

ESSAY . APRIL 2026

Open Windows

Discourse on one of the faces of
preparedness

Dagna Gmitrowicz & Eliza Zadłużna

Open Windows

Discourse on one of the faces of preparedness. **Individual readiness?**

Dagna Gmitrowicz & Eliza Zadłużna

"I love that moment when I arrive by train in the city late in the evening. Houses and blocks of flats appear beyond the window, their lights burning in rectangles. I think about the people living behind those lit squares, their individual stories, their dreams and fears. I think about how we shall probably never meet, and yet how holding them in thought is already a form of meeting."

The following article was written in the spirit of that meeting, composed in dialogue, weaving together our different perspectives and approaches. It is also an invitation to further meetings, real and virtual alike, to opening windows onto stories, and to building a world in which our "**windows of tolerance**" and "**windows of acceptance**" can grow wider. This text is an invitation to a conversation that emerged from a felt need to tend to the kind of environment for learning and growth that we are building in society. It was written by Dagna Gmitrowicz and Eliza Zadłużna, two internationally active facilitators with many years of experience working with people and organisations.

We would love you to be part of it as well.

Do we actually know how?

How to eat, how to breathe, how to sleep, how to run, how to love.
A life course.

We develop theories, write books, create methods and approaches, all so that society might "equip itself" with the competencies for "happy" survival. We seem to have all the knowledge about the "how", yet so few people actually live that "how" out. Those who do try often dive deep into a particular focus area, and when they surface briefly, they feel the fierce current of life, inevitable and unknown. And so they return to their niche, convinced that their path is the answer.

In this text, we wish to examine one term in particular: preparedness, a relatively recent addition to the European Union's priority narrative. It has become the language of institutions: NATO, WHO, the EU. Its original logic was systemic, concerned with managing infrastructure, ensuring state continuity, and fortifying economic resilience. More recent strategic documents speak plainly of the readiness of communities and citizens in the face of poly-crisis, not merely institutions. Readiness is to be built from the ground up, locally, relationally.

And here lies the paradox. The closer preparedness moves towards the level of the individual and the community, the more urgently it needs to answer the question: how? Strategic documents describe the goal. They rarely describe the conditions that make the goal possible. When those conditions are absent (time, resources, economic security, vital social bonds), readiness becomes yet another obligation heaped onto the shoulders of people who are already overburdened. The intention may be communal. The effect, unfortunately, far too often leads to individualisation.

This creates a context in which it becomes ever harder to cope.

Two closely related terms, though there are certainly more

Resilience, here we reach into neurobiology. It turns out we can develop the capacity of a positive nervous system response to what is difficult, unclear, and frightening. Practices that bypass the mechanisms of flight, freeze, or fight allow us to return to momentary harmony and a sense of agency.

Sounds familiar?

Change management, for its part, grew in the 1990s out of a genuine need: how to guide organisations and people through deep structural transformation. Change management models were developed as organisational tools for managing systems, communication and resistance to change.

The problem arises when the language and logic of these tools seep from the conference room into personal life and become a philosophy of individual survival. "What would I do if I weren't afraid?" is a question useful in a process of group reflection, but it takes on an entirely different weight when directed at someone who has just lost their job, their sense of security, the ground beneath their feet.

Being made redundant? Brilliant, lace up your trainers and go looking for a new role with enthusiasm. In fact, it's probably for the best. And once you've found it, don't stop. Nothing is certain any more. And that's supposed to be fine. This is no longer change management. This is a caricature of motivational coaching, leading straight to toxic positivity.

To summarise: preparedness is a language designed with political, economic and social systems in mind. Resilience in neurobiology describes a specific, clinically measurable and useful nervous system capacity, but that same term in political discourse has become an elegant way of saying: "Sort yourself out; deal with changes you didn't cause." Change management is a corporate tool, developed to steer people through restructuring, which can lead to a narrowing of positive thinking that pushes aside everything difficult. Each of these concepts has its legitimate place. The problem arises when all three land simultaneously on the shoulders of one individual.

Self-regulating ideology

Self-regulation as a tool, in the therapy room, in trauma work, in preventive work, is something genuinely valuable and helpful. Breathing techniques, mindfulness, and somatic work all have solid clinical foundations. The problem does not lie in the tool itself.

The problem lies in what happens when the tool becomes an ideology, when "you can regulate yourself" becomes "you ought to be able to manage on your own", and the system that produces the overwhelm is let off the hook. It is a subtle distinction, but a decisive one.

The same logic appears in the phenomenon of self-diagnosis. In itself, it is not a bad thing. Awareness of one's own emotional states, recognising patterns of response, finding language for what we are experiencing, these are all elements of healthy self-awareness. The problem arises when self-diagnosis becomes an identity label before any real contact has taken place: with a therapist, with someone close, with a group. When instead of saying "I feel overwhelmed and I don't know why", we say "I have nervous system dysregulation" or "that's my avoidant schema" and leave it there.

Clinical language can bring relief: naming what hurts reduces the sense of chaos. But that same language can become a shield, a way of keeping others at a safe distance, of managing a relationship rather than entering it. We begin performing the role of someone who is "working on themselves", rather than simply being ourselves, with all the ambiguity, the shame, and the need that cannot be patched up with a diagnosis.

In order to maintain productivity, some of us have found a new way of apparent survival. In place of alcohol or drugs (though those, too, take their toll), we have practices flying the flag of wellbeing. Practices that largely transfer responsibility onto the individual, lifting it from systems, groups and teams. We live in a world of self-perpetuating mechanisms. We maintain productivity. We often say "yes" when we feel "no".

A non-conversation

How are you?" "Fine. Lots on. You?" "Tired, but managing. I haven't been ill in years, strange, isn't it?" "You must have a strong immune system. What have you been up to lately?" "Working a lot. Various activities. It's hard at times, but I'm coping. Self-regulation techniques really do work: when anxiety creeps in, I ground myself, listen to mantras, go to the forest, or go to the gym. There's no time to give in." "Right. I really must be off. See you." "...but..."

"Over the following month, they exchanged a few more messages. A year later, one of them was no longer reachable.

With a modified sense of reality as our compass, we follow the algorithm for "how to cope in a crisis". Meanwhile, some of us are falling into the abyss. They disappear. We lose them. We lose each other. We lose the smell, the taste, the touch, the closeness, the stories of grief and sorrow. We lose most of what built our shared history.

But how can this be?

We know how to breathe, to ground ourselves, to paraphrase. We have diligently worked through generational trauma. We have clear goals and life visions. We are agents of change. Trained, equipped with soft skills, supported by coaching, therapy, and self-help guides.

These narratives of self-sufficiency tempt us to believe we can single-handedly create our perfect world, but that would be an illusion. Without the vulnerability required for a deeper human connection, we are only building an island, or the walls of Rapunzel's tower.

Loneliness and isolation in Europe are rising, among young people and adults alike. And this is not happening in spite of all our strategies. It is happening alongside them, and in all likelihood, partly because of them.



There is a way

In her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit describes something she observed repeatedly in disaster zones: earthquakes, floods, attacks. In the face of the sudden collapse of normal order, people spontaneously form a community, sharing resources, caring for strangers, and recovering a sense of agency and meaning. Solnit calls this a "paradise built in hell", the paradoxical experience of aliveness and solidarity that emerges precisely when the structures separating us from one another dissolve. As though human beings had experienced a reset and returned to a primordial competency of being human: togetherness.

This provocative observation raises an uncomfortable question: do we need a catastrophe to truly be together? Does everyday normality, with its productivity, its individual survival strategies and managed distance, systematically deprive us of access to something we only reclaim at the edge? Working with people living under constant threat shows that in the place where all self-regulation techniques cease to be enough, something we have been searching for may be hiding: genuine contact, presence, life.

Johann Hari, in his book *Lost Connections*, writes that depression and anxiety are often not simply a "fault in the brain", but a signal of severed bonds, from people, from meaning, from the body, from nature, from values, from hope and from agency. What we frequently call depression can be a perfectly reasonable response from an organism and psyche living in disconnection. Rather than asking "what is wrong with me?" it may be worth asking: from what, from whom, from what way of living have I become disconnected?

This is why it is not enough to ask: "How do I feel better?" We must also ask: "What kind of life is genuinely healthy and nourishing for a human being?" Because one can have regulation strategies, attend therapy, meditate, keep an emotion journal and still live in an environment that systematically severs one from vitality.

Sometimes the problem is not that a person is responding poorly. Sometimes they are simply trying to survive in a poorly arranged world.

Let us open windows

And this brings us back to the priority of preparedness. In response to EU priorities, many organisations and institutions are beginning to build programmes and projects supporting "readiness". And here a question faces us, one we consider essential:

What if, instead of preparing for something we wish to avoid, we prepared for what we wish to create?

For being together. For presence, here and now.

Our world of readiness is a world of authentic relationships and acceptance. Alongside the window of stress tolerance that each of us can individually widen, the window of acceptance matters just as much: a state in which we are able to receive our emotions as they are. Without judgement. Without shame. And that is no easy thing when we feel that "only I can't cope, only I am afraid, only I am failing".

In those moments, what helps is the experience of resonant contact with another person who can simply be alongside. Someone who says: "I see you. I see that what you are saying makes sense. I see how difficult this is for you. And I am here."

The experience of being truly seen, not through the lens of categories and diagnoses, but in one's full individuality and unique history, allows the window of acceptance to widen. And when it does, perhaps we ourselves begin to be capable of being with others in precisely that way. Without telling them "don't worry, everything will be fine", "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger", "you're strong, you'll manage".

Sometimes the courageous act is to show one's own powerlessness. To say that I need support. To share what I am ashamed of, without fear of being cast out.

We dream of a world of wide-open windows of acceptance, through which human stories flow freely into one another: stories of joy, pride, and achievement, but also of sorrow, disappointment, fear and loneliness.

From I to We

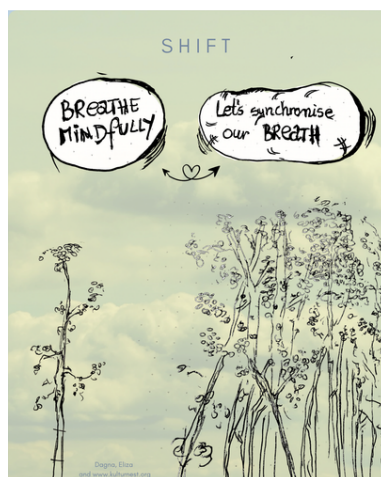
Without recognising that I am part of a system that shapes me, and that I am, consciously or not, co-creating that system, it is difficult to meet the challenges of the contemporary world. They are simply too big to be taken on at an individual level. They do not fit within our individual windows of acceptance.

And when something is "too large" to receive, we freeze or flee. I hear it in the words: "I don't want to talk about it, because I have no influence over it. I have no influence over ongoing wars. I have no influence over the climate crisis. I have no influence over growing inequality."

Social psychology has a name for this. Albert Bandura described three modes of human agency: individual, proxy, and collective, defining the last as action through the coordinated, interdependent efforts of a group. Crucially, research shows that when a person loses a sense of personal control, they turn to the group not out of idealism, but out of psychological necessity, seeking in collective agency what they cannot recover alone. This is not a weakness. It is one of the fundamental mechanisms of human resilience. The shift from "I" to "we" is a measurable change in how people experience themselves in the world.

We believe that this very transition, from individual responsibility for my piece of reality to seeing oneself in interdependence and shared responsibility, is at the heart of genuine readiness.

We do not need more individual-level regulation strategies. We need to create a world in which we can reconnect: with people, with meaning, with the body, with community, and with hope for change.



Building together

If we invested resources and energy into learning how to be with another human being, what might that look like?

- How and when do you talk with your neighbour?
- How do you approach someone sitting alone on a bench without causing alarm?
- How do you share resources?
- How do you create work that offers security and makes being together possible?
- How can we create holistic and welcoming public spaces for all members of society?
- How can we learn to live alongside behaviour and difference that initially make us feel uncomfortable?
- How do we build belonging where we already are, rather than retreating to communities of people who are just like us?
- And what if, instead of leaving to find the right community, we chose to become the kind of person who brings that quality of care and attention to wherever we already are?

These are the questions we are asking ourselves and asking of you. This text is an invitation. We want to talk, to experiment, to build together a body of practices that support relational development: in education, in work with adults, in organisations and local communities.

We are talking about solidarity. About genuinely being together. If that sentence moved something in you, write to us. Join the conversation.

Authors:

Dagna Gmitrowicz dagna.gmitrowicz@kulturnest.org,

Eliza Zadłużna e.zadluzna@post.pl.

Edited and supported by KulturNest e.V.

Elisabeth Fraser, www.kulturnest.org

Illustration: Dagna Gmitrowicz

2026, April

CC BY-SA

SHIFT

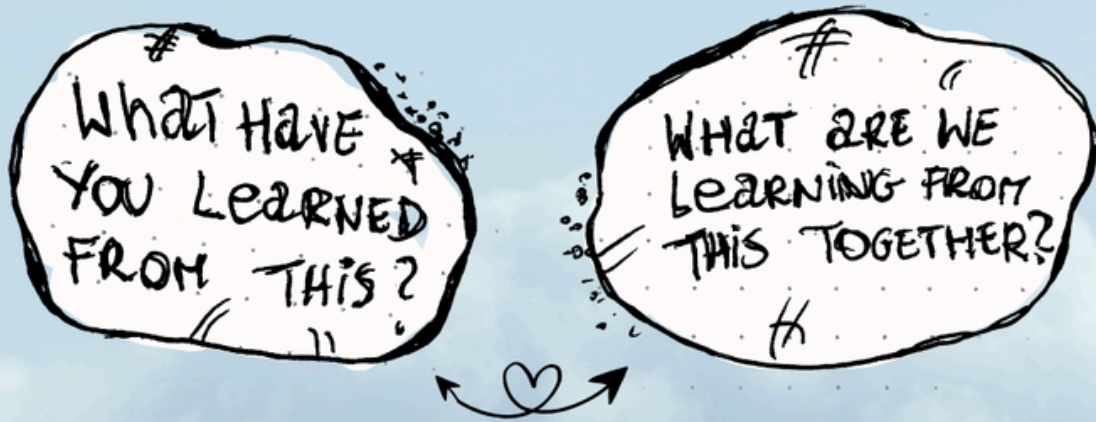
Go for
a walk #

Let's go #
for a walk #



Dagna, Eliza
and www.kulturnest.org

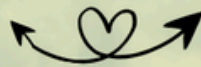
SHIFT



Dagna, Eliza
and www.kulturnest.org

SHIFT

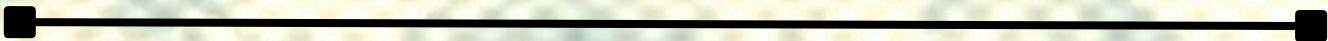
BREATHE
MINDFULLY



Let's synchronise
our BREATH



Dagna, Eliza
and www.kulturnest.org



CC BY-SA