

Mourning Our Planet: Climate Scientists Share Their Grieving Process

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I have been researching and writing about anthropogenic climate disruption (ACD) for Truthout for the past year, because I have long been deeply troubled by how fast the planet has been emitting its obvious distress signals.

On a nearly daily basis, I've sought out the most recent scientific studies, interviewed the top researchers and scientists penning those studies, and connected the dots to give readers as clear a picture as possible about the magnitude of the emergency we are in.

This work has emotional consequences: I've struggled with depression, anger and fear. I've watched myself shift through some of the five stages of grief proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. I've grieved for the planet and all the species who live here, and continue to do so as I work today.

I have been vacillating between depression and acceptance of where we are, both as victims – fragile human beings – and as perpetrators: We are the species responsible for altering the climate system of the planet we inhabit to the point of possibly driving ourselves extinct, in addition to the 150 to 200 species we are already driving extinct daily.

Can you relate to this grieving process?

If so, you might find solace in the fact that you are not alone: Climate science researchers, scientists, journalists and activists have all been struggling with grief around what we are witnessing.

[*To see more stories like this, visit "Planet or Profit?"*](#)

Take Professor Camille Parmesan, a climate researcher who says that ACD is the driving cause of her depression.

"I don't know of a single scientist that's not having an emotional reaction to what is being lost," Parmesan said in the National Wildlife Federation's 2012 report. "It's gotten to be so depressing that I'm not sure I'm going to go back to this particular site again," she said in reference to an ocean reef she had studied since 2002, "because I just know I'm going to see more and more of the coral dead, and bleached, and covered with brown algae."

Last year I [wrote about the work of Joanna Macy](#), a scholar of Buddhism, eco-philosophy, general systems theory and deep ecology, and author of more than a dozen books. Her

initiative, *The Work That Reconnects*, helps people essentially do nothing more mysterious than telling the truth about what we see, know and feel is happening to our world.

In order to remain able to continue in our work, we first must feel the full pain of what is being done to the world, according to Macy.” Refusing to feel pain, and becoming incapable of feeling the pain, which is actually the root meaning of apathy, refusal to suffer – that makes us stupid, and half alive,” she told me. “It causes us to become blind to see what is really out there.”

I recently came across a blog titled, [Is This How You Feel?](#) It is an extraordinary compilation of handwritten letters from highly credentialed climate scientists and researchers sharing their myriad feelings about what they are seeing.

The blog is run and operated by Joe Duggan, a science communicator, who described his project like this: “All the scientists that have penned letters for this site have a sound understanding of climate change. Some have spent years designing models to predict changing climate, others, years investigating the implications for animal life. More still have been exploring a range of other topics concerning the causes and implications of a changing climate. As a minimum, they’ve all achieved a [PhD](#) in their area of expertise.”

With Joe’s permission, I am happy to share the passages below. In the spirit of opening the door to a continuing dialog among readers about our collective situation, what follows are the – often very personal – thoughts and feelings of several leading climate scientists.

Frustration

“Like many others I feel frustrated with the current state of public discourse and I’m dismayed by those who, seemingly motivated by their own short-term self interest, have chosen to hijack that discussion,” [wrote](#) Dr. John Fasullo, a project scientist in the climate analysis section of the National Centre for Atmospheric Research, on the *Is This How You Feel?* blog. “The climate is changing and WE are the primary cause.”

Professor Peter B. deMenocal with Columbia University’s Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory [shared](#) an analogy to the climate scientist’s predicament, comparing it to how a medical doctor would feel while having to inform their patient, who is an old, lifelong friend, of a dire but treatable diagnosis. The friend goes on to angrily disregard what you have to say, for a variety of very human reasons, as you watch helplessly as their pain and illness unfold over the rest of their now-shortened life. “Returning to our patient, I feel frustrated that my friend won’t listen,” he concluded.

Dr. Helen McGregor, a research fellow at the Australian National University’s Research School of Earth Sciences, shared a very emotionally honest letter about her experience as a climate scientist. Here is what she [wrote in full](#):

I feel like nobody’s listening. Ok Sure, some people are listening but not enough of our leaders are listening – those that make decisions that influence all our lives. And climate change is affecting and will continue to affect all our lives.

I feel perplexed at why many of our politicians, business leaders, and members of the public don’t get that increased CO₂ in the Earth’s atmosphere is a problem. The very premise that CO₂ traps heat is based on fundamental physics – the very same physics that underpins so much of modern society. The very same physics that has seen higher CO₂ linked with

warmer periods in the geological past. And sure, there have been warm periods in the past and the Earth weathered the storm (excuse the pun) but back then there weren't millions of people, immovable infrastructure, or entire communities in harms way.

I feel astonished that some would accuse me of being part of some global conspiracy to get more money – if I was in it for the money I would have stayed working as a geologist in the mining industry. No, I do climate research because I find climate so very interesting, global warming or not.

I feel both exasperation and despair in equal measure, that perhaps there really is nothing I can do. I feel vulnerable, that perhaps by writing this letter I expose myself to trolling and vitriol – perhaps I'm better off just keeping quiet.

Hope

Dr. Jennie Mallela with the Research Schools of Biology and Earth Sciences at the Australian National University shared a range of emotions, including optimism.

"I believe people are capable of amazing things and I do believe that climate change can be halted and even reversed," she [wrote](#). "I just hope it happens in my lifetime. I don't want to become the generation that future children talk of as having destroyed the planet. I'd like to be the generation that fought back (and won) against human induced climate change. The generation that worked out how to live in harmony with the planet – that generation!"

She wasn't alone.

"So whilst there is enough good and committed people we can change our path of warming," [wrote](#) Dr. Jim Salinger, an honorary research associate in climate science with the University of Auckland's School of Environment. However, he went on to add, "I am always hopeful – but 4 to 5 degrees Celsius of change will be a challenge to survive."

I asked Dr. Ira Lefier, an Atmospheric/Oceanic Scientist whose research has focused on methane how he felt about our current situation. He expressed his concerns and frustration, but also optimism.

"I find the current situation is highly distressing, in that the facts regarding global warming have been known for many decades, because like an aircraft carrier avoiding a collision, course changes can easily be managed well in advance, but become impossible at the last minute – inertia seals the future destiny," he said. "And I ask myself, what did we (scientists and activists and concerned citizens of the planet), how did we get here, so close to the midnight? And I think that there was a tragic underestimate based on the successful campaign to save the Ozone Layer through the fight against CFCs – a gas with almost no political lobby, that the global society could easily accept the widespread changes needed to address global climate change through reducing CO2 emissions – which affects almost everyone on the planet. And that political change could be engendered simply by scientists presenting their facts and observations.

"So yes, I find it highly distressing that we are having a societal discussion on whether to take climate change seriously, half a century late. Still, I refuse not to be an optimist, – it is not yet too late. I continue to do whatever I can both scientifically and by communicating with the public, firstly, because it is the right thing to do, and secondly, in the hope and belief that even now, positive action will reduce the damage from our warming climate to

the ecosystem. I refuse to accept 'apres moi le deluge' [after me comes the flood]."

Concern

"As a human-being, and especially as a parent, I feel concerned that we are doing damage to the planet," [wrote](#) Professor Peter Cox, of the University of Exeter, on the blog. "I don't want to leave a mess for my children, or anyone else's children, to clear-up. We are currently creating a problem for them at an alarming rate - that is worrying."

Professor Gabi Hegerl, a professor of climate system science with the University of Edinburgh, [wrote](#), "I look at my children and think about what I know is coming their way and I worry how it will affect them."

Dr. Sarah Perkins, a climate scientist and extreme events specialist with the University of New South Wales, [shared both her concern and hope](#) about our Earth.

For sometime now I've been terribly worried. I wish I didn't have to acknowledge it, but everything I have feared is happening. I used to think I was paranoid, but it's true. She's slipping away from us. She's been showing signs of acute illness for quite a while, but no one has really done anything. Her increased erratic behavior is something I've especially noticed. Certain behaviors that were only rare occurrences are starting to occur more often, and with heightened anger. I've tried to highlight these changes time and time again, as well as their speed of increase, but no one has paid attention.

It almost seems everyone has been ignoring me completely, and I'm not sure why. Is it easier to pretend there's no illness, hoping it will go away? Or because they've never had to live without her, so the thought of death is impossible? Perhaps they cannot see they've done this to her. We all have.

To me this is all false logic. How can you ignore the severe sickness of someone you are so intricately connected to and dependent upon. How can you let your selfishness and greed take control, and not protect and nurture those who need it most? How can anyone not feel an overwhelming sense of care and responsibility when those so dear to us are so desperately ill? How can you push all this to the back of your mind? This is something I will never understand. Perhaps I'm the odd one out, the anomaly of the human race. The one who cares enough, who has the compassion, to want to help make her better.

The thing is we can make her better!! If we work together, we can cure this terrible illness and restore her to her old self before we exploited her. But we must act quickly, we must act together. Time is ticking, and we need to act now.

Sharing both his frustration and concern, Dr. Alex Sen Gupta with the Climate Change Research Center at the University of New South Wales [wrote](#):

I feel frustrated. The scientific evidence is overwhelming. We know what's going on, we know why it's happening, we know how serious things are going to get and still after so many years, we are still doing practically nothing to stop it. I feel concerned that unmitigated our inaction will cause terrible suffering to those least able to cope with change and that within my lifetime many of the places that make this planet so special - the snows on Kilimanjaro, the Great Barrier Reef, even the ice covered Arctic will be degraded beyond recognition - our legacy to the next generation.

Anger

"My overwhelming emotion is anger; anger that is fuelled not so much by ignorance, but by greed and profiteering at the expense of future generations," [wrote](#) Professor Corety Bradshaw, the director of ecological modeling at the University of Adelaide. "I am not referring to some vague, existential bonding to the future human race; rather, I am speaking as a father of a seven year-old girl who loves animals and nature in general. As a biologist, I see irrefutable evidence every day that human-driven climate disruption will turn out to be one of the main drivers of the Anthropocene mass extinction event now well under way."

The rest of his letter is worth reading in full:

Public indifference and individual short-sightedness aside, I am furious that politicians like Abbott and his anti-environment henchman are stealing the future from my daughter, and laughing about it while they line their pockets with the figurative gold proffered by the fossil-fuel industry. Whether it is sheer stupidity, greed, deliberate dishonesty or all three, the outcome is the same – destruction of the environmental life-support system that keeps us all alive and prosperous. Climates change, but the rapidity with which we are disrupting the current climate on top of the already heavily compromised environmental health of the planet makes the situation dire.

My frustration with these greedy, lying bastards is personal. Human-caused climate disruption is not a belief – it is one of the best-studied phenomena on Earth. Even a half-wit can understand this. As any father would, anyone threatening my family will be on the receiving end of my ire and vengeance. This anger is the manifestation of my deep love for my daughter, and the sadness I feel in my core about how others are treating her future.

Mark my words, you plutocrats, denialists, fossil-fuel hacks and science charlatans – your time will come when you will be backed against the wall by the full wrath of billions who have suffered from your greed and stupidity, and I'll be first in line to put you there.

"The Pivotal Psychological Reality of Our Time"

Joe told me the response to his project has been, in general, positive.

"I have received emails from all over the world from people of all walks of life thanking me for establishing the website – from retired grandmothers through to undergraduate university students," he said. "The letters have been picked up by various social media sites like Science Alert...and have subsequently reached massive audiences."

He was happy to add that the responses from scientists have been positive, and said his question of "How does climate change make you *feel*?" is "something they have not been asked before."

"Of course there have been some very vocal opponents to my work," Joe added. "This is to be expected. As I have said in the past, there is a small but very vocal group of people out there whose sole goal is to misinform and mislead the general public about climate change. These people don't have to use the facts, they don't have to even use the real data. They can cherry-pick from graphs, or even tell flat-out lies in an attempt to mislead the greater public. To what end, who knows? ITHYF [Is This How You Feel] does not exist to change the minds of deniers. It exists to provide an avenue through which every day people can relate to climate change."

The term “climate change deniers,” then, has an entirely new – and ever more relevant – meaning when viewed through the lenses of the Kübler-Ross five stages of grief, given that “denial” is literally one of the five stages.

Joe is [now asking laypeople to send in their letters about how they feel](#), and plans to publish those as well.

“This approach is not the only way to communicate on climate change, but it is one way, and I certainly feel that it is effective,” he concluded.

The practice of scientists sharing their feelings runs contrary to the dominant consumer capitalist culture of the West, which guards against – and attempts to divert attention from – the prospect of people getting in touch with feelings provoked by witnessing the wholesale destruction of the planet.

In fact, Joanna Macy believes it is not in the self-perceived interest of multinational corporations, or the government and the media that serve them “for us to stop and become aware of our profound anguish with the way things are.”

Nevertheless, these disturbing trends of widespread denial, disinformation by the corporate media, and the worsening impacts of runaway ACD, which are all increasing, are something she is very mindful of. As she wrote in [World as Lover, World as Self](#), “The loss of certainty that there will be a future is, I believe, the pivotal psychological reality of our time.”

We don’t know how long we have left on earth. Five years? 15 years? 30? Beyond the year 2100? But when we allow our hearts to be shattered – broken completely open – by these stark, cold realities, we allow our perspectives to be opened up to vistas we’ve never known. When we allow ourselves to fully experience the crisis in this way, we are then able to truly see it through new eyes.

Like reaching new heights on a mountain, we can see things we’ve never seen before. Our thinking, attitudes, and outlook on life changes dramatically. It is a new consciousness, one in which we realize the pivotal stage in history we find ourselves in.

Perhaps, within this new consciousness, we can live in this time with grace, dignity, and caring. Perhaps, here, we can find ways to save habitat for a few more species, while we share our precious lives and this precious time with loved ones, in the wild places we love so much, on this rare and precious world.

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