

## Educational Adaptations at the End of an Era

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How bad, how good does it need to get?  
 How many losses, how much regret?  
 What chain reaction, what cause and effect,  
 Makes you turn around,  
 Makes you try to explain,  
 Makes you forgive and forget,  
 Makes you change?  
 Makes you change?

—Tracy Chapman (“Change”)

To say that I “enjoyed” Bryan Warnick’s paper would be inappropriate, for the predictions of natural disasters, disruptions to food and fresh water supplies, and social instability as a result of climate change that he sums up are anything but enjoyable. I did, however, deeply appreciate Warnick’s frank expression of climate pessimism and despair. As figures of futurity, educators rarely permit ourselves such public displays of pessimism even if, I suspect, most of us privately know the feeling. For many who have lived in relatively affluent and stable regions of the world—with the exception, perhaps, of those whose religious upbringing involved a strong sense of impending end times—it is difficult to entertain the idea of societal collapse. Our minds just can’t go there. And yet, I agree with Warnick that we should make the effort to do just that. Not only because overwhelming intersubjective scientific agreement demands that we do, but also because the confrontation with the possibility of collapse does not need to lead to fatalism or nihilism but can open new possibilities for living and educating.

Warnick critiques three common responses to the climate crisis. The first focuses on survival skills and self-reliance, but is marked (and marred) by a strong individualism that, as Warnick points out, is not only unhelpful to the rapid social change needed but “might actually hasten the sort of social collapse

that we fear.”<sup>1</sup> The second response is one of *apatheia* and withdrawal, perhaps brought on by a paralytic terror in the face of the enormity of the changes needed. I must confess that I don’t meet many avowed Epicureans or Stoics in my social circles, so I cannot judge how many people yield to the Epicurean or Stoic “temptation.” I do meet a fair number of Buddhists, however, and they do not match the picture of withdrawal that Warnick sketches. In fact, there are countless engaged Buddhist communities around the world, whose engagement can be with social injustice, ecological degradation, or their intersections. The Buddhist cultivation of equanimity is not necessarily a form of disengagement or withdrawal, but can also be a way to sustain self and other in acting for the rapid social change needed.

The third response to the climate crisis Warnick critiques is an embrace of the joy and beauty of the present moment, akin to the Dostoevsky character facing the firing squad, or perhaps a patient with a terminal diagnosis. While a full absorption in the present moment can be seen as another form of withdrawal, and callous, hedonistic forms of present enjoyment (*après moi, le deluge*) are obviously problematic, I would argue that some forms of appreciation and even love for aspects of the present can actually be helpful in the “all-out climate activism” Warnick believes is the least bad option. Let me explain.

Warnick’s tone is similar to that of the Deep Adaptation and “collapsology” scholars, in that it recognizes the need for continued attempts to mitigate the climate crisis and repair damage that has already occurred, while at the same time acknowledging that significant suffering and turmoil will be inevitable.<sup>2</sup> Deep Adaptation rests on four principles:

- *Resilience*, understood as a society’s “capacity to adapt to changing circumstances so as to survive with valued norms and behaviours”;
- *Restoration*, understood as “people and communities rediscovering attitudes and approaches to life and organisation that our hydrocarbon-fuelled civilisation eroded”;
- *Reconciliation*, understood as learning to live “with each other and with the predicament we must now live with” as a way to “avoid

creating more harm by acting from suppressed panic”;

- *Relinquishment*, understood as “people and communities letting go of certain assets, behaviours and beliefs where retaining them could make matters worse.”<sup>3</sup>

All of these principles aim to balance a commitment to making changes over which human beings still have some control, with an acceptance of the need to adapt to changes over which control has already been lost. Moreover, the principles of deep adaptation are underpinned by three values that will benefit us in the present as well as the future. The first is *collectivity*. As Warnick argues, individual conceptions of survival and resilience are, at best, unhelpful and, at worst, damaging. Moreover, “climate activism” cannot be limited to changing individual consumption habits and reducing “private climate footprints.” Beyond that, however, collectivity also plays a central role in new conceptions of the good life that need to inform what Warnick calls the “Unprecedented Solution.”

The second value is *solidarity*. I agree with Warnick that climate activism must have a political edge in “pushing for systemic change.” This political edge is already clearly demonstrated by youth climate activists. Political solidarity with youth in their demands of intergenerational justice requires of teachers and other adults not just expressions of support, but “positive duties like social activism.”<sup>4</sup> The same is required for national and international political solidarity with those who are already living with, or fleeing from, the ecological damage and social collapse resulting from the climate crisis.<sup>5</sup>

This leads me to the third value: *integrity*. Educational responses to climate change sometimes take the form of asking how we can prepare young people to fix what adults have broken. This is, in my view, an entirely unacceptable approach, a disavowal of current adults’ responsibility to do what we can to fix things ourselves before turning the mess over to next generations. By “integrity” I am referring to the coherence and wholeness adults will have to develop between our actions and our teaching to enable students to “do as we do, not just as we say.” In other words, adults cannot just “baptize students into deep ecologies,” as Warnick puts it, if we have not yet been converted

ourselves. We will have to make drastic changes now to enable young people to experience alternatives for themselves or, to borrow Gert Biesta's phrasing, to enable students to "exist regeneratively and learn from it."<sup>6</sup>

Even after considering the option of "all-out activism," Warnick ends on a pessimistic and defeatist note: since "we have likely sabotaged" children's future, "we at least owe them the chance to find some peace amidst the ruins." I want to end on a slightly different note, one that is not more optimistic in its assessment of the current state of the world, but that aims to highlight how "peace among the ruins" can, itself, become a positive view of a new future.

Joe Davidson has argued recently for the political value of forms of the "social collapse thesis" at the heart of Warnick's paper and other work in Deep Adaptation and collapsology. Accounts of social collapse, writes Davidson, jar their readers into a kind of "cognitive estrangement," focusing attention on the untenable aspects of the current social order but also opening possibilities for seeing a post-collapse society as more than "ruins":

If the negative function of the societal collapse thesis is to disclose the inner destructiveness of industrial society, then the positive function is to demonstrate that there is nothing necessary about the latter . . . . [T]he gaze is opened to the range of societal formations possible once the ideological hold of industrial civilisation has been loosened.<sup>7</sup>

For many in the affluent global north, these societal formations will require radical shifts in our conceptions of the good life, so that relinquishment is not experienced merely as loss, but as the substantive ground of new forms of flourishing.<sup>8</sup> If "peace among the ruins" of an industrial era involves less growth but more basic livability, if it involves less private property but stronger collective ties, if it involves less extraction but more repair, it won't be such a disaster.

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## REFERENCES

1 Bryan Warnick, "Educational Temptations at the End of the World," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 2 (same issue).

2 The Deep Adaptation movement began with the publication of the first

version of the “Deep Adaptation” paper by Jem Bendell, a scholar in sustainability leadership at the University of Cumbria (UK); collapsology is mostly established in France and associated with scholars such as Pablo Servigne (biology/agricultural engineering) and Raphaël Stevens (environmental management).

3 Jem Bendell, *Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy* (revised 2nd version), July 27, 2020. <http://www.lifeworth.com/deepadaptation.pdf>

4 Sally J. Scholz, *Political Solidarity* (University Park: Penn State University Press: 2008), 60. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271056609>

5 Concern has been expressed about the dehumanizing language (including of “swarming”) used in alarmist predictions of migration. See, for example, Kara E. Dempsey and Sara McDowell, “Disaster Depictions and Geopolitical Representations in Europe’s Migration ‘Crisis,’” *Geoforum* 98 (2019): 153–160. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2018.11.008>

6 Gert Biesta, “How to Exist Politically and Learn from It: Hannah Arendt and the Problem of Democratic Education,” *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 2 (2010): 556–575. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016146811011200207>

7 Joe P. L. Davidson, “Two Cheers for Collapse? On the Uses and Abuses of the Societal Collapse Thesis for Imagining Anthropocene Futures,” *Environmental Politics* (2023): 14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2022.2164238>

8 This perspective is developed in Claudia W. Ruitenberg and Elisa Rathje, “Perceiving the Limits, or: What a Pandemic Has Shown Us about the Climate Crisis,” *Philosophical Inquiry in Education* 29, no. 1 (2022): 72–77. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1088385ar>