



Saving and Savoring the World in a Summer of Discontent

- an opinion(ated) piece by Michael Gagné, ELP program manager

"I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day." - E.B. White

Wouldn't it be great if all of our summers could be carefree, full of time for rest and relaxation and whatever that entails for each of us - sunny days at the shore, hiking in the hills, reading a novel by a lake, having adventures with old friends, listening to live music under the stars? [As I re-read this paragraph, the song ["my favorite things"](#) dances through my brain.]

I hope you're getting a lot of that joy and restoration. At the same time, I imagine you're also very aware of what a hot summer this is - [in the literal sense](#) and also in the political sense. As I was putting together this newsletter, it did not feel right to simply send an update about how things are going with ELP. Yes, of course we want to share some news about current cohorts, our excitement about recent and upcoming senior fellow events, and invite you to help build the next classes of ELP Fellows.

And this newsletter contains all of that.

But it's also important for us - as environmental leaders - to openly acknowledge that we are living in turbulent times, confronting crises that we can't ignore. These crises are, after all, the context and even the focus for our work and lives. In this short "opinion" piece, I won't solve any of these major issues but I'll name some of them, ask you some questions about them, and lift up a few of the ways that the ELP community is working with them. This summer, it feels important to name some of the following realities:

- We are in a presidential election year in the US - duh. Yes, all such years are historic but it might also be true that there has not been a time in the last couple of decades:
 - a) in which the two major parties are as far apart on policy, narrative, vision
 - b) in which there is such a deep struggle over the *internal* identity/policies of these parties - as exemplified by the primary season
 - c) in which fundamental questions are being asked *in the mainstream* about equality, the US role in the world, climate and our duties to future generations, etc.

As an ELP staffer, I don't harbor any illusion that all Senior Fellows will have the same ideology or engagement with the electoral realm. At the same time, I think it is important to point out that the US seems in an extreme state of "identity crisis." The conversations that happen and the policies advanced during this crisis will make a big difference over the next few years. Whatever your politics, this is a ripe time for engagement.

- Social movements are on the rise. Over the past few 5 years, we have seen both major political parties and candidates shift pretty dramatically in response to grassroots pressure. Disruptive ("outside game") actions and campaigns have shifted narratives and, ultimately, the balance of power in a political system largely [dominated by big money, corporations, and their lobbyists \(see the "Princeton Oligarchy Study" for evidence\)](#). On the "right", we've seen the Republican party seriously shifted by the grassroots insurgency from the Tea Party. On the other end of the spectrum, some progressive positions and policies have been moved into mainstream conversation by the Bernie Sanders campaign and other grassroots campaigns and movements like Occupy, the movement to defeat the KXL pipeline, the immigrants rights movement and, of course, Black Lives Matter.
- The Black Lives Matter movement is growing. BLM is currently seizing headlines, interfering with "business as usual", and prompting changes in the national conversation around race, justice, policing, structural violence and more. There is resistance or backlash to this movement, of course (there is in every movement) - intensified after a slew of recent killings of police officers that many conservative and mainstream commentators are connected to BLM.

What Americans thought of the Civil Rights movement in 1964...

63%

said they "push too fast."

58%

said most were violent.

58%

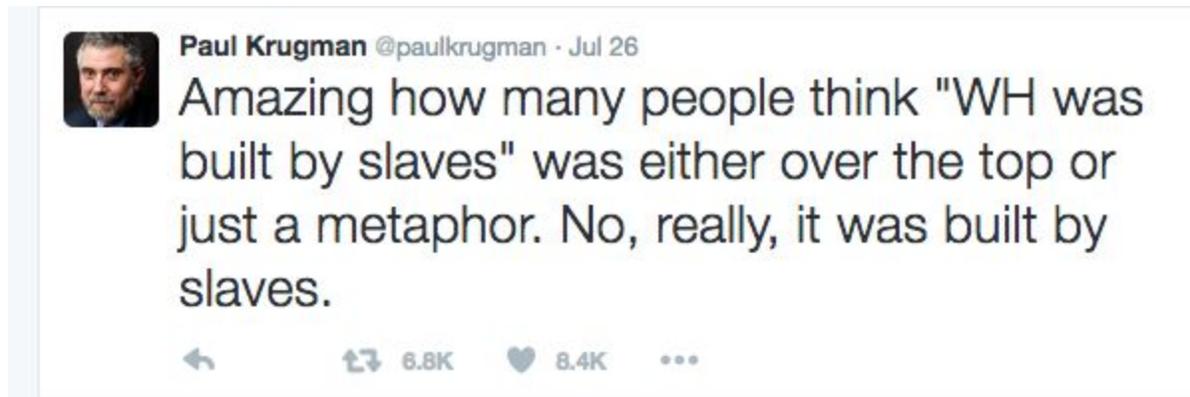
said they hurt their own cause.

SOURCE: ELECTIONSTUDIES.ORG



This movement is, however, already influencing policy and practice (like body cameras on police) and affecting what is discussed at the national level. A couple of nights ago at the DNC, for instance, Michelle Obama spoke about raising her children in the White House - an edifice built by slave labor. Would this have been mentioned a few years

ago? We can't be sure, of course - though I suspect that the current cultural climate allows for more "inconvenient truths" to be spoken. [It's amazing to me that "Who built the White House?" became a top google search term within hours. Is that because people hoped that the FLOTUS was wrong?!].

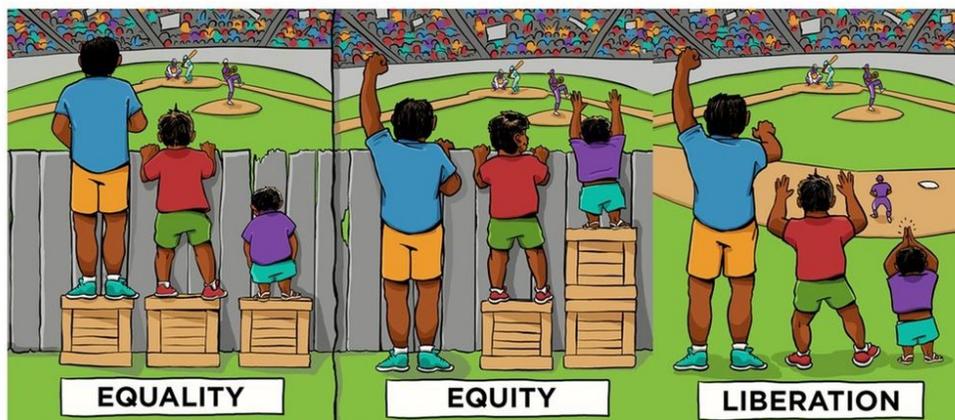


- At the same time, mainstream discussions of diversity and inclusion seem to be deepening in many organizations. From what I can tell, more of these discussions are centering an equity frame in which micro-aggressions cannot be discussed without also exploring structural violence, structural racism, etc.



Don't just tell a different version of the same story.

Change The Story!



Some environmental organizations are reflecting this deepened discussion - in statements at least (Greenpeace [here](#). Sierra Club [here](#). Article from Grist about why environmentalists should support BLM protests [here](#).) And [here's another article that was shared this week](#) on

the ELP discuss list by a Senior Fellow; it's a good one and contains one of the helpful "here's what you can do" listicles.

- Climate change and corporate malfeasance (such a lovely word!): Though there's so much that can be said about climate change - I'll simply mention a few things that stand out from the last year. 1. Ambitious international targets were agreed on in Paris - but without the kind of binding resolutions and plan that will allow us to achieve them 2. [The natural world continues to reflect](#) the fact - as Bill McKibben reminds us - that physics and chemistry are not subject to negotiations. 3. Fossil fuel companies - that have so strongly resisted discussion of and action on climate change - are [starting to become persona non grata](#) - even in the mainstream (though not yet for most politicians). Several U.S. states have now indicted Exxon for lying about and hiding climate science for decades - what some are calling "the greatest corporate crime in history." One can hope that there will be expanded opportunity for moving beyond "business as usual" in the next couple of years - when there are such strong examples around of how broken business as usual is.
- It's exciting to me that the consensus (in policy circles) around neoliberalism (what George Monbiot called "[the ideology at the root of our problems](#)") is breaking down. Spaces for alternative vision seem to be growing. A couple of years ago, it would have been tough to imagine The Atlantic publishing [this article](#) (a review of the book "[Viking Economics](#)" by my mentor, George Lakey) about "Making America More Like Scandinavia."

Given some of this context, what is to be done - or done differently?

I don't have the answers; like you, I might have pieces of the answers. I do think it's important to be asking bolder questions - and to ask them in community. And we'd love to hear some of the answers - or some thoughts, at least - from you! [Feel free to answer some or all of these by email or [in this survey](#) - which you can fill out anonymously, if you like.]

- How are you engaging with this presidential election cycle? Did you work on or volunteer in the primaries? Did you donate? Where have you been having conversations - in person or digital? Will you be working on or volunteering for before or during November? Why? How do you think the outcome of the election could most seriously impact your life and work? What do you think is the relationship between electoral politics and social movements?
- Do you consider yourself a part of a movement - or of several movements? In each of these, do you consider yourself an activist, a passive ally, a neutral ally? Are there movements to which you find yourself in opposition? What do you think is the relationship between environmental movement(s) and sectors?

- What is your take on the Black Lives Matter movement? Where are you getting most of your news about it? Have you felt engaged? Have you had a conversation, participated in an action? What do you think it is doing well if anything? Are you feeling more called to “show up for racial justice”?
- What gives you the most hope with regard to stopping/preventing runaway climate change? What terrifies you? Had you heard about the Exxon story? What should be done? What is an appropriate role for corporations in setting policy? What do you think should be done to encourage that role?
- What is your vision? Some have said that the dominant ideology in the US is “T.I.N.A” or “there is no alternative” the neoliberal economic model, growth economics, imperialism, etc. Do you believe that - or that “another world is possible”? If the latter, what are some words or phrases you use for the alternative vision?

My sense is that many of us are having conversations about the issues/realities name above. We’re having them with each other, with our families and communities. And many of us are trying to go further - to lean into bolder steps that go beyond the personal and professional and take us into more “political” spaces. [As above, I’m using “political” in a way that encompasses both electoral politics and advocacy (what some call “inside game” politics) as well as grassroots campaigns and movements (or “outside game”).]

Even though I’m not officially speaking for ELP in this piece, **I want to lift up some of the forward momentum I see within our community:**

- Race, Equity, & the Environmental Movement Senior Fellow Retreat! There’s a lot of interest in this gathering. It will take place in November (10-13) at the amazing Watershed Center and will be an opportunity for those with a passion for racial justice to do some deep work together.
- [RAY Marine Conservation Fellowship Program](#). If you haven’t already heard about this ELP “special program”, I encourage you to check it out. It’s off to a great start, looks like it will grow over the next several years, and is being overseen by the amazing Lili Allala, ELP’s Program Manager of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives.
- Study groups: I’m excited that more of our cohorts are starting books clubs and study groups and that some of these are centered on books like “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.” Some Fellows then wonder “okay, now what do I do?” I’ve been enjoying recommending this short manual (written by my friend, Daniel Hunter with Michelle Alexander’s strong support): <http://www.newjimcroworganizing.org/>
- Seizing “teachable moments” in our retreats. One of the things I love within ELP is the opportunity to deepen our work by embracing the learning and empowerment opportunities presented by the world. Last year, we were able to work with a cohort not long after things heated up in Ferguson, MO. The energy and feelings about Ferguson

were palpable in the room and so we planned two additional conversations in our open evenings. The first conversation was primarily a space to process emotion; on the second night, we explored strategy and tools that movements can use to win change. A different kind of opportunity emerged this year when one of our cohorts met at Pendle Hill while a conference on racial justice was taking place. Most of the class crossed the campus to hear a very powerful lecture on "[Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome](#)" by the amazing [Joy DeGruy](#) and spent hours afterward debriefing.

- And, finally, I am excited to see some ELP fellows showing up in the streets - not only at the People's Climate March but at things like [Democracy Spring](#) or actions organized by [SURJ \(Showing Up for Racial Justice\)](#) chapters. As a big believer in experiential learning, I love seeing friends and colleagues taking steps outside their/our comfort zones.

There are many other examples I could lift up, of course, but I want to give you the opportunity to name some of 'em. I look forward to being in touch with you around these issues, to hearing your responses and questions. Even more, I look forward to increasing our ability to collaborate (or "build power" in movement speak) over the long haul.

Wishing us all a "freedom summer",

Michael