
Staying close to loss

**A set of tools for tending to
organisational cultures so loss is
explored as part of life.**

Powered by **Stewarding Loss** - An infrastructure for
organisational endings.

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Thank you to Paul Hamlyn Foundation for supporting this work.

Why this is important

Prior to Covid-19 we were already living in a time of great change, and change itself is a constant state. The virus has just accelerated the need for transformations - it's revealed our interdependencies and laid bare the fragilities and inequities that many people already knew were there because they were living them.

We know that in this crisis context there are people going in to work with organisations in “distress” but as one person reminded us whilst doing interviews for this work, “some of these organisations have been in ill-health for some time.” Another said she has seen “many organisations in a palliative care state” prior to this crisis.

The Stewarding Loss project has created a resource for those organisations that need immediate support with how to face closure because we couldn't ignore that, but we also wanted to come back to the original intent of this work. This is to address the idea that within civil society there are, and have been for some time, organisations that in the natural cycles of death and renewal, have had their time.

“To be clear: current urgencies need urgent attention. In addition: we need to cultivate wiser, more farsighted and systemically-literate habits of mind, as individuals, as organisations, and yes, as whole societies.”

– Stuart Candy speaking about social foresight

We want to make a distinction between the enforced closing of organisations brought on by external events versus encouraging organisations to identify the right time to die or ‘vacate the stage’. In civil society we will need organisations to establish an ongoing relationship with loss so they can better reflect the wider context and invent from within it.

“An apprenticeship with sorrow offers us the chance to build our capacity to stay present when the intense feelings of grief arise. Through meaningful rituals, a community of friends, sometime in benevolent solitude and effective practices that help us stretch into our bigger selves, we are offered the opportunity to develop a living relationship with loss.”

– Francis Weller’s Wild Edge of Sorrow

An ability and capacity to be in an ongoing relationship with loss - to continually anticipate it - know how to respond to it, and have distinct roles for it, feels important to familiarise ourselves with in the next couple of years before crises happen on a wider and more regular scale.

Anticipatory grief¹ and an atmosphere of loss that has been referred to during the pandemic will also show up more frequently in relation to the climate crisis, alongside ecological grief², and Stewarding Loss may help prepare civil society for these broader concerns.

Civil society is also going to need to (and quite urgently) shift resources out of the old, no longer fit-for-purpose system to fuel the growth of an alternative system. An ability to do this, and to do it well, will be vital throughout the developed world in the next decade. Within the processes of change, adaptation and transitions, there will always be a need for some organisation's to die. It is vital to the health of the wider ecology, and yet it is mostly neglected. Aside from the work of the International Futures Forum³, the Berkana Institute⁴ and Vanessa Reid's work⁵, it's also woefully untended to as an area of focus in systems change work.

“The cyclical view of time helps to shift our sense of an ending, which is always an echo of our fear of death. We need to complete, to close well — understanding that this is what makes space for the next cycle. A second Enlightenment perspective pays attention to endings as much as beginnings (‘start-ups’), hospice work for the dying culture as much as midwifery for the new.”

¹ <https://medium.com/@IvorWilliams/an-atmosphere-of-grief-5546cbd21f02>

² https://www.nature.com/articles/s41558-018-0092-2?WT.feed_name=subjects_environmental-health

³ <https://www.internationalfuturesforum.com/>

⁴ <https://berkana.org/home/>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJyUktH49HM>

– From the International Futures Forum

Within our cultures we love to start things, we value birth and newness, and we shy away from ending things - whether that be life, or organisations - we don't want to face it. We haven't found ways to deal with the thought of loss. And because of this we strip away the possibilities of doing so with dignity.

We remove the chance to nurture endings so that through closing, we leave things in a better way than when we found them. We don't consider what would make better compost.

“This is structural, if things ended well in the sector, the sector would be healthier overall.”

– A participant in one of our Loss Circles

It's not enough to just keep increasing the supply of promising ideas, or being confronted with the immediate impacts of Covid-19 in terms of organisational ending's, we need our longer-term preparedness to have as sophisticated an approach to dismantling things, closing them down, and composting.

“The more that people can anticipate it. And live with the reality, the better. People need to engage and disengage, engage and disengage. The more they are able

to move in and out of the new or emerging reality, the more they are ready for it when it happens.”

– Heather Richardson, St. Christopher’s Hospice

When the natural cycles of renewal, or collapsing and birthing are deterred, because we haven’t stopped doing things we should have, or we’ve kept our head in the sand - negative patterns can be perpetuated and endings become impossible.

Yet this is a time when new things need to emerge.

This is a time to divest in the status quo.

What the work is

Stewarding Loss is a care-ful infrastructure for organisational endings. We've always seen part of the value of Stewarding Loss as being in starting the conversation, seeding across civil society organisations the capacity to face loss and design for it. This is the beginning of a longer-term piece of work that has 5 aims.

1.

A community of practice – creating a network of practitioners who can support civil society organisations to design their endings, and intelligently and carefully dismantle them.

2.

A peer support network that holds spaces for those anticipating or experiencing organisational endings to share and learn.

3.

A pooled fund or series of experimental funds specifically for resourcing wise and dignified organisational endings.

4.

Events and content that bring this work into the wider consciousness of civil society organisations – to encourage a cultural shift in how organisational endings are perceived, designed for and experienced.

5.

Through all of the above we aim to build a civil society that is better prepared and equipped to face the losses that other crises will bring, like the ecological and climate emergency.

If you want to be involved in any of the above, please get in touch with Cassie and Iona [through the website](#).

Our approach to this work

If you haven't read the very [first piece of writing about this work](#), then please do, as it still contains many of the questions that we continue to ask, and try to answer.

Bringing strategic design to the work

To take Jared Spool's definition, design is about "the rendering of intent." And as Matt Edgar says⁶, "intent without rendering gives us a strategy but cannot make it real. Rendering without intent may be fun – may even be fine art – but is, by definition, ineffective." We need to bring more intent to organisational endings, but also more rendering, which helps address the *how*. Strategic design, which outlines the "architecture of the problem," is helpful for blending together a mix of hard constraints like budgets and regulations with cultural sensibilities and symbolic meaning into a single outcome.

Another function of strategic design is stewardship. "We invoke stewardship in place of words like "implement" and "execute" out of recognition that the latter imply a cleanliness or linear progression which is rarely found when working on a shared proposition in a complex

⁶ <https://blog.mattedgar.com/2018/10/17/the-promise-of-understanding-a-talk-at-interact-2018/>

environment⁷.” This is much more than facilitation which suggests that others do the important work. Stewardship shapes the course of something; it is not a neutral role, and acknowledges things will change along the way, demanding agility over adherence to a predetermined plan. This approach, the role of stewardship, will be key for wiser organisational endings, where there is a need to continually calibrate the design of how it unfolds, with the constraints of the context.

Lastly, setting up a fund to specifically focus on more dignified organisational endings is a good example of a ‘Trojan Horse’.

“In strategic design what we make is not what we hope to accomplish. We never just make a website, we do it to change an organizational culture. We never just make a building, we do it to bring focus and urgency to regulatory change. We never just publish a book, we do it to illuminate an opaque network of actors and interests around a given topic. In these examples the material becomes a trojan horse for the immaterial. Strategic design involves the task of matching up the ambition for change with the appropriate vehicle that makes change concrete and visibly apparent. We reorganize material to unlock the potential for change in the immaterial aspects of life—the cultures, institutions, systems and governance structures that shape our world.”

– From the practices of [the Helsinki Design Lab](http://helsinkidesignlab.org/)

⁷ <http://helsinkidesignlab.org/>

A different frame

Ecological references⁸ and metaphors from permaculture⁹ are used more widely now in change work, but the themes of loss and regeneration, brought together in collaborative relationships, offer fertile territory that is under-explored. Framed in these ways, the narratives of organisational endings could move away from failure, shame and blame, towards recognition of natural life-cycles. There is other language to be explored too, from unraveling to disintegrating as indicative of things that were once entwined now quite literally dis-integrating.

There is also the potential to explore this work, the disinvesting in the status quo, as decolonising work. Drawing on the principles of Decolonial Futures¹⁰.

“It is about hospicing worlds that are dying within and around us with care and integrity, as well as attention to the lessons these deaths offer, while also assisting with the birth of new, potentially wiser possibilities, without suffocating them with projections.”

⁸ <https://www.schumachercollege.org.uk/courses/postgraduate-courses/ecological-design-thinking-0>

⁹ <https://theseedlingsagada.wordpress.com/permaculture/>

¹⁰ <https://decolonialfutures.net/>

The Decolonial Futures group also explore this through one of their Compass Questions¹¹.

“How can we hospice a dying way of knowing/being and assist with the birth of something new, still fragile, undefined and potentially (but not necessarily) wiser with radical tenderness?”

The luxury to engage with it and who gets to decide?

In the same way that power interests can be served by particular grief discourses, Stewarding Loss needs to explore what it means to bring an equity lens to this work. This includes acknowledging that People of Colour led organisations and infrastructure were already underinvested in, and will likely be some of the most hardest hit¹², so questions of closure should be considered differently.

An equity lens will also raise important questions of who gets to decide, and who is centred and participating in the conversations about an organisation's continued purpose and relevance.

¹¹ <https://decolonialfutures.net/compass-questions/>

¹² <https://www.ubele.org/news/2020/4/30/9-out-of-10-bame-micro-and-small-organisations-set-to-close-if-the-crisis-continues-beyond-3-months-following-the-lockdown>

What it sits in the shadow of

We've been conscious of what this work sits in the shadow of throughout the last six months. The devastating loss of human life¹³, the communities that have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19, and the wide-spread multi-faceted grief many communities are experiencing or anticipating. Including many organisations in civil society that are on the edges of existence. There is loss everywhere¹⁴.

This always needs to be acknowledged as the work moves forwards, but we don't want to pause or stall it. Facing loss, not avoiding it, feels essential now, and designing for it, finding community around it, making space for healing through it *might* create new contours for a better future.

¹³ <https://www.covidlive.co.uk/>

¹⁴ <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>

Canvases

The canvases Stewarding Loss has created are a first version of some activities and conversations we think will help to start infusing your organisation with greater awareness and inquiring around endings, life cycles, and loss. There are four different sections:

Care As you bring an ongoing inquiry about loss into your organisation, it's helpful to lay a foundation of shared narrative about who the organisation is, what brought you each here and what holds you together. Holding a space for enquiring about endings needs different kinds of skills and behaviours so there is also a canvas to help you consider the kinds of roles you might want to assign to people in the organisation, and wider.

Tuning in This section is about building a practice of regularly tuning in to what is emerging, and designing for that. If this work is starting with the permanence of impermanence as a background assumption, what needs tuning into? The first canvas suggests questions that will help you design what to tune in to, to help decide whether to exist or not. The second canvas will be useful once you've agreed what to tune in to, suggesting questions to use for ongoing enquiring and anticipating loss.

A shared view One of the most important parts of this work is how to keep making sense of the organisation together, in a participatory way so that everyone is doing regular temperature checks on the organisation. Having a shared view is a helpful canvas to keep referring back to.

Composting If the organisation does decide to dismantle itself, to unravel and to close, then this set of canvases helps to consider four aspects of that journey. Paying attention to the process, to what makes good compost, is important for laying foundations for what's next. Stories, artefacts, rituals and relationships.

We aren't suggesting these are linear stages, in the same way that scholars in the field of bereavement studies observe that 'stage models' and perspectives are becoming less relevant as a means of understanding contemporary expressions of loss and grief. We know that will be true for organisational endings too.

“Understandings of mortality are central to how we experience the time of life. Continuing bonds theory challenges the chronological view of time as entropic and irreversible. The dead are no longer so clearly culturally separated from the living, causing conceptions of past and present to become more fluid. At a time when organizations are becoming less clearly identified with a particular time and place, and organizational change is suggested to be

continuous rather than linear and episodic (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), a continuing bonds perspective on the relationship between past and present is likely to be more meaningful to organizational members than the materialist, empiricist tradition of conceptualizing change on a before/after basis (Adam, 1995). Rather than positioning the past and its inhabitants as other, distinct and separate from the present, a continuing bonds perspective invites consideration of temporal unity and relatedness.”

We'd love to hear from you if you use [these canvases](#), have suggestions for these, or want to be involved in developing more. Please get in touch with Cassie and Iona [through the website](#).