

## Editorial

# Metaphor, Hospicing, and the Work of Doing Otherwise

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For half a decade now, the Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change (JASC) has sought to accompany the deep, hopeful, and, at times, dissonant work of making visible, naming, and embodying emerging alternatives to dominant paradigms of knowing, doing, being, and becoming. There is both joy and also a particular discomfort—an edge—that accompanies the act of editorial writing. It is not merely about finding language to introduce a set of texts. It is the deeper struggle of meeting the moment, of offering words that do not merely describe but also invite, and of facing the tension between speaking from somewhere while speaking in ways that remain invitational to those whose somewhere is not our own. To be accessible without becoming formless; to hold a position without constraining difference—this is the work.

And yet, even as we write, we feel the subtle currents pulling in different directions. One pull moves toward clarity, toward language that can meet the practitioner's hand, the urgency of action, and the concrete, palpable impact that results in meaningful change for many, not just some privileged few. Another draws us toward the porous, the experimental, the slow work of inquiry that resists capture and refuses to translate itself too quickly into the grammars of productivity or use. Between them lies a space of friction: the field of awareness-based systems change itself stretches between the wish to be of service to what is happening on the ground and the knowing that service sometimes asks for surrender—listening, dwelling, or even hospicing the very habits of knowing that keep us from sensing and doing differently (Machado de Oliveira, 2025).

There are moments when these pulls feel almost irreconcilable: the desire to be legible and the need to stay faithful to what is emergent; the wish to speak plainly to a world in crisis and the recognition that our words and actions must themselves transform if they are to disclose anything new. In our work, we try to see these currents not as opposing camps but as living tensions or polarities—movements within us and between us—reminding us that every act of writing, every act of sense-making, is also an act of ambivalent positioning within a field still finding its shape.

## Speaking Truth With Love From Within Crisis

To speak truthfully within such conditions calls for a particular type of courage—what Michel Foucault (2001) referred to in relation to the Greek concept of *parrhesia*: frank and risky speech. More precisely, *parrhesia* is a practice in which the speaker “expresses their personal relationship to truth, and risks their life because they recognize truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as themselves)” (Foucault, 2001, p. 19). To write in this spirit is to risk being misunderstood—and yet to speak nonetheless—from care: for truth, for the world, and for one another.

Such truth-telling, as Hannah Arendt (1958/98) observed, takes place in the spaces in-between—the web of human relations where we appear to one another “through words and deeds” (p. 198). When the shared world loses its “power of illumination” (Arendt, 1955/1968, p. 4), when retreat replaces relation, something vital is lost, because “with each such retreat an almost demonstrable loss to the world takes place; what is lost is the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have formed between this individual and his fellow men” (p. 4–5). Losing this in-between allows us to drift toward isolation. Against this drift, Arendt (1955/1968) offers the practice of vigilant partiality—to remain awake to the world, to think about what we are doing, and to take up a position. It is a commitment to remain in relation, to sustain the shared space of discourse that allows plurality—and the possibility of a common world—to endure.

This vigilance feels especially needed now. The broader planetary context is one marked by intensification. Carbon dioxide concentrations have reached historic highs, accelerating the already critical pace of ecological destabilization (World Meteorological Organization, 2025). In parallel, we witness a resurgence of remilitarization and hardening geopolitics. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2025) reports that global military expenditure reached an unprecedented \$2.718 billion in 2024, marking the steepest year-on-year increase since the end of the Cold War. Recent announcements (in October 2025)—such as the United States’ intent to resume nuclear testing—evoke both past trauma and future risk. Social systems strained by pandemic-induced overspending now face renewed austerity pressures, with public spending on health, education, care, food, and climate protection giving way to militarized budgets and nationalist priorities (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2025).

Amid these fractures, many speak of a deepening ontological crisis—a loss not only of political direction but of felt coherence and shared ground. Recent analyses warn that even in long-established democracies, complacency is paving the way for backsliding. As Lewandowsky & Hertwig (2025) state, “information abundance can be detrimental to democracy,” (p. 1) because when people are “rushed and overwhelmed,” (p. 2) their ability to differentiate between true and false information decreases. Drawing on the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) dataset, Nord et al. (2025) find that global levels of liberal democracy have fallen back to those of 1985, with freedom of expression deteriorating in nearly a quarter of all countries and rising polarization and disinformation marking a new peak in twenty-five years.

For Arendt, such speaking truthfully is rooted in what she called *amor mundi*—love of the world (Zuurmond, 2016). This is not the unworldly passion that dissolves distance between people, but a worldly and political love that keeps difference alive so that plurality can exist. *Amor mundi* is the ground of action: to love the world in this sense is to take responsibility for it—to act, to speak, to create conditions in which new beginnings remain possible. It is to remain inside its complexity: to speak with care even when words feel inadequate, to act while knowing the limits of what can be known. In dark times, Arendt (1955/1968) reminds us, the task is to stay awake to what is happening and to think through what we are doing. Yet such vigilance asks for more than critique; it calls for presence—a willingness to meet the world as it is and to tend to what might yet become.

It is from this stance—of partiality, of staying with the world rather than withdrawing from it—that many of the contributions gathered in this issue speak.

## Practices of Reconciliation and the Work of Doing Otherwise

In a sense, the pieces collated in this issue respond directly to the very tensions we named at the outset—the pull toward clarity and the pull toward depth, the urgency to act and the necessity to dwell. Each contribution, in a different way, shows that reconciliation does not mean that difference needs to be erased, but rather the ability to remain in relation while difference persists. All of the featured works grow from practice, and they return to practice. They are written from within movement—be it artistic, pedagogical, ecological, or communal—and each one turns reflection back into action. What we see in these contributions is a deep desire for a kind of *doing otherwise* (Akómoláfé, 2017), arising from an attunement to other ways of being and becoming. Such attunement, Meek and Morales Fontanilla (2022) write, calls for “an ‘intensification’ of the possible within situated practices and relations” (p. 278)—a speculative gesture that does not merely explain but “augments, validates, dwells, intensifies, insists upon, potentiates, opens up, and activates.” (p. 278)

The movement of these pieces is cyclical rather than linear. Practice becomes inquiry; inquiry becomes practice. Transformation does not yet fully manifest itself but offers a first glimpse of a deepening of awareness, a reorientation of how one meets the world. There is a certain earnestness here that we sense—a willingness to remain with the trouble, in Haraway's sense (2016), and a perseverance to inhabit complexity over time.

If reconciliation, as these works suggest, is a practice of staying in relation, then it also calls for attentiveness to the spaces between—those interstitial zones where dominant and emergent systems, old and new worlds, meet, overlap, and at times collide. Several authors in this issue write precisely from within such thresholds. Their work, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, seeks to move beyond the notion of a *third way*. They refrain from attempting to merge systems into some new epistemic hybrid, choosing instead to honor the distinctiveness of traditions—including the historical, social, and embodied commitments from which they emerge—while bringing them into conversation.

In their Berkana Model, Wheatley and Frieze (2006) describe dominant and emergent systems as existing in a continual movement, one ebbing as another begins to coalesce. Such a dynamic flow demands practices that can both accompany and unsettle—for which Machado de Oliveira (2021) and Akómoláfé (2017) offer the metaphorical concepts of *hospicing* and *fugitivity*. Fugitivity here can be understood as a form of refusal—a conscious turning away from the logics of extraction and mastery that underlie much of modern epistemic life. Hospicing, in turn, asks what it means to accompany what is ending with care, without rushing to replace it. Functioning as a metaphorical pair, they open a field of praxis in which the work is neither to preserve the old nor to proclaim the new, but—as Machado de Oliveira (2025) uses as her book title—to navigate *complexity, complicity, and collapse with accountability and compassion*.

## Metaphor as Relational Method

To dwell in such liminal work thus also asks for a language that can move otherwise. Several of the authors gathered in this issue turn to metaphor as a way of sensing and navigating across systems and epistemic boundaries without collapsing them. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) write,

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think we can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language, but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. (p. 3)

This quality is particularly important given the pluriversal character of the work assembled here. Many of the metaphors in this issue—braiding, fugitivity, fermentation, hospicing—have roots in Indigenous knowledge traditions, which, in recent years, have gained renewed attention on the global stage, particularly in discussions of sustainability and systems transformation.

Indigenous traditions, as Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) note, offer pathways for “the restoration of complexity and connectedness to entropic socioenvironmental landscapes” (p. 7). Yet this engagement demands a shift in how knowledge is approached and enacted. Yunkaporta and Shillingsworth (2020) articulate this through the concept of *relational responsiveness*: to engage meaningfully with cultural metaphors is to enter into obligation—one that is shaped by situated relations to land, law, people, and practice. “Your intellectual process in relationally responsive standpoints,” they write,

involves engaging with and negotiating cultural metaphors that can express, structure and inspire thinking and learning processes.

Cultural metaphors are the tools we have been given to know and therefore sustain creation. The structured manipulation of words, images, actions and objects that carry additional layers of meaning is the way we co-create systems and events within the spiritual fabric of existence which is Dreaming. (Yunkaporta & Shillingsworth, 2020, p. 7).

Within a relational responsive standpoint, this layered intelligibility matters. It follows from the nature of relation itself. To think metaphorically is to stay with this groundedness—to attend to how language, world, and ways of valuing are made through one another.

This refusal to seek clarity at the cost of complexity also shapes Vanessa Machado de Oliveira’s articulation of *stacked metaphors*, the constellation of layered images and concepts that resist resolution into singular meaning. These, she writes, are meant to unsettle “the way we’ve been conditioned to crave simple, clear, and logical explanations of reality” (2025, p. 7). The metaphor carries epistemic friction: “Reality is far messier than that,” she continues, “always in flux, multilayered, and far beyond the limits of any system or framework we try to impose on it.” (p. 7). In this view, stacked metaphors are methodologically disruptive; they expose the expectations of coherence and offer a means of staying with what cannot be resolved.

What runs through the varied uses of metaphor in this issue is a shared attentiveness to how it functions not simply as a means of expression, but as a site of *reworlding* and *relational labor*. Metaphor allows knowledge to remain unsettled, grounded in context-specific engagements and responsive to the demands of place. Meaning emerges in relation—through encounter, through friction, through situated acts of sense-making. To work with metaphor in this way is to take care with the conditions of understanding, to move without

seeking closure, to hold open spaces in which forms of a future that have not yet taken shape can stay open just a little bit longer.

To work in this way is not comfortable. It requires a willingness to remain with the complexity that difference generates. It asks for a form of attention that is ethical, affective, and embodied. In the context of this issue, we invite you to stay with the difficult work of doing otherwise—not through breaking away, but through shifts in how continuity is held; not through control, but through careful attention. What follows in this issue, in the varied contributions, are examples of how we are shaped by relation and how meaning forms in movement. What grows here depends on how we attend to it.

## Contributions to this Issue

For this issue's *Commentary from the Field*, we feature a tribute to John O'Brien—visionary thinker, quiet catalyst, and one of the foundational figures in person-centered planning for people with disabilities. In *A Tribute to John O'Brien: Weaving Lives of Possibility*, Dave Hasbury, Lynda Kahn, Oliver Koenig, Beth Mount, Jack Pearpoint, and Patti Scott—long-time collaborators and companions in practice—come together to honor John's presence and influence on person-centered work and the wider struggle for lives of dignity and interdependence (Hasbury et al., 2025). Woven across six different braids, and patterned through John's own metaphors—the spiral, the edge, the star, the crack, the circle—the tribute reflects on decades of shared work through memories, images, and transformative developments John helped co-shape. John's lifelong quest is portrayed as an invitation to listen more carefully, to act with greater care, and to remain with the questions that continue to matter.

This issue features six peer-reviewed articles. We open with *Where, Who, When in Systems Change: Using an Indigenous Knowledge Systems Approach for Perspective on Systems Change* by Amara Bains and John Davis (Bains & Davis, 2025). Grounded in the authors' long-standing practice in systems transformation, the article offers a deep provocation to those seeking to engage with Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in non-tokenistic ways. Rather than positioning IKS and complexity science within a dialectical third space, the authors propose a culturally governed co-inquiry space—*duwur*—as a grounded entry point for ethical collaboration. Moving through protocols of yarning circles and guided relational frameworks, they describe a *kolab* process that makes space for different knowledge systems to meet without subsuming one into the other. Their articulation of systems change is rooted in Indigenous principles, practices, and metaphor as ontology, which surface tacit knowing and challenge Western linearity, calling attention to time, place, and accountability as prerequisites for emergence. The work draws attention to how understanding is made through embodied relation and the patterns held in community and country, offering a powerful framework for changemakers committed to intergenerational justice and decolonial practice.

The second article in this issue, *Dancing Otherwise: New Assemblages for Pluriversal Practices* by Victoria Hunter, Daniela Perazzo, and Michelle Elliott, offers an embodied exploration of how dance can serve as a mode of inquiry into pluriversal, more-than-human, and relational world-making (Hunter et al., 2025). Emerging from the AHRC-funded research network *Dancing Otherwise*, the article reflects on a series of choreographed events, workshops, and dialogues that brought together dance practitioners, researchers, and publics to examine the systemic conditions shaping dance research in the UK. With care and attentiveness, the authors articulate how movement-based practices can expose inherited patterns of exclusion and hierarchy, while gesturing toward more horizontal, attentive, and plurivocal ways of organizing knowledge. The article invites readers into a porous, reflexive process that engages dissent, ambiguity, and mutual learning. Through dancing, listening, improvising, and co-curating, the network modelled alternative modes of research as relational and responsive. Informed by a critical reading of power, ecology, and positionality, the work situates dance as a radical site of sense-making, one capable of tracing and enacting pathways toward ethical pluralism, systemic attentiveness, and reimagined ecologies of practice.

Ranjan Datta's article, *You Will Never Be Enough in a Settler Colonial System: Reclaiming Land-Based Identity as Decolonial Healing and Responsibility*, offers a reflective account of the author's use of story-sharing as a methodology to trace how settler-colonial educational, immigration, and governance systems recurrently sever land-based identities in favor of individualized *I-selves* rooted in Eurocentric logics (Datta, 2025). Drawing on lived experience from Bangladesh to Canada, the paper frames land-based identity as relational knowledge, ceremony, and responsibility to more-than-human kin. It argues that reclaiming such identity is simultaneously healing and political, enmeshed in acts of relational accountability, ceremonial practice, and radical responsibility. Throughout the paper, the author unsettles assumed hierarchies of knowing, shows how colonial systems perpetuate the message "you are not enough," and offers story-sharing itself as method and praxis for decolonial transformation.

The fourth article, *Cabbage, Curation and the Convivial: Relational Systems Change through Artist Residencies, Sympoietic Rituals and Liberatory Practices*, by Miche Fabre Lewin, Flora Gathorne-Hardy, and Rika Preiser, draws on a three-week artist research residency held in early 2024 in Stellenbosch, South Africa (Fabre Lewin et al., 2025). Hosted by Living Justice in collaboration with the Centre for the Study of the Afterlife of Violence and the Reparative Quest, the Centre for Sustainability Transitions, and the Stellenbosch University Museum, the residency centered around a participatory cabbage fermentation ritual as a practice of ecological and cultural repair. Engaging researchers, artists, activists, chefs, growers, and curators, the work explores how relational systems change can be cultivated through arts-based inquiry, food ritual, and sensory co-creation. The article offers three intertwined contributions: curating the convivial as an aesthetic of care; ritual as a liberatory praxis that enacts

relational sovereignty; and the artist residency as a responsive habitat for situated, sympoietic transformation. With *sympoietic transformation*—a term drawn from Haraway (2016) and extended by Fabre Lewin—the authors refer to a process of co-creation that is rooted in interdependence, mutual shaping, and ethical attunement to the more-than-human world. Through the embodied and material poetics of fermentation, this work affirms how transformative change can emerge not from control or intervention, but from shared gestures of care, presence, and becoming-with.

The fifth peer-reviewed contribution, *Cybernetic Lookbooks: An Emerging Visual Approach for Organizational Understanding* by Lorenn Ruster (2025), brings visual method and diagramming practices into conversation with cybernetics and systems change in the context of the development of responsible AI. Developed through intervention research with two early-stage startups and one responsible technology ecosystem builder, Ruster adapts the fashion-industry concept of the lookbook to the organizational field and proposes the cybernetic lookbook as a way to surface and make sense of organizational dynamics. Drawing on cybernetic concepts such as feedback loops, scales, thresholds, and leverage points, these lookbooks bring together visual artefacts created and iterated in participatory processes. Ruster reflects on how these diagrams convened conversation, co-production, and reflection spaces—opening new shared understandings of products, practices, and organizational storytelling. Drawing on second-order cybernetics, she proposes that such visual practices may help cultivate cybernetic awareness—a shift in stance from detached observer to participant within the system. In this way, the paper offers not only a methodological contribution but a broader invitation to researchers and practitioners engaged in responsible innovation.

The final article, *Dancing and Tending the Spaces-in-Between: On Hospicing and Fugitivity in Transformative Public Sector Innovation*, is co-authored by Lindsay Cole and Lily Raphael (Cole & Raphael, 2025). Drawing on nine years of experience at the City of Vancouver’s Solutions Lab, the authors explore the dilemmas of enacting systemic change within the institutional frameworks of municipal government. Their work is grounded in the *Two Loops* model of transformation developed by the Berkana Institute, which describes the overlapping dynamics of a dominant system in decline and an emergent system in formation. Within this model, Cole and Raphael focus on the *space-in-between*—the often-overlooked, liminal terrain where breakdown, refusal, and subtle reconfigurations take place. Guided by Black, Indigenous, queer, feminist, and decolonial scholarship, Cole and Raphael offer nine poetic *views* into this fugitive space, accompanied by concrete practices developed through their lab work. Their article contributes three key insights: a methodological framing of transformative innovation grounded in lived practice and poetic inquiry; an articulation of the public sector lab as a site for cultivating fugitive, relational, and liberatory practices; and a reimagining of innovation work as an ongoing dance of learning, rest, refusal, and care. By bringing attention to these interstitial spaces—where things fall apart and new patterns may quietly

emerge—the article suggests that meaningful transformation requires more than solutions; it requires tending to what breaks, what resists, and what might yet be imagined.

In this issue, we feature reviews of two recently published books from long-standing thought leaders in the field. The first review, by systems change practitioners James Gimian and Gabrielle Donnelly, considers the recent publication *Everyday Habits for Transforming Systems: The Catalytic Power of Radical Engagement*, by Adam Kahane. The second book review, from JASC Editorial Board Member, Vanesa Weyrauch, explores the newest publication by Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, *Presencing: 7 Practices for Transforming Self, Society and Business*, which builds on and evolves the seminal *Theory U*.

As this issue's *Innovations in Praxis* piece, *A Story of 3 Metaphors: Forging the Middle Space*, by Rarrtjiwuy Melanie Herdman, Claire Rafferty, and Fiona McKenzie, is anchored in Nhulunbuy, Yirrkala, Gunyaṅara, and the surrounding Homelands of North East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia, home to Yolṅu people across countless generations (Herdman et al., 2025). Emerging from long-standing work in education, governance, and systems change, the authors trace how Yolṅu-led practice can make space for shared work in contexts shaped by deep difference. The story is structured around three metaphors—Wärrkarr (*Onion Lily*), Munydutj (*Green Plum*), and Bulmuyuk (*a fire gone out*)—each offering guidance for forging relationship, fostering change, and engaging in complexity and the messy reality of collaborative work. These metaphors have grown from extended dialogue and practice, grounded in kinship, language, and long memory. Through them, the authors have co-developed frameworks that support Yolṅu-led work, while inviting others into more careful and accountable forms of partnership. As with many of this issue's contributions, the emphasis lies not in resolving complexity but in staying with it—in holding space for ways of knowing that are shaped in place, in relation, and in time.

## At the Threshold

In addition to our commentary on the passing of John O'Brien, it feels vital to acknowledge other thinkers whose work continues to guide this field even as they leave it. If *hospicing*, as Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2025) writes, means accompanying what is ending with care and attention, then we must also mark endings within the wider field of awareness, action research, and systemic change. As we bring this issue to a close, we want to honor the work and legacy of four remarkable thought leaders.

Bill Torbert (February 8, 1944–October 21, 2025) served for many years as professor and dean at Boston College, where he developed *Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry* (Erfan & Torbert, 2015) and the Global Leadership Profile. His central question was how leaders might act and inquire simultaneously—how to integrate reflection into the moment of action rather than treating them as separate stages. He argued that real-time awareness

across what he called the *four territories of experience* (Torbert, 1972)—the outside world, behavior, thought, and post-cognitive consciousness—was necessary if change was to reach beyond surface interventions. His work challenged the assumption that systems change could happen without practitioners examining their own patterns of perception and action.

Joanna Macy (May 2, 1929–July 19, 2025) spent decades weaving Buddhist practice, systems theory, and activism into *The Work That Reconnects* (Macy & Brown, 2014). She created spaces where people could face ecological grief and despair directly, without the usual defenses or deflections. She argued that the scale of ecological breakdown we face requires a shift in how we relate to ourselves, each other, and the living world. Referring to this shift as the Great Turning offered a meta-frame that locates local and smaller-scale expressions of the work within a wider—planetary—vision, instilling in so many a sense of hope and agency.

Ha Vinh Tho (September 27, 1951–September 26, 2025) was a French-Vietnamese educator and dharma teacher who directed Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Centre from 2012 to 2018 and later founded the Eurasia Learning Institute for Happiness and Wellbeing. His work translated contemplative practice into educational and policy contexts, arguing that wellbeing—not growth—should be the organizing principle of social systems (Vinh, 2022). In Vietnam, he co-founded Tinh Truc Gia (the *Peaceful Bamboo Family*), a community for people with disabilities centered on ecological practices, green technology, and mindful education—an embodiment of his conviction that transformation happens in place and in relation.

Nicanor Perlas (January 10, 1950–August 15, 2025) was a Filipino activist, scholar, and recipient of Right Livelihood Award in 2003, who campaigned against nuclear power and industrial pesticides, co-founded the Center for Alternative Development, and later focused on the implications of artificial intelligence for society (Perlas, 2018). In this book, he developed the concept of *collective human intelligence* to argue that transformation cannot be purely technological or economic—it must engage culture, ethics, and human development.

What unites the work of these four outstanding figures was a refusal to separate the terrain of consciousness from the terrain of systems, between inner and outer work. Their practice unfolded at the intersections—asking how one's ways of knowing shape what one sees, how practices of attention can open space for different forms of action. They showed that systems change is also a practice of self-change, and that staying awake to the world requires both vigilance and care.

This issue, in its varied contributions, carries something of that inheritance. In the metaphorical spaces throughout the articles, we see traces of what each luminary described above modeled: that transformation is relational, that it asks for presence, and that it cannot be rushed. Their example lives on in the ways we choose to stay with complexity rather than foreclose it, in our willingness to

remain in relation even when difference persists, and in the quiet forms of courage it takes to keep turning toward the world as it is—so that something else might become possible.

As we go to press, we are also delighted to share that our journal has been accepted for listing in Scopus—a milestone that extends our reach and reinforces our commitment to rigorous, open, and engaged scholarship. We enter this next phase with gratitude—for the thinkers who walked before us, for the community around this journal, and for the work that continues in the in-between spaces of practice, research, and transformation.

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