well as to new places and new cultures to enrich one's gardening palette. The fortunate ones have a community of green thumb neighbors yearly transforming their own gardens in new and innovative ways, happy to share their secret discoveries. It is always exciting when you have the chance to exchange a few new seed varieties along the way. Most often, the actual first hands-on work begins not at the garden site, but at the compost pile—building a repository of nutrients and beneficial micro-organisms that will feed the new plants. Of course you will need to determine how much food you want to produce and what grows best in your neck of the world. This includes a careful assessment of the current conditions of your new garden site. What is the soil acidity? How is the drainage? And will fencing be required to protect the harvest? Then there is determining one's approach to the unwanted plants already growing at the garden site. Disturb the soil too much and you will awaken the weed seedbed that lies dormant below, thwarting all your luxurious plans for a no-weed garden. Short change any of these steps and your home grown veggies pay the price.

I know all this. And as I stand at what I hope to be my new garden site, shovel in hand, surrounded by seedlings that needed to get in the ground yesterday, my anxiety peaks. After a very long tense 30 minutes, periodically poking my shovel into the ground, I walk away disheartened leaving the site undisturbed and surrender yet again to adding a few more big pots of veggies to my sunlit back porch. My new patch of titillating strawberries will have to wait yet another season.

The number of years I have faced this challenge are too many to publicly admit. And after almost breaking ground year after year, I have finally come to realize that it is not my knowledge or skills as a gardener that hamper my attempts (in fact I might just know too much for my own good); it is the seemingly infinite blank canvas of my vague veggie vision that stops me in my tracks. You see I have A LOT of south facing, manicured, grass-covered open ground. My problem, as Jonathan Swift would say, is that I have not yet mastered the art of seeing what is still invisible there in my backyard. "Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others," so his quote goes. Without a clear vision, I have no idea where to best plant my shovel. But this time I am not reaching for another garden design guidebook. Instead, I pull Anthony Weston's (2007)

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book *How to Re-Imagine the World: A Pocket Guide for Practical Visionaries* off my bookshelf and begin my crash course on how to be a dreamer who gets results!

When my fellow Journal for Sustainability Education (JSE) editors, Clare Hintz and Jen Mason, and I first conceived of this issue, I had my practical visionary guide in hand. Together we envisioned this special issue of JSE as a response to the current events within the United States and across the globe that left many of us literally waking up to a world unfamiliar and unsettling. We were feeling so off balance that even knowing what to do next seemed elusive. I personally found myself in the same place I was with my garden—unable to conjure a thriving vision of the future, yet knowing it was what would most feed my soul.

After some discussion, Clare, Jen and I all felt it was a critical moment to ask our field of sustainability educators to respond to these events by collectively painting at least a corner of that blank canvas with our vision of the future. We decided to publish an issue that celebrated the limitless possibilities the future still holds. We wanted to band together with our field to build a tangible vision of the future with such tantalizingly rich detail that we all would be inspired to action today. We felt sure there was a wild abandon caged within our field, desperate to re-imagine our work in as-yet-unimagined ways that would create new learning platforms for change.

The greatest challenge we face in visioning may very well be overcoming our own careers. Much of our work as environmental and sustainability educators throughout the last two decades has been in direct response to our fear and outrage over historic environmental degradation; global climate change; the destruction of diversity and culture; and the depersonalization of many of our key institutions such as education, health care and food production. While fear and anger do push us, Weston's (2007) visionary guide underscores that it is the affirmative visions that can pull us far more powerfully in the end.

I propose that what we urgently need right now is not the social pressure or the political power to enforce changes we already know we want. That is a recipe for more of the same...What we desperately need—first—are ideas,...ideas that leapfrog the familiar battles themselves....Our most urgent need is to reawaken the radical imagination (p. 2-3).

To Weston (2007), radical imagination begins with a move beyond complaint and resistance, beyond reactive tinkering or hunkering down or cynical accommodation, to an awe inspiring alternative picture of how things could be instead. As I read Weston's book, I am reminded that for me the call of teaching, like that of gardening, was the call of my inner artist whom I could no longer ignore. My passion and excitement were so strong my first years as an environmental educator, that I was never for want of a vision to cast on the canvas of my outdoor classroom. Who knew that those many hard fought battles with others for my creative expression as a teacher and for the protection of our natural world would teach me to temper my dreams and aspirations down to such vague details that I was sure not to offend. Now my sustainability education visions (even the ones only held in my head) are about as detailed as my own backyard garden. Much like we adhere to the key strategies for preparing a new garden bed, those of us in the field of sustainability education are skilled at using various techniques to assess and

challenge the current state of our field and at articulating numerous ways to fix it. These are important skills to advance our work. Yet, I can't remember the last time I actually took the time to simply offer a truly inspiring vision of the future.

This is where a visionary is most needed says Simon Sinek (2013). Most people can articulate a problem or challenge they are facing. The visionary goes further, trying to connect our complex systemic issues to a greater motivation to change our behaviors by talking about the future with such inspiring clarity that it is as if we are talking about a moment in time that already exists. Weston, himself a visionary, offers a beautiful image of the future: “[I] have a dream that our own children and our children’s children will again be able to freely drink from the waters of rushing streams, breathe deeply in the morning air and see glittering stars at night” (2007, p. 10-11). This simply clarity and elegant inspiration are the skills of an artist.

Sinek (2013) differentiates a vision from a strategy. He describes a vision as a destination - a fixed point to which we focus all effort. A strategy, on the other hand, is a route –an adaptable path to get us where we want to go. Why do most of our strategies fail? Because there is no collective vision of where we want to go. Here Henry David Thoreau got it right - in the long run, people hit only what they aim at.

You see, I know all the strategies necessary to create an amazing garden and I can adapt these strategies to wherever I live: Texas and Wisconsin alike. As sustainability educators, we have strategies tucked in to every pocket of our all-season parkas. We live and breathe strategies – ones for reaching our learners, others for addressing environmental degradation, and still others for researching the progress of our field. I can't count the number of strategic planning sessions I facilitated for non-profit environmental and sustainability organizations. But without a well-articulated vision of the future we are trying to reach (or the garden I want to grow), we have no idea where best to get started or how to build momentum. We must set aside time to capture our shared vision, even if it is only one that begins as lines and arrows on the back of a local farm-to-table restaurant's biodegradable napkin. Each day that I procrastinate capturing my vision is another day I let someone or something else fill my time and, thereby define my future (which will not include my glorious garden if I am not careful).

Today, we are rapidly approaching a time where the elements of climate change will produce such dramatic results that it will be hard for anyone to deny its reality. Weston (2007) believes this will be a pregnant but dangerous tipping point as people will at long last be listening and desperate for a vision. Many will grab on to the loudest tweet. At this critical moment, sustainability educators will need something better to offer than “#ToldYouSo!”

After Clare, Jen and I released our call of submissions, we found the field was not quite ready to set our radial imaginations free. Some were still strategizing on today's problems while many were too drained, over committed, or unable to separate from the crisis at our doorstep to think about the future. A few brave contributors did however take up the invitation and were able to capture what we feel are the first seeds of the future. We are pleased by the exchange of these ideas and ways they, like a well prepared garden bed, improve the productivity of our future sustainability education conversations. While this is by no means a complete list of the richness found within this issue, our contributors offer seeds that suggest a future that includes:

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- The development of a new model of Earth leadership (Capra);
- An authentic integration of indigenous eco-social systems (Marsden);
- A thorough examination of our current dominate notion of sustainability (Ferreira);
- The development of partnerships based on a deep level of collaboration that goes beyond simple information or resource exchange (Rodegher & Freema);
- The integration of immersive experiential learning that fosters connection to self, people, place, and culture (Kita);
- The reformulation of sustainable building as a sustainable architecture informed by radical philosophy and educational practices engaged with ethical relations (Wheeler);
- An authentic embodiment of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness within schools who embrace happiness as an educational goal (Sobel);
- The reconception of higher education as a place to enhance critical thinking, sense of place, and ecological literacy while advancing the capacity for current and future generations to face seemingly intractable problems with resilience and hope (Hensley);
- And ultimately the pursuit of personal journeys of self-observation on how the body gives rise to the mind, how the mind forms a unique constellation of meanings, and how our own personal worldview is continuously determining how each of us feel, think and act (de la Sienra, Smith & Mitchel).

Now, with these seeds in hand, we must give shape and detail to our vision by asking “what palpable future are we collectively trying to create?” We have unused lawn ground all around, waiting for us to start actively detailing our vision of how sustainability education could be done, not just better, not even with greatness, but so extraordinarily awe inspiring that we can’t help but fall deeply in love with it and the fruits it will produce. And we won’t think twice about where to plant our shovel. Weston (2007) implores us to make this whole vision widely appealing and beautiful to eyes of all backgrounds and to frame our goals inclusively and in ways that build connection and synergy as it mutually reinforces all our shared aspirations for a better tomorrow. As fellow editor Jen Mason encourages in her article, *Envisioning a Sustainable Future*: “Let us captivate and motivate one another with our visions and use the creative tension that arises between the present moment and these visions to fuel our efforts to bring them into reality.” Please take the time to read her article as it helps unpack why we think the field of sustainability education is struggling to vision. Her article also shared more of what we hope to receive for our “Art, Social change, & a Vision of Sustainability” Winter 2018 issue of the JSE where we, in part, re-issue the call for papers for future-casting articles

Today I am ready to start a new garden – one I think I’ll call “extraordinarily awe inspiring sustainability education.” I need help. I am looking for other green thumbs who are ready to share with wild abandon their dreams with clarity, detail and imagination. We will likely have to dedicate time to get outside our own self-imposed boxes. We will need to know how to differentiate between a vision and a strategy. We will also have to embrace complexity and learn to work collectively. And we may even have to transcend the norms of our academic training and give up the objective formal third-person tone we use as we present a position or argument in a logically organized flow of ideas or opinions that are based on a sound understanding of the pertinent body of knowledge and academic debates within a discipline. (That sacred cow I just described is academic writing as defined by a major West Coast university.) Re-imagining the future may require that we, for a time, put this cow to pasture. Are

you ready to get personal, be illogically imaginative, and leap-frog existing knowledge to land in territories as-yet-unexplored? You have my permission to leave your citations at the door (Kelly, 2050).

I look forward to reading your submissions.

Now I think I might know just where that strawberry patch needs to go!

Wishing you sweet dreams,
Christine Kelly
JSE Guest Editor

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