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The Dramaturgy of Transformation

Contribution to GTI Forum [The Climate Movement: What's Next?](#)

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About ten years ago, Bill McKibben wrote, with near audible exasperation, “What part of global warming don’t we get?” As a dramatist trained in drama therapy and theater for social change, my immediate response was “What if the ‘part’ of global warming we don’t get is the dramatic part?” McKibben’s question was my cue to find the dramatic parts of the global emergency, climate crisis, and meta-tragedy of a great extinction. I offer some of those surprising dramatic parts in my response to the three questions. The climate movement has excelled at resistance but is missing a crucial, essential element: a focus on repair. It is clear about what it is against, but largely mum on a restoration project equal to the scale of climate change damage. Unlike the anti-war movement, it lacks moral and spiritual power. We are shown images of the beauty of the earth and the losses of the world we and our kin were born into, but mostly to awaken individuals to act. If you love this earth, the message suggests, you will change your habits and join the resistance.

What is the Climate Movement’s State of Play?

When I look at the decades of the climate movement from a dramatic perspective, I see climate activists, today, struggling to do the same thing the ancient Greek Tragedians struggled with, as they watched their leaders drive their empire toward a “tragic fall” of civilizational collapse: getting us to see how tragically we are acting and developing collective consciousness of a tragic reality, our part in it, and what to do about it. One formal definition of ancient Greek Tragedy is “a drama of cosmic death”; we are in one. The climate movement has set as its activist

mission to bring us through our “real life” drama of cosmic death, alive on a livable earth, and transcend a tragic fate of human extinction.

I see the climate movement “faltering” at this mission for two connected, dramatic reasons. The first reason is that there may very well be nothing as difficult as getting humans to get a tragic reality and our part in it. Reflexively knowing ourselves as tragic actors in life meets deep cognitive and emotional resistance at many levels and degrees. Cognitively, our minds insist we would “never be so stupid” as to commit the tragic folly of driving ourselves to our own extinction, as many in the climate movement say about human-caused climate change now, and as people said about using the atom bomb before. Then, the United States did. Emotionally, our hearts, souls, spirit, psyche resist at the deepest level of our beings that we are acting contrary to our universal human desire for the “motion of our lives toward happiness,” as the Dalai Lama succinctly and eloquently puts it. The human heart has a hard time accepting that we would actively “move” our lives toward tragedy, toward anguish, suffering, pain, loss, rather than toward thriving, flourishing, just, and joyous lives.

In short, both the human mind and the human heart struggle with the “tragic human identity” of becoming the one kind of actor in life none of us want to be.

The issue for the climate movement, here, is that a tragic human identity is implied in the climate science, a dramatic subtext, if you will, of “the science as the story.” Underneath “human-caused climate change” and “a great extinction caused by humans” is an unspoken dramatic subtext that moderns are acting tragically. Worse, the scientific story implies, if not states overtly, that we are the most tragic actors on earth, ever, causing a great extinction. We don’t like the “climate casting” the science gives us. We don’t want the role of the most tragic actors on earth, ever.

My Western cultural ancestors, and perhaps yours, too, did not want the part either. The Hellenistic Empire is on the list of civilizations that failed to survive collapse. The untold, dramatic part of this history is that, exactly as the environmental and climate movements are doing today, the Dramatists, then, dedicated themselves to figuring out the acts that have the dramatic agency and power to bring us thriving through a “drama of cosmic death” of the world as we know it. Thriving through a tragic fate and tragic fall into collapse. Hellenistic leadership

refused to do the acts, and chose to censor, criminalize, and banish the Dramatists into exile as enemies of the state, rather than make the dramatic changes to the militant, misogynistic, and environmentally catastrophic Hellenistic Empire necessary to thrive through their drama of collapse. Leadership, today, makes the same choice: criminalize and censor climate and environmental activists who, exactly as the Dramatists did, have dedicated themselves to figuring out the acts to thrive through this.

Why did they refuse? Why do they now? In a word: hubris. Hubris has far more dimensions than mere “pride” or narcissism. The dimensions of hubris important for the climate movement to appreciate are, first, that hubris “kills the tragic messenger” by denying legitimacy and a voice to those who speak tragic truths to power. Second, hubris was defined as insane, wanton, reckless action on a cosmically catastrophic scale. Of all the dramatic parts of our ecological crisis that have surprised me on my dramatic environmental quest, hubris formally defined as insane action that destabilized the (sacred to the Greeks) Gaian Balance, may have been the most surprising. What we call “human-caused catastrophic climate destabilization and disruption” the Greeks called hubris and insanity.

Third, hubris is a form of blindness; specifically, self-blindness, an inability to engage in reflexivity and Know Thyself as the tragic actor one is. Hubristic tragic actors—on the ancient Greek tragic stage, then; in the political theaters, now—“turn a blind eye” upon themselves, and do not see their own reckless, cosmically catastrophic action. The climate Denier and the current occupant of the US White House fit the role of the reckless, cosmically catastrophic, blind hubristic actor, who is the driver of collapse, to a terrible, perfect, tragic T.

Hubris as self-reflexive blindness is the dramatic reason that protest activism and making demands of global leadership has not, and will not, work for the climate and environmental justice movements. The human afflicted with hubris ignores anything the protestors say; insists the protestors are wrong and deluded, and that they, themselves, are in “the right” and “great.”

There is a specific strategy for dramatically effective messaging and a very specific type of story to tell, to overcome hubristic blindness and denial, and inspire action in and on unfolding tragic

reality. If the climate movement has fallen short, as many believe, the dramatic reason is that the movement has not used the only messaging and story strategy ever devised for overcoming hubristic delusion and denial, and inspiring action to transcend tragic fates and thrive through a real life drama of cosmic death—not yet.

Cue: Next Steps/Next Stage/New Story

The dramatic, activist strategy, story, and rules for effective messaging to overcome hubristic denial and inspire action were laid down by Aristotle in his *Poetics* about 200 years after the invention of Tragedy. Aristotle's standards for effective Tragedy-making presented in his *Poetics* was an effort to give the Dramatists a new, effective strategy for facing their tragic reality. It seems to have come too late in the game for ancient Greece; I believe it is not too late for us.

The reason for my optimism is that modern cognitive psychology and cognitive neurolinguistics strongly support the efficacy of Aristotle's strategy, and that strategy can help develop the language to build robust, effective social movements. It should work—if we use it, as the climate and environmental justice movements have not yet done, and may yet work, even at this late stage of the game, in the eleventh hour.

The three essential, core dramatic parts to this strategy/message/story are the following:

- Replace the *causal* frame of the “science as the story” and its dramatic subtext with a reversal frame. Drop “human-caused climate change,” and replace it with “Fossil fuels have tragically reversed on us, from sources of thriving to drivers of mass failure to thrive; from beneficial fuels to fatal fuels. Capitalism has tragically reversed on us from survival of the fittest to inability to survive on earth”—and so on, identifying and naming all the tragic reversals, which are happening, now, in the present, shifting the climate movement's focus on the future to a problematical present demanding action now. The key is to show and explain how the tragic reversals are happening to everyone, including the elites and the Deniers. These reversals put us all into “double binds” in which we keep trying to “make a living” from things that are—now—“making a great dying” of all life on earth.

- Then offer *liberation* from the “vicious cycle” of tragic reversals and double binds, as “what” acting boldly on climate change will give us.
- Use the actual theory of tragic fates, which was to transform tragic fates into eudemonic states of human Flourishment. The poet Robert Bly observed that all stories from the world’s mythopoetic story tradition teach us how to turn the “wound into the gift.” A “new climate story” needs to do the same, extending an invitation to turn the “wound” of catastrophic climate change, and the many wounds of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy, into the gift of creating a just and joyous, new global culture and planetary civilization. Reverse and transform the wound of climate change into the gift of *thrivegenic systems change*.

I suggest an additional strategy for the climate movement that pertains to the political language of today: a radical reframe of the climate movement into “a right to life” movement that takes the cruel misogyny of the war against women, and uses its meme of “right to life” against it, reframing failure to act on climate change as denying a right to life—or perhaps, even better, the “right to live,” for all humans already born and yet to be born. This radical reframe would, at the very least, change the political conversation from climate change, to human life, which is the shift we need to build a meta-movement.

Cue: Meta-Movement

The final dramatic part of climate activism pertains to the perennial GTI quest for a meta-movement. Humans have tragic dramatic potential, but we also have wondrous and wonderful, courageous and creative, resilient dramatic potential. Humans can act in ways no other species can act. Those wondrous, courageous, creative, resilient ways need to be awakened and activated on a global scale of all humanity.

The way I see to do that awakening and activating is with a powerful message about human *agency* and *opportunity*. Paul Raskin’s idea that we have been “rehearsing” for this present moment for all human history awakens a sense of agency. We then turn the “twelve-year window” the recent ICC report says we have into a window of opportunity to tap into the global

fund of “eudaimonic wisdom” about how to live, thrive, and flourish on earth as human beings. A global fund of knowledge and wisdom about human Flourishment. If we tap into this global fund, it will give us the dramatic agency we need to thrive through the worst tragedy in all human history, and do what hasn’t been done before: craft a *eudaimonic contract and compact* between all the world’s peoples for how to thrive and flourish on earth, now. To make the mission of a meta-movement seizing our once-in-humanity chance to craft a “Flourishment Agreement” for all humans on earth to grant human generations already born and yet to be born a right to life on this beautiful biosphere, that’s the mantra and meme for a meta-movement right there.

About the Author



Mimi Stokes is an award-winning playwright who focuses on the intersection of sustainability and drama. She is a certified practitioner of playback theater, an improvisational, story-based community building theatre method in which specially trained actors “play back” the real life experiences of members of a community, dignifying individual emotional truths. In addition to her work in theater, she has a background in gifted education and ecological curriculum theory, as well as training in foresight and alternative futures. She is developing *The Dran Model*, a drama-based theory and practice of cultural evolution and sustainable social change.

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