

A Conversation with Dr. Janice Barnes on Approaching Climate Change with Optimism

By Kathleen Fleischauer, September 2021

Last month, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a [major report](#) identifying the devastating impacts of climate change. The landmark report concluded that human activities are to blame for the current state of global warming, and that further climate disruptions are a certainty in the coming decades. Described by U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres as a "code red for humanity," this report and its subsequent media coverage reflect a despairing view of the state and future of the world due to climate change. With the global temperature rising at an alarming rate, natural disasters increasing in both frequency and severity, sea levels rising and ice caps melting, who can argue with this pessimistic view?

After 30 years of working to mitigate the effects of climate change, Dr. Janice Barnes, GRI's [Distinguished Corporate Fellow](#), is no stranger to the gravity of the global climate situation. However, Dr. Barnes approaches challenging the effects of climate change with an optimism that seems virtually nonexistent in the climate conversation. As founder of [Climate Adaptation Partners \(CAP\)](#), Dr. Barnes leverages her background in design to ask "how might we?" when it comes to building resilience in the face of climate change. I had a conversation with Dr. Barnes in order to understand how maintaining this optimism is possible in a global conversation that is so often shrouded in hopeless negativity.

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According to Dr. Barnes, this sort of optimism is not as unique as it seems. Despite optimism being a critical factor in her work on climate adaptation, planning, advocacy, and partnership building, optimism is not so much a purposeful or strategic decision, but rather "a natural consequence of being open." She states that openness, along with curiosity, are what enable us to focus on evolution and knowledge that enable us to find solutions and build resilience. Openness and curiosity are critical because these qualities provide the motivation for building relationships. In the fight against devastation caused by climate change, "we are working on something huge that is well beyond our influence." No one person, organization, community, or nation can do it all. A global collaborative effort is required, and it must be founded on meaningful relationships.

But what makes a relationship meaningful? Dr. Barnes cites noted feminist, psychoanalyst, and social activist Jean Baker Miller, who defines healthy relationships as having "zest." This zest signifies a

mutual reinforcing positive relationship that is not manipulative or transactional. Rather, it is a relationship that emphasizes learning and sharing in a way that feels good and empowering to both parties involved. These kinds of relationships are what serve as the foundation for Dr. Barnes' important work in building climate resilience. Therefore, collaboration based on relationships with zest is not only what allows us to make progress in climate resilience, but to do so with optimism and positivity. Transactional relationships, though commonplace in the business world, discourage curiosity and limit progress.

In fact, moving away from these kinds of commonplace business practices and viewpoints is what inspired Dr. Barnes to start her own business in climate adaptation and resilience. Referencing her background in design, she explains that traditional design practice involves designing a place or a thing, with less focus on the "in-between." Noticing this gap

between the end-result of a capital project and the strategy, Dr. Barnes aims to broaden this perspective and think more comprehensively about all the different actors and systems that should be involved to inform a successful and resilient design. She asks the question, “how do we adjust the trajectory to be more inclusive?” Of course, creating and managing inclusivity involves building a network of meaningful relationships, through which individuals can share perspectives and ideas in order to create holistic and sustainable solutions. In Dr. Barnes’ words, she and her business partner “don’t run a transactional business, we are part of a series of relationships that we treasure.”

Being open to sharing ideas and experiences not only builds more comprehensive resilience solutions, but also influences the way we view progress. In the climate conversation, we often see grand indicators of progress, such as carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere or average global temperatures. These are undoubtedly important indicators, but we must be sure not to overlook small steps of progress. For example, Dr. Barnes respectfully tells the story of a local farmer in her hometown in rural Tennessee who has adapted his farming techniques in response to regional climate changes caused by global warming. This farmer’s knowledge and acceptance of climate change, as well as his family’s adaptive farming strategies are localized, though no less important display of progress. In addition, the farmer has put up a sign (pictured) disseminating knowledge and encouraging the possibility of climate adaptation among his community. Recognizing small acts of progress is not only empowering to community members, but also fosters optimism in the face of climate change.



Dr. Barnes reminds us that you do not need to be a trained designer to contribute to solutions. Nor do you have to be a scientific expert in climate change or technical expert in resilience to be involved. In fact, Dr. Barnes suggests that there are no “experts” in climate change as it is an emergent area in which everyone has much more to learn. What we need is openness and curiosity, embedded in both the personal and professional mindset. These qualities not only allow us to learn from one another and build more resilient solutions and relationships, but also allow us to be more attentive to the acts of progress displayed by our neighbors and local communities. While intergovernmental summits and global media have largely relied on doomsday narratives to express the urgency of mitigating climate change, Dr. Barnes shines a light on the power of informed optimism in facing one of our world’s greatest challenges.

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About GRI

Launched in 2017 with the approval of Northeastern University’s Board of Trustees, the Global Resilience Institute (GRI) is the world’s first university-wide institute to respond to the resilience imperative. Today, GRI undertakes multi-disciplinary resilience research and education efforts that draws on the latest findings from network science, health sciences, coastal and urban sustainability, engineering, cybersecurity and privacy, social and behavioral sciences, public policy, urban affairs, business, law, game design, architecture, and geospatial analysis.