



the partnership  
for water sustainability in bc

Waterbucket eNews on April 19, 2022  
<https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>



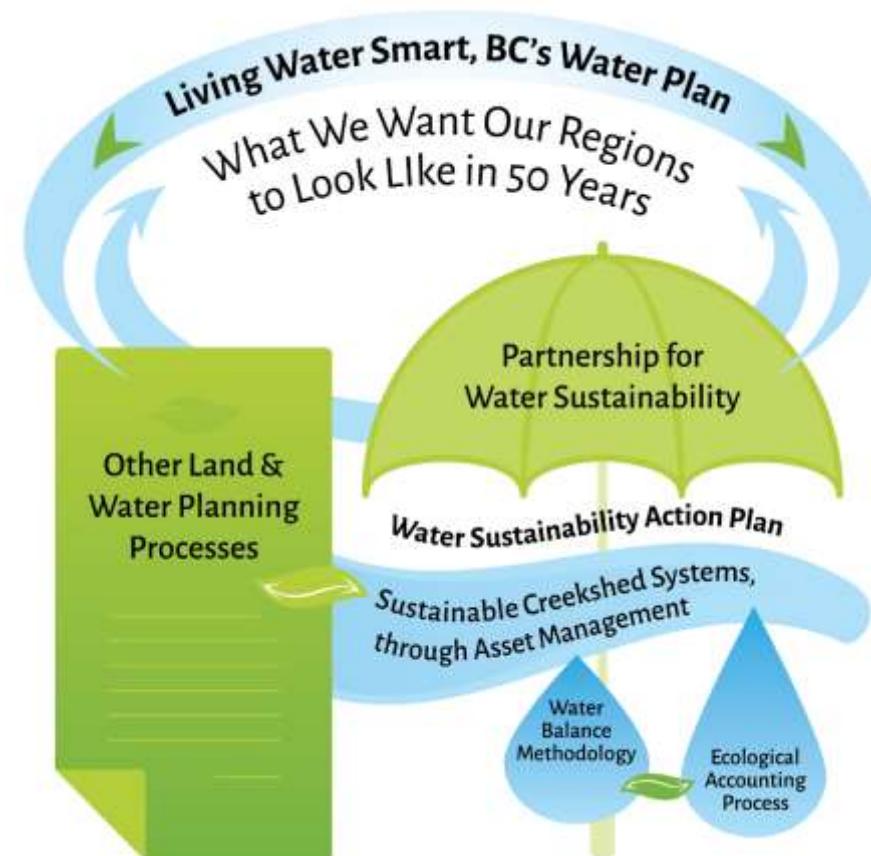
# Living Water Smart in British Columbia: *Touching the past can connect us to the future*

## Note to Reader:

Waterbucket eNews<sup>1</sup> celebrates the leadership of individuals and organizations who are guided by the vision for [Living Water Smart in British Columbia<sup>2</sup>](#).

The edition published on April 19, 2022 featured Dr. Jamil Zaki, professor of psychology at Stanford University, California. His research focus is on empathy. He describes empathy as less like a fixed trait, and more like a skill, which we can work on and build.

The umbrella for Partnership initiatives and programs is the [Water Sustainability Action Plan for British Columbia<sup>3</sup>](#). In turn, the Action Plan is nested within [Living Water Smart, British Columbia's Water Plan](#).



**Cover Image Credit:** photo by David Mackenzie,  
a *Lifetime Member* of the Partnership for Water Sustainability

<sup>1</sup> <https://waterbucket.ca/wscblog/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://waterbucket.ca/wcp/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/11/livingwatersmart\\_book.pdf](https://waterbucket.ca/wcp/wp-content/uploads/sites/6/2017/11/livingwatersmart_book.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.waterbucket.ca/cfa/sites/wbccfa/documents/media/81.pdf>

## Editor's Perspective

Three years ago, I was in the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island for meetings. One evening I was reading the Washington Post online. An op-ed on climate change by Dr. Jamil Zaki, a psychology professor at Stanford University, caught my attention. He introduced a way of thinking that resonated so much that I decided to reach out to him.

Lo and behold, 13 minutes later, Dr. Zaki responded to my email. “I am touched and flattered that you have chosen to share my message with your audience, and I hope it resonates with them,” replied Dr. Zaki. “This made my day,” he added.

As regular readers will know, I conduct a lot of interviews for stories that the Partnership publishes on Waterbucket eNews. These interviews are my source of inspiration. Certain themes are recurring in interviews, such as: oral history, intergenerational baton, and what do you do when “they don’t know what they don’t know”.

Jamil Zaki’s message is “touching the past can connect us to the future”. This soundbite aligns with the themes that I have observed. His message is timeless. Hence, the reason for this flashback story.

The focus of Jamil Zaki’s research is on empathy, a simple word for a complex idea, as he explains in his TED Talk. His findings about the erosion of empathy over the past four decades helps me understand what happens when the intergenerational baton is not passed along, and oral history is lost.

As an eternal optimist, however, I believe that the flip side of a problem is an opportunity. You just have to look for the silver lining to turn the situation around. Thus, it has meaning for me when Dr. Zaki says, “We can use our optimism to build pockets of solidarity and mutual aid that grow over time.”

In a TED Talk last December, Jamil Zaki ended with this statement, **“Optimism is not a relic of the past. It is one key to building a better future to let us see it more clearly.”** That works for me!



Kim A. Stephens, MEng, PEng,

Executive Director

Partnership for Water Sustainability in BC

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## ORAL HISTORY / INTER-GENERATIONAL BATON

**"Gratitude toward the past might empower us to help those who come after — a kind of golden rule across time," says Stanford University's Jamil Zaki**

The Partnership for Water Sustainability publishes weekly e-Newsletters to showcase and celebrate the passion, commitment and perseverance of champions who are establishing precedents for others to follow in B.C.'s local government setting.

Our focus is on local government staff as well as those in the stewardship sector. The ultimate goal of the series is to inspire all the players to collaborate to 'Improve Where We Live'.

Periodically we like to mix things up by featuring thought leaders from other sectors and other places. In September 2019, we introduced readers of Waterbucket eNews to Dr. Jamil Zaki. He is an associate professor of psychology at Stanford University and director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Laboratory.

He wrote [The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World](#) - an inspiring call to action in this era of a rapidly changing climate. All things considered, it seemed like an appropriate time to bring this story forward. For an impression of Jamil Zaki's visionary message, watch his TEDx Talk<sup>4</sup>.

**"Empathy evolved as one of humans' vital survival skills. It is only through our foray into the modern world that we have lost touch with our evolutionary empathy. Deeply empathic people tend to be environmentally responsible, but our caring instincts are short-sighted and dissolve across space and time, making it harder for us to deal with things that haven't happened yet."**

Dr. Jamil Zaki is an associate professor of psychology at Stanford University and director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Laboratory. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic*.



<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DspKSYxYDM&t=1s>

## **Inaction in the Face of a Changing Climate: Reflections by Dr. Jamil Zaki, Stanford University**

"Why would we mortgage our future — and that of our children, and their children — rather than temper our addiction to fossil fuels? Knowing what we know, why is it so hard to change our ways? One answer lies in the nature of empathy: our ability to share, understand and care about others' experiences," says Jamil Zaki.

"Empathy is built on self-preservation. We watch out for our children because they carry our genes, for our tribe because it offers sex, safety and sustenance. Spreading our care across space and time runs counter to those ancient instincts."

"Empathy evolved as one of humans' vital survival skills. It is only through our foray into the modern world that we have lost touch with our evolutionary empathy. Deeply empathic people tend to be environmentally responsible, but our caring instincts are short-sighted and dissolve across space and time, making it harder for us to deal with things that haven't happened yet."

"Touching the past can connect us to the future, especially when we look back fondly. Gratitude toward the past might empower us to help those who come after — a kind of golden rule across time."



***"Optimism is not a relic of the past. It is one key to building a better future to let us see it more clearly."***

Dr. Jamil Zaki is an associate professor of psychology at Stanford University and director of the Stanford Social Neuroscience Laboratory. His writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The New Yorker, and The Atlantic.

## Caring about Tomorrow

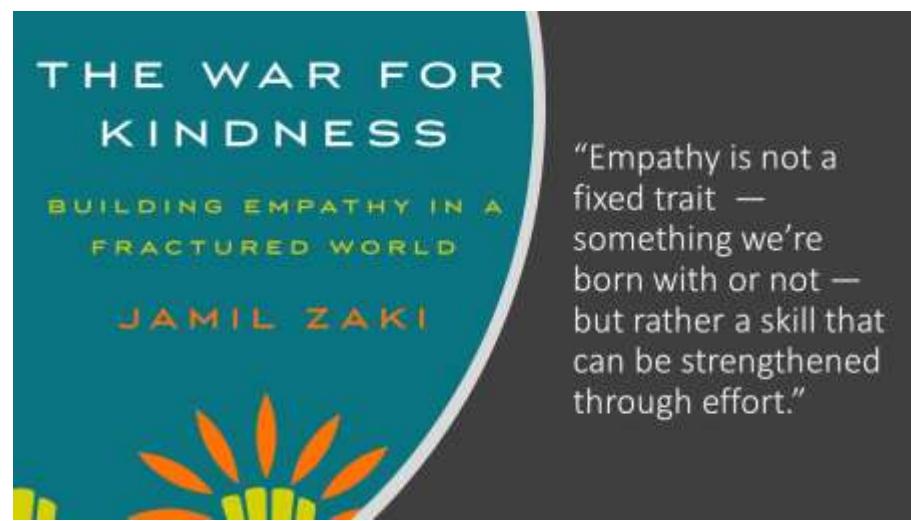
Empathy is in short supply, says Jamil Zaki. Isolation and tribalism are rampant. We struggle to understand people who aren't like us, he observes, but find it easy to hate them. Studies show that we are less caring than we were even thirty years ago, he reports.

It doesn't have to be this way, he writes. In his ground-breaking book, Jamil Zaki shares cutting-edge research, showing that empathy is not a fixed trait—something we are born with or not—but rather a skill that can be strengthened through effort.

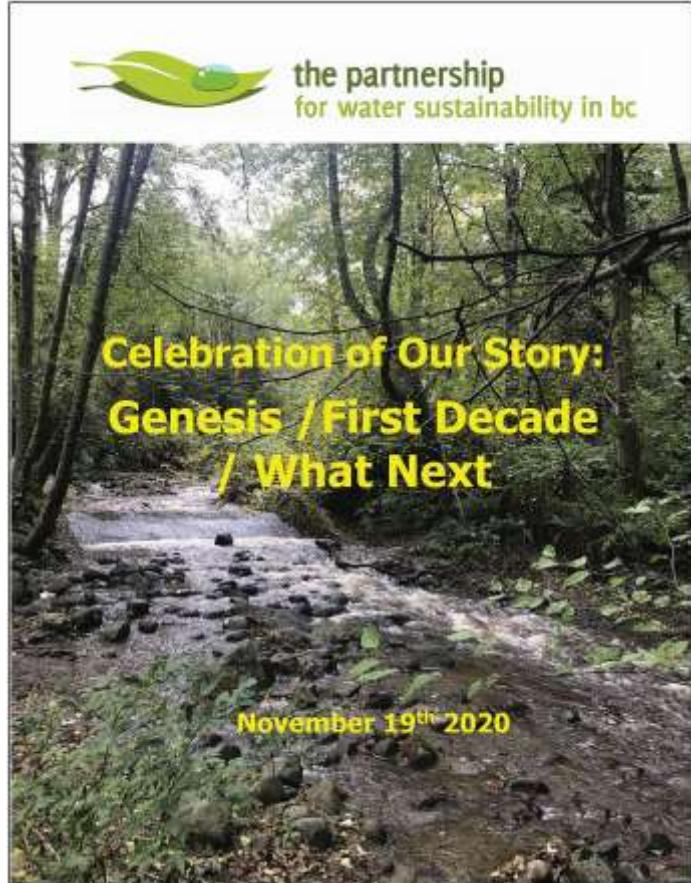
Research shows that empathy is something we can sharpen over time and adapt to the modern world. The future may depend on whether we accept the challenge, predicts Jamil Zaki.

"As I write about in [The War for Kindness](#)<sup>5</sup>, empathy is less like a fixed trait, and more like a skill, which we can work on and build—the same way you'd strengthen a muscle. To put the book's principles into practice, I've developed a series of Kindness Challenges, like exercises at an 'empathy gym' that you can use to push yourself and connect better," states Jamil Zaki.

"It is difficult emotional work, and also necessary. We must try to evolve our emotional lives: away from the past and toward a future that needs us desperately. **Doing so might help us to finally become the ancestors our descendants deserve.**"



<sup>5</sup> <https://www.warforkindness.com/>



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<https://waterbucket.ca/about-us/>

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## About the Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia

Incorporation of the Partnership for Water Sustainability in British Columbia as a not-for-profit society on November 19, 2010 was a milestone moment. Incorporation signified a bold leap forward.

Over two decades, the Partnership had evolved from a technical committee in the 1990s, to a “water roundtable” in the first decade of the 2000s, and then to a legal entity. The Partnership has its roots in government – local, provincial, federal.

The Partnership has a primary goal, to **build bridges of understanding** and pass the baton from the past to the present and future. To achieve the goal, the Partnership is growing a network in the local government setting. This network embraces collaborative leadership and **inter-generational collaboration**.

The Partnership believes that when each generation is receptive to accepting the inter-generational baton and embracing the wisdom that goes with it, the decisions of successive generations will benefit from and build upon the experience of those who went before them.



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