

Deep Adaptation: A Primer

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Summary

We are using the term “*Deep Adaptation*” to refer to an approach to the climate crisis distinguished by a starting point that admits certain dystopian realities that we have been reluctant to face for ourselves or to admit publicly: namely, that the damage “baked in” to the global ecosystem is already severe enough to render certain preconditions of the civilization we have known no longer reliably attainable.

Admitting the inevitability of social collapse could lead to apathy and despair; or, alternatively, to a more realistic, more robust and wiser response. Cultural, economic, political and religious institutions have all played a role in fomenting the present crisis. As national and global citizens, and particularly as committed members of the world’s dominant faith community, our calling is to put on the table all of the systemic contributors to the crisis, and to reimagine all elements of our life and calling in light of this unprecedented moment.

Founding Voice: Jem Bendell



Deep Adaptation as a term related to climate change was coined by . . . Jem Bendell, Professor of Sustainability Leadership, founder of the Institute for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS) at the University of Cumbria (Carlisle, UK)

Bendell, Jem (2018), “*Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating Climate Tragedy*”, *IFLAS Occasional Paper 2* (July 27, 2018), last accessed 10.5.19, <https://mahb.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/deepadaptation.pdf>



“We are not on the path to prevent going over 2°C warming through emissions reductions. In any case the IPCC estimate of a carbon budget was controversial with many scientists who estimated that existing CO2 in the atmosphere should already produce global ambient temperature rises over 5°C -- and so there is no carbon budget – it has already been overspent. . . . When I say starvation, destruction, migration, disease and war, I mean in your own lifetime. With the power down, soon you wouldn’t have water coming out of your tap. You will depend on your neighbors for food and some warmth. You will become malnourished. You won’t know whether to stay or go. . . .”



If you wish to hear from Bendell himself. . . <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daRrbSl1yvY>

“My conclusion to this situation has been that we need to expand our work on sustainability to consider how communities, countries and humanity can adapt to the coming troubles. I have dubbed this the ‘Deep Adaptation Agenda’. . . .”

Other Key Voices

(though they have yet to use the term Deep Adaptation)



Jonathan Franzen, “What If We Stopped Pretending?” *The New Yorker*, Sept. 8, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-if-we-stopped-pretending>

“If you care about the planet, and about the people and animals who live on it, there are two ways to think about this. You can keep on hoping that catastrophe is preventable, and feel ever more frustrated or enraged by the world’s inaction. Or you can accept that disaster is coming, and begin to rethink what it means to have hope.”

David Wallace-Wells

The Uninhabitable Earth

his initial magazine article: *New York Magazine*, 7/10/17

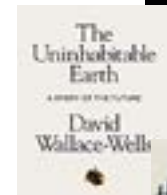
<http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/07/climate-change-earth-too-hot-for-humans.html>

his subsequent book: publisher Tim Duggan Books, 2019

<https://www.amazon.com/Uninhabitable-Earth-Life-After-Warming/dp/0525576703>

Chris Hayes’s podcast:

<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/fighting-climate-action-uninhabitable-earth-author-david-wallace-wells-podcast-ncna979551>



“More than half of the carbon exhaled into the atmosphere by the burning of fossil fuels has been emitted in just the past three decades [i.e., in the time since we’ve known about climate change.]”

“High-end estimates [about climate change impacts] establish the boundaries of what’s possible, between we can better conceive of what is likely. And perhaps they will prove better guides even than that, considering the optimists have never, in the half century of climate anxiety we’ve already endured, been right.”

Andrew Revkin

Chris Hayes’s podcast: “Exploring the Wicked Problem of Climate Change”

<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/exploring-wicked-problem-climate-change-andrew-revkin-podcast-transcript-ncna900526>



“So, I turned to Walter Munk, this unbelievable oceanographer from Scripps after dinner and wine, and I said, “So, Walter, what do you think is gonna get us through this century,” and here he is at 96, and he’s a physical oceanographer, not even a cool fish guy. He’s all about numbers. He turned to me and he said, “It’ll take a miracle of love and unselfishness,” and that ... I mean, my hair almost prickled.”

The Premises of Deep Adaptation (DA)

1. The severity, speed and scope of climate change is greater than reported publicly by most informed and respected sources.

A realistic assessment of the science of climate change indicates that when it comes to climate change impacts, the severity, speed, and scope of those impacts is greater than is currently being reported by the media, accepted by the public, and estimated by the (traditionally-conservative) IPCC. Most DA literature will include a brief summary of the science of climate change impacts (hurricanes, droughts, food shortages, sea-level rise, etc.) and the current manifestations of and near- and long-term projections for those impacts. Contrary to expectations, DA literature spends more time considering current climate-related disasters and the projections of 1.5 degree C and 2.0 warmings, than fixating on the nightmare scenarios of 4 C warming or higher. In addition, DA literature emphasizes the non-linear nature of changes to the climate, as well as positive feedback loops and the uncertainty of tipping points. How bad it will be depends on human agency, on the world responding to the climate crisis. In other words, DA literature DOES NOT give up on mitigation (however much they may be skeptical about the speed of the world's concerted response.)

2. Near-term social collapse is now inevitable.

Climate-related disasters will not happen in isolation. They will have an accumulative effect, and will result in what Wallace-Wells calls “Cascades,” the title of the first chapter in his book. Political, sociological, economic, and psychological systems (among others) will experience enough stress so as to lead, according to Bendell, to “inevitable short-term social collapse.” Bendell argues:

Collapse is inevitable
Catastrophe is probable
Extinction is possible

The probability of catastrophe and the possibility of extinction depends on human agency. Collapse is inevitable, but nonetheless the severity, scope, and speed of collapse is also dependant on human agency (i.e. the degree to which we switch attention to “getting ready”).

3. Sustainability thought leaders are prone to denial regarding the inevitability of collapse and the probability of catastrophe.

Climate change activists are keenly aware of the “climate change denial” associated with the Koch Brothers, Fox News, or the Republican Party. Climate change activists are not as aware of their own bias toward denialism, the deep machinations of our own psychological fear of death. Some will identify an explicit reason for denial, namely a fear of sowing despair. Others may have a tacit reason: fear of losing the justification for their own continued work. Bendell identifies three forms of denial that WE are prone to, and characterizes them as:

1. We can do it! -- “*We must try harder and re-double our efforts at GHG emission reductions. We need greater effort within the existing system. We can reform capitalism and still win the Paris Agreement targets in time.*”
2. Grow our own! -- “*We can turn from capitalism and return to community. We can grow our own food and grow our way sustainably out of this crisis.*”
3. Eureka! -- “*Geo-engineering and new technological innovation will save us, despite fears of unintended and localized consequences, despite the enormous task of scaling up promising technologies.*”

4. The inadequacy of political will is evident globally, and will be further undermined by the cascading social impacts of near-term climate disruption.

Political will is not as forthcoming as we need, despite the rousing conclusion to Al Gore's current slide show wherein he asks "Will we change?" "The only thing we lack," Gore claims, "is political will. And the will to change is a renewable resource!" (The audience rises to their feet in applause.) And yet, even if we claim that the apex of political will was at the signing of the Paris Agreement, the accumulated effect of all the nations' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs)--if each nation should meet its targets--was calculated only to be enough to prevent a 2.65 degree C warming, not a 2.0 degree C warming. Four years later, those same NDCs--if met-- are only sufficient to prevent a 2.9 degree C warming. Yet, no industrialized nation is on target to meet their NDC, and in fact carbon emissions reached an all-time high in 2018. The next COPs will take up the issue of "Ambition," a revision of each of the NDCs to more sufficiently align them with the Paris targets. In the meantime though, newly-elected nationalistic governments--most notably in the US and Brazil--are actively working in opposition to the Paris process.

5. Our current understanding of "hope" is eroding, and likely should be challenged anyway.

"Adults keep saying we owe it to the young people, to give them hope," Greta Thunberg said at Davos in January, "But I don't want your hope. I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act." Other people declare that "We need courage, not hope." Still others declare that hope is dangerous. What we seem to be discovering is that Americans, and white privileged classes in particular, including in the Christian faith, have conflated "optimism" with "hope," when the two are not the same. Bendell declares that we need to clear the field in order to seek for "alternative hopes." Jonathan Lear, explicating the narrative of the cultural devastation that the Crow People endured, calls this "radical hope." Theologian Walter Brueggemann identifies this as true biblical hope: "a bold conviction about an alternative possibility" [for the future in and through a good, free, and sovereign God.] Regardless, our culture has little experience with any other type of hope than the optimistic kind that envisions, nay demands, the successful preservation and/or recovery of the status quo. We must dig deep to reimagine hope in the face of inevitable collapse: What must we hope for? What must we despair of? What must we actively stop hoping for? What unique contributions might we have to offer to hope for the entire world?

The “Projects” of Deep Adaptation

1. “Get Ready.”

“We have to let go,” Bendell says. If we do accept the premises of DA, we could respond by declaring it to be “too difficult” and sticking our heads in the sand, by seeking escapism or lapsing into paralysis. Or we could choose to “get busy.” (Bendell equates the contemporary environmental NGOs with the Myth of Sisyphus: getting very good about pushing the boulder up to the top of the hill: new petitions, publicity stunts, etc.) The best response, Bendell argues, is to “get ready.”

2. Help process the difficult emotions of climate change.

Emotions like grief, loss, despair, anger, and anxiety are natural responses to the premises of DA. These emotions are difficult and uncomfortable, and as Walter Brueggemann teaches, we can never break through to true hope until such time as we process these emotions. Bendell’s seminars are often accompanied by trained clinical psychologists who meet with audience members either in a dedicated workshop or in private conversation.

3. Think beyond “mere” adaptation.

Mere adaptation as recognized in climate action and built into the Paris Agreement is not enough. With the severity, scope, and speed of climate change as envisioned by DA, it is unlikely that *adaptation* can keep pace with the inevitability of collapse and the possibility of catastrophe. While we must promote, fund, and implement these adaptation measures (e.g., building sea walls, breeding salt water resistant crops, or abandoning flood plains) in order to ameliorate the worst impacts of climate change, even so, we must recognize that most adaptation efforts will be a “rich man’s game” (i.e. affordable for developed countries, and only for certain privileged communities within those countries.) In this way, “mere” adaptation may actually, through its inequalities, add to the severity, scope, and speed of collapse. The “Loss and Damage” negotiations in the Paris Agreement will likely only succeed in the context of DA’s discussion of those values we wish to preserve and promote.

4. Be prepared to argue that DA is NOT “giving up on mitigation.”

Deep Adaptation is NOT a rejection of mitigation efforts, as if we are called to “give up” on fighting for the reduction of carbon emissions. While DA rarely speaks into mitigation, it would likely encourage mitigation to also go DEEP. In other words, it would likely encourage a serious reading of an author like Naomi Klein, who in her book *This Changes Everything* isn’t afraid to call into question modern capitalism. We need revolutionary approaches to mitigation, not merely reformational ones, and certainly not evolutionary ones.

5. Challenge the progressivist definitions of sustainability, resilience, and the SDGs.

Similarly, we need revolutionary approaches to adaptation, not merely reformational ones, and certainly not evolutionary ones. Bendell does not believe that even the prevalence of “resilience” as a conceptual framework--as compared to “sustainability”--is adequate, since most definitions of resilience still call for a bouncing back to “progress” and “development.” As you will see below, Bendell proposes a “less progressivist” understanding of resilience.

6. Conduct DA conversations built around the four “R’s.”

For Bendell, DA is primarily the result of a global proliferation of human conversations that “are premised on an acceptance of imminent collapse but with faith that through talking with each other-- with open hearts and open minds--we can work out what to do. It doesn’t mean we are going to succeed. . . to stave off some form of catastrophe [etc.]. . . but we can at least look at ways of reducing harm.” These conversations are built around the following four questions. (The first three questions are found in his paper; the fourth, he has added recently.)

Resilience: ask “what is it that we most want to keep, why and how?” (e.g. valued norms and behaviours)

Relinquishment: ask “what must we give up or make matters worse?” (e.g. cherished assets, behaviours, beliefs--such as, receding from coastlines, giving up certain consumption patterns)

Restoration: ask “what is it that we can bring back to reduce harm? (e.g. rewilding landscapes, recovering non-electronic entertainment, community-level productivity)

Reconciliation: ask “what could I make peace with to lessen suffering?”

7. Build resilient communities in ways not apparently connected to climate.

Jonathan Franzen writes: “All-out war on climate change made sense only as long as it was winnable. Once you accept that we’ve lost it, other kinds of action take on greater meaning. Preparing for fires and floods and refugees is a directly pertinent example. But the impending catastrophe heightens the urgency of almost any world-improving action. In times of increasing chaos, people seek protection in tribalism and armed force, rather than in the rule of law, and our best defense against this kind of dystopia is to maintain functioning democracies, functioning legal systems, functioning communities. In this respect, any movement toward a more just and civil society can now be considered a meaningful climate action.”

8. Prayerfully and Consciously seek a uniquely Christian response to DA

Inwardly, we must reconsider our own histories, hermeneutics, responsibilities and dysfunctions. We must revise deficient theologies of hope and suffering. Outwardly, we must adapt our missional calling to social collapse. We must authentically engage all the projects of DA with a willingness to “let go” of those values, behaviors, institutions, etc. that should rightly be considered sin, or at least as “old wineskins” which are no longer able to contain the fresh work of God’s spirit in a startlingly different world.