Climate change is the undercurrent that drives and shapes our lives in countless ways. Journalist Judith D. Schwartz sees the term as shorthand. “It’s almost as if people think climate is this phenomenon, determined solely by CO2, as if we could turn a dial up or down,” she tells me over the phone. “We are missing so much.”

In her quest for climate solutions, Schwartz leans into the complexity of natural systems. As she and I talk, I come to imagine our climate as a beautiful series of overlapping Rube Goldberg-style cycles of carbon, water, nutrients, and energy. Those systems have been knocked out of alignment, sure, but as Schwartz sees it, repair is not impossible.

While mainstream environmentalism has historically pursued either preservation or conservation, Schwartz’s new book, The Reindeer Chronicles (Chelsea Green 2020) explores a third option: regeneration. She looks at community efforts to restore ecosystems the world over. “We’ve been trained to believe that finding solutions is a job for the experts,” she writes, but “Earth repair is a participatory sport: a grassroots response to evolving global crises.”

Schwartz is worried that climate change conversations center around terrifying projections. “What do you do with that? Cower under the bed?” She says collapse is unlikely to be a one-shot meteorite, and that gives us some leeway. If we assume we’re not always going to get things right, that leaves room for mistakes and the collective learning they bring. “We have so much more agency than we’ve been able to see,” she says.

We may not know what the future climate is going to look like, and she acknowledges that not knowing is really hard. “But we’ve got to try,” she says matter of factly. “We’re here now … Just start.”

Overcoming cultural myths

Schwartz comes to the topic of climate solutions with curiosity and a deep appreciation for science. You can hear it in the way she writes about processes like transpiration and decomposition: “The logic of nature is no secret; it is laid bare in every streambed, every handful of living soil, every spiderweb, if we bother to take a look. Its tale is told through accrual or retrenchment of biomass, biodiversity, and soil organic matter: the stuff of life.”

She has a particular soft spot for soil health, sustainable grazing, and water retention—subjects on which she has written entire books. These pop up throughout The Reindeer Chronicles as she attends Ecosystem Restoration Camp in Spain and Cowgirl Camp in Eastern Washington. (Yes, it’s a thing).
While I find the name off-putting, Schwartz uses her Cowgirl Camp experience as a springboard to discuss the critical role of women in agriculture. The word “farmer” often conjures an image of a man on a tractor, but she writes that a third of American farmers are women, and in the Midwest, it’s closer to half.

“It’s our cultural myths. It’s our myth of the cowboy. It’s our myth of what a farm is,” Schwartz says. “There might be women involved, but you think about them as the supporting cast. We tend to look for heroes before we look for heroines.”

By perpetuating the myth of the male farmer, Schwartz says, “We miss half of the imagination, insight, problem solving, intuition that’s out there.” And when it comes to climate change, we’re going to need all we can get.

Naturalizing the economy

Schwartz’s writing is lyrical in its descriptions of systems normally not given such linguistic fanfare. When talking about the economy, she writes, “Its theme music—the vicissitudes of the market, job numbers, profits and losses—sets both melody and tone for newscasts and public debate, the inadvertent soundscape of contemporary life.” She calls the disconnect between limitless growth and a finite planet “a society-wide exercise in fooling ourselves.”

But rather than try to force the complexity of nature into existing financial structures—by giving value to resources and ecosystem services, for example—she writes of naturalizing the economy instead. This requires rethinking basic concepts we take for granted, like productivity, jobs, and meaningful work.

“There is no natural law that says profit must supersede other types of reward,” she writes. “The truth is, we are what we measure—or at least our actions are largely determined by how we gauge success. What if environmental healing, social engagement, and a commitment to the future governed our companies and institutions, and therefore our work lives?”

A lot of the solutions in the book talk about connecting with the land. In some communities that access is collective, but I press her on the fact that access to land is incredibly inequitable. In the U.S., a lot of that has to do with historic and systemic racism. What role does justice have to play here, and how can that be factored into the conversation about ecological restoration?

“It plays a huge role,” Schwartz says. “The people who are most at risk of losing work in this time are people of color and young people.” Rather than try to shoehorn everybody back into a service economy that refuses to provide a living wage and requires working two or three jobs, she tells me, we can start investing in restoration.

She describes the magnitude of the potential benefits with enthusiasm: not just a wage, but tools that are going to be needed throughout the world—the capacity to grow food, manage landscapes, design dwellings. Not to mention the impacts on mental and physical health of being in natural spaces and eating healthy food.

Schwartz describes these as short-term signposts that give positive feedback on the long
road to restoring ecosystems. Biodiversity inevitably bounces back, she says, and soil health, too. While she doesn't tackle the issue of racism head-on, she makes clear that healthy communities include people and the land.

“What can be more healing than to heal land?” she asks me.

A local land ethic

The book is somewhat meandering in its quest for resilience. Schwartz's willingness to entertain a wide range of ideas and approaches is central to her message: “Once ideas on how to achieve what's assumed to be impossible are articulated, that goal is no longer impossible.”

She describes different communal land management traditions—the Himma that long sustained shared grazing lands for Bedouin shepherds in Saudi Arabia, and ahupua’a, whereby each self-sustaining unit of shared land in Hawai‘i included functional ecosystems that stretched from the mountains to the sea.

“I was very humbled by Indigenous knowledge, understanding myself as a newcomer on that land,” she says. She admits she has a lot to learn but is excited about the prospect. I ask her how she views the relationship between Western science and traditional ecological knowledge.

“They can serve as reality checks for each other,” she says. She goes on to explain how in Western culture, scientific inquiry is about breaking things apart to look at them in greater detail. But this reductive approach misses the way things fit into systems. In this way, she says science can disconnect people from the very nature they are trying to understand.

“Originally science was based on keen observation,” she says. “That is part of getting us to knowledge.” Ancient knowledge systems emphasize the connections between humans and nature—and see humans as part of larger whole. She says science today seems to be bearing that out more and more.

Still, that doesn’t preclude the need for ancient knowledge as the climate rapidly changes. “Who better to be able to keenly observe those changes than people who have known what it has been?” she asks me. “To have a baseline and to know the various factors that will be changing?”

Centering community

Alongside the understanding of place, Schwartz emphasizes the equally important respect for community. Her writing recognizes that climate change is not so much an environmental problem as a human problem.

“Running in the back of my mind, like the hum of those hovering bees, was the dawning realization that all the knowledge and technology needed to shift to a regenerative future—one marked by agriculture that builds soil carbon, retains water, produces nutrient-dense food, and revives land and communities—is already available,” she writes. “It’s only people that get in the way.”

To come at it from another angle, as one of her sources puts it, “There is nothing wrong
with the Earth.”

In reporting the book, Schwartz reckons with the notion of imperialism and comes to realize the limits of information. Knowing more doesn’t necessarily change minds, but feeling heard can. Building trust can. Overcoming fear can. She witnesses the power of consensus when decades-old feuds among ranchers in New Mexico dissipate with the formation of a collective vision for their future.

“Worst-case-scenario perseverating keeps everyone pumping stress hormones. This leaves us at once frozen and overwhelmed, unable to act or seek alternatives,” she writes. “In short, we stuff our heads with worst possible outcomes and wonder why we get them.”

In my favorite example from the book, from which the title is derived, Schwartz explores what some local Indigenous leaders have called “green colonialism” in northern Norway. She follows the efforts of an Indigenous reindeer herder to prevent the government from culling his animals. While Norway’s government is considered among the most progressive in the world, it doesn’t recognize the value of the grazing animals in climate change mitigation, instead investing in wind turbines on those very same lands. The herder’s family considers reindeer herding a cultural bank for traditional language, handicraft, knowledge of the environment, and ecology. So the loss is far greater than the animals themselves. (Read an excerpt here.)

Homebound

“This was not an easy book to write,” Schwartz admits, and the world looks very different today than when she was writing it. Schwartz says the pandemic has given her permission to fall in love with the place where she is. She describes her home in southern Vermont as beautiful, though somewhat dismissively, saying that she always viewed the action as taking place somewhere else. Home was just the place she returned to after each of her reporting trips to write without distractions.

Now, though, she says she’s experiencing a newfound presence and grounding right where she is, and realizing there’s far more to discover than she previously acknowledged. “What was in the background has become foreground.” I would venture a guess that her shifted perspective is not unique in these uncertain times, and that’s just what she thinks we need.

Even in the small town of Bennington, Vermont, where she lives, she’s seeing the effects. A “grow your own food” webinar was offered in June. While a successful local event might usually attract five people, 100 people signed up. She says this is evidence that people are aware of the need for local resilience.

“We’ve all got places,” she says. “Places have their own ecological logic. Let’s do what we can where we are and learn from each other.” That idea of connecting with place and community is central to her worldview. “The ‘we’ who can address climate change is everybody,” she says.

“There is no one size fits all for climate action.” Schwartz says we need to protest oil companies and make art and grow healthy food and feed one another and, in her case, write—all using our respective skills to imagine a more resilient world.
Her argument, reinforced by 2020’s stay-at-home orders, is to focus on restoring the functions of whatever ecosystem you call home. Rhetorically, she writes, “How many microclimates does it take to make a new climate?”

Tipping points

In her concluding chapter, Schwartz asks what people would do if restoring ecosystems was achievable. She then lists possible answers, among them: keeping water in the ground, jettisoning the cynicism, and dancing.

I can’t help but push back on this. After all, if our planet is at a tipping point, don’t we need to do more and at larger scales to actually achieve meaningful ecological restoration?

Her answer is perfect in its simplicity: “Tipping points go both ways.” We may be on the brink of disaster, if we choose to dwell on the worst-case scenarios. But maybe, just maybe, if we focus on the best possible outcomes, we can tip the scales to bring best-case scenarios into being.