



## Interview with Gemma Mortensen (New Constellations)

**Skyler Reid**

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**Skyler Reid: Could you please introduce yourself and what you do?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** My name is Gemma Mortensen and I'm the co-creator of something called New Constellations. I'm also a Skoll awardee, now quite a long time ago, and that was for my work with Crisis Action.

**Skyler Reid: Can you describe the problem that New Constellations is trying to address and how New Constellations approaches that issue?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** The problem that New Constellations has been designed to address is recognizing that we're in this moment of epochal transition, in big historical terms, and that that is requiring everybody to take a step back, understanding that most of the systems that have been built for the world as was aren't fit for purpose for the world that's coming. We need to do some very, very deep reflective work in terms of what is the world we want, and how do we start to build the systems that will get us there, rather than perpetuate the same dangerous cycles that we're trapped in at the moment? New Constellations is basically a platform of exchange, inquiry, learning, which brings small groups of people together in very intense, immersive processes we call the "Journey," through this methodology that we've created. That methodology enables people to examine the here and now — what's going on, what are we living through, why has it come about, what needs to change if we are going to meet the polycrisis, the challenges of this moment?

To go on a journey of inquiry, really, rather than assuming that we know the answers, to accept and acknowledge that we don't know the answers. We can't, because of the nature of the times we're living through. To go through a journey of inquiry together with people who are very different from ourselves, to start to interrogate what might the future look like, and to do that from the vantage point of the most ambitious, audacious dreams of possibility, and then to ask ourselves, "Well, if that's worth fighting for, that's worth building, what's needed?" We look at the levels of



self-grouping systems. What transformation is needed in the way that we live? What transformation is needed in the way that we work, the organizations that we're running? And what transformation is needed at the level of systems? Whether that's our economy, our food and agricultural systems, education. You could apply that to almost anything.

**Skyler Reid: What are the processes when you're bringing people together for these journeys? You mentioned immersive discussions. What does that look like?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** On our website, there's a blog where we've broken this down and there's examples of the past ones that we've run. Our website, just so that it's there, is [www.newconstellations.co](http://www.newconstellations.co). We have developed this methodology, which we call the Journey, and in psychoanalytic terms, it's based on what's called an Odyssey experience. [It's] a journey in which you unlearn lots of stuff, you discover lots of new stuff, you arrive back where you started, different from where you left off, to put it in very simple terms. But the journey is constructed in the realm of archetype myths. We run it all in the metaphor of a journey out to see and discover a new set of stars to navigate by on uncertain seas, and come home and apply those guiding principles to how we live our lives.

We bring together small groups of about 15 people, and we take them through this journey. The journey either happens all at once, which takes weeks – it's quite long, so there are residential processes – or we break it up into phases. We worked with one leadership group where we did it in four stages following the seasons of the year. It's quite unusual in that it's very multidisciplinary. There'll be things for the head, things for the heart, and things for the gut. There's some theoretical models, new thinking, research, and pointing to different aspects of this journey. There's a lot of reflective practice, a lot of embodied work. One of the things that we use, which makes it quite distinctive, is we do a lot of our work in and through audio.

A lot of people recording audio, us editing it together. Examples of that are also on our website. What we've realized and what we're trying to do is get people out of only their rational brain and the place of ego and very individualistic self. In working with audio, we help people see themselves as part of a broader ecology, and it really changes the level and depth of the conversation that people have with themselves and with that group. The other thing to say about the group that's important is that everybody who's done it says they've never been in a group like it. These are people who are really very different – different demographically, whether that's class, race, professional background, whatever. Very different in terms of power status, with some people holding a lot of formal power, some people not holding any formal power, and we feel that's really important and really different ideologically.



We get people to do a quiz based on the research work of More in Common, so that we have in the room people who see the world in ideological terms really differently. We think that's really important, because one of the patterns that we're seeing in society is polarization. There's no point in everybody getting together with people who are exactly the same as themselves, and all dreaming up their own particular utopian ideas of the future, which is a future for them and ignoring everyone else. This has to be done in a way that bridges and knits people who are really different from each other.

The last thing, on a more granular level, is we run this in three areas. First, we do it in places, so in cities, towns, and we constellate people from that city. We map the city and we ask, what are the key institutions? Where power is held? What are the different walks of life? How can we blend together a really rich mosaic and tapestry? Which manifests itself through different human beings in that place. We also very much consider non-human life, so this is about our responsibility to other species, to nature, not just a human-centric journey.

The second area that we do it in is the area of leadership development. We'll take a group of leaders from very different kinds of organizations and initiatives and take them on that journey as a way of helping them find the course that they want to go on on a very personal level, in terms of that which they are committing their own leadership to. How can they be in service of this moment in that way? The third area that we do it in is around specific systems. We're doing something at the moment about the economic and financial systems, we're looking at food and agricultural systems. We would then constellate that system and bring people together across different nodes of that system to also go through that process of inquiry together.

**Skyler Reid: It sounds like you do a bit of a mix of direct service and indirect service. Does that sound right?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** We are just about to engage in a new project this year. For that project we will work with a local lead, somebody who is hired and seconded to our team for the period of creating the journey and running the journey. Once that's finished and you've got a group of 15 people who've really coalesced around a vision for their place and how they contribute to that individually and collectively, that person will stop working with us and will work for that group. That group will be able to have support to help coordinate the coordination that's required to enable them to actually see something through.

In this particular case, the philanthropic foundation that's supporting the work is also going to make available a fund that enables that group of people to do things locally. Exactly as you are saying, there's the piece of this that we do with the group, but then the idea is that it catalyzes a



stream of work which they do without us, which has ripple effects, hopefully positive and inspiring, in the place that they are. Similarly with a leadership journey, the work that we do is with that group of leaders, but we would select those leaders to come into the program based in the belief that they will then make commitments and start to do things that have ripple effects through the way in which they lead and what they lead in the world. That's exactly right to describe that as direct and indirect.

### **Skyler Reid: What makes your approach distinctive?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** We see ourselves as part of a larger ecology. We are thinkers, makers and doers of the future. The people that we see who inspire us, we see ourselves as a platform, really, that helps people discover this work and orient it towards themselves. We use the Three Horizons framework, which is something created by an amazing guy called Bill Sharp. One of the things that we do is create these audio encounters as part of our research, and there's actually an audio encounter with him on our website. I'd highly recommend Kate Raworth's YouTube video explanation of the Three Horizons framework because it is just very clear.

We are looking at people who are either incumbent in existing systems, but want to change them, which would be more horizon two, or what we call third horizon initiatives — it's like the grassroots of the new system. People who really are on the edge, the radical edge, trying to experiment with new models and new ways, and using something called the Berkana two loop model. There's this idea of connecting, nourishing and illuminating. A new system is born and takes shape when you connect, nourish and illuminate those green shoots, and we see that as our work.

There's really the journey methodology and New Constellations itself is a platform. It's a platform to profile and illuminate this new work, and there are literally hundreds of people I could mention to you that are referenced in our mailouts and our blog and when we run the journey, and they are the people that we think are helping to show us where the future might lie. We're not saying, "This is the future of anybody," this is all suggestive.

It's helping us think. Because like I say, I don't think we are at the phase of reaching any of the answers yet. **We need to go through a process of searching and inquiry before we reach any conclusions.** So we platform a lot of those thinkers. Kate Raworth might be one with Doughnut Economics, Hilary Cotton's work on the future of work and care, a lot of the deep ecology work of people like Joanna Macy. There's a lot of work around trauma and looking at the structures of racism and what we learn from those. Fazana Khan, who runs an amazing organization in the UK which does work on that. It's very multifaceted. There's lots and lots of different things that we bring together into a constellation.



That's why we call it that. There's no one star — it's the stories that many tell together. Of course, the other way in which it's a platform is that we're bringing people together who are starting to ask these questions and say, "What are the models of the future? Where do I find out about this?" We don't have the time in our day-to-day life to think about this stuff seriously, philosophically, deeply, emotionally, spiritually. We don't have that space and time. The New Constellations is built as a platform to enable people to do that. And I think there are other platforms out there.

For example, Partners For a New Economy is supporting a field of organizations looking at new economic systems. There's now more and more interesting work around wellbeing, or platforms to help people explore the spiritual frontier. But I don't know of any other ones which are quite like New Constellations in the extent to which they're doing the strategy and the emotional work, and in a way that supports and profiles lots of different people, versus our methodology is one that is a showcase of lots of things. It's not a view of the world that we have that we pretend is ours. I think the way that we work with audio is also really distinctive.

**Skyler Reid: Do you have any examples that illustrate the work you've done?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** The last big project that we did within a place was in Sheffield. That's [one of the largest cities] in the United Kingdom. We worked in partnership in that respect with the city council, the chief executive of the city council was part of the process. The group brought together the head of one of the leaders of one of the universities, of the teaching hospital, of the Chamber of Commerce. We had an amazing disability activist in the group, the head of the student union, somebody doing frontline health work with immigrant communities. There was an amazing creative artistic director of a theater. Very varied. An incredible young man doing work on gangs and knife violence.

That group went through the journey process together and came up with what we call a set of stars; basically a set of guiding principles that animated a vision for the future of the city. Since the end of the journey, they've constituted themselves as a group called Sheffield in Common, and they're supporting each other's work. **Most of them, 80% of them, didn't know each other before. They're this networked, almost like a citizen group now, who can work across these different nodes of the city and help each other bring about that future in the ways that they individually can.**

That actually took place as part of a bigger project, which was run by the Blavatnik School at Oxford University, where there was a group of leading economists who were looking at what it takes for a region and a city to undergo a process of big transformative economic change. Our project, our piece of it, the New Constellations journey, the idea there was that for any big swathe



of change to take place, something that's truly transformational, there needs to be a new story of possibility, a narrative of change and how that change comes about.

The journey that we ran was to support that group of people to look at, what is that story of where we are, what we need to move away from, what we want to move towards, what's the future and how we get there. A lot of this is about the power of storytelling — you'll know that as a journalist — and helping people to align around, what is the story of now, what is the story of how we've got here, what is the story of where we want to go? What's really beautiful is, even though you have a group of people that seem to be really different, when you strip it back, what people really care about and what they yearn for and desire right deep down, it's so similar. It's so beautiful to see that with a group.

That's one example of some work in place. Another example would be a leadership journey, where you see people come out of that — again, a really diverse group, from people working on climate and the environment to a guy who runs training for sports coaches who are coaching Olympians, to people working in AI and tech. Really different. They came up with — we call them a star chart, those old, really beautiful maps of the stars. We use very beautiful materials, we use a lot in analog because it gives people a felt sense. A lot of this is really tactile and artistic and creative, and that really matters. People end up with their own; they draw and create these beautiful star charts, which are the principles that they want to navigate their lives by in service of the moment that we're facing. They'll then present these to each other. We just hear from people, they have them next to their desk, next to their computer all the time, and these are the things that nudge their behavior. We've had some really beautiful stories from people about what they've been doing since or how it's informing their life and work, which is just incredibly powerful and very beautiful.

**Skyler Reid: Do you have any particular insights or lessons that you've taken away from the work that others might be able to use?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** The work that I did before New Constellations was very heady. I'd say it definitely had to engage with people emotionally because it was about getting people to do really big, really hard stuff together. But I think, if I'm honest, if I look back to how I was in that work, I think I conformed much more to an idea of professionalism that I and many people of my generation had been trained in. In a bit of a classic way, some stuff happened in life that was hard and painful and made me think. I made a really clear decision for myself that the next thing that I did was going to be in a way that integrated the different parts of myself that I needed to have integrated, in order to feel like I was in a place of integrity with myself and with the world.



The way in which we're working with New Constellations, it's very definitely head, heart, and gut. We are saying that our emotional complexion, what lives in our body, what resides in our heart and our guts, is as important as the deductions that we make through our rational intelligence. The more that we are learning about the importance of power of intuition, that's a whole different skill set and tools that people need to have to be able to meld those two realms, the brain and the body and the intuitive and the known, as it were, versus the known and deduced through our brains.

And I say this is a very — I'm a total geek. I'm most at home in my brain. What that has helped us realize is that the depth of experiences that people go through together, and the extent to which they are truly all-in, every fiber of their being, means that the honesty with which they're able to tackle these hugely difficult, painful, intractable issues that we're all living through — there's no escaping them — is much more honest. There is an element of catharsis; there's a lot of emotion that comes out through that. What it means is that where people end up in the end is also more honest. I think it's more likely to take root and to take grip. I just think that if we carry on with the same old ways and means that we've been taught were okay for the world as it was — we'll be making incremental adjustments and making things a bit better, but we won't be having the conversations where we admit that we've all been complicit in stuff which is literally killing us, and it's killing the planet. We need to be really honest about that. We can't shy away from it. And if we are going to be honest about it, then the spaces that we hold, the nature of those spaces, the processes that we go through together to figure out what to do and how to do it, they've got to be really different.

For me and for the team at New Constellations, we got to the point where we are prepared to risk everything. If I'll be honest, for about two years I was scared that I would never be able to work again in a normal job, because I thought everyone would just laugh me out of town. And, for the first six months or so, people did. People would definitely raise eyebrows. They were like, "You've got purple space orbs on your website." I was like, "Yes we do, and we're proud of them. We think they're gorgeous."

I think it's amazing how we started this properly in 2019, although we did some R&D before that, but even in that time, we're talking just four years now, everyone's like, "Oh yeah, that makes total sense. Of course you have purple space orbs on your website," even in four years. When we started, people were like, "What are you talking about?" If there's a lesson in there, it's like, do the thing that you think people will think you're crazy for, because sure as anything it will be way less time before people are saying to you, "Of course, that makes total sense." I think we're in a moment where we've all just got to be prepared to risk everything. Just do the thing that you want



to do in the way that you really want to do it, no compromises. Get it out there in the world. I think those are the things we need right now.

**Skyler Reid: How do you measure the success of this project and how do you see you're making progress?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** I don't think we've totally figured it out yet. When we started, we committed ourselves to the principle of emergence, which is easy to say and really hard to do. Because as soon as you do that, then you are not saying, "Here's the thing that we're going to bring about in the world and we're going to reverse engineer everything to get to these things." We're saying, "No, we're not. We don't know what's going to come out of it." Obviously that is a complete nightmare when it comes to how the entire philanthropic system is built because everyone always says, "Yeah, but what are your tangible outcomes?" And you're just like, "Well, we're just not working in that way. The way in which we're working blows all that apart."

It's difficult, because it would be really nice to say this is exactly [what we are trying to produce]. It would make life easy. But I do think it would be the wrong approach, because the whole point in New Constellations is to say that we're entering into an era of experimentation and figuring it out, and you can't do that if you have already closed off the possibilities that come out of it. What we do commit ourselves to is learning and we do these learning loops. After every journey there are individual interviews with absolutely everybody who's come on the program about the impact it's had on them, about their experience of being in the group, about what they may do differently. Increasingly we're going to stay in touch with people over a longer time period to see what their own narrative of change is over time.

Probably the way in which we're going to do it is through the lens of storytelling. What is the story of people who've been on this journey and how does the journey influence the narrative? It will be a contribution. It's not going to be the thing they do which changes everything, but how does the thread of the journey carry on through the weave of the story of their life and work, and how can we tell that bigger story? The other thing which we're beginning to do is look at ways of creating community for the people that have been on this journey, so that there's a way in which you can stay in community to deepen the process. We will probably do so not by, say offering another thing, but by saying, "Okay, we are in touch with all these amazing other organizations and if you're interested in figuring out more about economics, go here. Or if you want something that's rooted in very deep immersion in nature, go here," so that we can signpost people to these different things.





Over time, the measure of success for me is a generation of leaders who truly understand what it means to be alive right now, understands what the moment is and the degree of transformation that's required to meet it, and has committed themselves, in the extent that it's possible for them, for doing nothing less than meeting the moment in the ways that they can. Over time, that community is growing. That for me is the definition of success. And who knows — we're going to have to look back in 10 or 15 or 20 years, not in six months or a year, to see whether it's worked or not.

**Skyler Reid: Every social innovator is going to face challenges — sometimes it's funding, sometimes it's other things. Aside from obvious ones like funding, what are some of the challenges that you've faced or are continuing to face and still working to overcome?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** One is definitely the delta in terms of how we communicate what we're doing between retaining what's magical and mysterious and different about this, and it being something that people have any clue what it is, which I don't think we are, frankly, totally in the right place yet, but we'll get there over time. I think it's fine for people who are doing the kind of work that people who are in the Skoll community are doing. But if you go to a city where — for example, in Sheffield, we've got some amazing responses on Twitter, which we're going to save at some point and hopefully put on the website. Like, "Has the council been taken over by a cult?" Just hilarious, no-nonsense.

Some of that is fine — this isn't for everyone, and it's not meant to be. When you're doing something that is meant to be really different and you have to signal that it's something that is really different by being a bit weird and unusual, how do you strike that balance between not putting people off or not being pigeonholed? That's really tricky, and as I say, it's a journey. I don't think we've totally cracked it. I'm never losing the purple space orbs, though, just saying.

The other one is, we've been doing quite a lot of research, and my colleague Lilly is now working with a network of other organizations on this. It's like, "What are the organizational forms that best support this work?" Because it is not obvious. A nonprofit model where you are dependent on, fairly often, very dysfunctional funding cycles and operators, that's not going to work. A for-profit company where you are dependent on equity investment in that old way where it's basically extractive capital, that's not going to work.

It's some kind of cooperative, shared ownership, maybe. I think it's really important to recognize that in the beginning phases of something that is weird and different, it is really important that a small group gets to make some big decisions and you're not throwing everything over to lowest common denominator decision making, which would be a disaster in the first instance. There are



some really big questions about what kind of organizational form best supports something like this.

I'd love to think of New Constellations over time as a platform in which governance and ownership is in some way shared and in which holds funds that can fund projects within the ecosystem, but in ways which are patient capital and not extractive. I don't think we have the legal structures. In the States actually, there's more innovation now and you're starting to see some quite interesting models for mutuals and new era cooperatives and stuff, but it's still not easy.

We're just one of these examples about how the structures that are offered to us are designed for a different logic. The third challenge is, we've decided that we're not going to think about this in terms of scale. We're not going to say, "Here's our methodology, let's get as many people [as we can] and in as many places. Let's get everyone doing it." We're not going to do that, because this is about deep work and making sure that the quality of that work is really consistent. There's a huge challenge in terms of the number of people, who you get to then run the work, the speed at which you can replicate this stuff, that's a huge challenge given the scale of the problems out there in the world.

**Skyler Reid: What hasn't worked? Are there any things that have just not worked that have provided a good lesson for you or potentially for someone else who wants to pursue something similar?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** Lots hasn't worked. We've been trying this out lots. You do something unusual, you learn from your mistakes quite often. The Sheffield communications example is quite a good one. In Sheffield, we didn't have that person who was seconded to our team and then available to work with the crew, as we call the group, afterwards. That had two implications, one of which [being that] people are just busy and without that support, things can't happen as quickly or in as big a way as they might otherwise.

Also, it then means that the people who do have time are often those in positions of power who can do it from within their quite well paid day jobs, versus people who have much less bandwidth because of the nature of the day-to-day exigencies of life. So having some money available for a group of citizens then literally starts to make stuff happen.

The other big lesson that we learned was that four or five days is a lot of time to ask of people. We did try once where we thought, "Oh no, it's too long. Let's just try doing a process, which is basically half of the methodology." And we didn't trust ourselves enough, we didn't trust the methodology enough. I don't think we'd do that again because actually it works because you do



the whole thing, and that does take that long. There needs to be a quid pro quo with people: "If you want to do this, that's what it takes." That's a lesson we learned and that's now how we do it, but that was also learning the hard way.

**Skyler Reid: How are you working for system-level change? Are there specific ways that you talk to people about that? Are there specific things that you're trying to accomplish?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** To the extent that it's possible, we are trying to do some learning in the open. For example, writing a blog about the methodology we use. Over time we will do some case studies about some of the pieces of work that we've done and put that out there. I think trying to be in conversation with people who are perhaps already thinking similarly and seriously about this stuff. For example, we're doing a lot of work with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation at the moment, who have something called their emerging futures program where they really are trying to grapple with this and in a way that I think Skoll is as well. Part of it is, where can we be in partnership with organizations? One project is looking at the future of what happens beyond capitalism.

So how can we be in conversation and partnership and in relationships of reciprocal support with organizations and collectives of people that we think are genuinely committed to doing it? The big IT, versus something smaller. So far we haven't done much proactive comms in that respect, but I think every time that we're asked to speak about stuff, to try and coalesce the evidence base that we are growing of how many people are interested in this and all the work that is going on.

I do think the extent to which this has developed as a field is remarkable. Most of the time at the moment it's still quite pocketed. You've got people looking at the economy or people looking at — it's quite siloed. I think the most exciting learnings are to be made across all those different bits, because I think the analogies and similarities are actually very similar. When you go down to the root causes of all the problems across all the systems, it's basically the same stuff. Just helping to connect across those different silos and just being open to possibilities of connecting people up, just working in that very networked way.

**Skyler Reid: In addressing this type of system-level change, what is the most needed thing from other partners and actors? Is there anything specific that you need from others in addressing this system of systems?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** For the first time we're going to run an executive leadership program. We won't call it that, but basically that would be the comparable thing, the purple space orb equivalent



of an executive leadership program. We'd love to have people doing really interesting work from lots of different kinds of sectors.

The other thing is, whether it's around the system of finance and investment or whether it's around food and agriculture, but really finding people that are doing deep thinking in those systems that want to come together with just a group of people that they haven't probably ever come across before in quite the same way. Just finding those people and finding more and more examples of, we call them glimmers of the future, we really love to showcase examples of people who are building new things.

To give you an example, you could be doing a project that was all around Carbon Zero, but the way in which you were doing it and the structures through which you were doing it were very old systems. You weren't changing anything, really. You were giving the old structures and the old logic a different outcome. Rather than plugging in to maximize profit, you'd say maximize profit without the carbon. But what we are saying is that, no, all of those components need to be looked at. We mentioned the Three Horizon model. If people really are doing Third Horizon work, we'd love to hear from them, because we'd love to be able to profile and illuminate what they're doing.

**Skyler Reid: How do you see the work evolving or where do you hope the work is going in five years?**

**Gemma Mortensen:** Five years might be too soon because I think it's probably more 10 years than five years. In five years, I would love to see a genuine community of people who've been on this journey process, networked, helping each other out, and for there to be pieces of work, initiatives, projects, maybe new organizations that have come about by merit of those connections and that are resourced through that network in some way.

I'd like to see some people who've been through the process deciding that they want to go into positions of formal leadership, whether that's standing in politics or whether that's running big powerful stuff and doing that in a way which is really a new frontier. Leading in a way that truly embodies all of these different things. And in 10 years time, I'd like to be surprised to see how many people who you wouldn't necessarily think or know might be running something big or being very influential in politics, having made that choice and having gone on that journey because they've realized that the leadership we need for the future doesn't look anything like that which we've had in the past. I'd like to see the change through the people that we see out there.



*Skyler Reid is a multimedia producer and journalist living in New York City. He's worked on award-winning projects both nationally and internationally, and has produced photo, video and text features for publications including The Washington Post, The Guardian, VICE, NBC News and others. He's covered breaking news and features for wire services including Reuters, the Associated Press and Agence France-Presse. Much of his work focuses on urban development and communities, but occasionally delves into Satanic crime, pot churches, and pro wrestling. He takes too many photos of his dog, Bowie, and is obsessed with karaoke.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*