CLIMATE SPRING

The Climate Stories We Need From Apocalypse to Regenerative Futures

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Introduction

The lights on the dashboard are blinking red. We are hurtling into an increasingly scary future and our leaders seem entirely unable to rise to the challenge. The rest of us are feeling deep anxiety about where we are heading, frozen with fear and increasingly hopeless about our ability to grab control and steer us away from disaster.

Our culture is currently reflecting this deep anxiety and sense of doom that climate change engenders, with more and more TV shows, films and novels exploring climate anxiety and apocalyptic visions. But our culture also has the power to navigate us to somewhere safer by lighting up maps to the future, leading us out of the forest of disinformation and confusion.

This is the underutilised role of storytelling, and it is just starting to emerge, not a minute too soon. Stories can change the story of humanity from one of doom to one of repair.

We know that there is a large and growing number of creatives who want to channel their talents into addressing the climate and nature crisis, but are grappling with how to tell this daunting story of our time in a way that isn't too didactic or scientific, doesn't overload with misery, and - most importantly - that audiences want.

Climate Spring is a global screen industry insider organisation that works with a range of creatives to support a rapidly growing climate storytelling movement, based on the evidence of what works, what audiences want and what is commercially compelling.



Our culture has the power to navigate us to somewhere safer by lighting up maps to the future.

Storytellers, you are the illuminators. We need your superpowers to shine the light out of the chaos.



→ *Photo by Grant Ritchie on Unsplash*

This document sets out Climate Spring's insights into the climate stories we need at this time and how our industry can come together to shift climate narratives from apocalypse to regeneration. In doing so we can collectively unblock the public and political agency on the climate and nature crisis.

We know that we urgently need society to reclaim agency from passivity, to cooperate instead of fight, flee, or freeze. We believe that stories and the narratives they illustrate have the power to achieve this.

Narratives can create a new sense of direction, one in which we no longer need to stare at the abyss as if we are the passengers on an inevitable collapse into dystopia. A vision in which we can look, clear-eyed, at the unavoidable challenges we face, while we steer instead to imperfect, but preferable futures.

It is easier to steer if we have first seen the route through in our collective space of imagination: the narrative story. This is where the storytelling power of the screen comes into play - if what you see on film and TV reflects our values, culture and beliefs, then we need to make sure that what we see on screen reflects what we need to do and what role we want to play in shaping our regenerative future.

Narratives shape how we see ourselves, what we value, and what we feel is possible not just individually but at a societal level.

Narratives are the soil within which new systems can take root. Politicians will not take action if they do not see the mandate in our cultural narratives. If we are able to change the narratives then we change the conditions for what has a chance to grow and flourish.

What is a climate story?

Climate stories in popular culture have to date either reflected on the changing climate impacts or on warning tales of an apocalyptic future. But the types of climate stories are now expanding in new exciting directions. Climate Spring has developed a much broader definition of climate story with the screen and fiction publishing industry which focuses on the root causes and resolutions rather than the symptom of the problem – the changing climate and nature loss.

This means a good climate story is not about whether it mentions the climate crisis, but about what the story says about how we respond to the crisis.

This is the approach to climate storytelling that is based on what makes a good story – leading with genre – and is entertaining or engaging with an eye on the stories that people want in this time.

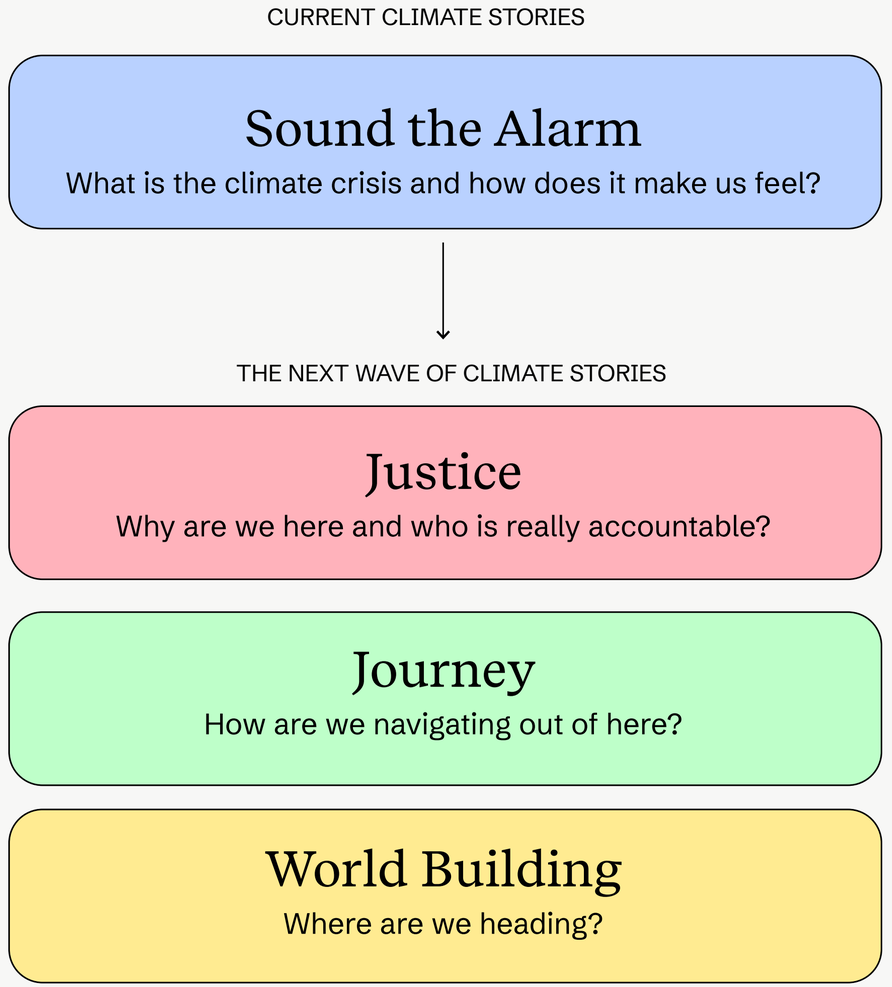
The climate stories that Climate Spring is nurturing are those that shift our cultural narrative away from doom to agency, and from apocalypse to regeneration.

By exploring the root causes and resolutions we believe climate content can inspire collective action.

Climate Spring is prioritising the next wave of climate stories that shift focus of the story away from having to discuss the climate problem, to focus on these 3 areas: Justice, Journey and World Building.

Ultimately, the stories we need to tell are the story of how we are transitioning from an extractive to a regenerative economy. Regenerative stories does not always mean utopia - no doubt there are difficult times ahead of us and there is no perfect future. We are however urgently at the point of needing to chart the way through what is now a stormy ride towards a more liveable future.

This is no easy task because as a society we have not spent as much time exploring what addressing the climate crisis will look like as we have setting out ways in which continuing as we are will take us to scary places.



Climate story to date

Film and TV offerings have spanned from documentary and news to fiction, with shows such as *Years and Years* by Russell T. Davies and Apple TV's *Extrapolations* series by Scott Z. Burns/Dorothy - both exploring a dark, apocalyptic future in which climate change has reached extreme levels of impacts, and then in 2021 Adam McKay's *Don't Look Up* serving the climate apocalypse with comic relief.

These stories have reflected the dominant messages of the climate movement - a series of dystopian warnings about the future.

There have also been a growing number of thoughtful novels exploring themes of climate anxiety and parenting in the climate crisis - for example, *The High House* by Jessie Greengrass, *Flight Behaviour* by Barbara Kingsolver and *The End We Start From* by Megan Hunter which was also adapted into a feature film starring Jodie Comer.

These shows and novels have created conversation and helped us relate to climate change in a way that news and facts don't always manage to, by telling the human story at the heart of the crisis. Stories can create empathy, understanding and make us feel we are not alone with the seeping anxiety.

RELATED CLIMATE STORIES

- → *The End We Start From* (2023)
- → *The High House* (2021)
- → *Don't Look Up* (2021)
- → *Years and Years* (2019)



→ *Don't Look Up (2021), directed by Adam McKay, Netflix. Source: IMDb.*

Climate Spring is here to support creatives. We support them to help and lead our wider culture to create compelling shared visions of characters and stories. Narratives not just about what we are fighting against, but what it is we are fighting for.

Peak Dystopia?

The dominance of dystopia in our culture reflects the collective anxiety caused by a growing awareness of the climate crisis and the danger ahead.

We have had decades of warnings about the dangers of messing with the planet. So much so that post-apocalyptic dystopia has become a dominant genre beyond explicitly ‘climate dystopia’ - from *Mad Max* to *The Last Of Us*. Imagining a destroyed civilisation is an endlessly fascinating story setting and enables us to explore the logical conclusions of dangerous attitudes, systems and values. But are we reaching peak dystopia? When our real world is starting to unravel, is it still an enjoyable escape?

The risk is that serving more and more dystopias creates a sense of fatalism. Even more worrying is the fact that young people are feeling deeply hopeless about their future. 75% of young people globally say that they feel frightened by their future[1]. Is this any wonder when they are fed the terrifying facts of climate alongside a cultural diet of doomerism?

We may be led to think that if we can just stress *how* bad things will be if we don’t act, if we just get people to *care* more, they will take action. However, there is substantial evidence to suggest that most people *do* care and *are* deeply worried about the looming impacts of the climate crisis[2]. It is a natural response to be paralysed with fear when we are confronted with a terrifying prognosis that seems outside our control and without being given a clear route out of the danger[3].

Worse, if we keep making everyone feel that it is their fault and that we are heading into disaster because they don't recycle enough, we are failing to identify the real villains or illuminate the adequate responses. If we keep scaring people, we will end up being too afraid to look to the future and dream of better times to come.

We are well beyond the point of needing to keep painting portraits of a scary future. It has already started to arrive and stories that do not reflect this reality will soon be their own genre of ‘head in the sand sci-fi’. As the screenwriter Dorothy Fortenberry says: “If climate change isn't in your story, it's science fiction.”

75% of young people globally say that they feel frightened by their future



→ *More Flames (2024) Image credit: Martha Treves*

Understanding the ‘climate and nature crisis’ in the context of storytelling



→ *There Will Come Soft Rains. Principal photography. Image credit: Ella Dowling Gubb*

Root and Heal

Climate stories don’t have to dwell on the symptom of destabilising climate systems - and can instead explore the root causes and the solutions that will heal the damage.

The climate crisis - global heating and all the knock-on effects that it is creating increased extreme weather events, sea level rising and ocean acidification - as well as the nature crisis - dangerous levels of extinction and degradation of nature - are both symptoms of how our economy and society are run: a highly extractive, linear, colonial system that is exploiting ecosystems and people in ways that are breaching the safe operating space humanity has to live.

Humanity has evolved over time to be able to live within the delicate balance of life on earth. We have now crossed the planetary boundaries of our climate, water, air, land, biodiversity and use of chemicals[4]. These boundaries are the living conditions that humanity needs to survive.

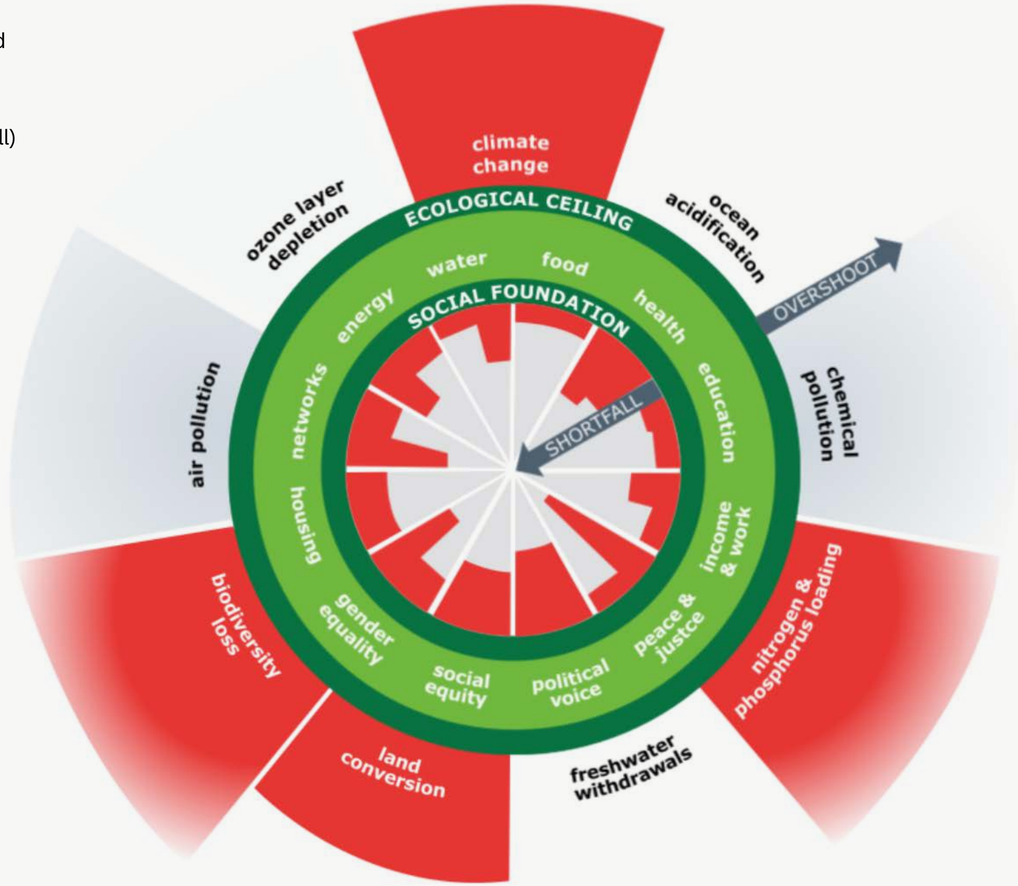
We have breached a planetary boundary before - our ozone - and we managed to bring that back to safe levels. We can do the same with the other planetary boundaries if we collectively act quickly. The other good news is that we have all the cultural, social, political and technological solutions that we need in order to make this shift.

When we understand that climate change is not the problem but the symptom, and the problem is our extractive economy, the focus of climate storytelling can shift.

Our extractive economy is exploitative of people as much as ecosystems. The resolution is a regenerative economy that is not just focused on reducing pollution and the climate impacts but on renewing and healing the damage done – for example, improving biodiversity and reforesting as well as greater wellbeing for people.

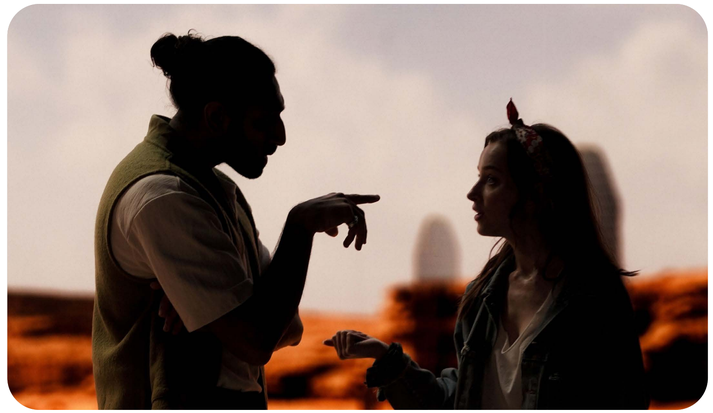
Doughnut Economics shows the safe operating space for humanity

- Planetary ceilings that have been breached (climate and biodiversity)
- Life essentials for humanity (also shown in red where there is a shortfall)



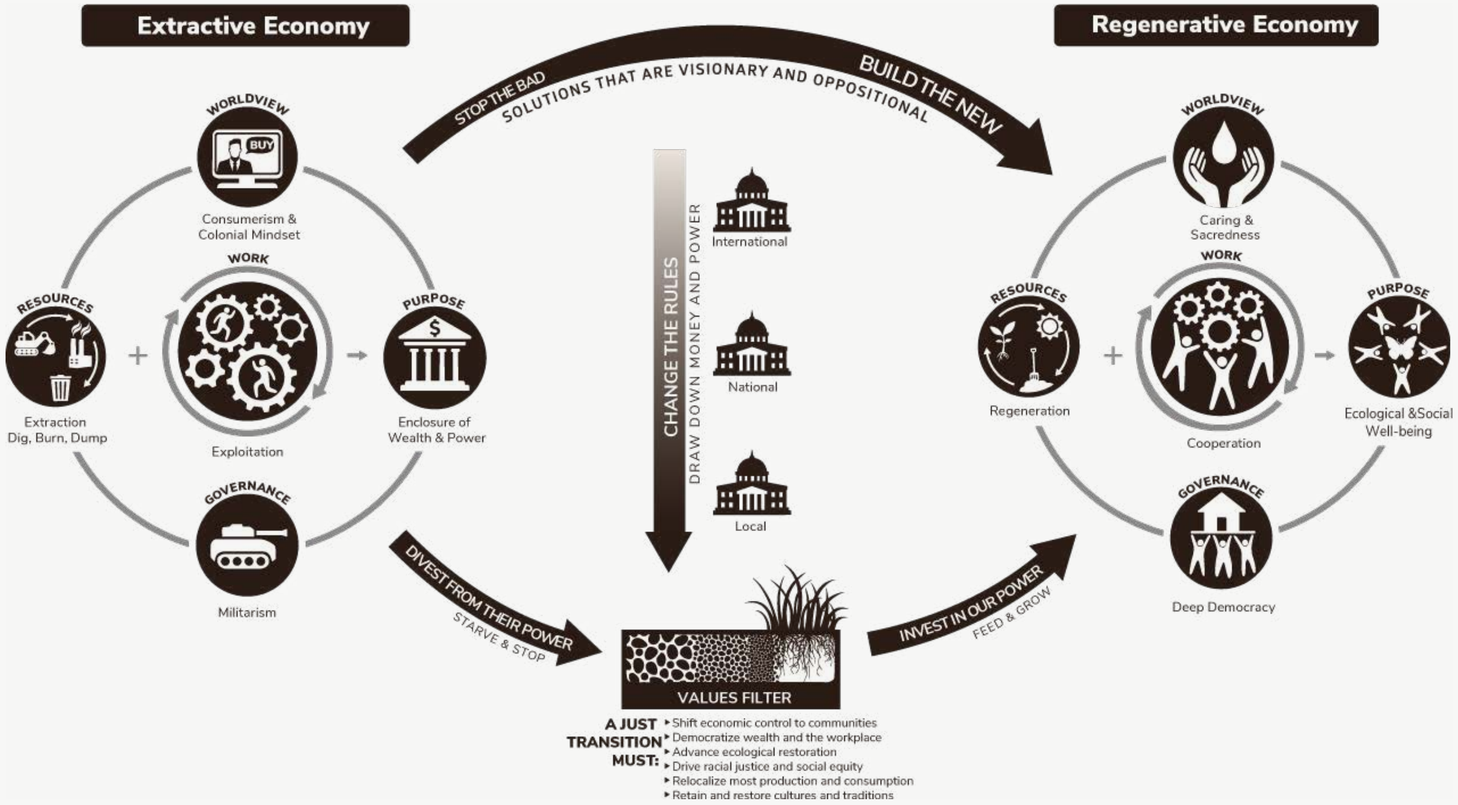
→ *Image: The doughnut of social and planetary boundaries (Raworth, 2017). Source: kateraworth.com/doughnut*

It is not enough that we just replace fossil fuels with renewables. To live within our planetary boundaries, we need to change our system.



→ *More Flames (2024) Image Credit: Martha Treves*

Transition from Extractive to Regenerative



→ *Image: Climate Justice Alliance*

It is not enough that we just replace fossil fuels with renewables. To live within our planetary boundaries, we need to change our system.

But it also matters how we transition. We need to ensure there is a just transition, and that we don't replace one extractive system with another extractive system run on clean energy. Lots of solar panels aren't necessarily the answer if they destroy the declining precious biodiversity, and the resources are dug from mines by enslaved labour.

This may sound idealistic, perhaps unachievable, but this transition is actually already underway. There are communities, towns, cities and businesses that are already moving to a regenerative economy, and of course, indigenous peoples have been practising regenerative economies for thousands of years.

Indigenous regenerative practices show us how humans can be a keystone species in a way that creates a positive impact on an ecosystem rather than a negative impact. In other words, rewilding our damaged ecosystems doesn't just mean taking people out of nature and letting it flourish, but rather enabling people to play their role in the flourishing of the land. As biologist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer describes it, not just healing our destroyed land, but healing our relationship with the land[6].



→ *Image: Sabina Fratila on Unsplash*

We need people to understand and create agency around the fact that the worst-case apocalypse is not inevitable, but we are running out of time. Countless UN studies have shown we have all the solutions needed to pivot away from a highly extractive society to a regenerative society[7].

We also still have a small window of opportunity to turn things around. We have not yet run out of time. But it's getting close. Although it is not everyone's fault we are where we are, we do need everyone to be inspired to act.

We need people to understand and create agency around the fact that the worst-case apocalypse is not inevitable, but we are running out of time.



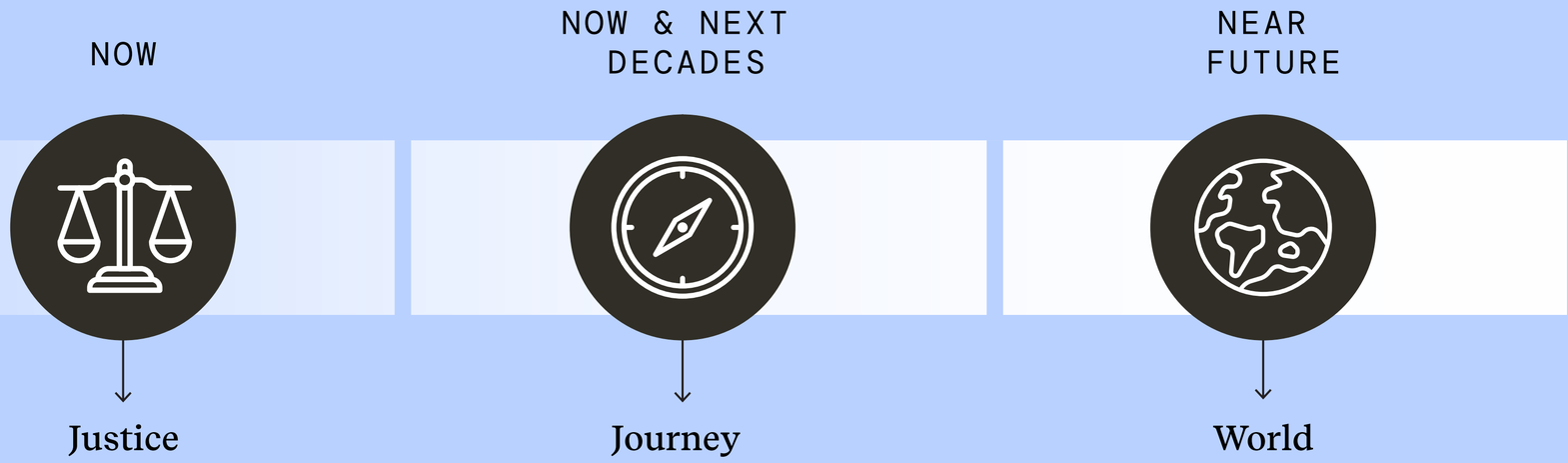
→ *Image: Transition Brixton*

The next wave of climate stories

Climate Spring sets out three ways that approach climate storytelling by moving beyond dystopia, where genre can lead, from thrillers and true crime to comedy, romance and drama.

The climate crisis is an epic story of the transformations that will take place across society over the coming decades. That change is already underway, and we have the privilege to roll up our sleeves and get involved in shaping that future.

For us a good climate story doesn't need to talk about climate, if it focuses on the narrative of the cause and resolution.



01.Reveal the truth: stories of accountability and justice

Who is really responsible for this unfurling crisis? We need to move beyond telling the story of how bad climate change is. Instead, we need to create stories that tell the truth about accountability for the real reason we are in the mess we are in.

We are at 5 minutes to midnight because a very small section of society is deliberately and knowingly keeping us on this path of destruction. Those responsible are the directors and boards of fossil fuel companies; not the oil workers in the tar sands, living on-site doing dangerous work to pay their bills. That is the decision-makers in banks and insurance companies who keep investing in fossil fuels even though they know it is rendering the planet uninsurable and unliveable; the elite who live an unsustainable life at the expense of others despite knowing the damage they are doing, and being able to afford to live sustainably. That is the politicians whose civil servants are begging them to listen to science.

This is a story of who is really responsible – and to highlight that is not the average person's fault. And that becomes even greater at a global level - where the Global Majority have not only done the least to contribute to the problem, but are bearing the brunt of the impacts.

It has been a deliberate strategy by Big Oil to put the responsibility of climate action on individuals, making us all feel guilty, when we have been locked into a fossil fuel system by design. Fossil fuel companies and their enablers have cleverly deflected attention from themselves onto the public, - everyone should do their little bit and 'reduce their carbon footprint'. Of course, we *are* in a crisis, and everyone should do the absolute *most* they can, including personal actions. Indeed enough personal action on climate can create social tipping points and create a political mandate. But for many people they have no choice about the fossil-fuel-designed system they find themselves in.



→ *This brilliant plot line in Apple TV's Ted Lasso, where the football players protested against their club sponsorship by an airline company and an oil company.*

RELATED CLIMATE STORIES



→ *(Above): Climate Spring supported ITV's drama After The Flood (2024) which showed a community confronting those responsible for the impacts of flooding. Image Credit: QUAYSTREET PRODUCTIONS FOR ITV/ITVX*

→ *Erin Brockovich (2000)*

→ *Dark Waters (2019)*

The tragedy is that we could have transitioned away from fossil fuels to renewables gradually over many decades, but that gradual, managed transition was blocked by fossil fuel companies, their financiers and politicians.

Solar energy was commercially available in 1956, and Henry Ford and Thomas Edison created an affordable electric car back in 1914. Fossil fuel companies' own scientists understood the dangers of their product back in the 1970s, and knew that alternative energy technology was available, but failed to invest in that transition, and were not compelled to by governments.

Even now, in the 2020s, companies are still lobbying to sabotage a transition away from polluting systems to alternatives which are not just less polluting but cheaper and better tech[8].

We need to shift the narrative away from making normal people feel responsible for the climate crisis, to holding corporations, financial institutions and governments to account for the role they continue to play in perpetuating the harm done to people by continued fossil fuel production.

For many people this is already existential right now - some low-lying islands, cities and communities will be lost to sea level rises or become uninhabitable due to the changes we can no longer avoid. The loss of culture has no price, and for some people they face the permanent loss of their home and their heritage

Kids at school learn that if you make a mess, you clean it up. But the polluters use every trick in the book to avoid footing the bill to clean up their mess, leaving taxpayers on the hook for the billions of dollars of damage being caused.

> The story of justice. What would justice look like for taking account of this responsibility?

There are so many amazing stories to be told of the everyday heroes taking on big power – and they are winning. And we need to continue to bring these stories to the big and small screen, to show that justice can be won.

We need stories that make us feel outraged at the real villains, enabling us to channel that anger into agency and a wider moment for climate justice.

There are thousands of lawsuits now being brought to remedy these injustices – from the Nigerians bringing a class action lawsuit against Shell for damage compensation for the chronic oil pollution, to a small island state seeking the international courts to compel polluting countries to do more and to compensate for their loss of state when they will be lost to sea level rises, to activists using the courts to sue their own governments to take action on climate in Brazil, France, the UK, the US, Australia, Ireland and Mexico. Lawsuits are being brought against individual directors of polluting companies for their personal liability on climate change[9]. Indigenous people who have been on the front line of trying to prevent and seek justice for the exploitation of their lands, there are also lawsuits being brought and won[10] as well as campaigns and action to ensure land sovereignty and land management remain under indigenous stewardship. The list goes on.

Climate Spring is developing a number of compelling stories on justice, inspired by the very commercially successful examples of truth and justice stories about environmental issues.

02. An epic journey: stories of the transition

Secondly, we need to tell the epic stories of the transition that is already underway. We know that even if the world stopped using fossil fuels tomorrow, we will still have the legacy of the last 100 years of greenhouse emissions in the atmosphere, and it would be far from reality to not acknowledge that we are in for a difficult ride and challenging times What we do need are stories that illustrate and allow us to believe that while this will be a tough transition, it will be a journey towards something better and a more stable future. We need stories that show how we can journey together and navigate this crisis together, and how the journey, even when tough, can be a story of adventure, courage and community.

The Wizard of Oz was really all about the journey, and discovering your voice and your strength and your team. The end was not the imagined utopia – which turned out to be an illusion – but realising that there is 'no place like home'.

Similarly, we need stories to show and make us *feel* that there is no place like our home that is planet earth. We do not need to eject from planet earth to live somewhere else.

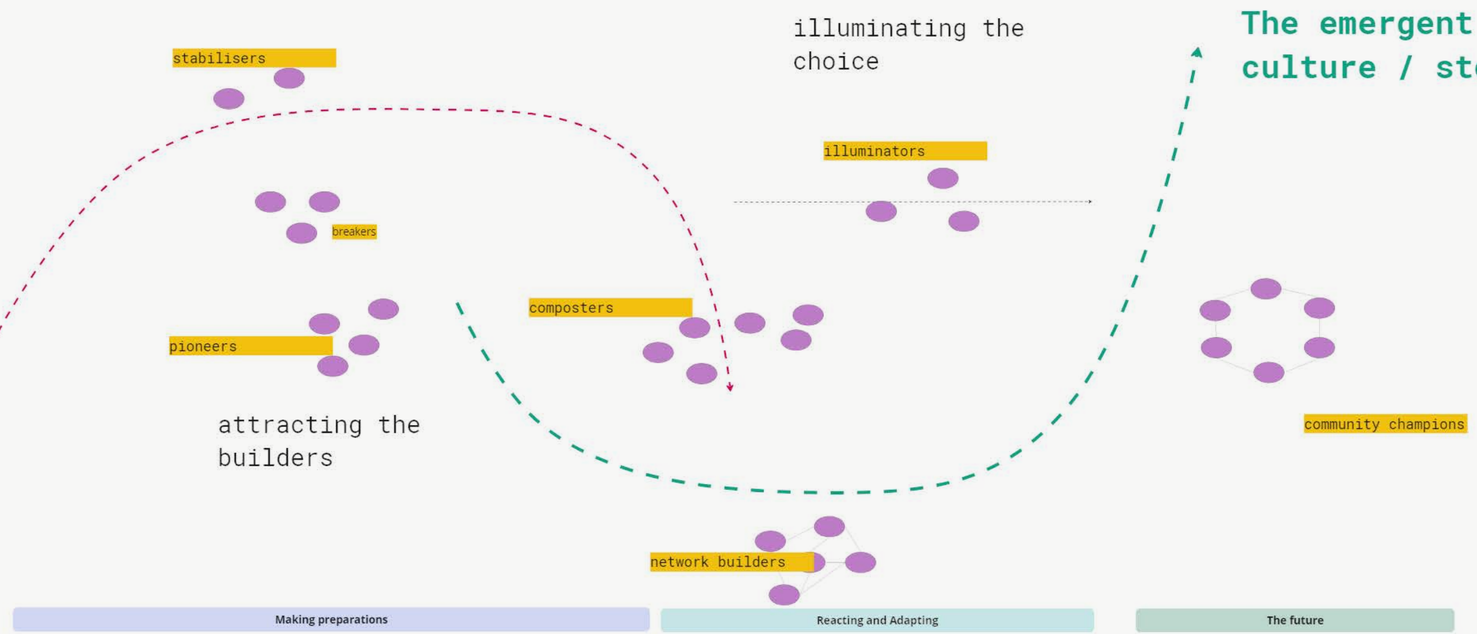
We are adapted to planet earth, our home, with the optimal living conditions, and if understood properly, abundant resources. We have to fall in love with our place here on earth, and realise that we are closely interdependent with the ecosystem, that we are part of it, that it sustains us. We are not trying to 'save nature', we have to have the sense that we are nature. And if nature is sick, so are we.

Ordinary people now agree with experts that we are already in a period of a great transition. Whether we like it or not, whatever happens, the old world - of a stable climate, of extractivism - is breaking down. The promise of betterment through economic growth is no longer true - life expectancy in Western economies is declining.



→ *Image: Wizard of Oz (1939), directed by Victor Fleming. Warner Home Video. Source: IMDb.*

How Social, Economic and Political Change Happens



We are already in a transition, where the current dominant system and our current dominant cultural story - that of rampant extractivism tipping us beyond safe planetary boundaries (shown in pink) - will, or needs to, decline, and at the same time, the new system, a more sustainable, regenerative, life-sustaining system (in green) is already in existence. As a dominant system ends and is replaced by a new system, there are different roles needed in society:

→ **the pioneers** create new system's technologies, new ways of growing food, building homes etc. This also includes early adopters of the new system

→ **the breakers** are those that call out the problems and injustices of the dominant system - campaigners, activists, lawyers, politicians, leaders

→ **the composters** are those that manage the decline of the problematic system - e.g. supporting workers to transition to new industries

→ **the networkers** connect the new economy actors together, to share learnings and build community and strength in numbers

→ **the illuminators** are the reporters, storytellers, creatives and dreamers who shine the line on the changing story, the pioneers and the breakers

→ **the community champions** are those that spread the new systems created by the pioneers into their communities, their workplaces and their families.

→ *Image: The Berkana Institute's 2 Loops Model for Change, adapted by RADAR - a collective of futurists (radardao.xyz).*

The insight from the Berkana Institute is that change is not linear, and the new system emerges while the old system is in decline.



→ *Kiss the Ground (2020) Image: Big Picture Ranch*

We are not going to be able to maintain the Western, industrialised, high-consumption lifestyles without experiencing major disruption. People sense the system is breaking down, even if they don't know why.

At the same time, systems are already transitioning and adapting to more regenerative models. Which system and worldview will become dominant, will depend simply on what this generation of adults do over the next few years - the next decade. We need to tell the stories of the transitions that are already taking place now, not just in our climate, but across society from our food, energy and transport to housing.

Everything is going to change over the coming decades:

- → Many farmers are now transitioning their farms from highly industrialised or damaging systems, to farming with nature. The results are a flourishing of nature, restoring the health of the soil and often a more financially sustainable farm. Most are doing this without support from government, with all the challenges this entails, as show in the film *Kiss the Ground* or described in the book *English Pastoral* by James Rebanks.
- → Companies and communities are installing renewable energy in ways that create energy independence, jobs and even income[13].
- → Fossil fuel workers are campaigning to retrain to be able to install heat pumps and solar panels[14].
- → Communities are digging up paving stones and planting[15].
- → Landowners from huge estates to small corners of unloved land are rewilding - transforming landscapes from deserts to wild abundance[16,17].
- → Species that have been extinct in certain landscapes for generations are being introduced and the impact is transforming not just the landscapes but the people involved[18].
- → People are buying land as a collective and building sustainable and affordable houses[19].
- → Electric cars are now cheaper than petrol cars to run, and electric bikes are even more appealing in urban areas[20].

Change is already underway, and the more people realise the more it spreads. Social tipping points can be created the more we shine the spotlight on these incredible stories of change. These changes are taking place in companies and communities that have far less resources than a well-funded fossil fuel industry that is doubling down on extracting the very last of a sunset industry. But change is underway.

03. World Building: normalising sustainable behaviour

We need to show climate action in the characters that we create, in a way that feels natural and normalised. One of the best ways to do this is to show it without being didactic.

The entry point is ‘planet placement’ - putting cleantech or sustainable products or behaviours into your story world or TV show in the same way that product placement is utilised by brands. BAFTA Albert who created the concept of ‘planet placement’ with Futerra, have created a useful guide to the types of everyday behaviours and actions that can be seeded in almost any story.

Beyond this, climate action can also include initiating a local energy or a rewilding project. It includes product and service designers, entrepreneurs, policymakers, people taking action in their personal and professional lives. A lot of popular culture portrays stereotypes around climate activists.

This needs to change since audiences, particularly Millennials and Generation Z, are shifting their values and desires towards sustainability. Some great examples of this starting to be reflected on TV include:

→ *Sex Education* TV series, Netflix - the third season was set in an ‘eco’ school where the cool kids rode their bikes, wore second-hand clothes and talked about the importance of sustainability.

→ *Love Island* TV show partnered with eBay to highlight second-hand clothing as more desirable than fast fashion.

We need to normalise slow travel and slow fashion, not jet-set lifestyle and fast fashion.

We need to show electric stoves and heat pumps as ubiquitous. They aren’t just climate-friendly; they eliminate the huge health impact of gas stoves and air pollution on health, particularly children’s health.

Put simply, they are better technology. Think of it as upgrading our homes and lives with 21st-century technology.

Spinning wind turbines and well-located solar panels can be an inspiring visual backdrop to a story. Slow travel by train has been the source of many beautiful love stories, thrillers or mysteries. Driving cars has been portrayed as the all-American Dream, a symbol of freedom and independence. In reality, driving cars is costly and you’re more likely to be stuck in traffic, breathing in pollution, shortening your lifespan.

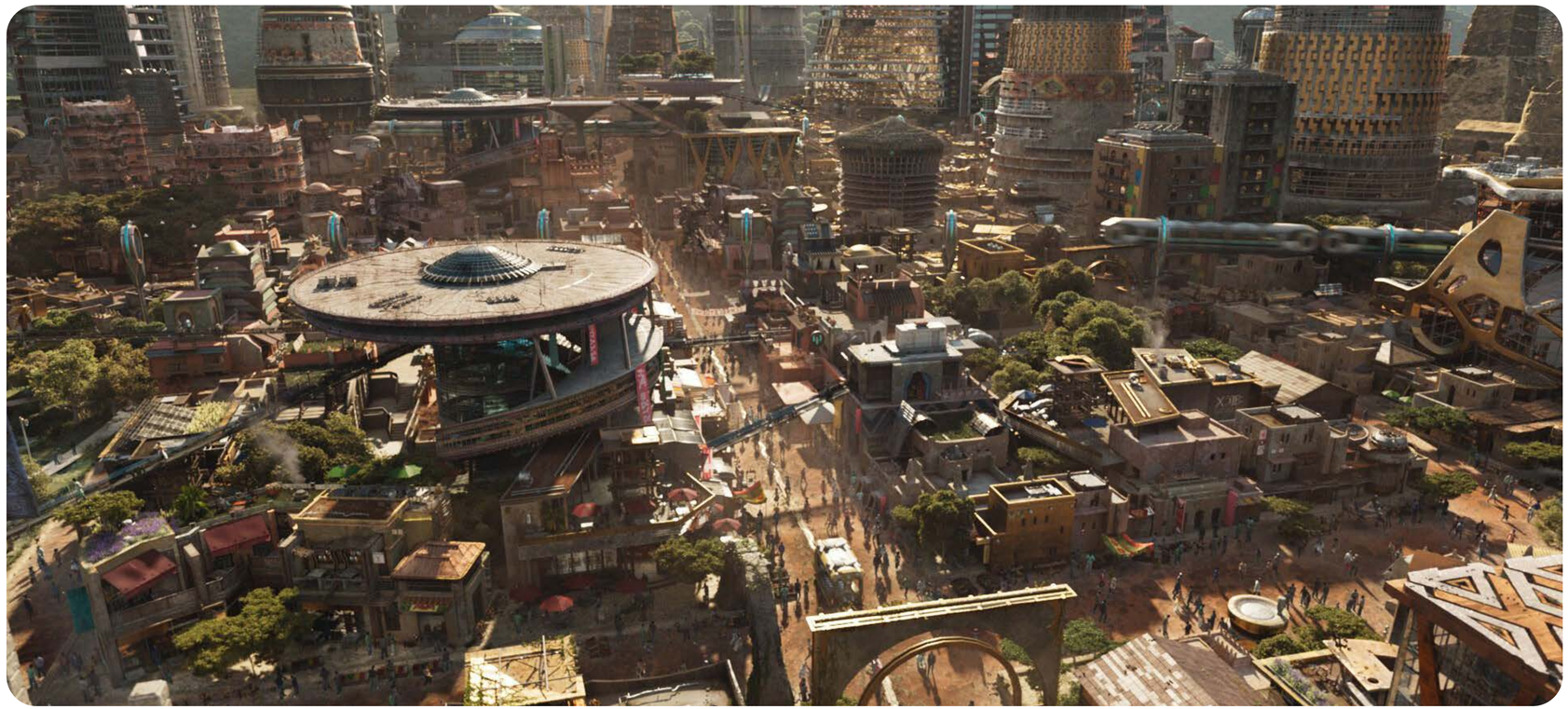
Bikes, trains and buses are a better portrayal of freedom, and trains make a much sexier location. There is lots of potential for romance or classic traintop chases when you don’t have to be stuck behind the wheel.





→ *Image (Top): Sex Education (2019), created by Laurie Nunn. Netflix/Samuel Taylor. Source: IMDb. Image (Bottom): Love Island, ITV Studios/Ebay.*

03. World Building: visualising and imaging a regenerative near future



→ *Image: Black Panther (2018), directed by Ryan Coogler, Marvel Studios. Source: IMDb.*

The superpower of the screen industry is world building – creating beautiful and inspiring worlds that are visually compelling. World building for screen creates the visual shorthand, the cultural reference points, that we are so lacking for climate action.

The *Black Panther* film makers utilised Afrofuturism to show us world building that was an African, decolonised, sustainable alternative. The world building had fun with levitating trains, thatched roofs on top of skyscrapers and pedestrianised streets.

We need climate world building – where we imagine what a regenerative future looks like, and make that exciting, beautiful, aspirational. This can be the backdrop to stories. This does not need to be far future sci-fi. It can be set in the near future or it can be stories of people doing things differently now.

This is about imagining and visualising a world in which we have moved away from fossil fuels. What would a regenerative Liverpool look like? What would it be like to live there?

For example, Amsterdam wasn't always a cycling city. Much like most cities, it was full of gridlocked traffic and pollution from cars. In a relatively short time, the city was transformed. These transformations have been taking place globally from Times Square in New York to Paris, France.

All of the evidence points to the fact that a sustainable, regenerative economy won't just be better for the planet, but will be better for ourselves and the other species we share the planet with. Imagine cities, towns and villages that have clean air, affordable transport that don't create major pollution or congestion, clean rivers to swim in, an abundance of seasonal, affordable food and homes that are warm, dry and heated and powered affordably, without being hostage to international energy price hikes.

Another great example is Transition Brixton, who raised funds locally to create locally owned solar energy to power housing estates, and created its own local currency the Brixton Pound to support local businesses.

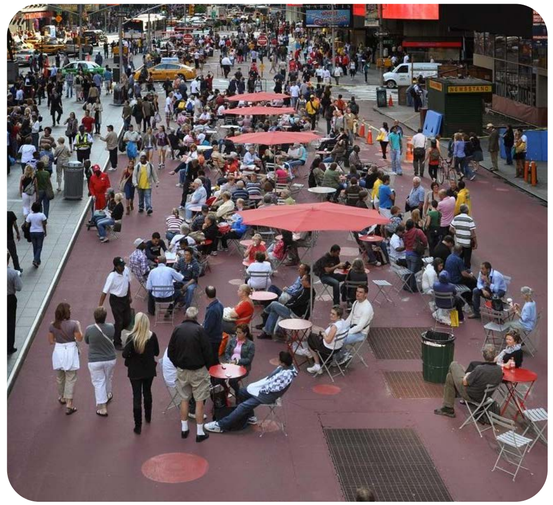
> World building stories are our biggest gap and where we need the greatest focus.

Outside of cities, rewilding landscapes can create dramatic improvements in a short period of time. Rewilding creates a flourishing of biodiversity and preserves natural carbon sinks trees and peat.

World building stories are our biggest gap and where we need the greatest focus. We recognise that for many creatives it is challenging to imagine a fossil fuel free, regenerative future. So we have developed a world building programme to cut through the jargon and noise and bring the examples and inspiration together for writers. Solarpunk is a great source of inspiration for having fun imaging a sustainable, regenerative future.



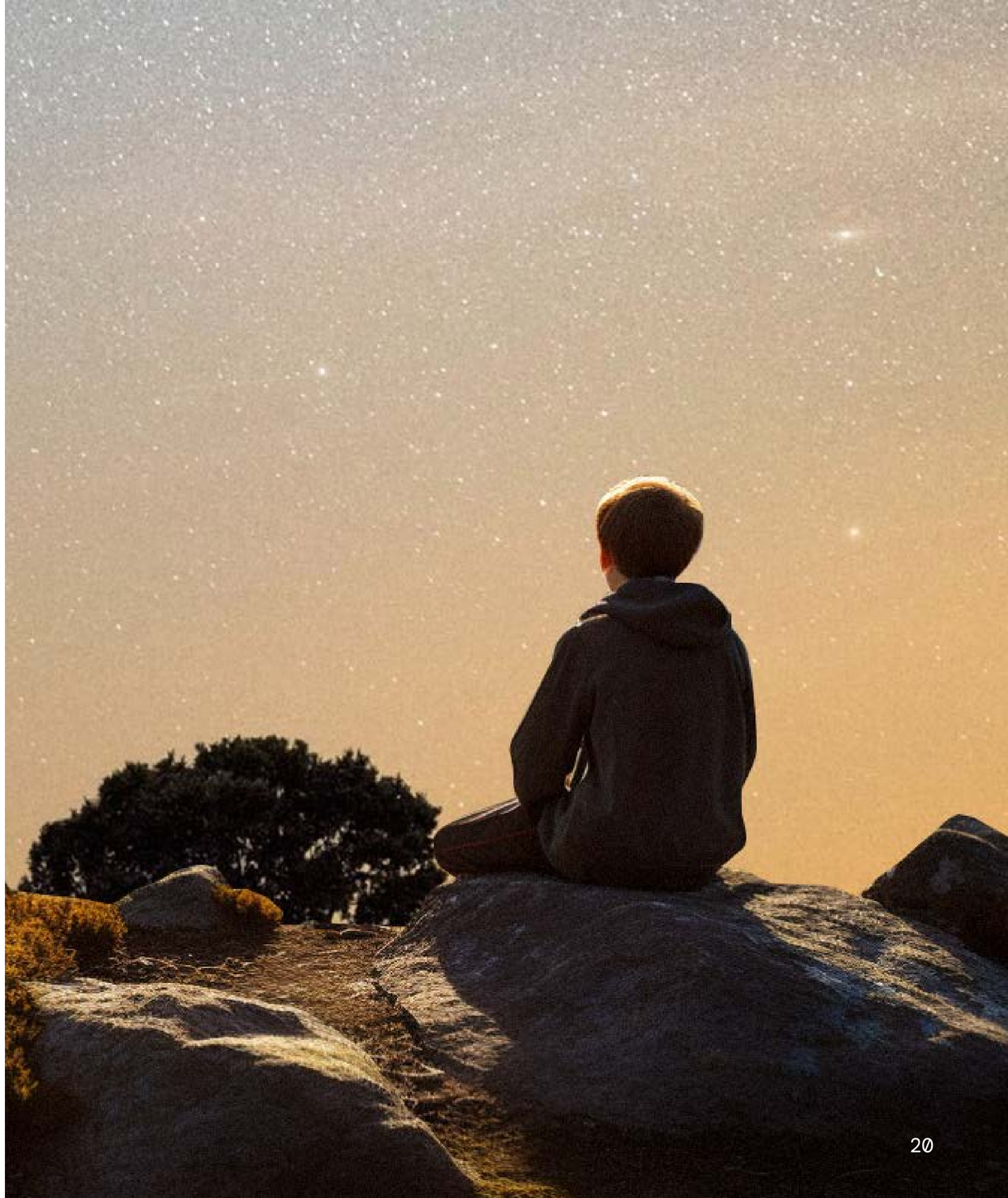




→ *Image (Top): Animation 'Dear Alice' for Chobani. Credit: The Line. (Bottom): Before and After. Times Square, New York. Source: New York City Department of Transportation via Flickr.*

We at Climate Spring see climate stories not as tools to ‘educate’ the public, or communicate how bad the planet’s health is, but rather as stories to illuminate the routes out of the burning forest, to right wrongs, and to have fun exploring what a life-sustaining world might look like.

We support stories that shift the narratives, and reveal the truth and highlight justice. This dreaming ability of our screens has a powerful role in society to reflect our collective desires and visions of new worlds that are sprouting.



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