

Unlearning human-centrism: A bumpy road

What does it take for young people to become ecologically aware citizens? If you look at our university education, the answer seems to be that you have to learn ‘facts and figures’ about issues like climate change or pollution, and once you *know* what is wrong, you will *do* the right thing. Of course, that’s not how it works. Young people are aware of the urgency of current crises – movements like Youth for Climate and Extinction Rebellion get thousands of them out on the streets. Yet, asking the government to save the planet is one thing. Changing your outlook on life is another. And that is not what you learn in the groves of academe.

So we embarked on a mission to launch a Young Persons’ Guide to the Future (YPGF) as part of the ‘Transdisciplinary Insights’ honours programme at the KU Leuven in Belgium.¹ Our inspiration came from Martin Luther King: had he proclaimed “I have a nightmare,” he would never have mobilized the critical mass to uproot entrenched racism. Young people today cannot *imagine* a world without, say, fossil fuels, even if they *know* CO₂ emissions are killing us. They fear the loss of familiar lifestyles for lack of a ‘dream’ about a better future. So dealing with these fears and hopes is a crucial ingredient of education for a sustainable future.

The YPGF is conceived as a travel guide showing how beautiful, exciting and creative an ecocentric world could be. It is to depict all aspects of life at the destination: how you eat there and move around, what housing looks like, culture, nature, work *etc.* Like any guide, it is based on *empirical* input, evidence from places where a regenerative future is trying to emerge.

Ideally, the YPGF becomes a work-in-progress to which everyone can contribute, co-creating a future world vision within an ecocentric framework. Getting that framework clear was our first challenge. It was also the hardest part, for it involved unlearning much of what we had always taken for granted. Reflecting now on our learning pathway, we realize what a radical mind-shift ecological citizenship entails.

As a first step, we read about complexity and co-creation (Chapman, 2015) and about shifting from human-centrism to ecocentrism (Crist, 2019). Discovering that humanity did not regard the extinction of 6800 named apple varieties in the US as a problem but rather as an advantage was an eye-opener. Having no recollection of how much biodiversity there was two hundred years ago, our idea of the baseline has shifted, and we tend to think of biodiversity loss as ‘nothing serious’. We grasped how oppressive humanity’s relation with nature is, and felt the shock of what humans have lost along the way; we came to understand how all environmental problems boil down to anthropocentrism and ecological amnesia.

We discussed the history of the Viking and the Inuit in Medieval Greenland: two civilizations that held different visions about ‘what it means to be human’ and ‘how to relate to nature’. Inspired by those ontologies they developed strongly differing economies and technologies (Snick, 2020). It was staggering to learn that after about half a century, the Viking – whom we consider ‘more advanced’ – starved to death, unable to learn from the wisdom of the Inuit. Asking ourselves “are we wiser than the Vikings?” we understood the fallacy of a linear model of economic and technological progress. We started to

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understand the complexity that stems from the interdependence and co-evolution of humanity and nature.

We were delighted to learn about an emerging landscape of initiatives making peace with the Earth. Ecocentric innovations in agriculture, education, mobility and so on, are popping up worldwide; community currencies protect local economies against the toxic effects of a financial monoculture, and allow people to assign value to things that matter to them but have no utility for the ‘grand capitalist system’. These examples of human restraint and natural intelligence triggered our creative thinking. We started rephrasing daily news items through an ecocentric lens. When, for instance, Dutch farmers protested against environmental regulations reducing their profits, we re-wrote that as “farmers demand government support for agro-ecology and local currencies no longer forcing them to torture nature.” Our team became a safe space for discussing worrying issues: Do we really need to rethink our entire system? Should birth numbers be limited? These questions are so daunting that just ‘getting the facts and figures right’ does not equip us with convincing answers.

Inspiration also came from a workshop where academics, policymakers, NGOs and business people co-created a mapping of a financial ecosystem that supports economic transactions contributing to community well-being and restoring planetary health. We visited pioneers who experiment with regenerative practices, such as cooperatively owned zero-waste shops selling local organic food, and experienced how they make people happy by reconnecting them with nature and with each other. Gradually we learned to reject the notion that technological advancement is the way forward since that is like plugging holes while the wall is rotten. We no longer believe humans can solve environmental problems mainly through technology, taxes and regulations. What we need is self-restraint in human behaviour. We acknowledge that we can learn a lot from so-called ‘developing’ countries or

indigenous peoples that achieve well-being with an ecological footprint many times smaller than ours. We understand that our focus must be on scaling-down and pulling-back rather than on designing our way out of problems. What is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for humanity depends on how we define ‘success’ for our species. By collectively envisioning an ecocentric world – inspired by regenerative practices – our initial hesitancy finally gave way to an ‘attitude revolution’ from within.

One of the core aspects of a university education is, we are told, to learn to think critically. For over 50 years, scientists have warned against the environmental degradation caused by our economic and technological exploitation of nature. Yet, the university did not change course to safeguard young people’s future. Even today, academia remains embedded in a philosophy that implicitly teaches us that humans are apart from nature and that human progress is equivalent to our capacity to exploit and alter life on Earth. It offers students no space to deal with fears or hopes in the face of a daunting and uncertain future. Even now that we have crossed planetary boundaries and life on the planet is rapidly going extinct, the university still treats sustainability as a separate discipline or as an ‘add-on’ to the standard package meant to sustain our competitiveness by advancing green technologies.

The YPGF embodies a different approach to education. The pedagogical philosophy underlying this project is about connecting and fostering kinship with all species, in order to let all life flourish together. It gave us hope: tomorrow is not written, we can write it. What we remember most from the YPGF is how we arrived at this understanding; it has been and still is an ongoing process of attitude change, and we are sure it will have an impact on the rest of our lives. Of course, embedding this new philosophy in mainstream higher education may be challenging. Universities may, for example, refuse tenure to teaching staff who propose this kind of approach because, from the academic perspective,

they fail to reach the ‘quality standards’ imposed by destructive anthropocentrism. Perhaps honours programmes can serve as experimental spaces for an ecocentric education, where new models are tested by and for students looking for novel ways to make sense of life in post-Covid times. ■

Notes

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Series by Louisa Mahony

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From the artist: These paintings are all made in rural Ireland during a year-long stay. My first studio was a poly-tunnel, painting among plants. Now I have graduated to a studio partitioned from a cattle shed. The experience of making work within a rural community brings landscape painting near to discussion around farming sustainability and practice. The health of farmland, trees and landscape is in constant debate, whether due to climate change or methods of production. During lockdown I have been drawing outside and then painting in the studio. The trees in my vicinity have taken on a huge presence and more than stood in for human company. As my companions their shapes suggested bodies and their growth personalities.



Lonely ash
Oil on paper, 2020
100 x 70 cm