



# FROM OVERWHELM TO ENGAGEMENT

Dr Chris Johnstone describes how to face the reality of our environmental crisis and turn shock and fear into positive, psychologically balanced action.

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**W**hen confronted with issues like climate change, peak oil or mass starvation, it is easy to feel overwhelmed. How can we find our power to respond to such huge problems? For nearly twenty years, I've been running workshops to help people strengthen their capacity to address the alarming realities of our world. I've trained and worked closely with U.S. author/activist Joanna Macy in this; I also draw on my experience as an addictions specialist and as a teacher of positive psychology. This article introduces five principles I've found helpful in promoting empowered responses to global concerns.

## INSPIRATIONAL DISSATISFACTION

When you encounter disturbing information, it's appropriate to feel disturbed. Our emotional reactions alert us to potential threats and are part of what motivates us to respond. But what happens when the problem is so vast that any response seems insignificant? Feelings of defeat or hopelessness may lead to paralysis and dependency; as a result, issues like these can become difficult to look at.

In my addictions work, my clients may also feel overwhelmed when facing difficult realities. Drink or drugs are attractive because they provide a temporary escape. But when problems are hidden from view, they often return with interest, thus creating a vicious cycle.

The more someone blots out disturbing realities, the more they pile up, and the more difficult to face they become. This downward spiral is unsustainable; eventually it crashes into crisis.

A turning point in addictions recovery is *hitting bottom*. Someone feels so dissatisfied by the way their life is working out that they make a deep-seated decision to change. Feelings of alarm about our world situation can be thought of in a similar way – they can provide the *inspirational dissatisfaction* that motivates us to respond. Feeling horrified or infuriated about an issue can be what starts the story of finding an empowered response. The next principle helps here.

## DRAW INSPIRATION FROM ADVENTURE STORIES

Many epic adventures share the same basic plot: a community is threatened by an overwhelming adversary, and, in spite of massively unfavourable odds, the central characters rise to the challenge of responding. Stories like this have been told for thousands of years, not just for their entertainment value, but also because they teach important lessons about how we find our power to face difficulty.

At the beginning of the story, the central characters usually appear underpowered for the job. Frodo and Harry Potter both seemed unlikely heroes at first. But the journey of facing their challenge is what strengthens them.

They learn new skills, find new friends and are helped by allies along the way. It is similar with global issues. If what we face seems beyond our power to influence, think of ourselves as at the beginning of the story. The first part of the adventure involves searching out the understandings, allies and strategies that will support our empowered response.

In the mythical view of things, encounters with obstacles are seen as part of the journey. The way forward may be blocked by a three-headed troll, haunted forest or vast mountain range; mythologist Joseph Campbell referred to these as *threshold guardians*. We too will face seemingly impossible barriers, but when we think of them as expected features of our adventure, we're more likely to engage in the search for a way through. The next principle can help with this.

### 'WHAT' COMES BEFORE 'HOW'

Have you had the experience of learning to do something that previously you'd thought of as impossible? Break-throughs often appear unrealistic before they occur; what they break through is our earlier limited assessment of what we thought could happen. If you bump into the threshold guardian of disbelief, where you hear the voice that says, "*it's just not going to happen*", remember Lord Kelvin. He was the distinguished scientist who, in 1895, declared, "*heavier than air flyer machines are impossible*".

An important principle in creativity is *what* comes before *how*. First we identify what we want to do, then we begin the journey of finding out how to do this. If we dismiss our vision of what we want because we can't immediately see how to do it, we stop ourselves ever finding a way. That is why I like the idea of seeing our lives as an adventure story. When we set out on a quest, the goal might initially seem unrealistic, but that doesn't stop us. We recognise that things often seem impossible when we can't see how to do them, but if we begin the process of searching for a way, we're more likely to find one.

### LET A LARGER STORY ACT THROUGH YOU

If you look at a newsprint photo through a magnifying glass, all you see are tiny dots. But if you step back and look at the picture as a whole, a shift in level occurs and the image emerges. When we are just a small part of something larger, we are like one of those tiny dots.

As an individual dot, it can be difficult to appreciate that something vaster is going on. But the bigger picture we are part of is more than the sum of its parts. Lots of tiny seemingly innocent activities can act together with vastly destructive effects. Climate change is an example. The other side of this is that positive shifts are also based on an accumulation of actions that might seem insignificant when looked at by themselves. Larger changes happen through smaller ones. When we recognise this, we see the power in all the small steps we take.

Our challenge is to find ways for the story of earth recovery to be expressed through us. The exercise in the box is taken from my book *Find Your Power*, and it can support this process. It applies the technique of *Imaginary Hindsight*. First you identify what you'd like to happen and then you imagine yourself in that desired future. From this visionary perspective, you look back

in time and tell the story of how the change you want occurred. Research has shown this to be an effective planning tool. You can use it for giving up smoking, losing weight or making business decisions. You can also use it as a way of identifying steps towards a better world.

### MAKE IT ENJOYABLE

If working for our world is seen as all about sacrifice and duty, in a way that leads people to deny their needs, then it won't be sustainable or attractive. I like the idea of *beautiful action* that meets personal as well as planetary needs. If there is to be a Great Turning towards a life-sustaining society, we need to design an approach that makes this enjoyable. What would make people really delighted that they'd come to a meeting or were involved in a project?

At the moment, addressing global issues is not the massively popular activity it needs to be. But this can change. Permaculture promotes the design of systems that sustain themselves. Developing an approach that is enjoyable can help make this particular adventure one that more people want to become part of. It will also help us keep active in it for longer 🌍

*Chris Johnstone is author of Find Your Power; Nicholas Brealey Publishing; price £12.99 is available from PM's Earth Repair Catalogue. His free email newsletter The Great Turning Times focuses on how we find our power to respond to global issues, see: [www.GreatTurningTimes.org](http://www.GreatTurningTimes.org) for details.*

*Information about Chris's courses can be found at: [www.chrisjohnstone.info](http://www.chrisjohnstone.info)*



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### TRY THIS

#### TELLING THE STORY OF THE GREAT TURNING

Using the power of your imagination, time travel in your mind to a make believe future 400 years from now. In this version of events, humanity has found a way through the difficult challenges it faced. The climate has stabilised, people no longer starve and we have learnt to live in balance with our world. Look around you, see what this world looks like, imagine that you are really there.

A small crowd gathers around you, as you are the storyteller-historian. They are interested in what you have to say. "Tell me about the Great Turning," one of them asks, "tell me how they turned things around". You know the historical period they are referring to: the early twenty-first century. The first thirty years of this was a crucial turning point in human history. Tell them what happened. Let your account begin at the point where it may all have seemed impossible.