

Building a larger us: five questions for change-makers

Alex Evans



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Summary

This guide is for you if you want to help bring about positive change in the world – but by bringing people together, not by dividing them.

Not as a them-and-us, but as a larger us.

Because as we navigate a time of deep crises and great opportunities, a lot depends on who is and isn't included in our idea of 'us'. Of course, we see our families and friends as part of 'us'; maybe our immediate communities too. But what about beyond that?

Think about everyday life – when we encounter a homeless person, say, or someone who comes from a different race, social class, sexual orientation, political position, or religion. Do we instinctively see them as part of 'us'? Or do we cast them as 'other' in our minds; as part of a 'them'?

When we watch the news or scroll through social media, do we see people who live in places like Russia, Iran or North Korea as part of 'us', or as a separate 'them' with whom we have nothing in common?

And at election time, as we decide how to cast our votes, are we thinking about an 'us' that only goes as far as 'people like me'? Or a 'larger us' that encompasses even people who disagree with us, and people on the other side of the world whom we've never met?

As all of these examples show, the question of whether to see ourselves as part of a larger us or a them-and-us may start in our minds, but it doesn't end there – because it shapes how we act, whether as campaigners, as citizens, or simply as humans.

I've thought about these dilemmas for a long time. I've worked in and around politics for the best part of two decades – as a campaigner working on issues from human rights to tax havens, as a think tank researcher in the US and the UK, as a political adviser to two British cabinet ministers, and as an expert on climate change in the UN Secretary-General's office.

The more I've worked inside the political system, the more I've realised how much the 'political space' that politicians work within is determined by the beliefs, behaviours, and votes of millions of ordinary people. In particular, I've become fascinated by how psychology affects how we show up as citizens. Whether we feel disconnected or like we belong. How we respond when we feel threatened. How we behave in the midst of a crisis, and cope with feelings of loss. The collective stories that we tell each other, and how those stories shape our behaviour.

And I've also realised how our work as change-makers can affect how other people feel – something I became especially uneasy about when I was running a national campaign on Brexit in the UK. I became acutely aware of the septic wound that seemed to have opened up in our politics, and uncomfortable at the thought that my work wasn't doing anything to heal it, and might even be contributing to it. Which is why, in 2018, I set up what's now [Larger Us](#).

Larger Us is a community of people who share the aim of bridging divides rather than deepening them, who want to transform relationships rather than defeat enemies, and who recognise that achieving these things is about psychology as much as politics.

The kind of people who make a point of recognising the humanity in 'the other side', and what motivates them to act as they do. Who are able to listen and reach out beyond our 'home base' of people who think the same way as we do, and who recognise and act on the psychological inner work needed to do this emotionally demanding kind of work in the world.

This isn't about whether we identify as 'progressive', 'liberal', 'centrist' or 'conservative'. Across all of these categories, there are people who share values of justice, kindness, wisdom, and care for the world and its inhabitants – and who refuse to see 'victory' as meaning that someone has to lose.

We also don't just mean people who do this work as their day jobs – who work at charities or foundations, who influence the opinions of thousands or millions of people on social or news media, who run election campaigns or hold elected office. We mean everyone who's trying to be a change-maker for the common good: volunteers, organisers, neighbours, citizens.

At our best, we can help to enlarge people's 'circles of compassion', nudging them to see themselves as part of an 'us' that includes not just people we've never met, other species, and future generations of both, but also – closer to home – people who may passionately disagree with us, or whose views we may find abhorrent.

But if we're not careful, we can also end up doing real harm. We may find that using polarising tactics fires up our opponents as much as our supporters – and that the result can be 'mutual radicalisation' that prevents transformation on shared issues, and instead leads us into extremes of division and fear of 'the Other'.

So how can we be the kind of people that both appeal to and help to create a larger us, rather than a them-and-us? That's what this guide is all about.

Throughout, we'll see how change-makers have particular power to affect how others perceive the world and react – and how we can use that power for good or ill. In particular, we'll look at five questions for change-makers that can have a pivotal impact over whether we and the people we communicate with fragment into a them-and-us, or come together as a larger us.

1. How can we build belonging? Loneliness and disconnection have political as well as personal impacts; and the need that we all share to feel like we belong can be exploited by extremists and others who prosper from fear and division. But we as change-makers can do a lot to build belonging through our work – the kind of belonging that includes and welcomes in, rather than defining itself in terms of who is left out.

2. How can we bridge divides? Political divides can flourish in our psychological and social blind spots – like when we fail to recognise and correct for our innate in-group bias, or ignore how homogenous our social groups have become and how vulnerable that leaves us to 'othering' people who are not like us. But as change-makers, we have huge opportunities to bring the power of encounter to the heart of our work, for instance in 'courageous conversations' that bridge divides.

3. How can we appeal to love not fear, especially when we feel threatened? 'Fight-flight-freeze' responses make us less empathetic and more anxious, overwhelmed, or aggressive – and can be

activated by social or political issues, as well as by our own work as change-makers. But we can also defuse fight-flight-freeze in our own minds, responding instead with self-awareness and critical thinking – and support collective ‘tend and befriend’ responses through our work.

4. How can we help people navigate loss and trauma? Experiences of collective trauma and shared loss can become central to group identity, leaving societies open to manipulation by destructive leaders. As change-makers, there’s a lot we can do to support people through periods of crisis, through bringing people together, holding space for mourning or remembering, or using crises to help build a sense of agency and purpose.

5. How can we tell stories that bring people together? Shared narratives have huge power to become self-fulfilling prophecies – and a lack of shared myths can be exploited by people peddling narratives that divide us rather than bringing us together. As change-makers, we have great opportunities – and responsibilities – to tell the right kind of stories. Stories of a larger us, a longer now, and a different good life; or deep shared stories about what is being revealed, what needs to be healed, or what is potentially trying to be born.

It’s striking to see how much actors who thrive on division – authoritarian populist leaders and extremist networks; trolls and conspiracy theorists; tech or media companies seeking to monetise our attention – can thrive from answering these questions negatively in ways that trigger fear or division. Loneliness and disconnection, fear of the Other, fight-flight-freeze threat responses, unresolved feelings of trauma and loss, and lack of shared stories provide vast opportunities for them. The last decade has shown vividly what can happen when they are given free rein to feed on these opportunities.

For us as change-makers, it can be tempting to meet fire with fire, and respond to division with divisive tactics of our own – especially when we ourselves feel threatened or burned out, or when the human impacts of the ‘long crisis’ we’re living through are in our faces 24 hours a day on the news media, in our social media feeds and in the culture in which we live. And as we’ll see, many respected campaign veterans like Saul Alinsky argue that polarising debates is a necessary precondition to changing the game.

But using that playbook comes with real risks and costs, as we’ll explore. We may find that our polarising tactics fire up our opponents as much as our supporters, amplifying cycles of mutual radicalisation that push our politics away from the possibility of new consensus and towards extremes. Although we may be seeking to use our influence to expand people’s ‘circles of compassion’, the tactics we use may have the opposite effect.

And there is an alternative that works.

As we’ll see throughout this guide, there are plenty of real world examples of ‘larger us change-making’. You may be one of the people already pioneering such approaches. And in the chapters that follows, we’ll see many more of them: from breakthrough election campaigns in Australia or Turkey to the African American blues musician who’s persuaded 200 white supremacists to leave the KKK, and from the migration activists winning over Members of Parliament with the raw power of their personal stories to the climate campaigners building surprising alliances with oil sector workers.

Instead of fighting endless them-and-us battles, it's possible to subvert and change the game towards a larger us, in terms of both the ends we seek and the means we use – through creating belonging, building bridges, appealing to love not fear, helping people to navigate loss and trauma, and telling stories that bring us together rather than dividing us.

This is complex territory. But the more of us searching for ways forward, the more chance we have of finding them – and of building the kind of community that can live those answers out.

Which is why, throughout this guide, we'd love you to join the conversation and say what you think – where you agree, where you don't, how the issues explored here have shown up in your own work. Above all, you're warmly [invited](#) to join the Larger Us community, and find others who are also holding these questions in their lives and work.



**Why do we need
to become a
larger us?**

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How big is 'us'?

The defining political issues of the 21st century are challenges where success depends on our ability to act together, and where fracturing into a 'them-and-us' dynamic can prevent us from achieving the breakthroughs we need.

All of us are living through a time of huge shared challenges. Both global ones, like climate change and refugee crises, and local ones, like community cohesion or child poverty.

They're the kind of challenges that defy easy answers or neat solutions, where our beliefs and behaviours can have a huge impact – both through the actions we take in our everyday lives, and through shaping how we act as citizens. Because even as these challenges affect us, we affect them too.

More than ever before, our everyday decisions have impacts that ripple far beyond us. How often we fly or eat meat. Whether we wear masks or get vaccinated. How we treat people who are different from us. The content we share online. Whether we listen to people or 'call them out'. And, of course, how we vote.

As we all navigate these challenges, a lot depends on who is and isn't included in our idea of 'us'.

The need to see ourselves as part of a larger us is nothing new. It's at the heart of all of the world's great religions, or the ['Golden Rule'](#) of treating others as we would want to be treated. It's about the moral work of thinking beyond ourselves, even – in fact, especially – when it's uncomfortable, or when it's about how we relate to people we find annoying or even hateful.

Albert Einstein once [wrote](#) that our delusion of our separateness from each other is “a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

In some ways, that's just what we've been doing for as long as we've been around as a species. The whole story arc of human history is a story of how we've connected and identified with a larger and larger 'us' – from tribes to nations, villages to megacities, hieroglyphs to html, all the way up to today.

Now, fifty years on from the first photograph of Earth from space, we find ourselves in a critical, liminal time when the ['long crisis'](#) of the early 21st century challenges us to expand our circles of compassion to an 'us' that encompasses all 8 billion of the humans alive in the world today, together with other species, and future generations of both.

That's the hopeful, uplifting bit. Back at ground level, though, the work quickly becomes harder. What about the people who disagree with us, the people whose views we find infuriating or oppressive, the people who seek to frustrate our hopes and ideals at every turn? Should we see them as part of 'us'?

The power of them-and-us

All of us who've ever wanted to change anything in the world around us are – by definition – interested in power.

Maybe we signed a petition once, or wrote to our MP or Representative. Maybe we shared something we believed in with friends on social media. Maybe we got involved in a local campaign to save a hospital, or helped support a food bank. Maybe we even do this work as our job, whether as a campaigner, an organiser, or even a politician. In every case, we're in the business of trying to gain and use power in order to do something good.

And that, of course, is where things start to get complicated – because my idea of what's 'good' might be different from yours. If we're both seeking to bring about change in line with our idea of what's good, that creates the potential for conflict. And at that point, each of us has a choice to make: whether to amplify and escalate that conflict, or to look for ways to transform it.

Some of the most respected change-makers out there argue that in these situations, we should double down on conflict. Take legendary organiser Saul Alinsky, whose famous [“Rules for Radicals”](#) conclude with the advice to “pick the target, freeze it, personalise it, and polarise it”. Or veteran US campaigner Anat Shenker-Osorio, who [argues](#) that unless your messages are alienating your opponents, they're probably not working.

As these experts understand, when we frame change as a [them-versus-us](#) proposition, we're harnessing an incredible source of power. It's why, when someone starts out as a rookie campaigner at an NGO like Greenpeace or Oxfam, one of the first lessons they learn is the power of a campaign that has a really good villain – a bad guy, an enemy – at its heart.

It makes sense. When we feel like we're in the fight of our lives, like it's us or them and we absolutely have to win, it fires us up like nothing else. It energises our allies and supporters, too. It generates a ton of media interest and social media virality. And it's superb for fundraising. Why would we forgo such a powerful set of tools, when we're sure that we're the good guys?

What's more, plenty of change-makers argue that trying to build bridges across political divides is at best naive and at worst, can lead to sell-out compromises or a kind of 'toxic togetherness' with our opponents.

Early in 2022, I wrote a long [thread](#) on Twitter arguing for a different kind of climate movement that would focus on building broad support across the political spectrum rather than just firing up people who already agree with us, and pointing to voices within existing climate movements (like [Rupert Read](#) in the UK, or [Jonathan Guy and Sam Zacher](#) in the US) who were reaching similar conclusions.

The author and journalist George Monbiot [flatly disagreed](#) with us, arguing that trying to “reach across the political spectrum, appealing to conservative as much as radical and liberal values” is a “mistaken theory of change”. He [continued](#),

“Think of one of the most successful recent movements: #MeToo, which rapidly altered social attitudes towards sexual assault, misogyny and everyday sexism. Imagine that its

leading lights had said “we also have to appeal to sexists”. Imagine they had trimmed their message to accommodate existing attitudes. How effective would they have been? How would they have inspired women to rise up and generate the wave of change?

“Similarly, you might imagine how successful the civil rights movement would have been if it had sought to appeal to racists, or the anti-apartheid movement if it had tried to accommodate the views of people who wanted to sustain minority rule.”

It’s not just a fair question; it’s an essential one. So what’s the answer?

Does larger us change-making mean selling out?

In fact, appealing to racists is exactly what many leading activists in the civil rights movement did do.

Here’s how James Baldwin put it in his famous letter to his nephew in 1962:

“...these men are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word “integration” means anything, this is what it means, that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it, for this is your home, my friend.”

Or take a more recent example: look at how public attitudes have changed on equal marriage in the United States, one of the [fastest](#) shifts in values in living memory. The LGBTQ activists who helped bring about this momentous shift weren’t selling out, compromising, or splitting the difference with anyone.

But they were in the business of transforming attitudes and debates, and of winning over rather than defeating – and willing to embrace the hard work of doing so [one conversation at a time](#). And they succeeded [spectacularly](#).

If building bridges did mean splitting the difference with our opponents, as George Monbiot suggests, it would be hard to disagree with him. Imagine if immigration rights advocates had done a deal with the Trump administration to imprison half as many migrant kids [without their parents](#) at the border – and then trumpeted that as an example of what bridge-building can achieve.

But what we’re talking about here is not ends, but means. Not watering down what we want, but thinking differently about how to get it, and whom we need to engage.

One way of looking at this is that it’s about [victories that last](#). The problem with ‘us’ defeating ‘them’ is that even when we win, we’re always going to remain vulnerable to the next pendulum swing.

Look at the endless flip-flopping on US climate policy: into the Kyoto Protocol under [Clinton](#) and then out under [Bush](#); into the Paris Climate Accord under [Obama](#) but out under [Trump](#); into the Glasgow agreement under [Biden](#)... who would assume that that’s the end of the story?

As campaigners Kirsty McNeill and Roger Harding [put it](#), the question for all of us trying to bring about change is whether we're more interested in winning battles, or ending wars. If we do want to end wars, then it means [bridging divides](#); engaging people; becoming a larger us rather than a them-and-us.

And although playing a them-versus-us game can have advantages, it comes with real costs, too.

One of my favourite movies is *Crimson Tide*, a thriller set on board an American missile submarine. At the heart of the movie is the relationship between two characters: Captain Ramsey (Gene Hackman), who thinks his job is to follow orders without question, and Commander Hunter (Denzel Washington) who leads a mutiny to prevent Ramsey from launching a nuclear missile strike, because the orders from Washington are ambiguous.

In one [scene](#) early in the film, the two debate nuclear war. Ramsey argues that, “the sailor most likely to win the war is the one most willing to part company with the politicians and ignore everything except the destruction of the enemy”. Hunter’s reply: “I think that in the nuclear world the true enemy can’t be destroyed ... in the nuclear world, the true enemy is war itself”.

For Ramsey, nuclear conflict is what game theorists call a [zero sum game](#). One side wins, and the other side loses – so you’d better make damn sure you’re the winner. Hunter, on the other hand, sees avoiding nuclear war as a [positive sum game](#). In a nuclear war, all of us lose, no matter what side we’re on. As another classic nuclear thriller movie, *WarGames*, [puts it](#): “the only winning move is not to play.”

As people trying to bring about change in the 21st century, all of us have to decide, issue by issue, moment by moment, whether we’re with Ramsey or Hunter. Sometimes, maybe we think we are in a zero sum game, and we do have to defeat our opponents at all costs.

The risk, though, is that sliding into them-versus-us dynamics means that we all lose, because those dynamics make it impossible to achieve the outcomes we need – in particular, when we’re dealing with the kind of shared issues that we touched on at the beginning of this section, like climate change, refugee crises, child poverty, or community cohesion.

So what’s the approach we need in those circumstances?

It all starts in our minds

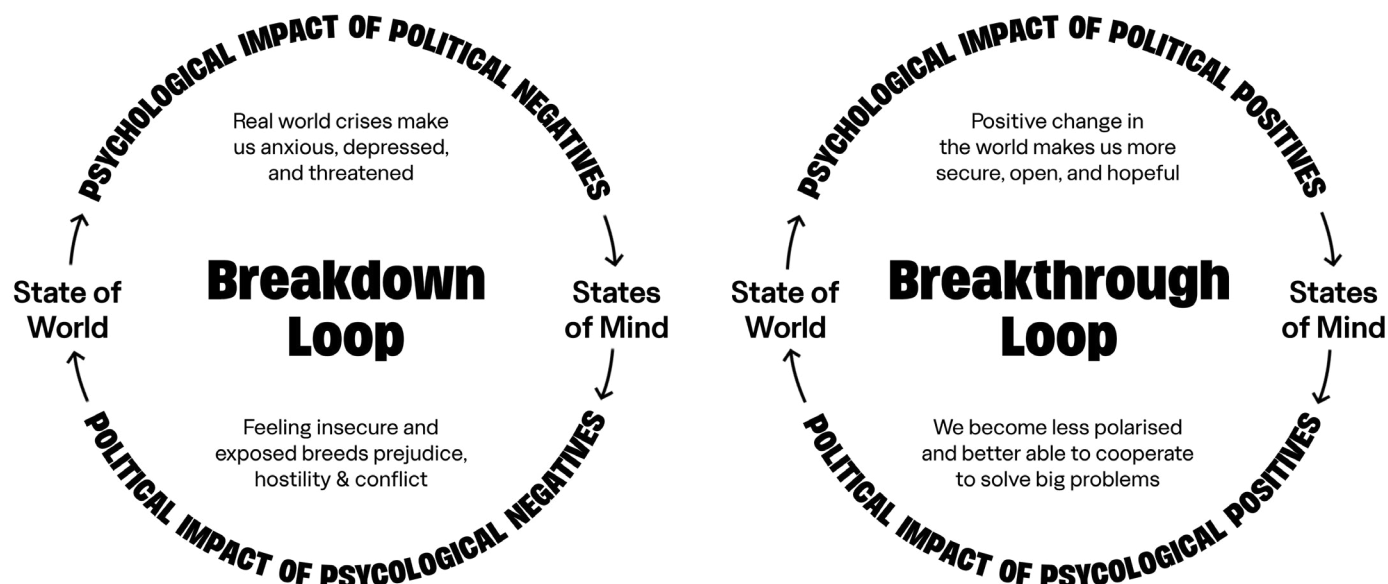
That’s the question right at the heart of our work at Larger Us, and that animates the community of pathfinders that we’re helping to build and support. And a central part of our approach is to start with what’s going on in our [minds](#).

All of us can see how our states of mind are affected by the state of the world. Think about the massive [impacts](#) that waves of Covid-19 and lockdown have had on our mental health, or how watching the news or scrolling through social media can make us feel anxious or overwhelmed.

But the converse is true as well: our states of mind affect the state of the world, too. Whether we’re a local volunteer or a globe-trotting politician, an organiser or an influencer, every time we tweet, pick a campaign tactic, or decide whether we’re playing a zero sum or positive sum game, our decision is affected by our state of mind. Whether we feel threatened or secure. Anxious or confident. Lonely or connected. Respected or despised. Loved or hated.

At Larger Us, we're especially interested in the feedback loops between our states of mind and the state of the world, and vice versa. At worst, there's the risk of our sliding into a breakdown loop, where crises in the real world make us feel anxious, depressed, or threatened – and those feelings then affect how we show up as citizens, breeding prejudice, hostility and conflict.

But we also think there's a more hopeful alternative: a breakthrough loop in which positive change in the world makes us feel more secure, open, and hopeful, which in turn makes us more compassionate, less polarised, and better able to cooperate and solve big problems.



As change-makers, the platforms that we have and the fact that people listen to us means that we can have an outsized impact on whether we tip towards breakdown or breakthrough: we affect whether others feel threatened or secure, anxious or confident, and so on. Which means that we have big decisions – and responsibilities – over the emotions we seek to evoke.

This is all the more so because in an age of social media and hyper-connectivity, it's never been easier for emotions and behaviours to ripple through networks (so-called 'emotional contagion') – sometimes [without our even being aware](#) of how our own emotions are being affected by those of others.

There's no shortage of people and organisations who feed on and amplify the emotions that produce [them-and-us dynamics](#), after all, whether to gain power or monetise our attention.

Think of authoritarian populist leaders (and their funders) who fan fears of a threatening 'Other'. Tech giants with their algorithms that [push towards us](#) content we'll find outraging or frightening. Media companies that profit from [sensationalising](#) news and playing up division. Conspiracy theorists who promote misinformation on Covid-19 [vaccines](#), or play up fears of a malign 'deep state'. Organisations like Cambridge Analytica that seek to use social media and psychological profiling to [promote division](#) – in effect weaponising our own anxieties against us.

This guide is for people who want to do the opposite.

People who recognise the humanity in ‘the other side’, and what [motivates](#) them to act as they do. Who are willing to [listen](#) and reach out beyond our usual ‘base’ of friends, allies and supporters. And who understand and act on the psychological inner work needed to do this emotionally demanding work out in the world.

There are five questions at the heart of this work, which we’ll explore in each of the five chapters that follow.

How can we build belonging through our work?

How do feelings of connection – or their opposite – affect how people behave as citizens? How can we as change-makers build belonging through our work? And why does it matter for our work that we learn and practice self-acceptance?

How can we bridge divides?

Why does in-group bias matter so much for politics – and how did our social groups become so homogenous? How can conversations bridge differences, and how can we build this into our work as change-makers? How do we know bridge building won’t lead to lowest common denominator outcomes?

How can we appeal to love not fear?

What happens when we respond to perceived threats with ‘fight-flight-freeze’ responses? Why is it so tempting for change-makers to generate such responses as a way of firing up our supporters? What are the risks of this approach – and what are the alternatives?

How can we support people through crisis and trauma?

What is collective trauma and why is it so relevant to so many of the issues change-makers work on – from climate to migration to gender equity? And how can we help people and communities recover from experiences of trauma or loss?

How can we tell the kind of stories that bring people together?

Why are stories so powerful, and how can the stories we use to make sense of the world become self-fulfilling prophecies? What happens when we lack shared stories? What kinds of stories can help us navigate this moment – and how can change-makers help to provide them?

Questions for reflection

- How does the state of the world affect your state of mind – and how does your state of mind affect the state of the world? Does awareness of this feedback loop affect how you manage your own state of mind, and/or that of those you seek to influence?
- Who is currently outside the ‘circle of your compassion’ (thinking both personally and from the perspective of your organisation or the issues you work on)?
- To what extent are your current strategies for effecting change based on a ‘them-versus-us’ approach (whether explicitly or implicitly)? What are the costs and benefits of that approach, both short- and long-term?



How can we create belonging?

Why belonging?

As humans, we're hardwired to see ourselves as part of groups – so when we feel lonely or disconnected, that has huge impacts on us.

Think about all the different groups you're part of. Your family and friends. Where you're from. People who like the same music or hobbies as you, or support the same sports team. Things like these are central to our sense of identity. They're literally part of who we are.

Now think about what happens when we lack belonging or feel a sense of disconnection from others. Even before Covid-19, it was often said that we're living through a "[loneliness epidemic](#)", with [young people](#) hit hardest. Anxiety about not belonging can show up in other ways too, for instance in [status anxiety](#) over our achievements or the esteem of our peers.

These feelings don't just show up at individual level. They can also be collective, rooted in whole communities wondering if they belong, or whether they're valued or respected – like people who are members of [minorities](#), or those who are dismissed as "[deplorables](#)" or "[citizens of nowhere](#)".

We know that feelings of disconnection from wider society matter hugely for health. Not just mental health, where social isolation strongly [predicts](#) anxiety and depression, but physical health too: chronic loneliness, for example, is clearly [linked](#) with reduced life expectancy and worse cardiovascular health

And feelings of disconnection also have political as well as personal impacts.

There's strong evidence that loneliness can make us more focused on [ourselves](#), for example – something that can make a big difference to how we show up as citizens. And the self-centredness that loneliness creates can in turn make us even more lonely, creating a self-amplifying feedback loop.

Worse still, disconnection can feed [populism](#), [extremism](#), and hate – or make it easier for autocratic regimes to come to power. Hannah Arendt famously wrote in her classic book [The Origins of Totalitarianism](#) that "loneliness is the common ground of terror", continuing that,

"Terror can rule absolutely only over men who are isolated against each other... Therefore, one of the primary concerns of all tyrannical governments is to bring this isolation about. Isolated men are powerless by definition."

There are plenty of examples of how loneliness can lead to hate and extremism in our own times, too. When, with depressing regularity, another mass shooter event takes place in the US, the perpetrator almost always turns out to be a lonely man who has experienced [social rejection](#). So-called '[incel](#)' culture is obsessed with experiences of disconnection and isolation – and can again lead back to hate, misogyny, and [violence](#). And there's also evidence that loneliness makes people more vulnerable to believing in [conspiracy theories](#).

When we do feel belonging, by contrast, that has political impacts too. It makes our communities [more resilient](#): look for instance at the flowering of '[mutual aid](#)' networks in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. It makes our communities kinder and stronger. It gives us more of a sense of [agency](#), while reminding us of our interdependence with each other.

The bottom line: when we feel more valued and secure, it makes us better citizens. We feel more able to value and navigate our differences; more ready to see challenges as structural rather than personal; better equipped to disagree constructively while still seeing the things we all have in common.

Where do change-makers fit in?

When we could build belonging through our work but fail to make use of the opportunity, we leave the field open to others who thrive on promoting division or hate.

We've already seen how loneliness provides fertile ground for hate. It's a fact not lost on extremist groups – from far right networks like the Proud Boys or the English Defence League, to Islamist groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir or ISIS – all of whom are skilled at preying on their targets' feelings of disconnection, offering in its place a twisted, exclusionary form of belonging that can groom people into [radicalisation](#).

Mainstream change-making organisations like NGOs or political parties, on the other hand, often omit to build real belonging. Instead, they often take an instrumental approach to their members – asking them to give \$10 a month, sending 'take action now' emails, or regarding them as pawns to deploy as needed.

Yet when we do build belonging, it can be hugely powerful.

The climate movement offers plenty of examples – from the local groups that make up [350.org](#) around the world, to [Extinction Rebellion's](#) affinity groups and Friends of the Earth's [Climate Action](#) groups in the UK. Barack Obama's extraordinary 2008 Presidential campaign was also rooted in [local groups](#) of activists – and offers a painful [cautionary tale](#) of the disillusionment that can result when change-makers create dense networks of belonging, but then leave them to rot.

Looking further back, history is full of examples of social movements that used religious congregations as their building bricks, from the role of [Quakers](#) in campaigns to abolish slavery in Britain to the key role of [Black church congregations](#) in the civil rights movement in the US in the mid-20th century.

To understand why small organising units like these are so powerful, we need to turn to what sociologists call [primary groups](#). Where so-called secondary groups are large, impersonal, temporary, and based on self-interest, primary groups are instead small, personal, face to face, and informal. As a result, they can inspire loyalty like nothing else – which is one reason why [armies](#) have for centuries organised themselves into platoon sized units, and why small groups can be so vital to ensuring that people stay engaged in movements over the long term.

But we also need to be careful in how we build belonging, to ensure that we don't base it on excluding somebody else, or on fanning feelings of superiority or supremacy.

While extremist groups are the obvious example, mainstream campaigners can be guilty of this too.

I saw plenty of this while I was working on Brexit, when I frequently saw other ‘Remain’ voices, many with highly influential platforms, firing up their base with expressions of [contempt](#) towards Leavers (and of course, there were plenty of examples in the other direction too).

This is not only unpleasant, but often counterproductive, for as we’ll see in a later section, feeling like you’re on the receiving end of someone else’s contempt tends to [mobilise](#) people politically like almost nothing else.

And [movements](#) can also trip up by failing to make people feel welcome, and instead making them think they don’t belong. Think of ‘purity tests’ designed to delineate an enlightened in-group from a not-good-enough out-group – as when animal rights activists attend climate marches with [placards](#) reading “shut up about climate change if you eat meat”. Or when new members of change-making communities feel patronised or shut out by veterans. Both are exactly the kind of thing we [don’t need](#) if we’re trying to build big tents that welcome people in.

At a deeper level, the very idea of ‘activism’ can create a them-and-us dynamic between ‘activists’ on one hand, and ‘not-activists’ on the other – with a sense of antipathy flowing in both directions. Anthea Lawson, author of The [Entangled Activist](#) and a longtime activist with Extinction Rebellion, [writes](#) that:

“I interviewed people about how they perceive activists and the same stuff was coming up again and again. Being hypocritical, being righteous, being angry. Those things are the cliché of activism, they’re lazy journalism, but there are also some truths in it. Righteousness is key, in its real meaning of defining yourself as right specifically in opposition to someone else who is wrong ...

“Every form of activism I’ve ever done, whether it’s professional or grassroots, out in the streets or lobbying in institutions, there has been a perceived feeling, whether admitted or not, of some kind of superiority.”

The inner dimension

Finally, consider the inner dimension of belonging – starting at the personal level.

At first glance, it might seem strange to think about ‘personal’ belonging; isn’t belonging by definition about our relationship with others?

In fact, though, a key aspect of belonging is self-acceptance, feeling comfortable in our own skin, and feeling compassion for ourselves when things are difficult. (As RuPaul [puts it](#): “If you don’t love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else?”)

Self-compassion is often what’s missing when people are coping with [shame](#) wounds (or ‘wounds of belonging’, as they’re sometimes called). These are [rooted](#) in feelings of smallness, embarrassment, humiliation, worthlessness, or the sense that we’re unacceptable in society’s eyes. They may come from authority figures like parents, educators, or faith leaders using shame to make us comply; from experiences of being bullied; or simply from a sense that we’re not good enough.

Whatever the cause, these kinds of shame wounds can live on inside us, often for our [whole lives](#), with far-reaching effects on us as individuals, from impacts on our [self-esteem](#) to triggering the kind of ‘fight-flight-freeze’ reactions that we’ll explore in a later section.

But shame wounds also have powerful social effects. In particular, they’re often accompanied by a “[self-protective rage](#)” that can ultimately find a way out in the form of scapegoating someone else for a discomfort that actually starts within us. While incels, white supremacists, or religious fundamentalists may all project their rage on to others, as we saw earlier, it’s also frequently the case that this rage is ultimately derived from a wound [within themselves](#).

So in terms of being the change we want to see in the world, the work of building belonging inside ourselves, of feeling comfortable in our own skins, is crucial. And this is work that we can do something about, practise and get better at – for instance with [mindfulness practices](#) that emphasise [self-compassion](#), or indeed through [compassion-focused therapy](#) (see the resources section for more on these practices).

But there’s also a vital collective dimension to this inner work.

When we think of inner work, or of mental health, we often think of it as something that’s mainly about us as individuals – especially in the west. We talk about ‘self-help’ or ‘self-development’. We see therapy as something that’s usually done one-to-one. Yet doing inner work together with others can be hugely powerful.

Look at how [Alcoholics Anonymous](#) has been transformational for millions – thanks to its network of small groups. Or the emphasis that religious leaders frequently place on the importance of [community](#) as part of spiritual growth. Or the Covid-19 pandemic – which, while hugely challenging for mental health, also saw people come together to help each other cope (something Jules Evans and I explored in a [report](#) we wrote for the Wellcome Trust on how people navigated the mental health impacts of Covid-19).

The power of small groups for inner as well as outer work, and for changing ourselves as well as the world, is a key reason why we use them as a [key design principle](#) of our work at Larger Us to build a community of practice of larger us change-makers. And in the longer term, as we imagine what a whole movement of larger us change-makers might look like, we wonder whether small groups doing inner work might be a key part of that as well.

Questions for reflection

- Where, or with whom, do you feel that you belong? What is it that creates that sense of belonging? Conversely, where do you feel that you do not belong and why is that?
- To what extent does your work help to foster a sense of belonging among the people it engages? Is there more that you (or your organisation) could be doing to deepen or widen a sense of belonging for those people?
- Who – directly or indirectly – may feel that they ‘don’t belong’ through your work? What are the likely short- and long-term implications of that for the change you want to help bring about?



How can we bridge divides?

How belonging can lead to them-and-us

The fact that we're hardwired for groups can bring us together and give us a deep sense of belonging, as we've just seen. But it can also divide us like nothing else.

One of the cognitive biases that all of us have and which matters most for relationships and politics is [in-group bias](#) – the tendency, whenever we see ourselves as part of a group, to see members of it more favourably and to give them preferential treatment.

In-group bias isn't always bad. It doesn't inevitably lead to polarisation or conflict; indeed, it's long been a source of [evolutionary advantage](#) for us. It goes to the heart of what it is to feel a sense of belonging, and can provide some of the [most rewarding aspects](#) of being alive.

Think back again to the groups you're part of and that help make you who you are. Chances are that some of the most joyful moments you can remember were spent as part of an in-group, celebrating the thing you have in common, be it a football victory, a music festival, a gathering with close friends, or the birth of a new family member.

But there are at least three specific instances where in-group bias becomes a political problem.

One is when it drives prejudice: when our tendency to favour groups that we feel part of gives way to outright feelings of superiority or supremacy (as with sexism, racism, or chauvinistic forms of nationalism) – and to people outside of the group being discriminated against.

A related problem is how in-group bias can drive inequality, like when we're part of a more privileged group – straight, white, male, able-bodied – and don't even notice how our unconscious bias affects us. Although the bias may be in our heads, it can lead to all-too [tangible impacts](#) on the life chances of others, for instance when it affects whom we hire for jobs, or how we vote.

Thirdly, in-group bias also becomes critically important for wider society when we [identify excessively with our political groups](#) – as Republicans or Democrats, Remainers or Leavers, liberal or conservative and so on. I caught myself doing this, more often than I wanted, when I was in the thick of Brexit campaigning and realised just how easy it is to slide into a them-and-us mentality in which policy disagreements start to feel existential.

And of course, just as we're hard-wired to view and behave towards our in-group favourably, so others are primed to do the same for their in-group – meaning that when conflicts between groups arise, they can rapidly become intense, as we'll see in a moment.

How our worlds are becoming less diverse

Another sociological concept, closely related to in-group bias, is ‘homophily’ – the way that contact among similar people tends to occur at a higher rate than between dissimilar people.

Jon Yates, the author of [Fractured](#), puts it simply: it’s the principle that, as the saying has it, “birds of a feather flock together”.

As with in-group bias, this is nothing new. What is new, though, is two factors that are intensifying how homophily shows up in our lives and communities: the arrival of social media, and – in real life – the sociological trend known as ‘the big sort’.

First social media. Most of us are familiar with the idea that each of us inhabits a kind of ‘[filter bubble](#)’ on the internet, within which the content algorithms that determine what we see online create, in [Eli Pariser’s words](#), “a unique universe of information for each of us ... which fundamentally alters the way we encounter ideas and information”.

Social media makes it far easier for us to find people who not only share the same interests as we do, but see the world in the same way as we do, too. As we become surrounded by people who are like-minded, we can find ourselves in a kind of ‘[echo chamber](#)’ in which it becomes easy to imagine that everybody (or everybody sensible, at least) sees the world much as we do.

There’s also evidence that our echo chambers can become reinforced not just by agreement with the people inside them, but also [disagreement](#) with the people outside them. A 2021 [study](#) by three psychologists at Cambridge and New York Universities found that showing animosity towards out-groups is one of the most surefire ways of making content go viral, far more than other established predictors of social media sharing like emotive language.

The ‘[big sort](#)’, meanwhile, is a bit like the real life equivalent of online echo chambers. It’s a nickname for a well-established trend which has seen the groups that we’re part of become steadily more homogenous. We’re now more likely than ever to study with, befriend, work with, date, or marry people with similar outlooks to our own – and of course to view them more favourably, thanks to in-group bias.

The combined effect of social media echo chambers, sociological sorting in real life, and the more homogenous worlds that they create around us, is that it can come as a shock when we meet the ‘Other’.

That in turn provides a perfect breeding ground for what political scientists call “[affective polarisation](#)”, when individuals “begin to segregate themselves socially and to distrust and dislike people from the opposing side” – even though they may actually disagree on policy issues a lot less than they imagine.

This is particularly apparent in the US, where the social networks of Republicans and Democrats are becoming ever more mutually [exclusive](#) – a perfect environment for high polarisation, low trust, and a minimal understanding of what we share with each other. But the same trend is also becoming an increasingly central feature of politics in the [UK](#), as well as in many [European countries](#).

So how do we work through differences when they crop up?

The power of conversations across difference

In practice, the work of bridging divides starts with conversations – especially ‘courageous conversations’ that take us across lines of difference.

These forms of encounter depend on deep curiosity for how others’ experiences lead them to act as they do – and perhaps the willingness to wonder whether we might even think or act the same way, if we had the same life experiences, social networks, and information sources as the people we’re talking to.

Courageous conversations can be psychologically demanding. They require both [empathy and the ability to take the other side’s perspective](#); patience, humility, and [self-control](#); [self-care](#), especially given the emotional weight of conversations in which hateful views are expressed; and [compassion](#) for both self and other. It’s a practice that takes time to master.

And sometimes it’s a practice that involves what psychotherapists call [‘shadow work’](#): coming to see and accept the parts of ourselves that we habitually reject (and often tend to see in others rather than face in ourselves).

What that means here is looking at how our own attitudes, actions, or blind spots may have played a part in leading others to see the world or to behave as they do. And we may also need to be willing to have our own preconceptions challenged – and perhaps even to be transformed ourselves by the power of encounter with the other.

Mónica Guzmán, the author of *I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times*, is one of the pioneers in this space, including in her work with [Braver Angels](#), a US-based organisation that brings together Americans of very different political stripes. She [explains](#) curious conversations like this:

“Being curious does not have to be nice. What does play a role is respect. People can’t hear unless they’re heard. And for people to genuinely hear each other, they have to begin by seeing the other person, and the path they took to their views, as being just as valid as their own. And that becomes a bigger and bigger challenge the more certain we are that other people are monsters.”

For an example, take Daryl Davis, a blues musician from Chicago who’s played with all the greats, from Chuck Berry to BB King. He also – unusually for an African American – [hangs out at KKK rallies](#).

Daryl's fascination with white supremacists began when he was the only Black kid in a cub scout parade, and found himself being pelted with bottles. Astonished, he wondered: how can you hate me when you don't even know me? That curiosity persisted for years, until one day, years later, he asked his secretary to set up a meeting with KKK Grand Dragon Roger Kelly – without telling Kelly that he was Black.

That first conversation led to many others. The two men slowly became friends, despite their utterly different worldviews. Kelly invited Davis to come and see KKK rallies; later, he asked Davis to become his daughter's godfather. And eventually, Kelly left the Klan, giving Davis his robe. And this was just the start. To date, Davis has persuaded over [200 people](#) to quit the KKK through the power of courageous conversations.

Of course, most of us won't be spending time at KKK rallies in the way Davis does. But there are still plenty of day-to-day opportunities in our lives and work, from engaging with relatives with intolerant views to figuring out how we can bridge the divides that we come across – and sometimes help create – in our work.

Bridging divides to defuse opposition

Why should people who want to make change happen in the world care about the power of encounter to bridge divides?

One good reason: because it can successfully head off polarisation dynamics that might otherwise defeat us.

For a great example, look at the 'Radical Love' campaign run by the moderate CHP party in Istanbul's re-run mayoral election in 2019, which successfully [defused](#) a polarising, populist campaign run by Recep Tayyip Erdogan's AKP party.

When the election first took place, in March 2019, the AKP narrowly lost to the CHP. Rather than accept the result, the AKP used its influence over the courts to have the result [annulled](#). CHP supporters were furious; many wanted to take to the streets to express their rage.

But ousted mayor Ekrem Imamoglu spotted the trap being set for them, [saying](#) that "They want conflict from us. But we, the people who do not want this nation to fight, we will insist on embracing each other."

What Imamoglu recognised was that if the CHP succumbed to the temptation to polarise, this would provide a gift to the AKP by firing up its base – making it much harder, if not impossible, to win the re-run election due to take place in June.

So instead of just focusing on the CHP's secular base, Imamoglu made a point of refusing to 'other' Erdogan's supporters. He invited his supporters to "find a neighbour who doesn't think like you, and just give them a hug" – and [led by example](#). He toured mosques to show respect for the AKP's predominantly religious voters, saying that "we are showing that walls can be torn down with love".

All this was pulled together in an extraordinary campaign [playbook](#) called ‘Radical Love’, which centred on a key principle: “Ignore Erdogan, but love the people that love him”. At its heart was the responsibility each activist had to manage their mental and emotional state and embrace the struggle to love each other even under the most challenging conditions.

So, for instance, the playbook invites activists to imagine a situation in which “A young man who you would normally get on with may come to your party kiosk and provoke you. What to do in this situation? Should we get into a fight as he wants us to, or should we let love win like we want it to?” Later, it [continues](#),

“Normal love is readily visible, radical love is not. It requires patience, repeated action ... Radical love needs to be strong. United we stand. A nation that stands strong and loves each of its members is a nightmare for hate-mongers. It is exactly for this reason that the game will no longer be run by hate-mongers; it will now be run by us. We will use the language of love. We will not get provoked.

Ultimately, what was a narrow win for the CHP in March 2019 became a [landslide](#) victory for them when the re-run election took place in June.

To be sure, not all of this success can be attributed to the Radical Love campaign; there was also the factor that many voters were simply outraged at the fact that their first vote hadn’t counted. But even so, the CHP pulled off the major feat of successfully avoiding and defusing a polarisation ‘trap’ set for it by its opponents, which might otherwise have caused it major problems.

Three years later, something similar happened in [Australia’s 2022 federal election](#). An increasingly populist governing coalition led by Scott Morrison tried every trick in the book to bait their opponents – an alliance of Labor, Greens, and community independents dubbed ‘Teals’ by the media – into a ‘culture war’, using issues like trans rights or immigration as bait.

But here too, just as with the CHP’s Radical Love campaign, the Labor / Green / Teal alliance steadfastly refused to take the bait. Instead, they led with messages of reassurance and unity, creating an alternative to which Coalition supporters – tired of being invited only to constant fear and anger – could transfer their allegiance.

Result: a powerful victory in which, as Australian political analyst Karen Stenner [puts it](#), “Labor successfully called back ‘home’ some of their ‘natural’ working class constituents who had drifted, over the decade, off to the right”.

We can also use the power of bridging divides to build coalitions of ‘unusual suspects’ that challenge preconceptions and create ‘man bites dog’ moments that surprise people with who’s involved.

One great example: a 2020 [campaign](#) run jointly by Platform, Friends of the Earth Scotland and Greenpeace on the future of the UK’s offshore oil and gas sector. Unsurprisingly, all three environmental groups are strongly focused on winding down the UK’s oil and gas production, in line with the UK’s ‘net zero’ goals.

What is surprising, though, is that the three organisations went out of their way to [engage](#) UK oil sector workers proactively, to listen to and amplify their [stories](#) and to campaign jointly with them for a just transition from fossil fuels to clean energy that includes proper support for workers to move into secure green jobs.

It's an arresting approach, in more ways than one. This had every potential to be a highly polarised campaign, with green NGOs on one hand and oil workers on the other. But the NGOs' decision to reach out to their opponents meant that this risk was greatly reduced.

And the impact went far beyond just defusing a potential conflict. More fundamentally, the NGOs managed instead to create a [new alliance](#).

The power of encounter

But there's also another reason why change-makers should seek to bridge divides through encounter, beyond just defusing potential opposition: the power of genuine encounter.

Back in 2008, a statewide referendum in California saw voters decide to ban equal marriage.

Many LGBTQ activists, shocked by their defeat, wanted to hit the streets to protest the discriminatory measure. But veteran activist Dave Fleischer decided to approach things in a different way: by going [door-to-door](#) to find out why so many voters had supported the measure.

Like Daryl Davis, Fleischer avoided 'calling people out' as bigots or homophobes. Instead, he tried something more unorthodox: starting a conversation, listening to concerns, finding common humanity, building trust, and then creating the space and time for people to [change their minds](#).

The approach – which Fleischer calls 'deep canvassing' – is still relatively new, but is already showing [powerful potential](#), including in academic studies.

A 2020 peer-reviewed [study](#) of nearly 7,000 deep canvassing conversations found that conversations that just deployed arguments had no effect on people's attitudes on immigration or trans rights. But when otherwise identical conversations used "non-judgmental exchange of narratives" – being patient with people, inviting them to reflect on experiences in their own life, avoiding aggression or shaming – then exclusionary attitudes were reduced.

There's similar data from the climate change context, too.

Against the backdrop of climate-inspired [school strikes](#) around the world, researchers from North Carolina State University devised an experiment to [explore](#) whether exposing 10-14 year olds to climate coursework would result in conversations that increased their parents' level of concern about the issue.

The result of their [study](#): significant increases in levels of concern about climate change across all groups of parents, and especially among parents who identified as male or conservative. The researchers highlighted the central importance of trust to these conversations, suggesting that this was crucial in parents being “willing to listen or accept their child’s views on complex topics”.

And the power of encounter can persuade policymakers and legislators as well.

One great example: a campaign by [We Belong](#), a group that campaigns in the UK for the rights of migrants aged 16-25, and which in 2017 pressured the Home Office for a shorter and more affordable route to permanent residency for young people who arrived in the UK as children.

As part of the campaign, We Belong activists met with numerous Members of Parliament to share their experiences of coming to the UK. Rather than trying to pressure them with media coverage or public outrage, We Belong’s activists sought to persuade them through the power of their own stories.

The activists didn’t pull their punches in sharing how the government’s immigration regime had caused them pain and suffering. But they also deliberately avoided shaming the MPs publicly for supporting illiberal or repressive immigration rules, or casting them as the enemy. Rather than creating a them-and-us dynamic between activists and politicians, they wanted to make it as easy as possible for policymakers to support reform.

The result, four years later: a major breakthrough, with political pressure forcing the Home Office to halve how long it takes young immigrants to secure permanent residency, from 10 years to 5.

Questions for reflection

- Thinking of the 5-10 people with whom you spend most time (whether by choice or not), consider how different they are to you. Are you a part of ‘the big sort’? If so, how might that be affecting your worldview?
- What are the taboo subjects in your workplace or change-making activities – the subjects that are too “dangerous” to talk about, or that feel off limits? What are the immediate and knock-on consequences of them being taboo?
- With respect to your change-making activities, with whom do you (or does your organisation) naturally ally itself? Thinking about the overarching values that you stand for, are there any “unusual suspects” with whom you might be able to form an alliance or coalition that would challenge societal preconceptions about what you both do?



How can we appeal to love not fear?

The power of fight-flight-freeze

You know how it feels when your ‘fight-flight-freeze response’ lights up and the adrenaline starts to course into your bloodstream.

Once the amygdala – a small, almond shaped part of the brain near the top of the spine – takes us into [threat response](#) mode, our heart rate, blood pressure, and breath rate all spike.

Our pupils dilate. We may start to sweat. Blood is diverted to our muscles. All without our having to even think about it. We’re literally getting ready to fight, or flee, for our lives.

It’s a response that’s hard-wired into us. And for thousands of years, when we’ve faced physical danger, it’s been superbly [effective](#). It’s a huge part of what’s kept us alive – both individually and as a species – to this day.

But crucially, fight-flight-freeze can also be fired up when we perceive [social or political issues](#) as threats.

And when we’re in fight-flight-freeze, it has emotional as well as physiological impacts. We get anxious, enraged, or overwhelmed. We become [less empathetic](#), less good at understanding where others are coming from or how they may be feeling. Instead, we get more hardline and aggressive, and focused on our narrow self-interest rather than the common good of the wider collective.

Relatedly, we lock into our [in-groups](#). We become more prone to collective emotions, groupthink, and ‘[othering](#)’: think of the kind of dynamics that ripple through a crowd in football violence, or a riot, or a social media pile on. And we get worse at separating out what’s real from what’s hypothetical or illusory – and less able to think imaginatively or creatively.

All of which, as we can see around us, are conspicuous features of our politics lately – presenting us with a big challenge as we face shared challenges like protecting our democracies or preventing climate breakdown.

Fight-flight-freeze is great when we’re facing immediate physical danger. But it’s the last thing we need amid social or political issues where success – and maybe even our survival – depends on coming together.

In many ways, fight-flight-freeze is the opposite of the courageous conversations we looked at in the last chapter. It’s a fast track to them-and-us. It actively shuts down possibilities of becoming a larger us. And that poses some hard questions for all of us who are working to bring about change.

Fight-flight-freeze and change-making

Let's start with an obvious point: fight-flight-freeze is catnip for populist and authoritarian leaders.

Fear and fury are their [natural element](#), after all, and they excel at using them to fire up support.

That's why leaders like Vladimir Putin, Hugo Chavez, Nigel Farage or Marine Le Pen lead with stories about a threatening Other; why they deliberately keep their base 'triggered' and on edge; and why they project an image of strength and authority as a response.

But let's not make the mistake of assuming it's only people on the extreme fringes of politics that take people into fight-flight-freeze mode. Because actually, most of us as change-makers have tapped into the power of fear or anger at one time or another, whether deliberately or accidentally.

Look at negative political attack ads (and how [effective](#) they are at grabbing our attention and holding on to it). Think of when we use upsetting [images](#) in campaigns or communications. Look at social media, and how expressions of [outrage](#) or contempt are the fast track to likes, retweets, and followers. Consider the stories we tell, and how often they're based on '[enemy narratives](#)'.

There are good reasons why we often reach for this strategy. Triggering people into fight-flight-freeze can be great for getting people to vote, sign a petition, or donate. We may not even consciously mean to elicit a fight-flight-freeze response; we may simply be trying to energise our audiences with the justice of our cause. But fight-flight-freeze can still be the result.

So does that matter?

The costs of fight-flight-freeze

We've already looked at how fight-flight-freeze affects us: more overwhelm, less empathy, more aggression, less critical thinking, more groupthink.

Which means that when we employ this tactic as part of how we try to drive change, these are the effects we're generating – throughout our networks.

We saw earlier how emotions can be contagious, [all the more so](#) in our age of hyper-connectivity and social media. Combine that with the platforms we have as change-makers, and we can start to see that the impacts we have on the emotions that people experience can ripple far and wide. All of which makes it worth asking: when we take people into fight-flight-freeze, does that make our work harder or easier?

Our instinctive answer may be that fight-flight-freeze is one of the most powerful weapons in our arsenal – and that hell yes we should use it wherever we can. We're in the fight of our lives. The issues we work on are emergencies of injustice or unsustainability. We need to fight to win. And if that means using fear or anger for our cause, then our instinct may well be to [sign up](#) wholeheartedly.

But we also need to be clear-eyed about the costs of fight-flight-freeze – in particular, the potential for burnout, and for mutual radicalisation.

Start with burnout – both in ourselves, and in the people we try to reach. There's plenty of psychological evidence to show that when we're constantly in and out of fight-flight-freeze mode, constantly in a state of high alert, then that can lead to [burnout](#).

As many of us know all too well, burnout among change-makers is [endemic](#). It's not surprising. We feel the urgency of what we work on, and the weight of the world on our shoulders. And it takes a toll. I left my job as special adviser to a British cabinet minister after months of anxiety and panic attacks. I know a lot of other people with similar stories.

So what about what happens when we trigger our supporters into fight-flight-freeze? When we lead with traumatising imagery of suffering and stories of hopelessness – when we say it's [already too late](#) to stop climate breakdown, for instance – we slowly induce burnout and compassion fatigue. People feel [overwhelmed](#). They start to think things will never change and there's no point in trying to do anything.

And of course, the problem only intensifies when we're faced with a torrent of different crises coming at us all at once – not just on the [news](#) (at the time of writing: war in Ukraine, a new Covid-19 wave, humanitarian disaster in Afghanistan, a terrifying new IPCC report, impending famine in East Africa, record numbers of refugees, war in Yemen, soaring cost of living, and an ongoing political scandal at the top of the UK government) but also in terms of how those issues show up in our lives (exhaustion, health worries, money worries, lockdown worries, relationship worries, fear for our children's futures, fear of nuclear war... and so on).

So that's burnout. It's an example of what can happen when the flight or freeze parts of fight-flight-freeze get out of control.

Mutual radicalisation

Next, let's take a look at what happens when the fight part of fight-flight-freeze gets out of control – which brings us to [mutual radicalisation](#).

Remember when, during the US 2016 election campaign, Hillary Clinton called half of Donald Trump's supporters a [“basket of deplorables”](#) – a statement that, she later admitted, had given a [“political gift”](#) to her opponent?

It highlights a crucial point: that when we fire up 'our' base up by acting in contemptuous or threatening ways towards 'them', it fires the other side up too.

As we touched on earlier, contempt energises people like nothing else; in fact, it was a key part of what ignited the [Arab Spring](#) in the Middle East and North Africa. It is, as the philosopher Michael Patrick Lynch [puts it](#), “how we treat someone who is beyond the pale, who has committed not just a moral failure but has failed as a person”.

Contempt, Lynch continues, is fundamentally at odds with the basic democratic ideal that “we owe each other basic respect” and should treat others “not only as capable of making up their own minds but as possible sources of knowledge”. Hardly surprising, then, that people feel hostile if they feel that we hold them in contempt.

And of course, as ‘they’ get fired up by the contempt or threat being directed towards them, they act out in ways that make ‘us’ feel threatened, outraged, or the object of contempt – and so the cycle of mutual radicalisation continues to [self-amplify](#). There’s no breakthrough or transformation; just a steady increase in the toxicity of our politics.

It’s a dynamic that we can see over and over again in hyper-polarised political environments, like at the height of the [Brexit debate](#) in the UK. Often, it combines with the “[affective polarisation](#)” we touched on in the last chapter – when division is based not on genuine disagreement about policy, but instead on each side’s sheer dislike of the other.

In-group bias is a big factor in all this, too, with [research](#) on intractable political conflicts showing that we tend to see our side much more favourably than the other side – attributing our side’s actions to “in-group love” even as we attribute the other side’s actions to “out-group hate”. That in turn leads to unwillingness to negotiate, or to vote for compromise solutions.

Mutual radicalisation can show up in [international relations](#), too, when each side’s actions energise the other to new heights of intense antipathy. It’s what we see with India and Pakistan, China and Japan, North and South Korea, Israel and Palestine, the ‘war on terror’ in the 2000s, and so on.

Just as with burnout, the question for us as change-makers is whether mutual radicalisation makes our work easier or harder.

For the kind of change-makers that actively want to divide people, mutual radicalisation can be hugely powerful. It’s exactly the dynamic that Donald Trump’s adviser Steve Bannon sought to tap into when he [deliberately timed](#) the announcement of Trump’s so-called ‘Muslim ban’ to maximise liberal outrage.

Or think of how both Al-Qaeda and the Bush Administration made political capital out of the war on terror – something that led Osama bin Laden to [observe](#) wryly of the Bush Administration’s polarising response to 9/11 that “it seems as if we and the White House are on the same team, shooting at the United States’ own goal”.

But if, on the other hand, our ultimate goal is to bring people together around shared challenges, then mutual radicalisation makes our work much harder.

In particular, we need to be aware of the risk of what the Australian political psychologist [Karen Stenner](#) calls the ‘authoritarian dynamic’.

Stenner’s research finds that around a third of people in developed countries like the US, Australia, or the UK have a latent psychological predisposition towards authoritarianism. People with this trait – which she argues is largely heritable and found almost equally on both the left and the right – have a

strong preference for ‘oneness and sameness’. They like conformity and consensus about values and moral order, and strong leadership that they can respect.

They also find the opposite of those things extremely stressful. In these conditions, they can experience sudden flare-ups of intolerance, and preference for authoritarian order. This ‘[authoritarian dynamic](#)’ can lie dormant for years, but then become activated in conditions of perceived ‘normative threat’, when it feels like society is beset by disagreements about core values.

In this sense, Stenner suggests, the “cacophony of modern democracy” is exactly the kind of environment that can fire up people predisposed to authoritarianism – which is why she [argues](#) that “liberal democracy has now exceeded many people’s capacity to tolerate it”.

And the more the authoritarian dynamic is activated, the more political space opens up for authoritarian governance and all the things that come with it: repression, prejudice, hostility towards immigrants, low priority for issues like climate and poverty, and so on. Which makes it all the more ironic, then, when the people activating the authoritarian dynamic are us – people who might self-define as explicitly anti-authoritarian – even if it’s something that we’re doing inadvertently.

So if fight-flight-freeze comes with real costs for us, what’s the alternative?

Alternatives to fight-flight-freeze

Let’s start with ourselves, and the power we have to defuse fight-flight-freeze at an individual level.

Viktor Frankl, a concentration camp survivor who went on to write the [classic](#) *Man’s Search for Meaning*, is reputed to have said that “between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

Frankl’s point is grounded in neurological fact. At the start of this chapter, we met the amygdala, the part of our brain that automatically takes us into fight-flight-freeze when we feel threatened. But there’s also another part of the brain that we can use to respond to threats: the [pre-frontal cortex](#) (PFC), situated towards the front of our brains, which is responsible for planning complex cognitive behaviour, personality expression, decision making, and moderating social behaviour.

Where the amygdala is all about knee jerk responses, the PFC is far more considered. It allows us to evaluate our emotions, and to respond reflectively, critically, or imaginatively. But crucially, it takes both practice and presence of mind to be able to put the PFC in the driving seat and overcome what’s sometimes called ‘[amygdala hijack](#)’.

This is something that special forces soldiers train for very deliberately, through focusing on the ‘[Big Four](#)’ techniques for fear control: mental rehearsal ahead of time, together with goal-setting, positive ‘self-talk’, and arousal control through deliberately slow breathing in the moment.

When we do manage to put our PFC in charge of our response to a particular threat, we find that we can respond to perceived threats from a far more considered, reflective and imaginative place than if our amygdala were running the show.

At a collective level, meanwhile, change-makers can seek to kindle a different threat response that psychologists call ‘tend and befriend’.

Tend and befriend is a new concept in psychology that’s only been around [since 2000](#), but it’s already become highly [influential](#) – and it has a lot to offer people working for change. In a [nutshell](#), tend and befriend describes what happens when we respond to a threat by tending ourselves and our families, and befriending others to build social networks of mutual assistance.

In contrast to fight-flight-freeze, tend and befriend emphasises interdependence, and sees our connections as a source of strength rather than vulnerability. It’s what we often see after disasters, when – contrary to the urban myth of mass looting and breakdown of law and order – what often emerges is widespread [solidarity](#) and even [heroism](#).

In contrast to fight-flight-freeze, tend and befriend is practical and [prosocial](#). It’s more empathetic, less aggressive. It’s focused on the good of the collective rather than just the individual. Above all, it leans towards a larger us rather than a them-and-us.

I should note that there’s one important exception: societies that were already highly divided before disaster struck, where shocks can instead exacerbate division. This is what happened in Haiti in the wake of the 2010 earthquake, when a hugely stressful situation in a highly divided society led to spikes in polarisation and fragmentation – even among the [civil society organisations](#) who were trying to help.

So what does it look like to use tend and befriend in change making?

One example: campaigns that talk about refugees as individuals and families. Save the Children, for example, ran a successful campaign to [invite people](#) to welcome newly arrived refugees to their area with cards or donations of clothes or books – and found that its resonance extended far beyond their usual supporters.

While some campaigns for refugee rights lead with the vast scale of human need, and risk triggering a sense of a huge problem that can take people into fight-flight-freeze mode, this campaign deliberately avoided overwhelm. Instead, it led with a sense of calm, of a plan coming together, and of shared values – all messages rooted in [tend and befriend](#) rather than fight-flight-freeze.

Overcoming fight-flight-freeze isn’t easy. The Radical Love [playbook](#) in Istanbul that we looked at in the last chapter emphasises over and over again how hard it is to overcome our mental and emotional triggers, and how much patience and self-mastery it requires.

Gandhi and Martin Luther King, too, stressed that nonviolence goes much deeper than just avoiding physical violence, extending [far into how we communicate](#), and the need to manage our own mental and emotional states.

But if we’re serious about being the change we want to see in the world, then doing this work – both on ourselves, and in how we approach our relationships and our attempts to drive change – is where it all begins.

At a time when much in the world seems threatening, fight-flight-freeze is a response that's rooted in fear, while tend and befriend is driven by love. The choices that we make about which to use will count for a lot in shaping the kind of future we inhabit.

Questions for reflection

- How do you channel your anger, both personally and professionally? What tools, techniques or mindsets do you find helpful for managing times when you feel tense or triggered?
- Where does fear show up in your change-making activities – for you personally, as well as in your workplace and in the system you are engaged with? Do you acknowledge and/or manage it, and if so, how? What more could you do?
- What emotional register does your change-making work appeal to? What costs and benefits do you perceive in activating the fight-flight-freeze responses of the people you engage with? What is the likely net outcome, both in the short- and long-term?



How can we help people navigate loss and trauma?

Introducing trauma

How does a time of [‘long crisis’](#) affect us emotionally? And what does it mean for how we try to bring about change?

Back when I was in my early 20s, I got mugged twice in the space of a few weeks.

On one of the two occasions, I had my nose broken; on the other, I had a knife pulled on me. For months afterwards I replayed the events in my mind. I felt scared of being out at night, constantly on the lookout for threats. Later, I started having panic attacks in which I would feel weirdly disembodied, as though I wasn’t properly in my skin.

I didn’t know it then, but all of these are classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress. The American Psychological Association [defines](#) trauma as an “emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster”. What I experienced was at the mild end of the spectrum. But even that felt overwhelming at the time – like more than I could cope with.

It’s increasingly recognised that traumatic stress doesn’t have to stem from a particular terrifying experience. A growing number of psychologists also focus on so-called [‘complex’ trauma](#) which is related to the cumulative effect of long-term stressors: things like abuse, neglect, or adverse childhood experiences.

But in either case, trauma can have long-lasting effects on us. It can show up physically, in our bodies, including through stress signals – the fight-flight-freeze response again – that continue long after the danger has passed.

It can lead to mental health impacts like [flashbacks](#), [dissociation](#), [sleep problems](#) or [low self-esteem](#). And when people with trauma struggle to cope, at the extreme they may fall into [substance abuse](#), [self-harm](#), or even [suicidal feelings](#).

There’s also growing evidence to show that trauma may be passed down generations.

[Rachel Yehuda](#) is one of the pioneers in this field. A psychiatry and neuroscience professor and director of traumatic stress studies at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, she’s undertaken groundbreaking research on how the effects of trauma in Holocaust survivors can be [passed on](#) through [epigenetic](#) changes in their children and even grandchildren – who then experience significantly higher levels of [stress disorders](#).

That’s led to interest in how similar dynamics may play out in descendants of survivors of other traumas like [slavery and colonialism](#), or the Clearances in Scotland and Ireland. And it’s also generated interest in how patterns of trauma, such as abuse, may continue to replicate themselves from one generation to another within families unless and until someone breaks the chain by doing the hard psychological work of healing these dynamics. As therapist and activist Tabitha Mpamira-Kaguri [puts it](#), “trauma not transformed is trauma transferred”.

It’s striking to see how these themes of inherited trauma are now surfacing in some of the most charged issues in our politics – for instance in how Black Lives Matters activists base their calls for

[reparations](#) for slavery partly on past traumas that live on today in the descendants of slaves and other victims of colonialism.

Trauma can also be something that's experienced collectively by communities, or even whole societies.

Think of what happens during a war, say, or a major natural disaster. Of course individuals still experience their own trauma. But when it's something that affects everyone in the community, then there's a crucial collective aspect, too.

Right now, to state the obvious, all of us are living through a moment when multiple crises that we experience collectively are flying at us and interacting with each other. True, they may not be as immediately life-threatening for all of us as the causes of collective trauma involved in, say, a war or a genocide. But crises like Covid-19 or climate breakdown still have the power to feel [existential](#).

In situations like these, the stress involved isn't derived from a single event. Instead, it's rooted in a steady drip feed of negative news and impacts on our lives, from loneliness to anxiety and from money concerns to relationship and health worries. All of this affects our mental health.

And as we're about to see, it affects our politics too.

Shared loss, group identity and destructive leaders

Why should change-makers care about feelings of loss felt by historically privileged groups?

One answer: because of how easily destructive leaders can manipulate those feelings.

[Vamik Volkan](#), a psychiatry professor who has for 40 years specialised in bringing groups mired in conflict together for [dialogue](#), is an expert on this. One of his key ideas is that when a [group's identity](#) is threatened after an attack or a loss of power, status or prestige, it becomes psychologically essential to reestablish it.

If societies don't work through their sense of loss and injury and undergo a necessary period of mourning, Volkan continues, then the trauma can become central to group identity – making the group hugely vulnerable to manipulation by a destructive leader who plays on old wounds.

It's not hard to find real world examples. Look for instance at Donald Trump's supporters in the US, and how their rallying cry, "Make America Great Again", speaks directly to a deep [sense of loss](#), as well as fear and shame: of America having been great in the past, but no longer.

This sense of loss can in turn drive profoundly destructive behaviour. [Research](#) on people involved in the January 2021 attack on the US Capitol also found a sense of loss at the core of their group identity: one of the things the attackers had in common was being disproportionately likely to come from places where the white share of the population is in decline.

Or look at Russia, where Vladimir Putin has [excelled](#) at manipulating the psychology of grievance. For [years](#), he has spun a narrative of humiliation at the hands of the West. As the political analyst Sam Freedman [notes](#), this was the backdrop to his sudden occupation of Crimea in 2014, when his previously lagging popularity suddenly shot up to its highest ever level amid “the first substantive national ‘victory’ in the lifetime of most Russians”. He continues,

“Anyone under 50 had lived their whole life through decades of decline, from the failed Soviet invasion of Afghanistan to the fall of the USSR, and then the ignominy of the Yeltsin years. Before Putin came to power they’d struggled to win a war against Chechen rebels. Suddenly they had reasserted global authority in the face of American protests. It felt to many like the end of the decline.”

While Putin may have miscalculated in his expectation of another quick victory in his 2022 invasion of Ukraine, his ability to play on Russians’ sense of grievance and humiliation is a significant part of the explanation not only for why he chose to go to war, but also for why he enjoyed [strong public support](#) for his decision.

Similar patterns can be found in so many other contexts. A sense of historical loss or humiliation is a powerful political factor in, for instance, [China](#) under Xi Jinping; in the [UK’s](#) decision to leave the EU, or the rise of the far right in [Europe](#); in [Rwanda](#) before the 1994 genocide, or [Germany](#) before the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s.

What if perpetrators need healing too?

The potential for a sense of loss to drive destructive behaviour stems from how it feels to those experiencing it.

It’s nothing to do with whether anyone else regards that sense of loss as legitimate or not, or whether they see a historically privileged group’s loss of privilege as a long overdue rebalancing.

The lived experience of someone’s sense of loss is real to them, whatever anyone else may think. And when a group of people feeling a sense of loss proceeds to act out in damaging ways as a result of its sense of loss (often encouraged, again, by a destructive leader), it becomes everyone else’s problem, creating even more trauma as others – often marginalised groups – become the victims.

Which brings us back to the point that trauma not transformed is trauma transferred – and to a host of dilemmas for us as change-makers. What should we do when we encounter a them-and-us situation in which both sides are traumatised, but one has more power, or when one side is perpetrator and the other the victim?

At the heart of these dilemmas is the challenging fact that ultimately, perpetrators need healing too.

On the one hand, profound questions of power and accountability are at play. Harm has been done by people with power, who need to be held accountable. On the other hand, unless and until their sense of loss is addressed, mourned for and healed, the risk is that that trauma just keeps being [re-enacted](#) – and that all of us suffer as a result. How do we square this circle?

One set of ideas that can potentially help comes from contexts like [restorative justice](#) (where victims of crime come face to face with the perpetrators), or truth and reconciliation processes like the one [South Africa](#) embarked on after apartheid.

In these contexts, the starting point is that healing is needed. Often, it can be [mutual](#), with both victim and perpetrator experiencing healing through the process – though it's essential that the victim's needs come first.

Crucially, the road to healing runs through [accountability](#).

People who have harmed others need to understand how their behaviour hurt other people; to accept that this resulted from a choice that they could have made differently; to acknowledge to everyone affected that their behaviour was harmful; to take action to repair the harm wherever possible; and to make changes necessary to avoid such harm in the future. In criminal justice, restorative justice is a complement to legal accountability, not a substitute for it.

So how can we translate these principles to the kind of issues we face in our politics? It's not straightforward. In contexts like criminal justice or truth and reconciliation processes, there is at least acknowledgement of the fact a crime has taken place, and on what form accountability should take.

That's rarely the case in much broader political contexts like systemic racism, climate breakdown, or economic injustice. And of course, thinking about perpetrators' psychological needs will often be the last thing we want to do.

While there are no simple answers here, it's vital that we ask the questions – because unless we're willing to be the ones who do the hard work of transforming traumas, the wound is left to fester and cause havoc – and ultimately passed on to our children, for yet another generation to suffer through.

Embracing this work is hard. It means turning in towards the shadow and hurt, and recognising that the only way forward is through the discomfort – and ultimately, recognising that the wound isn't in a separate 'them', but instead in an 'us' that's become broken, and that needs to be healed.

And it doesn't help that it's largely unclear whose job it is to help whole people through shared traumas. The vast majority of therapists and psychiatrists work with individuals, after all – not whole communities.

While we may recognise the need for perpetrators to be healed in order to break cycles of trauma, it's clearly inappropriate to expect victims to do the emotional labour of helping people who've done them harm – implying the need for others to step up, and to have [systems and frameworks](#) in place that relieve some of the burden.

All of which means that we as change-makers – people who work in politics and on the kind of charged issues we've been talking about – may have powerful opportunities to help.

What if this was an undiscovered part of our calling, and one that might even have the potential to be more transformative than anything else? What might that work involve, if we chose to embrace it?

Ways of navigating crisis

Psychologists have learned a lot about how to treat trauma in individuals. How can we apply this learning to communities and societies at a time when growing numbers of people are experiencing crisis, loss, or trauma?

Again, there are no neat answers or silver bullets. But here are a few ideas.

First, **self-care** is vital. We're no use to anyone if we're burned out – especially since, as change-makers, we're often already prone to take the weight of the world on our shoulders. So we need to make space for [self-care](#) – not just individually, but also collectively, through making it the bedrock of our organisations, networks and movements.

This is something that [Black Lives Matter](#) and [Extinction Rebellion](#) (XR) have both thought about a lot, as have humanitarian organisations like the [Red Cross](#). All of them have produced guides ([BLM](#); [XR](#); [Red Cross](#)) that provide resources to help them cope with the often psychologically demanding work they're involved in.

Rest, too, is essential. The [Nap Ministry](#) argues that “rest is a form of resistance”, and regards sleep deprivation as a racial and social justice issue. Activists whose work is grounded in faith communities have echoed this through drawing on theological ideas like Sabbath and teasing out their relevance to [environmental issues](#) in particular.

Second, **find ways to bring people together in meaningful ways**. [Connecting](#) with others can be hugely helpful in overcoming periods of crisis – and as change-makers, we can do a lot to help create those opportunities.

Something I always found moving when I worked as a campaign director at [Avaaz](#), a global online citizens' movement, was how good the organisation could be at creating online spaces for people to come together during and immediately after traumatic moments. One example: the aftermath of the Manchester concert bombing in 2017, when Avaaz invited its members to submit messages of love and support, and then put them on billboards all over the city.

Change-makers can also help to bring people together in real space during times of crisis. An obvious recent example was the flowering of volunteering and mutual aid groups that took place during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, creating a powerful shared sense of agency and belonging.

[In the UK](#) alone, some 4,300 groups sprung up and drew in three million volunteers – in the process, both appealing to people's desire to help others in a crisis, and raising awareness of who is vulnerable in the community.

Third, **hold space for grief and mourning**. Grief is always part of traumatic experiences – and it's [essential to work through](#) it before we can move on. As we saw earlier, if communities experiencing grief fail to mourn their loss, then experiences of shared trauma can become cornerstones of their identity and leave them vulnerable to exploitative leaders. But there is also much that communities can do to work through [collective grief](#) – starting with naming it and allowing ourselves to express it.

As change-makers, we may feel uncomfortable about working with grief. I've seen this myself in the context of climate campaigning, where – despite the obvious issues of profound loss that are involved – campaigners are often more comfortable either expressing alarm or outrage, or going straight to hopeful visions of the future, without pausing to [mourn](#) what's been lost.

But increasingly, people working on climate change are recognising the need to [acknowledge, respect, and help people to work through](#) the very natural feelings of grief that arise when we confront the extent of loss that climate change is already driving, and will drive in the future.

When we do speak from a place of grief or mourning, it can be powerfully transformative. I saw this at a UN climate summit in Poland in 2014, which took place just after Typhoon Haiyan had hit the Philippines. During his speech to the summit, the country's lead negotiator, Yeb Sano, [broke down](#) while describing the devastation left in the typhoon's wake. Abruptly, there was a whole different dynamic in the room. The dry bureaucratic interactions typical of the UN climate summit process were suddenly paused as the real-world impact of climate breakdown suddenly intruded, and empathy forced its way in.

Fourth, and finally, try to **do no harm**. We've already touched on the risk of destructive leaders using trauma to manipulate people. But the truth is that we can [do it](#) too, even if with the best of intentions – as when, for example, NGOs persuade victims of disasters to tell their stories to the media before they're really ready.

We also need to be aware of the risk of giving in to [saviour complexes](#) that create the kind of them-and-us dynamic that emerges when 'we' are the rescuers and 'they' are cast as victims in need of rescue. Not just because such dynamics rob victims of their agency, but also because such dynamics can pave the way for various kinds of so-called '[moral licensing](#)' (where people who initially behave in a moral way later display unethical behaviours, assuming that the former balances out the latter).

So much for what we can do during crises. What can change-makers do after crises, to help processes of both healing and accountability?

To begin with, [remember](#). When societies have experienced a collective trauma, it's essential to memorialise it – not only to help process grief, but also to tell the truth about what happened rather than repressing or ignoring it.

Sometimes our societies do this well, especially in remembering those lost during war: not just with monuments, but also through rituals in which we all participate. But at other times, we do it badly if at all.

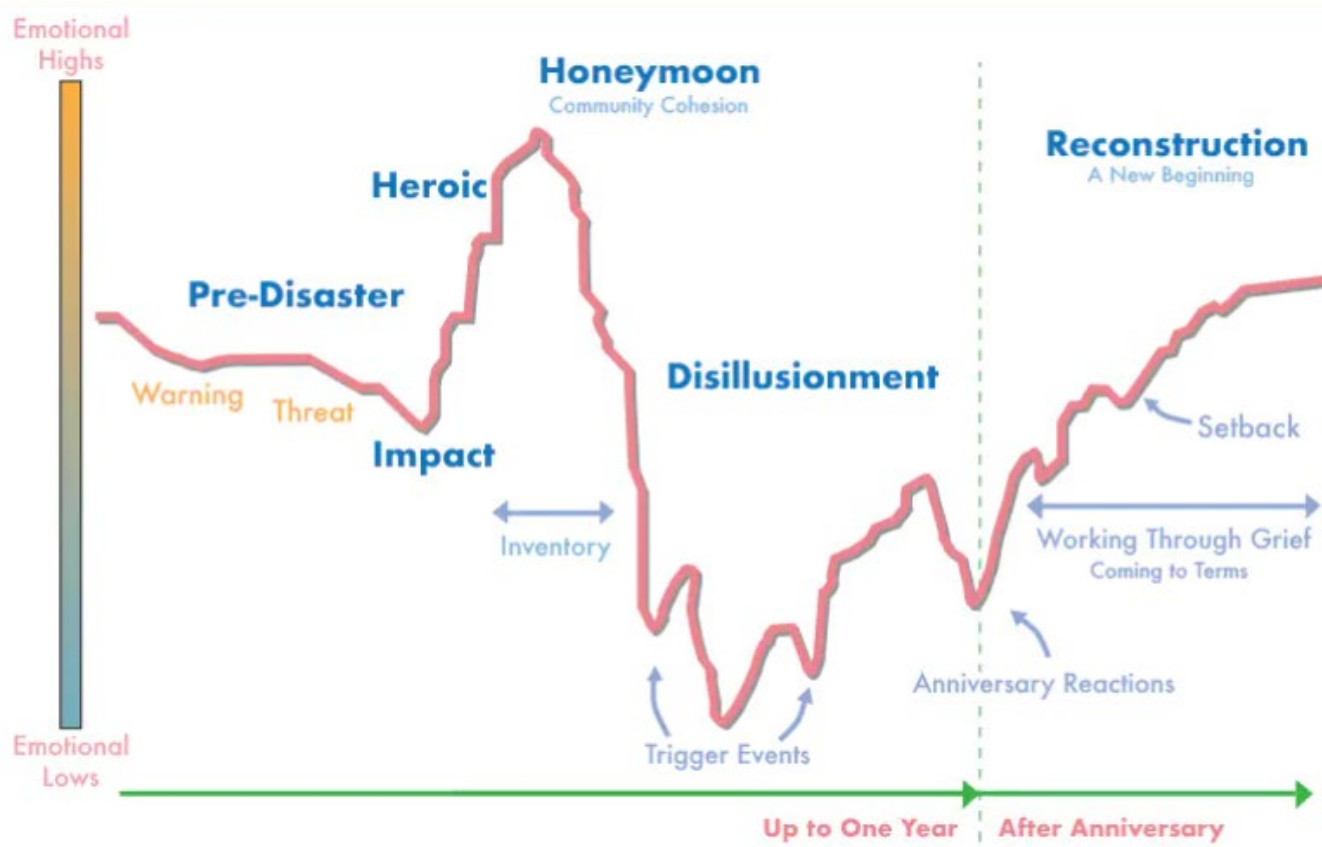
Here in the UK, there is a pressing need to mourn the 179,000 people who've died of Covid-19 at time of writing – and in the absence of action from the government, ordinary people have taken the lead. Bereaved campaigners worked with the campaigning organisation [Led By Donkeys](#) to organise a [Covid-19 memorial wall](#) on the south bank of the river Thames, directly opposite Parliament. The wall is hand decorated with more than 150,000 hearts, each representing a life lost to Covid-19; the fact that it was established without official permission just adds to its power.

More broadly, change-makers can **use crises to help build a sense of agency and purpose**.

When people have begun to work through the immediate impacts of the trauma, they may find themselves able to develop a sense of agency, purpose and meaning in their loss. This is what

psychologists call [post-traumatic growth](#). It's a process in which, as Professor Richard Tedeschi, a pioneering psychologist in the field, [puts it](#): "People develop new understandings of themselves, the world they live in, how to relate to other people, the kind of future they might have and a better understanding of how to live life".

There are similarities here with the stages that societies often go through in the wake of disasters (see [graph](#) below). While [reality](#) is of course more complex and less linear than this graph suggests, it can still be useful to think of an initial **honeymoon** period that's characterised by high solidarity and a strong sense of community and even exhilaration. The early stages of Covid-19, again, were a classic example.



Often, though, the honeymoon period then gives way to a long period of **disillusionment**. Fatigue, health and money worries, and relationship strains all crowd in; people start to realise how much won't go back to how it was before the start of the crisis. In time, a **reconstruction** stage may begin, when we recover a sense of agency and purpose – but this can take months or even years to materialise.

As people trying to bring about change in our communities or the world, we often have powerful opportunities to shape the stories that communities and societies use to make sense of periods of crisis, and to help them pivot towards reconstruction when (and only when) the time is ripe. Which brings us to the last chapter of this guide – and our role as storytellers.

Questions for reflection

- How am I coping with the emotional impact of the crisis around me, especially ones that I work on? Am I tending to myself adequately? What resources do I have available to support me, or might I need to find?
- What are the losses, griefs or pains in the system that you are trying to change – past, present and even future? Are they being acknowledged and mourned? Is the emotional labour involved in working through them recognised and fairly shared in your work, and if not what could help to rebalance it?
- How might a sense of loss or thwarted entitlement – whether legitimate or not – be relevant to the supporters of the ‘other side’ on the issues you work on? What could ‘your side’ do to avoid amplifying that sense, or perhaps even helping to heal it?



**How can we
tell stories that
bring people
together?**

Why are stories so powerful?

Once upon a time, there was a policy nerd who thought that if you wanted to change the world, then you just had to get the right evidence in front of the right policymakers.

That nerd was me.

But in time, I lost my faith that changing the world was primarily a question of getting the right evidence in front of the right policymakers. An especially bitter moment for me came in 2011 when I was the writer for the UN's [‘High Level Panel on Global Sustainability’](#), which produced a lot of warm words but little else, amid a deep failure by the politicians who made up the Panel's membership to set aside their national interests and do the right thing.

I began to wonder: if evidence and arguments don't drive change, then what does?

The answer, I slowly came to see, was stories. It's stories, not facts and figures, that shape how people [vote](#) at [election](#) time. It's stories that determine who's in 'us' and who's in 'them'. And, in particular, it's stories that we use to make sense of the world during periods of [crisis](#) and uncertainty, when all the other rules seem to go out of the window.

Stories are central to our sense of self, to our relationships, and even to how we think. As the author Jonathan Haidt [puts it](#), "the human mind is a story processor, not a logic processor". So in a lot of ways, people like us who are trying to bring about change in the world have one key role that transcends all the others: we're storytellers.

This starts at individual level, with the ‘stories of self’ that we tell ourselves, each other, and everyone else.

These stories tell of things like who we are and where we come from. The challenges we've faced, and the choices we've made. What we think is important, and our sense of purpose in life. For us as change-makers, our 'story of self' is especially important because, as the veteran organiser Marshall Ganz [observes](#), "when you do public work, you have a responsibility to offer a public account of who you are, why you do what you do, and where you hope to lead".

And it's worth noting that we have choices about the kinds of stories we tell ourselves and everyone else about who we are – which also means we can choose to change our stories.

In trauma psychology for example, a widely used form of talking therapy is [Narrative Exposure Therapy](#), where a therapist works with a client to go through their personal story and gradually turn a story of pain and trauma into one of survival, self-compassion, and self-respect.

Where stories get even more interesting for us as change-makers is when they become collective – not just about who I am, but who we are.

While Marshall Ganz argues that change makers have to start with their story of self, he goes on to say that we also need to set out a story of us – what our community, organisation or movement has been called to in terms of shared purposes, goals and vision – and a story of now that speaks to the challenge our community currently faces, the choices it must make, and the hope to which “we” can aspire.

It’s an incredibly powerful formula, and one that’s been used by everyone from grassroots organisers to presidents and prime ministers. Barack Obama, for instance, used this structure to shape his famous “fired up, ready to go” [speech](#) in 2009.

As Jordan Bower helps [unpack](#), the speech opens with a story of self – a short, personal story about a lesson he’s learned in his life. Next, it pivots to a story of us: Obama relates that lesson to something we’ve all experienced, reinforcing the idea that “we’re all in this together”. And finally, there’s a story of now – a clear call to action, with a clear and tangible choice that Obama wants the audience to make.

Myths and the myth gap

At a deeper level, there’s the kind of collective stories that we call myths.

The importance of myths is as old as we are as a species.

These are the kinds of stories that give us a sense of ‘magnetic north’: what’s important, where we are, how we got here, where we’re trying to get to, and above all who we are. At their best, myths are like a form of collective psychology. They hold up a mirror to the human condition, help us to work through collective emotions, and force us to acknowledge or confront the sides of our nature we prefer to ignore.

A few years back, I wrote a book called [The Myth Gap](#), which was about the idea that we in the west have lost a lot of our old myths in modern times, and especially over the last few decades. It’s partly the result of steep declines in religiosity in most developed countries: historically, religions have often been the institutions we’ve looked to as the home of deep myths, and as a ‘religion-shaped hole’ has opened up, we’ve been less sure of where to look for them.

But our modern ‘myth gap’ is also the result of changes in how [we see the world](#). We’ve come to see truth in a more literal and less symbolic way than we used to. We think things are either true in a scientific sense, or not true at all – which is why, if you look up the word ‘myth’ in a thesaurus, you’ll find it in the same entry as words like ‘bunk’ or ‘fabrication’.

As a result, we’ve become steadily more distanced from the myths that used to be so central to our societies – leaving us in a strange and historically unprecedented situation.

In such a situation, the psychotherapist Carl Jung argued, we're exposed to real danger – because, as he [puts it](#), “the man who thinks he can live without myth, or outside it is an exception. He is like one uprooted, having no true link either with the past, or with the ancestral life which continues within him, or yet with contemporary human society”.

What Jung understood is that without myths and the sense of magnetic north that they provide, the compass needle spins lazily around. We're no longer sure who we are or what's important; and in the absence of myths to sustain us, other things fill the gap.

Like what? Well, other kinds of stories – and ones that may not necessarily help us. Take for instance the consumerism story propagated by the marketing industry, that tells us that '[you are what you buy](#)'. At one level, it's just a story. But it's also a story that has hugely impactful real world consequences – as we can see in the environmental devastation all around us.

Or consider stories of environmental collapse, that lead on themes of ecological overshoot, resource [scarcity](#) and above all the idea that there isn't enough for everyone. These stories, too, have tangible impacts. The Nazi concept of lebensraum ('room to live') was [rooted](#) in a story of environmental scarcity, for example. Perceptions of resource stress and land scarcity contributed to the [Rwandan genocide](#) in 1994, too.

As these examples show, the key point about collective stories is that they have the power to become self-fulfilling prophecies – because when we believe stories and start to behave accordingly, we can make them come true.

Think of what happens in a run on a bank. As a story begins to circulate that the bank doesn't have enough money to cover its customers' deposits, people start to queue up outside. Suddenly, the story becomes reality – because enough people believe it and act accordingly. As the author [Terry Pratchett](#) put it, “People think that stories are shaped by people. In fact, it's the other way around.”

The power of stories to become self-fulfilling prophecies becomes especially important in periods of crisis. Times of profound upheaval – like the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 9/11 attacks in 2001, the financial crisis of 2008 or the Covid-19 pandemic – create pivotal moments in which different stories can take hold, with the power to create very [different futures](#). A lot depends on the kinds of stories we choose in such moments.

This brings us to a key question for us as change makers: how myths can be used and abused politically. In the last section, we saw how destructive leaders can manipulate trauma. In the same way, our contemporary 'myth gap' and lack of deep shared stories also offer rich opportunities for them.

Authoritarian or populist leaders like Donald Trump are, after all, nothing if not gifted storytellers – especially when it comes to stories about a threatening [Other](#) and why we need to build bigger walls to keep them out.

Yet these are just the kinds of stories that we don't need right now: stories that take us into fight-flight-freeze rather than tend and befriend, that inflame feelings of loss rather than helping people work through them, and that [divide us](#) rather than bring us together.

So what kinds of stories do we need right now?

The myths we need

Here are six ideas: three from The Myth Gap, and three from a more recent Larger Us [report](#) on how we navigate times of collective crisis.

First, we need the kind of stories that help us to see ourselves as a larger us.

What this means is an ‘us’ that, as we’ve been exploring throughout this guide, includes and welcomes in, rather than defining itself in opposition to a ‘them’. As we saw earlier, this isn’t a new idea – on the contrary, it’s at the heart of all of the world’s great religions as well as the [‘Golden Rule’](#) of treating others as we would want to be treated.

And it’s also our own story as a species, of how we’ve identified with a progressively larger ‘us’ – from tribes to nations, villages to megacities, hieroglyphs to html, all the way up to today, where we’re at last on the verge of seeing ourselves as a genuinely global ‘us’.

Second, we need stories that help us see ourselves as occupying a longer now that’s midway between a deep past and a deep future.

The writer and co-founder of the [Long Now Foundation](#) Stewart Brand likes to tell an [apocryphal story](#) about what happened when the Fellows of New College at Oxford University discovered that the great wooden beams in the College dining hall were infested with beetles and would need to be replaced. The Fellows agonised over where they might find oaks large enough to make new beams until, Brand recounts,

“One of the Junior Fellows stuck his neck out and suggested that there might be some worthy oaks on the College lands. These colleges are endowed with pieces of land scattered across the country which are run by a college Forester. They called in the College Forester, who of course had not been near the college itself for some years, and asked him if there were any oaks for possible use.

“He pulled his forelock and said, “Well sirs, we was wonderin’ when you’d be askin’.” Upon further inquiry it was discovered that when the College was founded, a grove of oaks had been planted to replace the beams in the dining hall when they became beetly, because oak beams always become beetly in the end. This plan had been passed down from one Forester to the next for over five hundred years saying “You don’t cut them oaks. Them’s for the College Hall.”

As change-makers, we can draw powerfully on these kinds of stories as a way of helping all of us to think about the future – and the past – over much longer timescales, for instance in thinking about the institutions we want to build or the legacy that we want to leave.

Third, we need myths that encourage us to imagine a different good life: one in which quality of life is no longer seen in terms of how much we consume.

As Jon Alexander explores in his book [Citizens](#), the dominant narrative of the 20th century was the 'Consumer story': a story of separation from each other, and of how wellbeing is primarily about how much stuff we own and consume. Now, though, the Consumer story is collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions, creating space for a new story to emerge – one that casts us instead as Citizens.

The writer Duane Elgin, meanwhile, argues that rather than focus on growth in consumption, we could focus on growth in our [maturity](#) as a species. In his travels, Elgin likes to ask people around the world a deceptively simple question: if humanity were a single person, would we be a baby, a child, a teenager, an adult, or an elder? All over the globe and across hugely diverse societies, he continues, large majorities of people typically respond that we're a teenager.

Which makes sense, he [suggests](#): "Teenagers are rebellious, and we are rebelling against nature. Teenagers don't tend to think about the long-term future; nor do we as nations." But, he continues, teenagers also "have a huge amount of untapped energy and idealism, a sense of hidden greatness that is about to burst forth". He concludes:

"Most teenagers do not become adults without moving through a time of testing and challenge – a rite of passage. I believe the human family is about to go through a time of profound initiation and challenge as we move from our adolescence to our adulthood."

At a deeper level, we also need myths that can help us to work through the enormous psychological challenges of a time as turbulent and uncertain as this.

[Three kinds of myths](#) seem to have been especially useful to our ancestors in helping them make sense of crises: apocalypse myths (stories in which something is being revealed); restoration myths (stories in which something is being healed); and emergence myths (stories in which something is being born).

Take apocalypse myths first.

We often think of 'apocalypse' as a synonym for the end of the world, and indeed have a whole genre of film and fiction devoted to imagining such futures, from World War Z and I Am Legend to The Day After Tomorrow and Don't Look Up. In reality, though, apocalypse means something more subtle and interesting than the end of the world, and instead refers to the idea of an unveiling of things as they really are; a revelation.

In this sense, Covid-19 was an apocalypse in the true sense of the word – one that above all made clear the vulnerabilities that come with our interdependence. (As evolutionary biologist Carl Bergstrom [puts it](#), "We may not act like we're all in this together, but in a pandemic, like it or not, we are").

George Floyd's murder, too, was an apocalyptic moment, when the depth of structural racism was made clear to all, together with the complicity of so many of us in systems that we've failed to challenge and transform. In Carl Jung's terminology, there is deep 'shadow work' to be done here as we are forced to confront things in ourselves and our societies from which we prefer to look away.

Next, restoration myths.

In these stories, something fundamental has gone wrong. Society, the world, or even the universe has suffered a wound or rupture in the natural order of things, often caused by our own greed or folly. In such circumstances, the remedy for healing the breach is a process of atonement, centring on a symbolic act of self-sacrifice.

As we see in countless works of popular fiction and film (Harry Potter, the Narnia books, the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Disney's Frozen or Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials) as well as in Judaeo-Christian theology, this act of self-sacrifice brings things back into balance and makes the world whole again. Images of winter or environmental catastrophe are replaced by those of flourishing and plenty.

In psychological terms, such myths point to the need to sacrifice the grasping ego that always wants more. But they also have a political point to make about the need for the kind of restorative justice that we saw in the last section – specifically, the kind of restoration that goes beyond mere apologies towards doing everything possible to heal the wrongs that have been done.

In environmental contexts, too, restoration myths point to the need to go beyond mere sustainability towards repairing the damage we've done and the ecosystems we've harmed.

Finally, emergence myths.

In mythic terms, acts of self-sacrifice often lead to rebirth (Jesus, Harry Potter, Aslan, Gandalf). But this isn't the kind of rebirth in which everything goes back to the way it was before. Instead, those who are reborn come back changed.

This has parallels with trauma psychology, which emphasises that healing from trauma is more subtle than simply being 'fixed' back to a pre-traumatic state. Instead, people who survive trauma and experience post-traumatic growth come back changed by the experience: able to see how it has made them more resilient rather than more vulnerable, able to live in the present and look to the future rather than being overwhelmed by the past.

And emergence myths can also help us to navigate a moment in which much is unprecedented – not just global challenges like climate breakdown or nuclear proliferation, but also the extent of our global connectedness and the ability to see ourselves as part of a larger whole than ever before.

Every time we communicate with people about the changes we want to see in the world, we tell stories – of self, of us, of now, of the world we inhabit and the world we want to help to be born. Stories that have deep creative power, through their potential to become self-fulfilling prophecies.

The fact that, as change-makers, we tell stories to which others listen means we have huge opportunities. But we also have huge responsibilities to ensure they're the right kind of stories: the kind that bring us together rather than divide us.

Questions for reflection

- Do you recognise yourself as a storyteller? Is anyone else telling your story for you? Conversely, are you telling anyone else's story for them?

- What is the story of how you came to be a change-maker, and work on the issues you work on? How does that lead into the stories of 'us' and 'now' that you could tell about the change you are seeking to bring about?

- Do any of the archetypes of apocalypse (stories in which something is being revealed), restoration (something being healed) or emergence (something being born) offer a structure that might help the people you engage with to process the challenges that they are facing?

Conclusion

What happens now?

Throughout this guide, we've seen how change-makers have the power to affect how others perceive the world and react, and how we can use that power for good or ill.

We've explored how **loneliness and disconnection** have political as well as personal impacts, and how the need we all share to feel like we belong can be exploited by extremists and others who prosper from fear and division. But we've also seen how much all of us can do to build belonging – the kind of belonging that includes and welcomes in, rather than defining itself in terms of who is left out.

We've seen how **divisions** can grow in our psychological and social blind spots – like when we fail to recognise and correct for our innate in-group bias, or ignore how homogenous our social groups have become – and how vulnerable that leaves us to 'othering' people who are not like us. But we've also looked at the power of encounter in bridging divides – and how this, too, is something we can bring to the heart of our work.

We've looked at **threat perception**, how fight-flight-freeze responses can make us less empathetic and more anxious, overwhelmed, or aggressive, and how that response can be activated by social or political issues – and by our own work as change-makers. But we've also seen how we can defuse fight-flight-freeze in our own minds, responding instead with self-awareness and critical thinking – and how we can support collective 'tend and befriend' responses through our work.

We've examined **crisis and trauma**: how collective trauma and shared loss can become central to group identity, leaving societies open to manipulation by destructive leaders, and how everyone experiencing loss needs healing – even those who do harm. We've looked at how change-makers can support people through crisis and trauma through self-care, bringing people together, and holding space for grief and mourning, as well as through remembering past traumas and using crises to help build a sense of agency and purpose.

And we've looked at the importance of collective **stories**, especially given their power to become self-fulfilling prophecies – and how a lack of shared myths can be exploited by people peddling narratives that divide us rather than bringing us together. But we've also seen how change-makers can tell the right kind of stories. Stories of a larger us, a longer now, and a different good life. Stories of apocalypses in which something is being revealed, restoration in which something is being healed, and emergence in which something is being born.

It's striking to see how much **actors who thrive on division** – authoritarian populist leaders and extremist networks; trolls and conspiracy theorists; tech or media companies seeking to monetise our attention – can benefit from all five of these areas. Loneliness and disconnection, fear of the Other, fight-flight-freeze threat responses, unresolved feelings of trauma and loss, and lack of shared stories all provide vast opportunities for them. The last decade has shown painfully what happens when they are given free rein to feed on these opportunities.

For us as change-makers, it can be tempting to meet fire with fire, and respond to division with divisive tactics of our own – especially when we ourselves feel threatened, burned out, or tuned into our in-groups. It becomes easier still to do so when the human impacts of the ‘long crisis’ we’re living through are in our faces 24 hours a day on the news media, in our social media feeds and in the culture in which we live. And as we’ve seen, many respected campaign veterans like Saul Alinsky argue that polarising a debate is a necessary precondition to changing the game.

But using that playbook comes with real risks and costs, as we’ve seen. We may find that our polarising tactics fire up our opponents as much as our supporters, amplifying cycles of mutual radicalisation that push our politics away from the possibility of new consensus and towards extremes. Although we may be seeking to use our influence to expand people’s ‘circles of compassion’, the tactics we use may have the opposite effect.

And there is an alternative that works. As we’ve seen throughout this guide, there are plenty of real world examples of the possibility of a different approach to trying to beat those who prosper from division at their own game. Indeed, you may already be one of the people pioneering such approaches, in which case we’d love to [hear about what you’re doing](#) so that we can share it with others.

Instead of fighting endless them-and-us battles, it’s possible to subvert and change the game towards a larger us, in terms of both the ends we seek and the means we use – through creating belonging, building bridges, appealing to love not fear, helping people to navigate loss and trauma, and telling stories that bring us together rather than dividing us.

It’s worth finishing by repeating that **all this is thinking in progress**. This guide is intended to ask questions and steer into the challenges we are facing, not to try to provide neat answers – and above all, to help create space for lots of us to ask these questions. This is complex and challenging ground, made more so by the urgency of so many of the issues we work on. None of us has all the answers. But now more than ever it seems necessary to be prepared to think again, and to hold these questions together.

And the more of us there are who are asking these questions, the more chance we have of finding answers – and of building the kind of community and movement that can live those answers out. Which is why we’d love to have your comments and feedback throughout the document, and above all why you’re warmly [invited](#) to join the Larger Us community to find others who are also holding these questions in their lives and work.

Thanks so much for reading.

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