

YOUNG SCIENCE

Communicators Competition

OPEN CATEGORY

RUNNER UP

THE STREETS BENEATH

Julia Davies

This poem takes the reader on a journey through the mind's eye of the author, who believes that the integration of science and society, through the implementation of technical solutions that are rooted first and foremost in altruistic values, is critical for realizing transformative change that will, ultimately, contribute to 'a better world.'

Here I find myself, once again, at the intersection of science and society – where innovation and technology meet something far more laden with complexity: the subjective values and vagaries that determine our individuality and which, cumulatively, contribute to the future trajectory of our earth, and indeed of all humanity.

It is in this oft-overlooked labyrinth that lies beneath what we see, immediately, that the musings of my mind take root. These thoughts - like the very world I want to see transformed - are steeped in intricacy, mired by the limits of my own explicatory capacity and thus best expressed through the medium of poetry.

Hence, I ask you (tentatively) to step into this space in which I stand, to take my neophyte hand and allow me to lead you along the intersecting avenues of my embryonic intellect. Come, walk with me down the streets of my psyche, smell the petals of my mentality, where my evolving thoughts on science and society are in early bloom.

If you come through and peer into the entryway of my (personal / peer-reviewed) opinions, you will see that it is here that my concerns around the ability of prevailing policies and (even novel) technologies to contribute to a better future, without deeper insight into what informs and defines our choices, begin to surface.

Here emerges my core question: doesn't true sustainability, equality, inclusivity and social security require transformational changes in our individual and collective values, fundamentally? And how does one even know what these are, if our proposals are imposed on one another, rather than walking alongside each other and working toward symbiotic solutions, collaboratively?

Globally, we seem to be dancing with the ideas of long-term prosperity and synergy in diversity. Yet, in reality, we are hurtling towards the steep, sharp, scorching edges of our planetary boundaries, the pitiless impacts of which are, ironically, experienced locally. Because, you see, contracts without acts are merely word-action binaries, vague in their values and lacking in corollary.

So, when we exit this room why not do what we say, instead of waiting on others to change the world in some way? Let's peer through these windows and try to see, just what is going on behind the scenes – let's educate ourselves (and our peers) on just why our planet is strangled by plastic weeds that bleed into the sea and get mistaken for fish feed or seaweed by those that feed on them.

And if you sit, mindfully, in this maze-like space of my mind for a minute, you might begin to agree that it could be our deep-seated values that bring the unease that we're feeling. Because when we've been blinded by our own perceived needs it's easy not to see, properly, those who are on their knees begging to be freed - from persistent poverty, political instability and climate variability;

from religious extremity, gender inequality and racial supremacy. So before rolling out generically developed machinery that discounts the needs, aspirations and nuances of local communities,

shouldn't we identify the underlying causes of vulnerability; seek to understand the reasons that some are driven to criminality whilst others lay lavishly on their irrigated greenery?

Then, we can begin to forge a new development pathway: one that winds, infinitely, on an upward trajectory of sustainability and empathy; that marries science, technology and policy with morality, civic responsibility and 'you before me.' Come, let's not repeat history but transition from the possibility of a better world, to one that is so tangibly.

If you agree then please, descend from your ivory-laden laboratories for a moment and follow me through the walkways of my budding awareness, where you might begin to see, like me, that transformative change is what we need if we are to achieve a better world for us, and for the generations not yet born to us.

Believe me, I know, that it's not easy to be a revolutionary when we've been overfed by this consumerist society. Indeed, it's no simple feat to stop shadowing the money-hungry who hungrily steal food, water and energy from those hungry for resource security, and instead to think about inciting a systemic paradigm shift:

away from the carbon-heavy, carefully controlled confines of humanity's unrelenting rat-race, toward a world built by innovative scientific and technological solutions that themselves are collaboratively crafted, and founded in commonly-derived values of sustainability, equity and generosity; of creativity, love and the principles of community.

So I ask you (nervously) - no, boldly this time - if I take the lead, would you take the leap and meet me there, on the potential pathway to a brighter future? At least then we could say that we truly tried to perceive, even questioned the prejudice in our beliefs, didn't just hang around comfortably but asked what it means to be meaningfully free, to experience true wellbeing.

Do you see what I mean - that more technology, harder science and another shelf burdened by policy cannot be the only keys to a better world? Yes, these technocratic solutions are, ultimately, highly necessary. But if you ask me, they are only truly worthy if they are positioned as complementary to the culturing of intrinsic values that are more visionary.

...And wouldn't that coalescence of science and society be, ironically, transformative change at its finest?

Me: I seek now to tread more lightly and give more freely; to love more wholly and live more peacefully; to engage more respectfully (but also to sit less silently and raise my voice when necessary!) And, in so doing, to embrace flexibility such that I learn continuously rather than (try to) do it all perfectly.

So, will you walk with me, along these subjective streets beneath the science?

About Julia



Julia Davies completed her tertiary studies at the University of Cape Town. She has a BSc (Honours) in Environmental and Geographical Science and an MSc in Climate Change and Sustainable Development. At the time of entering the competition, Julia was a Senior Research Assistant on the Adaptation at Scale in Semi-Arid Regions project and was based at the University of Cape Town's African Climate and Development Initiative, where she contributed to research on climate change adaptation and development challenges in Namibia and Botswana. She has recently moved to the USA to begin her PhD in the School of Geography and Development at the University of Arizona and is working on urban food security and climate change issues in sub-Saharan Africa.