

TRANSCRIPT

Jem Bendell: Deep Adaptation Q&A in Anyksciai Forest Festival (Lithuania)

by Jem Bendell, moderated by Simona Va
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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mTfuvPPaDE

[NOTE: Questions are paraphrased.]

Q: What do you think we can do to prepare for what's coming?

There's different kinds of preparation. Let's start with the practical ones, in terms of people's basic needs. We have already seen from last year [2018] and this year, how the destabilizing of Northern Hemisphere weather is damaging agricultural production. So, it raises a question of food production. So you can look to produce more of your own food in ways that will be resilient to future difficult weather, whether that's floods or droughts.

But you can also seek to be active in local politics and national politics, and European-wide politics. Because really we will need action at scale to improve food security. Otherwise, local efforts won't be sufficient. So that is a practical approach to one's material needs.

But there's another way of preparing, which is more emotional, or psycho-spiritual. It's to prepare for a lot of uncertainty, a lot of change, and a loss of our old way of feeling safe in the world. That needs to be done through coming together in communities, in dialogues and supporting each other with difficult emotions.

I think that is as important – perhaps more so – because I think panicked reactions and angry reactions to the difficult times ahead will make matters worse. It is natural to blame somebody, and we will be seeing a lot of people trying to blame a lot of people in order to give them something to do with their anger and their fear, if they don't really know how to cope personally or practically with the changes that are coming.

Q: Instead of preparing for breakdown, can we work to prevent what's coming?

Different scientists have different views, and different social scientists, like me, also have different views, on how bad it's going to be, and how fast, and where. For instance, some people say that an environmentally caused breakdown in our lives, our societies, is already happening. And they can point to agricultural disruption, but also they can point to wars that have been caused because of droughts.

My view is that a collapse of our current forms of agriculture is now inevitable, and that will lead to a breakdown in how we live our lives now. But that doesn't mean we stop trying to prevent even worse climate change. I don't think we can stop these problems, but we can try to cut carbon, and draw down carbon dioxide in order to give us a better chance.

To the people who have said: "It is counterproductive to talk about adaptation, because it reduces commitment to mitigation," this is what I say: When there is civil war, when there is international war, no one cares about cutting carbon. So adaptation and mitigation are two sides of the same coin, in a future destabilized environment.

Q: What about collapse as a big "restart" for humanity?

Yes, I hear that from some people, and I also hear some people going even further and talking about the need for a cataclysm, or an apocalypse, of sorts, to wake up humanity from their delusions. I realize that sometimes, people might be saying collapse will be good because it will overturn injustice, or collapse will be good because it will wake us up to our non-separation with nature, or collapse will be good because it will wake us up from our delusions.

I think those stories can be means of escaping emotional pain. It's important to recognize that shock, fear, sorrow, grief, anger, panic, are all natural, and even if we had a story about "this is what humanity needs," or a story about "this is what our friends, or our politicians need," that story on its own won't provide as much solace as you might want; there's no way of avoiding the difficult emotions.

However, I agree with you. I think that the destabilizing of our climate, in a way which is going to probably now collapse our civilization, is the greatest teacher about how deluded we became about separation from nature and each other, and a loss of the sense of the sacredness of being alive. So, collapse will be both horrible and beautiful,

and for me it's more a question of how we, ourselves, individually and collectively, choose to approach it, and what we wish to live by and for, ahead of it, and during it.

One thing we can't forget: This is not like any other catastrophe humanity has experienced before. It will get worse and worse, for centuries, if not millennia. On that happy note – next question!

Q: Are there any resources or communities for architects?

It's a good question, because it's the same for everybody. Everybody has an existing career or form of work. Everybody has an existing way of life, an existing community. So when you get the information that the future is going to be so different, and our normal way of making money and buying food and living is going to change, then how do you "bridge?" How do you bridge from where you are now and your work, to this future? Because this affects everybody, you can imagine what an impossible agenda it is to have simple answers.

The Deep Adaptation framework simply offers four questions – [the "four Rs"](#) – as a way for people to start talking with each other about what to do and what to stop doing in community or in your profession.

When I hear questions like that, I direct people to networks where people have come to this realization that a collapse or breakdown of normal life is either probable, or inevitable, or already beginning. And on these networks, people have these conversations. And you look for people who are in similar situations to yourself. That's why I launched the Deep Adaptation Forum. I don't think we have an interest group on building, architecture, town planning, or anything that much about the built environment. So that's a gap! That would make sense.

So I have no simple answer, but you would be most welcome to join the Deep Adaptation Forum at deepadaptation.info, and send a message to the curator with a proposal for a built-environment interest group. We would advertise that around the world – we can reach about 7,000 people now who are engaged in this – and you would suddenly find other people in your profession, or related professions, ready to talk with you about what this means.

Q: What can we do to spread awareness, to get people out of their “bubbles” and to change their behavior?

That’s not normally the kind of question I get in these sessions, because my analysis is that society will break down in the next ten years. I’m not very concerned about whether people are aware of the environment and wishing to “green” their lifestyles. That’s something that lots of NGOs [non-governmental organizations], lots of campaigners are doing, and my work isn’t on that.

We have an economic system which requires growth and consumption, and which fuels a media environment which encourages people to be fearful, and to be proud, to be defensive, and to consume. I don’t have much hope of transforming culture within this existing system. In fact, I don’t believe we can, and that’s why I predict collapse – I predict that people will be starving in Europe within ten years.

It’s a very different worldview that I start from. So I don’t normally have those questions. I’m more interested in how can we begin to prepare for a breakdown in law and order, a breakdown in our normal ways of having food and water. And the psychological trauma that people will go through as they realize that and as they go through that.

My own environmental activism has been in helping Extinction Rebellion, because it’s explicitly political, it says explicitly that we are in an emergency, and that the whole system has to change. Until now, they focused mainly on mitigation – so, cutting carbon – but there has always been this warning that things are so bad. Now they’re beginning to move more, and this year and from now on, they’ll be talking much more about adaptation to the coming disruptions to our way of life.

Q: How do we encourage systemic change and cultural change to adapt to what’s coming?

I’ve written a critique of the economic system for Extinction Rebellion. It’s called “[The Economics of Extinction](#).” It’s on the web site, for them. It talks about the need to change the economic system and the monetary system. Otherwise, we’re basically swimming against the tide of consumption.

How do you achieve that? Well, Extinction Rebellion has a particular strategy which is to become incredibly disruptive to “business as usual” in any country, and therefore force government to act. So, it’s got a methodology of disrupting life, forcing government to

act. I believe that's part of the picture. Also, I believe their tactics help bring mainstream media attention to the climate emergency, which can only help.

Since 1995, I worked on "ethical" or "green" consumerism, corporate sustainability, people voluntarily changing, the power of education for that. It doesn't work fast enough. It's too late. I think it also is probably too late to get government to change. But that's what I've been helping with, myself.

Everyone has to make their own decision about what can they work on in terms of persuading others to change, or the system to change. However, there's a possibility that such work can be a delusion – a way of ignoring and denying what's happening and what's coming.

Q: Are variations in the sun cycle included in the current models of climate change?

The changes in solar output have always made a difference to the earth's climate, for thousands of years. My understanding is that we have been in a solar minimum, and there are some predictions that the solar minimum will continue for about another five years, and then we'll go to a period when there will be more solar activity.

What we're seeing in the world's weather now, in the climate, is purely anthropogenic (man-made). The extent of the temperature anomalies and the melting of glaciers and the Arctic and Antarctic, and the heating of the world's oceans is related to greenhouse gases. My understanding is that we're being given a little bit of extra time by the sun, for the next few years, and then we're going back into a solar maximum output by the next five years. I don't know whether the main models that have been used by the IPCC are involving solar output as well. Solar output is not the decisive factor at the moment in what we're experiencing in terms of our current climate.

Q: Are changes in solar activity important to the current climate situation?

No, but I recommend anyone who is doubtful about climate science, you can look into it for yourselves. Anybody, now, can Google "solar minimum," "solar maximum." But to be a denier of climate science... Just type in "climate change," and hit "News." Look at China underwater. Look at America underwater. Look at what's just happened to the French agricultural fruit crops. Just open your eyes.

At the moment, my emotions are... I'm astounded that anyone is doubting what's happening in the world right now. There are lots of theories about why people look for ways to deny what's happening, already, around the world, or to say that it's not anthropogenic. I wish! I wish it was all some strange conspiracy.

The world governments agreed in 1987, based on science, that climate change is caused by humans, and it's a problem. And it was the oil industry, for ten years, that tried to stop action on that. The idea that there's any doubt, that was just funded by people who didn't want to see change.

I suppose one thing to say as well is that: I think we're in a solar minimum at the moment. I don't normally talk to anyone who's skeptical of what's happening, or that we're causing it. You could look into the solar minimum. I think it's going to continue for another few years. In terms of solar cycles, it will then get worse. So even if you don't believe in anthropogenic climate change, we're already seeing disruption to agriculture, and shocking amounts of ice loss which, through positive feedback loops will further heat the planet. The planet's already heating itself because of the loss of ice cover in the Arctic.

One of the real simple and worrying things about our climate is that: Prior to humans affecting the climate, the famous graphs which show global temperature and carbon dioxide moving in lockstep over many tens of thousands of years. It shows that actually, temperature went up – the world warmed, global ambient temperatures – often, more often than not, prior to carbon dioxide levels going up. Climate skeptics used to say: “Aha! So carbon dioxide is not the driving factor here.” But what it actually shows is that once the world starts warming, more carbon dioxide is released from the biosphere into the atmosphere and the oceans. So already in that data, it shows that we may see the planet Earth itself releasing carbon dioxide as the world gets warmer. That can be from forest fires, it can be from melting permafrost, it can be from drying soils, and all sorts [of other sources].

Q: Should we continue with our professional careers and stay in the cities, or move to the country, form a community, and grow vegetables to share?

It's a difficult question. Because also we don't know how fast the changes are coming.

I was going to leave my job [in 2018], and I was going to try and find a place to live this year, more off-grid, more resilient, with my own water supply, embedded in a village or community that makes more of its own food. Not because I thought that would help me

survive long-term, but it would be a way of living which would feel more right according to what I think I know. And it would be a way of living that would give me a better quality of life in an early phase of a societal breakdown when there's no food in the supermarkets – or less food or very expensive food in the supermarkets, and potentially people going hungry and there being more crime and violence.

I didn't do that. That was because my paper became famous, and I felt a sense of responsibility to engage with the people who were waking up to this. And to provide a way for them to talk with each other and work together.

But part of the reason why that was seductive for me was that I felt: We can't ride this out in small-scale, self-sufficient communities. Because if you have millions of people going hungry in a city, then they'll just come and steal your food. So I hope, in future, that I can find a balance between staying active nationally and internationally on collective, systemic responses, while also living differently in my own life, more off-grid, but also, not in a tough, grim way; in a way that is joyful.

So I'm interested in equanimity, and pleasure, because I don't know whether anything I can do can help. Three things [I think about for myself]: 1) Try to stay active, nationally. 2) To try and change my own life, to be a bit more ready, 3) to make sure that I'm living life open-heartedly in the present moment rather than get too brought-down by this topic and this concern.

I've stopped really worrying about what happens to my own life, ten years from now. I can't believe that I'm in control of my own life ten years from now. I'm not convinced I'll still be alive, given what's coming. I'm much more focused on how I'm going to be living in the next few years.

Q: Is Extinction Rebellion a potential solution to our predicament?

I'm very, very pleased with the explosion of campaigning since October last year [2018]. Obviously, Greta [Thunberg] started it [in August] last year, but I think it really took off, I think, particularly, when Australian students also came out on strike, I think in October last year. I've been in Extinction Rebellion from the start, since September last year. I'm really pleased that those things are happening.

Your question is: Do I take that into account when I am predicting a breakdown or a collapse in most societies, including Western ones, including Lithuania [where this workshop is located] and the U.K.?

No, because they don't matter – and I'll say why. In my paper, I talk about how we now have the signs of runaway climate change: because of the loss of Arctic ice reflecting sunlight into space; because of the melting of the permafrost releasing methane; and because there's a forty-year time lag of carbon dioxide being released to actually having its full warming effect in the atmosphere; because 90% of all anthropogenic heating has been absorbed by the oceans, and there will be an equalizing over that 40 years – I conclude it's too late; we're not in control. Humans could stop any carbon dioxide emissions – at all – today, and this is already underway.

So, I'm interested in Extinction Rebellion in how it is prefiguring the way of being together – putting truth and love and sacrifice first. That's what's most important. Not what it's calling for. It's the fact that people are coming together in solidarity across all generations, across all political persuasions and classes, and they're doing it to help each other to put truth and love first. That's why I support them; that's why I'm involved. Not because I think it's going to stop what's coming. It could help us prepare.

Q: Are intentional communities a potential solution to our predicament?

The question is: Are these [existing intentional communities] prefiguring the communities that we will... prefiguring the form of human society after a climate-induced collapse?

I don't know. I would repeat my point earlier that climate will get worse and worse for human habitation over a thousand years, if not more. The Western Antarctic Ice Sheet will definitely go over the next several hundreds of years, if not sooner; so, sea-level rise by seven meters. There will be continued pressures, as well as the immediate abrupt ones, to our agriculture.

The problem is, that if you have your own, nice resilient community, and then you just have a drought that takes away your ability to produce your own food, then you just become refugees in a society that's collapsing. Yes, some communities may be okay, but it's like rolling the dice. But yes, at least more and more self-reliant, off-grid, eco-villages means you've got more dice to roll.

The problem is, most eco-villages aren't place which are [actually] functioning off-grid, and self-sufficient in terms of food and water. Many people who live there... It's based on workshops, bringing in fiat cash [i.e. government-issued money] from outside to buy food and energy. Most of them rely on industrial civilization for the piping, for the

electrics, and so on. So, I think, currently, it's a bit of an illusion to think that these places have what it takes, in terms of practicality.

I also realize that many people need hope in a human successful future. I don't think that is necessary for everyone, for us to act. My hope is more in the way we will try and be truthful and kind and compassionate, whatever comes, including us being nice to each other, as we starve to death.

So, for me, my hope is about how we will be, in this situation. I don't think that stories of salvation through eco-villages is... No, I think it's partly a form of delusion. It's not being reconciled with the idea that we're not in control anymore – the planet is. And we don't know what's going to happen. And we might all disappear from this earth. We might!

I'd like to follow that up to say: I do not see human consciousness as the center or the pinnacle of the cosmos or of life. I don't need to know that *homo sapiens* will continue for there to be meaningful consciousness or its potential within the Universe. I'm as interested in how we live today, and how we live no matter how catastrophic things will be, rather than us continuing in any form, whether it's in an eco-village or in a city.

Q: How do we educate our children without inducing fear and panic?

It's a little bit like the question about architects and architecture. There's no simple answer. We're all working this out together. It's more a question of where do you go to talk to people about that?

The [Positive Deep Adaptation Facebook Group](#), which Simona has been a moderator of, which has about 3,500 people on it, there are many people talking about parents and parenting, and schools and schooling on that. I would recommend you join and use the search box to type in "parent" or "children" or "schooling" or "education," and look at the relevant threads. I think at the moment we haven't had anyone launch a parenting group on Facebook, but I think it's necessary.

In a summer camp I went to recently, my partner, Katie, after one of my speeches, she held about 14 people, parents and grandparents, in a circle, to express emotions and to start talking about what to do as parents on this topic. Perhaps that's something that you, yourselves, could do. Simply. Not trying to fix anything here, but just to sit in circle, as parents, and talk about your emotions and talk about where you're looking for support, and any ideas or questions you might have. That might then lead to something else, afterwards, because obviously not everything has to be done online.

I would also recommend Simona's film ([Sand Castle](#)), for a bit of inspiration, about how a 13-year-old boy can start to process this information. It isn't completely melancholy. It actually shows that children, because they haven't got so much invested in a particular way of life, can say: "Okay! If this is the future, what should I start to learn about? What can I just say 'no! I'm not going to do that! I'm not interested. I'm going to try something else.'" I think, perhaps, there's less for them to lose in terms of their own identity, than us.

I hope you do all get to talk more about this.

Q: Where do we go from here?

[Humourously] You all need to move to resilient, off-grid, sustainable communities; and you need to take charge of the government [laughs]; and you also need to do everything while having a lot of fun so you're not attached to the outcome, you just have passion for the activity, no matter what happens, because we're not in control. [laughs] Oh, sorry! You want something else.

I think: Join the initiatives that have some momentum – like Fridays for the Future – and promote adaptation. Children striking, trying to get government to act, is good, but that's not going to help them with the skills necessary to feed, clothe, and look after themselves when modern consumer industrial society breaks down. I think those Fridays off school could be filled with education of life skills and things that can help them in terms of gardening and cooking and all kinds of basic skills.

Also, how children can be together in community and express difficult emotions. So, all kinds of things: even like meditation and mindfulness and relating with each other in a spirit of forgiveness and tolerance, and so on. Get involved in the student strikes and evolve it to look at adaptation as much as calling on governments to mitigate, would be a real thing to do.

And if that provides you with enough of an organizational structure to keep working together, talking together, great! If it doesn't, then maybe join or create an Extinction Rebellion group or some other group. Because you need to stay together because there are so many different things to do. So many different questions to discuss.

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