



PATHWAYS TO PLANETARY HEALTH

Symposium

REPORT



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SYMPOSIUM ON THE COMMONS AND THE COMMON GOOD | MARCH 15-17, 2023

The Garrison Institute held a Pathways to Planetary Health symposium on The Commons and the Common Good in March 2023. This in-person event continued the tradition of the Garrison Institute bringing people together to address key topics that are central to creating a more resilient and sustainable world. The previous symposium on Ethics in the Age of the Anthropocene is summarized in a [report available online](#).

The 2023 symposium gathered a diverse group of about 75 thought leaders, including scientists, indigenous teachers, public sector leaders, impact investors, researchers, and on-the-ground change makers. [A book of biographies](#) describes work that participants lead to help shift worldviews from hyper individuality to deep relationality, and from hyper consumption to valuing and conserving the commons.



Participants engaged in rich conversations and exchanged wisdom and insights from the field.

The symposium sought to define the ways in which the concepts of the commons and the common good could provide coherent grounding amidst chaotic times marked by climate change, biodiversity loss, injustice, and racism. The magnitude of these issues and the recognition that the way we've been living isn't biophysically

sustainable requires a deep re-thinking of humanity's role within the global ecosystem. The symposium therefore sought to envision what it would take – and learn from what is already unfolding – to shift mindsets towards the commons and design economic and social systems based on relationship and mutuality.

THE COMMONS AND THE COMMON GOOD

The commons is a broad concept that reflects a whole, integrated world. It can be both a noun and a verb and includes shared resources and wealth rather than division into individual property and rights; interconnected places and communities rather than separate territories; and self-organized social systems with their values and norms that guide relationships between people, places, and resources. It is grounded in mutuality and differentiated parts that belong to an integrated whole. Under predominant economic and political systems based on privately owned property and monetary wealth, the approach of the commons is severely challenged. Many forms of the commons are being exploited and eroded.

There are many examples of social systems, resources, and relationships that result in collective benefit. This form of governance is different from that provided by markets or the state. For example, communities have managed fisheries and irrigation water as common pool resources. Traditional stewarding of landscapes for future generations is a form of commoning. Other examples of the

commons include communities that publish research in open access publications, generate and share open source software, and collaborate in curating shareable content such as Wikipedia.

The common good is the recognition of links between personal and shared interests and responsibilities. It emphasizes relationships and the importance of mutual care for oneself, other fellow members of society, the living Earth of which we all are a part, and past and future generations. Centering the common good is a way to appreciate our deep interdependence and infuse it with compassion.

Pope Francis outlined a common good ethic in “Laudato Si,” his encyclical on the environment and human ecology, which calls for a universal communion that “excludes nothing and no one.” Thich Nhat Hanh coined the term “[interbeing](#)” in his book *The Art of Living: Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now* to describe our deep interconnection with everything else. “To be is always to ‘inter-be,’” he wrote. “We inter-are with one another and with all life.”

Pathways to Planetary Health is the Garrison Institute’s integrative environmental initiative. Planetary health encompasses the vitality of all life on Earth, including people, and recognizes that our wellbeing and the wellbeing of the planet are deeply interconnected.

The Planetary Health Alliance defines planetary health as a solutions-oriented, transdisciplinary field and social movement focused on understanding and addressing the impacts of human disruptions to Earth’s natural systems on human health and all life on Earth.



GOALS AND THEMES OF THE SYMPOSIUM

Participants discussed and developed ideas about how commons systems and practices (or “commoning”) could contribute to planetary health. By beginning to form a network of networks, the group of participants started forming a community of people and organizations doing commoning, which could work together to advance the commons and the common good as a coherent, impactful field.

Awareness of interdependence and relational ways of knowing and being in the world are central to planetary health. Commoning can give rise to fundamental value systems that honor every element—from organisms in the soil to humanity itself—with respect and care.

With this in mind, the symposium aimed to intertwine diverse ways of thinking about the commons and the common good and collectively explore the science, language, stories, and practices that could help prime a more holistic state of mind focused on the commons. The symposium nurtured a rich exchange of ideas and experiences across diverse disciplines, including natural sciences, sociology, philosophy and ethics, Indigenous wisdom, sustainable farming, and regenerative finance.

The symposium was organized around several key themes explored and evolved in plenary sessions

and small groups. The event weaved five main threads together:

- Interdependence and cooperation as fundamental conditions of all life;
- Indigenous worldviews and associated language that integrates this understanding;
- Mutuality as the basis for social systems that support, preserve, and strengthen the commons;
- Institutional, legal, policy, and political models for “commoning;” and
- Practical steps and paths forward we can take starting now.

Many sources provided inspiration and direction for the main themes throughout the symposium. Participants contributed to a [journal of ideas](#) as a pre-read full of thought-provoking written pieces. Attendees who are leaders in their respective fields also provided key framing. For example, David Bollier presented about decades of work to explore and describe institutional, legal, policy, and political possibilities of the commons. Sara Horowitz shared about a recently published book on *Mutualism: Building the Next Economy from the Ground Up*. Krista Tippett drew from a recent interview with artist and technologist James Bridle to offer the phrase “the broad commonwealth of life” that we are “inextricably entangled with and suffused by.”

RECURRENT IDEAS THAT EMERGED DURING THE SYMPOSIUM

THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE

Language is a reflection of our mental models. A language of the commons that reflects Indigenous worldviews could invite us to participate in the living, reciprocal relationships between all things, and to communicate in ways that respect the Earth and one another. Several indigenous leaders described the ways that the present moment, relationality, and interdependence are expressed through – and cultivated by – their languages.

Tiokasin Ghosthorse, a member of the Cheyenne River Lakota Nation of South Dakota and host of First Voices Indigenous Radio, said “We have no word for dominion, guilt, or sin... Our word for water is, ‘voicing the living relationship between all things.’ We can describe the word and the

energy for the word – it’s all in verbs, not nouns.” He challenged everyone in the group to more deeply contemplate the language we use. “I want you to know how I am thinking here and now. Your language is present-phobic. Be here now.”

Yuria Celidwen, a native of Indigenous Nahua and Maya descent, reminded us that of the 7,000 languages spoken in the world, 4,000 are Indigenous, and 2,200 are spoken by fewer than 1,000 people. Every two weeks, we lose a language forever. Cultural extinction mirrors biodiversity loss. As languages are lost, so too are ways of knowing and being based on ancestral wisdom. Meanwhile, indigenous people safeguard 80% of Earth’s remaining biodiversity. The well-being of indigenous cultures directly contributes to planetary health.



Julia Kim and Monica Gagliano performed and presented a new narrative for the story of evolution based on the emergence of complex life through mutuality and symbiosis.

Puna Dawson, an internationally honored elder of the Hawaiian Islands and record keeper of Hawaiian culture and history, shared about the language and songs of honoring Earth, each other, and oneself. She led the symposium in traditional songs and dances that brought about a deeper understanding of hula and the spirit of aloha with mutual regard and warm affection.

Chris Googoo and Melody Martin-Googoo, First Nations leaders from Mi'kmaq, each shared about their indigenous languages and traditions. Their stories showed how youth education and community empowerment could be powerful aspects of reclaiming language and culture. They reflected on how language can inspire community development, establish balance, and create spaces for healing.

SCIENTIFIC INSIGHTS AND NEW NARRATIVES

Monica Gagliano re-told the story of evolution to illustrate how complex life evolves in symbiotic relationships. Julia Kim played music on electric violin to accompany Monica's scientific immersion into the ways of nature and evolution. Their collaborative performance underscored the essential nature of emergence and mutuality rather than competition as the foundations of life.

David Sloan Wilson shared his work on the theory of multi-level selection and described how evolutionary dynamics occur simultaneously at multiple scales. This led to insights such as the need to create a framework for continuing interactions at larger scales so that interactions at the micro-level don't undermine goals or intentions at the macro-level. He showed how altruism can be a competitive advantage, especially at more complex levels of organization.

There were several references to the groundbreaking work of Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom. Her work and research on the commons across the world provide many insights on how commons can be created, preserved and continuously managed (e.g. the 8 design principles she articulated for co-managing a commons).

CONNECTING AND SUPPORTING "ISLANDS OF COHERENCE"

A quote shared at the symposium resonated with many participants:

"When a complex system is far from equilibrium, small islands of coherence in a sea of chaos have the capacity to shift the entire system to a higher order."

- Attributed to Ilya Prigogine, recipient of the 1977 Nobel Prize in Chemistry

In the latter half of the symposium, participants used Prigogine's phrase "Islands of coherence" to frame conceptual frameworks and real-world projects that center the commons as essential antidotes to an increasingly chaotic world. Others reflected on islands of coherence in the context of how social systems and worldviews change, for example, from hyper individuality to deep relationality.

While literal islands appear separate, they are actually connected to the surface of the Earth and are part of the same source. Questions arose about whether multiple conceptual islands could be part of a deeper, interconnected coherence that lies below the surface; and what contributes to an island's stability and capacity to hold coherence amidst chaos.

Contemplating islands of coherence led to ideas about potential action steps. One way we conceptualized our work together was to map islands – endeavoring to connect them and navigate between them – and coordinate and build clusters of activity among them that could potentially "shift the entire system." Could support for multiple connected islands grow their shared coherence to eventually become a broad, more coherent equilibrium state? Participants noted the importance of engaging with communities of practice to co-design this work rather than imposing structure or creating a map of people, places, or activities without community participation.

The imagery of islands of coherence is consistent with the Garrison Institute's experience advancing emergent fields. Connecting networks one to another can give rise to new social structures with

new emergent functions. Connected networks of networks behave differently and amount to more than the sum of their parts.

ART, MUSIC, MEDITATION, AND A SENSE OF PLACE

The Garrison Institute served as a gathering place where people could deepen their work, build community, and engage with transformational change. The physical space for the symposium was the former monastery built on a bluff overlooking the Hudson River. The ecological place of the river valley and surrounding forests provided opportunities to walk together on open trails and be in living relationship with the Earth. The mental space of openness and compassion for self, each other, and the Earth was cultivated through meditation and mindfulness practices.

Art was foundational to engendering a deeper experience for participants. The art woven throughout the symposium was simultaneously grounding and uplifting. Fredericka Foster curated works by several artists that showed – and even

brought into the room – the local waters and watersheds around Garrison. These visual displays evoked the living movement of water. An art installation by Paz Perlman titled *Down to Earth* used sound, scent, and soil to create an immersive, contemplative space where participants experienced being grounded and also held up by the Earth.

Place-based music with Dar Williams, Jonathan F.P. Rose, Andy Revkin, and Julia Kim enlivened the group. Improvisational violin by Julia Kim facilitated emergence, while traditional songs by Puna Dawson and flute by Yuria Celidwen underscored the important roles of ceremony in bringing people together and creating shared experiences full of celebration, honor, and good intentions.

The symposium was an experiential event where participants did more than just talk. Participants engaged in play, song, dance, deep listening, contemplation, and communion beyond language with one another and the Earth as the source of understanding, wisdom, and life. These were deliberate ways the symposium sought to integrate transmissions between different cultures and generations.

Participants were invited to bring an object representing their place of origin, their ancestors, or where they consider home.





The group gathered in a closing circle to reflect on new ideas for collaborative projects and intentions for carrying work forward.

OUTCOMES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The symposium brought together diverse change makers and perspectives in a circle around common ground. Transformational efforts in individual areas became better connected to one another while new relationships were formed and old ones were renewed. Some participants who had collaborated online for years met in person for the very first time. Through the many interactions, there was a shared appreciation for commoning as essential for the systemic, social, psychological, spiritual, economic, and political changes that are needed to address pressing issues of our time, including climate, biodiversity, and social justice.

The symposium initiated an ongoing focus at the Garrison Institute on the commons. It sparked fresh new ideas about developing commons-based initiatives across specific key topics (such as land and finance) and inspired interest in taking stock of commoning efforts that exist and that could be created. These collaborative efforts could give rise to a network among communities of practice and further deepen relationships among “islands of coherence.” Ultimately, a program on the commons could build broader awareness of interrelated and

interconnected worldviews and cultivate a cultural shift toward commoning work – with a deeper sense of purpose and mutuality.

A strategic communication and engagement platform could become a key way for collaborators to make commoning work more visible and prevalent. It could include research and thought pieces, op-eds, interviews, podcasts, and more. Some participants intend to create a map of commoning networks which can track and facilitate interconnections among different projects and organizations, and measure the growing strength of the network over time.

The Garrison Institute aims to serve as a hub for a co-created “framework for continuing interactions” which will help develop and support ideas that were shared during a final brainstorming session at the symposium. To that end, a new group and a series of online meetings following on from the symposium will enable continued exchange of ideas and partnership opportunities.

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We share deep and eternal gratitude to Jonathan F.P. Rose and Diana Rose for founding the Garrison Institute with a mission to apply the skills and wisdom cultivated through contemplative practice, together with the insights emerging from science, to today's urgent social and environmental challenges, leveraging transformational change and helping build a more compassionate, resilient future.

We offer heartfelt thanks to the steering committee for helpful guidance and inspirational ideas that shaped the design of the event (including Angel Acosta, Bill Vendley, Cynthia Bourgeault, David Bollier, Jonathan F.P. Rose, Julia Kim, Melanie Goodchild, Monica Gagliano, Pamela Ayo Yetunde, and Yuria Celidwen); to fellow staff for program support (including Jeanne Johnson, Monique Francis, and William Freeman); to Fredericka Foster for skillfully curating the art exhibition and to the many artists who contributed beautiful pieces; and to Christa Tinari, David Bollier, Jonathan F.P. Rose, Sander Tideman, Stephen Posner, Steve Kent, and William Freeman for helping to write this report.





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