WHEN THE 2015 PARIS ACCORDS WERE ratified and became law a short time ago, U.N. climate chief Patricia Espinosa and Moroccan Foreign Minister Salaheddine Mezouar said in a joint statement, “Humanity will look back on November 4, 2016, as the day that countries of the world shut the door on inevitable climate disaster.” Perhaps this will be the judgment of history on our generation. Perhaps that judgment will be less generous in view of how much more could have been done between Kyoto in 1992 and Paris twenty-four years later. Too many Hamlets have been at the helm of political leadership; too many citizens have not been able to see any alternative to the political impasse. In any case, the hour is so late that candor requires talking about a less bad future rather than a better one.

How much less bad? What contribution will the people of the United States make to determining how bad it is? Powerful people and institutions want to change the subject rather than change the economy. Much in the political turmoil and clamor that is coming in the Trump years will attempt to distract us from this question. We should not let that happen. The onus is not on the government really, but on the responsible party named in the preamble to the Constitution: “We the People of the United States.” That would be us, and, yes, I do mean all of us, despite all the injustice and inequality that divides America in other ways. The climate responsibility of We the People, the moral responsibility that crosses borders of place and generation, can and should have a keystone function in our civic ecosystem. It is the needle of the moral compass of our thought and action. We must pay more attention to where that needle is pointing. Simone Weil said, “The capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle.” It won’t be easy, this act of paying attention to a suffering future and biosphere; it never is.

On November 8, 2016, the American electorate shut the door on leaders who might have taken the Paris accords to heart. As I write this, odds are that the government of the United States intends to take the American people and go AWOL in the fight against global warming and climate change. Officially the United States cannot withdraw from the Paris agreement for at least four years, but President Trump has made it clear—indeed, made a promise to his supporters—that U.S. policy will be such that we will not meet our pledged emission reductions. There is a difference between a people and a government. Only tyrannies erase that difference. In a free society, if a government chooses to ignore important responsibilities in the use of its power and authority, that does not mean that a people must do likewise.

Perhaps it is time to take “think globally, act locally” out of the cliché bin and polish it up. Suggested in the work of town planner Patrick Geddes and much later given currency by René Dubos and David Brower, the slogan was a clarion call of ecological and moral imagination, urging us to see and care in new ways, to understand and emphasize more broadly. It admonished us to go beyond the limits of our own individual lives, nationalities, and ethnicities, so as to affirm our common membership in the great community of life. At the same time, it was a call to attend and abide in practice on our home soil, to be emplaced
Moreover, thinking globally and acting locally recognizes the fact that environmental protection—the phrase sounds a bit anemic now in the face of climate change, biodiversity loss, and Anthropocene responsibility—is a global problem, but one that ordinary citizens can address by making efforts in their local communities. This is a pertinent reminder for today also. The end run below the national government by We the People is not only about institutional networks and coalitions, as crucial as an institutional response is. It is also about eco-civic action by individuals in communities and families. It is about reformation in our personal ways of living and in our private habits of the heart.

As economists will tell us, the logic of collective action says that unilateral change initiatives by individuals—that is to say, acts of courage and vision—are futile and self-sacrificial. If castles in the air are not what is needed, neither are beaux gestes. Structural incentives, like a carbon tax, are the key. Well, yes and no. Structural incentives are necessary but not sufficient. Unless they arise impersonally out of technological innovation or shifts in market demand, they must be deliberately planned and implemented, and that is most effectively done at a nation-
al level, and with many nations acting in coordination and concert. This is precisely our current dilemma, since political support for such national governance in America is temporarily lacking. Of course, other nations in coalition may move forward without us, but ultimately the American economy must be part of a global solution. It is too big to drop out.

Equally troubling, this way of thinking is flawed because it is premised on self-interested rationalism and very limited benevolence—assumptions that grossly underestimate the actual possibilities of civic motivation and agency. It places its bet on private consumptive vice to produce public climate virtue. Not only is it waiting for a horse that will never come in, it is at the wrong racetrack altogether.

Telling people that only re-structuring incentives and markets at the national level will work does have the effect of letting individual citizens off the hook. This narrative reinforces what might be called the tyranny of no alternatives.\(^5\) It reinforces the tendency of individuals to feel powerless and overwhelmed, and it gives people a rationalization for inaction. This is as insidious in its own way as climate change denial and the well-orchestrated and funded misinformation campaigns that support it.\(^6\) Defeatism and civic surrender come from a failure of political imagination and an inability to see what is right under our noses precisely because it is so ordinary and so close at hand. We have acquired the bad habit of expecting solutions from experts above us, vertical expertise, and have unduly discounted the horizontal wisdom of fellow citizens that surrounds most people in most places.

We ask ourselves, What can I do? We should ask, What can I do in concert with others? Not only in collective concert with millions of others, such as the Climate Action March in 2014, but also in personal concert with scores or hundreds of friends and neighbors. These are local actions tailored to local needs and conditions. Concrete examples are near at hand and plentiful. Change local building codes to require that all new building and renovations utilize highly energy efficient materials and systems. Amend regulations to facilitate conversion to renewable energy technologies and set up financing mechanisms that make their adoption affordable. Reduce automobile dependency through zoning that promotes close proximity between residential units, public transportation hubs, and commercial services. Take back the streets for safe, pleasant walking and cycling. Preserve wetlands and provide migration corridors. Decrease the mass of the waste stream and increase recycling. These are small changes within local and personal reach, big ideas scaled down to the dimensions of everyday civic life.

How can we break out of the tyranny of no alternatives? The time does not seem propitious, yet doing so is now more important than ever. I believe that the antidote to feeling powerless and stuck lies in several important ideals and practices, namely, civic learning, civic solidarity, equality of mutual civic respect, and civic empowerment. I will define what I mean by this in a moment. The reach of the tyranny of no alternatives is much broader than ecological issues, of course. It infects most areas of econom-
ic and social injustice in our neoliberal age. But in the environmental domain, a countervailing push back against this tyranny and an answering response to it lie in an eco-communitarian vision coupled with an eco-civic action strategy.

Democracy holds that law and policy should be based on the majority consent of the governed. But civic democracy—the kind of democracy to which the United States has traditionally aspired, but not always fulfilled—is more demanding. It requires informed public consent, a collective agreement to pursue the public interest and justice. Consent that is truly informed and public relies on the capability of citizens to focus on how interests they all share can be defined and fulfilled as common purposes. And it requires their ability and willingness to understand what such interests mean through mutual dialogue with others. This is what I meant by the adjective “civic” when I spoke before about civic learning, civic solidarity, civic respect, and civic empowerment.

These capabilities do not just happen, and where they exist, they should not be taken for granted. They must be supported and nurtured. Some doubt that a sense of common purpose can be achieved in a diverse, pluralistic society. I believe that it is precisely in a pluralistic society that civic capacity building is not only possible, but necessary. Pluralistic societies that lose an overriding sense of public or shared purpose undermine their own stability and their democratic future.

Civic capabilities are the product of our major learning systems—educational institutions, electoral and policy debates, news sources, books and periodicals, and structures of communication, from the mass and social media to local community meetings. But these learning systems themselves must appreciate the civic function they provide and value it. Today our learning systems have other self-images and agendas—branding, market share, amassing celebrity capital. It seems clear from the current fragmentation of our discourse and our politics, that these systems are part of the problem, not the solution. The state of civic learning today is not healthy. What is undermining it? How can it be revitalized? What might a just and resilient civic democracy mean in America today?

I think that we must work to rehabilitate three things that are in disrepair: First, we need to articulate an accessible language of shared purpose—a vocabulary that gives voice to values that today go unheard and unheeded. Next, we need to be more open to innovation and devise experimental practices to build more democratically empowered public spheres for ecological governance at the local level—communities of conservation. And finally, we need to develop a support system for solidarity and knowledge exchange in communities across the country—a network of civic learning.

I say “rehabilitate” because robust civic ideals and values, and institutions of deliberative governance and learning, do not have to be crafted out of whole cloth. A civic renewal movement and network have been building for decades at the local level—communities of conservation. And finally, we need to develop a support system for solidarity and knowledge exchange in communities across the country—a network of civic learning.
young leaders are turning their attention again to more modest wells, where the waters of change are not so dark and bitter.

Cultural framing and social power set the terms and possibilities of civic learning. They inform the convictions and contentments that individuals pursue in their everyday lives. But frames are changeable and power is fluid. America’s capacity for practical and institutional civic learning determines how wide a gap there will be between its normative ideals and its actual practices. With civic learning that gap will narrow; without it, in a time of disagreement and conflict-generating communications and worldviews, the gap will widen. Indeed, at such times the content of those normative ideals—freedom, equality, justice, and mutual respect and care—may itself erode and morally degrade, as when freedom becomes exclusionary or when mutuality embraces only those who are alike.

Indeed, one gets the sense that there are deep factors in American political culture that are threatening traditional civic ideals. The outcroppings of these underlying factors are readily apparent: partisan political paralysis, loss of trust and confidence, and an extreme ideological indifference, widespread among officials and citizens alike, to the public interest when it comes to law or policy. For some time now, the sense of public purpose in our politics, our governance, and our public discourse has been eroding. Authority, as Hannah Arendt once remarked, is “leaking” from our institutions, drop by drop. One might say the same thing about civility and mutual respect. As authority leaks out, alienation seeps in.

Perhaps one aspect of the problem lies in the very short attention span fostered by mass and social media. Civic learning requires a certain duration and continuity of attention, during which progressively developed and complex information is assimilated. There is a dearth of civic forum opportunities to engage in serious public or civic discourse, which is the only kind of discourse that will lead us toward a sense of common purpose.

It is sometimes said that the solution is to reach larger audiences with the right content, such as accurate information about climate change and feasible approaches to converting our energy systems and conserving natural carbon sinks, for example. But larger audiences will not help unless they are made up of viewers or listeners who bring to the information a civic disposition and mentality. Without that, even accurate information may backfire and result in greater mistrust and resentment rather than enhanced understanding. To achieve a better outcome from our outreach, we need to reach citizens who have the capacity to invest a critical, thoughtful, open attentiveness to the grave ecological challenges before us. Directing attention at ecological responsibilities without also building attentiveness regarding them is not enough.

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If this capacity is scarce, it can be made more prevalent via civic innovation practices. The critical attentiveness of which I speak comes from direct life experience and the experience of participatory and deliberative civic engagement. Activity in projects of environmental conservation or restoration is civic as well as biophilic. Urban and
social project activities can also help people develop the dispositions to see interdependence and shared values. These dispositions redound to the benefit of both eco-civicmindedness and commitment to social justice.

We need to increase the flow of civic messages and discourse before we can increase people’s civic attention span and transform attention into attentiveness. Such discourse production requires support and an infrastructure of its own. It requires expensive and time-consuming research and preparation, as well as multiple venues of learning communities engaged in critical examination and debate. One would think that universities and private research institutes might serve eco-civic goals in this way, but the former seem reluctant to engage and the latter have for the most part positioned themselves to engage in the partisan activity of offering controversy-generating content rather than consensus-building content.

This is both a political and a moral mistake. If we are aiming at consensus-generating discourse, then we can’t view our own preferred discourse merely strategically or instrumentally as a weapon in a competitive struggle of will and power. The slide into this mindset of politics as competitive advantage and bargaining—the art of the deal, as it were—must find a countervailing resistance in the form of another politics, a discursive, dialogic politics of listening, mutual respect, and common sense—that is to say, a sense of what we have in common.

I have drawn a distinction between conflict-generating and consensus-generating discourse and noted a critical shortage of the latter. That may seem inconsistent with my support for critical attentiveness, but it is not. The problem is not disagreement per se; reasoned disagreement is essential to any kind of learning, including civic learning. The problem is the gradual loss of the capacity to disagree constructively; or worse, the unwillingness to engage enough with fellow citizens to truly disagree or debate with them at all. Indifference feeds upon itself and discourages would-be civic participants. As singer-songwriter Rod Stewart put it in his 1981 song “Young Turks,” “there ain’t no point in talking when there’s nobody listening.” Our conflict-generating discourse today is bringing about the death of listening.

The intellectual work needed here is partly restorative and partly innovative. Civic democratic theory and its language of common purpose does not have to be invented afresh; it already resides in a rich and varied intellectual tradition. But the world and the dynamics of civic renewal in American society are not static, and new realities require new moral responses. An important part of the tradition of civic theorizing maintains that theoretical insight and conceptual or moral knowledge must not be divorced from practical experience.

Climate models tell us that we are in trouble, but neither economic models nor general principles of political and moral philosophy will get us out of it. We will have to build the conditions of the future with civic engagement and public work. The future is not determined, and it is not really even yet to come. It is here, in formation among our communities, landscapes, and watersheds. In a moment
of wild politics, we still have domestic common sense to guide us.

This issue of *Minding Nature* contains a special feature we are proud to present. In 2016 the Center for Humans and Nature worked with students at Loyola University in Chicago and students taking part in the Historically Black Colleges and Universities Internship program with the National Park Service, created by the Greening Youth Foundation. Two essays by students from each of these groups are published here, and we fully expect that we will be reading more from these young authors in due time. They address difficult questions about reorienting our economy, the great benefit our national parks provide, and the importance of diversity in the Park Service.

Articles by James Krupa, Alisa Singer, and Kathryn Flinn explore the connections between nature and history. Krupa takes us to the badlands of southern New Mexico in search of a rare animal, the white-sided jackrabbit. The history of conflicts, past and present, pervades the journey, but so does hope. Singer discusses her art, which graces our cover and the article itself. Using factual information about climate change as an element of a visual message about our times, she conveys a kind of knowledge unavailable in other ways. Flinn, a botanist, turns her attention to the fascinating history of the relationship between human greed and ginseng.

Our reviews and reflections contain a rich variety of topics and information. David Lukas, in an excerpt from his new book, uses his naturalist’s eye and attentiveness to remind us of how much is there waiting for us in the familiar landscape of language. Reminding us of the important work of Thomas Berry and the award-winning documentary *Journey of the Universe*, Mary Evelyn Tucker describes a series of Massive Open Online Courses presented from Yale University in 2017. Joyce Munro presents a brief story of early printing efforts by an ancestor of Strachan Donnelley, the founder of the Center for Humans and Nature.

Rounding out the issue, Julia Travers discusses the importance of new approaches in environmental law. Gavin Van Horn reviews *City Wilds: Essays and Stories about Urban Nature*, edited by Terrell F. Dixon. The Last Word finds Michael Jawer reflecting on animal souls.


NOTES
3. S.R. Weart, *The Discovery of Global Warming*, Revised and Expanded Edition, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). A personal footnote to this history: my wife, Margaret Jennings, a software engineer, worked from 1972 to 1977 at the NOAA Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory at Princeton University. Many of the scientists she knew there were working on global climate modeling. The greenhouse gas effect on atmospheric warming and oceanographic changes was well recognized.
5. I paraphrase a notion taken from Brazilian social theorist Roberto Mangabeira Unger, who refers to the “dictatorship of no alternatives.” See *The Left Alternative* (London: Verso, 2009). In the 1980s,
Margaret Thatcher used the slogan, "There is No Alternative," to promote her government’s policies of market de-regulation and privatization.


7. For a study of this movement in the 1990s, see C. Sirianni and L. Friedland, Civic Innovation in America, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). I was recently informed by an administrator who works closely with graduating students at Yale Law School that interest in jobs in Washington, DC has fallen off markedly in favor of NGOs and agencies operating at the state and local levels, where it is perceived there is a greater likelihood of being able to make a difference.