CLIMATE WAYFINDING

Healing Ourselves and the Planet We Call Home

KATHARINE K. WILKINSON

Co-Editor of National Bestseller *All We Can Save*

1

Embarking

Come to the crossroads
where your wonderings meet.

At the age of sixteen, perched on a ridge in Pisgah Forest, North Carolina, I scrawled these words into a handbound journal: *Want to help the world. Be connected with the Earth. Change the way I live.*

I remember the day was cold—oaks, hickories, and maples long ago having given up their leaves for winter silhouettes—but the sky was bright. By the time we made it up the valley, my lungs were heaving in the sharp air. A dozen high school sophomores had followed our teacher, Susan Tinsley Daily, through a beautiful, remote stretch of the forest.

We were used to going to magical places with her: crawling through a twisting thicket of rhododendrons and writing about what it might be like to live beneath them; sliding on our bellies through a flooded riverside field, smearing our faces with mud, and cackling with delight as we made face-prints on paper. Her classroom, of four walls or none, was typically a place for growing our sense of aliveness.

But that day, Tinsley led us to a totally denuded ridgeside. The clear-cut was a barren gash in the Southern Appalachian ecosystem I had come to love. I felt my heart fissure as I looked out on what was traditionally—rightfully—Cherokee land, once canopied by towering chestnut trees, before the days of colonization and forced removals, then ubiquitous logging and deadly chestnut blight. So many layers of tragedy.*

The brutality of the extractive economy gripped me. I ached with realization about the gap, the gulf, between how we *can* do things—like accessing timber selectively, with attention to ecological integrity—and how we *do* do things—taking it all, land be damned. I shuddered with shame from not having been more awake before, thinking clear-cuts were a wrenching, awful problem in faraway places like the Amazon, but not here.

This was the most pivotal instance in a series of experiences that had helped me understand the harms of industrial forestry and agriculture, fossil fuels, and climate change. And through that understanding, I also came to see my own entanglement in those systems—unintended and largely out of my control, yes, but painfully present. The mundane use of toilet paper or a plastic shampoo bottle collided with the existential. I was heartbroken, angry, activated, and I yearned for a sense of belonging on, and with, this planet we call home.

My mother has always called the Appalachians "wise old mountains," not as tall or dramatic as their younger relatives in the American West, but sage and

*Roughly thirty miles northwest of where we encountered the clear-cut is the Qualla Boundary, the 56,600-acre territory of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. It is a sovereign nation of some fifteen thousand members, who continue to steward these ancestral homelands and the culture woven into them.

powerful in their longevity. In the presence of these remnants of geologic uplift, now carved by cold water and swathed with moss, one feels summoned to deeper truths.

I recall a steadiness of hand as I recorded my clarity and commitment in that pale-blue journal. My lucidity, cast into vows, has stayed with me for almost three decades. But like many moments of inward truth-telling, the one inked that day prompted more searching than it supplied answers.*

What can I do to help?
What does this mean for the direction of my life?
Will action ease the anguish I feel? Will any of it matter?

That is the paradox of a calling: certainty and uncertainty in the same breath.

What I did not realize at the time was that I was stepping into a lifelong process—a navigational process at the nexus of my own being and the broader world. That kind of navigation is nothing new. Among other core attributes of our species, human beings are seekers and makers of meaning. Our own lives—the time we have in these fleeting bodies and the paths we take—are raw material for that creative act. The terms *purpose*, *vocation*, and *calling* all point to an enduring desire to carve significance out of, or into, the years we spend embodied on this Earth. We want to make something of a heart that pumps, neurons that dispatch, and lungs that inspire—each piece of us, an improbable ancestral gift.

And so we wonder:

What can I offer to our world?
Is my soul built for certain contributions?
Who am I here to become?

*During the hunkered days of 2020, I reflected on this formative experience in "morning pages," one of Julia Cameron's two essential practices from *The Artist's Way*. That free-flow, longhand writing evolved into a piece for *Time* in 2021, some of which is echoed here.

Questions like these, and the longing that can churn beneath them, are a through line of late-night journaling, conversations between best friends, self-help summits, therapists' couches, elders' guidance, and every medium of storytelling. There is good reason many know by heart Mary Oliver's study of the essential question: "Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?"

> Have you held this kind of tender, pulsing question? What shape did it take?

Our Changing Context

Today, the perennial act of navigation has a new context: the climate crisis and all its implications for life, both human and beyond. Those implications are already part of our days: ferocious wildfires and stifling smoke, floodwaters and storms of freakish speed, dallying domes of blistering heat, and likely the warmest temperatures in at least one hundred thousand years. (Back then, *Homo sapiens* were just beginning to use symbols, the first marks made with meaning.)

What scientists once outlined as *someday* climate possibilities are, more and more, our shared reality. Shorelines and thoroughfares slip beneath rising seas. Whole forests and centuries-old towns are reduced to ash in mere hours. Land that sustained specific crops for generations lurches from ideal conditions to inhospitable, snatching the livelihoods of farmers and communities. And entire species—snuffed out.

All of it is happening in a profoundly unequal world, with those who are already in jeopardy or facing injustice, and who have scarcely contributed to this crisis, suffering most. Our new troubles inflame existing ones.

In a very literal sense, we find ourselves facing a world where maps increasingly no longer work.

Our physical world is changing with such rapidity that efforts to document it are almost always out of date. From road maps to planting schedules in the *Farmers' Almanac* to passed-down knowledge, the records we have used to plan, steer, and respond to conditions—they all feel less and less reliable. Have we logged the latest mudslide, algal bloom, oil spill, or refinery discharge? Is it safe to take that road, swim that lake, fish that bay, or breathe that air? Is that grassland or glacier still there? What are the edges of water, of land, of high temps and low, of *safe* and *sure*?

The gap between what is on paper or screen and what we encounter in three dimensions can be startling, distressing, and also dangerous. We are feeling our way through the obscure, a word that comes from the Latin for "dark."

As we traverse, our internal maps are failing us too. *Where to live, what work to do, who to love, what matters most*—these queries press amid the commotion of change that is global in scope yet intimately local in consequence. They seem to outstrip many of our inherited answers, and efforts to track our own deepest knowing may come up murky and muddled.

With *home* so very much in question—as flux comes to neighborhoods, ecosystems, and entire countries—how can we not lose our bearings? In fact, if we feel we have clear coordinates on life, we may not have truly reckoned with what's afoot and the material conditions that will shape every path from here.

For meaning-seeking beings, this time of climate crisis and ecological unraveling is clarifying. If we are looking for something worthy of our waking hours, surely the work of mending our planet is it. The continuance of life itself seems a rather consequential mission—personally, communally, and for society as a whole. But in other ways, this moment is wholly confounding. To be so small, in the face of something so big, is disorienting.

> Take a moment to inhale . . . and exhale. Inhale . . . and exhale. Let breath be a tether to here, to now.

More and more of us are waking up to the climate and ecological crisis now fully on our doorstep. As we do, we find ourselves unsettled, unnerved, and even unmoored. We do not want to be in this mess—yet cannot piece together how we get out of it.

If you think of the climate crisis and feel bewildered, overwhelmed, useless, or inconsolable, you are not alone. Globally, 84 percent of young people are moderately to extremely worried about climate change. They express feeling sad, afraid, angry, powerless, and betrayed by leaders. A majority of Americans are worried, too, and a quarter of the country expresses alarm about our heating planet. But a much smaller group—just 8 percent of us—has turned alarm into action through activism, donations, consumer choices, or even just discussing the topic with friends and family. More Americans say they are willing, but unsure how best to engage. Around the world, 89 percent of people want to see more climate action from their governments—but often do not register that many, many others share the same desire.

The climate sidelines are filled with concerned, but largely quiet, spectators. (Getting to this point was no small feat, to be sure; ask any longtimer in the climate movement.)* Now, we need many more people to join the pilgrimage of planetary healing, which is being routed in real time. And we need to ensure that those who do join can stay engaged over the long haul—which is, I'm afraid, almost certainly what lies ahead. As social justice strategist Makani Themba has said, "We are living in high-stakes times. There is no one to spare. There is no bystanding."

*In the 1800s, scientists like Eunice Newton Foote pointed to the possibility of what we now call climate change. Research intensified in the twentieth century, including Dr. Charles Keeling's pioneering documentation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The 1980s saw a surge in researchers, activists, and Indigenous communities sounding the alarm. In 1988, NASA scientist Dr. James Hansen delivered a seminal warning to the US Senate, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was formed. The public concern evident today grew out of decades of work.

Nodes of Possibility

As a climate leader, the core belief that inspires my work is this: *Each of us is a node of possibility for healing the climate crisis—whoever we are and whatever we've got to give.*

In the world of plants, nodes are the points on a stem where leaves or buds emerge. They are the sites of new growth. Nodes are also the points of intersection in an underground mycelial network, where the fungal web grows stronger for its crossings and connections. For flora and fungi, nodes are where the action is. I believe we also have the capacity for that kind of generative potency.

Maybe your fingers are snapping because you believe that too. Or maybe the idea that we can be a planet-healing force feels entirely far-fetched from your particular lookout. Certainly, there is plenty of the antithesis on display. But believer or not, the work remains the same: to allow and activate the forward motion of that inherent possibility we contain.

Just as surely as I'm convinced we can each be a generative node, I also know we rarely, if ever, become one alone. Solo, we may be paralyzed by distressing climate emotions or mired in our own doubt; cheat our immense capacities to help or lose sight of what could be; defer to the current course of things or burn out trying to reroute it. We may simply lose ourselves in our lostness.

What's more, solo action is rarely the pathway to social change. A node, by its nature, is part of something bigger. Cultural celebration of lone heroes—think of Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., or Greta Thunberg—is a persistent predilection that misleads us. Lionization of individuals, however visionary and bold, veils the collaboration and collectives that are the fuller, truer story. That fuller, truer story is one we need now. We need a story of *our* possibility, a story of *us*.

> Pause on the word *possibility*. Welcome in the maybe-ness of it. Can you feel possibility in your body—perhaps a warmth, a quiver, or something else entirely?

When we scan the current landscape of society's leaders—in a conventional, narrow definition—we see climate shortcoming after climate shortcoming. For many in positions of power, the norm is insufficient attention, resolve, and real action. Too few setting strategy in corporate boardrooms, or setting down laws in chambers of government, seem to grasp the stakes of this moment, much less step up to meet them. Plenty are fighting to burn every last barrel of crude, come actual hell or high water.

In the written-spoken words of poet Andrea Gibson: "Why are the keys to our future in the hands // of those who have the longest commutes / from their heads to their hearts?"

So what is the antidote? The one that tugs insistently at my imagination is a *leaderful* upwelling. Like nutrient-rich water rising from the deep sea to the surface, I imagine a dynamic flow of people who care and commit to a safe, just, and lush world. If many more of us join in—with verve and cooperation—we could rectify the leadership crisis at the heart of the climate crisis and, just maybe, grow a life-giving future for everyone.* Even if that is a long shot, shouldn't we at least try?

In this fraught thicket of time, this is the pinch we feel: *There is no hope, and there must be hope. There is no way, and there must be a way.* We are caught between peril on one side and possibility on the other. If we are to navigate this nexus of distress and dreaming, we need contemplative, collective spaces to reflect, make sense, and then move together. Yet, more than ever, we seem to lack them.

A temple, synagogue, mosque, or church might be an obvious place to start, but fewer and fewer of us are part of one. Just 37 percent of American adults belong to a house of worship. (Admittedly, I am not one of them.) Even if we do, these institutions often remain unresponsive—or insufficiently responsive—to the realities of a heating, heaving planet.

*I first articulated the idea that "the climate crisis is a leadership crisis" in 2019 and proposed the need for approaches to leadership that are more characteristically feminine and more faithfully feminist. I further honed and unpacked those ideas in the opening essay, "Begin," of *All We Can Save*.

Classrooms are another place to turn, but we may find most are ill-equipped for our more-than-intellectual needs. In civic and movement spaces, emphasis on urgency and action can crowd out efforts to do this quieter soulful and relational work. (There are, of course, beautiful exceptions to these trends.)

We need to build or retrofit more spaces for holding our big questions, reverently and well, together.

> *What does it mean to be human, here and now? To help tend to a changing planet? To devote ourselves to the genuinely common good?*
>
> *What futures can we dare to dream?*

I have often felt responsible for providing a good answer to the echoing question so many of us hold: *What can I do?* I know well the agony that not-knowing can brew. But easy answers are phantom when it comes to a complex challenge. There is no simple formula, no fact sheet or checklist, for figuring out our roles in the vital work to forge a future we want and need.*

Navigating the twists and turns of my own climate journey, I have learned that rather than hunting for actions that are one-and-done or one-size-fits-all, a series of reflections and practices can help us work with that wondering—*What can I do?*—in beneficial and substantive ways. They can also help us work with questions down in the mycelium of the psyche. *What can I do?* is often the fruiting body of deeper inquiries about longing, belonging, and how to cope.

As we do that work, we can edge toward answers that are not about ticking a box but rather embodying wholehearted care for life on this planet. At times, that isn't about action, in its common trappings, at all.

*In 2018, as I was preparing to give a TED Talk, one of the curators asked me to leave the audience with a call to action. It prompted me to do my first writing (and speaking) about the true complexity of that request and the need to offer our superpowers, whatever they may be. A few years later, I published a five-step approach to answering the question of *What can I do?* That piece for *Time* was the foundational thinking for what became *Climate Wayfinding*.

Climate Wayfinding

Per dictionary definition, the term *wayfinding* means "the act of finding one's way to a particular place." In other words, sussing out where we are, working out where we want to go, and then finding passage to get there. It is a purposeful navigational act, one that has been fundamental, even defining, for the human species.

In Indigenous wayfinding traditions—like those of the Sámi, Polynesian, Inuit, and Aboriginal peoples—an array of signs and signals guide navigation through particular waters or across a given terrain. The location of stars above and the sun on the horizon. The movements of wind and ocean swells. The location of specific trees, rocks, and lichen on trees or rocks. The tracks of animals and patterns of snowdrift. Alongside environmental cues, oral history and song play a key role, as do memory, instincts, intuition, and even dreams. Colonization has eroded many of these practices, yet they persist, even as they now also bear the weight of climatic changes that scramble landscapes, seascapes, and skies.

Beyond humans, all species that migrate—from sockeye salmon and leatherback sea turtles to Arctic terns and humpback whales—are engaged in their own wild wayfinding. Seasonal rhythms, the Earth's magnetic field, and even smell guide the journey, which can span thousands of miles. They are endowed, it seems, with some sort of biological compass.

Attunement to place, and our position and movement within it, has also shaped entire realms of professional practice. In the field of urban design, for example, wayfinding entails the use of architecture and signage to help people orient and steer in a given locale. We build directional clues into human-made spaces.

Climate Wayfinding refers to the navigational process we are called into, as our home planet trembles with loss and change but also such potential. It is a lifelong practice, aided by intentional exploration, connection with our inner guidance, the support of others, and trusting in something greater than ourselves.

As with reading signs or stars *out there*, we engage in dialogue with the living Earth. We also go inward while keeping the big picture in view—a critical skill for this period of planetary transformation. We might think of *Climate Wayfinding* as a way of being in the world, rooted in sensing for *what is* and *what could be*, for relatedness with ourselves and other beings, for finding some steadiness in a shaky time, for making paths where there may be none.

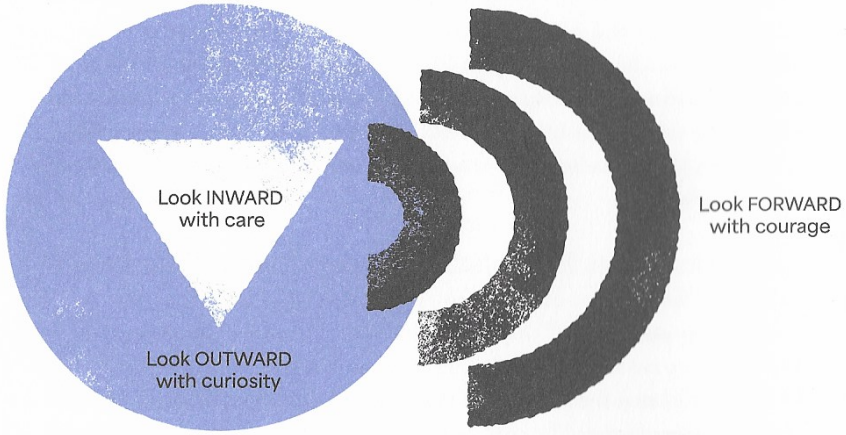
> How does it feel to find yourself without a path? How do you greet the unknown?

To see more clearly the path ahead, we need to bring together three powerful and intersecting lenses. We need to *look inward with care*, *look outward with curiosity*, and then *look forward with courage*. In the simplest terms, these are the core practices of *Climate Wayfinding*.

We look inward to welcome and witness the essential *emotions*, core *motivations*, and guiding *values* that we bring with us into our climate engagement. We reflect on what insight or counsel they offer. And we discern and honor the *skills* or *superpowers* we want to contribute to collective transformation.

We look outward to scan the wide range of climate *solutions* and *accelerators* for change. We use our energy and curiosity to filter and gain focus. And we survey our unique *contexts* and *communities*, to consider where we want to engage and who our kindred collaborators could be.

We look forward with *vision* and weave together our threads of inquiry and discovery to create a personalized Climate Compass—a living navigational tool for the journeys we each take from here. And we plan next steps to deepen or enliven our climate engagement, taking *action* in our personal, professional, and public lives.



3 Core Practices: Look Inward, Outward, and Forward

In this moment and beyond, ours is a voyage without a clear destination. We know certain things we want for the climate-safe world we are trying to build. We want fossil fuels to be replaced by clean energy; buildings and cars to be efficient and entirely electric; cities to be redesigned for people over engines; waste to be rewoven into fresh material; ecosystems to be protected and restored; and regenerative food systems to flourish. We want all communities to thrive in and through this evolution.

But there is so much that remains opaque, still to be imagined and puzzled out. How will we see to the survival of people everywhere, and the more-than-human world, as we curb pernicious emissions, industries, and consumption?* How will we care for the hearts breaking and lives rent as losses continue to spread and sharpen? How will we evolve our shared stories

*Cultural ecologist and eco-philosopher David Abram coined the term *more-than-human world* in the mid-1990s. It is an invitation to turn our attention and appreciation to the myriad life-forms who also share this planet—to shed a sense that humans are so very special and that others, somehow, are not.

and beliefs and do so swiftly enough for the urgent metamorphosis we need? How will fairness and repair come to the fore?

We are immersed in a swirl of *yet*—but we can commit to finding our way with one another.

> What already gives you sustenance amid the swirl of *yet*?

Now in my forties, I still have the handbound journal that collected my teenage pangs and aspirations. Holding its worn pages in my hands, I wish I could somehow write back in time to my sixteen-year-old self and say to her, *Welcome.*

> *Welcome to being human on Earth. The ache you feel, the convictions you spelled out, the questions you are holding—they are all evidence that you are alive and a part of this wounded yet dazzling planet. Trust, if you can, that you will learn to let the questions work on and with you and begin to live life as a response. One answer, and then another.*
>
> *The path will be winding, more the way of water than a straight-shot pine. There will be moments of feeling utterly lost, but also stumbling into awe. Along the way, you will come to know your own being and its marvelous interrelatedness at ever greater depth. Let yourself feel the firmness of Earth underfoot, dear one, as you step forward from here—mapless but journal in hand.*

So very much has already shifted in my lifetime. Much more will in the rest of it. There is no easy bypass or relief road to steer clear of change.

We live in a liminal world. The Latin *limen* means "threshold"—literally the bottom of a doorway, crossed over as we enter a house or room. If we imagine ourselves at the point of entry, of beginning, we might give ourselves some grace for not knowing, for our angst and clumsiness. The verge can be an unnerving

place. We might also recognize, here at the threshold, that we are being asked to bridge between the world as it is and the world as it could be. It can be hard to find our place and contribution in the space between. And yet, we must.

As Penobscot author and teacher Sherri Mitchell (Weh'na Ha'mu Kwasset) explains, there is incredible power, even magic, in that space. She uses the metaphor of the air held between a drum's round shell and taut skin, where vibration kindles sound. *Climate Wayfinding* meets us there—in the liminal, the emergent, the between. It accompanies us in the intermingled certainty and uncertainty of calling.

We will continue to face crossroads in the months and years ahead, and they will become more challenging as climate impacts swell.

> *Could our dismay and confusion call us into relationship?*
> *Could uncertainty beckon imagination and creative response?*
> *Could perception, pluck, and even play join us on the journey?*

My hope is that we will equip ourselves to greet the inevitable crossroads with more openness, more deftness, and more reciprocity; that we will grow our capacity to sense for openings, for next steps, though we may stumble as we go.

Climate Wayfinding is about finding our way forward and conjuring the future, yes. But it is also about remembering. We are each part of this sacred, extravagant community of life—alongside the dark tangles of rhododendrons, the unfurling fronds of ferns, and the rapture of moss in the rain.

We, and our gifts, belong here.

Equinox

Tamiko Beyer

Dear child of the near future,
here is what I know—hawks

soar on the updraft and sparrows always
return to the seed source until they spot

the circling hawk. Then they disappear
for days and return, a full flock,

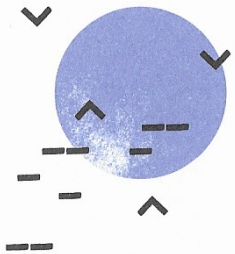
ready. I think we all have the power
to do what we must to survive.

One day, I hope to set a table, invite you
to draw up a chair. Greens steaming garlic.

Slices of bread, still warm. Honey flecked with wax,
and a pitcher of clear water. Sustenance for acts

of survival, for incantations
stirring across our tongues. Can we climb

out of this greedy mouth,
disappear, and then return in force?

My stars are tucked in my pocket,
ready for battle. If we flood

the streets with salt water, we can
flood the sky with wings.