

## **Cultural change is essential to tackle climate change**

### Tim Hollo presentation to Fenner School Human Ecology Forum

I want to preface my contributions to this session by noting that I come to this as a practitioner rather than a theoretician. I have many years ago studied legal and social and cultural and linguistic theory, and I have followed developments with interest, but my career has been in campaigning, communicating, politics and music. I'm very interested in any theoretical grounding you can offer me back, and I hope very much that what theory I offer isn't too basic, or even wrong.

With that in mind, let me start by telling you a story, and we'll return later to why.

Once upon a time, in the middle of a shining sea, there was a beautiful country. Crowned by snow-peaked mountains, edged by snow-white beaches, garlanded with magnificent forests. Most of its people, sadly, never saw much of its beauty. They spent their days in offices and shopping centres, caught in traffic between them, and feeling rushed. But they did feel pride in that natural beauty, and sadness deep in their hearts when they thought about losing it.

Every few years the people of this land came together to elect new leaders. Now, the people knew that the wild places that they loved were under threat, and they felt sad, but every day in a myriad ways they were told that that was an inevitable cost of modern life. When they watched television, when they listened to the radio, when they drove past the billboards on their commute, they were told that the path to happiness lay through material possessions. They heard themselves addressed as consumers, not citizens. So they pushed their sadness deeper inside and pressed on.

Now there were those in this country who saw where this was heading, and they worked hard to turn things around. They quoted facts and figures, they shared photographs on social media, they talked of the costs to the economy of failing to protect the environment. And most of the people agreed, yet they still turned away.

In their wisdom, the news media of this country felt that it was important for the citizens to be properly informed for their solemn democratic duty, so they set up a great many "fact check" sites to make sure those seeking election were held to account. On many key issues at this election, it was

found that one party in particular was not being entirely truthful. It was the party that most strongly promoted the idea that material wealth would make us happy, and that protecting the environment was a nice but, in the end, frivolous path.

Come Election Day, it was that party which won a majority.

And there was much wailing and gnashing of teeth and people crying "but he's not telling the truth! What went wrong?"

Well, that's why we're here today. I think all of us agree that it is our culture that went wrong. And that what we need to address, fundamentally, if we're to turn this around, is our culture.

This is not to say we should abandon facts and figures - far from it. Rather, we need to use better ways of communicating these facts. Because, far deeper than facts, it is our culture that determines what most of us believe and how we act, most of the time.

As a media advisor for Greenpeace and then Communications Director for The Greens, I used to get deeply frustrated when people told me that we couldn't set our sights on ambitious climate action because "politics is the art of the possible". But, having spent a year outside day-to-day politics, researching widely, discussing broadly and thinking deeply, I now believe it's true.

Because I now see politics as the outward expression of underlying culture. Subcultures are still expressed through minority voices, but the governments we are able to elect and the policies we are able to implement, even the stories we can get reported, are limited by what the culture deems "possible".

But equally I know that, if we set out to do what is possible, if we accept the limits of what is currently possible, we will fail. We will never succeed in driving the scale of change necessary to prevent catastrophic climate disruption.

That is not to say, either, that we need to set out to do the "impossible". The lesson here is that it is our job to *change* what is possible. And that is about changing culture.

Let me dig a little deeper into what I mean about culture limiting what is possible.

In campaigning and politics, one of the central tasks of planning is power analysis, based on a pretty traditional structure: power is exercised by political and business leaders, mediated and often aided and abetted by media. Grassroots campaigning has always been a common approach to driving change at these levels, through a belief in democratic power being ultimately held by the people. My analysis has long placed media in a more central and powerful position than others' analysis, partly due to its deep links with and hold over politicians and business people, but largely because I agree with McLuhan, Chomsky, Lakoff and so many others, even back to Gramsci, that power in our society is in the hands of those who control the story, those who set the boundaries of our discourse. In our modern societies, where thankfully state sanctioned violence is no longer a common form of coercive power, coercion is generally exercised by controlling the discourse and controlling the culture – controlling what we are allowed to say and think. If an idea cannot be said – or if said, cannot be understood – then it cannot be implemented.

While ever the dominance of the current culture persists, none of the individuals involved – political or business leaders, journalists and editors, ordinary citizens – are able to envision a reality outside their current conception of the world. We know this from theory, but also from practice. Working on the Hill I got so tired of hearing phrases like “you guys are so far out there we can't see your tail lights”, or “but we can't do that, it would mean a different world”, or “that's not how we do things”, or “politics is the art of the possible, so you have to change your demands to fit into what is possible”.

Well, “what is possible” is fundamentally a cultural question, wrapped up in how we collectively and individually conceive of the world around us and our place in it. In order to change the culture, we need to reprioritise cultural values, shift behavioural norms, and tell new culture-defining stories.

The “right” has now spent a generation redefining “what is possible”. And many of the “left” have ceded the ground on the basis of a failure to understand that “what is possible” is changeable. Our post-Fukuyama *End of History* politics has reached the point where those who advocate change on any substantial scale are dismissed as naïve and childish while those who want to indefinitely extend the status quo, despite clear scientific evidence that *that* is impossible, are seen as realists.

We see poll after poll showing overwhelming support for our issues while voting intention goes in the opposite direction. So many people support maintaining the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area yet vote for the Tasmanian Liberals when they vow to undo it; so many support

renewable energy yet vote for Tony Abbott after he promises to wind it back. I believe what's going on here relates to our ability to hold two contradictory ideas in our heads at the same time. People *do* support our views, but they don't see them as a priority. They come in a distant second to the "grown up", "mature", "responsible" priorities of making lots and lots of cash fast so we can buy new toys.

Central to the subconscious calculus going on here are values. Values are central to culture as it is largely through values (and the stories that embed them in our consciousness) that we establish our conception of how the world operates and what our place in the world is.

The most sophisticated work going on in this area, in my opinion, is the research undertaken by the Common Cause project in the UK. Here, psychologists involved in values mapping – analysing the way the values which underpin our understanding of the world relate to each other in our minds – have shown that emphasising “extrinsic values” such as wealth, status and security undermines and suppresses “intrinsic values” of sustainability, compassion, creativity and universalism and vice versa.<sup>1</sup>

So no wonder, when we're consistently told that consumption and materialism and wealth and status are the most important facets of life, sustainability and compassion are suppressed.

Values trump facts. But it goes even deeper than that.

A study by political scientist Brendan Nyhan and colleagues has found that strongly held political values actually trump our ability to do maths. We can read graphs really well. Except when they contradict our frames. This study showed a clear tendency for people with high numeracy skills to misread graphs about gun control or climate change, even when they'd just correctly read the same graph about soap.<sup>2</sup>

One rather special example I want to share with you highlights the power of culture and values to an extraordinary degree.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://valuesandframes.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Nyhan, Brendan and Jason Reifler, 'When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions' (2010) 32(2) *Political Behavior* 303.

In recent years in the USA, there has been an extraordinary number of virgin births recorded.

A group of researchers decided to look into this. They found the young women, across the USA, who had given birth and denied having ever had sex. What they found is critically important to environmental and science communicators. They found that this phenomenon was, and I quote, ‘associated with cultural mores highly valuing virginity’. These young women, they found, truly believed that they were virgins. They had, it appears, subconsciously redefined sexual intercourse so that their own behaviour fitted into their culture.<sup>3</sup>

In this, I believe, is the most fascinating and difficult irony of what we might call our “post-Enlightenment” era: the discovery, through rational, scientific processes, that we humans are not, in fact, rational beings. One in a long line of researchers in this area, neuroscientist Drew Westen, has mapped cerebral activity when asking people political questions. He has demonstrated that political decisions are made in the amygdala, the ‘lizard brain’ which controls our fight or flight reflex, and our more highly evolved cortexes then go through a complex process of post-facto rationalisation, presenting a veneer of respectability to ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

Our political decisions, even though we might not want to believe it, are tribal, emotional, cultural.

That’s why cultural change is vital to any serious attempts to address the ecological crises facing our world.

### ***Art, performance and culture***

Art and culture, of course, have a very close relationship. Some people use the two words interchangeably. There are a couple of very interesting reflections on this relationship that I’ve found in my research and are worth quoting.

Firstly, theatre director Wesley Enoch beautifully explores the complex relationship between art, culture and nature from the perspective of an Indigenous Australian artist:

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<sup>3</sup> US researchers ponder modern day virgin births, *British Medical Journal*, December 17, 2013, <http://www.bmj.com/press-releases/2013/12/17/us-researchers-ponder-modern-day-virgin-births>.

<sup>4</sup> Westen, Drew, *Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation* (PublicAffairs, 2008).

Art is a way of mapping our landscape, story is a way of placing ourselves in the continuum of time, dance teaches us to be the animals and plants we live with. Art has a purpose that is beyond distracting you from your life. Art is about personal connections to the world around you... expressing what you have at stake.<sup>5</sup>

Environmentalist and author, Bill McKibben brings a culturally very different perspective to the role of art in shaping our cultural response to climate change:

Art, like religion is one of the ways we digest what is happening to us, make the sense out of it that proceeds to action... We can register what is happening with satellites and scientific instruments, but can we register it in our imaginations, the most sensitive of all our devices?<sup>6</sup>

The social role of the arts goes back millennia. According to William Danaher, “[m]usic and rhythm have been central to human history, in part, by motivating humans to act for the benefit of the group over and above themselves.”<sup>7</sup> As John Street notes, “From Plato to the Frankfurt School and beyond, the case has been made for regarding music (especially popular music) as a source of power”.<sup>8</sup> Michael Kantor argues, for example, that:

The Greek tragedies were... performed to reinforce the resilience and openness that Greek society needed to be able to cope with uncertainty, both through reminders of the limits of the human condition, and the always-present potential for the Gods to render humanity secondary.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tipping Point Australia, *Greening the Arts: Thinkpieces for Zero Carbon Future and A Survey of Sustainable Arts Practices* (October 2010), 4.

<sup>6</sup> William McKibben, ‘Imagine That: What the Warming World Needs Now is Art, Sweet Art’, *Grist Magazine*, 21 April 2005.

<sup>7</sup> William Danaher, ‘Music and Social Movements’ (2010) 4(9) *Sociology Compass* 811, 813.

<sup>8</sup> John Street, “‘Fight the Power’: The Politics of Music and the Music of Politics’ (2003) 38 *Government and Opposition* 113, 116.

<sup>9</sup> Tipping Point Australia, *Greening the Arts: Thinkpieces for Zero Carbon Future and A Survey of Sustainable Arts Practices* (October 2010), 11.

Much deeper is the case put forward by Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison in their book *Music and Social Movements*, that the arts/cultural change relationship is not just one way, but their interaction can in fact be a “source of cultural transformation”:<sup>10</sup>

Our claim is that, by combining culture and politics, social movements serve to reconstitute both, providing a broader political and historical context for cultural expression, and offering, in turn, the resources of culture - traditions, music, artistic expression - to the action repertoires of political struggle... [T]he collective identity formation that takes place in social movements is a central catalyst of broader changes in values, ideas and ways of life.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, they argue, cultural changes driven by political movements can also have a quite specific impact on the arts. For example, “the resurrection of bluegrass music, as well as many other traditional musics, was inspired by the civil rights movement, and its actualisation of history, its linking of the past with the present”.<sup>12</sup>

This brings us to one of the most critical aspects of culture that art has a strong influence on: that of identity. Art can help define the identity of a broad national or ethnic culture as with bluegrass, Jewish klezmer music, traditional dancing and more. But it can also help new and emerging subcultures define themselves in a way that can strengthen their internal coherence.

Andrew Ross, writing on youth music and culture, notes that:

the level of attention and meaning invested in music by youth is still unmatched by almost any other organised activity in society, including religion. As a daily companion, social bible, commercial guide and spiritual source, youth music is still the place of faith, hope and refuge. In the forty-odd years since “youth culture” was created as a consumer category, music remains the medium for the most creative and powerful stories about those things that often seem to count the most in our daily lives.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.

<sup>12</sup> Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose, *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture* (Routledge, 1994), 3.

We'll return to the question of identity shortly. But for now let's take that last line as a cue to turn to one of the most powerful and central aspects of culture – narrative, or story.

### ***Narratives and culture***

Culture is very frequently mediated or transferred through story.

We all know the power of story. It runs very deep in human nature that we are attuned to understanding and responding to stories far more than we are to facts and figures. Why else do fairy tales old and new, from Cinderella to Star Wars to Frozen, hold such sway? Why else would every religion be based on ritualised retelling of stories? Why else do we use mnemonics? 'My very elderly mother' is so much easier to remember than Mercury – Venus – Earth – Mars.

Creation myths, Bible stories and other allegories; all are used effectively to instruct us about our world and our place in it. The stories embed in our hearts and minds the values we are supposed to hold dear, those we are meant to prioritise over others. They depict, and thereby create and emphasise, cultural norms.

In order to create culture change, we need to tell new stories which will shift values and norms. And, in order to do that, we need to first understand what the cultural basis of our current situation is.

This is, of course, very much up for debate, but I suggest that the cultural basis is four-fold:

- the dominance of consumption/production/economy culture;
- the dominance of conservative/stasis/"change is too hard" culture;
- the dominance of hyper-individualism that overlies both and these; and
- expressed most particularly at the elite level, by Tony Abbott and right wing business and media leaders, the powerful cultural belief that natural resources are simply there for humans to make use of. And that actually has the power of creation myth, coming as it does from a one-eyed reading of the Bible, making it intensely difficult to shift.

These four cultural stories emphasise values of wealth, status, material possessions, and a narrowing of the value of security to the smallest scale – protecting me, my family, my culturally homogenous white bread country, and excluding the broader conception of security as a universalist need for us

all to work together to learn to share this tiny planet of ours. There is clear evidence that our society is becoming less trusting of others, less empathetic, less tolerant of difference, more fractured and polarised.

Put these four stories and the values they represent together and you find not just the heart of why we are not tackling climate change but also why we accept dehumanising brutalisation of refugees, why we flee public schooling, why we no longer join unions, why we fail to face up to our past and present mistreatment of Indigenous Australians, and so much more.

Here is my first attempt at creating four threads to a new story that match and respond to the four cultural drivers I articulated above:

- Readdressing what makes us happy, is at the heart of it. We need to demonstrate through modelled behaviour, through experiential programs and through new stories, that consumption and materialism do not make us happy. There is actually reason to believe that if some of us stopped campaigning for climate action and started campaigning towards greater happiness, we might be more successful.
- In order to move from a culture of stasis to a culture of transition, we need to tell stories that explain that “this world is over”, that “change is coming – whether it’s positive or negative change is our choice”.
- To overcome the hyper-individualism, we need to rebuild the power of community as stronger than the individual, through modelling, story and experience.
- We need to rebuild a culture that understands that human civilisation is entirely dependent on the natural world.

Through telling these stories, modelling behaviour, providing experiential opportunities and empathetic encounters, we CAN effectively reprioritise cultural values, pushing intrinsic values at least into balance with the extrinsic values which so utterly dominate our current culture, if not eventually putting them into a position of dominance.

### ***Culture and change***

Now story, of course, isn’t the only way to embed culture. Personal experiences, empathic encounters, immersive experiences and modelled behaviour are also very powerful.

One non-artistic idea I want to dip into briefly is the cultural problem caused by our disconnection from the natural world and the potential for cultural change this raises.

This is something that has been explored quite a bit recently, especially led by Richard Louv and his description of Nature Deficit Disorder.<sup>14</sup> The fact that we are bringing up generations of children who have less and less direct experience of playing in nature has serious implications for how we understand our relationship with nature. How can we love nature, how can we fear and mourn its loss, if we have no direct experience of it?

Fascinatingly, it goes a lot deeper than this. Louv points to medical and psychological research attributing all sorts of problems to a lack of connection with the natural world, from obesity to depression.

There are now several organisations dedicated to driving broad cultural change through engaging children and adults with nature, the most prominent being Nature Play, Natural Change, and Project Wild Thing.

Through modelling and immersive experience, as well as the stories they tell, these projects can make a significant contribution to the fourth thread of my narratives above – the story that our society is a small part of, and entirely dependent on, the natural world.

Another left-field idea I have recently come across is the Human Library project, which aims to foster community and experiences of universalism by asking people to register themselves as books to be borrowed and read by others interested in broadening their horizons. I am keen to find out more about this idea but can't yet tell you more about it.

To return to the role of arts in culture, one of its central roles is in identity formation, as raised earlier.

“Identity processes are inherent in all movements,” Rosenthal and Flacks explain, “[a]nd music is the way many first try on that identity... Indeed, music is a major resource for identity construction in

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<sup>14</sup> Louv, Richard, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books Of Chapel Hill, 2005.

contexts that are remote from the political".<sup>15</sup> "Music and group identity," they say, "may become so intertwined as to be synonymous in the minds of group members and outsiders".<sup>16</sup> "Music is a basic tool, especially for young people, in the 'cultural map-making'" that all people must do."<sup>17</sup>

As part of this identity process, art can act as a social legitimiser. "While the music creates the bond, the listeners of ... may then be motivated to carry out their political ideals not because the music 'says' they should but because many others feel the same way and that it is acceptable to express those opinions".<sup>18</sup>

Possibly the most powerful role for music in social and cultural change, then, is the power of artistic work infused with that sense of identity to spread ideas wider. As Rosenthal and Flacks say:

The ethos developed in scenes and subcultures also functions powerfully to spread a worldview beyond their boundaries ... What begins percolating isn't a coherent ideology, but... "structures of feelings", part emotional, part rational, a heady brew of social ideas, fashions, music, and so forth, both precursor to a developing ideology and more than simply an ideology, involving "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt" by each individual.<sup>19</sup>

One of the early deliberate attempts to create this kind of deep change using artists was taken by early union organisers and the Communist Party in the USA, bringing in non-involved musicians to recruit supporters. The advent of radio, which spread songs beyond the reach of the musicians themselves, helped radicalise millworkers, becoming an alternative form of information from papers and mill owners.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 165.

<sup>16</sup> Rob Rosenthal, unpublished work extracted in Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 94.

<sup>17</sup> Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 95.

<sup>18</sup> Rob Rosenthal, unpublished work extracted in Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 165.

<sup>19</sup> Rob Rosenthal, unpublished work extracted in Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 100.

<sup>20</sup> Rob Rosenthal, unpublished work extracted in Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 75.

Taking this approach to perhaps its logical conclusion, the Highlander Centre, one of the first activist training centres in the world, involved a substantial focus on music, recruiting and training musicians and workshopping campaign songs.<sup>21</sup> “We Shall Overcome” is the most famous of many protest songs of the 1960s that had its origins there. The recent emergence of “Tipping Point” projects in the UK and Australia, which bring together artists, scientists and campaigners to work on climate change, might be considered to follow a similar approach.

Perhaps selfishly, I want to mention in this context the project I have recently, started, Green Music Australia.

As both a musician and environmentalist, the idea behind this project is that, if we musicians can start to convincingly walk the talk, if we can green up our own industry through cutting waste streams of things like plastic water bottles and plates at venues and festivals, by using LED stage lights, efficient refrigeration, and on site renewable energy, and by tackling transport to and from gigs, we can become very powerful cultural leaders.

By tying together modelling of behaviour, experience and participation, both for the musicians themselves and for their surrounding industry and audience, and the cultural power of the music itself, the idea is that this will drive change at a deeper level than has yet been achieved by the environment movement.

I want to conclude with what I find the most fascinating idea of all, and filled with opportunity for the role of the arts in driving climate action. That is contained in a recent paper published by Common Cause suggesting that engagement in arts & culture in and of itself can encourage values of compassion, social justice, and sustainability.

This is an idea that has been instinctively noted before. For example, arts educator Bridget McKenzie writes that “the skills of critical thinking, empathy, imaginative problem-solving and resourceful

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<sup>21</sup> Rob Rosenthal, unpublished work extracted in Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* (Paradigm Publishers, 2012), 205. See also Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

making will be essential in helping humanity rise to the many challenges climate change presents.”<sup>22</sup>  
But the evidence base in the values mapping work is new.

The value of care for the environment sits on the map close to values of creativity and curiosity, amongst the values collectively referred to as “intrinsic”, and opposite “extrinsic” values, such as desire for more material possessions, social status and power.

If we accept the sensible proposition that engagement in arts and culture activates values such as “curiosity” and “creativity,” then the implication from the research ... would be that the intrinsic portion of the human motivational system could be encouraged and strengthened, while the extrinsic portion could be suppressed, as a result of participating in arts and cultural activities... As such, it may be that the more that one engages in artistic activity for these kinds of intrinsic reasons, the more the intrinsic portion of the motivational system will be strengthened, and thus the weaker extrinsic values will become.<sup>23</sup>

There is more research to be done in this area to confirm the link in practice, but it may well be that, beyond their role in helping to most effectively communicate messages and support social movements for change, the arts may in and of themselves change our culture to one more conducive to tackling the climate crisis.

This is a very brief overview of my current research and thinking. I hope it is provocative and useful and welcome any feedback.

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<sup>22</sup> Bridget McKenzie, ‘Cultural Education for a Changed Planet’ (2008) *Spring Engage* 21 19, 19.

<sup>23</sup> Professor Tim Kasser, in Mission Models Money & Common Cause, *The Art of Life: Understanding How Participation in Arts and Culture Can Affect our Values* (2013) <<http://valuesandframes.org/download/reports/The%20Art%20Of%20Life%20-%20MMM%20and%20Common%20Cause.pdf>>, 10-11.