



# WE HAVE TO MAKE IT OVER

Katharine K. Wilkinson

# At a symposium in the fall of 1960,

James Baldwin charged that a country is “only as good . . . only as strong as the people who make it up and . . . turns into what the people in it want it to become.” Society transforms not “by an act of God, but by all of us, by you and me.” He rejected the idea that we do not have agency and placed accountability for the future in our hands: “We made the world we’re living in, and we have to make it over.”

Baldwin was not talking about the climate crisis. In 1960, the challenge of global warming was largely unknown to the public—though major fossil fuel companies were well on their way to understanding that all the excess carbon from their products would eject humanity from the not-too-hot, not-too-cold conditions of the last ten thousand years, basically just right for civilization.

But since I encountered Baldwin’s counsel some years ago, I have come back to it again and again in the context of our planetary trouble. And I have held his words, sometimes with trembling hands, as an invitation to genuinely occupy our ability to make the world over in myriad, simultaneous ways.

As Earthlings of the twenty-first century, we find ourselves in an exceedingly rare and decidedly daunting position. We live and learn, labor and love, in a brief but decisive chapter of the human story—the chapter when we can still do something about climate change. Even after decades of damnable denial and delay, there remains a slim window of time to move the world away from the worst climate scenarios and toward regeneration and resilience. Not perfection, not a return to planet past, not a future without gutting losses and real difficulty—but better is still available to us.

In making the world over, climate solutions will be key—all the ways and means we have to curb heat-trapping emissions and regenerate ecological integrity.

Solution is an imperfect word, suggesting something a bit too definitive, like landing all the correct answers to a crossword puzzle. But the root of the word—solvere—can help clarify what solutions are capable of and why they matter. Solvere is Latin for “loosen,” and that is precisely what climate solutions can do. They can loosen the hold of current trajectories, incompatible with life as we know it, and weaken the grip of the fossil fuel industry on our global economy. With intention and care for how that loosening is done, especially as it affects marginalized communities, our cultivation of those solutions could also grow a more liberated, luminous world.

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Today, our collective “toolbox” of solutions is robust and nearly overflowing—not deficient or pending, as some deceptively suggest and others unwittingly believe. There are so many practices and technologies already in hand and in motion.

I spent most of 2016 at my desk, writing most of the book *Drawdown*, which offered a groundbreaking, comprehensive look at the world's abundance of climate solutions. In essay after essay—from geothermal power to green roofs, peatland protection to plant-rich diets, silvopasture to solar hot water—the book's consistent, clarion through line is this: We have much of the knowhow and technical wherewithal we need to stop burning fossil fuels and come back into some balance with the planet's living systems.

As author and activist Rebecca Solnit writes, "One of the best and most challenging things about the climate crisis is that there is no one solution. That is, the solution is a mosaic of many changes." This bounty is in some ways a gift, but also a lot for anyone trying to figure out where to concentrate and what to prioritize.

Quantification is the conventional approach to honing in. Numbers have an important role to play. We do not have unlimited time or resources, so we want to know that we are focusing on interventions that can truly, meaningfully help. Crunching data can yield useful clarity.

But clean numbers and clear logic may not be enough. When it comes to climate solutions, there is so much that is "necessary," "strategic," and "measurably impactful." In my experience, those credentials are insufficient for navigating through the breadth and depth of solutions. The rational mind, I've discovered, can only carry me so far, and I need alternative or complementary approaches to hone in—and get fired up. I suspect most of us do.

To step, intentionally and actively, into the role of shaping our community, our country, and our world is no minor move. It feels less like a well-reasoned, matter-of-fact choice—something we do because it makes good sense—than it does a leap of faith—something we do because we cannot do otherwise.

I think of artists, those who conceive and create the new from inspiration and seemingly thin air. A poet does not set out with a punch list so much as a stirring of something needing to find shape in words and the skill to craft it with imagery, rhythm, and meaning. A sculptor senses the form that their raw materials are calling forth and follows, chiseling intuition. Gardeners collaborate with soil and seed, pollinators and rain, to bring forth beauty and nourishment.

These are makers and remakers of worlds, small and large. What might be possible if we were to consider climate solutions in this spirit—not just as things to prescribe, plan, and push through, but as creative comrades to be in relationship with, remaking systems and society together?

## Who might we become as we create the world— —not tinkering from afar but wholly immersed in, and remade by, our relationship with this spinning sphere?

When we orient to things that light a spark in us or tap a longing, we often find we can engage with gusto and stay engaged over time. Energy, I would posit, is vastly more powerful than information, catalyzing ingenuity and aspiration. This approach, which we could term solutions artistry, doesn't mean that we abandon rational and numerical understandings or toss all strategic plans. It means that we also welcome knowing from some other place—the heart, the gut, perhaps the space right in between.

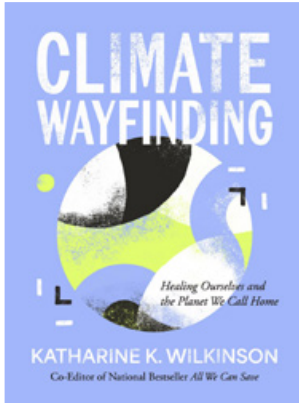
Writing was James Baldwin's way of responding to his own essential invitation to make the world over. It was the tool he selected among many to help create "a more human dwelling place." The solutions vary, but the task is shared. So much about our world is out of your hands and mine, yet potential also sits right at our fingertips. We can unravel infrastructures and industries of harm and weave climate solutions so thoroughly into society that they become simply the way things are done. We can stitch the continuation of life such that it is not just viable but vibrant.

Who might we become as we create the world—not tinkering from afar but wholly immersed in, and remade by, our relationship with this spinning sphere? And if we let our remaking be guided by land and water, shaped by sentience larger than ourselves, what beauty and brightness might suffuse this new, renewed world?

**In the process, we might discover our true nature as makers, in loving, creative connection with the most extraordinary artist of all, this defiantly flowering Earth. 🌱**



# Info



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Katharine K. Wilkinson** is a human on Earth. As a writer, teacher, and creator, she has inspired hundreds of thousands of climate journeys through transformational projects that shift our cultural narratives about what's possible and nurture engagement in renewing our world. Her publications include the bestselling anthology *All We Can Save*, the podcast *A Matter of Degrees*, and the *New York Times* bestseller *Drawdown*. Dr. Wilkinson co-founded and leads The All We Can Save Project, where she shaped the much-beloved programs All We Can Save Circles and Climate Wayfinding. She holds a DPhil in geography and environment from the University of Oxford, where she was a Rhodes Scholar, and a BA in religion from Sewanee: The University of the South. In 2019, *Time* magazine named her one of fifteen "women who will save the world." She lives with her loves in Atlanta, Georgia, and finds her deepest joy on a mountain or a horse. On [Instagram](#) & [Substack](#) at [@drkwilkinson](#).

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