Climate Change:
Seeking better-informed dreams
Martin Mulligan, Globalism Research Centre, RMIT

Martin Luther King did not mobilise a mass movement by declaring: 'I have a nightmare'

Anthony Giddens, social and political theorist, 2009

O sighing at the blistered door, darkening the evening star
the dust accuses. Our dream was the wrong dream
Our strength was the wrong strength
Weary as we are, we must make a new choice
a choice more difficult that resignation

Judith Wright, *Dust*, 1946

Context and challenges

- **Climate change is an emerging reality not a future threat.**

- **Regardless of mitigation efforts, we are in for more frequent and more intense 'extreme weather events' for at least 100 years.**

- **We should learn more from the past summer of disasters and Black Saturday before that.**

- **Adapting to climate change will require major changes in beliefs, attitudes and practices at all levels of society. It cannot be left to 'experts' and 'authorities'.**

- **We need to focus more on the emotional or 'affective' dimensions of climate change adaptation, e.g. dealing with grief, fear and anxiety as much as possibilities, hopes and dreams.**

- **There will be disasters, losses, tragedies as well as inspirational responses and adaptations.**

- **Climate change overlaps with other global challenges, such as financial vulnerabilities, 'peak oil', the spread of pathogens, rising power and influence of China globally**

Opportunities

- **We are at a transition point in the history of humanity (note the work of Brian Swimme/Thomas Berry and book by Camilleri and Falk).**

- **We have new opportunities to heal the rift between humans and nature in western societies.**

- **Opportunities to re-emphasise human solidarity and forms of community that can operate at all levels from the local to the global**

- **There must be a certain 'relocalisation' of social life, potentially involving a rediscovery of places and landscapes. Yet we continue to be globally connected and can participate in a wide range of real and virtual communities.**

- **This is both a scary and exciting time to be alive.**

- **Like the Chinese, we should see 'crisis' as a combination of 'threat' and 'opportunity'.**

Shifts and transformations

- Climate change as a 'condition' to deal with rather than a problem to be solved

- Learn how to live with heightened levels of risk and unpredictability

- Focus on the journey rather than the destination. See my essay titled 'To Travel Hopefully' in *Arena Magazine* No 97, 2008 (from Robert Louis Stephenson quote)

- Shift the emphasis from science and technology to cultural adaptation

- Opportunities to 'reinhabit' the more-than-human world (Freya Mathews) and to 'bring the biosphere back home' (Mitchell Thomashow)

- A life of excess is palpably unsustainable and increasingly indefensible. So, what constitutes the 'good life', without compromising global equity?

- Identify and nurture 'practices of resilience' which can operate at the levels of individuals, households and communities.

- In the contemporary world we all have to create our own life narratives (Richard Sennett), which can become part of wider social or community narratives.

Creating community

- **Community is not a social structure but an aspiration; a desire for a secure sense of belonging in an insecure world (Gerard Delanty).**

- **Community operates at many levels from local neighbourhoods and networks to the nation as an 'imagined community' (Benedict Anderson) to global networks and interest groups.**

- **In the face of risk, insecurity, and trauma, projections of the identity of a local community can become backward-looking, parochial and divisive.**

- **Our post-tsunami study confirmed that there are 'fault-lines' in all local, regional and national communities which can open up under stress and when groups of people feel excluded.**

- **To avoid new tensions and conflicts in challenging times efforts must be made to create, and constantly recreate, inclusive and resilient communities at local and regional levels.**

- **Adaptive communities are multilayered and complex.**

- **Nikolas Rose has suggested that in the contemporary world, community is not the 'territory of government' but rather the 'means of government'**

A growing role for artists

- Artists can help people create richer life narratives; sometimes bringing these into community narratives.

- In the 'digital age', information, ideas and feelings are increasingly communicated through images rather than words.

- Exciting possibilities for using new 'social media' for creatively sharing thoughts and ideas related to climate change adaptation; eg YouTube.

- A big role for artists in exploring embodied and place-based relationships with global climate systems; i.e. exploring the emotional and 'affective' dimensions of climate change adaptation (see the work of Lesley Duxbury).

- The Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney is looking at the role museums can play in helping people and groups to grapple with climate change challenges.

- There could also be a big role for local and regional art galleries and arts organisations.

- Opportunities for climate-related community art projects

Challenges and opportunities for local government

- Under state and federal climate change response policies, much is expected of local government and of 'partnerships' between LGAs and local communities; some 'passing the buck'.

- Better to think that local government should be looking for ways to constantly build more inclusive and resilient projections of community at local and regional levels. Community development should be 'core business' of local government.

- It is popular to support 'model' design projects related to energy, water and food and these certainly have a role to play; however, they do little to address the emotional and 'affective' dimensions of climate change adaptation.

- Climate change adaptation strategies should aim to integrate action at the level of community in order to get beyond action at the level of individual households.

- Need to go beyond rather 'dispassionate' technical responses and support cultural action aimed at building 'practices of resilience'

- Diversity enhances adaptability and LGAs have a role to play in supporting social and cultural diversity within communities.

A few thoughts on resilience

- 'Resilience' has become a 'buzz word' with the effect that it is often used in loose and shallow ways.

- Resilience cannot be based on naïve optimism or forms of denial; rather it needs to be a pragmatic confidence in the ability of individuals and communities to overcome loss and adversity and sustain hope.

- Cultural impediments to resilience include: risk-aversion, a desire to find people to blame when things go wrong, and overconfidence in 'experts' and authorities.

- We found more 'resilience' among poor people who survived the tsunami in Sri Lanka and southern India than we would expect to find in most Australian communities; certainly there is less belief in the ability of humans to control nature's extremes, and this reflects cultural and cosmological differences.

- Increasingly, things WILL go wrong and we will all need community support to face the challenges that lie ahead.

An emerging area of work

- We have formed a new research 'team' at RMIT that includes a very experienced sociologist, with expertise in social movements and young people; an art practitioner/researcher; an expert on religious and cosmological responses to global challenges; and myself.

- One idea is to develop a travelling, interactive, art exhibition on people and a changing climate, if we can find the funding; a research project for us.

- Finding out about other researchers interested in cultural adaptation to climate change, as in the Centre for Cultural Research at UWS and a range of other people at RMIT (some of whom are at the annual VCCCAR annual meeting at Bendigo).

- Probably should work towards some kind of gathering, symposium, conference (or whatever)—perhaps in the second half of 2012--to share work on Art, Culture and Climate Change, with a significant focus on local government.

Back to where we started (and knowing it for the first time)

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Judith Wright, *Dust,* **1946**