Dear SUNY New Paltz colleagues and community,

I’ve been on sabbatical this academic year and have firmly embraced the gift of time for reflection and focus on my work and artistic research. From this perspective, I am compelled to share the following words with you.

COVID-19 has pulled us out of our habits, expectations, and comparatively comfortable ways. We now find ourselves facing a shaking world which doesn’t offer clear markers on how things will develop. This epidemic is hitting very close to home. We have been startled awake by the fear, stress, and sorrow it has brought, and we are now looking, from our separate screens, at a changing world. The economic system is rumbling, exposing the precarious nature of its structure and of the living conditions of so many. Our college is facing a massive shake-up. What we relied on as stable and secure is potentially moving and morphing.

This is not a time for looking back and trying to rebuild what was, but for visioning forward. This world we have created was built on mindless ecosystem destruction and unprecedented levels of CO2 emissions. As a result, climate change with all its complex feedbacks is here, nudging us toward the terrifying precipice of climate tipping points. Through our systems and habits, we are creating conditions, globally and locally, which in hindsight may make this current epidemic look like a minor inconvenience. The predicted warming of 4 degrees by the end of this century does not offer a world fit to support peaceful, healthy, and happy humans or non-humans. How can we act so relatively swiftly and drastically to a virus, but sleep at the wheel in the face of an emergency of epic proportions? Let us face the truth. By continuing to live and teach the way we have been, we are recklessly contributing to a climate emergency future for our students we would not want to, or be able to, live in.

Meeting the climate challenge head-on offers significant opportunities for vital change. We can improve human and ecosystem health while actively addressing the existential vulnerability of our many disadvantaged communities, effectively transforming institutional and structural inequities on which COVID-19 has shed such stark and chilling light.

As a university, let’s dare to embrace our responsibility of swiftly working and teaching toward a future that is built on radically sustainable systems and institutions, and which fosters healthy ecosystems, community, emotional and physical wellbeing, and social and economic justice.
Let’s face it, there is no more normal—no normal weather or season, no standard path toward a financially stable and secure future, and, as a result, no normal curriculum or way to teach anymore. Let us dare to consider what it might mean to leave behind the old shell of normalcy and become adventurous in exploring new ways. Can we open up to change enough so we can envision and embrace systems and related habits that actually draw down atmospheric CO2 concentration to safe, livable levels, and that make room for the ecosystems we rely on to thrive?

Only if we ourselves know and live this possibility can we teach our students to be change makers who actively work toward this best-case scenario of an emerging sustainable and resilient world in the midst of shifting markets, territories, cultures, and threats.

Let us interrogate our respective disciplines and curricula and re-evaluate what and how we need to teach at this critical point in human and Earth history. I am hopeful. I am relieved. Change is here, and moving forward together in a future-oriented direction brings relationship, energy, and connection in the midst of all the fear and pain.

A lot is happening on our campus already. A lot has changed in the eight years I have been part of it. It is not enough. It isn’t even scratching the surface of the transformation process we will go through, voluntarily or by force and circumstance.

Let us critically review what has clouded our clear vision. Let us embrace change wholeheartedly and focus on the here and now, and on this community. Let us create heart-based, transdisciplinary conversations to see the bigger picture and create new pathways and communities. Let us trust that each community member, and particularly our students, have a lot to contribute. If institutional or bureaucratic rules and structures only keep us busy without contributing to the larger whole, let us reform them, together. If personal beliefs and habits are in the way, let us bravely explore and transform them, and grow as persons along the way.

Let’s step it up. A university has to serve not us but the students and their futures. If transformation of never-seen proportions on all levels is needed, let’s do it, with joy. We are weaving a lifeline, the umbilical cord to our collective future.

Thank you for reading, I appreciate your consideration.

With heartfelt good wishes,

Andrea Frank