

Blooming in the Doom and Gloom: Bringing Regenerative Pedagogy to the Rebellion

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Abstract: Transformative sustainable pedagogy and public intellectual work share the same aims and guideposts, including upholding higher education's foundational intentions of fostering moral character in tomorrow's leaders. Radical modes of sustainable education (including *regenerative pedagogy*, which tends to the global shift to restore, respect, and regenerate ecological and societal balance, and *inside-out pedagogy*, which helps learners take their inner seeds, sprouts, and blossoms of good ecocultural intentions to stages of external fruition) speak both to educating learners and engaging the public. If pedagogues aim to encourage students to put beliefs into action and be leading voices in ethically addressing today's pressing environment and society problems, this may require role modeling by having the courage to do so themselves. In these contexts, the author relates her own experiences speaking for Extinction Rebellion as an illustration of expanding notions of what it means to be a sustainability educator today.

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We are in extraordinary times, when children and academics are founding vibrant global movements of peaceful civil disobedience for the planet and viruses teach us about our interconnectedness at lightning speed. Extinction Rebellion (XR) and School Strike 4 Climate (SS4C) – inclusive movements dedicated to transforming environmental public perceptions and political policies – emerged only about a year ago, when the public sphere was a space of face-to-face gathering, respectively founded by two academics in England (Taylor, 2018) and inspired by a young teenager in Sweden and her lone weekly strike in front of federal parliament (*Greta Thunberg*, n.d.).

These quickly growing movements to reclaim the power to direct our species' orientation with the rest of the planet have everything to do with knowledge, interconnection, participatory engagement, learning, teaching, and mutual empowerment – all factors fundamental to sustainability education and well-being. While these new public movements stand to learn from the successes and mistakes of former radical environmental movements (Milstein, McGaurr, & Lester, 2020), *regenerative pedagogy* – or teaching and learning that directly tends to the global shift to restore, respect, and regenerate ecological and societal balance – does not end with teaching about what has come before. Indeed, this is a fertile moment to ask about the roles ecopedagogues and ecopedagogy have in bolstering these and other unfolding mass movements for sustaining earthly life now and into the future.

As scholars, even if we ourselves are not directly active in these movements – “or in related Indigenous environmental protector movements and environmental justice movements” – increasingly these days it is likely our students are. And, if they are inspired in the classroom, they may view regenerative pedagogy as having the potential for broader, more profound public impact – even when we ourselves might unnecessarily assume pedagogy's limitations.

Recently, before the Covid-19-enforced lockdown much of the world is still in as I write, due to having students involved in XR, I have been pushed beyond my typical classroom comfort zone and asked to speak to large public audiences – in the city's central free speech park, on its iconic public beach, and on the steps of town hall. The mixed backgrounds, cultures, and ages of those activated and finding themselves – often for the first time – doing peaceful civil disobedience and creative intervention on the streets resembles the diversity of students in many university classrooms. And, so far, I've found connecting with participants not unlike connecting in the classroom. In public spaces, as in sustainability-focused classrooms, there is a growing gathering of individuals forming expanding communities intensely concerned about increasingly evident interrelated environment and society issues. And, like our most passionate students, these welcoming and rising gatherings are seeking, examining, and proposing ways forward to restorative ways of being at individual and system scales.

While it seems many of us educators feel decreasingly conflicted about leaving the ivory towers to take part in public action for the good of the Earth and the multispecies generations to come, many also still harbor concerns about how to do this public work effectively or how to begin to do it at all. Elsewhere I have argued that effective radical pedagogy and public intellectual work share the same organizing tenets and the interrelated aims of social justice and ecological regeneration (Milstein, 2012). I argue these tenets, which O'Sullivan (2002) originally put forth as the three discourses of transformative education – *survive, critique, create* – also can be understood as guideposts. The guideposts provide regenerative pedagogues and public intellectuals clear ways forward toward ecological survival, cultural critique, and restorative social and environmental orientations, with a focus on locally and globally salient education and

planetary protection (Milstein, 2012). The guideposts align to undergird and strengthen what I've termed a "new moral character" (p. 14), reflecting the intentions of our first universities to create principled civic leaders and adding the crucial ingredients of contextualization, critique, reciprocity, and interrelationship, as well as a dedication to unveiling and, if necessary, redirecting the forces behind our constructed realities.

Such modes of educating learners and engaging the public can be understood as radical or regenerative forms of sustainability education, and include the model of *inside-out pedagogy* (Milstein, Alhinai, Castro, Griego, Hoffmann, Parks, Siebert & Thomas, 2017). Inside-out pedagogy acknowledges most people tend to germinate good intentions when it comes to environmental and social relations. The model posits it's the job of teachers to help learners bring their own inner seeds, sprouts, and blossoms of good intention to stages of external fruition. The educational journey then is a mix of helping learners identify the fertile soil of their inner wisdom and providing conceptual frameworks, theory, and applied research to help them cultivate and effectively engage "their interconnected existence, and efficacy, within wider integral ecological and cultural systems" (p. 55) outside of the classroom.

A key aspect of the inside-out classroom model is having high expectations for students' and one's own capabilities – and recognizing a shared hunger for conscious engagement in our ecocultural situation – which helps create a shared supportive space in which people *feel free to expand from the role of active learner to that of efficacious actor*. Part of this work includes encouraging our students to put their education into action. Doing so may require us to role model and foster the courage to make our voices as educators heard in the public sphere – in doing so, we bring regenerative sustainability pedagogy to the rebellion.

In conversation with other forms of radical pedagogy and ecopedagogy (e.g., hooks, 1994; Freire, 1970/2000; O'Sullivan, 2002) and their notions of interconnected internal shifts and external praxis, regenerative and inside-out pedagogy include not only raising awareness about – and critiquing the fundamental premises of – the destructive global neoliberal profit-driven ecological crises, but also collaboratively bringing about transformation. Culture jamming (Lasn, 2000) is one invitational form of regenerative public pedagogy that provides simple acts of creative resistance aimed at playfully raising awareness, reframing debates, and reclaiming and maintaining sovereignty (Milstein & Pulos, 2015; Weder & Milstein, in press). Specifically, ecoculture jams provide pedagogic and participatory ways to cooperatively stay on one's toes to respond to hegemony by resisting unsustainable toxic ideologies and putting forth restorative alternatives.

Indeed, doing so is a matter of life or death. Not surprisingly, both XR and SS4C have integrated culture/ecoculture jamming as one tactic central to their approaches (for an example, see Andrewartha, 2019, on XR Melbourne's act of "disobedience"). One could posit that educators straying beyond the classroom to take regenerative sustainability education to the streets embodies an ecoculture jam of sorts. If done collectively in different parts of the world, taking such powerful forms of pedagogy to the public sphere could have profound effects in informing public awareness, the character of debates, and transformations in consciousness about who we are as a species and how we want to be as ecological and cultural kin.

In a recent speech with XR, I spoke from the steps of Sydney's Town Hall in day two of the Australia-based XR Spring Rebellion. The other main speaker, Greens Party politician Scott Ludlam, could not address those gathered due to his arrest the previous day for peaceful civil disobedience. In Sydney, Ludlam and others' bail conditions contradicted any pretense of freedom of speech and included not being allowed to take part in further Extinction Rebellion

events or to be within 2.5 kilometers of the city's Town Hall ("Scott Ludlam says shutting down climate protests like 'turning off smoke alarm,'" n.d.). In London, police issued an outright ban on XR protesting (see <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/15/extinction-rebellion-protest-ban-chilling-assault-on-civil-rights>), which High Court judges later ruled to be unlawful (see <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-50316561>).

Seeing high profile politicians and the public face draconian bail conditions put in place to squelch widespread peaceful voices of dissent against government-backed climate destruction – and walking through a thick maze of intimidating police presence to attend the rally – helped crystallize my understanding of our role as sustainability educators as never limited to predetermined classrooms or university campuses. Instead, spaces of learning extend to anywhere we gather as communities to understand and intervene in corrupt conditions of power, unjust regulations of conduct, and systematized destructive environmental and social orientations. If we are to return to the clear-sighted foundations of higher education – to create moral civic leaders – it is high time we apply regenerative pedagogy not only in our classrooms but also in the broader public sphere. In doing so, we can help nourish a new collective public moral character in which inclusive planetary well-being is the beacon for ethical ways of thinking and acting, and with which we together can tend to the blooming in the gloom and doom. What follows is the script of my XR speech at Sydney's Town Hall:

"We're here inspired by Spring and this courageous season's trusting and tender power. We are no longer passive audiences or participants in Earthly destruction.

Instead, we are a blooming movement of people of all ages and backgrounds, shaping and making a very different restorative and regenerative reality – from declaring climate emergencies at council and country levels, to divesting from fossil fuel at institutional levels, to reclaiming what democracy and what reality look like.

I've been teaching environmental studies at universities for more than 20 years – specifically I've been studying and teaching about the power of culture and communication when it comes to ecological relations.

The focus in my field is on our ecocultural frames, those frames through which we perceive the planet and our species' place on the planet – the globalizing dominant frames, the rising alternative frames, the enduring Indigenous frames.

And for so long now, the globalizing dominant frame has revolved around an untruth. A binary – a dualistic belief of humans as somehow separate from nature, separate from environment, from ecosystems, from Earth.

This dominant frame shapes the majority of our thinking, our behaviors, our institutions, and our structures.

This frame is not carved in stone – it's not truth! – but it carves into stone and deep into the body of our planet.

This frame – in which humans are not only separate from but also supposedly master of a homogenous and replaceable "environment" – is closely related to and interdependent with other dominator frames – for instance, those of colonialism, of sexism, of racism.

All those separate from, better than, and I-can-limitlessly-extract-from-you ways of perceiving the world.

These frames have served generations of the 1%. And these frames have harmed ecological multitudes including and far beyond the remaining 99% of humanity.

The most important, but often hardest thing to do is to change dominant frames. Status quo thinking hinges on such frames. Vested interests profit from them. And dominant frames powerfully shape public, political, and even interpersonal ways of thinking and doing.

Yet, dominant frames are constructs. They are creations.

Because they are shared ways of thinking and doing – they need our buy-in to maintain their form.

In this way, we can choose to stop our maintenance of them. AND, importantly, we can choose to transform them. We, as publics. We, as police, We, as politicians. Together.

And, finally, for the first time in our lifetimes, and in many lifetimes preceding ours, together, globally, we *are* succeeding in changing this dominant frame.

Instead of dualism, we are co-creating a different story – a story of mutualism.

An interconnected and reciprocal frame in which planet and people are not separate but instead are one and the same.

A regenerative frame in which profit is not the bottom line but instead inclusive planetary protection and well-being is *the way* of thinking and doing.

This truth is not new. This frame is enduringly old and abiding.

This frame has been waiting to re-emerge from the soil just below the surface.

It has been fiercely nurtured there by Indigenous guardians. And it has been passionately fought for by the persistence of those custodians, healers, leaders, and visionaries of all peoples who come before us and sustain today.

It is not by accident this frame is changing – right here, right now.

This is the moment of truth telling. And the dominant frame has been a lie.

Not only are we demanding our elected governments tell the truth and act now, but we, each and every one, finally are telling truth to ourselves.

We are telling the truth hundreds strong in peaceful civil disobedience and arrest.

We are telling the truth millions strong in the streets.

We are telling the truth billions strong in conversations that have been a long time coming.

Some seeds can last generations, waiting for fertile times from which to emerge.

And these are fertile times. Greed masked as “the economy” or as “politics as usual” has become so blatant, so ludicrous, so deadly, that all of us, waiting just under the surface, are sprouting forth.

While we may be dealing with a lot of bullshit, bullshit makes some of the best fertilizer, making flowers of all kinds bloom.

And such blooming leads to fruits!

As Dr. Erica Chenoweth at Harvard has shown – historically it takes only 3.5% of the population peacefully mobilized to bring about the change demanded – this is true across cultures, times, and places.

We’re getting there. For instance, here in Australia during the Global Climate Strike, in Hobart 22,000 people took to the street – that’s more than 10% of that city’s population.

None of us is sprouting alone. We are not meant to.

We each are doing our part from our interconnected place of strength.

As each does this, we help bring about a growing evolution of environmental and cultural ways of knowing and being.

A regenerative culture does not let a crisis go to waste.

This crisis of mass extermination has us reimagining how we want to live.

We are taking up this fertile opportunity – not just to avoid disaster – but to reconfigure our very ways of life to be deep, fulfilling, responsible, and connected.

Such fruits create even more seeds!

As we rise, others can rise with us.

Spring is welcoming. It's a party, an embrace.

As you act, welcome friends, family, co-workers, our police, and strangers to act with you.

Invite them to invite others.

Spring is infectious. It's a time for active pollinating.

A time to turn toward the warm truth-revealing light of the sun.

As we close our time together today, if you can, please take the hands of the people next to you – and raise our hands together.

Let's lift our heads and hearts toward life-giving sun (and rain).

Together, as it's been since there have been seasons, we gratefully receive the gifts of spring, the courage and foundation needed together for sowing seeds and bearing fruit, the tender and trusting power to bloom – for now and for the future.”

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Above: Tema Milstein bio photo

Below: Icon image. Author Tema Milstein speaking at Extinction Rebellion's Rally at Sydney Town Hall, Oct. 8, 2019. Photo by John Carr

