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It's Time to Build Resilient Communities

Margaret Killjoy

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The month that I wrote this, it was potentially the hottest month in human history. By the time you read this, you will have seen hotter. The month that I wrote this, there were fires and floods, there was mass suicides by whales. The month that I wrote this, asphalt melted and power grids buckled, crops died and covid surged. The month I wrote this, the antarctic winter didn't see the ice return for the first time in recorded history. Yet the month I wrote this was likely safer and more stable than the month you're reading it.

The month that I wrote this, someone started their first foray into gardening, a bit late into the season but not too late to learn. The month that I wrote this, new community food banks were stocked with the early harvest from community gardens. The month that I wrote this, someone met their neighbors, someone stopped waiting to tell their partner that they love them, someone took care of the elderly, someone rerouted medicine production to a new facility in response to natural disaster. The month that I wrote this, I'm sure that someone, somewhere, started planning a direct action against those who profit off of the destruction of our

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climate. Maybe that action will be a flash in the pan, maybe it will be the spark that changes everything.

The month that I wrote this, I hope, an awful lot of people woke up to the facts that our climate is getting worse, our existing systems are showing their cracks, and that no one from the top is coming to save us – that those of us at the bottom are going to, as always, need to build the solutions ourselves.

I don't have all of the solutions. I only have one to propose, which will only ever be a part of the patchwork of solutions that we might use.

What I have to offer is that it is time for us to make our decisions about what to do with our lives based on the extreme nature of the risks we face. It's time to make decisions that prioritize facing our problems collectively. It is time to build resilient communities.

As always, the secret is to really begin. You make a plan, you envision the steps necessary to complete the plan, and you begin to enact the plan. Along the way, you make modifications to your plan. It does not matter if the plan is perfect. Trying to make the plan perfect is just an elaborate form of self-sabotage to keep you from ever starting anything.

A strategy that is being tried is always more likely to succeed than a strategy that stays hypothetical.

When I was 21, I lived in a squatted tenement building in the South Bronx. An older squatter had – probably to his later regret – let dozens of us young anarchists move in to help organize a protest in the city. The five-story building was always falling apart. One day, one of us younger folks noticed one of the steps was broken, so she decided to be helpful and made a sign: “step is broken.” Later that day, the older squatter fixed the step, all the while mumbling “these fucking anarchists. You don't put a sign on it. You do the fucking thing.”

There's more to cultivating community than that, and I'm not an expert. I'm just someone who talks to experts. Conflict resolution and mediation skills are valuable. Direct communication matters. All solid relationships are built on a foundation of honesty.

Most people want to be alive and eat food every day and feel useful and have adequate health care and be some degree of happy, so no matter what your interest-based community is built on, resiliency can be part of it.

In times of crisis, like now, people are looking for answers. Some people offer very simple and horrendous answers, like “it's the immigrants' fault,” or “let's all pull together behind a strong man, from the Right or the Left, and let daddy save us.” We can't let those be the only answers proposed. We have to speak up and offer tools for collectively discovering our own answers.

It's time to stop waiting. It's time to start the hard conversations, to start the hard work. We owe it to ourselves and we owe it to each other. A storm is coming, but this is no time to panic. It's no time to ignore the clouds on the horizon and the ever-closer rolling thunder. It's time to get to work.

as a community – that is, help people figure out what they can do, what work they can accomplish that plays to their strengths, while also making sure that the community itself is attempting to leave the world better than they found it.

To build interest-based communities, look to see if one already exists and join it. If it doesn't, start it. Throw shows, or host a book club, or potlucks, or movie nights, or model train exhibitions if you're into model trains or whatever. Open an infoshop – or if you're feeling ambitious (and this isn't time for half-measures) an entire community center that hosts multiple affiliated projects. Never engage cynically with community – don't join the model train club to convert them to your politics if you don't actually care about model trains.

Geographic communities used to be more common than they are, though there are still places where people know their neighbors. Community is strongest when it focuses on what unites people, and with no specific shared interests, cultivating geographic community can be hard. Particularly for people who are not always going to be accepted by most of their neighbors – where I live in rural Appalachia, there are not a lot of out LGBT people, for example. That doesn't mean there aren't people nearby with whom I have enough common cause to build community, it just means that I have to be more careful as I do it.

To build geographic community, talk to people. Introduce yourself. Check in with one another during extreme weather events or about local news – the shared interest you have with neighbors is your apartment building, cul-de-sac, or gravel road. Offer to help where you can, with whatever skills you have available. Bring your neighbors cookies, or beer, or whatever is appropriate. Of course, be careful not to overstep your bounds, but fostering relationships, whether close or not, with your immediate neighbors is useful. Even if all you learn is which neighbors can be trusted and which can't, it's worth finding out.

We had all sorts of excuses. Not the least of which being a distinct lack of masonry skills. But they were excuses – we could have taught ourselves, or asked him to show us. His critique of us became our new motto: “do the fucking thing.”

I don't know the right way to prepare. I don't even know the right way to convince people that they ought to prepare. I do know the wrong way to prepare, which is not trying.

So here's a guess about what to do:

It's time for friends to get together and soberly look at the problems facing this world. To look at how we can act with agency to fight the worst excesses of climate change and how we can act with agency to weather the impacts that are already here and are coming.

If you have access to any kind of social center (or a living room, or Zoom, whatever), get people together to have structured conversations about what can go wrong and how to deal with it. To figure out who in the community has skills that they are willing to teach – or if the community is able to bring in outsiders to teach the skills people want. Figure out what kind of collective infrastructure can be built.

Ask each other questions like:

- **What disasters is your area prone to, currently or with climate projections?** How can your community respond most effectively to those disasters? Is there a plan for people to meet up and discuss next steps in case of disaster? Can that plan be written down and available to everyone?
- **How can water be stored, treated, and distributed?** Can rainwater be caught? Can plastic containers be washed and treated water stored in them for later distribution? How can the existing infrastructure be made more resilient?
- **How can both individuals and the community find something close to food sovereignty or at least keep**

enough food stored to make it through disruptions in the supply chain? Can dried foods be stored in a location accessible to everyone in the community, or can food be processed (canned, dehydrated, salted, pickled, freeze-dried) and distributed so that people have their own stockpiles at home?

- **How can people communicate if existing infrastructure becomes inaccessible?** Does anyone have an amateur radio license? Can people learn to use various radios? Can a mesh network be built to provide a small-scale internet for a community? Do neighbors have loud whistles to signal for help and can you develop a code for how to communicate in that way?
- **What medical skills are available or can be gained?** Can the community center be used as a makeshift trauma center in case of a disaster? Is someone available to teach the basics of trauma first aid, such as a stop-the-bleed class? Can first aid kits be assembled and distributed at workshops that teach participants how to use the kit's contents?
- **Who has specific needs, and how can the community address them?** Do spaces need more physical accessibility, or are there certain individuals more likely to need rescue or medical attention? How will you store that information and make it available to everyone?
- **What can you do to foster community?** Can you have community meals weekly so that people come together and eat? Can you throw shows, or hold public workshops? Who is competent at conflict resolution and mediation? Are more people interested in learning those skills?
- **How will your community network with other communities?** Are there multiple organizations or groups that can

businesses hardest hit by a respiratory pandemic. While cafes and diners around the country closed their doors for good, we didn't see a single one of our clients go out of business from 2020–2021. Why? It's not because their customers were more loyal or more foolhardy. The collective workplaces survived because horizontal decisionmaking is not only more just, it is also more responsive to change. Since the workers themselves were the owners, they were able to decide amongst themselves how to scale back their operations and how to pivot (a piece of business jargon, "pivot," but still important) in the face of diminished business.

Resilient communities are by necessity ones in which power is dispersed. Disaster destroys infrastructure – that's kind of its thing – and if that infrastructure isn't built to reroute around damage, then it will not function.

Not everyone has much in the way of community. This alienation from one another is baked into capitalism and needs to be overcome – not only has capitalism created climate change, it's also ordered society in such a way that confronting or surviving climate change is particularly complicated.

Community is built around relationships between people. Community is just the complex interwoven web of relationships in a given group. Some communities are built around shared interests – religious, ideological, or subcultural – and other communities are built around geographic proximity. Both are good. Both are worth developing. Both will help more people survive adversity.

Communities are like gardens – they happen on their own, as seeds find soil, as rain and sun find plants, but they can thrive through planning and cultivation.

Interest-based communities usually revolve around some sort of social center, whether a religious building or an infoshop or a venue. Some advice for cultivating this kind of community: **prioritize inclusion over exclusion. Try not to be a gatekeeper, but instead an usher, helping new people find their role within the community.** Foster a sense of agency, both individually and

but our existing system tells us two more lies we have to come to terms with: it tells us that it is our individual responsibility to survive climate change and it tells us it is up to our existing leaders and economic system to solve these problems.

Basically, it says: “Look, you drove a pickup truck instead of an electric car, so now everyone is going to die, but we’ve got it handled and are working on solutions, and it’s up to you to make sure that you’re prepared to survive and crises that crop up before we get this whole thing sorted. Keep calm and carry on.”

Everything the system is telling us, then, is a lie.

Well, keeping calm is valuable. But not if it means keeping our heads in the sand.

“Community resilience” is something of a jargon phrase that’s bandied about a lot by people who mean very different things by it, but the core idea of a resilient community is a community of people who are able to collectively face and withstand adversity. It is essentially the non-individualistic counter to the nonsensical ideas that are put forward by so many doomsday preppers.

Community resilience is, in the end, better for the individuals involved. It is healthier to be part of a healthy ecosystem of people than it is to fend for oneself or only one’s own family. Whether your motives are community-minded or selfish, community resilience is a better plan than raw individualism.

Resilient communities are by necessity not structured from the top down but from the bottom up. Again and again, people are learning that decentralized and distributed decisionmaking is more efficient and more resilient.

During most of the first few years of the recent pandemic, I worked for an organization that financially and organizationally sponsored worker cooperatives. Many of our clients were restaurants and other public-facing businesses – exactly the kinds of

federate together to create a larger, bottom-up structure to coordinate needs and plans?

- **How will your community protect those who are acting to defend the climate?** Most of what people can do to build resilient communities is lawful and not in-and-of-itself dangerous, but many of the ways that people choose to confront climate change are not. How can you develop a security culture in which the only people who learn about specific direct actions are those performing those direct actions?
- **How will your community defend itself?** Many communities – particularly LGBTQ+ communities, communities of color, and followers of minority religions – are currently facing direct and violent threats. Certainly, it is better to build alliances than walls and it’s best to avoid the tendency to hoard and defend resources against all outsiders. But there are people who are not looking to work across cultural lines and are instead looking for ways to oppress people. Can you develop community defense skills and make common cause with other groups for mutual protection?

This work is serious and it is life-saving. That doesn’t mean it can’t be joyful. Coming together to learn together – or even individually nerding out and researching – is enjoyable. **It is agency, not hope, that is the antidote to despair.** Acting with agency during times of crisis is one of the primary ways to reduce PTSD. Preparing for crisis can, if done right, actually reduce the anxiety of that crisis.

More so, resiliency is not a binary thing. A community isn’t either resilient or doomed. It’s a process. The goal of resiliency provides a direction to walk rather than a destination.

I don't see top-down solutions to climate change coming, but I do see disaster coming. It's something we can face, when we work together. It also doesn't mean that it needs to be small scale.

Bottom-up structures often start small-scale but they don't have to stay that way. The skills we learn – community building, conflict resolution, networking – leave us in a position to grow. People often despair at how we might run the large-scale infrastructure that currently meets our needs without the top-down structures that run it. I don't despair about that. I believe in us. Not that we can just magically wake up and do it – organizing complex systems is a specialized skill, after all – but that we can learn how. That there already *are* people who know how to run complex systems, and that we can learn from them, and include them in our communities and conversations.

A self-defense class can become a community gym. A community gym can become one part of a social center. A social center can become a node in a network to distribute goods where they need to go and stage disaster relief. A network can become a mutual aid society. A mutual aid society can become, well, a society. A resilient society.

This isn't to suggest that we ignore existing infrastructure and build all our new systems from scratch. Rather, it is to suggest that we build redundancy into and alternatives to existing infrastructure, and that we ideally build towards a better society to control that infrastructure. Conversations about rainwater harvesting need not conflict with conversations about how to harden municipal water supplies.

Our individualized, atomized society does not position many of us well to handle catastrophe, because it makes us think we have to face catastrophe alone. I've lost count of the number of people who don't prioritize preparedness because they presume themselves ill-

equipped to do so – too poor to build a bunker; not enough space to store six months of food; too reliant on medication and other supply-chain-complex support to imagine surviving without society; too socially isolated to maintain a consistent friend group, let alone manage a complex community focused on survival. Most of us fall into one of these categories or another. It is only the atomization of modern society that has us believing we will need to do these tasks on our own (even the task of building community).

During World War II, the people of London sheltered in the Underground, the subway tunnels beneath the city, during air raids launched by the Nazis from occupied France. This method of sheltering didn't start as a governmental program. It started because some leftists decided they didn't want to die and they didn't want to wait for anyone to save them. A socialist Spanish Civil War volunteer named JBS Haldane (most famous as the inventor of the “primordial soup” theory of the origin of life on earth) studied and presented information about how bombs work and advocated for sheltering deep underground. Phil Piratin, a Jewish communist who had previously been part of the grassroots campaign that stopped English fascist organizing at the famous Battle of Cable Street, was part of a group of people that broke into the basement of a hotel to survive the bombing and later pressured the city into opening the tunnels.

Even solutions to problems that rely on existing social infrastructure are only put into place when people, from the bottom up, force the issue. Nothing seems possible until people make it possible by means of direct action – then it seems inevitable.

Our existing system has a tendency to blame climate change on individuals without much power – you used incandescent light bulbs instead of LEDs, so it is your fault the waters are rising. We've caught on to that particular bit of misdirection – there *are* individuals who can be blamed for climate change, but they are the heads of the institutions such as major corporations and governments that are profiting from the warming earth. We've caught on to that lie,