

# **BUILDING JUST AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES: NEW FOUNDATIONS FOR THE TRANSFORMATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

M. Paloma Pavel and Carl Anthony

**W**e are living in an historic moment. We are each called to take part in a great transformation. Our survival as a species is threatened by global warming, economic meltdown, and an ever-increasing gap between rich and poor. Yet these threats offer an opportunity to awaken as an interconnected and beloved community ... . Here in South Africa, interconnectedness is described by the concept ubuntu. Ubuntu is the philosophy and belief that our humanity is inextricably bound up in one another, and any tear in the fabric of connection must be repaired for us all to be made whole. This interconnectedness is the very root of who we are. Thus, compassion and service to others enhances the humanity of all, including oneself.

— Desmond Tutu <sup>1</sup>

The success of eco-psychology will depend not only upon its ability to help us hear the voice of the Earth, but to construct a genuinely multicultural self and a global civil society without racism.

— Carl Anthony<sup>2</sup>

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1 Desmond Tutu, foreword in Anne Herbert and M. Paloma Pavel 2014.

2 Carl Anthony in Theodore Roszak, p. 264.

The triple breakdown of environment, economy and equity presents an opportunity to re-imagine and co-create a just and sustainable world, as well as to heal ourselves and our relationships with one another.<sup>3</sup> Big history offers new pathways for action by providing a framework for re-examining our past as part of a larger planetary history.<sup>4</sup> This has been called the ‘great work’ of our time, giving shape and meaning to everyday life by relating human ventures to our larger existence, and so it offers a new horizon for the transformation of thinking.<sup>5</sup> The following stories are drawn from our work with frontline activist communities working on sustainability and social justice in the United States over the last three decades.

*Excavating the Ecological Self: The Hidden Narrative of Wall Street*

In 2001, the Ford Foundation selected Carl Anthony to direct the Sustainable Metropolitan Communities program (SMCI) in North America, an initiative to create opportunity for disadvantaged communities. Building on our previous collaboration in the Bay Area, Carl invited Paloma Pavel to join his New York team to design and implement the strategic planning, peer learning and leadership development for this innovative project. On this day, our dedication ceremony, Carl recommended that we visit the African Burial Ground Monument, adjacent to Wall Street.

We never suspected the life-changing impact this visit would have on us and on our work over the next few decades. The burial ground is a threshold that marks the vast social, economic and cultural transformations that brought the world into the modern era. We stood on its rolling berms of grass, covering deep secrets, with an imposing granite sculpture at one end, stark and deceptive in its simplicity.

The African burial site was discovered in 1991, as excavation began for a new General Services Administration building near Wall Street in lower Manhattan. The requisite anthropologists were on site, in accord with city policy, but they were unprepared for what they found that day: not pottery sherds or glass, but human bones seven metres

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3 M. Paloma Pavel 2009.

4 Nigel Hughes 2015; David Hookes 2016; Barry Rodrigue 2015; Carl Anthony and M. Paloma Pavel 2016.

5 Thomas Berry 1999; Brian Swimme and Mary Evelyn Tucker 2011.

below the surface, orderly and well-preserved. It was an intact skeleton inside the remains of a coffin – the fully preserved body of an African-American slave.

As they called in additional experts, over the days and months, another and another body was discovered ... gradually unearthing hundreds of graves. The moist clay had assisted in preservation. Silver pendants, military buttons and burial objects helped reconstruct their origins. Carbon-dating set the year at about 1700, with an average age at death of 37 years. African-American community leaders and friends and allies came forward to halt the building planned to be built on this remarkable site. Although 419 bodies were located, the remains of 20,000 free Africans and slaves are estimated to lie here, adjacent to Wall Street, in a site of almost three hectares.<sup>6</sup>

The more we discover, we find ourselves alternately stunned, grief-stricken and outraged by what has occurred at this burial site. Remarkably preserved, it carries a memory of our history. One quarter of early New Amsterdam's population was from Africa. Slaves built the wall of Wall Street in 1653 to protect the Dutch from the indigenous Lenape tribe, which the settlers had nearly annihilated only days after the Pipe of Peace Hoboken agreement. Although the Africans built the protective wall, they were later excluded from their own burial inside it. The free Blacks and African slaves died segregated from the very city that was built on the backs of their stolen labour. This is the hidden legacy of the Wall Street Stock Market, codified by the British in 1711 as 'appointing a place for the more convenient hiring of slaves in the Markett House at the Wall Street Slip'.<sup>7</sup>

Experiencing all this together added a transformative dimension: a wall, a hidden burial, a lost narrative. The segregation, fragmentation and spatial apartheid embedded in the land-use patterns of our 21st century metro regions takes on deeper meaning as we uncover the iconic story of this wall built by African slaves, buried and forgotten for centuries. It is an encounter of three cultures, a truly big history.

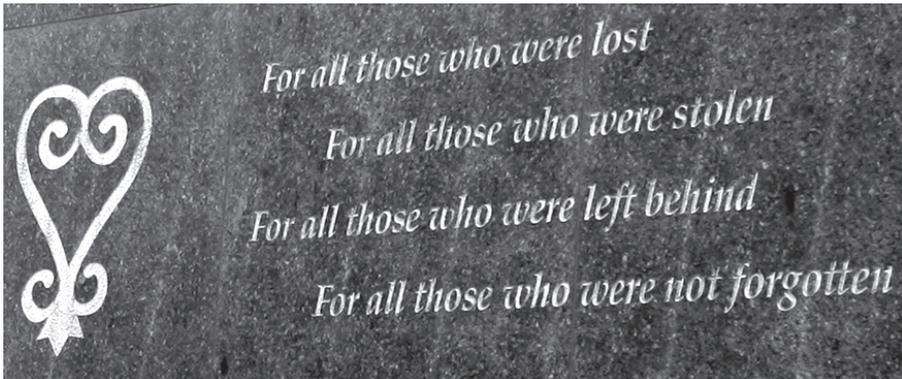
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6 Joyce Hansen and Gary McGowan 1998.

7 Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace 1999; Roi Ottley and William Weatherby 1967; Marcus Rediker 2007.

60,000 years after leaving the Rift Valley in Africa, a group of *Homo sapiens* began migrating eastward through Asia and across the Bering Strait to the Americas, while a second group migrated north and west into Europe. A third group remained in Africa until 600 years ago. The Africans and Europeans came to New Amsterdam together by ship as part of the triangular slave trade, where they encountered the native Americans – all one family separated by sixty millennia. Why had we not learned of this before?

New connections erupted; we exchanged insights and made relevant applications for our own lives and for the collaborative work ahead. We poured a final offering of water onto the sacred ground of the burial mounds – an expression of honour and gratitude for the many lives and deep history revealed here.



*Plate 1: Dedication on the African Burial Ground monument, New York City, 2016. Photograph from the National Park Service.*

Our journey back into the history of this place continued in our own bones as we re-entered the churning sidewalks of the financial district in Manhattan. We re-joined the 21st century, but we were changed. We left this place with resolve, reclaiming a shattered piece, restoring our broken world. Ubuntu – ‘I am because we are’. This new knowledge is like reweaving a torn fabric, revealing a fundamental wholeness – the discovery of this hidden narrative enables a cultural healing to occur.

#### *Current Challenges: The School-to-Prison Pipeline*

As of May 2017, in Oakland, California, only 38 per cent of the school district’s third-graders can read at that grade level, almost 40

per cent of African-American youth drop out of its high school, and, in 2014, the city had eighty homicides.<sup>8</sup> Communities of colour, such as Oakland, have been pushed into ghettos by decades of red-lining, discriminatory housing and development, disinvestment, and white flight. These communities are now being over-policed and under-resourced for education and jobs, funnelling youth of colour into the prison system. Scholars draw direct historical links between the United States' former institutions of slavery and Jim Crow laws to the current system of incarceration and criminalization of people of colour.<sup>9</sup>

These communities are also used as toxic dumping grounds, such as those found in industrial West Oakland and the Chevron oil refinery at 'Cancer Alley' in adjacent Richmond. Sites like these cause health problems and declines in life expectancy. In addition, tobacco and alcohol industries prey on economically depressed areas, while grocery stores refuse to invest, leaving 'food deserts' along with the attending problems of malnutrition, obesity, and addiction. Schools are underfunded and jobs scarce, while access to both is restricted by a lack of public transportation. These long commutes to job centres and educational programs increase greenhouse gas emissions and further damage our climate and health. The spatial apartheid in these economic wastelands reinforces an unsustainable way of living, as well as disconnecting us from our communities and ourselves.

*Overcoming Fragmentation in Self and Society:  
A Learning-Action Agenda*

No other animal would poison its own habitat, its own air or its own water systems, but our cultural state of dissociation, a response to atrocities on people and land in the name of short-sighted profit, allows us to continue this self-destructive cycle. We can only be released from this cycle when we uncover the hidden narrative we have been repressing and create a new story by which we can come home to ourselves.<sup>10</sup>

As we face and heal our deep fear of one another, we become more willing and capable as multicultural allies and symbiotic beings on the planet. This provides an essential and profound role for consciousness

8 Barbara Grady 2014; SF Gate 2013; City of Oakland 2015.

9 Angela Davis 2003; Michelle Alexander 2011.

10 Linda Buzzell and Craig Chalquist, 2009.

transformation to facilitate healing the culture of separation – by moving us into action together. In order to reintegrate ourselves, our society and our connection to the planet, we offer an eco-psychology model that is grounded in the multicultural narrative of our time, which includes both individual and collective reflection and action.

This is a potent resource that we have been discovering in our work over the last four decades, on the front lines of the environmental justice movement, where we have linked community organizing to consciousness transformation and depth psychology. We offer this as a critical counterpoint to the medical model focusing on the delivery of services that dominates psychology today, which, embedded in the capitalist context of our time, has reinforced the mindset that our struggles with isolation and separation are an individual problem with individual solutions.<sup>11</sup> We seek to move beyond individual-internal reflection, to integrate community psychology and incorporate collective action as part of the process of individual, community, cultural and planetary healing.<sup>12</sup>

### *A Breakthrough Compass for Transformation of Consciousness*

The *Breakthrough Compass* is a grounded, societal-change model that has undergone several rounds of testing and shows promise as a robust and accessible tool for personal and community transformation through action and reflection. We developed this learning-action model in a research process over ten years in twelve regions of the United States. The results are documented in our book, *Breakthrough Communities: Sustainability and Justice in the Next American Metropolis*, which was published by MIT Press in 2009. The *Breakthrough Compass* allows us to see the interplay between individual and collective transformation, and can be used diagnostically to orient ourselves to where we are allocating our current energies, as well as strategically charting a course toward the next stage of our transformation.

The five stages of the *Compass* include its spiral centre (Waking Up), as well as both an action axis (Horizontal: Saying No, Saying Yes) and a learning axis (Vertical: Getting Grounded, Exploring New

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11 James Hillman and Michael Ventura 1993.

12 Ken Wilber et al. 2008; Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman 2010.

Horizons).<sup>13</sup> Following the spiral outward from the centre, we begin by Waking Up to a situation threatening our communities. Then we take action by Saying No and fighting back against immediate threats or injustice.

Next, we Get Grounded, learning more about the depth, breadth and history of the circumstances. This knowledge enables us to Explore New Horizons, taking new actions, stepping into new roles, and forging new alliances. Finally, we can Say Yes, advocating for the future we want to co-create. We continue to find the Breakthrough Compass resilient and versatile as a fractal theory, applicable to individual leaders as well as to groups, organizations, and coalitions.<sup>14</sup>



*Figure 1: The Breakthrough Compass for the Transformation of Consciousness is a model that summarizes the five stages of successful community-led change at a regional scale in the United States. M. Paloma Pavel with artist Dennis Rivers, 2009.*

Place matters. A metropolitan region is a dynamic system that includes a central city along with its surrounding suburbs and rural areas. These urban-to-rural landscapes are potent places for personal and community transformation by the application of learning-action strategies. We find that climate justice action at a regional scale is large enough to affect global sustainability issues but local enough for participants to claim the region as home.<sup>15</sup>

13 M. Paloma Pavel 2009.

14 Fritjof Capra and Pier Luisi, 2014; Margaret Wheatley 2006.

15 M. Paloma Pavel, 'A Climate Justice Compass for Navigating Transformation', 2015.

The transformative power of metropolitan regions is due to their encompassing many neighbourhoods, cities and areas that have been separated from one another, yet exist in interdependent relationship: ghettos and gated communities, toxic waste dumps and pristine green-spaces, prisons and financial districts. Regional coalitions work together across these social/geographic boundaries and across divisions of race, class and ethnicity that have fragmented our society and our psyches. This work not only wins real policy changes for more sustainable regions and greater social justice but also transforms individuals and communities in the process.<sup>16</sup>

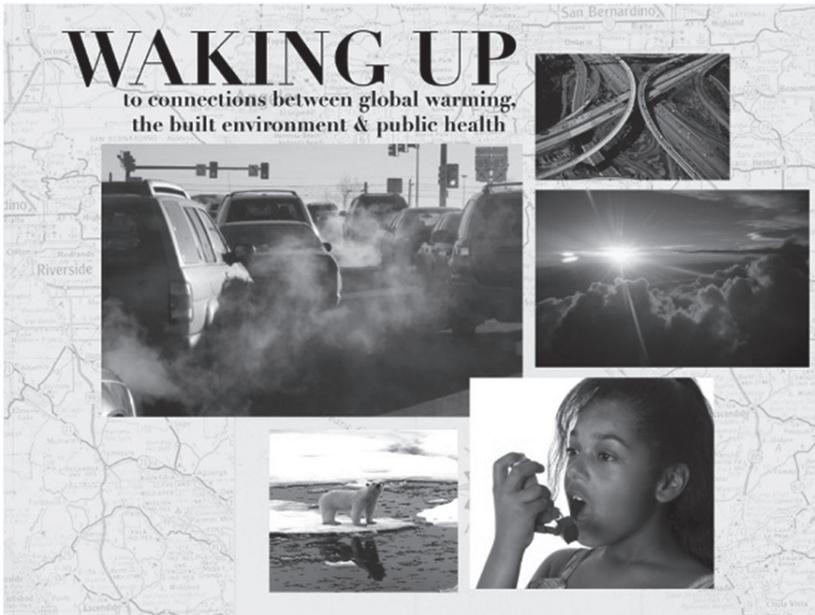


*Figure 2: The Six Wins for Regional Equity united six different networks for social-justice in the San Francisco Bay Area in successful climate justice collaboration. Design by Carl Anthony with artist M. Paloma Pavel, 2012.*

One such success story is our climate justice coalition, the Six Wins for Social Equity, here in the San Francisco Bay Area. We have heard many stories from our coalition partners, coming from diverse sectors (public health, community organizing, affordable housing policy, academia, and many others) and diverse backgrounds, about how they were personally transformed through this work, while winning real victories for climate justice.<sup>17</sup>

16 Mindy Fullilove 2013.

17 Anne Herbert and M. Paloma Pavel, 2014.



*Figure 3: Waking Up poster, Six Wins for Social Equity coalition, Oakland, California. These images show the growing interconnection of global warming and health problems, affecting both polar bear habitat and asthma for inner-city youth. Design by M. Paloma Pavel with artist Melanie Ida Chopko.*

### ***Stage 1: Waking Up***

Community leaders wake up to the connections between climate change and social equity in their region, realizing that global warming is not only about polar bears on icebergs but is connected with the spatial apartheid that causes sprawl, greenhouse gases from long commutes, and disinvestment in low-income communities and communities of colour.

### ***Stage 2: Saying No***

A coalition of social justice and environmental justice groups from both community organizing and professional policy come together to work across racial and social divides and say no to disinvestment in public transportation. In Oakland in 2009, \$70 million in federal stimulus funds

that were earmarked for public transportation and were intended to address the urgent needs of the most vulnerable populations were being funnelled toward an exclusive and expensive ‘airport connector’, which would prove virtually useless for the daily transportation needs of the low-income neighbourhoods it was slated to be built through, with no local stops. The new coalition files a civil suit under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, redirecting the money back into desperately underfunded public transportation relied upon by low-income communities. This unprecedented victory gained national attention and lit a fire of courage and determination for climate justice advocates.

### ***Stage 3: Getting Grounded***

Realizing that the problem is bigger than a single lawsuit can solve, the new climate justice coalition gets grounded by researching root causes and systemic problems in the Bay Area region. They find the intersection of many environmental and social justice issues – health, public transit, affordable housing, quality jobs, anti-displacement, and community power – and form the *Six Wins Coalition*. Now armed and confident with a deeper understanding of their regional context, they explore new horizons of organizing and advocacy.

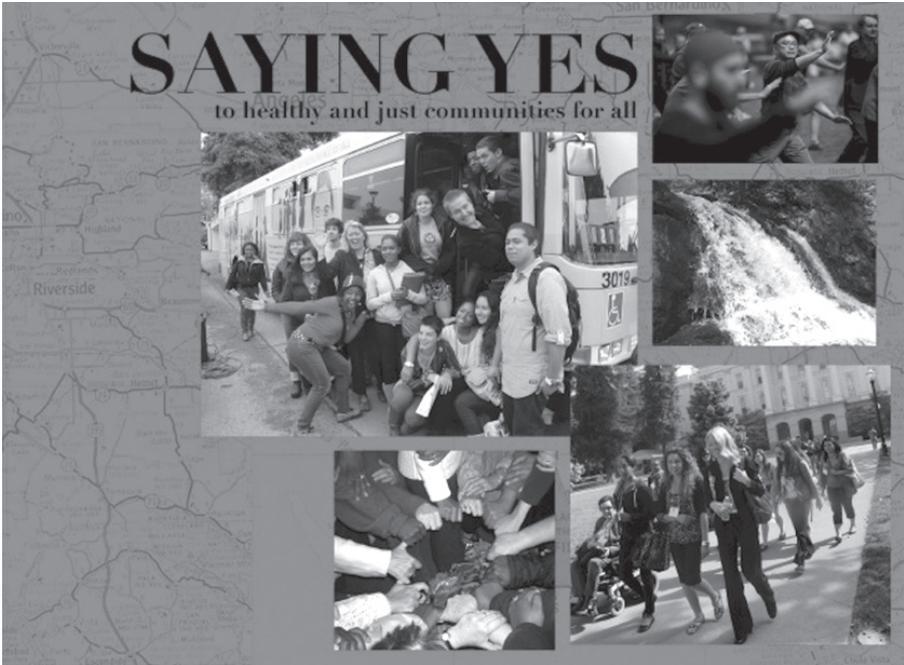
### ***Stage 4: Exploring New Horizons***

Leaders from vulnerable communities take on new roles in regional planning processes, becoming steering committee members of regional working groups, testifying at public hearings, and meeting with regional agency heads one-on-one. They also make new alliances, working closely with university research facilities to translate community voices and needs into the language of regional planning.

### ***Stage 5: Saying Yes***

These forces combine to produce a positive, proactive, innovative vision for the future. The *Six Wins Coalition* produces a revolutionary community-based model for

regional transportation and land use planning that, when tested alongside the agency’s professional models, outperforms on metrics of both social equity and greenhouse gas reductions.<sup>18</sup> Regional agencies enact several of our coalition recommendations – protecting the environment and vulnerable communities in the Bay Area.



*Figure 4: Saying Yes poster, Six Wins for Social Equity coalition, Oakland, California. Intergenerational images feature the Freedom Bus, designed by youth artists honouring transportation workers and celebrating a free eco-bus pass for urban youth that provides victory for the 3 Es – equity, environment, and economy. Design by M. Paloma Pavel with artist Melanie Ida Chopko.*

A huge victory for climate justice, the process itself was transformative for all involved. Community and youth leaders from marginalized communities, who had not been represented in decision-making agencies, took power as regional citizens and won a permanent seat at the table. Academics who had relied on complex transportation-modelling processes discovered the depth of community knowledge for

18 Richard Marcantonio and Alex Karner 2014.

solutions to global warming. Regional decision-makers heard the voices of vulnerable constituents speak powerfully for their communities and were affected in their hearts, minds and approach to serving the region.<sup>19</sup>

These personal, community and regional transformations – through collective learning and action and across boundaries of separation – are one of the ways out of our climate crisis. By acting together to counteract the fragmentation of our regions, we also can heal the cycle of isolation, fear and apathy. The result is the discovery of a capacity to build resilience, sustainability and justice in the face of what journalist James Kunstler calls the ‘long emergency’.<sup>20</sup>



*Plate 2: Unanimous vote by the Metropolitan Transportation Commission Board at the Metro Center in Oakland, California, 2012, which acknowledged that the community-driven Equity Scenario outperformed all other scenarios in reducing greenhouse gas emissions while still leading with Social Equity. Photograph by M. Paloma Pavel.*

### *Conclusion*

The dynamics, patterns and history of our ecologically unsustainable relationship with Earth are fundamentally intertwined with historic and current dynamics of racial and social injustice. The culture of denial and separation we have constructed, in order to forget this painful history,

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19 Anne Herbert and M. Paloma Pavel, 2014.

20 James Kunstler 2006.

stands in the way of our society rising to the urgent challenges we now face. The story of the African-American Burial Ground near Wall Street illustrates the way in which collective memory of our painful past is suppressed. Its rediscovery serves as an entry point for transformation and for the hidden narrative of race in the United States. The legacy of slavery provides clues to how social and environmental devastation are intertwined, especially when particular people or lands are designated as separate and disposable.

These dynamics are still playing out today with continuing environmental injustices in the school-to-prison pipeline and in the spatial apartheid of our metropolitan regions. We damage ourselves and our planet as we continue the cycle of denial and fragmentation. This demands a new vision for the transformation of consciousness and for healing deep-seated patterns. It also demands the incorporating of individual and collective transformation, as well as reflection and action. Big History provides a transformative lens for this individual and collective process. We also offer a consciousness transformation tool that facilitates this ongoing metamorphosis of self and world – the Breakthrough Compass. A potent site for this work is in metropolitan regional organizing for environmental sustainability and social equity, where we re-integrate our fragmented social systems and our fragmented psyches while winning real changes for a better world.

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Carl Anthony is an architect, author, urban / suburban / regional-design strategist, and co-founder of the Breakthrough Communities Project. He has served as Acting Director of the Community and Resource Development Unit at the Ford Foundation. Carl funded the national Conversation on Regional Equity (CORE), a dialogue of national policy analysts and advocates for new metropolitan racial justice strategies. He was Founder and, for twelve years Executive Director, of the Urban

Habitat Program in the San Francisco Bay Area. With his colleague, Luke Cole, at the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation, Carl founded and published *Race, Poverty and the Environment Journal*, the only environmental justice periodical in the United States. He has a professional degree in architecture from Columbia University. In 1996, he was appointed Fellow at the Institute of Politics, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Carl's forthcoming book is *The Earth, the City, and the Hidden Narrative of Race: Discovering New Foundations for the Great Work of Our Time*.

M. Paloma Pavel PhD and President of Earth House Center, is co-founder of the Breakthrough Communities Project. Her dissertation (Organizational Culture and Leadership Development) was part of a five-year study by the Carnegie Foundation on the workplace in the United States. She served as Director of Strategic Communications for the Sustainable Metropolitan Communities Initiative at the Ford Foundation and has been a Fulbright Scholar in community development, environmental literacy and climate justice. Paloma teaches in Bay Area institutions, lectures internationally on living systems and urban sustainability, and co-edits the Sustainable Metropolitan Communities Books series at MIT Press with Robert Gottlieb. Her publications include *Breakthrough Communities: Sustainability and Justice in the Next American Metropolis* (MIT Press, 2009). Her forthcoming publication includes *Climate Justice: Frontline Stories From Groundbreaking Coalitions in California*. She is a Fulbright Scholar in community development, environmental literacy and climate justice and can be reached at Earth House Center, 5275 Miles Avenue, Oakland, California USA 94618. E-mail: <palomapavel@gmail.com>.

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