

The Soil Series: Grassroots for the Climate Emergency
Part 3: Connection Through Stories
Speakers: Katherine Oaks & Maddie Kempner
with offerings from Cheryl Herrick & Sha'an Mouliert
March 20, 2019

Contents

- Living Notes FROM THE WALL: Actions; People; and information to connect with (from this Series session and links to past sessions)
- Events (upcoming, collected from all Series so far)
- Group Discussion - *statements and questions from this Series session*
- Presentation notes

Soil Series Hosts

- [Building A Local Economy \(BALE\)](#) - South Royalton, VT. BALE is a community resource center for local economy initiatives in the White River Valley of Vermont, intentionally multi-issue in focused and multi-dimensional in their programmatic work. Check out the [documentary film](#) Dancing With the Cannibal Giant: Five New Stories for the Great Transition.
- [Vermont Healthy Soils Coalition](#) - To join the Vermont Healthy Soils Coalition Email Listserv, fill out this [quick survey](#). Then, follow the instructions in the email confirmations that you'll receive to join the listserv. Join the [VHSC Facebook group](#).

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Living Notes FROM THE WALL

This is not complete list of resources by any means The lists below were compiled from the collective voices throughout the event. All this in just 2 hours!

ACTIONS (*people are already doing these things in our region*)

- Stop schools for a year to learn about soil
- plant trees to lower crime
- Remove NIMBY from vocabulary
- Remove “ugly” from renewables
- Help develop Randolph Community Orchard
- Contact Katherine Oaks to share your story in an interview

EVENTS

PAST SOIL SERIES EVENTS

Part 1 Ground to Body Soil Health and Human Health: [VIDEO](#), [NOTES/RESOURCES](#)

Part 2 Shielding Soil with Plants & Animals (VIDEO *coming soon*) [NOTES/RESOURCES](#)

Part 3 Connection Through Stories (VIDEO *coming soon*) Notes are below.

UPCOMING SOIL SERIES EVENTS

[The Soil Series: Grassroots for the Climate Emergency](#)

March 27 Part 4 Building the Soil From the Ground Up

April 10 Part 5 Social Mycelium: the Fiber of Community Resilience

April 24 Part 6 A Soil Sponge to Cool the Planet

May 8 Session 7 - Next Steps: Growing Grassroots Agency & Action for the Climate Emergency

UPCOMING EVENTS

March 27: Food Connects Spring Garden Planning

Workshops for Schools, Bellows Falls and Brattleboro

March 28 Our Four-Town Future, 6-8:30 PM at Sharon Elementary School in Sharon

March 30 Cultivating Farm to Early Childhood Workshop, Morrisville

March 30 at 6 to 8 pm - Vermont Law School/BALE - Meet Your Farmer/ Feed Your Farmer

March 30 - Faces of Dairy Conversations with Vermont Farmers - 11 to 2 @ the Dairy Center in Enosburg Falls - Ruralvermont.org for details

April 2-4 2019 New England Farm to Institution Summit

April 3 - at BALE 8pm Sound BATH by Relax with Tones

April 4th Lunch Talks on Racial Equity in the Food System @ 12:45 at Vermont Law School in Hoff Lounge

April 4 Get Up and Grow: Youth Gardening Symposium

April 6 & 7 Wild Roots Farm, Spring Homestead Weekend: Scion Swap, Dutch Oven Potluck, and Homesteading Demos

April 5 - 9 350 VT Climate Walk: A 5 day, 53 mile walk from Middlebury to Montpelier.
<https://350vermont.org/nextsteps/>

March/April Meetup series for new farmers: Vital Communities is organizing a short meet-up series for new farmers that have been in production for three years or less in the White River valley. The group will be meeting 3-4 weeknight evenings in Bethel between March and early April. The meet-ups are primarily geared towards building community between new farmers, though each will also feature a brief dinner table presentation from a local agricultural expert. Email Lauren@vitalcommunities.org to get plugged in.

April 11 [Vermont Organics Recycling Summit](#) (VORS). Vermont Technical College, Randolph VT

April 11 Lunch Talks on Racial Equity in the Food System @ 12:45 at Vermont Law School in Hoff Lounge

April 14 [VHSC Common Ground for Climate Action](#), Brattleboro

April 14 [MycoRemediating a Vermont Brook](#) Poultney VT Vermont Myconode

April 14 Family Cow Class - 12:30 to 5 pm @ [Earthwise Farm & Forest](#)

April 16 Bow Thayer's first ever solo show of his paintings runs through April 16 at the White River Gallery at BALE in South Royalton.

April 16 [Emerald Ash Borer training](#) Hartland - VT Urban & Community Forestry Program

April 18 Lunch Talks on Racial Equity in the Food System @ 12:45 at Vermont Law School in Yates with Karen Spiller of Food Solutions New England

April 23 Post Oil Solutions [Climate Café](#) usually meets on the 4th Tuesday of each month 6:00 PM, at Brooks Memorial Library, Brattleboro. "Our House is on Fire" Community Conversations

April 25 [Spoiled to SOIL](#): Backyard Composting with Cat Buxton 6:30 - 8:00 PM Ascutney

April 27 Vermont Community Garden Network's Day in the Dirt

May 2 [Spoiled to SOIL](#): Backyard Composting with Cat Buxton 6:30 - 8:00 PM Cavendish

May 5 Management - Intensive Grazing Class - 10 to 4 @ [Earthwise](#)

May 8 Soil Series - Next Steps: Growing Grassroots Agency & Action for the Climate Emergency
6 - 9 PM Bethany Church, Randolph

May 9 [Spoiled to SOIL](#): Backyard Composting with Cat Buxton 6:30 - 8:00 PM Bridgewater Corners

May 16 Spoiled to SOIL: Backyard Composting with Cat Buxton 6:30 - 8:00 PM West Fairlee

May 23 Spoiled to SOIL: Backyard Composting with Cat Buxton 6:30 - 8:00 PM Chester

May 28 Post Oil Solutions [Climate Café](#) usually meets on the 4th Tuesday of each month 6:00 PM, at Brooks Memorial Library, Brattleboro. “Our House is on Fire” Community Conversations.

May 30 Spoiled to SOIL: Backyard Composting with Cat Buxton 6:30 - 8:00 PM North Pomfret

June 7 - 8 [Resilient Vermont Conference](#) Norwich University, Northfield VT

June 13 Spoiled to SOIL: Backyard Composting with Cat Buxton 6:30 - 8:00 PM Grafton, VT

June 20 Spoiled to SOIL: Backyard Composting with Cat Buxton 6:30 - 8:00 PM *White River Junction*

June 25-27 Vermont FEED's Northeast Farm to School Institute

CONNECTIONS *(from this session)*

- [Real Organic Project](#)
- Edible School Yard at Thetford Elementary - Cat Buxton; The Food Loop
- [Alternative Energy Resources Organization](#) in Montana
- [Northern Plains Resource Council](#)
- [Vital Communities Valley Food and Farm](#)
- [Valhalla Movement](#) out of Montreal- Environmental storytellers - make it cool
- [The Wicked Collective](#) - Bring the idea of art to tell stories in a way that helps the world
- [Billings Farm](#) - Woodstock
- [Peace and Justice Center](#)
- [Exit 4 Group](#)
- [Soil4Climate](#)

INFORMATION *(from this session)*

- Hugelkultur

We've moved these two important sections to separate pages.

- 1) [PEOPLE](#) *(alphabetical) (from ALL Soil Series sessions so far)*
- 2) [GROUPS/INITIATIVES](#) *(from all Soil Series so far, broken down into lists of Local and not-so-local, with links)*

Group Discussion

Note: these discussion rounds will directly inform the May 8 event.

Pose a question that won't be answered; State a comment or how you're feeling; Question(s) you're left with.

Below are your questions and statements as best as we could capture them

Questions:

- How to incorporate storytelling into education and summer camps?
- Are these conversations happening fast enough with enough people to really make a change?
- How can we empower folks with less means to be able to participate to create the change they want to see in the world?
- Healthy Soils Law Project - Community Engagement Piece - how to identify strong feedback loops and policies?

Statements:

- Excited that this event is in Randolph
- Vermont Healthy Soil Coalition - these are the people that I need to be with
- Confidence in who I am when the spring comes and I can get my hands in the soil
- City living doesn't work for me, came to Vermont
- Wish that the school's in the state would pause and let kids learn about soil and that the earth is alive because there's so much we can do loving the land and receiving the gifts of the land
- Need to give young people the chance to get in the sunshine and in the dirt, then what kind of adults are we?
- Vermont Law School student - California agriculture background
- Stories are genetically implanted; stories have a beginning, middle and end, as we all do; stories are a way to impart values in a culture
- Effort to grow more and more of my own food, build a place that is resilient and friendly to plants and animals and people
- Story about trees: Baltimore, MD - very large city, former home, lots of poverty, there are areas where you can walk for blocks without plants of any kind - someone had an idea to plant trees along the sidewalks and the crime rate fell in these neighborhoods
- Plants do much more for us than just things that we can list, especially trees
- Different kind of agriculture in Central Ohio - Row crops, loving Vermont for it's agricultural practices, CSAs
- Community Resilience Organization of Hartford
- Energy Institute at VLS, impact of sustainable energy projects to work with farmers and agriculture
- Grow Food Northampton - community building - members organized and raised money to buy land for community based agriculture
- NIMBY - Not In My Back Yard - derogatory word for people who want to participate in the public process; we use this story to ignore real concerns

- Renewable energy is ugly or has an impact on aesthetics or tourism - this is just a story
- Environmental educator working with kids outside of school
- Cat's passion is impressive (VHSC and BALE); this is reenergizing
- Exciting to be in this space where we can learn about a new topic - like Soil
- Intersectionality of food justice and environmental justice
- Grandfather was most proud of a granddaughter for working on a farm over a summer and getting her hands dirty
- Agricultural background from growing up on a farm
- Homeowners using poison vs farmers polluting Lake Champlain - 24D
- Experience with water bodies not being right on the map; the map is just a man-made thing
- Efforts to become a better soil storyteller
- Implement regenerative techniques to meet the needs of commercial agriculture in the midwest
- Petroleum refugee - having to give up so much; climate refugees to follow
- This program tonight ties a lot of things together - messaging and storytelling for environmental activism
- Get to the true message of the story, don't get lost along the way
- Couldn't live in a state any longer that wasn't taking care of the land
- Soil4Climate - get involved! (See the poem, 'Ode to Dirt' by Sharon Olds, pasted at the bottom of these notes)
- Drawn to farmers dinner with BALE
- Feel most alive when in the dirt and out in the woods
- I am captivated by what the dirt has to offer; what's involved
- Picking up the ability to listen to people who are thinking differently from me - before policy is made
- Rising of the moon this evening
- Newness - seeing the world through the newness of a child's beginner's mind
- Playing with seeds with children; picking up an open pinecone and adding it to a collection
- Newness of spring supermoon rising- reminding us that we are blessed with the coming of another spring
- Play at farming
- Depth of storytelling and communication - experiences of a bartender from around the US; being able to find commonality in the depths of our experiences
- Your communication is planted seeds in others, impacting the people who hear you
- Fighting coal strip mining in Montana in 1970s-1980s
- Want to promote something and not fight something
- Promoting the use of renewable energies
- Soil is hopeful for dealing with climate change
- Gardening for a lifetime, learning a lot at these talks
- Regenerative soil topics
- Teaching children to explore curiosity; bring them outside
- Love this experience in Vermont with the way people respect one another
- Can't wait for the geeky part about soil science
- Endeavoring to start a farm, previous experience in digital storytelling
- Nobody is bad at telling stories, everyone tells stories - all ages

- Having to convince people to listen and that people's stories are important to share - this is powerful!
- The meaning that we derive individually and together is the story
- Getting to know the soil, allows us to love it, protect it, and care for it
- Cities have become dead zones
- Kids are playing in toxic soil and that is their experience of dirt
- Pregnant women are told not to play in soil.....

Presentations

Speakers:

- Maddie Kempner - NOFA-VT: Membership Coordinator and Policy Advisor
- Katherine Oaks - Vermont Law School: Research Fellow - Institute for Energy and the Environment, Vermont Law School; Healthy Soils Law Project
 - o Community members working together to create change and draft policy regarding food system and its connection to climate change
 - o Background in criminal defense

Chronological Discussion:

Maddie

- Everyone's story has value
- How we listen differently when we're being told a story: body language, lean in, settle in
- Stories are critical for policy change
- Experiences with bill testimony in the state house
 - o Some people come with a lot of facts and data
 - o Example: pesticide use (neonicotinoids)
 - Stories of beekeepers in addition to a review of all of the recent literature; combination of facts and stories
 - o Stories change the minds of legislators; stories are what change people's minds
- Stories in the context of government and regulation
 - o Government sometimes feels distant
 - o Dept of Agriculture: Required Agricultural Practices - to help clean up the waterways; trying to make rules without the full context; need participation in the democratic process and storytelling

Katherine

- Storytelling is critical to the pursuit of justice
- The problem with facts is that they are devoid of perspective
- Meaning exists between the facts, can be found in stories
- Stories exist between us, not within an individual
- Your interpretation of a story is its own story
- Feedback Loops - cyclic

- Institutions/Governments - the person working on writing, developing, enforcing rules is a human being
- By perceiving the person receiving your information to be adversarial, you can change the effectiveness of your own argument
- Need to use creative space to connect and close those divides between people; prevent alienation
- See the humanity in another person to better advocate for your cause and build relationships
- Stories can shorten the distance between us
- Stories can also increase the distance between us, the way we speak to each other and about things matters (language)
- The words you choose matter, can bring people in or push them away
 - Example "overburden" - coal mining from mountain top removals
- Storytelling can be good or bad
- Wonderful tool for realizing democracy and our shared humanity and the way we behave

Maddie

- Media is telling stories (third person)
- First hand stories can bring meaningful connections (first person)
- Example: Op-Eds that are demonizing dairy farmers (polluters) - removes the person and their story from the narrative all together
 - Drives a wedge between people who care about the environment and farmers
- Example: People losing their dairy farms, struggles to go through this way of life
- Need to create space in our communities for people to tell their own stories, to find commonalities and the heart of our intentions/values - critical to work toward a future that we want to see
- In context of soil: Bring together groups that can intersect
 - Ex. farmers vs. environmentalists (not always a divide here)
 - NOFA-VT hosting On-Farm workshops around Vermont and inviting environmental advocates to pair up with farmers who are working to innovate for climate change adaptation; learning about better stewardship methods every day; sharing stories

Katherine

- Stories allow us to have a conversation
- This vs. that, built into our lives
- We assume that different people feel a certain way based on their primary focus, and assume that that is necessarily in conflict with something else
- Part of a healthy democratic process is to have all of the perspectives together
- Justice requires that all of our voices are heard
- Imposing a false narrative or choosing only one narrative creates a grave injustice
- Ties into the problem with facts/data alone
 - Helpful that they demonstrate a point, quantified evidence
- What really moves humans is the way that we feel
- Narrative we tell ourselves: Legal Fiction - admittedly false narratives that work well within the way that we want the world to work

- Example: neutral judiciary - judges are able to strip themselves of their past and experiences and judge without any bias
- Outside the courtroom we do the same thing too
 - Example: The corporation as person - allows us to go about the legal process with ease, but it's ridiculous
- Communicating our stories requires a certain vulnerability and courage
 - Example: expressing emotions is weak
- Storytelling condemned as soft and noncredible, but also we fear it because it is manipulative, (i.e. no amount of data can convince you otherwise)
 - Example: Wind turbine project effect on property value in NH; despite studies, people still think it will work a certain way
- We are very good at persuading ourselves that something must be wrong with the data if it goes against what we ourselves believe (have told ourselves)
- Climate change complacency - need to continue to create the narrative around this, not allow it to disappear after catastrophic events
- People are moved to action, they are not convinced to do so because the data says they should

Cat Buxton

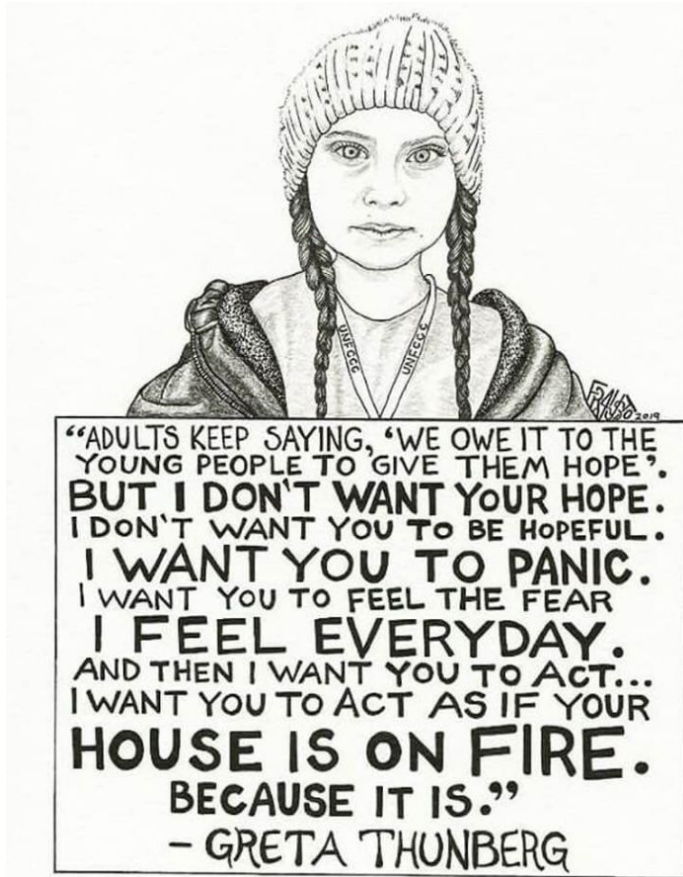
- Who here is a writer?
- Who here writes songs?
- Who here tells stories through imagery and art?
- Who here tells stories through theater or dance or movement?
- Who here is a gardener?
- Who here is infatuated with the story of the forests or the world or mushrooms?
- Who here works in the field of law, municipalities, schools?

This is where we need stories, and listening with presence

Listening with presence means that we are trying to stop our own thoughts and reactions from what you're hearing - this is trainable and creates different outcomes in all of your relationships/interactions

Maddie

- We use stories to advertise, to bring people into organizations
- We use fear in the narrative around climate change which stalls people, whereas hope can inspire people to act
- Greta Thurnberg - nominated for Nobel Peace Prize recently for her climate change work



Katherine

- Closing points:
 - Real need we have for functional and whole feedback loops
 - The sharing of stories from farmers to government farmers and vice versa!
 - Example of a government worker disagreeing about the location of a stream on a landowner's property - poorly functioning feedback loop to get anything to change
- Development project or action being discussed - begins with industry and science, industry funds the science, then government gets involved, then science comes in funded by the government, then there's a period for public input, then policy developed
 - At that point, the development has already happened, so asking for public input is a common way we include the public in the process, but not really....
- True democracy means we have all of our perspectives included at the beginning of the process
- Humans love stories and using our imaginations
 - Realizing this allows us to communicate with one another and connects us in a way that is peaceful
 - We protect what we love and we love what we know
- Need to use stories to connect research, science, community, farmers, etc. to develop a system that allows us to combat climate change not at the expense of any of our community members

Cat

- Offering for Soils Stories Event reading - from Cheryl Herrick and Sha'an Mouliert (pasted below)
- Human, humus, humility - share a root word
- Listening with humility, being present - key practice in healing and growing the world
- Humility is important in storytelling
- The desire for wholeness and whole lives
- We are in a time of awakening
- [Who Farms Project](#); [I am Vermont, too](#); Center for Sustainable Agriculture projects
- Farmer.Gov [Faces of Vermont Agriculture video series](#) 8 short Youtube videos
- Real Organic Project. [Know Your Farmer video series](#) on their website. [YouTube channel](#) March 2 2019 Symposium videos are being added weekly.
- Center for an Agricultural Economy [Meet the Maker video series](#) (14 short Youtube videos)

Offering for Soil Stories Event

from Sha'an Mouliert ([I am Vermont, too](#)) and Cheryl Herrick ([Who Farms Project](#)):

Sha'an Mouliert and Cheryl Herrick wanted to be able to take part tonight, and are grateful to Cat for the opportunity, and sorry they were each unable to make it happen. But the topic of how the health of soil, of the earth, is connected to stories and to story-telling is a beautiful and fertile one that excites us both. When we talked about it, we thought about how the words human, humus (soil, not the chickpea spread), and humility share a root word. And that let us think and wonder about how the act of listening with humility, of being present to complexity and mystery - whether in the soil or in each others' lives - seems like it's got to be a key practice in healing and growing the world. That part about humility seems so important with story, how we might accept an invitation to bear witness to another's truth without assuming that we can ever know a complete truth. And how this maybe applies to soil health when we think about farming practices, and how families and communities are seeking to live whole lives in balance with each other and the land, in the complex landscape of history and power and privilege and the desire for wholeness. We are living in such interesting and complicated times of awakening and striving, and on some level it seems like the goals of a just society for human beings and a society in balance with the more-than-human world are facets of the same gem. And maybe presence and humility are a key part of both.

Thank you for the opportunity to share a bit of our thinking and our process. If you're curious about our work together on the Who Farms? project, or Sha'an's work with the I Am Vermont Too project, or Cheryl's work in communications at the Center for Sustainable Agriculture, feel free to get in touch. (Cat has our contact info, and we're both on Facebook.)

Poem read by Karl Thidemann ([Soil4Climate](#))

'Ode to Dirt'
by Sharon Olds

Listen

Dear dirt, I am sorry I slighted you,
I thought that you were only the background
for the leading characters—the plants
and animals and human animals.
It's as if I had loved only the stars
and not the sky which gave them space
in which to shine. Subtle, various,
sensitive, you are the skin of our terrain,
you're our democracy. When I understood
I had never honored you as a living
equal, I was ashamed of myself,
as if I had not recognized
a character who looked so different from me,
but now I can see us all, made of the
same basic materials—
cousins of that first exploding from nothing—
in our intricate equation together. O dirt,
help us find ways to serve your life,
you who have brought us forth, and fed us,
and who at the end will take us in
and rotate with us, and wobble, and orbit.