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Connecting our soul and the natural world: Unleashing the power to transform our relationship with people, profit and planet.

Presentation by

[Professor Emerita Cynthia Mitchell](#)

Regenerative Futures Thought and Practice Leader

Communities in Control Conference
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Video and audio versions of this speech and Prof Mitchell's presentation slides, will be posted at www.communitiesincontrol.com.au

About the presentation

How do we relate to the natural world? Are we really separate from nature? Where are our souls in all this? What drives runaway climate change and terrifying natural disasters is not CO2 by itself ... unwittingly, it's us, hemmed in by an economic system that thrives on disconnection from nature and from each other. It's time to reconnect our souls so we can grow economies that celebrate what we hold dear. What's required is to look deep inside ourselves – perhaps the hardest and most rewarding work of all. Cynthia melds the latest research with ancient First Nations' wisdom to show how a different path is possible.

Introduction from Our Community group managing director Denis Moriarty

It's my pleasure to introduce you to Professor Emerita Cynthia Mitchell.

Cynthia is respected globally as a thought and practice leader who challenges us to rethink how we transform ourselves, our systems, and our institutions towards regenerative futures. Cynthia's story is unusual in academic terms – instead of narrowing, she has steadily expanded her focus, starting with biotechnology and engineering and opening to encompass sustainability, learning and change, economics, systems, and leadership.

Over 20 years, she helped grow the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney from a fledgling into a world-class entity, delivering more than 100 collaborative research projects that enabled her industry and government partners to make practical sustainability improvements.

Along the way, she received many accolades and awards here and abroad, including an honorary doctorate from Sweden and being listed in the Australian Financial Review's 100 Women of Influence in 2015. In 2021, Cynthia started her first business, 'the good ancestor', through which she helps her clients take actions that demonstrate love and care for the generations who will follow us.

We are very proud to have Cynthia as a member of the Community Directors Council, helping guide the work of Our Community and the Institute of Community Directors Australia and as a personal friend of mine – with both of us 30 years ago (that's a lifetime) being Awarded an Ethics Fellowship. And she was always so much smarter than me. Please make her feel welcome.

Professor Emerita Cynthia Mitchell

So, today, I'm kicking off the conference program with a focus on the natural world. Spoiler alert, that's us too. For me, poetry speaks the language of the soul, and so I wanted to share with you, the poem that is the inspiration for everything that I do now. It's called *The Good Ancestor*. It's by Daverick Leggett, and I think it also speaks beautifully to this year's National Reconciliation Week theme, which is about being a voice for generations.

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*Every day I walk the hundred years
to the hill where my great great granddaughter sits.
I carry words of blessing
and reach to touch her back.*

*But feeling me near she turns
sad eyed and heavy with grief
“What was it like?” she asks
“when the great whales swam
when the birds sang you awake
when the rains came soft
and the soil smelt sweet underfoot?”
And the blessings
catch in my throat.*

*On darker days she turns,
her famished face charred and eyes,
sunk in their bony orbits,
burn with curses.
And the blessings froth at my mouth
with the poisonous spume of betrayal.*

*On the darkest of all days
I walk the hundred years
and find no one there.*

*Let this day be the bright day.
Let today be the bright day
I lay my hand upon her back
And, feeling me there,
she turns and blesses me, saying
“Your love was fierce enough,
sweet ancestor,
your love was fierce enough.”*

I want to pay my respects to the Wurundjeri Woivurrung people of the Kulin nation and acknowledge them as the traditional ancestors and custodians for this place. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging, and to thank Tony

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Garvey for his gorgeous and cheeky Welcome to Country yesterday. I'd also like to offer my humble apologies for the atrocities, and the everyday insults that my mob, white fellas, have inflicted upon our First Nation's people for centuries, and that continue to this day, sadly. Voice, treaty, truth, ay?

So, Wunya ngulum, hello and welcome in the language of the Gubbi Gubbi people, which is from South East Queensland, where I'm from.

Let's bring up these three big ideas that I want to leave you with from today. The environment are us. The environment are slightly stuffed, just at the mo. But there's lots of paddles. All we have to do is pick them up and paddle like there's no tomorrow, right? So, let's dive in, shall we?

Take a minute to chat to the person next to you. Maybe check in with them, see how they're feeling. Do they need a hug? Do you need a hug? Do I need a hug? When you're ready, what do you reckon about this? What's the biggest recycling program in the world? You've got about 30 seconds or so. Have a quick chat, and then I'm going to do a voxpop.

[Inaudible group chatter]

Okay, what do we reckon? Okay, down the front here I've got humans. What have I got from up the back corner? Humans? Sorry? Water. Air. Vegetation. Animals. Something from the back corner. Streams. Okay. All great answers. And here's mine, atoms. Atoms. See the atoms in this finger, right, I mean, I know you can't see them, but you know what I mean, right? So, they're not mine, I'm just borrowing them, you know, for what amounts to less than a heartbeat in their journey through the universe.

Every single thing, physical thing, on this amazing planet, is made up of atoms. So, you, this room, your breakfast, every physical thing. And mate, oh gosh, the stories these atoms could tell, about where they've been. Maybe some of the oxygen atoms in here teamed up with hydrogen at some point and flowed down the Amazon. You know? Maybe some of the carbon atoms were once woolly mammoths. Maybe some of my atoms were on that first ship when African people were taken into slavery. It's amazing where these things might have been. And it's kind of a big concept.



The thing is, these atoms, they'll be here long after I'm gone. And there's another confusing angle on this idea of me and separateness, and that's this whole idea of our microbiome. I'm not the only organism here, yeah? There are as many bacteria and fungi on me and in me right now as there are stars in that fabulous galaxy that Missy was talking about yesterday, that she could see from the beach at Broome. And they're responsible for the fact that I'm alive, all those bugs. So, if this finger is not me, and I can't go anywhere without about 30 trillion hangers-on, who am I?

Have you ever been to one of those get-togethers when the invitation is to bring some yummy food from your homelands, and you end up with this fabulous table of all gorgeous goodies? Well, if nature asked us to come along to one of those get-togethers, what is it that humans would show up with? What's the one special thing that we offer the world? I'll give you another minute to chat with your neighbour.

[Inaudible group chatter]

Okay. This is something that we could talk about for the whole day, right? And we're not going to, because we've got too many other fabulous people to listen to. So, couple of responses, what do you reckon? Thought. Yeah, beautiful. Lived experience, thank you. Hope. Gosh, yeah. Sorry? Art. Yeah, I'm going to go with that one, because - I mean, there's so many possible answers, right, and this is not my expert field by any means. But I came across this answer just recently, that I think holds incredible potential for us. It comes from Adam Rutherford. It's in this realm of art, and stories, and dance, and music, and religion. It's about how we accumulate and transmit culture. How we accumulate and transmit culture.

And no group is better at accumulating and transmitting culture than Australia's First Nations peoples, right? They never bought into what Tyson Yunkaporta, in his wonderful book *Sand Talk*, calls the most destructive idea in existence, and that's the idea that I'm greater than you, and that you, and the other-than-human world are somehow less than me. Dr Mary Graham, this wonderful Kombumerri and Wakka Wakka scholar from Queensland, she speaks eloquently about how relationality is absolutely central to Indigenous worldviews. She says the custodial relationship to land is central and foremost. And it's the quality of that stewarding relationship that a person has with

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country, that becomes like a foundation and a yardstick for the quality of the relationships that that person can have with others, with other people. Isn't that just the most amazing idea?

So, there is no us and them when it comes to the world around us. The environment are us. The second big idea for the day, the environment are us, and slightly stuffed, up the proverbial, as it were. There are so many images that we could use to depict the scale and the depth of the stuffed-ness, just at the minute. This one comes from NASA, and it's from when we were in that terrible firestorm time, and it depicts the smoke and ash cloud, the scale of it, from space, coming off the eastern coast. We know an area the size of the United Kingdom burned, 3,000 properties lost, 36 people killed, billions of mammals, hundreds of billions of insects on which we depend died. Then there's the floods. It used to be enough to know a flood by its year. Last year, the Hawkesbury River, to the west of Sydney, flooded four times. So those are kind of local and experiential ways to understand the depth of the hole we're in.

There's other ways. This is a kind of global and analytical tool, a thing called Earth Overshoot Day. The idea is that we can calculate how much Earth can produce and absorb in a year, how much we produce and emit in a year, and when we go past the Earth's capacity, we're eating into its capital. That's called Earth Overshoot Day. Last year - up until 1970, we used to be okay, we could live within the capacity of the Earth. Not anymore. Last year, Earth Overshoot Day, July 28. When do you reckon Australia's was? If that's the global one, when do you reckon Australia's was as a country? March 23. We might be overperforming there, overachieving, just a little bit.

Then there's the scientific way to understand where we're at. Who's heard of the IPCC? This Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Reports come out from them every so often. It's the UN body that's been going for 30 years, whose unenviable task it is to scientifically track our demise. But there's 195 countries' worth of bureaucrats involved negotiating the language with the scientists before the report hits the press. So, the language that comes out is very sanitised, very sanitised. So, we get this kind of thing, which you will have been reading while I've been chatting. "*Climate change is a threat to human wellbeing and planetary health*".



But this year, we got this: “The choices and actions implemented in this decade will have impacts now and for thousands of years”.

So, this is the lowest common denominator language. The most sanitised language on the planet around this. “*The choices and actions implemented in this decade will have impacts now and for thousands of years*”. It’s a tough one to let sink in, hey? And there are amazing things happening, but the truth is, our greenhouse emissions are still going up, and the window is narrowing. So, we have this decade, the 2020s, and there’s every reason not to act, right? Cost of living pressures, once in a generation, struggling to manage the kids, or the ageing parents, or the stresses at work, or all of the above. But somehow it’s come to this. It’s up to each of us to determine the course of history.

Lucky we’ve got lots of paddles, hey? Really, we do. The best paddles are made from the kind of creativity and possibility that comes when you do what our fabulous Future Crunch people were talking about yesterday, and others yesterday as well. To take that positive, that generative kind of stance. Because as Abraham Lincoln famously said, “*The best way to predict the future is to create it*”. Right? Because, after all, it’s our hand on the throttle. Yeah? So, the first part of the answer is that we need to slow down, so we can turn around and paddle in a different direction, towards regenerative futures. I’ll say more about that in a tick. A big part of that different direction is a different economic direction, because our old economic model, neoliberal capitalism, it’s at the core of why we’re here. Changing how money moves is what I mean by follow the money, and there’s some fabulous women out there showing us how to do that.

So, first thing, Bayo Akomolafe, a wonderful African thinker, scholar, writer, poet. This is an old African proverb that he uses. “*The times are urgent; let us slow down*”. So, for 25 years, I’ve been working alongside industry and government, helping them with transformative change. I could never tell ahead of time, whether a particular project was going to grow wings of its own and fulfil all its potential and more, or just end up being able to tick the boxes well enough. So, the last few years, I’ve spent my time trying to answer that question, that’s been my research question. How do we make more projects that grow their own wings. So, ranging across philosophy and learning and



psychology and neurology and systems in leadership, and my own experience of leading 100 or 200 transdisciplinary projects here and around the world.

Where I've landed is this. The extent to which we are able to sit with ourselves, gently, and appreciatively, with our foibles and our fears, along with our strengths and our potentials, well, that's a really strong indicator of how open we'll be to fundamental changes in how we do things around here. When we're threatened, we fall into autopilot and block things. It's biological. So being able to step back from ourselves to notice our reactions to things, well, that gives us space to choose, to respond rather than just to react. In all of our relationships. It's like Aunty Mary Graham's idea, the work we need to do now is not only to heal the rift between us and nature, but also to heal the rifts within ourselves. This transformation dance, it's an inner/outer thing. If we get that right, then we have half a chance, I reckon.

Doing that also helps us question our questions, and that's what's needed for us to head in a different direction. Up until now, our focus has been on slowing down the rate at which we're digging a hole, but we're still digging the hole. What if instead, we started thinking about regenerative ideas. Literally heading in a different direction. Things that are net positive in social and economic and ecological terms from the get-go. Lots of marvellous stuff happening in this space, and I think the WWF program is probably my favourite there.

I just want to take a minute while we're talking about value to put the economy into perspective. You're probably familiar with this logo, but maybe not as a sustainability concept. So, the idea is the environment, those atoms that we were talking about, that's a very real and physical limit for what's possible on this planet, because everything is made of atoms. Us, well, we're a subset of the planet, so we're a smaller circle within those planetary boundaries. The economy? here's a thing, we made it up. We did. So, we can make up another one. And there's so many big ideas now about what other kinds of economies are actually possible and preferable. I mean, there's this slight issue of power, right? But we can handle that. This community can handle that.

One of my favourite models, other economic models, is Kate Raworth's, and it's called Doughnut Economics, and it's not the favourite because it's called Doughnut, honestly, it's not, no. It's one of these cut-through ideas in its elegance and its simplicity. About 15 years ago, a bunch of Earth scientists

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identified the nine fundamental biogeochemical processes that hold the Earth in the place that it's in now. In other words, a nice place for us to live. If we go beyond those limits that they called the planetary boundaries, then we're in deep trouble, basically. There's things like climate change, of course, but also ozone, land use, biodiversity, nitrogen, phosphorous, so forth. They called staying inside those boundaries, "a safe operating space for humanity".

Kate Raworth, who is a marvellous development economist, saw this model and went, 'Oh, yeah, **and** there's a minimum amount of resource use. So that enables every person to live a dignified life'. That's going to change from place to place, right? She called this the social foundation, and in between the social foundation and the planetary boundaries, that's the sweet spot, and it looks like a doughnut, so Doughnut Economics was born. Kate's taken this to the OECD and to Davos and to the UN, and it is building up a head of steam. Of course, when you do a global assessment against an economic framework that actually is built for thriving planet and thriving people, it doesn't look so good. Our current economic model misses that, and that's why we need a new one.

What's powerful about this Doughnut Economics is that not only can you do it globally, you can do it at a country level, and at a city level. Like City of Melbourne, here, has a whole Doughnut Economics project underway, with about 160 local organisations and so forth. Maybe some of you here are already involved in that.

Last bit of inspiration to share with you all is the idea of this wellbeing economies. We started down this path here in Australia, but other countries are much further along, and Wales is leading the way. Wales was at the forefront of the coal trade. Now, they're at the forefront of net zero. Just saying. They were brave enough to have a proper nationwide conversation about "The Wales We Want". What came out of that were these seven goals, now enshrined in legislation. In 2015, the world's first Independent Commissioner for Future Generations was part of that legislation. Their role is something we recognise, keep the bastards honest. No power in that role, but keeping the government honest. Because all public bodies in Wales are now required by law to consider future generations in all decisions that they make.

Female audience member

She was in Australia the other week.

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Cynthia Mitchell

I know. Sophie Howe. Fan girl. Did other people see Sophie Howe? She's just finished her seven-year term as the world's first Independent Commissioner for Future Generations. So many cool stories, right? Voting age of 16. And a mentoring program where younger people are giving wisdom to older people. How cool's that? And a national health strategy focused on preventative measures, even piloting a Universal Basic Income to tackle poverty as the root cause of poor health. Because they're now recognising that housing, employment, environment, education all contribute. What do you know. A fundamentally systemic approach rather than a systematic approach, which is what most of the western world has done for a very long time. And thinking in systems is core to this better future that's ahead of us. So, this whole experiment in Wales, it's the biggest cultural change project ever. But remember what our special sauce is, as humans, our planetary superpower? We accumulate and transmit culture.

So, what would it take for us to launch The Australia We Want? To have our own Future Generations legislation, and commissioner. Imagine what a fully-fledged wellbeing economy could do for our collective future. And at the same time as we slow down and ask those deep questions, and find those new paths, there's so many small, practical things we can do, right? Those atoms, that's about what we consume. Go renewable, go circular, all that stuff. Don't necessarily go vegan, because your local Woolies or Coles might well have those faux meat patties from Finland, that have been refrigerated all the way here. Local's a good option though, always a good option. Make our money count. Starve the industries that we need to transition out of. Move our money and our super to organisations that don't invest in things like fossil fuels. Go Bank Australia, just saying Sorry CommBank.

Mainly though, it's about investing in our people and our culture like never before, so our people get more comfortable with knowing ourselves, and we feel safe to speak up at work with whacky ideas. The second thing is to get better at thinking in systems so we get better at making connections. Seeing how one thing leads to another so we can spot the unintended consequences before they turn up.



So, three big ideas, flexible enough to fit in everyone's suitcase, you can take them home, make them your own. The environment are us. We're one and the same. Slightly stuffed at the mo. An awful lot we can do, both slowly and immediately. As my Gamilaraay collaborator and brother, Phil Duncan often says, *We can be better together*. I'll probably get teary again. Together we can make our love fierce enough, right? I'll make these slides available. There's a list of resources at the back, so you can follow up with them, or follow up with me if you choose. Thank you. And I'll leave you with this beautiful quote from Arundhati Roy. Cheers.

[Applause]

ENDS

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