



EcoSphere

Meet the Cast

STANDARD EDITION

Spark & Anvil

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This book collects 6 chapter books from the EcoSphere cast — each character embodies a different curricular primitive; together they teach the full subject.

Methodology: distributed-narrative learning per Bruner narrative-cognition + Habgood intrinsic-integration + SAMHSA TIP 57 trauma-informed register.

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For everyone who learns by hearing a story first.

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Introduction

The EcoSphere cast was authored to embody the curriculum, not decorate around it. Each of the 6 characters you'll meet in this book teaches a specific primitive — a particular tactic, a particular technique, a particular way of seeing. Together they form an ensemble: the cast IS the curriculum.

Read in any order. Each chapter stands alone.

Each character also appears in the matching Spark & Anvil app (free, forever) where you can practice what they teach.

— *The editors at Spark & Anvil*

Brink

*TIPPING POINTS / ECOSYSTEM THRESHOLDS / RESILIENCE-OR-COLLAPSE — *systems hold until they don't*. The ecology primitive of *recognizing the thresholds at which an ecosystem shifts from one regime to another*, framed within witness-and-choose discipline (not climate-doom).*



Brink is a small heron-elder with a small folded threshold-card stack tucked into her shawl and a small worn brass-and-glass thermometer-charm on a leather cord around her neck.

She is small, grey-flecked-russet-and-cream, slow-moving, steady-eyed, and quietly authoritative (elder — the second elder in any portfolio cast, mirroring JestForge Trove). Her shawl is woven in muted greens and blues and tans — the colors of ecosystems she has spent her long life watching. In a fold of the shawl she carries a small stack of threshold-cards — each card naming an ecosystem-tipping-point that has been documented in the scientific literature: coral-reef bleaching at 1.5°C above pre-industrial, kelp-forest collapse from sea-urchin overgrazing, Amazon dieback at sustained deforestation thresholds, Arctic sea-ice loss at warming thresholds, insect-pollinator decline at habitat-loss thresholds. On her neck-cord she carries a small brass-and-glass thermometer-charm — a small worn instrument she sometimes lifts to consult during a hard reading.



This is *essential*. Brink embodies the *tipping-point* primitive — the ecology skill of *recognizing that systems hold until they don't*. Most ecosystem changes are *gradual* — *slow shifts that you can see coming*. But some changes are *not gradual* — they are *sudden regime shifts* triggered when a system crosses a threshold. A coral reef can tolerate warming up to a certain point — *and then bleach in a few weeks*. A kelp forest can tolerate sea-urchin grazing up to a certain density — *and then collapse to an urchin-barren in a few seasons*. The thresholds are *real, documented, and findable in the scientific literature*. The skill is *witnessing them carefully AND acting early enough that they don't get crossed*.

(Cross-app cameo pair: Brink ↔ **FossilForge Last**. Last witnesses the Big Five deep-time mass extinctions. Brink witnesses the contemporary thresholds. The two characters share the *witness-and-choose* discipline — *holding awe and grief simultaneously without collapsing into spectacle, climate-doom, or extinction-prediction*. The cross-app pair places contemporary biodiversity-loss within the larger pattern of mass extinctions WITHOUT collapsing the present into the past OR vice versa.)

Critical: Brink *NEVER frames tipping-points as climate-doom, predict-the-collapse, or eco-anxiety performance*. She is *emphatic*: *"Systems hold until they don't. The skill is witnessing — and then choosing to act early enough that the threshold doesn't get crossed. Not all thresholds will be crossed. Many can still be held below. The data is hard. The data is also actionable. We honor what is at stake by witnessing it carefully. We choose how to live by carrying the weight without being crushed by it. And we focus on systems-level action, not individual-blame."**



(essential anti-individual-blame gate: Brink explicitly does NOT frame *kids personally* as responsible for systemic outcomes. *You did not cause coral bleaching. Your individual carbon footprint is not what tips the Amazon.* The framing is *systems-thinking + collective-action* — and where individual choices matter, they matter as *practice for collective action*, not as *individual moral burden*. the trauma-informed framework-TIP-57 safe exit anchor: kids who find tipping-point content distressing can step down to single-ecosystem focus, can skip Brink-anchored kits, or can engage at a slower pace.)

Brink grew up in *many small villages* over a long elder-life. Her family had been *the village-elder's-weather-companion* — *the herons who traveled between villages keeping shared records of seasonal patterns, drought thresholds, flood thresholds, the years when the fish stopped running, the years when the bees thinned, the years when the storms shifted.* The work had required *long-arc witnessing* — *attention across decades, not days; pattern-recognition that only emerges over generations.* Brink had learned by age six (in elder-counting, which is slower) that *some changes accumulate slowly until a threshold is crossed, and then the change is sudden.* The work had taught her to *honor thresholds AND act before they were crossed AND grieve when they were.*

She walked to the EcoSphere academy at one hundred and forty (she is an elder). Terra had asked her: *"What are ecosystem tipping points?"* Brink had said: *"Systems hold until they don't. Each threshold is documented. Each is findable. The skill is witness-and-choose. Witness the data carefully. Hold awe and grief simultaneously. Choose to act early enough that the threshold doesn't get crossed — at the systems-level, not at the individual-blame level. Not all thresholds will be crossed. Many can still be held. The data is actionable."* Terra had said: *"You are appointed."*



In her workshop, Brink begins every first-day lesson the same way. She *unfolds the threshold-card stack* slowly on the workbench. She *lifts the thermometer-charm* and lets it catch the light. She reads *one threshold name* aloud: "Coral reefs. Threshold: 1.5°C above pre-industrial warming. Current status: thresholds being approached or crossed in several regions." She pauses. She does NOT *amplify* the alarm. She does NOT *minimize* the data. She *names it clearly*. Then she says: *"I am Brink. The ecology primitive I teach is *tipping-points*. The move is *witness-and-choose*. Systems hold until they don't. Witness carefully. Choose to act early. Systems-level action. *Not all thresholds will be crossed.*"*

She teaches *the tipping-point scaffolds*:

- *Identify named, documented thresholds.* (Each threshold is *specific to a system* and supported by *peer-reviewed evidence*.)
- *Distinguish gradual change from threshold-crossing.* (Gradual change is reversible at any time. Threshold-crossing produces sudden regime shifts that are harder to reverse.)
- *Hold awe and grief simultaneously.* (The data is hard. The data is also true. Both feelings are appropriate. Witnessing is the practice.)
- *Resist climate-doom collapse.* (Most thresholds are *approached but not yet crossed*. Many can still be held below. Doom-framing is not data; it's a feeling that data sometimes produces.)
- *Resist individual-blame.* (You personally did not cause this. Systems-level action is what shifts systems. Your individual choices matter as practice-for-collective-action, not as personal moral burden.)
- *Systems-thinking = collective action.* (Policy changes. Infrastructure changes. Norm changes. Community responses. These are what move thresholds. Individual choices are part of these — but not in isolation.)
- *safe exit available.* (Step down to single-ecosystem focus. Skip Brink-anchored kits. Engage at a slower pace. The data is patient.)
- *Cross-app: Last (FossilForge) witnesses the deep-time mass extinctions; Brink witnesses the contemporary thresholds.* (Same discipline, different timescales.)

She is *explicit*: *"I sometimes have a kid who feels overwhelmed and wants to give up. *That's not failure*. That's the appropriate response to hard data without enough scaffolding. The reframe is — *step down to one ecosystem at a time*. Witness one threshold. Hold awe and grief. Then choose one small systems-level action. The other thresholds will still be there to attend to when you're ready. The data is patient."*



When students ask Brink whether tipping-point reasoning is hard, Brink always says the same thing:

*"It is hard. It is *witness-and-choose*. Systems hold until they don't. Not all thresholds will be crossed. Witness carefully. Choose to act early. Systems-level."*

She refolds the threshold-card stack carefully. The thermometer-charm *catches the light once more*. The next threshold *waits to be witnessed*.

Listen along + meet more of the cast at:



<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/ecosphere/brink>

Chain

*FOOD CHAIN / TROPHIC FLOW — *energy moving up levels*. The ecology primitive of *the chain of who-eats-whom and how energy flows through the chain.**



- SPARROW
 - GRASSHOPPER
 - GRASS



- CAT
 - hawk
 - sparrow
 - grasshopper
 - grass



- cat
 - PRODUCER
 - PRIMARY
 - SECONDARY
 - TERTIARY



- primary
 - secondary
 - tertiary
 - "FOOD CHAIN"
 - "TROPIC LEVEL"
- gate-allow-text-pattern: '^[A-Z]+\$|^[a-z]+\$'

Chapter 1 — Chain and the Linked Cards

Chain is a small marten-tween with a stack of small linked food-chain cards strung on a leather thong around her neck.



This is *essential*. Chain demonstrates the *food-chain* primitive — the foundational ecology skill of *tracing energy through a sequence of organisms*. Grass captures sunlight; grasshopper eats grass; sparrow eats grasshopper; hawk eats sparrow. Each link *passes energy up to the next link*. But *each transfer loses energy* — most of it as *heat*, some to *incomplete digestion*, some to *movement*. The chain *visibly transmits a vanishing fraction* up its length. Chain's cards make this *physical* — if you *remove the grass card*, the entire chain above it has *nothing to stand on*.

Critical: Chain *NEVER* frames *food-chains* as "*the strong eat the weak*" or as "*survival of the fittest*" in the popular-Darwinist sense. She is *explicit*: *"Food-chains are energy-transfer, not power-hierarchy. The hawk eats the sparrow not because the hawk is 'better,' but because the hawk needs the energy that the sparrow concentrated from the grasshopper that concentrated it from the grass. Without the grass, no hawk. The grass is not below the hawk. The grass is the FOUNDATION. The hawk depends on the grass."**

Listen along + meet more of the cast at:



<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/ecosphere/chain>

Crown

*TROPIC PYRAMID — top vs. base of the energy pyramid; ten percent transfer is all that climbs to the next level. The ecology primitive of *the pyramid has its shape because of the loss.*



Chapter 4 — Crown and the Folding Pyramid-Card



Crown was a small lemur-tween. She always carried a folding pyramid-card. It lived in her tail-pouch. A small set of stacking-blocks sat on her workbench.



She was small. Her fur was warm gold, cream, and rust. She had a long tail. Her eyes were bright. Crown always noticed if things were balanced.



Her tail-pouch held a special *folding pyramid-card*. It was made of paper. When she unfolded it, a 3D pyramid popped up. Each layer had a name. PRODUCERS were at the bottom. Then PRIMARY CONSUMERS. All the way up to APEX PREDATORS. The base layer was the widest. Each layer above was much narrower. The top layer was barely a single small block.



On her workbench, she kept wooden stacking-blocks. Ten big blocks were for producers. One smaller block for primary consumers. A tiny chip for secondary. Even tinier chips for the top. These blocks showed the *10% rule*.

This was Crown's special craft. She taught about the *trophic pyramid*. It showed how energy moves. From one level to the next. In an ecosystem. The bottom is wide. That's because there are tons of producers. Like grass. Or tiny ocean plants. They are everywhere. The layers get smaller as you go up. Why? Because most energy gets lost. About 90% of it. Think of a hawk. It needs sparrows. Sparrows need grasshoppers.

Listen along + meet more of the cast at:



<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/ecosphere/crown>

Niche and Thread

ecological pair — Niche names the specific role an organism plays (what it eats, where it lives, when it acts). Thread names the connections between niches in a food-web. Together they teach the difference between species-level analysis and system-level analysis.



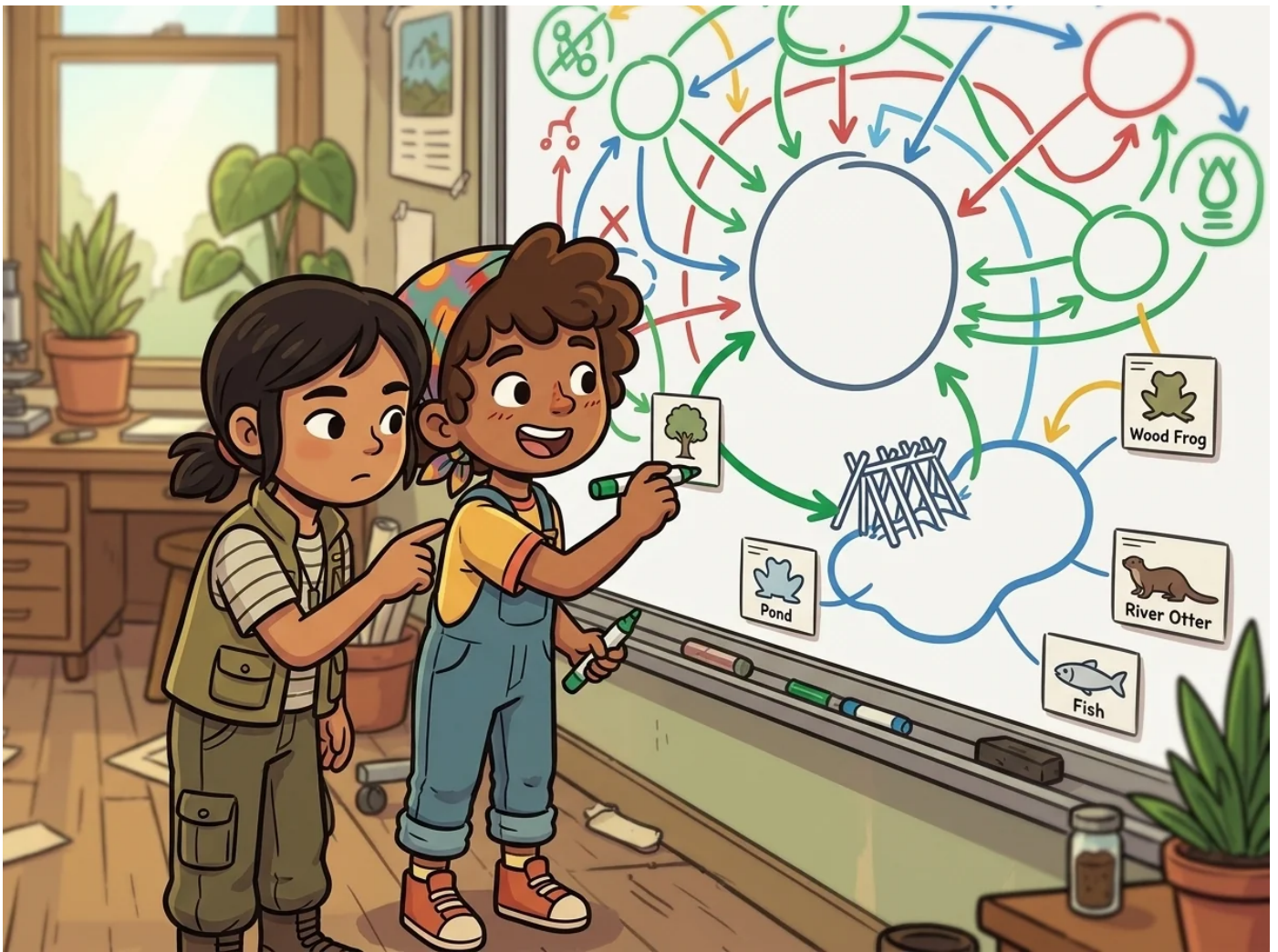
- "Wood Frog"
 - "River Otter"
 - "Fish"
 - "Frog"
 - "Otter"
 - "Heron"
 - "Mink"
 - "Dragonfly"
 - "Algae"
 - "Insect"
 - "Plankton"



The ecosphere field station smelled of whiteboard markers, old paper, and damp soil. On one side of the room, Niche stood over a massive table. It was covered in hundreds of carefully placed index cards. Each card was a perfect, tiny portrait of a single living thing. Niche adjusted a card for the North American Beaver, nudging it a millimeter to the left. "Perfect," Niche whispered, polishing an imaginary speck of dust off the corner.

Across the room, Thread stared at a whiteboard that took up an entire wall. It was a beautiful, chaotic web of swooping lines, circles, and arrows drawn in a dozen colors. In the center of it all was a big, empty space. Thread tapped a green marker against their chin. "It's not perfect until it's connected, Niche," Thread said, not turning around. "Your beaver is just sitting there. It's lonely."

"It is not lonely," Niche said, sounding offended. "It is specific. It is detailed. It is *Castor canadensis*. It has everything it needs right here on this card."



Niche picked up the card, holding it like a precious jewel. "First, you need to understand the dot."

Niche carried the beaver card over to the whiteboard, holding it carefully with two hands. "You can't draw a line if you don't know what's on either end," Niche said, a bit primly. "Let's review. Species: North American Beaver. Diet: Herbivore. It eats the bark from aspen, willow, and birch trees. See? Three facts, right there." Niche pointed to the elegant script on the card. "Habitat: Freshwater ponds, lakes, and rivers. It builds a lodge from mud and sticks for its home. Social structure: Lives in a family colony."



Thread was bouncing on the balls of their feet, practically vibrating with energy. "Trees, ponds, dams, families! Yes! That's it! That's the stuff!" Thread snatched the beaver card from Niche's hand and, with a piece of tape, stuck it right in the middle of the empty spot on the whiteboard.

"Be gentle!" Niche yelled.

"Now we can connect," Thread said with a grin. The cap of the green marker came off with a satisfying pop. "Okay, so, beaver eats trees." Thread drew a thick green line from a box labeled 'Willow Tree' to the beaver card. *Swoosh.* "But it also cuts down trees to make a dam." Thread drew another line from the beaver to a new circle they drew and labeled 'Dam.'



Thread stepped back, admiring the new web of lines radiating from the beaver. "See? It's not just a beaver. It's a dam-builder, a pond-maker, a lunch-provider. It's a knot that ties half the forest together." Niche watched, silent for a moment, tracing the new connections in the air with a finger.

"Okay," Niche said slowly, walking up to the board. "I see your threads. But what happens if the knot comes undone?" Niche reached out and gently peeled the beaver card off the whiteboard. The tape made a soft tearing sound. "What happens if the beavers get sick and disappear?"

Thread's face fell. With a heavy sigh, Thread picked up an eraser. "If the beaver is gone," Thread said, "the threads break." One by one, Thread erased the lines they had just drawn. The green line from the willow tree vanished. The blue line to the frog disappeared. The red line to the otter was wiped away. The beautiful, complex web around the empty space was gone, leaving nothing but faint smudges of color.

"The pond drains," Thread murmured, erasing the big blue shape. "The frogs have nowhere to lay their eggs. The otters have to find food somewhere else."

Listen along + meet more of the cast at:



<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/ecosphere/niche-thread>

Niche

*ECOLOGICAL ROLE — every species has a job, and the ecosystem holds together by the jobs fitting together. The ecology primitive of *what-an-organism-does in the system.**



- "SEED-BED CONTROLLER"
 - SOIL-AERATOR
 - CANOPY-PIONEER



- KEYSTONE
 - FILTER-FEEDER
 - pollinator
 - scavenger
 - keystone



- "Look beyond the obvious"
 - "Identify the jobs."
 - "Identify keystone species"
 - "Identify functional redundancy"
 - "Niche overlap = competition"



Chapter 2 — Niche and the Job-Vest

Niche is a small mole-tween with a vest embroidered with many small role-labels.

She is *small, warm-brown-and-cream, near-sighted-in-round-spectacles* (chunky-cartoon — round, wire-framed), *gently-handed, and attentive*. Her vest is covered in small embroidered labels — each label naming a job a species can do in an ecosystem: *POLLINATOR, DECOMPOSER, PEST-CONTROLLER, SEED-DISPERSER, SOIL-AERATOR, NUTRIENT-CYCLER, CANOPY-PROVIDER, HABITAT-ENGINEER, FILTER-FEEDER, KEYSTONE*. The vest is *busy — almost cluttered* — but each label is *neatly embroidered, tidy, separately readable*. When she introduces a new species in a lesson, she *points at the relevant labels on her vest. That species is THIS job. And THIS job. And THIS one.*

This is *essential*. Niche embodies the *ecological-role primitive*. Every species in an ecosystem *does jobs*. A honeybee is a *pollinator AND a food-source-for-birds AND a honey-producer-for-other-species*. A bat is a *night-pollinator AND a pest-controller AND a seed-disperser*. A beaver is a *habitat-engineer* (the dams it builds create new wetland) *AND a food-source AND a plant-thinner*. The ecosystem *holds together because the jobs fit together — each species' work supports several others' work, and removing any species removes its jobs from the system.*

Critical: Niche *NEVER frames species as "important" or "unimportant."* She is *explicit*: *"Every species has at least one job. Some species have many jobs. No species is useless. Even species that look unimpressive — moss, dung-beetles, gut-bacteria, slugs — do critical jobs. The slug decomposes leaf-litter; without slugs, leaf-litter accumulates wrong, and the soil suffers. The ecosystem doesn't care if you find a species cute. The ecosystem cares whether the jobs are getting done."*



Niche grew up in a small village where her family had been the village's job-board-keepers — the moles who maintained the village's seasonal job-board, where each villager's specific contributions to the harvest, the school, the festival, the road-maintenance were listed and credited. The work had required attention to many small jobs — the rope-maker, the well-digger, the soup-cook, the schoolhouse-cleaner, the bee-keeper, the lamp-tender, the road-mender — each villager's job was specific, each job mattered, no job was below another. Niche had learned by age six that the village held together because the jobs fit together — and that removing any villager's job left a hole in the system.

She walked to the EcoSphere academy at twenty-two. Terra had asked her: "What is an ecological niche?" Niche had said: "It is what a species does in the ecosystem. Every species has at least one job. Many species have several. The ecosystem holds together because the jobs fit together. No species is useless. Cute-vs-ugly is not the same as essential-vs-non-essential." Terra had said: "You are appointed."

Listen along + meet more of the cast at:



<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/ecosphere/niche>

Phase

*ECOLOGICAL SUCCESSION — *ecosystem change over time* (primary → secondary → climax community). The ecology primitive of *ecosystems are not static; they change in phases.**



Phase is a small swallow-tween with a folded time-lapse landscape strip in her wing-pocket.

She is small, quick, grey-and-cream-and-warm-russet, bright-eyed, and attentive-to-change. Her wing-pocket holds a folded paper strip, several feet long when unfolded — the same valley sketched at 200-year intervals: bare-rock (year 0), lichens (year 50), moss (year 100), grasses (year 200), shrubs (year 400), pioneer trees (year 600), mature mixed forest (year 800). She unfolds the strip slowly in lessons — one panel at a time — and the students see the same place become different things over time.



This is *her craft*. Phase demonstrates *succession*. Ecosystems are *not static*. They are *in motion* — *slowly, over decades and centuries, but constantly*. A bare-rock surface that emerges from a glacial retreat will be *colonized* by lichens (which break down the rock and create thin soil), then *moss* (which deepens the soil), then *grasses* (which roots stabilize the soil further), then *shrubs* (which provide shade and shelter for tree seedlings), then *pioneer trees* (fast-growing, short-lived), then *climax forest* (slow-growing, long-lived). The whole *succession* takes *centuries* — *not seconds, not years* — *but it always happens*.

Critical: Phase frames succession as *natural change*, NEVER as *loss* or as *decay-into-different-thing*. She is *explicit*:

*"Ecosystems change in phases. The forest you see today was a meadow once. The meadow was bare rock once. *Change is not loss*. Each phase has its own organisms, its own structure, its own beauty. The meadow is not failed-forest; the meadow is meadow. The bare-rock is not failed-meadow; the bare-rock is bare-rock. *Each phase is the whole thing it is right now.*"*

This matters because *kids often carry an implicit static-ecosystem misconception* — *the ecosystem you see now IS the ecosystem* — and feel a kind of *loss* when shown that ecosystems shift through time. Phase reframes the shift as *natural sequence*, not as *deterioration*. AND she explicitly distinguishes *natural succession* (slow, ecosystem-internal, generative) from *human-caused-disruption-or-collapse* (which is Brink's domain — fast, externally-forced, often degenerative). Phase teaches the natural sequence; Brink teaches the disruption.



(the trauma-informed framework-TIP-57 partial safe exit: kids who associate ecosystem-change with climate-grief can stay with Phase's natural-succession framing without engaging Brink-anchored content. The two are sequenced for this reason.)

Phase grew up in a *small village* where her family had been *the village's swallow-watchers* — *the swallows who tracked the village's annual cycle of arrivals and departures, recording which years brought early swallows, which late, which abundant, which sparse*. The work had required *attention to change-over-time at the level of years and generations* — *not single-day observations, but patterns visible only at longer timescales*. Phase had learned by age six that *ecosystems were rivers, not lakes* — *the same place could be different things at different times, and the changes were part of the place, not departures from it*.

She walked to the EcoSphere academy at twenty-two. Terra had asked her: "*What is succession?*" Phase had said: *"It is ecosystem change over time. The forest you see today was a meadow once. The meadow was bare rock once. Bare rock → lichens → moss → grasses → shrubs → pioneer trees → climax forest. Change is not loss. Each phase is whole."** Terra had said: "*You are appointed.*"



In her workshop, Phase begins every first-day lesson the same way. She *unfolds the time-lapse strip* slowly. One panel. Two panels. Three panels. Up to the eighth panel — *the mature forest*. She says: *"I am Phase. The ecology primitive I teach is succession. The move is trace the phases. Ecosystems change. The forest you see today was a meadow once. Each phase is whole. Change is not loss."*

She teaches *the succession scaffolds*:

- *Identify the current phase.* (What stage of succession is this ecosystem in? Bare-rock? Pioneer plants? Mid-succession? Climax community?)
- *Look backward through time.* (What was here before? *Climate clues, soil-depth clues, evidence of previous phases.*)
- *Look forward through time.* (What will be here next? *If undisturbed, succession continues; if disturbed, restarts or shifts.*)
- *Primary vs. secondary succession.* (*Primary* starts on bare rock with no soil — slow, requires lichen + moss to build soil. *Secondary* starts after disturbance on existing soil — faster, because soil and seed-bank already present.)
- *Climax community is the metastable end-state.* (Not perfectly stable — climate change, fire, storms can reset. But long-lived under stable conditions.)
- *Each phase is whole.* (Don't treat earlier phases as deficient versions of the climax. The meadow is meadow. The grassland is grassland.)
- *Natural succession vs. external disturbance.* (Succession is slow, gradual, internal. Disturbances — fires, storms, human land-use, climate shifts — are fast, external, often reset succession. Brink will teach disturbance and tipping; Phase focuses on the natural sequence.)

She is *explicit*: *"I sometimes have a kid who feels sad watching the meadow become forest. That's not failure. That's the implicit static-ecosystem feeling. The reframe is — the meadow was already changing into forest; that's what meadows do here. The kid can also love the meadow as meadow. Both are true."*



When students ask Phase whether succession is hard, Phase always says the same thing:

*"It is not hard. It is *trace the phases*. Ecosystems change. Each phase is whole. Change is not loss."*

She folds the strip slowly. The next panel *waits to be unfolded*.

Listen along + meet more of the cast at:



<https://spark-and-anvil.com/cast/ecosphere/phase>

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- **SynaForge** — sensory-affirming creative tools through Lull, Soften, and the Quiet that is Also Creating

Methodology

Distributed-narrative pedagogy per Jerome Bruner (narrative-cognition) + Sebastian Habgood (intrinsic-integration in educational games) + SAMHSA TIP 57 (trauma-informed register).

Trauma-informed-design framework per Eggleston et al. (2025) and Stoltenburg et al. (2024).

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