

# THRIVABLE SOCIETY JOURNAL



*Ocean Water, Watercolor on Paper, Jean M Russell 2023*

**ISSUE**  
**WINTER 23**

## FEATURES

**5** Collaborative  
Action: Jean M.  
Russell

## FELLOWS

**13** Katie Teague  
**15** Deanna Zandt

## FUTURES

**4** Power of Edges: David P. Reed  
**16** Selected Dreams: Melissa Pierce



Left: Jean M. Russell (*Benevolent Trickster*), Right: Melissa Pierce (*Agent of Epiphany*)

## LETTER FROM THE BENEVOLENT TRICKSTER AND AGENT OF EPIPHANY

We walked through a forest, watching the light weave through branches without leaves. And we asked ourselves, “Why do any of us do this work, friends? Why are we doing this work?”

There seems to be a symphony of catastrophes. They sing to us of climate crisis and economic disasters, supply chain breakdowns, and an onslaught of battles against well being that have become the hallmark of this age. Should we be sending a different type of hallmark card to each other, “sorry for the bout of chaos, hope you feel better soon!”

These are mad libs. We cannot plan for all scenarios, stellar events, and cosmic collisions. Well, a little word play tells us that we’d like to host stellar events, but when it comes to asteroids, we expect the dinosaurs also did their best. Nuclear War? It’s been a threat all our lives. Sure, there are some unpredictable and annihilating events that we seem to have mostly escaped/ survived for a few million years. And yet.

What can we even be strategic about? Where can we apply our grassroots foresight and futurist skills to create a more thrivable world? And could we create that thrivable world in a cool fun way that might help us vault over the overwhelm and cast away the catastrophe fatigue, please? “Sign me up,” you say? You are heretofore invited to participate with us at Thrivable Society, a playful space for serious, and sometimes not so serious questions.

We believe that life gives rise to more life and that the universe has a serious can-do attitude that we’d do well to adopt. If there is any way to “thread the needle” of the remotely implausible and dare we say audacious path by which a more thrivable world is possible, then we should choose that path over giving up.

Why choose to sip metaphorical martinis on a sinking ship or flagellate ourselves and others for a past we can’t change? We need to lean into the universal wow and create our own stellar event: How about we co-create the world we want to save, then save it? Let’s find the bold adventurous path that will push a more thrivable world through the eye of the cascading catastrophic needles.

What is this thread and where is the needle? Let’s imagine the thread as our intertwining strings of life, weaving into a tapestry of social fabric. And the needle is the minuscule possibility space we pass through into another glorious day of aliveness on this spinning blue marble. In the

ginormous space of the universe, we are but a tiny blip, lucky to be here, even if briefly. Let us revel in our near impossibility. Grieve, laugh, scream. We exist, stardust made conscious.

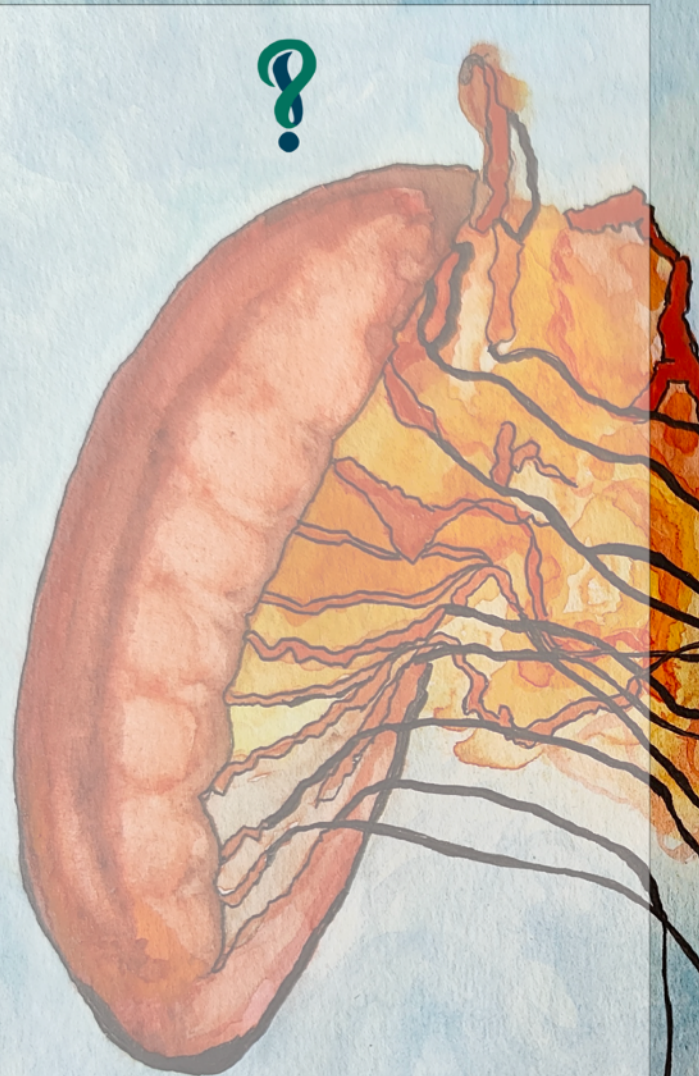
If there is a way through, how do we find it and live into that? Let us begin with this premise: there might be a way through, perhaps implausible or unforeseeable, but possible.

Given that premise, how might that way be decorated with signposts? We have experienced too much democracy, shoddy as it is in practice, to give it up. That would look like Austerity Fascism. Market solutions? Hahahahhhaaa. That looks like Disaster exploitation! No, the first signpost we notice points to a massively distributed cooperative effort of conscious beings tilting like maniacs at all the windmills we can find.

So how do we collectively build the stellar event of our own thrivable world and push it through the eye of a needle? Look to the edges where experiments might already be working. Celebrate these attempts at a grassroots thrivable future, and add to them. Assume mass customization rather than upscaling and universalizing. Harmonize this tension: the gloriously specific and local with what can be borrowed, shared, or hacked to fit elsewhere. No one knows it all. And no one has nothing to contribute.

We offer this Journal to you, our thrivable family, to highlight your work to foster aliveness in the world.





**The Thrivable Society  
Artificial Abundance:  
A Multi Dimensional  
Chat about AI**

*March 14, 1pm ET*

## **AN INVITE TO CONTRIBUTE: ARTIFICIAL ABUNDANCE: A MULTI DIMENSIONAL CHAT ABOUT AI**

Greetings, fellow futurists and thrivable dreamers!

The time has come for us to gather and ponder the vast, uncharted territory of artificial intelligence (which maybe shouldn't even be called that, really). As we continue to push the boundaries of what is possible with this powerful technology, let us not forget to consider both the dazzling possibilities and the treacherous pitfalls that lie ahead.

Together, let us explore the ways in which AI can improve healthcare and education, streamline mundane tasks, and unlock new frontiers of human potential.

But let us also delve into the darker side of this brave new world - the potential for job displacement, the ethical quandaries of creating autonomous systems, and the risk of creating a society that serves the needs of machines rather than humans... and maybe, possibly, most definitely, let's delve into possibilities of blessings and shadows we haven't considered yet.

Let us not shy away from these difficult conversations, but instead approach them with openness, curiosity, and a commitment to creating a future that is not merely prosperous, but thrivable for all.

Join us on March 14th at 1pm ET for a lively discussion that promises to be both thought-provoking and inspiring. And remember to [RSVP by March 11th](#), so that we can ensure you get a seat and a paper hat. [thrivable.net/events](http://thrivable.net/events)

Your fellow travelers on the wild and wonderful journey of the future,

Melissa and Jean - Thrivable Society Surfers

**"WITH EVERY EXHALATION WE DECANT OURSELVES BACK INTO THE WORLD."**

**~ SOPHIE STRAND, THE FLOWERING WAND**

# Thrivable Plug and Play

<b>adjective:</b> _____	<b>past tense verb:</b> _____
<b>noun:</b> _____	<b>noun:</b> _____
<b>verb:</b> _____	<b>noun:</b> _____
<b>verb:</b> _____	<b>verb:</b> _____
<b>verb ending in ing:</b> _____	<b>noun:</b> _____
<b>verb ending in ing:</b> _____	<b>plural noun:</b> _____
<b>person(s):</b> _____	

## RECIPROCITY

Humans seem \_\_\_\_\_ wired for reciprocity. And yet keeping too close \_\_\_\_\_ on the exactness  
 [adjective] [noun]

of that relational exchange seems to oddly \_\_\_\_\_ it. Too tit for tat. In game theory they discovered  
 [verb]

that the way to win the most is to \_\_\_\_\_ generous tit for tat. \_\_\_\_\_ a little more,  
 [verb] [verb ending in ing]

being forgiving, this is the path of thrivability. When I think about what I am \_\_\_\_\_ to  
 [verb ending in ing]

\_\_\_\_\_, I am included in the us. I don't worry as much about whether I will "get back" what I  
 [person(s)]

\_\_\_\_\_ to us. When I do the accounting just between the two, it doesn't account for the  
 [past tense verb]

\_\_\_\_\_ of how I benefit from us. I am less likely to play generous tit for tat.  
 [noun]

I am not trying to say that you don't want to be doing things for someone else. There are times when I  
 do something for you that is just about you and not about us. Maybe I do a \_\_\_\_\_ that you don't  
 [noun]

\_\_\_\_\_, and I don't think matters to us, but it makes you super happy. Great. Keep the flows going,  
 [verb]

but in the \_\_\_\_\_ that includes us too.  
 [noun]

Magic things happen in systems where the sum is greater than the \_\_\_\_\_.  
 [plural noun]

"WHAT IF WE ASK THE ANIMATE EVERYTHING FOR SLIPPERY SUGGESTIONS?"

~ SOPHIE STRAND, THE FLOWERING WAND

# Visiting the Archive

Sketches, Concepts, and Salons

We have moved our [videos](#) onto an accessible corner our website. We have also moved [Core Concepts](#) with the [Thrivability Sketches](#) on Decko,

## Power of Edges:

### David P. Reed

For an organism or ecosystem to thrive, strength and power are not enough. Adaptation and evolution seem to be far more important processes that confer huge advantages on systems, whether living or not. Adaptation and evolution in the face of unpredictable change, uncertainty, and other sorts of shocks to the system are so important that mankind and its societies ought to be studying how to implement them. However, too often we view evolvability and adaptability of systems as processes to be analyzed, rather than properties to be synthesized and maximized.

What makes a system like the Internet so adaptable and evolvable? That it has adapted and evolved is unquestionable – today's Internet looks entirely different than the Internet we conceived and designed, starting with Taylor and Licklider's paper "The Computer as a Communications Device" in the mid-1960's; yet in a very real sense it is the same system, much evolved.

A primary reason is that at every point in its evolution, power was pushed to the edges. Rather than a centralized control hierarchy, the Internet is a voluntary assembly of parts. Some of the parts evolve using markets to allocate resources, other parts adapt using culture and social connections to direct attention to changed conditions and coordinating ad hoc or persistent responses. It has evolved sophisticated signaling and sensing mechanisms that are dispersed among its parts.

Mammals thrive as individuals because of their immune system. The power in the immune system is inherently decentralized. As we continue to study the immune response at all scales, we see evolution and adaptation processes at all scales, but what is constant is

that the power to respond is organized at the edges, with little or no center, and certainly no central control mechanism gives them their resilience.

Similarly, we wonder at the adaptability of a rather simple organism - the slime mold *Dictyostelium discoideum* - that thrives, depending on its environment, as a collection of single amoeba-like cells, a multi-celled mobile slug, and a plant-like stalk that disperses spores on the wind. Our bias towards seeing power as a centralized phenomenon led scientists to believe that certain mold cells must be the "leaders" coordinating these actions, until Evelyn Fox Keller demonstrated that any cells can begin the processes that lead to transformation of shape and function, depending on conditions. Again we see that "power at the edges" promotes surprising adaptability and evolvability, conferring a resilience upon the system.

What's wrong with centralized power, though? It's certainly easier to comprehend the workings of a society or a system by studying a central controller, ignoring the vast web of parts that it controls. But we make a mistake by confusing comprehension with effectiveness. The problem with centralized power is that it weakens the system, as a bottleneck and an easy target.

Thrivability requires understanding how to decentralize power in systems, a process that need not diminish power - when coordination and power move to the edge, they are amplified.



Image: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/myriorama/58736549>



# Collective Intelligence: Swarms, Molds, and Forest Webs

## COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE AS MODELED IN THE WILD WORLD

### Author

Jean M. Russell

### Concepts

Collective Intelligence  
Group Dynamics  
Dynamic Alignment  
Embodiment

### Swarms

I remember being captivated by the notion of swarms. People would share a video of a starling murmuration and explain the very basic principles by which many “agents” could be acting independently and yet create something so magnificent: all the birds moving together as a whole. It spoke to a sense of belonging that I was yearning for mixed with a shared game or simple known rules. How could we move together the way the starlings moved together without bumping into one another actually or metaphorically or even emotionally. What a beautiful dance. Yes. And the sound! A murmuration is named after the sound of such a large collective as it hums! How can we humans be more like that swarm together? Humming. It was so alluring, how could I not want to be part of every swarm of birds, school of fish? How could humans be more like swarms? How could we, as groups of individuals acting in concert, jump into a layer of collective being?

Later I found that swarms and even murmurations are often largely understood to be a protection strategy. Do we just not have information in our computer models about social pleasure in a dance? The joy of friend greeting friend? There are many models of collective surviving, but where are the models of collective thriving? With some disappointment, I filed the behavior of starlings away.



Image: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A\\_starling\\_murmuration\\_at\\_Rigg\\_-\\_geograph.org.uk\\_-\\_4302931.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_starling_murmuration_at_Rigg_-_geograph.org.uk_-_4302931.jpg)

Still, murmurations have inspired me to see the collective action. What is possible?

### Slime Molds

A few years later, I heard David P. Reed talking about the transformation of slime mold, and I asked him to add a bit to the [Thrivability Sketch](#). I started exploring it deeper. This too was many "individuals" acting in concert. And, the collective was so significantly different from the individual state, that they had appeared to be different species altogether. Imagine that! Imagine if the birds didn't just maintain some set distance from each other in a murmuration but actually touched wings and turned into a Mega-Bird! "Autobirds, transform and roll out!" But this isn't the Transformers. My flight of fancy goes too far, this is about slime molds, which do transform, though. And they do so in response to shifts in their environment: temperature, chemicals, food.

In turning the focus of collective intelligence from Swarms to Slime Molds, we increased our awareness of how a collective can be responsive to its environment in transformational ways: not just responding to predators and threats, but to the broader environment too. Not just a group, but a whole collective body.

### Fungi and Forests

More recently, like many of our peers, I fell headlong in love with fungi and forests. Mycelium shows collective intelligence as life forms that can find their way through a maze and increase resources directed toward successful paths and abandon unsuccessful dead ends. These collectives can probe for possibilities and respond to feedback, not just in a defensive way (away from a predator or threat) but also positively, towards more resources. We see collective intention play out. There has also been a ton of research shared in the last decade about forests: how trees communicate and care for one another (along with their alliance with mycelial networks to form forest webs). Big yes to co-building common ground for nurturance across species!

Why are these ideas so enlivening? Why does the metaphor coming from our growing understanding of the more-than-human, wild-world feel like validation for what is possible with humans? Why do they set my intuition ablaze with wonder and a sense of "follow this hunch"

in my gut? (Maybe that is my own microbiome speaking up?)

### Life, Death, and Centralized Control

In his essay within the Thrivability Sketch, David P. Reed wrote about alternatives to central control. "Our bias towards seeing power as a centralized phenomenon led scientists to believe that certain mold cells must be the "leaders"... but we see that "power at the edges" promotes surprising adaptability and evolvability, conferring a resilience upon the system."

I suspect we find these wild world stories promising because they show collective intelligence that isn't centralized command and control. They are not monumental pyramids of hierarchy, supposedly intelligent, but where the intelligence is so far from the common ground as to be alienating. Deadening for those who live within it.

If you have felt crushed by centralized control, then you might react and want to become a single agent, off on your own. Build a cabin in the woods and get away from it all. I have yearned for that. But then you or I might encounter other drivers of human behavior - like our need for belonging and our dependence on others. I can't just escape and be content. I want to connect and cocreate. Don't you?

### Collective Organisms

What is a way that we might coordinate human behavior without having a universal and central authority, managing our behavior? How might we balance the individual need for free will/ agency/autonomy with collective well-being? How can that be as good as or better than the pyramidal centralization that successfully carried us to this level of sophistication and technological ability?

Pyramidal collective intelligence applies to large human organizations that operate through centralized decision making processes applied to top-down chains of commands.<sup>1</sup>

Some have suggested that an alternative to pyramidal collective intelligence could be holoptic collective intelligence.

From the Greek roots holos (whole) and optikè (see), holopticism means the capacity for an

individual to see the whole as a living entity in the collective in which he/she operates. Sports teams and jazz bands operate in a holoptical context because each player perceives the team as a whole and knows what to do.<sup>2</sup>

A crowd is not necessarily holoptic. It is insufficient to have many together count as holoptic. Averaging the guesses of 100 players estimating the beans in a jar may seem like a kind of interesting intelligence, and there is much written about crowd intelligence this way. That isn't the kind of collective intelligence we are looking for though (Pretend I wrote that as Obi-wan, saying it isn't the droids.) Because the type of intelligence I am talking about isn't computational. What the slime mold is doing isn't the average or mean of what all the cells do. The cells literally change, like a butterfly is different from a caterpillar level change.

I am looking here for the transformation: that the slime mold and forest ecology actually transmute through an intelligence greater than what any individual knows or does. That transformation

emerges from the intent of each to do something in response to what it can sense and what others do.

enduring than a moment for the murmuration, although the strategy helps individuals continue to live on. The slime mold and

without central control, and manage resources and health, even across species. Yes. And through that collective of individuals something more than the sum of the parts emerges. How can human collectives swarm/mold/web together, not just for defense but also adjusting structure to fit the environmental conditions and moving with intention towards resources and offering invitations to other agents to join that movement on a common ground? Collective action while holding for each, as individual agent well-being. Both, and.

Yes, I want an alternative to central control and top-down management. In my heart, I want each agent to thrive in their own autonomy and capability while also having the sum of all movement be valuable, even transformational, to the whole and to each. I want to understand. I wonder, where are the models? I want to know, where have humans done this well?

### Exploring the Question

So I am asking myself the question, "What does doing well look like? And, this little voice in me wanted to



Leucocoprinus mushrooms illustrated by M.C.Cooke

### Better Metaphors

**I want better metaphors.** I believe something more is possible. These forms we are modeling, forms of distributed agency resulting in collective being; they still feel limited in function. They react. They respond. The flock of birds come together, swarm, and then dissipate. Fish, same. Their coming together doesn't hold something more

forest start to point to something bigger: redistribution of resources and cultivation of an ecology. Life giving rise to more life. This is not just the defensive signaling of one tree warning another about fire or pests, but also the movement of nutrients through the web. Now we are beginning to see that individuals can be in relation with others,



say ants, as they also show up in the media as interesting, around the same time. Ants! Maybe you saw the movie or even the old Ants and Grasshopper movie. So cute! [Picture one on each shoulder, talking in my ear doing a devil and angel bit.] Ants fit into this collective action picture, this social process biomimicry of the last few decades, surely. But I hear another voice in me start to scold: there is a hierarchy in the ant world. Each ant feels limited. In talking about ants, we speak of colonies of ants. And a queen who rules them all: central control. Bees too. This isn't the kind of social structure I am yearning for. Let's decolonize rather than model colonies. What I yearn for, deep in my soul, feels like something closer to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (<https://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/>)

than the nation-state of Britain.

The Haudenosaunee Confederacy is one of the first and longest lasting participatory democracies in the world, bringing together multiple tribes into a peace accord. But if that analogy of the Haudenosaunee rings right, then I should probably note that the tribes of the confederacy didn't build many huge

monuments. Their "productivity" together isn't about enduring physical structures reinforcing their prestige, making materially grand their achievements. They made common ground.<sup>3</sup>

This now, the present need I see, also seems more about an

which was before all war and strife." GEORGE FOX (to the Commonwealth Commissioners) Journal, Vol. 1, p. 69, bi-Cent. edit. From 1650<sup>4</sup>

It turns out, we westerners have long been gauging intelligence, development, and

some reading: Survival of the Friendlist<sup>5</sup>, Humankind<sup>6</sup>, and The Dawn of Everything<sup>7</sup>. There are refreshing narratives about humans, our evolution and relationship to land, to other forms of life, and to each other. These are radical retellings from the school books that I grew up with in the 70s, 80s, and even the 90s. A retelling that puts humans as a part of nature, not apart from it.

**Arrival**

How did we get here? Those who can cooperate, survive against the odds. That feels plausible enough. Those who can store food for the long winter survive, for example. Those who innovate tools and technology survive. Those who can teach their offspring and relatives what they know, survive. Those who can take what they need from others, survive. Run that program for a few thousand years. Now just measure the last one as the summation of the rest: the ability to take what they need from others. That seems like how a capitalist society would see it. That is where leaning into the metaphors of nature took a wild turn to the side and assumed that lions were better for taking

—◆—

*What is the measure we can use that attends to the flow: the experience of abundance, rather than the stockpiling and hoarding that we recognize in monument building?*

—◆—

agreement to put weapons of war down and listen to our grandmothers, like the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. The Quakers have been advocating that since at least 1650.

"I told them I knew from whence all wars arose ... and that I lived in the virtue of that life and power that took away the occasion of all wars, that I was come into the covenant of Peace

sophistication by the measure of dominance over land, other species, and other people. Now, as I think of it, that feels quite absurd. Now, as we start to unravel the consequences of that domination and what has been rendered invisible in our histories, I have serious questions.

To follow some of my flow here, it may help to wander through

down a gazelle than sloths were for fitting into their ecosystem.

It is not what we take from others that fosters life<sup>8</sup>. It is where we can build common ground, upward spirals<sup>9</sup> for life to give rise to more life. Thriving as a collective doesn't come from domination and taking. It comes from being a contribution to something larger than oneself, building together something that nobody could do alone, growing an interactive emergent learning system that is more than the sum of the parts.

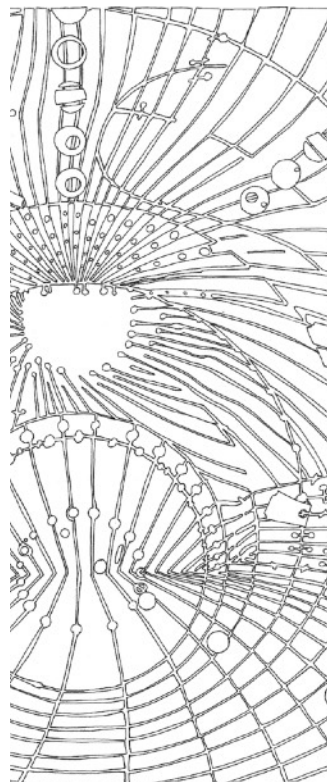
I want to roll around in a few different aspects here. Intelligence, what is it and what does it mean for us to lean into these wild world metaphors? Where can we go from there? Then I want to explore a related idea: learning systems. And finally, I want to dig into coherence: what binds people, ideas, intelligence?

**Intelligence**

So first, intelligence. Why haven't we been gauging intelligence on the ability to be creative, engage in mutual aid as a resource strategy, and choose kindness over violence? In part, I suspect, because we have gauged intelligence by architecture and

artifacts because of their obvious materiality. We can see it. We can see it in time, through archeology. And we can see the birds and fish, and we begin to see the slime molds and forest webs.

What if we gauge intelligence instead by the ability of life to support more life. In the human world, this might look like the ability to support the life of more people and the creature web we relate to, on the land. Of the land. What is the measure we can use that



Web design by Mycelium

attends to the flow: the experience of abundance, rather than the stockpiling and hoarding that we recognize in monument building?

**Learning**

Then, second, part of this challenge feels like a system theory question. How do individual agents interact to create something greater than the sum of the parts? How does that "sum of the parts" demonstrate intelligence? Can the sum of the parts learn, except by the parts themselves? Nora Bateson coined the term Symmathesy<sup>10</sup> to draw a distinction between living systems that learn and systems that don't. Learning systems demonstrate symmathesy. What else is learning but the use of intelligence with memory? We can recognize learning in an agent. Can we recognize learning, as intelligence and memory, in a collective? How do we recognize and value symmathesy? How do we best assist it? What holds it together?

**Coherence**

And, thus we come to coherence. What brings the flock of birds together? Foiling a foe. Birds and fish and creatures that gather seem to use this as an individual and collective response to a predator or threat. We can see this often also motivates human groups: align against

a common threat or enemy. Basic.

Humans, with our fancy-dance symbol-systems and sense of time, also come together as comrades for a shared purpose. This is group forming focused on building a house, saving endangered species, or creating a corporation for allocating resources. These are goal-directed groups.

They aren't always so coherent about their why, though. Some human groups might be better described as 'friends on a common ground,' as Jim A. Corbett<sup>11</sup> phrases it. Those groups hold coherence together, regardless of output, because the locus of attraction is being rather than doing. So we have: common defense, common purpose, common ground. Is this Commoning?

As we roll around in these possibly different ways of making cats of coherence, I recognize that intelligence in each might appear in rather orthogonal forms. The intelligence of being together may take quite a different form and feel quite unique when focused on a common enemy compared with the collective intelligence

that arises from having outcome-focused, purposive groups managing shared resources.

Let's draw a distinction here between a few ways we might see the intelligence of the group, given the approach to coherence the group uses. What does an individual in the group have, what do they do, and how are they being with themselves and others? And what does the group as a whole have? What does the group do? How is the group being with itself and the individuals of which it is composed? Can we recognize intelligence at the individual and/or group layer that is not a monument? What sorts of artifacts might we perceive?

You may have noted we have moved into the realms of abstraction here. I am doing so for two reasons. First, I want to know what to look for next in the wild world as a useful mnemonic metaphor for what is possible in distributed groups that demonstrate intelligence. And second, I want to see if we can get somewhere that feels appropriate to the gifts and responsibilities we have as humans and stewards of life and the land we belong to.

### **A Word on Nature**

I have a confession here. Now. I need to admit to the romantic allure that nature holds for me. How much I want to see our next step held out to us from the wild world. And, I also want to hold a more complicated ethics. When we lean into modeling our human world on the world of birds, bees, ants, molds, lions and tigers, and other creatures, we slip into the moral codes these creatures engage with and are limited by. The wild world has a wild ethics. In the darkness,

this can lead to brutality. The birds hope to avoid a predator, use this strategy to minimize their risk, but that does not mean it stops the predator. What birds try to save the ones who are caught? Do fish? What creatures not only save themselves but attempt to protect their kin? Some do, some don't. Are we humans okay with the morality that comes with the metaphor? Do we believe we have other strategies we can use to minimize predation on our kind? From each other? I invite us to consider our ethics, of distributed collective intelligence, on the incredible ability we have to sense and feel with each other, to care for each other. What affordances do we have to enable an ethics of care appropriate to our emotional systems, intentions, and ability to communicate?

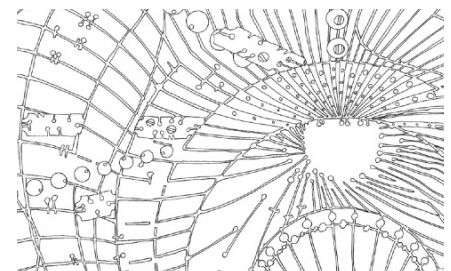
### **Common Coherence**

Ethical rant complete, I want to return to what evidence we might see of common defense, common purpose, and common ground. One might say that rather than grand monuments we might look at anything we would call artificial, crafted by human hands, as the materialization of collective work. Humans come together, for purpose, common ground, or defense and we shape the world around us. We innovate tools to improve our ability to shape the world. We share what we learn from each other, and scaffold up ever more innovation. Intelligence. Learning. So I want to sense into the tools and scaffolding, even reaching up into the abstract dematerialized ones, to see what we can make possible as a collective without requiring centralized hierarchy. I say 'sense' rather than see, because we want to use any sort of sensing we can, every sensory capability we have,

internal or on the surface, or in the space between us, to sense into this.

I am asking this question after decades of listening to our culture suggest that the development of agriculture improved humanity, and the building of the pyramids and other grand structures hold something to admire about the ingenuity of past peoples. Wengrow and Graeber<sup>12</sup> have left me wondering, instead, if the supposed dark ages of the past actually demonstrate times in which humanity builds common ground. Maybe there is something I might admire more than the evidence of acting from common defense. I am wondering if escaping central control means letting go of the burial mounds of past oppressors as pinnacles of human achievement. I am listening to my partner's mother idolize lost civilizations while wondering what happened to lose them. And we are seeing so much about why civilizations end, perhaps sensing our own impending demise. What else is possible?

There are hints that much of the present United States had been managed by the people who honored the land here before being invaded by Europeans. Perhaps they cultivated a common ground by coming from a place of the ground itself being sacred and belonging to the land rather than the land belonging to them?





I read about the disappearance of the commons and wondered how the nobles sold us that bill of goods, that they should privately own what had been publicly shared. Somehow it leans more into the model of central control, naming a border to a territory so it can be defended against others. Against other humans.

I snort at myself and want to avoid being so idealistic here as not to acknowledge that starvation happens or disease. We have certainly faced times where we had to find ways to choose which people survived and which did not. Who do you bring in from the cold? Does bringing them in keep you safe from their anger and fear?

And still, my intuition presses on, these times need not be the default, the norm, the way things need to be. We are told so only by those who use it to justify their own choices. The humans who give away their own coat to keep another warm don't build monuments to their own egos. Beware of the evidence trail left behind by narcissists.

### Commoning

So I want to look at commoning from the place of common ground. Is there something here to revisit in our human history? Can we find the times in our past in which individuals came together to build a shared relationship with the land and each other? Consider now that the tragedy of commons has been defeated by numerous examples documented for decades by Elinor Ostrom and her collaborators. What might we learn from her nobel-prize-winning explorations?

As a side note, I would say that the tragedy of the commons, as the story is usually told: a pasture and people choosing to optimize for their own maximal output at the expense of others and the pasture itself... is really a story about a free market without private property or governance. Actual commons have governance, and Ostrom and her collaborators have some basic rules they generalized from the successful commons they studied.

### What are the better metaphors we can look to for commoning on common ground?

Perhaps you can help me and us find better metaphors? My intuition is guiding me here, but I am unclear where to go next.

Where might you take it?

- How does our nesting of common grounds create a way to include those who would seek

to invade? AKA, what is the strategy for defense against outsiders when the main purpose is cocreation on common ground?

- Monuments and even the religion so many monument-cultures live inside may make for a material coherence to society. What other ways might we recognize coherence, especially without hierarchy?
- Flocking intelligence is the intelligence of defense. It moves away from. What are the better metaphors of life moving towards desired resources and collective purpose?
- How do we develop ethical models for collective intelligence given the emotional abilities we have and how that may differ from the ethics of algae?
- What metaphors of cross-species symmathesy can we be inspired by?
- There are game theory trackers concerned about Mollach. How does collective intelligence of this transformational type steer clear of the worst possible outcomes, in the end? How is the collective intelligence game structured to not reward malicious action?

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### Footnotes for Collective Intelligence: Swarms, Molds, and Forest Webs

- 1 <https://cir.institute/pyramidal-collective-intelligence/>
- 2 <https://cir.institute/holopticism/>
- 3 There are plenty of indigenous groups who have been monument builders, so I do not mean to imply that being indigenous can be synonymous with building common ground rather than common statues.
- 4 <https://quaker.org/legacy/mounttoby/statements/historical%20statements.html>
- 5 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Survival\\_of\\_the\\_Friendliest](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Survival_of_the_Friendliest)
- 6 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humankind:\\_A\\_Hopeful\\_History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humankind:_A_Hopeful_History)
- 7 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Dawn\\_of\\_Everything](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dawn_of_Everything)
- 8 When we assume supremacy, we then decide what the hierarchy is based on. If we base it on who eats what, we get one perspective on life forms (predators at the top). If we base it on who proliferates, we get another (ants outnumber us all). For thrivability, let us avoid the moves of supremacy and hierarchies where we hide the decision of what we value. Let us say instead that we value life and life giving rise to life, and notice how life of all sorts and sizes does this.
- 9 [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/548071.Seeing\\_Nature](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/548071.Seeing_Nature)
- 10 <https://norabateson.medium.com/symmathesy-709a39ccb5bc>
- 11 <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/76872.Coatwalking>
- 12 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Dawn\\_of\\_Everything](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Dawn_of_Everything)



Long Break! Jean M. Russell 2023

**NOBODY CAN SEE IT ALL. ALMOST EVERY, IF NOT ALL, INTERVENTIONS HAVE A VISIBILITY HORIZON. BUT ON THE BRIGHT SIDE, ON THE STELLAR EVENT SIDE, OUR WAYS OF SEEING KEEPS EVOLVING. ~ JEAN RUSSELL**

# Thrivable Society Fellow

## Katie Teague 2023



Katie Teague hanging out with her favorite tree people:-)

### Who are you or how would you describe your life's work/play?

I am a five-fingered Earthling currently residing in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, where I co-mingle with the wild turkey, the black bear, and the winds that sometimes howl. To be honest, the older I get the more fluid and permeable my sense of self becomes. My identity is increasingly more kaleidoscopic, in participatory relationship with the ever-changing world around me and less pinned to titles, credentials, and cultural identifiers.

At the heart of my life's work/play as a filmmaker, coach, and wilderness rites of passage guide is recognizing the epochal time we are living through and thus it's about liberation from the malware of separation so Life can re-wild itself and unfold its complex potentials. It all centers

around being a threshold guide between the OS of late stage (parasitic) capitalism to the emerging world-space of regenerative thrivability, from globalization to planetization.

### Thrivability. How are you relating to the world through a thrivable society lens? What story do you have about thrivability and why are you being named a thrivable society fellow?

First off, thank you for the invitation to join the thrivable society fellowship. I'm honored.

About 15 years ago my late friend and teacher Larry Emerson, a Diné scholar and medicine man, told me "don't start anything if you can't finish it in Beauty." I took this on as something of a koan to guide how I relate to the world. Is this act or how I am being in accord with Beauty? In the midst of inevitable mis-steps, how do I complete this in a good way? Now looking back I see that it has served as a thrivability heuristic for me all these years.

Thrivability is equal parts paradigm and virtue for me and has everything to do with Beauty (capital B) and aiming to live, walk and play in Beauty - "blood, snot and tears" as Larry would say. Thrivability is centering the health and wellbeing of life, meeting the needs of all beings within planetary boundaries, such that all of life can flourish - grow, blossom and fall away according to natural law.

**"LIFE CAN RE-WILD ITSELF AND UNFOLD ITS COMPLEX POTENTIALS."**

~ KATIE TEAGUE



## Katie Teague cont...



Wilderness Unfurling - Katie Teague (2019)

### **Aliveness. What is fostering aliveness in you?**

Paying attention to and playing in the edge spaces of what is coming alive in this time between worlds. It's not all coherent and visible, more like mycellium growing beneath the mainstream radar, but it's crackling with potential and an invitation to harness our collective intelligence and deploy daring creativity.

### **What question could I ask that would be the most interesting to answer right now?**

What is possible when we reboot our imagination through the perspective of thriving?

### **Imagine we are living in an incredibly fecund world, what would you be/do/have?**

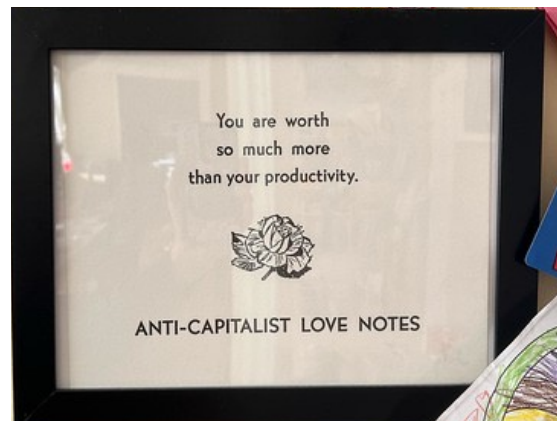
We already do live in an incredibly fecund world. It's a perceptual detour that tells us otherwise, and that I certainly fall victim to. But in this possible future you allude to, we would be ecological selves living reciprocally with the non-human world in a land-based economy that tracks flows of exchange and governance by metrics of thriving, which is a reflection of the health of our relations. The value is and will be in the relationships between things, not in the acquisition of things. We will live by relational currency which will set the conditions for new structures to emerge.

**"THE VALUE IS AND WILL BE IN THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THINGS,  
NOT IN THE ACQUISITION OF THINGS." ~ KATIE TEAGUE**



Left: Deanna Zandt wears her beliefs on her shirt, as one does. Right: Plaque that adorns Zandt's office wall.

## Thrivable Society Fellow Deanna Zandt 2023



### **Deanna, who are you or how would you describe your life's work/play?**

I'm a generally entertaining human. I like to make things that connect with people.

### **Thrivability. How are you relating to the world through a thrivable society lens? What story do you have about thrivability and why are you being named a thrivable society fellow?**

I use thrivability as a guiding principal in a ton of places in my life, but especially in social justice work because so many people get so focused on harm reduction but using the metaphor of thrivability "Do you want to sustain or do you want to thrive" really opens up people to expand their big picture. What's the thrivability goal here?

Personally, I ask myself am I getting by or what do I need to thrive - and sometimes that is to do nothing.

### **What do you have/want/dream of contributing to a thrivable society?**

I dream of helping my fellow society members discover and celebrate their inherent self worth. Sometimes I do this through creating web comics, other times it just giving big hugs.

**"PERSONALLY, I ASK MYSELF AM I GETTING BY OR WHAT DO I NEED TO THRIVE  
- AND SOMETIMES THAT IS TO DO NOTHING. " ~ DEANNA ZANDT**

## Deanna Zandt cont...

### Aliveness. What is fostering aliveness in you?

These days, one thing fostering aliveness for me have been working on a couple of project with [Jim Hightower](#) addressing the abandonment of people by the political machinery. Looking at and supporting the

<b>"NOBODY WANTS TO WORK ANY MORE!"</b>	
<i>A brief history of capitalists complaining that nobody wants to work for starvation wages</i>	
2022	According to a new survey released by TinyPulse, 1 in 5 executive leaders agree with this statement: "No one wants to work". These same leaders cite a "lack of response to job
2014	What has happened to the work ethic in America? Nobody wants to work anymore. It has not always been that way. When I first started to work as a teenager, I saw people work hard.
2006	<b>like nobody wants to work anymore and when they do</b>
1999	"Nobody wants to work anymore," Cecil said. "They all want to work in
1981	off this land last week. But they just fooled around. They didn't want to work. Nobody wants to work anymore.
1979	<b>"Nobody wants to work anymore."</b>
	— <b>disgusted businessman</b>
1969	called "Nobody Wants to Work Anymore." Talking about un-
1952	everybody was getting too darned lazy and nobody wants to work anymore. That's the truth if I ever heard it.
1940	trouble is everybody is on relief or a pension — nobody wants to work anymore."
1937	ams counties are complaining that "Nobody wants to work anymore." There is work, it is reported, for 15
1922	it is because nobody wants to work any more unless they can
1916	he answered, "the reason for food scarcity is that nobody wants to work as hard as they used to. I asked a
1905	unreliable. None want to work for wages.
1894	next winter? It is becoming apparent that nobody wants to work these hard times.

*Nobody Wants to Work Anymore, A History - 2022*

work that is going into rebuilding human relationships in which people can thrive. That's alive for me.

Another thing is seeing so many people come around to the idea that our notions of productivity and self worth and what we bring to the table as humans need unpacking - an example is this graphic I saw that listed time throughout history that employers have exclaimed "Nobody wants to work anymore," the jig is up though, the young people have figured out the productivity is bullshit. I appreciate that.

On that note, Trisha Hersey's book: [Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto](#) is incredibly alive for me right now. It is a praise poem, a sermon. She's writing particularly from black liberation theology lens - there is so much to learn from that lens which really relates to how we view thrivability. Rest because it is a gift, not because you have earned it. You don't have to earn it.

### What question could I ask that would be the most interesting to answer right now?

I don't know, do you have any backup questions?

### Imagine we are living in a world in which the whales were in charge, what would your life be like? What would you be/do/have?

If I have prior consciousness when humans were in charge and now the whales are in charge I would just be like: what do y'all need? Whatever we need to keep the humans from being in charge - sign me up. I'd like to be a whale nanny.

**"REST BECAUSE IT IS A GIFT, NOT BECAUSE YOU HAVE EARNED IT. YOU DON'T HAVE TO EARN IT."**

~ DEANNA ZANDT





White Magnolia grandiflora (southern magnolia)  
flower on tree, Duke University campus, Durham,  
North Carolina, USA. 2009

## Slow Poem of Selected Dreams

Melissa Pierce

I dreamed that tree and plant roots grew into my body tendrils and sprouts - holding me up well past what I could endure on my own

But the most emotionally resonate dream I've ever had was of kissing the flowers of a giant magnolia tree soft petaled lips to lips

A bow shock of light arching over me directing a symphony of stars from my dreaming bed into the branches of a tree

I dreamed about a car keyed to your bio feedback and emotional attachments. Curious thing, its anti road rage features demanded your docile agape

Curiouser was the dream in which we raised encrypted snails, the nautilus of their shells twisted and multiple. "We can't salt them." you said, as if I'd thought that was an option

We kept time by each other's heartbeats. We practiced slowing our pulse when we together so the day stretched longer, quietly deliberating between the infinite hallways woven from possibility, maybe, and improbability

It felt like raindrops soaking into the earth and spreading through the soil.

It felt like belonging.

# In The End, Thrivable Society Presents: Absurd Scenario Planning



*Absurd Scenarios Abound - Jean M. Russell 2023*

**We need to challenge our imaginations, get creative.**

**Part of what makes thrivability so difficult for people to picture turns out to be how much we live in our assumptions of what exists now continuing to be.**

**How can we push our imaginations to dream up a thrivable world?**

## **Make up Absurd Scenarios to get your creative juices flowing:**

- Everyone lives off microgreens they grow in their bathroom.
- Everyone gets a customized diet garden to fit their personal microbiome as part of a universal income and health policy after the massive earthquake in London.
- A solar flare destroys most of digital money, and we start writing I love you, I owe you.
- The floor really is lava.

Send us your absurdly creative scenarios so we can share them in our next journal and practice imagining:

email us at: [jean@thrivable.net](mailto:jean@thrivable.net)

or tweet us at [@thrivable](https://twitter.com/thrivable)