

# Tending the flames

Lessons of hope and resilience in activism



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A fully illustrated version with additional texts will be available in print and ebook formats later in 2024. The book will be available through the author's website and bookshops. To be notified when the full version is available, or to order a copy, see:

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# **This is why we talk about burning**

There are things we've always known about fire, and there are things we've had to learn over time. We've always known fire can be dangerous; we've had to learn that it can be kind.

Knowing how to tend the flames – how to feed them, fan them, keep them going – has been crucial to our survival for at least a million years. In short: we know a lot about fire.

Activism is exhausting at the best of times. Standing up for what is right is difficult work, especially when 'what is right' doesn't align with 'the way things have been', 'what is profitable' or 'what keeps the powerful in power'. Rarely have we seen this as clearly as we do now, during this ongoing, global climate crisis.

We watch our politicians sign climate pledges with one hand, while reopening coal mines with the other. We repeat 'reduce, reuse, recycle' like an encouraging chant, while every available surface seems plastered with the message: 'buy more, more often'. Being a climate activist can feel like standing up to the sea. Like trying to protect your sandcastle from an approaching storm. It can feel terrifying and ultimately hopeless.

You may feel tired. You may be tempted to give up. You may feel drawn towards anger, hopelessness or despair. There may be questions ringing in the back of your mind, like: how do I keep going when people aren't listening? Why am I making these sacrifices when no one seems to care? Why should I commit when our politicians don't?

'Because it is right' may be the answer, but over time, it can start to feel like a sneer.

You are not alone. We are not alone. There is a quiet cheer on the wind from all those who came before. We are not the first. We're not the first to rise against the tides. Not the first to be weak in the face of the powerful. We're not the first to march for our rights or the futures of our children. We're not the first to fight for survival.

There are lessons to learn from those who came before us. Those who had to march against the tides to change opinions. Those who burned against the darkness to win us freedoms and rights.

Although this challenge feels inconceivably huge and threatening, there is hope. The climate crisis is not a force of nature – it is a monster of our own making. The



powerful are not legends or gods, they are people. Capitalism is not an ocean, it's a habit. The darkness is not complete – you are holding a torch.

Like the activists who came before, we have to keep moving. We have to keep our fires burning and hold out for the dawn. We are resilient and we are strong. We have hope and there's still time. This is why we talk about burning. To remind us to tend the flames.

# What do we mean when we talk about burning?

Everyone talks about fire  
We fan the flames of hope and revolution  
Burn with passion, excitement, desire, longing, regret, resentment, rage

There's a spark of an idea  
A spark of inspiration  
A spark of genius

There's the internal flame, and the eternal flame  
A baptism of fire  
Fire away

Add fuel to the fire, play with fire  
Our world might go up in flames

Come light my fire  
Set my world on fire  
Get me all fired up  
Go scorched earth on my arse

This year might be a dumpster fire  
Our dreams might go up in smoke

We burn the candle from both ends  
The midnight oil  
Burn all our bridges  
We burn out

This is what we mean when we talk about burning:  
Warmth and light  
Cleansing fire  
A force of destruction.  
How do you burn?

# **You hold, you are, you see the fire**

You hold the fire.

It's the candle you light in the window on a dark night. It's the match you strike against the darkness. It is the lantern you raise to read the writing on the wall. The torch you carry through the woods. The candle at the vigil and the lamp you bring down the mines. You hold the fire.

You are the fire.

You are the campfire others gather around to warm their hands and feet, to share their stories. You are the passionate call among the murmurs. The spark that lights the flame in others. The excited flicker of new ideas. The patient flame of a guiding star. The harsh light that falls on secrets and lies.

You see the fire.

You see the fire in others, and the dying flames. You see the sparks and flickers, the campfires and the stars. Take notice.

You feel the fire.

At the centre, down where it's quiet and still.

You feel the warmth and see the light that burns eternal.

If you listen, you will hear it speak.

You feel the fire, when you seek it,  
and only you can name  
that still small voice.



# They are not the darkness

It might seem almost impossible to believe, but they are not the darkness. Their power and influence, their harsh words and condescending tones, their constant fight for injustice – it's easy to mistake them for the dark.

But they are not the darkness – they are in it.  
They don't create the darkness – it entangles them.  
As they move, it moves.  
As they spread, it spreads.  
As they speak, it speaks.  
Without them, it is weak.

Blinded by darkness, they build their monsters and dig our graves.  
They dance around their shrines and mumble, “More please, more.”  
They read the world around them in the ghostlight of their own lies.

But they are not the darkness – and this is key.  
You fight monsters with swords and crossbows and anger.  
Darkness is just an absence,  
and we are on our way.



# Tending flames

If your house is heated by electricity or gas, or you grew up somewhere warm, wood-burning fires may hold a romantic spot in your mind. They may belong to images of roasting chestnuts, romantic getaways, or Christmas movies.

I grew up on a farm in Norway, and wood burners were our primary heat source in the colder months. And although the orange light of a flickering fire, the radiating heat, and the crackling sound of crisp firewood are all distinctly cosy to me, they also remind me of the toil and effort of keeping a fire going.

Days at home were punctuated by the sounds of the wood burner opening and closing. Of logs being thrown into flames, tossed onto heaps of embers, or gently stacked over a weak glow. Air vents being slid open or shut. More firewood being brought in from outside.



In summer, there was lumbering and wood chopping. Huge pallets of wood left to dry in preparation for the winter. All in careful consideration of sustainable forestry. Where could it be cut? Would it leave us with spruce or birch this year?



A fire requires attention. It asks you to be aware of its needs and plan for them. It needs you to stay aware of its purpose. It needs to be fed – at the right time and in the right amount. It needs air – enough to keep burning, but not so much that it rages through the fuel. It needs to be contained so it doesn't grow destructive and wild, but not so contained that it suffocates and dies.

Regardless of whether your fire is lit for heat, light, atmosphere or destruction – it still has needs of its own. The fire asks you to remember that its needs are yours. If you don't take care of the fire, it cannot take care of you.

# Feeding the flame

It may seem complicated to keep a fire burning, but it really is very simple. A fire only needs three things: fuel, oxygen and heat. When someone tells me they feel like they're burning out, the first thought that springs to my mind is always: how are you feeding your flame?

We know that flames need to be fed, but we rarely pay attention to what we feed them. And – perhaps more importantly – we don't think about why it matters.

Some things burn quickly. They burn with a bright, hot flame, and are gone in a matter of minutes. These things catch fire at the slightest spark, but flicker out just as quickly. It can be addictive, burning this kind of fuel. It's exciting to watch it flare and feel the intense heat of the flame. These flames can cut through metal and melt rocks into lava. This can be very useful. This can be very destructive.



Some things burn poorly, with weak flames, with thick, dark smoke and noxious gases. It can be difficult to make these things burn at all. They're too wet, or need too much heat to get started. They may leave behind too much residue, making it harder and harder to keep burning over time.

But these fuels are often cheap and readily available. They will keep you warm enough to survive, and cast enough light to see the next few steps in front of you. They will keep you going, at least for a while, but they're rarely good.

Some things burn with steady, warm flames and clean ashes. They cast light in a large area and give enough heat to warm others. These fuels are rarely exciting. They're rarely cheap. Often, they're heavy, and must be patiently gathered, and gathered with intention. They often have to be sought out and chosen. But they'll burn long and well.



Some of these fuels are good and sustainable; others are not. They can be toxic and harmful to you and others. Some are plentiful, others are only available to those who can afford them.

Some fuels catch fire in a split second and bring the whole building down. They explode in fiery infernos and destroy everything in their path. The damage can linger, or be quickly forgotten.

Some things won't burn at all. They may have no effect on the fire whatsoever, or they may quell it, smother it, suffocate, drench or snuff out the flames. Sometimes forever. Sometimes for good.

So, what do we feed our fires? So very many things. Here are some:

Violent passions, righteous indignation, anger, anxiety, entitlement, greed or lust.

Guilt, fear, obligation, shame or irritation, resignation, discomfort, a desire for attention, a want to be seen doing the right thing.

Hope, a sense of community, kindness, excitement, a desire to be right, a sense of justice, courage, a desire for power, the wish to make a difference, the wish to leave a mark, the wish to help those who can't help themselves, the wish to help yourself, faith, passion or curiosity.

Rage or desperation.

Apathy, depression, hopelessness, complacency, conscious ignorance, or cowardice.

What do you burn?

# **There is more to do (The campfire)**

Climb the barricades, tear down the fences, dismantle the forces and stand up against injustice. Spread the message. Be loud. Be proud. Be fearless and cunning and brave and persistent.

March. Arrange a candlelight vigil, and a protest, and an exhibition. Chain yourself to a tree, or to your friends, be in the way.

Disrupt. Break it down, cause a commotion, find alternatives, stay calm. Speak with a clear voice. Give them reasons. Show them what we can do, what you can do, don't lose hope. Shout.

Do everything – do all of this – or don't. There is more to do.

Someone has to light the campfire.

Make spaces where others can come back to lick their wounds. Someone has to serve the teas, make the coffees – put the kettle on.

Someone has to keep the campfire burning.

Someone has to share our stories – pass them on, bring them forward.

Tell us the stories of those who came before.

Someone has to light the campfire.

Open the floor for discussion and make sure we're all heard. Keep an eye on the leaders. Keep an eye on the children. Welcome newcomers with open arms and without judgement.

Someone has to offer comfort. Offer clarity. Keep the fires from running wild.

Stepping out of the darkness is a terrifying thing. To see yourself in the light for the first time, and see what you have done. See what you have built, or what you didn't do.

Someone has to light a campfire.

Invite those stepping out of the darkness to have a seat. Make a space where they can sit and quietly stare into the flames. Somewhere they won't have to meet any-



one's eyes. Not yet. Not before they're ready. Somewhere they can have a blanket placed around their shoulders and a mug pressed into their hands.

We need the loud disruptors  
The barricade builders  
The wall jumpers  
And the medics  
And the quartermasters  
And the navigators  
And the travelling bards

We need someone to light a campfire  
and to meet us there.



# Those who cling to darkness

There are those who will never listen or understand.

Their eyes have grown too used to the darkness, and they see light as nothing but a terrible threat. When your light temporarily blinds them, they will accuse you of manipulation. Of masking the truth. Of diverting attention from the beautiful nuances of night. Of being part of some great conspiracy, or victim to it.

You will not win them over.

There are those who will never care.

The darkness grants them too much power, and the devastating consequence of inaction will reach everyone else before it reaches them. They will belittle you. Claim the matter too complicated for you to understand. They are experts in pointing fingers and deflecting blame. They nurture themselves on the ignorance of others.

You will not win them over.

But most of those who cling to darkness are there because we failed them.

We failed them when they were younger, or when they grew older,  
or when they called out for our help.

They distrust everything we say

because so much of what we claim possible has never been possible to them.

They distrust authorities

because authorities have spent so much energy proving themselves untrustworthy.

They distrust scientists

because our schools didn't meet them where they needed to be met.

They are angry

because we are asking them to give up what they've been fighting all their lives  
to gain.

They are angry because we're asking them to give up

the only power and privilege that benefits them.

We are asking them to give up hope in a dream

that we've collectively spent decades convincing them to follow.

To them, you say you're sorry.

You listen to their anger, and try to understand where they're coming from.

You let them rage against the injustice of it all,

and present their strange hypotheses.

You do not laugh.  
You do not scorn.  
You do not lecture, or mock, or roll your eyes.  
You do not point out the injustices done to others,  
or how privileged they really are  
or how their altars to the darkness look a lot like  
false gods.

Instead, you listen patiently, and then you ask questions.  
You ask open questions that will ring out in the caverns inside them,  
and stir up answers from within.  
Questions to which you don't know the answers.  
Not clever questions. Not carefully crafted questions.  
Just honest questions  
that sink through the murky waters  
and create ripples on the surface  
without posing any threat.

You do not dim your light. You keep the fire burning.  
You meet their eyes and smile.  
You patiently listen for the light inside them,  
and let your light answer its call.





# Light in a storm

There is a kind of storm that makes the heart feel small.  
The wind howls and the rain whips; thick clouds darken the sky like a bruise.  
The creaking of trees threatening to fall; the clatter of debris tumbling  
through the air.

A storm is a cacophonous being.

A dangerous space.

A creature of force and fear.

You cannot fight a storm.

But you can hold a light. Hold it high.

Be a beacon showing the way back to shore – out of the woods – out of the rain.

A storm is a scary place, and the bravest thing you can do is be in it.

Find shelter. Seek refuge. And tend to the flame.

Place a candle in your window. In every window.

Light the fire and put the kettle on.

Be the refuge and the fire for those who stumble through the night.

You cannot fight a storm.

But you can hold the light.





## Shielding the flame

If you've ever tried to light a candle outside, you know about shielding the flame. You know about positioning your hands as far inside the snow lantern as possible, hoping the wind won't catch it. And about hunching over – your back to the wind – or striking the match too close to your coat. You know about failed attempts, and about trying to figure out which direction the wind is coming from, and perhaps about finally lighting the candle, only for the wind to blow it back out.

Every smoker I ever met knew about shielding the flame – a practiced cupping of their hands around the match, or the lighter, or someone else's flame. A way to let the orange glow light up their face from below, while the wind whipped their hair into their eyes.



If you've lit a lantern on the porch, or a campfire in the woods, or a bottle rocket on New Year's Eve – you'll have learned about shielding the flame.

But I see you hold your flame up unprotected. I see how it flickers helplessly against the night. Sometimes, you let the wind blow it out – then blame the wind, and the flame and the fire, for leaving you lonely and cold.

Sometimes I do, too.

We blame ourselves for being too weak. Suspect each other of not caring enough. Not being brave enough. Of not burning bright enough.

But we're just not shielding our flames.

Be gentle with your flame.

Cup your hands around it and give it respite from the wind.

Build yourself a lantern of hope, of calm, of courage.

Let the wind blow.

Hold the lantern up against the night,  
and watch your flame burn.

# Magic trick

There's a magic trick you can do with a candle and a match.  
It delights children.  
It fascinates adults.  
It shows us something true.

Blow out a candle. Let its smoke rise.  
Hold a lit match into its plume – not too high up, but high enough – and  
watch the flame jump from the match to the candle.  
Watch the candle burn, even though it didn't.

Stand close to me. Let me stand close to you.  
If my flame flickers out, I want you to see the smoke as an invitation.  
If yours flickers out, I will lean in close, before your smoke fades, and bring  
it back to life.  
If we stand close together,  
you can warm yourself on my fire  
and I will read in the light of yours.

# Wildfires

The thing about wildfires is that they're wild.  
Destructive,  
terrifying,  
out of control.

Wildfires burn until there's nothing left to burn.  
They leave you hopelessly sifting through the ashes  
or running for your life in between the trees,  
longing for birdsong,  
desperately sad  
and scared.

Burn big, burn bright, burn all through the night,  
as long as you burn with intention.



# You didn't start the fire

My grandfather taught me a song, which we sing after Christmas dinner in my family. He made it clear that this song was important.

My great-grandmother brought this song to my great-grandfather's farm when they married in 1907. Her mother had grown up singing it, too. We don't know how long it has been sung in my family, but we suspect it's been sung for a very long time. The first translation of the song appeared in Norwegian in 1569. Despite later translations being much more common and widespread, and there being a later melody that is all but established as the melody at this point, it is this first translation of the song that has made its way down to me.

As a child, I felt the song was like an heirloom. Something valuable and precious that had been passed from hand to hand down the ancestral line. Something that had to be protected at all costs. I railed against these other, more established versions of the song. I felt they sullied the purity of 'our' song – cheap replicas of a true masterpiece. When other people told me they, too, had a version of the song travelling down their family line, I would silently doubt the validity of their version. Had it travelled as long as ours? As purely as ours? Had they really sung it every Christmas?

Like many children, I assumed my experiences were unique and superior. The way my beautiful grandfather's thunderous voice had carried the song all these years, that surely had to be better than what some stranger's wobbly-voiced grandmother had managed? Of course, I grew out of this way of thinking, but to my discredit, I stopped thinking about it at all.

When my grandfather died, he was a hundred years old. He died right before Christmas, and out of nowhere, I felt the song become a burden. A responsibility. This flame had been passed from generation to generation, but as my grandfather's flame flickered out, I suddenly felt scared. If we didn't make sure the next generations' candles were lit, the song itself could die. How could we make sure the song remained true? What if we messed it up? What if we corrupted it somehow?

Of course, I shouldn't have worried. When a song is only sung once a year, it is bound to transform over time. For years, we'd had occasional discussions about some of the words, and we knew they were different – updated and slightly altered – from the ones in my grandfather's old hymnal.

We sang the song on Christmas Eve the year my grandfather died, and we sang it again a few days later, at his funeral. That's when we learned that some of my grandfather's eleven siblings had continued the tradition, too. They had sung the



song with their children, who had sung it with their children, and now we were a mighty choir singing this simple song.

We were one choir and one big family, but we were also several individual families singing side by side. The words were not exactly the same from family to family, and the tune had been shifted up or down here and there. Over time, the flame had grown and changed, but it had kept moving. Each of us was carrying the flame. We weren't the custodians of some unique heirloom, but bearers of a flame that was lit in a thousand other families, in a thousand different ways.



There was comfort in that. Although many had blown out their candles and chosen different paths, there were still more people singing in that room than there had been around my grandfather's childhood Christmas table. The song would keep moving, as long as some of us kept passing it on.

I sometimes think of that song when I see young or new activists shaking under the responsibility of saving the world. When the severity of the planet's situation dawns on them, they might clutch their candle until their knuckles whiten – terrified that they will be the one who drops it after all this time. Like me, they may be scared to death that they'll somehow corrupt it – change it – get it wrong. And no wonder. If you think you're holding the only flame – the one true burning flame – sitting down to take a break feels impossible. Because what if a storm rolls in? What if night falls? What if you fall asleep and drop the candle? When you feel the weight of the world on your shoulders, I invite you to look up.

You didn't start the fire. It has been carried for a long time, generation after generation. Sometimes, it has been weakened, sometimes strengthened, but it has made it this far, and now we're many. Your flame is important – maybe even crucial – but your flame is not the fire.

For the older activists, too, it can be frustrating to see new activists fight in unfamiliar ways. Sometimes, they change the wording of the narrative you've fought so hard to push, or they turn focus away from your preferred cause, suggesting that a different focus matters more, is more urgent. It may feel like they don't value your contribution. Like they don't understand how much it took to get here. They roll their eyes at your exhaustion, and carry on as if you didn't just lead the march. Look up.

Look behind you. Look at the long train of flames slowly marching towards a common goal. The train stretches back through time and forward through the darkness, and links us all together in the hope for a better day. Your flame is important – maybe even crucial – but your flame is not the fire.

Change might happen fast or slow, and it might not happen soon enough. But the flame will keep moving, as long as we keep passing it on. The fire will keep burning, as long as someone carries the flame.

# Embers

Once upon a time, an ember was a valuable thing.  
Just as much as it was evidence of a dying fire,  
it was the promise of new flames.

Embers saved time. To light a fire from embers is relatively easy. Easier than lighting a fire by striking flint against steel, or rubbing wood against wood. Embers can handle more moisture, more wind, more of everything than sparks can. Embers let you carry the fire with you; yesterday's fire grows new flames today.

More than 5,000 years ago, a man we now call Ötzi set out on a journey across the Alps. He died, and lay frozen for thousands of years before he was found. As he travelled across the mountains, he carried a birch pouch dedicated to fire. It contained dried mushroom of a kind that burns well, iron pyrite for sparks, and two embers wrapped in maple leaves – remnants of a previous fire.

Vikings boiled a particular kind of fungi in urine for several days. Afterwards, they beat it flat and flexible – created a material that would smoulder but not burn. This way, they could carry their scalding-hot coals, bring fire from home with them on their journeys. The Piegan branch of the Blackfeet carried embers inside buffalo horns. The beast they roasted on the fire provided the tools to carry the fire forward. We throw water on our campfire before we leave it, as we know there might still be embers under the ashes; they might still smoulder and glow.

Sometimes, you cannot keep on burning. Perhaps you run out of fuel, or the night is too long, or you simply can't stand it anymore. Stop. Take a breath. Don't let yourself burn out. The flames are not the fire.

Keep your embers safe. They need air – but not too much. You can wrap them in insulation and walk until you're ready. You can cover them in ashes until the morning comes. Then you blow on them – gently – and feed them dry kindling.

Your fire can burn again.

Rummage around in your mind until you find the fire pot you inherited from those who came before you. Make yourself a fire pouch of perseverance and loving-kindness.

Keep your embers safe.

Now, as much as then, an ember is a valuable thing.  
Just as much as it is evidence of a dying fire,  
it's the promise of new flames.





# We carry on

Of course, this isn't everything.  
Of course, it's not enough.  
We cannot save the world with only words  
or flames, or fire.  
But keep the fire burning,  
tend the flames and feed them well,  
shield them from the wind and rain,  
keep your embers, trust the flame.

Of course, this isn't everything.  
There's work and work and work to do.  
And yes, the night is long.  
And yes, the dark is deep.  
And yes, the creatures stalking us  
have long and deadly teeth.  
And no, we may not win.  
And yes, all may be lost.  
But every day, we carry on,  
we must, we must, we must.





# On metaphors – an explanation

Imagine the two of us meeting. Somewhere neutral and comfortable, where we both feel safe and in control. We're meeting for a conversation – to discuss a topic we don't entirely agree on. I put forward my case, and you shake your head with indignation. You put forward yours, and I become defensive and frustrated.

“You're just not hearing me,” I say.

“You're just not listening,” say you.

Our words slip past each other: you get a couple of lashes in, and so do I. We take turns replying – not to what the other says, but to what we think they must have meant. After all, I know where you're coming from – I know the problem with your way of thinking. I know that people who think like you say things like this, and why that's wrong.

But so do you. You've heard people like me speak before. You know how misguided we are, and how our arguments hinge on the same misunderstanding. The exact words I say are not important, because you know what I really mean.

When we leave, we're both bruised and tired. We're both certain there's no hope for the other. We're sad. This is sad. This isn't what we hoped would happen.

“Under different circumstances, I think we'd really get on,” I say when I get home.

“The worst part is, I think we'd be friends in a different life,” say you.

While we were busy talking, the humanity in you called out to the humanity in me, and it heard my humanity sing in reply. At their level, there was common ground to be found. At their level, the fundamental truths are more important than the complicating details of history, precedence and politics. But on our minds' level, there was no room to listen. Our minds knew – long before we even met – that there was no hope of reconciliation. Not really.

Let's try again.

We change the rules.

“The topic as a whole is too complicated,” you say. “Let's think of it this way...”

Instead of the planet, industrial countries, social inequality, rising oceans, natural cycles and the future of our children, we imagine a beautiful garden. Four houses border this garden – your house and mine, and the houses of our two neighbours.

Some of us use the garden more than others. Some of us grow our food in it, while others use it just for joy. Some of us cut and sell its flowers; others wish we would leave them alone. But we all love the garden. We all need the garden. The garden is what makes our houses the most valuable on the street. The garden is what provides some of us with most of our food, and most of our recreation. We've owned this garden for generations. We all know the family of robins that lives in the great tree, and all our children have grown up marvelling at the rabbits in the hedge and the bugs in the lawn.

But the garden is dying, or so the experts tell us. We haven't all quite seen it yet. Perhaps the grass has been a bit dryer than usual, and maybe the trees are drooping. There are fewer bugs than before, but it all happened so gradually, we hadn't really thought about it. Not until the experts warned us, and then we couldn't stop noticing all the little signs. They say the fumes from our very exciting, delicious, cheap and wonderful cooking oils are the problem. Those fumes are what's killing the garden. If we don't reduce their use, the garden might never revive.

"And if it dies," they have told us, "you might never be able to plant anything else here at all."

We know what that means. We'll lose our sanctuary. Our income. The place we grow our food. The robin and its family. The rabbits in the hedge. None of us want that to be true.

We meet in this garden. Here, you and I can talk. In the garden, we can discuss what we can and cannot do. We don't have to agree about everything. We don't need to be convinced that the experts are right, or that reducing our use of cooking oils will be enough. We don't need to agree on who has bigger claims to the garden, who planted the strawberries thirty years ago, or if the family who moved in most recently should really have equal rights to sell the flowers. We only need to decide whether or not ignoring the experts is too high a risk.

"Because even if we don't agree," you say, "that the cooking oils are to blame, don't you think it's worth changing it up, just in case?"

We'll miss this cooking oil. It's delicious. It makes cooking so easy. There are excellent alternatives, but they're more expensive, and they don't taste the same. We know there were even more harmful oils around in the past, so this isn't as bad as it could be. Some of us have been looking forward to retirement – to doing more cooking. We've imagined all the wonderful things we'll make, and now, they'll have to look different. We've worked so hard, maybe even sacrificed things, to be able to cook as much as we want to when we finally get the chance – and suddenly, we're told we won't be able to. Not in the same way. Not the way we pictured it.

Some of our favourite recipes are dependent on this oil to be ‘just right’. Now, they might be rare treats. It’s frustrating. We wish it wasn’t so. We love this oil.

But we love our garden more.

“It will be hard for me to reduce by a lot, right now,” says one of our neighbours.

“The alternatives are too expensive and money is tight.”

“No problem,” I say. “We understand. We’ll reduce as much as we can, and when your situation is better, you’ll reduce too.”

“I’m happy to pay a little towards alternatives,” you say.

“So am I,” say I. “At least a little.”

Not everyone agrees.

“The garden has always gone through cycles of doing better and worse,” says our final neighbour. He’s an old-fashioned guy. “I refuse to change my ways. Besides, their family is four times bigger than mine. Why should I reduce if they don’t have to? They use more, so I should be allowed to use what I use.”

The rest of us exchange glances. We agree it’s sad. It feels unfair. But we also know we can’t risk losing our beloved garden. If he insists that he’ll keep going, we’ll just have to sacrifice more.

We exchange glances with his wife, who looks as stern as he does. So do his eldest son and two daughters. But the grandchildren, too, have eyes. And they have heard of all the bugs in the lawn, and the lush grass and spritely trees. And they miss it – even if they haven’t seen it. They want it, even if they don’t fully understand what it means yet. We smile at them. We smile at each other. It won’t be quick, but the grandchildren will convince him. And if nothing else, they will outlive him. Either way – change will come. We’ll do what we can do, and we’ll keep talking, keep pushing. We’re giving the garden a chance.

Our metaphor can’t change the world or solve our problem. It’s not a tool for drawing up legislation or creating global change. But it allows us to see what we can agree on – right now – and what we can and cannot do.

The metaphor transforms the situation, shrinks it down to a size we can handle. It becomes an idea we can wrap our heads around. We cannot possibly imagine what it means for the planet to become uninhabitable, little by little, over years and years and years. But we can imagine the devastation of losing a beloved garden. Of seeing our neighbours starve because they can no longer grow their vegetables out back and their finances aren’t as healthy as ours.

We cannot fully see our individual roles in these geopolitical nightmares, but we would judge ourselves for not trying to save the garden. We can imagine how bad it would feel to sit idly by, and not admit the experts were right until it was too late. We can agree to accept some discomfort in order to save something we truly love. We can agree it would be worth a go. In this space, you and I have found common ground.

Perhaps you feel this is an over-simplification. The death of a garden isn't comparable to the global destruction we see. Perhaps you feel metaphors and allegories are dishonest. Ways of avoiding the complexities and challenges we're facing. And I don't blame you. We trick ourselves with language all the time. We cloak our meaning in euphemisms. We try to make the uncomfortable, the human and the dirty into something palatable and clean by twisting our words. Instead of looking straight at the truth, we look around it.

"Grandma passed away," we say, because "died" makes it sound so definite. But it is definite. "We're letting you go," we tell the employee, because it sounds more like a kindness than, "You're fired." But the action is the same. Euphemisms let us bypass the truth – let us stay out of its revealing light, and make it less uncomfortable.

Responsibly wielded metaphors do the opposite. They make us look past the clutter and zoom in on the truth – or parts of it. They help us test our assumptions to see if they're right.

A good metaphor gives us a map for looking at the truth together. It lets us bypass the baggage and noise we carry, and see ourselves in a new light. The allegories are spaces we enter. We can stay inside them as long as there are lessons to learn. When they're no longer useful, we can leave them behind, but take with us what we needed to see.

Metaphors crumble when you stretch them too far, or when you use them dishonestly. No metaphor holds up to every question or intense scrutiny – they are the maps, not the landscape itself. If a metaphor wasn't made in good faith to begin with, it will start to crack at even casual inspection.

Our neighbour might say: "Imagine there's a car that all of us share. You use it four times as often as I do, and now it has a problem. Is it fair that I should pay the same for repairs as you?" If we don't take a moment to look at it, this metaphor and the metaphor of the garden may seem exactly the same. But unlike the garden, the car can have its parts replaced. Unlike the garden, the car itself can be replaced. Unlike the garden, the car is not home to myriads of other life forms whose wellbeing is dependent on the choices we make. Unlike the car repair, saving the garden is not just a practical question of money.

Even the best metaphor can't contain every nuance. Unlike a garden, our planet is the only one we've got. But you and I – right here, right now – we need a space where we can hear each other and find common ground. We don't need a spreadsheet for carrying out complicated calculations of blame, guilt, consequence and profit. We just need somewhere truth isn't buried under our expectations of each other. Somewhere truth can stretch its legs and roll the stiffness out of its shoulders.

A metaphor is a powerful thing. It helps us look past each other's clutter and down to our humanity. It helps us dig through complex issues until we arrive at their simplest truths. Down there, we hear each other's songs and see the light that shines in everyone. There, we are equals. There, we are at peace.

The truth waits for us in the garden.

To be notified when the fully illustrated version with additional texts is available, or to hear some of the texts read by the author, see:

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