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AUGUST 4, 2023 BY ANNALISA DIAS

Decomposition Instead of Collapse – Dear Theatre, Be Like Soil

Co-signed by Lauren Halvorsen and edited by Regina Victor.

With thanks to Stephanie Ybarra for always daring me to speak my ideas – Annalisa Dias

Editors note: This eco-driven essay urges us toward regenerative strategies and will also be published in Halvorsen’s newsletter: [Nothing for the Group!](#) This brain trust and resource sharing is a natural development as Annalisa dives into the collective wisdom of mycelial networks, and what they can teach us about supporting each other through this abrupt change. – *Regina Victor*

Author’s note: One of the biggest obstacles to systemic change is the unwillingness to move beyond the current paradigm we inhabit. We won’t be able to identify solutions or viability / scalability of those solutions until we move beyond an economic paradigm driven by scarcity. This essay is for those interested in using the imagination to push past the limitations of our current social and economic containers. – *Annalisa Dias*

at the time all we knew was the story had run out. all the stories. of staying young to cheat death. of thinking young people wouldn’t die. of immortality via “making a difference.” of genetic imprint as stability. of stacking money and etching names on buildings. people used to do those things before. not to mention that they would not mention death and would hide the dying away and strive to protect the eyes of the children who already knew everything.

at some point. all the dead being here anyway and all of us here being obviously doomed, we let go of that particular game. and started breathing. and saw our hands.

we let go.

i felt like i could fly.

alexis pauline gumbs. [M archive.](#)

Beginning, middle, _____

There are lists going around.
Every day another closing.
Another staff shattered.
People ask “is anyone keeping track of the losses?”
“Who’s watching?”
“Do you see the magnitude of the disaster?”
An archival impulse: make a list.
Order the chaos.
Name the emergency.

Do you realize we’ve become conservation biologists:
Critically Endangered
Endangered
Vulnerable
Near Threatened
Least Concern

Some are reeling in shock.
Some are wringing their hands.
Others have seen it coming for decades.
Their hearts are still breaking...
(Did they truly understand the scale?)
Rooms full of dedicated leaders say over and over
“rock bottom”
While they compare deficit budgets
And whisper incantations
like “implosion” and
“existential threat.”

Beginning, middle, _____

I need a different metaphor than “rock bottom.”
I’m exhausted by the stories of scarcity, threats, and imminent collapse.
I’m a playwright and dramaturg so what I know is:
We have a narrative problem.

It’s the same narrative problem we have in climate organizing.*

We keep spellcasting about all we're losing
and describing the immensity of the damage,
It becomes too overwhelming to *imagine* building something different.
It becomes impossible to build the political will to act.

I long for a different dramaturgy.

In Western dramaturgies, endings are final.
In a capitalist narrative of constant growth and perpetual “sustainability,”
endings are tragic.
No wonder people are panicking.
No wonder it hurts so much.
We've been telling ourselves that endings = failures.
Institutional and, worse, personal.

What if instead of dramaturgies of collapse,
we looked to the earth and learned from natural processes of *decomposition*?

Decomposition is gruesome

Pieces of an organism get pulled apart.

Decomposition is intimate.

Decomposers digest the dead.

Decomposition creates new worlds.

Nutrients recycle and release back into the ecological system.

A dramaturgy of decomposition
Is a tender invitation beyond loss
Toward re-memembering our interconnected futures.

Can we be like mycelium? Can we be like soil?
What might we re-compose
with the nutrients being released into the system right now?
What if this moment, painful and raw though it be (and grief has its place),
is not just the ending of a world
but the beginning of something new?
What if instead of at “rock bottom,”
we're at the dawn of an arts ecology that's more healthy?

More loving?

More free?

I long for a theater
that turns its gaze downward to the land,
outward to the water,
and upward to the sky.

I long for a theater
that earnestly listens for the lessons the earth has to teach us.
This is how we'll remember
That like mycelia, like the soil, like interconnected forests and seas
We have always belonged to one another.
This is how we'll find unexpected pathways.
This is how we'll reconstitute the world.

*Let's keep our grief in perspective. We're in the midst of an actual global extinction crisis driven by colonial capitalist enclosure of wealth and an ideological worldview that positions whole peoples and geographies as sacrifice zones. Institutions programming fewer shows or shutting down altogether isn't the root problem.

Beginning, middle, _____, and then...

In a recent conversation someone told me, "The field is ablaze. It's up to us to put on our vests and be firefighters." Someone else said, "These institutions want to be told what to do. They're looking for someone to save them."

But we don't need saviors. So many leaders of color have been appointed in the last 5-7 years and expected to be singular saviors of institutions that enclosed wealth for decades. So many more are about to be appointed. This again is a narrative problem: we know what happens to saviors. They are designed to be crucified.

No, we don't need saviors. We need world builders.
And thank goddess our field is rife with them!

I see world builders making bold choices to leave behind buildings.
I see world builders mapping and pooling collective resources.

I see world builders (re)investing in local ecologies.
We need mycelial networks and compost and... time.

Where do you see them?

(What you pay attention to grows.)

People keep talking as though there's a single solution to "the business model."

(As though it was ever singular.)

Like whoever can crack the code first will *win*.

(What game are they playing?)

There won't be a single magic remedy for the whole field.

(Valorizing the monoculture of LORT institutional theaters is what got us here.)

We need to build a solidarity economy of ideas. Not every idea will work for everyone. Not one intervention but many interventions. Not one vision, but many visions.

To change everything, we need everyone.

In the spirit of the interdependence of living systems, I've invited interlocutors to continue worldbuilding alongside me. Their responses will come soon. In the meantime...

Let us revere biodiversity (of form, of aesthetic, of story).

Let us celebrate bioregionalism (think global, act local).

Let us be like nutrient-rich soil (regenerative and moving always toward new life).

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