

Episode 12: “Creating Spaces Where We Invite, Imagine, Empower”

Alice McGary

The Art of Climate Dialogue

Vivian:

Welcome to The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa, produced by myself, Vivian M. Cook, and The EcoTheatre Lab. And welcome to today's conversation with farmer, artist, and founder of Mustard Seed Community Farm, Alice McGary.

Alice:

When I felt like I didn't have anything wise to say, I went out to check on the greenhouse, on the little plants in this wild wind and bright sun thinking about rural regeneration. I was thinking, "Remember that we love this place. This place, big and small, right here. This land and these people and creatures and water and soil. Our wider community extending slowly wider to the whole world." It centered me in my mixed upness, a hope for myself, for my community, for rural people everywhere, for all of us on this planet. To remember that we love is to remember why but also how.

Vivian:

Addressing climate change is urgent. But in order to move toward action, we first have to find ways to talk about climate change with one another. The Art of Climate Dialogue: Stories from Iowa is a podcast series featuring 13 conversations with artists, farmers, community engaged researchers, and community organizers and activists who have all used arts and storytelling strategies to talk about climate change and agriculture. Through this podcast, they generously share these strategies so that listeners can implement them in their own communities.

I'm Vivian and I invite you to explore The Art of Climate Dialogue with me. As we enter into these conversations around climate action, sustainable agriculture and community engaged arts in Iowa, The EcoTheatre Lab and I want to first recognize that Indigenous nations have been leaders in such conversations for centuries and continue to be today.

Iowa now occupies the homelands of Native American nations to whom we owe our commitment and dedication. Iowa is now situated on the homelands and trading routes of the Ioway, Meskwaki, and Sauk, Ojibwe, Omaha, Ihanktonwan, and Santee.

And because history is complex and time goes far back beyond memory, we also acknowledge the ancient connections of many other Indigenous peoples here. The history of broken treaties and forced removal that dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their homelands was and is an act of colonization and genocide that we cannot erase. And as a result, Indigenous ecosystems within Iowa have suffered from extraction, degradation, and unsustainable agricultural practices contributing to the ongoing climate crisis.

Understanding and addressing these injustices is critical as we work toward climate dialogue, action, and justice in our communities.

My thanks to podcast interviewees, Shelley Buffalo, enrolled member of the Meskwaki Tribe, Lance Foster, enrolled member and tribal historian of the Iowa Tribe of Kansas and Nebraska, and Sikowis Nobiss, Plains Cree/Saulteaux of the George Gordon First Nation for their collaboration in developing this acknowledgement.

Alice McGary is a farmer, fiddler, potter, weaver, quilter, mentor, and community facilitator. She's excited about beauty, justice, community and being outside. She lives and works at the Mustard Seed Community Farm which is an 11 acre diversified cooperative farm in Northeastern Boone County near the Ioway Creek.

Welcome, Alice, to the podcast. Thank you so much for being here.

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Alice:

Thanks for wanting to talk to me.

Vivian:

Of course. I've been wanting to talk to you for a while, so this is wonderful.

So at the beginning of this episode, we just listened to some incredible fiddling of yours and then to a short excerpt, To Remember That We Love This Place, that you wrote for a recent multimedia article you and the Mustard Seed Community Farm team published in the Rootstalk journal. The overall piece was titled Growing Kin: Voices from Mustard Seed Community Farm. And at the end of your excerpt, you say that you have a hope for yourself, for your community, for rural people everywhere, for all of us on this planet "to remember that we love is to remember why but also how."

From what I understand, this love for each other, for the land, for envisioning a future that could be different informs all of the work that you all do at Mustard Seed. So I want to start by having you tell us a little bit more about Mustard Seed Community Farm and its history.

Alice:

Sure.

Yeah. So I am part of the Mustard Seed Community Farm. I am one of the founders of this farm. We've been farming as a group of enthusiastic, idealistic, scruffy people for around 15 years now. And we're a little farm northwest of Ames. And yeah, there's a lot to talk about it.

But we're just trying to grow food in a cooperative, ecological way. We're trying to, yeah, just in little basic daily things reimagine our food system and our economic system and the way we work together with the land. And then, yeah, we're trying to grow delicious, healthy, beautiful food to share with whoever needs it.

Vivian:

That's wonderful. And I've tasted some of that delicious, wonderful food actually. So it's pretty good.

Alice:

Fantastic.

Vivian:

And who all is engaged in Mustard Seed's work?

Alice:

Yeah. Well, it's a hard one to say.

We from the start have had a little core team and that team has shifted over the years as people maybe graduate from school or have more children and... Anyways. As people's schedules change, but there's always been a team of five to 12 people who are at the core making some of the main decisions in consensus and usually working at least once a week on the farm.

But then, yeah, we have a lot of people who are just coming also maybe once a week to help harvest and taking food home. We have people who just come out once for a fun party or for an education

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event or to volunteer and then we just have so many partners that we are sharing food with and families that are sharing our food with other people. So it's quite hard to necessarily know what is the exact extent of our community.

Vivian:

That seems like a good problem to have actually.

And in that article that you all wrote then, part of the title says, "Growing Kin." What do you all mean by growing kin when we're talking about community?

Alice:

Yeah. I think this is also one of the core ideas behind our art show that we just had also.

Just this idea that maybe at the root of all of our problems is this exploitation of other people or of our planet or the resources or our land. And just idea that things are things to be used for whatever I want for growth of our economy or for my own greed or for competition.

And that we are trying to completely turn that upside down and that really thinking of everything as a fellow, as kin, as part of our family, as is something whether it's the little microscopic things in the soil or just our places or every other person, yeah, it's just beautiful and important and sacred and as important as me and I don't need to quite understand it but, yeah, that we're building relationships with kin.

Vivian:

That's really wonderful.

And it seems like and from what I know about the farm that this idea of growing kin does connect to the work that you all do facilitating climate dialogue through your work on the farm and the different events you hold, education or parties or whatever it might be. So can you talk a little bit more about how Mustard Seed works to facilitate dialogue around climate change and climate action?

Alice:

Yeah. The climate crisis is huge and affects everything. And I think everything that we do affects it. And so it's just an issue that is present at all times, I guess.

And I think that we are trying to build a place... I was just talking to Zoë before this, I was like, "What should I say to Vivian on the radio?" And Zoë was saying, "Yeah, well, just that the farm is this place that we are trying, are creating a place where people can come together and discuss and learn and practice different ways of doing things that have to do with art, with creativity, with climate, with social change."

Vivian:

This idea that it, because of the mission and values of Mustard Seed and the kind of work that you're doing, whether that's figuring out different ways to farm, figuring out different ways to be in community with one another that isn't exploitative, from what I understand, that is all connected to the issues that are continuing to cause climate change and the solutions that we need to find to address it.

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Alice:

And I think that we are all trying to make those connections in our conversations with each other in talking about why we're doing the work we're doing in the work that we're doing, in the art that we're doing, in the education, in the support for each other's activism. But yeah, it's hard to be like, "This is the one thing that we're doing and it's so great." Yeah, I feel like it's a lot of little things and I hope that they matter.

Vivian:

But I think that's helpful to hear, especially I assume for many of our listeners and for me talking to you. I think for many of us, especially those who are involved in conversations about climate change a lot or are thinking about climate change a lot, it does feel like a really massive problem. And it can feel hard to know what to do about it, that it is affecting so many parts of our lives and we are affecting it and where can we even start.

So this idea of it's a lot of little things that contribute to addressing climate change and climate justice in all of its different facets I think that's really helpful to hear, that it starts with little things, little actions, little conversations that we're having with each other in community.

Alice:

Yeah. And I feel like not to be like, "Well, we can all change a light bulb and that's going to save the world," but our personal choices are important. And then how we engage with each other and then how we engage with systems and corporations and governments, I think all those things matter.

But I think also we need a lot of cultural shifts and we have the power to make cultural shifts. It's hard sometimes to see that we have that power, but as artists, as people, as a person making a podcast, you have power to help shift the conversation and help shift people's mindsets.

Vivian:

And figuring out ways to create spaces where we help people know that they have that power and that we have that power together.

Alice:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. It's hard to have that power all by yourself.

Vivian:

Right. So we've talked about some of this before, especially how we as a society, in order to build community and then build that power together, we have to invest in artistic and creative spaces that are inspirational and hopeful and that these kinds of spaces will help us build relationships, community, and opportunities to practice different ways of living and farming and interacting with each other. So can you tell us a little bit more specifically about how art, storytelling, and creativity play a role in Mustard Seed's work?

Alice:

So it does feel helpful to be like, "We just had an art show," so I can feel like we're more clearly engaged in the art world than sometimes seems like we are. I do think that just our creative efforts to make the

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place where we live beautiful, fruitful, inviting, and the creation of our systems are also, I think for me, part of that art and the creation of events.

And I'm very uncomfortable being right now talking on your thing. I really like to be the person who is helping to create an opportunity for other people to talk to each other or to facilitate people's engagement with nature and with work. But here I am talking to you because I care about these things a ton.

So I think this is important for me right now as an artist is helping create positive imagination and hope and... It's been really important for me and it is really important for me to speak really honestly about terrible things. That's always been important to me. But I also think I've become more and more aware to me that lots of other people are more overwhelmed by terrible things than I am. And so sometimes, people can't engage if you're just talking about terrible things.

I feel like the people are very overwhelmed by... So it is overwhelming. There's so much despair, there's so much loss, there's so much grief and change and frightening things that we're right in the middle of. And then when we look forward or even look back, just the loss is so heartbreaking. And I think we need to make time and space to feel those feelings and to honor that and to appreciate the beauty that we have and just the glory and the amazement of the world. But I think that, yeah, there's so much hopelessness and fear and often people will just want to deny, they want to turn away, they don't know what to do.

And then I think that we have these corporations and we have this government that's like, yeah, just like, "Let's avoid it, let's push it down the road. Let's not make any changes." And I think that there's this overall idea that we have to sacrifice. We're going to have to sacrifice all of our good things, and especially the people with power I feel like are like, "We don't want to sacrifice. We don't want to let go of our power. We don't want to let go of our money. We don't want to let go of the comfort and the ease of our fossil fuels."

And so one thing I just want people to maybe start thinking about is that some of those sacrifices might be fun.

Vivian:

Right, right.

Alice:

They might not be that bad. Actually, some of those things that we're afraid to let go of aren't actually giving us joy, they're not giving us connections or meaning. We could let go of some things that aren't actually making anyone happy except for the really rich people and maybe aren't even making them happy, they're just making them rich.

And we could have amazing things. We could have wonderful, beautiful communities and we could have a beautiful planet and beautiful abundance of food and biodiversity and we could have loving, caring relationships and we could know our neighbors and... There actually could be a million changes that we make that would be good for the climate and they would be fantastic.

Vivian:

Right. In a lot of other ways too.

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Alice:

Yeah. So we don't just have to be afraid all the time. So... Anyway. That's something that seems important to me and I feel like that's something that we try to do on the farm is just be like, "Actually, we can grow food and harvest food and share food and work together and work hard and it's beautiful and we can be loving and we can talk about hard things and it's caring and..." I don't know. And we can have...

Vivian:

Parties and art shows and...

Alice:

Right. Parties and art shows. And we can maybe have no electricity sometimes. And it's like... People go camping. It's fun to go camping. You could do that every day and it's still pretty fun.

Vivian:

Right. You've also talked about how practicing artistic and crafting skills which you all do at the farm by inviting people to artistic events and doing art showcases and all that and even just farming in and of itself as an artistic and crafting skill, that that's one way to demonstrate that hope and beauty of what things could be. Can you talk more about how practicing those skills can help connect us more deeply with the land and each other?

Alice:

Yeah. This idea for me that... It does connect to this idea that we're all amazing, we're all important, and that we're all creative and we all matter and that we can all make things, we can solve problems. We don't just have to be consumers. Also, maybe that our joy and pleasure doesn't just come from buying things or consuming things but actually creating things. And it might just be dinner that we create, but that act of imagining and making something happen and then making something happen with others, yeah, it's just really empowering and that we all can do it. It's not just for some sort of special person.

Vivian:

I love how you talk about practicing these skills, especially in community with each other, as empowering, that it's not only the result itself of creating beautiful food and creating beautiful artwork and all of that, but the process that can give us confidence to pursue change in these other systems that we are a part of and maybe are worried about and feel like we need to change in some way and that practicing those skills with each other can actually help give us the confidence and hope to pursue those changes in other parts of our lives, even if we're not at Mustard Seed.

Alice:

Yeah. I think that... I see this a lot when there's younger people that work with us who have a ton to teach me and are amazing and are thinking about things that I haven't thought about. But I feel like we've all been so indoctrinated into capitalism, into systems of power, and it's just hard sometimes to practice skills of equality, of revolution, of cooperation, just so... Yeah, for sure. Just practicing skills sometimes can help us realize how caught we were in a different system.

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Vivian:

And that practicing different ways of being with each other, with the land, with everything around us, I guess that also can create habits that make the sacrifices that you were talking about earlier feel less like sacrifices if we're just practicing how to be in the world in different ways than we thought were necessary and maybe they're not.

Can you describe a day at Mustard Seed where art and storytelling merged in some way with the farm's climate action efforts?

Alice:

Well, this is what I guess what I will describe.

So twice a week, we have our harvest mornings and I think it's just a fantastic time on the farm, and a lot of people come out to the farm for this, and we start in a circle, we start as a group, and this past year, we've also been doing stretches. So we've been going around, everybody introduces themselves, there's usually some new people and they offer a stretch that we all do. So if you're new, usually, somebody else will volunteer to be your buddy.

People might say, "I'd like to lead the spinach harvest today." I've usually made a list beforehand of everything that we're going to harvest and some people sign up to be leaders. And then we have this three-hour shift where people break up into teams and they go out to harvest different things. And we have a person in the pack house and a washer.

And I guess what I'm describing is a system that's in place twice a week and people know how to fit in. But I feel like at the beginning and at the end of this time, it is about all coming back together and honoring each person and what they want.

So anyway, yeah, we go out and harvest all the things, we bring them back, everybody passes messages to the packer and the washer, and... Anyway. Then they go back out and do the next thing. It's open on the list.

And in the packhouse, they're just making these beautiful boxes of really abundant, just a lot of food in every box. And now our packhouse folks are really organized and they're writing people's names on and they're figuring out who's going to deliver which box when they go home.

And then we gather, we bring the bell, and we gather again as a big group. And this is my storytelling time, I don't know if this counts as storytelling.

Vivian:

Yes, love it.

Alice:

So again, we go around, everybody says their name again, and then we have a time to share a rose, a bud, and a thorn. And also any important information like, "Oh, somebody should weed the beets. I was harvesting the beets and they really need weeding," or "There's a really weird bug. Does anybody know what this bug is?"

And it's a time for people to share something new they learned. They might share from their morning, they might share from their life. Sometimes, people share really important things like somebody in their family has passed away or they're going to have surgery. Sometimes, it's just like, "I saw a really cool

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caterpillar," and the kids can share. And again, I feel like it's a really wonderful time of just honoring each person.

And then also this past year, we've had flowers for everybody. So everybody goes and gets a box and gets a bouquet of flowers and goes home and usually delivers food to somebody on the way home also.

And how does it fit in with our climate action? I guess it just-

Vivian:

It seems integrated that - with some of the other interviewees on this podcast series, then we've talked about the importance of, one, creating space for everyone to share their stories even if it's small stories about the bug they found, weeding, something important or meaningful that's happened in their lives, then that creates a space for everyone to be a part of the conversation.

And when we're talking about something like climate change, when it feels so huge, I think sometimes people have to figure out how to connect with the issue in order to help solve the issue by figuring out what is their small connection point, how does their story relate to this larger story of climate change, climate action.

And in Mustard Seed's case, it seems like regenerative agriculture is climate action in and of itself. And these little moments for storytelling, for people to connect with each other, for there to be beauty in the boxes with the flowers, or anything else that those actually help people find ways to connect their lives with this larger community and goal.

Alice:

Absolutely agree.

We definitely do have events that are about specific issues where we come together to talk and discuss those issues. But I feel like that this... Well, also on harvest days, lots of people have a lot of meaningful conversations out in the fields as they're working. I'm usually jumping between teams and so... Again, I'm feeling great that other people are having good conversations.

Vivian:

Right. So you're facilitator of that.

Alice:

Yeah. Facilitating it. I'm facilitating the vegetables. Yeah, I guess that's all I've got.

Vivian:

No, thank you for painting that picture of what the environment feels like on a day of the farm and that this climate dialogue, that is the theme of this podcast is pretty integrated into everything you do and these little moments for joy and hope and beauty and art help facilitate that integration, that it's not always an overwhelming conversation to be a part of, but instead it's a conversation that people want to be a part of because it's ongoing and everyone's practicing skills together of how to take climate action in very small ways.

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Alice:

Yeah. And sometimes, it feels like we are doing... There are definitely times where I'm like, "We have no effect on anything in any way." But then, yeah, I also feel like people come back and they say things like... I do feel like we're a really special place for a lot of people and have been a place where people's hearts and ideas have changed and where they've learned new skills and built really meaningful relationships.

People say things like, "This is the first place I ever felt like people actually cared what I had to say," which is... It's really surprising or just that... Yeah, I don't know. Just that it's this place of joy and connection. So yeah, I always hope that we have some effect. Anyway, people have been affecting me, so I guess it's worth something.

Vivian:

Absolutely. And like you said, in order to address something like climate change, we have to figure out where our power is and that in some ways has to happen through community building because yes, everyone can make a difference, but there's a big burden to put on any one person is to be like, "You go, you over there on your own solve climate change, and you over there on your own solve climate change," that we have to figure out how to talk about it together and be together and figure out how to change things together or it's not going to happen.

Alice:

Yes. Yeah, find that balance. That's what... Yeah. Yeah. We all have power and we all matter so we shouldn't give up, but we don't have all of it. We are not responsible for everything, so don't give up.

Vivian:

Right, right.

So I do want to talk about the art show. So you all just said and you've alluded to it a couple times. So Mustard Seed Community members recently opened an exhibit called Nest in its Branches: A Collaborative Art Show about Mutual Aid, Ecology, Justice, Community. Can you tell us about the show?

Alice:

Yeah, I feel really good about our art show. Yeah... Well, you were there.

Vivian:

I was there at the opening and it was pretty fantastic.

Alice:

I was really glad you showed up. That was fun.

So it was artwork. I had a bunch of really big quilts that I wanted to show and this space, the Harvest Vineyard Church that let us use their really big lobby, has really a big space for big artwork. So that was exciting. But yeah, I wish I had my list. I feel like there were eightish to tenish visual artists and eightish to tenish poets and musicians and it was just... Yeah, I'm at a loss for words.

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Vivian:

Well, the opening just happened a couple days ago, and yeah, I did get to go, which was being in that space with all of the artwork that Mustard Seed Community Farm volunteers, community members created and shared, it felt like a space that was all about sharing whether that was stories or food or artwork or conversations with each other. And the space was gorgeous, but it really felt like a space that was carefully created to build community which I can imagine is what it feels like to be on the farm many, many days as well.

Alice:

Yeah, that's sweet. That's good.

So me and Jen and Greta and Beamer and Lauren, we worked a lot and then the two folks from the church, Alicia and Amy, and we worked a lot for actually two weeks to get all that stuff up in that space. We had so much artwork that we needed more hooks than the church had. We had to order more hooks for their hanging wires and then they got delayed in the mail and... Anyway.

So it was a little adventure. It was a lot of stress, I guess, getting the art up. But I felt really... It was just a really fun mix of different... It was fiber, it was weaving and quilts and painting and some drawing and just some really bright stuff. And I don't know. Just was some photography, some knitting, and it was just a really fun mix.

And then I just felt like our poets and our musicians were really, really powerful and I just was really touched by everything and I just felt really grateful, I guess. Just grateful to be part of this creative community and grateful for all the people who came and all the conversations and the food.

Vivian:

And I did feel like how you just described a harvest day in terms of bookending the experience with these moments for touching base with each other and connection. I don't know.

When my partner and I entered the space and there was someone there to greet us and give us a flyer that listed all of the artists that were going to be showcasing and telling us when the performances were going to take place, the person let us know that we can go have food, go see the artwork, talk with people, performances would start soon. It was very generous and welcoming when we came in.

And then eventually, after some conversations and just mingling with people, finding people we knew which was all great, then we had this wonderful set of performances that ended with this group song. There wasn't a lot of pressure or anything like that to perform which I wonder if some people listening might be like, "What? You did a group song? What does that mean? You didn't expect to sing?" But that's not how it felt at all. It was a bunch of people gifted us with their music and poetry.

And then one of the community members went up and said, "Okay, now I'm going to teach you a song that I wrote myself and that everyone can join into if you want." And then she taught each of us parts of the song and we all sang together. And it was this really wonderful ending that felt like we were intentionally connecting with each other.

Alice:

Yeah. That was Solveig. Solveig taught us a gratitude song that she had written with four parts plus once we... And there was 80 people. Some people singing this song together who had just learned it and we're just learning four different parts and singing together. But it was simple, but beautiful.

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And again, I love community singing and I love... I'm a old time musician and I play for dancing. And again, for me, much more fun than performing is this invitation. And I love playing for dancing because then it's like we're this little band that's playing together and you're dancing with us and we're all making this really, really big experience together. And there's maybe a caller callin'. So for me, it's really rewarding to have art bring us together that way and uplift us and transcend us or something.

Vivian:

And like you said earlier that everyone is creative in some way. You don't have to call yourself an artist but that everyone has skills and stories that we can bring to these conversations whether it's an overwhelming conversation or just sharing what's going well in our lives or whatever it might be and that these little moments of invitation remind people of that, that you don't have to be an artist up here on the stage, but you can still not only listen to but then be a part of this experience. And that's a metaphor for other things that the farm is doing too. It felt like that this really is for community.

The exhibit title says that the art show is about mutual aid, ecology, justice, and community which as someone who went and was able to experience that artwork, then I saw in the art pieces themselves and the little descriptions of the art pieces next, each of them. But can you talk a little bit more about these themes and how you think the artwork and stories that were in the exhibit can help facilitate conversations about these topics?

Alice:

Yeah. It goes back to what I said at the beginning. This idea, the injustice between people and the destruction of our planet is tied into this idea of thinking of things as objects to be used and that maybe the solutions to those problems are also tied in that idea that love and cooperation and I feel... I don't know. Equality seems so simple, I guess, but just, yeah, for me, I don't know. I feel like I'm always really cheesy, but just this loving holiness or something like that. Everything is not just my equal but just amazing. And if those are the founding principles of my life and my choices, what would that look like? And then celebrating...

That show I think was partly how is the farm trying to live out these ideas, but also how can our world try to live out these ideas.

Mutual aid, just this idea again of not necessarily, "I'm rich and I'm going to help you poor person," but more everybody has something to offer and everybody needs something and that we all need to be helping each other. We all need to be accompanying each other. And that again... That family, that kinship, and then just...

I think that in a sense when you look at the... The natural world, it can be brutal and terrible but it's also really beautiful and really diverse and really interwoven. So just thinking about how we could take some examples from ecology of how maybe human beings could interact with the world in a little more balanced way, a little more humble way is just one part of a much bigger, glorious puzzle or I don't know, puzzle's not the right word, so I don't know if that makes sense.

But that was the idea of how justice and ecology and mutual aid and... What's the other one that was in there?

Vivian:

And community, I think.

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Alice:

And community, how those all tie together with the farm.

And just one more thing I'll say about that, because I feel like I had some these giant quilts in there and I feel like maybe it's not totally clear how they fit into the theme sometimes.

But I think for me also with quilting, quilting is very fun for me. But also it's just making a really big thing out of a lot of little pieces of things. And I think that for me, that's a lot of what community is like and what ecology is like and it's just that all these little pieces might not obviously seem to fit together but sometimes when you step back you're like, "Whoa, that's beautiful," or "Maybe that pattern doesn't totally make sense," but it is a really beautiful thing when you step back a little bit.

Vivian:

Can you tell us more about the two quilt pieces? Or you might have more in there.

Alice:

Yeah, I have-

Vivian:

about the quilt pieces that you had and a couple of them at least, they were directly tied to conversations about climate change and your experiences of climate change on the farm.

Alice:

Yeah. Yeah. I had four quilts in there and I think two of them were more directly tied to climate change. One was a storm at sea traditional pattern and the other one was a broken dishes traditional pattern.

And the storm at sea one, I think it's a pattern I love because it's just squares and rectangles and diamonds, but that ends up being really... When you step back, there's a lot of motion and it's wild, like a storm at sea. And the colors I used were a lot brighter than the traditional. They're not quite... Well, they're more like the colors maybe on a storm radar. So that was in my mind a little bit too. Just I feel like...

The reason I make visual art sometimes is because I can't really talk about what I'm trying to say.

Vivian:

That makes total sense.

Alice:

It's like these ideas, I feel like they do connect, and I can't quite say it in words.

Vivian:

But you talked about in your artist statement that went next to the pieces how the quilts for you connected to what has happened with the derechos in Iowa and resilience.

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Alice:

So the other piece was the broken dishes one and I feel like that's a little more clear what was going on in that one I think. The square is called broken dishes and then it's a whole quilt of these broken dishes squares put together and then over the top, when you quilt, you make stitching on top of it to hold all the layers together. And so I drew this giant picture on top of it. It's hard to see. So I put a little sketch next too, so you could see what was going on.

But we had had two derechos on the farm in the past 15 years. And so it was a story about the first derecho that we experienced, that I've experienced in my lifetime, but also the first I experienced on the farm and the destruction that it caused and how all of our dishes were broken.

And then how we had another derecho just a couple years ago across the whole state, basically, that was extremely destructive. But by that time, we had had a lot more practice with extreme weather events. And so we were not surprised by that storm. We did not have this much destruction. We had much better systems in place.

So it was speaking about how in some sense we are adjusting to the extreme weather events that have been happening across the world, but also how tragic it is that we are adjusting to these things. And I don't think that... We can't just keep adjusting. We can. We might have to live underground to be able to keep adjusting.

So it was a story about learning how to survive climate change but also just a sadness I guess about... And a fear about weather. Being a farmer and living in the country, I definitely do have fear about weather.

Vivian:

And looking at those pieces too, you talked about wanting to do it and this giant lobby because some of the pieces, including your quilts are huge, and there was something powerful about walking in and seeing all these beautiful, colorful quilts all around this huge space and you're drawn to them. And then there is this deeper story that you've put right next to them too, that has you engaged more deeply with the quilt itself and the artistry of it. But then also the story that I think connects a lot of people in Iowa and beyond about what we're dealing with and what does resilience mean but then what does also mitigation mean-

Alice:

Yes, yes.

Vivian:

... and the necessity for mitigation because of this sadness, about feeling the need for constant adaptation and how we have to find that balance.

Alice:

Yeah. It was a huge storm and not many people died, but when you look around the world, there's so much destruction, but so many people are dying and so many people are losing their homes, and so many people are losing their places, their ways of living and, yeah, the scale is... What we're going to have to do to adapt is huge, but also we could change what we're doing.

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Vivian:

Right. Right.

Alice:

We could stop some of this.

Vivian:

Do you want to share any snippets of conversations you heard from people at the event on Saturday? I know you're a facilitator, so you were floating around a lot, probably watching other people have all these conversations, but yeah, do you want to share anything about what were people's responses to the event and to this artwork, especially when we're talking about how can it facilitate dialogue?

Alice:

Yeah. Well, on the way home, I was talking to Nate and I was like, "It's like being at your own wedding." You just want to say hi to everybody and be kind and try to not fall apart and just trust that they're all having good conversations with each other. Anyway...

I talked to a lot of people for-

Vivian:

Very brief amount of time.

Alice:

... very brief amounts of time.

Vivian:

I get that completely.

Alice:

So I heard a lot of positive things.

One thing I will say, as I heard a lot of positive feedback from all the artists and I think that was important, a number of people who were showing work that they hadn't done something that big before or that was a stretch for them or they were feeling vulnerable and that they felt really good about the whole show, the whole event, and each other I guess. A lot of positivity for each other. So that felt really important to me too.

I feel... I think that the art show was something that helped all of the artists feel a little more confident going forward and putting themselves out there.

Vivian:

Got you. Again, goes back to what you were saying earlier about building power and empowering people through invitations to contribute what they can.

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Alice:

Yeah, so that feels really good to me.

Vivian:

Yeah. So we've talked a little bit about all the different kinds of artwork that you've done and as we heard at the beginning of this episode, you're a musician, a fiddler, you're a singer, and then obviously you're also a potter and fiber artist. Can you tell us a little bit more about how your art informs your work as a farmer and community organizer and vice versa?

Alice:

Maybe going back to the practice of being a maker or a creator. I don't know how I got to be like that, if that was how I was raised or if it's the practices of doing those things that helps me have that mindset. But it is life giving to me. It is something that gives me joy. It is something that calms me when I'm stressed but maybe, yeah, I also just have this mind I think that is constantly imagining and then trying to do.

Vivian:

That's great actually because my next question followup to that, which I think maybe you've already answered, is why is your artistic practice important to your climate advocacy work? And I don't know if that's partially this idea of that climate advocacy work can be stressful and having a way to, like we talked about earlier, imagine a better future and create spaces for hope and if your artistic practice is life giving, how it can replenish?

Alice:

Yeah. I'm this kind of person who I feel like even if I have... Well, I've been reading a lot of fiction lately so that's what I've been doing recreationally, I guess. But I feel like even the things that I do for fun maybe would fall into the category of work. So if you were me and define work as seeing either a problem or something that you want to happen and then imagining and trying to figure something out and then putting some effort in and seeing what happens and then maybe adjusting and trying again.

So I'm like, "Oh, playing music, it's work. And farming is work and making a rug or making pottery or... And even socially doing work with people." So I guess I feel like the same is true for advocacy or working for change. It's imagining something different and putting forth effort whether by yourself or with others. So it just all seems like the same, I guess.

It's like what medium are you working in or what skills do you have but it's all kind of the same imagining and then trying to make it happen.

Vivian:

We've talked about how even if they're all connected, like you said, it can be challenging to balance all of these roles or all these different mediums for doing work and all of these work that's really meaningful in all of these different capacities. What have you learned about this process of finding balance, even if you're not there yet?

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Alice:

Right. No, this is the question I thought you were going to ask me about. And I have no idea. No idea how to find balance.

Vivian:

Have you learned anything that you want to share?

Alice:

Well, that it's not a fixed thing and that you can't do everything you want to do. I can't do everything I want to do. Maybe you can. I can't. I want to do so many things, and I'm excited about doing so many things and I care about doing so many things and I want to talk to so many people and I want to listen to so many people and I care about so many people and I want to be friends with everybody and you just can't do it.

So what have I learned? To be patient with myself and to trust maybe the longer picture or the bigger picture. It's been tough. Since I started farming not just working on other people's farms but trying to make a farm work, I've written one song in 15 years when I used to write a lot of songs and I played in three bands and now I sometimes play in one band.

There's a lot of things that I can't do as much of as I want to but also to be like, "Okay, I haven't stopped being a musician. I just maybe am not spending as much time being a musician and that doesn't mean I'm never going to. Might be another time in my life when that's one of my top priorities and maybe just to trust that, I don't know, it all fits together somehow."

And also to trust that it's important to take care of myself and, I don't know, to have friends. It's important to have friends and to let other people take care of me.

Vivian:

Yeah. Especially when you're... Seems like you talked about your role as a facilitator and you've created these spaces and all of that and how you're taking care of other people and doing your best to take care of the land and create systems and structures that can allow us to do that. There has to be balance in that way too.

Alice:

Yeah. And living in the country, living a rural life, and being a farmer, it's isolating it's lonely, it's more logistically difficult to do social things and to not ignore that just because it's harder doesn't mean I should be alone all the time.

Vivian:

Yeah.

Alice:

Yeah. And just because maybe I'm working with people all day and facilitating lots of great things doesn't mean I don't need to just go hang out with my friends.

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Vivian:

Exactly. That's I think important to hear especially if... I know a lot of the interviewees on this podcast series and maybe several of our listeners too are also figuring out how to juggle, as you put it, a lot of different mediums of doing the work that really matters but also maybe recognizing that one of those mediums needs to be finding ways to replenish and be taken care of, not just caring for.

Alice:

Yeah.

Vivian:

Thank you for sharing that.

Speaking of systems and structures, you've told me about how Mustard Seed works to be a beautiful, safe, welcoming place for people to experiment with systems, economic, agricultural, social systems that are more just. In order to address climate change and work toward climate justice, we are going to have to reevaluate these systems on a broader scale too. So I'm curious how you think the kind of artistic, creative, local work that Mustard Seed is doing can help us push for climate policy?

Alice:

I do think it can. I do think that advocating for policy change is super important. And I don't think it's my top work as my own person but absolutely, I think I'm part of... I guess I feel like I'm part of a lot of movements that are working on that and that it is my job personally to just support them, to encourage them, to maybe uplift them.

I think it is my job to maybe support people in finding their power, in finding their voice, in finding their relationships with our planet and with each other and encouraging them to keep fighting this fight. And I think that our farm does that.

And I think sometimes we are going to the protests or sometimes we're just sending food to the protests. I'm definitely more of a fan of direct action, I don't know, than letter writing.

Vivian:

But it's like... So I used the word local to describe the work that Mustard Seed does because it seems to be very focused on what is our community here and what can we give to it. And everything you're talking about, about the way that the systems of the farm work and the systems of the community that you've created work, then it seems to be very much about figuring out who has what skills, stories, assets to offer, and giving people encouragement and confidence and support to do that, like you said, that you've created a space that facilitates opportunities for people to figure out how they can advocate in their own way, whatever that might be.

So maybe through direct action, maybe through letter writing, maybe through creating the food that helps sustain the people who are doing that other work. So that's actually...

Yeah, I hadn't thought about it in that way, but that's I think really important to remember that when we're talking about something like how do you push for climate policy that that's not just in one way, it's creating communities where we can help each other figure out how to contribute in the ways that mesh best with the skills we have to offer, what we're passionate about, what we feel like we have the capacity to give to.

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Thank you for sharing that.

Yeah. Okay. So as we are wrapping up our conversation, you have shared so much wonderful information and I would say wisdom about how to start shifting the systems that we're in in a way that is hopeful and inspirational and thoughtful and caring which I think is really wonderful to hear and makes me feel just more confident in the community that I'm in to hear that these things are happening.

So what are the three key ideas that you want people listening to understand about your work that's at this intersection of art and farming and organizing and climate action?

Alice:

Okay. I did think about that. So here's my three things.

So one of them is cooperation and then one of them is making time and space for what gives you meaning and the other one was coming back to that everyone matters. So then I'll have a few sentences on each one of those.

So cooperation, one, is just for me and for you if you want, is just that, yeah, you don't have to do it all, you don't have to think of everything. Just to join with what other people are already doing, having friends supporting other efforts. I think that being humble is part of cooperation and community. So that's that one.

So making time and space for what gives you meaning. For me, that is community and function and beauty. I like to make beautiful things that are also useful. I also think that that is helpful for an ecological economy is to make things that are beautiful and useful, but that's something that I love doing. I also love being outside and just lying on the ground and looking at the sky.

And so I work really hard sometimes and I don't have a lot of time, but just even taking a few minutes to just lie down and look at the sky can calm and center me. So anyway...

I guess that, yeah, you don't have to do everything and to make sure that you create some space to do the things that are meaningful and that you love.

And finally, that everyone matters and everyone is creative. For me, that means to listen to everybody and be humble again and to be amazed by everybody. But yeah, also, we all have power. We all can make a difference and that we don't have to do everything.

Vivian:

Great.

Alice:

Oh, wait. Wait, wait, wait.

Vivian:

Yeah.

Alice:

And love. I forget about love. Love was part of my one about making space for things to give me meaning. Yeah, sorry, function, beauty, love. Anyway, sorry. That was going to be my nice end path. We started off with love and then I finished with love and I'm really cheesy. Oh... Anyway.

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Vivian:

There will be a way to get that in there. I'll make a note.

And so with these takeaways from the work that you do, what is the biggest recommendation you have for others who might want to use artistic strategies to talk about climate change especially in agricultural communities?

Alice:

Well, I feel like I live in quite a white rural agricultural community. And I think a lot of agricultural communities are probably fairly homogenous and have maybe been there for a while and maybe a little wary of outsiders.

And I also think that there's a lot of defensiveness in farming. I think a lot of farmers just care a lot about what they're doing. They care about a lot about their land, they care a lot about their families. They want to make money to help their kids have a better life. I think a lot of us are buying into the economic myths and the things we're learning from our ag universities and our big corporations. And I think a lot of farmers are defensive about, I don't know, regenerative agriculture and organic farming.

Yeah. So I don't know what I want to say. Maybe I would say... Well, I want to say don't start off by picking a fight.

Vivian:

Yeah?

Alice:

But maybe that's the wrong... Maybe you start off by picking a fight if you want. I think that's important too. Somebody should be doing that too. We should try everything. We should try everything wherever we are.

For me, I've been trying to make friends, trying to find common ground. A lot of what I try to do is try to find the common ground to build a little bit of relationship before digging some of the harder stuff.

But other thing I think is I think culture is powerful and that partly what the power of the arts is that we can tap into culture. We can create culture, but we can tap into this culture that's been with us and that's in our food and that's in the way we relate. That's in our music, that's... It's in all of our arts. And so yeah, tapping into that taps into people's memories, into their hearts, and their history. And some of that is painful and some of it's terrible and some of it's beautiful, but I think sometimes it can help people engage and think about things. Yeah, I don't know. Use culture to make new culture.

Vivian:

Thank you so much, Alice, for all of those takeaways and recommendations. Really. Thank you.

Speaking of, also, as we've discussed throughout this entire episode, the importance of community and connecting with the work that's happening in your community and learning from each other and all of that. How can people listening connect with you and your work?

Alice:

Yeah, we have a website and I think Vivian's going to put some of this on somewhere.

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Vivian:

Yes, it will be on the website for sure.

Alice:

So the farm has a website. I do not have my own website. I have a old Instagram account that got hacked and I've got a new Instagram account that has six little things in it.

But yeah, the farm is much easier to engage with on the inter-world. But also, you should come see us once it starts to be springtime. So starting in May, we will have pretty regular harvest days and we will have events and we'll have workshops and we might have some potlucks and parties. So come see us. That's what I recommend.

Vivian:

Definitely. And I got the chance to go see the farm for the first time a few weeks ago. So I hope to make it out there too and to see you again and talk more and see more about the wonderful work that you're doing. So thank you so much again for joining, Alice, and for all of the incredible thoughtful spaces and conversations that you help create in this community here.

Alice:

Well, thanks. And thanks for having a fun podcast project about art and farming and climate change.

Vivian:

Thanks for making it fun. It's people like you who make it possible.

Thank you for listening to The Art of Climate Dialogue and we hope you'll listen to the rest of the series. More information about podcast interviewees is available at ecotheatrelab.com. We invite you to engage in conversation with us by leaving a comment, responding to the short feedback form in our show notes, and checking out The EcoTheatre Lab's website.

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