

University of Massachusetts Amherst

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Sabbatical Report 2018 - Climate Change Conversations in Libraries

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Sabbatical Report

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Introduction

This 24-week sabbatical (February 2018-July 2018) was a rare gift that allowed me to:

Step back. Breathe. Integrate. Experiment. Read extensively. Travel in liminal mind spaces. Sort through my too full plate, identifying possibilities. Focus. Savor spacious conversations with colleagues. Interact with public library colleagues. Graft budding projects onto foundational work.

The main themes of my sabbatical were: climate disruption, libraries as community hubs, building resilience, collapse and rebirth, mindfulness, conversations, transformational leadership, empowerment, and facilitation (particularly World Café).

For most of the sabbatical period, I participated in [CoJourn](#), an accountability partner program. My partner was a fellow graduate of the Conway School of Landscape Design. Using a shared spreadsheet, we set goals for each week, as well as for our year and our life. Each Monday we enjoyed our 30-minute peer coaching conversation via Zoom. The connection with Angela helped me manage my time efficiently, stay focused and not feel isolated during those many hours sitting at home writing and musing. She benefited from my support regarding her fast-growing ecological design and planning enterprise in eastern Massachusetts.

Training

The core of my sabbatical involved traveling to each New England State and training ~100 library professionals from both public and academic libraries. The trained was entitled *Facing the Future: Facilitating Climate Change Conversations in Your Library*. Dates and locations:

March 16th – Northampton, MA (including two MLS staffers)
April 10th – Middletown, Connecticut
April 24th – Marlborough, Massachusetts (including a library trustee, artist, and writer)
April 26th – Cumberland, Rhode Island
May 1st - Topsham, Maine (including staff from Cornerstones of Science)
May 8th – Hookset, New Hampshire
May 18th – Fairlee, Vermont (Vermont Library Association conference)

This experiential training guided participants on how to gather their communities to communicate about climate change/disruption/collapse while considering how to build a safety net of preparedness and psycho-social resilience. World Café was the centerpiece experience of each training. I first discovered World Café through the American Library Association's program [Libraries Transforming Communities: Models for Change](#). While I participated in various webinars, [World Café](#) is the model that totally grabbed my attention. In a convivial café setting (from 12-1000 people), participants are led in "conversations that matter." Moving from table to table, they answered carefully crafted questions such as, "What are some skills and resources (inner and outer) you could offer others in the event of a catastrophic weather event and/or social unrest?" Participants were also invited to doodle and write their thoughts and ideas on the white paper tablecloths. Taking up the tablecloths at the end serves to "harvest the collective wisdom" so that everyone can notice connections and patterns that emerged.

The productivity and satisfaction of the World Cafe model motivated me to take an eight-week, online course this fall through the Fielding Graduate University, training more thoroughly with Amy Lenzo (who led the original ALA webinar). In addition to hosting in-person World Cafes in the local community, I am also collaborating with Amy and others to host virtual World Cafés. My vision is to keep training librarians in this model as part of *Climate Change Conversations in Libraries* (see below).

Mindfulness practices were an integral part of *Facing the Future*, including walking a fold-out labyrinth. The training feedback form inquired about a "most valuable takeaway." A few examples:

"It was not what I anticipated, but I found it very fulfilling...Working with Quakers, I know the importance of quiet meditation in coping with our technologically enclosed world. That was a nice inclusion." — Public library director from New Hampshire

"The contemplative piece is important to both facilitation of the conversation and having the strength for the actual catastrophes. So, it's fully worth it to integrate them into programming." — Instruction librarian from Smith College

"As humans we are in this together. It's okay to feel the 'doom.' More importantly we need to act upon it to ensure positive results personally and in our communities." — Staff person from Maine State Library

“To ground myself and force my way out of my comfort zone for the greater good of bringing about climate change discussions/actions.” – Public librarian from Maine

“What I appreciated about your workshop was the focus on emotional responses and to use Donna Harraway’s phrase, ‘staying with the trouble’.” Academic librarian from Rhode Island

This [blog interview](#) offers more details about the training.

Following the training series, I created an interactive, online group using OpenUMass (a Moodle-based platform). There are 50 librarians subscribed to date. Training [resources](#) are kept updated in this space where subscribers can share their facilitation successes and questions with the group. I sometimes share the resource list with non-librarians. For example, I sent it to Jennifer Atkinson, Senior Lecturer, Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences Associate Director of the Pre-Major Program and Discovery Core, University of Washington Bothell. She is teaching a course on eco-grief and wrote to me, “I've sent your online resource [from Facing the Future training] to at least a dozen colleagues and students who've inquired about this topic. I'm so glad you created it - it's been a tremendous resource to more people than you know!”

The next phase of the project is already underway and sports a broader title, *Climate Change Conversations in Libraries* (C3L). This phase began when Chris Glass of Boston Public Library invited me to co-facilitate a talk for librarians as part of the first annual [Climate Preparedness Week](#) (CPW) in Metro Boston. “[Librarians, Climate Change and Community Resilience](#)” became a springboard for Chris and I, along with CJ Wong (a librarian at Merrimack College) to partner with the organizers of CPW, a group called [Communities Responding to Extreme Weather](#) (CREW). We are now working to mobilize libraries across Massachusetts to participate in the second annual Climate Preparedness Week (September 24-30, 2019). To motivate and support librarians to participate, we are offering a [webinar](#) through Massachusetts Library System on May 14, 2019. Other training opportunities are also in the works; I am building a Wordpress site as a landing page for the project.

Loida Garcia-Febo, President of the American Library Association, personally invited me to present a pre-conference at the annual ALA conference in June 2019. This interactive experience, “Climate Change Conversations in Libraries: Stabilizing Ourselves and Our Communities” will be in keeping with her wellness initiative in her presidential year. As part of the pre-conference, I will present Massachusetts as a model for building climate change awareness in library communities.

An exciting development just arose in January 2019 – an invitation to apply for a seed grant through [Resilient Thriving Communities Collaboratory](#). If successful, C3L will continue beyond CPW, offering the next round of engagement through a Just Transition frame (i.e. social justice figuring prominently in planning and implementation of events). We will also expand into New

England and beyond.

Conversations

Long conversations with colleagues were a vital part of my sabbatical experience. Sometimes I tracked the person down; sometimes they tracked me down. Immediately following each conversation, I typed up my notes as I savored the meaning of our exchange. Some examples:

- Grady McGonagill, Founder & Leader, Elders Climate Action Massachusetts – seeking opportunities to present in libraries
- Staffer from Yale Climate Connections – [podcast interview](#) which aired May 15th:
- Sarah Robinson, Co-founder of WeSpire -- creating a climate change communication hub and invited me to contribute
- Don Marshall, Suzuki Elders in Vancouver – seeking advice on convening a climate change conversation in his community
- Sarah Buie, Clark University, Convener of Council on the Uncertain Human Future – invited me to participate in a Council (which I did in Dec 2018 and Jan 2019)
- Eira Tansy, U of Cincinnati librarian – podcast interview for ProjectARCC
- Joy McNally, Union of Concerned Scientists librarian – informational interview about her job
- Joe Brewer, Change strategist/complexity researcher/cognitive scientist – informational interview about his work building resiliency hubs, including physical library collections
- Ellen Moyer, author of *Our Earth, Our Species, Our Selves: How to Thrive While Creating a Sustainable World* – overlapping interests
- Heather Diaz, librarian at Forbes Library, Northampton – seeking support in writing a climate change grant program.
- Carolyn Baker, author of *Collapsing Consciously: Transformative Truths for Turbulent Times* – coaching session to support my communication about climate change
- Les Cook, Vice President for Student Affairs and Advancement, Michigan Technical University -- seeking connections for his research leave centered on contemplative practices in higher education
- Long-time acquaintance – eager to tell me about her climate change skepticism and concerns about public libraries offering a climate change program (i.e. whether the perspective would be balanced and welcoming to all)

Contemplation-Mindfulness

To support my stepped up leadership training role, I enrolled in a six-month online course, [Meditate and Mediate: Developing Presence, Resolving Conflicts, Inspiring Change](#). Thomas Hubl and William Ury, two globally recognized experts, led ~400 virtual participants from

around the world in lessons on psychology, human development, collective healing, mediation, negotiation, and conflict resolution. The class sessions and online discussion groups spoke to the need for transformative leadership, risk taking, and vulnerability in the face of these uncertain times of climate chaos and social churning. Some learning outcomes for me were: examining the interconnectedness of world events and my inner experience; understanding the influence of collective and intergenerational trauma in perpetuating conflict and how to begin healing; mapping my social environment to better see the real influences in my personal community; assessing social technologies in relation to global change and as a mirror for spiritual competencies; and exploring the collective emergent future through the potential evolution of human consciousness.

During the sabbatical period, I co-wrote (with Jonathan Crowley, Regional Development staffer) a Campus Climate Improvement Grant and was awarded the full \$2,500 to run an eight-week series at the Du Bois Library, *Mindfulness for All*. I developed materials and co-coordinated the facilitators for the highly successful fall series, leading two of the sessions myself.

As a collegial offering, I brought my fold-out labyrinth to the library staff at Amherst College and the Jones Library. A few quotes from participants:

- “This was the cherry on top of my day...You should bring this to Washington DC. We need this now.” Then she pondered about building a labyrinth on the property or a park downtown.
- “We should do this here once a month...our work life is so chaotic.”
- “The town offers some stuff but nothing specifically for US.”
- “I could really feel my feet. If I weren’t on the clock, I would have gone slower.”
- Her: “This is a perfect day for it.”
Me: “Seems like people are really frazzled here today.”
Her: “It’s the whole world” (shaking her head).

In June, I attended a three-day silent retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. The experience deepened my practice and exposed me to expert teachers, Michelle McDonald and Jesse Maceo Vega Frey. Regular meditation practice strengthens my concentration, increases my productivity (“A relaxed mind is a creative mind”), reduces my stress levels and expands my compassion for myself and others.

Publications

Writing took up a significant portion of my sabbatical time. *Going Green* was already underway. However, *Recipes for Mindfulness* sprung up unexpectedly and I just could not decline such a ripe opportunity. The ACRL chapter was a very rigorous editing process, including multiple peer editing sessions via Zoom. I learned so much about authorship and the publishing world! The experience also helped prepare me for my current involvement with the *Open Textbook Network*.

- Co-editor, *Going Green: Implementing Sustainable Strategies in Libraries Around the World* (De Gruyter, October 2018). With Petra Hauke and Harri Sahavirta. Includes a co-authored chapter, with Jenny Colvin “Contemplative Pedagogy: Building Resilience in Academic Libraries.”
- Co-editor, *Recipes for Mindfulness in Your Library: Supporting Resilience and Community Engagement* (ALA, forthcoming, Spring 2019). With Richard Moniz and Jenny Colvin.
- “Facing the Future: Facilitating Climate Change Conversations in Libraries (A Sabbatical Training Adventure).” Chapter in *Libraries Promoting Reflective Dialogue in a Time of Political Polarization* (ACRL, forthcoming, Spring 2019).

Conclusion

My sabbatical allowed me to strongly reinforce and build on what I already knew to be true about libraries functioning as community hubs and transdisciplinary spaces. In particular, libraries are well positioned to play a crucial role in preparing our communities for unprecedented physical, mental and spiritual challenges in the Anthropocene. The UMass campus incubator [Talking Truth: Finding Your Voice Around the Climate Change Crisis](#) provided an excellent jumping off point for the training series and my ability to communicate effectively with Facing the Future trainees. I want to express my gratitude to my *Talking Truth* co-founders, Lena Fletcher (Environmental Conservation) and Kris Nelson (Community Engagement and Service Learning) who linked arms with me, braving the uncharted territory of exploring authentic emotional responses to climate chaos in an academic setting. It is this kind of vulnerability that is, I believe, an imperative step toward creating a just, regenerative world that is habitable for all living beings.

Images (permission granted)



Maine librarians engaging in World Café



Rhode Island librarian perusing training resources; World Café harvest seen above



Walking the fold-out labyrinth in Vermont