

Eco anxiety

by Ger Murphy

The Black Cloud of Despair

*The black cloud of despair sits on the dark lake of early morning,
The acid rain cries across the valley,
And we face what we have done, squandered our inheritance.
Almost too breathtaking to look upon this scene of stagnant water, stunted growth,
strange colour unfamiliar to the land.
Almost unbearable, too overwhelming even to cry out,
But cry we must,
To break this spell of ignoring,
And cry, cry, cry the waste, the waste, till tears start to flow,
First from deep inside, slowly rising to cleanse us of our shame, opening us in humility
And the tear, a first drop of cleaner water that begins to cleanse the land.*

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On this subject, I start and end with a poem, as poetry brings us to the more affective and reflective parts of ourselves, which is useful as we engage with a subject both overwhelming and vast. They say you know a new phrase has arrived when you hear it twice on RTE 1 in the same week. ‘Eco anxiety’ featured on Morning Ireland and Ray Darcy over the past week, so we know it is arriving in the common lexicon.

Eco anxiety relates to people’s concern, anxiety, or fear for what is happening on our planet. The world is heating up, with strong consequences for climate, habitat, food production and ultimately for the continuity of our civilization. Growing numbers are concerned, as evidenced by the latest MORI poll in the UK, where last month 85% of respondents voiced concern about the climate - the highest level since the question was first asked in 2005. Climate change deniers are now dwindling in number, though many of us could be said to live a lifestyle of denial.

Concern can be thought of as on a continuum with anxiety, fear and ultimately panic. We do not think well or act wisely when in the grip of overwhelming fear; in fact, it can be seen from neuroscience of the brain that in such circumstances, much of our brain function shuts down (Segal, 2005). An issue like this leads us to look outside at facts, trends, predictions, and to become engrossed in activism. First, I suggest it is useful to start inside: to manage our concern, anxiety and fear, so as to prepare us for effective and thoughtful activism.

From my practice, I see anxiety as akin to the oil light in our car dashboard. We could take out the fuse to rid ourselves of the bothersome anxiety... but as in our car, this would be to our peril. Under anxiety there are often stronger emotions which may need to be recognised, such as grief, fear, and anger. Over the past 20 years, I have seen an increasing tendency to open up and speak about anger. Anger management has now a place in business and home; bullying and rage is no longer tolerated but can be spoken about and addressed.

However, fear has yet to get a place at the table. When was the last time you said to a colleague or family member, ‘I’m scared/frightened’? When was the last time you said to yourself, ‘I’m scared...’? Often, we deny fear, bluster through it or become angry against what or who we feel frightened us. We are often afraid of our own vulnerability, as if it were a weakness which needed to be fixed. Could we turn towards our fear with a few deep

breaths, some self-compassion, wait a while with it, not treat it like a naughty child inside who must pull themselves together? Our anxiety and fear are more likely to subside if we do. We can manage our feeling response to the environmental crisis we face, if we focus our attention on doing so. Psychotherapy has a particular role in helping us face this crisis as it has had a role in bearing the unbearable, speaking the unspeakable and thus breaking taboos in many areas of life.

To understand our own personal fear, I value the questions set by the great eco campaigner Joanna Macy, who has been working with these issues for many years. She asks us to reflect on a set of three questions (Macy, 2015):

1. *What I fear as I face the collapsing of our old way of life is...*
2. *What I am grateful for as I face the collapsing of our old way of life is...*
3. *What I will try to remember as I face the collapsing of our old way of life is...*

With an enquiry like this, we can meet our fear deeply but at the same time hold it in the context of gratitude and the values we hold most dearly. We can reclaim our nervous systems and become more empowered and resilient. We can then act in wiser and more considered ways, and we can avoid projecting blame and scorn onto others in unhelpful ways. It's good to remember that one defence against fear is blame. But what if there were no bad people, only deluded, greedy and angry ones? As the Roman philosopher Terence said: "Nothing that is human is foreign to me" (Radice, 1976: 1.1.25). So, what if we don't point the finger, but look and act out of love, and not anger, when we can? When we have the urge to blame, could we look at where that trait is within us too? This ability to take responsibility as well as attribute it, but without the blame, may help us towards the great teaching of these times: we are in this together and our old defences of splitting and projection will not see us through any longer. Under anxiety is often deep grief for all we are losing, and it is useful to view grief as a skill rather than a feeling, a skill to turn consciously towards and to engage with the heartbreak of it all without losing ourselves.

Having processed our responses to climate change, we may be in a better position to begin to act, as act we must. We will act best out of our love for the Earth, and the wonder and awe that its beauty generates, rather than from the guilt or shame we can get caught in. Action absorbs anxiety. Could we get in touch with our caring for the planet, get in touch with our gifts, look at what holds us back? What if we were bold and courageous? Perhaps we could act, not in the expectation of results, but rather because it is the right thing to do although outcomes are uncertain. Perhaps we can act in community and not alone, as this can help contain eco anxiety.

There is a cost to waking up to what is happening on the earth right now. We have to face our own deaths and the question of the survival of our species like never before, and it is daunting to do so. This is new and alarming, and a part of us, and me, wants to check out or watch the next box set! But I like the quote from the Book of Esther (4:14) from the Old Testament: "*for such a time as this were you born*" (Reid, 2008).

It may be important for those of us who wish to be conscious at this time of challenge to imbue our actions with meaning, whether that be spiritual meaning, community meaning, or other. As Dr Victor Frankl, the eminent psychiatrist and psychotherapist who survived a concentration camp during the Second World War, observed, those who imbued their actions

with meaning survived better (Frankl, 2004). Meaning can be something we convey to experience rather than waiting to find it out there.

The actions that we can now take are many, but how do we choose? I have found it useful to listen to the guidance of Jem Bendell, who in his exceptionally thorough and clear article “Deep Adaptation”, outlines a structure for deciding action in these times. Bendell (2018) outlines four questions we must face in the forthcoming times of collapse in order to build a redemptive world:

1. *Resilience - what values and behaviours do I want to keep in my daily life?*
2. *Relinquish - what values and behaviours am I ready to let go of?*
3. *Restore - what values and behaviours, which seem lost now, would I like to bring back?*
4. *Reconciliation - with whom do I want to make peace?*

These questions could be used well to orientate our actions in these times. They are especially challenging questions for a culture as death-phobic as ours where no one dies any longer, only ‘passes’. The work of Stephen Jenkinson (2009) is particularly useful here. The prospect of facing our own, or our species’, death is breathtaking and can best be done in the company of others. Perhaps it can also be done in a way that does not leave us stuck in despair, but in a place of gratitude and reconciliation.

At present we may be caught reaping the rewards of our hyper-individualism, having lost our gods and our ancestors. We see everything as other - our neighbour, nature, other species, and the Earth - and can follow the profit god and growth god. We have freed ourselves to plunder as we see fit, seeing the earth as ours to do with as we wish. Maybe it’s time to review this, as it does not look sustainable. Maybe we could find again our place in the web of life. Perhaps it’s not just about reducing carbon emissions, but about changing our worldview and ensuing actions. This may be the opportunity of the crisis in which we now find ourselves.

We do not know how the future will unfold, so it asks of us to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty and to act with compassion. To support this, a meditation practice may be a great help, and immersing ourselves in nature and the wild may also be supportive. If part of our current problem stems from the way we frame our world as an inanimate object which is ours to do with as we wish, then part of a solution might be to find a different relationship to the natural world, one where we see ourselves as part of it rather than separate from and dominating of it. It is interesting that while many would say that they love nature, few would say that nature loves them.

How can we find a reciprocal relationship with the natural world, the world of the wild? To finish, I offer another of my poems that speak to these themes.

Into the Wild

I go in and time loses its dimensions, becomes a soft cheese between my fingers, no longer the solid basket holding hopes and expectations it once was, and the only thing rushing is the water.

As it falls away, the silent sound of now, full with running water, insect tickle, and birds, grows to embrace all with the hush and secret symmetry of the wild.

The breeze and drops of rain the drama now that so much empties out.

Even the great project of a self wobbles on its axis, falling softly like another rotting branch of the old oak tree which has seen 500 years of drama in these woods.

The sheer weight of silence cleaves the brain in two, the cerebellum opens and flowers - the lotus flower which the holy seekers knew, and I can only guess at.

I remember my teacher's lines about what a caterpillar does inside a cocoon: it liquefies!

It's getting hot in here.

Now I see how tame I am, meeting the wild in the dark.

Was that a scream, a dream, or the roar of the stream?

Terror pours in, breathtaking in moments.

Will I run?

The torture's complete,

A terrific defeat, I'm back on my feet for the day.

Then the doors open and the old gods pour through, the manic willfulness and sovereignty of Godhood all about them.

You must claim God, they declared, and be claimed, like the kite chicks and the lambs claim their mothers, with the almost arrogant mix of demand and plea that parts the water, opens the brain and invites the flowering.

A madness that pulls back the curtain of devotion, or urgency to essence.

No more bland or coy, like claiming second prize at a fete raffle, but blazing in hunger for consecration.

Claiming with the heart, that muscle of yearning, pulling on the oars that draw us closer to the harbour of the Divine, the row and return of every boatman's striving.

Look what your civilized ways did to us, the gods roar.

Churched us, put rules in our mouths, made us angry, when all we wanted was to frolic, be frightening and free.

You reduced us to a thing, a concept, not pointers to essence.

We retreated to the wild where you will not look, leaving us with the ancestors, and others you have lost.

But now you reclaim the wild, tame the wild, not in service of oneness, but in service of production, and profit.

Across the hill, all these days the land is being torn, scarred with a new wound, raw earth laid bare, the ice-age valley's peace and beauty shattered with a grievous assault.

Bulldozers and trucks the scalpels.

Now the fog clears further and I see how my inner bulldozer has been wounding someone in my family, the ache of dawning responsibility cutting through righteousness.

Enough, enough, the Earth says, and I say so too.

How will I hand my granddaughter an earth in revolt?

A tarnished gift, a poison chalice.

Her innocent pudgy, toddler fingers grasping an exploding world.

How can I go on and see this?

Bear witness to this.

Yet what if my witnessing, unflinching and undone, could be a gift, as we watch if a great turning could yet be our lot, surely given our now one billion a decade population increase consuming earth's resources at twice the rate she can replenish –some tragedy is at hand?

And yet, have we mammals not brought something?

A kinding, a minding, a devotion to our young, (that makes us so many) and brought a new kindness into the world.

For this alone??

If, if, if,

If we could find again our place in the wild, our surrender to grace and beauty and working with, not the fist of domination, could the earth, the wild, the ancestors, the gods give us a second chance to find our correct place in the web of life?

Or is it done?

Now I return to where it does not get dark, silence is a moderate thing and time finds again its spine in schedules and appointments.

To my bed, my bath and the comforts I call home that give me some safety.

*Yet may the pure honesty of the wild stay with me, of darkness, birdsong and silence,
that I may remember, that we might all remember and belong.*

Ger Murphy (MIAHIP) works as an integrative psychotherapist, supervisor and trainer and has been Director of the Institute of Creative Counselling and Psychotherapy for over 25 years. See www.iccp.ie/library for other articles and information. Ger is currently involved in a project, *The Word in the Wild*, where groups go into the wilderness and engage with poetry and the spoken word to deepen their connection with nature in these times. He can be contacted at germurphy@edgeworth.ie.

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