

Earth, we have a problem – and it grieves me.
A homily by Donald G. Marshall
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You will know that the title comes from a NASA space ship communication and would have been “Huston, we have a problem”. So, yes, we, earth and its biosphere do have a problem, or more correctly, we have a predicament. That is because a problem has a solution, a way of correcting the problem, and a predicament has no solution.

Our predicament is that what humans have been doing with our environment since the Industrial Revolution has created a situation that is rapidly progressing on a path that has no correction. Scientists, parts of government, and other powers agree that we are heading into a future that no one can accurately predict, except that it will be very different and unpleasant, ultimately leading to collapse.

President Obama’s science advisor in 2008 said *the menace of growing, human-caused disruption of global climate could create catastrophic increases in suffering that will require large increases in the efforts devoted to both mitigation and adaptation*”.

Climate change is not just a crisis for the biosphere; it is a crisis for our very significance and purpose as human beings. It represents a stunning change in the climate of all human emotion. Simply being human at this time in history – and particularly being a middle-class human in one of the world’s richest nations – makes you and me agents of extinction.

I didn’t come here today to lecture you about climate change, or peak oil, or the threat of economic crisis, or over population, or wars, or any of the other threats to our comfortable existence. I am sure you have some awareness of what is going on. The details of all the issues that define the decline and the ultimate collapse of the world as we know it is a very long complex story which you can easily access elsewhere. I want to begin by telling you my story, and how I came to agree to tell it to you.

I have been a member of the church since the 60’s. I came here after rebelling against the dogma of the United Church to seek guidance in developing my own beliefs. I found that here and have participated actively in the church. With the guidance I found and the felt sense of support and inclusiveness, and other moments of personal introspection, I knew that it was important for me to give back to my community, to try to make our world better.

During this time, the “Aquarian Conspiracy” was a much read and discussed book and concept. From it I have held on to the idea that it was important to “live in the cracks” like a small blade of grass that could ultimately flourish and be useful when everything had collapsed. This idea has always been fundamental to my drive to “keep going” – that my efforts could always, in the face of defeat and collapse, be a basis for re-growth.

In the 70’s my family began a rudimentary recycling effort with other Unitarians in our neighborhood - we were “doing something to help the environment”. Around this time attention to the environment was evoked from Rachael Carson proselytizing against pesticides in her book “A Silent Spring”. Environmental action was warming up, and scientists were beginning to warn about climate change, and I was quite active in political spheres.

In 1996, I and my wife, Diane, moved to Bowen Island, where we both increased our efforts in recycling. I volunteered at the sophisticated recycling depot and Diane helped to create the re-use-it store. Then I did more work in Zero Waste activities and municipal committees, and ultimately helped establish “Bowen in Transition” based on the world-wide Transition movement that began in England. I had always felt that recycling was not enough, so “Transitioning” seemed a way to really do something constructive.

Transition recognizes that, because our governments and corporations will not or cannot alter the course of climate change, the prospect of carbon based energy depletion, or the implications of economic crises, ordinary people must learn to take care of themselves. That essentially means being involved in small resilient communities where everyone is supported and cared for by the community.

One of the aspects of the Transition model that appealed to me was what they call “Heart and Soul” work. Therein they recognize that working for the protection and improvement of the environment is hard work, often fraught with disappointments and defeat, and that it is important that people need to do and support activities that are fun filled or that involve being in and enjoying the beauty of nature – to bring some “heart” into the work. In spite of the terrible state of our world, there is still an abundance of beauty and it is great to be able to experience the exquisiteness of life. But perhaps more important is the “soul” work - that it is essential to pay attention to one’s inner feelings as one contemplates the collapse. It was here that I felt that I wanted to work, and could offer something of help.

About six years ago I discovered the writings of Carolyn Baker. She has written several books and a daily news-letter that basically lay out the vision that our world is in collapse that we are witnessing a death of the world we know, and knowing this brings up thoughts of our own mortality. We must be grounded in ourselves and know how to deal with our emotions of grief, anger, and despair to be able to work at mitigating the collapse and to ease into a new paradigm. It is essential to begin now to be familiar with the emotions that rise in us.

In the fall of 2013 Carolyn put on a workshop on Bowen Island for BIT that took us to the door of looking at emotions, particularly grief. Out of that came a small working group who, using Francis Weller's book "Entering the Healing Ground", studied the awareness and impact of grief in our personal lives. The important part of our work was done within the context of the group – we were witness to each-others grief as we went through the Five Gates of Grief. This work was instructional and revelatory to me, and helped me to see that I wanted to show others that this could be useful to them as they faced the problems of the world.

As a member of the Suzuki Elders Council I suggested to them that we might examine the subject of emotions as related to the predicaments of the world. We began with a Salon in January that was received enthusiastically and I was asked by Karl Perrin if I would present the concept to you. My mission in all this, and in speaking to you, is that I want to spread the idea that we can, and should, be ready to be helpful to our "brothers and sisters" if they need support as our world collapses.

I cannot do much to change the course of the collapse, but I have pledged to myself and my family that I will do whatever I can to make a difference. Advocating for the environment is of course still essential, but I think I can best help by bringing the awareness of what our emotions can do to help or hinder that work or affect our personal well-being. So how do I approach this problem, this predicament, that grieves me, and make sense of it?

I have read widely on this subject for a number of years, and I beg your forbearance as I use a number of excerpts from these writers. They state more clearly and understandably what I know about emotions and the predicament, and what I believe about the inherent issues.

Writer Bill McKibben says, "do something braver than try to save the world we have known, *accept the fact that the world we have known is going to change in hideous and damaging ways*". Susanne Moser follows with: "The *bravest thing is to take the first step: get real. Face the truth, and let it sink in. This won't happen quickly and it is not to be rushed, though the*

temptation to jump into mad action to fight for solutions that may still avert the worst is indeed immense. But coming to grips with the reality we now are in takes time, and it is critical that we give it a quiet space inside ourselves, and that we ground ourselves in the face of it with any practices of balance we may already have or could adopt. The landscape you will find yourself in, once you allow this realization to take hold, is a different one. Despair lives there, along with helplessness and anger, fear and disorientation, undoubtedly also unspeakable sadness. We have to accept that “better tomorrows” may not come. It is akin to accepting one’s own mortality”.

Carolyn Baker says of this: *“The moment we begin to consider our own mortality we need someone or something to help us navigate all the so-called negative emotions that surface, and we need support for finding and making meaning in every aspect of our lives”.*

If we accept the reality of climate change, and our responsibility for causing most of it, we could become so wounded we may not be able to act. The prospect of collapse in the future fills us with anger, horror, desperate hope, and debilitating sadness. And underneath this is a sense of great dread. Climate change and collapse in the future can be likened to contemplating our own death.

Moser again: *“Grief follows accepting what is happening with an open heart – for you and for those with whom you may speak, work, or who you may lead. When I really let myself experience the state of the world, my first reaction is bottomless, unutterable sorrow. That moves quickly into outrage. The sorrow I can deal with; the outrage I used to suppress – after all, it might offend someone. Now I use it to give me courage. When I get mad, I have to move* Grief deliberately acknowledged is utterly countercultural in modern western society, certainly when done in public. In the wider public discourse, much less in everyday practice, grief about environmental losses is still largely a solitary matter. This must change, if we are to connect with our deepest humanity and the sustaining motivations that will help us work toward constructive solutions and deal with the relentless onslaught of the coming changes. While each of us will have to do this work for his or her own sake and soul, grieving together with others holds it safely and honorably. One clear demand on you is to be at ease with your own grief in order to provide a strong container for that of others.

In the western consciousness, emotion has had a bad rap as the opposite of reason and good judgment. But psychological and neurological research reveals that emotion is the primary organizing force for human beings. It is what has enabled us to survive, form families and

groups, and develop morality and empathy. The six basic emotions – joy, surprise, shame, anger, fear, and sadness – can all trigger effective responses to what is happening around us. They need to be recognized and worked with, not hidden away.

The growing field of eco-psychology shows that not paying attention to feelings can lead to significant problems. Furthermore, scientists who have been working in the field of climate change report that, though they must retain a rigid approach to research and data, they are having increasing difficulty with their emotions.

Many observers have written about the experience of environmental grief, of mourning for ruined ecosystems. In ordinary circumstances, grief enables us to accept the loss and to face the future having integrated that past into our lives. Through this process of recovery, in some sense we recover our sense of reality, regaining a future through absorbing that loss.

But grief in the era of climate change can no longer operate in this way. Grieving for what we have lost, we will move forward into more loss, into a generalized experience of even greater mourning, and recovery becomes very hard, and in need of supportive actions by others

Baker: "Grief is the work of mature men and women. It is our responsibility to be available to this emotion and offer it back to our struggling world. The gift of grief is the affirmation of life and our intimacy with the world. Grief restores the soul and enhances the connection with our deeper humanity. Conscious grieving allows us to feel more alive and to savour more exuberantly all other emotions, including joy. Moreover, grief serves not only the grieving individual but the entire world. The earth community, as well as each of us, needs our grief".

One of the areas that raises emotional issues is dealing with the many paradoxes that exist in life, and in particular when contemplating our predicament. Consider the tension one feels in thinking of: the grief over what is being lost and the gratitude for what we still have; the fears that are inevitable and the hopes that we need; that we are both perpetrators **and** victims, slowly destroying our lives and surviving that destruction at the same time.

The work that we are challenged to begin, of learning about and beginning to work with our emotions, can take a number of practical directions. The simplest is just to have the courage to speak of our concern for the predicament to individuals, knowing that some will reject the approach. It is useful to be able to ask questions that do not confront their resistance, but rather invite an emotional awareness and response.

In the same vein, groups of people can gather, perhaps on a regular basis, for individuals to air their concerns and emotions. None of this need be considered “therapy” but rather a human approach to sharing that leads to the closer relations required in communities facing the accelerating collapse.

There are a number of recognized speakers who can address the subject of dealing with emotions in lecture form. And one can participate in workshops where, in the context of sacred ritual, people can explore their grief. The exploration and expression of emotions, particularly grief, in public with a facilitator can be very helpful in creating a stable and comfortable grounding.

It has become clear to me that the best way to engage others in meaningful conversation about difficult subjects is to tell stories, and to invite stories from the person you are engaging. No one wants to hear facts and data, particularly if it is negative or confrontational. They just do not hear it, or go away.

When one carefully examines the scientific information about the predicament, it is very easy to slip into despair, that there is no hope of survival for an individual, or a family, or everyone, or all living things. Mary Pipher, author of “The Green Boat” says: *“The antidote to despair is not just work. The most powerful antidote to despair is bliss. We can access this by simply recognizing our kinship with other living beings, by finding one beautiful thing to enjoy, or by allowing ourselves to be swept away emotionally by the miraculous and intricate world we have all around us.”*

Nobody knows what will happen to the planet, but we do know what makes humans stronger, healthier, and more resilient. That is facing the truth, dealing with it emotionally, and transforming it. Happiness and sustainability depend on everyone healing everyone else. As we repair our relationships with the web of life, the web of life will repair us. Healing the earth is not a liberal, or conservative idea – it is a form of prayer”.

I realize that I may have raised some complex and challenging questions. I encourage you to dwell on the questions and to courageously be in dialog and conversation with those you trust.

In closing I would add this thought. Wendell Berry cautions us not to put too much emphasis on the future, that predictions can be inaccurate and un-fulfilled. But he adds *“if we take no thought for the morrow, how will we be prepared for the morrow?”*, and finishes *“all we can do to prepare*

rightly for tomorrow is to do the right thing today. So the first right thing we must do today is to take thought of our history. We must act daily as critics of history so as to prevent, as far as we can, the evils of yesterday from infecting today. And, appreciate the day itself and all that is good in it”.

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