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# Climate Change Despair and Empowerment

JOHN SEED AND RUTH ROSENHEK

*We live in a culture where there is a profound denial of feeling.*

*From an early age we are taught to fear, conceal and repress feelings of anguish, distress, fear and anger. Feelings are an important aspect of our intelligence and when we suppress them, it leaves us helpless, anxious and depressed, damages our ability to think clearly and, especially, paralyses our ability to act forcefully and passionately on the basis of what we know.*

*Apart from the personal impacts, the social consequences are profound: if we are unable to feel and honour the pain we feel for what is happening to our world, then we are unable to act intelligently and decisively to address the social and environmental ills that give rise to this pain. "Despair and Empowerment" processes create safe contexts within which we can explore the banished feelings and reclaim the power that is inevitably suppressed along with the feelings. This article explores these ideas and how they are being brought to the service of climate activism.*

Over the past few decades, the task of environmentalists has been to raise awareness about the acceleration of widespread ecological destruction. Our hope was that once enough people understood what was happening to the natural world, things would begin to change. Indeed there have been many gains in the efforts to conserve nature. The destruction of the ozone layer was halted, World Heritage areas have been declared and some species that were on the brink of extinction have been "saved". However, in light of the most widespread consensus of scientists ever to occur, it has become clear that without a far more profound change than anything we've seen yet, *nothing* has truly been saved and *nothing* has been protected. Clearly, "knowing" is simply not enough. More awareness will not mobilise politicians and citizens alike to take decisive action to preserve what is left of the Cenezoic Era. We *know* what is happening to the forests, we know what is happening to the air and the water and the soil and we know what is happening to the climate. At the recent launch of Haydn Washington and John Cook's book "Climate Change Denial", the provocative suggestion was made that, given the overwhelming scientific consensus supporting the reality of human-induced climate change and the fact that the industry-funded climate denial campaign has been so devastatingly successful at sowing doubt and confusion, 95% of future climate research funding should be directed at social sciences. Although all of this is no longer a secret, we continue to avoid making the necessary changes to swiftly and effectively address the slow tsunami of global warming before it is too late.

From the viewpoint of eco-psychology, there is a collective state of denial that blocks our ability to think clearly about the issue of climate change and the overall destruction of Nature. Referring to personal grief as when "a loved one is diagnosed with a terminal illness", public intellectual Clive Hamilton (2010, 4) writes that:

The first phase of grief is often marked by shock and disbelief, followed by a mixture of emotions: anger, anxiety, longing, depression and emptiness. To regulate the flood of unpleasant emotions, humans deploy a number of strategies to suppress or buffer them. Among them John Archer includes numbness, pretence that the loss has not occurred, aggression directed at those seen to be responsible for the loss, and self blame, which are similar to the methods we use to deny or filter climate science. This suggests that the widespread prevalence of forms of denial and avoidance among the population may indeed be defenses against the feelings of despair that the climate science rationally entails.

According to Deep Ecology philosopher and activist Joanna Macy, there is a strong taboo in western culture that prohibits the expression of our deepest feelings of grief, terror, rage and despair about what we see happening to our world. Not only are we never invited to share these feelings, we've been taught that they are

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dangerous – if we were ever *fully* to let that genie out of the bottle we would be crushed, annihilated, sink into deep depression and never recover...maybe we would even commit suicide. It is these unacknowledged and repressed feelings which sap our power, paralyse us, and freeze us in the glare of the rapidly approaching headlights of climate and ecological catastrophe. In fact, according to Joanna Macy, the opposite is the case; when the feelings are acknowledged, welcomed and validated, the result is empowerment. To put this into practice, Macy has been offering workshops since the early 1980s that invite participants to express these sorts of difficult feelings, to speak or sob with grief or howl with rage within the context of the safety created by the workshop format.

To support participants in their exploration of these profound feelings, it is important to begin to deconstruct some of the misconceptions and myths about feelings. Firstly, feelings are not socially constructed; we are born with them, they are “hard-wired”. Not only is every human child born with a full palette of feelings, but they long predate our humanity. One of the reasons why mammals have been so astoundingly successful and have jumped, climbed, flown and swum to such prominence in the brief 65 million years of the Cenozoic Era, is precisely because our feelings are so *accurate*. Should a mammal feel like running **towards** something when the correct response would have been to run away as fast as it could, it is unlikely to leave its genes in the pool. That is, accurate feelings have been selected for and refined in every generation without pause since life began. The fear the animal feels, or the courage, combined with what we call intuition forms an exquisite intelligence which our ancestors, human and pre-human, honed unceasingly through billions of years of successful evolution. At each step along the way, not once did any of our ancestors fail to have sufficient intelligence to reach the age of reproduction before being consumed. This awe-inspiring pedigree is precisely what we sacrifice when we suppress our feelings. This is not to disparage our thinking intelligence, but cognition is partial. If we merely *know* what’s going on without *feeling* it also, we are not motivated to make the necessary changes. When we say “I was moved” to do something we are not talking about thoughts, we are talking about feelings. Without passion, thought is sterile.

As an ancient core of our survival mechanism, in children, feelings push up with vast instinctual force. At a very early age we are taught to suppress our feelings and thus we develop sophisticated defence mechanisms. According to Freud, defence mechanisms, such as denial and repression, allow negative feelings to be reduced by distorting the reality of the situation that produced the feelings. Denial has evolved to help people cope in extreme situations by reducing the arousal caused by the emergency. Ongoing denial, however, leads to

the replacement of realistic perceptions of potentially threatening circumstances with an inaccurate more pleasant interpretation of reality. Hence, the ongoing denial of climate change science and the lack of action. By the time we are adults we may no longer be consciously aware of the huge amount of energy that we expend to keep our feelings at bay in a futile struggle between instinctual feelings and social conditioning. This waste of our very life force can result in apathy, a sense of helplessness, hopelessness, and despairing thoughts such as “What can one person do anyhow?”, “It’s all too late anyway.” and so on.

Surprisingly, we find that even after a lifetime spent repressing these feelings, whenever a circle of like-minded people join together to challenge this social taboo, participants can easily reconnect with strong feelings of grief, anger, fear, and despair in a cathartic experience that releases the blocked energy. In the aftermath, feelings of helplessness and paralysis become transformed as participants feel revitalised and ready to engage. As the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Naht Hanh, once said, “The most important thing that we can do for the healing of our world is to hear inside ourselves, the sounds of the Earth crying.” We can know many facts and statistics about the Earth but we seldom invite ourselves to open our eyes and our ears and our hearts to acknowledge the tragic loss of species, the pollution of water and air, the wars on each other and so on. It is vital that we can create the space within ourselves to hold and be with the sadness and not just wipe the tears away. In the same vein, the 8th century Buddhist saint, Shantideva, is remembered for his prayer “May all sorrows ripen in me”. This prayer suggests that we invite into ourselves not only our personal sorrows, but all sorrows, those of all humanity and of all beings. These sorrows have the capacity to be transformed when we accept and even nurture them as we would a small seedling. Like the fruit that becomes sweet once ripe, a sorrow that matures reflects deep love and compassion. Similarly, when we nurture and accept our fears, we develop great courage. Anger that is given positive expression can be transformed into a magnificent outrage that provides the energy to stand up for what we believe in. Each so called ‘negative’ emotion, when honoured and allowed to come forth without repression and restriction, has a positive counterpart.

The significance of ‘despair and empowerment’ work lies not only in the upsurge of intelligence and power in the person who expresses previously suppressed feelings. The importance of witnessing such honest expressions from one’s peers cannot be overstated. We are descended from a social species where the unit of survival was never the individual but always the community. In ancient times, when a member of a tribe perceived danger, he or she

screamed out the alarm call that alerted her community. In fact, natural selection has formed us to require such overt expressions of alarm to activate the “fight or flight” chemicals that prepare us for decisive action. Yet, one can sit in a room listening to climate scientist Kevin Anderson predicting that not more than 10% of the Earth’s humans would be supported in a four degrees warmer world and there may be nary a response. No whimpers or sighs, no tearing of hair, gnashing of teeth, rending of clothing. In the absence of visible signs of anguish and distress, the information alone is worse than useless. To merely “know” that we are in danger clearly doesn’t trigger the necessary response. Perhaps even worse, to know these things and to do nothing corrupts our sense of self-worth and honour.

Humanity faces huge challenges that require radical change to transition to a sustainable future. Yet, we cannot build a new conception of the future until we allow the old one to die. Joanna Macy reminds us that we need to have the courage to allow ourselves to descend into hopelessness, resisting the temptation to rush too soon into a new future. The taboo against feelings in western culture tethers us to a futile struggle as we are unable to respond with effective, creative and inspired solutions. For the shackles of the denial to be lifted, emotions need to re-enter into the public discourse of social transformation, into the educational, social and political institutions, at this time when we need all of our intelligence to be brought to the table. Homo sapiens survived alongside a vast slew of other species that didn’t make it. Over 99.9 percent of all the species that ever lived on the planet have been extinguished. Only one in a thousand species managed to survive to the present day – and one of these species is us. We can rest assured that it’s within our capacity and our intelligence to figure out what needs to happen so that we can go on. Teetering on the brink as we stand right now, this invites us to go deeper into that intelligence that has led us to be here today. To discover an Earth ethic that begins to shape a future that we are proud to pass down to our children and our children’s children.

### References

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### **‘No fixed rule applies in fluid matters’**

John Standing, 1607 \*

Flood marks and brass plaques on churches at Goldcliff, Redwick, Nash show where the sea made a shore once.

It will swell again, will come  
in storm and surge. Tor ammonites know this,  
sure in their beds of lias and clay, hardened  
in sandstone, waiting for water to soften  
their shells and ease them over the seven  
terraces into the Severn Ocean.

The Levels will fill, dykes and seawalls fail.  
Reed beds will drown in warbling liquid  
that will salt the sheep in Summerland meadows.  
Drains will inundate bringing brine-fish  
to sport in the willows.

You can build barriers,  
but these are no more use than a hand  
plugging a leak. The sea ignores small boys.  
It wants to live the prophecy in a sparkling wave,  
to make islands of Brean and Avalon.

\* translated from the original Latin. Standing’s poem has no title per se, but is addressed ‘To Sir Edward Standing, Knight, about the incredible flooding of the Severn (the day after the poet begins his journey to London), in which that seawall recently built at Aberthaw was overcome and torn apart. January 20, 1607’.

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