

MIT Global Change Forum • Cambridge, MA • March 28-29, 2024

Confessions of a Climate Change Communicator

Can We Meet this Transformative Moment?

March 29, 2024

Susanne C. Moser, Ph.D.



Cliff Notes

- What kind of time is this?
 - The symptoms
 - The deeper pattern
- How have we tried to meet the moment?
 - 20 years of climate change communication
- What is needed instead?
 - Skills for a psychosocial transformation
 - Tasks of transformational engagement





The Symptoms: Planetary Melancholia

Networked emotionality:
Connectivity and Its Discontents

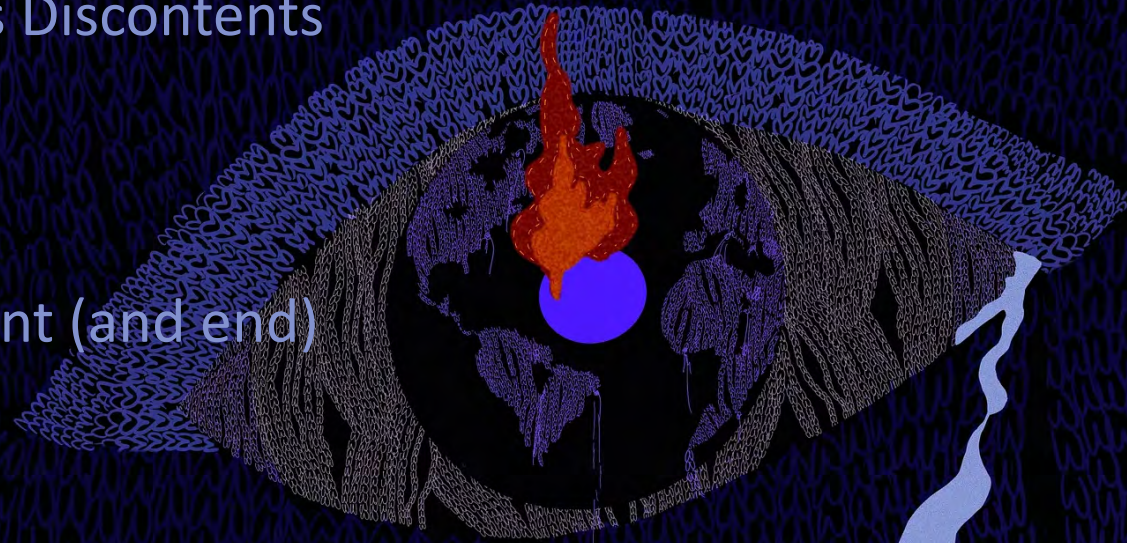
Transgenerational Trauma:
Ghosts in Our Bloodstream

Ambiguous loss:
Catastrophe without event (and end)

Anthropocentric Bias:
Planetary, Pain, and
Human Exceptionalism

Moral Injury:
Ideological Rupture and the Challenge to Self-Integrity

The Privilege to Heal:
Self-Care, Mourning, and Power

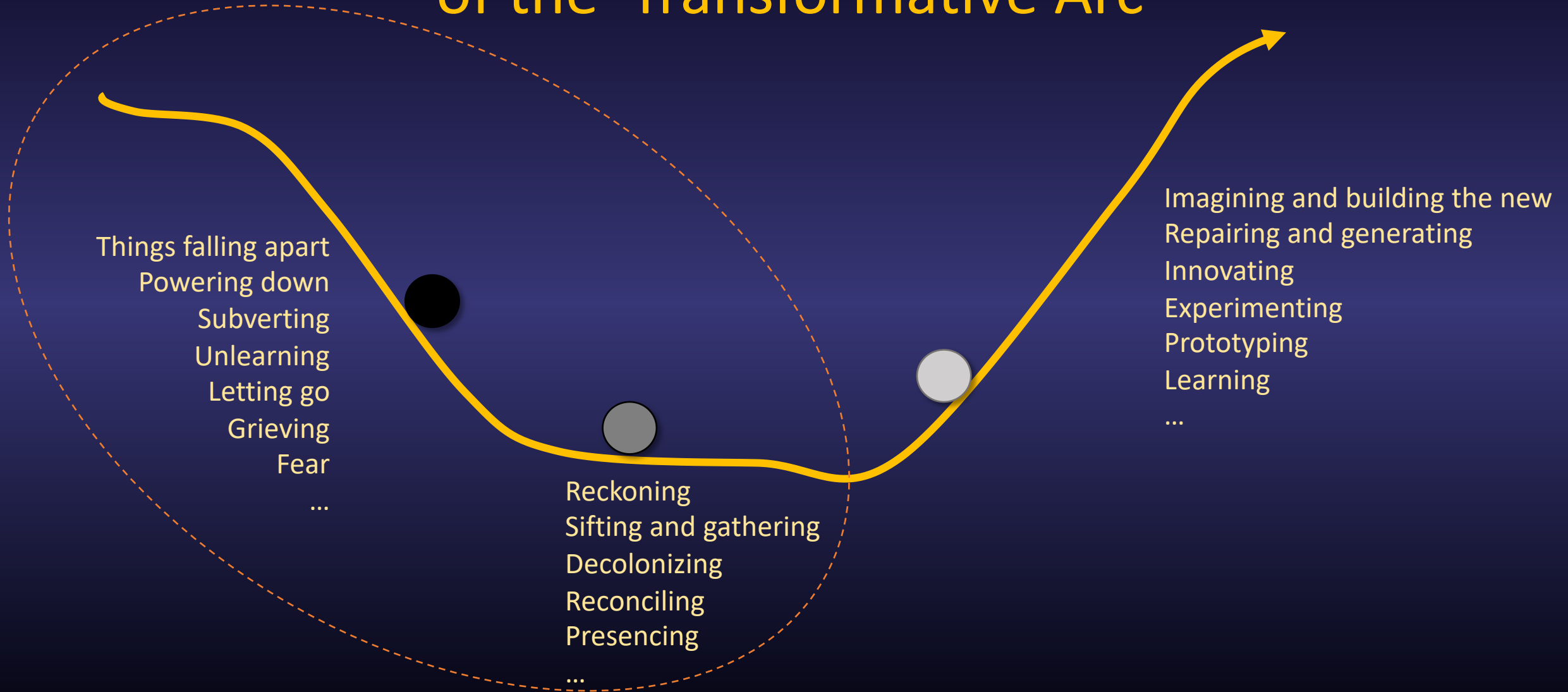


The Deeper Pattern: The Arc of Transformation

Crises of the old

A yellow line graph on a dark blue background. The line starts at a low point, rises to a small peak, dips slightly, rises to a second, slightly higher peak, dips again, and then rises to a third, significantly higher peak before ending with a slight downward curve. The overall trend is upward and fluctuating.

We Simultaneously Labor Along Different Segments of the Transformative Arc



Psychological Responses to Overwhelming Existential Threats/Fears of Annihilation

Inadequate/Unskilled/Trauma Response

- **Fight**
 - Hypervigilance and anxiety
 - Violence
 - Aggressive, exploitative behavior
 - Death threats to messengers
- **Flight**
 - Distraction
 - Denial and contrarianism
 - Escape into alternate realities
- **Freeze (and Flop/Fawn)**
 - Silence and avoidance
 - Sense of powerlessness, fatalism
 - Apathy and inaction
 - Blaming others, waiting for someone else to fix it
 - Complete shut-down, giving up

Constructive/Skilled/Healing Response

- **BeFriend (or Form bonds)**
 - Connect with others, build social capital, form social support systems
 - Face the threat together
 - Share feelings and stories
 - Use no longer suppressed energy toward learning and creative and strategic action
 - Support each other through difficult changes
 - Reconnect with nature (including one's own: i.e., the body)
 - Find or redefine the deepest purpose for living
 - Dedicate to something larger than oneself

You Don't *Message* Your Way Through a Transformation

You are in it...

live it...

feel it...

navigate it...

fight over it...

work it out and

create it together

But What Have We Tried?

20 Years of Climate Change Communication Study & Practice

- Communicating the science better
- Countering denial
- Moving from problem to solution
- Dealing with despair & fostering hope
- Reckoning with equity, simultaneity of crises and challenges
- Now: Skill building for the descent
 - Acknowledging the polycrisis, end of road
 - Decolonizing our minds
 - Facing existential fear/anxiety, grief
 - Courage and strength to feel
 - Finding our agency despite loss, failure
 - Empowerment
 - Endurance



It's a Tall Charge to Do It Better (Now)

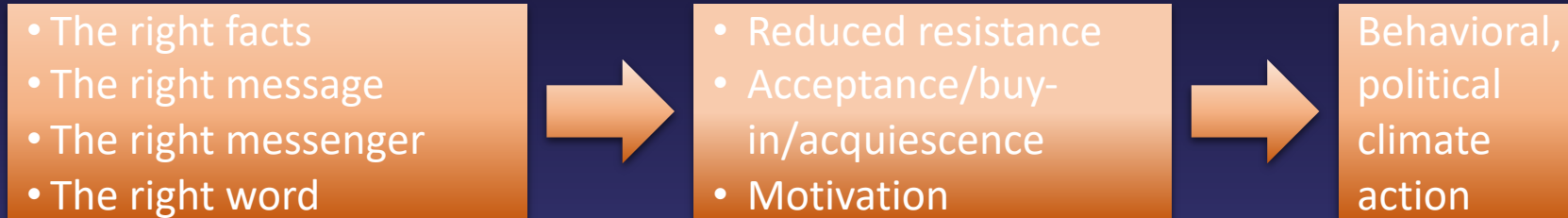
This means, we have to move:

- *from delivering unwelcome messages...
...to participating in **difficult dialogues***
- *from delivering scientific findings...
... to making a **human connection***
- *from thinking we speak only to the mind...
... to also engaging the **heart***
- *from merely giving bad news...
... to accompanying peoples' **emotional journey***
- *from triggering fight-or-flight (trauma response)
... to supporting healing and motivating **active engagement in creating feasible futures***



Traditional vs. Transformative Risk Communication

Persuasion model



Transformation model



The Skills to Build: Toward *homo sapiens sapiens*

Head – framing, learning, understanding, sense-making

Mouth – communicating, mediating, resolving conflict

Heart – feeling, clarifying values, connecting with others

Body – grounding, caring, resting, healing

Hands – defining action, amplifying, gathering assets

Feet – engaging; walking the talk

Soul – connecting with purpose, inner compass

Spirit – maintaining spiritual practices & connection

Different approach, different people/leaders, different goals

Thank you!



Susi Moser, Ph.D.

Email: promundi@susannemoser.com

Web: www.susannemoser.com

LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/susanne-moser-ph-d-8686943a/>

The Transformation Imperative: Facing the Scope of the Challenge Before Us

To reach the goals of the Paris Accord: 2°C (the 1.5°C goal is dead!)	To miss the goals of the Paris Accord: >2°C	To miss the goal of the Paris Accord: >3, 4, 5, 6°C
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Immediate “blood transfusion” of modern society• Fundamental restructuring of the globalized economy• Profound changes in people’s consumption thinking, behavior• Extraordinary demands on functioning institutions• Adaptation to “moderate” climate changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• More extensive climate changes and catastrophes• Steeper emission reduction efforts• More profound adaptation efforts• Profound losses• Geoengineering• Unprecedented political, legal and military complexity amidst growing destabilization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Extensive, rapid climate changes & catastrophes• Global shift in or breakdown of markets and production sites, incl. for basic needs• Massive migration of people• Attempts to adapt or mitigate increasingly failing• Unpredictable consequences of climate change and adaptation efforts in all areas and sectors of society

Full-Range Emotional Experience of Climate Change & Related Crises (incl. our policy responses to them)

Anger

- Agitation
- Unfairness/injustice
- Sense of exclusion
- Social tensions
- Resistance
- Non-acceptance
- Protest
- Loss of trust in stability
- Loss of trust in authorities

Defensiveness

- Polemic discussions
- Denial
- Resistance
- NIMBY
- Conflict/controversy
- Othering
- Rejection of the new/
unfamiliar

Post-Traumatic Growth

- Renewal and opportunity
- Relief
- Feeling lucky/blessed
- Embracing change
- Optimism
- Hope and empowerment
- Healing and reparation/restorative justice
- Giving a chance to/land back to Mother Nature
- Personal sacrifice for higher/communal purpose
- Finding/making meaning

Joy, Love, Care

Incl. love of place & of
community, care, place
attachment & identity,
pride, belonging,
security, positive/
negative history in
place; hazard
experience

Unresolved Trauma Experience

- Overwhelm
- Lack of control
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness/desperation
- Feeling trapped
- Fatalism
- Giving in/giving up
- Behavioral health issues (alcohol misuse, overeating, insomnia etc.)

Anxiety

- Unease
- Stress/tension
- Concern
- Worry & fear
- Guilt
- Being left behind/abandoned
- Feeling uprooted
- Need to go to/find a new place
- Uncertainty
- Disorientation
- Alienation

Grief

- Loss of place
- Loss of community
- Loss of connection to land/sea/species
- Sadness
- Nostalgia
- Broken heart
- Feeling hurt

Where Then to Focus?

- **Downstream:** Help people navigate and cope with constant, complex and chaotic change, uncertainty, destabilization
- **Midstream:** Support healing from and stop perpetuating trauma and pain
- **Upstream:** Become and help others become agents of transformative change



10 Tasks of Transformative Communication

1. *Naming and Framing the Depth, Scale, Nature and Outline of (Necessary) Change*
2. *Mirroring Change Empathetically*
3. *Fostering the Transformative Imagination*
4. *Helping People Resist the Habit of Acquiescing to Going Numb (rest, ease, joy)*
5. *Orienting and Course-Correcting Toward the Difficult*
6. *Distinguishing (and Deconstructing) Valuable (Un)Certainties*
7. *Sense- and Meaning-Making of Difficult Change through Story (not Facts)*
8. *Fostering a Challenging, Authentic and Radical Hope*
9. *Promoting and Actively Living a Public Love*
10. *Fostering Generative Engagement in Building Dignified Futures for All*

We Are Asking People to Make a Difficult, Treacherous Change



Source: Adapted from Webb (2008)

What would make you and your colleagues cross that bridge:

- Strong feelings (e.g., fear, dread)
- Clear assessment (e.g., no other option to be safe, dependable help)
- Motivating values (e.g., altruism)
- Incentives (e.g., your children on the other side, freedom from oppression)
- Social norms (e.g., seeing others cross bridge)

What would stop you/could get in the way:

- Strong feelings (e.g., fear of bridge failure)
- Clear assessment (e.g., no better on the other side)
- Disincentives (e.g., seeing someone fall in)
- Social pressure (e.g., important other(s) saying don't do it)

How to Foster Hope – In Yourself and Others!

“The adjacent possible”

Listen

Vision

Expand the circle

Invite creativity

Foster imagination

Set the bar high(er)

A Desirable Future

Agency
(Choice, Efficacy &
Action)

Talk about solutions

Show “how”

Tell personal stories

Teach/learn history

Illustrate effectiveness
of collective action

Encourage and empower

Stay nimble
Expect surprises

Track progress

Reflect & learn

Adjust strategies

Uncertainty & Change

Break down big goals into
smaller achievements

Make narrow goals bigger

Ask questions about
how change happened

Expect variation in emotions
(hope is NOT a steady companion)