

# **Sustaining All Life**

**Overcoming the Destructive  
Policies of the Past**

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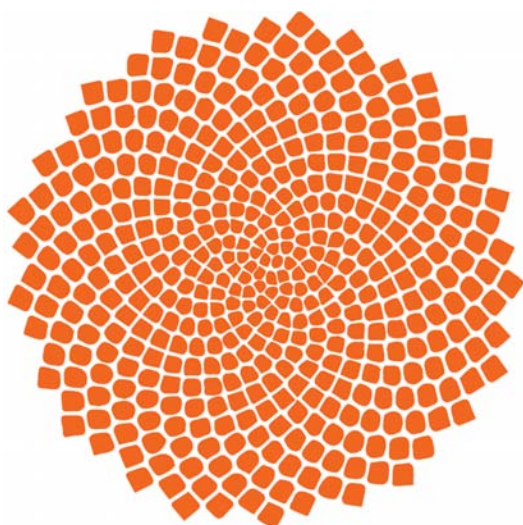
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## PREFACE

It is possible to limit the effects of human-caused catastrophic climate change and restore the environment—and some big changes are needed if this is to happen. These changes will require a massive movement, spanning the globe, of people from every background. We believe that current barriers to building a sufficiently large and powerful movement include (1) longstanding divisions (usually based in oppression) between nations and between groups of people within nations, (2) widespread feelings of discouragement and powerlessness among the populations of many countries, (3) denial of or failure to engage with the environmental crisis, and (4) difficulties in effectively addressing the connections between the environmental crisis and the failures of capitalism. The tools of *Sustaining All Life* are useful in addressing these issues and others.

The challenge before us gives people everywhere a unique opportunity to advocate on everyone's behalf. It's also a unique opportunity to make significant change without setting one group against another. Oppression—including racism, the oppression of Indigenous peoples, classism, and sexism—must also be ended to fully stop the destruction of the environment.

Thousands of years of struggle for survival have been hurtful to our species. It has left us unable to think well about all people and the Earth. It has caused us to develop societies in which groups of humans oppress other groups of humans. The period of actual struggle for survival of our species ended a long time ago, but

its effects persist. Emotional hurts, passed down the generations, have resulted in societies based on exploitation, oppression, and division. Among these hurts is discouragement—many people feel like we can't make meaningful change.

*Sustaining All Life* offers tools of mutual support, engaged listening, and a process that frees people from the effects of the hurts and oppression. We can also use these tools to remove many of the difficulties of working together. This personal work heals the internal damage and, as a result, people are able to think more clearly about the environmental crisis, build and strengthen alliances, and fully enjoy working together to set the world right. This healing work also builds courage and stamina, and the confidence that we can create a just, sustainable future for everyone.



BETH CRUISE

# SUSTAINING ALL LIFE

## Overcoming the Destructive Policies of the Past

### WHAT IS *SUSTAINING ALL LIFE*?

*Sustaining All Life* is a group of people dedicated to (1) ending human-caused destruction of the environment, including climate change, and (2) ending the exploitation and oppression of people that set up these, and other, destructive processes.

We and our parent organization, the International Re-evaluation Counseling Community, consist of people of all ages and backgrounds, from many countries. We seek to include all voices in our work to end this unprecedented threat to all life on the planet.

We support the work of groups and organizations dedicated to achieving these goals. And we offer unique tools to support people in their organizing.

The emotional harm done to us in our societies interferes with our ability to think clearly and sets groups of people against each other. These hurts make it difficult for us to think about and respond to the environmental crisis. People would not cooperate with a society that exploits people and damages the environment if they had not first been hurt.

We can heal from these hurtful experiences by having someone listen to us attentively and allow and encourage us to release the grief, fear, and other painful emotions from our past hurtful experiences. This emotional healing occurs spontaneously as we cry, tremble, express anger, laugh, and talk. *Sustaining All Life* uses

the tools of Re-evaluation Counseling<sup>1</sup> to help people build ongoing mutual support for this personal healing.

The main work of *Sustaining All Life* is to (1) create awareness of the emotional damage that interferes with each person's thinking about and acting to end environmental degradation, and (2) undo this damage on an individual basis. Often people are able to move forward by the force of their own thinking and decision, but unless we are able to heal our emotional hurts, harmful behavior tends to reappear.

The environmental crisis cannot be resolved without ending racism,<sup>2</sup> genocide toward Indigenous peoples, classism, and sexism. The impact of environmental destruction and climate change falls most heavily on people targeted by these particular oppressions. Oppression also divides people from others who have the same interests and sets everyone against one another. It interferes with a united response to the environmental crisis.

We can use the tools of *Sustaining All Life* to uncover and heal from the damage and separation caused by oppression. Doing so removes many of the difficulties of working together and strengthens the building of alliances. Freed from the internal damage, we can organize effectively, take decisive action to stop human-caused catastrophic climate change, restore the environment, and end oppression.

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<sup>1</sup> Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) is a well-defined theory and practice that people of all ages and all backgrounds can use to help free themselves and each other from the effects of past distress experiences.

<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion on ending racism, please contact our sister organization, United to End Racism <[www.rc.org/uer](http://www.rc.org/uer)> and see our publication *Working Together to End Racism*.



The facts about climate change are clear. The supporting science is substantial. All humans care about the well-being of life on this planet. The widespread denial, passivity, and fatalism are a result of emotional damage. Our personal healing work will greatly assist us in creating a just and sustainable future for everyone.



LISA VOSS

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

*Sustaining All Life's* perspective on climate change and environmental destruction is similar to that of much of the environmental movement. We summarize it here so that you may know us.

We applaud and support the work done by the many excellent environmental and other organizations, including, in particular, Indigenous organizations and the environmental justice movement. They have fought long battles to address the impact of environmental destruction and climate change on their communities. This has been done with little outside support but to all of our benefit.

Carbon emissions from mining, processing, transporting, and burning fossil fuels, and the destruction of forests, grasslands, and other carbon sinks, are creating a heat-trapping blanket around the Earth. Reliance on fossil fuels and other unsustainable practices is also damaging the natural systems on which our lives and well-being depend. All of this is driven by consumption-based societies.

Nearly all climate scientists agree that carbon pollution is causing global climate change. The pollution is already generating unusual and severe weather across the world. We are seeing more and bigger floods, increasingly severe droughts and wildfires, extreme temperatures, and destructive storms. Rising temperatures are reducing ice volume on land and sea. The global sea level is rising; coastal lands are flooding. The oceans are absorbing carbon dioxide and are becoming more acidic, with negative impacts on marine ecosystems.

Additional planetary warming will create new problems and increase the severity of current ones, such as smaller crop and fishing yields and reduced access to fresh water. Thousands more species will go extinct. There will be more severe weather. Widespread disease, poverty, social disintegration, and war will also become more likely.

The damage done by human-caused catastrophic climate change and environmental destruction disproportionately impacts people targeted by racism, Indigenous communities, and poor and working-class communities (referred to hereafter as frontline communities). It disproportionately impacts the nations that have long been targeted by colonialism, genocide, and imperialism—and in many of these countries the majority of the population is also targeted by racism (we refer to these hereafter as frontline nations). The damage disproportionately affects the women, children, and elders of these communities and nations. This is largely the result of racism, the oppression of Indigenous peoples, classism, and sexism.

Because of these oppressions, some of the early warning signs of environmental destruction have been ignored by dominant groups and nations and some in the environmental movement. For the same reason, much of the environmental movement has been slow to prioritize working together with the environmental justice movement.<sup>3</sup>

For thousands of years Indigenous peoples have played an important role as stewards of the land. They

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<sup>3</sup> The environmental justice movement is comprised of groups led by people targeted by racism and Indigenous people, addressing the environmental problems occurring in what we are calling frontline communities and nations.

continue to play an important and increasingly large role by putting attention on the harmful environmental (and other) practices of our societies.

***Big problems require big solutions***

It is time to take action. We can limit the environmental crisis by reducing and eventually ending the burning of fossil fuels, reducing consumption in the globally dominant nations, and supporting massive development of renewable energy resources, such as solar and wind.

We can restore damaged ecosystems—protect and increase forests and wetlands, conserve and rebuild soils, conserve water, regenerate fisheries, and promote plant and animal diversity.

Wealthy nations should be expected to help frontline nations adapt to climate change while these nations gain access to clean energy.

Building the movements that will bring about these changes will require reducing and ending the gap between the rich and the poor and ending any acceptance of oppression and exploitation.

Making these changes will require a profound shift in our societies. It will be necessary to replace our current profit- and growth-based economies with economies that meet the real needs of humans and other life forms and that protect and restore our global environment.

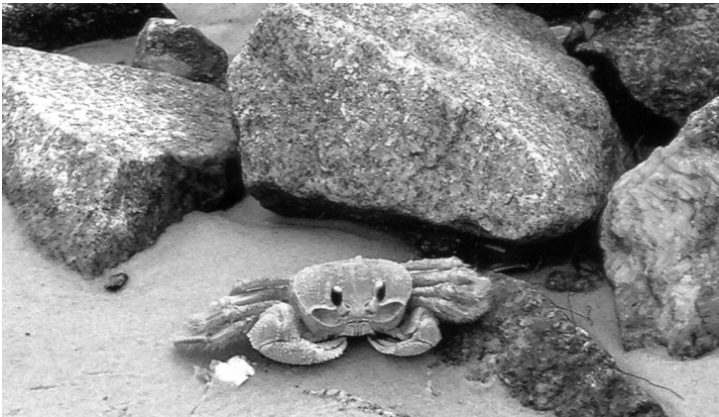
We will need a worldwide movement to make this change. The coalition should include the environmental movement; the movements to end racism, genocide, poverty, sexism, and war; and the labor movement. It

should include religious and lay groups, parent groups, schools and educators, and every group working to end environmental destruction.

A priority will be replacing our current economic system with one that puts people and the planet above profits and economic growth.

While we are faced with a big task, we are also given an important opportunity. Groups of humans have always organized to end the oppression of their groups, but often one group of people has struggled against another. The current crisis makes it easier to see that no one group is the enemy. The source of the crisis is an economic system based on exploitation and how it has shaped our societies. Capitalism permits and even encourages the plundering of the Earth for profit. It cannot provide solutions to climate change.

We will all suffer from climate change. It is necessary that we act in everyone's interest and replace a system that has always harmed the majority of people and is now harming everyone and much of life on Earth.



STEVE BANBURY

## THE SOURCE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

### *Human struggles for survival*

Modern humans have lived on the Earth for about 200,000 years. For much of that time we have struggled for survival. As we developed societies, we increasingly controlled (or thought we controlled) the environment, and our likelihood of survival improved. Our survival as a species has only seemed assured in the last few thousand years. Our fierce struggles over time have led us to thoughtlessly manipulate the Earth and its life forms. This has had drastic effects.

The fear for our survival has been passed down to each generation. It has left us feeling that we always need “more” in order to be secure. As a result we do not always consider the welfare of other people—especially those we think of as “not our people.” We rationalize taking more than what we need, more than our fair share.

Our destructive impact on the environment has seemed secondary to our immediate well-being, which has seemed to require more and more resources. Our drive to consume more and more has been so deep that we have often confused human worth with the possession or control of property.

Our present societies are an outgrowth of our struggle for survival and our fears of scarcity. War, genocide, and domination wiped out many peoples and other life forms. These atrocities led to enormous inequality among people and damaged much of the Earth. Now more than seven billion of us are living in societies in

which greed and oppression often take precedence over our inherent cooperation and caring.

Our modes of production are driven by our feelings of always needing more and are deeply embedded in our societies, especially our industrial, commercial, and financial systems. Our economic system sets nations and corporations in competition for resources. Capitalism demands growth and profit with little regard for life forms and the Earth.

### *The role of oppression<sup>4</sup>*

The effects of oppression make it much more difficult for us to address and end climate change. Everyone in our societies is at some point in his or her life targeted by oppression. We are all harmed by it. Then we are pulled to act out on others the hurts that we have experienced. Much of the emotional damage done to humans is the result of this phenomenon.

Oppression and exploitation are institutionalized in our societies. Under capitalism some groups receive much less resource than others. Every group is turned against every other group, set in competition for seemingly scarce resources. Meanwhile, most of the wealth is taken by the owning/ruling class. They control the resources and make decisions that favor them financially and that perpetuate capitalism.

Oppressive societies are organized to perpetuate this status quo. Certain groups of people are trained to function as agents of oppression toward others (we say

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<sup>4</sup> Oppression is the one-way, systematic mistreatment of a group of people by the society or by another group of people who serve as agents of the society, with the mistreatment encouraged or enforced by the society and culture. Oppression can be personal or institutionalized, subtle or blatant, aware or unaware.

they occupy an oppressor role). The policies of oppressive societies exploit and oppress the vast majority of the world's people. The majority are denied access to resources and social power. They are considered less intelligent and are treated as "less than" those in power.

When we are targeted by oppression, we can come to believe (internalize) the messages of the oppression. We can feel that we are not smart or not powerful enough to challenge authority or take leadership in a society. If we actively resist oppression we can end up in the mental health or prison systems. We are divided among ourselves and often feel competitive and distrustful of our natural allies.

Some of us are lured into cooperating with the oppressive society in the hope that we might share in the wealth or gain status. We are led to believe that individuals can escape oppression and that those who don't "succeed" are unworthy.

Many of us feel discouraged when our efforts to make change are unsuccessful. When we feel discouraged, powerless, and less intelligent than others, it's hard to be motivated to make change. We feel left on our own and don't identify our interests with the interests of others. Divided by oppression, we can't see our common interest in a just and sustainable future.

Capitalism relies on the mechanisms of oppression to keep people divided from each other. It also fosters certain assumptions that have led to environmental destruction. Among these are (1) that economic growth is essential, (2) that capitalism is the best and only possible system, and (3) that all problems, including the environmental crisis, can be solved by making the "solutions" profitable for corporations and the ruling classes.



These assumptions are unawaresly accepted because they are so thoroughly ingrained in many cultures. Challenging them is an important part of our work.



LYNDALL KATZ

### *Loss of connection*

More than half of the world's people now live in urban environments. Oppression, concrete, and walls separate us from each other and other life forms. It's hard to notice that we are connected with other species, even though our lives depend on our interconnectedness with the ecosystem.

Some Indigenous and rural communities have stayed connected with the natural world and recognize the interconnectedness of all species and their own connection with the Earth. But many of us have lost sight of this.

Damage (which includes oppression) from living in modern society keeps us from noticing how damaging our actions are to people, other life forms, and the environment. We remain unaware, even when faced with factual evidence.

For many of us, facing what is happening to ourselves and to the environment is so frightening and overwhelming that we numb ourselves to it. We turn our minds away from the facts and don't engage with the issues.

We can face the reality of our situation and regain our connection with all of life. We need to listen to each other's feelings of grief, fear, and anger that keep us from facing and engaging with these issues.

We need to connect with large numbers of people in this way and support them in their struggles as we address the climate crisis.

*The role of racism, the genocide of  
Indigenous peoples, classism, and sexism*

Environmental degradation endangers everyone. However, certain populations continue to be impacted more heavily and sooner than others. People in front-line nations have been devastated by colonialism, genocide, and imperialism over a long period of time. They are also more heavily impacted by pollution, climate change, and other environmental degradation. They have been the dumping ground for the world's toxins and waste, including the waste from war.

People living in these frontline nations generally lack the resources to move out of harm's way (at best a temporary solution) or to adapt to the damage climate change is causing.

The globally dominant, more industrialized nations (that have colonized, dominated, and exploited the labor and resources of other nations) consume the most resources. They put the most carbon in the atmosphere and have polluted the Earth the most. They are clearly responsible for the growing disaster.

However, many of these nations resist stopping these damaging practices. They also refuse to finance efforts to repair the damage that their policies have inflicted on



JIM MADDREY

frontline nations—nations that have contributed far less to climate change.

Some people in the dominant nations can still ignore the impact of the environmental crisis and debate its existence.

The perspectives and voices of the people of frontline nations and communities have generally been marginalized or excluded in the mainstream environmental movement in the globally dominant nations. Unchallenged racism and classism in this movement make it unwelcoming to these populations. (In recent years, the movement has been trying to address this, but those efforts move slowly because people have not yet faced their role in these oppressions and done the necessary personal healing work.)

In the frontline nations, women bear a heavier burden from climate change. Their communities are particularly vulnerable, as they rely upon natural resources for survival and lack the infrastructure to adequately support themselves. Drought, flooding, and unpredictable temperatures make life extremely difficult for the women, as they try to provide food, water, and fuel for their families. Women also bear primary responsibility for the care of children and elders, two other extremely vulnerable populations.

Women have unique and essential thinking to offer at this turning point in history, when humanity is making decisions about our future on the Earth. Women do play leadership roles throughout environmental movements, but racism and sexism, and the accompanying disrespect of women's thinking, have not been eradicated. They must be acknowledged and addressed for women to play a full role.

## WHAT PEOPLE CAN DO TO ADDRESS OPPRESSION AND ITS IMPACTS

*Those of us in the globally dominant nations or from globally dominant cultures can do the following:*

- Become aware of the history of environmental destruction and the theft and exploitation of resources that have devastated frontline nations and communities
- Learn about the unequal impact of environmental pollutants and climate change, both globally and locally
- Learn about and support the work already done by the Indigenous and environmental justice movements
- Insist that our governments address how much more frontline nations and communities are impacted and how few resources they have
- Heal from the emotional damage from racism, classism, and other oppressions and the ways these oppressions are acted out within the environmental movement and the broader society
- Encourage and follow the leadership of people from frontline nations and communities
- Change the organizational structures, policies, procedures, and cultures of environmental and all other organizations working for a just and sustainable society so that they are more welcoming to and inclusive of people from frontline nations and communities
- Build alliances with all others working to end environmental degradation and climate change

*Those of us in the frontline nations and communities can do the following:*

- Become aware of the history of environmental destruction in frontline communities and nations (our own and others)
- Advocate for good policies in these nations and communities
- Demand global, national, and local assistance to repair the damage suffered by frontline communities and nations
- Address and heal from the individual damage due to internalized racism, classism, and other oppressions
- Seek unity within our own group and with other groups of oppressed and exploited peoples
- Raise our voices and insist on full and meaningful inclusion in the environmental movement
- Take leadership everywhere
- Build alliances with all others working to end environmental destruction and climate change

Every person and every group, whether in the oppressor role or the oppressed role, needs to do their own personal healing work. Those in the oppressed role and those in the oppressor role often need to meet separately at first. As we heal, we will be able to come together, communicate with one another, and develop a common program for action.

Many of us are committed to doing this work, and our numbers are growing rapidly. We can bring about the necessary changes—and our personal healing work is essential for us to accomplish it.



LYNDALL KATZ

# THE IMPORTANCE OF HEALING PERSONAL DAMAGE

## *Introduction*

We need to undo the damage done to each one of us by oppression, disconnection, and fear. As we do this, we will become more aware of the many aspects of the environmental crisis. We will find ways to form and sustain the united movements we need in order to face and end this crisis and create a just world. We do this work in *Sustaining All Life*.

*Sustaining All Life* views all human beings as inherently intelligent, cooperative, and good. We assume it is natural for a human to have good relations with all other humans, to think well, to act wisely and successfully, to enjoy life, and to preserve and protect the environment.

We believe every human being cooperates with others except when emotional hurts interfere. Then negative feelings and failure to cooperate and communicate replace the inherent human behavior.

These “distress patterns”<sup>5</sup> are the scars of physical or emotional hurts, many of them dating back to childhood (and some passed down from generation to generation), from which we have never fully recovered. We are pulled to reenact them when something in the present reminds us of the earlier times of distress.

The effects of past distress experiences could have been recovered from quickly and permanently, at the time we were hurt, through the natural channels of

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<sup>5</sup> Distress patterns are rigid “thoughts,” behaviors, and feelings that are left by unhealed hurtful experiences.



emotional release<sup>6</sup> (including crying, laughing, and trembling). After emotional release, a person is able to think more clearly and rethink what happened in the distressing incident.

Social conditioning against emotional release is part of our cultures and was rigidly inflicted upon us when we were children (“Don’t cry,” “Be a big boy,” and so on). This has interfered with, and prevented, recovery from our hurts, leading to an increasing accumulation of distress, tensions, and rigid behavior.

By the time we are adults, this conditioning against emotional release has severely limited our original abilities to achieve good relationships with others, to enjoy life, and to think and act well in difficult situations. It has also interfered with our collective progress toward a society that supports all humans to thrive in cooperative, respectful relationships with one another and with the environment.

We can regain the natural ability (that we had as infants) to heal from hurt. The main requirement for this is a listener/counselor who is sincerely interested, who will remain relaxed in the face of our difficulties, and who understands how the process of emotional release operates.

We must free people’s minds from the accumulated fears, disconnection, and feelings of powerlessness and discouragement. Without this it will be difficult to effectively address and resolve the climate crisis.

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<sup>6</sup> (Emotional) release—called emotional discharge in Re-evaluation Counseling—is a process inherent to human beings that heals the emotional damage from distressful incidents. Outward signs of this process include crying, trembling, laughter, animated talking, and expressions of anger.

### *Recovering from the effects of oppression*

Many of our accumulated hurts are from oppression (racism, classism, and sexism are examples).

Every adult in every present society has been conditioned, from being hurt, into functioning in both oppressor and oppressed roles (for example, being in the oppressor role with regard to sexism but being oppressed by racism).

Oppression is neither inherent nor inevitable in human beings. It arises and operates only on the basis of distress patterns.

No human being would ever agree to oppress another human being unless distress patterns had been previously installed.

No human being would agree to submit to oppression unless a distress pattern of submission had been previously installed.

Once these patterns are in place, we are pulled to act oppressively.

We also internalize oppression and pass it on to people in our own group.

The processes of emotional release can free people from the damage caused by racism and other oppressions.

With healing, we can organize more powerfully to eliminate oppression from the institutions of society.

*The damage from oppression takes several forms.*

*One form is the corruption of the minds and spirits of those of us who have been conditioned by society to be the agents of oppression. This damage is reinforced by society and tends to be acted out. (The classic example is the man oppressed at work who goes home to oppress his wife. She reacts by hitting the child who then kicks the dog.)*

No one is born with patterns of racism, classism, or sexism. All oppressive behavior is the result of previous mistreatment.

Individuals who act as the agents of institutional oppression have been hurt into playing that role. People in oppressive roles do not have a better life in any human sense, though they often benefit materially.

A minority of the world's population acts as the primary agents of racism, the oppression of Indigenous people, and classism. These oppressions dominate the globe and harm every person, every life form, our society, and the environment.

Male domination supports and enforces these oppressions. Men are conditioned by the society to play the role of "enforcer." They are not born that way.

*A second form of the damage is that done to the group that has been targeted by oppression, for example, by racism, classism, sexism, or the oppression of Indigenous peoples. People targeted by these oppressions are systematically denied resources and targeted with violence. They are treated as inferior, less intelligent, less capable, and needing to be controlled and led by the dominant groups.*

People targeted by racism and/or people who are poor and working-class, are exploited for their labor and given inadequate economic and social resource. In oppressive societies, land and resources are considered more valuable than the Indigenous peoples, who are killed or removed from the land. The harm done by these oppressions can last for many generations.

*A third form of damage from oppression is what happens to the oppressed group's attitude toward themselves. They absorb oppressive messages as a true picture of themselves and come to believe the misinformation about themselves and other members of their group. This can lead them to treat themselves and others in their group in a manner similar to their oppressors. Re-evaluation Counseling calls this internalized oppression.<sup>7</sup>*

Some of us can reject these lies intellectually, but we still struggle not to feel inferior and to mistreat others in our group. For example, people targeted by racism may end up belittling and invalidating themselves and each other. They may act out on each other the violence historically used to oppress them.

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<sup>7</sup> Internalized oppression is false and hurtful attitudes toward oneself or one's group that were originally imposed as oppression from the outside and then "taken to heart" and believed (until they are healed).



SEA LIONS • BETH CRUISE

All three forms of damage can be healed if we are listened to well and supported to release our accumulated distress. We then become able to cooperate across lines of oppression.

### *Recovering from discouragement and grief*

Oppression causes people to feel powerless and discouraged. The oppressive society conditions us to fit in rather than think about how things can be better. It tells the common people that they aren't fit to lead—that they should leave big issues to the authorities. The majority of people are left feeling like they aren't smart enough to think about climate change. They feel too small and insignificant to make a difference.

Each of us has a long history of trying to make changes in our lives that we lacked the understanding or resources to bring about. These experiences of living in our oppressive society have led to feelings of powerlessness. They have interfered with our thinking clearly about the environmental crisis and making steady efforts to change things for the better.

These feelings are a reflection of how we have been treated. They do not fit the actual situation facing us at any given moment.

If people have a chance to be listened to about these feelings, they can recover a sense of power and hope, and join others to bring about change.

People also need to be listened to about the grief they naturally feel about having caused great damage to our planet and its life forms, about the losses suffered by people around the globe, about the many species lost or endangered.

When people hold a lot of grief inside, life can feel difficult or meaningless. It can be hard to see that all is not lost. Releasing the grief frees them from these heavy feelings that can keep them from seeing future possibilities and moving forward toward them.

### *The impact on activists*

Many important changes have been made in society by people coming together, speaking up, and uniting around common demands. We environmental activists have much to be proud of. We have made many important gains. But our successes and accomplishments can be easily forgotten in the daily struggles of organizing. We are taking on oppressive forces that fight back and attack us in every possible way. They launch direct attacks on activist leaders and organizations. They lie and buy experts to support their lies. They flood the media with these lies. Their access to enormous profits gives them ongoing resource for their efforts to maintain the status quo.

As environmental activists we care deeply about the Earth, its inhabitants, and our work. We are also under great pressure. We are working on enormously important issues with deadlines that cannot be ignored. This can wear on us.

We try to ignore our feelings of discouragement and despair as we work for change, but without addressing them, many of us give up being activists. We “burn out.” We criticize, get angry at, and undermine each other.

Strong movements depend on strong relationships. These relationships make it possible to pay attention to difficulties as they arise, overcome them, and move ahead.

To sustain ourselves for the long haul, we need to grow and thrive as we do this work. To face the challenges of climate change year after year, we need a strong support system.

By releasing distressed feelings in a supportive network, we can stay united, hopeful, thoughtful, joyful, and committed. This will contradict people's numbness and discouragement and will attract them to the movement. The tools of *Sustaining All Life* can assist us in this.



YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, CALIFORNIA, USA • LANCE CABLK

## THE TOOLS OF *SUSTAINING ALL LIFE*

Healing from the hurts that drive oppression and other damaging behavior is not quick or easy work. Many of us resist it. We may feel that we have been able to succeed in life only by not showing anyone how much we were hurt. We may feel ashamed of or embarrassed by our feelings. We may feel it would be unbearable to look at and to feel them again. Perhaps this is because we have had no opportunity to tell our stories or have not been treated well when we tried to tell them.

We may have survived by numbing ourselves to the damage we carry and accepting that we will never be free of it. In *Sustaining All Life* we have learned that it is possible to free ourselves from it.

### **Sustaining All Life co-counseling sessions**

The basic tool of *Sustaining All Life* is engaged listening that supports us to review our past experiences and release the painful feelings.

These listening sessions, also called co-counseling sessions, can be used by anyone who would like to be free from the feelings left by oppression and other hurts and recover her or his full initiative and intelligence.

A co-counseling session consists of two people taking turns listening to each other. It's simple to get started. It just takes two people. Find a friend (or co-worker or spouse) who will try it with you.

Agree that you will take turns of equal length listening to each other without interruption and agree how long the turns will be. Then decide who is going to talk first. That person talks about whatever she or he wants



to talk about (but does not complain about or criticize the person listening or mutual acquaintances).

We refer to the talker as the client. We refer to the person listening as the counselor. The counselor pays attention, tries to understand fully, and doesn't interrupt to give advice, or comment, or tell how she or he feels about what is being said. The counselor can help the client turn her or his attention to the painful parts of her or his past (or good times that help him or her notice that all of the past has not been painful) and encourage emotional release.

After the agreed-upon time, the client becomes the counselor, and the one who listened first now talks. Thus the term "co-counseling" session.

Confidentiality is important. Agree that whatever is said by either person, when in the client role, will not be repeated by the counselor outside of the session. This makes it safe to talk more fully.

Co-counseling sessions can be as long or as short as you have time for. Even a few minutes of being listened to can make a big difference in how you are able to think and function. Each person having an hour to talk is even better. Use a timer to keep the turns of equal length.

Since only time is exchanged, this process is widely accessible. And it becomes more effective the more you use it.





MATT WEATHERFORD

## **Sustaining All Life support groups**

It also works well to get a small group of people together to take turns listening to each other. In *Sustaining All Life* we call this a “support group.” Each person gets an equal amount of time to talk while the rest of the group listens.

One person acts as leader of the group. She or he helps the group decide how much time each person will get and who will go first. The leader makes sure that no one’s turn is interrupted.

A timer is used to make sure that each person gets equal time. The leader can actively support each member to speak, in turn, and encourage the release of painful emotion. He or she can also remind the group about the importance of confidentiality, assist the group to schedule its next meeting, and so on.

Four to eight people seem to be the best size for a group.

Groups can meet as often or as many times as the group members wish.

People of any similar background or interest can use a support group to talk about what they like about being from that background (for example, what they like about being female, Black, young, climate activists), what has been hard about it, what they wish other people understood, and so on.

When each person has had her or his turn to be listened to, the meeting can be ended with each person saying what she or he liked best about being in the group meeting, or something she or he is looking forward to.

*What can happen in a co-counseling session or support group?*

Being listened to with caring and respect about how living in our oppressive society has affected our lives begins the healing process. The counselor can ask the client questions such as

“What did you love about the environment around you when you were young?”

“Did you have a favorite place in nature?”

“What is your earliest memory of being a member of your oppressed group?”

“How has oppression affected your life?”

“When were you pleased with yourself for speaking up about injustice?”

“What are your earliest memories of being aware that people are mistreated because of their skin color or class?”

“How were you treated when young that left you feeling powerless or discouraged about making change?”

“What’s one of your biggest successes?”

“What are your earliest memories of feeling isolated from other humans?”

“What are your earliest memories of feeling better than others or entitled?”

“What is your life story?”

Or the client may want to simply follow her or his mind wherever it goes when being listened to about

climate change, the environment, oppression, our society, and so on.

Healing begins when we can talk about our lives, the current situation, and how oppression has affected us and the environment, with others listening and giving us their full attention. We become more powerful and more able to experience deep connections with others and the natural world.

All of the emotional effects of living in an oppressive society can be healed, and our clear thinking recovered if we are given enough time, attention, and understanding.

*Sustaining All Life* sessions are done primarily for the benefit of the client. As the counselor, the attitude and attention you bring will make a significant difference in how safe your client feels and how openly she or he can reflect and share. You will be most helpful if you listen with respect for and interest in the person, while assuming that your client is intelligent, powerful, and loving.

Be sure to keep your focus on the client and keep your memories of similar experiences and your emotional reactions to yourself.

Don't analyze, interpret, or give advice. Communicate relaxed confidence in the client, in yourself, and in the importance of the session.

We have been conditioned to try to solve the problem when someone is expressing a difficulty. You might want to resist this tendency by saying very little or even nothing in the session. You will often be surprised at the good use your client can make of just your warm attention.

Listening to someone attentively and with complete respect, while holding out that everything about the person matters deeply, is a powerful force against oppression.

As client you may begin to laugh or cry or show anger or tremble or yawn. These forms of release are a natural human process for healing emotional hurts. To heal fully from oppression and live intelligently in an oppressive society, we need to release our emotional tensions in this way.

While this may initially make you uncomfortable, it is a sign of progress. It means you are feeling some old embarrassment, grief, rage, or fear and are becoming “un-embarrassed,” “un-sad,” “un-afraid,” or healing from the anger. The person listening can be pleased if this happens and should continue to pay attention to you with calm interest and not try to stop the emotional release.

***How do you use your turn in a session or support group?***

You can start your turn by telling your counselor about good things, big or small, that have happened lately. It could be a beautiful sunset you saw, meeting a friend, or solving a problem. The idea is to give yourself a chance to notice the things that are going well. This is particularly important if you feel discouraged.

Focusing only on “bad news” and misinformation keeps us discouraged. Painful feelings can pull our attention into paralyzed (hopeless) inaction or frantic action. Neither is the focused, purposeful clarity and movement that is needed to end climate change and restore our environment.

You can then talk about recent events that have been upsetting. Often you will find that being listened to about them, without someone trying to give you advice, allows you to get a better perspective on them. Often you can think of a good solution, if someone will hear you out and show confidence in you while you feel upset and talk about the problem.

It can also be useful to ask yourself what earlier experience the current situation reminds you of, or when you felt this way before. You will almost always think of some situation from the past that was hurtful or upsetting in a similar way. Talking about it and releasing the painful emotions will help you think more clearly about the current situation. Sessions can also be used for telling your life story, appreciating yourself, reviewing successes, or setting goals.

At the end of a session, especially if you have been talking about something difficult for you, take a few moments to redirect your thoughts to something pleasant in the present. For example, you can say something you are looking forward to or mention something simple that you don't feel tense about, such as a favorite food, place, and so on.

The process is simple and effective, but being the counselor is often not easy. Since we have not been listened to enough ourselves, it may be difficult for us to listen to someone else. Because we were stopped from releasing emotion, we may feel uncomfortable when someone else shows their feelings. As client, talking and sharing our stories may be challenging at first, since we may have had few, or bad, experiences when trying to do this. And, because we all have been stopped from releasing our emotions, that too can be

challenging. But we can get back our ability to listen and support emotional release as well as share ourselves and show and release our hurts. Try it out and see if it makes sense to you.

### *Working together*

Many movements worldwide are doing excellent and important work on climate change and environmental degradation. Many members of *Sustaining All Life* and the Re-evaluation Counseling Community are involved in these groups and support their efforts.

We hope the ideas in this pamphlet will help individuals and organizations improve relationships, communication, the work on oppression, and everyone's enthusiasm for that work.

We would like to be in contact with you and look forward to working together. For more information or to find a local co-counseling group near you, you can write to us at *Sustaining All Life*, 719 Second Avenue North, Seattle, Washington 98109 USA, e-mail us at [ircc@rc.org](mailto:ircc@rc.org), or call us at +1-206-284-0311. Our website is <http://www.rc.org/sustainingalllife>.



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## GLOSSARY

In Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) we have created some specialized definitions for our purposes.

**Classism** is the economic exploitation of the working classes by the owning class. It is the basic oppression in class societies.

A **client** in a co-counseling session is the person who is being listened to, who is encouraged to talk and to release emotions.

**Co-Counseling** means the practice of Re-evaluation Counseling. It consists of people taking turns listening to each other and assisting each other to release painful emotions, which removes the effects of past hurts and frees people to think clearly again.

A **counselor** in a co-counseling session is the person who listens attentively to and encourages emotional release by the client.

**Discharge, emotional release, or emotional discharge** is a process inherent to human beings that heals the emotional damage from distressful incidents. Outward signs of this process include crying, trembling, perspiration, laughter, yawning, animated talking, and expressions of anger.

A **distress pattern** or **distress recording** is a rigid set of "thoughts," behaviors, and feelings that is left by a hurtful experience (or experiences) that have not been reviewed and recovered from.

**Frontline communities** include communities of people targeted by racism, Indigenous communities, poor and working-class communities. These are the communities being impacted the earliest and hardest by environmental degradation and climate change. Because of oppression, they have insufficient resources to address this.

**Frontline nations** are nations that have long been targeted by colonialism, genocide, and imperialism and in which the majority of the population is targeted by racism. They are the nations that are impacted the earliest and hardest by environmental degradation and climate change and that have the fewest resources to address this.

**Genocide** is the deliberate and systematic extermination of a group of people.

**Intelligence** is the ability to create a new, flexible, creative response to each new situation. Distress experiences that have not been reviewed and recovered from interfere with this ability.

**Internalized oppression** is false and hurtful attitudes about oneself or one's group that were originally imposed as oppression from the outside but have been "taken to heart" and believed (until they can be healed).

**Liberation** is the program and process of freeing oneself and one's group from oppression.

**Oppression** is the one-way, systematic mistreatment of a group of people by the society or by a group of people who serve as agents of the society, with the mistreatment encouraged or enforced by the society and culture.

An **oppressor group** is a group of people that have been conditioned by the society to act out oppressive behaviors toward groups that the society targets with the oppression (for example, white people are the oppressor group with regard to racism).

**Racism** is the one-way, systematic mistreatment, reinforced by society, of a group of people on the basis of "racial" characteristics. ("Racial" is in quotes because we believe that while human beings have cultural, social, religious, or other differences, they have many more com-

monalities than differences, and there is only one race of our species, the human race.)

**Re-evaluation** is the freeing up of the ability to think that follows emotional release. Information that was frozen in a distress recording is converted into useful, flexibly available information. There is a rethinking of past conclusions that were limited by distress. Re-evaluation takes place spontaneously to the extent that the discharge process has been completed.

**Re-evaluation Counseling (RC)** is a well-defined theory and practice that people of all ages and all backgrounds can use to help free themselves and each other from the effects of past distress experiences.

The **Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) Community** is a network of people who use RC to regain their humanness. It is secondarily a network of local RC Communities, groups, and classes. It is also a group of people who want to involve all people everywhere in a common effort to regain their intelligence, their humanness, and the use of their full potential.

**Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) theory** is a summary of the information gained from the experiences of co-counselors. A good theory makes it possible to relate our individual experiences to what has already been experienced and to the conclusions drawn from those earlier experiences. RC theory guides the practice of RC. Applying the theory can reveal contradictions in our practice and allow our knowledge to grow.

In a co-counseling **session**, two people divide time equally and listen to one another without interruption and encourage emotional release.

**Sexism** is the one-way systematic mistreatment of women reinforced by the institutions of society. Men are the agents of sexism.

A **support group** is a group of three to eight people who take equal turns listening to one another and encouraging each other to release painful emotions. The group can be made up of people of a specific constituency (African-heritage people, women, young people, and so on) or people who are interested in a particular issue such as climate change, or it can be a diverse gathering.

*Sustaining All Life* is a project of the International Re-evaluation Counseling Community. *Sustaining All Life* practices, including *Sustaining All Life* co-counseling sessions, are based on the theory of Re-evaluation Counseling (RC). You are invited to become acquainted with Re-evaluation Counseling and, if interested, to join the Re-evaluation Counseling Community. For more information or to find a local contact person, please see our website, [www.rc.org](http://www.rc.org), or contact the International Re-evaluation Counseling Community by e-mailing to [ircc@rc.org](mailto:ircc@rc.org) or by calling +1-206-284-0311.



DAVID WALLACE