

living leadership

CITIZEN POWER

Re-imagining what it means to be a Citizen in a time of rupture

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Something fundamental needs to shift. I feel it — and I suspect you do too. We are in a metacrisis — institutions of all kinds are stuck, under huge pressure, some are faltering and others collapsing.[1] There is no assured brighter future. We've looked to leaders for solutions: political leaders, experts, 'saviours' – and found them wanting, and been left disappointed, even cynical. More of the same is possible, a downwards doom loop. This moment calls us to reclaim our power as 'citizens' and to re-imagine what it means to be a citizen in a time of rupture.

By 'citizen', I mean our shared responsibility as members and co-creators of: a family, community in the place we call home, our democracy and our shared living world. The seed pattern of a different way of being a citizen is already present. This paper describes the patterns leading to our current stuckness and the way we might create a different future *together*.

The roots of our predicament go back a long time. We are at the end of "*a four-hundred-year-old age rattling in its deathbed as another age struggles to be born*".[2] Radical business leader, Dee Hock, the founder of Visa, named three key questions 20 years ago:

- *Why are institutions everywhere, whether political, commercial or social, increasingly unable to manage their affairs?*
- *Why are individuals everywhere increasingly in conflict with and alienated from the institutions of which they are part?*
- *Why are society and the biosphere increasingly in disarray?*

Yet here we are 20 years later asking the same questions. T.S. Eliot named our challenge well: "*humankind cannot bear very much reality*".[3]

The future, if we are to create a liveable future, lies in a profound shift of mind and heart. The ancient Greeks had a word for this: metanoia. This is nothing less than a re-imagining of what it means to be human, and what it means to be a citizen.

> The future, if we are to create a liveable future, lies in a profound shift of mind and heart. The ancient Greeks had a word for this: metanoia.

Have you noticed how the language of citizen is becoming more commonplace? It is happening across the world, from re-imagining 'relational public services'[4] in the UK, to citizens successfully resisting the actions of ICE in Minneapolis through a new way of 'neighboring'; to the way citizens everywhere quietly sustain and repair the shared fabric we call community.

Being a citizen is more than a legal status or our eligibility to vote in elections, foundational though these two elements are. 'Citizen' is multi-dimensional and speaks to our belonging at every level of the system.

These levels of belonging are like rings in a tree trunk. These are not separate rings but nested realities — we inhabit all of them at once, even as we tend to notice only some.

Like a tree, citizenship is a nested, living system:

- Citizen as a member of a **family**.
- Citizen as a member of a **community**: a physical **place** such as a neighbourhood, village, town, city or an online community of shared interest.[5]
- Citizen as a participant in a **democracy**[6] [7] and **co-creator of the common good**.[8] [9]
- Citizen as a member of our **planetary home**, which **includes our more-than-human kin and the living world**[10] of which we are part.[11] [12]



If our levels of belonging are the tree rings, the sacred[13] [14] is the sap – what is most core, precious and sacrosanct – that runs through them all and makes the tree one living whole.

This understanding of Citizen is a disruptor to the familiar story we tell ourselves about who we are and where power resides in the systems of which we are a part.

Our attention invariably has focused on the power and responsibility of Top leaders[15] — politicians and CEOs — to bring about the changes. We gave up our agency and power and waited for Top leaders, of one kind or another, to fix things and invariably we were disappointed. It's been easy for the rest of us to feel powerless: they were the cause and we were the effect.[16]

In this repeating failure loop, we failed to see what Barry Oshry calls the '*terrible dance of power*'[17] and how we, largely unawarely, played our part in perpetuating this cycle of power and powerlessness. This love (and hate) of Top leaders has limited our capacity to create an alternative future.

In fact, when we pause and look more closely at the world of Top leaders, we discover an uncomfortable truth that "*no established political or industrial player has the will or power, within the established rules, to ensure the changes that are necessary*[18]*… If a respectable member of the political or industrial elite proposes such changes, they would not remain respectable for very long*".[19]

The issues we face — the climate and nature crisis, massive economic inequality, increasing polarisation, an epidemic of loneliness, distrust of our politicians… – are complex,[20] interlocking issues[21] and require the engagement of all of us.[22] The combination of complex issues and breakdown in trust in public and private institutions and government has set up a "self-reinforcing democratic doom loop".[23]

Facing reality involves seeing how entangled and enmeshed we are in the systems we say we want to change. We are implicated.[24] We need to face the breadth and depth of the challenge before proceeding otherwise we risk giving up at the first barrier we encounter. We need to recognise the size of the cloth we have to reweave together.

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To face reality, we need to engage the depth of our humanity and reckon with one of the most powerful but often overlooked forces that both animates individuals and binds them together in groups: the sacred.

The sacred names what we hold to be core, precious and sacrosanct — the deepest commitments in relation to which we understand everything else,[25] whether we name them in religious, spiritual or secular terms.

For most of us the sacred is felt more than articulated, encountered in lived experience: in family, in community, in our shared civic life, and in the living world.

Many of us would struggle to name what is sacred to us. We usually know what matters most when it has been lost, when it is threatened, or when it is transgressed by others.

The sacred is not an optional or decorative aspect of human life. Every group — religious, spiritual or secular — has its sacred forms, expressed in stories and myths and encoded in symbols, rituals and everyday practices — the shared realities it holds as of ultimate importance. And in holding them, the group draws a boundary between what lies inside and outside — between the sacred and the profane.

This is why the sacred is a force to be reckoned with: it is double-edged.

The sacred binds people together, creates belonging, and calls them to something larger than themselves — and it also provides potent material for fragmentation and the 'othering' of those whose values and practices are felt to be different, inferior, wrong or profane. In its darkest turn, the sacred licenses the dehumanising of the other — cast as enemy, as sub-human, as evil — and it is this that has so often made real atrocity possible.[26]

It is not surprising, then, that the sacred is largely absent from current discussions of citizenship. But absence is not the same as irrelevance. The deeper issue is not religion versus secularism; it is that the sacred operates in all of us, and we have lost the capacity to recognise it, name it, and reckon with its double edge.[27]

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Can difference become a source of strength rather than of polarisation and scapegoating?

The real question is not whether to admit the sacred, but how to hold our differences — including our sacred differences — without turning them into grounds for division.

Can difference become a source of strength rather than of polarisation and scapegoating? This demands something of us: not that we abandon what we hold sacred, but that we hold it in a way that connects rather than divides.

Richard Holloway calls for a different way of listening to the stories we live by — "fumbling towards a new ecumenism of the meanings by which we interpret our common existence".[28] This is not passive tolerance but active connection across difference — the ongoing, practical work of encountering the other, which is itself the heart of citizen-ing.

Activating citizen space is not a panacea.

Human beings, and therefore human systems, have a tragic element – a predictable, repeating nature and a tendency to get caught in patterns which are self-limiting, stressful and destructive.[29] [30] And at the same time, human beings are capable of great creativity, generosity and compassion and we rightly also marvel at the wonder of the accomplishments of human systems.

Viktor Frankl named "the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way".[31] Between stimulus and response there is a gap, and in that gap lies our freedom. We stand in that gap as Citizens. Our choice matters.

And so, in the Citizen context, there are two possibilities. The familiar story where we and others get stuck, having created the same old story again, ending up feeling powerless and alienated from others. And there is also the largely unrealised power of Citizen space.

The table that follows sets out the conditions of Citizen space, the predictable behavioural responses, the resulting familiar disempowering experience and 'the Stand' – the latent power – that is available to us when we act with greater awareness, insight and courage.

	CITIZEN
Conditions — the characteristics and primary forces operating in Citizen space.	**Search for a good life, Unmet needs, Disconnection** At the heart of the Citizen space is something we all know deep down. People want to build a good life — for themselves, their families, and the communities that matter to them. This is not a new impulse. The search for a **good life** takes a thousand different forms. What we think of as a good life is shaped by the stories we're told, the systems we live in, and the experiences we've had. But the search itself is universal. We humans all have basic physical **needs** — food, shelter, safety. And we have deeper needs too: for belonging, for recognition, for a sense that our identity and community are valued and have a future. These needs are universal — shared across every human being, however different our circumstances, however opposed our strategies for meeting them. When these needs go unmet — when people feel unseen, disregarded or left behind by the systems and institutions that were supposed to serve them — then the conditions are set for what follows. We live in a time of rupture and breakdown. What once worked — in institutions, in politics — is failing visibly. We live in the gap between the old that is dying and the new that is struggling to be born.[32] **Unmet needs**, individually and collectively, are a defining condition of our time. **Disconnection**. Individualism is the dominant story of our age in the West and has profoundly shaped how we understand ourselves and the world. It tells us that we humans are separate, independent selves — that the good life is something we pursue alone, or at best in competition with others. This is not a personal failing. It is a systemic condition: we are disconnected from one another and from the living world of which we are part. In this story, we stand alone. And standing alone, with unmet needs and no shared means of addressing them, we become vulnerable to the predictable responses that follow.

Predictable Reflex Response — **common, habitual response activated by the conditions of the Citizen space**	**Become a passive consumer, outsource responsibility, blame** **Become a passive consumer** — the dominant story says: "*You are a consumer. The good life is something you buy. Solutions come from experts*".[33] In this story, we stop seeing ourselves and each other as citizens. Instead, we are cast as atomised individuals: separate, disconnected, and competing with others. Citizenship becomes hollowed out and is reduced to choice, complaint and compliance… **Outsource responsibility** — we reflexively look *up or outward* to meet our needs: to experts, institutions, influencers or 'saviours' with easy answers. Standing alone and in the face of issues which feel too big, too complex, too difficult, we fall into spectating rather than participating.[34] **Blame** — Fear in the face of rupture is understandable, and it is flammable. Ignited, it can turn outward — scapegoating others, the group who we think, or populist leaders tell us, are the cause of our problems. It can also turn inward — as self-blame, taking personal responsibility for a largely systemic predicament. These responses are not due to an indelible aspect of human nature. They are the reflex responses that reflect the culture we inhabit, the stories we are told and retell, where the most available 'scripts' are consumer, client or critic. We try to buy the good life, we look up or out to systems, experts[35] or leaders to fix what's not working, and when that fails, we blame.
Familiar Disempowering Experience — **a lived experience that feels like reality but isn't inevitable**	**Powerless** When we disconnect from each other, it creates a vicious cycle. We start to feel isolated — powerless to change anything — unsure that our voice matters and we lose belief in our capacity to influence what's happening around us. As a result, we rely more and more on systems to meet needs and solve problems — waiting for experts, institutions, or 'leaders' to act, rather than turning to each other.[36] As we focus our frustration and anger on others, our differences harden into polarisations and 'us vs them'.[37] There can be a feeling of solidarity and strength as we unite with others against them. Yet the complex problems we all face are likely to persist, or re-emerge in a new form, as scapegoating makes things worse and short-term fixes fail. In this sense we can still end up feeling powerless.

Stand

— a freely chosen commitment to realise the latent power of Citizen space

Be a Citizen who connects with others, builds a good life together & strengthens the common good

The starting point is a shift in perspective: seeing ourselves — and others — as citizens. We reclaim our agency, moving from spectators to co-creators. We choose to live in a different story rejecting the narrative that nothing else is possible.

Strengthening the common good means turning "the good life" from a private purchase into a shared practice — citizens co-creating collective well-being within reach. By the common good we mean citizens reclaiming the power to act and producing what we care most about — *together*.

This power is not only relational; it is also material. It is the power to decide and to refuse, to make claims and secure rights, to contest decisions made elsewhere and to change how things are governed. Reclaiming it is not about loading responsibility back onto individuals, but about building the collective agency to act — and to hold power to account — together.[38]

Creating citizen space takes imagination: it asks us to live by a different story, and to host spaces where we experience the best of the human spirit. It also means a different pace. As Bayo Akomolafe says: "The times are urgent. Let us slow down".[39] Slowing down helps us notice the habits we're repeating.

The cloth is rewoven when people's needs and people's gifts are brought back into relation; not as charity from the capable to the needy but as mutual contribution in a shared life.

And it often means starting small, where we are: committing to local, ongoing experiments that carry different values and different logics. As we practise citizenship together, agency grows, relationships deepen, we mobilise people power and the good life becomes something we build — *together*.

We create the conditions for co-creation, not dependency.[40] Our focus is relational: we restore weakened ties — between individuals, communities, institutions and the living world — connecting people to one another. To shared purpose. To the places they inhabit. To the things they care deeply about.

We remind ourselves and systems that agency and creativity live in all parts of the whole and that people already carry gifts and capacities — waiting to be seen, invited, and valued.

> Citizenship is not something we acquire, it is something we co-become.

The essence of Citizen context is relational. Citizen can be thought of as a practice done with others — Citizen-ing.[41] Citizenship is not something we acquire, it is something we co-become.[42]

The words from poet David Whyte ring true: "*Start close in, don't take the second step or the third, start with the first thing close in, the step you don't want to take*". And then we expand outwards, like the rings of a tree as we widen the worlds in which we experience and express our citizenship.

We recognise the depth of the work: enmeshed as we are within the systems we want to change, entranced by the dominant narratives,[43] and yet also with the human possibility of re-imagining what it means to be a Citizen.

This is not starry-eyed optimism. We recognise the conditions of the Citizen space and the potency of the forces of separation, disconnection and othering that impact us. And we act together, with awareness, insight and the three Hs — humility, humour and hope — remembering that hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up.

Citizen space does not replace institutions, services or politics. It reminds us that none of them can flourish for long if citizens are reduced to consumers and spectators. The work is to reclaim agency, rebuild relationship, and strengthen the common good in the places where we live.

And the next step begins as soon as we see ourselves and others as Citizens. What is that next step for you?

"Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart… Try to love the questions themselves… Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them — and the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answers".
— Rainer Maria Rilke

John Watters, Living Leadership, November 2026

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Appendix 1: Relational Systems Framework

Re-imagining what it means to be a Citizen is a disruptor to the status quo. Throughout this paper, a particular way of reading human systems has been quietly at work: a way of noticing the relational and power dynamics that shape how we act and feel. The appendix makes explicit key elements of this framework.

One of the most useful things I've encountered in working with human systems is a simple insight: most of what we experience as personal or interpersonal conflict is actually systemic. We often mistake systemic issues for personal problems (believing the causes are personal or interpersonal) or situational ones (believing the causes lie in our unique, specific circumstances). Oshry's framework reminds us that the major issues are rarely just personal or situational — they're systemic.

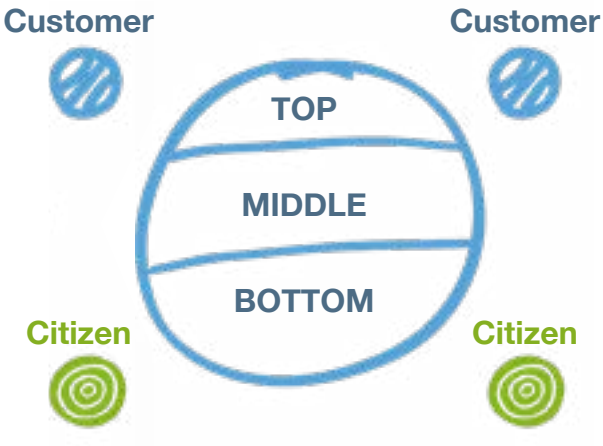
Barry Oshry's Organic Systems Framework (OSF) gave me a language for that insight — a simple, robust map of the relational contexts that shape how people think, feel and act in human systems.[44] I've worked with this framework for over 25 years and introduced it to Europe. It has been a central frame in my organisational consulting practice and my understanding of leadership.

In human systems we move between multiple relational spaces — or contexts — in the course of a single day. We are invariably blind to the context that we and others are in and the impacts of those contexts on our relationships.

Context matters because it shapes our experience of ourselves, others and how we perceive our system and other systems. Context shapes how we think, feel and act, often without us noticing.

Each context has a predictable condition which describes the characteristics of that space, the primary forces at play. Here's a simple metaphor to illuminate what we mean by condition.[45] If you stand barefoot in a puddle, your feet get wet — it doesn't matter if you're a kind person or a cruel person, hopeful or cynical. It isn't about your personality or your temperament. It's not about you. The condition of your feet is wet. Likewise, if you step into a systemic space, certain forces predictably play out. It's not personal. It's systemic.

The diagram that follows sketches out the four spaces of Top, Middle, Bottom, Customer referenced in Oshry's original work and includes the additional context of Citizen. To avoid confusion with Oshry's Organic Systems Framework, I have called this expanded framework the Relational Systems Framework.



The world is of course more complex than just these five contexts, nevertheless this simple framework has a remarkable power to illuminate the way human systems become stuck and to highlight the latent power and possibility that lies waiting to be realised in every human system. This relational systems framework offers a dynamic map that enables you to navigate with more awareness, choice and impact across the many different contexts you move between in the course of a single day.

The framework identifies five contexts. The condition of each context is described below:

- **Top** — *a space of accountability and complexity.*

- **Middle** — *a space of tearing where you find yourself between two or more individuals or groups who have differing priorities, goals, needs and demands.*

- **Bottom** — *a space of vulnerability when you are on the receiving end of a decision made elsewhere which impacts your world in major or minor ways.*

- **Customer** — *a space of neglect, promises made and promises broken in delivering what you need.*

- **Citizen** — *a space of disconnection, the search for a good life and unmet needs.*

The Citizen context is not readily legible in the dominant world of institutions — government, public sector or private sector — which recognise Customer far more readily, and so tend to collapse Citizen into Customer, the nearest thing they can see.

Example
— a day in the life of a principal of an educational college

The example below maps a day in the life of a headteacher/principal across the different spaces. Whilst the headteacher's role/position stays constant across the working day, the relational dynamics change depending on the nature of the interaction.

- The principal starts in **Top** space when addressing an all-staff meeting.

- Then, she moves into **Middle** space, caught between two parent governors with competing demands.

- Next, in a Zoom meeting with a national network of headteachers, she advocates for lobbying government over the shortage of specialist teachers in philosophy, religion and ethics for 16–18-year-olds — a cause grounded in her conviction that exploring faith and belief matters for societal cohesion. Here she does something worth naming: she says to her colleagues, "I want to speak now not just as a principal, but as a citizen." Nothing external has changed — same meeting, same screen, same role/position as a principal — but something important has shifted. She is bringing her **Citizen identity** into how she inhabits that role. And notice that at this point of speaking up relationally she is in a **Middle** space — one amongst a network of peers.

- Later, news of a funding cut from a national agency puts her and her senior executive team in **Bottom** space — vulnerable to decisions made elsewhere.

- Then she makes a request of the Head of Estates about an update on a building project — she's now in **Customer** space.

- And that evening at home, she joins a neighbourhood meeting about tree planting — **Citizen** space.

Notice that Citizen appeared twice, and differently: in the evening she was in the *Citizen space as a member of a community group*; on the Zoom call it was the *Citizen identity* she brought into another space. The rich multi-dimensional nature of Citizen is what sets it apart from Top, Middle, Bottom and Customer.

The table below sets out the conditions of each space, the predictable responses these conditions activate, the familiar disempowering experience those responses create, and the Stand — the latent power — that becomes possible when we act with greater awareness, insight and courage.

Space	**Condition** — the characteristics and primary forces operating in this space	**Predictable Reflex Response** — common, habitual response activated by the conditions of this space	**Familiar Disempowering Experience** — a lived experience that feels like reality but isn't inevitable	**Stand** — a freely chosen commitment to realise the latent power of this space
Top	Accountability Complexity	Suck up Responsibility	Burdened	Be a Top who creates responsibility throughout the system
Middle	Tearing – pulled between two or more individuals or groups who have differing priorities, needs and goals	Slide in between others' issues and make them your own	Torn	Be a Middle who maintains my independence of thought and action in service of the system
Bottom	Vulnerability – on the receiving end of decisions and actions that impact your world in major or minor ways	Hold Higher-Ups Responsible	Oppressed	Be a Bottom who is responsible for my condition and for the condition of the whole
Customer	Neglect – promises made and promises broken by the provider	Stand aloof and hold provider responsible for delivery	Righteously Screwed	Be a Customer who works in partnership with the provider
Citizen	Disconnection Search for a good life Unmet needs	Become a passive consumer Outsource responsibility Blame	Powerless	Be a Citizen who connects with others, builds a good life together and strengthens the common good

Citizen is a multi-layered concept:

- Citizen is a **role**: there are rules about who can become a citizen, and citizenship confers both rights (e.g. voting) and responsibilities. Governments speak of 'engaging citizens', for example in citizen assemblies — deliberative forums for investigating and making recommendations on complex issues.

- Citizen is a source of **identity** and names a level of belonging: earlier in the paper we named four levels of belonging — family, community, democracy and planetary home.

- Citizen is also a **logic**: a set of assumptions that offer a different viewing point on how our social and organisational systems could and should work. Setting out the difference between the institutional and citizen logics merits its own paper. In summary, where the dominant institutional logic organises through vertical hierarchy, transaction and impartiality, the citizen logic rests on distributed authority, relationship and the personal.

A map is not the territory. This framework does not capture the whole of our relational lives — no framework could — but it does something useful: it helps us pause and notice.

- What **role** or **context** are we and others in — Top, Middle, Bottom, Customer or Citizen?

- What is the **dynamic** in me and in the relationship with others? Am I falling into a predictable reflex response — or am I bringing personal and systemic awareness to the interaction and choosing my response? Am I realising the latent power of this space and strengthening the whole system?

- Am I choosing to draw on and bring my **Citizen identity** into this role — whether that role is Top, Middle, Bottom or Customer?

- What **logic** are we and others acting from?

- What is at stake for us and others — the **sacred**, what is core, precious and sacrosanct?

And, finally, the Quakers, when they meet, ask not one question but several: did we solve the problem? Did we move the issue forward? And, importantly and distinctively, did we strengthen community?[46] All three matter. We have learned to ask only the first two. Learning to ask the third, again and again, in the places where we live and work — that is an important part of what it means to reclaim the power of the citizen.

References and Notes

I want to acknowledge the generous conversations and spirit of exploration from colleagues and friends in the UK, U.S., Ireland, Denmark, Singapore, Aotearoa and Australia who engaged with my early wanderings and encouraged an ongoing action inquiry approach to writing this paper.

[1] Katie Teague, *Living in the Metacrisis with Jonathan Rowson,* Perspectiva, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9rTHj1Im3q4

[2] Dee Hock, *One From Many: Visa and the Rise of the Chaordic Organization,* Berrett-Koehler, 2005, xvi

[3] T.S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, The Four Quartets, http://www.davidgorman.com/4quartets/

[4] Simon Parker, Becca Dove, Benjamin Taylor, A Hundred Origin Stories – an Unfinished History of Relational Public Services https://www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-lab/news/2025/dec/hundred-origin-stories-unfinished-history-relational-public-services Relational public services refer to approaches that place ongoing human relationships — between citizens, communities and service providers — at the centre of how public services are designed and delivered, rather than treating people primarily as clients or consumers.

[5] Cormac Russell, John McKnight, *The Connected Community: Discovering the Health, Wealth and Power of Neighbourhoods*, Berrett-Koehler, 2022

[6] Jon Alexander, *DOCE Beats DOGE: The Case for Meaningful Government Transformation Through Citizen Empowerment*, Harvard Kennedy School, 2026

[7] "We have frequently printed the word Democracy. Yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the real gist of which still sleeps quite unawakened… It is a great word, whose history, I suppose remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted. It is, in some sort, younger brother of another great and often used word, nature, whose history also awaits unwritten". Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*, 1871.

[8] Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging,* 3rd edition, Berrett-Koehler, 2026

[9] Pope Francis, *Laudato Si, On Care for our Common Home*, 2015, para 156 "The common good is the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment. Underlying the principle of the common good is respect for the human person as such, endowed with basic and alienable rights ordered to his or her integral development". See also Pope Leo XIV, *Magnifica Humanitas, On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence*, June 2026, para 13 "building a world in which everyone can flourish

requires shared responsibility and courage. No one can single-handedly bear the weight of the challenges the world is facing, just as no one is so weak that they cannot play their part…All are given their own section of the wall: scientists and researchers, entrepreneurs and workers, educators and legislators, civil society, popular movements and faith communities. This is the logic of subsidiarity, which values the cooperation between generations, peoples, disciplines and cultures as the best way for fostering stability, prosperity and peace. We should not be intimidated by tensions or differences because they can become creative forces when guided by shared responsibility".

[10] "The source of all our problems today comes from the gap between how we think and how nature works". Gregory Bateson quoted in Dee Hock, *One From Many: Visa and the Rise of the Chaordic Organization,* Berrett-Koehler, 2005, xii

[11] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Knowledge, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*, Penguin Random House, 2013

[12] Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future,* Random House, 1999, ix Berry describes the shift from a consumer narrative which sees *earth as a "collection of objects*" (resources for human use which only have 'value' when exploited and used for human consumption) to a citizen narrative of an "*earth community as a communion of subjects",* a single earth community made up of human and more-than-human kin, other living beings who also have inherent dignity in their own being and rights.

[13] The language of the 'sacred' may seem unfamiliar, even edgy. Perhaps the edginess of the word 'sacred' indicates how colonised our language has become by the dominant 'religion' and ideology of free market consumer ideology with its hallowed values of: scarcity, speed, scale, certainty, perfection, privatisation, individual rights and autonomous individuals. To be blasphemous is to question these taken-for-granted assumptions, values and beliefs. For more on the consumer culture read: Walter Brueggemann, Peter Block, John McKnight, *Another Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture*, John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

[14] For an understanding of how to host groups to cultivate the conditions which are hospitable to the sacred see Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey towards An Undivided Life*, John Wiley & Sons, 20th Anniversary Edition, 2024 and the work of https://couragerenewal.org/

[15] "The underexamined problem is that Britain's economic settlement has been designed around people as passive 'consumers' or disempowered workers rather than active 'citizens' - that is, complex political and moral agents with community ties and a national identity. By relegating citizens to passive beneficiaries of or contributors to the economy, consecutive governments have operated without the democratic legitimacy to

navigate hard economic trade-offs". Polly Curtis, *The New Deal: How to Repair the Broken Relationship Between State and Citizen*, Demos, June 2026, 10

[16] "We are fascinated with our leaders. We think they are decisive. From a distance, this belief seems almost quaint. We speak endlessly, both in the public conversation and privately, about the rise and fall of leaders. The agenda this sustains is that leaders are cause and all others are effect. That all that counts is what leaders do. That leaders are the leverage point for building a better community. That they are foreground, while citizens, followers, players, anyone else not in a leadership position are background. It is this love of leaders that limits our capacity to create an alternative future. It proposes that the only real accountability in the world is at the top. That they are the only ones worth talking about. The effect of buying into this view of leadership is that it lets citizens off the hook and breeds a culture of dependency and entitlement. It undermines the development of a culture where each is accountable for their community. The attention on the leader declares our innocence. In its own way, it reinforces individualism, putting us in the stance of waiting for the cream to rise, wishing for a great individual to bring light where there is darkness. It is possible to admire and be inspired by great leaders, even bosses, but we need to resist the projection that they can produce a change in the conditions that concern us. Each of us is accountable for our small piece of creating better conditions. When we project that onto a leader, power gets abused and disappointment is inevitable". Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, 3rd edition, 2026, 44

[17] Barry Oshry, *The Terrible Dance of Power*, Power + Systems Inc, 2007, available for free download

[18] "Politicians are conflicted by the fact that their survival depends on the current rules of the game". Polly Curtis, *The New Deal: How to Repair the Broken Relationship Between State and Citizen*, Demos, June 2026, 13

[19] Rupert Read, Liam Kavanagh, Rosie Bell, *The Climate Majority Project: Setting the Stage for a Mainstream, Urgent Climate Movement, London Publishing Partnership*, 2024

[20] Adam Kahane, *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems: The Catalytic Power of Radical Engagement,* Berrett-Koehler, 2025

[21] The collective impact of the way we humans live has caused a climate and nature crisis which now threatens our existence as we are on track for a 2°C, possibly 3-4°C rise in average temperatures by the end of the century, conditions that do not support human civilisation – life - as we have known it for the last thousands of years. https://www.nebriefing.org/ In November 2025, ten of the UK's leading experts briefed an invited audience of over 1,200 politicians and leaders from business, culture, faith, sport and the media. The briefing set out the implications of climate and nature breakdown for health, food systems, national security and the economy.

[22] Marvin Weisbord, Sandra Janoff, *Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!: Ten Principles for Leading Meetings That Matter*, Berrett-Koehler, 2007

[23] Polly Curtis, *The New Deal: How to Repair the Broken Relationship Between State and Citizen*, Demos, June 2026, 6

[24] Margaret Wheatley, *Who do you Choose to Be? Facing Reality, Claiming Leadership, Restoring Sanity*, 2nd edition, Berrett-Koehler, 2023

[25] I use the words core, precious and sacrosanct to define the sacred. Sociologist Gordon Lynch who is an important reference point uses more technical language when he describes the sacred as that which a group holds as 'absolute, inviolable and non-contingent'. When I say that the sacred is not optional or decorative I am drawing on this quote from Lynch: *"The sacred is inseparable from the very idea of human society, because it is with reference to sacred forms that the meaningful, moral foundations and boundaries of a human society are made known".* Gordon Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach*, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 125, 128

[26] On the dynamics of 'othering' and the possibility of genuine encounter, see Barry Oshry, *Encounters with the "Other": A History and Possibilities* (Triarchy Press, 2024). Available for free download as a pdf: https://www.triarchypress.net/encounters.html Oshry frames the reflex to 'other' as primarily systemic — a pattern of interaction we fall into — rather than a personal or moral failing, while cataloguing the real catastrophes it has produced across recorded history. He holds two truths at once: that the pattern is changeable, and that its outcomes have been grave. Difference is usually not experienced as neutral but as threatening to our culture, to the way things should be; and what turbo-charges this into an existential threat is the sacred — when the other's ways are felt to violate what we hold core, precious and sacrosanct. And once the threat is felt as sacred, the violence that can then follow is robed as holy duty: "catastrophes are clothed (justified) as sacred missions", where the existence of the 'other' is experienced as a contaminating influence on what the host culture holds sacred, and demagogues offer "the sacredness of their cause… the superiority — moral, spiritual, physical — of those who join them… the inferiority… of the 'other'". Oshry proposes interrupting the cycle of separation and alienation at an early point, through real encounter with the 'other' that builds connection and commonality across separation and difference, through shared practice in mutually meaningful ways: "taking meals together… working on community projects together".

[27] A recent New Statesman essay by James Walters was striking in naming what he called "religious illiteracy" in the UK, at a time of national interreligious turbulence *"where the political right now speak of the West as a culture rooted in Christianity and endangered by the influx of non-Christian peoples, particularly Muslims".* Walters called for an interactive and cohesive religious pluralism to counter those who wish to divide the country based on a

tribal and caricatured use of religion. James Walters, *'Britain can't talk about religion'*, New Statesman, 28 June 2026 https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2026/06/britain-cant-talk-about-religion

[28] Richard Holloway, *The Stories We Tell Ourselves: Making Meaning in a Meaningless Universe*, Canongate, 2020 p. xxiii

[29] Barry Oshry, *Context, Context, Context: How Our Blindness to Context Cripples Even the Smartest Organizations,* Triarchy Press, 2018

[30] Barry Oshry, *Seeing Systems: Unlocking the Mysteries of Organizational Life*, Berrett-Koehler, 2007

[31] Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Rider, 2004, 53

[32] Political theorist Antonio Gramsci noted our shifting context as far back as 1930: "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters".

[33] John McKnight, Peter Block, *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Neighborhoods and Families,* Berrett-Koehler, 2010

[34] Marshall Ganz, *People Power Change: Organizing for Democratic Renewal*, OUP, 2024,16-24

[35] Ivan Illich, *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis, The Expropriation of Health*, Aakar Books, 2021

[36] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin, 2017

[37] Barry Oshry, *Encounters with the "Other": A History and Possibilities*, Triarchy Press, 2024, 5

[38] I am grateful for the constructive challenge from my friend and colleague Benjamin Taylor on this and other points.

[39] Bayo Akomolafe is a philosopher, writer, activist, professor of psychology, and executive director of the Emergence Network, https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/

[40] Cormac Russell, *Rekindling Democracy: A Professional's Guide to Working in Citizen Space*, Cascade Books, 2020

[41] The term 'Citizen-ing' is drawn from the work of Indy Johar, and a working paper on Citizenships, Dark Matter Labs, 13.10.2025

[42] Indy Johar, *Citizenship Beyond the Individual: A Relational Ontology of Civic Being and the Emergence of the Noble Citizen,* Substack, 13 Nov 2025, https://indyjohar.substack.com/p/citizenship-beyond-the-individual

[43] Vanessa Machado De Oliveira, *Outgrowing Modernity: Navigating Complexity, Complicity and Collapse with Accountability and Compassion*, North Atlantic Books, 2025, 62

[44] Barry Oshry, *What Lies Beneath*, 2020, available for free download with permission of the author

[45] The puddle metaphor to describe the 'condition' of a space comes from Kevin Purcell, a practitioner in the network associated with the work of systems theorist, Barry Oshry.

[46] These questions, drawn from Quaker practice, I owe to my friend and colleague Nancy Aronson, from her work with leaders of Quaker-values-inspired senior living communities in the USA.