

REWILDING FUTURES: REIMAGINING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE MORE-THAN- HUMAN WORLD

BY DANA KLISANIN

My research in Rewilding Futures began with an unexpected insight during a “rewild your words” workshop on Sherkin Island, located off the southern coast of Ireland. The workshop, led by writer Paul Kingsnorth and artist Caroline Ross, was designed to help writers reconnect with the natural world to support creative expression.

Part of the process involved inviting nature to speak to us and working with nature to create art and artifacts. From the island’s limpets to its seabirds, as I engaged with these processes, a deeper question emerged: What if rewilding could extend beyond words to transform our psyche and how we imagine and shape the future?



Shortly after this experience, the COVID-19 pandemic upended daily life and work routines. I began investigating the *antifragile mindset*, (i.e., how people grow stronger during difficult times and witnessed a global turn toward nature for recreation and solace). This, along with a storytelling workshop under the guidance of Dr. Martin Shaw, intensified my interest in and focus on rewilding ourselves.

In conservation, rewilding means returning denatured areas to their original state. This can include any place – a forest, wetland, prairie or desert.

However, in the workshops I attended, rewilding was used as a sort of shorthand for attuning to nature – creatively. As a transpersonally trained psychologist and futurist, I wondered: What elements of our visioning capacity have been diminished by our disconnection from the more-than-human world? Just as a rewilded landscape flourishes with the return of diverse species in harmony, could a rewilded imagination unlock ways of thinking and being that are more adaptive, creative, and attuned to natural wisdom?

These questions have shaped my ongoing exploration of rewilding, growing into a broader vision for transforming futures through practices that support our reconnection with the more-than-human world.

Rewilding Futures proposes that by reconnecting with nature's intelligence – both outside and within ourselves – we can develop more regenerative ways of envisioning and creating change. This isn't about rejecting structured approaches but rather enriching them with wisdom that emerges from direct engagement with the natural world and actively engaging our imaginations.

Indeed, one of its core insights is that the distinction between “outside” and “inside” reflects a limited worldview. While these terms are practical ways of speaking, they obscure Indigenous, Traditional, and Ancestral ways of knowing that recognize our inseparability from the living world and, ultimately, interdependence (Abram, 1996; Narby, 1999; Kimmerer, 2013). My background as a shamanic practitioner confirms this understanding and informs my exploration of rewilding.


Viewing futures thinking, or anticipatory studies, through a rewilded perspective enables us to see, hear, feel, smell, taste, and intuit possibilities that more conventional approaches may overlook. Natural systems illustrate principles of adaptation, resilience, and regeneration that can guide our thoughts and planning for the future. A forest doesn't merely endure disruption; it innovates, forming new relationships and opportunities.

Following disturbances such as a fire, forests often experience a phase known as “succession,” in which new species and relationships take shape, resulting in a different yet flourishing ecosystem over time. This adaptability makes forests dynamic, fostering new connections among plants, animals, fungi, and microbes. It boosts biodiversity and sometimes results in previously unseen ecological interactions. Accordingly, forests “innovate” by uncovering new balances and opportunities that support life. Similarly, a rewilded imagination opens new avenues to explore alternatives and envision regenerative futures.


To support our ability to access the *biodiversity of our imaginations* – I use a transdisciplinary, multimodal model that draws upon eight knowledge ways/experiences: nature immersion; sensory experiences; ecological storytelling; Indigenous, traditional, ancestral; altered states of consciousness; temporal exploration; expressive arts; and multispecies perspective taking (Klisanin, 2024; Klisanin, in-press).

These eight knowledge ways serve as pathways to expand our cognitive and sensory capacities for envisioning futures. When applied to futures consulting and leadership development, they create transformative experiences that help individuals and organizations transcend conventional thinking patterns. Though these eight knowledge ways are depicted as separate paths, their real strength comes from their combination and interaction – similar to how natural ecosystems flourish through intricate connections. For instance, when expressive arts are combined with ecological storytelling or sensory experiences are integrated with multispecies perspective-taking, new insights, and possibilities emerge that wouldn't be accessible through any single approach.


To provide you more context, I'd like to describe five of the eight knowledge ways:



Nature immersion begins with being outdoors in a natural setting, a workplace garden, a local park, nearby trails, or a more remote environment. Depending on the time frame and objectives, participants may go for a walk, sit quietly, or engage in appreciative observations. Being in nature has health benefits, and many people have positive associations with being outdoors, often from childhood. Leaders who regularly engage in nature immersion often report enhanced well-being and the ability to navigate complexity and uncertainty; some report drawing inspiration from how natural systems maintain balance through constant adaptation.



Sensory experiences and expressive arts are often paired with nature immersion. In workshops, I guide participants through multi-sensory exercises (e.g., touching bark, feeling the breeze, smelling natural scents, listening to nature's sounds, and so forth). Just as being outdoors can stimulate memories, it can also promote future visions. Participants are invited to express their future visions (personal, organizational, etc.) through movement, sound, or other creative means. Such methods enable participants to tap into nonrational ways of knowing.



Ecological storytelling and multispecies perspective-taking enable individuals to deepen their connection with the more-than-human world. Macy's "Work that Reconnects" is a preferred source for entering this work. Speaking as another species – whether a river, a wolf, or a microorganism – helps participants expand their perspectives and increases empathy and compassion.

The remaining knowledge ways – Indigenous, traditional, ancestral wisdom, temporal exploration and altered states of consciousness – each expand our perceptions and frequently lead to heightened creativity, unexpected insights, and feelings of interdependence.

The synergy between these eight knowledge paths supports the rewilding of the imagination, which in turn, empowers and supports leadership in applying insights to personal, organizational, and societal transformation. The multimodal approach can be applied to address complex challenges such as climate change adaptation, sustainable innovation, and organizational resilience.

Many of these approaches are being explored by futurists under a variety of terms, with women practitioners increasingly bringing fresh perspectives to the field.

In a recent conversation, futurist Alexis Tennent shared about an outdoors workshop series, "Futuring With Nature," that she and colleagues Shaun Alphonso and Joanne Renaux, conducted. The workshop series explored "emergence and signals of change through artmaking and relationship with nature." In another discussion with futurist Willow Pryor, she shared her current focus on "Wild Feminine Futures." These contributions highlight a growing movement of practitioners exploring the intersection between futures and nature-based methodologies. This aligns with broader societal trends towards regenerative practices.

These nature-dependent approaches are crucial as we face unprecedented global challenges. Climate change, biodiversity loss, and social fragmentation are symptoms of a profound disconnection from nature, from each other, and from our own capacity to imagine different ways of being. When we reconnect with the wild — both in nature and in our own psyche — we access ways of knowing that can help us envision futures as diverse, interconnected, and regenerative as natural ecosystems. Direct engagement with the natural world allows us to understand future possibilities through our senses and lived experiences. This expanded way of knowing can help us move beyond "defuturing" and actions that diminish our capacity to create viable futures (Fry, 2009) toward approaches that actively regenerate our ability to imagine and create positive change.

The practice of rewilding ourselves transforms how we perceive our relationship with the more-than-human world, which in turn transforms our imaginations and how we "do futures." As we navigate the complexities of our time, this renewed relationship can enliven our ability to envision and create futures as resilient, diverse, and symbiotic as nature itself.

REFERENCES

- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous*. Vintage Books.
- Fry, T. (2009). *Design Futuring: Sustainability ethics and new practice*. Berg.
- Kimmerer, R. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge, and teachings of plants*. Milkweed.
- Klisanin, D. (September, 2024). Rewilding imaginations for regenerative futures. *Anticipation Conference*. Lancaster, UK.
- Klisanin, D. (in-review). Rewilding the Imagination for Regenerative Futures. *World Futures Review*.
- Narby, J. (1999). *The cosmic serpent: DNA and the origins of knowledge*. Tarcher.



Dana Klisanin

Dana Klisanin, Ph.D., founder of Rewilding: Lab and one of Forbes' "50 Leading Female Futurists," is a visionary psychologist working with nature, storytelling, the arts, and design to inspire creativity and rejuvenate the minds of today's leaders and workforce. Her work fosters well-being, corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and regenerative possibilities for our world. Dr. Klisanin's innovative work has earned recognition from the World Futures Studies Federation and the American Psychological Association, and her insights have been featured in prominent media outlets such as BBC, TIME, and Fast Company. In addition to her professional work, Dr. Klisanin is the author of the Chronicles of G.A.I.A., a sci-fi series for youth that introduces anticipatory thinking and inspires environmental action.