

Following is the full transcript of author Deborah Frieze's TEDx Talk: **How I Became a Localist** @ TEDxJamaicaPlain conference.

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### **Deborah Frieze - Author**

The way we're trying to change the world is not going to work, and it's never going to work. I'd like to offer a radical theory of change, based on my experience working around the world with people trying to solve our most pressing problems. This belief turns most of our efforts to fix our world on their heads.

Here it is: you can't fundamentally change big systems, you can only abandon them and start over, or offer hospice to what's dying. By big systems I mean education, healthcare, government, business, anything characterized by overorganization, standardization, regulation, and compliance. And I'm saying you can't undo, fix, reverse-engineer, redirect, or reassign these systems. That's because they are not machines, they are living systems.

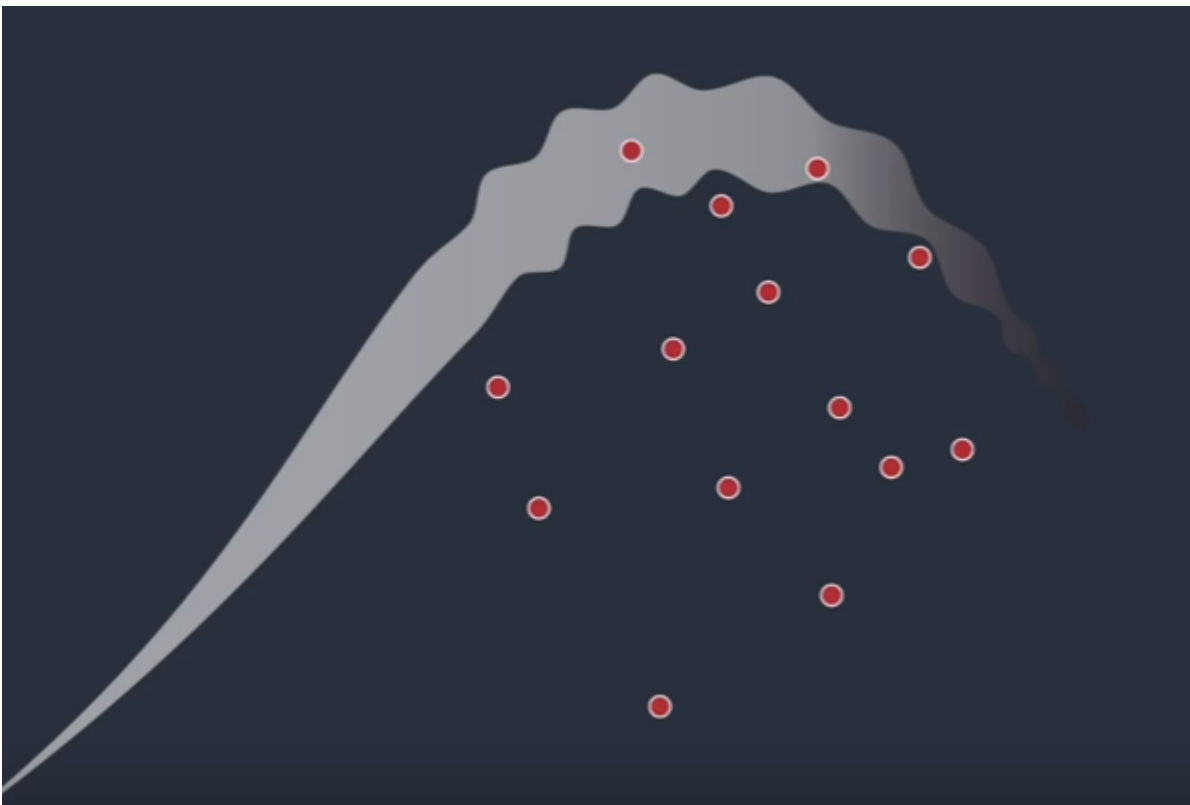
Somewhere along the way, maybe around the time of Isaac Newton, we got confused about how life works. We convinced ourselves that the world was causal, linear, and predictable. And so we began to treat our bodies, our communities, and our ecologies as if they were machines.

Machines respond really well to top-down, preconceived strategies. They rely on designers and engineers to give them purpose. A machine would never criticize the 5-year plan or lose faith in the boss. Thankfully, that's

not how we are, and that's not how life is.

Natural systems, living systems are complex, emergent, and unpredictable. Every system we, humans, participate in is a living system. Small wonder we keep failing to predict and control the outcome of our good-faith efforts to repair our schools, hospitals, banks, and bureaucracies.

So I'd like to offer a map for what we can do to create change. Maps orient us, they tell a story about how we see the world, and right now, I believe, the maps we've been using have gotten us tragically lost.



So here is a new map, a living system's map, to help us better understand the complexity of the world we live in. My colleagues and I call this map 'The two loops', though for better or for worse, I've also heard of it

referred to as 'Deborah's curves.' All living systems rise, peak, and move into decline.

At some point, usually around the peak, signs of turbulence appear: disruptions in supply, spikes in demand, volatility in pricing. Alternatives to the dominant system begin to appear. I call these alternatives 'walk outs.' People who turn their backs on the dominant systems so they can experiment with creating something new. If these 'walk outs' remain isolated from one another, nothing happens.

The dominant system will crush, absorb, or co-opt the pioneers, because every living system is inclined towards self-preservation.

But if they get connected to one another, exchanging information and learning, then their separate efforts can suddenly emerge as a powerful system capable of disrupting the old order and giving birth to something new.

Let me offer an example. How many of you grow your own food, participate in a community garden, or buy local produce directly from farmers through a CSA or community-supported agriculture? We're in JP, right? OK, 40 years ago, only a few people were talking about organic food. Most of us were eating the products of industrial agriculture, a chemical and technology-intensive food system that has dominated this country for most of our lifetimes.

But as that system began to peak, as crops required increasingly expensive and toxic inputs to produce the same meals, 'walk outs' began to experiment with local and organic food. Today, there are more than 6,000 CSAs nationally, and the number of farmers' markets has skyrocketed in recent years. My guess is that in this room most of us consciously choose local and organic agriculture.

We see the same phenomena happening today in the shift from fossil fuel

to renewable energy, from conventional architecture to green building, from Wall Street and global finance to main street and crowd-sourced capital. What each of these transformations have in common is that nobody planned them.

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Sometimes, leaders like to take credit for them, and we, citizens, like to ascribe genius to our favorite innovators, but the truth is they are emergent phenomena. Emergence, which is at heart of this worldview, is nature's way of creating change.

Emergence is tricky to see, and it's hard to describe, but we know it's present when local actions spring up simultaneously in many different areas get connected, and then, suddenly and surprisingly, emerge as a powerful system.

I'm a localist. I believe it is through small, local actions, alongside people who share our visions and dreams, that we create the conditions for change. That's why I've chosen to focus my attention on working here in Jamaica Plain and throughout the Boston area.

As an impact investor, I want to create the conditions for a just and sustainable local economy to emerge here at home. I do this through my work with the Boston Impact Initiative which provides capital to locally-owned enterprises that address the growing wealth gap and ecological challenges of our times. I know there are others like me doing similar work in New York, Detroit, Oakland, and beyond. I trust that our separate local efforts will add up to collective change.

To do this work, I rely on 'The two loops' as my theory of change. So if you embrace this map of change, then the question arises, "What role do you play in it?" When you recognize that the dominant system, the status quo

no longer has the capacity to create solutions to the very problems it was created to solve, what do you do? I'd like to share four roles each of us can play to support the shift to healthier systems.

You'll probably recognize yourself in more than one. 'Walk outs' are the trailblazers. These are the folks willing to turn their back on the dominant system, eager to be free to experiment with the future.

If you're 'a walk out', then you're willing to feel ignored, invisible, and lonely a good portion of the time. That's because what you're doing is so new and different, people can't see you work even when it's staring them in the face. These can be difficult dynamics to live with, especially when you know you've done a good work, that you've already solved problems others are still struggling with. That's why we, 'walk outs', need each other.

When we work as community, we sustain the resilience and the stamina to give birth to the new in the midst of the breakdown of the old.

So, let me give you an example from my local economy work. In today's economy, ownership and investment are in the hands of the few. But every one of us has the right to participate in owning the assets we work so hard to create. Cero is a worker-owned recycling cooperative that operates in some of our city's poorest neighborhoods. In addition to being owned by every single one of its workers, Cero has figured out how to sell shares of its stock directly to the public, raising more than 370,000 dollars from community investors.

These people are trailblazers, and they are setting an example for the rest of us on what it looks like to walk out of Wall Street and walk on to rebuild a local, living economy. Of course, not all of us are suited to the kind of uncertainty, isolation, and risk that 'walk outs' must embrace.

So another role is to stay inside failing systems and become thoughtful and

compassionate in attending to what's dying, to become good hospice workers. As a skilled hospice worker, your gift is to offer comfort and support to those who are suffering, and to help the dying focus on the transition ahead. It's my belief that many of our big systems are in their death rows.

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Our schools are failing our children, our food is making us sick. Our financial institutions are exploiting our citizens, but all of us can't abandon these systems all at once. Take a look at the space between the dying of the old and the emergence of the new. There is a gap. And that's because the emerging systems aren't robust enough yet to receive all of us.

We still need fossil fuel to manufacture solar panels. We need to provide food aid where there is drought and disease. We need hospice workers to guide us through these transitions. In our local economy, the Jobs, Not Jails campaign is an example of compassionate hospice work. These activists are fighting to redirect two billion dollars from prison spending to job creation.

They are working inside our failed criminal justice system to advocate on behalf of those most vulnerable to its inequities, and they are helping those who've suffered regain the dignity of employment and economic stability.

The third role to play in supporting the emergence of the world we wish for is to make visible the choice. If you're an illuminator, then you love to tell stories, to shine a light on trailblazers' efforts to create something new. You have to be willing to repeat yourself and to maintain grace in the face of resistance and criticism. It takes perseverance to help others see new approaches for what they are, examples of what's possible, of what

our new world could be.

How many of you have noticed the JP Local First decals and stores up and down Centre Street? The buy-local and local-first signs on many main street businesses throughout our country are the work of illuminators, those who are helping us, consumers, choose to support local businesses. They're reminding us that half of every dollar we spend locally stays in our community, as opposed to draining out to multinational corporations. Every day, each of us makes dozens of choices, usually unconsciously, about which economy to support. Illuminators help us make wiser choices.

And finally, there are those who've been quite successful in the dominant system. They wield power and influence, and they have access to resources and relationships that could advance or destroy pioneering efforts. If you're a protector, then you're willing to use your power and position to consciously create an oasis where people can innovate protected from the disabling demands of the old system. You are the dedicated and thoughtful revolutionaries who live deep inside institutional life to give birth to the new.

My friend John Barros is a shining example of a protector. John is the Chief of Economic Development for the City of Boston. His roots are as a trailblazer. Right around the corner from here, in Dudley Square, John organized his community to reclaim control of their property through a groundbreaking land trust. Now he uses his influence to support pioneering efforts to make our economy more equitable and inclusive.

For too long, we've convinced ourselves that change will come when someone else figures out how to fix what ails us. But in living systems, there are no silver bullets.

The truth is we need all of us - the trailblazers, the hospice workers, the illuminators, and the protectors - to create the conditions for change.

So take a look around this room. If we want a healthier and more resilient Jamaica Plain, then it's up to us. The change we wish for will emerge when each of us takes small, local actions alongside people who share our visions and dreams. Join me in being a localist.

Thank you.

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