

Teaching to Cultivate a Better Anthropocene: Metaphor Work and the Conceptual Development of an Environmental Anthropology Course

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Abstract: This case study follows the eight-year development of an environmental anthropology course, beginning with my own failure as a teacher to provide students an adequate way of thinking and acting amid planetary crisis. It then turns to a diagnosis of three challenges students face when thinking about global ecological futures: (1) an inability to act, (2) an inability to imagine how an individual can make a difference, and (3) an inability to conjure an adequate sense of hope. For each of these challenges, I introduced a conceptual metaphor designed to help us think anew, where a conceptual metaphor is a trope that enables thinking about one conceptual domain in terms of another. The metaphor of wayfaring helped us overcome the conviction that one must become an expert before acting. The metaphor of seed planting helped us reimagine how an individual can contribute to larger-scale change. Finally, I introduce two new conceptual metaphors for thinking about hope amid planetary crisis—weedy invasions and broken jars. By working with these tropes, I propose an alternative way of thinking about hope that does not rely on a sense of optimism. Along the way, I make two broad arguments. First, thinking through novel conceptual metaphors, what I call metaphor work, is a worthwhile technique for approaching planetary crisis with students. Second, an undergraduate seminar is an excellent place to experiment with new ways of thinking about, and living in, the Anthropocene.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, metaphor work, environmental anthropology, hope, agency, failure, Anthropocene, planetary crisis

Introduction

I began teaching an environmental anthropology course at Kansas State University eight years ago. This case study tracks how the course has changed in response to the needs of students. It begins with an honest look at my own failure as a teacher to provide students an adequate way of thinking and acting amid planetary crisis. The remainder details the conceptual development of the course as a response to this initial pedagogical insufficiency. In every case, the responses to the diagnosed challenges began with a search for a new conceptual metaphor, where a conceptual metaphor is a trope that enables thinking about one conceptual domain in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Finding and thinking through the entailments of new conceptual metaphors is what I will call metaphor work.

From this experience, I would like to draw two broad lessons. First, metaphor work can be considered an important part of learning, along with students, what it means to live in the Anthropocene. Many of our old ways of thinking are no longer adequate, and many scholars in the environmental human sciences have been working for years toward better ways of talking about life in the Anthropocene. I would like to show that metaphor work can be a useful, collaborative process of generating idioms for speaking and thinking along with students. Second, and related to the first, I would like to show that an undergraduate course is an excellent place to experiment with new ways of thinking and living in the Anthropocene. Students need not be seen as mere receivers of knowledge. They can be real colleagues in learning and practicing the art of living in times of crisis.

A Reflection on Method

The pedagogical apparatus of this course, as with infrastructures in general, only became a matter of attention and concern in its breakdown and failure (Howe et al., 2015). The first of these failures, as will be shown in the next section, began a process in which problems were diagnosed, interventions were designed and then implemented, and new challenges were produced and experienced. The diagnostic process closely followed a standard cycle of immersion-crystallization commonly used in qualitative analysis in which an inductive, iterative procedure is used to identify meaningful themes and patterns (Borkan, 2022). The data analyzed included my own participant-observation, as course instructor, teaching notes and conversations with students in and outside the classroom, and years of student blog posts that were produced as a primary assignment for the course (see below). Analysis included reading and rereading this material and writing analytical notes to summarize ongoing themes, patterns, and insights. These notes became the basis for interventions (including new readings, assignments, and organizing metaphors) akin to what Kim Fortun (2012) has called “ethnographic looping in,” in which analytical insights are fed back into the worlds from which they were derived as a way of experimentally producing new idioms for thinking and talking about the world. I have presented the ongoing results of this process previously. The first was a blog post (Durbin, 2015) and then a conference presentation (Durbin, 2018) that reflected the early development of the course and that has been adapted as the first sections of this case study. The case study in its entirety is based

on a more recent invited talk, given to the Open Learning & Teaching Collaborative at Plymouth State University, that provided an opportunity to reflect more deeply on the problem of hope amid planetary crisis (Durbin, 2022).

Failure and Crisis in an Environmental Anthropology Class

I taught the first iteration of the course in fall 2014 as an upper-level graduate/undergraduate split called “Environmental Anthropology in the Anthropocene.” The syllabus included challenging readings from both primary and secondary sources in environmental anthropology and the broader environmental human sciences. It focused on scholarly readings about the problems of planetary crisis, including climate change, species extinction, ubiquitous pollution, sea-level rise, and other challenges. The following excerpt from the course description clearly shows this emphasis:

We are faced with the consequences of what many scholars have argued is a new epoch—the Anthropocene—in which humanity has become a major planetary force. The Anthropocene is characterized, in part, by global climate change, massive species extinctions, ocean acidification, pollution, deforestation, and other large-scale problems that threaten vital infrastructure, food security, and the lives of many humans and non-humans.

The only assignment consisted of an ongoing blog project in which students would post and comment on other students’ posts throughout each week. The group blog was primarily envisioned as a way for students to engage both individually and collectively with challenging texts in the context of an overarching question: What does it mean to be human in the Anthropocene? The questions and readings were taken from what I felt were important directions within environmental anthropology and the broader environmental human sciences. Engagement in class discussions and on the blog were encouraging. Students wrestled with key ideas and texts, asked their own questions, asked classmates for help, and formed their own opinions about scholarly arguments. In most cases, student engagement and learning in this version of the course would be considered a success.

Planetary crisis, however, is different from many course topics and presents us with a complex set of problems that seem to demand action. Yet, it is not obvious that those of us who are trained in the environmental sciences, broadly considered, are experts in which precise steps should be taken, given the complexities of socio-political and other systems. We know generally, for example, that we must stop emitting carbon, but most of us could not say exactly what we must do to inspire social and political will. Like our students, we are within the system and, to some extent, also at the edges of our knowledge. Furthermore, it is now clear that planetary crisis is not simply a knowledge problem. It also includes important psychological and emotional dimensions that must be dealt with both individually and collectively (see Lertzman, 2015; Norgaard, 2011). For most instructors, and certainly for me, scholarly training did not include the important personal work that planetary crisis demands, including the labor of dealing with feelings of denial, despair, guilt, and mourning. These challenges became obvious when students began to experience the course as a crisis.

Insights from a Student Crisis

On November 11, 2014, one student chose to turn from her usual, conceptually driven blog posts to a deeply personal and confessional mode of reflection. She wrote:

I decided that for this post, Ima [sic] get real for a couple paragraphs. I took this class because I wanted to address my relationship with the idea of climate change. I think I was somewhere between Margaret Klein's description of guilt and grief. The problem seemed so enormous. And then I started doing the readings for this class, and every problem that we learn about stresses me out so much. It feels uncomfortable to just go on with my normal, student life. I want to do something about climate change; I want to change the social values of Western humans, and bring media attention to the people who are experiencing the first, real and destructive effects of climate change. But an individual has almost no influence. ... I can recycle and use reusable containers and take short showers. What does that add up to? It's quite stressful being so uninfluential.

When I read the post, I felt a bit like I had arrived at work only to realize the stove was still on at home, both sick and guilty. In writing how she was feeling, this student helped me realize something to which I was blind before. I realized that if I am going to take students from relative ignorance of our planetary crisis, from a kind of denial to the edges of despair, then I also needed to show a path back out of that darkness to something that might reasonably be called hope. Psychologist Mary Pipher, in her book *The Green Boat* about climate change action, called this a path from trauma to transcendence (Pipher, 2013).

Other students, in their comments on the November 11 post, confirmed that the feeling was widespread. One wrote:

I just wanted to say, thanks for being real. I realized recently that it's easy to get caught up in these posts trying to sound "intellectual" and present a boat-load of information and facts when this blog is also just about having a conversation with each other. I too feel exactly the same way you do – I feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem (especially when doing reading and research), I feel like a helpless individual in the midst of a world-encompassing crisis.

The feedback was not all negative. All students expressed some gratitude that the course existed because it gave them an opportunity to talk about how they felt. It was getting them somewhere, maybe, but not far enough.

Diagnosis of the Problem

Students in that first iteration of the course were problematizing a complicated nexus of affect and action in relation to climate change. They felt a personal responsibility to act but sensed a lack of ability to respond, or a clear means of imagining how they might do something meaningful based on what they knew. They were asking a big question: Given all this terrible information, what can I do that will make a difference? It was a practical, ethical query for which

many did not have the conceptual tools, or social imagination, to answer in a way they found satisfying.

I think the problem can be diagnosed as having three dimensions, all of which can be found in the November 11 blog post: (1) an inability to act, (2) an inability to imagine how an individual can make a difference, and (3) an inability to conjure an adequate sense of hope.

1. Inability to Act Before One Knows Enough

A significant challenge hinges on how students conceptualize the relationship between knowledge and action. I have noticed a pervasive notion that one must have detailed and complete plans before executing a project that might help create a better Anthropocene. Students have been taught to think of education in this way, where education is what one receives in preparation to do things in the “real world.” This model is problematic for many reasons, one being that accelerating socio-ecological change increasingly renders the knowledge one receives in this mode less and less applicable. If students must “know enough” they will likely never act.

2. Inability to Imagine How Individuals Can Make a Difference

A related problem is that students are already sophisticated neoliberal thinkers. By this, I mean that despite their dissatisfaction with the world as it is and their willingness to change it, they tend to explain problems and conceive solutions in terms of self-interested rational actors. The individual person is ontologically real. Technological breakthroughs and individualist solutions—buying local or recycling—tend to be the most easily comprehensible. Imagining their place within assemblages with higher orders of organization is much more difficult. Yet, these students also tend to sense that individualist solutions to climate change are not nearly enough. The result is a conceptual and pragmatic chasm between the individual scale of action and the global scale of climate change.

3. Inability to Find Adequate Hope amid Planetary Grief

A third challenge is dealing with negative emotions about planetary crisis, especially denial, grief, and despair. Denial among my students is rarely outright denial of anthropogenic climate change or any other dimension of crisis. Instead, it is more like the denials Karen Norgaard associates with various social norms (Norgaard, 2011). This includes social pressure to remain optimistic despite facing a scientific consensus that is increasingly ominous. Because negative emotions make optimism more difficult and because hope is usually associated with optimism among students, the ability to construct hope adequate to planetary crisis has become a palpable challenge.

Rethinking Agency through the Metaphor of Wayfaring

After reading about my student's anguish, and the sobering realization that I had offered no route back from the brink of despair, I redesigned the seminar as a way to help students address the first challenge we had diagnosed, the sense that one does not know enough to act amid planetary crisis. There is an affinity in this sentiment with what Tim Ingold has called the building perspective (Ingold, 2000), or the sense that life is simply the execution of a plan, much like how the building of a house is imagined to be simply the execution of a blueprint. This high modernist view of life may have been more adequate in a world that seemed relatively stable. In the Anthropocene, however, where even "nature" appears to be an active agent rather than a passive backdrop to history (Chakrabarty, 2009), my students intuited the inadequacy of the building perspective. Unfortunately, they did not have an alternative perspective that seemed more adequate. It is here that I introduced the metaphor of wayfaring as a central trope of the course and as a means of rethinking the relationship between knowledge and action.

For Ingold, wayfaring is an approach to learning about the world by moving through it (Ingold, 2011). As one moves through the world, it opens up and is seen from perspectives impossible from previous positions. For our purposes, wayfaring means that one need not wait until one feels like an expert before taking action. Instead, one acts and, through action, meets new people, has new experiences, and learns new things about the world. One's previous ideas and expectations may then seem naïve, at which point they can be rethought. Then, one acts again and, again, meets new people, has new experiences, and learns new things. The process is repeated. Eventually, one looks back over one's life and realizes that the world as it is now understood could never have been imagined from one's starting position. In reflective movement the world can be comprehended.

Students sometimes misunderstand wayfaring as antithetical to planning because it is contrasted with the building perspective. They tend to think, at first, that a wayfaring perspective is about doing nothing and letting life happen to them. This is not the case. Wayfaring, as we have developed the metaphor, utilizes careful planning. However, it insists that one hold one's plans loosely and that goals and plans are evaluated as new knowledge is gained about the world. Wayfaring, properly understood, has some radical implications for ambitious young people who have spent much of their lives faithfully waiting and planning for their future—the first of which is that they can do something before they feel they have the world figured out. Next, I turn toward some tangible examples of this metaphor work as instantiated in student projects.

Blogging: A Partial Success

I have had some partial success by anchoring a semester-long blogging assignment in the metaphor of wayfaring. Unlike the blogging requirement in the first iteration of the course, which was intended to collectively engage with the required texts, blogging in the second iteration was conceived as a way for students to document a project. The project had three broad requirements. First, it needed to focus on something a student cared about. This could be anything, and students chose widely. Second, whatever a student chose must be somehow

threatened by planetary crisis. Initially, some students found this difficult. Within the first few weeks, however, they began to realize that nearly everything they care about is open to the precarity of the Anthropocene. Third, each student must attempt to do something to address threats to the object of their care and affection. As much as possible, students were required to undertake their projects along with others rather than alone. Projects have been as diverse as the students themselves and have included experimentations with urban foraging, an attempt to help popularize indigenous cuisines, a public dialogue about sustainability between ethical vegans and hunters, and an attempt to persuade vendors in the K-State Student Union to eliminate single use plastics. Required readings for the course changed slightly. More importantly, they were re-conceived a supporting infrastructure for student projects rather than as the primary source of learning. As students read, they asked: How can these texts help me act in the world through wayfaring?

By inviting students to understand coursework as wayfaring, I hoped they would begin to feel more able to act despite believing they did not yet know enough. The message was that we must do something at some point, and we do not need to have everything worked out before we take our first steps. Action, movement, critical reflection, and connecting with others in good faith is, in part, how we learn to reconceptualize and rebuild the world.

Student Projects: Edible Insects and Loving Locally

I will next draw attention to two early student projects from the second iteration of the course that exemplified this wayfaring approach to life in the Anthropocene. Both are kinds of excuses to act without an assurance of success, excuses to do something anyway because it might lead to something better. Both projects connected on a deep level with what each student found personally meaningful. Both were highly active and passionate responses to planetary crisis. Neither of these projects will solve our biggest problems, of course, but perhaps they are the beginnings of journeys that, given the complex systems that make up our world, will connect with others, evolve, and contribute to the sort of tipping points we would all like to see.

(Edi)morphosis— Edible Insects



Photo 1: Insect cookie using (Edi)morphosis mealworm flour (photo credit: MacKenzie Wade)

MacKenzie Wade told anyone who would listen about how she once felt powerless in the face of climate change. Regaining a sense of empowerment, she said, involved choosing a strategic project that could have multiple positive effects at different scales. She decided to focus on the cattle industry as a major source of carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, and water consumption. However, instead of asking people to stop eating beef (a rhetorical and political non-starter in most of Kansas), she suggested that they add something. She started a small company called (Edi)morphosis that produced mealworm protein powder. She used her products to passionately advocate edible insects as a means of challenging harmful nutritional norms in a way that cannot be easily classified as politically “right” or “left.” Instead, her project experimented with the possibilities and limits of a pervasive neoliberal subject position, the social entrepreneur, that can potentially work in politically polarized settings. Since graduation, MacKenzie has been accepted into a PhD program and has become an innovative scholar working at the intersection of culture, edible insects, and sustainability (see Wade and Hoelle, 2020), including the pedagogical use of edible insects (see Wade, 2021).

#LovingLocallyChallenge

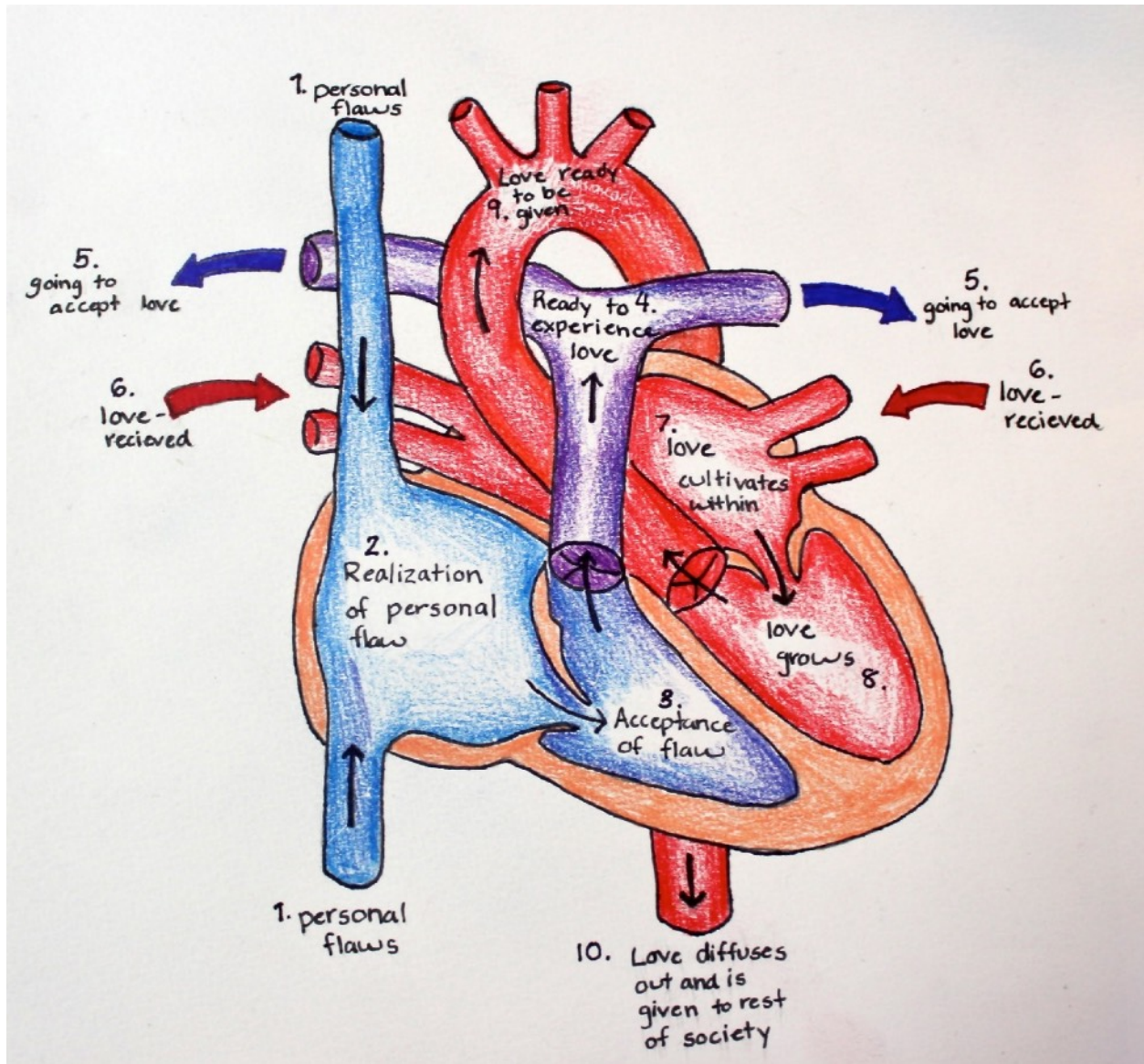


Photo 2: *Love in the Anthropocene* (image credit: Samantha Grieger)

Samantha Grieger knew from personal experience that faith, including its evangelical Christian form, is not necessarily an enemy of action against climate change. She found role models in people like Katharine Hayhoe (see Hayhoe and Farley, 2009) and Lowell Bliss (see Bliss, 2013), both evangelical Christians and climate change activists. This perspective led her to explore how the way we feel about the environment can motivate action. Specifically, she wanted people to begin their journey toward sustainability by learning to love the world they already inhabit. She explored wayfaring as a cycle of love, awareness, and storytelling that can motivate action on larger-scale environmental issues. Her project included a social media campaign called the #LovingLocallyChallenge that encouraged people to take and share photos and stories of the

local places they love. In doing so, she hoped we would see that all places and people are worth loving.

These early student projects convinced me that wayfaring could offer tropic orientation for action and learning. Subsequent projects have offered additional evidence that students can view wayfaring as a viable alternative to the building perspective. However, although many students express a sense of pride in their projects, they also often felt dissatisfied with the results.

Rethinking Individual Efficacy through the Metaphor of Planting Seeds

Framing student work as wayfaring was largely a success in getting students out into the world, working to some extent alongside others, and doing something on behalf of something they cared about. But students also felt some limitations of wayfaring. They were doing something before they felt ready, and many were proud of what they had accomplished, but they also tended to feel this was still not enough. In their blog posts, and perhaps more in one-on-one conversations, students sometimes expressed a deep personal sense of failure. They conveyed an implicit belief that each person should be able to have more impact.

The Asymmetries of Individualist Solutions

I believe the sense of both pride and failure among students has several sources. One that seems ubiquitous is the asymmetry between the belief that an individual can contribute significantly to planetary crisis, and is therefore guilty, and the belief that an individual is unlikely to make a positive contribution to a better Anthropocene. A result is that a student may feel guilty about her carbon footprint and despair because her creative contribution is not enough. In short, even though one can become a wayfarer with others, it was difficult for students to think about how those actions might scale up or out in any significant way.

Two metaphors seemed to be either part of the problem or not very helpful. The first was thinking in terms of nested scales with an individual at the center and with the gap between the global scale and the individual scale being imaginatively insurmountable. Unfortunately, this seemed to be the most used mental model by students. The second, and less commonly held by students, is that of a network or an assemblage, which for our purposes amount to the same thing. In a network, individuals make connections, and those connections build out until, presumably, a large effect is felt. For whatever reasons this has not seemed very convincing to my students either. Maybe they already know that network relationships are as easily broken as they are formed, making them inherently precarious.

Planting Seeds of a Good Anthropocene: A New Metaphor

We have had more success with an organic metaphor: seed planting. This metaphor is taken from the work of Elena Bennett and her colleagues (Bennett et al., 2016) who argue that existing global scenarios of possible futures are inadequate. Specifically, existing scenarios are based on overly simplified worldviews that emphasize end states but not practical steps for achieving desired ends. Instead, Bennet and colleagues suggest using real examples of ongoing projects to inform how we tell future-oriented stories. These examples, what they call “seeds of a good

Anthropocene” bring together social welfare and ecological sustainability in real initiatives that deal with real-world complications and demonstrate the ability to scale up or out in various ways. A large seedbank has been created (<http://goodanthropocenes.net>) through which hundreds of examples can be explored, compared, and used to inspire new projects and more adequate scenarios. One seed is called “Grassroots Economics: Complementary Currencies for Community Resilience in Kenya.” This is a project of an organization called Grassroots Economics that operates in poor communities in Kenya. Grassroots Economics creates local currencies in communities that have difficulty accessing the national currency system, thus increasing liquidity at the local level.

In class, students explore the seedbank themselves to get a sense of what real-world sustainability projects look like and how they can begin to grow beyond the work of one individual or community. Of all the seeds we have reviewed in class, however, an overwhelming student favorite is one that is not in the official seedbank. Specifically, they have found much inspiration in the story of Scott Harrison and Charity: Water, an NGO that works to bring clean water to communities around the world.

Charity: Water: A Seed Planted by a Wayfarer

Charity: Water is an organization started by Scott Harrison, a former nightclub promoter who came to feel that his life lacked meaning. His personal crisis led Harrison to work with an international aid organization, where he saw firsthand the devastating effects contaminated water can have on individuals and communities. He decided to start a charity that would help provide clean water but realized he knew almost nothing about starting an NGO and even less about doing it well. He encountered several challenges and obstacles, one of which was mistrust of charities, especially among younger Americans. The result was Charity: Water, a charity in which 100% of normal donations were used for water projects and separate funding sources were used for overhead. To build transparency, all projects were tracked on Google Earth, so donors could see how the work they funded was progressing. Harrison tells how his efforts led to surprising partnerships with companies like Saks Fifth Avenue and American Express as well as endorsements from high profile public figures like Barack Obama. At the time of writing, Charity: Water had provided clean water to over 15 million people.

Students have tended to find Harrison’s story compelling and inspiring for several reasons. First, he is a gifted speaker who captivates audiences by telling stories about real people rather than using statistics alone. Second, Harrison presents himself in terms students can recognize as wayfaring. He does not appear to hide the fact that he acted despite his own naivete. Many of his mistakes and unexpected successes are on full display, and his story connects the metaphor of wayfaring with the metaphor of seed planting. Finally, his story clearly shows how a project can quickly grow beyond the efforts of one person by highlighting the specific ways Charity: Water scaled up and out.

Student-Led Metaphor Work

The seed planting metaphor was taken up by students in interesting and surprising ways. First, it helped them address the asymmetry mentioned above, meaning the ease of imagining how our

individual efforts might doom the world and the difficulty of seeing how they might make the world a better place. Seeds grow and can become much larger than the person who planted them, as Harrison's story makes explicit. Second, and more surprisingly, students used seed planting as a vehicle for critiquing how I had constructed the course. This became clear in one class discussion in which a student claimed that if we need people to plant seeds for a good Anthropocene then we also need people who will water and tend them. As one student suggested, "Maybe not everyone needs to be a seed planter. Maybe not everyone should aspire to be a founder of an NGO. Maybe some of us can spend our free time supporting those projects." An organic metaphor helped us see that some of us can spend our time making things better by refusing to make things worse. An example is to engage in pleasurable activities that are high in meaningfulness and low in environmental impact, such as reading and thinking or walking in the park, activities that Cymene Howe, Dominic Boyer, and others call "low carbon pleasures" (Boyer and Howe, 2017). We can do less for a better Anthropocene while supporting as best we can the seeds planted by others.

This criticism is important because the course had required students to become founders of their own projects and try to advance those projects in the world. In line with a dominant neoliberal myth, my course had helped fetishize the social entrepreneur as the solver of our most important problems. Students had not raised this issue directly, but it grew indirectly and organically from our metaphor work as an entailment of the organic seed trope itself.

Finally, students came to ask which seeds we should plant. They noted that many of the innovative projects in the seedbank have originated in places and among people who have historically been marginalized. Perhaps the seeds we have been planting in what appeared to be the tidy monocrop gardens of modernity needed to be reconsidered. After all, if those projects had gone differently, we might not now be in such a mess. Is it not possible, even probable, that the ideas and projects (the seeds) we need to plant are the very seeds that seem to be out of place? Should we not plant and tend the seeds that have so far grown in the margins, in the cracks, in the disturbed soils of global industrialism? In following out these entailments of metaphor further, students began to understand anew the importance of a diversity of voices, ideas, projects, and approaches. They were also foreshadowing a new metaphor at the horizontal edge of the course: the hopeful tragedy of weeds. After all, what are weeds if not perfectly good plants growing where people do not want them?

New Horizons: Rethinking Hope through the Metaphors of Broken Jars and Weedy Invasions

It had become obvious in the first iteration of the course that coping with negative emotions linked to planetary crisis was important for a truly effective response. These emotions include guilt, grief, and despair, all of which can manifest themselves in various forms of denial (see Norgaard, 2011). From the second iteration of the course, students and I have tried to explicitly describe and share our own emotional responses through assignments like the Anthropocene Playlist (see below) and by reading and discussing the work of scholars and writers that directly

confront the challenging negative emotions planetary crisis can evoke, such as Karen Norgaard, Renee Lertzman, Mary Pipher, and Roy Scranton (see Scranton, 2015, 2018). In what follows, I will describe the Anthropocene Playlist assignment, discuss its successes, and talk about its inadequacies. I will then turn to what I believe is the emerging need in the course to begin explicitly working with new conceptual metaphors for hope in a time of planetary crisis. This metaphor work is at the horizontal edge of the course and has not yet been presented to students. As such, it is part of the preliminary work of revising the next iteration of the course.



Photo 3: Trevor Durbin and family gather with students to eat and socialize amid planetary crisis. Being together in gatherings like this have been an important way of coping with grief. (photo credit: Abigail Graham)

Grief and the Anthropocene Playlist

For several years, the Anthropocene Playlist has been a student favorite. For this assignment, they are asked to create a playlist of songs, including listening notes, that reflects their emotional journey through planetary crisis. As a way of raising awareness and building a sense of community, students are required to build their playlist with another person outside the class. This means they must practice speaking to others about planetary crisis. In class, each student presents their playlist and plays a selection of songs for everyone to hear and discuss.

Even more than the playlist itself, student reflections and class discussions about the experience produced important insights about the limits of dominant tropes for the future. For example, one student used the experience of creating a playlist with his father and a friend to question the need for optimism. He wrote:

After piecing together the playlist with the aid of my father and friend, for some reason I started to think about potential dangers of positive thinking. I deliberately placed some feel-good songs at the end to symbolize the liberation from trauma that comes with transcendence, but I'm not sure that optimism is always the correct answer. ... After all, we did absolutely nothing to actually help climate change, isn't the positive thinking a little out of place? There is a time for the optimism, sure, but there is also a time for dwelling in the emotions which come with the trauma of realism. In fact, I'd argue that the extremely negative emotions are the driving force for *doing something in the real world* and only after doing something should one honestly allow themselves to be optimistic about the situation.

Although this student believes that “doing something,” rather than doing less, is the only way to help mitigate climate change, he is anticipating an important critique about the inadequacy of optimism as a basis for hope in the Anthropocene. He is arguing, at least implicitly, that whatever hope we find, it must be grounded in reality. In this, he agrees with Lesley Head, who published her book *Hope and Grief in the Anthropocene* in 2016, the same year this student published his Anthropocene playlist. Head writes:

The argument I make about hope, and where it might be found, consists in decoupling it from the emotion of optimism. Hope savours the life and world we have, not the world as we wish it to be. (Head, 2016, p. 22)

On both fronts, Head and my student agree. Optimism is not an adequate basis for hope, and hope must be found in the world as it is, with all its tragedy and messiness. If hope can be understood as an antidote to grief and despair, then a hope adequate to planetary crisis must begin with an unflinching look at the realities that cause us grief and despair. What metaphors can help us with this daunting and apparently unpleasant task?

Hope in the Tragedy of Broken Jars

To start, I will look back to the case of Charity: Water as a seed for a better Anthropocene and the story of Letikiros, as told by Scott Harrison. I will quote the story at length from an interview he gave on YouTube:

I was with a few donors, a small group. I was sitting in the kitchen of this hotel, and the hotel owner walks out, recognizes me because we've been doing work in this region for a while, and just sits down and, unprompted, starts telling me a story about a woman who lived in his village, in a remote area, of about 3,000 people, and he said all the women used to walk for water for eight hours a day, and they would have these heavy clay pots that they would carry on their back and he said, “One day, one of the women in my village named Letikiros,” he had her name, “walks back into the village and she slips and

falls and she breaks her clay pots and all the water spills out into the dust,” and he said, “she hung herself, and she didn’t go back for more water.” He said, “We found her body swinging from this tree in our village.” ... Long story short, I went to the village. I lived there for a week. I wound up meeting the priest that gave her funeral. I saw the pile of rocks behind the church that was her grave. I met her mom. I met her friend that walked with her that day. I wound up writing about it on *Medium*, about the experience and seeing the tree. It’s kind of this frail tree, and I didn’t know before I went into the village that she was 13, so that was a huge shock for me. I was expecting an old lady, and I was kind of imagining this hunched 60-year-old woman who had walked for water her entire life; it’s a 13-year-old girl — a teenager. And I remember — all this through translators — asking her best friend why she thought she actually did it and hanged herself, and her best friend said, “She would have been overcome with shame because she broken the clay pot and she spilled the water.” (Charisma on Command, 2017)

When I first heard this story it sparked a vague memory of a similar episode, not from Scott Harrison but from E.E. Evans-Pritchard, a British anthropologist famous for studying witchcraft among the Azande in the Sudan. According to Evans-Pritchard, the Azande explained nearly all exceptional misfortune in terms of witchcraft (Evans-Pritchard, 1976). Witchcraft was understood as a psychic means through which ill intent toward a person can cause them real harm. For example, when an expert potter broke his pots, it was considered the result of witchcraft. Death, illness, and other misfortune was explained in this way. One striking exception, that Evans-Pritchard went out of his way to mention, is when a girl broke a water pot. He noted that “When a girl smashes her water-pot...they will be admonished severely by their parents for stupidity.” (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 29)

In the context of Scott Harrison’s story, this brief example takes on a new meaning. The broken water pot becomes a metaphor for utmost failure leading to despair and grief. Drawing on the work of Thomas Keating (2010) I call this “utmost failure” because one cannot escape the full personal responsibility for the mistake. Unlike a master potter who breaks his pots, no relief is found by transferring blame to a witch. The full consequences of shame are unavoidable.

In the utmost failure of a broken jar, we begin to understand what an adequate hope amid planetary crisis must be and must not be. First, hope must be found in the realities that are before us, including failure and tragedy. Hope without this unflinching look must be a form of denial. Second, implicit in this story is a subtle critique of the seed planting trope and any easy hope we may be tempted to find there. In the story of Letikiros, we see that we might plant and nurture seeds, that they may grow into trees, and that we might hang ourselves, nevertheless. We may fail, utterly and collectively. Hope must reconcile with this possibility. Finally, hope cannot include an “all’s well that ends well” attitude that accepts suffering as long as we eventually find our way to a sustainable future. The story of Letikiros continues, and Harrison tells how her village now has clean water. This, however, cannot minimize the tragedy of her death. In the case

of an adequate hope, the means cannot justify the ends. Both must be accounted for. Anything else, I believe, feels too much like denial and fantasy.

Hope without Optimism: A Lesson from a Marginal Parable

Hearing Harrison talk about Letikiros and re-reading Evans-Pritchard's account of a similar event led to another association, this time with Christian biblical scholarship. This is an unusual turn for me because I am not a biblical scholar. I have no expertise in the Christian New Testament or theology. My primary justification for continuing down this path is an appeal to a central course metaphor. I am wayfaring, and in doing so, I hold out hope that we might arrive somewhere different and better. I can also cite as precedent a key text from the course, "Love Your Monsters" (Latour, 2011) by anthropologist and philosopher of science and technology Bruno Latour. In it, Latour draws explicitly on the Christian theology of incarnation to craft a new way of talking about human care for, and entanglement with, technology in the Anthropocene. In the following sections, and akin to Latour's own metaphor work, I will use a religious conceptual domain to understand another: global ecological crisis.

Specifically, I will begin with a historically marginalized Gnostic Christian text called the Gospel of Thomas. In saying 97 of the Gospel of Thomas we find a unique parable that is not found in any of the four canonical counterparts. It goes like this:

The kingdom of the [father] is like a certain woman who was carrying a [jar] full of meal. While she was walking [on the] road, still some distance from home, the handle of the jar broke and the meal emptied out behind her [on] the road. She did not realize it; she had noticed no accident. When she reached her house, she set the jar down and found it empty. (Lambdin, 1990, p. 136)

Here again we have a woman carrying a broken jar, not water this time but meal, processed from grains that when planted and watered grow and when eaten as bread help others grow. Like the water carriers, a woman is holding the future life of her family, but tragedy strikes. The handle breaks and she does not notice. All is lost and, given the context of this story, it is suggested her family may starve. It is possible that ancient hearers of this story would have contrasted it with the story of Elijah and the widow, who fed the prophet from a jar of meal that miraculously never emptied. Instead, in this parable, no external help is given, neither from God nor anyone else.

This is utmost failure, but it was intended to be an illustration of a hoped-for future, the coming kingdom. Somehow, hidden in this wisdom riddle is a way of thinking about a kind of hope that refuses to turn away from the reality of tragedy, suffering, and pain. But how should we solve the riddle? Here I turn explicitly to biblical scholarship for help with planetary crisis. Afterward, I will re-turn to Lesley Head's work on hope in the Anthropocene. Both, surprisingly, reinforce each another.

In biblical studies, I draw on Bernard Brandon Scott's work on the parables attributed to Jesus (Scott, 1989). He argues that the parables we find in both the Gospel of Thomas and the canonical gospels are modes of cultural critique, emerging from the margins of society. In this view, the parables take the structure of myth and are built out of the same mythemes, or small meaningful fragments of myth. However, parables serve a different function than myth. While myths are ideological forces that help justify the status quo, parables are anti-structural stories that change at least one mytheme in a way that collapses the dominant narrative. Like stories from the margins of lived experience, parables spoke truth to power while providing a new way of viewing justice and hope. Unfortunately, according to Scott, the parables themselves have been co-opted by power and recast in mythic form, but that it seems was not the original intent.

Hope in Weedy Invasions

A good example is the parable of the mustard seed. Like several other parables, this one is about seed planting, a central metaphor for the course. These anti-structural myths draw heavily on the same organic metaphor of growing the future. According to Scott, a reconstructed version of the parable would go like this:

The Kingdom is like a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his garden and it grew and became a great shrub and puts forth large branches so that the birds of heaven can make nests in its shade. (Scott, 1989, pp. 380-383)

A modern and mainstream understanding of this parable, and one that is unhelpful, is that the mustard seed is Christianity that began small and then spread all over the world. This feels like a co-option of an anti-mythic parable by a dominant myth, and we will need to look for alternative explanations to find better ways of thinking about hope.

Originally, again according to Scott, the idea was nearly the opposite of this triumphalist interpretation. He argues that mustard, according to ritual law of the time, was prohibited from being planted in vegetable gardens. It was considered a particularly invasive weed. Instead, it was supposed to be grown in marginal areas where its spread would be kept in check. The mere suggestion of planting mustard in a garden would raise the question among hearers: Is the kingdom (our hoped-for future) grown from corruption and unlawfulness? In addition, the mustard plant is an inversion of a popular mytheme, the kingdom as a great political power symbolized by the massive Cedar of Lebanon that casts its shadow on the whole world. Instead, the good future will be much more modest, more like an invasion of that which does not seem to belong.

This reading helps cast light on the parable of the broken jar as our metaphor for hope amid utmost failure. The message seems to be something like this: The future we should hope for, if we saw clearly, will come from the margins, from the places and experiences we believe are corrupt, from the experiences we think of as failure, even utmost failure.

The suggestion that hope must be found in reality and not in our desires or ideologies sounds a lot like what Lesley Head and my student were saying. But the message becomes even clearer when Head turns to weeds themselves, in an entire chapter of her book, to better understand hope. In doing so, she contrasts how weeds are largely viewed in Australia, as a kind of living pollution that corrupts orderly nature, with the Swedish tendency to live with weeds. She says that in Sweden weeds are “plants growing where people do not want them, *for example in a garden or in a crop* [emphasis added], but they are understood to be part of nature” (Head, 2016, p. 116).

Here, Head could almost be quoting from the parable of the mustard seed! Weeds are designated as such because they challenge our attempts to impose clear cognitive categories on a complex and messy reality. The weeds are attempting to bring us back from our fantasies to a world with which we must deal. They are anti-structural and anti-mythical and, as such, they are attempts at healing. Head is clear on this when she writes that “Weeds may offer hope...in their capacity to be healers of broken landscapes” (Head, 2016, p. 127). When we disturb the soil, actually or metaphorically, it is weeds that invade to heal and bring hope. They are a salve of the Anthropocene.

This way of thinking about hope is certainly a departure from what many of us, including many of my students, tend to think. We often construe hope as a belief in the likelihood that what we think of as good will get better and what we think of as bad will diminish. This is hope as progress and is rooted in a feeling of optimism. If I must attempt to move beyond optimistic hope to one more adequate to planetary crisis, and at least one worth considering and discussing among students, it would be this:

The hope we find in the reality of broken jars and weedy invasions is more like the ability to act as if a better future can grow out of any reality, even our utmost failures, without diminishing or justifying the tragedy from which a better future might grow, and without insisting that “better” conform to our dominant conceptions of it.

Conclusions

I am not completely certain how I will introduce the hopeful metaphor work on broken jars and weedy invasions to the next batch of students. Likely, it will not be in the same form as what I have outlined here. Likely, as with previous metaphors, students will take these tropes in new and unexpected directions that anticipate what must be considered next.

I have reason for hope. Wayfaring has helped as a new conceptual metaphor for action and agency in relation to knowledge and education. Seed planting has opened our imagination to how our acts of wayfaring might make real and significant contributions to a better Anthropocene. I believe we can also learn to act without an optimistic hope, that form of denial that refuses to look for long at the tragedy of suffering and utmost failure. I also believe students are up to the task, maybe even more than many of their instructors.

By reflecting on its history, I get a palpable sense that this course has been thinking through us, myself and generations of students, to make known the lessons it would like to teach. I feel less like an instructor and more like a steward of memory, recording what has been done and thought and what has been tried with success or failure. As an experimental space, the development of this course has shown me that working within the confines of an undergraduate seminar need not be considered a second-rate way of engaging with planetary crisis. I have learned more from it about living in the Anthropocene than from any other source.

“Environmental Anthropology: Learning to Live in the Anthropocene” has become the name for a seed that was planted on November 11, 2014 by students who were troubled by planetary crisis and that I have tried to water and tend since. As a seed for a better Anthropocene, grafts and new generations of seeds are free to take and plant. If it feels to some like a weedy invasion from the margins, so much the better.

Acknowledgements

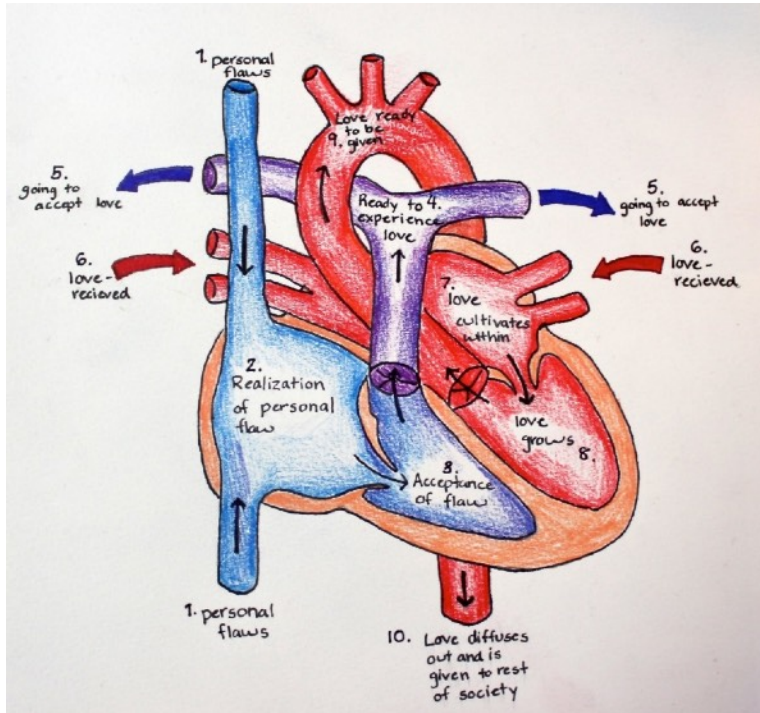
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