



Young People and the Climate Emergency

Young People are a revolutionary force and have been at the forefront of many important social movements. Youth are playing a vital role in the climate movement today. Ending the oppression of younger people is crucial to creating the massive, broad-based movement we need to stop the degradation of our environment and end the climate emergency.

The oppression of young people and young adults stops adults from taking the leadership of younger people seriously. Unchallenged, it leaves many younger people with the incorrect idea that we are not smart or powerful. You can see the oppression in many school systems, where young people are told what to do at all times and given little space to take leadership or explore their own interests.

Despite the oppression, young people and young adults have led

many environmental and social-justice movements. Young people have had less time to accumulate discouraged feelings and can often remember human beings' inherent connection to nature and to other humans. One can see this with young children—they are curious about the natural world and the people in it and they want to take action when they see something that is not right.

Every person in the world either is a young person or was once a young person. This means that all of us have felt the effects of young people's oppression. We can heal from the hurts, take our ideas seriously, and leave behind any discouragement or hopelessness about the climate emergency. It might be hard to do this, because when we tried as young people we were teased or ignored by the adults around us. However, by sharing our stories with one another, releasing



the painful emotions, and taking action together, we can recover from the hurts.

Many older people have accumulated feelings of discouragement about making the wide, sweeping changes needed to limit the destruction of the environment. Adults who have given up on fighting environmental destruction and the climate emergency often see younger people as “the last hope.” At the same time, young people and young

adults are not considered completely intelligent and capable and therefore not fully supported in our climate leadership. Adults need to fully support the leadership of young people and young adults, while working on their own initiatives in regard to the environment.

We all need to heal from the effects of the oppression of younger people to be able to create a united movement to end the climate emergency and restore



Sustaining All Life (SAL) is an international grassroots organization working to end the climate emergency within the context of ending all divisions among people. *United to End Racism* (UER) consists of a wide diversity of people in many different countries, who are dedicated to eliminating racism in the world and supporting the efforts of all other groups with this goal. UER and SAL are projects of and use the tools of Re-evaluation Counseling. Re-evaluation Counseling (RC) is a well-defined theory and practice that helps people of all ages and backgrounds exchange effective help with each other in order to free themselves from emotional harm resulting from oppression and other hurts. By taking turns listening to each other and encouraging the release of painful emotions, people can heal old hurts and become better able to think, to speak out, and to organize and lead others in building a world in which human beings and other life forms are valued and the environment is restored and preserved. Re-evaluation Counseling currently exists in 95 countries.



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the environment. This is not quick or easy work. Many of us resist emotional work. We may think there isn't time to do it. We may feel that we have been able to succeed in life only by not showing anyone how much we've been hurt. We may feel ashamed of or embarrassed by our feelings. We may have survived by numbing ourselves to the hurts we carry and by assuming we will never be free of it. We may feel it would be unbearable to look at and to feel those feelings again. Perhaps this is because we have had no opportunity to tell our stories or have not been treated well when we have tried to tell them.

In *Sustaining All Life* we have learned that it is possible to heal the mental and emotional harm from oppression, and we offer the tools to do this. By releasing distressed feelings about the oppression of younger people in a supportive network, we can grow ever more united, hopeful, thoughtful, joyful, and committed. Supporting young people to heal from the effects of the oppression and supporting their initiative and leadership are vital steps to building a strong environmental movement.





The Work of *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism*

It is possible to limit the effects of human-caused climate change and restore the environment—if we make some very large changes in our economy and the lives we live in the next decade. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* believe the environmental crisis can be resolved only if we by simultaneously address racism, genocide of Indigenous peoples, classism, sexism, and other oppressions. The impact of environmental destruction and climate change falls most heavily on the groups targeted by these oppressions, and on other vulnerable populations (including populations of people who are elderly, disabled, and very young). Making the changes needed will require a massive movement, spanning the globe, of people of every background fighting the effects of both climate change and racism.

In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we believe that the barriers to building a sufficiently large and powerful movement include (1) longstanding divisions (usually caused by oppression, and especially racism and classism) between nations and between groups of people, (2) widespread feelings that it's too late and any actions will be ineffective, (3) denial of or failure to engage with the climate emergency, and (4) difficulties in effectively addressing the connections between the environmental crisis and the failures of our economic system. *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* work to address these and other issues.

The role of oppression

The economic and political forms of our societies demand growth and profit with little regard for people, other life forms, or the earth. This results in exploitation and oppression. Oppressions (such as racism, classism, sexism, and the oppression of young people) target everyone, inflicting tremendous injustices, limiting access to resources, and damaging the lives of billions of people. Once targeted by oppression, we tend to act toward others in ways that repeat the hurts that we have experienced. Much of the mental and emotional harm we experience is the result of this passing on of hurt. Though people are vulnerable to acting in oppressive

ways, oppressive behavior is not inherent, but arises only when a person has been hurt emotionally. Oppressive societies manipulate this vulnerability to establish and maintain economic exploitation.

The importance of healing personal harm

The mental and emotional harm done to us by oppression and other hurtful experiences interferes with our ability to think clearly and sets groups of people against each other. This makes it difficult for us to think about and respond effectively to the climate emergency.

Healing from the hurts that help to hold oppression in place and lead to other harmful behavior is neither quick nor easy work. Many of us resist this personal healing work. We may have survived by numbing ourselves to the harm done to us by oppression. Some of us assume that we will never be free of this harm.

In *Sustaining All Life* and *United to End Racism* we have learned that it is possible to free ourselves from these hurts and address barriers to effective organizing. We can heal from hurtful experiences if someone listens to us attentively and allows and encourages us to release the grief, fear, and other painful emotions. This happens by means of our natural healing processes—talking, crying, trembling, expressing anger, and laughing. By releasing emotional pain in a supportive network, we can stay united, hopeful, thoughtful, joyful, and committed. This in turn strengthens us in building our movements to stop the effects of climate change and racism.



Sustaining All Life



For more information, see:

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