

VI. Afterword: A Call to Innovation

It's about a fight for the planet's resources, but the fight is taking place through a capture of the mind. We can only liberate our rivers and our seeds and our food, and our educational systems, and redefine and deepen our democracy, by first liberating our minds and decolonizing our minds.

~Vandana Shiva¹

Frames emerge from history, and they are connected with institutions. To win, we must take on all of it — the frames, the history, and the institutions. We must have the courage to name what is right and plot a course that connects to everyday lives and transforms them. If we do this, we can re-frame our movements in ways that astonish, delight, and liberate.

~From *The Soul of Environmentalism*,
a response to *The Death of Environmentalism*
by environmental justice leaders²

6.1 Beyond Talking Points

Tune in to any serious scientific or long-term policy discussion and you can't avoid the symptoms—a mass extinction, global warming, skyrocketing disease rates linked to pollution, and the depletion of key resources such as topsoil, fresh water, biodiversity, and cheap oil.

These converging trends suggest a troubling forecast for our future. The ecological crisis is already feeding the historic

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Hurricane Ike hits Galveston, Texas in September 2008. The hurricane killed 114 people in Haiti, Cuba and the U.S. and is estimated to have caused over \$10 billion worth of damage.

dynamics of militarism, entrenched corporate power, and the systems of racism and oppression that have haunted the human family for generations. It is tragically predictable that the impacts of environmental collapse—like all structural problems— will follow the well-worn tracks of privilege that divide haves from have-nots.

The worst scenarios are rarely discussed but increasingly foreshadowed: private mercenary armies on the flooded streets of post-Katrina New Orleans. The militarized water grabs in the West Bank. Financial meltdown and global recession. Food riots. More wars over the planet's remaining oil supplies...This version of our future is already all too familiar.

It is inaccurate to compartmentalize these overlapping crises as an “environmental issue,” or an “energy issue,” or any type of “single issue.” Rather they are warning signs that our global system—which is based on centuries of unchecked industrial expansion, colonial conquest and exploitation— has brought our planet's ecological life support systems perilously close to collapse. The crisis is the, often unacknowledged, white noise behind all discussions about the future—the future for our children, for our communities, for the economy, for the role of government, and for global society as a whole.

SmartMeme's roots are in the earth-centered politics of ecological resistance movements. We founded the organization and wrote *Re:Imagining Change* because we

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believe that our lifetimes come at a decisive moment in the history of our planet—a moment that requires creative, bold, and strategic action.

Our times call out for more powerful and effective social movements. We need not only bigger movements but also better strategies to confront the crises head on. We need to unearth the deep roots of our social and ecological problems in the worldview of the **dominant culture**. Social change, at the sweeping scale we need, will require systematic intervention into the pathological assumptions and **control mythologies** that maintain the status quo and limit the collective imagination of alternatives. Our movements need to go beyond talking points and isolated policy proposals to actually shift the narratives that shape popular understanding of our economy, our political system, and our entire relationship with the natural world.

6.2 The Slow Motion Apocalypse

We're in a giant car heading towards a brick wall and everyone's arguing over where they're going to sit.

~David Suzuki

Our lifetimes are witness to a *slow motion apocalypse*—the gradual unraveling of the routines, expectations, and institutions that comfort the privileged and define the status quo.

But the word apocalypse does not mean the end of the world. The Greek word *apokalypsis* combines the verb “kalypto” meaning to “cover or to hide,” with the prefix “apo” meaning “away.” Apocalypse literally means to “take the cover away,” or to “lift the veil” and reveal something that has not been seen.³

And thus these are indeed apocalyptic times. A 2008 poll reveals that 62% of Americans already agree with the statement “The earth is headed for an environmental catastrophe unless we change.”⁴ As the veil lifts, the assumptions and narratives that rationalize the status quo are shifting. What has been made invisible (by propaganda and privilege alike) has become a glaring truth: global corporate capitalism is on a collision course with the planet's ecological limits.

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The militarized streets of New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina (September 2005)



Indigenous women march in Mexico City at the Fourth World Water Forum to demand that water be recognized as a human right (March 2006).

Photo by Orin Langelle.

As activists, we often dare not speak this whole truth for fear of self-marginalizing, terrifying people, or worse—dousing the essential fires of hope with a paralyzing despair.

Indeed, to face the scale and implications of the ecological crisis requires a degree of psychological courage. The lifting of the veil can release an emotional rollercoaster of anxiety, anger, grief, and despair. When we take it all in—all of the suffering, all of the destruction, all that is at risk—added onto our ongoing daily struggles, it is difficult not to be overwhelmed. Denial is a common response and an effective poultice, however temporary.

A **narrative power analysis** helps us understand denial as a dynamic that shapes the terms of the debate around the ecological crisis. The assumption that the United States can ‘go green’ on its current path, rather than fundamentally change our systems to operate within ecological limits, is one such manifestation. Denial is one of the key psychological undercurrents in the **dominant culture** that is preventing widespread acknowledgement of the scope of the ecological crisis, and keeping the apocalypse suspended in surreal slow motion. Denial is a more comfortable alternative to despair, but its impact on the collective political imagination is equally corrosive.

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We also see this dynamic inside of progressive movements. Among many dedicated activist groups, there is an unstated culture of self-preserving denial. We see it expressed in various ways: rigid boundaries around an issue or constituency, an exclusive focus on short-term “wins,” and a suspension of disbelief about the limits of current strategies to face the crisis. The underlying assumption is that *if we just keep doing what we’ve been doing, and just work harder at it, it will be enough.*

Stagnation is the prevailing creative tendency in too many of our organizations. While some tactics are improved, innovation of strategies is perennially postponed. The undertow of denial can keep our movements trapped in a crisis of imagination. The consequences are a policy paradigm incapable of dealing with the scope of the overlapping problems. The sector plods on while an increasingly unnerved public is left vulnerable to fear-mongering, corporate greenwashing and phony quick-fix techno solutions.

6.3 Psychic Breaks

Sometimes a breakdown can be the beginning of a kind of breakthrough, a way of living in advance through a trauma that prepares you for a future of radical transformation.

~Cherrie Moraga

What happens when denial is shattered by unfolding events? Dramatic crisis situations can challenge underlying assumptions and redefine the conventional wisdom. These cultural and political moments freeze-frame and expose the limitations of current understandings. 9/11, the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the flooding of New Orleans, and the Wall Street meltdown are all recent examples.

These sorts of seismic events inevitably disrupt the dominant culture’s mental maps and can trigger mass **psychic breaks**: moments when status quo stories no longer hold true, and a critical mass of people can’t deny that what is happening in the world is out of alignment with their values. People are left searching for new explanations, and are potentially open to new perspectives and willing to take new risks. As a result, the narrative landscape can shift rapidly and unexpectedly as the terms of debate are redefined.

Psychic breaks open new political space and can provide powerful opportunities for new stories to take root in popular consciousness. We’ve seen it in the upwelling of community



Psychic breaks can occur when the conventional wisdom is shattered by unfolding events. The 2008 financial meltdown on Wall Street led many people to question the system, and changed the conversation about regulation and the free market ideology.

building post-9/11, the outrage and mass civil disobedience during the U.S. military invasion of Iraq, the outpouring of mutual aid during hurricane Katrina, and in the fallout from the Wall Street financial meltdown and the changing story about free market ideology.

Unfortunately though, these moments are often hijacked by **power-holders** who use fear to manipulate trauma and re-entrench old power dynamics. The post-9/11 **psychic break** quickly turned to warmongering, hate crimes against Muslim Americans, and the swift passage of the PATRIOT Act. Resistance to the Iraq invasion had to compete with feverish, bloodthirsty rhetoric couched as patriotism. The historic campaign of Barack Obama also led to Klan-like rallies with a chorus of hostile whites shouting “terrorist” and “kill him.” In the absence of effective progressive framing, the financial crisis was exploited to pass a massive \$700 billion bailout for the largest companies and super-rich investors.

As we see more eco-spasms, resource grabs, economic disruptions and mass displacement, the myths that glue the system together will strain under pressure and more people will experience **psychic breaks**. Our movements must not fail to offer accessible narratives and frame popular understanding of the complicated crises that define our times. As the crisis compounds, these events have a momentum of their own—with or without us.

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As the slow motion apocalypse accelerates, will the fallout trigger regressive policies or progressive change? Will the mass **psychic breaks** of the future unleash popular momentum for social transformation? Or will they serve as an excuse for mass manipulation by desperate elites struggling to maintain the status quo?

The answers depend on how effectively **change agents** can harness awakenings from denial to build movements that can fundamentally shift the course of events. As the **control mythologies** unravel, our movements can offer new narratives and foreshadow new, more just futures...but to do so means we must be ready to wage the **battle of story** in the midst of upheaval, fracture, and rapid change. In this day and age, where cascading events unfold in the 24-hour media environment, when the old story is eroding rapidly, we have to be ready to intervene in the **spectacle**, **reframe** and launch new stories.

6.4 Re:Imagining Change

There are no passengers on Spaceship Earth.

We are all crew.

~Marshall McLuhan

The history of grassroots social change teaches, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” This equation reflects the power of narrative to multiply a social movement’s impact when a common story unites and mobilizes popular energy towards shared goals.

At *smartMeme*, we believe that our times demand that we build more holistic movements that can tell bigger stories. We believe that to address the global challenges of our lifetimes, our movements must cultivate a broader understanding of **narrative power** and develop more sophisticated **story-based strategies**. Our movements need to nurture a culture of strategic innovation. Organizations need Research and Development budgets, street level laboratories, and a swarm

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During the 2007 United Nations Convention on Climate Change, social movements mobilized in 86 countries and converged on the talks in Bali, Indonesia. Indigenous peoples denounced “false solutions” to global warming such as carbon trading, agrofuels and practices that devastate their lands and violate human rights. Photo by Orin Langelle.

of creative strategists. We need to shift the activist culture to see innovation, not as a luxury at the edge of “the work,” but rather as a necessity at the heart of “the work.” We must be willing to take risks and re-imagine not only a vision for our communities, but also a vision of what social change process and practice can look like.

But make no mistake, bold innovations are afoot: From the community supported agriculture (CSA) program of the Milwaukee racial justice organization Growing Power, to the youth-based cross-cutting work at the Center for Media Justice in Oakland, to the community-based corporate campaigning of the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) in Florida. There are countless examples of cross-sector work bubbling up in communities across the country. Innovative organizations are stepping beyond single-issue politics to open new political spaces, test new models, and embrace new organizational forms. Leaders are forging new alliances that build unity amongst different issues, constituencies and movements without creating structures that deny our differences or compromise our diversity. The victory of the Obama campaign shows us the power of hopeful stories to unite people, and the mobilizing potential of the Millennial generation, who mashed up Twittering and good old-fashioned door-knocking to get out the vote in record numbers.

Story-based strategy has an important role to play in supporting these types of innovations. When we come together across social divides to share our histories and our dreams, new understandings of interconnection can emerge.

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Storytelling can help us build relationship across race and class lines. **Story-based strategy** can help us articulate shared values and more effectively communicate the connections between all the “issues.”

The name *smartMeme* is inspired by a vision of grassroots **change agents** collaboratively creating and unleashing **memes** designed to challenge assumptions and change destructive stories. The *smart* implies both effective and networked: **memes** that are born from and spread through **people-powered** collaboration. Our movements desperately need *smarter memes* that encapsulate and popularize stories with the creative power to point us towards a more democratic, just, peaceful, and ecologically sane future.

SmartMeme’s first five years of experimentation leads us to believe that there is vast transformative potential in narrative social change strategies. The **story-based strategy** model that we’ve outlined in the preceding pages is a rudimentary sketch of the possibilities. There are more ideas to explore, more stories to tell, and more interventions to imagine. We offer *Re:Imagining Change* as an invitation to **change agents** from all walks of life to step into your power as strategists and storytellers.

To succeed, we must resist the despair and overcome the denial that have shaped our responses to the crisis for too long. Our generations have the opportunity to lead a path towards ecological reconstruction, mass reconciliation, a more free, just society and ultimately a better world for all.

To succeed, however, our movements must become the culture’s storytellers. The transformational stories of 21st century change will celebrate the heroes at the margins, inspire us to face the true scale of our problems, and herald visions of a world remade. They will accommodate complexity, embrace diversity, and foreshadow the challenges and triumphs we all will face. But these stories will not be handed down from the **meme-makers** on high. They will emerge as collaborative strategies from communities and grassroots movements. They will emerge from struggle and celebration.

Our movements can transform fear and denial into hope and action, if we have the courage to experiment, innovate, struggle, and win. In the new stories emerging from grassroots movements around the planet, lie the creative sparks to reimagine change and remake our world.



Re:imagining Change is a call to innovation and a call to action. Join with *smartMeme* to change the story for a better future.

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Endnotes

1. From “The River vs. Water, Inc: An interview with Vandana Shiva” by Antonia Juhasz for *LiP Magazine* (October 28, 2005) http://www.lipmagazine.org/articles/featshiva_water.htm
2. From “The Soul of Environmentalism: Rediscovering transformational politics in the 21st century” By Michel Gelobter, Michael Dorsey, Leslie Fields, Tom Goldtooth, Anuja Mendiratta, Richard Moore, Rachel Morello-Frosch, Peggy M. Shepard & Gerald Torres (May 27, 2005) <http://www.rprogress.org/soul/soul.pdf>
3. Edinger, Edward F. *Archetype of the Apocalypse: Divine Vengeance, Terrorism, and the End of the World* 1999 Open Court: Chicago. Until his death in 1999 Edinger was one of the leading Jungian analysts in the U.S.
4. *A New Values Survey, on The Emerging Wisdom Culture and New Political Compass* by Paul H. Ray (Unpublished, 2008)