



## *Come Together with David Baum*

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*EPISODE – André S. Clements:  
An Artist's Journey  
to Extinction Rebellion.*

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<https://cometogether.me/andre-s-clements-an-artists-journey-to-extinction-rebellion>

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**DAVID BAUM:** Hello Everyone! I'm David Baum, in Seattle. I'm with André S. Clements, in South Africa. André is a visual artist – a photographer – and a volunteer for Extinction Rebellion, which is also known as “XR.” Extinction Rebellion is famous for its campaign of civil disobedience to force governments to act on the climate, but at a deeper level it's about creating new ways to distribute power in society. Here's André.

**ANDRÉ S. CLEMENTS:** I'm not sure how familiar people are with XR. It's got a very – sometimes I like to describe it as almost bacterial kind of structure, where you have circles emerging within circles. And then as the circles, the work groups become stronger and bigger, then they separate into new groups, and it keeps expanding. In terms of the areas I'm involved in locally, it's mostly at the moment in media and message. Also in our strategy circle. And then in International Support Team, I'm involved in regenerative culture work group. And liaising from there into talks and training.

**DAVID:** Who are the people that you meet in XR?

**ANDRÉ:** That is a big question! The only way to really answer it is to experience it. It's the first organization or activity that I've really been engaging with everyone. It's crossing... The most fascinating part for me – especially, you know, being in South Africa in a highly politicized environment for various reasons – one of the most fascinating things to see is the extent to which (I mean it's a far cry from perfect) but

already the extent to which there's bridging happening across class divides, specifically.

But also then culturally and lifestyle. To give you a really funny story. We had a little bit of consternation because you can imagine a lot of permaculture and kind of very naturally nature-orientated people joining XR and you know, you can imagine all the vegans. And the next minute you have a bunch of professional hunters wanting to join the XR because they worried about running out of their animals, or their prey. And you know, one of our principles is be welcome everyone and every part of everyone. So we need to figure out how to deal with this stuff.

And the beauty of XR is that it can do that, for the simple reason that it places primacy on "axiology" or the value system – the value construct – before ideology. And especially in an environment like South Africa, we really see the impact of doing that. That makes a very, very important difference to most other organizations.

**DAVID:** I'm not sure I understand the difference between a value structure and an ideology. Could you talk more about that?

**ANDRÉ:** So with ideology you always have some kind of an interpretation happening. Typically it's somebody who gets up in front and say, "This is what's wrong. This is how we're going to fix it." With a value system, or axiology, you say, "Let's identify the actual values, those things that you are not able to do without – or not willing to do without – and base everything on that."

And the other thing that then ties into that is that part of the whole character and strategy of XR is to look at what is it that has brought us to the predicament that we are in. And the way a lot of us see it is that it's really about asymmetries of power. And the moment you have asymmetries of power, you have the potential and the incentive for exploitation.

So that takes us to, I think it's the third principal about "We need a regenerative culture." So if we were to say, well, let's look at what's wrong with culture, regardless of how much time we've got left in the culture we are in, but we start saying to ourselves, "What should culture look like? What should it be like?" And you come to the conclusion it should be more horizontal. It should include more autonomy. It should nurture that autonomy, and grow it.

Yeah, then suddenly you've got a very, very exciting kind of cybernetic construct running.

**DAVID:** Do you find that the meetings that you have with people are rewarding, or are

they contentious and difficult?

**ANDRÉ:** More so the former, sometimes the latter. You can imagine the amount of politics and discord that can emerge. Especially in an organization that is expanding at the kind of exponential pace that Extinction Rebellion is unfurling.

And also when you bear in mind that people are coming into it from their mainstream lives where they've been used to doing things one way. Especially at the moment with a lot of kind of middle class, professional kind of middle-management-level people stepping into the organization. A lot of people come with that kind of corporate paradigm. Or that "operating system" running.

And then to say to them: "Okay, look, here you go. This is what you've volunteered for. You've got your mandate. Please discuss anything you're not sure about, but Go! You don't have to ask anyone permission to do anything within this mandate that you've now taken on."

Differences of opinion are going to arise. And you know, some people are going to use the set of principles as a hammer to clobber people over the head with, rather than necessarily living it out themselves. Those kinds of issues do emerge.

But generally the meetings are incredibly uplifting and encouraging. Some of it is designed into the structure of the meetings. So meetings typically start with people checking in and just having a minute or half-a-minute to say where you are at. So you're getting acknowledged on a very real human level. And because you're not vying for authority, or trying to work your way up some kind of pecking order, there's a lot more space for honesty. And that, in turn, forces you to reflect and be honest with yourself in a way that we're not always used to being.

So the meetings are one of the best parts of Extinction Rebellion.

**DAVID:** What does the phrase "regenerative culture" mean?

**ANDRÉ:** The easy answer is to say that there are as many answers to that question as there are people trying to answer it. For myself, I've carried a lot of my relationship to fine art, or the art practice, over from that world into Extinction Rebellion.

But for me, the crux of it is about caring. When you look at the way that it's usually broken down in the XR documentation, it talks about starting with caring in the context of the self, and then expanding that into the group you are, into your environment, and wider and wider arenas.

But the crux of caring for me is about, in the first place, paying attention. So if I'm an

artist making a drawing, the first thing I'm actually caring about – the canvas or the piece of paper that's in front of me. And I'm caring about the marks that I'm making. So I'm paying attention and there's a quality of relationship in that. And then as that process expands, you start paying attention to the environment that you're either interpreting or trying to work with. And that caring expands out into the audience and into the world. So it's the same kind of model for me. And maybe that's just my weird and wonderful artist's interpretation.

So I like to think about those kinds of things. But in the process of trying to see what is emerging out of the world, it was becoming more and more distressing and more and more disturbing. I was doing a lot of cityscapes. I would go into downtown Joburg (Johannesburg, South Africa) and because there's the lure of all the little lights and everything. But once you go into downtown Joburg, you realize it's actually an "effing" war zone right now. Things are broken down. There's bricks lying everywhere. There's all these heaps of cloths.

I like to go out at night because everything visually becomes liquid and it's quiet, and it feels like a sacred space. But then you walk into the space and there's all these what looks like heaps of fabrics on the road. And it takes you a moment to realize those are people sleeping there. This is people's lives. And that's a war zone. There's barbed wire, there's tendrils of smoke curling around the sidewalk.

As an artist, then, it starts putting you in a very difficult position. Because on the one hand, this is the reality that you're confronted with. You want to go and capture that in process and work with that, but at the same time, you know that what's going to end up is you're going to make a print or an image out of this that your going to expect some rich person to drop a lot of money on, to put on their wall. Even regardless of how honest or in an integrity your response is, at the end of the day, are you not also just exploiting other people's misery?

So increasingly I started getting confronted by those questions in my art practice, and being uncomfortable with what I experienced a; the pretence that's almost inherent in the way that the art – certainly, the art market – works. Artistic practice for me is a different kettle of fish entirely.

And in the process of thinking about these dynamics and trying to look at the world, and then starting to do some serious research on climate change (whereas previously I was more interested in things like automation and the fourth industrial revolution and everything coming there) and realizing just how dire the predicament is, I started looking a little wider and a little deeper. And it was roughly at that point that I became aware of

Extinction Rebellion.

And my experience of it was seeing.... It was almost as if I was looking out over the vast voids of cyberspace, and suddenly I saw this program that my honest gut response was, okay, here's something I need to know about. And the more I connected with it and plugged into it the more rewarding and stimulating and exciting and challenging it became.

**DAVID:** Where do you think XR is going? And more generally, how do you think the human response to climate change and the imminent threat of collapse is.... How do you think we're doing now?

**ANDRÉ:** Well the problem with a question like that is what kind of rubric do you want to use to judge it by? Its very hard to make that kind of judgment.

What I do think is that there's a lot that is very exciting that is going on. How XR is doing and where it's all going to go, nobody actually knows. Let's just be honest about that.

For me, the predicament we are in as humanity can be many different things. On the one hand, there's the obvious stuff. There's the apocalypse, there's the fear response, there's that way of looking at it.

Another way of looking at it is to say, "Hey, maybe, just maybe, this thing has got a completely different character and quality to it. Maybe, just maybe, as a specie, we are faced with a rite of passage with a kind of initiation. Maybe we all where we are because civilization as we know it has been a fixation on a very specific kind of way of being. Maybe it's been a fixation on the "will to power" as Nietzsche phrased it. And maybe that has caused a whole lot of pretense; a little bit like your and my personalities. It's kind of defense mechanisms that we've built up over time.

So when you look at something like the Enneagram that I'm very fond of (and I know that you've, you've studied various kind of transpersonal modalities and things based on the little bits that I've picked up) One of the things I like... Well, two of the things I like about the Enneagram is a) that it shows you how something that might be good for one person is bad for another person, the predicament's a little bit like that. But on the next level it shows you that you don't have to be trapped in that little box of your personality.

So if we start saying that civilization is humanity's current personality and that you can possibly make adjustments and work on what that personality or that manifestation is, then that opens up a whole new arena for us to work and play with.

Because literally never before has the entire specie or that or our specie been faced to

this extent with this kind of existential threat.

So there's a sense.... Because I mean, let's face it: In terms of crisis and impending doom and all of that stuff, the reality is still that we were all going to die anyway! That's the truth. It'll be a damn pity if we take the only known instance of life in the entire universe as far as we know, out with ourselves.

But maybe that is not our business. Maybe our business is who and what we are, and how we relate to that. And if we can drop the pretense of thinking that we are immortal, and then manifesting that in our civilization.... I mean, ask any eight year old whether you can build a perpetual motion machine and they laugh at you. Yet, that's what we have the neoclassical economists telling us: "We can have infinite growth!" Yeah, sure.

So I think those are the kinds of issues that we are beginning to deal with, all in our own different modalities, and ways, and contexts. Will we get it all right. No, probably not. Does that matter? A little bit, but not too much.

**DAVID:** Well, that's just wonderful. I just love the way you talk about it. I really do.

**ANDRÉ:** I'm glad.

**DAVID:** To finish up.... Let's say there's someone who is not familiar with Extinction Rebellion and they're looking at it. They're thinking about maybe they should check it out or become involved. What would you say to such a person?

**ANDRÉ:** Absolutely. Go for it. Check it out. I'm not saying it's for everyone, just like Deep Adaptation is probably not for everyone...yet. I think at some point everybody's going to have to be dealing with the issues inside of Deep Adaptation.

In terms of Extinction Rebellion, I would say go to any of the very many Extinction Rebellion websites and simply sign up and check it out. A good way of going about that is to try and get what's often called "DNA Training" in Extinction Rebellion. So it's usually an hour, sometimes two hours, of somebody that is familiar with the principles and values, taking them through them, discussing them, and a little bit of the strategy and culture inside of Extinction Rebellion. And first check that you're okay with that. That really is the "who we are" of Extinction Rebellion.

Then you can start... Because part of the principle of Extinction Rebellion is: Provided that is in place, you can then say, "What appeals to me? What resonates for me? What am I interested in? Where do I feel I can make a change either in my community or in the world at large?" You can choose to get involved locally. You can choose to get involved internationally. You can be part of the Global South Solidarity or Global South

Connection group that's very, very strong at the moment.

Find the areas that you're interested in. Typically you'll find that you can become part of the larger group with that interest. Inside of that group will typically be a work group, usually less than 12 people with each person having a role. Volunteer, maybe to be the secretary for a group for a certain amount of time, limited to a couple of weeks, and take minutes in those – typically it's weekly meetings – which gives you a sense of what's happening. And realize that that group is probably going to be different from the next group, but it's a stepping stone in, and then you can start navigating your way.

Part of the beauty of Extinction Rebellion is that it really is a manifestation of the idea of lifelong learning. We go through school and most of us then get convinced that now you're supposed to know everything you're ever going to know. Nonsense! We learn as we go.

So as you engage with different circles, you might come with your own skill set, but suddenly you're in a different milieu, a different environment, and you start.... Like, I was learning a hell of a lot about climate change that I had no idea about. Or you get involved in something like food security, or water security, that is more related to the Deep Adaptation response.

We've also tentatively in IST (International Support Team) started what we call XR Deep Adaptation group, which is aiming at specifically starting to explore the overlap or the intersection between the Deep Adaptation agenda and the Extinction Rebellion paradigm.

But I know that there's also other groups working on XR and Deep Adaptation strategies and responses for things lying ahead, and how that influences various other activities. So if you're very interested in Deep Adaptation, you could take that as a point of interest or focus. Or if it's the climate and the apocalypse stuff that you want to make sense of, there's these areas for you to do that.

If it's literally just a matter of wanting to get involved in community development and support, you can do that as well. So there's lots of lots of options.

**DAVID:** And if you would like to get involved, I'll give links in a moment.

That's the story for now! That was André S. Clements, a visual artist and a volunteer for Extinction Rebellion South Africa.

There are links to Extinction Rebellion, and to André's photographic artwork, on my website at <https://cometogether.me/>.

If you'd like to discuss what you've heard with me and other people, please join the [\*Come Together Conversation Group\*](#), on Facebook. (The link is on the website.) Until we meet again, farewell!

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