

Psychology for a Better World

Strategies to Inspire Sustainability

Includes a self-help guide for sustainability advocates

By Niki Harré

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Strategies to Inspire Sustainability

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To my mother, Charmian Ola Harré
(1938-2000)

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Chapter One – Introduction

I wrote this book for people (like me!) who believe it is worth trying to make a better world in which both our species and the ecological systems we are part of can flourish. We may think the problems humans face are a simple truth and that it is blatantly obvious business as usual won't work for much longer. But in any human system, it is not just about who is right, it is also about who can win people over. This book contains numerous strategies for inspiring others to join with those of us who are trying to make a difference. It is for the teacher who updates her class on the latest climate change negotiations, the office manager who buys Fair Trade coffee, the student who cannot accept that our current way of life is the best we can do, the builder who suggests his clients install solar panels, the mother who refuses to provide take-home bags of plastic toys at the end of her child's birthday party, the city councillor who lobbies for cycle lanes. Whatever your social location, if you believe a more sustainable world is possible and desirable, then (I suggest) this book is for you.

I am an academic psychologist and the strategies I propose are based on the latest research and theory in psychology. Instead of simply summarising the implications of various studies, I've tried to provide a sense of how the research was conducted so that you can also draw your own conclusions. In this way, I hope to offer you new ways to think about how people interact in social settings, why we are tempted to stick with what we know, and how the same characteristics that currently keep us hooked into unsustainable practices can be used to move us forward.

Three principles underlie the following chapters.

Principle number one concerns my emphasis on sustainability as a collective, social enterprise aimed at new ways of managing ourselves. This emphasis is different from most debates about the current state of our planet and its people, which focus on "the problem". Unfortunately, this problem-based approach tends to invalidate any attempts to create a better world that see "the problem" differently.

Perhaps you've responded to books like Frances Moore Lappé's *Getting a Grip*, or movements such as *Be the Change* that suggest we start with our personal lives, in the belief that such efforts produce change from the ground up.¹ Pointless, according to environmentalists such as George Monbiot who consider that changes to our personal lives make no difference and legislation is the only solution.² The problem from this perspective is rooted in government policy, so the solution must lie there too. What about offsetting your own or your organisation's carbon emissions? Wrong again, according to many analyses that view this as having no effect on the increasing concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere, but rather as an indulgence aimed at assuaging

guilt.³ Perhaps you turned out your lights for Earth Hour? Merely symbolic, the cynics say – it's not as if you saved a significant amount of energy by doing so.

I've been at meetings where the focus is on making changes to the built environment, removing any need for people to be involved. Automatic lights and passive heating are presented as solutions to a primarily technical problem. On the other hand, I've heard people vehemently oppose technical solutions as if they are a capitalist plot to make money out of our impending planetary disaster, with the only solution being a complete overthrow of our greedy ways.

What it comes down to, is if you are too focused on the view that sustainability is a particular kind of *problem* you'll be vulnerable to the latest argument suggesting it is something else all together. The problem will continue to shift and the solutions will always be contentious. People will mock you and prove you wrong. If, on the other hand, you see yourself not as solving a problem, but as helping to create a viable alternative to our current way of life, the meaning of what you do changes. Of course it will involve dead-ends, mistakes and even actions that turn out to do more harm than good, but your role is not to avoid these. As a sustainability advocate, your role is to take a position that says to others: "I am with those who think a better world is possible, and I am willing to take risks, including the risk of being wrong and looking naive or moralistic or well-meaning, to work alongside others in creating this world". Offsetting your carbon emissions, installing passive heating and participating in Earth Hour do not then have to work through crude cause and effect (e.g. offsetting your carbon emissions means there are 1,000 more trees than there would be otherwise). They just have to work in the sense of signalling to others that you are out there (e.g. offsetting your carbon emissions strengthens the signal to your government that many citizens want effective carbon control). In this sense, therefore, the best action is not "best" in terms of having the most dramatic effect on the physical world, it is "best" in terms of having the most dramatic effect on the social world. A green building is no better or worse a solution than an awareness raising campaign or a new government policy, they are all part of the same collective enterprise.

The second principle is that I will be focusing on positive strategies. There is good psychology behind this. By definition, positive approaches are inspiring, uplifting, engaging, fun, and all those other good things. This means people are attracted to whatever it is you are saying or doing. They will come a little closer and pay attention. If people are motivated to attend to you, then the message you are delivering has a much better chance of spreading.

Positive strategies offer more than just a way to win people over. Let's face it, sustainability is like weight loss – if we want to maintain it, we'll always have to work at it. Given that we are in for the long haul, do we really want to spend our lives immersed in tales of terror about the environment and social injustice? A few months before writing this paragraph, I saw a cartoon on Colin Beavan's blog *No Impact Man*.⁴ The cartoon showed Santa standing on a small piece

of ice in the Arctic Ocean, saying: “Why did I give those bad children coal?”. You have to be of a certain age and culture to understand this joke, which is based on a threat from European parents of old that if you are naughty you’ll get coal instead of a present in your Christmas stocking. The cartoon was part of a post lamenting how seriously we take ourselves, or, to quote Beavan directly, “*If we aren’t going to joke around, is the planet even worth saving?*”

He’s got a point. Sure we want to save the planet, and that is a serious task. But we’ve still got to get on with life as we do it. And life is about laughing and enjoying each other and feeling good. Without that, what is there to save? One could argue that the fun bit can happen elsewhere or later, when the crisis has passed (don’t hold your breath). But how many of us are going to dedicate ourselves to sustainability under those circumstances? This is not to say we should cover up problems or keep our message light-hearted – *ten things you can do to save the planet today!* – but we need to be careful with people’s emotions. It’s always tempting to think that for a cause as important as _____ (fill in the blank) it’s OK to send people away feeling shocked and terrified, but is it? Shock, fear, anxiety, anger – these are all forms of human pain. Human pain – along with damage to our ecosystems – is precisely what we are trying to avoid. This is not to say pain is completely avoidable as people move forward on issues, but surely it is better to not only create a world more conducive to human thriving, but also to create human thriving as we go?

My final principle is that I am always working on the assumption that as sustainability advocates we are people too. As a psychologist I am often asked how to change behaviour, and every time this happens I feel uneasy. There is something about the concept of “behaviour change”, when it comes to one set of adults talking about another set of adults, that doesn’t sit quite right with me. It implies that some of us know exactly what is needed, and the only issue is how to set in motion the conditions that will compel others to comply. Certainly there are times when it is possible, and even inevitable, that those of us with control over human settings will induce others to behave in a particular way (see *Nudge* by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein for an argument along these lines).⁵ I am not averse to taking advantage of these opportunities when they come my way. I am also aware that if people only *did* things differently most of the issues we currently face would be gone. But there is a greater prize – showing, persuading and inspiring people to join in, so they themselves become active and creative advocates for a sustainable world.

Acknowledging our humanness also means recognising that we do not have access to the ultimate truth about the way things are or the effect of possible interventions on the complex systems we are part of.⁶ It may feel as if we have science and morality on our side (all right, it *does* feel as if we have science and morality on our side), but I’ve never heard anyone in the public realm claim their position is immoral or ignores scientific evidence. We can and should provide evidence for our statements and appeal to higher values.

But in the end, there are times when we have to make claims based purely on the kind of world we want to live in and our best guess on how to get there. “I just want to live like that,” may on occasion be a more honest and powerful statement than: “This is the way it has to be if we are to survive as a species”. But to be able to talk that way we have to acknowledge that we are all just people, living as people always have – with some notion of how the world works and a lot of ideas on how it could work better.

A consequence of this approach is letting go of those people who are way out of reach. Some people are, and will remain, resistant to sustainability. *Maybe your neighbour really will be the last person in the world to give up driving his V8 to the corner store for a bottle of French mineral water.* On the other hand, there are many people who would like to play a role, if even a tiny one, in the creation of a better world. They are the ones to look out for and nurture, not just because you can take them forward, but because they can take you forward too.

If we think of ourselves as part of a negotiation with equals, rather than in any way external to or above the political struggle to create the world we want to live in, then it follows that we must practise what we preach. For the last few years I’ve offered students places on a sustainability project at the school I’ve been working with in central Auckland. When we discuss whether the project would suit them I always, albeit awkwardly, tell them how our research team walk, cycle or take the bus to the school and that they would need to do this too. (In case I am immediately sprung for hypocrisy, we do drive on occasion for various reasons, but it is not our default mode of transport.) We also provide mostly local food with minimal packaging and ensure that all scraps are composted. I go on to say to the potential new student – my awkwardness increasing – that while they are by no means expected to be perfect they do need to be on a sustainability journey in their own life or the project will not be a good fit for them. At that point students either gush with enthusiasm at the idea of working on something that integrates their personal and academic worlds, or I get a strange, glazed look of confusion. *Huh, I thought psychology was a science? What’s all this sustainability journey waffle?*, I hear them think, or imagine I hear them think. There is a place for the objective study of people and much of the research I’ll draw on here comes from that orientation. But as I shift from the safety of discussing research findings to the riskier task of offering advice on how to apply these findings, I have tried not to be pompous and suggest activities that I’ve decided would be good for you, but not for me. It’s all about “us”, in this book and in our collective enterprise.

Finally, because we are people too, we are subject to all the confusion, hesitation and egoism that hold back progress on this issue. I believe that one deeply committed person can make a tremendous difference, but I also know that most of us are not that person – including me. It’s a fine balance between letting yourself and others off the hook when the going gets tough, and being

unrealistic about what is manageable. I finally came to accept my own and others' limitations as eco-warriors when I discovered fascinating research on how willpower appears to operate like an energy source – each of us only has a limited amount and we can use it up. I discuss this in more detail in the next chapter. The point for now is that, as people too, we need the same inspiration and support that others need to keep going. So as well as focusing on how to get and keep others with us, I'll be discussing how to keep ourselves intact.

The next chapters cover four topics. Chapter two is about how positive emotions and “flow” – the latter a highly engrossing and productive human state – can inspire exactly the kind of creativity and persistence we need to formulate new ways of approaching life. The next chapter is on copying. It discusses the responsiveness of the human brain to what we observe and how this makes copying others almost irresistible to us. While our tendency to imitate currently keeps us hooked into the unsustainable habits we witness on a daily basis, it also suggests openings for positive progress, as I'll discuss. Because we don't just copy what we see but are also highly tuned to stories of what others have done, this chapter then looks into the motivational power of narratives about sustainability leaders, pioneers and successful groups. Lastly, it covers the intriguing topic of self-modelling – how modern technology allows us to see ourselves at our best and how we can take advantage of that to pull ourselves towards a better future. The fourth chapter focuses on identity, that is our ideas of who we are and where we fit, and the advantages of fostering individual's and organisation's identities as sustainability advocates. Alongside this I discuss our deepest desire – to belong – and how critical it is that we look out for and support each other in our efforts. Finally, I discuss morality. Chapter five is my most tentative, as while there is considerable evidence for a universal human morality that can be utilised to protect the planet and each other, the moral high ground is dangerous territory to occupy. But being the good people we are, if we can get sustainability into our souls, many changes will follow.

The final chapter is a self-help guide for sustainability advocates. In this chapter I discuss three levels at which we can take sustainability action. First is the personal or lifestyle level, second is the group level, and third is the civic level. I have included a series of worksheets to enable you to analyse your current and possible future actions at each level. By the end of this book, I hope you are empowered to continue and expand your role in our collective effort to make a better world.

Endnotes

- ¹ There is more than one *Be the Change*. In New Zealand it was a website run by Greenpeace, Oxfam and Forest and Bird from 2007-09. People were able to discuss and pledge to lifestyle changes to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions.
- ² Monbiot has written about this extensively. Most recently at the time of writing on his blog: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/georgemonbiot/2009/nov/06/green-consumerism> (Accessed 6/11/09).
- ³ For example: Smith, K. (2007).
- ⁴ Beavan says he first saw the cartoon on the blog *Climate Progress*, and it was originally posted on *Skeptical Science*. No impact man: A little antidote to environmental over earnestness. <http://noimpactman.typepad.com>. (Accessed 8/1/08)
- ⁵ Thaler, R. H. and Sunstein, C.R. (2008).
- ⁶ This is complexity theory. For an accessible introduction, see: Westley, F., Zimmerman, B. et al. (2007).

Chapter Two – Positive emotions and flow: Encouraging creativity and commitment

As I've argued in the introduction, positive experiences are an important way to inspire and motivate people, as they attract us towards the activity or message being promoted. More than that, however, positive moods bring out important personal qualities that are essential to social progress. This chapter is about how positive emotions and states (such as "flow"), can contribute to building sustainability. Part one looks into positive emotions and part two explores the enticing world of flow states.

Part one – The secret of positive emotions

Beginning this chapter are two very different passages, both of which are designed to persuade a reader that our current lifestyles need to change. I've included these to give you a feel for the emotional effects of positive and negative communications. To get the most out of the passages, read them slowly, and as you read reflect on how you feel. Next, think about or list the actions you wish to take, given your emotional response to the material. Read and reflect on the first passage and the actions it inspires before moving on the second one.

Passage One

James Lovelock: *The Earth is about to catch a morbid fever that may last as long as 100,000 years*

Imagine a young policewoman delighted in the fulfilment of her vocation; then imagine her having to tell a family whose child had strayed that he had been found dead, murdered in a nearby wood. Or think of a young physician newly appointed who has to tell you that the biopsy revealed invasion by an aggressive metastasising tumour . . . Gaia has made me a planetary physician and I take my profession seriously, and now I, too, have to bring bad news.

The climate centres around the world, which are the equivalent of the pathology lab of a hospital, have reported the Earth's physical condition, and the climate specialists see it as seriously ill, and soon to pass into a morbid fever that may last as long as 100,000 years. I have to tell you, as members of the Earth's family and an intimate part of it, that you and especially civilisation are in grave danger . . . as the century progresses, the temperature will rise 8 degrees centigrade in temperate regions and 5 degrees in the tropics . . . We are in a fool's climate, accidentally kept cool by smoke, and before this century is over

billions of us will die and the few breeding pairs of people that survive will be in the Arctic where the climate remains tolerable.

By failing to see that the Earth regulates its climate and composition, we have blundered into trying to do it ourselves, acting as if we were in charge. By doing this, we condemn ourselves to the worst form of slavery. If we chose to be the stewards of the Earth, then we are responsible for keeping the atmosphere, the ocean and the land surface right for life. A task we would soon find impossible – and something before we treated Gaia so badly, she had freely done for us.

So what should we do? First, we have to keep in mind the awesome pace of change and realise how little time is left to act; and then each community and nation must find the best use of the resources they have to sustain civilisation for as long as they can. Civilisation is energy-intensive and we cannot turn it off without crashing, so we need the security of a powered descent . . . We could grow enough to feed ourselves on the diet of the Second World War, but the notion that there is land to spare to grow biofuels, or be the site of wind farms, is ludicrous. We will do our best to survive, but sadly I cannot see the United States or the emerging economies of China and India cutting back in time, and they are the main source of emissions. The worst will happen and survivors will have to adapt to a hell of a climate.

Passage Two

Holger Kah: Urban New Zealand in 2020 – an Organic society

You are pedalling back from work with the other seven passengers sharing the solar-assisted Octocycle. You are cruising at a leisurely 60 km/h assisted by a light tail wind. You admire the fresh green, and the ripe and luscious fruit on the trees that line the traffic lanes; the birds giving a free concert to your delight.

Cycle vehicles are everywhere, with passengers and by-passers waving and greeting you.

You see people cruising around having a free and healthy snack from the trees.

“It’s good,” you think, “that we don’t have to worry about pollution when we bite into a fresh fruit offered by someone on the traffic lane side path.” Land transport has been completely exhaust-free for the last six years. Even all the trains are running on sustainably generated electricity.

As you pedal past fields of naturally grown wheat and vegetables you help yourself to wonderfully aromatic, under-rainforest-canopy-grown fair trade coffee from the traffic lane side bar, transported from Brazil on wind assisted containership. Boats and ships are still using the precious oil, although much less, thanks to the new sail designs.

Just then your daughter reminds you via your personal mobile 3D screen to make a detour and pick her up from school. As you reach the school you return the used coffee cup to the traffic lane side bar for re-use.

Your daughter greets you with a glass of freshly pressed juice made from apples, carrots and beetroot – all grown in the school gardens and juiced in the school kitchen. She is all smiles. She has just won her school's compost making contest in the temperature category. Her pile made it to a staggering 87°C. "She's a smart little cookie" you think. "Last year she came second in the earthworm breeding competition."

Both of you wait at the depot until two seats become available on a flash new, photo-voltaic hexacycle going in the direction of your home. Almost everyone on board wants to stop at the local gardens for some fresh produce, so the hexacycle pulls into the parking lot of the food garden cooperative.

Fresh strawberries are everyone's favourite as the season is now rapidly coming to an end. You purchase some antioxidant purple potatoes, and you find a nice mix of salad greens as well. All harvested earlier that day.

In the old days all this would have been organically certified, you remember, now, of course, everything is organic by default. There is no organic labelling required. Organic has become the conventional.

Finally arriving home, your husband takes the lettuce off you and, together with some herbs and home-made dressing, based on real egg mayonnaise from the local delicatessen factory, turns it into a beautiful salad. This will go well with the main course, home-made pizza. It only takes four minutes in the adobe, dome-shaped oven, fired with sustainable, locally grown firewood.

After the meal you relax in front of the 3D screen watching the semi-final games in the soccer championships. The teams look good in their latest hemp fibre outfits. You enjoy the game, while thinking back to the times when television broadcasting was interrupted so frequently by annoying commercials. With very little globalised trade and the emphasis on local production and processing, there is no need for nationwide or international advertisements.

The favourites have won again and enjoy the applause and celebrations from the crowd.

"Oh well, time for bed," you think. After visiting the bathroom you get into your linen nightie sewn by your daughter at school, crawl under the woollen duvet (thanks to Uncle Albert's home flock of sheep) and cuddle up to your husband. Another day in Ecotopia.

The first passage, by James Lovelock, probably made you feel sad, angry, depressed and anxious – or a similar cocktail of unpleasant feelings.¹ It is

certainly designed to shock. Holger Kahl's vision of a possible 2020 has a very different tone designed to make you feel hopeful, intrigued and positive about what the future might bring.² Did either communication tactic inspire you to action? If you are like participants in many psychological experiments, the passage that created negative emotions will have dampened your ability to imagine possible actions, whereas the passage that left you feeling good will have encouraged you to think broadly about how you and others could contribute to a new way of life. You may not have agreed with everything Kahl suggests is possible, but his imagined future is still likely to have ignited that welcome spark of hope.

What is it about feeling good that gets people going? To answer that, we will take a look at several psychological studies that have explored this question, before looking more specifically at the implications of these for promoting sustainability.

Emotions have three components. First, they are bodily sensations (they aren't called *feelings* for nothing), hands trembling with nervousness, jaw clenched with anger, the particular weightlessness that comes from joy. Second, emotions are thoughts – pictures and words that invade our heads, in ways that can be highly disruptive, good or bad. Third, they are “action tendencies” that is, ideas about what to do next.³

Barbara Fredrickson has suggested that one of the differences between positive and negative emotions is that positive emotions broaden our sense of what we can do, whereas negative emotions narrow this sense.⁴ According to Fredrickson, a negative emotion is telling us that something is dangerous, and we had better attend to it. So we narrow our focus to the potential threat and work out how to make it go away. If we feel anger, for example, we have the sense that we or someone we care about has been wronged, and we want to attack in order to restore justice. Anxiety makes us churn the threat over and over in our minds, trying to work out what might happen and what we could do to prevent it. If we are scared we want to retreat.

Positive emotions, on the other hand, are a signal that things are going well. One of the implications of this is that we can afford to look around at what the world has to offer. We might try things we haven't done before, even take a few risks. Positive emotions are therefore conducive to creativity, expansion, and looking for and seizing opportunities.

In one study, Fredrickson and her colleague, Christine Branigan, divided 104 university students into groups.⁵ Each group watched one of five short films intended to produce particular emotional responses. The film *Penguins* showed groups of penguins “waddling, swimming, and jumping”, which generates amusement. *Nature* featured “fields, streams and mountains in warm, sunny weather” and elicits contentment and serenity. *Witness* shows “a group of young men taunting and insulting a group of Amish passers-by in the street” and elicits anger and disgust. To generate anxiety and fear, one group watched *Cliffhanger*

which shows a “prolonged mountain climbing accident”. The final film *Sticks* was emotionally neutral and featured an “abstract dynamic display of coloured sticks piling up”.⁶

Having watched their allocated film, the students were asked to describe the strongest emotion they felt when viewing it. In most cases, this was the emotion the researchers had anticipated. They were then asked to complete a judgement task, as seen in Figure 1.

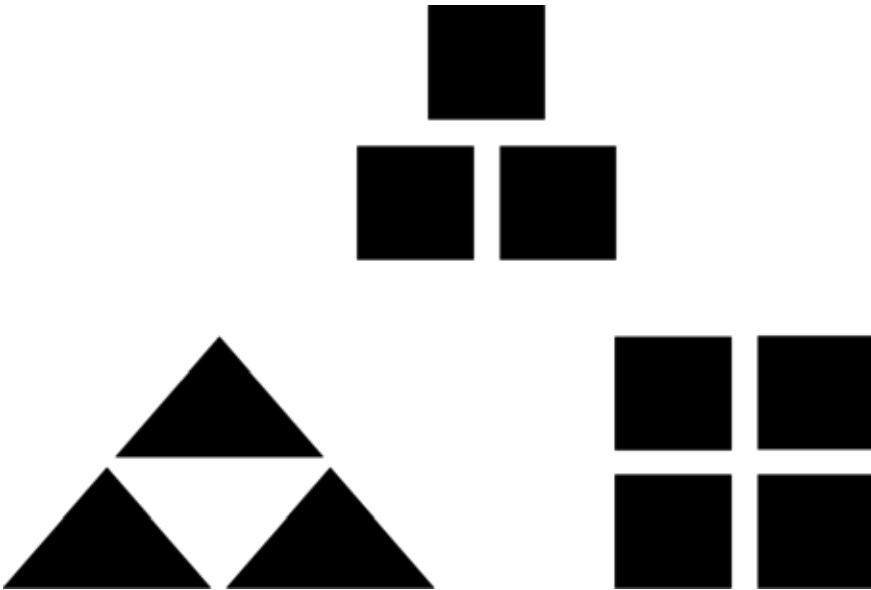


Figure 1. Example of global-local item in Frederickson and Branigan's (2005) study

The participants' task was to decide which of the bottom two configurations is most like the top configuration. There obviously isn't a right answer, because you are forced to decide between the one with the same shapes – squares, and the one with the same number of shapes – three. They were given eight examples of these, all of which forced them to choose between the shapes themselves and the number of shapes shown. Participants who tended to go with the number of shapes, that is they focused on the overall pattern, were deemed to have a *global* bias. Those who tended to go with the same individual shapes were considered to have a *local* bias. Next, they were asked to concentrate on the emotions aroused by the film and "*live [them] as vividly and as deeply as possible.*" (p. 320). They then had to list everything they could think of to do, given this emotional state.

The results showed that participants who had watched *Penguins* or *Nature*, the two films that generated positive emotions, had more global biases and more ideas for actions. (The *Penguin* film, produced fourteen action statements on average, with the *Witness* film, producing just nine statements.)

Why did the films produce these differences? Fredrickson and Branigan argued that it was because of the broadening effect of positive emotions and the narrowing effect of negative emotions. The films that made participants feel happy, also made them open-minded. They saw life, or at least clusters of squares and triangles, with a holistic gaze and they could think of lots of things to do, given their feelings. The films that produced anger and anxiety, on the other hand, encouraged the participants to narrow in, to see details and to have a more restricted sense of options.

Fredrickson also suggested that different positive emotions work in different ways. Joy creates the urge to play and be creative. Interest prompts us to explore, take in new information and expand our understanding of the world. Love creates the same urges as joy and interest, but the desire to play and explore is more specifically with loved ones. A sense of pride spurs people towards new and better achievements; and even contentment, that blissful sense of being satisfied with what we have, encourages an expanded sense of who we are, where we fit in the world and what we may be able to contribute.

These emotions are valuable and have become part of our nature, because the actions they inspire make us stronger and more knowledgeable, improve the quality of our social relationships and help us gather resources. A joyful person will wonder what is over the hill and go and explore, a contented fisherman will be open to teaching others how to mend fishing nets, and the woman proud of her garden will plant even more tomatoes the following season. The finishing touch in favour of positive emotions is that the knowledge, relationships and physical resources accumulated during these good times are there even if we become miserable.

Other studies have also found that people in a positive state are more creative. For example, one study set participants the task of attaching a candle

to the wall in such a way that wax would not drop on the floor when it burned.⁷ To do the task, they were given drawing pins and a box of matches. Seventy-five percent of the people who had been put in a good mood (by watching bloopers from television Westerns) got the solution, which is to pin the match box to the wall and stand the candle in it to catch the wax. Only 20% who had watched *Area Under a Curve*, a maths film, did so. The task requires a bit of imagination and this seems more provoked by humour than geometry.

It is not just films that do the trick. People given attractively wrapped candy have been found to seek greater variety when choosing from a selection of snacks than people not given candy.⁸ Simply being asked to imagine a recent event that provoked a good mood increased creative performance when constructing a lunar hotel from card and tape.⁹

The studies described so far used strange tasks that the participants would not encounter in real life, and most used university students as participants. In a somewhat more real world setting, Carlos Estrada and his colleagues examined the effect of positive emotions on 44 physicians who had been practising for an average of 14 years.¹⁰ A positive mood was induced in some by giving them candy, while others weren't so lucky and got no gift. All 44 were given a written case study describing a patient's symptoms as follows: *"...a 45-year-old female who presented with a 6-month history of arthralgias, fatigue, dark urine, and 'red spots' on both legs."* (p. 122). In addition, they could seek tests and obtain the results (which were pre-prepared and available from the research assistant). The doctors were asked to think out loud and their thoughts were recorded. They went something like this: *"...Um, red spots, I think something like thrombocytopenia... immune hemolysis creating dark urine...dark urine makes me, um, think of a possible hepatic disease but that doesn't seem as likely. So the working diagnosis, thrombocytopenia, collagen vascular disease..."* (p. 124).

The researchers found that being given candy did not affect whether the physicians (eventually) arrived at the correct diagnosis of chronic active hepatitis, with around 62% doing so overall. But those who had been given the candy were twice as quick to consider liver disease, and also showed much less "anchoring" than the no-candy group. That is, they were quicker to drop their initial diagnoses when given evidence that these were incorrect. What this study seems to show (apart from the benefits of giving your doctor sweets if you want a quick result) is that being in a good mood encouraged the doctors to more open-minded or, to use Barbara Fredrickson's terminology, to broaden their thinking.

Positive emotions also seem to improve people's ability to handle threatening information. When threatened, we usually feel fear, anxiety, anger, or jealousy – one or more of the negative emotions that narrow our focus. One strategy, usually sensible, is to deal with the threat itself. If I am angry because a new motorway is proposed for my suburb, ideally I should deal with that directly by writing to members of my community board or organising a petition.

However, people often (perhaps most often) try to alleviate the emotion by discounting the threat, that is, telling themselves it is less bad than it appears. We talk with our friends about the motorway and collectively come to the conclusion that it will be perfect for an electric train line when oil hits \$500 a barrel. Reframing the threat in this way, serves the purpose of dispelling the bad feelings almost as effectively as doing something about it and, being keen to conserve energy (in the psychic sense, not in the light bulb sense), people very often take that way out. Such a strategy might work in the short-term, but if the threat is real, convincing ourselves it isn't is unlikely to make it go away forever.

People who feel good, however, seem a little more willing to look directly at threats than those who aren't in a positive mood. One study involved groups of young women, half of whom were asked to recall their acts of kindness towards others.¹¹ This was designed to put them in a positive frame of mind by drawing attention to how nice a person they were. The other half (the control group) were asked to complete a more general questionnaire about their personal characteristics, designed to leave them feeling neutral. All the participants were then told that medical evidence suggested a link between caffeine use and a "painful but non-cancerous breast disease" (p. 107). Having been told this, they were given the opportunity to read three articles: *Caffeine consumption can be dangerous to your health*, *Drinking caffeinated beverages poses little health threat* and *Physiological effects of caffeine on the human body*. The aim was to measure differences between those women who had been induced to feel good compared to those who hadn't. Would a good mood give women the courage to look at the first article listed? The interesting differences were between the high caffeine users in the two groups. Of these, those who had been encouraged to think about themselves positively were twice as quick to look at the first article that implied caffeine was bad for them, as were the high caffeine users in the neutral (control) group. Importantly too, the group that were feeling good about themselves later rated themselves as having more control over reducing their caffeine use than the other group.

What this suggests is that if people are confronted with a threat their tendency to examine the threat from all angles, including those that may reveal unwelcome information, is stronger if they are feeling good. It would seem, therefore, that positive emotions are not only useful for creative tasks, but also for tasks that involve re-examining our personal practices. This has very interesting implications for nurturing sustainability as will be discussed later.

A final feature of positive emotions worth drawing attention to is their value when negotiating situations with others. Two studies involved putting some participants in a good mood (through exposing them to funny cartoons or pleasant scents – such as Renuzts "Fresh 'n Dry Powder Soft") and then comparing their negotiating skills with participants not induced to feel happy.¹² The studies found that those in a good mood were more efficient and effective, and also favoured less confrontational tactics. Once again, this seems largely

due to the broadening effect of positive emotional states. As Carnevale and Isen, the authors of one of these studies pointed out, the superior negotiating skills of those in a good mood was primarily about their willingness *“to integrate, find creative ways of combining issues, and to develop novel solutions”* (p. 12).

Do positive emotions have a downside?

The evidence presented so far shows that positive emotions make us more creative, better at sifting through complex information, more open to information that is personally threatening but potentially important, and better negotiators. Are there any downsides to feeling good?

If you recall, one of the functions of positive emotions discussed at the beginning of the chapter is to signal things are going well. When this is the case, we sense we can afford to broaden our attention – whatever is happening now is under control, so we can look elsewhere. This is good for encouraging creative thinking and exploration of new activities. However, it can also distract us from the task at hand, particularly if it is boring or unpleasant.¹³ There is experimental evidence to support this. Studies have found that university students in a positive mood judged both strong and weak arguments about acid rain and increasing university fees as equally valid, unlike students not in a positive mood who judged the strong arguments more favourably.¹⁴ People in good moods have also been found to use social stereotypes more readily when judging if an individual is guilty of a crime.¹⁵ What these studies suggest is that people in a good mood are motivated to move on quickly from tasks that are dull, and so may latch onto poor quality arguments or stereotypes to get the job done. Intriguingly however, the last of these studies found that if participants were told they were accountable for their judgment of guilt or innocence, people in a good mood were just as careful in their judgements as others. This suggests that the downside to being in a good mood – lack of focus in boring situations – can be reversed as long as people are convinced that care is important.

It is also important to point out that the principal effect of negative emotions – to narrow attention and become focused on the issue at hand – can have value in motivating action. Anger, for example, is clearly apparent in the life stories of political activists. In interviews my students and I carried out with New Zealand political activists, one activist said:

“I think that motivated probably the last 20 years of my political activism, just the outrage really, that these people in government could just do this stuff without any consent, that they were just riding roughshod over 50 years of democratic history and had no concern for the fact that they were deeply unpopular and that nobody supported what they were doing except the very rich people who loved it”.

Similarly, other activists we interviewed referred to being “outraged” and “horrified” at the actions of their government or other powerful organisations.¹⁶

Fear also plays a role in getting people on board with issues. Fearful messages are rarely boring and so grab our attention.¹⁷ When I was talking with friends about this chapter, one of them told me his father had given up smoking the very first time he saw an advertisement showing pictures of diseased lungs. You can’t get much more effective messaging than that. However, as with threatening personal information, fearful messages can be dealt with in two ways. We can try and dispel the fear itself, which often leads to avoidance, or we can tackle the source of the fear.¹⁸ There are many reasons why we might go down either path, but a critical factor is believing that we *can* tackle the source of the fear. In this sense smoking is relatively straightforward. The required action is clear – give up, and although actually doing so is a little trickier, it is within most people’s capabilities (eventually). Fearful sustainability communications are much more complex. It is difficult to successfully assure individuals that their actions will be effective. Will recycling this Coke bottle really prevent the build up of landfill? Will riding my bike reduce carbon emissions to any meaningful degree?

Fearful communications are also likely to work better when the information is new. On the one hand, it is impressive that my friend’s father was persuaded by a single advertisement to give up smoking. On the other hand, if the first wave of information doesn’t work, it is much harder for the next onslaught to do so. By then we have been become used to avoiding the fear, rather than working to remove the threat itself.

One study investigating fear communications in an environmental setting involved people from Seattle businesses.¹⁹ They were given messages about the importance of water consumption, energy conservation and recycling. These messages were framed either using a “sick baby” appeal that stressed the severity of the problem, or a “well baby” appeal that emphasised people’s ability to address the problem. With regard to water and energy, participants who received the sick baby appeal rated the issue as more important than those who received the well baby appeal, but the latter group rated themselves as more able to address the issue than the former. Well baby appeals produced higher ratings of both importance and ability to address the issue for the recycling message. The authors suggested that sick baby appeals are useful when people aren’t aware of a problem (in this case water and energy) but not when concern is already high (as for recycling). In fact, when concern is high, they suggest that drawing more attention to the severity of the problem may have a rebound effect, as it increases people’s sense of helplessness.

Getting the balance right

The important point about negative emotions is that they have value in small doses and in particular circumstances. Positive emotions, on the other hand,

have value in large doses and in many circumstances. Even the political activists discussed earlier had much more to say about their passion for what they were doing and how it enriched their lives than they had to say about their anger. In the end, anger does not have the same ability to open up possibilities and take us forward as do hope and joy.

Interestingly, recent psychological research, again by Barbara Fredrickson this time with Marcial Losada, has even come up with an optimal minimum ratio of positive to negative emotions for human flourishing.²⁰ The ratio is 3:1.²¹ Similar ratios apply to groups. In one study, Marcial Losada and Emily Heaphy observed different business teams who had been ranked as high, medium or low performance using a variety of criteria, such as customer satisfaction and peer and manager reviews.²² They found that in the 15 high performance teams, positive interactions amongst the members outweighed negative interactions by more than 5:1. For the 26 medium performance teams, the ratio was 2:1, and for the 19 low performance teams it was 0.5:1 (i.e. for these groups, there were more than twice as many negative interactions as positive ones). Losada and Heaphy also demonstrated how the higher ratios led to a much greater range and quality of ideas than the lower ratios, the latter sending teams into an increasingly restricted space in which they became stuck on issues and unable to progress.

The observant reader will have noted that some negativity can still be found both in flourishing individuals and flourishing groups. It would appear that a small dollop of this is indeed needed and serves as a reality check. According to Fredrickson and Losada's study, mental health may deteriorate at ratios of above about 11:1 positive: negative emotions. Losada and Heaphy also suggested that group dynamics will fall apart at very high ratios, as the group no longer has the ability to self-correct as when some people some of the time, point out the flaws in others' thinking.

Putting positive emotions to work for sustainability

So how can we put positive emotions to work for sustainability? First and foremost, if we want to develop creative strategies that take account of the whole picture, the research evidence suggests that we should attempt to induce positive emotions in both ourselves and others.

At the personal level, this is about making sure we do what is needed to maintain a positive outlook – both in general and with regard to sustainability issues in particular. If you give up too much for the cause – and only you can know how much that is – you are likely to feel resentful, which will create exactly the wrong kind of narrowed focus.

Acknowledging what it takes to feel good and stave off resentment at the personal level is also about exposing yourself to the positive aspects of sustainability, and only plunging into the bad news stories to the extent that you can do so without feeling doomed and helpless. The person in a positive

emotional state to start with can absorb some threatening news, as we've seen, but there is a limit. The same goes for the company you keep. If you cannot face a particular group of people without having to go through a two-hour debrief with your partner or friend (or dog) afterwards, then maybe you should move on. Chances are that group isn't going anywhere anyway. At some point it becomes irrelevant how important the issue is or how much you could achieve if only you didn't feel angry all the time. As long as you do feel this way, you won't be getting very far. What's more, both good and bad feelings are contagious. As a "cheer germ", you are helping induce those productive and pleasant positive emotions in others, whereas when you are suffering you have the opposite effect. Once you think of it this way, exposing yourself to information, activities and people that make you feel good isn't just about you. It is also a gift to those you are working with.

However, we mustn't forget that negativity does have its place, and it is both impossible and undesirable to completely avoid the painful aspects of either the issue or of group dynamics. The people I admire most manage to blend a degree of stoicism with a positive outlook. They give of themselves, even in difficult circumstances, but make it look easy – rather like the gymnast who does a backward somersault on the beam with a smile on her face. Those people are particularly wonderful at pulling us forward by the combined power of example (the subject of the next chapter) and an upbeat disposition. So aspire to be one of them, but the research on self-control that will be discussed later in this chapter suggests you won't be able to fake it for long. When your grumpiness increases to the point you can no longer make friends and influence people, it is probably time to retreat for a while. *(S)he who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day.*²³

When motivating others, we often find it hard to resist stressing just how desperate it all is, thus setting ourselves up as people others will turn from. The James Lovelock passage at the beginning of this chapter is a case in point. I've sat through numerous talks and read several books that discuss the bad news at length. When exposed to this material many, including me, turn away – using the preferred human strategy of avoidance. Undeniably, others have a morbid fascination and repeat the bad news at the next opportunity, especially when it involves the outrageous acts of our favoured villains (another oil company scandal?). But how many does it inspire towards the creative acts that a sustainable society needs?

Later chapters detail how stories and films can be used to inspire action and induce positive emotions in others. For now, the main lesson is to think carefully about what you say to others and what impact it is likely to have on them.

For those readers whose (paid or voluntary) work involves organising meetings and events, this research strongly reinforces the importance of

paying attention to making people feel welcome, relaxed and uplifted. Food is a reliable winner. An aesthetically pleasing setting and humour are also ways to shift people into the positive frame of mind most likely to get new ideas flowing in the group. If you have any experience as an organiser, you've probably learnt this already, but you may not realise that it doesn't necessarily take much effort to make a substantial difference to the mood of an occasion. Remember – simply a *pleasant smell* seemed to make people more creative negotiators in one of the studies discussed earlier. If you are like me and always in a hurry, a supply of Fair Trade organic chocolate is brilliant for these purposes. Cartoons are probably even better – reusable (with a different group of course), and I admit to feeling slightly guilty about plying people with imported caffeine and sugar (although I mostly stick to dark chocolate as I've read it is a health food!).

Finally, it is worth reflecting on the research that shows the value of feeling good in facing up to lifestyle threats. While many of us believe that sustainable living would actually be a lifestyle improvement, anything that questions the status quo will be threatening to many. Given this, it seems wise to stress people's capabilities whenever we discuss lifestyle issues. When people feel guilty and vulnerable, they readily shut down to protect themselves from further hurt. When they feel good about themselves, paradoxically perhaps, they may be willing to consider a change.

The next part of this chapter takes these ideas one step further. How can very intense activities – those that represent the peak of human experience – be utilised to further encourage sustainability?

Part two – Flow: The key to commitment

“On a run I forget everything. I feel I am running with all my heart and mind and strength.” (Sato, 1988, p. 103).²⁴

“You are in an ecstatic state to such a point that you feel as though you almost don't exist. I have experienced this time and time again. My hand seems devoid of myself, and I have nothing to do with what is happening. I just sit there watching in a state of awe and wonderment. And the music just flows out by itself.” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, p. 44).²⁵

Positive emotions, as we've seen, are beacons that signal to people that it is safe to engage with the issue. They encourage creativity, which is useful for generating solutions. However, while a fun one-off experience may kick-start people, more is needed to keep them going. As Suzanne Hidi has pointed out, there is a difference between momentary and lasting interest. Engaging events prompt momentary, or what Hidi termed “situational” interest.²⁶ We are all familiar with this type of interest. It comes when you watch the *School of Rock* and vow to learn how to play the bass guitar, or when you see a Santa made of cans on

a fence at Christmas and rescue suitable cans from the recycling when you get home to make your own. More often than not, your enthusiasm wanes as the event fades – bass guitar lessons are for teenagers, and the cans are put back in the recycling. Enduring interest, however, is not aligned with the presence of a particular trigger and endures beyond initial obstacles. Once an interest has penetrated into who we are, we actively seek opportunities to indulge it. The dedicated guitarist pesters his friends to join him in a band; the keen can artist raids the recycling bins of local businesses.

While enduring interests come in many forms, the psychological experience that accompanies them is probably very similar for each person, no matter what their particular obsession. This is the state Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi has described as “flow” and it is clearly one of the most sought after human experiences.

In order to investigate flow, Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues conducted interviews with more than 10,000 people all over the world.²⁷ The researchers found that creative activities, music, sports, games and religious rituals are typical sources of flow, but that people also described flow at work and when parenting.

Flow states have a number of characteristics. They involve total concentration, where the task at hand uses up all available attention. This idea is captured by the quotation at the beginning of this section, in which a member of a Japanese motorcycle gang describes being absorbed “*heart, mind and strength*” when competing in a *bosozoku* race.²⁸ Such concentration may lead the person to ignore other aspects of the situation, such as the rugby player who only notices that he has a bruised elbow after the game. When in flow, people feel completely in control of what they are doing, but this control is effortless and natural rather than a matter of self-discipline. This can be seen in the following extract about sailing:

“Our lives lay in our hands alone – no one knew where we were – and the independence was a good feeling. I felt exuberant and reassured somehow. I knew that I was in charge of the ship and what we did, but I also had the notion that I was in control of the sea that I could see around me – a foolish idea, I suppose, for it is manifest that the sea knows no master. Yet as long as we paid proper respect to the might of the ocean I felt sure that our tiny ship would be safe.” (Roth, 1972, p.8, cited in Macbeth, 1988, p. 227).²⁹

People in a state of flow also describe clarity about what to do from one moment to the next. The activity may have specific requirements (such as when following a knitting pattern) or a clear goal (such as getting the ball into the next hole). Feedback is immediate, and received through either external information (the mountain climber knows that the footrest will hold or not on testing) or

because of the individual's own standards (the poet has an immediate feel for whether a particular word works). Paradoxically, people describe themselves as feeling more alive than in any other situation and yet they also lose self-consciousness and become unconcerned about themselves or how they appear to others. The boundaries between who the person is and what they are doing disappear. This is illustrated in the second opening quote by the conductor who feels as if he almost does not exist as the music flows out.

Flow experiences occur in the space between boredom and anxiety. If a task is too easy, then total engrossment is not possible and the person may slip into a state of boredom. If a task is too hard, then again engrossment is elusive as the person struggles with feelings of inadequacy and confusion. There must be challenge, but the person must also (just) have the skills to meet that challenge. While in this state of complete concentration, people become more persistent and precise. They are willing to keep going until the problem is solved and they are not willing to settle for something that isn't quite right. It follows from this that people experiencing flow are riding an upward cycle, constantly fine-tuning their skills and are able to take on increasingly more difficult tasks.

The flow state is so engrossing that it is "autotelic", which literally means self-motivating. While flow activities generally have a goal (for example to win the race, climb the mountain, or finish knitting the hat), Csikszentmihalyi has suggested that the goal itself may be an excuse in order to experience flow. It is not the outcome the person truly seeks but the state itself.

You may be thinking that flow sounds like a lot of fun, and if you are one of the lucky ones, you will recognise it in something you do. However, you may also be wondering what it has got to do with the serious business of creating a sustainable world. Well as it turns out, creating new worlds might not be such a serious business after all.

Societies are shaped by many forces, one of which is the motivations of individuals within that society. An historical analysis by Huizinga in 1949 showed that many of the institutions embedded within our society originated from play.³⁰ It is easy to see how the film and sports industries were derived from people entertaining each other and testing their physical skills, but Huizinga argues that even courts of law evolved from ritualised debates, and military institutions from ceremonial combat. Essentially, his argument is that these institutions would not have gained prominence if the rituals embedded within them weren't fun. To quote Mitchell, who touched on similar ideas 40 years later, "*In the long run a boring system cannot last*" (p. 57).³¹ In other words, institutions have to provide (at least some) individuals with the opportunity to express themselves and develop their skills, or there will be nobody driving the system and keeping it going.

It is very easy for me to see this at work in my own profession. Both research and teaching are sources of expression, skill development and flow. I can't imagine a cutting edge researcher who does not find his or her work

absorbing. You simply cannot move beyond what is already known and make the connections necessary to explore new territory without fully engaging with your material. People who are half-hearted won't have the stamina to find the holes, push at, and break through the barriers. Similarly, although you are unlikely to get fired for being a dull lecturer, students will be much more attracted to those who love teaching, and such teachers have the greatest impact. Further than this, if everyone found research tedious and teaching a chore, it seems most unlikely academia would exist in its current form.

Capitalism requires inventors, designers and advertisers who persist until they hit on the product or appeal that creates a new niche. Medicine is driven by doctors who lie awake at night trying to figure out how to cure their patients, and don't be fooled into thinking it is the money that makes top soccer players work hard. To give of your best, a problem or activity has to grip you. It has to be flow-inducing.

A word about willpower – the opposite of flow

But what about having a work ethic? About learning to keep going when jobs are tedious, don't we need that too? Willpower, or self-control, is what we use to try and keep doing the right thing when it is hard, painful or just plain boring – in other words well outside our flow-stream. Certainly, there are times when we need to persist with a dreary or frustrating task. However, it may not surprise you to learn that research has suggested people have a rather limited ability to do things that take conscious sacrifice.

Kathleen Vohs, Roy Baumeister and their associates have argued that this is due to “ego depletion”. If we force ourselves to do something tedious, we will find it hard to do something else tedious in a short space of time. The self-control required is like an energy source – eventually it runs out and we need to take a break and allow our stores to be replenished. Vohs and her colleagues demonstrated ego depletion in a series of experiments. In one, 67 psychology students, from the Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, signed up for what they thought was a study on taste perception.³² They were told not to eat for three hours before coming in. As each arrived they entered a room filled with the smell of chocolate chip cookies baking and there was a plate of chocolate chip cookies on the table. However, there was also a plate of radishes. Each student was told that he or she would get to taste one or the other of these foods, and that there would be a follow-up study the next day to measure his or her sensory memory. Some of the students were then instructed to taste the chocolate chip cookies and some the radishes. They could have as much of their allocated food as they liked but were instructed not to taste the other food. The student was then left alone in the room while the experimenter went out.

The experimenter surreptitiously watched each student through a one way mirror, and none of them ate the forbidden food, although those who had

been told to eat radishes were seen to gaze longingly at the chocolate chip cookies and a few even picked up a cookie and sniffed it before putting it back on the plate. When the experiment was over, many of the participants in the radishes group said how difficult it was to resist the cookies. (No one in the cookies group appeared to have problems resisting the radishes.) Therefore, the experimenters appeared to have successfully created a situation in which one set of participants were having to exercise considerable self-control, while the other set were not. Finally, each participant was then asked to complete a problem solving task, supposedly as part of a second, unrelated study. The problem was in fact frustratingly unsolvable, and thus persistence required self-control. The experimenters reasoned that if “ego depletion” was operating, those who had to eat radishes would show less persistence on the problem solving task, than those who had to eat cookies. This is exactly what happened, with the radish students persisting for an average of just over eight minutes, while the chocolate chip cookies group persisted for an average of nearly 19 minutes.

In another study, Kathleen Vohs and Ronald Faber instructed participants to read aloud boring biographies of scientists.³³ Some did so without further instructions, but others were asked to smile and show obvious enthusiasm for the task. All participants were then paid \$10. Those who had to pretend to be enthusiastic, spent much more of their \$10 on food and other items that were available for purchase immediately afterwards than the others. This effect was even more dramatic for the participants who had high scores on a Buying Impulsiveness Scale. If they did not have to read the passage in any particular way, their average spend was not much more than \$1. If they had to pretend enthusiasm, their average spend was over \$6. For our purposes, this study is particularly intriguing because it shows that consumerism can be an immediate response to having to do a task that feels inauthentic.

Overall, these studies show that self-control should be used sparingly, as it is not a state that humans are capable of maintaining for long periods of time. Tiredness, alcohol, stress and overlapping demands for attention have also been found to dramatically reduce our ability to do the right thing.³⁴ It is perhaps most useful to think of self-control in the same way as the negative emotions we looked at earlier. It has its place, but only in small doses. Large doses of flow, on the other hand, are an ally to any cause.

Putting flow to work for sustainability

The sustainability lesson from the research on flow is easy. If we want people to give their best, then we must create, or allow people to create, suitable opportunities to further sustainability using passions and talents. I'm entirely in favour of “turn-off” reminders on light switches as part of the solution to getting people on board, but the people who lead the way will be those who are “turned

on” by the issue and stay on. A friend of mine is writing a screenplay that features a future community (I had better not give away too much of the plot). She is a film distributor, and for her the time-consuming task of researching the viability of various ideas is fascinating. At the local secondary school where my (university) students and I are working, the major undertakings last year were painting new waste stations and making a film to teach the (school) students how to use them. With many students passionate about art and film, we were able to use these as the flow-vehicles for encouraging ownership of the waste situation. I belong to a Transition Town in the suburb of Pt Chevalier, where I live (Transition Pt Chevalier). This group is dedicated to local, community-based approaches to sustainability.³⁵ Gardening has taken off as our leading endeavour. I see many faces light up at our monthly meeting when someone talks about how to get rid of stink beetles and when to prune your pear tree.

As is always the case in this book, these lessons apply to us as sustainability advocates as much as they apply to the people we are trying to engage. What do you love doing? Is it possible to turn your passion for dance or computers into something that addresses the social and ecological issues we are facing? (As for me, if I didn’t find writing considerably more absorbing than stink beetles, this chapter would not be in front of you right now.)

Interestingly, the research on flow adds to my earlier argument that an excessive focus on the reasons why we have to take action now (that is, the bad news about the environment) should be used sparingly to bring about change. By drawing attention to a large and general problem (for example, that coral reefs are in danger of extinction by the end of the century), bad news creates in us what Csikszentmihalyi has referred to as “entropy”, a state of psychic disruption that is unpleasant and in opposition to flow. Flow is experienced as a state of harmony and involves feeling in control, having the skills to meet the challenge and losing our self-consciousness and concern about whether we are doing the right thing. This can only happen when the individual can manage the task at hand.

As well as flow being an important motivator for enduring interest in sustainability, and people in flow states being most likely to push the issue forward, another side-effect is that people in flow are oblivious to external rewards. They don’t need money and material goods to keep them going; they do whatever it is that they do because it is intrinsically rewarding and fun. This is very different to people who are expending effort on activities that they find tedious. As we saw from the research on self-control, people not interested in the tasks they are doing are often readily seduced by the instant and easy pleasure of consumerism. Although I am suspicious of claims that material goods bring “false” happiness and if we just brought people back to their natural state they would find “true” happiness without needing possessions, there is no doubt in my mind that happiness is possible without much in the way of resource intensive experiences (like overseas travel). People can be, and are, happy when solving problems in a domain they love.

When Quentin Atkinson and I wrote the conclusion to our edited book *Carbon Neutral by 2020*, we included the advice to think about spending as you do voting.³⁶ I'm often conscious of that advice. What I've come to realise is that one of the best ways to spend money is on activities that involve people developing and showcasing their skills. When we put money into sport, dance, art or music lessons for ourselves or our children, we help fill the world with people passing on and developing their skills in these ancient flow-inducing activities. The sustainable society cannot and will not be dull. Instead it must provide intensely enjoyable and satisfying experiences for happiness-hungry humans.

Concluding comments

The research discussed in this chapter overwhelmingly suggests that when people are in a positive mood, they are likely to be more open-minded, creative and work better with others. In addition, people are most likely to give of themselves when an activity induces flow – that is, when it challenges them to fully use their skills and is utterly engrossing. If we are interested in advancing sustainability by working *with* people, rather than just enticing them to fall in line with the solutions we propose, then it seems critical that we do whatever we can to promote a positive atmosphere in the contexts in which we operate. We should also look for opportunities to link sustainability with flow-inducing activities. When we succeed in doing this for ourselves and others, the tedium falls away and the context for progress takes over.

Fearful messages have their place in small doses and when a message is new. But it is very important to note that people will attend to these messages better if they have confidence in themselves, and particularly in their ability to take effective action. A useful rule of thumb is to think in terms of *three to six positive inputs for every one negative input*. Finally, as we are in this for the long haul, it is worth making our sustainability activities fun, simply in order to create human flourishing here and now.

Endnotes

- ¹ Lovelock, J. (2006).
- ² Kahl, H. (2007).
- ³ See Frijda, N. H., Kuipers, P. et al. (1989). for theory and an experiment investigating this idea.
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Chapter Three – Copying: The power of doing and telling

It is not fashionable to admit to copying others. Ask anyone why they chose a particular haircut or job and the answer you are least likely to get is “I copied someone else.” You are much more likely to get an explanation that implies creativity, or at least individuality. “It was time to try something different” (a favourite for haircuts) or “I’ve always liked numbers” (says the accountant). Explanations like these, while not deliberate half-truths, hide that we chose that haircut after seeing it on someone else, or that we grew up paying close attention to Uncle Joe, an accountant and the successful one in the family.

Despite being the dull option, even simple copying is a rather complex undertaking. Some evolutionary psychologists, such as Susan Blackmore, have argued it is one of the key skills underlying the reproductive success of our species. As Blackmore explained in her book *The Meme Machine*, copying involves careful attention to an action, deciding which parts are essential to correct replication, and then working out how to do that.¹ Have you ever been in a new city and tried to figure out how to use the machine to pay your bus fare by watching those ahead of you? It is no easy feat to work out whether they are all putting in tickets because they are season pass holders or you were meant to pre-purchase a ticket somewhere else, and you may not even see the red button each pushes at the end of the process to return the ticket to them. Nevertheless, as intuitive imitators, we pay careful attention and usually get the hang of it reasonably quickly, especially when a kind local takes our money and pushes the right buttons for us, slowing down the process so we can clearly see each step. It is this ability to attend to the actions of others and reproduce them in a way that results in the same outcome that may well have given our species a learning edge. No other species comes close to demonstrating the diversity of abilities that humans possess, each largely acquired by copying the skilled practitioners before us.

When it comes to sustainability, our capacity to copy provides opportunities and limitations. It keeps us hooked into the unsustainable patterns being demonstrated around us. However, it also means that people who display alternatives can be and often are copied, allowing the possibility for new patterns to form. This chapter is about copying – why we do it, what makes an action more likely to be copied, and what this all means for inspiring sustainability.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first is about modelling – that is, when and why we copy other people’s behaviour and what it is we really pay attention to when replicating what we see or hear. The second part is about stories as ways to make our goals coherent and provide exemplars of how to live. The final part covers an idea used largely by athletes and those

working with children who have special learning needs – self-modelling. Not only can we copy and be inspired by others, but we can also copy and be inspired by ourselves. Given this, what would happen if whole communities had the opportunity to see themselves, right now, living in a new way? But first, let's look at modelling.

Part one – Modelling

In the strictest sense, modelling is the process by which people watch – or in some cases, hear – another person carrying out a behaviour and then reproduce it. The watched person thus “models” the behaviour. In this chapter, I'll start by talking about modelling in this strict (or classical) sense, then move on to a slightly broader idea of modelling as the reproduction of what we perceive to be normal in a situation. The reproduction of the normal (or “social norms”) may not involve seeing other people in action, but rather inferring their behaviour by a variety of other means. People, it turns out, are exquisitely sensitive to cues that signal the usual way to respond to a situation, and adjust their behaviour accordingly.

But first, we'll look at the way in which people copy a model, that is, the behaviour of another person. I first became aware of the power of modelling when I had a baby. Having a psychology degree, I was deeply concerned that everything I did would leave a lasting impression on my infant's brain and that I had the power to produce a neurotic worrier or a deeply secure genius by how often I fed her and if and when I responded to her crying. Naturally, I read every book in our local library on parenting in preparation for growing the perfect child, and had endless conversations with my friends and relatives who were, or were about to be, parents. Then when she was born, I read and re-read sections of Penelope Leech's *Your Baby and Child* trying to find out exactly what to do when she cried 10 minutes after a feed or whether it was normal for a baby to stare at a blank wall and ignore the colourful mobile hanging above her. Thank goodness the Internet hadn't taken off (this was 20 years ago), or I would have spent innumerable hours searching combinations like “overfeeding and long-term effects” or “brain damage and blank wall”. Advice abounded, but what I didn't have were models. Although two of my siblings and some friends had babies before me, I had not lived with a baby since I was seven and my youngest brother was born. I was at a loss primarily because I didn't have a long history of watching what you do with babies and so I couldn't copy what I'd seen done around me. The snippets I saw as my equally unsure peers managed their babies were riveting, but not enough to really train me in the art of baby care.

Baby care, as it is learned in societies where adults are hardly around infants until they have their own, highlights the usefulness of modelling as a learning strategy, because in this case modelling is largely absent. In other situations, where modelling is the primary form of learning, we barely notice it,

because we are so adept at absorbing what others do and making it our own. How does modelling work? What opportunities does it present for inspiring sustainability?

Imitation and mind reading

As previously mentioned, people are extraordinary imitators, and imitation is one of the easiest ways for us to learn a new behaviour. In a fascinating article called *Learning a culture the way informants do: Observing, imitating and participating*, the anthropologist Alan Fiske describes how inept people of all cultures are at teaching their way of life through explanation. As an example, he discusses how stumped Americans (or New Zealanders for that matter) would be if asked why we celebrate people's birthdays with cakes and candles that are blown out by the person whose birthday it is. We cannot clearly articulate why we do so, and our children certainly don't learn this tradition because of explicit instruction on our part. We bake cakes and put candles on them because we witnessed it being done as we grew up and we copied what we had witnessed, as our children will do after us. For most of us it simply feels like the right thing to do on someone's birthday.²

Even babies not yet three days old seem inclined towards copying others. Andrew Meltzoff and Keith Moore demonstrated this at a Swedish Hospital in Seattle, with 40 newborn infants, the youngest a mere 42 minutes old.³ The babies watched an adult opening his mouth or poking out his tongue. The model performed one of these gestures repeatedly for four minutes before switching to the other gesture for another four minute interval. Although the babies were by no means perfect imitators, an independent observer who could not see the model's actions rated 26 of the 40 babies as producing more mouth opening when the model was mouth opening and more tongue protruding when this is what the model was doing. Using a similar study design, Tiffany Field and her associates from the University of Miami showed that observers were able to correctly guess which of three facial expressions – surprised, sad or happy – newborn infants were imitating 76%, 59% and 58% of the time respectively.⁴ This is much better than the 33% hit rate that we would expect if infants were completely hopeless at following along.

In fact, we seem to find imitation almost irresistible in some circumstances, particularly when it comes to simple motor behaviours. Tanya Chartrand and John Bargh have referred to this as a chameleon effect.⁵ Like the reptiles, we blend into our surroundings, although rather than changing colour we change our behaviour to match what is going on around us. In one of Chartrand and Bargh's studies, for example, participants were interviewed by someone who deliberately rubbed his or her face or shook his or her foot. Observations showed that those with the face rubbing interviewer were more likely to rub their own face, while those with the foot shaking interviewer were more likely to do this.

Other research has shown that people find it easier to copy a model than

to follow more symbolic instructions to carry out the target behaviour. In a study by Marcel Brass and his associates, German participants were asked to place their right hand on the table, with their knuckles facing upwards and their finger tips touching the surface.⁶ They were then instructed to raise one of their fingers in response to one of two sets of instructions shown via photographs. Half the participants were instructed to raise their index finger when shown a photo of the number “1”, and their middle finger when shown a photo of the number “2” (a number cue). The other half was instructed to raise their index or middle finger when shown a photo of a hand with the appropriate finger raised (a model cue). As predicted, the participants were quicker to react when they were imitating a model than responding to a number. The experiment then got more complicated. They were again asked to raise the appropriate finger in response to the number cue. However, this time the photo showed both the number and the model’s hand. Some of the time the photo showed the *same* finger raised as indicated by the number (e.g. an index finger raised when the number “1” was shown) the rest of the time it showed a *different* finger raised (e.g. a middle finger raised when “1” was shown). In these circumstances, the participants were much quicker to respond correctly if they saw a raised finger that was consistent with the number cue that they were meant to be following. What this study shows is that copying is easy and compelling and seeing someone act in a particular way can interfere with instructions to do something else.

I admit that the results of the finger raising study are not surprising. As five year olds we all learn the trick of telling someone what to do while simultaneously modelling the behaviour: “Pat your head”, “Rub your tummy”, “Put your hands on your shoulders”, and once they are lulled into a false sense of security, giving them an instruction that is different to what we are modelling. As long as we manage to find another five year old who is naïve to our intentions or an adult who plays along we are rewarded by them patting their head, which is what we are doing, when we told them to rub their tummy. Gales of gleeful laughter follow.

But, if you think about it for a minute, it is not immediately obvious why this trick works or why the finger moving experiment produced the findings it did. To start to understand why imitation comes so easily to people, we need to understand a little about how the brain works, and particularly the role of mirror neurons.

The brain is composed of billions of neurons. These are specialised cells that communicate with each other through electrical and chemical signals to produce all our mental functions, such as thoughts, emotions and messages to our bodies to move in a particular way.

Studies have been conducted on monkeys and other animals to try and understand which neurons are involved in which functions. One technique involves using an electrical probe in the brain to investigate which neurons are

discharging – that is sending signals to other neurons – when the animal is engaged in or witnessing particular activities. In a study by Leonard Fogassi and his associates, a monkey was trained to do two tasks.⁷ The first task was to pick up a piece of food and eat it, and the second task was to pick up a piece of food and place it in a container. Once the tasks had been learned, the experimenters measured the activity of neurons in a segment of the parietal lobe, a part of the brain thought to be responsible for integrating incoming sensory information with outgoing action-instructions. They did this using a probe directly touching the monkey's brain. This allowed them to measure which neurons were discharging when the monkey carried out each task.

The experimenters then trained the monkey to watch a person either grasp a piece of food and eat it, or grasp a piece of food and put it in a container, and once again measured what was going on in the same segment of the monkey's parietal lobe. What they found was that a number of the neurons that had become highly active when the monkey was grasping to eat became active when the monkey was watching a person grasp food and eat it. Similarly, a subset of the neurons that discharged strongly when the monkey had grasped food and placed it in a container did so when the monkey simply watched this activity. The neurons that discharge both for watching an activity and doing an activity have been called mirror neurons. It is as if when we watch someone do something we “mirror” it in our brains. For our purposes, this study has three very interesting implications.

One implication is that, in a rather literal sense, we are mind readers. Our brain “knows” what is going on in the brain of the person we are watching and automatically replicates some aspects of that experience. This may be part of the explanation for why imitation sometimes happens without any conscious thought, as we saw in the study when people unknowingly copied an interviewer who shook his or her foot or rubbed his or her face. A second implication is that the visual experience of watching is directly tied to the motor instructions the brain sends out. In other words, mirror neurons show that the brain does not simply “see” an action through the activation of one set of neurons and then “do” an action with another set of neurons. Seeing and doing are, at least in part, the same brain process. It is as though seeing an action puts our brain into a state of alert, geared up to do the same thing. This provides an intriguing explanation for why imitation is not only easy, but almost irresistible, as we saw with the finger movement study and as many of us have experienced in imitation games. When watching a behaviour, some of the neurons involved in generating that behaviour become active in our own brains. To not copy what we are watching requires ignoring these neurons. Obviously we can ignore mirror neurons, or we would be constantly forced to imitate others and chaos would ensue. But they provide an edge, favouring the modelled behaviour over others, particularly when the options are similar (such as in the finger movements study) or when we're not paying full attention to competing instructions (the state that imitation games try to create).

The third implication of this study is that we pay close attention to the goal of an observed action. As noted earlier, Fogassi and his associates identified the mirror neurons involved in grasping and eating food, and the mirror neurons involved in grasping food and putting it in a container. What I didn't stress earlier is that these were two largely distinct sets of mirror neurons. Despite the similarity of these actions, it appeared to be the end goal, either eating or placing the food in a container, which was the biggest factor in determining which mirror neurons were active. The experimenters tried all sorts of tactics to make the motor actions involved in grasping to eat and grasping to place as similar as possible. For example, in one variation they put the container right by the monkey's mouth, so that the hand and arm movements would be identical until the last micro-second, but they still found that there was only 25% overlap in the mirror neurons that discharged.

Another study with three macaque monkeys found that mirror neurons could be activated by the sound of an action. When the monkeys heard a sound such as a peanut shell breaking or paper ripping, some of the same neurons were activated as when the monkey itself performed these actions.⁹ This gives us a further hint that the brain "understands" the action as whole. In a 2009 article reviewing research on this topic, Marco Iacoboni suggested that two thirds of mirror neurons respond to the goal of the model, rather than just to the motor action being demonstrated.⁹

For obvious reasons, it is harder to get precise measures of human neurons in action. However, functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI), which uses an MRI machine similar those used to detect medical problems, can give some clues as to what is happening in the brain when people are watching or performing simple tasks. It works by producing coloured pictures that indicate what parts of the brain have higher blood flow during the task, with higher blood flow assumed to mean more neurons are discharging. Some fMRI studies have suggested that people have mirror neurons that work in a similar way to those found in monkeys.

Therefore if we extrapolate the findings in the monkey studies to human behaviour, what it means is that although we are highly sensitive to, and prone to imitate, the actions of others, we are probably even more attuned to the goals of others. In fact, this was suggested much earlier in the history of psychology by Albert Bandura.¹⁰ Bandura and his colleagues set up numerous situations in which children and adults had the opportunity to observe a behaviour and then repeat that behaviour later on. In his most well known study, some children observed adults acting aggressively towards an inflated "Bobo" doll – hitting it with a mallet, punching and kicking it. Other children observed an adult simply playing with toys in the presence of the Bobo doll. When the children later encountered a Bobo doll, they demonstrated much more aggression towards it if they had earlier seen an adult act in this way. Much of their aggression was the same as had been modelled by the adult,

but the children were also more likely to commit non-demonstrated acts of aggression.

The fact that the children showed some novel acts of aggression, suggests they were probably responding to the perceived goal of the adult (beating up the Bobo doll) rather than simply imitating the motor actions. Bandura's later studies provided further evidence that when we see other people in action, we think to ourselves: "What is this person trying to do?" We then code the behaviour in terms of its perceived goal, rather than just the physical acts involved. This code acts as a mental option, something we are almost forced to consider when we encounter a situation in which it may be appropriate. In psychological terminology, the behaviour becomes a "salient" option that demands mental attention and invites the corresponding action.

Of course, we (almost) always have a choice about what to do. If I see someone dash across the street outside my office without going to the lights, I code *that person is trying to get across Symonds St as quickly as possible* and, being a stickler for traffic rules, simultaneously think "too risky for me". However, every time I see it, and code it, it also strengthens the salience of the behaviour in my mental file headed *How to get across Symonds St*. "Should my goal be to get across Symonds St as quickly as possible today?" I think to myself when I step outside the building and gaze at the short, but treacherous gap involved. I almost always mentally shake my head and walk to the lights, but the temptation to take the action persists, kept alive by the examples I encounter.

Before moving beyond "classic" modelling, it is important to note that our attention to a model does not cease at the end of the action – we notice what happens next. If we are sitting together on a park bench and you attempt to throw your orange peel across the concrete path and into the long grass on the bank in front of us, I notice where it lands. Should it successfully disappear into the vegetation, I am likely to copy you. Should it fall on the concrete path, requiring you to pick up the scattered bits of skin, I may decide it safer to dispose of my peel by some other means. It matters to us whether the model's goal is achieved and whether the end result is something that fits our desired self-image. In the case of orange peel, there is something satisfying about a successful throw and a hint of humiliation in having to rescue a failure. Numerous studies in psychology have shown that rewarded actions are more readily copied than non-rewarded actions, a phenomenon that is known as "vicarious reinforcement".¹¹ By seeing you get rewarded, the salience of the behaviour in question is strengthened in that mental file of mine.

We may seem to have drifted a long way from sustainability by delving into the world of mirror neurons, Bobo dolls and psychological salience, but our capacity and desire to copy others' actions and goals has intriguing implications for encouraging sustainability, as I'll return to a little later. It may already be clear that sustainable choices are going to be tricky if we are

surrounded by example after example of people showing no interest in saving the planet and its people. On the other hand, hopefully it is equally obvious that models of sustainable choices are vital in inspiring sustainable practices.

Social norms

So far we've talked about one individual directly copying from another. I've suggested that the behavioural codes we create when observing others become salient options for our own behaviour, that is they have a magnetic appeal that we find hard to resist. In this section we'll move on to examining people's inclination to reproduce what they see as "normal" in any given situation.

Get together a bunch of people interested in sustainability, and it won't take long before they start apologising to each other for their eco-sins. A couple of years ago, I attended a conference on sustainable consumption. I listened to a talk by a woman who held a senior position in the New Zealand Ministry for the Environment. She started her talk by listing the electrical appliances she had in her kitchen, there were many; and then asked people to raise their hands depending on how many appliances they could count up. A man from Christchurch, who said he couldn't do without his popcorn maker, had the most. Everyone laughed (as we were meant to) and we all felt guilty but united.

In fact, my talk at this meeting had the same tone – I talked about my meat eating and inability to control my teenager's habit of having everything electrical in her room running all the time – including when she went out. At the time it felt necessary to preface my comments on how to encourage people to consume less, with a message that I too over-consumed. I suspect the woman from the ministry was similarly motivated.

The comfort we get from revealing our dark side, and having it affirmed by others is found in many facets of social life and often seen as a motivator for change. If we can reveal who we are and understand that we are all in the same boat, then we can move on. But does bringing to light our unsavoury habits really make them go away?

In the health field, research has shown that this technique can backfire. In his book *Crazy Like Us: The Globalization of the American Psyche*, Ethan Watters described how anorexia spread from the USA into Hong Kong.¹² According to his analysis, anorexia was extremely rare in Hong Kong until a teenage girl died of the disorder, and Western psychiatrists were brought in to explain what had happened. Detailed descriptions of the symptoms appeared in the news media, and soon more and more young women were diagnosed with anorexia. Watters suggests that anorexia, and the particular characteristics it has in the West such as fat phobia, became part of the "symptom pool" for young women in Hong Kong, a collection of behaviours and motives that they could draw on to express their distress.

When my friend and I used to binge together in our first year at university, I thought we had invented abnormal eating. Then I read Suzie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* in 1981. It is hard to imagine a young woman today seeing herself as unique in her struggles with food. This change in the social climate is generally perceived as a "good thing". Ironically however, some of the strategies we now use to help people overcome eating issues, may exacerbate the problem, in just the same way that detailing the symptoms of anorexia in the Hong Kong media did so. This was demonstrated in a study on eating disorders conducted at Stanford University. The researchers found that many college eating disorder programmes involved group work, led by someone who herself struggled with the issue.¹³ In an attempt to measure the efficacy of these programmes, the researchers assessed the eating disorder symptoms of 788 female students. Half the students then attended a seminar in which a young woman who had either anorexia or bulimia talked with them about the symptoms of eating disorders and how to get help. The facilitator also discussed her own story and ongoing struggle to stay on top of the disorder. All 788 students' symptoms were measured again four and 12 weeks after the workshop. Unfortunately, there was no evidence that the programme had reduced disordered eating, and some indication that those who had attended the workshop developed more symptoms as a result of doing so. They also found that after the programme the young women saw eating disorders as more normal than they had previously, despite initially overestimating prevalence by five times!

While it is always difficult to identify exactly why programmes have the effect they do, it seems likely that by discussing eating disorders the seminars provided these women with a sense that they were *normal*. And the perception that something is normal works just like watching a model perform a behaviour – it makes that option salient, encouraging us to do the same thing. Programmes such as this probably make people feel better, but feeling better about doing something that is ultimately destructive is obviously problematic. In fact, my issues with eating went on for about five years after my discovery that bingeing was a shared experience, and I sometimes wonder what course they would have taken without a framework by which to understand them as a reasonable response to an unreasonable society. I sucked up the compassion from Orbach's book and others that followed, but did they help me shift into a healthier space?

But I digress. The point is that making behaviour seem normal may also make it more likely to occur. Worryingly, environmental messages also often normalise undesirable behaviour. I've already mentioned how tempting it is to reveal our own eco-sins when we are with others who want to change the world. This happens on a much larger scale too. In a review of the literature on social norms and how they influence behaviour, Noah Goldstein and Robert Cialdini discussed an advertisement made by the *Keep America Beautiful*

organisation that was shown in the 1970s in the USA.¹⁴ It was rated as the sixteenth greatest television commercial of all time by the *TV Guide*. This is what it showed:

“The spot begins with a stately and serious looking Native American dressed in traditional garb canoeing across a river. As he paddles through the waterway, we see that the river is effluent-filled and debris-ridden, and that the air is replete with industrial pollutants spewing from smokestacks. After the canoeist pulls his craft along a Styrofoam-laden shore, a driver zooming down an adjacent street tosses a bag of trash out of his car, splattering its contents across the Native American’s feet. As a lone teardrop tracks slowly down his previously stoic countenance, a voiceover intones, ‘People start pollution. People can stop it.’” (p. 173).

A sequel to this advertisement was produced some years later:

“The camera features several people waiting at a bus stop, engaging in everyday activities such as drinking coffee, reading the newspaper, and smoking cigarettes. After the bus arrives and they all climb aboard, the camera cuts to the empty bus stop waiting area, now completely covered with cups, newspapers and cigarette butts. As the camera pans from right to left, it slowly zooms in to a poster of a Native American overlooking the refuse, still with a tear in his eye. As the screen fades to black, the text of the spot’s take-home message appears: ‘Back by popular neglect’” (p. 173).

While these advertisements tell us pollution and littering are bad, they also tell us they are normal. To convey that message to a species set-up to imitate is a dangerous thing, as the eating disorder study suggested. Studies on littering have borne out this concern. In one experiment, Cialdini observed the littering behaviour of people in two different environments, one in which there was a lot of litter lying around and one in which there was none.¹⁵ A handbill was placed on the windscreen of their car – an object most people want to get rid of as quickly as possible. In the highly-littered environment, 32% of people dropped their handbill on the ground; in the clean environment only 14% did so. Incidentally, the number who littered in the highly-littered environment was substantially increased by adding a model who also littered – in that situation, 54% did so.

The *Keep America Beautiful* advertisements and the study described in the previous paragraph show how behavioural norms can be conveyed by environmental cues – in this case the presence of litter. In Cialdini’s study the environmental cue alone was enough to double littering. As discussed by P. Wesley Schultz and his associates in a 2008 review of environmental modelling, it is not unusual for environments to show “traces” of human

behaviour that prompt people into following along.¹⁶ Some of the traces they discuss include paths worn through a forest showing us where to walk, or website information on how many people have downloaded a particular music track. I know that when directed to a *YouTube* video I am much more likely to open a related video if it shows a large number of hits. (Even when you know about social norms, you are still their victim.) It's fascinating how much you can figure out about what people do in a location by identifying the behavioural traces they have left behind. Try it at work and at home. What do your places say about how you spend your time? And – *you know the next question* – are you conveying norms consistent with the kind of world you want to create?

Information about social norms can also be provided through explicit statements about what people in the target context usually do. This is something I looked into during the years I spent working with local authorities on traffic safety. Traffic safety is rather like environmental sustainability in that it is tempting to focus on what people are doing wrong. You've probably seen media campaigns in which reckless drivers cause injuries too horrible to list here.¹⁷ However, in the study I want to talk about now, Wendy Wrapson, Paul Murrell and I took the opposite approach and explored the impact of a message implying the norm was to drive safely.¹⁸ We had noticed how in general conversation, people often comment that "everyone speeds" along a particular stretch of road. Conversely, close examination of traffic data shows that actual speeds are often much lower than these conversations imply. This observation has been backed by research showing that drivers do tend to overestimate the speed of other drivers.¹⁹ In other words, their social norm is skewed. As a result of this, many drivers think they are slower than average. For example, one New Zealand study found that 90% of drivers claimed to drive slower than the average driver in a 50 km/h zone.²⁰ This matters because nearly half of those drivers will probably be mistaken – they actually drive faster than average, and so have an elevated risk of injury, but don't realise it.

Given that the normative speed on many stretches of road is actually desirable, traffic safety researchers have investigated whether informing people about the average speed will entice those who drive faster than most to slow down.²¹ Our study was based on this premise. After establishing that the average speed on a targeted stretch of road in Waitakere City, Auckland was 54 km per hour (which was above the speed limit, but below the threshold for receiving a fine) we posted a sign stating this: *Average speed 54 km per hour*. While the sign was in place, as predicted, the percentage of drivers travelling above 60 km per hour decreased.²² As with all modelling, it is likely that this information increased the salience of not driving fast as a behavioural option for these drivers, and thus enticed them to slow down.

In our study, we were able to transmit normative information of immediate relevance to the choices people were making – the speed to drive *now*. Explicit information about social norms can also be transmitted outside the immediate context, with similar effects. For example, a study describing drinking norms

using a computer programme reduced the alcohol intake of college students who were heavy drinkers.²³

The impact of providing information about social norms has been investigated in the sustainability field too. Interestingly, implying that pro-environmental behaviour is normal has been shown to be a more powerful way to encourage that behaviour than direct pleas to protect the planet. Take the case of towel re-use. You may well have stayed at a hotel that displays a card in the bathroom encouraging you to re-use your towel. You may not have paid a great deal of attention to what the card actually said as, being ecologically minded, you were delighted to comply. However, one study showed that, for many hotel guests, message wording does matter.²⁴ Over an 80-day span, researchers recorded 1,058 incidents of compliance with towel re-use instructions from 190 rooms. The guests in those rooms were exposed to one of two messages. The first was a standard environmental message:

HELP SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT. You can show your respect for nature and help save the environment by reusing your towels during your stay. (p. 473)

The second message stated that it was normal for guests to reuse their towels:

JOIN YOUR FELLOW GUESTS IN HELPING TO SAVE THE ENVIRONMENT. Almost 75% of guests who are asked to participate in our new resource savings program do help by using their towels more than once. You can join your fellow guests in this program to help save the environment by reusing your towels during your stay. (p. 474)

Both of the messages also included further information outlining the environmental benefits of the program. What they found was significantly more towel re-use when it was described as the normal behaviour (44%), than when it was simply described as way to help save the environment (35%). A 9% improvement may not sound huge, but all it took was a simple change in wording.²⁵

There is one catch when making normative behaviour explicit – it works both ways. Some of those who are “worse” than most may be prompted to reform but what of those who are “better” than most? Shouldn’t the same psychological process – our desire to stay in step with social norms – prompt them to ease up (at least a little) when they realise the standard is lower than they may have imagined? Well yes – but there may be a way around that, as was shown in a study of energy consumption.

The study started by measuring the energy consumption of 290 households in San Marcos, a community in California.²⁶ The households were then divided into whether they consumed less or more energy than average. The households in both groups were told how much electricity they consumed and

the average consumption of the homes in their neighbourhood. This enabled them to compare their usage with the norm. They were also given a brochure with hints about how to reduce their energy consumption.

What they found was that there was a 6% reduction in energy consumption amongst the group that was above average. Unfortunately there was a 9% *increase* in consumption by the below average group. This was not good, as overall the situation had worsened. However, when they included a smiley face on the information given to the below average group, indicating that their low energy consumption was valued, this group showed much less tendency to increase their consumption. Then, they only increased their usage by 2% from the baseline rates at the beginning of the study. As can be seen, the normative information alone did exactly what we would predict – it pulled everyone toward the average – but it only took a smiley face to reverse most of this effect for those who were already doing well. A little recognition does wonders – as will be discussed further in the next chapter.

Most research on social norms has involved one-off or short-term situations, in which normal behaviour is implied by the setting (such as a clean or messy carpark) or written information. It almost certainly underestimates the power of norms to hold people in their current patterns of behaviour or to entice them into new ones. Later in this chapter I'll discuss how we might consider norms in our efforts to bring about positive change.

Stereotypes as models

So far, I've talked about replicating fairly simple behaviours. However, we also replicate much more complex models of how to behave. One fascinating way in which this takes place is with regard to social stereotypes. A series of studies by John Bargh and his associates at New York University showed this in action.²⁷

Their first experiment involved 34 students at their university. The students arrived one at a time to complete what they thought was a test of language ability. They were presented with a series of words, out of which they had to construct sentences. They got one of three sets of words:

Set One: *aggressively, bold, rude, bother, disturb, intrude, annoyingly, interrupt, audaciously, brazen, impolitely, infringe, obnoxious, aggravating, and bluntly*

Set Two: *respect, honor, considerate, appreciate, patiently, cordially, yield, polite, cautiously, courteous, graciously, sensitively, discreetly, behaved, and unobtrusively*

Set Three: *exercising, flawlessly, occasionally, rapidly, gleefully, practiced, optimistically, successfully, normally, send, watches, encourages, gives, clears, and prepares*

As you will have noticed, these are not random sets or words, but are carefully designed. Set one is words associated with “rude” behaviour; set two covers “polite” behaviour and set three is words that are neutral with regard to these categories. After the participants had worked with these words for about five minutes, they were asked to go to the experimenter waiting in the hall to get instructions for the next test. It was set-up so that the experimenter in the hall was always engaged in conversation with someone else. The real point of the study was to see how long it took the participant to interrupt, and whether this depended on the set of words he or she had been working with.

Intriguingly, the different sets of words were found to have a dramatic effect. Sixty-seven percent of those who had been given the rude words interrupted, while only 16% of those who had been given the polite words did so. Thirty-eight percent of those given the neutral words interrupted.

The researchers did a second study in which participants had to make sentences from either (largely negative) words associated with the elderly – *worried, Florida, old, lonely, grey, selfishly, careful, sentimental, wise, stubborn, courteous, bingo, withdraw, forgetful, retired, wrinkle, rigid, traditional, bitter, obedient, conservative, knits, dependent, ancient, helpless, gullible, cautious, alone* – or from neutral words, such as *thirsty, clean* and *private*. They then asked participants to go to another room and timed how long it took them to get there. Those who had been working with the rather sad set of words about older people took around 15% longer on average than those who had been given neutral words.

This phenomenon is known as “priming”. By exposing people to words associated with a behaviour or social category, the experimenters induced a state of unconscious readiness to behave consistently with the behaviour or social category that participants had been exposed to. As the authors suggested, it was as if the words made that behavioural option more salient. The words associated with rudeness tipped the participants towards interrupting, while exposure to words that conjured up images of dodderly old age slowed them down. In these studies, words acted like behavioural models or social norms concerning the appropriateness of rude, polite or sluggish behaviour.

Before moving on from this research, one last study by Bargh and his associates showed how words can effectively prime cooperative behaviour of the sort particularly relevant to averting exploitation of an uncontrolled public resource – a problem known as the Tragedy of the Commons.²⁸ This study involved 60 men, with an average age of 24 years. They were asked to play a fishing game. Before they played, some were exposed to a cooperative prime by completing a word task using the following words: *dependable, helpful, support, reasonable, honest, cooperative, fair, friendly, tolerant, and share*. They were not aware that this task was in anyway associated with the game that followed. Others were explicitly set the goal of cooperating as much as possible. A further group received no priming words or additional instructions.

The participants were asked to play the fishing game with another participant sitting at a computer in a different room. The game involved a lake with 100 fish, from which the participant was to catch fish. The rule was that the lake could never go below 70 fish, or all the already caught fish would be lost. In order to achieve this, it was sometimes necessary for the participants to return fish that had been caught. What the study found was that both priming the participants with cooperative words and giving them explicit instructions worked to encourage cooperative behaviour, with primed participants returning about 32 fish over 5 trials. The non-primed participants returned 25 fish on average.

This study is of great interest here because it suggests that “being cooperative” is within most people’s repertoire of what to do, but that it may take an extra prompt to bring that out. In this case, telling participants it was a goal they should follow worked. It also worked just to expose people to the general notion of cooperation.

So we now see that modelling can be a direct process of imitation, or it can be an indirect process of inferring the social expectations of a particular situation or role. Modelling is the x-factor that makes one behaviour option rise to the surface, *pick me, pick me!*

Putting modelling to work for sustainability

The most glaring implication of all this is that *what we see people doing matters*. If I had to pick one reason why people (largely) continue to drive cars, buy so many new products and in numerous other ways replicate our unsustainable lifestyle on a daily basis, it would be because these behaviours are relentlessly modelled around them. This chapter has shown that our brains are highly tuned to noticing others’ behaviours and, when they seem to work as planned, making them our own. This happens automatically and often unconsciously, as human minds are not truly independent but interconnected through our orientation to the behaviour and goals of others, and neural activity that merges the image of an activity with the activity itself.

However, no person or society is static. The capacity to copy that keeps us doing what we do now can be utilised for the opposite purpose, to encourage new patterns.

So the first action suggested is this: if you want to encourage sustainability, be visibly sustainable yourself and leave behind as many behavioural traces as you can. A recent Canadian study found that 36% of restaurant diners who observed a pair of people using a compost bin and discussing with each other their decision to do so, went on to compost themselves. Only 22% of those not exposed to a model did so.²⁹ This suggests that being sustainable and drawing attention to yourself, as awkward as it might feel, will win some people over.

Some activities are easily visible and traceable, others less so. But you can almost always increase the chances that people will notice what you are

doing, and the research on modelling would suggest that this is a good thing. Let's assume, for example, that you are a cyclist and you want to encourage others to take to the road on two wheels. Cycling is inherently visible as it is done in public. The more that people observe cyclists, the more modelling power cycling generates, so just doing it helps strengthen people's image that cycling is an option for getting around. However, there are ways to show you cycle even while sitting at your desk or shopping at the mall. This is where those behavioural traces come in, signs that indicate what you normally do even when you are not doing it. For example, where do you put your helmet? You might attach it to your bike, but that is a lost opportunity – consider what it would do sitting on your desk or attached to the outside of your bag. Just as a monkey who hears a peanut cracking “thinks” of the underlying action, a person who sees a cycle helmet will “think” about cycling. It will serve as another prompt that cycling is a viable option.

As a cyclist myself, I do make an effort to show that I cycle – I lug around my helmet and I also talk to students about my cycling in lectures. I admit to feeling rather self-conscious when I throw in a seemingly off-hand remark about riding my bike to work. Will they think I am making a point about my mode of transportation? (Well, yes, they might because I am. . .) But then I remind myself how easily people refer to their car trips, as if the car is an obvious location in which life happens. As in: *I got a text from Vodafone as I was driving to work this morning reminding me that using cell phones in cars will be illegal from the first of November, how ironic is that!*. So I try and put aside my fear of being judged and tell myself that for every person who detects and is repelled by any self-righteousness I may transmit, there will be another for whom cycling becomes a more salient option. It is a fine line, because it is off-putting when people imply that what they are doing is morally superior. But the personal is political. There is no way around the fact that people copy each other and that what is seen to be done is done over and over again.

Aside from the practical uses of modelling, it sits well with one of the fundamental principles I discussed in the introduction to this book – as sustainability advocates, we are people too. By definition, demonstrating behaviour in order to inspire change means there is no gap between what I say is right for you and what I show is right for me. I will do what I do, and you can copy or not. Even if I cannot resist a little cajoling, at least it is based on what I know – in the most authentic sense – is possible.

Moving up a social level, organisations and city councils can also help make sustainable practices more visible. To go back to cycling, Auckland City has had several media campaigns to draw motorists' attention to cyclists, the latest encouraging drivers to leave a 1.5 metre gap between them and a bike. These campaigns are useful, but there are also more subtle ways to make cycling salient. An obvious one is to put cycle racks right outside the front door of buildings, where everyone can see. My heart always lifts when I arrive somewhere with obvious cycle racks, especially when there are bikes

on them. This is a place where cycling might take off, I think. Conversely, I feel dismayed when there are no racks to be found. I imagine cyclists who slink in and out and have little chance of encouraging others. At this level, it is a matter of appreciating that design choices (such as where to put the cycle racks) are not just about practicality and cost, they are also about visibility.

If individuals risk being judged as self-righteous by drawing attention to their sustainability practices, then organisations risk being accused of green-washing for doing the same. Unlike most individuals, many organisations are, after all, rather adept at pointing out their contribution to environmental progress, and green-washing undoubtedly occurs.³⁰ Personally, however, I am usually uplifted by authentic descriptions of what organisations are doing well. It comes back to the same underlying rule: the more that sustainable practices are in the air, the more salient they become and the more likely individual people and groups of people (organisations, city councils, nations) are to replicate them.

I hope that the general idea is clear – by living consistently with what you believe in, and doing it as visibly as possible, you are affecting those around you and strengthening the possibility of those behaviours being taken up by others. If you are working at the organisational level – or higher – the same principle applies. By highlighting sustainable practices you increase their salience and chance they will be taken up by others.

The second action implication concerns the conditions under which modelling is most likely to occur. As discussed earlier, we are more likely to copy models who are rewarded. Sometimes rewards – or punishments – directly follow a behaviour. The orange skin is either successfully thrown into the long grass or not, right away. It follows, therefore, that if we want a particular behaviour to grow, it is a good idea not just to make it visible, but to make the rewards it produces visible as well. Conversely, we need to be careful about drawing attention to any drawbacks associated with the behaviour. Will publicity about the inconvenience and expense of taking the bus encourage people to do so? I suggest not. In general, highlighting the difficulty of living sustainably is not going to fast forward us towards that world, because people get the message that behaviour is not rewarded and so its viability as a choice falls. Highlighting the pleasure of adopting these behaviours just might get us somewhere. Growing vegetables, for example, has taken off recently as a pleasurable and healthy experience that is also good for the environment.³¹

We also infer connections between a person's behaviour and the social rewards they attract, such as respect. It is because of this that commercial and public-good advertising often features people with high social status. Such people strengthen the association between the desired behaviour and reward, making the behaviour a more salient choice. Albert Bandura, who conducted the Bobo doll study discussed earlier, suggested that prominent examples of a new behaviour – such as recognised public figures whose

behaviour is featured by the media – are an important first step in transmitting these behaviours.³² They are taken up by early adopters who then spread the behaviour through interpersonal contact. In other words Bandura argued, and I agree with him, that more distant forms of modelling (such as media representations) are likely to have the most effect on those who are already open to the practice being advocated. However these early adopters are a critically important group, as they then demonstrate the practice to those around them, becoming models themselves. Although it will reach fewer people, their one-on-one close-contact modelling is likely to be much more powerful than the modelling displayed by remote public figures. So the take home message is that, while poster girls and boys are an asset to inspiring a sustainability issue, having people on the ground is essential.

The research on social norms suggests many interesting possibilities for encouraging people to join in with sustainability endeavours. When most people's practices are in line with a desirable behaviour, then it is worth highlighting that to encourage the next tier to join in. Because norms can backfire by de-motivating those who are better than average, the ideal strategy is to let the norms themselves pull forward those who are lagging behind, and to reinforce those who are ahead by clear messages that their contribution is valued. Although most of the research on norms shows fairly small effects from publicising them (less than 10%), if we think of progressively inching forward on these issues, the effects over time could be dramatic.

The final, perhaps less obvious, action implication I'd like to draw out of this research relates to the way in which people are always seeking the meaning of a behaviour. We discussed this with regard to classic modelling – how people ask themselves what the behaviour is trying to achieve. We also saw how people can be primed by words to access a mental stereotype and replicate some element of that stereotype. Although people sometimes “mindlessly” copy, much of the time they are actively interpreting what they see. Following on from this, you can strengthen your power as a model if you are able to not only demonstrate the behaviour itself, or leave traces of it behind, but also transmit its meaning. It is as if you are weaving together a number of different threads and showing people how they all contribute to the underlying goal of living in a more sustainable way.

If you have anything to do with children, they are a great audience for this approach. They readily listen to and absorb explanations about the meaning of what we do, as their minds struggle to come to grips with the mysteries of social life. My children have heard endless variations along the lines of: *You can go to Nicole's but only if you walk. I am not going to produce carbon emissions to take you there when I wouldn't take the car for a short trip like that myself. I know it's raining, but fortunately you've got waterproof skin... We will buy these tomatoes because we can put them directly in our bag, and not those ones with a plastic tray. Why use energy recycling a tray like that when*

it is completely unnecessary? I know these statements sound preachy, but if you don't preach your values to children, they will still absorb values from somewhere; there is no neutral way to approach life.

It's harder with adults. Nevertheless, I've had many *aha* moments when a friend or colleague of mine has made the connection for me between a practice and sustainability. Once I know that their notebook is from 100% recycled paper and has a sustainability story behind it, I become conscious of my own notebook, and sustainability thinking comes to the surface when I next consider a new one. Because I am always on the lookout for ways to better align my values and my practices I relish these exchanges, but it isn't easy to slip explicit statements about your sustainability purpose into informal adult conversations.

However, there is always a way. In the next part of this chapter, we'll look at how stories can provide the meaning people seek when observing approaches to life and making them their own.

Part two – Stories

The previous section has argued that people absorb ways of being by watching and imitating others, but that we do so through a meaning filter. In other words, it is not just a matter of person see, person do, but also a matter of person see, person figure out what the person they are watching is trying to achieve, person think about whether they want to achieve that too, then person do (or not). Because of the importance of those second and third steps, different players in the social world compete to fill our minds with a dazzlingly array of explanations that link action to meaning. The savvy know that if you can provide a compelling reason for an action, then it is more likely to catch on.

One particularly powerful “meaning maker” is stories. Most of us love that wonderful, out-of-body experience of being completely absorbed by a tale in which we almost *become* the hero. Because we are so readily captivated by stories, it is likely that all cultures have used storytelling as a prime means of transmitting information and educating about the meaning of life.³³ As Brian Boyd has argued in his 2009 book *On the Origin of Stories*, stories allow us to pass on experiences we have neither had ourselves nor observed, and inform us of the consequences of particular actions. They have also played an important role in many social movements, by revealing the human experiences that lie behind abstract principles, policies and statistics.³⁴

For our purposes, useful stories have two key elements. One is that they are easily absorbed and passed on. In other words we are compelled to attend to the story closely and then tell it to someone else, who tells it to someone else, who tells it to someone else...The second vital element is that we want to, and can, *live* the story. Good stories, stories that will help propel us toward a sustainable world, compel imitation. They provide that all important meaning-behaviour package that allows us to work out what the person was trying to

achieve, motivates us to take up the same goal, and tells us how. We'll look at these two elements in turn.

If you are after a prototype for the most compelling story, you need look no further than your office tearoom or family dinner. The gossip that characterises these settings is both enthralling and highly tell-able. Sometimes it is so juicy we can't wait to gulp down our coffee so we can pass it on the next person. The news of a relationship breakup, a pregnancy, an accident, a promotion or a redundancy; these are all prime material for human stories. Coming a close second to stories about people we know are stories about people who everyone knows. How long did it take you to find out that Michael Jackson had died? The chances are you knew within one minute of running into someone who had seen it on the news or heard it from someone else. The tell-able quality of gossip is backed up by studies that show that it constitutes over half of all human conversation.³⁵

Part of the reason that gossip is so compelling is that it generates emotions. It is emotions – envy, outrage, fear, delight, sadness, excitement, relief – that propel us forward, wanting to know all the details and understand the motives of those involved. It is perhaps obvious that gossip should be emotionally charged. It is not hard to see how news of someone's promotion could generate envy or the pregnancy of our niece result in delight. These events have real world consequences that affect us and the people we care about. However, emotional arousal is also a feature of engrossing stories about characters we only get to know through the story itself. With our flair for observation and imagination, we can read a book or watch a movie and feel a lifetime of emotions in response to the fortunes of a protagonist who is not only a brand new acquaintance, but who *may not even be real*. When literally sitting on the edge of my seat waiting to see if the good guy shoots the bad guy first, I'm sometimes aware of the ridiculousness of my concern. Aside from the fact that the good guy always shoots the bad guy first, why should I care about the fate of a fictional character? Intellectually, I know the only human suffering or pleasure at stake is in the minds of viewers like me, but that is largely irrelevant. Once feelings are involved, I, at some deep, way beyond "thinking" level, am hooked in.

So, a story must be emotionally charged if it is to draw our attention and make us want to tell others. However, the *really* fascinating thing about engrossing stories, and the trump card for our purposes, is that the most tell-able stories have a pro-social moral.³⁶ That is, they generate emotions that steer us towards behaviours that are good for others, and away from behaviours that damage others. Take, for example, the story of a fireman who crawled under a burning overturned truck to rescue a father of two. The story is told in admiring tones, and fosters the idea of heroism as a way to feel good about oneself and bask in the warm glow of others' approval. It is worthy of both the front page of the local newspaper and a ten minute discussion at

morning tea. On the other hand the story of a fireman who stood by in the same situation is not nearly as tell-able, unless he felt so guilty about his inaction he went on to donate a portion of his salary to support the father's twin daughters. In the first version of the latter story, we imagine the bystander's sense of guilt, but there seems little point to the tale. So what? Guilt alone is boring; as a story it just doesn't work. The second version, however, offers us the possibility of redemption from guilt. Now the story feels complete, and so it is worth passing on. (If you doubt this, try watching a TV show and notice how you feel when people are getting away with an antisocial act. You will find yourself waiting for them to get their comeuppance – it always happens. If it doesn't you find yourself in a disconcerting state of moral uncertainty, wondering if you misinterpreted the initial behaviour.)

Intriguingly, Boyd suggested that the reason we are particularly compelled to pass on stories of pro-social behaviour is because such stories forward our own interests. It works like this: Each individual benefits from living in a society of good people. If those around us are trustworthy, kind and maybe even willing to sacrifice their lives to protect us, then we are safer. By telling a story in which good behaviour generates social rewards and positive feelings, we help motivate those who listen to our tale to *be good*. As with any feature of our evolved nature, we don't have to understand why such stories work, we just have to have an urge to pass them on. Even the current television series *Dexter* (which seduces you into liking a serial killer) is probably only popular because he is an *honourable* serial killer. (Although I know plenty of people who gave up on the show when Dexter first turned on his chain-saw, it is one of my family's favourites).

Religions are full of tales of ethical exemplars and more contemporary examples include Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Mother Theresa. Such tales are emotionally arousing in all the right ways and illustrate what can be achieved when one has an unswerving commitment to "doing good". We clearly like telling such stories, as they are told over and over again. These stories are rather daunting, however, involving extreme levels of self-sacrifice and moral fortitude. Therefore they don't fully meet our second criteria for useful stories – that we want to, and actually *can* live them.

To be really useful for our purposes, stories need to provide the full motivational and detailed how-to-do-it package that we human imitators respond to so well. They need to demonstrate that life as someone who cares about ecological and social issues is obtainable as well as socially rewarding. The community psychologist Julian Rappaport has referred to stories that show positive, and feasible, ways of living as "tales of joy".³⁷ Tales of joy ideally show how someone like us struggled with difficult circumstances, but came through in the end. We are simultaneously inspired and instructed how to do the same. Rappaport contrasted tales of joy with tales of terror. Tales of terror keep us stuck, as they foretell gloom for people like us. In any community both types of tales

are present, and to some extent we can choose which to model ourselves on.

One popular tale of joy in contemporary Western cultures is the rags-to-riches narrative. At the time of writing John Key, the Prime Minister of New Zealand, is a classic example of this story. His father died when he was a child, so he was raised by his mother in a modest home rented from the government. He attended the local public high school, went on to university, and worked his way up the financial world until he became Merrill Lynch's head of global foreign exchange, earning a salary reputed to be in the millions. He then entered politics, and won the 2008 elections as head of the centre-right National party.

The rags-to-riches narrative is endemic in modern Western societies, and undoubtedly helps create the viability of wealth-creation as a respectable goal. Fortunately, however, in this book we are not concerned with battling to win over those who see this particular tale of joy as their prime motivator, but in finding ways to inspire those who crave an alternative. So what are the alternatives? How can we make use of and create tales of joy that show sustainability in action?

Putting stories to work for sustainability

Although stories that feature sustainability in action are not amongst our dominant cultural narratives, there are plenty of them out there. Finding and sharing such stories is a great way to uplift and motivate (or re-motivate) yourself and anyone else you can get to listen, read or watch what you've discovered. I've just read Colin Beavan's book *No Impact Man*. In it he describes his year of progressively reducing his environmental footprint in New York City. It is a narrative, but is also packed with information about his philosophy of life. In fact so much of the latter is similar to the arguments I've been making, I wasn't sure people would believe I'd only read one of his blog entries – the one referred to in the introduction – prior to writing these first few chapters. The truth is that neither Colin nor I have made up our views on the meaning of life. Rather, we are both engaged in the human trick that is the core of this chapter – listening carefully to how others give meaning to their lives, taking in the bits that fit, and then creatively pasting together a collage of meaning and action, which as a whole looks slightly different from anyone else's but vaguely like those of many others sharing the same cultural space. By giving us a narrative, complete with interpersonal struggles, emotional reactions and ultimately a sort of victory, it is easy to stay hooked into Colin's book until the end, by which time we are itching to make muslin bags for buying food from bulk bins and join a group to clean up the local stream. (My book is more of a challenge perhaps, not being a story, although I have deliberately tried to frame each piece of research as a little narrative, hoping you will be on tenterhooks until the end wondering how it turned out.)

There are now a number of books with a similar plot structure to *No Impact Man*. Others I've read and enjoyed are Leo Hickman's *My life stripped bare* and

Barbara Kingslover's *Animal Vegetable Miracle*. My favourite film that shows sustainability in action is *The Power of Community*. It tells the story of Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet Union and how the country re-grouped after losing access to imported oil. That film played a significant role in my belief that a different sort of society was possible and that community action was one way to bring about that society. There are also reality shows; for example in New Zealand we've had two series of *Wasted*, where participants are challenged to reduce their environmental impact, and blogs such as Matthew Luxon and Waveney Warth's *Rubbish Free Year* blog. All these package information about how to live an environmentally and socially responsible life and provide reasons for doing so. They are emotionally rich and true tales of joy.

If you are part of an organisation that has film screenings – which are common amongst ecologically-oriented community groups in New Zealand – then I strongly suggest you consider films that feature a tale of joy, rather than overwhelming your audience with tales of terror. As discussed in the chapter on positive emotions, a little dose of negativity is good for keeping us focused and realistic, but what will pull us forward is living examples of how to be sustainable. The more local the better, as local films will demonstrate actions that are most likely to work in your context. In fact you could make your own film, as I'll discuss at the end of the next section on self-modelling. Another suggestion is to work with librarians. I am part of the library group for Transition Pt Chevalier, and we worked with our local library to have a book display, with the rule that 75% of the books be positive.³⁸ Although most of our books were not narratives, we ordered all the narratives we could find, and – a note to all you potential autobiographers out there – I wish there were more. These books generate terrific conversations and ideas for action.

However, we do not need to solely rely on public stories of sustainability in action. Everybody who is attempting to integrate sustainability into their personal, work or political life has a sustainability story, and one of the most powerful ways to demonstrate what can be done is to share our stories with each other. While this can be and of course is done informally, the process is a little hit and miss – as I discussed earlier, people may feel self-conscious about sharing their eco-strengths in casual conversation. So an excellent way to fast-forward the process is to run a storytelling workshop.

I first discovered storytelling workshops ten years ago at a health promotion conference. The workshop was designed and run by Ron Labonte. He got us to work in small groups to tell each other stories of our health promotion work.³⁹ We talked about our motivations and values as well as the structure of our everyday work lives. It was an extraordinary experience. Instead of the snippets you usually hear about people's lives and motivations, we heard whole narratives – and got to tell our own. We also had to respond to each story by drawing links to our own experience and, as a group, come up with common themes. There was no room for critical pontifications on what is wrong with the world and what “we” (i.e. someone else) need to do to solve

our problems. Instead, it was an opportunity to find out how others actually struggle with and succeed in translating their goals into practice. It also created an instant sense of intimacy within our storytelling group – belonging being another critical component to taking on any goal, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Some years later, I adapted the process and ran a workshop at the 2005 *Psychologists for Social Responsibility* conference in Portland. Since then I've run storytelling workshops in a number of settings – with university students, youth workers and community groups – and it works well every time. Brad Olsen, Pat Bullen and I wrote a book chapter about the process and you can find the workshop materials in the appendix to this chapter.⁴⁰

To conclude: stories are both ways for us to transmit our goals and actions and to be inspired by the goals and actions of others. They can fast-track the modelling process by helping us understand what lies behind the actions of an individual or group committed to sustainability, as well as showing us lives we cannot observe directly.

Part three – Self modelling

The storytelling workshops just described involve two important actions; you listen to stories, but you also tell stories. It may be that part of the power of storytelling lies in bringing ourselves into our own consciousnesses. *Actually, I do live consistently with my ecological values in many ways. I've just told people how I walk and ride my bike to get around, belong to a local organic food cooperative, attended all the major climate change rallies in Auckland last year, actively seek out fair-trade products, am part of a sustainability action group at work...* Just as watching and listening to others increases the salience of their actions and goals and makes us more likely to adopt them, watching and listening to an aspect of ourselves – in this case our ecologically and socially conscious self – makes us more likely to perform actions consistent with who we appear to be. In this section, the last on copying, we are going to look further into the idea of individuals and communities observing themselves and how that can help advance sustainability.

“All creatures learn from observing their successes... humans distinguish themselves by being able to learn through observing successes they have not yet had.” (Dowrick et al., 2006, p. 194).⁴¹

As the above quote states, all animals try out actions, note the impact of these actions and then store up that knowledge for future use. By doing this, they develop a repertoire of appropriate techniques to use when trying to attain a particular goal, such as catching dinner. However, as is also stated above, people can do more than this. Through our ability to create physical images of a hypothetical future, we can trick ourselves into learning from success we have not yet had.

This is the essence of a method developed by Peter Dowrick and his associates called “feedforward”.⁴² Unlike feedback, which involves observation of the present to inform the future, feedforward uses observation of the future to inform the present. This is done by creating still pictures or a film that show the individual concerned doing a desirable act that they either cannot currently do, cannot do in a particular setting, or only do rarely. One of the examples Dowrick gives is of a gymnast who could perform her routine competently – except for the ending. Despite practice, she could not land without stumbling, and was soon to perform in a competition. Dowrick and his colleagues filmed her doing her competition routine and an old routine in which she landed properly. They then edited the footage, to show the new routine finishing with an ideal landing taken from the old routine. She watched the film three times and was immediately able to complete it successfully.⁴³

Another of Dowrick’s cases involved an eighth grade boy “Gaz” who had Asperger’s syndrome. Several times a week he was provoked into violent tantrums when anyone even mildly criticised his work. Dowrick and his team made a two minute film of the boy, in which, instead of having a tantrum when a teacher suggested he do something differently, he squeezed a special ball hard and took five deep breaths. The film was entitled “Gaz’s excellent day” and showed a series of very short scenes, each filmed separately and pieced together, which included the teacher looking at Gaz’s work and commenting on it, as well as him asking for his special ball, and smiling broadly after completing his squeezing and breathing routine. Gaz watched the film at home with his parents every day for a week. By the end of this period his behaviour had improved dramatically and in the next three months he had only two tantrums. He also asked for his special ball in other settings, but after three weeks was able to keep his behaviour under control without it.⁴⁴

Feedforward has also been used to improve the wellbeing of women who are depressed (by making and watching a film of themselves engaged in animated conversation), with elderly residents of a home (to improve their ability to complete physical exercises), and to help children read independently.⁴⁵ According to Dowrick the demonstrated uses of feedforward extend to communicating, physical skills, life-transitions, academic and vocational issues.⁴⁶

Four mechanisms are likely contenders for explaining why feedforward or self-modelling works. The first three have been raised by Dowrick; the last, that self-modelling may act as a “false memory” is an intriguing interpretation put forward by Thomas Kehle and Melissa Bray.⁴⁷ Each will be discussed in turn. The first mechanism that Dowrick draws attention to is that self-modelling works, and works better than modelling from others, because people love watching themselves in action. I discussed earlier how vital it was for stories to capture attention; the same principle applies here. If we don’t attend we don’t learn, but when it comes to watching ourselves, boredom seldom applies. Excruciating embarrassment maybe, but not an indifferent yawn. Although I

have not experienced it directly, I expect it would be particularly delightful to watch the improved version of oneself that feedforward films offer.

Second, watching ourselves do something increases our sense of efficacy, that is, our belief that we can do whatever it is we are trying to do. After all, there we are doing it. Whether or not we consciously accept that it is possible for us to produce the perfect routine or take criticism without having a paddy, our brain sees us doing it and may well be convinced (remember mirror neurons). A sense of efficacy also produces focus and persistence, and so if self-modelling inspires efficacy, this may prevent us from giving up too easily. Third, according to Dowrick, seeing ourselves perform a desirable behaviour can clarify our goals. It can help narrow the world down from a multitude of competing ways to approach life – or a particular situation – to the one featured in our film. Interestingly, the mental imagery used by competitive athletes, in which they visualise themselves performing optimally (usually without the benefit of an external image), probably works in similar ways to encourage efficacy and focus.⁴⁸

In order to understand the fourth possibility – that self-modelling induces the equivalent of a false memory – it is necessary to understand that the brain does not store memories and fantasies in separate compartments that remain distinct. Instead, both our memories of what has happened and our fantasies about what might happen are reconstructions drawn from several brain regions. It is because of this that our minds can be fooled into creating false memories, which are nevertheless experienced as real. Given vivid enough imagery, a supposed memory of something that never happened can slither in and take hold. It can also act to overwrite what really did happen.

Kehle and Bray were promoted to think along these lines through having worked with children who were selectively mute. Selective mutism involves never or rarely talking in particular situations, while talking normally in others. Several such children had benefitted from video self-modelling, but one side effect they noticed was that after a time many had little or no awareness of having been mute in the situation concerned. In a 2009 book chapter, they provided a compelling example of this in relation to a girl called Tammy who Kehle had treated with self-modelling for mutism 10 years previously. Kehle came across Tammy again when her sister Vicky, aged 7, was brought in for help with the same problem. The passage below describes what happened:

“Tammy is now 17 and is a freshman at college. Vicky who is now in the second grade has not uttered, to anyone’s knowledge, a single word in the classroom or any other school-related settings since enrolling in kindergarten. Her mother stated that during the initial parent-teacher meeting, attended also by Vicky and Tammy, Vicky did not respond to any of the teacher’s questions, nor would she respond to her mother’s or Tammy’s questions. Tammy became upset and shouted at her sister, ‘What is wrong

with you? Are you nuts? Why don't you answer?' The mother was amazed and outside of the school setting queried Tammy with regard to her own selective mutism that was treated when she was also in the second grade. Tammy had no recollection of herself being selectively mute and remained irritated with her sister's nonresponsive and 'embarrassing' behaviour." (p. 240).⁴⁹

It seems extraordinary that a teenager could have so thoroughly wiped such an experience from her mind. However, as Kehle and Bray argued, self-modelling films have exactly the qualities that have been found to promote false memories. They are vivid; they make sense because they show the person acting in a plausible way in a familiar setting; they are viewed repeatedly which helps to encourage the new memory to overwrite the old; they show an event, with events being particularly easy for people to remember (much more so than lists, instructions, names etc), and they are presented as if they are real. A new (but false) memory is then retrieved in the same way a real memory is retrieved when deciding what to do next. *I'll do that because that is what I do in situations like this.* To return to the concepts discussed at the beginning of this chapter, self-modelling makes the desirable behaviour more salient, rising to the surface of our hierarchy of action choices.

Putting self-modelling to work for sustainability

To date, self-modelling has mostly been used with individuals to overcome specific difficulties. However, it surely has tremendous potential for inspiring sustainability. Imagine getting together with your colleagues or members of your community group and making a film in which you are living in an ecologically and socially vibrant 2050. Ideally the project would include collectively working out exactly how you'd like your community to be, and then involving multiple people in piecing together and starring in a film showing this.⁵⁰ In this way there is likely to be a greater sense of ownership of the film, and the more people or familiar places that are actually featured, the more self-modelling potential the film will have. The film can then be shown internally, posted on the Internet and become a magnet for your organization, pulling you towards such a future.

I am fortunate to know Peter Dowrick and, as a community psychologist, Peter has a great interest in how groups can make what he calls "future planning" films.⁵¹ At the time of writing Peter and I are supervising a PhD student, Charlotte Blythe, whose project is on the use of film and other media in promoting sustainability cultures in high schools. Her project is part of the school sustainability research I mentioned in the introduction. Charlotte has worked with students at a central Auckland school to produce a music video which features new waste stations, beautifully painted by the students, which separate compost, recycling and landfill. These are quite a step up for the

school which previously had 67 landfill bins in the grounds, recycling only in the classrooms and the canteen area, and no compost. Importantly, in the music video students are shown using the bins correctly, and favouring the recycling and compost bins.⁵² It is notable that films such as Charlotte's, which show desirable collective action, also draw on the power of social norms. One of our hopes is that students will use the bins correctly because the film portrays this behaviour as *what we do in situations like this*.

Concluding comments

This chapter has shown the extent to which people formulate goals and undertake activities in response to what is demonstrated around them. We copy actions, are highly sensitive to behavioural traces that provide clues about what is usual in a particular situation, and search for the meaning of what we see. We are particularly attracted to behaviours and goals that are seen to be effective and socially rewarded. Our complex brains are working at many levels simultaneously, as we act, think, and act again, not always knowing what we are doing or why, but always observing and always learning. As sustainability advocates we can take advantage of this dynamic. By demonstrating and discussing our actions and goals, we increase the salience of options consistent with the world we'd like to create, pushing these options forward in people's minds. Finally, we can use ourselves as our own models to feed us forward into a sustainable future.

Endnotes

- 1 Blackmore, S. (1999).
- 2 Fiske, A. P. (nd)
- 3 Meltzoff, A. N. and Moore, M.K. (1983).
- 4 Field, T. M., Woodson, R. et al. (1982).
- 5 Chartrand, T. L. and Bargh, J.A. (1999).
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- 7 Fogassi, L., Ferrari, P.F. et al. (2005).
- 8 Kohler, E., Keysers, C. et al. (2002).
- 9 Iacoboni, M. (2009).
- 10 Bandura, A. (1969); Bandura, A. (1972).
- 11 For a recent example see: Coates, C., Malouff, J.M. et al. (2008).
- 12 Watters, E. (2010).
- 13 Moann, T., Nolen-Hoeksema, S. et al. (1997).
- 14 Goldstein, N. J. and Cialdini, R.B. (2007).
- 15 Cialdini, R. B. (2003).
- 16 Schultz, P. W., Tabanico, J.J. et al. (2008).
- 17 If you are interested in my work on the impact of these campaigns on the young drivers who are often the target see: Harré, N., Foster, S. et al. (2005); Sibley, C. and Harré, N. (2009).
- 18 Wrapson, W., Harré, N. et al. (2006).
- 19 See the Wrapson et al. article for further references.
- 20 Walton, D. and Bathurst, J. (1998).
- 21 See the Wrapson et al. article for further references.
- 22 This is a simplified version of our study that also involved a sign implying drivers' speeds were under police surveillance – that sign worked too.
- 23 Neighbors, C., Larimer, M.E. et al. (2004).
- 24 Goldstein, N. J., Cialdini, R.B. et al. (2008).
- 25 They give various reasons for why this rate was well under the 75% that they quoted, including using a conservative measurement of the desire to re-use towels.
- 26 Schultz, P. W., Nolan, J.M. et al. (2007).
- 27 Bargh, J. A. and Williams, E.L. (2006).
- 28 Bargh, J. A., Lee-Chai, A. et al. (2001).
- 29 Sussman, R. and Gifford, R. (Manuscript only).

- ³⁰ A website that has examples of this at the time of writing is: <http://www.greenwashingindex.com> (accessed 7/11/09)
- ³¹ E.g. Malcolm Rands "What's good for the climate is good for our health". NZ Herald, 2/11/09.
- ³² Bandura, A. (1977).
- ³³ See the following for more information on the role of narrative in social life: Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988); Boyd, B. (2009).
- ³⁴ For more on the role of stories in social change see: Loeb, P. (1999).
- ³⁵ Dunbar, R. I. M. (2004).
- ³⁶ According to Brian Boyd's *Origin of Stories*.
- ³⁷ Rappaport, J. (2000).
- ³⁸ As mentioned in the previous chapter, transition towns are groups focused on creating sustainable communities. Our group's website is transitiontowns.org.nz/ptchevalier.
- ³⁹ For more on Labonte's rationale and method see: Labonte, R., Feather, J. et al. (1999).
- ⁴⁰ Harré, N., Bullen, P. et al. (2006).
- ⁴¹ Dowrick, P. W., Kim-Rupnow, W.S. et al. (2006).
- ⁴² Dowrick's summaries of his work and its implications can be found in: Dowrick, P. W. (1999); Dowrick, P. W. (2007).
- ⁴³ Dowrick (1999).
- ⁴⁴ Dowrick (2007).
- ⁴⁵ Dowrick et al. (2006); Dowrick (1999); Neef, N. A., Bill-Harvey, D. et al. (1995).
- ⁴⁶ Dowrick (1999).
- ⁴⁷ Kehle, T. J. and Bray, M.A. (2009).
- ⁴⁸ For more on imagery and athletes, there is now an entire scientific journal devoted to the topic: the *Journal of Imagery Research in Sport and Physical Activity*.
- ⁴⁹ Kehle and Bray (2009), p. 240.
- ⁵⁰ This has parallels to "backcasting" which is advocated by the Natural Step. Backcasting is when a group decides on the desired future and extracts the key principles that underlie it. These principles then underlie decision making. It is contrasted with the more common forecasting which assumes that current – and often destructive – trends will continue. See Holmberg, J. and Robert, K.H. (2000).
- ⁵¹ Dowrick (2007).
- ⁵² The film is on YouTube, search "go green with gumby".

Appendix – Running a story telling workshop

What is a storytelling workshop?

A storytelling workshop gives you an opportunity to tell and listen to life-stories. Storytelling is an ancient and powerful way of generating bonds and transmitting knowledge. Many groups are using storytelling today to advance their personal and organisational agendas. The workshop described here is designed to advance the action agendas of people who are interested in creating a more just, peaceful and eco-friendly world. You can run the workshop with people in your activist group, workplace, college, school or even with a group of like-minded friends.

We have found this workshop to be a powerful way of creating a sense of intimacy and trust between people. Therefore, it is particularly good for newly formed groups, groups with several new members, or groups with cliques that need restructuring. It has a formal structure that gives space for everyone to speak. This encourages democracy within the organisation and reduces the risk that a single view dominates or becomes the group's position, simply because it is being stated by someone perceived as powerful.

How to run a storytelling workshop

Session one – Preparation (10–30 minutes)

Ideally, two sessions are beneficial. In the first session, people are told about the method and the theme on which to base their stories. The theme is:

What are my values? Where have my values come from? How do I live these values? How am I supported in living these values? What ideas do I have for how I could live my values more fully?

This theme is designed to capture how people's values and life-stories are intertwined. Because the ultimate objective of this workshop is to stimulate action that creates a more just, peaceful and eco-friendly world, you may need to explain that participants should think about their values along these lines. There are many websites and books that focus on ways in which people can live more personal values aimed at self-improvement or self-fulfilment.

Participants then write a story in their own time. You may wish to give participants a worksheet, with each of the questions that make up the theme spaced out over one or two sides so that they can jot down notes for each.

Session two - Sharing stories (2 hours)

NOTE – It is best if stories are shared in a second session, having given participants time to collect and connect their various life experiences. But if

a single session is all that's allowed, you can give participants 20 minutes or so at the beginning of the session to sketch out a rough story before sharing it with others.

When you gather for the storytelling, organise participants into groups of about five people. We recommend selecting the groups in a random fashion (e.g. if you want four groups, number people 1, 2, 3, 4 and then gather the 1s in one location, 2s in another, etc). This process helps ensure people talk with those they do not know as well, creating more interconnections within the larger group.

There may be some people who decide they do not wish to tell a story. You can find this out before you organise the groups, and then put the non-storytellers in different groups. Once the groups are organised, each should appoint one or two note takers. There are two rules to ensure that a sense of trust and safety are built (not destroyed) by this process:

1. Details of the stories are to be kept confidential to the group.
2. People should be sensitive to the fact that these stories are personal, and must always be treated with absolute respect.

Each group should additionally follow the procedures outlined below. You may wish to ask one of the note takers to ensure that these rules are followed and that all voices are fully respected.

1. The group should first organise a speaking order. Those who most want to tell their stories should go first.
2. The first story teller tells her or his story. It is important not to interrupt. You may want to limit story tellers to a particular timeframe to ensure that all stories are told.
3. Once the story has been told, the listeners can ask for clarification.
4. After that first story, members should, in a set direction, starting to the left or right of the speaker, say how this story *is like* and is *not like* their own experiences. Everyone gets a turn, and no one should interrupt a speaker. It is recommended that the note takers make special note of themes that appear to be emerging, for example common reactions to a particular story.
5. Next, the group discusses what can be learned from the story.
6. Once the group moves on to the next story, steps 2-5 should be repeated until all the stories have been told.

7. The group then organises the ideas that have come from the discussions of each story into 3-4 insights that can later be shared with the workshop as a whole. These insights should focus on things the group has in common as well as ideas for new personal and collective action. Although the insights will, for the most part, be written, groups can also present insights in other forms, for example, diagrams or short skits (we've seen it done!).

After the groups have generated their insights, these can be presented to the larger group. From this point, your group could generate collective action agendas, based on the insights and what participants have learnt from the process.

Follow-up

It's a good idea for someone to write up the insights and any collective action agendas generated and send these to all the participants.

For more information please see: Harré, N., Bullen, P. et al. (2006).

Chapter Four – Identity: The role of who we are and where we belong

The week before starting this chapter I attended an assembly at my daughter's school. We saw various items, including a dance by my daughter – the primary reason I was there. Then the student announcer declared: "Now Room 2 will read out their persuasive writing." Two representatives from Room 2 stood up; a girl and a boy. The girl told us that their persuasive writing was about green transport, and that she was in favour of it while the boy was against it. She then began reading aloud. She started by suggesting we had a choice – to use green transport, or witness the end of the world as we know it. She repeated her message several times during the three minute reading, interspersed with comments about the pollution caused by cars and how fun it is to ride your bike. Next the boy stood up. His speech stressed the virtues of cars referring to their speed, convenience and ability to protect you from the rain. Walking and cycling, he claimed, were just too slow and the bus was much too unreliable. Electric cars had no guts and so were not a patch on those with combustion engines. His talk was longer than his classmate's, perhaps five minutes, and, I admit, made rather more unique points. Had I been a teacher, I would probably have given him more marks than the girl who gave us the choice between cars and total destruction. But was I persuaded by the boy's long list of reasons for why cars are good? Absolutely not. Instead I felt an increasing sense of panic as I listened to him – *they've managed to infiltrate the younger generation; what chance have we got?*

At this point you are probably thinking that my reaction was predictable. Of course I am not going to be persuaded to change my view on green transport by a clever 10-year-old boy. What might not be so obvious is that my experience is replicated again and again in how people react to information from many different sources. It is not just 10-year-olds who fail to persuade us, it is also scientists, politicians, doctors and intellectuals. Neither is it just those of us who want social change who show this resistance; so do those who want to maintain business as usual. No matter *what* our worldview, anyone who represents a *different* worldview faces an uphill struggle when it comes to shifting our opinion.

The most compelling way to explain this phenomenon is through the psychological construct of identity. People do not only assess incoming information objectively, but instead pass it through identity filters that ask if it fits with their worldview and the social groups they belong to. Only then do they decide if they will listen to it carefully or dismiss it without thinking.

As people who want to affect change, it is critical that we understand this point well. While we may yearn for "the general public" to accept what

we see is obvious about the state of the planet, they will not do so if our information is presented to them by the wrong people, using the wrong frame of reference. As we should surely know by now, even scientific observations are not perceived as a reliable information source by many people. For example, when it comes to public debate about environmental action, scientific consensus is just another position, with no more social authority than, let's say, a business roundtable. What all this amounts to is that there is no solid, irrefutable information source we can draw on that is free of social content. Instead, if we want to slowly increase our circle of influence and nurture those with sustainability inklings, we are going to have to think about the identities with which people view, judge and ultimately act upon the world.

In this chapter we focus on the psychology of identity. At its core, identity is about how we think of ourselves and our position in society. Without it, normal human life would not be possible. Consider this: every day you get out of bed and know what to do next. This is because of how well you know yourself and where you belong. If you work in an office, you know to put on clean(ish) clothes, possibly set out the night before. If you are a parent, you set about making the children's lunches. If you read the *New Zealand Herald* with breakfast, you nip down the driveway in your dressing gown to retrieve it, and so it goes on. We rarely slip up. The parent is most unlikely to leave home without attending to the children; the office worker will not go to the park by mistake at 9am on a Monday morning. It is through this complex interweaving of people who know where they belong that social life happens.

In the previous chapter, I argued that one of the reasons most people don't act on the sustainability message is because they are surrounded by examples of unsustainable behaviour and our copying nature makes it difficult for us to stand aside from these and be different. That chapter also stressed the importance of lived examples and stories of sustainability. These at least give the option for people to act differently by providing models of what is possible. In the current chapter, we go one step further. We see why it is that people can learn from some models but not others. Why certain arguments make sense to us and others are dismissed. We also learn how to work with the power of identification when attempting to inspire sustainability in others and, importantly, when trying to keep our own sustainability groups thriving.

To start, we will look a little more deeply into how identity functions. Six aspects will be considered: the importance of action in making an identity real, the social nature of identity, self-worth, how identities are held in place, identities as not just what we are but also what we are not, and identity as a filter through which we see the world. Throughout this part of the chapter I will take small forays into the research on social change groups and other identities that I think are particularly relevant to our purposes.

The second part looks more directly at how to put identity to work for sustainability. Among the issues we'll consider is how to influence others when

you are in the minority, as many of us are much of the time. If convincing people who do not identify with the same worldview as us is difficult, then convincing them from the position of a small group who are outside the status quo can feel impossible. But it isn't. In this section I hope to show that you can, and perhaps do, have more influence than you may realise, especially if you take into account the identity positions of others and have patience. We'll also look at the intriguing question of how identities change and how we can encourage people, who may currently have little head-space for ecological concerns, to take sustainability into their daily patterns and approach to life.

At the conclusion of the chapter I hope the practical implications will be clear – identities hold us together, both as individuals and as groups. Our goal must be to expand the network of those who include sustainability in their identity system, while simultaneously making sure that being a sustainability advocate is a meaningful and enriching social niche.

Part One – The inner workings of identity

Identities are action

Despite the claim just made in the heading of this section, some identities are *passive*, so we'll briefly consider those first. Our nationality and gender, for example, are usually determined at birth, and most people don't argue with their placement. Furthermore we don't have to do much, if anything, to retain these identities. I am female and a New Zealander by default. If things got really bad, I might be accused of betraying my sex or my nation, but I wouldn't be accused of being male or from another country. Most identities however are active. We have to behave in a certain way to feel, and be seen as, a genuine holder of that identity. I cannot be a cyclist for long if I never ride a bike. I would not be an academic without a job in a university, and I'd be hard pressed to feel like a "real" mother if I completely lost touch with my children.

To illustrate just how identity and action work together, I'd like to take the first of this chapter's venture into the lives of social activists. (No matter what your beliefs about how to create a more sustainable society, those who have tried to bring about social change via political agitation can teach us a lot about what it means to see yourself – that is have an identity as – a change agent.) To do this, we'll look at two studies on U.S.A. civil rights activists. Both studies, one by Doug McAdam and one by James Fendrich, were conducted decades after the civil rights movement waned.^{1,2} McAdam and Fendrich were interested in what these activists went on to do. Did they sell out to the corporate machine as rumour suggested, or did they continue to be politically active? How did their political behaviour affect their identification as activists?

Doug McAdam's study involved tracking down and interviewing people who had been involved in, or applied to be involved in, the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer campaign. From June until August around 1,000 college

students, most of them white and from northern universities, travelled to Mississippi to register black voters and teach in “freedom schools”. McAdam managed to locate and interview 42 people who had gone to Mississippi (volunteers) and 40 people who had applied, but for various reasons had not taken part (no shows). When examining what the two groups did after that summer, he found that nearly 30% of volunteers but only 8% of no shows reported working as full time activists or for the Peace Corps. It was apparent that many of the volunteers had to work hard to organise their lives around political involvement, but that they were determined to do so. For example, one of the volunteers McAdam spoke to described his life in the following summer as:

“...a set of episodes; it had a kind of political continuity to it... but the geographic or occupational focus might shift... because these kind of normal concerns – education, career, occupation – were totally incidental in my life. [They got] slotted in as a necessary kind of nuisance; it’s something that didn’t provide a framework, a guiding thread; in fact, it was repulsive to think of them as providing guiding threads to one’s life. There was so much more at stake.” (p. 187)

Notably, however, it became more difficult for some of the volunteers to continue to be politically active as the social context changed and opportunities for involvement became scarcer. In the following extract a volunteer captures exactly how distressing that was for him and, of particular relevance to the topic of this section, how being unable to live out his identity as an activist meant the identity itself was threatened:

“I don’t know, I feel that in a way I’m more profoundly disaffected and that my radicalism is so deep I can’t find the words for it... but...I have no political affiliations; I’m not politically active except for the occasional demonstrations...and I feel in consequence a... great loss, a kind of rootlessness, a lack of real orientation and identity in the world...because of the loss of that political anchor...I cannot in good conscience any longer make that identification [as an activist] in my own head, and that’s profoundly troubling and disorienting...if you’ve lived for so many years bound up in that world...and felt that you knew what your life was about.” (p. 218)

Fendrich found similar trends in his study of the political activists of the 1960s and the pattern of their lives 20 years later. Many delayed careers and marriages, chose occupations that had a social change agenda, earned significantly lower incomes than those with similar social backgrounds and focused their lives on collective action rather than individual achievement and success. Most continued to maintain some level of political activity.³

These two studies show the way in which identification and action are

bound together. There is little meaning in identifying as something, such as an activist, without also doing the behaviours associated with that identity. Furthermore, the action makes the identification stronger. In McAdam's study, those who had gone to Mississippi that summer were much more likely to continue to be politically engaged than those who had not. For Fendrich's participants, action encouraged greater identification with the cause and so more action. In a review I did of youth activism, several studies showed that when young people become involved in activities designed to improve the common good, they acquired expanded identities that included political participation or social responsibility.⁴ For example, one study of 132 black students in their first year at high school found that after volunteering in a soup kitchen, several wrote about themselves as political actors, whereas none had done so before the experience e.g. *"As I began serving again, I realised I could run from one homeless child, but not hide from homelessness in our society."* (p. 278).⁵

So, to summarise this section, identity and action are intertwined. As with all the topics in this book, while the mind shapes behaviour, behaviour also shapes the mind.

Identities are social

You may have noticed how the Freedom Summer participant quoted in the previous section as *"no longer able to make an identification [as an activist]"* described not only an inability to **act** consistently with his radicalism, but also an inability to find political *"affiliations"*. Intriguingly, Fendrich's study of a similar social group through the same historical period also found repeated examples of participants reporting the same problem. This finding was so consistent that Fendrich concluded the main reason why many highly political people ceased to be so engaged in the following decades was because of the lack of "collective opportunities" (p. 144) to take action. He noted that particularly for whites, the "new left" created by the civil rights movement did not have an established place in adult life. It was largely a movement of youth, so as people aged it became increasingly difficult for them to find like-minded others to work with. Indeed many descriptions of the 1960s highlight just how strongly the issues of the day were driven by young people. For example, in his description of the anti-racism movement in New Zealand, Trevor Richards, one of the leaders of this movement, described protests as an *"integral part of university youth culture"* (p. 42).⁶

This takes us to the second key point about identities – they are social. In most cases we cannot be something without getting together with others, or at the very least following in the footsteps of those who have gone before us.

Our society places so much emphasis on the individual that is easy to lose sight of this. Even when discussing social change, we have a tendency to inflate the role of individuals who have become historical symbols of a

movement – Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela. In reality, however, people rarely act alone. In identity terms, it is as if people “join” many of their identities as much as they acquire or are born with them. You could try testing this out on yourself, by completing a simple test called the Twenty Statements Identity Test. All the test requires you to do is to complete the sentence “I am...” twenty times. There are various ways of categorising your responses, but one thing you may notice is that many refer to a social niche you fill as a member of a particular group. (I am a university lecturer, a New Zealander, a member of Transition Pt Chevalier...). All these identities only make sense because of the other people involved, and in each case we become part of a group of others who also share that identity. John Turner and his various colleagues in social psychology have referred to these as “social identities”.⁷ Social identities are obviously of great relevance to this book because, as I have argued, it is hard to bring about change without being part of a group that shares your objective.

Identities are social in another important sense as well. To feel happy with an identity we hold, we must believe that others value that identity and our particular rendition of it. For example, to continue to feel like a half-decent friend, I need some indication that my friends like and appreciate me. This doesn't have to be a direct acknowledgement of my value, simply ringing me occasionally or responding to my approaches with warmth and enthusiasm is enough.

In terms of our social (group-based) identities, we are acutely sensitive to this flow of social feedback. In particular, we need to get the message that we *belong* to the group concerned. Belonging is often considered by psychologists to be the top, or at least one of the top, psychological needs and motivators.⁸ In a review of the literature on belonging, Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary concluded that there are two aspects of belonging that are critical to human wellbeing and that we are always on the lookout for.⁹ One is pleasant interactions with others. In terms of group membership, this means that in order to feel like we belong, other people in the group must be nice to us. They should act pleased to see us, attend to what we have to say, treat us as an ally and so on. They should not fail to notice us, discount our opinion, or show no emotional animation when interacting with us. This sounds simple, but it can be very hard indeed to respond warmly to newcomers and make sure they are included in the group process from the beginning. I'll pick up on this again in part two of the chapter.

The second aspect is that in order to feel we belong, we need to know that we can rely on others to consider our welfare beyond the current situation. In other words, there is little chance we will experience a deep sense of belonging when people are pleasant but clearly have no intention of putting themselves out for us, should the need arise at some future date.

To tease out the difference between these two aspects of belonging,

imagine signing up for a tour of, perhaps, the local glow worm caves when on holiday. During the two hour walk through the caves, the guide and the others in the group are *nice*, but they aren't going to be there for you if you get home and find you've lost your job. On the other hand, your family might cruelly laugh at your photos of glow worms, but they are much more likely to help you financially while you look for another job than is the charming tour guide. (As a friend of mine once said, "*My family is like my old Nokia cellphone. It doesn't work very well but I still need it*".¹⁰)

We crave both these elements of belonging, and there are probably good evolutionary reasons for this.¹¹ If you imagine yourself in a savannah in Africa long before the technological era, it is clear that one of the first things you would have needed is friends. Having people you could trust to come to your aid when faced with a dangerous animal or lack of food would have been vital to survival. Finding a mate would have involved at least some charisma (as it still does) and child rearing was probably always a collective effort. In short, if you weren't likable, then it would have been hard to get the help and support that humans need to thrive and rear offspring. Our craving for belonging therefore may well be an inbuilt motivator to make sure we connect with others, work on our social relationships and try hard to set things right when others are cold towards us or we fear we have caused offence. Like any evolved psychological trait, it is useful but not perfect. We hang on to relationships that are detrimental to our wellbeing, feel awful when we tell someone selling raffle tickets for the local rugby club that we haven't got any change, and wish over and over again that we'd been a better daughter to our parents when they were alive. All examples of wasted energy at best, but by-products of that vital desire to stay connected to others.

Because belonging is so important to us, when we test social groups as to the identity potential they offer – *do we or do we not take this group to be our own?*, we are highly alert to whether it seems likely we can forge bonds with the current members. If a group passes our early detectors and we join, we continue to monitor whether we are valued by the group. We may not pull out of a group at the first belonging set-back, but neither are we likely to stay with it forever if the interpersonal dynamics deteriorate beyond a certain point. After all, in complex modern societies we have choice about many of our social identities. We certainly have a choice about our membership of groups that aim to challenge the status quo.

So how well have social change groups done in this regard?

Research on these groups has shown mixed evidence of how well they are able to help participants feel as if they belong. On the positive side they can certainly give people a space in which they can join with others who have similar values, and so feel affirmed in those values. For example, Rosemary Randall, the Director of *Cambridge Carbon Footprint*, recently interviewed members of "Carbon Conversation" groups, whose aim is to support each

other in making significant changes to their carbon emissions.¹² One of the ways she discovered these groups functioned was to make people feel less isolated in their aspiration to live a low-carbon lifestyle. As one group member said, *“I feel better in this group...I don't feel odd like I do at work; it makes it seem normal.”* (p.123).

Even more intense feelings of connection have been found in other studies of social change groups. Some of McAdam's participants reported enormously powerful experiences of belonging during the summer they went to Mississippi. It is worth including two quotes here that illustrate the strength of their feelings:

“What I remember about Mississippi was the love I felt...from everyone. There was this openness and acceptance of you as a person that I've never really felt since, not even in the women's movement, even though that's what we were trying to recreate.” (p.184)

“I mean we really came back feeling that...[we] had been part of a new world... a new community, a new society...that was being born and you know all these people... and there were networks of people all over the place and ... you really did feel very much part of a movement... and you really felt you belonged to [it].” (p.137)

Similarly, Trevor Richards, on the 1970s and 1980s anti-racism movement in New Zealand, wrote that:

“There was also plenty of infectious enthusiasm – and there was camaraderie. Out of ‘the cause’ developed many important, close and supportive friendships. Moments of pure joy, whether personal or political in nature, helped recharge tired batteries... While it could be draining, frustrating and tedious, it could also be fun and enormously rewarding.” (p. 55).

It is notable that both sets of quotes are referring to short-term, focused political situations. McAdam's participants lived communally, often with black families whose daily experience was so different to their own that they were effectively in an entirely different culture. They experienced bombings, violence and run-ins with the police. Four volunteers died. In the case of the anti-racism movement in New Zealand, much of the effort went into demonstrations against visits by apartheid South Africa's rugby team, especially a Springbok tour in 1981. These were huge, nationwide protests. I was twenty years old at the time and attendance felt compulsory. In fact, I felt slightly ashamed for many years afterwards that I did not attend all the marches and certainly never went near the front where I might be subjected to police efforts to keep the group contained. But the atmosphere was undeniable. For some of my friends the weeks of the tour were all consuming as they travelled to games in the hope

of stopping them (once, in the city of Hamilton, they succeeded). For them there was no other meaningful identity at the time, and it would not have been possible without being able to rely on others who were equally committed.

It is, however, relatively easy to create intense experiences of belonging in limited situations that involve a very high level of contact with similar minded others. The events we've looked at so far have something of the flavour of school camps, albeit with an agenda to tackle social injustice and a lot more physical risk. Most importantly, such events can take over the participants' lives, at least temporarily. This is especially true when the participants are young and have few responsibilities for the day to day welfare of others.

Social change groups that are in for the long haul have a more demanding task in terms of belonging. For them, it is essential to create both warm interactions and a sense of ongoing trust that members will look out for each other. However, this must be managed despite gaps in meaningful activity, inevitable disagreements on what to do next and as members dip in and out of involvement.

The study my students and I conducted on New Zealand political activists (previously mentioned in Chapter two) revealed many interesting findings around if and how social change groups successfully create belonging.¹³ The participants were eight highly committed left-wing activists who had been involved in social change movements for at least two decades.

We found many descriptions of positive belonging experiences within the various groups they had been part of over the years. Interestingly, many of these descriptions were in relation to particular events, indicating again the power of concentrated, temporary situations in generating bonding. Here is one description: *"The best thing would be being on big protests where there is a kind of unity around a common cause. That is always uplifting and strengthening."* Another participant provided a compelling example that hits on both the warmth and the ongoing trust aspects of belonging. First he noted that *"the only route forward is to have lots of people empowered to do stuff"*, a comment that highlights the importance of collective action for progress. He went on to comment, *"Then you find out, to your great pleasure, that's actually the most fun way of doing it, and that is the most affirming way of doing it and the safest way of doing it."*

However, we also found many experiences of bitter interpersonal conflict. Before we started the interviews, we thought that most of the activists' negative experiences would be with people who had different politics from themselves. I guess we imagined a brave activist who is abused and ignored by the holders of the system she or he is trying to change. Indeed, our interviews did reveal some disturbing stories of threats and abuse from "outsiders", including being beaten by the police. However, most of their descriptions of negative encounters with those opposed to their political agenda were brushed off, even laughed at. This is captured nicely in the following comment from one participant: *"There are plenty of negatives I have had, but they have come from*

political opponents whose views I have not respected”.

What was not brushed off was the conflict they experienced within their activist group, or with perceived allies. First, they described more of this type of conflict, and second, this type of conflict clearly penetrated them at a depth that could not easily be reached by their political opponents. Almost all commented that they had experienced not fully “fitting” with a group they belonged to or finding the group process difficult. In contrast to the earlier quote from a participant who found working with others to be fun, one said: *“I know the only way you can be effective in changing is through collective action if you are a left wing activist, and that’s a bit of a down side for me.”* Another put it more bluntly: *“actually working towards getting people to agree to move beyond how you see the world to what you are actually going to do about it [is] a pain in the arse”.* One of the questions we asked in the interviews was for them to describe the worst thing about being an activist. Here is what one said: *“The worst things that have happened to me in my activist life have been about when you’ve ended up in a group that’s more divided than it was to start with.”* For two more participants the worst thing they described about their activism was betrayal. In their cases, supposed allies did not support them when expected or seemed to *“give up on their principles”.*

As well as active conflict, half described feelings of being isolated or lonely. As groups disbanded, due in many cases to interpersonal conflict, they were left without the support they craved to carry on the cause.

I am not sure if social change groups are particularly prone to interpersonal tensions. Perhaps they are exacerbated by the often precarious nature of the organisation, and are a sort of counter-balance to the enormous sense of unity these groups can also generate. I am sure, however, that a social change group that fails to provide members with a positive sense of belonging will not be an attractive identity vehicle. Given our deep need to be appreciated by others and to be able to rely on them for help, it is too much to ask even the most committed sustainability advocates to hang on indefinitely. As one of the participants in a study by Anne Colby and William Damon on “moral exemplars”, Sharon Crandall, said:

“One of things that I’m learning is that you can’t just by forcing yourself, keep going indefinitely. Something’s got to feed you at some point, or you’re going to fall off the train. And I’m getting real marginal with that lack of community, that lack of intimacy with people that I had assumed when I went into the business, that was going to be provided. That’s a real killer. That’s a real killer.” (p. 269).¹⁴

To summarise this section, identity is social in two main senses. First because we step into identities that are provided for us by others. Many of these are social groups and, because of the collective nature of most action to try and change the status quo, these social identities are particularly important for

our purposes. The second main sense in which identity is social is that we must receive positive social feedback to maintain that identity. As our study with New Zealand political activists showed, the most important place for that feedback is within the group. If we don't feel that the group values us and that we can rely on others, we will not feel as if we belong, and without that we will be driven, or wither, away.

Identities are highly related to self-worth

The next important point is that identities are highly connected to self-worth. Our identities, after all, are the core of who we are. I *am* all the groups I belong to and the relationships I have. Although I might be able to give up on some identities and take up others, if I abandoned the whole lot, it is hard to imagine how I'd still be me. A Niki without children, a job in a university, a husband, fair-trade coffee in the cupboard and subscriptions to Cycle Action Auckland and Greenpeace? Unthinkable. That would be the Niki I remember from 25 years ago, a lost soul who has long since been overwritten.

The health of our identities also deeply affects our own psychological health. We've already seen how important belonging is to us. If we have an identity as a member of Group X and Group X is not a nurturing place to be, we feel some combination of betrayal, anger and loneliness. But even more importantly we feel bad about ourselves. Our self-worth goes down right along with our trust of others in Group X. We may experience this as feelings of shame, obsessive thoughts about why we always seem to mess things up or frustration at our inability to influence others.

Feeling a sense of belonging to a group that is part of our identity structure is good for our self-worth, but a group must supply more before we are able to pat ourselves on the back for being a member. In some way, a group needs to boost our position in society. Ideally, we want to be able to say with pride "I am a member of Group X". If we cannot do this, then our commitment to Group X may be insecure. Groups that offer members tangible rewards (such as pay packets) may be able to retain people even if the group's social status is in doubt, but voluntary groups will have a hard time staying afloat if they are not populated with proud participants.

A recent study of zoo volunteers beautifully illustrates the potential of a voluntary role to provide both a sense of belonging and a sense of pride in members, thus offering the double self-worth deal we are all after with our social identities. The study was conducted by John Fraser and his associates and published in the journal *Ageing and Society* in 2009.¹⁵ It had two phases. The first was with 30 volunteers from New York City Zoo and the second with 21 volunteers from the Bronx Zoo. Most of the volunteers were over 60 years old. In both phases participants were asked questions related to their motives, what they got out of the experience, their relationship with other volunteers,

and if and how being a zoo volunteer had affected other aspects of their lives.

Most participants described their initial motivation for volunteering as related to the animals (they did sign up to a zoo after all). However, a particularly fascinating finding was that it was their relationships with the other volunteers that dominated their accounts of why they intended to continue in the role. Many met with their fellow volunteers outside the zoo; as one said, *“It’s like a family, you know, an extended family”* (p. 362). In part, this bonding seemed to be because of the shared love of animals that had initially inspired their volunteering. Note how this participant uses “we” to indicate how the volunteers were bound together by the animals: *“You know if there’s something upsetting, like I said, the death of the animals...and we loved the sea lions. When Bandit died, we were so, so upset but other people wouldn’t understand that.”* (p. 359).

Furthermore, it was very clear that the participants were proud of their identities as zoo volunteers. They believed that their activities made the world a better place, especially in relation to animal conservation and for future generations. As a result of their role they experienced heightened status with others, including their grandchildren, workmates and friends. This was reinforced by the positive responses they received from others. *“I’m you know, very proud. When you tell someone that you’re a volunteer at the zoo, people get [to say] ‘Oh, how nice!’ and ‘how lovely!’ and this and that, and they get all excited. It’s something to be proud of.”* (p. 363)

Many of the participants engaged in other animal protection and environmental actions; for example, making donations to wildlife organisations, signing petitions and contributing to letter writing campaigns. One of the volunteers was also a member of the organisation PETA (People for Ethical Treatment of Animals). Notably, she *“found her zoo volunteer identity to be more authoritative when speaking on environmental issues”* (p. 362). She said, *“I write letters all the time and get into big political discussions with people about what they are doing to protect the environment. Now I can back it up and say ‘I’m a FOZ [Friend of the Zoo] and I happen to know that’, you know.”* (p. 364). This is a telling insight that highlights the social status some voluntary groups have compared to others. It also shows that group status is relevant to members not just for its own sake, but also because higher status groups give people a stronger voice.

Finally, the study measured the volunteers’ “collective self-esteem” using a scale that asked if they were valued as a member of the zoo volunteer group, if they privately valued their role, if they felt their role was publically valued, and if they felt it was an important role. The scores were extremely high with most people choosing either the most positive point on the scale or the next one down (i.e. 6 or 7 on a 7 point scale) for each item.

Fraser and his co-authors concluded that being a zoo volunteer had become incorporated into participants’ social identities. Given the material discussed

so far in this chapter, this conclusion is not surprising. Volunteering at the zoo provides people with a social niche that nurtures their sense of belonging and carries status in the world. Importantly too, being a zoo volunteer nurtured their other identities (as members of other conservation groups; with their families and workmates). This leads us to the next characteristic of identities – that they are held in place by other compatible identities.

Identities are held in place by other compatible identities

In Auckland on May 1st 2010, I boarded a bus to attend a demonstration to protest proposed changes to New Zealand's Crown Minerals Act. Among other things, the Act prohibits mining on lands designated as having high conservation value, including the National Parks (at least at the time of writing). The incoming government, lead by the National Party, was proposing changes that would allow 7,058 hectares of this land to be removed from protection under the act. They claimed that any mining that did take place on conservation land would use minimally invasive techniques, akin to keyhole surgery. The proposal raised heated public debate, and over 35,000 submissions were received by the government during the consultation process. I was delighted when my dean, Grant Guilford, surveyed our faculty for their views on the proposal in order to put in a submission from the Faculty of Science. The great majority of our staff were strongly opposed to the removal of any land from the act for a wide variety of reasons, some of which were about the direct threat posed to the ecosystems themselves, while others were concerned with what the act symbolised in terms of New Zealand's identity as a "clean green" nation both at home and overseas.

There were several other people on my bus, including many from Transition Pt Chevalier. When we arrived at the official gathering point there were so many people and banners that it proved impossible in most cases to link up with people we had planned to meet. Eventually, things got underway and we slowly made our way up the main street. At one point I was passed by a woman with a small dog wearing a placard declaring "Even I don't dig up national parks". Many carried signs that punned on the word "mine" – "They say mine, we say ours".

The *New Zealand Herald* declared it the "Biggest Protest for a Generation" and estimated that 40,000 people attended (2/5/10). For some it was their first protest ever, for others it was their first in many years. It was attended by several politicians from parties in opposition to the National government, and high profile celebrities including Lucy Lawless (*Xena, Warrior Princess*) and Robyn Malcolm (*Outrageous Fortune*). I saw many people I knew in addition to my Transition Town peers. My dean and his partner were there, as were the CEO of the sustainable business network, a husband and wife team of architects who specialise in green renovations, and two families from my

daughter's school who I knew were in favour of sustainability, but who I also knew were not active in any political organisations.

I've described this event at some length because it was an attractor for many people who seldom take conscious political action. It raises the question of why some of us always attend protests, often write submissions and so on, while for others it takes a deeply symbolic issue to ignite their political urge.

The easy answer is that some people are more committed to these issues than others. But this just leads to another question – why is that? Well, one reason is that their commitment is held in place by having *several* identities that are relevant to political action. For me, the mining march was compelling in terms of many of my identities. My direct boss was opposed to the issue, and I had led a departmental response to his request for information. Attending was therefore consistent with my work-self. (You may have noticed that I saw many others at the event who do work related to sustainability). I went with several friends from our Transition Town group – hence it fitted with my Transition Town-self. I took my daughter, and felt it was good for her development – my mother-self. My husband is of a similar mind to me on these issues, so it squared up with my primary relationship. I subscribe to Greenpeace, one of the major organisers of the event. When you add these identities up, it would have been strange for me not to have attended, unless I was running a marathon (my sister's excuse that day) or had something else equally as watertight.

For others, the mining march is more likely to have been a one-off. They went because the issue grabbed them, someone they knew was going, and they were free that day. There were probably thousands of others who could have attended if it had worked out, but it didn't. Their partner wasn't keen and none of their friends had given the Mining Act a second thought, they felt a little unwell, their children had netball games, getting to the start seemed too complicated and so on. They didn't have the layer upon layer of relationships and social identities that I have which ensured I went.

The importance of people's identity networks to their engagement in civic action has been shown in many studies. In fact, political participation can often be better explained by a participant's social identities and relationships than by their passion for the issue. For example, in McAdam's study of the Freedom Summer participants, those who followed through with their commitment to go to Mississippi were more likely to have personal links with other volunteers or to belong to organisations that were already involved with the project. The involvement of the churches in the black civil rights movement was also clearly a key factor in why blacks got involved.¹⁶ In my review of youth activists and volunteers, I found that family was particularly critical. Part of this was through providing young people with the values that made them more interested in civic issues – I hope that my children will internalise a belief that you should contribute to political debates. But it was also through offering connections – a sort of “old boys' network” if you like. It is also of note that in our study of

long-term New Zealand political activists *none* had maintained a long-term relationship with someone who was not politically active. One said: “*There was another woman who I married and we had a son. . . then she dropped out of politics and our relationship ended.*” (p. 338).

The most compelling study I have come across examining this issue was by Florence Passy and Marco Giugni.¹⁷ They examined the life histories of two sets of activists who participated in the Bern Declaration (BD), a major organisation in the Swiss Third World solidarity movement. One set had maintained their commitment, the other set had not. For example, Yves was raised as Catholic and exposed to people who believed in international solidarity from childhood. He trained to become a teacher in order to work in Africa. He taught in Senegal for a period and then returned to Geneva, where he continued to focus his teaching on Third World issues. He was able to use his teaching experience within the BD and led a group creating teaching tools for children in the Third World. He got married and his wife also became involved in the BD. The couple then adopted a child from Bogota. He described his life as “coherent” (p. 128). It is no surprise that he was part of the group that had maintained their commitment, as his involvement in BD is so clearly held in place with several overlapping identities, including his religion, work and family.

In contrast, Francois followed a very similar trajectory to Yves to begin with – he too came from a Catholic family and chose to become a teacher as a way to change the world. Until he was thirty years old he engaged and led projects within the BD, but then he got married. In Yves own words:

“I met my wife at that time...She’s not at all into these kind of things, she’s favourable, she finds this nice but...it’s not her who pushes me by saying: ‘Don’t forget to be an activist’ [smile]. I would rather have needed to negotiate...So it has progressively gotten undone.” (p. 133).

So, our identities are not isolated, they are part of an overall identity network, and that overall network supports some identities rather than others. As the examples given in this section suggest, it is perhaps particularly hard to keep going if you don’t have active support from the people closest to you. This leads to the last point I’d like to make in this section – not all identities are equal. That is, it is not just a matter of the sheer number of identities that converge on an issue that maintains our commitment to that issue, it is also a matter of how important each of those identities is to us. Identities form a rough mental hierarchy.¹⁸ If an identity is not near the top of the hierarchy, or is not supported by identities that are at the top, it is likely to fall by the wayside, given the complexity of contemporary life.

To explore this point, I’d like to take a diversion into the concept of an “ecological identity”. The essence of an ecological identity is a feeling that you are not restricted to your physical body, but are in some important way connected to nonhuman nature. As described by Elizabeth Bragg, people with

an ecological identity feel empathy or some kind of discomfort when they see other creatures in pain.¹⁹ They tend to be “*drawn to activities that enhance their connectedness with ecosystems of which they know they are a part*” (p. 101) and feel shame if they fail to act in the interests of these systems. If they witness others damaging nature they feel angry and protective, in much the same way people act to protect themselves and their families in such circumstances.

There is plenty of evidence that people can define the boundaries of themselves more broadly or more narrowly than their physical body. Many religious philosophies encourage thinking of oneself as part of God or the universe or both.²⁰ Recently I also listened to a bizarre interview on the BBC world service with Ray Kurzweil in which he encouraged the opposite view – that we are merely our minds. According to his argument our memories, personalities and knowledge *are* ourselves, and one day we will be able to upload all of this onto a computer. When our bodies wear out, we will then be able to download ourselves into a new body. Back-up copies will take care of accidents, and so death will be a thing of the past. I found the idea repellent, but it does help prove the point that while our bodies would seem to be the most natural boundary for ourselves, it doesn’t have to be so.

But back to ecological identities. As with most things people get up to, movements and groups have been formed to support this way of seeing and being in the world. One such movement is ecopsychology. Ecopsychology argues that opportunities to be immersed in nature are essential to human wellness, as people are part of nature. Those who do not recognise this are not only likely to wreak environmental havoc but are also unwell in themselves. Theodore Rosak, who coined the term, has written that disconnection from nature is a form of madness that is widespread in Western culture.²¹ When we shop or drive in our cars, we are substituting for activities that would bring us, as well as the planet, much greater wellbeing. Walking in the bush perhaps, appreciating the sunset, watching birds forage for food in a tree. Recently, a new psychology journal has been formed called *Ecopsychology*, which is dedicated to the study of these issues. The passage below is from an article by Peter Kahn.²² Here he is writing from a personal perspective, although he is also an expert on children’s moral development. I think it beautifully captures the feelings natural encounters can generate.

“This afternoon, I had dropped down to the river, a few miles away, off trail and steep with large firs and oaks and a few buckeyes, to the river’s edge, and then looped back around. As I entered into one of the meadows, I saw a doe and her older fawn off to my right. Their backsides were mostly facing me, as were their faces, with their necks turned at about a 120 degree angle. I kept running up the meadow, which had me slightly circling them, and as I did the mom kept tracking me by bending her neck more and more with my every stride. It was close to dusk,

but from what I could see from the top of the meadow she had bent her neck and head more than 180 degrees. At any point, she could have simply switched directions and tracked me from a more comfortable angle. My guess is that she didn't want to take the risk of losing sight of me in that moment of transition. I got back to my cabin. The sliver moon is in the Southern sky. Then it just happens. Click. Everything is radiant, alive with joy. It's the feeling of youth, of endless possibility, with a strong body and an awakening spirit. It's contentment in the moment, but without any effort perceptions flow in, flow over. The clarity of thought, pureness, joy. I just live in it." (p. 41)

Most of us have surely had some of these moments. For Kahn, in Washington State, U.S.A, it is about deer and woods; for me, living on an island in the South Pacific it is usually about the ocean. Seeing the ocean pounding on rocks can bring about that sense of rightness, a kind of significance and insignificance all at once that banishes mere mortal concerns. While most of us probably don't consider ourselves sufficiently in union with nature to have an ecological identity *per se*, it is not hard to appreciate the emotional experience that this identification is based on.

Ecological identities would certainly seem to be a very good thing for the environment. In Elizabeth Bragg's words:

"The basic thesis is if individuals extended their identification outward, finally encompassing all life forms, ecosystems and the Earth itself, there would be no need for environmental ethics, 'altruism' or 'self-sacrifice'. This is because the separation between self and other, 'ego' and 'alter' is blurred or dissolved. 'Self-interest' would motivate people to act on behalf of the larger, ecological self, rather than the biographical, personal self. Individuals would 'naturally' take care of and defend the Earth, without feeling any moral pressure to do it, just as we 'naturally' take care of our individual, small selves" (p. 96).²³

But do ecological identities serve to do this? (In asking this we are getting to the main point of this diversion, identity hierarchies.) To investigate this question, Stephen Zavestoski, a sociologist from the University of San Francisco, investigated people who identified as "deep ecologists".²⁴ Deep ecology has similar values to ecopsychology, and one of the movement's features is workshops that get people to focus on their relationship with nature. Zavestoski attended one of these workshops that required people to act as if they were something nonhuman – for example a plant or a rock or an animal. They act and interact with others in role, and the others respond to them as if they are the object they are representing. At the end of the workshop participants prepare to go back into their lives and form goals that will help them maintain

this perspective of themselves.

At the workshop, Zavestoski asked his participants to complete the twenty statements test of identity I discussed earlier. Many listed identities he categorised as ecological, for example “I am an Earth lover” or “I am part of nature”. However, when they were asked to rank their identities in order of importance, their ecological identities came lower than those concerned with their occupation, families, and even altruistic or compassionate, moral, taste and interest identities. His explanation harks back to the importance of the social factor in making our identities real. Most of the time, he suggested, even deep ecologists are surrounded by people who don’t hold or even understand these identities. In the face of this, it is very hard to thrust that identity to the forefront. It is as though their ecological selves keep fading away in the midst of the social clatter that dominates human experience. If that clatter was all about slowing down and smelling the flowers, then these people would likely leap at the opportunity to lead everyone down the garden path. But as we know, this is not the case. Instead, it is predominantly about producing, consuming, caring for our families, being entertained, looking after and presenting our bodies and all those other tasks and priorities that make up everyday life in industrialised societies. Acting in accordance with loving the Earth *just doesn’t fit in*.

However, both Zavestoski and Elizabeth Bragg, who conducted a similar study with deep ecologists, did find that if participants had social support for their identity, especially if they were embedded in a network of like-minded others, then they were more likely to live out their ecological values. This harks back to the highly social nature of identity we keep touching on in this chapter. If the people we see all the time don’t affirm what we are doing and how we see ourselves, then it is very hard to keep going.

The key message of this section is that our multiple identities are not isolated from one another; on the contrary, they work together. Sustainability-related identities are most likely to flourish in people whose other important identities and close relationships support the values and activities embedded within them.

Identities are not just what we are; they are also what we are not

With every identity group, there are people who do not belong. Outsiders, however, are never irrelevant. In fact, having people who are not entitled to a particular identity is critical to defining that identity. Take the zoo volunteers we discussed earlier. One talked about how upset they were when Bandit the sea lion died. Clearly it was an emotional event for everyone involved. What is of interest to us here is that the volunteer also added “*other people wouldn’t understand that*”. This statement shows how their shared emotional response didn’t just bring them together because they were all upset, it brought them

together because it was a special experience *that others could not understand*.

Because groups are keen to demonstrate their social worth, members often put a lot of energy into convincing each other not just that they are good, but that they are better than others. Our university markets itself as New Zealand's premier (i.e. best) university. Our suburb has a weekly email report for residents of the greatest place to live in Auckland. These are blatant examples, but we do it more subtly too and sometimes our keenness to justify our position relative to others can lead to strange kinds of distortion.

Kari Marie Norgaard discovered this when she lived in Bygdaby, a small town in Norway of 14,000 people, for eight months.²⁵ She was there to observe social life in the town, with a particular focus on how people were responding to climate change. Because of its extreme northerly location, there were obvious changes to weather, and the townspeople were highly aware of this. However they did not attribute these changes to global warming, instead putting considerable effort into denying what was going on. One of their strategies was to be positive about the future. Even those who had serious doubts, such as a school teacher, felt it was important they hide these and show an optimistic front.

Another strategy was to deny Norway's role in the changes. Norway was a small country, they argued (ignoring Norway's economic gains as an oil producer). But the clincher was this – whatever role Norway did play it was *nowhere near as bad as that of the U.S.A.* By referring constantly to the U.S.A. as worse than them, they were able to protect their own cultural identity as Norwegian. When I read Norgaard's article I was struck by how similar it is to what happens in my own country. The climate debate in New Zealand revolves around whether or not we should take any leadership on this issue because, relatively speaking, we are a small emitter of greenhouse gases. Even those of us who believe New Zealand should take responsibility for our carbon emissions still have many conversations about how much worse the U.S.A. is in this regard.

There are lessons here for sustainability advocates. Comparison is almost unavoidable in terms of identity creation, as identity is about difference as much as it is about a common purpose. But there are dangers here too – such as complacency because we are “better” than others, and drawing boundaries that exclude those we consider ourselves superior to. Small doses of these tribal traits are probably inevitable, but it is not hard to see where big doses could lead – to smug self-contained groups that aren't going to be influential in the way we are aiming for here.

Once in place, identities become a way to see the world

Here are four statements taken from measures of worldviews, developed by Dan Kahan and his associates in 2007.²⁶ You may like to read through them and see which you agree with most.

1. The government should do more to advance society's goals, even if that means limiting the freedom and choices of individuals.
2. Too many people today expect society to be doing things for them that they should be doing for themselves.
3. We have gone too far in pushing equal rights in this country.
4. It's old fashioned and wrong to think that one culture's set of values is better than any other culture's way of seeing the world.

The first is consistent with a “communitarian” worldview – which emphasises collective interests and acknowledges that this involves regulation and restrictions. The second typifies the opposite pole of “individualism”. People with extreme individualist world views believe that self-regulation and individual negotiation are the most desirable way to distribute resources. People get what they deserve and are entitled (or doomed) to keep whatever that is. The third statement is consistent with a “hierarchical” worldview. Those who subscribe to this perspective believe that society should be organised with those who are superior having rightful authority over those who are inferior. The final statement is “egalitarian”, which Kahan's work poses as the opposite to the hierarchical view. Egalitarians embrace social change, are positive about social diversity and believe resources should be distributed equally. Although it is possible for individuals to hold any combination of these four dimensions (e.g. to be a hierarchical egalitarian), in practice the most common combinations are for people who endorse hierarchical values to also endorse individualist values and for people who are high on communitarian values to also endorse egalitarian values. This gives us two dominant worldviews (at least in the U.S.A. where most studies have taken place) – a hierarchical/individualist worldview and an egalitarian/communitarian worldview.

In an online study conducted by Kahan and his associates and reported in the journal *Nature Nanotechnology* in 2009, people were asked questions that identified their worldview using the dimensions described above.²⁷ They were also asked what their opinion was of nanotechnology, “the scientific process for producing and manipulating very small particles” (p. 87). Do the benefits outweigh the risks? Sixty-seven percent of respondents judged they do. Importantly, their worldview made no difference to their judgment.

In all likelihood, however, neither Kahan's respondents or most people reading this chapter know a great deal more about nanotechnology than the definition supplied in the previous paragraph. Your response is likely to be lukewarm. In order to give people more to go on, Kahan's team gave a second group of participants two paragraphs to read. One paragraph described the possible benefits and one the possible risks. The paragraphs were equal in length and each contained the same number of arguments. They are replicated below.

The potential benefits of nanotechnology include the use of nanomaterials in products to make them stronger, lighter and more effective. Some examples are food containers that kill bacteria, stain-resistant clothing, high performance sporting goods, faster, smaller computers, and more effective skincare products and sunscreens. Nanotechnology also has the potential to provide new and better ways to treat disease, clean up the environment, enhance national security and provide cheaper energy.

While there has not been conclusive research on the potential risks of nanotechnology, there are concerns that some of the same properties that make nanomaterials useful might make them harmful. It is thought that some nanomaterials may be harmful to humans if they are breathed in and might cause harm to the environment. There are also concerns that invisible, nanotechnology based monitoring devices could pose a threat to national security and personal privacy. (p. 89)

Having exposed participants to this balanced argument, the researchers asked them the same question as the previous group, whether the benefits outweigh the risks. What they found was curious.

Whereas in the previous group of participants who received only the brief definition of nanotechnology their worldview had made no difference to their judgement, in this group, it made a dramatic difference. For the hierarchical/individualist people, agreement that the benefits outweighed the risks shot up to 86%. However, in the egalitarian/communitarian group, agreement plummeted to 23%. Far from bringing people with divergent approaches into alignment by presenting them both with the same, even-handed information, it drove them apart.

How can we explain this seemingly irrational difference?

Well, one explanation is that each group filtered the information through their worldview. They favoured the pieces that fitted with their picture of how life works and discounted information that did not.

From a hierarchical perspective, technological risk can and will be managed by experts in whom they trust. For individualists, technology is a key part of

individual enterprise. Therefore, technological benefit is very salient to people who adhere to these worldviews; it (almost) literally leaps off the page, as it simultaneously endorses the current social system and suggests opportunities for individual advancement. For those with the opposing worldview, however, it was the risks that captured their attention. Their worldview predisposes them to be suspicious of new technologies. They do not trust the current social order and its experts in the same way as the hierarchists and they see no value in technology as a means to accumulate private wealth. As described by Dan Kahan and his associates:

“Thus, persons who subscribe to an ‘individualist’ worldview react dismissively to claims of environmental and technological risks, societal recognition of which would threaten markets and other forms of private ordering. Persons attracted to ‘egalitarian’ and ‘communitarian’ worldviews, in contrast, readily credit claims of environmental risk: they find it congenial to believe that commerce and industry, activities they associate with inequity and selfishness, cause societal harm. Precisely because the assertion that such activities cause harm impugns the authority of social elites, individuals of a ‘hierarchical worldview’ are (in this case, like individualists) risk skeptical” (p. 5).²⁸

So, each group read either the risks or the benefits as more valid and worthy of consideration, and ignored or discounted the information in the other paragraph.

Dan Kahan refers to this process as “cultural cognition”. He has suggested that when the public assess scientific information, *“People endorse whichever position reinforces their connection to others with whom they share important commitments...On issues ranging from climate change to gun control, from synthetic biology to counter-terrorism, they take their cue about what they should feel, and hence believe, from the cheers and boos of the home crowd.”* (p. 297).²⁹ With regard to the study above, each worldview represents a social group that the holders of that view align with. Even though the information was not directly attributed to a person who represented their group, they nevertheless picked up the cues that indicated to them: *These are the kinds of arguments our people make. These are the arguments that fit with the world our people believe in. These other arguments are from people who want to make the world in an image we don’t like. Their arguments cannot be trusted, but our arguments can be.*

Cultural cognition seems to operate across a wide variety of social issues. You may not be surprised to learn that one USA 2005 study found that the 7% of people who responded to the idea of climate change with “nay saying” by using phrases and terms such as: “environmental hysteria”, “hoax” and “junk science” also tended to be Republican, politically conservative, pro-individualist, pro-hierarchical, distrustful of most organisations and highly

religious. On the other hand, the 11% who responded with “alarmist” phrases such as “bad...bad...bad...like after nuclear war...no vegetation”, “end of the world as we know it”, and “death of the planet” held pro-egalitarian worldviews, were anti-individualism and hierarchism and were politically liberal. They also strongly supported government actions to mitigate climate change.³⁰

It is extremely unlikely that advocates of these two extreme perspectives on climate change differed primarily because they each rationally considered the available evidence and came to different conclusions. It is much more likely that they differed because taking climate change seriously is connected to a particular political worldview. Almost all climate change mitigation involves regulation of some sort and restrictions on the freedom of business and, in some cases, individuals. If you like the idea of regulating business, then climate change is going to be politically congenial to you, if still terrifying. If you don't like this idea, then climate change has nothing going for it. Your threshold for “believing” in it will be high and you will pay close attention to any flickers of hope that it may all be a socialist plot.

What this research suggests is that all social issues, including environmental issues, come knitted into a cultural package that alerts those responding to the issue to pay attention to and endorse some types of messages and information and to ignore others. But what happens when the cultural cues are mixed and it is harder for the recipient of a message to figure out if it aligns or does not align with their worldview?

One way to examine this is to have unexpected people advocating for a position. This was done in a study that examined people's support for either protecting or milling forests.³¹ At the start of the study, participants were categorised as to whether they were “pro-conservation” or “pro-logging”. The researchers then gave participants a message from either *Friends of the timber industry* or from *Friends of the forest*. Some got a message consistent with what you would expect from groups with those names. That is, the *Friends of the timber industry* advocating milling and *Friends of the forest* advocating leaving the trees in the ground. Some of the messages, however, were the opposite of what you would expect. For these messages, *Friends of the forest* advocated milling and *Friends of the timber industry* advocated conservation. When the message and the advocating group were consistent they found what we should by now expect – reading the information only strengthened the views of those who believed what was being advocated to start with. It worked in the opposite way for those who were delivered a predictable message by a group they did not trust. For example, the pro-conservation people who read conservation advocacy from *Friends of the forest* became more firmly pro-conservation as a result, but the pro-logging people who read the same information being advocated by the same group became more pro-logging as a result. (This also shows that a message by the wrong advocate can be worse than no message at all.)

Where things got interesting is when people were exposed to a message they were not likely to agree with, but advocated by a group they were likely to identify with. This scenario was created by giving some of the pro-logging people a message by *Friends of the timber industry* saying that the trees should be left in the ground, and by giving some of the conservationists *Friends of the forest* material saying that logging was the way to go.

When faced with a message that they did not readily endorse from an advocate that was one of the home crowd, people shifted slightly towards the position being advocated. When the researchers measured their opinions some time later, they had shifted even more towards the position being advocated. What this suggests is that if someone like us says something that is not the sort of thing people like us normally say, we are only slightly receptive at first. *If Friends of the forest say logging is a good idea on this occasion, I guess it isn't quite as bad as I thought.* But, the persuasion processes doesn't stop there. *Having had some time to think about it, I guess Friends of the forest are right and these trees should be milled.* The phenomenon of delayed influence is something we'll come back to when discussing minority groups. These findings are particularly exciting for our purposes because they open a little persuasion crack – maybe we can win people over if we use advocates who represent the worldviews they believe in.

In the cases discussed above, our identities are more or less working for us; that is, they are recognising issues and advocates that fit with our general orientation to life, and weeding out information that is considered irrelevant. However, our identities can also work against us. As you may have assumed, an awful lot of the sorting process that is going on when we confront new information and assess if and how it fits with our worldview happens unconsciously. When I hear a message from a representative of New Zealand's far right party, Act, I don't observe myself thinking: Act, they are far right, they can't be trusted, don't listen. Instead, I observe myself feeling disinterested or irritated depending on the topic. If it is feasible, I remove the source of the message – turn off the radio, go to the next page of the newspaper. My emotional reaction is a shortcut to the worldview I hold dear. However, because identity filtering involves those murky processes going on in our mind without our conscious awareness it can also betray us.

The mischievous side of identities was revealed in clever studies by Claude Steele, a social psychologist from Stanford University. Steele has argued that in order to achieve within a certain domain you have to identify with the role required to be effective in that domain. For example, to do well at school, you have to think of yourself as a good student. To get excellent marks in science, say, you must do much more than understand the topics, you must also take on board the other aspects of achieving in science – coming to class, completing assignments in the style required, taking exams seriously and so on. Even more than that, you have to *believe* you are an excellent science

student. Via mechanisms we don't fully understand, not believing that you fit the role required can have dramatic effects on performance.

In one study, Steele showed just how powerful this process can be.³² The study looked at men and women with strong mathematical capabilities who were given a difficult maths test. In one condition they were told women usually performed worse than men and in another they were told there were usually no gender differences. Men's performance was not affected by this information. However, women who had been told that women usually perform worse *did* perform worse, but women who had not been told this performed at the same level as the men. The differences were dramatic, with men scoring about five times as highly as women when the women had been told there were gender differences.

What seems to be going on here is that when we are told *people like you are hopeless at tasks like this*, we indeed become hopeless. This happens unconsciously and implies that while our identities provide useful shortcuts to our cherished views of the world, they can also interfere with our effectiveness in other domains.

The take home message here is that whenever we communicate with others, we are doing so through the identities we hold. Identities function throughout the psychological system that makes up each individual human being – they are both the shop window we present to those who encounter us and the basement from which deep rumblings vibrate upwards, making it almost impossible for us to deal with information in a purely rational, socially isolated way. This affects us as information processors, and it also affects those we are trying to communicate with. The implications of this will be explored more fully in the next section.

Summary of the key characteristics of identities

Here are the insights into identity that we've discussed:

1. Identities are action. You can't *be* something without *doing* the behaviours that identity demands. How can you be a sustainability advocate if you do nothing to push for a more sustainable world? Short answer: you can't.
2. Identities are social. We don't make up our identities, we *join* identities, by following in the footsteps of or teaming up with others. Once we've acquired an identity it is essential we receive messages of approval and support from other holders of that identity – *we like you, you belong here, you contribute something we value, and we will look after you when you need us*. Social change groups have a patchy track record for successfully providing members with those affirmations; this is something we need to think about carefully.

3. Identities are related to self-worth. If our identity group affirms us, and the world affirms the value of that group, then we feel good about ourselves.
4. Identities are held in place by other identities that overlap and are compatible with them. Our compatible identities support each other; our incompatible identities drag each other down. Some identities are more important to us than others.
5. Identities are not just what we are; they are also what we are not. In our quest to feel good about who we are, we expend considerable effort comparing *people like us* with *people who are not like us*. The conclusion is invariably that we are better. Sometimes we are fooled into thinking that being better than another group at, let's say, saving the planet, is good enough. Which it isn't always.
6. Once in place, identities become a way to see the world. Identities ooze into many corners of our thinking; they direct conscious thought and interfere with rational decision making. If we try to communicate with people who see life differently from us, without considering the identity filters that they will be applying, we may only alienate them further.

If we are able to understand the interwoven identities of those around us, we can understand a great deal about who they are, and how they will respond to information. It is, I humbly propose, naive to believe that one can simply show people the science and they will come on board. Equally, identity theory has lessons for us. We are not immune to the need for social affirmation as group members. To be truly resilient as sustainability advocates we probably need to be upheld by several overlapping identities that are compatible with values of ecological protection and future thinking.

In the second part of this chapter, hold all these ideas in mind as we consider how to put identity to work for sustainability.

Part Two – Putting identity to work for sustainability

I have thought about identity issues for many years, both in my teaching and research. I am convinced that people's sense of who they are and who they are aligned to is an essential piece of the puzzle of why people either embrace or resist visions for a sustainable future. However, putting identity to work for sustainability is tricky. Identity is like a slippery jelly that if probed wobbles furiously in an attempt to maintain its form, but that may, as a result of that agitation settle and rearrange itself when left alone, sometimes even radically. Crucially, however, too much probing tends to send it shooting off to huddle near others of the same persuasion that pat it back into its original shape.

As with all the other topics in this book, we too have (or are) identities, and are subject to their quixotic natures. We have to gather with like-minded others to share experiences and ideas for moving forward on the issues we care about. But we also have to venture into the wider world of those who are not like us, and probe them with information and visions. These tasks are both challenging, but even more disturbingly *they potentially interfere with each other*. By supporting those like us, as we must, we also create a barrier for others who consider themselves different. That is, the more we stand for something that can be recognised, the more we attract those whose sense of who they are matches what we offer, but the more we repel outsiders. This means there is an inevitable downside to identity alignment, despite it being crucial to progress. I am not sure if there is any easy solution to this problem. To some extent we may have to accept that providing a base for people who already consider themselves “green” (or whatever identity label fits your perspective on sustainability) will be at the cost of getting some others offside. For example, many New Zealanders simply will not attend to a statement from the Green Party noting, say, that a number of climate scientists now consider climate change is happening faster than they originally proposed. The Green Party is just too much of an identity barrier for them to straddle. They may, however, listen carefully to exactly the same message from an institution like the Royal Society of New Zealand. Does this mean that the Green Party should disband because its messages will fall on many (probably far more) deaf ears than on those who are receptive? No. What it means is that by creating a strong identity-package, the Green Party provides a home for a small but very important group of sustainability advocates. From this base, this group can work at many levels, including making deals with other political parties.

But it does mean that the Green Party can never do it all, because the strength of their identity is such that they will always alienate certain sectors of society, who may have nevertheless have “green” tendencies. Anabela Carvalho demonstrated the reluctance many people have to identify with what they consider to be extreme social positions in a fascinating analysis of a survey of over 2,000 people in the U.S.A.³³ The survey asked people about their political activism on climate change, that is if they had *“written letters, emailed, or phoned government officials to urge them to take action to reduce global warming in the past year.”* (p. 173). Eight percent claimed that they had. But what was most interesting, was that they were also asked about the reasons why they had not done so and given 10 possible options. The option most commonly chosen, by 33% of the participants, was “I am not an activist”! This shows two things; that corresponding with government officials is considered “activism” by many and that “activism” is a ring-fenced identity which few people consider describes them.

What we need are many different groups that can offer identity slots to all those who are interested in working towards a more sustainable

world. Alongside hard-core groups, we need some that are less radical and more inclusive. These groups offer a more gentle challenge to the status quo, and so do not put up such a high identity barrier to those who find social change threatening. We also need new groups to emerge as potential new identifications arise. These groups may sometimes be amalgams of existing groups, and so offer “enlarged identities”. An example of a social action project that worked along these lines will be discussed soon.

Given these identity barriers, we should also carefully consider our communications with outside groups. I have two key suggestions for approaches that may work – one takes patience and the other takes compromise. Neither is ideal, but both are worth considering and will be outlined in the next section. Finally, while people’s identities are powerful gatekeepers of their beliefs and values, people do change. We certainly should not give up on enticing (not forcing, manipulating or threatening) people to take up our values and worldview.

So what should you do, right here and now as an individual who is juggling multiple identities and group memberships? To try and make this process easier, I suggest that you consider five issues, only some of which may be relevant to your motives and possibilities as a sustainability advocate.

Issue one: Do you, personally, have nurturing “identity locations” for your sustainability advocacy?

Issue two: Do the groups you belong to create nurturing identity locations for others?

Issue three: Are there allied groups you could work with to achieve an enlarged identity?

Issue four: Can you shape your messaging to appeal to those outside your group?

Issue five: Can you get some people on side by enticing them to change their identities?

Let’s look at each of these in turn.

Issue one: Do you, personally, have nurturing “identity locations” for your sustainability advocacy?

No one is very good at keeping going at anything without being in a supportive group of like-minded others. (This explains why my guitar practice drops off dramatically in the breaks when our class doesn’t meet). If you are not part of at least one – preferably more – groups of people who understand where you are coming from when you fret over whether to ask your manager to

replace the Nescafe with fair-trade organic coffee, then your good intentions will almost certainly wither at the first knock back – should you get so far as actually receiving a knock back.

These should be groups of people who offer you warm relationships and who you trust will look after you. They also have to feel “like you”, and you have to be proud to be part of them, as were those Friends of the Zoo. If, as you read this, you are considering action but unsure where to start, I suggest you start by joining (or forming) a group – even a small group. While it is hard to make general rules, this is likely to provide you with a better chance of making a sustained difference than to simply “do something” as is often promoted by our culture’s “go for it” philosophy. (Although you could perhaps do something and see if others come out of the shadows to join with you as a result). If you do belong to one or more groups, but they don’t work for you at an emotional level, then you know what to do – we’ve arrived at this place before when discussing the importance of positive emotions – think hard about whether they are sufficiently worthy for you to keep struggling with feelings of disconnection. And align with others who give you more of the interpersonal rewards that, in the end, you will need.

Issue two: Do the groups you belong to create nurturing identity locations for others?

The best a group can do is provide a positive sense of belonging and an identity that can be displayed with pride to *some* people (if a group does this for no one, then it will not last). If you are part of a group that works for you, the next question to consider is who else is included in, and excluded from, that warm inner circle. Are newcomers made to feel welcome? This takes effort, as for most of us it is much easier to start gossiping with someone we are familiar with than to pay attention to the unknown person who has come along to their first meeting. Do you make in-jokes that are hilarious for those in the know but alienating for everyone else? Can all those who want to find a meaningful niche? Do you allow for people to have different levels of commitment?

I’ve been along to groups and felt welcomed in a way that made what they were doing seem irresistible. I’ve also been along to groups where they appeared to have a shorthand unique to themselves and communicating with me was too much trouble. Groups can’t control the entire identity package they offer (for example, the status they have in the eyes of the community), but they can control how they respond to those who approach them and how well they look after each other. These are very basic and critical components to get right – so it is worth thinking about whether the groups you belong to do so.

Issue three: Are there allied groups you could work with to achieve an enlarged identity?

One way to effect change is to tackle a specific issue and work with a band of like-minded others to achieve it. An example of this is Friends of Oakley Creek, a project that aims to restore and maintain a creek near where I live. They are a relatively small group of people with a specific purpose. Because of this they are able to directly affect the ecosystem of Oakley Creek, but they are also intrinsically self-limiting. Only a small number of people will ever want to be actively involved in their project. Another way is to connect with other groups and try to establish a new, enlarged identity as a bigger group committed to a more ambitious aim. There are risks, such as losing focus and becoming immersed in tedious negotiations, but there is also the potential to build a much stronger platform from which both groups can operate.

Jane Wills, a social psychologist, observed this approach with The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO), a movement aimed at improving the living conditions and social networks of residents in their part of London.³⁴ TELCO was comprised of many groups, including churches and other political and community organisations. Their key focus was to respect the identities of the member groups while simultaneously taking collective action. At meetings and events, TELCO used readings, reflections and teachings designed to reflect the diversity of the participants. These included Christian and Islamic teachings as well as material from the civil rights movement and left-wing scholars. Importantly, rather than trying to obtain ideological agreement, the group sought to find sufficient common ground to take action.

“As this Marxist trade unionist put it when describing her developing relationship with the faith communities involved in London Citizens: ‘It’s a working relationship, it’s not a relationship outside of that, I mean, it’s a very solid working relationship. It’s one of mutual respect and it’s one about which I dare say they are surprised as I am! Coming from where they’re coming from [it’s surprising] that we are able to have that degree of unanimity about objectives and about the process. (5 April 2005)’ (no page number as currently in press).

The very first feature of identity that I discussed was that to be something, you need to act accordingly. The TELCO process shows this happening – how acting together creates a new identification based on that action.

Wills’ argument is that political movements must reach beyond those who currently identify with them in order to appeal to a broader group and make progress towards what they are trying to achieve. If they appeal only to their current constituency, then they cannot expand, and so will not achieve the traction needed to influence larger social processes. She is only partly right, I think. Some groups can stand their ground and make a difference

as other social forces catch up to the issue they are trying to promote – like Greenpeace’s anti-whaling campaigns. However, there is little doubt that joining forces with other groups holds considerable potential for getting sustainability on the agenda.

It is notable that TELCO was based around a *place* that all the participant groups shared – East London. Place identity is an intriguing psychological phenomenon that has great potential for bringing together normally disparate individuals and groups, so is worth a brief discussion here. Place identity seems to develop in middle childhood.³⁵ Children are readily drawn into the landscapes around them. They climb the trees, wade through the streams, pick the daisies and sometimes just gaze at the sky. I remember when I was about ten I used to regularly sit on a swing we had attached to our one big tree and swing backwards and forwards while I sang *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Children rarely walk home from school quickly; instead they are easily distracted by the small changes they encounter – a puddle, dog poo, fresh grass clippings. From this comes a sense of being part of that landscape or neighbourhood. In a study with seven Australian adults, Paul Morgan found that they expressed strong positive emotions for the place where they grew up. They also showed significant grief at having left, whether by their own choice or because of circumstances out of their control. For example, one participant said that as a child she was “*intensely engaged in the love I had for that farm*” and when her family sold the farm “[*it was*] like losing a limb. You know, I mean something vital had gone.” (p. 17).

Place identity is a universal phenomenon, but it may be particularly strong in indigenous cultures whose entire history and worldview is often tied to the details of their landscapes. In New Zealand, for example, Maori identity is closely tied to the person’s tribal lands and marae (meeting place). As shown by Lani Teddy and her colleagues in a study of 12 members of the Hairini marae, people are a very important part of this, with the marae being described by one participant as “*a place for meeting whanau [extended family] and a place that you identified with by history and whakapapa [genealogy] ... At the marae there was always a place for you, no matter what.*” (p. 5)³⁶

The importance of place extends into adulthood, and people’s identification with the town or area they live in seems to play a key role in their willingness to engage in collective action, including environmental action. In a very simple piece of research, Mark van Vugt measured the degree to which people living in Chandler’s Ford, a town in Hampshire in the south of England, identified with their community.³⁷ Using just the three items below, he divided them into low identifiers and high identifiers.

1. I feel strongly attached to the community I live in
2. There are many people in my community I think of as good friends
3. I often talk about my community as being a great place to live

Everyone in the community was on a fixed tariff for water. That is, they were charged the same no matter how much they used. Nevertheless, in the summer water was limited and they were encouraged to conserve. Van Vugt found that identification seemed to be a key factor in whether people were responsive to the call for conservation, with the low identifiers using an average of 21,930 litres per month and the high identifiers using 33% less at 14,640 litres.

Therefore, people's attachment to the place they know could be a very important starting point for developing new action networks, or even encouraging people to take up sustainable practices in order to play their role in preserving a collective resource. Most of us want to be guardians of our land. Is this enough to draw us into collective action that bypasses our differences?

To summarise the sustainability lesson in working with allied groups: in practical terms, for each of us, located as we are within different groups, we should be at least open-minded to working with other groups, even if their values do not quite fit with ours. If we are adventurous enough, we should also consider reaching out to those groups. Is your group in a position to align with others? How could you do this in ways that acknowledge and respect the uniqueness of each party? Does the physical place in which you are located provide a possible identity base for new collective action?

Issue four: Can you shape your messaging to appeal to those outside your group?

Earlier in the chapter I highlighted how difficult it is to appeal to people whose identities include a fundamentally different way of viewing the world. Such people will be alert to any cues that indicate you are *one of them* and will tend to disregard your message if they suspect as much. Nevertheless, this does not mean our messaging is doomed.

In the first part of this section I mentioned that two approaches to persuading outsiders are worth considering depending on whether patience or compromise fits better with your character and cause. The patient approach stems from research on minority group influence. Within psychology, this field was instigated by a French social psychologist called Serge Moscovici in the late 1960s.³⁸ As sustainability advocates we are often in the minority. That is, most of the people and institutions around us do not overtly put sustainability at the forefront of their planning and choices. By doing this ourselves we suggest a new priority that is different from the prevailing majority view. To get a feel for how this might work in practice, let's imagine the hypothetical case of Mary, who I've positioned as a staff member in the politics department of a prestigious university.

The Case of Minority Mary

Although most people in Mary's department are in favour of stricter environmental regulations and a more equitable distribution of resources, actually advocating for principles of sustainability within how the department operates is hard work. The department as a whole favours "big politics" – they want the right policies in place, and see little value in trying to persuade individuals or organisations to change their practices. In fact, they look down a little on those who attempt to reduce their environmental footprint. They see such gestures as simply a middle-class feel-good fad that distracts people from the real centre of power – governments, multi-nationals and the media.

Nevertheless, Mary wants her workplace to be more environmentally conscious in its practices. She believes that change can happen from the bottom-up and she cringes when energy and other resources are used wastefully. Therefore, at one staff meeting Mary tried to suggest that people turned out unnecessary lights. This provoked a discussion of why all the lights that are left on, are, in fact, necessary. Some people can't see room numbers in poor light; one woman had experienced being left on the toilet in the dark when someone turned off the lights in the bathroom. Mary walked away confused and disheartened, not quite understanding how such a simple idea had been made so complex. Strangely however, she observed that over the next few weeks there were fewer lights left on than previously. The person who had raised the difficulty of reading room numbers in poor light emailed to say that she hoped Mary didn't think she was against turning out lights, it was just that she had been finding it frustrating lately, needing to use her reading glasses more and more often. The woman who had been stranded in the dark on a toilet made a big point of turning out a light in front of Mary and saying that she wasn't as anti-green as Mary might be thinking.

Some weeks after the meeting, Mary got an email from a graduate student who had heard about Mary's plea. Thomas was constantly frustrated by the department's printers not defaulting to double-sided printing. Mary's willingness to take a stand had inspired him to take up this issue with the departmental manager. Mary was keen to help and together they researched the cost and carbon savings that would come from printing double-sided. They presented their findings to the departmental manager who agreed it was a good idea, but somehow didn't follow through. Mary and Thomas persisted, showing their savings calculations to several members of the department at and a subsequent meeting of the department's management committee. Eventually they gained the department manager's permission to set up all the printers themselves.

I constructed the example of Mary to illustrate several features of minority influence. The first is that minority positions are often initially resisted. Take the battering poor Mary got over turning out lights. There are few satisfactory arguments for leaving unnecessary lights on, but nevertheless people attempted to argue. They resisted. But what, exactly, were they resisting? In all probability they weren't resisting the idea itself, they were resisting Mary's identity as a sustainability advocate. They didn't believe in "lifestyle change" or want to be seen as people who fussed over petty issues like lights. Perhaps they felt told off, as if Mary was saying they were bad people for not paying attention to lights in the past.

Research has consistently shown this type of resistance to minority group messages. That is, people resist them because the fact that the message comes from someone with an alien identity inhibits their ability to listen to and appreciate the content. If they listened they would be acknowledging what is, in their thinking an illegitimate source. This is exactly the same sort of resistance we see when people perceive someone from a different worldview trying to get into their head space. However, over time an interesting process sometimes occurs. As explained in an article by Juan Perez, people appear to disassociate the message from the messenger.³⁹ This allows them to think about the message more clearly, at face value or for its own sake. This process is unconscious, and involves gradual disentanglement. This explains Mary's curious finding that despite people's passionate objections to her suggestion at the staff meeting, they later started switching off lights.

Whether "delayed influence" occurs is going to depend on several factors to do with the issue at hand.⁴⁰ One of these is how consistent the minority is in their argument. Although there are exceptions, a minority is usually more influential if their argument is consistent over time. Mary and Thomas were consistent in their approach to the printing issue; they repeatedly presented the same argument to the staff and departmental manager until they had a breakthrough. The night before writing this I was struck by an example that showed the flipside – a minority group with an inconsistent message who had no chance of being taken seriously. It was at an event run by the Science Faculty at my university showcasing the latest research in climate science. One of the questions posed to the presenters asked them to outline the criticisms of the sceptics, and whether any were legitimate concerns. The response from most of the presenters was that the criticisms are "all over the place" and "keep shifting". It was clear that they were meaning that *this is a minority position you do not need to worry about because they do not have a consistent view*. (One of the presenters took a slightly different view that there were some "crackpot" sceptics, but that there were also some who reasonably questioned the validity of climate science models which are riddled with unknowns.)

This brings us to another point: minorities have more influence when they provide or rely on objective information than when they offer subjective opinions. So the "reasonable" sceptical view was considered reasonable

because, although held by a minority, it was nonetheless based on a possible interpretation of the evidence. Mary and Thomas provided facts about paper-use, not opinions about the best way to bring about an ecological revolution. In both these scenarios the minority position was taken seriously and in our hypothetical example led to change.

The final feature of Mary's story is that by standing for a minority position, she enabled someone who had similar values to also take up the cause. The power of a single ally in breaking away from the majority has been shown in several studies on conformity. In one famous study by Solomon Asch in 1951, participants often publically agreed with a majority position, even when it was clearly wrong, but when just one other person was prepared to disagree with the majority the participant almost always also disagreed.⁴¹

A more recent study demonstrated this with 46 Japanese university students who played a computer game in which they were able to invest in two companies.⁴² One company returned high profits, but was environmentally destructive by causing pollution to the ocean, including loss of marine life and human sickness. The other returned lower profits, but was ecologically responsible and cleaned up after itself. For some of the players, the profit margin between the companies was 3%, but for another group of players it was 21%. Each player was told he or she was playing with four other people, whereas in fact the four other people were simply a computer programme pre-set to perform in a particular way. For some, the four other people all invested primarily in the high profit company, while for others three out of the four invested in the high profit company but one invested in the ecologically responsible company. Thus, this second group had a role model for ecologically responsible investing. There were 13 investment rounds, to give the players a chance to learn the behaviour of the other players and alter their strategy over time.

When the profit margin between the companies was low, players were relatively even-handed in their investments in the two companies, regardless of whether or not they had a role model for ecologically responsible investing. However, when the difference in profits was high, there was a dramatic effect. By the middle rounds of the game, those without a role model for ecologically responsible investing put only around 20% of their money in the ecological company, whereas those with such a role model put 60% in.

It is interesting to speculate on what was going through the Japanese students' minds in these conditions. It is likely that they were searching for the informal rules of the game. Is it appropriate to act as if pollution doesn't matter, or is it appropriate to take that into consideration? When no one else seems to care (with all four other players investing solely in the high profit company), the message is loud and clear that pollution doesn't matter and the socially appropriate behaviour is to ignore it. However, when one other person does care, it indicates that is a socially valid position and people may therefore take it if they chose.

So, the research on minority group persuasion suggests that sustainability advocates who favour the patient route when trying to persuade “outsiders” (people whose values around sustainability are different to our own) should remember that:

1. Messages may be initially rejected, but people will still be processing them over time. Just because something doesn’t seem to go down well, does not mean the message has failed.
2. If your message is consistent and is based on “facts” rather than “opinions” it is more likely to be taken seriously by those you are trying to persuade.
3. We all need allies and role models (a recurring theme of this book). By being consistent and reasonable you may provide someone with the support they need to take a stand.

Each of these lessons means that we cannot expect quick wins when trying to communicate with outsiders, but we do not need to feel defeated by apparent losses. Persistence can be boring, but it may also be effective.

Compromise is another way forward with people who differ from us on these issues. Compromise involves understanding the values of those you are interacting with and pitching your message in a way that draws on their values as well as, or perhaps even instead of, your own.

Members of one long-time lobby group who are masters of this are anti-abortion advocates. In an article on the rhetoric of social movements, social psychologists Nick Hopkins and Steve Reicher analysed a speech by a senior official from the U.K. Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC).⁴³ The speech was given to students at a university campus. Here is an extract:

“We have traditionally over the past 25 years gathered most of our support from young people which is why we are a growing society. We had six and a half thousand new members last year and given that we are, as well as being an educational organisation, an organisation dedicated to promoting research, dedicated to promoting knowledge of the unborn child...”
(p. 271).

While there is no doubt the core underlying value of this group is to prevent abortions, you can see how the SPUC official draws on the assumed identities of his audience – that they are young, that they value education and believe in research. The result is very disconcerting if you are not anti-abortion, as it appears so disingenuous.

However, this technique is already rife in sustainability messaging. It involves, say, asking people to turn out lights because it will save money on their power bill, pointing out the health benefits of organic food, or encouraging a company to improve their image by planting trees at a local reserve. In each case we

may be after a commitment to what we see as a more ecologically sustainable choice, but we are attempting to get that commitment via a different set of pre-existing values.

To an extent I think it is only sensible to draw on people's pre-existing values when trying to broaden the sustainability message. Why not point out that using less electricity saves money as well as rivers, coal-miners and carbon? Actions held in place *only* by the assumption that they are good for the planet are likely to be blown away at the first inconvenience for all but the most dedicated eco warriors.

One has to be careful with this approach, however, because if our message becomes too diluted then maybe we have missed the point. If we think back to Mary, what if she had tried to get people to turn out lights by posing a primarily economic argument? Maybe she would have met with less initial resistance but she would not have progressed sustainability consciousness in the department. Thomas may not have been empowered by her example, and when she wanted to persuade people to take an action that didn't save money she would have to start again.

Appealing to values beyond sustainability will help to drive forward some issues, and it may allow for alliances with other groups. But it must be done cautiously. After all, we don't want to pretend to people that we are something we are not, or be perceived as patronising, which may happen if we deliberately pitch our messages at what we think others value. We may also lose a little of what makes us special to each other. So compromise, yes, but only a little, only in full knowledge of what you are doing, and only in conjunction with showing your true colours as someone who values sustainability.

Issue five: Can you get some people on side by helping them change their identities?

When I teach identity, one of the stories I tell my students is how I became a tidy person. Being a tidy person is a rather important identity to me, and it takes considerable effort to maintain. Both at home and in my office I have places for just about everything. In my office, for example, I have filing cabinets with labels, ring-binders with sections and boxes for old projects. I am not a hoarder. At home I keep the really good children's artwork, the odd irresistible exercise book filled with their creative writing or projects and birthday cards, but they have a special drawer. Generally speaking things are either in use, are in storage for use within the foreseeable future or are being kept indefinitely for sentimental reasons.

Then there are the rituals necessary to deal with everything that comes into my territory and place it correctly. Anything made of paper that I should read goes into a tray on the coffee table. Once a week I shift most of that to the recycling. I regularly move around the house putting things where they belong. I have never actually measured how long this takes, but I suspect it adds up to

a few hours each week. These, I must stress, are pleasant hours. I love putting things away. As a space goes from messy to tidy I feel this warmth coming over me, a sense of order and calm, a reaffirmation that I am a tidy person. I often just gaze at the room I am in at home, or at my office at work, feeling self-satisfied. Just in case you think I keep my territory perfectly, I must confess that I don't think I am as clean as I am tidy. I don't like the marks from soy sauce and milk bottles that accumulate in the fridge, but I can live with them. I am capable of ignoring the flyspots on our ceiling and I know that there are thick layers of dust on the top of our light shades. I do clean, but I tidy more.

As part of this, I admire other tidy people. I look at their houses and get hints as to how I could perhaps organise the shoes more satisfactorily or deal with those horrible plastic bags that seem to reproduce with little help from me.

I realise how this comes across, and I don't want to give the impression that it is a part of me that overrides other parts. I'd much rather talk about politics or science with people in a messy room (well, to be more precise, in their messy room, in my own I'd be too agitated to concentrate) than talk about how to keep your house tidy with another neat-freak.

But the point here is how I came to be tidy. It wasn't always so. Twenty years ago, before my transformation, I would eat apples and put the cores down beside my chair to shrivel and mould. It might be weeks before I gathered them together and threw them out. When our oldest child was little, I'd get all her paraphernalia out of the lounge and just throw it into her room. Every so often, mostly in order to vacuum, I'd throw the stuff in generic toy boxes, everything muddled up together. Throughout the house there would be piles of papers in various locations, items I didn't know what to do with. The washing would come off the line and be dumped on a chair. We might put it away, or we might just use the clean clothes direct from the pile.

Then one day, I went to the open home of a house that was for sale in a nearby suburb. The house was lived in, but meticulously tidy. Dressing tables with hair brushes and toiletries beautifully laid out. Wardrobes with clothes neatly hanging and stacked. The house was a little too expensive for us, we put in an offer but we knew it wasn't really enough. Secretly however, I also knew I didn't deserve it. What right did a messy person like me have to live in a house like that? For many years losing that house was a source of deep regret for me, but it left another legacy. One morning, soon after the negotiations fell through, I woke up as a tidy person. It took a little longer than that for our house to become fully ordered, but I went from someone who felt vaguely helpless in the face of our stuff to someone who knew how to organise it. And I've never gone back.

Identity transformations like this intrigue me. Like all of you, I've had others, some that seemed to spring up overnight, and others that crept up on me. (I can never pin-point when I became deeply committed to environmental issues, I know it wasn't always so, but there was no moment or even year in which

it happened). When I was doing the review on activists and volunteers I've mentioned earlier, one thing I looked into was how they took up these identities. Sometimes they appeared to be provoked by a single event, an inspiring speech, an act of injustice, or even a dream. Other times one identity merged into another; for example members of a church took up a human rights issue until for some people dedication to that issue became an identity in itself.⁴⁴

How activists emerge was also of interest to the sociologist Charles Keiffer.⁴⁵ He was particularly fascinated by how some people living in very difficult social and economic conditions amongst "*general apathy and hopelessness*" (p. 11) nevertheless became citizen-leaders. After studying 15 leaders, he found that first something happened to disrupt their view of the world, second they developed relationships with and learnt from people who were already activists, and finally they came to see themselves as "*authors of – as well as actors in – the socio-political environment.*" (p. 23). So identity change can happen, even in circumstances that seem set up to keep people reproducing their current identities over and over again.

There is a big difference, however, between *describing* people's experiences of identity change and coming up with strategies to *promote* identity change in others. In both Keiffer's study and my own review, we found that a transformative event – a kick-start – often played a role. So as sustainability advocates, we can think of ourselves in this role, provoking others into seeing the world differently and hoping that some of them will be motivated to become advocates themselves. Another possibility is to become the support agents Keiffer described in the second stage of his participants' transformation.

Rosemary Randall's carbon action groups – discussed earlier in this chapter – work on this level.⁴⁶ She is interested in promoting lifestyle-related sustainability identities. Her philosophy is that developing a lifestyle focused around sustainability is not easy, because so much of what we value is tied up in opposing identities. To change our practices requires us to give up not just material things but also psychological things – means by which we express ourselves and our relationships with others. Here she explains why private car use is such a hard practice to tackle:

"Take for example a young woman whose car is her cocoon. She has chosen it for its colour and style. She fills it with personal comforts – her CDs, a favourite rug, a mascot, water bottle, and tissues within easy reach, radio tuned to her favourite station. Snug inside, she feels safe. At the start of the day, it helps her make the transition from sleepy, child-like dependence to independent, responsible, working woman. At the end of the day, its privacy and containment comfort her from the bruises of working life. Its outward gleam and shine speak to her success. Its inner warmth and comfort acknowledge her fragility. It both

protects and expresses her identity. The suggestion that she might take the bus to work or lift-share with colleagues will not be appealing. Aspiration, lifestyle, security, and identity are all instantly under threat. We should not be surprised at a negative response to the suggestion.” (p. 120)

Randall’s suggestion is that we face the losses head on, and in group settings. In this way our old lives can be acknowledged and mourned and we can move forward. As she sees it – writing in 2009 – environmentalists have done little to come to terms with the core psychological needs that keep us bound into unsustainable lifestyles. When, for example, have you ever read a report on sustainable transport that truly captures the layers described in the previous paragraph? Sure, they talk about convenience, time and other practicalities, but rarely about the more intimate functions of the car. These functions may be part of the reason why in my experience so few people, even those who devote a lot of time and energy to the cause, substantially change their transport habits.⁴⁷

Randall refers to the hard and slow process of changing our lifestyles bit by bit in a much more self-conscious way than when people spontaneously take on a new cause or when a new identity emerges gradually and apparently without effort. Each piece is a struggle against habit, convenience and most significantly against the social flow that assumes we will drive from A to B, want a bag for our purchases and attend our cousin’s wedding in a far away city. Support groups, such as her carbon action groups, are an important part of the process. Even groups that do not focus on the lifestyles of members per se, may, however, provide a space for participants to do some of the self-searching necessary for making these deep, level, personal changes.

Another route to self-conscious identity change may be through “mindfulness” techniques. Mindfulness is about becoming aware of our thoughts and feelings as well as what is going on in the world around us. As described by Erika Rosenberg “[Mindfulness] training develops present awareness, nonjudgmental observation...and awareness of changes in conscious experience.” (p. 108).⁴⁸ This, she suggests, can help protect us against advertisers that are attempting to promote non-conscious associations and behaviour. It is certainly true that most advertising relies on emotional associations rather than reasoned arguments – *buy this acne product and you’ll get a girlfriend!* It is also true that we don’t think about many of our habits, which given the unsustainable nature of our lifestyles are likely to be energy hungry (turning up the heating instead of putting on a jersey) create waste (buying coffee in a disposable cup on our way to work) and rely on a poorly paid workforce (buying cheap manufactured goods at the shopping mall). If we are mindful, we take notice of our habits and can behave differently if these are not consistent with who we’d like to be. There is some evidence that mindfulness can indeed help us break away from unwanted habits.⁴⁹

So nurturing sustainable lifestyles in ourselves and others is hard, but if we want people to join us as advocates for a better world, then we are often demanding something else as well – that they go beyond their own practices and attempt social change. For this next step, support is essential. As Keiffer described, with support people can truly become advocates for new social systems. Support takes many forms – it can be about welcoming newcomers, (something we have already discussed), but it can also be about affirming people’s actions and efforts to contribute.

I flinch when I hear old hands putting down the ideas of people who are just starting out. I don’t think they realize how much courage it takes to suggest something when you are finding your way. Instead we should be tender with those who have approached us or who we can see are struggling to find a way to take sustainability action and create themselves as advocates.

Concluding comments

The first people to look after in any sustainability endeavour are those who are with you already. These people *have* identities as sustainability advocates, but like all people need to feel the warmth of belonging in order to stay committed. They are your “low hanging fruit” to use a common metaphor. Importantly too, if members of your group or movement look after each other you help make sustainability a positive, fun, enriching experience. Not only does this attract people, but it creates immediate wellbeing. As I argued in the introduction (and hopefully you agree), we can’t put off being happy and having good times together until the imaginary era when the planet is saved.

When newcomers enter your circle, attend to them, inspire them, and if possible get them active. Identity is created by action. The more we act for sustainability, the stronger our identities as advocates and the more we feel compelled to act for sustainability. It is a virtuous circle. Understand too that some people’s identities as sustainability advocates are more fragile than others, depending on how thoroughly they are supported by the important people and other activities in their lives. Every compatible social setting helps build an individual who will stay the distance.

When it comes to balancing all these identity issues, you and your group do not have to be all things to all people. In fact, you and your group *cannot be* all things to all people. You have to trust that sustainability will be progressed by a complex weave of groups. Having said that, there are times when some of us are positioned to extend our reach. We can do this by joining with other groups, possibly based on our physical location. Place identity is a very powerful phenomenon that may be highly suited to ecological issues in particular.

We can also extend our reach by attempting to communicate with those who do not share our sustainability values. The research discussed in this chapter suggests that this is a fraught process that takes patience, mental resilience and compromise. Simply arguing with those who believe the world

works differently from you may be counter-productive by backing those people further into their corner. On the other hand, presenting “factual” information, being consistent, and waiting for a delayed effect may result in winning others over, at least a little. It may also be worthwhile appealing to the values you believe others hold (saving money, being healthy etc), although I think this should be done cautiously and it should always be blended with the sustainability message so that little by little we change the playing field to one that is greener.

Although few people have identities invested in *not* being sustainable (there are some!), all of us have identities that conflict with sustainable practices. This is inevitable, given that the social world we have inherited is built on fossil fuel based transport, cheap labour from third world countries, and extracting non-renewable resources with no plan for re-use. All too often refusing something you consider socially unjust or ecologically destructive is also refusing something you value dearly. Should I not send my children to the local school because they have discos in which each child receives a one-use glow stick made by people on very low wages from non-recyclable plastic? Should I give up visiting New Zealand’s native forests because I live in a city and must drive or fly to get there? Perhaps we can at least become more “mindful” about our choices, recognising their dark side, and supporting each other in seeking ecologically and socially positive ways to achieve our valued identities.

Endnotes

- ¹ McAdam, D. (1988).
- ² Fendrich, J. M. (1993).
- ³ Other studies that have shown that those who are activists or volunteers at one stage in their lives are more likely to be so at a later point in their lives include: Hodgkinson, V. A. (1995); Hofer, M. (1999).
- ⁴ Harré, N. (2007).
- ⁵ Yates, M. and Youniss, J. (1996).
- ⁶ Richards, T. (1999).
- ⁷ Hogg, M. A. and Abrams, D. (1988).
- ⁸ See for example: Baumeister, R. F. and Leary, M.R. (1995); Myers, D.G. (2000); Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. (2002).
- ⁹ Baumeister and Leary (1995).
- ¹⁰ Actually, he referred to his old Volkswagen, but I've taken some poetic license here, as I couldn't possibly imply a car was essential to life.
- ¹¹ Baumeister and Leary (1995) discuss these reasons; another good discussion of the evolutionary advantage to belonging is: Krantz, D. H., Peterson, N. et al. (2008).
- ¹² Randall, R. (2009).
- ¹³ Harré, N., Tepavac, S. et al. (2009).
- ¹⁴ Colby, A. and Damon, W. (1994).
- ¹⁵ Fraser, J., Clayton, S. et al. (2009).
- ¹⁶ On the other hand, there is considerable evidence for people taking on volunteerism or activism through their social networks; either family and friends: Roker, D., Player, K. et al. (1999); Eden, K. and Roker, D. (2002); McLellan, J. A. and Youniss, J. (2003), or organisational affiliations: McAdam, D. (1988); Hodgkinson, V. A. (1995); McLellan, J.A. and Youniss, J. (2003); Snow, D.A. and McAdam, D. (2000); Youniss, J., McLellan, J.A., et al. (2001).
- ¹⁷ Passy, F. and Giugni, M. (2000).
- ¹⁸ See, for example, Stryker, S. (2000).
- ¹⁹ Bragg, E. A. (1996).
- ²⁰ Buddhism is the most obvious example, but probably most religions encourage this to a degree; see Karen Armstrong's book *The Case for God*.
- ²¹ Roszak, T. (2001).
- ²² Kahn, P. H. (2009).
- ²³ However, she also says people show active self-neglect, so it will not always follow that they would not neglect the Earth, even if they identified with it.
- ²⁴ Zavestoski, S. (2003).
- ²⁵ Norgaard, K. M. (2006).

- ²⁶ Kahan, D., Braman, D. et al. (2007). For further descriptions of the worldviews described here see: Drake, K. (1991).
- ²⁷ Kahan, D. M., Braman, D. et al. (2009).
- ²⁸ Kahan, D. M., Braman, D. et al. (In press).
- ²⁹ Kahan, D. (2010).
- ³⁰ Leiserowitz, A. A. (2005).
- ³¹ David, B. and Turner, J.C. (2001).
- ³² Steele, C. M. (1997).
- ³³ Carvalho, A. (2010).
- ³⁴ Wills, J. (In press).
- ³⁵ See these articles for more detail on the development of place identity:
Proshansky, H. M., Fabian, A.K. et al. (1983); Morgan, P. (2010).
- ³⁶ Teddy, L., Nikora, L.W. et al. (2008).
- ³⁷ Vugt, M. V. (2001).
- ³⁸ For a brief history of the field see: Martin, R., Hewstone, M. et al. (2008).
- ³⁹ Perez, J. A. (1995).
- ⁴⁰ For more information on these processes see Wood, W., Lundgren, S. et al. (1994).
- ⁴¹ Asch, S. E. (1951).
- ⁴² Nonami, H. (1997).
- ⁴³ Hopkins, N. and Reicher, S. (1997).
- ⁴⁴ Harré, N. (2007).
- ⁴⁵ Kieffer, C. H. (1984).
- ⁴⁶ Randall, R. (2009).
- ⁴⁷ This seems to be true at least in Auckland, a very car-dependent city. I also don't know a single New Zealander who has completely given up plane travel for the sake of climate change or the environment. In New Zealand to do this would be to never leave the country, which seems too great a loss for us to consider.
- ⁴⁸ Rosenberg, E. L. (2004).
- ⁴⁹ Rosenberg (2004).

Chapter Five – Morality and cooperation: Making the most of our desire to be good

In his book, the *Moral Mind*, Marc Hauser offers two scenarios¹.

A surgeon walks into the hospital as a nurse rushes forward with the following case. “Doctor! An ambulance just pulled in with five people in critical condition. Two have a damaged kidney, one a crushed heart, one a collapsed lung, and one a completely ruptured liver. We don’t have time to search for possible organ donors, but a healthy young man just walked in to donate blood and is sitting in the lobby. We can save all five patients if we take the needed organs from this young man. Of course he won’t survive, but we will save all five patients.” *Is it morally permissible for the surgeon to take this young man’s organs?*

A train is moving at a speed of 150 miles per hour. All of a sudden the conductor notices a light on the panel indicating complete brake failure. Straight ahead of him on the track are five hikers, walking with their backs turned apparently unaware of the train. The conductor notices that the track is about to fork, and another hiker is on the side track. The conductor must make a decision: He can let the train continue on its current course thereby killing the five hikers, or he can redirect the train onto the side track and thereby kill one hiker but save five. *Is it morally permissible for the conductor to take the side track?*

Hauser suggests that most people think it is acceptable for the conductor to take the side track, this feels like the right thing to do. However, we are appalled by the idea of a surgeon harvesting organs from a healthy person, no matter how many people could be saved. Viewed purely from the perspective of saving the most number of people on a particular occasion these are logically identical situations – one person for five, but, even though we’ve never confronted these scenarios before, we know that the second act is acceptable, and even morally courageous, whereas the first is repugnant.

In this, our last chapter, we are going to explore the psychology of morality and its close relative, cooperation. Why is it that it is right to kill one hiker instead of five but wrong to harvest organs from healthy humans? What are the parameters of human moral reasoning? Do we, indeed “reason” our way through problems like the above or do we instead reach our conclusion through intuition? If we do have moral intuitions, are they specific to different individuals or different cultures, or are they universal? And, of course, underpinning all this will be what the answers mean for promoting a sustainable society. As with

every topic in this book, a sustainability advocate will do better by working with the way people are, than by lamenting our failings and hoping that people will get the message and change their ways.

Importantly, this is not a chapter about what *is* right and wrong. I will not be pleading with you to save the planet because it is our moral duty. (I assume most people reading this are convinced of that already?). It is a psychologist's view, and so *describes* how people decide what is right and wrong rather than *prescribes* what *is* right and wrong.

Having said that, people's sense of what is right and wrong is almost certainly based on what is, or was, right and wrong for the survival of human groups. That is, we probably have moral radar with a certain structure because it is helpful to our own acceptance as members of groups, and because human groups that included a certain kind of morality out-did other groups. They survived and reproduced. Their moral norms, and possibly their moral genes, were passed on to new generations. One of the reasons the surgeon example is so abhorrent is because a society in which that could happen would be haphazard and unpredictable and people could not trust each other. Such a society could not last and we sense this.

However, as with all aspects of our evolved natures, our moral radar is not necessarily suited to solving the problems of now, it is suited to solving the problems we faced as hunters and gatherers. So, as people, we are in the odd position of being able to objectively analyse what is right and wrong for the common good, but on a daily basis, as we make decision upon decision about what to do next, our evolved moral sense is not always going to point us in the necessary direction. In fact, emotions like empathy that encourage us to be good, may also lead us astray, causing good people, because they are good people, to make bad choices. So morality is a minefield for the future of the planet, but as sustainability advocates, it is a minefield we can navigate around if we know how it works.

Part One: The inner workings of morality

To begin, I'd like to explore what we mean by morality.

At the simplest level, morality is our sense of what is right and wrong. Just like identity, the subject of the previous chapter, it keeps changing form, but we know it when we see it. To help us along, every culture has actions that are forbidden. Marc Hauser, whose moral dilemmas we introduced at the beginning of this chapter, lists these as universally forbidden: killing, causing pain, stealing, cheating, lying, breaking promises, incest and committing adultery. However, here's the rub, he also notes that every society outlines circumstances in which some or all of these acts are permissible. In all societies it is acceptable to cause pain if to do so results in curing a disease, in some murderers are killed by the government, you can steal a nuclear weapon from a country you consider too irresponsible to have one, and so on.

What changes the moral tone of these acts is the motive behind them. Arbitrary assault, killing or theft is never allowed, but these acts are allowed with good reason.

As a counter to forbidden acts are obligatory acts. A universal list of obligatory acts is harder to nail down than the list of things we must not do. (This may be why the “golden rule” is often expressed in the negative: *do not do to others what you would not want them to do to you.*) However, we are obliged to keep promises, to reciprocate good deeds, to protect the vulnerable, and to allocate goods fairly. Again there are exceptions, and considerable interpretation is needed when performing many of these obligatory acts. I might believe that inviting you to lunch was a good deed that you should reciprocate, whereas you may have considered it a chore, and hence feel no such debt.

The obligatory merges with what we might call the extra-virtuous. These are acts that earn us additional points in the morality stakes. We don't have to do them, but if we do, we get something from it. Because of your obligation to protect the vulnerable, you would be obliged to swerve to avoid running over a child, but you would not be obliged to crawl under a burning vehicle to rescue the child. If you did, however, you'd be considered particularly virtuous.

When the forbidden, obligatory and extra-virtuous are taken away we are left with what is permissible. These are all the acts that are considered a matter of choice and taste, and are not part of the moral sphere. As the cross-cultural psychologist, Richard Shweder has pointed out, in some cultures not much falls into this category.² These are cultures in which almost the entire natural and social worlds are infused with moral implications. For example in Hindu cultures, food preparation, eating, sex, dressing and a myriad of other everyday activities are subject to rules concerning purity and pollution and many rituals must be performed to appease the hidden world of gods and karma. In Western culture, however, rather a lot is considered a matter of choice and taste – even religious practices, which are carefully kept apart from the rules of the land and the moral codes that everyone must follow.

So, to sum up, what we are talking about when we are talking about morality is the practices and motives that are considered forbidden, obligatory or extra-virtuous in any culture.

To try to get to the bottom of why certain practices fall into each of these categories, in the next section we will look into the domain approach to morality. This approach suggests that even young children can distinguish acts that are forbidden or obligatory on “moral” grounds from acts that are forbidden or obligatory on “conventional” grounds. Then we'll look more deeply at the importance of intention and beliefs in shaping what individuals and cultures consider right and wrong. (You certainly won't consider carbon emissions a moral issue if you do not believe they are contributing to global warming.)

Next we'll look at moral intuition as an end-product of this developmental process and at the possibility that there is an innate component to human moral intuition. This implies that the way we are set up both enables and constrains what we can learn to judge as right and wrong. We'll also explore the moral emotions such as empathy, anger and admiration. Despite moral issues arousing powerful feelings, morality, just like talent or taste, can be set aside. We'll discuss the moral balancing act we all do and why some people invest more in being moral than others.

The last section before exploring how to put morality to work for sustainability is about social dilemma games. In these games people are forced to choose between cooperation and defection. The research findings from these games are heart-warming and heart-breaking – most people do cooperate (yes!) but they are bitterly hurt when others do not.

What all this will hopefully demonstrate is that people are deeply concerned about being moral. They want to be moral themselves (although not at the expense of everything else they value) and they want other people to be moral too. In fact we set up elaborate systems to try and ensure this happens. If we can work *with* people's desire to be good (or at least not to be bad), we have a much better chance at making a sustainable world.

A moral domain

Every child knows that there are some things you are not allowed to do and some things you have to do at school. The list is likely to be long. Here are some of the rules I remember from high school:

Forbidden – wearing jewellery except a watch and plain gold or silver hoop earrings or studs, hitting another student or teacher, stealing, being late, leaving early, having sex with a teacher, having sex with each other, cheating on an exam, bullying, talking while the teacher is talking, smoking.

Obligatory – wearing your hair up, wearing the uniform, doing homework, telling the truth, attending class, entering at least one event on sports day, taking six subjects in the fifth form, doing a speech in English. (It is frighteningly easy to remember all this, and I haven't thought about these rules for years. I am not sure what that means except that I was, and am, very rule-conscious. I confess to a little poetic licence with the sex rules. They existed, but I am pretty sure they weren't spelt out in the school prospectus).

Something that Elliot Turiel and Larry Nucci, developmental psychologists, noticed about social rules is that some seem more arbitrary than others.³ If Turiel and Nucci are correct, all readers will agree that wearing prohibited earrings just isn't in the same league as bullying. Even smoking and having sex with each other surely aren't as bad as bullying.

Turiel, Nucci and their colleagues suggested that this is because all people recognise that there are three different domains when it comes to social rules.

They are the moral, conventional and personal domains. This area of work is known as “domain theory” which is how I’ll refer to it from now on. The moral and conventional domains have been the most intensely researched, so we’ll look at these in some detail before examining the personal domain.

According to the theorists, the moral domain is both “objective” and “prescriptive”. It is objective in the sense that immoral acts cause actual harm that is real above and beyond the perspectives of those involved. So, bullying a girl in a cooking class by intermittently flicking her with a wet tea towel, inevitably and irrefutably causes actual psychological and physical pain in the victim, in a way that wearing the wrong earrings or teenagers having sex does not. In judging the first I would consider it either silly or sinister of you to argue that the act does not cause harm, in judging the second and third, I would accept that we might have different perspectives. Immoral acts are also prescriptive in that we consider these rules apply universally because of the actual harm they cause.

The second domain is the conventional domain. As Nucci puts it in his book *Education in the Moral Domain*: “Unlike moral prescriptions, conventions are arbitrary because there are no inherent interpersonal effects of the actions they regulate.” (p. 7). Conventions may serve the function of protecting people from harm, but they do not do so directly. There is nothing inherently damaging about wearing non-regulation earrings or not doing an event on sports day. These are just the rules my school used to try and ensure students looked respectable and were at least a little physically active.

Importantly, these two domains aren’t how the domain theorists think we *should* view morality versus convention, they are how their research shows people *do* view morality versus convention. They argue that children learn to make this distinction, not by being taught it by adults, but by “figuring it out”. In their interactions with other children, siblings, adults and so on, they are highly motivated to be effective social agents, and to get on with the others around them. No one has to tell them that pain is bad, because they know that from their own suffering. They watch how other children respond to pain and realise that they also feel bad when they are hurt. Simultaneously, they discover that if they cause pain in others, others will avoid them or hurt them back. They therefore conclude that causing others to suffer for no reason is bad. Because every human society is constructed of people who feel pain, avoid sources of suffering and want to be accepted by others, we see these moral foundations in children everywhere.

To get a feel for this perspective, here are two passages from Nucci’s *Education in the Moral Domain* (pp. 36-38). They are from an interview with a girl they called Marsha, a conservative Jewish girl aged 9 years and 11 months. In the first passage Marsha is being interviewed about a religious convention requiring men to wear head coverings.

I: Was Jonathan right or wrong not to wear his kippah to the public school?

M: It was wrong because he's not showing his, uh, his, like his religion. You should always show how good your religion is, and you should always keep the mitzvah. And also, he's probably disobeying his parents.

I: Okay. Do you think it matters whether or not Jewish boys wear kippot?

M: I think it matters. For one thing, you can never tell if it's a Jewish man or not a Jewish man and you could say, "Can I, uh, can I have, can you give charity to the people, to the poor people?" And they would say, "No, I'm not Jewish." How would I know? Like you'd get really embarrassed, because you don't really know, and also like, when you are trying to do something really good and you find out he's not wearing a kippah and also it shows that he doesn't like, go in the laws of HaShem [God].

I: But why do Jewish boys dress differently? Why do they wear kippot?

M: Because it's a law of HaShem, and they're just supposed to.

I: Suppose the rabbis got together and removed the rule about wearing kippot. Would that be all right?

M: No

I: Why not?

M: Because it's been that way and that's a rule.

I: Well, if they did agree and removed the rule, then would it be all right for Jewish boys not to wear kippot?

M: No

I: Why not?

M: Because the rule is there and it was meant to stay there.

I: The Christians don't require boys to wear kippot, is that all right?

M: Yeah.

I: Why?

M: Because, well, because that's not one of their rules. They don't respect God in the same way.

I: Is it okay they respect God in a different way?

M: Yes. The religion is different. What they do is not our business, and if they want to do that they can.

I: Suppose it never said in the Talmud or anywhere else in scripture anything about wearing kippot, then would it be all right for Jewish boys to read the Torah or pray without wearing a kippah?

M: Yeah. I mean why would anybody need to do it if it wasn't there? How would anybody know?

In this next passage, Marsha is being interviewed about stealing.

I: Is it okay to steal?

M: No, because it's a law in the Torah, and it is also one of the Ten Commandments.

I: Does that rule have to be followed?

M: Yeah

I: Why?

M: Because HaShem said so in the Torah, and, uh, you should follow all the mitzvahs of HaShem. The Torah has 613 mitzvahs.

I: Suppose all the rabbis got together and decided not to have a rule about stealing. Would that be okay?

M: No.

I: Why?

M: Because like I said before in some of the other questions, it's a rule of HaShem. They can't change it cause like once when Moishe was walking, his sons wanted, there was a law and they wanted to change it, and they changed it and their punishment was to die.

I: Suppose that people of another religion do not have a rule about stealing. Is that all right?

M: Probably yes – but no. So, it's like half yes and half no.

I: Could you explain that more to me?

M: Well, like if they don't have a rule they might think that it's okay to steal, and no because it still wouldn't be.

I: Why would it still be wrong?

M: Because you're taking something from another person. And the other person – let's say it was a real gold pen or something and you really love it, like it was a present for your bar mitzvah or something, or bat mitzvah, and it would be really wrong for the other people. Because it's like a treasure to them. Like on a Peanuts show, Linus can't live without his blanket. It's like a beautiful present to him and he really needs it. It's like a treasure. Without it he probably can't live. And another thing is because, say there's one person and he steals from another person who steals from the first person who stole things. Well, he would feel, both, like one that got stealed from would get real angry and the one that already stole with the first stealer also would get angry because his stuff was stolen. That he already stole, probably.

I: Suppose there was never a law in the Torah. God never made it one of the Ten Commandments or one of the 613. He just didn't say anything about stealing. Would it be okay to steal then?

M: No. Still I don't think it's right because you are taking something from somebody else. But to some people probably yes, because they think it's fair because, well, they might say, "Finders keepers, losers weepers."

I: I see. Is it right to say that?

M: No, because they really took it and they didn't just find it, and the other people didn't lose it. It's not fair. And besides, it's also a lie. So there are two wrong things in that then.

The differences in Marsha's reasoning are striking. Head coverings are required for Jewish boys, but only because they have been mandated by an authority. Stealing is inherently wrong, for all people, because it causes harm. Even God is redundant when it comes to this rule. In another interview, Michael, an 11-year-old Jewish boy was asked "*Suppose God had written in the Torah that Jews should steal, would it be all right for Jews to steal?*" to which he replied: "*Even if God says it, we know He can't mean it, because we know it is a very bad thing to steal. We know He can't mean it. Maybe it is a test, but we just know He can't mean it.*" (p. 42). Or in other words, stealing is so wrong we know this, even if our most reliable moral rule-maker apparently says otherwise.

When analysing their interview data, the domain theorists apply the following criteria to decide if the interviewee considers an act to fit in the moral or conventional domain. The table below describes these criteria and how they apply to Marsha's interviews. As you can see acts are moral when they are not contingent on the existence of a rule, cannot be altered, apply to all cultures (generalisable), and the consequences are severe (i.e. result in undeniable harm).

| Criteria | Conventional | Moral |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Rule contingency</p> <p>Does the wrongness of a given action depend upon the existence of a governing rule or social norm?</p> | <p>Yes: Not wearing kippot is only bad because there is a rule that requires it</p> | <p>No: Stealing is bad regardless of the existence of a rule</p> |
| <p>Rule alterability</p> <p>Is it wrong or all right to remove or alter the existing norm or standard?</p> | <p>All right: If the rule about kippot was removed that would be acceptable</p> | <p>Wrong: The rule about stealing should not be removed</p> |
| <p>Rule generalisability</p> <p>Is it wrong or all right for members of another society or culture not to have a given rule or norm?</p> | <p>All right: Christians have no rule about kippot, and that is acceptable</p> | <p>Wrong: If a society did not have a rule about stealing, that society would be wrong</p> |
| <p>Act generalisability</p> <p>Is it wrong or all right for a member of another society or culture to engage in the act if that society/culture does not have a rule about the act?</p> | <p>All right: It is acceptable for Christian boys not to wear kippot</p> | <p>Wrong: If someone without rules about stealing steals, it is still wrong</p> |
| <p>Act severity</p> <p>How wrong is a given action?</p> | <p>Somewhat wrong: Not wearing kippot is a violation, but does not cause obvious harm</p> | <p>Very wrong: Stealing causes undeniable harm to others</p> |

Table 1. Criteria for conventional and moral issues

There have been over 60 articles showing that children distinguish moral judgements from conventional judgements, usually by the age of four. These studies have been done in Brazil, mainland China, USA, Canada, Colombia, Virgin Islands, Indonesia, Israel, India, Korea, Nigeria and Zambia.⁴ Observational studies of children playing have also shown that they respond differently to rule violations in the two domains. If a child breaks a conventional rule (such as sitting in the wrong area of the playground), then the other children tend to ignore this, it is up to the adults to do something about it. On the other hand if a child breaks a moral rule (such as throwing sand in another child's lunch) then the other children attempt to regulate the behaviour.⁵

This finding is particularly intriguing for our purposes. What it means is that if a pro-sustainability behaviour is considered a conventional act, then people are likely to leave it up to the authorities to regulate. However, if it is considered a moral act, then people may regulate each other. In 2010, one of my students, Adam Scott, worked on the sustainable school project I've referred to in other chapters, and closely questioned groups of students about littering and separating their waste into recycling, landfill and compost streams. While they all thought littering and putting your

rubbish in the incorrect bin was wrong, none of them indicated that they regulated others' behaviour in this regard. Littering and waste organisation appeared to be considered conventional acts, to do with how the school managed its environment, rather than moral acts that caused harm to others.

I had a hunch this might be different for my 11-year-old daughter Carla. Being a few years younger, she has grown up in an "Enviroschool"⁶, and has been subject to my ranting about waste! I knew that she had been thoroughly educated in the links between littering and rubbish getting into the sea and being a risk to marine life. So I interviewed her, using similar questions to the domain theorists.

N: If you are out at a park is it okay to drop a lolly wrapper on the ground?

C: No

N: Why not?

C: Because it is littering and then it will go into the oceans and stuff and it will not biodegrade and it will look ugly

N: What if there was someone who was going to clean-up the park afterwards?

C: No, because if there was a wind the rubbish might get blown away from where she was going to clean it and also they would be collecting too much rubbish and you don't know where they are going to put it, say if it was recyclable they might just put it in the bin.

N: Say there was a society that had a rule that it was okay to drop your rubbish on the ground, would that make it okay?

C: Um (long pause). It's not okay but yet if the whole society did it the society would be dumb or something.

N: Why would they be dumb?

C: Cause they made a dumb rule not a good rule cause it is meant to be a rule not to do it.

N: Why is it a dumb rule?

C: Because it pollutes the world and makes the world a worsen place and it can go into the sea.

N: What happens in the sea?

C: Fish or dolphins can eat it and they can suffocate and it can get trapped on them and they can't breathe if it gets stuck on

their mouth. And it is bad for them if they eat it.

N: What if you are at the park and [best friend] drops a lolly wrapper?

C: I would put mine in my pocket.

N: Would you say anything to [best friend]?

C: I'd say "[Best friend] did you know you dropped your lolly wrapper?"

N: What if she said that she didn't care?

C: If she kept walking I'd pick up the rubbish and put it in my pocket.

N: Can you imagine [best friend] doing that?

C: No!

As you can see from the above, Carla appeared unable to conceive of a situation in which there could be a reasonable convention in favour of littering. The potential for harm was simply too great. She also looked so perplexed when I asked her about what she would do if her best friend littered, I asked an unplanned question about whether she could imagine this scenario, but she could not. For these 11-year-olds, dropping rubbish in a public place is morally wrong, and it may be that they are prepared to hold each other accountable. Could this signal a strategy for getting more people to become agents for sustainability? We'll come back to this in the second part of the chapter.

So far, the examples I've given of actions that fall into the moral domain are focused on direct physical or psychological harm, mostly to people, but possibly to other living creatures as well. However, along with "figuring out" that harm is bad, the domain theorists argue that by about 10 years old, children have worked out that sharing and treating others fairly is important too.⁷

According to the justice principle, even harm is a moral issue primarily when it refers to innocent others, those who have not harmed you first. If they have harmed you first, then it may be "fair enough" to harm them back. Also according to this principle, goods and other rewards should be distributed fairly. For example, if members of a group have contributed equally to a group task then they should all share equally in the reward. Similarly if members of a group are all equally culpable for a problem, they should share responsibility for dealing with it. Not only are children highly sensitive to fairness – as anyone who has parented or worked with children knows only too well – but adults are too. This is an issue we'll keep coming back to in this chapter.

Notably, there is a lot of interest in the innocence or otherwise of "victims" of climate change. Future generations are portrayed as entirely without blame for the situation they will inherit, in this sense they are a powerful moral lever.

The island nations that are facing sea-level rise are also usually portrayed as hapless victims, given that they emit tiny quantities of greenhouse gases themselves. Sometimes however, their innocence is called into question. For example, there has been talk as to whether people from the Carteret Islands in Papua New Guinea blasted the reef around the atoll, in order to let in more fish – and consequently more ocean. This, it is sometimes suggested, means they perhaps have themselves at least partly to blame, letting “us” off the hook.⁸

The third domain is personal. This covers permissible activities, those over which people are considered to have the right to make a choice. In an observational study, Nucci and Weber found middle class mothers in the USA gave their young children a lot of choices.⁹ Here is one interaction (p. 1442):

Mother: You need to decide what you want to wear to school today.

Child: [Opens a drawer.] Pants. Pants. Pants.

Mother: Have you decided what to wear today?

Child: I wear these.

Mother: Okay, that’s a good choice. How would you like your hair today?

Child: Down.

Although the mother is implying the child must wear something to school (a requirement of the conventional domain, we can safely assume), it is the child’s choice what to wear and how to have her hair.

Importantly, once an act is firmly located in the personal domain for a group of people, to deprive them of that right is to harm them, and thus becomes a prohibited, immoral act.

In Western societies, the teenage years are sometimes full of bitter disputes as the young person and his carers argue over the boundaries of his personal domain – Piercings? Bedtime? Violin practice? Smoking? Watching adult movies? Being an eco-freak many of my disputes with my now 20-year-old daughter were around using the car. On the one hand it seemed like “her right” to use the family car, provided she met basic criteria – obeyed the licence rules, paid for the petrol, left it tidy. On the other hand I found it almost unbearable to let her drive to a friend’s house less than 2 kms away, or to go to the mall for one item (like the false eyelashes she needed for that night’s party). In neither case would I consider that justified *me* to take the car, but I know that most people in Auckland consider such trips a matter of personal choice.

I find it extremely useful to think in terms of these domains and am convinced by the evidence that as children we learn which acts fit where. Harming innocent others and acting unfairly are key principles underlying

the moral domain. Despite these underlying threads there is, however, still considerable disagreement between cultures as to the particular acts that do harm innocent others and that are unjust. By taking a closer look at the cultural differences in how the domains work, we can get a feel for how malleable these are, which has important implications for sustainability.

Some of the most interesting research in this area comes from a series of studies by Richard Shweder and his associates with Hindu people in the city of Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India.¹⁰ They observed that unlike in the U.S.A. (and we can infer, in most other Western countries) where there is a large emphasis on the individual and his or her rights – the personal domain – in Orissa the dominant emphasis is on community and divinity. The social world, natural world and divine world are all deeply entwined to the point that most acts have moral implications – primarily because, if done wrongly, they can result in damage to oneself or others, either in one's current life or in one's rebirth. This happens through karma, a moral balance sheet that has repercussions for each individual. The notion of karma ensures that people mostly act appropriately without the need for constant social monitoring, because you can never get away with a transgression.

As well as this resulting in a shrunken personal domain, it also results in less distinction between the conventional and moral domains. Much of what may look like “conventions” to someone from outside Bhubaneswar, from an insider's perspective is necessary to maintain the karmic ledger.

In the study described in Shweder and Much's 1987 book chapter *Culture and moral development*, they worked with several groups from Orissa.¹¹ The group of interest to us was Brahman – 30 girls and 30 boys aged between five and thirteen years old. The Brahman caste is a particularly religious one, and at the time of the study was responsible for many of the rituals at the local temple in which a stone statue of the deity Lingaraj resided. The study was based on descriptions of 39 behaviours that are feasible, if not necessarily common, in Bhubaneswar. The cases were developed based on close observation of the culture in operation and were designed to try and capture the three domains. They included (p. 41):

1. The day after his father's death, the eldest son had a haircut and ate chicken.
2. A widow in your community eats fish two or three times a week.
3. After defecation a woman did not change her clothes before cooking.
4. While walking a man saw a dog sleeping on the road. He walked up to it and kicked it.

5. There was a rule in the hotel: Invalids and disfigured people are not allowed in the dining hall.
6. A young married woman went alone to see a movie without informing her husband. When she returned home her husband said, “If you do it again, I will beat you black and blue.” She did it again; he beat her black and blue.
7. Two men hold hands together while they wait for a bus.

To me, and I assume to readers from other Western countries, the first three are not a breaches of any sort, although I can readily imagine them as conventions. We, after all, have similarly strange conventions, eating cereal for breakfast but not for dinner, encouraging girls, but not boys, to put on pink slippers, a leotard and a pretty skirt and practise pointing their toes. Number 5 and especially number 6 are clear moral breaches. They violate principles of justice and unjustifiable harm respectively. In regard to the man beating his wife, even if the woman broke a convention, the convention itself is not fair (and thus immoral) and the punishment is outrageous.

However, the examples are listed in order of how serious a breach each were considered to be by the Brahman children. The first one was the most serious of the 39, and the last the least serious, it was not considered a breach of any sort. The man beating his wife was ranked 35th by the Brahman children, and also not considered a breach. Their reasoning for ranking the son’s haircut and chicken consumption number one, was that the son’s act imperils his fathers’ rebirth, which is about as bad as it gets. Similar problems occur when a widow eats fish. The new bride on the other hand, was not an innocent victim, she broke a rule and was warned. It is her husband’s duty to punish her – just as it was once the duty of parents in the Western world to hit their children – *spare the rod and spoil the child*.

Thus, many events that Westerners would consider intrinsically harming and so immoral, were viewed as necessary to maintain the social and natural order. Similarly, few acts were considered conventions, as most were bound up with the potential for harm, if not now, in the life to come. There is evidence of similar reasoning in many other cultures. For example, in a study in Zambia, Roderik Zimba described how pre-marital sex and adultery, *chigololo*, lead to people becoming polluted and so having the potential to make others sick simply by touching them.¹² For these Zambians, illicit sex is intrinsically harmful, not simply a useful social rule. Zimba even found that wearing school uniforms appeared more a moral than a conventional issue in interviews with teachers from Lusaka. This can be seen in the extract below:

Interviewer: Would it be all right to change the rule about wearing school uniforms after every teacher and student in the school agrees to do so?

Teacher: Well, I feel that it would not be such a good idea because some pupils who come from poor families would feel embarrassed to come to school in rags while their friends from rich families come dressed in very nice clothes. (p. 379)

Zimba concluded that *“a large number of teachers and students understood the wrongness of most conventional events in terms of unfairness”* (p. 379). In other words, to get rid of the convention would breach the moral imperative for justice, so it wasn't on.

It seems feasible that a reason why people in Western countries have a strong sense of the conventional and the personal as distinct from the moral, is because of the secular and multi-cultural nature of our societies. When you live as we do, with the legal requirement to remove religion from all public institutions, you can no longer put piety at the forefront. Groups and individuals are forced to examine those acts that are essential for maintaining their claim to be moral creatures, and to compromise on many others. Simultaneously you are constantly in the presence of people who go about life differently. Are these bad people? The pressure to compromise your own practices and get along with those who have different practices is likely to make the conventional an increasingly useful category. Simultaneously, the personal domain grows as people are considered to have the right to choose which conventions, if any, they adhere to.

This potentially poses some problems for those of us who see legislation as part of the solution to sustainability. Legislation is creating conventions that, as we have seen, are considered negotiable to the Western mind. Achieving sufficient consensus to put them in place is extraordinarily difficult. Not only that, but rules potentially interfere with our strong sense of personal freedom. For example, in the last general election in New Zealand, the centre-right National Party that won after nine years of a Labour government campaigned on dismantling the “Nanny State”. In other words, they wanted as little as possible to be governed by convention and as much as possible to be each individual's choice. This included reversing both a new policy to ban the sale of incandescent light bulbs and reversing a more established policy to ban certain unhealthy foods (i.e. low nutrition, high fat, high sugar) from school canteens. The National government does not deny that the world faces climate change and that many of our children are malnourished and/or overweight, but they are passionate about people's right to buy whatever light bulbs and snacks they want.

If a new government can remove a convention, and declare an act to be in the personal domain, could we, as sustainability advocates, do the reverse? Could we gradually ply acts currently considered individual choice, into the conventional, or better yet, the moral domain? Has this already happened with children like Carla who see littering as a moral, not a conventional issue? For many of us the products we buy, our use of electricity, how we get around and

the food we eat, already feel like moral issues. In many ways, we live rather similar lives to the Hindus of Orissa, with our notions of pollution and purity. The big difference, though, is that we are not part of a similarly minded community. This is something I'll explore later in this chapter.

The importance of intention, information and belief

As I noted earlier, motive is a big slice of the morality pie. In studies of moral reasoning, harm and unfairness are generally only moral issues when someone knowingly did something wrong to cause them. This suggests that morality is about what we mean to do, not what actually happens.¹³

In a series of studies with children based on the Punch and Judy puppet show, Michael Chandler and his associates investigated this issue.¹⁴ In one scenario Punch, who has been the subject of Judy's "slapstick abuse" (p. 94), notices that Judy has fallen into a box on stage. He decides to push the box off a cliff. He leaves the stage to get rope with which to commit the deadly act. Meanwhile Judy gets out of the box, leaving Punch to push an empty box off a cliff – attempted, but not actual murder.

In another scenario, Judy again falls into a box, but Punch is unaware this has happened. Again he disposes of the box, this time not knowing she is inside. In a third scenario, Judy falls into a box (how does one fall into a *box*?) and asks for Punch's help, saying she has fallen into "the orange box". Punch takes this to be the box that is orange in colour, not the box with oranges in it. His mistake results in him accidentally pushing Judy off the cliff once again.

The children were shown each scenario and then asked: was Punch wrong?

The researchers' reported that every child thought that Punch's motive was the key to his culpability. His act was wrong when he thought he was pushing Judy off the cliff. Some children also considered Punch to be culpable for his negligence in the orange box scenario. He should have checked. Punch's act in this scenario was treated as an "error of interpretation" something we are less willing to tolerate than an "error of ignorance" such as pushing Judy off a cliff when there is no reason to think you are doing so.

Recently I listened to a BBC interview with the British ex-Prime Minister Tony Blair that concentrated on his decision to join the U.S.A. in the war in Iraq. The interviewer was clearly having a hard time believing that Blair believed there were weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq, this having since been (more or less) proved wrong. Blair kept insisting that he had good reason to think this. The pivotal issue, as with children's judgements of Punch's actions were what Blair really thought and, even if he did really think there were WMD, if only thought this because he did not investigate the matter properly.

With both Punch and Blair, the issue is one of the information they have, or should seek. However, judging the moral culpability of people gets even more complicated when they have an entirely different worldview to ourselves.

Having read about the Brahman children's belief in the consequences of a son eating chicken immediately after his father's death, do you now think it would be immoral for a Hindu son to do this? If I told you that in some parts of Papua New Guinea, fathers put sticks up the noses of their sons in order to drain blood and rid their sons of damaging female pollutants, would you judge this as an immoral act?¹⁵ Possibly not, because you understand that it is a moral imperative for parents to protect their children from harm, and this explanation for why parents might treat their sons in this way is plausible. After all, we subject our children to painful dentistry, surgery and other medical rituals to prevent problems we cannot see.

You don't have to consider the rituals of exotic cultures to come across acts that appear motivated by different worldviews. Even within Western societies, there are many contentious issues which appear based, at least in part, on differing beliefs about the truth of the matter. For example, in a study described by Cecilia Wainryb and Elliot Turiel, people were questioned about the morality of abortion.¹⁶ Their judgements about the morality of abortion, appeared focused on whether or not the foetus was "a life" as all participants thought it was wrong to kill. If the foetus was a life then abortion was wrong, if it was not, then abortion was acceptable. Intriguingly, this thinking may also help explain why infanticide in various forms may be acceptable in some cultures. For example the anthropologist, Nancy Scheper-Hughes found that for women in the poor shantytown of Alto do Cruzeiro, Brazil, babies were not seen as "really human" in the way older children were, they were not named at birth, and it was acceptable, even desirable, to let a weak baby die.¹⁷

So, to summarise, the intentional breaking of a key moral principle is always seen as wrong, but there are several ways in which people may believe themselves (or at least claim) not to be doing that. For example if the resultant harm was an accident, so not intentional, if the harm was done in order to protect, if the person being harmed was not really innocent, or if the person harmed was not really a person; then an act that causes harm may still be moral.¹⁸ The practical implication for us is that we must take motive into account when linking sustainable actions with moral actions.

The limits of moral reasoning: Bringing intuition into the picture

So far, I've presented research findings that show people to be rational thinkers who make moral judgements by logically applying universal moral principles, given their beliefs about the truth of the matter. Similarly, they have been shown to judge others on the basis of what those others believe to be true, only expecting them to investigate the situation within reason. However, it is all a little murkier than that.

For one thing, people's beliefs about the world aren't necessarily as

absolute as they might appear. In the research on abortion discussed earlier, I stated that the prominent factor in the participants' beliefs on the acceptability of abortion concerned whether or not the foetus was considered "a life". However, for some who considered the foetus a life and abortion wrong, it was acceptable in cases of rape. Similarly, some who thought the foetus was not a life and abortion acceptable, considered it unacceptable to abort a foetus of an unwanted sex. We also know that people sometimes use moral reasoning to justify actions that are not morally motivated. This is rarely as simple as straight out lying, it is a more complex justification to themselves and others that they are still a good person, despite their apparent bad behaviour.¹⁹

So, while beliefs about the world and the morality of the act are related, beliefs about the world are not simple, absolute truths and sometimes our proclamations about what we believe are not the only or best explanation for our behaviour.

Jonathan Haidt is among those who have argued that the reason we see so much misalignment between moral reasoning and moral judgements is because morality is actually intuitive.²⁰ He claimed that we usually decide if an act is right or wrong in a flash, only later constructing a story to justify that decision. So, instead of being "intuitive scientists" who consider the evidence and then come to a conclusion about what is going on, we are "intuitive lawyers" committed to a particular position, who then seek information to justify this position. (Of course this claim overstates both the open-mindedness of scientists and the close-mindedness of lawyers.)

To what extent do you have to think about whether it is wrong for a company to release chemical effluent into the local river? Or for children to work long hours in factories instead of going to school? You probably don't have to think at all, you just know these things are wrong. You could now explain why they are wrong, but you almost certainly didn't think through that explanation before coming to your judgement.

This does not mean that reasoning and beliefs about the world are irrelevant when it comes to moral judgements. First, we do sometimes reason our way to a moral judgement. This might happen in a new situation, where we need to consider all the evidence first. So, for example, when you first read in this chapter about the nose bleeding practices in Papua New Guinea you may have experienced an instant intuition that it was bad, but hearing the justification for the practice, you may then have been intellectually convinced that it was at least understandable. If I was able to provide further evidence using Western medical science that nose bleeding really did rid young men of female pollutants (which, by the way, I cannot do) you may start thinking the practice was good.

Second, after multiple exposures to arguments in favour of a particular moral stand, we may take on that stand ourselves. In part we may be persuaded by the reasoning we hear, but we may also start to feel that if

others put that much investment into a position it must be right. Critically, and as discussed in the previous chapter on identity, this is likely to be a much quicker process if we identify with those advocating the new moral position.

One of the fascinating implications of this view is that when we argue with other people we are “exchanging blows” on each other’s “shadows” as Haidt puts it. In other words, a moral argument occurs because each party has a different intuition. The argument is generally an attempt to provide reasoning and evidence as to why one’s own position is superior. The argument goes nowhere, because neither party is getting anywhere near the real site of their opponent’s moral position, which is intuitive and buried beneath layers of learning and emotion.

This explains a lot of the frustration we experience as advocates for a better world. Those of us who think it is a moral imperative to cut back on emissions, clean-up our rivers and distribute the resources we have equitably, argue passionately for these actions in logically constructed arguments that we reckon make absolute sense. For example: rising levels of CO₂ probably causes climate change, climate change will harm innocent people – the logical conclusion is that it is our moral obligation to cut back on emissions. The people who don’t get it are infuriating. Do they not believe that CO₂ emissions pose a large risk of causing dangerous climate change? Or do they not care about innocent others? These appear to be the two possibilities. The first is slightly more forgivable than the second, although, to use Chandler’s terminology from earlier, we are likely to see this as an error of interpretation, not an error of ignorance. In other words, if they don’t believe CO₂ emissions are dangerous, they have failed to fully investigate the situation. So, our most generous conclusion is, *at best*, they are negligent.

Much as it hurts me to go down this track, I (we) need to admit that it is possible to also make a moral and rational argument against doing much about climate change. Such as: if the economy is threatened and unemployment rises many innocent people will be harmed. This is a known threat, as opposed to the still hypothetical threat of climate change. Do those who think we should side-line money into environmental causes care about real people or only about preserving natural environments in which to spend their summer holidays?

Again, at best, they are likely to judge us as having made an error of interpretation, that is, we have failed to investigate the human suffering that would be caused by our reckless disregard for economic viability.

Does this make moral arguments pointless? No. It makes them very hard work and potentially disheartening as they can rarely be won there and then. But well reasoned arguments can gradually shift those who see the world differently. We all take time to absorb new ideas, but if there is convincing evidence for them and an increasing social consensus that they are right (in both senses of the word), our minds change. If you’ve been reading this book from beginning to end you may realise that we came to the same conclusion

about minority group influence – that we can sometimes appear to be getting nowhere, but actually be changing minds in the background.

A moral instinct?

When talking about the domain theorists, I explained their argument that children “figure out” what is moral. Because children grow up with other people, they come to realise that harming others is bad and justice is good. This view implies that each generation of children re-discovers how to be moral all by themselves. Many other theorists think children need, and get, more help than that, and I agree.

One idea I find plausible is that people have genetic, evolved characteristics that predispose them towards both morality as a concept (i.e. the notion of right and wrong) and towards considering particular human behaviours and motives to be right or wrong. For this to make sense, it also needs to make sense that moral inclinations helped people survive and reproduce. Without such inclinations being useful, it is unlikely they would have been passed through the generations. It doesn't take much imagination to see how behaving fairly and not harming innocent others would have led to other people trusting and liking you. When you are a weak animal with little hope of surviving alone, other people's approval is as critical as food and drink. Hence, it seems feasible that people who had the biological equipment to quickly pick up on matters related to fairness and harm would have been more likely to survive, reproduce and successfully rear offspring. They would have passed these inclinations on to their children – who in turn would have produced more viable offspring than the children of those who lacked this capacity.

One proponent of this view is Marc Hauser, who constructed the train and the organ donor examples we discussed at the very beginning of this chapter. In his book, *Moral Minds*, he calls this evolved tendency a *moral faculty*. He draws a parallel with our facility for language. Just as human languages are various but have some grammatical features in common, so, he suggests, are our moral systems various but with core shared features. Hauser suggests several very specific universal moral principles. While this claim is highly controversial, it is interesting for our purposes to consider two of these.²¹

To get a feel for the first, here are two scenarios (p. 51):

The vice president of a company went to the chairman of the board and said, ‘We are thinking of starting a new programme. It will help us increase profits, and it will also harm the environment.’ The chairman of the board answered, ‘I don't care at all about harming the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let's start the programme.’ They started the new programme. Sure enough, the environment was harmed.

How much blame does the chairman deserve for what he did? Answer on a scale of 1 (considerable blame) to 7 (no blame):_____

Did the chairman intentionally harm the environment? Yes_ No_

The vice president of a company went to the chairman of the board and said, 'We are thinking of starting a new programme. It will help us increase profits, and it will also help the environment.' The chairman of the board answered, 'I don't care at all about helping the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let's start the programme.' They started the new programme. Sure enough, the environment was helped.

How much praise does the chairman deserve for what he did? Answer on a scale of 1 (considerable praise) to 7 (no praise):_____

Did the chairman intentionally help the environment? Yes_ No_

According to Hauser's research, people typically say that in the first scenario the chairperson intended to hurt the environment, and deserves blame for doing so. However, they also say he did not intend to help the environment in scenario two, and so deserves little praise for doing so. This, Hauser argued, shows that people are more concerned with "bad" acts than "good" acts, again relevant to the negative version of the golden rule which tells us what *not* to do, rather than what *to* do. If Hauser is right, this may help explain why people (me included) are easily outraged by large-scale acts of recklessness towards the environment and tend to give these considerably more talk time than acts that benefit the environment. Think about the media coverage of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010. Can you think of a positive environmental act that got anything like that coverage?

The second of Hauser's specific principles I want to draw attention to, adds further insight into those frustrating arguments with people who just don't get the seriousness and urgency of climate change. Here is the principle: "*If we can directly prevent, with a high degree of certainty, something bad happening without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we are obliged to do it.*" (p. 64). For those of us who do feel climate change to be a moral imperative, the conditions for this rule are met:

1. There is something bad to prevent
2. There is a high degree of certainty we could prevent it if we lowered our greenhouse gas emissions
3. The cost of preventing it is nothing like as high as the cost of failing to prevent it.

However, it is also easy to see how each one of these conditions is contentious. As we discussed earlier, condition number one is often refuted – climate change may not be happening or may not be bad. Conditions two and three then act like backstops. Even if condition one is conceded, they dispute if we could prevent climate change and at what cost. So we continue to land blows on each other’s shadows.

If there is an innate moral grammar that all cultures draw on, there may also be sensitive periods in our development when we are particularly attuned to learning our culture’s version of morality. Jonathan Haidt, who we met in the last section, has proposed that this is late childhood and early adolescence when the pre-frontal cortex develops, a part of the brain involved in decision making and social behaviour. During this time, he argued, we absorb the “custom complex” of our culture. We watch, copy, listen and gradually become fully fledged practitioners and transmitters of our cultures, including our ways of being good. A Brahman boy in Orissa becomes deeply attached to Hindu death rituals to the point that he will now adhere to them as a matter of course and repeat the cultural story about why they are so important. Possibly too, a child who has been shown pictures of sea creatures whose stomachs are full of plastic will find it abhorrent to carelessly dispose of waste.

We don’t know enough to proclaim what is within the bounds of a universal human moral grammar, but as sustainability advocates, there are two important implications from assuming an innate component. One is that our moral intuitions will be suited to living in the small groups typical of early human populations, not to dealing with global problems. As we’ll see in the next section, it may well be that our desire to be good leads us astray from actually being good at times. This means we need to tread the fine line between understanding and appealing to the moral drivers that come naturally to people while also accepting that these have inherent limitations. The second implication is that children and young teenagers may be particularly open to new moral visions, as they absorb the culture in which they live.

On the moral emotions

Another reason why human morality is likely to have some genetic component is because it arouses such intense emotions. In chapter one, we discussed how positive and negative emotions serve to direct our attention, influencing our creativity, sociability and productivity. Emotions direct our attention in other ways too. Consider the power of lust in focusing us on the object of our desire, or the fear many people have of spiders. You don’t need to drill young people in order to make them want to jump into bed – or the bushes – with each other. (In fact, many cultures expend a lot of energy trying to hold back these reactions for as long as possible.) Neither do you need to pair spiders with pain or danger more than once or twice for most people to instantly flick them away. Lust and fear of spiders are emotional reactions we learn with only

the gentlest guidance, suggesting we are primed for these emotions.

Similarly, the rage we feel towards injustice or the empathy we show for others in pain – as you'll see shortly – suggest that fairness and avoiding harm to innocent others are, like sexual attraction and fear, not simply principles taught to us by our culture, but principles we absorb from our culture because we are predisposed to care about them. In fact, people seem to have several distinct emotions, all designed to keep our moral intuitions on track and to ensure that we care enough to act on those intuitions. As sustainability advocates, the research on moral emotions can help show us what really matters to people, and give us a better sense of how to deliver messages and set up systems that will be at least morally palatable or, even better – morally inspiring.

While there is no definitive list of the moral emotions, here are some of the more commonly cited ones: shame, guilt, compassion, empathy, indignation, anger, gratitude and admiration. These form five clusters.²² Two are *self-conscious* – shame and guilt. We experience these when we've broken the rules. Shame is a deeply social emotion, and the dread of shame is about your behaviour being revealed to others. Some cultures emphasise shame, for example in Chinese culture where maintaining "face" is critical. In these cultures shame is nurtured in young children as an appropriate reaction to anti-social or immodest behaviour.²³ Guilt, on the other hand is seen as more related to one's own standards, rather than those of real or imagined others. Guilt is the emotion of Western cultures, where we are encouraged to look inward for our principles and feel bad when we breach them.

But that's enough on shame and guilt – evoking them hardly fits with the positive approach this book is all about. The second pair is *other-suffering* – compassion or empathy. We feel these in response to someone else's distress. Empathy has been the subject of fascinating recent research that demonstrates how our hearts go out to a single person whose suffering we can imagine, but we may be unable to "feel" the impact of events that harm lots of people. Paul Slovic, a major researcher in human perception, has concluded that the limits to human empathy are an argument for legislation. According to him, only formal rules can compete with empathy's pull toward those whose needs are blatant, immediate and in our face. We'll look at this research in the next section.

Indignation and anger are *other-condemning*. We save these for those who have behaved badly. A particularly important source of other condemning emotions is violations of fairness. One of the lines I often heard as a child, and sometimes repeat to my own children, is that the world isn't fair and you'd better get used to it. But this platitude misses the point. Our fury is rarely about those random events that appear to have no source. It is more commonly about the person or group that acted unjustly, causing us to suffer or miss out. I've come to believe that being seen to be fair is a bottom-line in terms of credibility and trust, and I hope the research I'll present on this will convince you too.

Gratitude is an other-praising emotion. It prompts us to feel indebted to those who were kind to us and so serves to keep the fairness cycle going. Admiration is also an *other-praising* emotion and can motivate us to be “extra-virtuous”, one of the moral categories we considered earlier. Admiration inspires, so is important for our purposes and will be discussed in more detail in the last part of this section.

Empathy

Our ability to imagine other people’s feelings and the desire we have to make it better for them is empathy. It is something almost everyone is capable of, and can motivate extraordinary actions. In the book *Carbon Neutral by 2020: How New Zealanders can Tackle Climate Change*, I wrote about Bob Geldoff’s motivation to raise money for Africa, after seeing pictures of people in a famine and feeling he had to do something.

For this reason, groups attempting to make people take action on issues that affect those outside their immediate circle often try to generate empathy, and pictures are a common tool. So we are shown children clinging to coconut palms as the waves wash over their homes, and families in drought-stricken areas, thin, thin, thin, and surrounded by flies. There seems little doubt that images such as these do work (on some people some of the time). Bob Geldoff is one example, and much of the moral outrage about the Vietnam war seemed to be fuelled by television footage of the horrors being committed in the name of Freedom. What is important is that we can see, or perhaps hear, suffering in the expression of another human being. From there, our brains create a shadow of that emotion in us too – perhaps with the help of the mirror neurons introduced in Chapter three, and as we’ll discuss later.

As with so many human traits, however, our empathic impulses do not always align with the most effective way to relieve the suffering of others. Our caring is not rational, it is emotional, and so is a mixed blessing when it comes to solving human problems. I’d like to discuss one curious aspect of empathy now: *the more people in trouble the less we care*.

This hiccup in human empathy was exposed in a series of studies summarised by Paul Slovic and his associates.²⁴

In the first study, the researchers Deborah Small, George Loewenstein and Paul Slovic, gave 165 people the opportunity to contribute up to \$5 to Save the Children.²⁵ A third of the participants were shown a picture and told the story of Rokia.

Rokia, a 7-year-old girl from Mali, Africa, is desperately poor and faces a threat of severe hunger or even starvation. Her life will be changed for the better as a result of your financial gift. With your support and the support of other caring sponsors, Save the Children will work with Rokia’s family and other members of the

community to help feed her, provide her with education, as well as basic medical care and hygiene education. (p. 152).

Another third were given statistics about the situation:

Food shortages in Malawi are affecting more than 3 million children. In Zambia, severe rainfall deficits have resulted in a 42% drop in maize production from 2000. As a result, an estimated 3 million Zambians face hunger. Four million Angolans – one third of the population – have been forced to flee their homes. More than 11 million people in Ethiopia need immediate food assistance. (p. 152)

The final third were given both the information about Rokia and the statistics.

When participants were given Rokia's story, they donated a mean of \$2.38. It would seem that seeing Rokia and hearing her story provoked in them an emotional stirring – *this is a person I understand and that I can help*. When they were given statistics alone they donated \$1.14, a dramatic drop. Oddly, when they received both Rokia's story and the statistics they donated only slightly more than with statistics alone – \$1.43. A possible explanation for this is that by drawing attention to the size of the problem, the empathy people felt for Rokia was diffused. You can test this on yourself by thinking about your reaction to the passage about Rokia. If you are like me, you can imagine her as poor and then as part of a thriving community, and there is a certain satisfaction in the idea of helping make that happen. When you read about the scope of the problem however, your donation seems almost pointless, it is no longer one person to another and the warmth that accompanies that. At best, you feel you are fulfilling a duty to give to those less fortunate than you are.

In the second study, Tehila Kogut and Ilana Ritov measured how much people donated to the treatment of sick children.²⁶ Participants were divided into groups and told either about one child or about eight children. In addition, the groups got varying amounts of information about the child or children. Willingness to donate peaked in the group exposed to a lot of identifying information about one child. Importantly, participants in a similar study rated themselves as feeling more distressed (worried, upset and sad) when they were focused on one, rather than eight children.²⁷

As Slovic pointed out, this shows that human empathy and compassion is diluted when people are thinking about a group as small as eight – let alone when they are forced to think about millions of victims as is the case with genocide (Slovic's primary concern) or environmental problems, such as climate change. However, the story doesn't stop there. In one more variation on the first study we discussed, people were again asked to donate money after being exposed to Rokia, or another child, Moussa, or by being exposed to both children.²⁸ In this scenario, both Rokia and Moussa attracted roughly similar donations and feelings of distress, but the two of them together generated

slightly reduced feelings and donations. Interestingly too, the amount donated in the individual appeals was much more closely related to the feelings people had towards the children than when they donated to the pair.

This invites two conclusions. One is that we feel more for one person than we feel for *any number above one*. Intriguingly the same mirror neurons we talked about in Chapter three may help explain this. If you recall, mirror neurons fire both when we see someone doing an action and when we are doing the action ourselves. They help explain why we find it easy, even irresistible at times, to copy others. In relation to empathy, it seems they work with emotions in the same way as with actions, firing both when we feel an emotion and when we observe that emotion in others.²⁹ While real people or pictures do this particularly well, as we know from the research cited in Chapter three, these neurons are also responsive to more abstract representations of an action, like the sound. So stories of human suffering can potentially allow us to imagine an emotion in the victim, and then feel some of that emotion ourselves.

The second conclusion from the study of Rokia and Moussa is that while we can help others as a result of rationally analysing their situation, we are more generous when prompted by an emotional route.

At this point you may be thinking that the lesson in all this is that we should stick to single images and stories of individuals when attempting to portray the results of letting our planet go to wrack and ruin, or the human suffering that results from ecological devastation or social injustice. That is indeed a lesson to be taken from here, and will be more fully explored in the practical implications section coming up very soon. But, the way in which empathy is so focused on single individuals has sinister implications too. Let's look into why.

For one thing, empathy is not even-handed. We feel more for people who are like us, to whom we are emotionally attached and for whom we feel responsible.³⁰ When a friend of my daughter's recently died, my heart broke for his mother. She is my age, works in a university and lives around the corner from me. In the studies Slovic discussed, people who are like us were not competing with those who are more distanced, and so the latter did successfully generate feelings and some positive action. However, if we rely on empathy to generate caring, we need to accept that it will favour our in-group above others.

Also, empathy by its power to generate action towards an individual who is suffering, may sometimes vie for action aimed at the common good. I'd even venture to say that despite the common belief that people's self-interest prevents them taking action for sustainability, our caring for others may be a more important force. A fascinating study by Daniel Batson and his associates explored this.³¹ Undergraduate students from the University of Kansas were given raffle tickets to allocate. In one set-up they could allocate tickets to themselves or to the group as a whole, in another they could allocate them to someone they had been made to feel empathy for, or to the group as a

whole. As it turned out, they allocated about the same proportion of tickets to the person they felt empathy for, as to themselves. This suggested that selfishness and empathy were both factors that detracted from acting for the common good. In another version of the experiment there were the same two allocation set-ups as in the original version, but this time they were told their allocations would be revealed to the group as a whole. This made them unlikely to allocate to themselves, but it did not inhibit allocation to the person for whom empathy had been induced.

This finding reveals an intriguing aspect of our moral behaviour. Acting in the interests of another makes us feel morally virtuous even if it damages the interests of the group as a whole. As the authors summarise: *“Empathy-induced altruism may seem socially benign, even benevolent, but it too can pose a powerful threat to the common good, at times more powerful than self-interest. It can lead me to narrow my focus of concern to those for whom I especially care – the needing friend – and in doing so lose sight of the bleeding crowd.”* (p. 14)

In many ways, I think this is the crux of our problem in making substantial progress on sustainability. It is not because people are selfish, but because our wonderful selflessness is itself dangerous. People cannot resist flying half way around the world to attend their sister’s wedding, pouring medical resources into people in the last week of their lives and giving each other packaged products from foreign countries. These are acts of caring, that show we are good people. To turn our backs on them is much harder than to turn our backs on the toys and experiences we crave for ourselves. Our readiness to feel empathy for the suffering of those around us also makes the natural world fade away in significance. How can you put the nests of seabirds above the jobs that would be created by mining black sands? It is rhetorical questions like these that are sometimes posed by those who favour economic progress over conservation, and they work because they fit with our moral code – real people whose emotions we can imagine are morally deserving over and above just about anything else.

Are there ways of working with people’s empathy? For appreciating the people-affirming emotion that it is, while also not allowing ourselves to go down in a rosy-glow of generosity towards the individuals who are right in front of us while ignoring the many other people and species we may be damaging through our lifestyles? We’ll pick up on this again in the final part of this chapter.

Other-condemning: Anger and indignation

“Greedy, dishonest, cheat, rip-off, cut-throat, liar, immoral, traitor.” These are strong words, reserved we might assume, for crooked company directors, double-crossing drug dealers and the like. In fact, however, they were used by university students while playing a game to describe those they perceived had played unfairly.

The study, conducted by Phillip Bonacich involved 128 students, recruited through newspaper advertisements.³² The students worked in groups of between four and six, and all played games that allowed them to cooperate or not with the other group members. For example, in one set up they were able to take from a pool of money allocated to the group. If everyone did *not* take, then everyone also received \$2. However, if anyone defected and did take, that person received more money than those who cooperated. As more people defected the co-operators received less and less. Also, as more people defected, the defectors received less and less, until eventually, they each earned under the \$2 they would have received if everyone had cooperated. Importantly, the decision to take or not take was made simultaneously by all group members. The social dilemma faced by Bonacich's participants was whether to trust the other people to cooperate and whether to cooperate themselves.

The games were all recorded and most people did cooperate. This was probably encouraged by the “joking” that went on in the groups prior to participants choosing how to behave. These are some of the fates they threatened would follow defection: *“He would not leave the place alive, they would push him down the stairs as they left, they would write a letter to the student newspaper exposing his perfidy, or they would take him to the small claims court.”* (p. 207). The words listed at the beginning of this section are among the terms they used towards those who, despite these threats, actually did betray the group.

Other studies of social dilemma games have uncovered similarly strong reactions. A year after Bonacich, Robyn Dawes and her colleagues conducted a study with 40 groups of eight participants.³³ Again people could cooperate or defect, with defectors doing better than cooperators unless everyone defected and then the entire group got nothing. As with Bonacich's study, the researchers recorded what was happening during the group process. Here is their description of what went on:

“Comments such as, ‘If you defect on the rest of us, you’re going to have to live with it the rest of your life,’ were not at all uncommon. Nor was it unusual for people to wish to leave the experimental building by the back door, to claim that they did not wish to see the ‘sons of bitches’ who double crossed them, to become extremely angry at other subjects, or to become tearful. For example, one subject just assumed that everyone else would cooperate ... and she ended up losing \$8.00 ... She was extremely upset, wishing to see neither the other members of the decision group, nor her friends. We are concerned that her experience may have had a very negative effect on her expectations about other people (although, alas, making her more realistic)... Three defectors were the target of a

great deal of hostility ('You have no idea how much you alienate me!' one cooperator shouted before storming out of the room); they remained after the experiment until all the cooperators were presumably long gone." (p. 7)

Clearly the degree of anger and indignation that the participants in these studies felt could not be explained by the amount of money involved (less than \$10 in each case). Instead, these emotions show the intensity with which people hold moral codes around fairness and cooperation. While these games were isolated experiences for the participants who did not have to interact later, it is easy to see how they would serve to encourage cooperative behaviour in real groups. Who would want to face such derision on a regular basis?

So far, this section has focused on the negative, how people respond to violations of fairness. However, brain imaging studies have demonstrated that we do feel good when acting and being treated fairly.³⁴ So acting justly not only prevents the outrage that accompanies injustice, it also rewards everyone concerned.

Admiration

Admiration inspires moral action, by showing us what we can be. I've emerged from many books and films wanting to be like the hero. Those are the books and films I like best – ones that show me how to fight for what is right, and win. When I read Gandhi's autobiography in my early twenties I was particularly struck by the possibility of a moral journey and the personal salvation it promised. I became vegetarian as a result (it didn't last, but that is another story). A decade later I saw the film starring Ben Kingsley and re-watched it last year. Each time I've emerged with a determination to be a better person, and with a belief that the most effective action is not always strategic, but can just be about doing what is right. On a more everyday level, I admire many members of our Transition Town group – the gardeners who are able to grow food, those who are staunchly organic or don't own a car, those who persistently lobby the local council.

Micheal Shulman from Columbia University, has written about the power of admiration, and how children are attracted to goodness. This makes sense, as good people are warmer and safer to be around and, it is hard to imagine how any child would prefer someone who is distant, cruel or unpredictable.³⁵ This also means that, provided the child has the opportunity to be near good people, their habits will rub off on the children that observe them, in keeping with the power of modelling we discussed in Chapter three.

Admiration is a powerful and positive emotion that can promote extra-virtuous behaviour. It is an emotion we'll come back to when looking at putting morality into practice for sustainability.

Morality is not absolute – balancing and individual differences

We've seen how morality can be a force for the good, but also how it can lead us away from the grand problems and keep us hooked into our immediate social networks. A further limitation with human morality is that moral concerns are not absolute. We are not good at any cost, as our moral intuitions and emotions are balanced with other concerns.

As someone who wants to have a role in creating a better world, you, like me, are probably acutely aware of the moral compromises you make. As I write this, I am soon to get on a plane and go tramping. There is the travel, the packaged meals we are taking, and the imported, mass produced gear I bought. But somehow these moral concerns are not bigger than my desire to experience the New Zealand wilderness, show my daughter our natural environment and get away from my life for a week. I can try and dress this as a moral act – particularly in terms of my daughter's education, but I don't feel that. I feel it is a moral compromise. I also know that everyone who thinks about these issues also consciously compromises.

Moral compromise is sometimes about two competing morals. An abstract moral principle, such as withdrawing support from businesses you feel damage the environment, is probably going to be compromised if you also feel a moral obligation to buy something for a relative in hospital and the environmentally dubious business is the only one open at the time. However, we also balance the moral with the non-moral. Related to this, an analysis of several studies of pro-environmental behaviour by Sebastian Bamberg and Guido Möser showed that three factors seem to contribute almost equally to people's intention to perform such behaviour.³⁶ One is their judgement of the costs and benefits of the pro-environmental option to them personally (which they referred to as "attitude"). Another is "perceived behavioural control" or how difficult it is to carry out the pro-environmental option and the third is "moral norm", if they considered there was a moral obligation for performing the pro-environmental option. If people's moral norm had been everything, then the other two factors would have had no impact on their behaviour, but they did. So we take the car to work because we can't face up to a long trip on the bus (an attitudinal barrier) or we buy a tee shirt from a chain store that sources products from sweatshops because our local mall has no alternatives (a problem of perceived behavioural control).

For a variety of reasons, it also seems that some people are more moral (in the human terms we've explored, rather than necessarily in an objective sense) than others. At the extreme positive end are people who have identities around being a moral person.³⁷ These people are inclined to take a firmer moral stand than most of us. They seem capable of both feeling strong empathy for people who are not like them and of putting moral principles above all the urges that

get in the way of living according to these. Gandhi is a very obvious example of this. Another dramatic example was found in a study by Samuel and Pearl Oliner of the rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe.³⁸ These people put their own lives and those of their families at risk in order to hide Jews. In interviews with the rescuers the Oliners found that this was because the rescuers “felt” for the Jews – they did not analyse the situation and consider it wrong, so much as it was clear to them “viscerally” what they needed to do. (We’d call that moral intuition.) Helping the Jews was part of an orientation towards life that involved responding to an extended range of people in need. My research into the motives of activists and volunteers also found that the more deeply committed had a powerful sense that the world was not right and that they needed to act to improve it.³⁹ They cared about people in general at a level most of us do not, and they were prepared to put aside their own interests to act in accordance with this.

An intriguing twist is that a commitment to heal the world also seems to create a sense of personal wholeness – a sort of psychic healing. For example in their study of moral exemplars, Anne Colby and William Damon quoted one as commenting “*Who I am is what I am able to do and how I feel all the time. . . It is hard for me to separate who I am from what I want to do and what I am doing*” (p. 304)⁴⁰. Similarly, in a study of morally exemplary youth from a poor urban area in the USA the researchers found that the exemplars tended to have greater overlap between who they wanted to be and how they perceived themselves to be than other young people from the same community.⁴¹

So, in one of life’s many paradoxes, acting for others may end up serving yourself. This is encouraging news for those of us trying to do the right thing.

Morality in communities

As we’ve seen throughout this chapter, human morality is all about relationships. The issues we find morally compelling concern how we treat others, and the closer those others are to us the more we are inclined to treat them properly. So far, however, we’ve been mainly talking about how individuals make moral decisions, and only taken glimpses into how people regulate each other’s morality, for example with anger when they act unfairly.

In the real world, individuals make moral decisions that others respond to, shaping their next move. People also adopt different niches as moral actors. The “extra-virtuous” discussed in the previous section, give the common good a greater priority than most of us can muster. These people may gain an internal reward – the sense of a coherent identity. But they may gain social rewards too. In the study of a social dilemma game by Charlie Hardy and Mark Van Vugt from the University of Kent at Canterbury, people who gave more to the group as a whole were rated as having higher status than other group members and were also the preferred leaders.⁴² This is known as “competitive altruism” – competitive in the evolutionary sense, because being

altruistic secures you a social position and ultimately helps you produce and successfully rear offspring. For our purposes it suggests that being good to others helps you gain the social respect that is crucial for drawing others to you.

The study of games has revealed other individual niches as well. One of the major researchers in this area is Elinor Ostrom, an economist who became interested in how cooperation and the just distribution of goods occurs in different social groups.⁴³ According to her research, there are two types of players. “Rational egoists” are ones who are after self-interest. These people attempt to maximise their own outcome. “Conditional co-operators” are people who are willing to cooperate – as long as most people are also cooperating.

Selfish and cooperative behaviour are both conditional on the circumstances, so the proportion of people who act selfishly and cooperatively varies in different scenarios. When there is complete information available about what everyone is doing and people know they will be dealing with each other in the future, cooperation is rife. In these circumstances, being an egoist doesn’t work well. You gain a reputation as someone who is selfish and other people will refuse to deal with you. Ultimately that isn’t rational, so even those inclined towards self-interest as a default position, realise that cooperation is the better strategy.

When there is no information about people’s level of cooperation, then egoism is possible, and will ultimately dominate. Imagine a tax system where people were expected to anonymously pay their allocated tax, and no one ever knew if they did so? It is, of course, unimaginable. To make the cooperative endeavour of collecting taxes feasible, we have to have a way of knowing who has, and has not, paid their share.

Over time, information about past cooperative or egoist behaviour becomes attached to people. Having a good reputation – that is, being known as a co-operator, is a core social resource. We feel our reputations are worth a lot, and we are probably quite literally correct. We’ve already seen how being altruistic increases people’s social status, so does being cooperative. In one study 79 Swiss university students played a social dilemma game in which each could choose to donate money to others.⁴⁴ Each donated to a series of individuals one at a time. Their donations were noted on a sheet that was visible to all players. The researchers found that the participants gave more to people whose tally sheets showed that those people had been generous to others in previous interactions. This suggests that merely the reputation for being generous provokes others’ generosity.

“Willing punishers” are people who will punish defectors, given the opportunity. It is likely that those who are most co-operative are also most likely to punish – showing that co-operative behaviour isn’t the same as being nice.⁴⁵ According to Ostrom, in all functioning societies people invest resources in monitoring behaviour and sanctioning those who don’t cooperate. Without

punishment, there is no incentive for egoists to fall in line, and thus they will take advantage of the system. As conditional co-operators interact with them, they too would eventually adopt an egoistic strategy and the system would break down.

Numerous studies of social dilemma games have shown people's willingness to punish, even if it means reducing the overall value of what they receive. ⁴⁶ The anger we saw co-operators show in the face of egoists earlier in this chapter may well serve the evolutionary function of motivating punishment, ensuring egoists do not take over and destroy social systems.

A sustainable society must be cooperative, as we must learn to share resources in a way that is perceived to be fair, and that does not destroy the resources themselves. For example, we must learn to fish in a way that allows people reasonable access based on whatever rules have been devised. We must also not allow so many people so much access that a fishery becomes irreversibly depleted. The research on cooperation, the intensity of people's anger towards violators and the conditional nature of people's trust shows that fairness and preservation of resources go hand in hand. It is not just an abstract moral imperative that people distribute common resources fairly, it is essential to maintaining efficient systems.

Based on observations of many successful organisations and groups, Ostrom is a strong advocate for groups managing their own common resources. Critically, however, they must ensure that people's past behaviour – that is, their reputations, are known as widely as possible, that behaviour is monitored and violators are punished, and that there is frequent communication between the participants.

What I love about this work, is that it shows how to maintain a moral system in which people have different degrees of moral intent. Not everyone needs to be motivated by concerns for equity and protection of the innocent, or even to believe that a certain resource needs management. By setting up the right structure the system can override individual differences in cooperation. These are structures that people working in organisations and communities can aim for. We'll delve more deeply into what this implies for sustainable systems and how we operate as advocates in the next part of this chapter.

Key insights into morality and cooperation

Before moving on to how to put the psychology of morality and cooperation to work for sustainability, let's summarise the key insights from this chapter:

1. All cultures and most people within them adhere to practices they consider obligatory and avoid those that are forbidden. These are the minimum standards for being "moral". Underlying many of these practices are two key principles: the protection of innocent others and justice.

2. One of the strong moral positions in our society is the freedom of individuals. This has possibly stemmed from our need to create a system that is acceptable to the many different cultures that make us up. This equates to a large quota of everyday activities being considered an individual's choice (i.e. permissible, or in the personal domain). This includes many activities that threaten sustainability, such as the extensive use of private cars.
3. Moral positions are infused with powerful emotions such as shame, indignation, anger, gratitude, admiration and empathy. These emotions help compel us to act in accordance with our moral intuitions.
4. People tend to vehemently defend their moral intuitions.
5. People balance moral considerations with other considerations, such as the costs and benefits to themselves.
6. Intention is important, and is related to what people believe to be true. People have to know what they are doing and either intend to do it, or wilfully neglect the consequences to have committed a moral violation. At present, many people do not believe that the practices we, as sustainability advocates, see as harmful or unjust *are* harmful or unjust. For example, if you do not believe in human-induced climate change, then clearly there is no morality involved. However, people's beliefs are slippery. It is difficult to tell if people's beliefs are "genuine" or motivated by the desire to justify a particular practice. This relates to the material on identity we discussed in the previous chapter.
7. Given that moral judgements, once formed, are held more deeply than the reasoning that justifies them, if we try to argue with people who oppose our views we will, at least at first, appear to get nowhere, although our reasoning may affect them on reflection. This is the same process we observed when discussing minority group influence.
8. Most people's moral intuitions are flawed in relation to maximising human wellbeing for the long term (and certainly in terms of maximising the wellbeing of ecosystems). This is because we are intensely social creatures whose moral radar is developed within small social groups with the purpose of helping us get on with others in the group. Our moral radar is not designed to solve problems like world poverty and environmental destruction.

9. Extra-virtuous people who are more moral than most, can inspire others to be moral, and we are likely to be drawn to them.
10. We are extremely sensitive to violations of fairness. This means we are most comfortable when operating in systems that are perceived to be fair. This includes systems that manage the distribution of natural resources.
11. Without punishment of violators, a system may not be perceived as fair, and without fairness, a system will not work well.
12. Reputation is critical. For many individuals having a reputation as a moral agent is so important, they want to be seen to be moral, even with people they will never see again. These people have internalised moral principles and are the conditional co-operators in social dilemma games. We will also find people who have moral identities and are extra-virtuous amongst this group. Other people are not as concerned about their reputations, unless the circumstances require a moral reputation in order to achieve a desired outcome. These are the rational egoists in social dilemma games, who will only cooperate if they know their behaviour will be seen by others and that others will punish them for defecting.
13. Learning plays a big role in the development of morality, as we absorb the moral code of our culture. Children may be more receptive to new moral norms than adults. This could be because of sensitive periods in the adoption of moral norms.
14. Everything we have talked about so far, and this is in keeping with the vast literature on morality, sees morality as basically about human relationships and relationships with the divine (with the latter having an impact on human welfare). Can our relationship to nature be pulled into this sphere? This is a challenge we need to consider.

Part Two: Putting morality and cooperation to work for sustainability

In this part I hope to weave the above insights on human morality into practical suggestions for action. From time to time I'll refer back to previous chapters, as in many cases the lessons from the current chapter build on those discussed earlier.

Pulling pro-sustainability actions into the moral domain

My first suggestion is that we aim to pull those actions we feel affect our chances of having a viable future into the moral domain. I've argued that Western, industrialised cultures emphasise personal choice and consider relatively few practices to be in the moral domain. For example, where I live, in Auckland, these behaviours are an individual's right: driving whatever motor vehicle you want as often and as far as you want, flying to wherever you want as often as you want, use of more or less unlimited electricity, possession of and turn-over of electronic goods, and the use of disposable cutlery and containers for takeaway food and drink.

However, in my view, and probably yours, our social agreement to put these in the personal domain is misplaced. Instead, they feel like moral issues, because I think all of them are posing a risk to innocent, future people, and many also aggravate current injustices. Because I consider all of these moral issues, I do none of them lightly and each has an emotional consequence. Driving my car, while convenient, makes me feel bad. Getting my cell phone repaired instead of throwing it away makes me feel good. In fact, because I believe myself to be operating within an ecosystem that has finite resources, just about everything I do that involves "stuff" has moral implications.

But, most of the time, I am surrounded by people who do not have the same values. This means, for example, I am rarely concerned about my moral reputation when I get on a plane. So, I monitor myself, but it is as if I am only half-way there, because no one else is judging me (or at least that is how it *feels*, which is what matters here). My rational brain knows that flying is morally dubious, but the emotional thread is thin, it is not thickened by the social norms that we are all so sensitive to. This thin thread allows my non-moral concerns – convenience, wanting to further my career, personal comfort, a desire for adventure and so on, to get a hold.

If, however, we could shift key practices from the personal and into the moral domain, then we'd all become emotionally invested in these practices and want to be seen to do the right thing. We know it is possible for whole societies to have far more "moral" worldviews than we do, I gave the example of the Orissa at some length earlier in this chapter. Could we, collectively, develop a moral approach to how we treat resources?

I know that this is unfashionable talk. Modern, enlightened societies are supposed to allow for a multiplicity of values, and living according to those is seen to be a private act. But, it seems to me, a moral free for all with regard to the practices that are harming our future viability is just plain silly. I know not everyone agrees on the practices that are harmful (more on that soon), but I can't help but feel we'll look back on ourselves in a few decades, merrily burning the last of the fossil fuels as we feel the temperature rising, and wonder why so few people were prepared to lay it on the line and say outright

– these practices are wrong. Just because it is hard to do the right thing, doesn't change that these acts exacerbate injustice and put innocent others at great risk.

I also know that despite the impatience many of us feel, it takes a long time for societies to absorb new understandings about how the world works and incorporate them into moral codes. You have probably observed this lag in yourself. First, you learn that something you are rather attached to is “bad” (say those plastic bottles made of plant matter that, it turns out, can't be either composted or recycled). Then, you go through a period of denial. You may, for example, try convincing yourself that the new information is misleading (the bottles will still breakdown eventually) or that you have a sufficiently virtuous moral balance sheet to allow yourself this one sin (if I cycle to work, what's one bottle of water?). But, gradually, you find the bottles less and less appealing until one day you realise you haven't bought one for a month. Now you are prepared to put water bottles made of vegetable plastic on your list of “things I avoid because they are harmful to our world and the people in it”. Imagine a whole society going through that process, and you can understand why progress is often at a glacial pace.

However, as sustainability advocates, I still suggest we keep this aim in our sights, as the moral climate is changing, and can potentially do so more quickly with our help. Despite my claim that we are terribly timid about naming harmful practices as “bad”, this is not the case when it comes to some of the more blatant environmental sins of big businesses. We are prepared to condemn those who dump effluent into rivers and cut down rain forests. Even at the personal level, a social conversation is starting about what practices are acceptable, and not everything that was once securely in the personal domain is quite so firmly located there now.⁴⁷ In Auckland for example, the following practices are among those that seem to be creeping toward moral issues: putting recyclables in recycling bins, disposing of e-waste properly, careful use of water during times of known shortage, and avoiding (too many) plastic bags when shopping. It is hard, for example, to imagine many people who would blatantly and without the least degree of shame refuse to recycle. We are sensing that these practices affect us all, so maybe the time will come when the really big issues (e.g. transport and energy use) also seem like everyone's business, not just the user's private affair.

If you agree that putting harmful practices in the moral domain is a way of bringing about a more sustainable world, then how do you take this into consideration in your advocacy? One place to start is by keeping more or less up to date with the latest scientific thinking on the big issues like climate change. As we've seen, people will not view an issue as moral if the information they are working from suggests it has no impact on the wellbeing of others. While the world is simultaneously both denying the need to focus on sustainability *and* cautiously acknowledging that focus might be needed,

people will grab hold of misinformation like a life line. Recently someone I respect a great deal, told me that the scientists had admitted to being incorrect about climate change – it wasn't happening after all. I was thrown by this, as I had no idea what he was referring to. It turned out it was related to widely publicised errors concerning the 2007 IPCC report. Because he knows that I know a bit about the science of these issues, he was ready to listen when I initially expressed doubt that this was possible, and later directed him to material that put the errors in perspective. There are a lot of people out there who are currently misinformed, but who pride themselves on being open-minded. For them, accurate information is going to be very important to re-thinking the morality of our practices. (Having said that, please don't scare people – too much! I am talking here about getting everyone on the same page with regard to the basic facts that lie behind our need to take action.)

Another possibility is to describe your own pro-sustainability practices in terms of how they protect innocent others or promote social justice. “Nice shoes”, “Yes, they came from Trade Aid, I really like knowing that someone didn't slave away in a factory earning only 10 cents to make them”. (In case you think that exchange sounds forced, I was one of the speakers. The shoes were on the other person's feet). Sometimes you'll strike a chord, other times people will be outraged, feel judged or write you off. We've been over this before, as I suggested the same approach in the chapter on modelling. In that chapter we saw how people copy others' goals, which led to me suggest that you make explicit your goals, so other people are (hopefully) enticed to make them *their* own. This is the same principle, except with an added moral component, and when you are trying to preach what you practise some negative reactions are inevitable. As we learnt in the identity chapter, you are particularly likely to provoke these if you are interacting with people who have a different worldview to you. Even in that case, however, you may get them thinking. We've seen delayed effects at work in two contexts now. In the material on minority group influence I showed how people may initially reject an argument from a minority group, but be more accepting of it later. And in this chapter we've discussed how moral arguments are rarely won *at* the time, but *over* time, people may become convinced, partly because of the sheer conviction of the opposite side.

When we are relating to children it is particularly important to explain to them why a policy or practice links to issues of harm and justice. I described my daughter's reasoning about littering and how she saw that in terms of harm to sea mammals. She certainly hasn't seen dolphins being suffocated by lolly wrappers when out swimming at our local beach, these are connections that have been made for her, by (thank you!) her teachers and her school. By bringing littering into the moral domain of Carla and her friends, they have made it so much more firmly embedded in each of their mindsets, and ensured

it is reinforced by the children's collective moral culture.

Bear in mind that empathy is a powerful awakener of people's interest in an issue. If the suffering of a single individual is made real then you don't have to convince your audience that the situation that led to it is damaging, they see it for themselves. Stories, films and photographs are all tools for provoking empathy. If they feature an individual from your own community then people will probably be even more engaged, as we feel more for people who are "like us" and in our circle of care.

But empathy can't do all the work, as its trick is to make us feel for one or a few people, not to make us extract a general moral principle that then directs our everyday lives. For that we are going to have to go the slow route most of the time, discussing, showing, convincing, and gradually changing the collective worldview. Witnessing suffering is also a type of suffering in itself, and so I suggest you provoke empathy in tiny doses, not in the huge wallops we get from some environmental documentaries. As I've said before, I'm very uncomfortable with making people miserable, no matter what the ends I am trying to achieve.

Which brings me to the last point in this section. Throughout this book I've been keen to ensure that whatever I suggest is not just about saving the planet, but it is about improving life right here and now, for ourselves as advocates as well as for those around us. As someone who already views sustainability issues through a moral lens, it would be a relief to feel others shared this position. Furthermore, moral talk that is positive and targets practices that are within our control is inspiring. It promises something real, because, to the degree you choose, you really can be better. This distinguishes it from so much of the other "inspiring" rhetoric we are exposed to – how to be rich, thin, happy, stay married and so on. None of those are really up to you (sure you can improve the odds), but everyone can take steps to align their lives and their values more closely.

Placing nature into the moral domain

Insofar as human morality has a function, it is to ensure that people can live with each other. So can nature enter the moral domain?

Peter Kahn has looked at this issue in depth, by exploring the extent to which adults and children in the USA and in the Amazon see the protection of nature as a moral issue.⁴⁸ In one study that involved 72 children in Houston, he and his colleagues investigated if throwing rubbish into the local bayou was considered morally wrong. He found that 68% of Grade 1 children (about six years old) judged it morally wrong, and by Grade 5 (around eleven years), 100% did so. In all his studies the reasoning of the people he interviewed fell into two primary categories. The most common reasoning was about the effect on people, here is an example:

“[The people by the river would be affected because] the smell of the water, it should bother people to open their windows and feel that foul smell... [It would matter to me] because a person shouldn’t have to smell dead fish or trash bags full of rotten stuff when she opens the window in the morning (Lisboa study).” (p. 119)

The other was about the effect on nature:

“It is like me having an arm or a leg cut ...Nature is like a person, no, thousands of persons because it isn’t just one thing...[A] person is like a tree. If the tree bears fruit, it is the same with people. Taking care of a tree is the same. If you cut a branch off a tree it is like cutting a finger or the foot. To cut a tree down is like doing it to yourself. It is the same to our heart, it is not good. The jungle is like the heart of a person. (Amazonia study).” (p. 117)

When people did consider the effect on nature, it was sometimes because living systems were seen as having the same feelings/experiences/capabilities as humans, and therefore deserving of the same consideration. You can see that in the quotation above. Sometimes it was because nature was viewed as being good in and of itself, and so should be allowed to exist and flourish.

Kahn’s studies suggest that people can see nature or animals as in the moral domain, particularly to the extent that the natural phenomena is considered to have human characteristics. If something can suffer like us, then we can feel empathy when we witness or hear about the suffering. My daughter Carla’s concern for the fate of sea mammals is at least in part because she can imagine the suffering of a dolphin. I asked her how a dolphin would feel if it had a plastic bag over its blow hole and couldn’t breathe. She said: “Hurt, suffocating, not nice, the dolphin wouldn’t feel good.”

In our society we have films and books about animals, including talking animals, and many of us have pets. I still remember the horror I felt during the *Ring of Bright Water* when the starring otter was killed with a pick-axe. We sense that animals suffer, we empathise, and through that may be prepared to act. Notably too, animals are innocent, and protection of the innocent is one of our key moral tenets.

However, nature is a much harder sell than people. Animals and occasionally even trees or forests can arouse empathy, but in real life situations, a person will almost always come first. I suspect it is because people know they are accountable to other people in a way they are not accountable to natural objects. Again it is that thick emotional thread, versus the thinner one that nature wraps around us.

Moral leadership

I am going to be blunt. *We take a lot of action in the name of sustainability that contributes to the problem.* We attend meetings that involve people flying long distances, sometimes the food provided at these is imported and heavily packaged, and bottled water is offered to drink. We produce documents that use a lot of paper, we work in over lit offices, the list could go on. I know why we do these things – we want to be where the action is. We want to use the latest communication tools and to pour our energy into making “Change”, not fritter it away on small acts that cost us a great deal in time and effort and “make no difference”.

Moral leadership, however, is about the consistency between principles and action. As we’ve seen throughout this chapter, we are judged, and judge ourselves as moral to the extent that we do actions that are consistent with our moral principles. Knowing what is right and wrong only contributes insofar as we are prepared to let people off the moral hook who have a different understanding of how the world works, or who didn’t intend to cause harm. Once we know an action is damaging or unjust, we are morally culpable when we undertake that action.

Yikes! What am I saying here? Do I really want to go down this track? Actually, I’ve dithered considerably about writing this section, because of my commitment throughout this book to never suggest you do something I am not doing, or prepared to do myself. I’ve now put myself on the spot. But I’ve come to think that rhetoric has much less inspirational and persuasive value if it is not consistent with the behaviour of the person or organisation that is producing it. As Marshall McLuhan said – *the medium is the message*. When I attend an event on climate change in an air-conditioned room and am offered imported grapes and pineapple at morning tea, I feel so let-down. The talk may be all about how our way of doing things has got to change, but the medium screams at me – these people believe in business as usual.

We are now not just talking (as we did earlier) about acting morally and articulating the morality behind your actions in order that people are inspired to do the same. We are talking about acting morally, so that you are seen to have integrity and genuinely believe in what you are saying.

My colleague Quentin Atkinson, an evolutionary psychologist, introduced me to the concept of “costly signalling” and it is another way of understanding why moral leadership showing a personal commitment to the cause, is so powerful. We know that animals sometimes have features that seem counter-productive to their survival. One example is the peacock’s cumbersome tail that is surely highly visible to predators. Perhaps the peacock’s tail does have a function however, in showing females that the peacock is fit enough to afford it. So the very cost of the tail signals something important. Similarly, when an event organiser ensures that the food is local, the water comes from the tap, people can attend via the Internet or whatever is appropriate for the occasion

in question, this is costly signalling. All these provisions take effort, but they also show that the event is authentic, and encourage us to pay attention to the principles being discussed.

Individuals are also perceived as authentic when they openly live their values – this is moral leadership. When George Monbiot resisted flying to events, that did more for my admiration of him than a hundred new and clever columns. Admiration, as I've discussed is something we feel for the “extra-virtuous”, it makes us attend carefully to the person concerned and want to be like them.

Personally, I haven't yet got to the point I can completely give up flying – I do live in New Zealand, which would make it a much costlier signal for me than for Monbiot, but I do try to show moral leadership. I've mentioned before how when I am in charge of an event I am careful to provide vegetarian food, local fruit, and Fair Trade chocolate. This, I hope, is behaviour that will rub off on others, but it is much more than that. I feel that my authenticity depends on it. I can't begin to imagine myself telling people what they should do while knowingly demonstrating something different. *Cringe*. Even if I did a survey at an event I'd helped organise and found that no one noticed the apples were grown in New Zealand, I'd keep providing New Zealand apples. It is about who I am – not necessarily all the time and in every facet of my life (I have my eco-sins, as I've confessed before and will again soon) – but who I am when I am supposed to be an authority and am expecting people to learn from me.

Within the academic community I think my approach is rather rare. Most of my colleagues, especially in science, separate their attempts to measure and inform people about the state of the world from any attempts they make to live in alignment with this analysis. It is almost as if they believe their credibility as scientists would be *diminished* if they demonstrated any spill-over from their science to their lives. But I think they are wrong. Imagine how seriously the world would take climate change if the leading climate scientists pledged to give up their cars.

So, please don't think the catering can be out-sourced. All those details are critical to you being real – in your own eyes and those of other people.

Creating values based communities and education

When I am away from my life for a while, like at an academic conference, I can feel myself letting go of my struggle to be sustainable and influence the political process. It's not exactly time out, but it gives me a taste of what it would be like to be a different person. It's that thin moral thread I was talking about before, thin because no one around me seems to care. If I was in that world forever it would probably break completely, as it would be absurd to worry about environmental and social issues if I thought I was the only person to be doing so. However, I am much better at being morally staunch when I am amongst the people I feel accountable to. I've already discussed how acutely

accountable I feel when in a leadership role. But I also sense my reputation is at stake when I ride my bike through our suburb to work, or take a shower at home. Caring about the wellbeing of our planet is, for me, entangled with my husband and children, the school where we run our sustainability project, certain students and work colleagues, and most especially our Transition Town members in the suburb I live in.

This leads to a possibility for action, which is emphasising the values base of our organisation and making visible people's reputations.

Several psychologists have written about "moral communities".⁴⁹ These are generally considered to have three key characteristics. One is that the more senior members practise what they preach – so values are shown, not just stated. The second is that there is regular dialogue in the community about moral issues. The third is that the community's moral foundation springs from the group's discussions.

Our Transition Town is a moral community in all these senses. Most members actively practise what we preach – most of us cycle or walk to meetings for example. We also extensively discuss the values base of our group. Everyone can help shape these values. Over time I've become more locally focused with food, because eating locally is a core value of many of our members and is something that comes up a lot at our meetings. I don't mean to paint too rosy a picture. We don't always agree and are sometimes stumped by this into inaction. We also have the luxury of being a group that doesn't need to do anything *except* be a moral community. We don't need to produce widgets or gain clients or get students through exams. But, at a personal level, I am highly aware of the difference in my own moral identity when I am with Transition Town people or out and about in my suburb (where they could be watching me), than when I am elsewhere. Maybe we all need a moral community to touch base with so we don't drift off into the much more accessible world of consumerism and all the rest of it.

Some elements of the moral community are possible in any organisation. One location that is especially interesting is schools. In schools, we have young people who are developing moral norms, and there is also a well established tradition of moral "talk". It is usual for schools to be explicit about their values and students are expected to live by these values. Students' reputations are constantly, and sometimes painfully, revealed to their peers and parents. It may be unrealistic for students to set the school's values, but at least there is space for values to be explored and discussed. This is happening with programmes such as Enviroschools, mentioned earlier. Schools that are part of this New Zealand programme are encouraged to develop a vision that focuses around respect for resources and people, and then put that vision into place. Teachers are also encouraged to "walk the talk" and so demonstrate the moral leadership that is invaluable in showing an organisation *really* has the values it articulates.

So there are two lessons here. Accept that you will be better at holding to your principles in the company of like minded others, and seek them out. Maybe it is useful for some sustainability groups to function just as moral holding grounds, rather than as direct mechanisms for change. Second, if you want your organisation to be a moral community, aim for moral leadership, discussion and input from members. This approach may be particularly valuable for those of us who want to simultaneously respect the diversity of values people bring in, but also to challenge each other's values where we feel they compromise our long-term collective functioning.

The need for rules

As a species we value our relationships with each other, and believe in protecting the innocent and promoting justice. But these are abstract principles. In the lived world they are manifest through assumptions about how the world works, biases towards the people in front of us and so on. Our attempts to be moral are similar to the attempts of a child to draw a perfect circle. The child clutches her crayon with her hand in a fist, sets the paper down on a rock, and draws. The end product is only vaguely circle like, because of the irregularities in the rock, the crudeness of the crayon and the child's limited drawing skill. But still, she smiles at the result, because she can't see a perfect circle in her mind, and to her the drawing is pretty damn good.

The perfect moral circle is similarly elusive to us as individuals struggling with our daily lives. If we want to achieve moral outcomes – which is what sustainability is all about – we cannot trust human moral intuition to achieve these. At some point, we need to collectively create rules that, on occasion, require us to override our impulses to be good. We need rules that control our tendency to pour (too many) resources into our children, friends and families because of the strong empathic tug these connections create. We need rules that protect biodiversity, despite the fact that the natural world doesn't care about our reputations and so cannot hope to have the same pull on us as people.

It is critical these rules are seen to be fair. We've seen what unfairness does to people – it encourages self-interested action, destroys cooperation and can even lead to people sabotaging their own best interests. Imagine this scenario: a speaker comes to your organisation and convinces you that by reducing your energy use you can help eliminate the need for a coal-powered station. Everyone agrees, but only your division is charged with finding ways to reduce your power, everyone else is excused for a year. No matter how much you hate the idea of a coal-powered station, it is highly likely that the idea of others being let off and you contributing more than your share is even more emotionally abhorrent.

At the 2010 conference of the International Congress of Applied Psychology in Melbourne, I heard Linda Steg from the University of Groningen talk about her work in the Netherlands on sustainable transport policy. She emphasised how important perceived fairness is to the acceptability of a policy that favours public transport, walking and cycling. You can raise the tax on petrol or introduce levies for travel into the inner city, as long as you do so in a way that appears systematic and does not require a small group of people to carry the cost for the whole population.

So, any solution to sustainability that you work out at an organisational or institutional level has to be fair, and most important of all, be seen to be fair. If you are a manager, please treat this as a golden rule – don't expect people to "get over themselves" and focus on the big picture. Strangely, it may not even be that your systems need to be radically changed. In the energy-saving scenario it could be that one division volunteers to go first, and their savings are discussed with the other divisions. The key here is that justice must *be seen* to be done. This is not an invitation to deceive people, it is simply recognition that justice is an approach rather than an outcome. If you have a transparent and just approach then the outcome will be seen as fair. If you do not, goodwill will be shattered.

So rules, and fair rules are an essential part of creating a sustainable society. Even though I find it blindingly obvious that rules are necessary at every level of human functioning (even families need rules to work smoothly and nations wouldn't be nations without them), we do need to remember that democratic capitalist societies place a great deal of emphasis on the personal domain. Allowing people to "choose" is itself a moral imperative. So any rule is going to be resisted by some, purely on ideological grounds – that is, the assumption that (almost) no rule is a good rule. If you want to advocate for rules that take your organisation further toward sustainability and spread the responsibility fairly, you may well need to remember the lessons covered in the previous chapter – have patience and remember that resistance isn't the same as losing. Rational persistence may sound cold-hearted but it may also be needed.

Having said that, I too am a product of my society, and believe that it is good for people to have hefty personal domains. How far we should go with rules that are designed to protect the common good, but that turn us away from our intuitive morality I am not sure. Is compulsory sterilisation after one child acceptable? It may be fair, but it still "feels" wrong to me. To what extent would I want to live in a society that polices it? Would men and women who do not comply be snuck up on at work, anaesthetised and taken to the hospital for an operation against their will? Perhaps it isn't worth it, and perhaps we will end up doing ourselves in because we are too good to do otherwise. But I hope not, and I think it is possible to have rules that protect us from ourselves just enough to allow us to carry on.

Concluding comments

We are moral creatures, concerned with protecting the innocent and social justice (but not, usually, at substantial cost to ourselves or those we care most about). Our moral judgements are held in place by strong emotions, a desire to have a “good” reputation amongst our peers and by being in communities that share our understanding of how the world does, and should work. Human moral intuition and reasoning can work for us in promoting a better world, if we are able to convincingly frame sustainability issues as moral issues. This will make it possible to create collective rules about how to manage scarce resources fairly. Just as, in Chapter two, I argued that a boring society cannot last, an unfair society cannot last either. People will feel compelled to get what they are entitled to, even if this means damaging the ecosystems on which we depend.

Be as moral as you can be in your own practices. This will increase your credibility, draw others to you, and allow you to be a leader, if that is what you want. But accept too, that none of us can be moral alone. Consider promoting values-based discussions in the organisations you belong to, and challenging the assumption that people have a personal right to engage in practices you believe threaten human sustainability on this planet. Remember to spend most of your time (if possible) with those who have the same values as you, as these people will keep you strong. If and when you come up against people who see the world differently, remember that you will feel as if you’ve lost any arguments that result. But you haven’t necessarily. If issues such as malnourished children, climate change, overfishing and so on are “real”, then, eventually, society as a whole will recognise this – not just through talk but also through new structures and practices. And those bitter arguments that you, or someone like you, has with those who currently dismiss these issues as unimportant or unsolvable, are an inevitable part of this shift. Of course, we may be wrong, and even if we are right, most of us will play only a tiny role in helping embed sustainability as a moral issue. As always, it is mostly a matter of who you want to stand alongside while it’s your turn to inhabit the Earth.

Endnotes

- ¹ Hauser, M. D. (2006). These passages are on page 32
- ² Shweder, R. A., Much, N.C. et al. (1997).
- ³ Both are prolific authors, their most helpful books include:
Nucci, L. (2001); Turiel, E. (2002); Nucci, L. (2009).
- ⁴ See Nucci (2009).
- ⁵ See Turiel (2002).
- ⁶ Enviroschools are part of a programme to adopt sustainable practices both across the curriculum and in how the school operates, see (enviroschools.org.nz, accessed 30/11/10)
- ⁷ See Nucci (2009) for a breakdown of the years in which certain aspects of morality are acquired.
- ⁸ See the following reference for this debate: Barnett, S. (2009). It is notable that the author, Sarah Barnett, came down firmly on the side of the Carteret Islanders as not culpable for the situation they were facing.
- ⁹ Nucci, L. and Weber, E. (1995).
- ¹⁰ See: Shweder, R. A., Mahapatra, M. et al. (1987); Shweder, R. A., Much, N.C. et al. (1997).
- ¹¹ Shweder, R. A., Mahapatra, M. et al. (1987).
- ¹² Zimba, R. F. (1994).
- ¹³ This has been argued in detail by, for example:
Chandler, M. J., Sokol, B.W. et al. (2000); Schulman, M. (2002); Hauser, M. D. (2006).
- ¹⁴ Chandler, M. J., Sokol, B.W. et al. (2000).
- ¹⁵ This example is discussed in the following article that explores people's tolerance for the beliefs of other cultures: Wainryb, C., Shaw, L.A. et al. (1998).
- ¹⁶ Wainryb, C. and Turiel, E. (1993).
- ¹⁷ Scheper-Hughes, N. (1985).
- ¹⁸ Tolerance of acts that appear to be morally motivated but nevertheless harmful is complex. For more on this, see Wainryn and Shaw et al. (1998).
- ¹⁹ See the following for a discussion of moral hypocrisy: Batson, C. D., Ahmad, N. et al. (2002).
- ²⁰ Haidt, J. (2001).
- ²¹ For an argument questioning innate moral principles see Sterelny, K. (2010).
- ²² See Hauser (2006).
- ²³ One study on Chinese families with pre-school children in Taiwan, found that undesirable behaviour was often framed as leading to *xiu* (shame or shyness) for both the children and their parents: Fung, H. (1999).
- ²⁴ Slovic, P. (2007).

- ²⁵ Small, D. A., Loewenstein, G. et al. (2007).
- ²⁶ Kogut, T. and Ritov, I. (2005).
- ²⁷ Kogut, T. and Ritov, I. (2005).
- ²⁸ The article on this study is described as “in preparation” in Slovic (2007).
- ²⁹ See Iacoboni, M. (2009). Also, for interesting research on how the limited empathy that can accompany autism is related to limited firing of the relevant mirror neurons see: Dapretto, M., Davies, M.S. et al. (2006).
- ³⁰ See the following for a summary of this research: Batson, C. D., Ahmad, N. et al. (2002).
- ³¹ Batson, C. D., Ahmad, N. et al. (1999).
- ³² Bonacich, P. (1976).
- ³³ Dawes, R. M., McTavish, J. et al. (1977).
- ³⁴ See Lieberman, M. D. (2007).
- ³⁵ Children may prefer a cruel parent over a kind stranger, but all things being equal, kindness is almost certainly going to be more attractive.
- ³⁶ Bamberg, S. and Möser, G. (2007).
- ³⁷ Numerous of the authors we have already discussed look into this for example: Nucci, L. (2001); Turiel, E. (2002).
- ³⁸ Oliner, S. P. and Oliner, P.M. (1988).
- ³⁹ Harré, N. (2007); Harré, N., Tepavac, S. et al. (2009).
- ⁴⁰ Colby, A. and Damon, W. (1994).
- ⁴¹ Hart, D., Yates, M. et al. (1995).
- ⁴² Hardy, C. L. and Vugt, M.V. (2006) discuss competitive altruism and how and why this operates.
- ⁴³ Ostrom, E. (2000).
- ⁴⁴ Wedekind, C. and Milinski, M. (2000).
- ⁴⁵ See Hauser (2006) for a discussion of punishers
- ⁴⁶ For example see: Sigmund, K., Hauert, C. et al. (2001).
- ⁴⁷ Carvalho, A. (2010). Carvalho has pointed out, that climate change rhetoric has started to shift a number of acts, including car use, that used to be considered to have no political ramifications into the public sphere.
- ⁴⁸ Kahn, P. H. (2003).
- ⁴⁹ Damon, W. and Gregory, A. (1997); Haidt, J. (2001); Noddings, N. (2002).

Chapter Six – A self-help guide for sustainability advocates

On a filing cabinet in my office, I have a quotation from Helen Keller’s essay on *Optimism*.¹ It captures how I often feel as a sustainability advocate. Perhaps it rings true for you too.

“I long to accomplish great and noble tasks, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble... The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.”

It may be just human to yearn to do something great. After all, what better way to become an indispensable part of the community, and finally feel *safe* (or so we imagine). But our desire for greatness is also nurtured by the modern, Western view that people are first and foremost individuals, rather than part of a complex social web. To be completely fulfilled as an individual who cares about the future of our planet and its people, one must either do something great enough to change the direction in which the world is headed or fail. Wow, what a burden. I know what a burden this is, because I’ve experienced it. *If I don’t do everything I do nothing.*

If, on the other hand, we view ourselves as occupying a social role that is entwined with the roles of others, then this burden is instantly lessened. *If I do something, then I may enable the actions of others, and together we will change the direction in which the world is headed.*

So the very first piece of advice I’d like to give in this final chapter, my self-help guide, is to try and maintain a little modesty. The world is huge and there are many people who want to make it work their way. What we end up with is a sort of “best fit” that reflects the (always temporary) outcome of these ideological debates. It isn’t necessarily – OK it isn’t *ever* – the best fit in terms of ecological and social wellbeing, but if the planet is being wrecked and people are miserable, the dominant ideology will change. In this constant flux everyone has the opportunity, not to be great, but to stand for the position they believe in, and contribute a tiny push. The liberating truth is that it will almost certainly turn out the same whether or not you take action. I refuse to write a book implying that you have unlimited power to make a difference. But equally, I refuse to write a book that implies any individual has this degree of power, and so you can leave it to someone more influential or talented than you. It is up to *us*. You can either stand with us or not. That is all.

Well not quite all. I think you should stand with us because you’ll feel better; it will be fun, exciting, and intellectually enriching; because one of my missions in life is to get more sustainability allies so of course I’m going to say that; and because standing with us can mean as much or as little as you want it to. *I’ve*

got numerous inconsistencies, indulgences and all the rest of it, and I still call myself a sustainability advocate with pride. I hereby give you permission to call yourself one too, as long as you do at least one thing on a regular basis that is consciously aimed at making the world a better place. If you are already an eco-warrior extraordinaire, I thank you wholeheartedly and apologise if any of the preceding sounded patronising.

It is all about shifting from worrying about the effect of what you are doing on the big questions, to finding a sustainability niche you can occupy.

This chapter talks first about the different levels at which you can act and then about the care dilemma that most of us face, and possible ways to manage it. It ends with a series of worksheets designed to help you analyse what you are doing as a sustainability advocate, if it is working for you, and if you could make adjustments. Further copies of the worksheets can be downloaded from the book's website (psych.auckland.ac.nz/psychologyforabetterworld).

Levels of action

I will be talking about three key levels of action. The personal level, which concerns your lifestyle; the group level which includes both the sustainability-focused and other groups you are part of; and the civic or political level, which concerns the larger systems that influence us all. I suggest you work on all three levels, although you may put more into one than the others. As with everything in life, they simultaneously complement and contradict each other.

In terms of making an impact on the world, they complement each other in that actions at one level feed into the others. For example, when you install a solar panel on your house (personal level), you add to the political message that people want energy efficiency (civic level). If you lobby for a government subsidy for solar panels (civic level), and the subsidy is implemented, you help enable people to install these (personal level). They are complementary in a psychological sense too. This is because any pro-sustainability action tends to strengthen our identity as a sustainability advocate. As we saw in Chapter four, people who only dabble in sustainability are less likely to take strong and ongoing action because they do not have multiple identity prods that demand this of them. If however, you are working for sustainability in your personal actions, as a member of different groups and as a citizen of your country, then you are glued in. Sure you can still pull out, but each piece you relinquish will have ramifications for the other pieces. I could stop riding my bike to work, but I'd be letting down Transition Pt Chevalier, I'd weaken my credibility as an ecologically and socially conscious teacher, it would be harder for me to insist my children ride rather than get driven to local destinations, and I'd have to rewrite all the passages in this book that refer to my cycling, including this one. As you can see it is way too hard for me to stop cycling, because it is attached to so many other aspects of who I am.

But trying to act at all three levels also means conflict. This weekend, for example, I went to a *Festival for the Planet*, that was scheduled in the city for 12 – 4pm. I arrived at 12pm, and had my reusable coffee cup with me. At around 1.30pm I searched for food, and realised there was nothing for sale at the event. Immediately I stepped out of the cosy, eco-friendly atmosphere of the festival, my choices were: Starbucks (you all know Starbucks) Gloria Jean's (which I knew was also a chain of some sort) or walking into a cinema complex that is so techno-hellish I can't think once inside. I became paralysed with inaction and stood for 10 minutes at my bus stop ready to go home, before I talked myself down and decided a Gloria Jean's coffee and muffin was acceptable in the circumstances. Actually, they were pretty good, but I hid the paper bag with the muffin inside my Trade Aid handbag when I went back to the festival, because of the shame I felt.

I know shame seems like a strong emotion for such a small sin, but for those of us who care about sustainability, it often feels as if the world is set up to trap us – to force us to choose between a civic action (staying at the festival) and a personal action (supporting local businesses when eating out). Of course no one was out to trap me, my dilemma was the result of trying to make change while also needing to live in a physical and social space dominated by priorities that are different to mine.

But we still need to act, and you didn't read this book to find out action is too hard, you read it to help get your head around how to act. So I am going to simplify things, and categorise actions into these three levels, and, when they all get messed up and you don't do any of them properly, you can re-read the paragraph about my muffin dilemma, and know that feeling compromised is part of it, and not an excuse to give up (I haven't!).

Personal level

This is the lifestyle commitments you undertake. They may include transport choices, waste reduction, energy efficiency, buying Fair Trade products and so on.

Why the personal level is important

Lifestyle commitments are an important part of the sustainability web for several reasons. First, when you choose sustainable transport, food, energy and so on you show politicians and businesses that people want these things. Politicians and businesses are highly sensitive to the imagined concerns of citizens and consumers and neither will act greatly out of step with what they believe people want. Remember there is no neutral space. Every unsustainable lifestyle choice you make is a vote for the status quo. We forgive you of course, but you do need to accept this is the case.

When you behave sustainably, you strengthen the signal to others that sustainable choices are viable, as discussed in Chapter three. When people

who themselves want to be more sustainable see your action, they may be inspired to imitate you. In keeping with this principle, lifestyle commitments that have high visibility, such as transport and clothing choices may be particularly important. You can also increase the visibility of your sustainability actions by talking about them, or leaving a behavioural trace. In Chapter three I discussed carrying your bike helmet around; growing vegetables in your front garden is another example.

Demonstrating a commitment to sustainability in your personal life also makes you a more credible advocate at higher levels. We would give little attention to someone who advocates for vegetarianism but themselves eat animals. So why would we listen to someone who advocates for waste reduction but brings a mini-pot of yoghurt to work for lunch each day?

Finally, the personal level is important because it helps you learn what sustainable choices involve, and the extent to which our current systems enable or thwart these. For example, if you live in Auckland and choose to take the bus or ride your bike, you soon realise how privileged cars are. You are then in a much better position to talk, from the heart, about the practicalities of sustainable transport. You actually “know” what you are talking about – in something close to the real biblical sense:

“to ‘know’ in the biblical sense is not to just know something in our brains, intellectually, but to experience it, to engage deeply with it, to intensely come to understand it from the inside out.”²

The challenges of working at this level, and how to overcome them

One challenge of taking sustainability actions at the personal level is that it can be hard to tell yourself you are really contributing. This is because your small actions can seem swamped by the mountain of actions that go in the opposite direction. This is especially true when the mountain of opposing actions are your own. So you wonder if you should bother choosing the organic coffee at McDonalds, when, hey you are going to *McDonalds*. Self-talk like this can be refuted by evoking the principle discussed in the introduction to this book, that sustainability is a social enterprise, as much, or perhaps more than, a physical enterprise. Yes, absolutely choose the organic option at McDonalds, that will help encourage McDonalds to go fully organic – at least with its coffee. This, in turn will simultaneously encourage other fast food chains to follow suit *and* make a difference to how coffee is grown in some parts of the world. Only being able to do a little is never a reason not to do the little you feel you can.

Another challenge is that making sustainable choices in an unsustainable world takes self-control and may lead to a sense of loss. Even if we don’t believe that a new cellphone would make us happy, we are still drawn to the newspaper pullout advertising the iPhone 4. Chapter four has some ideas on how to deal with loss by acknowledging it and working in support groups with

others who also want to reconcile their personal values and lifestyle choices. As always, I don't suggest you give up too much. Giving up the iPhone 4 if you are obsessed with wanting it and would truly delight in owning one, may be asking too much of yourself. You become resentful and eventually give in and buy it anyway. But if you get the latest iPhone, perhaps you don't also need a powerful car and an overseas trip and coffee in a disposable cup each day. I think most of us make deals of this sort with ourselves, and each of those deals is good, because it takes a bit further towards sustainability in at least one area of our life.

The final challenge I'd like to mention is that becoming a hard core sustainability-type in your personal life might set you so far apart from most of the people you spend your days with, that you lose effectiveness as a change agent. In other words your lifestyle, clothing, home-made lunch and insistence on walking everywhere, may clearly label you as a "radical greenie" (or whatever) and so make people resist your underlying message. I sometimes worry about this in relation to my cycling. I don't sweat much, so rarely shower when I get to work, but I do change my clothes. One of my colleagues once "joked" about how she needed to hold her nose when she walked past my room, because of the bike clothes in my cupboard. So, from time to time I feel a rush of self-consciousness that perhaps my colleagues find me unclean. Naturally, such judgements would not inspire them to copy me and take up cycling.

Only you know how real such concerns are. It is possible that to be effective in your social location you do need to undertake practices that you know are unsustainable – just to show you aren't so out of step with those around you that they write you off without a second thought. In practice many of us shift around, being more staunch when we are with others who are also staunch and less staunch when we are with a more mainstream crowd.

Group level

There are two components to the group level. One is working within a group that is specifically designed to promote a sustainability issue, the other is as a member of a group that has other functions, such as your workplace. I'll discuss these in tandem.

Why the group level is important

Group level action is important for numerous reasons. The most obvious is that groups get things done. Many people working together can usually (not always) achieve more than one person working alone. For example, as an individual acting at the personal level, you can support local growers and Fair Trade suppliers and that is good. As a group however, you can set up a cooperative to put growers and consumers in touch with each other, you can lobby key organisations in the city to be Fair Trade and you can build a "brand"

that other people can buy into.

Groups are also the places where we can create the highly positive and creative environments featured in Chapter two. We can eat good food together in pleasant environments and affirm each other's ideas, thereby becoming more effective as advocates while also having fun. We can create the "values communities" discussed in Chapter five, where we discuss and work towards a new morality that takes better care of the planet and future generations.

Groups are also important sites for creating and sharing inspiring stories and visions for a better world. In our Transition Town group we are always discussing what other groups have done, and I know some of our activities have similarly spread throughout the Transition Town network. These are the tales of joy we discussed in Chapter three – tales that offer a positive narrative for how we can be as sustainability advocates. Such tales are tremendously important in changing the social playing field toward one in which sustainable choices are seen as socially approved and rewarded. As I also suggested in Chapter three, in groups we can work on visions for the future, perhaps through movies that show our community as it could be. What is more, active, enjoyable and welcoming groups are strong attractors to people who want to take a role in creating a sustainable world. In fact, it is hard to imagine social change without these human hubs where a new future can be explored, enacted (little by little) and eventually seem inevitable.

At their best groups allow people to take on a role that suits them, whether it be delivering speeches or delivering pamphlets. There is little that beats the buzz that comes from being part of a collective endeavour in which everyone does their part to make the project a success. As happiness seekers, this buzz will motivate us to sign up for the next group effort. We may even be willing to do a little more next time.

There are also more subtle ways in which groups are important for keeping sustainability advocates on task. People are deeply social, and unless we feel we are acting alongside others, most of us haven't got the stamina to keep going. Groups provide us with a social identity, something we may take pride in and feel accountable to. In this sense, they offer an anchor that holds us in place, as to give up on whatever the group stands for is to not only turn our back on the issue, but to turn our back on others like us. When I need an extra push to go to a Transition Pt Chevalier meeting on a rainy Tuesday evening, it isn't the thought of our impending ecological crisis that gets me there, it is the thought of letting everyone down and having to come up with an excuse for why I didn't show up. It's that thick emotional thread I've referred to before, the one that binds our values to our relationships and ensures we stay true to our better selves.

Attempting to bring about change *in* groups rather than *with* groups is also very important. For most of us, our workplace, our children's school or our sports club is the highest social unit we have direct access to. Most of us can find colleagues, other parents or players with similar values and put together a

proposal for change within the institution. I am a staff member of the biggest university in New Zealand. I have access to a variety of mechanisms, such as meetings, staff surveys, committees and so on where I can have a say. Just recently a colleague and I arranged for our department to buy all our coffee, tea and sugar through a Fair Trade supplier. I have a cup of Fair Trade tea on my desk as I write, and there are Fair Trade posters prominently displayed in our tea room.

Of course it can be very hard to change organisational practices, but when you do the rewards are great. In the above example we are talking about high visibility action, with all the modelling potential that contains. Our signs constantly remind people in the department to consider Fair Trade in other contexts. In addition when we have visitors, they see that Fair Trade is an option, and so may be prompted to move forward with this in their workplace. Just as importantly, it develops our identity as a department that cares about these issues. Somehow it seems easier to unselfconsciously brand your organisation as ecologically and socially responsible than to brand yourself that way. Group promotion is perhaps culturally acceptable in a way that self-promotion is not.

The challenges of working at this level and how to overcome them

I began this chapter with the gentle words of Helen Keller, but I'm going to begin this section with the equally wise but wicked line of Jean-Paul Sartre from his play *No Exit*: *"Hell is other people"*. Social change groups can be wonderful love fests but they can also disintegrate into dreadful scenes of social and emotional disarray. You may remember in Chapter four how much distress the long-term political activists my students and I studied experienced within their activist groups. Feelings of betrayal and failure were common (alongside equally strong feelings of unity and success).

Even if a group is working well, you will almost certainly have to compromise what you believe is the ideal approach to whatever issue you are tackling. If you are part of a sustainability group, the compromise is most likely to be about strategy rather than values. As one of the activists quoted in Chapter three stated: *"actually working towards getting people to agree to move beyond how you see the world to what you are actually going to do about it [is] a pain in the arse"*. It may be that just knowing this process is painful and shared – *you are not weird for getting irritated with the people that are supposed to be your closest allies* – is helpful.

If you have a leadership role within a sustainability focused group, then it is my belief that it is better to err on the side of group harmony than group productivity. If a group of people enjoy each other's company and get a little done, they will stick together to do a little more. If a group of people are at loggerheads then they probably won't get much done, but even if they do achieve the goals of the current project, there may well not be another one. It also comes back to

one of the basic tenets of this book – that we need to consider wellbeing in the here and now. There are many routes towards sustainability, why choose one that provokes bitter interpersonal conflict? In saying that I do realise it isn't easy to distinguish the inevitable minor bruises caused by moving forward on any issue – someone will almost always feel disregarded or bullied – and the major bruises caused by rushing forward on an issue in a way that *does* disregard or bully members.

This relates to one of the trickiest choices we sometimes face as group member – whether or not to stick with a group that is going nowhere or causing you significant distress. We know that people cling to relationships that are harming them, because, in general, our capacity for attachment is high and our capacity to cut lose after pinning our identity to a group, is low. I've talked about this before, and there is no right answer. You know your capacity for working through the apathy or conflict, you know if there is still a spark of hope and if others see that spark. Very often it is more a matter of gradually letting the connection atrophy as we invest energy in an alternative, rather than moving, cold turkey, into the wilderness.

If you are attempting to affect change in a non-sustainability focused group, such as your workplace, then there are likely to be compromises about both strategy and values. Some things may come easily – obviously the time was right for our department to take on Fair Trade. The only hurdle raised was that it was more expensive, but once I pointed out that we could save the extra cost by setting all the printers to default to double-sided, that objection lost traction. On the other hand, with some issues you will be up against cherished notions, such as the importance of individual freedom, the competitive disadvantage, the inconvenience, the notion that “people won't like it” and just plain resistance to change. If you want to maintain positive relationships with people in the organisation, then small forays into these issues and being prepared to retreat is probably best. You can always take heart from the research on delayed influence discussed in Chapter four – arguing for change and failing to get what you want, does not mean you left no impression. If the social ethos is headed towards sustainability, and you are patient, persistent and reasonable, you are likely to get there in due course.

Civic level

This level refers to action that is directly intended to influence public opinion, government, corporations and other large institutions. Civic level action can be undertaken by individuals or by sustainability oriented groups.

Why the civic level is important

I don't know anyone who denies the civic level is important, and many people consider it the *most* important level to work on. Certainly there is tremendous power at this level. If you can get your national or local government to introduce

a carbon tax, improve labour laws or upgrade the standards required for building consent, you've (probably) ensured a shift in social practices for a very large group of people. What is more if your nation or state or city takes actions like these, this is likely to encourage other nations or states or cities to follow suit – copying happens at all levels in the social system. Corporations, and in particular multi-nationals, are also an important target for high level change. Yes, you can play a part in encouraging McDonalds to go organic by ordering the organic option, but if you lobby McDonalds and they are convinced by your arguments, you can bring about this change more directly.

Included in this level are actions designed to shift public opinion. Public opinion sits at the highest level in our sequence, because, just like governments and corporations, it has widespread influence. In fact, as I've discussed before, neither democratic governments nor corporations are willing to move far away from public opinion – as they perceive it – and so changing people's minds, or bringing the minds of people who think like you to the attention of these institutions has considerable potential to change the way things are done.

While this level is daunting when viewed as a whole, change efforts aimed at the civic level do not have to be large. When you vote, sign a petition to introduce a new law, write a letter to the editor of a newspaper or to a politician, make a submission on your city's annual plan, join a political party, or attend a rally, you are acting at the civic level. You could, and people do, go much further than this – by initiating a petition and gathering signatures, standing for government elections, making a documentary about an environmental issue and so on. This level is distinguished from the personal and group levels not by the effort and size of the actions, but by the directness with which they target the overarching structures that effect large numbers of people, and possibly the world as a whole.

Needless to say, small civic efforts are essential to the overall success of the big efforts. After all, the person who initiates a petition and gathers signatures is only effective insofar as people sign the petition; the rally is only successful if people attend; the political candidate is only elected if people vote for him or her. For every big player in this realm, many small players are needed.

The challenges of working at this level and how to overcome them

To me there is a mist over the civic level – a sense of mysterious mechanisms and power structures that are deliberately obscured by most of those who are close to the action. Very often, when I catch interviews with politicians or corporate CEOs on the radio, I cannot bear to hear them out, because it is clear they are not speaking in good faith, but replicating the party line. I've talked about boxing at each other's shadows in Chapter five, those head-spinning arguments we get embroiled in with people who have fundamentally different values to our own. To me, there is a lot of that at this level, arguments

that are slightly “off”, and in which even our allies simplify and over-state issues, intentionally misunderstand the opposition, deliberately discard evidence that does not suit and so on. So, I suggest, the first challenge in working at the civic level is the need to accept that it is a game, with rules, and that even if you try to be authentic in all you say and do, others certainly will not be. For some this will all be part of the fun, for others it will be excruciating. Your emotional capacity for the game will play a large role in how you take your place in the civic realm.

A second challenge of this level is that the high stakes – changing the operation of macro-level institutions – are also high risk. When you plant a vegetable garden or your organisation gives workers subsidised bus passes, you know you’ve got somewhere. It is tangible, and makes a difference right away. When you organise or attend a rally to show the public’s concern about climate change, your achievement is much less tangible, and probably will not make an immediate difference to how systems operate. So to work at this level you need to be able to think long term, and to accept that it will rarely be clear if your actions are having the effect intended. This is even more true of private civic actions such as making a submission, writing a letter to the editor or voting in postal ballots (voting in polling centres is a far more psychologically enticing, as it is a public act in which you feel part of something important).

So you can, and should, try to come to terms with the uncertainty of outcome that plagues action at this level, but this is likely to be an ongoing struggle. The activists my students and I interviewed often questioned the overall efficacy of their lifelong dedication to political issues. This doubt however, was counted by two certainties that shone out from the interviews. One was that they *knew for sure* that the world needed to change, and they could not turn their backs on that knowledge by failing to take political action. They also knew that if people with their values did not participate in the civic realm, this *would certainly* lead to the dominance of other values.

You may not feel such a deep compulsion to act in the civic realm as these activists, but it is useful to remind yourself that important decisions are made at this level, and if we are not represented, then the voices of those who believe in “business as usual” will dominate, and business as usual is what we will get. It’s now up to you if you want to take a stand at this level. (No pressure.) Remember that *many small contributions are needed*, simply participating in the opportunities set up by others (attending events, signing petitions and so) is to take an essential role at this level. Those who organise these opportunities will love you for taking part and get the endorsement they need to keep going.

Because the civic realm is so uncertain and long-term, one way to stay with it is to utilise the power of human connection, a principle we keep coming back to. If you join with others to change your city or the laws or your land, then it won’t just be the issue that keeps you going, it will be your relationship with those in your group.

How do I do all this and care for myself and those around me?

Before going on to the worksheets that allow you to analyse what you are doing at each level and plan future activities, we need to tackle the “care dilemma” that so many of us face. The dilemma is this: I care about people and the planet, and want to leave the Earth in a better state than when I arrived. But I also care (more) about myself and, most importantly, the people I love and feel responsible for. Part of the reason I care about the planet is because those in my immediate circle of care will be affected by humanity’s common future. But, as social life is currently organised I must often choose between a certain, immediate gain for myself or the people I am closest to and an uncertain, long-term gain for the common good. What is the right thing to do?

This dilemma is made more intense by the altruistic pull we feel for people who are right in front of us as they yank at our heart-strings with their warm blooded emotions. But, even as we choose to pull out of an election campaign to put more time into our children, or put a visit to our sick mother ahead of taking our place on a picket line, or retreat from pushing green issues at work for fear we won’t get promoted, we know that each of these reasonable, human and – in the case of the first two examples – even noble choices mean a failure to challenge the status quo.

While I don’t have a solution to this dilemma – dilemmas after all are inherently unsolvable, I do have some strategies for maintaining, and reducing, the conflict between care at each of these levels. We’ll look at these now.

Caring for yourself is about choosing sustainability activities that not only contribute to the common good, but also nourish you. Several possibilities have been discussed in previous chapters. If you can combine your personal passions with sustainability, then you are onto a winner, as you will be contributing to a better world, while also giving yourself the opportunity to experience flow (Chapter two). Chapter two also highlighted how you need to protect yourself from too much bad news, as although this provides useful jolts that keep us focused, it also drags us down emotionally and inhibits our creativity. If you immerse yourself in the worst case scenario, you are going to seek relief elsewhere, whereas if your sustainability activities are uplifting, it is relief and planet saving in one.

Working with people who are upbeat and warm towards you is also critical (Chapter four). I usually come out of our Transition Town meetings feeling better about myself, because everyone is so nice to me. These meetings also give me the opportunity to be nice to others, which is equally important for making people – me – feel part of a nurturing unit.

The final aspect of self-care I’d like to mention here involves taking the time to figure out your capacities and limitations. This goes beyond your passions, it is about what you can generously give to the cause and what feels like

too much. As I discussed in Chapter three, as a young person I hated large protest marches, especially the mass anger and shouting and feeling that everyone on the side lines was watching me. I went to them, because I am the conscientious type, but I never gave my all. I felt guilty about this at the time, but now I am perfectly comfortable attending marches out of a sense of duty and just being one of the crowd. I no longer hate marches, because I no longer expect myself to like them.

Another aspect of myself I've learnt to work with is that I like to have clear tasks, especially for collective projects. I find vague plans to do something with other people unsatisfactory. When I sense that no one is taking control of a planned group activity, I give myself two choices – take charge or keep right away. I know that my desire for structure and capacity to organise others, will mean that I take charge if no one else is, but if I don't have a clear vision for what we are trying to achieve, I'll resent this, and may well nudge the group towards a minimalist job.

But I don't want to dwell on myself for too long, as this is meant to be about you. The point is that to care for yourself while caring for the common good is about finding action niches that *suit you*. Once you find those, then you will not experience this conflict so deeply or so often, and be less tempted to give up on the world in order to be kind to yourself.

Caring for those around you, while being a sustainability advocate, is a more complex problem on many levels, because, as I said at the beginning of this section, our humanness compels us towards looking after those who are immediately in front of us, rather than caring for humanity as a whole. And, as we saw in Chapter five, it is morally acceptable, even correct, to favour one person with acute needs over a group with chronic needs.

This problem pervades social life, but if you have children, you are likely to find it most acute when balancing being a “good” parent with being a “good” sustainability advocate. As a parent, one is immediately compromised in terms of being able to pour resources, time and energy into the common good. This is partly practical, in that children take resources, time and energy, but it is also emotional – the outside world can never matter as much as one's children. As a mother, I understand why many religions require celibates, to ensure there is a community of people that will hold fast to the common purpose, rather than be diverted by the emotional entanglement of a partner, and especially children.

But children aren't the only people that demand our attention in the here and now, I've just broken off from writing this to attend a morning tea to celebrate a colleague's daughter turning one. Should I have ignored the invitation to continue writing and thus contributing to the sustainability cause, or should I have gone, because this supports her and enriches the relationships between people in my workplace?

I am not sure if the tension between caring for the world and caring for those in front of us can ever be resolved, but I do know that as sustainability

advocates we must allow space for both types of care to exist. As I have argued throughout this book, there is little point in creating a bright new future if the process of doing so does not enrich ourselves and those around us here and now. People will always strive for a better future, but we also owe it to each other to make the present as good as possible. (Not of course, by blowing all the world's resources in a big party to which only some nations are invited, but by noticing and supporting each other).

So, slowing down personal or collective progress towards a particular sustainability goal in order to care for others is, I think, part of being a good person. But, to always choose those in front of you, is to allow the impulses of the heart to rule, which compromises your full capacity as a human being as much as constantly ignoring those impulses. You will feel as if you are procrastinating on the big issues, because, perhaps, you are. You may also wish to consider the effect you have on those you care for, by always putting their needs first. If, for example, you are inclined to miss a community meeting when your children are mildly ill, then you model to your children that mild illness is a reason to pull out of activities.

It may be that your daily life is too full or you are too tender hearted for this to be any other way, in that case, so be it. I know I am not the world's most sensitive mother or friend, and that, in part, is what has enabled me to be productive in my work and devote time to the sustainability cause. But I also know there is social glue provided by those kind mothers and friends, and I, and my children, have benefitted from this glue.

Although this care tension can never be removed, you will feel it less acutely if you can entwine the people in your immediate circle with an activity aimed at the common good. As a parent, this could be about volunteering for the school's environment group or consciously teaching your children the social and ecological values you hold (see Chapters two and five for more on the latter point). If you join a sustainability group, then, over time these people will become your friends, and so when you care for them, you simultaneously strengthen the group and the common identity you share.

It is now time to look in detail at what you are doing as a sustainability advocate.

Endnotes

- ¹ Keller, H, (1903/2010) Optimism: An Essay. Project Gutenberg Ebook, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31622/31622-h/31622-h.htm>, Accessed 6/6/11
- ² <http://jonmsweeney.wordpress.com/2010/01/28/to-know-in-the-biblical-sense/>, Accessed 21/5/11

Appendix: Worksheets

The following worksheets enable you to analyse what you are doing or would like to do to advance sustainability at each of the levels we've discussed. From there, they encourage you to decide which activities to take further; given who you are, your other responsibilities and your social location.

I've listed several trigger questions to help your analysis. These are designed to draw on the core ideas discussed throughout the book and especially in this final chapter. They are only a guide – modify, remove or add to them as you see fit. I've provided a worked example from my own life for the personal level to give you an idea of how to go about the analysis process.

You may prefer to just ponder the trigger questions, rather than complete the worksheets in full. Alternatively, you may wish to modify the worksheets for use in a group setting.

Because the personal, group and civic level are overlapping, you may find it hard to decide which level some of your activities belong to. Please don't worry about that. In writing this chapter, I may have succeeded in convincing both of us that there *“are”* such levels of action, but the real world is not nearly as tidy. If an action is important to you, I hope you will find trigger questions on one of the worksheets that allow you to examine it.

I'll reiterate once more: there are no *“right”* sustainability actions in an absolute sense, despite the fact that many people will tell you so. You may find that these worksheets help you understand why you've never been able to take that personal, group or civic action that you feel you *“should”* – because when you examine it, it just isn't *you*, or it compromises your care of the people you love or you do not feel sufficiently supported to go ahead. As a result, perhaps you can let yourself off that particular hook. On the other hand, the process may reveal opportunities for action that can enrich you as well as contribute to a better world. These are the ones to look out for.

Personal level

After listing your current and possible actions at this level, use the middle box to analyse how each fits with who you are, what you are trying to achieve, and if the impact of the action could be improved. I've listed some trigger questions for the analysis below. In the final column, note if and how you wish to proceed with the activity. The example relates to my cycling.

In relation to personal “fit” think about:

Does the activity enrich your life here and now?

Is it a source of flow?

Is it compatible with caring for those you are responsible for?

Does it enhance your identity and credibility as a sustainability advocate?

In relation to the impact of the action think about:

How is this action contributing to sustainability?

Is it inherently visible and could you increase its visibility, by talking about it or leaving a behavioural trace?

| Actions Current and possible | Analysis Fit: Is it –Enriching, flow-producing, compatible with caring for others, identity enhancing Impact: Sustainability contribution, visibility | Assessment |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Riding my bike to work</p> | <p><i>Enriching</i> – maintains my fitness, gets me outside (good), hassle of wet clothes, dread the ride up the hill after work some days (bad)</p> <p><i>Flow-producing</i> – often feel really alive when riding home, would be more challenging and engrossing if I trained for an event, but I don't like training alone or riding in packs</p> <p><i>Compatible with caring for others</i> –I like the message it sends my children, sometimes limits my ability to shop or visit people after work (but actually I rather like that too!)</p> <p><i>Identity enhancing</i> – Yes, more than anything else I do at this level. Because I cycle, I feel I have the right to speak as a sustainability advocate. Small caveat - does it make me seem too radical or not grown up or something similar at work?</p> <p><i>Sustainability contribution</i> – If everyone that was physically capable rode a bike, the world would be transformed. Cycling feels like one of the magic bullets to me, if only others would see it this way. On the other hand, I can't zip around all over town attending every sustainability event going.</p> <p><i>Visibility</i> – Highly visible, and since writing this book, I have thought more about this, and started putting my helmet on the central table in my office, instead of on a shelf, so visitors can't miss it.</p> | <p><i>Continue</i> – One day I might get rid of my car altogether, but too limiting for now.</p> |

Personal level worksheet

| Actions Current and possible | Analysis Fit: Is it – Enriching, flow-producing, compatible with caring for others, identity enhancing Impact: Sustainability contribution, visibility | Assessment |
|--|---|-------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Group level – Sustainability groups

I've provided two separate worksheets for this level, one for the sustainability focused groups you belong to or are considering joining and one for other groups you are part of (your workplace, sports clubs etc). I am going to refer to the latter as "organisations". For both worksheets I've only given you space to consider two groups or organisations, you may have more. The first worksheet is for sustainability groups. The trigger questions are more extensive than for the previous level, and include a third dimension of group functioning.

In relation to personal "fit" think about:

Does the activity enrich your life here and now?

Are the group activities a source of flow?

Do you have warm relationships in the group?

Is it compatible with caring for those you are responsible for?

Does it enhance your identity and credibility as a sustainability advocate?

Are you proud to be a member of this group?

In relation to the functioning of the group think about:

Do we operate positively?

Do we welcome newcomers?

Do we craft and share tales of joy?

Do we have a clear and enticing vision for the future?

Have we discussed and articulated our shared values?

Does the group incorporate sustainability values into its everyday operations?

In relation to the impact of the group think about:

How does this group contribute to sustainability?

Are our activities and operational practices (from the section above) visible in the community and could we increase our visibility?

Sustainability groups worksheet

| <p>Actions Current and possible</p> | <p>Analysis Fit: Enriching & flow-producing activities, warm relationships, compatible with caring for others, identity enhancing, proud to be a member Functioning: Positive, welcoming, tales of joy, vision, values, everyday operations sustainable Impact: Sustainability contribution, visibility of activities and operational practices</p> | <p>Assessment</p> |
|--|--|--------------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Group level – Other organisations

Analysing the non-sustainability focused organisations you are part of requires a slightly different approach. I am assuming that your membership of these organisations is not in question, what is in question is if and how you can advocate for pro-sustainability changes within them. Therefore, unlike the trigger questions for the previous questions, I've written these in the future tense – as if you scoping possible opportunities for action, and considering their fit. If you are already forwarding sustainability within an organisation, or have a specific action in mind, then you could use the trigger questions from other worksheets to analyse these actions in more detail.

Opportunities

What is my organisation already doing that promotes sustainability?

Could I join in on current activities?

Who in my organisation is also interested in sustainability?

Could I join with them to initiate something new?

What are the mechanisms for change open to me?

What outside organisations or people could help me make changes?

In relation to personal “fit” think about:

Will promoting sustainability in this organisation enrich my life here and now?

Are the activities involved likely to be a source of flow?

Will promoting sustainability enhance my current relationships in the organisation?

Will promoting sustainability allow me to develop positive relationships with like-minded others?

Will advocating for sustainability fit with my credibility and identity as a group member?

Is promoting sustainability compatible with my other responsibilities and the people I am expected to care for within the organisation?

Other organisations worksheet

| Actions Current and possible | Analysis Opportunities: Current activities, joining with others, mechanisms for change, outside help Fit: Enriching & flow producing activities, enhance current relationships, positive new relationships, enhance identity as group member, compatible with responsibilities in group including people responsibilities | Assessment |
|--|--|-------------------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Civic level

Many of your civic level actions may be undertaken with a group. For example, if you belong to a political party, you will be operating at the civic level, but in a group context. Those actions are probably best analysed as group activities. This worksheet will most suit civic level actions that you do as an individual (e.g. attending sustainability events, contributing to website discussions, signing and forwarding petitions). The trigger questions are identical to those for the personal level.

In relation to personal “fit” think about:

Does the activity enrich your life here and now?

Is it a source of flow?

Is it compatible with caring for those you are responsible for?

Does it enhance your identity and credibility as a sustainability advocate?

In relation to the impact of the action think about:

How is this action contributing to sustainability?

Is it inherently visible and could you increase its visibility, by talking about it or leaving a behavioural trace?

Civic level worksheet

| Actions Current and possible | Analysis Fit: Is it – Enriching, flow-producing, compatible with caring for others, identity enhancing Impact: Sustainability contribution, visibility | Assessment |
|--|---|-------------------|
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