

# Waking up to the planetary health emergency




**Some psychological aspects:  
trauma, power, threat and meaning**

Annie Mitchell, Clinical and Community Psychologist  
26<sup>th</sup> November 2020



# Waking up to the crisis, through care, curiosity, and conversations

- **Care:** attending to what matters most to us
  - **Curiosity:** understanding trauma and distress
  - **Conversations:** meeting the democratic challenge
- 

# From denial, through despair, to action & hope

“It is worse, much worse, than you think.” David Wallace-Wells.



And the lives we could lead are better, far better, than we realise. .







# Labours of Love: the Crisis of Care

(Madeleine Bunting 2020).

Care Is a political and moral concept: a form of work which includes: ***‘everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible.’***

(Feminist philosopher Joan Tronto)

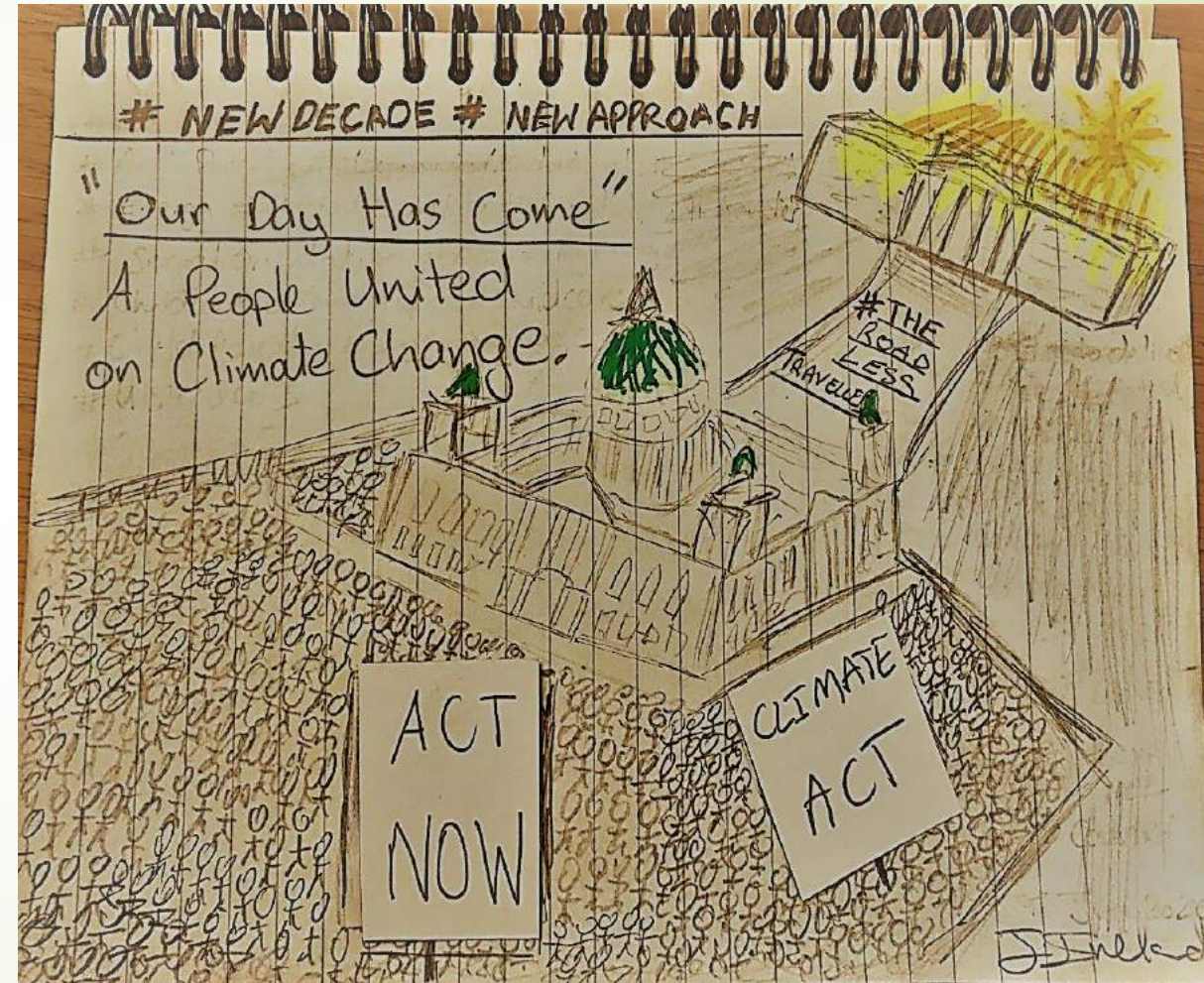
# Facing existential challenges

- Facing death & potential destruction of all we hold dear
- Optimism & pessimism, hope & despair, individual & collective responsibility
  - **gratitude**
    - actor Michael J Fox, on living with Parkinson's Disease
  - **Interconnectedness**
    - being part of a community
  - **"staying with the trouble"**
    - philosophical & psychological approach
- How do we talk with one another about all this?

# Life events shape our awake-ness, our care for our world – and our future

- our roots and cultures and values
- developmental influences
- world events that touch us directly or indirectly
- inspiring role models

Joseph Ireland , PhD Candidate at Queen's University Belfast





# Workings of power & neglect of life, 1966

- NE pit village roots
- Aberfan 1966: collapse of colliery spoil heap killed 109 children, 5 teachers.
- At 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary: “try to focus attention in Britain and beyond on the lessons of Aberfan, still of profound relevance today. They touch on issues of public accountability, responsibility, competence and transparency”





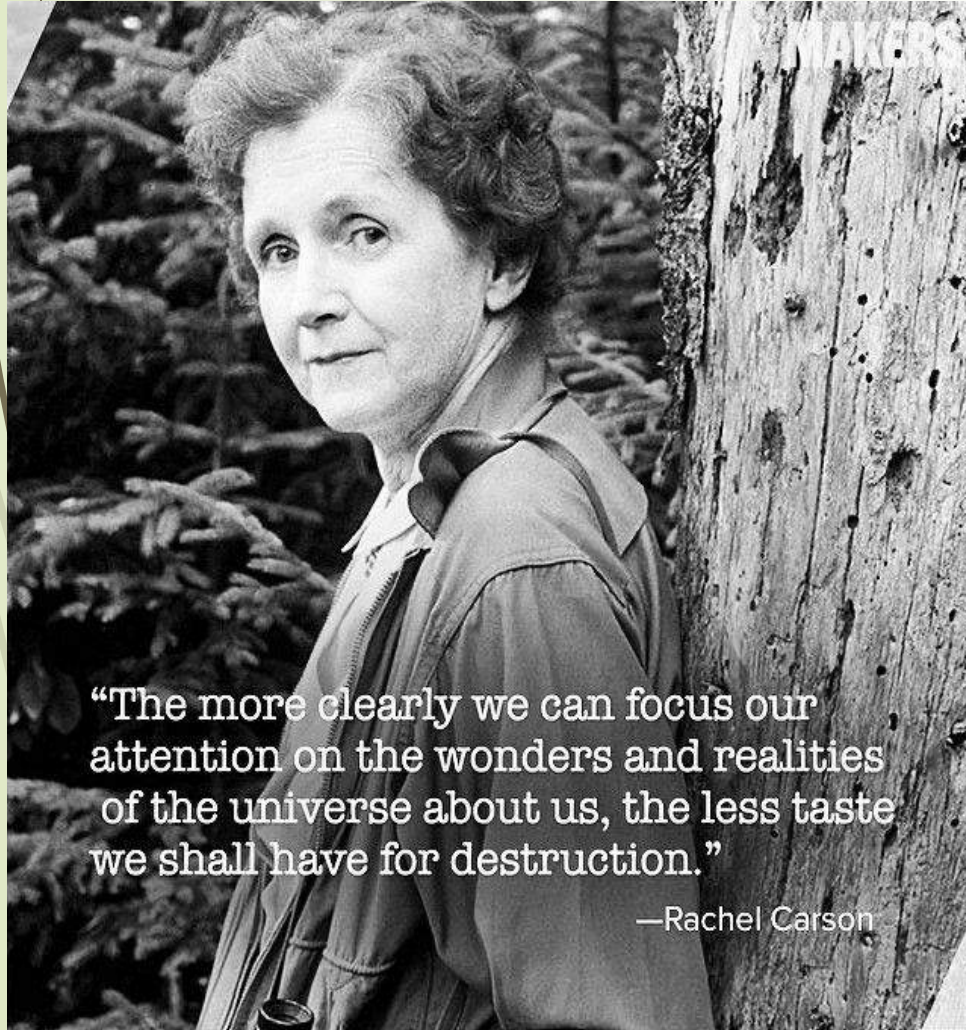
# Workings of power & neglect of life, 1985

- Armero, 1985: **volcano** eruption in **Colombia**: 20,000 people buried in mud, ice & lava.
- My dear friends among the dead
- Did people ignore warnings? It was a foreseeable catastrophe. Banner at mass funeral in Ibagué read, "The volcano didn't kill 22,000 people. The government killed them."



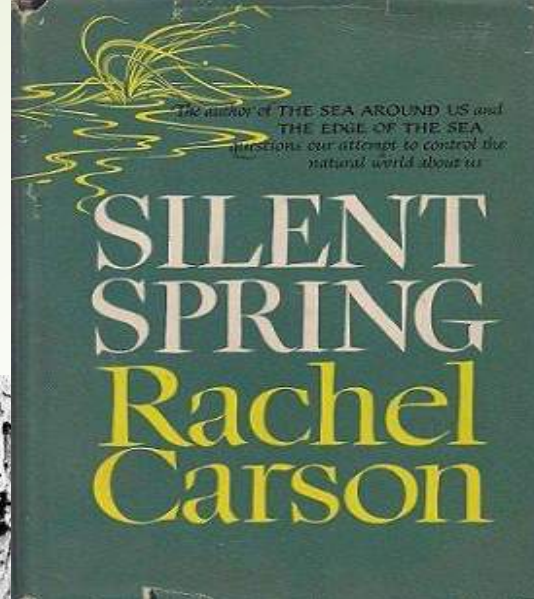


# Silent Spring: 1962.



"The more clearly we can focus our attention on the wonders and realities of the universe about us, the less taste we shall have for destruction."

—Rachel Carson



The human race is challenged more than ever before to demonstrate our mastery - not over nature but of ourselves.

## 'Silent Spring' Is Now Noisy Summer

Pesticides Industry  
Up in Arms Over  
a New Book

By JOHN M. LEE

The \$300,000,000 pesticides industry has been highly irritated by a quiet woman author whose previous works on science have been praised for the beauty and precision of the writing.

The author is Rachel Carson,



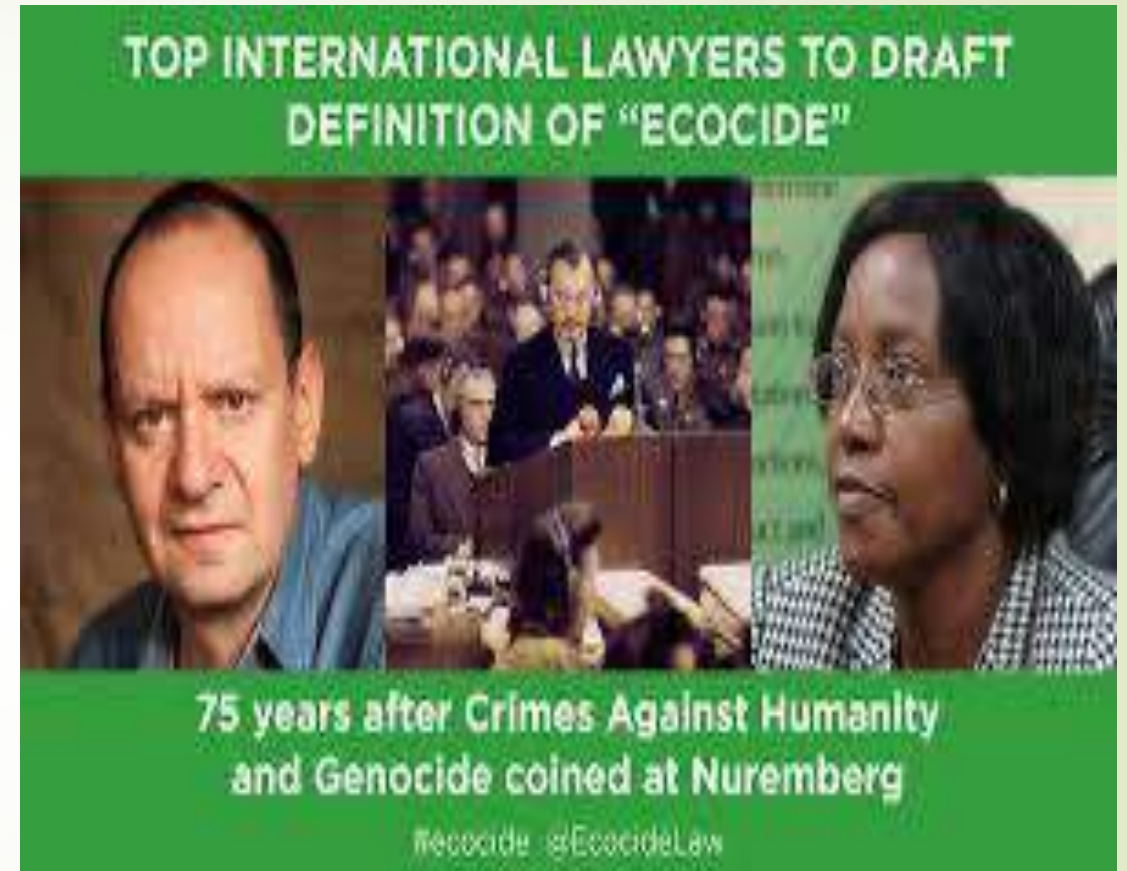
Rachel Carson Stirs  
Conflict—Producers  
Are Crying 'Foul'

fending the use of their products. Meetings have been held in Washington and New York. Statements are being drafted and counter-attacks plotted.

A drowsy midsummer has suddenly been enlivened by the greatest uproar in the pesticides industry since the cranberry



# Polly Higgins: a legal duty of care for the Earth

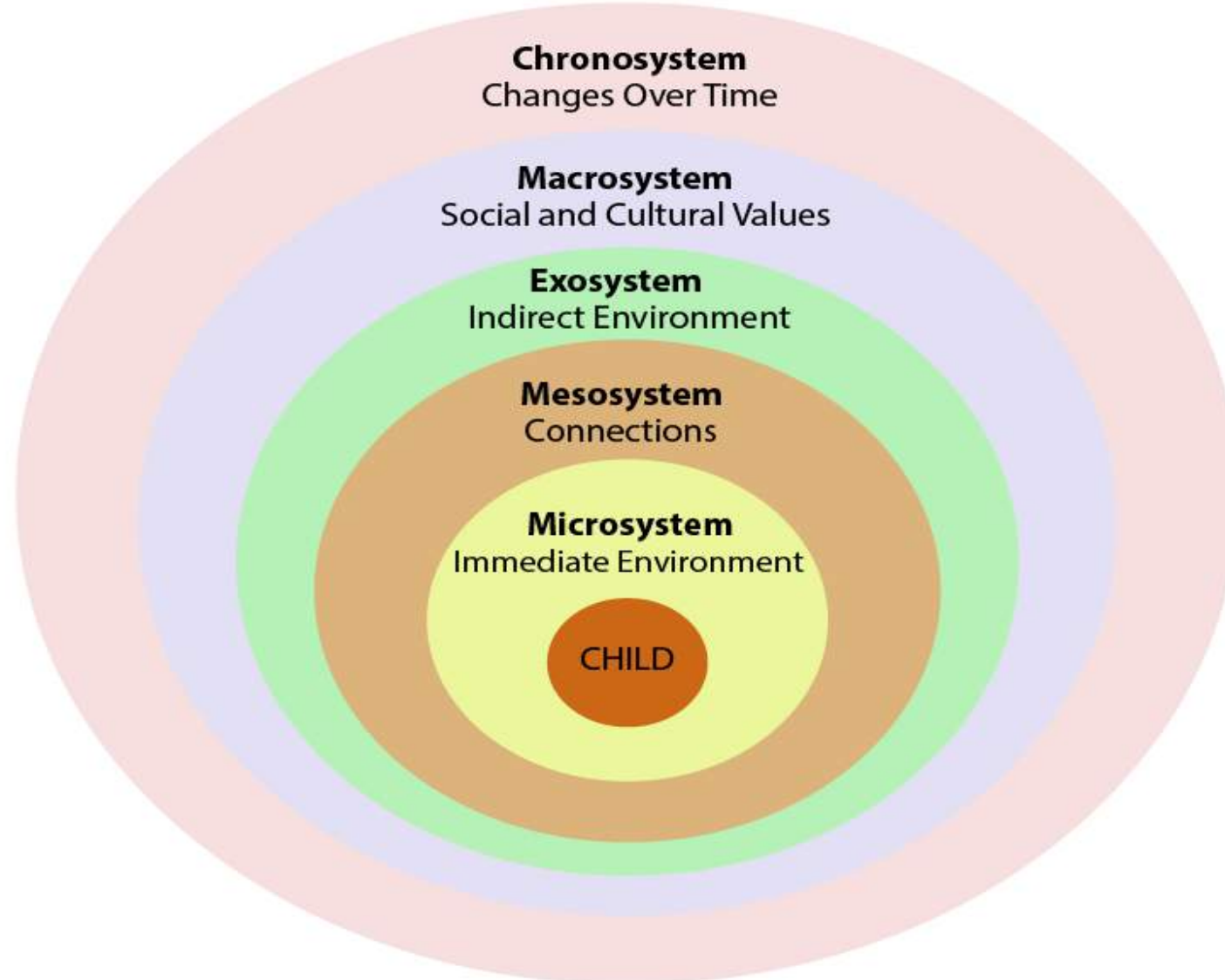


***"For me it's not about whether or not you are an environmentalist, it's about whether or not you care. If you care you can move mountains. Any mother knows this." ~ Polly Higgins***



# Curiosity: exploring the bigger picture

## Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory





The British  
Psychological Society

Promoting excellence in psychology



Division of  
Clinical Psychology

# The Power Threat Meaning Framework Overview

➡ <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/introducing-power-threat-meaning-framework>



## The Power Threat Meaning Framework poses these core questions:

- 'What has happened to you?'  
(How is **Power** operating in your life?)
- 'How did it affect you?'  
(What kind of **Threats** does this pose?)
- 'What sense did you make of it?'  
(What is the **Meaning** of these experiences to you?)
- 'What did you have to do to survive?'  
(What kinds of **Threat Response** are you using?)
- 'What are your strengths?' (What access to **Power resources** do you have?)
- ..... 'What is your story?'

# The Impact of Climate Change on Mental Health:

## A Systematic Descriptive Review, Cianconi et al 2020

**Acute** impacts: extreme events (e.g. floods, hurricanes, wildfires, etc.) that immediately expose undefended, helpless people to mental injuries.

**Subacute** impacts: intense emotions experienced by people who indirectly witness the effects of climate change,

**Long-term** outcomes: large-scale social & community effects - forms of violence, struggle over limited resources, displacement and forced migration post-disaster adjustment, and chronic environmental stress

**Impacts** vary depending on the resources available in the communities affected: the poorest, those with the least power, are worst affected



# UK Environmental Agency 2020

Experiencing damage caused by extreme weather such as storms or flooding can increase the chance of facing mental health problems such as stress and depression by 50% while a quarter of people who have been flooded still live with these issues for at least two years.



“When my street flooded in 2000, we had just found out my youngest son was severely autistic. The bewilderment when he realised the flood had ruined his toys was devastating. One of my neighbours who is severely agoraphobic had to move out of her house, and another who had been recently widowed found all her wedding photographs had been ruined by the floodwater. Living through a flood is the most appalling experience and really does compound issues you are already dealing with.”

# Young people are distressed about the state of the world

- Over half (57%) child & adolescent psychiatrists in England report that children & young people they see are distressed about the climate & environment. RCPsychiatry 2020
- “Eco distress is not a diagnosis or mental illness. Feeling distressed or anxious about the world is normal and shows that young people care about the planet, but sometimes these feelings can be overwhelming and hard to deal with, especially at a young age.” RCPsychiatry 2020
- “Schools can do so much to support understanding and a feeling of togetherness. My kids are part of their school eco club and they feel they are doing something positive, while increasing understanding of climate crisis. Yes! Social action prescribing!” (Rachel Forrest, XRPpsychologists)



# Where are the adults? Greta Thunberg ...and more

**Charlotte, 16:** “The climate crisis is terrifying and confusing. There are lot of emotions to cope with. I have felt powerless to do anything, sad about what we are losing and guilty about my own impact. Taking action, even small steps, has helped me feel more in control, whether through talking to other people, going on a climate strike, or changing what I consume and how I travel. Young people also need to remember it isn't just up to us to fix this. We need society to change.”

# Psychological trauma

- When the bottom falls out of our world, and we face abandonment or annihilation
- Sequelae of psychological trauma include: **blunted &/or anguished emotions, confusion, sadness, anxiety, agitation, numbness, dissociation, physical arousal, exhaustion; chaotic behaviour, physical illnesses, addiction, neglect or harm for self...**
- “...an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, & meaning.”

➤ Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*



# To prevent & mitigate the worst impacts of trauma – psychological prevention & first aid

- **Safety:** prevent or remove the immediate danger
- **Acceptance:** stay connected, acknowledge the feelings, don't deny
- **Sympathetic support:** be kind, be present, be human(e), show you care
- **Information:** explain clearly, tell others who need to know, tell the truth

[OR AS XR PUTS IT: SWIFTLY REDUCE HARMFUL GREENHOUSE GASES.  
TELL THE TRUTH. WITH CITIZEN CONTROL. AND DO ALL OF THIS FAIRLY]

The Power Threat Meaning Framework recognises the importance of

- Histories of colonisation & intergenerational trauma
- Inseparability of individual from the social group
- Relationship to the natural world
- Integration of mind, body, spirit, natural world
- Indigenous psychologies and research paradigms
- Narrative & meaning-making - personal, family, community.



# Waking up to the workings of power

Oil companies, such as Exxon, have buried the evidence of the harms of their products, since at least 1977 (as did tobacco companies).

"Tobacco companies threatened human health, but oil companies threatened the planet's health. "It's a harm that is global in its reach."  
Scientific American 2015

Let's promote our shared capacity to build a better world: with "the diversity, citizen empowerment, and mutual assistance essential for resilient communities."

# How does change happen? Change is a social process

- ➡ Through safe, trusting relationships
- ➡ Engaging with emotion
- ➡ Tackling cognitive errors
- ➡ Being good role models
- ➡ Addressing resistance
- ➡ Building motivation
- ➡ The arithmetic of compassion

<https://www.arithmeticofcompassion.org/blog>



# How does change happen? Acting together

- Through safe, trusting relationships, now and with/ for future generations
- Understanding our histories and creating new shared vision(s)
- Reaching out: appreciating different identities & values
- Valuing differences with respect & due process
- Shifting power and resources
- Engaging with politics: voting and lobbying
  - Inspired by the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, Jon Bird introducing the Future Generations Bill in the House of Lords
  - Climate and Ecological Emergencies Bill
- Choosing good leaders (where we can)
- Prescribing social action, rather than drugs and therapies
  - Psychologists for Social Change
- Building alliances and bridges: collective action



# Trust with our fellow citizens: climate conversations

## ➤ **Effective communication:**

- speaking to our values across political divides (Climate Outreach)
- Civil conversations, Beyond the Red Line, Schwartz Rounds, creative engagement...

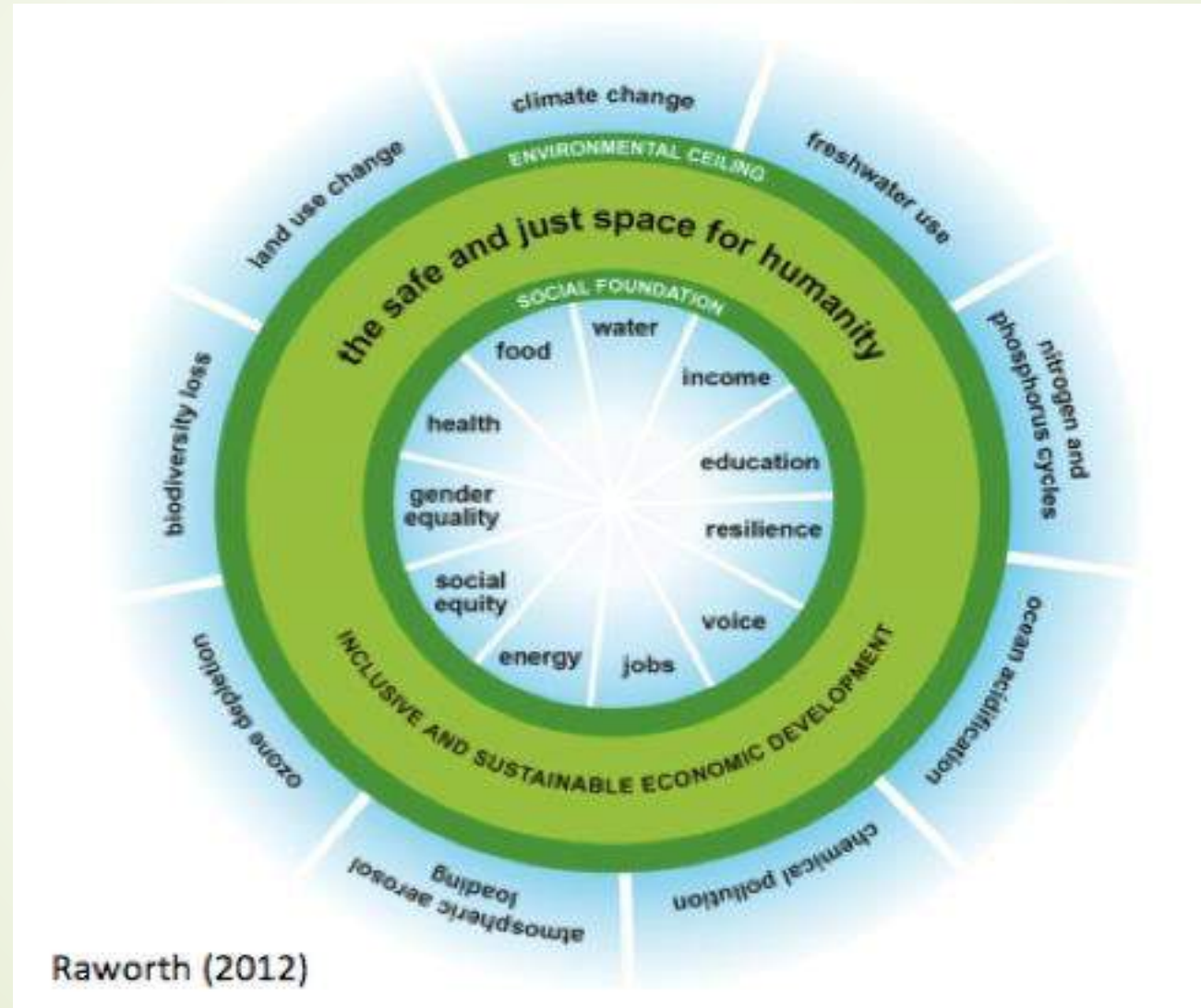
## ➤ **Our individual responsibilities as trusted role models? (Rebecca Willis)**

- **Speak out**
- **Think conversation, not monologue**
- **Think about our own footprint (energy, diet, travel) at home and at work**
- **Be kind to ourselves**
- **change the rules**
- **Take to the streets**



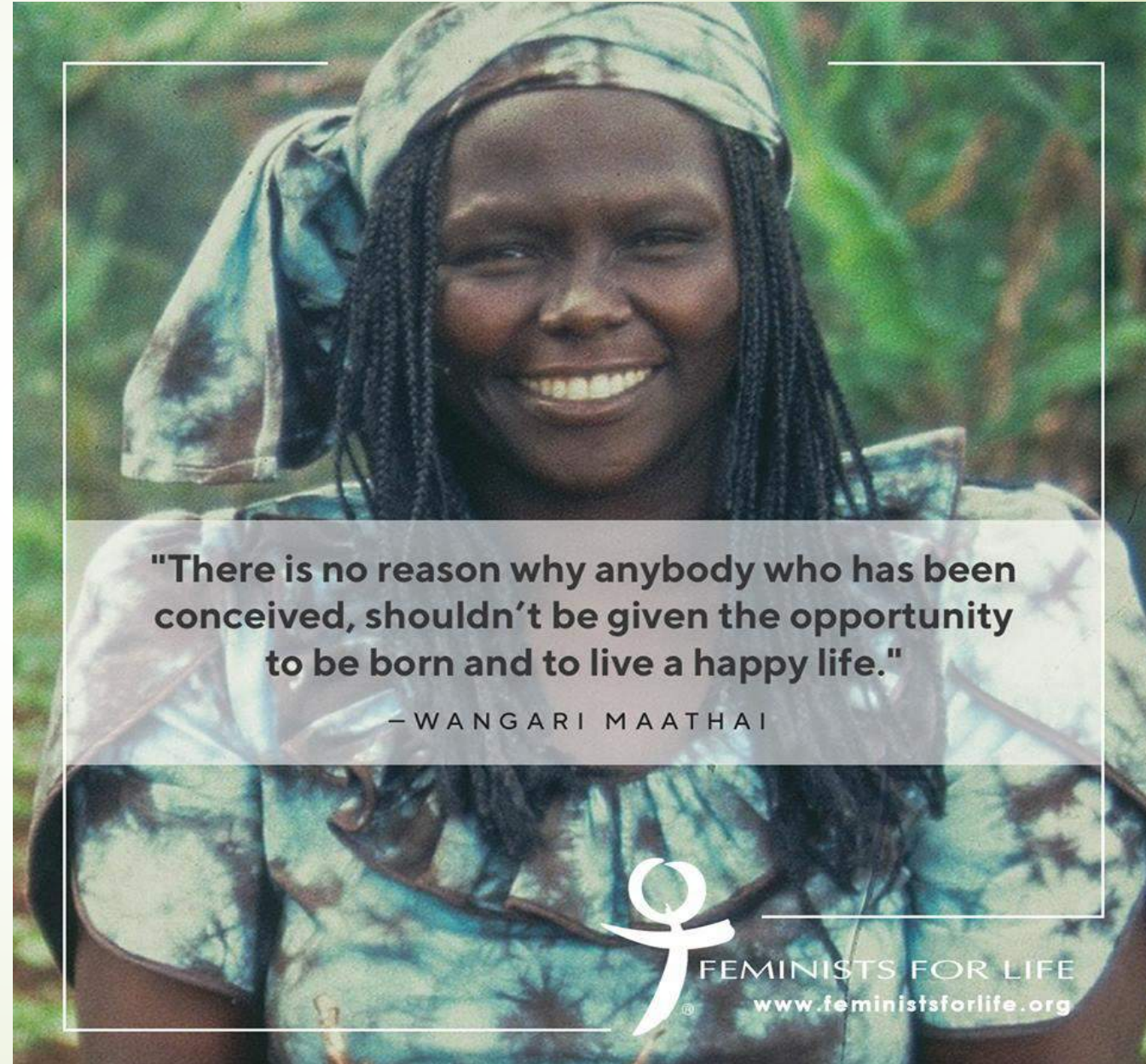


# Caring for our home: a safe and just place for humanity





# Care: and celebrating the things we can do together





A young child with dark skin and curly hair is pointing their right index finger at a map of the world on a wall. The child is wearing a purple shirt. To the right, an adult's arm and hand are visible, also pointing towards the map. The adult is wearing a red shirt. The map is a standard world map with various countries and oceans labeled. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

Treat the **earth** well.  
It was not given to you  
by your parents.  
It is loaned to you  
by your **children**.

-Kenyan proverb