THE **BTS**
CENTER



Cultivating Earth-Shaped Leadership:

Ecological Imagination in Organizational Life

How would organizations act
differently today if they embodied
an ecological imagination?

Foreword

Margaret J. Wheatley, the wise organizational consultant, author, and student of human culture and living systems, has observed,

> Today, our world confronts us with an ironic conflict. We go into nature and feel a sense of harmony and profound belonging beyond the tiny confines of self. Yet our technology and the lives we live continue to demand that we perfect the means of extraction and destruction to keep our lives going. We ignore the science, destroy the environment, and then go outside to feel more peaceful.[1]

It's an ironic conflict, indeed, and the implications are widespread, as the impacts of late-stage industrial capitalism lead us closer and closer to ecological devastation and mass extinction. As human beings, we possess seemingly endless technological capabilities, but often we lack the ethical clarity and spiritual capacity we need to employ them well. Even organizations doing the important work of justice and community-building in the world find themselves spinning on an endless hamster wheel in the pursuit of bigger and more, captivated by the myth of perpetual growth and limitless progress.

But organizations are not machines, and the people who lead them are more than mechanical cogs in wheels.

And so, we who lead The BTS Center began to wonder: **How would organizations act differently today if they embodied an ecological imagination?** What difference might it make if organizations began to take their cues from nature — of which we are all a part?

With roots dating back to 1814, The BTS Center is a private operating foundation in Portland, Maine, building on the legacy of the former Bangor Theological Seminary. Although no longer a degree-awarding institution, today The BTS Center seeks ***to catalyze spiritual imagination, with enduring wisdom, for transformative faith leadership*** by offering theologically grounded programs of continuing education and spiritual/vocational formation, all oriented around our programmatic focus: ***Spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world.***

Inspired by the vision of ***human hearts renewed, justice established, and creation restored***, we are paying particular attention to deep and important questions about the global climate crisis and the ways in which that must inform and transform spiritual practice and faith leadership — and of course, how climate devastation also intersects with other issues of social justice, spirituality, and the practice of faith. As we undertake this work, we are grateful to collaborate with imaginative leaders, spiritual teachers, faith-rooted activists, academics, authors, poets, artists, music-makers, and dreamers. This work requires all of us.

In 2021, in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, The BTS Center launched a significant research initiative to pursue this question. We might have chosen to consult with scholars, collect a bit of data, and draw our own conclusions, but instead, we opted to go deep. We invited seven organizations, all planted within Northern New England (plus one organization across the border in Montreal) — organizations representing many different sectors, including education, prison reform, the arts, community gardening and food justice, and social action — to join us for an 18-month journey of co-learning. Together comprising a Research Collaborative, we spent a year and a half in mutual exploration: reading together, asking big questions, sharing our experiences, wondering aloud, and engaging in personal and organizational experiments.

[1] Margaret J. Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017), 214.

Students at Ashwood Waldorf School

Photo courtesy of Ashwood Waldorf School

Guided by a wise team of Consultant Advisors, our Director of Applied Research, Ben Yosua-Davis, employed a qualitative, ethnographic research methodology, collecting extensive field notes over the course of almost a hundred unique gatherings and then gleaning from them important insights. This report conveys our learnings.

Why does this matter? This matters because ecological devastation represents the most urgent crisis that humanity has ever faced. We are seeing the impacts of climate chaos more clearly with each passing year, and climate scientists' forecasts for the coming decades are dire. In this moment of uncertainty and great concern, the work of these eight organizations — Ashwood Waldorf School, Boston Food Forest Coalition, Hour Exchange Portland, Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition, Montreal City Mission, St. Joseph's College, Waterville Creates, and The BTS Center — and thousands of other organizations like them, secular and religious alike, matters. Moreover, *the way in which* these and other organizations engage in their work matters. Their perceptions, postures, and practices of leadership have great potential to promote healing and regeneration, to nurture resilient communities, to strengthen our collective fortitude — *and* — without a good deal of self-reflection, care, and intention, their perceptions, postures, and practices of leadership also have the potential to perpetuate the troublesome dynamics that have led us to the very crises we face.

We have developed and facilitated this Research Collaborative as a first significant undertaking that reflects a broader intention to approach our work with a posture of "rigorous and reverent curiosity." We use this phrase frequently: *rigorous* because we aim to bring the discipline of quantitative and qualitative research to our programs, asking important questions, surfacing stories, collecting data, drawing conclusions, and sharing our findings; and *reverent* because we understand this work is sacred — we ask curious questions not simply because we are interested, but also because there is a divine urgency, a sacred calling, to this work of cultivating and nurturing spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world. This particular question about the influence of ecological imagination in organizational life is one of several big questions that we have begun to pursue, and we look forward to sharing our findings — with both the academic community and the communities of practitioners — in the months and years to come.

We certainly do not consider this to be a definitive study; rather, we see this as the beginning of an ongoing listening and learning venture that we intend to continue. We invite you to join us.

Because the challenges we face at this moment are urgent, because we have invested significantly in this Research Collaborative co-learning process, and because we believe we have learned some critically important things along the way, we offer this report with gratitude and hope. Please do not hesitate to reach out with comments, with ponderings, or with your own ideas about the questions you'd like to pursue. We look forward to hearing from you.

As you prepare to turn now to the report that follows, authored by Ben Yosua-Davis, pause for a moment to take a few deep breaths and to reflect on this encouraging word, again from Margaret J. Wheatley:

> "If we embed ecological values, if we focus on relationships, if we position learning as a core value, if we seek to behave as partners with life, then we have a strong chance to manifest, to self-organize as individuals living and working purposefully together in healthy community."[2]

May it be so.

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[2] Margaret J. Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017), 229.

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Executive Summary

As humanity grapples ever more deeply with the realities of a climate-changed world, scientists, activists, and others have begun to realize that the core issues at stake are greater than a policy and technology analysis can capture. The answers to the challenges facing us are about more than technology or politics; they are about the values and systems that lie at the roots of the challenges we face. If we understand climate chaos as the symptom of a deeper set of systemic cultural crises, then *anything* we do to transform the industrial-capitalist, mechanistic, imperialist systems that are the roots of this crisis is inherently climate work. Furthermore, if the climate crisis was precipitated, at least in part, by our alienation from the Earth, then turning back to the more-than-human community as the teacher helps ensure that we are not simply replicating the same destructive systems that we are attempting to transform.

With this thesis in mind, The BTS Center began to ask the question: How would organizations act differently today if they embodied an ecological imagination?

In 2021, The BTS Center convened a Research Collaborative that engaged seven cross-sector organizations drawn from Northern New England and the Quebec province of Canada, representing fields from agriculture to immigration to higher education; together, they comprised a Co-Learning Community that collaboratively explored this question. Very early in the design process, we decided that we would not try to *define* ecological imagination. Rather, we wanted to explore what happens when leaders enter into conversation with ecological imagination as the framing and then attempt to practice it in their settings.

We tried to embody ecological imagination in our learning process. We intentionally decided to open space for the dynamics of emergence and consciously chose not to plan too far ahead, allowing the community's energy to shape the content, even as we also held to the constants of our group's geographic proximity and to a consistent three-month rhythm of gatherings.

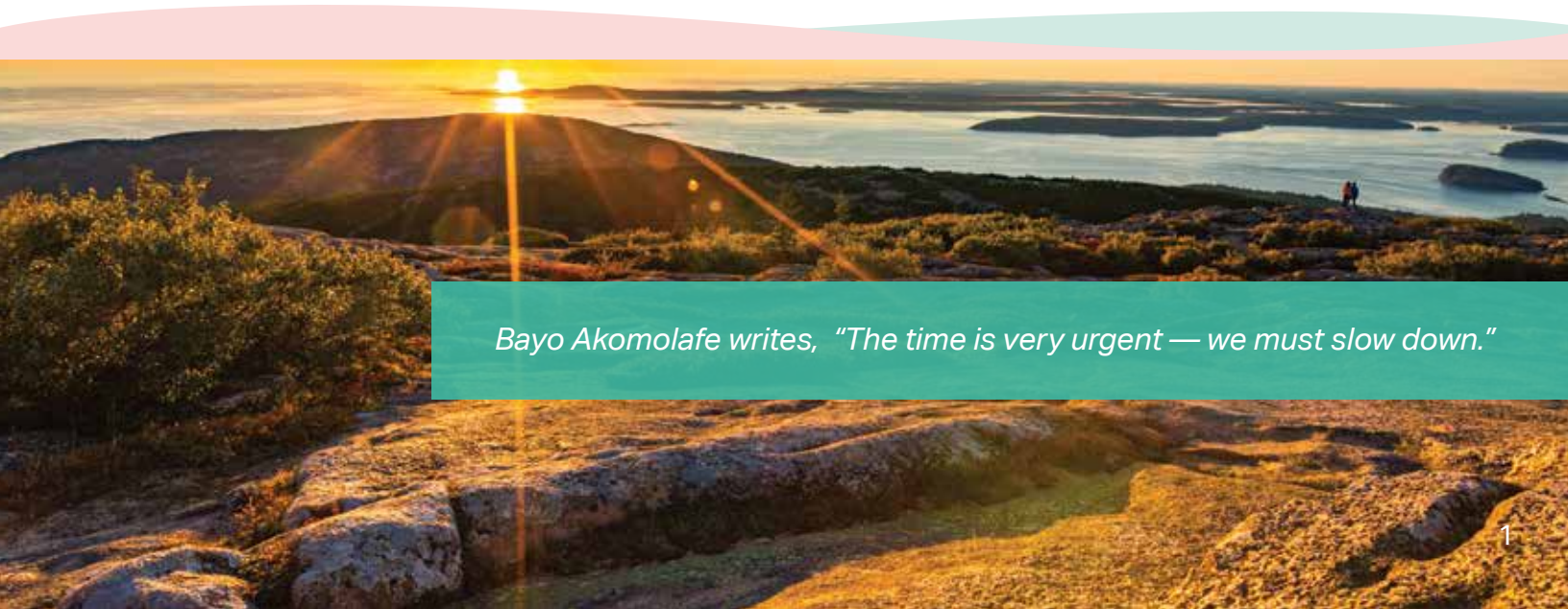
This process was nested within a rigorous qualitative research framework, broadly following research scientist Clifford Geertz's call for "thick description" in anthropological fieldwork. Along with extensive documentation and field noting, we gathered a circle of researchers and practitioners with terminal degrees and expertise in ecology, sociology, religious studies, and theology in global contexts to support this project, check the lead researcher's perceptions, and offer their own insights. We also invited the participants of the Co-Learning Community to be engaged in their own reflective process through surveys, focus groups, and regular questions throughout.

From this research, several patterns emerged that characterize what happens when leaders attempt to integrate ecological imagination into their organizations.

First, we learned that **space is the most necessary precursor for transformation**. Participants engaged in the research process within the context of intense pressure and busyness at their workplaces. This relentless pace functioned to fortify cultural stasis within their organizations. It is impossible to enact cultural change, such as moving to ecologically-imagined values, when there is no time for deep, open-ended conversations that do not bear a one-to-one relationship to leaders' to-do lists.

As philosopher and essayist Bayo Akomolafe writes, "The time is very urgent — we must slow down." [3]

[3] Bayo Akomolafe, "The Times Are Urgent: Let's Slow Down." Bayo Akomolafe, October 2, 2022, www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/the-times-are-urgent-lets-slow-down/



A St. Joseph's College program at Windham Middle School

Photo courtesy of St. Joseph's College

Even small practices of spaciousness yielded dramatic results. Five minutes for board members to share moments of gratitude, when framed as an act of resistance, resulted in meaningfully more thoughtful discussions afterwards. Ritual, which is a different way to inhabit time, became a way for a group to process an event when there wasn't time for a long discussion. Pausing from programming led to leaps in strategic clarity for staff. All of this led participants to ask, in the words of one leader, "Do we really need to have as much programming as we do? Or can we do things in a way that encourages broader collaboration, or more meaningful types of things?"

Secondly, we learned that organizations operate within **the limits of the Spirit of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex**, which has very specific ideas as to what it means to be a "good" leader or a "real" organization. These expectations center around endless productivity, success defined only in terms of dollars or growth, and structures that are both rigid and hierarchical. These expectations are enforced implicitly through social cues and norms; and explicitly through the expectations of funders, upon which many organizations depend abjectly for their continued existence.

It is impossible for most organizations simply to discard these expectations. Therefore, leaders began to imagine how they could be in more productive conversation with this Spirit in ways that did not compromise their integrity. They imagined a range of possible forward-looking approaches that included sharing their insights via a Diversity, Equity, Inclusion or Decolonizing lens, telling powerful stories, or finding detailed, even quantitative ways to describe their work's impact in areas like relationship building.

Third, leaders developed **a new theory of change**. Typically, organizational leaders believe either in "Change your thinking, change your organization" or "Change your programs, change your organization." Participants came up with a new theory: **"Change what you see, change your organization."** We cannot change what we cannot see. However, when we see something that was invisible to us previously, change becomes possible.

We expand our perception through the practice of imagination, by which we strengthen our ability to visualize and actualize possibilities that do not exist within our current reality. When this imaginative practice is shaped by the metaphor of ecological imagination, our imaginations naturally become more ecological.

These shifts in perception led to changes in how leaders looked at their organizations. **Leaders began to see their organizations as ecologies, not machines.** When leaders understood their organizations as ecologies, they noted how humanizing moments, such as celebrating birthdays, made a large difference in the health of the community, even if they were not valued by mechanistic metrics. This shift expanded over time, as leaders also began to perceive their entire organizations as having a "collective soul" that needed tending to.

This means that **leaders don't manage a machine — they tend relationships.**

Ecological imagination is inherently relational. If machine thinking encourages leaders to look at their organization as a series of interlocking parts that need to run smoothly, then ecological imagination invites leaders to look at their organization as a web of relationships that need tending.

This led leaders to dream of organizations that practiced a higher degree of reciprocity between each of its members and to ask themselves, "What type of hierarchy do we need to support the health of the whole?"

Next, **ecological imagination invites leaders to measure their work differently.** Traditionally, metrics are seen as a particularly visible, quantifiable form of organizational self-perception. If we can't see it, then we assume it doesn't exist. Likewise, if we can't measure it, then we assume it doesn't matter. Leaders noted how mechanistic metrics missed something important about what they did and imagined new ways of measuring their work: ones that often involved paying attention to bodily responses, looking at relationships, and tracking dynamics over the long term. They also wondered if there were funders who might be interested in reframing what they measured as well.

Finally, leaders understood that **all organizations come from somewhere**: a somewhere that is both about history and about place. All organizations have ancestors: a lineage that becomes both a source of caution, often through DEI or decolonizing work, and also a rich site to enter more deeply into ecological imagination. All organizations are also rooted in very particular communities and geographies, which creates identities that are both more fixed in identity and more fluid in their response to their environment. This means

that leaders must engage in messy work with deep intention, rather than just striving for sterile excellence, which in turn requires that they must become comfortable with uncertainty, failure, and experimentation.

From beginning to end, leaders asked: **Can an organization really "change the world"? In the end, the answer was no.** Ecological imagination made leaders aware of the limits of their own moral agency: that their work was frequently a series of trade-offs that made it very hard always to do the "right thing." This is especially true for large institutions, in part because large institutions generally grow in co-dependence with the cultural conditions that made them large in the first place. This means that they are both less likely to see cultural transformation as necessary and more institutionally invested in keeping the status quo.

Answering "no" to this question brought grief and anxiety. However, leaders also articulated genuine relief and hope. The journey, in the words of one participant, was "going into despair and coming out through connection and action." Naming these limits allowed participants to set down a burden that was never theirs to carry and provided them with new opportunities to find productive ways to engage the world as-it-is.

If larger institutions can be particularly ineffective in cultivating cultural transformation, then smaller organizations have a much higher degree of agency to affect meaningful cultural change, both for themselves and for their broader community. Within the Co-Learning Community, smaller organizations had an easier time making nimble cultural pivots, especially if decision makers were present.

This does not necessarily mean that large institutions are terminally locked in cultural stasis. Participants did identify one way that these types of institutions were able to culturally change: through collapse. While this may not sound like good news to leaders of large organizations, it is in leading organizations through a period of collapse within an intentional, ecological framework, that they can become something new.

After all, as several participants noticed, death and rebirth, rather than immortality, is the cycle present in nature. We should not be surprised when it is the natural cycle of institutions as well.

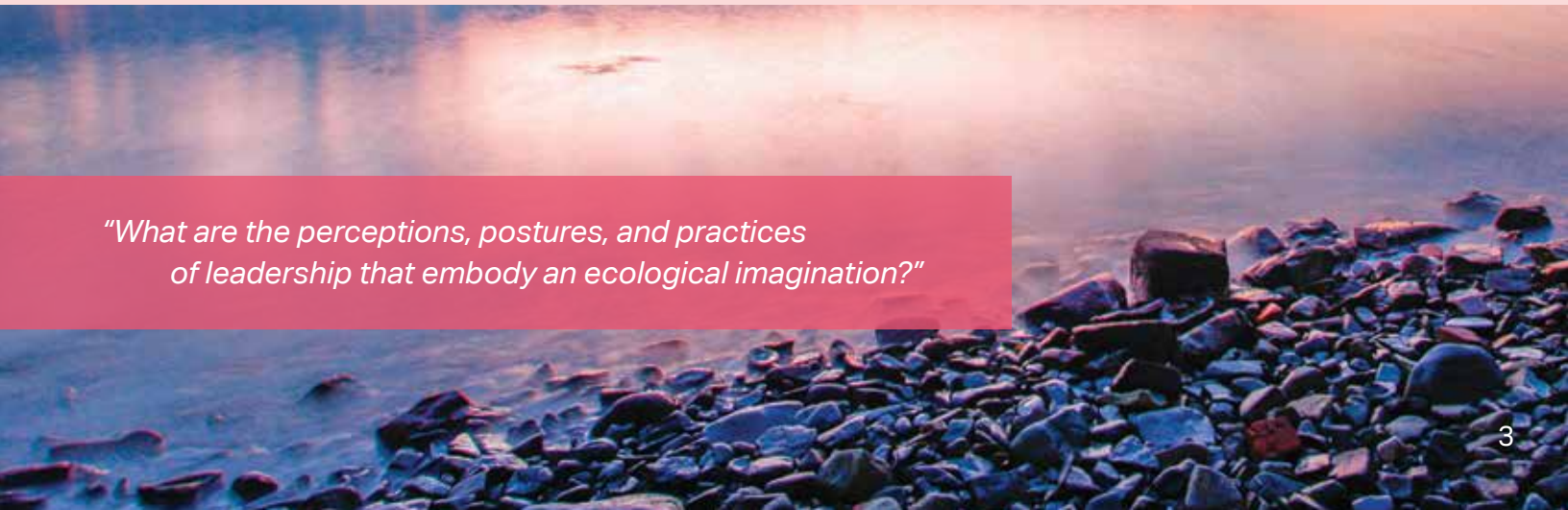
Reflections such as this demonstrate how participants have transformed the dominant metaphor behind the question "What does it mean to make a difference?" from one of power to one of ecology. Within an ecological imagination, even small changes can make a large difference. Each leader's orientation can become a fractal of the organization's larger behavior,[4] and from there, can become a fractal of the larger system in which it is embedded. This process is more circular — tending to the same priorities for season after season, rather than linear — expecting a quick, dramatic change before moving on to the next new project.

From this, we can begin to build a picture of ecologically-imagined leadership, asking, **"What are the perceptions, postures, and practices of leadership that embody an ecological imagination?"** These leaders see health before growth; they focus on the relationships between the different parts of their organizations, and they understand their work as connected to a larger story. They approach their work with grounded hope, approach people and possibilities with curiosity and adaptability, and engage it all as a unified person. They practice spaciousness and intentionally shift speeds when it comes to the pace of their organization's work.

How would organizations act differently if they embodied an ecological imagination? We ended the Research Collaborative not with definitions but with signposts that could lead toward new ways of being.

Our research left us not only with new findings but with new questions as well — ones that we hope will help lead into forms of leadership that can powerfully respond to our climate-changed world.

[4] "Fractals are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales." In other words, no matter how far you zoom in or zoom out in studying a system, that pattern remains the same.
"What are Fractals?," Fractal Foundation, March 13, 2023, https://fractalfoundation.org/resources/what-are-fractals/



Introduction

What does ecological imagination have to do with the climate crisis? Absolutely everything.

As humanity grapples ever more deeply with the realities of a climate-changed world, scientists, activists, and others have begun to realize that the core issues at stake are greater than a policy-and-technology analysis can capture.

If responding to climate change is in part about better policies and more solar panels, then it is also about asking "How did we get here in the first place?" — or, perhaps even more urgently, "Why do we keep doing that which so obviously runs against the future flourishing of our planet and our species?"

The answer to this question is about more than technology or politics; it is about the values and systems that lie at its roots. As lawyer and environmental activist Gus Speth says,

> I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems, but I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed, and apathy, and to deal with these we need a cultural and spiritual transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that.[5]

If we understand climate as the symptom of a deeper set of systemic cultural crises, then *anything* we do to transform the industrial-capitalist, mechanistic, imperialist systems that are the roots of this crisis is inherently climate work. Even more particularly, if we understand this moment as a symptom of our alienation from the planet, then the first place we should look for wisdom is from the Earth, which is our home.

The seeds of this research were planted on the same day that the first case of Covid-19 was officially discovered in Maine right across the street from where we gave a presentation for The BTS Center Board of Trustees on "ecological imagination," a phrase that the BTSC staff found to be both compelling and mysterious.

What is ecological imagination? We didn't know the answer to that question, but we knew that this type of imagination existed only at the edges of our Enlightenment-shaped, mechanistic worldviews.

When we cannot see that another way of being is possible, we end up reinforcing the same systems that created our current crises in the first place.

As Womanist scholar and poet Audre Lorde famously said: "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[6]

Our best intentions are bound by our pre-existing perceptions, which themselves are born of the mechanistic, technocratic, dominating worldview of Western modernity. Therefore, we asked ourselves: What might happen if we first focused on expanding *perception itself*?

The term *ecological imagination* has been our teacher. It has pushed us into conversations that currently lie only on the edges of the technocratic and political discourses that frequently frame the climate crisis. It has compelled us to examine our own assumptions as an organization and to experiment with new practices. It has caused us to turn outward, away from the inward-focused hall-of-mirrors that can so often dominate congregational circles, and toward the broader social and natural worlds in which we dwell. Ecological imagination has impelled us to seek wisdom from creative and committed organizational leaders who share a desire for something new and have felt that same call to meet this moment in a way that is spiritually and culturally transformational.

This is an account of the Co-Learning Community's journey with this metaphor: what it helped them see about their organizations and their work, the new questions it raised, and how it changed their practice of leadership. The language used in this report strives to record accurately what the participants shared with us, which at times may seem emotionally charged, with value-laden language and sharply contrasting metaphors. As these leaders expressed repeatedly, the issues at stake were not just professional, but frequently existential, and the spaces they worked in were both sites of great purpose and deep struggle.

What has this journey looked like so far and what questions are we still asking?

We invite you to enter into its story.

[5] Gus Speth, interview with a British radio presenter in 2013, quoted in a North Carolina Interfaith Power and Light blog post, "The Environmental Crisis is Not Environmental. It is Spiritual," Interfaith Power and Light Blog, Oct. 25, 2017, https://ncipl.org/environmental-crisis-not-environmental-spiritual/

[6] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007), 110-114.

Our Methodology

What does a research process that embodies ecological imagination look like?

We wrestled with this question almost constantly. Through numerous conversations, we began the laborious work of surfacing the many unspoken assumptions that were products of our Western training. We had to invite our emotions, our bodies, and our intuitions into this new imagination through a process of iteration and experimentation. As Annie Murphy Paul notes in *The Extended Mind*:

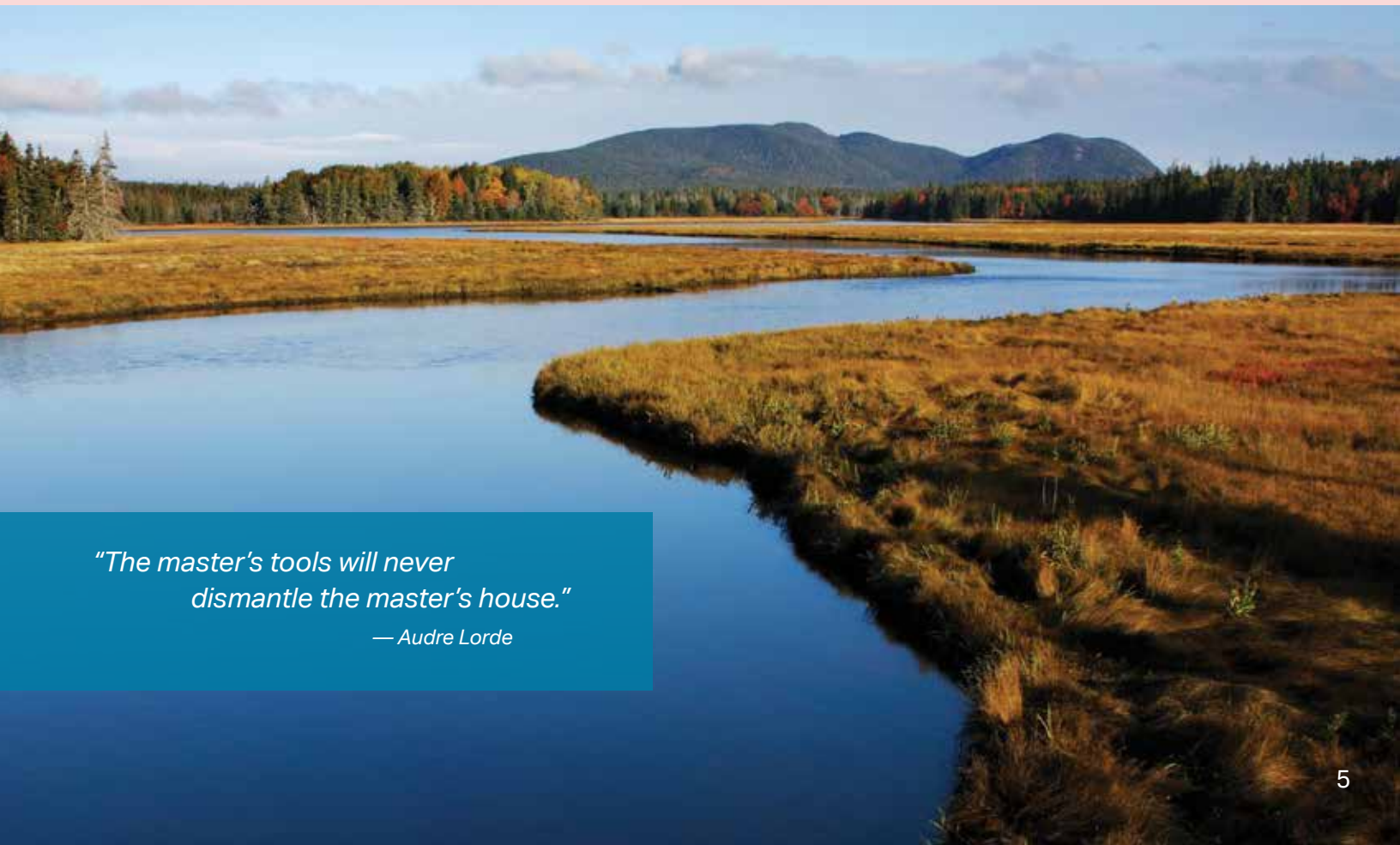
> Our response to the cognitive challenges posed by contemporary life has been to double down on what the philosopher Andy Clark calls "brainbound thinking…." We urge ourselves and others to grit it out, bear down, 'just do it' — to *think harder*…. The smart move is not to lean ever harder on the brain but to learn to reach beyond it.[7]

The commitment to reach beyond "brainbound thinking" has led us into a process that was intentional and, therefore, time intensive. It frequently took us months of conversation and countless drafts of design documents to articulate the "why" for each of our decisions in a way that we felt we could build on.

Our work took the form of creating and nurturing a Co-Learning Community: seven organizations, representing many different sectors, inhabiting a common regional geography, sharing a common discontent with the world as it is and a shared desire to lead in a new way. It has also taken the form of careful qualitative research: paying close attention to the shared and disparate patterns that make up each leader's experience, watching carefully to what they (and we) brought with them into the space of encounter, and noting the quality and shape of our shared journeys.

In our methodology *itself,* we have also sought to make ecologically imaginative decisions throughout our research design: in our initial planning documents and letters of invitation, in our in-gathering of participants, in our plans for fall and spring retreats, in the ways that we have structured conversations and Zoom gatherings, and in the reflective and reflexive ways that we have interpreted our findings.

[7] Annie Murphy Paul, *The Extended Mind: The Power of Thinking Outside the Brain* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2021), 12.



Research Design: The Co-Learning Community Model

Our Co-Learning Community gathered to explore the question, "How would organizations act differently today if they embodied an ecological imagination?" Very early in the design process, we decided that we would not try to *define* ecological imagination. Rather, we wanted to explore what happens when leaders enter into conversation with ecological imagination as the framing and then attempt to practice it in their settings. Definitions, especially when introduced too early, can remove the opportunity for an idea to surprise us. By keeping the definition open, we invited change and emergence into our research process.

We intentionally formed this project as a *Co-Learning Community* rather than as a class. This meant approaching our research with a posture of humility as we tried to learn with and from other people and cultivate collective wisdom as it emerged. Our Co-Learning approach also created an environment of mutual responsibility. As The BTS Center staff shared during the first Co-Learning Community retreat,

> Here — in an emergent Co-Learning Community where the team explicitly decided not to take on the role of teacher; the quality of this experience is determined almost entirely by our collective engagement as individuals and as teams. We trust the community to engage wholeheartedly, to share bravely, to sit with discomfort, and to step proactively into the messy process of trying out what you learn in your own contexts.

While Co-Learning was our emphasis, The BTS Center design team did play a significant role in the formation of this community in terms of exposing participants to particular concepts, thinkers, interpretive frameworks, and model organizations. We introduced books such as *Who Do We Choose to Be?: Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* by Margaret J. Wheatley and *From What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want* by Rob Hopkins. We introduced outside speakers who presented on topics such as circular time and reframing metrics. However, the way that we invited the community to process these ideas was collective, dialogical, and dialectical. For instance, rather than articulating the implications of this work for the leaders or their organizations, we invited them into conversation with each other to reflect on what they heard and on the implications for themselves, in ways that shaped what topics we decided to introduce in the future.

While many of our lessons from our Co-Learning process will eventually make their way into our work with religious congregations, we decided to form the Co-Learning Community outside of the bounds of congregational life. While small mainline congregations form the core part of The BTS Center's constituency, we believe that it was key to begin our research by looking *outwards* for wisdom, rather than inwards. However, we also claimed our religious lineage as an organization at the same time, identifying the Co-Learning Community as a spiritual space. During conversation with prospective participants, we shared, "This is not a Christian space. However, insofar as climate brings up questions of meaning, of perception, and of our deepest held values, we believe this is a spiritual conversation, and we welcome those questions in this space." Identifying our Co-Learning space as a spiritual space and as a place where our deepest values could be discerned, debated, and discussed led to profoundly rich encounters and sharing across significant religious difference.

A Boston Food Forest Coalition community garden

Photo courtesy of Boston Food Forest Coalition

Structure and Process

We decided to form this Co-Learning Community with *cross-sector organizational participation*. The sectors represented in our Co-Learning Community included the arts, immigration, higher education, religion, prison reform and abolition, and agriculture.[8] This cross-sector approach entailed creating a variety of spaces for collaborative learning: from all-group gatherings where participants could learn from each other, to organizational team spaces for reflection, to peer cohort groups, where leaders who had the same roles in different organizations could share their experiences.

This strategy allowed for the rich cross-pollination of ideas, reduced the presumed pressure on participants to "perform" in front of same-sector colleagues, and offered an opportunity to develop a shared common language, one that was not couched exclusively in any single field.

For a project that emphasized ecological imagination, committing to work within a shared geographic landscape, broadly construed, felt especially important, acknowledging how common landscape shapes our wisdom, especially when lived experience is emphasized.

Six of our organizations were from northern New England, with one from the Province of Quebec in Canada, and so they shared a similar landscape and cycles of the seasons.

We focused on *integration* and *praxis* as the foundation of both our formation and research. The BTS Center's Applied Research efforts center on the needs and wisdom of practitioners, not academics or other experts.

Ecological imagination teaches us that deep wisdom emerges from deep engagement with very particular contexts, both natural and cultural. We realized that the richest site for our shared learning would be in studying what happened when people attempted to integrate ecological imagination into their organizational life.

We trusted that this organic process would illuminate what ideas would take root and grow, as well as identify the constraints under which each organization operated.

As activist and writer adrienne maree brown notes in *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, in order to be adaptive leaders, we need "less prep and more presence."[9] Drawing on her work, as well as on the work of thinkers such as Margaret J. Wheatley and Rob Hopkins, we decided to open space for the dynamics of emergence and consciously chose not to plan too far ahead. Choosing to be flexible and iterative in our research design required a much higher degree of attention and intention than is usually found in carefully pre-scripted research models. We needed to pay careful attention to the energy of the community and to the questions that participants were asking. Therefore, the design team met regularly to discern what would be most helpful to advance the discussions that were taking shape in the Co-Learning Community. We then worked directly and responsively with the participants themselves in order to shape our next season of learning together.

Certain elements remained constant throughout. We intentionally recruited only organizations that shared a common geographic region. Our three-month cycle of gatherings — one month in a day-long retreat, the next month in a Zoom gathering with an outside teacher, and the following month meeting in organizational teams and in cross-organizational peer cohort groups — remained constant. Our facilitation always leaned strongly towards small group breakouts, rather than large group presentations or discussions.

Other elements changed, as we tried to follow the directions that the group's discussion took us. For instance, at the opening retreat, one participant mentioned the idea that a leader's responsibility was to create an "island of sanity" in the midst of an increasingly unhealthy and chaotic world — a phrase taken from Margaret J. Wheatley's *Who Do We Choose to Be*?[10] This framing resonated strongly with other participants, who mentioned it unsolicited in the next two gatherings. As a result, we read the book, found that it engaged creatively with the idea of ecological imagination, and made it the centerpiece of our in-person retreat. By attending to this practice of emergence, we were therefore able to let the energy and questions of the participants dynamically shape both the content and the research going forward.

[8] For a complete list of participating organizations, see Appendix A.

[9] adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Edinburgh, Scotland: AK Press, 2017), 42.

[10] Margaret J. Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* (Oakland, CA: Berrett- Koehler Publishers, 2017), 51.

Recruiting Through Relationship

Originally, we expected to recruit participants through an application process. However, as we began to understand how ecological imagination requires *a relational and reciprocal* approach to the world, we shifted to a community-organizing model, selecting our participants through conversation, and pushing back the start of the Co-Learning Community by three months. We had approximately fifty conversations with people across New England and the country, to share with them The BTS Center's understanding of the climate crisis as a spiritual crisis and our hopes for the Research Collaborative. Our process was to receive feedback from our conversation partners, refine our research design in light of the good questions they posed, and always end by asking, "Who else should we be talking to about this?"

Four of our seven participating organizations joined us through introductions made during these exploratory conversations. We also made numerous connections with other people who served as key resources: one who ended up presenting at a Co-Learning Community gathering and another who became The BTS Center's Scholar in Residence. We found that by taking the time to engage in rich conversation, we were able to create a Co-Learning Community that was already invested in our shared agenda. In addition, participants were well-launched into the conversation about ecological imagination before we even had our first gathering together. In short, decisions that seemed like *delays* when using one evaluative framework were actually *advances* when considered in terms of engagement with key concepts and commitment to the Co-Learning process. In this sense, the kinds of distinctions that we sought to discover through the Co-Learning process were *already emerging* in the recruitment phase of our work.

Our recruitment process meant that while participants brought a wide range of identities and experiences to the Co-Learning process, they also held certain "givens" in common. These included a shared understanding of the climate crisis as a product of Western, Enlightenment-influenced worldviews; a commitment to engage the realities of climate change at more than a technological or political level; and a willingness to have spiritual conversations, broadly defined, even if participants did not consider themselves to be religious.[11]

Our participants brought a remarkable set of relational skills to this process. Almost universally, they demonstrated an awareness of what it means to take up an appropriate amount of time and space. They showed comfort with sharing from the heart and expressed genuinely appreciative curiosity about one another. During peer-facilitated sessions, they helped the group honor its agenda, drew out quieter members, and asked follow-up questions to help deepen others' sharing.

The experience of the Co-Learning Community validated these design decisions.

In surveys and focus groups, participants cited the ability to form relationships and cross-pollinate ideas across sectors as one of the most powerful parts of the experience, with some wishing for even greater cross-sector diversity beyond non-profit organizations and higher education institutions.

They also named how this open-ended exploration of ecological imagination provided them the opportunity to focus on contextualization within their institutional settings, which in turn increased their sense of "accountability and curiosity."

[11] We defined these as conversations about deeply held values and asking serious questions about meaning, story, and purpose, using the idiom of our own religious or non-religious traditions.

Students at Ashwood Waldorf School

Photo courtesy of Ashwood Waldorf School

Fieldwork Methods

Our process found its roots in the field of qualitative, ethnographic research through a process that was both carefully designed and intentionally open-ended.

In its broadest definition, qualitative research investigates "the way that people make sense of their ideas and experience."[12] It is a descriptive, interpretive discipline that creates structures to meticulously observe the patterns that shape both people's behavior and how they make meaning within the contexts of their everyday lives. Successful ethnographic research also includes an intentional process of reflexivity, whereby researchers pay careful attention to how their actions, identities, and ideas may impact both participants' experiences and the descriptions and observations that are made by the research team.

Our study of the Co-Learning Community was not, then, an objective, quantitative study. As quantum physicists, social theorists, and others have pointed out, "objectivity" is less a true look at reality than it is a socially constructed *way of seeing*, one that often is influenced heavily by the legacies of white colonial dominance.

We are a religious organization with a definite social mission. We bring a unique perspective to bear on what this climate-changed moment is calling out of us. We chose to bring that mission and perspective to our work rather than trying to set them to the side.

While our approach is qualitative and open-ended, it is in-depth and rigorous, broadly following research scientist Clifford Geertz's call for "thick description" in anthropological fieldwork. For instance, we have worked to identify and describe closely the subjectivities we have brought with us to this space. As described above, we were attentive, from the outset, to the process by which we guided the Co-Learning Community, in addition to being nuanced and detailed in our descriptions of the experience of the participants themselves. Along with extensive documentation and field noting (125,000 words of field notes over approximately one hundred events), we gathered a circle of researchers and practitioners — including activists, religious studies scholars, and sociologists — to support this project, check the lead researcher's perceptions, and offer their own insights. This multi-ethnic group included a community activist, our lead facilitator, and four people with terminal degrees and expertise in ecology, sociology, religious studies, and theology in global contexts,[13] all of whom were actively involved in talking to groups, facilitating retreats, and offering their own observations during monthly meetings. We also invited the participants of the Co-Learning Community to be engaged in their *own* reflective process as well, by asking them to surface the patterns and themes that they observed through surveys, focus groups, and regular questions throughout.

We also ensured that every Co-Learning Community participant gave informed consent to participate in this research process. This included a Memorandum of Understanding signed by every organization that articulated how The BTS Center would observe and notate group gatherings and disclosed that their observations would be shared publicly with others in the form of reports such as this one. Participants were also asked for their explicit consent for every attributed quote that was part of presentations, reports, or other public communications.

[12] Maggi Savin-Baden and Claire Howell Major, *Qualitative Research: The Essential Guide to Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2012), 12.
[13] See Appendix B for a list of Consultant Advisors and their biographies.

What We Learned

Space is the Most Necessary Precursor to Transformation

> *It's hard to be attentive when you are working in an organization that's super, super busy.*
>
> *– Co-Learning Community Participant*

This quote could have come from virtually every participant in every organization, and the universality of this dynamic is both obvious and stunning.

Everyone entered the Co-Learning Community through what felt like a too-narrow opening. Participants constantly apologized for their lack of time, arrived five or ten minutes late, or had to leave a few minutes early. When asked, "How are you?" the universal response was almost always: "Busy!" This opener was frequently followed by "stressed," "sick," or "overwhelmed." Such responses indicate the extent to which most participants held to their commitment to the Co-Learning process while being acutely aware that every minute that they spent with the Research Collaborative was a minute where another item on their to-do list was not getting done. As one participant remarked,

> It's sort of difficult to get here. What can I say? "I shouldn't be doing X, Y, and Z emails right now?" But then I'm here. I'm like, "Alright, if I don't do it, [the work of the Co-Learning Community], I will never get those chances." To do this other work: that's so necessary.

The pressure of busyness (which is often expressed in the language of both "space" and "time") was so universal that it barely raised anyone's eyebrows. The constricting narrowness of people's lives, crowded as they were by commitments both within and beyond the organizations that they serve, became such a given that to imagine *not* being busy would be to imagine a world where something had gone horribly wrong. Moreover, in American culture broadly, "being busy" has become synonymous with "being important," so questioning the breakneck pace of the work is often dismissed as being deviant or lazy. The ironies embedded in such a worldview are what makes this sense of constriction both "obvious" and "stunning." This felt pressure often came from very good intentions. Particularly in the nonprofit world, people feel genuinely, often passionately, committed to their mission, to their constituents, and to stewarding their organization's resources well. However, this pressure meant that participants constantly had to rearticulate the value of their commitment to this Co-Learning Community, both to themselves and to their colleagues. One participant shared her difficulty in inviting other colleagues to engage with the Co-Learning Community.

> I tell them the time commitment, and they're like, "Oh yeah. No." I'm like, "It's really great; you're going to enjoy it!" Even the first conversation we had with Ben, which was 45 minutes or 90 minutes. It was long. I think everyone was like, "Why is it that long?"

When asked about their greatest frustration in contextualizing their learnings and bringing them back into their broader organizations, the primary response was not about a lack of receptiveness from their colleagues or particular strategic challenges; it was about the lack of time for their organizational teams to plan and share what they learned with others. This is the place where participants' most hopeful imaginings almost immediately ran aground. In essence, time seemed like the most non-negotiable reality and the scarcest resource. The words of one participant summarize what most expressed at some point in the Co-Learning process: "We're not in nearly enough conversations together because we just have so much going on that we don't have the opportunity to cross paths and collaborate."

We took it as a given that organizational leaders would be busy. However, we did not anticipate how this lack of space would become the primary barrier to an organization's cultural transformation.

It appears that time pressures are the primary strategy by which cultures maintain the status quo. Busyness creates cultural stasis because it chokes out conversation and meaningful reflection. Sustained and authentic collaborations seldom emerge if forced to operate within carefully proscribed boundaries. Haste short-circuits any inquiries that do not lead to direct actions. Every new vision and possibility simply mean more work for already overworked employees. In sum, a presumed scarcity of time places almost unimaginable pressure on people to justify any expenditure of time that does not directly address the organizations' most immediate concerns.

As the Co-Learning Community progressed, participants began to name changes in their understanding of the meaning of time in organizational contexts. Far from just being "the way things are," the organizational concept of "time" was identified as linear, instrumentalist, and even violent. In the words of one leader:

> I've been thinking a lot about…the language we use for time and how so much of the language is profane. We say things like "spending time," "taking time," and even "doing time;" really talking about time in ways that are kind of extractive and dominated by capitalism and colonialism.

In a culture that values linear time and limitless progress, it can seem like the only way to go is forward as fast as one possibly can. However, this is a cultural construction. Time moves in different ways and in different modes. For instance, it moves seasonally. One participant noted that her approach to time and productivity changed once she acknowledged that her rhythms moved to the patterns of the seasons.

> I noticed that January to March [in my schedule] was really empty. And then I started feeling guilty. And I was like, "Well, I have to think of something I did for work that had value for my organization." Then I just saw [how the seasons] mimicked in my year in a way that I'd never kind of noticed before: very much quiet from

> January to March. And then things started happening: like relationships [in the spring], and then in the summer, it was tending to the relationships, doing stuff, getting out, like being with people. And then, all of a sudden, in the fall, it was incredibly full. It was almost like this harvest that had come from the year. But I very much experienced guilt before I got to the realization that "Oh, I like this; this is a natural cycle."

As another participant noted, even the understanding that time moves forward is a cultural construction. He shared from his African cultural context about how they understand time:

> [In the West] there is this thinking…that the past means ignorance, the future means newness. So, when you're in the future, you're progressing going one direction. The African concept of time, which I proposed, is that we don't go in forward…. Look at that moment or when you come, which they'll call the future, but the problem is the future means death. Therefore, how can it be the state where you are ceasing to be? So, the Africans will say you become an ancestor. You are living in the past, and you are living in the future, and this is the dance that the future and the past married. As a result, we are all just progressing in this circle. Now if you do draw a circle, others will say the past is the present where we are, and then the future in the circle depends on where you're standing.

As philosopher and essayist Bayo Akomolafe has written, "The time is very urgent — we must slow down."[14] Therefore, we designed a Co-Learning process that would simultaneously *take* time but *provide* spaciousness.

That is, once participants made the commitment to join us, we created learning experiences that operated at a recognizably different pace. As soon as participants entered into a felt experience of spaciousness within the context of the Co-Learning Community, the fruits of this open-ended time immediately began to manifest, regardless of the content. As one participant noted after a retreat, "I really loved getting reflection time and time to digest information. It felt so different to be paced in a way that allowed for digestion of difficult topics."

All our participants helped us to see that time is not just about minutes but also about spaciousness. It is about the ability to ask questions that are bigger than one's daily demands and that don't have quick answers. It's about the ability to sit and let the answers to those questions emerge at their own pace. It's about resisting the urge to press fast-forward on deep discussions or to bow to scheduling exigencies. It's about giving room for people to bring their whole selves to their work, even when that means that they occasionally step out of their proscribed roles. Multiple participants noted that the Co-Learning Community had given them the chance to have "conversations that I would never be able to have otherwise."

As participants experienced this spaciousness, they found ways to name its value in terms that they believed their organizations could hear. One participant noted how she always feels guilty when she takes a break during the workday but is immediately more productive afterward. Another noted how spaciousness allows her to process important information better than she would be able to otherwise. Another noted how when her organization pauses, rather than working to exhaustion, people

[14] Bayo Akomolafe, "The Times Are Urgent; Let's Slow Down." Bayo Akomolafe, October 2, 2022, www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/the-times-are-urgent-lets-slow-down/

Waterville Creates at Schupf Art Center, December 2022

Photo courtesy of Waterville Creates

become meaningfully more efficient. Another observed how busyness creates breadth but little depth: a "no" is often necessary to create space in order to do the most important things well.

Even small practices of spaciousness, like seeds planted in fertile soil, can achieve meaningful cultural results if engaged with intention. For instance, Wendy Evans, the Board Chair of Montreal City Mission, took a cue from our spaciousness experiments in the Co-Learning Community and decided to make time for a gratitude practice at the beginning of every board meeting. In telling the story of the first time that she engaged in this practice, she framed it as an act of resistance. From the very start, she faced immediate challenges:

> [When I first wanted to implement this practice at our next board meeting,] our auditor…had like 15 minutes [to meet with us]. I was like: "I just don't quite feel ready to implement this, but I don't know what to do," so we had him do his thing. We're dealing with this audit, and [I said to myself], "Do I still let this [practice] go and wait till the next meeting?" [As] soon as he had to go, I said, "Look, we need to [do this practice] as our transition here." I named that in the scarcity of stuff, we actually had [to practice] gratitude not just as something to do, but as a very deep thing that we can do to name an abundance in our lives.

The results were immediate. She continued:

> The shift just happened so fast. And then as we looked at that data together [and faced] some other big contentious issues, it was a totally different spirit. As we went into that [next] board meeting, there was just this whole deeper relationship.

As Paula Kline, Montreal City Mission's Executive Director, shared, even this small practice of spaciousness changed her understanding of time. "We think of time in such a linear fashion, *but time could be expanded. And I think that's what happened*. If we didn't get to A, B, [C]…and D, [then] it's a deeper look at A-B-C. [Getting through A-B-C-D] became less important…there was a shift to a deeper level." [italics added]

Leaders frequently identified *ritual* as a way to inhabit time with more spaciousness, especially in challenging moments. One leader shared, based on his learning with the Research Collaborative, how he developed a ritual to help his staff process a particularly grueling event when there was not a lot of time to reflect together afterward.

> People were tense and working hard, and then we had to…shift gears and go straight into our stewardship appreciation event at the end of October. And I was able to say, "Let's do something ritualistic because we don't have time to debrief. There's a lot that we just went through; there's a lot of feelings that we're carrying, and tensions and toes that have been stepped [on] in the process of trying to get this right. But rather than actually getting into it, let's just write down everything that you feel like you're carrying — all the burdens that you have from any part of your life — put them on this piece of paper, put them in this pot, and I'm going to go home and burn it tonight and hope as the fire [burns] to transform this, [that it will] free us from it as we shift gears into the stewardship event.

This leader intuited that through ritual, the group would be able to engage in a process of reflection and release that would not have been possible without far more hours than they had available to them at the time. In this way, ritual became a way to discover more space, even if there was no more time.

Other groups developed their own practices to cultivate spaciousness. For instance, The BTS Center, in its capacity as a participant, decided to engage in a month of intentional pause in December where they would refrain from public programming, limit public communication, and spend more of their time in conversation, connection, and reflection. From this emerged a high degree of strategic clarity around a number of questions that the staff had been talking about for years, including discovering a new metaphor that gave insight into their mission, establishing a significant new program focus, and developing a host of opportunities for planning and strategizing that would not have been available otherwise.

In the end, many organizations ended the Co-Learning Community by asking, "What can we do less of?" Spaciousness may still have felt unattainable to the degree that they wished, but many now could clearly articulate its value, having themselves experienced it over the course of the year.

Many noted how even framing the value of spaciousness in terms of "greater efficiency" can be limiting because spaciousness has its own intrinsic value, one which is not defined by greater productivity. As one leader asked at the closing retreat, "Do we really need to have as much programming as we do? Or can we do things in a way that encourages broader collaboration or more meaningful types of things?"

The Spirit of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex

> *"Our structures are really organized on the for-profit model. When we're hiring, when we're counting, we use the for-profit model, not the non-profit model. How do we undo that? Are we divorced from the for-profit world in the not-for-profit world? Aren't we just saying one thing and then doing the exact same thing that the for-profit world is doing? And [in order] to undo it, what kind of society do we need? And I think that'll demand a bit more radical step than what we currently have…because if we look at our budgets and their priorities, they tend to just mirror the corporate world, we just changed the titles."*
>
> *— Co-Learning Community Participant*

When observing conversations among participants, it often felt like there was another entity in the room. This entity had a very particular type of personality: anxious, stressed, frequently judgmental, often overbearing, with a very specific understanding of what it meant to be a successful leader in a "real" organization. This uninvited yet pervasive presence meant that even in sympathetic groups, conversations about organizational transformation often felt like contested spaces. There was a story that participants felt the need to define themselves *against*, sometimes combatively, sometimes in resignation. These dynamics seemed to illuminate a hidden presence that seemed to have its own agenda, one which participants sometimes named the "Non-Profit Industrial Complex."[15]

Like the "Spirit of Capitalism," the omnipresent ethic that Max Weber so compellingly described in 1905 in "The Protestant Ethic and the Spiritual of Capitalism," the Spirit of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex (NPIC) is at once ineffable and, at the same time, has a very specific set of expectations about what it means to be an effective leader of a successful non-profit. It also has a series of implicit and explicit tactics for ensuring that organizations conform to those expectations. The NPIC strictly espouses a very particular sense of what it means to be a "real" organization: one that runs as efficiently as a machine, defines success only in terms of dollars and growth, expects relentless productivity, and legitimates a version of authority that is expressed only through a few types of hierarchical structures. Anything that deviates from this, whether that be a more spacious pace of work, a more collaborative leadership model, valuing something other than dollars and the number of programs, or so on, is assumed to be a result of laziness, not caring, or just playing at leadership, rather than doing the real work in the real world.

The NPIC exerts its influence through a set of implicit tactics, internalized through frequently unnamed and unchallenged expectations that allow for very few ways for participants to feel that they are honoring the work that they engage in. As one person remarked,

> I mean, it's like I have a little PTSD, just naming it. The pressure is so multifaceted, and the desire to do right by everybody…and the grief of not being able to do right by everybody, because you can't. I feel like that's where it's coming from: it's not…coming from any one particular place; I think the pressure comes from the squeeze.

This pressure may be implicit, but it is also relentless: often compressing well-intentioned leaders into a set of narrow norms. The Spirit of the NPIC also sets the expectations for what it means to be a "real" organization. As one board member shared, "There are some cues. We are a non-profit, [therefore] we have a board, a director, a budget, and a strategic plan. These [cues] flag that there's a certain way to be a non-profit." Therefore, when participants began to

[15] This term was originally coined by INCITE!, editors of *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

Members of the Montreal City Mission community at an apple picking event

Photo courtesy of Montreal City Mission

imagine a more ecological way of being as an organization, they frequently also articulated anxiety and self-doubt from the weight of these norms.

Another participant talked about the internal headwinds she faced as her organization tried to chart a new course together:

> I feel a sense sometimes that we might not trust in our own value: our slower way, our more relational way. It feels like the most beautiful thing and is often devalued. I sometimes feel a little unsteady, a little unsure of myself. I can sometimes hear it, too. The threads of our conversation will begin in this very relational way, and then [it] sometimes edges toward language that doesn't match that: language that feels more "non-profity."

The Spirit of the "Non-Profit Industrial Complex" is also embodied explicitly through the very concrete expectations of funders, colleagues, and supervisors, most of whom explicitly expect for-profit strategies and mechanistic metrics while creating a pace that demands relentless productivity. Occasionally these demands may be negotiated, but they simply cannot be dismissed since many non-profits depend abjectly on funding from these organizations for the resources necessary to continue with their work. As one participant remarked, "We get caught in a cycle of funding because funders want short-term projects rather than core long-term work, and this pulls us away from that core work that is so desperately needed in our context."

Leaders feel the Spirit of the NPIC to different degrees and in different fashions. For some organizations, especially those that are largely dependent on annual grant funding, there is often a keen awareness of this Spirit and the limitations it puts on their ability to shape the organizations that they lead. With this awareness often comes a resigned acceptance that dealing with this limitation is "the price of doing business." For organizations that are dependent on this funding but have experienced longer-term financial stability, the awareness of this spirit is often present but is described with less existential urgency. For organizations that are either all-volunteer or not dependent on outside donors for financial security, there is less external pressure from the Spirit of NPIC (although there may be internal pressure in terms of volunteer capacity and sustainability). For this last group, there is often more felt agency to boldly name traditional non-profit dynamics and to experiment, adventurously and non-anxiously, with changing them.

Participants openly wondered what it would look like to be in a more productive conversation with this Spirit in ways that would not compromise their integrity. "How do I share this with my supervisor, my colleagues, my funders?" was an almost constant refrain that we heard during every gathering.

Members of the Co-Learning Community started to imagine what language and stories they *could* use to share about their work. They wondered about the ways that these new forms of language and stories would give themselves space to re-imagine themselves ecologically without wholly overturning the reigning NPIC ethos.

No group has yet generated concrete answers or a concrete, specific strategy, but participants suggested a range of forward-looking possibilities that included: sharing their insights via a DEI/decolonizing lens (which coincided with the priorities of many organizations and their funders), telling powerful stories, and finding detailed, even quantitative ways to describe their work's impact in areas like relationship building. One participant shared how her care for those who participated in their programs led her to become the go-to person when her supervisors wanted stories that would help make their grant reports more compelling:

> When we started doing our reports back to our main funders, [for] whatever reason, I've emerged as one of the people who's pretty good at telling those relationship stories. Our directors kind of rely on me to gather those stories…I've just loved it…like, "Here's all the stories that came out of the thing that we did." It's gotten so that our reports out to the board and other folks have gotten richer and more like "What is the work all about?"

This "story about stories" tells us something. Here we see a staff member finding an opening to convey a different meaning of success and using that opportunity to share in ways that she is naturally drawn to; ultimately establishing a new kind of norm within the organization, one in which she is *expected* to harvest and share stories of success. Here we see ecological imagination serving to animate an otherwise mechanistic set of markers. In doing so, leaders come to recognize the very human impact that lies behind why people have chosen to engage in the work in the first place.

Another group hoped that asking the question, "What felt like success to you this week?" might change the way that their board approached success. One staff member mused:

> I'm wondering: could you . . . share some of this with funders and other groups, too? They're hard-wired to ask about very traditional metrics, and we can report those, but I'm just curious how our board would resonate if we shared [our experiment]…And then what would it look like to go into a conversation with a funder and do that same thing? I don't know how they would receive it. But maybe there's a way to incrementally change the conversation beyond one organization so that we're all thinking a little bit differently.

If ecological imagination finds places to grow in the shadow of the NPIC, it is through these small practices and interventions: new stories told, new questions asked, all of which allow entirely different voices to enter the room.

Reimagining Organizations

Change What We See, Change Our Organization

> *The act of noticing is like having taken the Master Naturalist course. One of the things…you realize: "I've noticed nothing." When you start leading walks, you are like, "No one here is noticing anything." What are you actually seeing in front of your face? What are the things that you've noticed? Because that's a radical act right there.*
>
> *— Co-Learning Community Participant*

At the risk of oversimplifying, there are two dominant theories of change within organizational leadership. The first is, "Change our thinking, change our organization." In this framework, leaders frequently assume that changed thoughts lead to changed organizations. The idea is that if everyone has different knowledge (e.g., that they all read the same book, went to the same presentation, or followed a new strategic plan), then they would also act differently. New information is therefore considered the most reliable method of cultural transformation in ways that are often entirely disconnected from questions of values or practice. Alternately, leaders may believe, "Change our programs, change our organization." In this framework, leaders believe that official institutional action, such as starting a new program, project, or initiative, will culturally transform their organizational identity.

Leaders in the Co-Learning Community came up with a different theory: "Change what we see, change our organization." Rather than transformation being the result of the right thinking or the right project, it is first the result of changed perceptions. We cannot change what we cannot see. However, when we see something that was invisible to us previously, change becomes possible.

In this model, formation begins with perception, and new perceptions begin with an expanded imagination. *Formation* is how our identity is shaped as leaders. This is more than the simple reception of knowledge or acquisition of skills, but also about the habits of hearts, body, mind, and eyes. *Perception* is what we see or don't see about our world, our organizations, our communities, and ourselves. It is our worldview and our self-understanding, one that is pervasively and often invisibly limited by the cultures in which we were raised. How do we expand what we see, which is limited by history and culture? Through the practice of *imagination*, by which we expand our perceptual capacities and strengthen our ability to visualize and actualize possibilities that do not exist within our current reality.

While this process sounds linear, it is circular, and it connects back to practice, which is not about starting new projects but engaging in repeated habits. For instance, the practice of asking better questions can allow leaders to envision new possibilities and change their self-understandings. As Rob Hopkins writes in *From What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future We Want*,

> The question begins to open the door, creating a crack through which we might push and rush to the other side. It is an invitation as much as a question. It is a space we create and hold, and the question at the beginning of that, is what the authors Eric Liuy and Scott Noppe-Brandon call the move "*from what is* to *what if.*" At a time when such spaces seem in short supply, "What if…" becomes the perfect antidote to "There is no alternative."[16]

Hopkins invites his readers not just to ask "What if…" questions but to enter into a process of asking questions in a way that changes their self-perception and therefore opens up new possibilities for how to act.

As the Research Collaborative progressed, participants began to particularly note how metaphors shaped the way they saw themselves and their organizations, and how changing the metaphors they used changed what they saw. One leader described how this worked for him within the context of the Co-Learning Community:

> We have mental maps of society…it's all very mechanistic. Then there's this invitation [from the Research Collaborative] to expand our sense of self and our way of perceiving. And I think the metaphors unlock that…. Nature and natural systems teach us different ways of understanding.

[16] Rob Hopkins, *From What Is to What If: Unleashing the Power of Imagination to Create the Future* We Want (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2019), 123.

These different ways of understanding shift how leaders and organizations understand themselves. As another participant reflected:

> If we are deepening ourselves in this [ecological imagination] and we are coming more into that context, then it is shifting things that we might not even know yet or be able to see. Because it's like a web…[when] something shifts, [something] else is actually moving too.

These shifts may not be initially apparent, but they are real in their impact, and often the change is far broader than leaders are able to see at first glance.

When this imaginative practice is shaped by the metaphor of ecological imagination, the metaphor itself transforms into a teacher. When we allow nature to become our teacher, our imaginations naturally become more ecological, almost regardless of the specific content of any given gathering. As Margaret J. Wheatley notes in *Who Do We Choose to Be*:

> As a living system decides what to notice from the unlimited stimuli in its environment, it shapes the environment into its own little world. "It brings forth a world" through what it chooses to notice. It doesn't matter what exists beyond the perceptual filters of the organism. By its choices, it determines what's relevant and what's not. Everything else disappears.[17]

Simply observing and naming an unnamed norm is a powerful practice in and of itself.

In February 2022, participating organizations were asked to engage in a "small experiment with radical intent."[18]

Participants were invited to do something that would authentically embody organizational ecological imagination, would go meaningfully beyond the scope of the team directly participating in the Co-Learning Community, and would be small enough that it could be planned, implemented, and reported on in three months. Without any prompting from us, *every single participating organization independently chose to work on changing perception*.

The BTS Center invited staff members to ask the question, "What felt like success to you this week?" and tracked the responses, framing it explicitly as a way to deconstruct definitions of success. Ashwood Waldorf School invited groups in different grade levels to go to a place on their campus and respond to the prompts, "I note…," "I wonder…," and "It reminds me of…," as a way to "re-alive" and "re-soul" their experience of place. Waterville Creates generated a set of questions to invite the Waterville community into a new experience of their place, such as "Who was here before us? Who is here now? What stories need to be told? What stories are missing?"

Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition's small experiment with radical intent powerfully illustrates how ecological imagination can change perception. Ryun Anderson, the Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition's board chair, invited a group of people working in prison abolition and reform to imagine an appliance and then to imagine a place in nature. She then asked, "How does change happen with that appliance?" She then asked, "How does that change happen in nature?" She used this exercise to reframe people's perception of how reconciliation works in the criminal justice system, pointing out the ways that reconciliation works differently when imagined ecologically rather than mechanistically. In response to her imaginative reframing, Ryun received an email from one of the facilitators, saying, "The way you framed the experience with visualization was so effective. It had me rethinking the whole topic."

During the closing retreat, Christopher Fuller, Vice President and Chief Sponsorship and Mission Integration Officer of Saint Joseph's College, shared his reflections on why their small experiment with radical intent, which was to invite students to notice the physical environment of the Saint Joseph's campus through a nature walk, had not worked as they intended. He shared that "It did not work, I think, in some ways, because we didn't really understand its promise. We tried to pigeonhole it into an existing event."

His reflection afterward on their failure to *see* the experiment in a way that could have unlocked its possibilities led him to ask new questions and interpret his work in new ways:

> It was the actual failure of our attempt that was productive because it gave me the language… [to] be more attuned to where those opportunities are, and how to be intentional about helping my colleagues see those as opportunities, and begin to make connections between them to create a different experience from all of us as learners.

This *initial "*failure" of perception led Vice President Fuller to ask a new set of questions that changed his priorities as he looks toward the future. He reflected, "I think there's a push towards conversation across departments. And I think what this…is helping me do is perhaps be more attentive to 'Where is the relational possibility?' Otherwise, it turns into just the next programming event."

Fuller's story of what we might call a very successful "failure" demonstrates the ways in which changed perception can open up previously unseen possibilities for collaboration, for depth, and for relationship.

[17] Margaret J. Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017), 185.

[18] This phrase comes from EmcArtsInc., a New York non-profit focused on research and innovation in the arts. Richard Evans, "Small Experiments with Radical Intent: Adapting to a Changing Arts Sector." https://vimeo.com/96509751.

Members of the Research Collaborative cohort from the eight participating organizations gather for a retreat organized by The BTS Center

Organizations Are Ecologies, Not Machines

> *It was the first breakout group of the opening retreat, and Katherine shared how her organization had to lay off three-quarters of its staff during the pandemic.*
>
> *"We pretend that the people that left, that somehow it doesn't make a difference. It's like we are an organization of machines rather than made up of humans."*
>
> *She paused for a moment to collect herself.*
>
> *"We're humans, not machines!"*

Participants speak powerfully about the impact of the burdens that they carry as part of their work. For many, these burdens are experienced as relentless, for others, less so. Nevertheless, they generally don't identify the central cause of these burdens as actively dysfunctional leaders or actively dysfunctional organizational norms. More often, they see their situation as "simply the way it is." If participants experience that their humanity as workers is overlooked, by default, by the organizations that employ them, it is perhaps because our normative view is that organizations are inanimate, not alive. This disanimate thinking distinctly limits an organization's ability to extend compassion, flexibility, or empathy to those who work within it. As one participant notes, "This is the kindest place I've ever worked, and we still kind of suck at it."

If organizations are machines, then it is clear that the people are the parts. Even as participants genuinely appreciate the organizations in which they work, they note how dominant perceptual frames make it difficult for them to be treated as human, to treat others as human, or even to treat *themselves* as human. For instance, most of these organizations work at the same pace year-round — or if their work happens to be slower in certain seasons, these fluctuations generally go unnoticed, rather than being consciously named, so that its activity can ebb and flow in intentional ways. Others have noted that there is often no space to grieve the loss of employees who have left, nor an understanding of why that grief might be important. Organizations almost universally struggle to track their success in ways that do not boil down to a few key statistics about money, program attendance, or growth.

Opportunities for community building or play almost always have to be laboriously wedged into over-packed work schedules in ways that often diminish how much enjoyment participants derive from them. Lack of time means that supervisors do not have the time to celebrate birthdays, offer thoughtful appreciation, or become engaged mentors in their employees' lives.

These limits on human-scale engagement are especially strong for those who bear significant organizational responsibility and therefore feel unable to pause because they feel like the machine would stop without them. One participant shared:

> Starting after the Christmas break and the holidays, I've been pretty much straight out. And I was starting to feel this huge burnout. I knew that there was a time coming for me when I needed some time to rest, right? And then before I [could] do that, I got cluster headaches for about a month now. When I'm in an episode of a headache, whatever is happening, I have to take space. It makes me take space. A question I asked myself was, "Okay, now is *this* my rest?"

This story typifies the dynamics that unfold when humans are implicitly regarded as machines (or come to see themselves as such). This leader is passionate about his organization's mission. As with many of our participants, he works hard because he believes so deeply in what he does and in the constituents that they serve. In a mechanistic frame, the only way legitimately to actualize that commitment is to never let the machine stop running. Therefore, he works "straight out," even while knowing that he is reaching the end of his capacities. In a mechanistic frame, what is one of the only legitimate forms of rest? A debilitating medical condition. After all, the machine world understands that when parts are broken, they need to be fixed (or simply thrown out and replaced).

Focusing on ecological imagination invited participants to remember their humanity, for fundamentally, humans *are* ecological beings nested within the animal kingdom. In response to that invitation, our participants noted how genuinely humanizing practices, even quite small ones, could become powerfully transformational.

Multiple groups observed how responding to simple personal check-in questions at the beginning of meetings made a large difference, both in their own feeling of belonging and in how well the group functioned when having discussions and making decisions. Another participant noted how one sign of a healthy organizational culture was the way that everyone genuinely celebrated each person's birthday. Even a small practice, such as inviting everyone to add a quote from an author whom they value to the end of their email signatures, led to powerful community building. As one participant noted:

> I enjoyed my email so much because all of a sudden this became an opportunity to ask questions about somebody that you've maybe been emailing with for two or three years and didn't know that they loved Dr. Seuss enough to put it in their signature.

These small acts of re-humanization also legitimated new sources of knowledge for leaders to draw on, especially the wisdom that emerges from emotions and embodiment. One participant describes a powerful encounter he had while engaged in a drawing exercise during a Co-Learning Community retreat.

> [I remember] the time we spent in that creative, liminal space of painting, which was challenging for me, because I'm like, "I have things I need to get done." And here I am, you know, using watercolors, right? And then the question was, "What does your picture tell you about your relationship to productivity?" What I had ended up painting [without knowing the question] was a picture of a scared rabbit that said, "Make space to feel."
>
> As I've gone through my day since then, I have noticed that maybe I just need to go for a walk now or take a shower even or something that allows me to access and tap into my emotional reality…[giving] me permission to do something that I probably wanted to do anyway.

Participants in the Co-Learning Community emphasized more than their *own* humanity. As time passed, they began to see their entire organizations as a kind of living entity. When asked about what it means to tend to the spirit of their organization, participants used language like "collective soul" to describe their work, to share how organizations grieve, to wonder about the implications for hierarchies and power in living ecologies, and to highlight the necessity of reciprocity and relationship.

The Co-Learning Community itself developed its own collective wisdom that, at times, seems startlingly alive. During the April retreat, each organizational team was invited to share what they learned from their "small experiments with radical intent,"[19] with the larger group asking curious questions after each team shared. With each presentation, the group's questions shape-shifted effortlessly: from appreciative inquiry for a group whose project was neat and well-formed, to personal encouragement to a team member who was self-critical during her presentation, to concrete coaching for a group that needed help with wording public questions. In this, we glimpsed hints of collective wisdom that was adaptable, insightful, and had a distinct personality, speaking through each individual member.

[19] See Appendix A for a list of the organizations and their small experiments with radical intent.

Boston Food Forest Coalition participants show their pear harvest

Photo courtesy of Boston Food Forest Coalition

Leaders Don't Manage Machines; They Tend Relationships

> *Each member of the community is an essential part of a greater whole. The whole and each part have incalculable value. Relations between individuals can either contribute to the flourishing of the greater community, or they can diminish it. The greater community is like a living organism that always seeks to maintain its own life, its wholeness in the face of that which would fragment it or devalue it.*
>
> *— Co-Learning Community Participant*

Ecological imagination is inherently relational. If machine thinking[20] encourages leaders to look at their organization as a series of interlocking parts that need to run smoothly, then ecological imagination invites leaders to look at their organization as a web of relationships that need tending.

While it is seldom articulated as an explicit goal in many organizations, cultivating a healthy relational ecology requires the same intention that leaders deploy for programming, strategy, or budgets. Sometimes, this means that "productivity" must take a back seat to more human concerns. One Executive Director talked about his decision to place relationship over productivity with a struggling employee.

> I'm thinking about somebody who's really struggling with mental health issues. As a leader in this work, there's a lot of pressure to succumb to the traditional structures: "You're not producing; therefore, you're no good to me." I've had some angst around that, and yet I didn't act on my angst. Today was one of the days where I got to see how my patience paid off. My care for this person was bigger than [their] role, and now that person is able to show up in ways that they couldn't show up before.
>
> It's more than about performing the task. The people that we're working with are not just some components of economics. They are functioning people and humans that we actually care about, and part of that care is not just caring about the work, but caring about who they are as individuals.

Relational ecology is not only about extending care and compassion to others who need it. Tending to relationships means reframing conflict or other difficult events as inevitable, productive, and worthy of positive engagement. One leader noted how engaging with discontented members of their organization often led these members to engage more deeply in the work, even if no policy or program was changed as a result. Another noted the value of her colleague, who frequently voiced "contrary opinions" during staff meetings, and how their discussions were less rich when that employee left. A leader in a school shared how discontented parents offered him a chance to invite them into their school's unique philosophy about the formation of young people.

Paying attention to relational ecology led participants to consider what it means to be in a reciprocal relationship with all the people who belong to their organizational circles. Sometimes, this looked like engaging a broader range of voices in decision-making and learning. For instance, one participant shared how he was intentionally deconstructing the "sage on the stage" model of teaching that he had inherited from his own education, moving to experiment with one that is in active dialogue and collaboration with students. For Ashwood Waldorf School, it was realizing that some of the friction that they had experienced with parents was because parents also needed to be included in the community of learners whom they were nurturing. For Montreal City Mission, foregrounding relationships meant re-conceiving themselves not as an agency providing

[20] The image of "machine" references both the language of the participants themselves and the numerous authors who have explored the connection between modernity and machine-thinking. For examples, see David Korten's *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution,* or Vanessa Machado de Oliveiria's *Hospicing Modernity: Facing Humanity's Wrongs and the Implications for Social Activism.*

services to clients but as a "community of friends," where all are invited to bring their gifts and stories to the table. Paula Kline, their Executive Director, described how Anwar, their Associate Director, approaches his initial conversation with refugees who come to them for help.

> [Anwar] always says: "When people come into the office, I give them 15-20 minutes to complain, to get it out. And then I say, 'Okay, what can you do?' And oftentimes, they say, 'Well, what do you mean, what can I do? I'm here to get some assistance.' [I reply] 'Well, yeah, but you've got talents and gifts, and we need your talents and gifts for the programs that we're running."

Participants also noted how healthy ecologies are necessarily diverse. Leaders particularly noted this with the Co-Learning Community itself, where they identified that the opportunity for engaging with leaders beyond their organizational circles in a cross-sector fashion was one of its greatest strengths. Not only did this enable a rich cross-pollination of ideas, but engaging with people from different contexts who shared similar concerns was, in the words of one participant, "exciting and heartening."

Paying attention to relational ecology also led participants to dream of ecologically-imagined organizational structures that turn the responsibility outward from a small core of paid professionals to a larger community of empowerment. As one leader put it, "We're trying to kind of foster an organizational culture where we are all in charge. If you see something that's a problem or something you want to do, [then] participate in either solving the problem or getting something going that you'd like to see happen."

Early on, leaders noted how ecological imagination invited them to question the hierarchy of their organizations. These structural conversations significantly evolved as participants began to note that nature demonstrates hierarchical characteristics, and thus the question of "Should we have hierarchy or not?" was not actually the one that ecological imagination invited them to ask. Not surprisingly, participants certainly affirmed the pervasive presence of hierarchies that are both artificial and oppressive. As one participant reflected:

> There are hierarchical systems that are not necessarily natural to us. And if we think of it on a really small scale in the workplace, where maybe we're seeing that a chain of command isn't working…we're identifying that it's that [type of] hierarchy [that] is something that we want to push up against, because the way in which they are currently being engaged with doesn't feel natural to us.

But while the artificiality of some hierarchical structures was noted and cautioned against, participants also discovered that ecological imagination reframes conversations about hierarchical structures, from "Is our organization going to be hierarchical or flat?" to broader, more nuanced possibilities. In the words of another participant,

> If [organization as] organism is the metaphor, it unlocks a conversation about hierarchy because there are hierarchies within an organism. There are organs that have control over other organs, but there are other things that just happen automatically. There's a certain way where everything is critically important. Complexity requires a certain amount of hierarchy and…that metaphor helps us have that conversation [about complexity].

Flat, unhealthy structures can create their own set of challenges for a thriving organization, just as unhealthy hierarchical structures can. Rather than asking whether hierarchy is good or bad in the abstract, ecological imagination brings the conversation into the lived context of each organization by asking the question, "What type of hierarchy do we need to support the health of the whole?" Participants also noted that all organizational structures became more obviously "ecological" when the *humanity* within the organization was remembered and valued. In this sense, the conversation about hierarchies and organizational structures was often explicitly linked to the question of what kinds of structures serve the humans who are part of the organization and in what ways. Needless to say, the answers to these queries may well cut in more than one direction, depending on the diversity within the organization and the particular biographies of those who work within it.

In the end, relational ecology prizes health over growth and frames its questions within that value.

One participant began to imagine what that would look like:

> If we designed our organizational structures, based on some of the things that we've been talking [about], like, using that ecological framework, you'd probably start with a question like, "What would mutually flourishing look like for both of us in this office?" [instead of saying] "This is the structure." I feel like going back to one of those ecological principles of reciprocity, [and asking] "What's going to help you thrive? What's going to keep you sustained and fed?"

Rather than dreaming about entirely new paradigms, participants began to dream of new questions, such as "What would mutual flourishing look like?" Together, they began to wonder whether questions like this could grow entirely different organizations if given the space to do so.

Ecological Imagination Invites Leaders to Measure Their Work Differently

> *I do a lot of fundraising. What's required to get the funds are these metrics of "How many people are going to be [there]?" or "How many people participated in this activity?" or "How many people did come?" It's all about numbers. Oftentimes I would really love to explore [what it means to be successful] more deeply... How can we articulate success in a different way?*
>
> *— Co-Learning Community Participant*

Metrics are the place where the struggles concerning perception and imagination become most evident. Traditionally, metrics are seen as a particularly visible, quantifiable form of organizational self-perception — the place where organizations evaluate how well they are inhabiting their identity. Metrics provide organizations with the grounding from which they tell the story of their work to others, especially to the donors, grantmakers, and other constituents who supply them with the resources that they need in order to continue their work. Indeed, metrics commonly become one of the organization's primary perceptual lenses and the filter through which they judge the worth of their collective imaginings. If we can't see it, then we assume it doesn't exist. Likewise, if we can't measure it, then we assume it doesn't matter.

Participants often noted how this form of self-perception can itself become a form of "internalized oppression" and self-exploitation. One noted:

> They [funders] want our "stuff," whether that is our work or our story…I think about organizations that are funding across…differential power and cultural differences…. I think it's really tempting. We can get a lot of money by selling trauma, right? And there's something that [makes] my heart sink like the ability to change these metrics is bounded by something external…. I want [to] apply the ecological imagination to that relationship [with funders] too.

The point that this participant makes is significant and not necessarily apparent unless one takes time for organizational self-reflection. Namely, if many are drawn into meaningful work because of wanting to make a tangible difference in people's lives, there is often the underlying risk that this impact, those people, and the stories about them can be readily turned into commodities, "traded" to funders in exchange for the resources to continue their work. In other words, even a story can become a kind of "metric" if deployed for funding purposes.

While participants intuitively understood that traditional mechanistic metrics miss something crucial about their work, they often struggled to imagine and articulate new ways of evaluating their work and telling their story. They sought means of self-understanding that are concrete and specific enough to feel meaningful. They wondered whether an emphasis on story or relationship are legitimate sources of measurement. In searching for a way to reframe metrics in terms of relationship, one participant reflected on his initial bodily reaction and how he felt torn.

> [There's] something here that feels deeply human. I wonder [if] the mind gets in the way because I wonder how beginning with relationships can scale out. Maybe it's my gut getting in trouble with my mind on this — they're fighting with each other on it.

The fact that this leader noted the ways that the mind aligned with traditional metrics and that his gut aligned with more relational metrics highlights the mind/body split that typifies the mechanistic ways in which leaders are taught to understand their organizations and how this privileges information that tends to be concrete and abstract.

Hour Exchange participants

Photo courtesy of Hour Exchange Portland

When leaders successfully reimagine new forms of self-evaluation and self-understanding, these new ways of self-perception are often long-term and relationally or somatically formed. One group brainstormed about how they could use conversation and questions about somatic experience with program participants to track how well they were fulfilling their mission, building on a question commonly used in therapy: "What does it feel like in your body?" Another imagined following up with constituents a couple years after they first engaged with their organization to ask questions specifically about relationship building, such as how their services helped people to nurture friendships and how those relationships, in turn, gave these initial contacts access to resources such as jobs or housing. Others wondered what language, practices, or coaching they would need to use to prevent themselves from drifting back into mechanistic modes of tracking their success. Participants also questioned whether "success" or "metrics" were even useful terms anymore: perhaps even the terms themselves were in need of transformation.

The overriding question that emerged was not so much "Is redefining metrics the right thing?" as it was, "Is redefining metrics feasible?" Most often, the very hard limits of time and working with funders — who usually require traditional metrics as a condition of their funding — limited how much space leaders felt they had to freely imagine new modes of self-understanding. Deploying new "metrics" might mean telling new stories about their work as an organization; and while that can be exciting, it can also feel time-intensive and risky when it comes to renegotiating relationships with donors and grantmaking bodies. Multiple times, participants said something to the effect of "I really want this, but I have to go at a fast pace so I can get funding from backers, so I can do this work that I care about so much."

In the end, the most promising route emerged as participants wondered whether the funder/organization binary was *itself* a product of an industrial imagination. In the words of one person, "Maybe they're being confined by the same things?"

Leaders began to wonder whether some funders might *also* long for a new way to do their work; and that by building relationships in ecologically imagined ways, it might be possible for those who sometimes felt like unintended adversaries to become open-minded supporters.

Understanding that funders *themselves* may be frustrated by culturally inherited binaries and metrics opens up new opportunities, allowing funders and organizations to unite against a common "opponent": the accepted way of doing things.

One participant, who also sits on the board for a grantmaking organization, shared how her experience pioneering a participatory grantmaking program led to a process that was messier, more collaborative, and, ultimately, more empowering:

> We have this participatory grantmaking group which includes people that are applying for grants and members of the general public, which is a unique way of granting money. And it's messy because we invite dissenting voices into that process. Inevitably there is tension around that. But having those voices makes for richer learning, discussion and, ultimately, decisions. It is time consuming: we take three days, which is the end product of several other steps. It's not efficient. But the end result feels better than a group of folks sitting in a room making a decision. It's a decision that is owned by the group. And I wish I could take that model and put it in other places.

In this story, we hear the value that can come from emphasizing collaboration over efficiency. Consciously choosing a less efficient process allowed the grantmaking group to enter into a dialogue that was far richer in its outcome than it would have been otherwise. What type of metrics might be able to capture depth, equity, and impact in ways that are not exclusively tied to efficiency or to growth? The Co-Learning community consciously chose not to provide prescriptive answers, but it intentionally posed (and re-posed) the question, while providing several possible avenues for experimentation.

All Organizations Have Roots

> *[We are] an aggregate member organization that is part of a vast ecosystem of interdependent relationships. Like a living organism, all our members are essential to maintaining its vibrancy. All of our activities, therefore, should be designed to strengthen that web of relationships in our community/communities.*
>
> *— Hour Exchange Portland answering: "To us, organizational ecological imagination is…"*

Ecological imagination means understanding that every organization comes from somewhere: a somewhere that is both about history and about place.

Like people, organizations have ancestors. Through the process of co-learning, we found leaders becoming aware that they were part of a broad web of interdependent relationships and that they themselves grew from the soil of their lineage.

This awareness provided resources both for positive transformation and for careful reflection. Significantly, this realization emerged against the backdrop of the Spirit of the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, which, as described above, often propagates an atmosphere of place-less, timeless ambition, and pressure: the assumption that if what one is doing is worthwhile, then it should be equally worthwhile for everyone, everywhere. As one participant noted, "When responding to those [pressures], it's easy to forget who you are." Lineage and history are too often sacrificed on the altar of institutional expediency.

As the Co-Learning Community progressed, leaders increasingly cited their own lineage as both a resource for ecological imagination and as an invitation to reflect on the limits of their current self-understanding. Multiple organizations shared how the Co-Learning Community was a form of institutional engagement in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, or Decolonizing work for them, especially in the ways it examined how their dominant worldviews were connected to ecological destruction, the climate crisis, and oppression of people. They described the work of co-learning as a way for them to understand how they had unintentionally internalized some of these dominant, often destructive, views through their own organizational practices.

On the other hand, most organizations found their lineage to be the rich soil from which ecological imagination could take root. In the words of one participant, "As an organization, we're close to this core [of ecological imagination.]" For instance, every member of the Saint Joseph's College team (whether practicing Catholics or not) cited their founding by the Sisters of Mercy as one of their most essential resources. They collectively named the Sisters of Mercy's core concerns, which include "caring for Earth's ecosystems," as one of the college's greatest strengths when it came to stepping into ecological imagination. Montreal City Mission shared how they were turning back to their religious roots as an organization founded by the United Church of Canada, as a more authentic way to be in relationship with their multi-religious environment, where previously they had downplayed their religious affiliation.

Rather than feeling the need to become something other than who they were, participants experienced ecological imagination as inviting them to become more deeply who they *already* were.

Just as organizations found roots in their history, they also found roots within the very concrete geographies and communities where they were located. Paying attention to the *relational* dimensions of ecological imagination also invited a sense of genuine interdependence with other organizations and with their broader community context. As the Co-Learning process unfolded, participants increasingly explored the ways in which fostering connections with other organizations and with their broader community strengthened their own sense of mission and identity. At one point or another, *every* group has asked how their broader community could shape their organizational identity. Saint Joseph's College and Ashwood Waldorf School both explored how they could invite their students (and community members) into deeper relationships with their campuses. Organizations such as Waterville Creates, Boston Food Forest Coalition, and Hour Exchange Portland engaged in regular practices to ensure that their work is shaped by the municipalities that are part of their names through surveys, potlucks, community placemaking art events, or countless ongoing conversations with community leaders.

Students at Ashwood Waldorf School

Photo courtesy of Ashwood Waldorf School

It is well worth noting the diverse directions organizations can take once ecological imagination is embraced. For instance, attentiveness to ecological imagination can lead to identities that are *both* more fixed and more fluid. On the one hand, their sense of identity, rooted in lineage, becomes both more clearly and deeply held. This allows organizations to develop very clear criteria to guide when to say "Yes" and when to say "No." On the other hand, this level of self-aware interdependence can lead to a responsive, iterative posture, where programs and projects come and go regularly as the organization responds to the life of the wider community — a process that requires a high degree of non-anxious adaptability from leaders.

Adaptability of this kind frequently means engaging in messy work with deep intention rather than always striving for sterile excellence. For instance, Boston Food Forest Coalition (BFFC) has long experience embodying an iterative process and posture that is intentionally open to messiness. When they start a new food forest, they immediately reach out to neighborhood members to ask for their support, or at least their assent, and will not continue a project unless they can get a "yes" from every land abutter. Neighborhood residents work with Boston Food Forest Coalition to develop their vision for the food forest, and local volunteers become the core of the group of stewards who care for the project going forward.

This approach inevitably leads to moments of chaos. BFFC leaders can point to numerous projects that stalled out, went sideways, or simply failed to take, and they see that simply as part of the process. They work with stewardship teams on an ongoing basis, acknowledging that each food forest will go through its own ebb and flow. Orion Kriegman, BFFC's Executive Director, explains the dynamics of this process:

> You do go down dead ends to get somewhere…you backtrack, you try another approach. That's part of the patience: it's not all going to just flow. It's important to just accept that's the nature of this work. That's the nature of the world we're in. Another thing I often say is, "Humans are really difficult to work with, but they're the only game in town."
>
> There are natural cycles to everything. People who do community organizing talk about that when you have a campaign, you're building momentum to your goal. When you get to your goal, there's just a drop off [and a] dissipation [of energy], and you have to build back up to a new goal, and then there's a drop-off. And just having some awareness of those patterns. You can help people who are just stepping into this work and know what's normal, what's to be expected.

This idea that an "ebb and flow" process is normal, rather than a sign that something is going wrong, can lead to a willingness to hold everything lightly, to be patient, and therefore to respond to whatever comes one's way with a sense of grounded adaptability.

Ecological imagination, with its inherent emphasis on relationships, also leads to a greater awareness of interdependence with the more-than-human world.

This understanding takes root in simple practices, such as a commitment to holding meetings in outdoor spaces or considering how an organization's work can help people reconnect with the broader world around them. One of the teachers at Ashwood Waldorf School describes how she helps her students enter into this type of interdependent community with the natural world:

> When I walk in the woods with our kids, I may notice, "Wow, that tree really is beautiful. Look, there's a squirrel who worked really hard at building that nest." And I wouldn't necessarily say it, but I'll be just looking at it. And the kids say, "Oh, what's that? Oh my gosh, it's a squirrel." That's reverence, which is gratitude for where we are, who we are…

Simply stepping outdoors led naturally to ecological imagination. Montreal City Mission noticed how just by going outside for a meeting, even if it was their parking lot, led to deeper relationships and a more spacious sense of time. Over the course of the Co-Learning Community, increasing numbers of participants began to offer their colleagues the chance to hold one-on-one meetings as walk-and-talks. One participant described how she began to hold nature walks for students and colleagues.

> Because I lead nature walks and do nature journaling with people, I've just decided that…the most radical act that I can do with people is just to have them sit with their phones off for ten whole minutes. And it sounds ridiculous, right? It's ten minutes. But I'm like, "I just have a few rules. And yes, you could probably break my rules, but sit without your phone on, and put it away. And all I want you to do is notice, like, just notice." People come away with, "That changed my day!"

The outdoors not only led participants into greater spaciousness, it also led them into a broader sense of their identity and mission — one that had something to do not just with people but the whole circle of living beings. Some considered putting bird stickers on their building's windows or bringing up the question of light pollution in their offices. Others began to share what they were learning when they looked at their local ecologies as teachers. Others remarked on the profound sense of relational accountability that they felt to non-human communities and their grief at the ways that they had already been harmed.

In the end, rootedness in both place and history meant leading with greater intention and greater adaptability. Leaders found themselves more amenable to their wider community and to their history, and this led to a sense of mission that gained both scope and depth over the course of the Co-Learning Community.

Can an organization really "change the world"?

Can We Really "Change the World"?

> *How do we avoid despair? I was talking with my eleven-year-old and she was like the rest of us: "What's happening here?" By the time you're 80, this world might be quite a hellscape. I think one problem with being in the academy is that it is very easy just to be at that bird's eye view: to be really anxious and prognosticate. It's not very helpful to think about a lot of these things in terms of our individual choices. But you make choices that then affect somebody else's choices and that then affects somebody else's choices. You get your hands in the dirt, and that inspires somebody else to get their hands in the dirt. It can make a difference. But I don't know. I've been struggling with this a lot lately.*
>
> *— Co-Learning Community Participant*

Can an organization really "change the world"?

This burning question underlies much of what participants brought with them to the Research Collaborative, an experience that was framed as an invitation to join a community of "leaders from many fields who yearn for the organizations that they serve to become the best possible versions of themselves in response to our planet's deep need." During the opening retreat, participants were asked about their bodily responses to the climate crisis. This crisis was framed as the manifestation of the cultural values of the Enlightenment, which created the sacred/secular divide and taught that we should view both the world and ourselves as inanimate machines. The most prevalent response was anxiety, manifested in clammy hands, tightness in the chest, and headaches.

The question of "making a difference" in their organizational culture, let alone the world, invited similar levels of anxiety and a tendency towards "paralysis by analysis."

Between the world-as-it-is and the world-as-it-could-be lies terrain made both incomprehensible and unnavigable by the irreducible complexity of the dynamics facing them.

"I almost feel paralyzed by this," admitted one Executive Director.

Those living and working in Western society tend to think of their problems in terms of power. If we perceive a problem, then we consider it our moral responsibility to accumulate enough of a certain type of power (generally institutional, financial, or technological) to fix it. But what happens when we encounter a problem, such as the current climate crisis (or the cultural transformation of an organization), that cannot be fixed? The Western worldview is unable to engage or even see unsolvable challenges, especially when organizations reach the limits of their own power. Indeed, within a Western cultural framework, it is implicitly (or even explicitly) *verboten* to suggest that a problem perhaps *cannot* be solved.

Ecological imagination brings participants up against the limits of their own moral agency as individuals, as leaders, and as organizations. Leaders are keenly aware that they are not always capable of doing the "right" thing because of the hard realities under which they operate. Their work often consists of a series of difficult, frequently frustrating tradeoffs, where they are inevitably amenable to other cultural forces, such as the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, the perspectives of supervisors, donors, and constituents, or other factors particular to their context. As one Executive Director noted:

> I don't mean to be sounding despairing; it just means that those compromises are real. Sometimes we do it better than other times, and sometimes we honor the relationships we're in in a way that feels great. Other times, it seems like we make a mistake because we didn't slow down. But sometimes, we couldn't slow down, and it was just the reality of our circumstances.

Can an organization or its leader "change the world?" The emerging consensus is no, especially at the level of large systems. From our participants, we have learned that the size of an organization is a strong determinative factor in its ability to affect cultural transformation. Participants working within larger institutions note the durability of the patterns that they are trying to change. It takes considerable work to push against "dominant and domineering" dynamics for a long period of time, especially as these systems can quickly return to their original state even after considerable effort. As one leader noted, this cultural stasis is endemic.

> Organizations are embedded within certain systems. They've adapted and evolved within that context, and they're more responsive to those external systemic pressures than to the internal inspirations that we might bring. Can an organization really change? The reason why it's persisted is because it figured out a way to fit in the world as it is. Maybe it has to be transcended because even if we move them a little bit, they're going to snap back into place because the structure of the world requires them to be that way.

In this framework, the common pressure for successful organizations to "scale up" or "expand their impact" becomes a means to induce cultural conformity. Growth can put an organization in a dependent relationship with the very dynamics that they are trying to culturally transform, such as donors, grantmaking bodies, or other sponsoring funders, who enforce the norms of the dominant mechanistic culture. This is rarely an explicitly stated strategy. However, financial dependence makes an organization more vulnerable to implicit expectations about what qualifies as a "real organization" as defined by the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, which in turn makes it more difficult for them to maintain themselves in a position of significant social differentiation. Large organizations will almost inevitably drift towards a position of cultural normalcy simply because of the strength of these implicit social and financial pressures.

If larger institutions can be particularly ineffective in cultivating cultural transformation, then smaller organizations have a much higher degree of agency to affect meaningful cultural change, both for themselves and for their broader community. Within the Co-Learning Community, smaller organizations seemed to have an easier time making nimble cultural pivots, especially if decision-makers were present as part of the community. For instance, The BTS Center was able to brainstorm, plan, and implement a month-long programmatic pause in December over the course of just a few months. Other small organizations directly polled members about shifting to a climate focus or adding ecological language to their hiring practices, while leaders from larger organizations frequently either had a difficult time coordinating schedules to meet as a team or found it difficult to find a sufficiently "local" place within which to focus their efforts. One participant noted that she served in three organizations of different sizes and reflected on how size changed her ability to lead with integrity.

> I can see how that ecological imagining of leadership varies from each of these three places. The smaller the organization, the easier it is for us to bring that relational aspect and for us to try to move towards [it]. And for us [our organizational team], I think that we have assembled a group of such like-minded people who really believe in establishing relationships and being inclusive, and making sure that decisions that we make include the folks that we are supporting and serving.

Even if small organizations are better able to adapt and affect meaningful cultural change, in part due to these relational dynamics, then this does not necessarily mean that large institutions are terminally locked in cultural stasis. Participants did identify one way that large institutions were able to culturally change: through collapse. In other words, if large institutions grow in inextricable dependence on the cultural conditions that allow them to be large, then cultural transformation will inevitably entail significant institutional deconstruction. While this may not sound like good news to leaders of large organizations, there are, in fact, many ways to collapse. It is in leading organizations into a period of collapse within an intentional, ecological framework that they can become something new.

After all, as several participants noticed, death and rebirth, rather than immortality, is the cycle present in nature. We should not be surprised when it is the natural cycle of institutions as well.

The story of The BTS Center — which was both the hosting organization for this Research Collaborative and a participating organization, as well, with its own small team involved as participants — illustrates the immense agency that leaders in large institutions have when faced with questions of cultural transformation and institutional survival. The BTS Center is the successor organization to Bangor Theological Seminary, which was one of the oldest seminaries in the country before its closure in 2013. For two hundred years, Bangor Seminary was singularly focused on providing theological training to students who would otherwise have been considered too poor, too old, or too uneducated to receive a seminary education so that isolated rural congregations could receive trained spiritual leadership. Because it always operated in a position of economic and social marginality, the Seminary struggled with financial sustainability throughout its entire history. In the early 2000s, as it experienced firsthand the disruptions both in American Christianity and in higher education, some of its leaders began to understand that its lifespan was limited.

Following a period of deep discernment, its leaders made the painful decision to close before their last dollar had been spent and their last student had left so that their resources could be used as a seed for something new. This was a difficult and messy decision, one that has left behind its own legacy of hurt and grief. It took several years for The BTS Center to emerge from this transition, but it now has gained significant momentum as a private operating foundation with a mission to "Catalyze spiritual imagination with enduring wisdom for transformative faith leadership" and a programmatic focus on "spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world." Its Executive Director, Rev. Allen Ewing-Merrill, reflected on this transition and the Seminary's legacy:

> There's no question, the religious landscape has shifted dramatically over the past two hundred years, and the economics of higher education have certainly shifted, as well. We are living in a time of complex, accelerating change, often-traumatic change, and I believe transformative faith leadership has never been more important. With great care and much prayer, we are holding the incredible legacy of Bangor Theological

> Seminary — stewarding that legacy as faithfully as we can — and focusing intently on our mission: to catalyze spiritual imagination, with enduring wisdom, for transformative faith leadership. As we orient ourselves to the challenges of this moment and to the future, we're incredibly grateful for the long line of faithful servants who have come before us — faculty and administrators and students of Bangor Theological Seminary through two hundred years, on whose shoulders we stand and whose legacy we strive to honor through the work of The BTS Center today.

It was the ability to intentionally enter into a season of collapse that enabled The BTS Center to emerge as a new expression of the Seminary's lineage. In this way, collapse was actually a means by which the Seminary could continue its work beyond its current organizational incarnation.

When naming the hard limits of their organizational and moral agency, participants articulated relief alongside anxiety. The journey, in the words of one participant, was "going into despair and coming out through connection and action." Naming these limits allowed participants to set down a burden that was never theirs to carry, and provided them with new opportunities to look for productive ways to engage the world as it is.

With surprising rapidity, the Co-Learning Community began to name collectively what meaningful engagement looked like, even if "changing the world" was no longer an option. It starts with the realization that cultural transformation if it is to have integrity, must begin with the self: a "reorientation of the heart," which allows each leader to act with integrity within their organizational contexts. In the words of one participant, "The personal can be the organizational."

Rather than "changing the world," the goal is to find the places where one can exercise agency with steadfast, conscious intention to create, in the words of Margaret J. Wheatley, "islands of sanity." In describing leadership within "islands of sanity," Wheatley explains:

> The term island may be too physical a way to describe these…. Yet, for many, it's an interior space bounded by our values, commitment, and faith. The boundary is only visible in our actions; no matter where we are, we stand out as different, leading against the norm. We aren't intent on changing the world; we simply try to work in ways that honor people and evoke our best human qualities.[21]

Wheatley reminds us that we can (and should) exercise local agency, whether that "local" be your community, your department, or simply your co-workers. It is within these localized environments that people can come back into touch with a grounded sense of their own agency and power.

In our findings, we saw a wide range of localized efforts that involved both stated and implied embodiments of ecological imagination, where practices of interconnection and articulations of non-mechanistic values were tested out and incorporated. We heard board chairs cite gratitude or personal check-in practices that changed the tenor of their meetings. Teachers spoke about change actualized through personal relationships with their students, sometimes not fully realized until they ran into a student years later. Executive Directors frequently shared how small moments, such as grace offered during a challenging personal period with an employee or taking an extra twenty minutes in conversation to listen intently to a constituent, made an outsized difference.

Given our emphasis on ecological imagination, it is perhaps not surprising that *all* of the participant organizations named very specific efforts grounded in place: for example, starting a food forest in a neighborhood, offering mindfulness practices on walks in the woods, establishing arts projects at a specific school or community center, or creating a partnership with a local farm, as some of the ways that they identify that they are making a difference.

[21] Margaret J. Wheatley, *Who Do We Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2017), 154.

In the words of one participant:

> I think about looking at the tiny changes we have made that have made a huge difference…I think it's very easy to think we need to do some huge thing. I think we need to celebrate and recognize the little things we do and can continue doing that make a difference.

Reflections such as this demonstrate how participants have transformed the dominant metaphor behind the question "What does it mean to make a difference?" from one of power to one of ecology. Within an ecological imagination, even small changes can make a large difference. Each leader's orientation can become a fractal of the organization's larger behavior and from there, can become a fractal of the larger system in which they are embedded.

From this place of intensely particular focus, big dreams begin to emerge again, often first from small organizations, who imagine what it looks like when all these "islands of sanity" begin to connect. As one leader said:

> Sometimes at a really small scale, we can do very deeply emergent processes really well. Even outside of an organizational infrastructure, it might just be one relationship with one person. But I think that those matter, too…. I think when we try to take it to a very large scale…[we] bump up against systems that are meant to keep us from operating in that way because they don't serve that system. Lately, I've been thinking a lot about . . .vines as a metaphor for connection because the vine will find its way through cracks and then show up someplace else. I wonder about the ways that we can connect in a vine-y way across places as well.

This "vine-y" transformation happens in ways that are both slower and deeper than a traditional change process. Its development is more circular — tending to the same priorities season after season, rather than linear — expecting a quick, dramatic change before moving on to the next new project.

Cultural change is slow work.

Frequent leadership changes mean that even the best ideas don't have sufficient time to take root before organizational leaders are off to their next idea or next job. Rather, ecological imagination emphasizes that stability, even when one is not at the top of an organizational hierarchy, may have greater influence. For instance, a teacher who stays in the same school for thirty years is more likely to make a long-lasting cultural difference than the principal who stays only for five. One leader reflected on this through the metaphor of soil, saying,

> [It's] like building the soil, which takes time. We know in agriculture how important that is…that [it] can pay benefits in the future, but sometimes not right away. The health is actually in the soil of a garden…it's going to take time for everyone to kind of break free of those old habits and [then it will happen] in unexpected ways that we wouldn't even think about.

Participants left the Research Collaborative with a renewed sense of hope and agency. This took many forms. For some, it was the simple conviction that the future is fundamentally unknowable, which means that they always have agency to affect change, even if the prognostications don't inspire optimism. With others, it was the reminder that they were not alone; there were others who were doing the same work, most of whom they would never meet or know about. For others, it was understanding they were connected to a larger story. Even their small stories were nested in much larger stories, ones that have the power to make a difference or maybe even change the world.

As the Co-Learning Community came to a close, participants named how small changes in themselves could make a big difference in their organizations. Orion Kriegman from Boston Food Forest Coalition has integrated ritual into his leadership and is taking time to let himself be human in the context of his work. Sarah Braik from Hour Exchange Portland named that the organization was changing how their activities were planned, from centering on board leadership to creating circles of members that were empowered to design and run new events for the organization. The staff and leadership of Waterville Creates noted how some of the questions that they asked for their community-wide art project came directly from suggestions from other members of the Co-Learning Community. One member of their team shared how she's bringing humanizing practices into meetings and trying to think more intentionally about the best role she can play in her organizational ecosystem. The BTS Center implemented a full month of pause from most public programming and communication, a practice that is now part of their annual calendar. Christopher Fuller from Saint Joseph's College shared how the Co-Learning Community reshaped the way he goes about his work, from understanding how ecological imagination connects to their roots as an organization, to how his job needs to be less about starting new events or programs, and more about connecting people in collaboration. Ashwood Waldorf School shared that they have learned better ways to integrate the campus into their learning and named the necessity of letting some of their long-held traditional Waldorf festivals go so that their calendar is not overly busy. Montreal City Mission changed their board practices to include moments for both gratitude and storytelling.

In short, even the small practice of gathering once a month for one year in the context of a Co-Learning Community created small changes that participants could identify as having the potential to make a large difference. It is this emerging emphasis on the power of small that left participants feeling that it was indeed possible to "make a difference," even if none of them could "change the world."

Figure 1 - "What is ecological imagination, both in journey and destination?" Waterville Creates and Hour Exchange Portland

A nursing student at St. Joseph's College

Photo courtesy of St. Joseph's College

Ecologically-Imagined Leadership

> *And then I thought about the repercussions. I said to my husband, "I feel like I've sailed us into a storm." And he said to me, "We were in a storm, and you've sailed us into port, and we have to repair the sails and sail out again." And so sometimes, what looks like sailing into a storm is actually falling out of a storm, and I think about that in these times, just preparing for the unfamiliar and getting comfortable with it, that space of growth and moving out.*
>
> *– Co-Learning Community Participant*

What are the perceptions, postures, and practices of leadership that embody an ecological imagination? As we listened to participants share about their organizations, we also observed how they carried themselves as leaders. We asked: What was it about this group that predisposed them to a question about organizational ecological imagination in the first place? What did their participation unearth about what ecologically-formed leadership looks like? Questions of leadership emerged regularly throughout the Co-Learning Community, even when not explicitly solicited. We also were able to closely observe the experience of Executive Directors through peer cohort groups and conducted targeted conversations specifically addressing ecologically-imagined leadership. However, we did not have sufficient opportunities to probe the question of leadership with the same level of specificity that we brought to questions of organizational creativity, growth, and constraints (along the lines addressed above). Therefore, our hypotheses and insights are preliminary ones that, ultimately, would need to be refined through further research and observation.

Perceptions, postures, and practices were terms that emerged directly from our observations. *Perceptions* are what people see or don't see about themselves, their organizations, and the world around them. In other words, a leader's worldview is the foundation of how that person is formed as a leader. It is frequently the unnoticed, unnamed norms that hold the greatest influence, and perceptions and norms often live side-by-side in mutually reinforcing ways. *Postures* describe a leader's approach to their work — not simply their skills, but, more generally, how they interact with their environment. This can include the questions they ask, their responses to unexpected developments, and how they interact with others and themselves. Finally, there are *practices*, the day-to-day habits that leaders integrate consistently into their work and often model for others.

The question of leadership that embodies an ecological imagination is nested within the assumption that the environment plays a large role in forming leaders. Rather than seeing "ecological" characteristics as being intrinsic to leaders — something that they have or don't have — we understand that leaders do not develop *ex-nihilo.* The contexts in which leaders are formed play a significant role in whether they are able to step into new perspectives, postures, and practices, regardless of innate talent. Indeed, it makes consummate sense that leaders with strongly developed ecological imaginations would quite readily recognize the extent to which *context* (a mix of cultural and natural "ecology") would play a strong role in their own development. Even the best seeds will fail if planted in poor soil. As one leader noted, "Depending on where I am, it's sometimes easier for me to employ the things that I know I want to be and model and lead with…but it falls apart when I am within an organization where it's an uphill battle."

Multiple participants noted that it was *the environment* of the Research Collaborative, not just the content, which proved transformational for them.

For instance, one leader noted how the pace of the Co-Learning Community itself gave room for deeper reflection when she shared, "I've noticed that they [the Research Collaborative facilitators] are proficient and they practice space for thought. The pace of our in-person retreat felt like a human pace, an ecological pace."

With all this said, there were several unique perceptions, postures, and practices that emerged. There are three *perceptual* patterns leaders in the Research Collaborative appear to hold in common. First, **they see health before growth**. In industrial capitalism, leaders often equate the two, but leaders with an ecological imagination understand that growth, while sometimes an expression of health, can also lead to mission drift, an unsustainably accelerating pace, and greater economic vulnerability while still not guaranteeing that an organization will make a greater impact than it did previously. Rather than seeking growth as the more reliably effective way for organizations to do their work, the leaders in the Co-Learning Community understood that organizations that are healthy will naturally produce better outcomes.

Secondly, rather than seeing their organization as a sum of many discrete parts, **these leaders value the *relationships between those parts.*** More importantly, they understand that a key part of their work is tending those relationships. In other words, while developing a good program or project is still important, perhaps even more important is how those programs and people are connected dynamically with one another. Near the end of the Co-Learning Community, one leader shared that his key insight was that "[ecological] practices are already happening [in our organization]" and then asked, "How can we try to pull people together with intention? I think the challenge…is to try to be more intentional in trying to pull them together to some kind of coherent or dynamic relationship with each other."

Finally, **they see their work as connected to a larger story**. What they do is nested within larger ecosystems of meaning, and they have the ability to articulate how the local, concrete actions that they take are connected to broader issues that go beyond the bounds of their individual organization. This isn't just about looking outward to connect their work with challenges such as anti-racism or the climate crisis; but also, inward to roots, lineage, and history: understanding how the organization of the present is an expression of who they were in the past.

At different points through the Research Collaborative, leaders began to articulate deeper and broader understandings of their work. For instance, Saint Joseph's College drew the connections between an ecological imagination and the Critical Concerns that have always been foundational to an organization started by the Sisters of Mercy. While Saint Joseph's cultivated ways to connect back to their roots (geographic and spiritual), Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition started to articulate their dream for the future, noting that their vision, which values small, still could be about the transformation of the entire penal system.

There were likewise three *postures* that these leaders appeared to hold in common. First, **they approach their work with grounded hope.** While the idea of ecological imagination may seem aggressively idealistic, these leaders are not naïve. They are keenly aware of the complexities and limitations of their context, which means that their ideals must always be imperfectly actualized through the reality of the communities in which they are embedded.

Participants spoke with great specificity about the lived challenges and limitations of their context. While some envisioned radical change, many acknowledged that simply blowing everything up and starting over would be a complicated and fraught endeavor. However, rather than leading into a disempowered pessimism, this recognition of realism led them to a deeper understanding of their own agency and a greater confidence in their ability to make a meaningful difference.

In this way, ecological imagination was not an abstract ideal to live up to but a more honest way to engage with their work. One participant shared a conversation she had with a skeptical colleague about ecological imagination.

> [My colleague said]: "I would love to live in [an ecologically imagined] world…[like you described.] [That] just sounds like a utopia. But I live in the real world. And this is what it looks like here." And I felt like, "No, I feel like the real world is emergent, and messy and wild and mysterious. And what we've created is [an industrial mechanistic worldview that] doesn't match that."

Secondly, **the leaders that we worked with tended to approach people and possibilities with curiosity and adaptability.** Stepping out of the sterile constructs of modern organizational life entails a greater acceptance of chaos, change, and failure. This does not mean cultivating a posture in which one chases down every new idea, but rather, it means being genuinely open to one's organizational environment, both the people within it and the broader cultural forces that surround it. When projects go sideways, their first response is curiosity, a willingness to let the mess not necessarily be a sign that something has gone fatally wrong. Challenges and obstacles are often greeted as new material for greater learning. Throughout, these leaders demonstrate a consistent willingness to imagine, to iterate, and to experiment. As one leader shared:

> Part of it is just…not holding tightly and really having the patience and the perseverance in saying, "The community is going to tell me which direction we're going to push. This community is going to decide, and nature is going to help the community decide. And we're going to listen. We're just going to do a lot of listening and holding loosely."

Finally, **they approach their work as a unified person.** In the words of one participant, "The personal is the organizational." There is a continuity between how they conduct themselves as leaders and who they are as people. Information received in one context flows to the other and vice versa. It is understood that personal modeling is also a form of leadership and that leadership that embodies ecological imagination extends beyond organizational confines as such and into how they live in other spheres of their lives, whether as volunteers, as parents, or as community members.

From these *perceptions* and *postures* emerge daily *practices*. This is the place where we perhaps have the least empirical data, as many leaders acknowledge that their practices are either nascent or aspirational. Many of these practices are also direct extensions of the perceptions and postures we have named so far, such as the practice of asking curious questions or investing time to cultivate relationships. In addition to ones like these, there are two additional practices worth naming.

First, **these leaders strive to practice spaciousness.** This does not mean that they are less driven or productive, but that many find practices to create space within their day-to-day responsibilities, even if those spaces themselves are hard fought for and painfully small. One leader shared how she intentionally modeled spaciousness for her organization.

> I'm usually in the habit of starting work at five because I'm trying to get ahead of email traffic, and then be ready at eight when everybody else gets on. But when I got back [from a sabbatical,] I took a walk at five. And then I took a picture of this beautiful path that had fallen leaves of every color on the path. And I sent it to my team. And I said, I'm out walking, and I'll see you at eight. And it was a signal to them that I'm not going to be there until eight and [to] look at what I've found, just by taking this time.

Secondly, these leaders **intentionally shift gears when it comes to the pace of their organization's work.** They do not assume that as-fast-as-possible and as-efficient-as-possible are the default speeds for a healthy organization, but rather, that a healthy organization operates with different paces and different structures depending on both its needs and external forces (such as the seasons). Rather than operating from a "go-go-go" mentality, Co-Learning Community leaders demonstrate the ability to discern what speed best serves the organization and its leadership at any given time. There are, of course, still seasons of intense activity and high structure. However, these seasons are also balanced by seasons where leaders will intentionally be "less efficient" or will "go slow" in service of greater goals, such as relationship building, offering greater space for reflection, or giving everyone an opportunity to rest. As one leader remarked,

> Lying fallow is important for creativity…taking the time to be with our full selves and our emotions, which means slowing everything down sometimes and not getting things done and on an efficient timescale…finding a different balance, letting things take the time they need to take to be really present; to see things from new angles, to be present [to] each other in a more healthy way. There is this "Go slow to go fast" quality to it sometimes, but I think there's also just "go slow to go slow."

From this story emerges the portrait of a leader who is grounded and opportunistic, valuing each person while focusing on the relationships between the whole and connected with the urgency of their work while being willing to speed up or slow down depending on the season and the need.

Students at Ashwood Waldorf School

Photo courtesy of Ashwood Waldorf School

Waterville Creates at Schupf Art Center, December 2022

Photo courtesy of Waterville Creates

An Invitation

"How would organizations act differently if they embodied an ecological imagination?" You may be asking this question at the end of this report. It's a fair question. However, ecological imagination, much like the living communities that it takes its imagination from, is far too alive to be pinned down to a mere definition. To turn it into a set of policies about sick time or vacation or an acontextual list of best practices about celebrating employees' birthdays or offering land acknowledgments would be to render it into a mere set of organizational tools: ones that would wear out almost as quickly as they were used.

We have a better question.

"How would *your* organization act differently if it embodied an ecological imagination?"

Take a few moments with a cup of coffee and a pad of paper. Find a quiet space, outside if you can.

Consider:

What if your organization embodied an ecological imagination?

What is one new story you'd tell about your lineage?

How would the organization move with the rhythms of the seasons? Every year? Every week? Every day?

When would you meet outside? What would you do when you were there?

What is one way you would honor the humanity of each person who was a part of your organizational ecology?

What great dream would you need to let die? What do you hope might take its place?

What's one "small experiment with radical intent" you could undertake in the next month to step into this reality?

Hopefully, the answers to these questions do not feel as far off after having gone on this journey with us. Our climate-changed era is calling for something deeper than new branding for the same old thing. It's calling us to re-imagine what it means to be a community together and then to see what happens when our dreams touch the earth.

It's time for a new adventure. May it take you into far greener places than you can possibly imagine.

Unanswered Questions

Any good research process unearths new questions at the same time that it unearths answers. Often, the new questions themselves are what constitute and generate the most significant findings. Here are five enticing and substantive questions that we're holding going forward:

What happens when ecological imagination is introduced into organizational culture over a longer period of time? While we have developed a robust picture of an organization's experience working with the metaphor of ecological imagination over a year, this is only enough time to *begin* the work of exploration, reflection, and contextualization. What happens when ecological imagination is put into practice in an organization-wide manner for a longer period of time? What are the unexpected bumps and benefits of that process? What might be the most common objections or misunderstandings from colleagues who have not yet engaged with the idea of ecological imagination?

In what ways could we find common ground between an ecological and a mechanistic organizational imagination? Speaking the language of the dominant capitalist organizational culture is a mandatory part of ecologically-imagined organizations' learning if they expect to exist with integrity in the world as it is. What might an interface look like that could connect the two systems? How can these different organizational worldviews be in healthy conversation and cooperation with each other? How can leaders speak of outcomes, stories, and values in ways that funders, constituents, and other leaders can relate to and value themselves? In what ways might these types of conversations begin to change how industrially-imagined organizations perceive themselves and their work?

How would what we learn manifest differently in other organizational spaces? What else might we learn about this process if we did it within larger institutions? How might the shape of the Co-Learning Community's questions and insights change if working with business, government, or congregational leaders? (For instance, how might change within a given congregation be helped or constrained by larger denominational structures?) How do particular geographic regions and cultures shape our insights? How might that change if this type of work were conducted in a different region of the country or in a different place in the world?

What might other groups have to learn in order to engage with what we've discovered in this Co-Learning Community? When our research began, we quickly discovered that this particular Co-Learning Community had a much higher-than-expected level of consensus when it came to integrating a spiritual analysis of the climate crisis into their work. Participants also demonstrated a sophisticated level of acceptance of the limitations of their own abilities to "make a difference" in the traditional sense. They've also shown extraordinary attunement to the dynamics of group process — listening curiously, speaking with care, and being mindful of one another. This has made us wonder whether we could expect that every group would come in with the same understanding and group process, or whether there is an intermediate step that other leaders or organizations would have to take before they could engage in this conversation well. If so, what *is* that intermediate step, and what would other participants, who have had less exposure to these conversations, have to learn before they would be equipped to engage with questions of climate and organizational ecological imagination?

Participants at a Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition event

Photo courtesy of Maine Prisoner Advocacy Coalition

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Rev. Nicole Diroff, our fearless facilitator and co-conspirator, who came up with this idea in the first place and whose fingerprints are all over every brilliant insight that you just read.

And most of all, to the Co-Learning Community:

I'm deeply grateful for the ways you have exercised incredible patience as I've climbed up a steep learning curve made up of countless emails, innumerable half-baked design drafts, endless field notes, and infinite curious questions. It has been made easier by the richness of our discussions and your willingness to share in ways that are honest, vulnerable, and thoughtful. I've been both blessed and frequently overwhelmed by your superabundance of wisdom.

I've appreciated each of your stories and reflections. I'm especially grateful for each half-finished yearning and struggle that you've entrusted to us as well. Ecologically-imagined leadership is unavoidably messy: full of dreams, dead ends, beautiful conversations, and unresolved conflicts — and I frequently imagine each of you, hard at work, up to your elbows in the dirt, cultivating new futures in your soil.

Your wisdom has infiltrated other parts of my life as well. I look at trees differently than I used to and occasionally find myself having conversations with the red maples in my front yard (although generally, when no one would be around to hear me!). Within my own community leadership on the island where I live, I find myself thinking about seasonal calendars and check-in questions and reminding myself that the core part of transformational work is done one conversation at a time. I'm reminded of my own agency and take comfort in feeling like I'm doing my part.

There's a "something" here that we're uncovering together. Only some of it is new (in fact, much of it is quite old), but it hangs together in a way that has wonderful coherence. What has emerged is not a set of disconnected best practices but a whole ecology for our organizations that we are exploring and cultivating step by step together.

Sometimes it almost feels like this ecology has become alive through all of you. Perhaps that's the way wisdom works: embedded in environment, animated by community; speaking in one voice through many mouths. I've enjoyed having a conversation with that lively wisdom in the time we've journeyed together. I'm looking forward to discovering what else it might have to tell us in the years to come.

Appendix A: Participating Organizations

www.ashwoodwaldorf.org
ASHWOOD WALDORF SCHOOL is an independent, pre-K through eighth-grade learning community. Ashwood offers a rigorous, classical education structured around the stages of human development.

Small Experiment: Inviting each classroom to do an exercise where they go to a place on campus and make observations based on the prompts, "I note," "I wonder," and "It reminds me of."

www.hourxport.org
HOUR EXCHANGE PORTLAND is a community network of neighbors helping neighbors. Members share their talents and services, record their hours, then "spend" them later on services they want. Everyone's hours are equal. This is not barter. These are friendly, neighborly favors. Together they are restoring the local community currency based on relationships and time.

Small Experiment: Distributing a survey to see how they could embody ecological imagination going forward, followed by brainstorming options during their annual in-person meeting.

www.sjcme.edu
SAINT JOSEPH'S COLLEGE OF MAINE, sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy and animated by the vision of Catherine McAuley, is a Catholic college in the liberal arts tradition distinguished by its welcoming community. They foster an ongoing dialogue between faith and reason so as to prepare our learners to live meaningful lives that improve the world around them.

Small Experiment: Going on a shared walk to a body of water on campus.

www.thebtscenter.org
THE BTS CENTER is a private operating foundation building on the legacy of the former Bangor Theological Seminary, with a mission *to catalyze spiritual imagination, with enduring wisdom, for transformative faith leadership*. Located in Portland, Maine, The BTS Center offers theologically grounded programs of continuing education and vocational-spiritual formation — workshops and retreats, learning cohorts, public conversations, and projects of applied research — in pursuit of a vision of *human hearts renewed, justice established, and creation restored*.

Small Experiment: Asking "What felt like success to you this week?" during program staff team meetings and an organizational pause in the month of December, where the organization refrained from most public programming and communication to focus on reflection, conversation, and connection.

www.bostonfoodforest.org
BOSTON FOOD FOREST COALITION works with neighbors at the intersection of racial equity and climate resilience to transform vacant lots into locally-run, public edible parks placed into permanent community control and ownership. Together, they are building community resilience in their city with more equitable access to healthy green space and greater connection to each other and the natural world.

www.watervillecreates.org
WATERVILLE CREATES believes that the arts have power — the power to strengthen community bonds, drive a robust local economy, and enrich lives through creative expression. They believe art and culture are vital to a vibrant community and a prosperous city — the future they want for Waterville.

Small Experiment: A community art project in a mobile tent that asked residents questions about their relationship with place, including, "Who was here before us? Who is here now? What stories need to be told? What stories are missing?"

www.montrealcitymission.org
MONTREAL CITY MISSION: For 110 years, MCM has been committed to helping vulnerable members of society integrate meaningfully into their communities. Montreal City Mission is currently developing a new SAGE model of social action and presence that is creating a ripple effect in their own community of friends and beyond. SAGE stands for Service, Advocacy, Gathering, and Eunoia, with all of their programs and projects echoing these different elements.

Small Experiment: Beginning each board meeting with a moment for gratitude, storytelling, or personal check-in, all framed as an act of resistance.

www.maineprisoneradvocacy.org
MPAC is a statewide group formed in 2007 to improve conditions for inmates, former inmates, their families, victims of crime, and others. Their coalition members include, most importantly, offenders and their families and friends. Their organizational colleagues include groups well known for their powerful commitment and continued struggle for human rights: NAACP, ACLU, NAMI, Maine Council of Churches, MERN, and individuals dedicated to social justice and humane treatment of all people.

Small Experiment: Presenting on reconciliation by contrasting how it happens in mechanistic and ecological paradigms.

Appendix B: Principal Investigator and Consultant Advisors

Principal Investigator

Ben Yosua-Davis is the Director of Applied Research at The BTS Center, a Maine-based organization focused on spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world. He co-hosts the podcast *Climate Changed*, which explores what it means to find faith, love, and life in a climate-changed world through interviews with activists, thinkers, and poets across the globe.

Ben is a Maine native and now lives on Chebeague Island, Maine, with his wife, Melissa, his son Michael, and his daughters, Genevieve and Emeline, where he directs the community chorus and delivers tins of cookies to unsuspecting neighbors.

Consultant Advisors

Rebecca Kneale Gould, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Environmental Studies and co-director of the Philosophy, Religion and Environment focus at Middlebury College. She is delighted to be working with The BTS Center as a resident scholar, assisting with Applied Research and other programs. Rebecca is a scholar of comparative religion and American religious history by training (Ph.D., Harvard University, 1997). Her prevailing interest is in how people make meaning for themselves in both religious and "spiritual-but-not-religious" ways. Her book, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America,* explores back-to-the-land movements as an expression of American "nature religion." At the same time, much of her research and writing has focused on religious environmentalism, particularly the ways in which Christians and Jews of various stripes understand and negotiate the relationship between their religious identities and their ecological commitments. Rebecca embraces the liberal Jewish roots of her multi-religious family tree, leads a monthly women's Hebrew chant group, and is active in various interfaith spiritual direction initiatives. She has a passion for Thoreau and currently serves on the boards of the Thoreau Society and Vermont Interfaith Power and Light. She lives in Vermont with her wife and a small flock of adorable rescue sheep.

Amara Ifeji is a systems thinker and climate justice activist committed to advancing equitable access to the outdoors for ALL youth. Her barriers to access to environmental learning drove her to lead community science learning efforts and conduct internationally awarded climate change research. Through her role with the Maine Environmental Education Association, she strives to empower a network of over 400+ youth environmental activists in the Maine Environmental Changemakers Network. Amara also pushes for both state and federal environmental education policy reform through her roles with the Nature-Based Education Consortium and the Maine Climate Council Equity Subcommittee. In recognition of her work, she was recently awarded the National Geographic Young Explorer Award — one of only 24 youth in the world.

Sarosh Koshy, Ph.D., is the Area Executive for Southern Asia as part of the United Church of Christ's Global Ministries. He is also a researcher with more than two decades of activist experience in the field of social movements and faith-based social groups both in India and the United States. From 2006 to 2011, Koshy served the National Council of Churches USA (NCC) as Program Specialist in the departments of Interfaith Relations and Faith & Order. As an auxiliary position from the NCC, Koshy served as Executive Director of Religions for Peace-USA (RFP) from June 2010 to March 2011. Along with full-time work at NCC and RFP, Koshy earned his Master of Arts degree in Christian theology from the Union Theological Seminary in New York City and his Ph.D. from Drew University. He is the author of *Beyond Missio Dei: Contesting Mission, Rethinking Witness* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

Rev. Wanda Stahl, Ph.D., is a spiritual guide, retreat leader, educator, and consultant who has worked in a variety of congregational, denominational, and academic settings. Most recently, she served on the faculty and as Director of Contextual Education at Boston University School of Theology, where her favorite moments were engaging with students exploring questions of meaning, purpose, and vocation. Wanda continues at BU on the Leadership Team for Creative Callings, a Lilly Endowment-funded project focused on accompanying and supporting local congregations as they discern and deepen their callings to serve in their communities. She holds M.Div. and STM degrees from Boston University School of Theology and a Ph.D. in Theology and Education from Boston College. Wanda has completed programs in Individual Spiritual Guidance, Contemplative Prayer Group and Retreat Leadership, and Group Spiritual Direction through the Shalem Institute in Washington, DC. In 2021, she completed the year-long Seminary of the Wild EcoSpirituality Certificate, an experience that deepened her already strong connection to the Earth as a source of wisdom, guidance, and healing for navigating these challenging times. Wanda has been a follower of Jesus since she was a teenager, grounded especially in contemplative and Wesleyan streams of Christianity.

Susan MacKenzie, Ph.D., is a spiritual director, retreat leader, and educator. A graduate of the Guild for Spiritual Guidance in New York, Susan works with individuals who wish to be more intentional in their lives through reflection, prayer practices, and spiritual disciplines. Susan offers retreats throughout New England, including some that draw upon her Maine Guide training and incorporate outdoor adventure. Her retreats are geared to a range of audiences, including spiritual seekers with no affiliation to organized traditions. Susan is comfortable with anyone who seeks to live from a deep center of personal integrity and meaning, honoring whatever s/he names as sacred. Susan has served as a faculty member for the 5-day Spiritual Formation Academy sponsored by The Upper Room in Nashville, TN. She has taught courses in World Religions and Ecology, Sustainable Development, and American Environmental Literature at Colby College. She is an expert in ecosystem management and a Maine Master Naturalist. Susan and her husband manage their 20-acre forest for wildlife habitat. They garden, raise chickens, and keep bees. She enjoys Early Music and plays recorders for fun.

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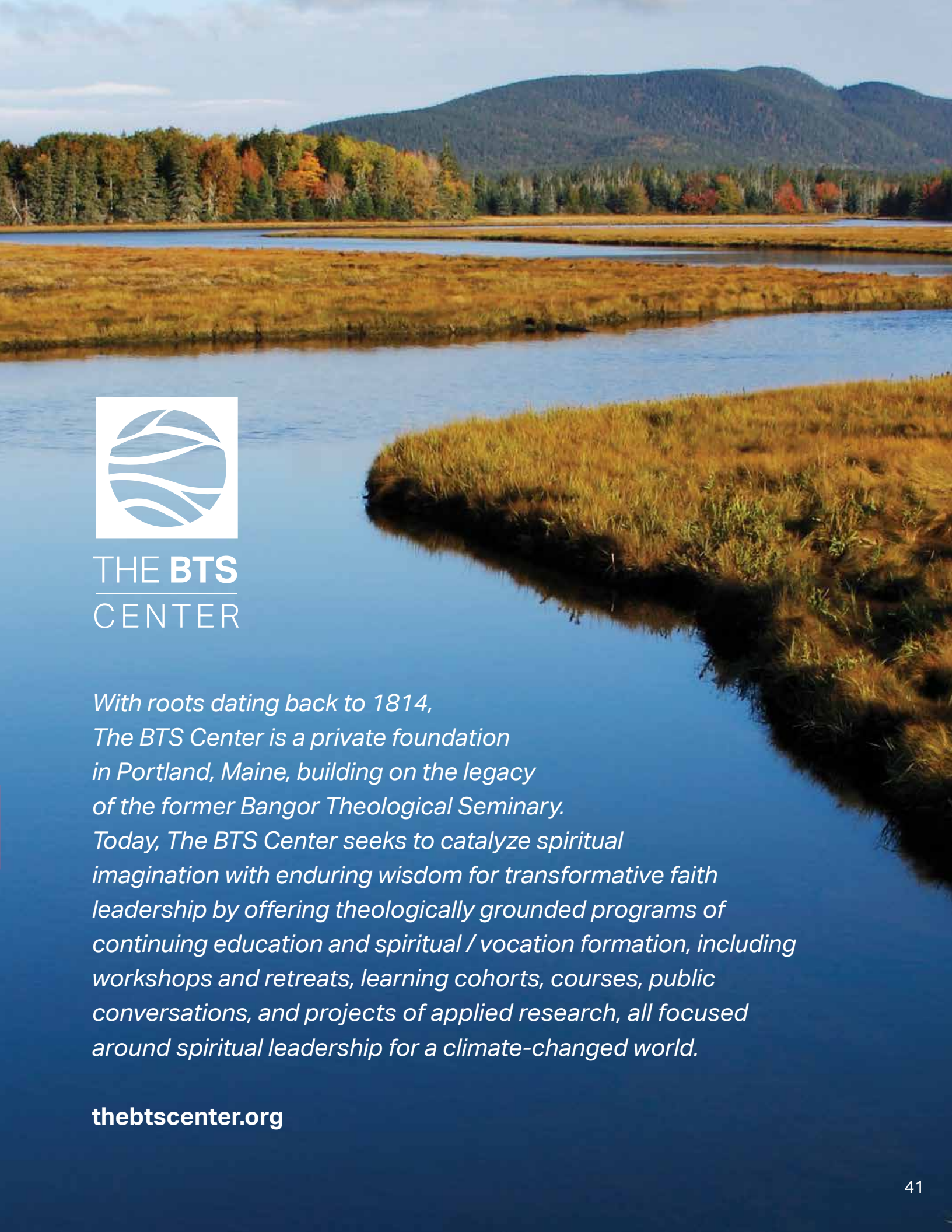
Participants in The BTS Center's Adaptive Mind training, November 2022

Participants in The BTS Center's Wonder and Wander retreat at Tir na nOg Farm, April 2023

Participants in The BTS Center's Wonder and Wander retreat at Gilsland Farm, July 2022

Photos courtesy of The BTS Center

Participants in The BTS Center's Climate Advocacy and the Sacred Wild retreat, June 2023



THE **BTS**
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Today, The BTS Center seeks to catalyze spiritual
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workshops and retreats, learning cohorts, courses, public
conversations, and projects of applied research, all focused
around spiritual leadership for a climate-changed world.

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