

Perceiving the Limits, Or: What a Pandemic Has Shown Us about the Climate Crisis

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Education and, in particular, education concerned with our response to the climate crisis, can draw important lessons from the changed desires and re-evaluation of individual and collective values and goals that occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has shown us the importance of making the limits of the world perceptible. While the limits imposed by the pandemic and climate change alike can lead to serious losses, they also bring the possibility of discovering and enjoying new ways of living within those limits. We call attention in particular to forms of relinquishment that bring new pleasures.

Perceiving the Limits, Or: What a Pandemic Has Shown Us about the Climate Crisis

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Education and, in particular, education concerned with our response to the climate crisis, can draw important lessons from the changed desires and re-evaluation of individual and collective values and goals that occurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has shown us the importance of making the limits of the world perceptible. While the limits imposed by the pandemic and climate change alike can lead to serious losses, they also bring the possibility of discovering and enjoying new ways of living within those limits. We call attention in particular to forms of relinquishment that bring new pleasures.

COVID-19 and the Perception of Limits

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how drastically and quickly human behaviour can change when we are faced with a life-threatening and rapidly spreading virus. The communication of large-scale public health data (who does not know the “curves” and “waves” of COVID-19?) as well as small-scale stories of human loss and grief persuaded large numbers of people to make immediate and major changes to their behaviour.

Through the ebb and flow of the pandemic, the public pedagogy of media and government communication has shown people the *limits* of what our societies and, especially, healthcare systems can bear: each time restrictions were eased, infection and hospitalization numbers rose, and new restrictions sought to bring those numbers down again. The press briefings and news articles explained that the spread and mutation of the virus was an external reality we ignored at our own peril; if we cared for our and others’ survival, we had to pay attention to what this external reality showed us about the need to change our behaviour and adapt to the limits of our societies and healthcare systems.

Some of these limits were difficult to accept. People were unable to spend last moments with dying loved ones. Residents of seniors’ homes went without family visits. Families whose members were spread across different countries when the borders closed were unable to reunite. None of these changes were perceived as positive, and people abandoned the changed behaviour as soon as the restrictions were lifted.

In this paper, by contrast, we are interested specifically in changes that, even if they were perceived initially as a loss or sacrifice, became the source of newfound pleasures and a larger re-evaluation of individual and collective values and goals. For a behaviour change to persist, it must, at least to some extent, be chosen; it has to reflect changed desires. We believe that it is in this area, of changed desires and a re-evaluation of individual and collective values and goals, that education, and in particular education concerned with our response to the climate crisis, can draw important lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.

This essay is a call-and-response emerging from conversations over each other’s previous writings, readings, and lived experiments, and draws on forms that we each work with, sometimes academic, sometimes conversational, sometimes poetic. We met in person in August 2021, in Elisa’s garden. Claudia had a notebook, Elisa had a big bowl of grapes to destem while we talked. Claudia had sent Elisa an earlier paper on a similar

topic, Elisa had been sharing her ideas via social media and short films. We talked for almost two hours, appreciating the opportunity to exchange ideas without screens or face masks, interrupted only by curious geese.

Education as the Rearrangement of Desires

Gayatri Spivak (2004) has characterized education, and, specifically, education in the humanities, as “an uncoercive rearrangement of desires” (p. 526). As one of us has written elsewhere (Ruitenberg, 2020), this refers to Spivak’s view of education in the humanities as, ideally, offering students not just an enrichment of what they know and are able to do, but a change in what they want. More specifically, in a world divided by colonialism, education in the humanities should constitute for those who have been marginalized by colonialism an “uncoercive undermining of the class habit of obedience” (p. 562) and a reorienting of the expectation of injustice to a desire for justice. However, the phrase “uncoercive rearrangement of desires” can also be understood as a more general description of education, since education, regardless of the social position of the student, affects not only what students know or are able to do, but also what they imagine, attend to, understand to be desirable, and desire for themselves and others. We believe that what is needed is an uncoercive undermining of human habits that lead to ecological destruction and degradation, including climate change.

The “uncoercive” aspect of the rearrangement of desires is significant. Of course, it signals that education, in order to remain education and not become indoctrination, cannot be forced and must involve the agency of the student. However, it also signals that the responsibility of rearranging our desires is distributed unequally, both locally and globally, as not all have been able to afford the most ecologically destructive habits in the first place, nor do all have the same degree of choice in changing them. Our reflections, then, are intended primarily for an audience of those who have at least some choice. We have the responsibility not only to rearrange our own desires, but also to create the conditions in which it becomes more feasible for others to do so.

A different way of framing the uncoercive undermining of ecologically destructive habits is as uncoercive “relinquishment,” as proposed by Deep Adaptation scholar Jem Bendell (2020). The Deep Adaptation framework works from the view that, even with continued efforts to reduce or eliminate human behaviours that exacerbate climate change, and with continued efforts to find technologies that might intervene in or reverse some aspects of climate change, certain climate change tipping points have already been reached, and certain changes have been set in motion that will not be brought to a halt any time soon. It is not a fatalistic framework that suggests that we are doomed so we should all just sit on our hands now and do nothing. Rather, it proposes that, in addition to many other efforts at mitigating climate change, we should also prepare to adapt to it as a new reality. One of those adaptations is relinquishment, which “asks us ‘what do we need to let go of in order to not make matters worse?’” (Bendell, 2020). Importantly, relinquishment cannot remain an experience of loss or sacrifice for the new habit to persist. Rather, relinquishing one’s habits needs to enable new experiences that become their own source of pleasure.

in relinquishing desires for what is revealed to cause an intolerable destruction of life, there may begin a transformation, perhaps incremental, then compounding, perhaps self-absorbedly, then in support of family, friends, community until all in a rush the desire to support all life in all living systems is the greatest pleasure.

what begins as distress at the conflict of values at the fuel pump, in isolated boxes stuck in traffic, personally comfortable but collectively so at odds, in relinquishment can slide into alignment with a new set of pleasures. what begins as a giddy ride on an electric bicycle up the same hills with the same groceries, sparks a recognition of what could be. the scent of the air and its temperature on the skin as we arrive make us so immediately present to the place we are in. the elation of moving around with the freedom we felt as kids on bikes is at once freedom from the weight of a story that says that what i want must destroy others, it’s just the way it is.

The Pleasure of Rearranged Desires

Various news media have featured stories about people experiencing new pleasures as a result of changes that were imposed or enabled by pandemic restrictions. For example, some employees experienced the pleasure of not having a long daily commute to and from work (Satov, 2020), some parents discovered that both they and their children preferred homeschooling (Crary, 2021), and some who left the city for a more rural environment experienced the pleasure of living closer to nature (Kelly & Lerman, 2020). There is no doubt that the pleasures and pains are distributed very unequally, with many health care and other essential workers not being able to work from home, homeschool their children, or move out of the city, and others losing employment and economic security altogether. Once again, we recognize the privilege of those who have had some of these choices.

One of our interests here is in how the stories were told of those who shifted into new ways of living, and how those ways became aligned with new desires. The following two narratives, from the *New York Times* and *Time Magazine*, respectively, are just two examples of the many stories told in mainstream media:

Brendan McLoughlin, 29, a business analyst for Ireland's national postal service, is among many whose job will remain at least partially remote; he plans to relocate from shared accommodation in Dublin to his own house in a port town north of the city this summer. "I think it's forced this re-evaluation of what matters in your setting and your home life," he said. (Specia, 2021)

Until March 2020, Kari and Britt Altizer of Richmond, Va., put in long hours at work, she in life-insurance sales and he as a restaurant manager, to support their young family. Their lives were frenetic, their schedules controlled by their jobs. Then the pandemic shutdown hit, and they, like millions of others, found their world upended. ... "I did some soul searching. During the time I was home, I was gardening and really loving life," says Britt, who grew up on a farm and studied environmental science in college. "I realized working outdoors was something I had to get back to doing." Today, both have quit their old jobs and made a sharp pivot: they opened a landscaping business together. "We are taking a leap of faith," Kari says, after realizing the prepandemic way of working simply doesn't make sense anymore. Now they have control over their schedules, and her mom has moved nearby to care for their son. "I love what I'm doing. I'm closer to my goal of: I get to go to work, I don't have to go to work," Kari says. "We aren't supposed to live to work. We're supposed to work to live." (Lipman, 2021)

These and other stories translate abstract concepts such as "the Great Resignation" (Klotz, as cited in Cohen, 2021) or "urban exodus" (Salon et al., 2021) to the level of individual lives, and highlight the role that changed desires play in individual decisions to move or change jobs.

The Climate Crisis and the Perception of Limits

Of course, adapting and responding to a pandemic is not the same as adapting and responding to the climate crisis. One of the major challenges of the climate crisis is that the enemy is not a virus, an organism external to us. We are our own enemy. As Bruno Latour (2020a) puts it: "this time, the pathogen whose terrible virulence has changed the living conditions of all the inhabitants of the planet is not the virus at all, it is humanity!" (par. 8).

A second challenge is that the threats posed by the climate crisis have been unfolding over a longer period of time than the threats posed by the COVID-19 virus. They are what Rob Nixon (2011) calls a form of "slow violence": "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (p. 2).

Third, the threats posed by the climate crisis are often less direct and immediate than those of COVID-19: while the virus directly attacks human bodies, the various "slow onset" phenomena under the umbrella "climate crisis"—melting glaciers, ocean acidification, desertification, etc. (Van der Geest & Van den Berg,

2021)—do not directly “infect” human bodies; rather, they produce or exacerbate the acute floods, droughts, heatwaves, hurricanes, and so forth that threaten people in particular places at particular times.

In spite of these differences, we believe that responses to the climate crisis can learn from responses to the COVID-19 crisis. We draw inspiration from Gert Biesta’s (2019) argument that “the educational task consists in arousing the desire in another human being for wanting to exist in and with the world in a grown-up way” (p. 53). The emphasis here is on existing *in and with* the world, which is something quite different from living as independently as possible and turning the world into one’s resource. Biesta writes: “The grown-up way acknowledges ... that the world out there is indeed ‘out there,’ and is neither a world of our own making nor a world that is just at our disposal, that is, a world with which we can do whatever we want or fancy” (p. 53). The rearrangement that is needed, then, is one that shifts our attention from our own desires to the question of what is desirable, which includes what the human and non-human world in and with which we live can sustain. Biesta explains that “grown-up-ness is not a suppression of desires, but a process through which our desires receive a reality check ..., by asking the question [whether] what we desire is desirable for our own lives and the lives we live with others” (p. 58).

We hope it is clear that, when we speak of finding new “pleasures,” we are referring not to a superficial sense of fun, but to a changed conception of the good life, of contentment, a sense of fulfilment. Wanting to exist in the world in a grown-up way is such a conception of the good life, and it is different from indulging every fancy without any consideration for what the world around us needs and can support.

to discover, in giving up some imported food, some packaged thing, that going to the source
at the farmer’s market makes visible and pleasing the relationships to our food. that in
witnessing the germinating seeds, in learning to tend to plants, to harvest, to preserve, a
whole other invisible life appears, full of the intense pleasures of reconnection.

in staying home, grounded, transferring the search for adventure, the story of our own
sophistication in extracting experiences, to a deep knowledge of where we actually live,
committing to place, arriving at a sense that it is the limits that allow us to attend to what is.
in attachment we begin to take care of where we are, rooted down at once into history as
into the living soil.

One of the things we can learn from the pandemic is the importance of making the limits of the world perceptible. Nixon (2011) writes: “Falling bodies, burning towers have a visceral, eye-catching and page-turning power that tales of slow violence, unfolding over years, decades, even centuries, cannot match” (p. 3). How can the losses due to slow violence be raised to the same gut-punching level of impact? We agree with Rebecca Solnit (2021) that “the first task of most human rights and environmental movements is to make the invisible visible and to make what has long been accepted unacceptable.” We can learn from the public pedagogy employed during COVID-19 and, in particular, the combination of data visualization and storytelling, to help people see the limits that the planet is showing us. An intensive period of education as well as media and policy communication that keeps the issue in the headlines can make the limits of the world more visible and audible, and help people perceive the threats posed by climate change as equally intolerable as the threats posed by COVID-19.

Second, responses to the climate crisis can learn from the stories about new ways of living that offer joy and fulfillment, and how these were shown and shared during the pandemic. Stories of ways of living within the limits of the planet can support others in making changes, especially when the stories show how desires were rearranged so that relinquishing is experienced not as sacrifice or loss but as a new source of pleasure and human flourishing.

The Pleasure of Rearranged Desires (Redux)

Latour (2020b) has advocated “using this time of imposed isolation in order to *describe*, initially one by one, then as a group, what we are attached to; what we are ready to give up; the chains we are ready to reconstruct and

those that, in our behaviour, we have decided to interrupt.” In other words, he has advocated using this time to reflect on how our desires have been interrupted, which of our desires we want to rekindle as soon as conditions allow, and which we are ready to relinquish in favour of new ways of living and the new pleasures they bring.

it’s not just the satisfaction of mending what we have, the creativity of using what we’ve got,
it’s not simply the grounding effect of looking to the land to see what materials grow
abundantly here, embedding our projects in place. it’s not just a growing sense of autonomy
in reclaiming skills that went the way of the corporation.

it is in a retelling that we begin in our own minds and multiply in community, that necessarily
grows with each act of sharing tools or skills or seeds or space, the story of being a life-
affirming, regenerative part of living systems.

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