



Normalizing Ecological Grief and Anxiety

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Normalizing ecological grief and anxiety requires language to help us identify, process, and communicate our painful experiences with climate change.

This language helps us accept that some things are lost forever AND not everything is doomed.

This language roots hope in more realistic places.

Communities are built around shared language.

Background: How I Ended Up Here

B.S. in English from Appalachian State University

15 years teaching AP Language and Composition (writing and rhetoric)

Between 2006-2020s, I noticed a shift in my students' relationship with their imagined futures.

Watching my students and my children learn themselves and the world in a changed and changing climate forced me to face my own grief about the climate crisis.



The Climate Apathy Myth

“We must not assume that...concern is absent but rather that it may be seeking a home.” (Environmental psychologist Renee Lertzman)

People aren't avoiding the climate crisis because they don't care; they are likely avoiding it because they care so much. Since the climate crisis is bigger than our individual choices while simultaneously caused by the collection of our individual choices, many of us don't know where to start or what to do.

Self-preservation plus a lack of direction or agency traps people in their normal thought patterns and routines.

Labeling our inaction as apathy allows us to tuck our feelings away with other unfollowed trains of thoughts. This gives us permission to move on—at least until we are once again reminded that our environment is most definitely changed and changing.

Apathy protects us when we have no outlet for very big feelings. Language can help provide that outlet.

How is ecological grief different from “regular” grief?

Doesn't follow the stages of grief we've come to expect; there's no clear “end” or “return to normal”

Ecological grief asks us to lose something over and over again; it's an overwhelming loss, especially when we don't have language to conceptualize it

Environmental sciences vs. environmental humanities; imperative of the impersonal (thanks Descartes)

Hope and grief are not mutually exclusive: “We need to stop worrying about giving people hope and start letting people grieve...Climate grief is not an illness to cure. It is a condition we will have to live with. But then again, isn't all grief?” (Mary Annaïse Heglar)



Solastalgia

- Combination of Latin *solacium* meaning comfort and the Greek root *-algia* meaning pain; Austrian philosopher Glenn Albrecht in 2005
- Similar to nostalgia, which comes from Greek *nostos* meaning return.
- Nostalgia: describes a desire to return to a place or time that is in our past.
- **Solastalgia:** missing a place that we still inhabit because it is no longer recognizable. It has been changed or destroyed by forces beyond a community's control (extreme weather, war, civil unrest, pandemic, industrial buildouts, mining, gentrification, sea-level rise, wetland loss, etc)

A homesickness that people feel while still being at home

Glenn Albrecht. (2019) *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*. Cornell University Press, 39.

Hyperobjects

- Anything "massively distributed in time in space relative to humans"
- Exist in a way that stretch or escape human comprehension
- Climate change, cosmology, fossil fuel dependence, global warming, capitalism, deep time, the number of shows and movies available on streaming services, parts per million, the internet, microplastics, etc. (very large finitudes)
- Difficult to think and talk about because they exist everywhere and at all times; create a crisis of scale that pushes against the limitations of human temporality and perception; **number blindness**



Thinking About Climate Change as a Hyperobject

How do we push through the number blindness?

How can we think about the hyperobject of climate change without our fear of ecological grief and anxiety shutting our thoughts down?



Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1886)



When you allow yourself to move in close enough, you realize you don't have to see or understand the big picture to be a change-making part of it.



Learning language to face ecological grief and anxiety can give us the perspective we need to find our work and our place in a community engaged with the climate crisis.

Sources

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