

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Mary Pipher



The Green Boat

Reviving Ourselves in
Our Capsized Culture

*Take this sinking boat and point it home.
We've still got time.*

GLEN HANSARD

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INTRODUCTION

Humanity appears to be rapidly approaching the breaking point. And there are two possible outcomes: breakdown or breakthrough.

PETER RUSSELL

I began this book in the summer of 2010 at a time when the world seemed almost too complicated and frightening for me to manage emotionally. When I listened to the call of a meadowlark or walked around the lake near my home, I was serene. When I played hide-and-seek outdoors at dusk with my grandchildren, I was happy, albeit mosquito bitten. But when I turned on the news or read about the environment, war, and the daily global injustices, I felt like jumping out of my skin.

I sensed that many people felt this way. For example, most of my news-junkie friends no longer read the news. And people who had once loved intense political conversations avoided any talk about national or international affairs. People were rushed, stressed, and edgy. Everyone looked tired. We were all confused about what was going on and about how to fix it.

This book emerged from my attempt to understand myself and the people around me. I wrote it for the same reasons I wrote *Reviving Ophelia*. I sensed that individuals were struggling to deal with cultural problems. They felt alone, hopeless,

and uniquely damaged and they didn't realize that almost all of us felt that way.

Our individual anguish reflects enormous, systemic problems. On a global level, almost all major systems are breaking down. The problems include, but are not limited to: global climate change, drought and famine, overpopulation, diminishing resources, peak oil, the sixth great extinction of species, financial panic, and the specter of war. Indeed, sometimes it seems as if all that is holding our planet together is money-colored duct tape.

Scientist Will Steffen calls all these interconnected changes the Great Acceleration. While no one term encompasses the totality of what we are dealing with, Steffen's phrase reflects the tsunami of urgent and life-threatening planetary changes. Sometimes I'll refer to our problems as the "global storm." One definition of storm is "a violent disturbance of our atmosphere." That is exactly what we are navigating, literally and figuratively.

Our problems are made even more alarming by our inability to face them. Actually, that is our main problem. When a ship is sinking, pretending it isn't happening only intensifies the catastrophe. In fact, anytime we humans disconnect from reality, we enter individually and collectively what could be called a psychotic state.

Part of what makes our situation so surreal is that we don't know how to categorize it, we can't agree what caused it, and not everyone even believes we are in a crisis. We don't know how much time we have to react but we suspect that matters

are urgent. And we don't talk about it, much less make plans to deal with it. As a species we are engaged in suicidal behavior that we cannot even discuss.

Of course people avoid facing problems they have no idea how to solve. All of us tune out information that seems unbearable. Yet our denial, while understandable and sometimes even useful, keeps us from grasping what we are up against and from talking about it, and it prevents us from responding adaptively to the situation around us.

The world has changed a great deal, but our basic homo sapiens minds and bodies have not changed since the Neolithic Era. In our twenty-first century, we humans are struggling unsuccessfully to cope with a world that challenges our basic physical, emotional, and cultural systems of resilience. We are in over our heads, and at some level, all of us are looking for a life buoy.

The Trauma-to- Transcendence Cycle

In *The Green Boat*, I explore a process that allows us to face the situation and cope with it in a resilient manner. It is within our power to make our lives less stressful and more joyful. This trauma-to-transcendence cycle allows us to once again be present and focused, to stay calm and balanced, and to attend to the world around us with great love. Of course we hope that our personal transformation leads to positive changes in the world, but without question it will change us.

Our reaction to overwhelming stress is trauma. At first, we simply are too stunned to respond. But gradually, healthy humans sort themselves out and find adaptive ways to deal with reality. This process requires us to face the truth, feel the pain of that experience, and ultimately transform that pain into action and authenticity. As we move through this cycle, we can acquire the skills we need to overcome our sense of doom and discover our own capacities for transcendent coping. By this I mean that we can find deep within ourselves new strength, deeper courage, and an enriched capacity to love the world. This cycle is not easy, but it is really the only sensible way to proceed in the current moment. And it gives us hope.

Abraham Maslow, the humanistic psychologist, is famous for his theory of a hierarchy of needs. He argues that humans first satisfy their most basic of needs—for water, food, and shelter—before they aspire to less tangible goals, such as love or respect. I have great regard for Maslow, but I have always felt his hierarchy was simplistic and that it misjudged the nature of human motivation. I would argue that our most basic needs are hope and love. We can be happy when we are cold or hungry, but we cannot be happy when we feel alone and without hope.

Neuroscientists have discovered that the human mind functions best when it acts as if there is hope and organizes itself to make good things happen. We can never fully know the significance and impact of our individual actions, but we can behave as though our actions have significance. That will create only good on earth and will allow us to function in a sane and intelligent way.

In his book *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Gregory Bateson

writes, "The unit of life is the organism." We cannot live in isolation from the outer life. The extent to which we can be healthy depends on the environments around us. Survival is contingent on the ability to adapt.

These are not just abstract ideas. They are a new healthy normalcy: a new normalcy of hope, passion, and the pain of facing reality. It is the beauty of the human condition, a kind of emotional resilience that can help, especially in times of crisis.

Throughout the history of the world, people have stopped the Keystone State from becoming my Nebraska friend. They have helped all of us to see that our story can serve as a model for others. Perhaps even a transformation.

Just days before the September 11 attacks, Sandy devastated the East Coast from Cuba to New York. People were with horror as they watched the East Coast and the world.

I knew that September 11 had been partly the result of the levels, and warm weather. The changes were caused by the changes were over. Almost

writes, "The unit of survival is the organism and its environment." We cannot protect our inner life unless we protect our outer life. The external is not so external after all. The only way we can be healthy as individuals is to create healthy environments around us. We are all mixed up together; our survival is contingent on the survival of other living beings.

These are not the times for tepid responses. We'll explore a new healthy normal, which is defined by awareness, engagement, passion, and balance. For me, balance means that the pain of facing reality is not more than the joys of connecting to the beauty of the world. One of the ways to achieve this kind of emotional balance is by participating in actions that help, especially with other like-minded people.

Throughout this book, I'll tell the story of our Coalition to Stop the Keystone XL Pipeline. Forming that coalition with my Nebraska friends was one of my primary coping devices and helped all of us deal with our anger and despair. I hope our story can serve as an example of resilient coping and perhaps even a transcendent response.

Just days before the election in the fall of 2012, Hurricane Sandy devastated coastal communities along the Atlantic from Cuba to New England. Like most Americans, I watched with horror as the lights went out and the floodwaters rose on the East Coast and in the Upper Midwest.

I knew that Sandy was no more a "natural disaster" than September 11 had been. The hurricane's size and strength were partly the results of melting polar ice caps, rising sea levels, and warmer seawater temperatures. And these tragic changes were caused by human-made problems. The old days were over. Almost everyone could see that.

Hurricane Sandy's effects were immediate: thousands of people were unable to go to work or school, many were left homeless, without heat, lights, or fuel. Most significantly, in terms of effecting cultural change, this event crashed into our country's pocketbook. Wall Street shut down for two days, the longest weather-related closing since 1888. Experts estimated that Sandy's costs, including crop damage, might exceed \$75 billion.

This storm was almost certainly what's known as a climate signal, which is a weather phenomenon that can be explained only by taking into account new weather patterns attributable to global climate change.

It may also have signaled a cultural turning. Ideology, misinformation, and the psychological defense systems that have kept many Americans from accepting the reality of global climate change will hold for only so long. It is hard to deny impending climate catastrophes when one is up to one's waist in muddy salt water. Not surprisingly, it is the most practical among us who come out of denial first: the insurance company employees, the mass transit engineers, the mayors of coastal towns, and the builders. They must wake up in order to do their jobs.

As terrible as Sandy was, and I do not wish to minimize anyone's suffering, it also may have given us a culture-changing teachable moment. Overnight the great unmentionable, global climate change, became mentionable, not only by environmentalists, but by the media and by mainstream political leaders. I was heartened by New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg's endorsement of President Obama in which he specifically men-

tioned the need for change. Then, in a conversation with a group of told listeners, "We aren't threatened by

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tioned the need for a president who will deal with climate change. Then, in President Obama's post reelection speech, he told listeners, "We want our children to live in an America that isn't threatened by the destructive power of a warming planet."

This breaking of the silence surrounding global climate change gives me hope that, at last, we as a society might have a conversation about the fate of our beloved planet. We cannot solve a problem we won't discuss. But now that the spell of silence has been broken, perhaps we can stay awake and go to work.

I struggled to write this book. No one, including me, really wants to think about these overwhelming problems. In order to deal with the issues I wanted to write about, I had to come out of my own denial, connect dots I did not want to connect, face my own pain and sorrow, and finally accept reality. This process was one of the most painful of my life.

I also was reluctant to inflict suffering on readers. I want every one of you to be happy and have a positive experience when you are reading this book. With this topic it is a challenge to make that happen. I try to use humor and stories whenever I can. The most difficult material comes first. But it is soon finished. Then we will move into more heartening reading. Stay with me, please. Expect a turning.

If you are reading this book, you have already made a commitment to begin a voyage of discovery. Recognizing and naming problems is a huge step on this journey. Facing them emotionally demands courage and a certain trust in your own

strength. I urge you to be gentle with yourself. You will traverse dark and stormy seas, but together we will come ashore at a new and hopeful place.

As a fellow traveler, I cannot hold myself up as a great success. I've failed many times to calm myself or to find a beacon on the shore—but I can reference myself as one who has made the trip. I know from experience that people can navigate this process and come out on the other side of the storm. While I don't pretend to be an expert guide for everyone, I hope to be a small lighthouse for you as you begin your own odyssey.

In its particulars your path will be different from mine and from everyone else's, but, at core, we are on the same journey. We are alive together in this moment on the green boat of Earth. We share the same desires to be respected, loved, and useful. And in spite of a possible impending calamity, we want and need to be able to relax and have fun. We are all entitled to the same basic human rights for a sustainable planet and a future for all living beings.

We humans are not without resources. We have our intelligence, humor, and compassion, our families and friends, and our ancestry of resilient hominid survivors. We can become the whole, authentic, and connected humans we were meant to be. Let's help each other with this.



TRAUMA

ONE

SOS

The Tidal Wave

*He who fights the future has
a dangerous enemy.*

SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Then

My first memory is a visual one, of dappled sunlight splashing through the green leaves of a tall tree. I was on a blanket in my grandmother's front yard in Sparta, Missouri. All I could see was sunshine playing peek-a-boo behind shimmering leaves and occasional explosions of white light when a sunbeam burst upon me unsheltered by the greenery. This first memory is also my first memory of beauty.

In the 1950s, my family lived in a small Nebraska town. When we drove down a highway at night, we could see in the headlights the white tails of jackrabbits hopping off the road. Tumbleweeds the size of armchairs blew across the car hood.

After a rain, the water in the ditches teemed with tadpoles and, at night, the music of frogs, which we called peepers, swelled in the background. Enormous prairie dog villages covered many fields. In the summer, our yard attracted bluebirds, magpies, bobolinks, and Baltimore orioles.

The seasons ebbed and flowed in predictable patterns, even though, of course, the day-by-day weather was often surprising. Crabapple and pear trees flowered in late March, peonies bloomed around Memorial Day, wheat was harvested the week of the Fourth of July, and shortly afterward we picked sweet corn. Wild plums were ripe in late September and our first snow often fell by the end of October or the beginning of November. On January first, New Year's Day, we played Monopoly and drank hot chocolate—it was too cold to go outside.

With the exception of those Nebraskans who lived in the sleepy cities of Lincoln and Omaha, almost all of us lived in little towns with sidewalks, alleys, open spaces, and cemeteries for the homesteaders. My town, Beaver City, was built around a square. I remember the old men in overalls who in good weather sat under the elm trees visiting with each other and teasing the children who walked by. Some of them chewed tobacco or sucked on a dreadful candy called horehound. Others gave us pennies or lollipops. We knew these men and their families and they knew us.

Most homes had front porches, but no air-conditioning. No one had televisions or home entertainment centers. After dinner in the evenings, when the weather permitted, people sat outside or walked around their neighborhoods chatting with

their neighbors. We had a town whistle that told us when to eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner. At night, the sky was so clear I could lie on my front lawn and see the Milky Way, and sometimes even the northern lights.

We read the news once a week in our local newspaper or when *Time* magazine arrived. But most of the information that mattered to us was passed person to person more quickly than it could make it into print. We cared most about who had died, who was getting married, and who was born. We wanted to know who was buying a new car, when the baby chicks would arrive at the hatchery, who would play quarterback at the next football game, or if the high school band could afford new uniforms.

If we needed a pair of shorts or a sweater, our families ordered them by mail from Sears, Roebuck or J. C. Penney and waited several weeks for them to arrive. Men walked home from work for lunch and often took a nap before returning to their jobs. In the summer, children spent their days lolling around and swimming at the local pool. Stores closed at six at night and all day Sundays. Weekends were so slow that families often just drove around in the country or dropped in on friends for a visit.

One of my favorite memories is of the adults in my family asking me to go places with them. When they'd invite me to ride to the next town over or to a farm, they would often add, "I want you to keep me company."

In Beaver City, we were with the people we were with. Except for pen pals, letters, and expensive long-distance calls, we had no way of communicating with anyone else. I remem-

ber lying outside on a haystack with my friends at night and talking for hours about whatever floated to the surface of our consciousness.

This manageable universe lasted for me until October 1962, the year the USSR tried to ship missiles to Cuba. President Kennedy was concerned that the Soviets would use Cuba as a launching point to destroy the United States with nuclear weapons. He announced he would blockade Cuba to prevent the missiles from arriving near America's shores, a turn of events the press labeled the Cuban Missile Crisis.

I still remember that event. It was a strange, unsettling time. My father drove a hundred miles to pick me up from a Methodist Youth Fellowship retreat. I was playing jacks with my friends when my wild-eyed father rushed into the gym and hustled me out the door. In the car, he explained that because of what was happening in the world, we might have a nuclear attack, and he told me, "When all hell breaks loose, our family needs to be together."

He assured me that he had stored ample water, food, and blankets in our storm cellar. He said, "If we have to, we can last a month down there." As we drove home past the little Nebraska farms, we didn't speak again. We were both too frightened.

Luckily, the crisis simmered down. But it was then that I learned that faraway forces could destroy my world in a day and that my parents—that anyone's parents—really had no power to protect us children.

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Recently I was telling my grandchildren about all the things that didn't exist when I was a girl. I mentioned cell phones, the Internet, cruise control, blenders, microwaves, and television. The list was so long that my grandson asked, "Nonna, did they have apples when you were a girl?"

People are not the same today, either. They look and sound different. They carry more tension in their faces and bodies and more stress and exhaustion in their voices. Even children's faces look less innocent and more harried. And people behave differently, too. There's less joking, less singing in the shower, and fewer long, rambling conversations. People aren't as spontaneous. At grocery stores, concerts, or on the streets, when we meet people we care about and haven't seen for a long time we give them a few minutes of our time and then rush on to our important tasks.

People seem less focused and present. Often when I am talking to someone, I can tell the exact moment when they disappear from our conversation and "go to China," as Iowa songwriter Greg Brown would say.

So many aspects of life that I took for granted until quite recently seem to be deteriorating. As my friend Karen put it, "I can accept change, but nowadays all of the changes are for the worse."

I was curious how widespread this belief was, so I queried people about what kinds of positive cultural changes they'd witnessed. Some came up with a few examples, such as the rise of farmers' markets, an African American president,

the restoration of the California condors, or emerging alternative energy sources. However, many people couldn't come up with a single positive change. Not one.

A colleague told me, "I feel as if everything is broken right now—in education, in health care, in the politics and the banking system." I noted that even the U.S. Postal Service, that Rock of Gibraltar of my youth, has been pounded into near bankruptcy because our government is unwilling to subsidize it.

On every level—international, national, and personal—the pace of change is such that it is hard for us to respond in adaptive and timely ways. As a school administrator told me, "Sometime in the early 1990s problems stopped being solvable." A friend put it this way: "There are no simple problems anymore."

My husband Jim and I can serve as examples of this confusion. We want to do the right thing, but it is increasingly hard to discern what the right thing is. Most problems, when carefully considered, seem to possess almost oceanic complexity. We are not sure what to eat, what products to buy, how best to travel, what charitable groups to support, and what authority figures to trust. We are skeptical of much "information." Jim and I have an old joke. Whenever I say that something or someone is driving me crazy, Jim responds, "That is not a drive, it's a short putt." That seems to apply to all of us now. We all feel a little too close to the edge.

People's increasing workload is called "speedup," which *Webster's* defines as "an employer's demand for accelerated output without increased pay." For example, hotel maids now clean three to four times as many rooms as they did fifteen

years ago. In my town, office workers have doubled, and we have more students in high school than students with serious disabilities. Office workers often have ADHD; they are hyperactive and

We constantly are overwhelmed. Every topic is being covered. Every day we are admonished. We could fill in the blanks of our daily lives, eat organic food, stay connected to our roots before we make a purchase. While all of these ideas are off absolutely essential, everything can't be the new

One of my neighbors was teaching young children to the toothbrush weren't brushing their teeth. I gave it for them for a week, and they were teaching each child that, the dentist suggested a toothbrush for another week, and said, "How am I going to get my kids brush their teeth?"

This speedup pervades our lives. People are frenetic but, sadly, they are doing activities that would cause stress.

Via our machines—

years ago. In my town, Lincoln, the caseloads of human service workers have doubled or tripled. Schoolteachers not only have more students in their classrooms, but they have more students with serious learning and behavioral problems. Office workers often have so much work to do so quickly that they are hyperactive and disorganized.

We constantly are told—and we tell ourselves—that whatever topic is being considered is the most important thing. Every day we are admonished that it is essential to _____. We could fill in the blank in a thousand ways: develop our spiritual lives, eat organic fruits and vegetables, exercise regularly, stay connected to our extended family, research our options before we make a purchase, and make time for our friends. While all of these ideas are commendable, the sheer number of absolutely essential things we should do is ridiculous. Everything can't be the most important thing.

One of my neighbors, a single father, once took his three young children to the dentist. The dentist told him the kids weren't brushing their teeth properly and that he needed to do it for them for a week, spending about seven minutes twice a day teaching each child how to brush and floss properly. After that, the dentist suggested the dad observe them brush and floss for another week. When the neighbor told me he sighed and said, "How am I going to find forty minutes a day to watch my kids brush their teeth?"

This speedup pervades all aspects of life. Not only are people frenetic but, sadly, they don't have time to engage in those activities that would actually help them to alleviate their stress.

Via our machines—be it phone, television, or computer—

we receive an enormous amount of information every day. But we don't have the time, the energy, and the emotional resilience to deal with all of this information. We do triage as best we can, but we still are flooded with more stimulation than we can process and integrate.

Still, many people are hooked. Scientists have discovered that every time we hear the blip or ding of an e-mail or text message a small amount of dopamine is released into our brains. We humans are programmed to be curious and it is natural to want to know more, more, and more. Therapists have coined a phrase for a new addiction: FOMO, or "fear of missing out."

We cannot seem to dance fast enough. Most of us suffer from what Susan Moon calls "hurry sickness." During a visit to a meditation retreat in northern California, called Spirit Rock, I learned that even the most revered Tibetan Buddhist monks, who have spent their lives learning to be present and centered, have said that they're not certain they could stay calm if they lived in America.

Our bodies send us SOS signals via ailments such as high blood pressure, ulcers, headaches, and hives. At my last checkup, my dentist told me that something alarming was happening with her patients. For most of the years of her practice, the incidence of grinding teeth (called temporomandibular joint disorder, or TMJ) has been steady. However, in the last five years, she has noticed a meteoric increase in the percentage of patients with TMJ. She believes that this phenomenon can be explained only by the increasing stress in her patients' lives.

Trauma

Recently at dusk, on our way to Omaha for a concert, my husband Jim and I saw a wild tom turkey in the median of a busy highway. Somehow, crossing the road, the turkey had become trapped there with traffic buzzing by at fifty miles an hour and absolutely no way for him to cross to safety. We pulled off to the side of the road to strategize a rescue.

At first, the turkey was frantically running in circles. He appeared overheated and his beak was open. It seemed that he knew it was almost over for him. We discussed various rescue plans, but none seemed plausible. We felt sad and helpless. Finally, we couldn't bear to witness his suffering any longer. When someone else stopped and called Animal Rescue, we drove on.

We humans are much like that turkey. We are in a dangerous environment without much room to maneuver, and we are running out of time to fix things. Our fear, sorrow, and sense of hopelessness go far deeper than words. We want what we have always wanted and we make the same mistakes we have always made, but today the context is different. There are more of us; our destinies are more intertwined; and nothing less than the life cycle of our planet and the future of our species is at stake.

Trauma is the psychological experience of stress when our inner and outer resources are not sufficient to handle what we are facing. Certain conditions, such as war, dislocation from one's homeland, torture, rape, or the witnessing of grisly

accidents or crimes, cause serious trauma in almost all people. But trauma also comes from being marooned in an airport while one's parent dies alone in a faraway hospital, from losing a job one desperately needs, and from lying awake at night worrying about an out-of-control teenager. Trauma can arise from knowing that the planet is dying and that we are not organizing ourselves to prevent that.

Most of us are suffering from mild to severe mid-traumatic stress disorder, a term coined by my friend Stephanie Sugars, who is engaged in a long-term battle with cancer. Usually trauma is discussed as post-traumatic stress disorder. We Americans are not post-trauma, but rather are engaged in an unfolding situation that is almost certain to worsen before it improves.

For some of us, trauma manifests as sorrow, and we find ourselves struggling every day to be happy and hopeful. For others, trauma sparks anger and irritability, and we find ourselves needing to apologize for our short tempers. Still others simply feel powerless and helpless.

I need not expound on our current stress and despair levels. You are experiencing it. Indeed, if you are paying attention to the world, you likely are in pain of some kind.

Mental health surveys show record numbers of people with depression and panic disorders. In 2012, the National Institute of Mental Health reported that 18 percent of adults suffer from anxiety disorders.

When life becomes unbearably painful, some people stop experiencing it. Over 10 percent of the U.S. population is taking antidepressants and one in eight has a problem with alcohol or street drugs. Remember the old joke, "I'd rather have a

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We have become a nation of ruminators and insomniacs. We feel frazzled and stressed and harried in ways we don't even understand. The fact that we cannot even grasp or acknowledge what is happening to ourselves makes it difficult not to feel isolated. If we are brave enough to face the truth and to share it with other people, often we are punished the way whistleblowers are always punished. That is, we are ostracized or considered troublemakers or overreactors.

By now, many of us have stopped believing in any kind of permanence. We don't assume the human race and other living species will persevere. We do not expect that the world's freshwater, coral reefs, air, fuel, or forests will last into our grandchildren's lifetimes. With the rise of gene-splicing, robotics, our rapidly evolving computer systems, and genetically modified everything, we do not even have a sense that humans will remain as the familiar organisms our grandmothers could describe. We have no faith that our futures will be better than our pasts.

Over the last decades, humans have sailed into an emotional hurricane that no one knows how to navigate. People still have their usual problems—we can't afford to fix the leaky roof or our child is failing social studies or our dog has fleas or our mother has Alzheimer's. But in addition to these, we are threatened by all kinds of global storms.

As a culture, we do not have constructive ways to think about and help each other think about how to handle the Great Acceleration and our global storms. Our burdens themselves are strange because even though they have to do with

the entire human history of technology and the whole world in all its complexity, at the same time, they are personal issues. After all, each one of us wakes up in the morning, faces a daunting day, somehow propels through it, and falls in bed exhausted at night, our to-do list not completed and our needs for relaxation, companionship, laughter, and leisure often unmet. What is happening to us?

The Great Acceleration of Human Impact on the Planet

The trauma of our personal lives and the rapidity of the deterioration of our planet are deeply connected. Hominids have been around for at least two million years and homo sapiens for two hundred thousand. Yet it is only in the last 250 years that as a species we have changed the core systems of the planet. The atmospheric scientist Paul Crutzen calls this span of time the Anthropocene. Humans are changing our earth's biological and chemical composition. Unless we make radical changes, the Anthropocene will be painfully and sadly short.

We now face problems that we can barely name and that we do not understand. As we struggle to cope with the daily tempests and the continuous tidal wave of troubling information, such as the slaughter of the Syrians by their government or the information that half the coral reefs are at risk, we feel many emotions at once. We experience our own grief, but also the pain of the earth and of people suffering all over the world.

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Writers are inventing terms to try to describe this new set of emotions. Environmentalist Joanna Macy calls this pain "planetary anguish." Daniel Goleman coined "eco-angst." And Glenn Albrecht created "solastalgia" to describe "a type of homesickness or melancholia that you feel when you are at home and your home environment is changing all around you in ways that you feel are profoundly negative."

Even people who enjoy lives filled with friends, family, and good work know that our world is simultaneously falling apart. We sense it when we cross bridges with no rivers below or look out on miles of tract homes in what only a few years earlier had been wheat fields or meadows. We are heartbroken when we see pictures of the oily pelican or the stranded polar bear.

Yet we naturally resist upsetting information about the state of our planet, with its implied responsibility for doing something to help save it. Terry Tempest Williams wrote about the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina in *Orion* magazine. She told truths far scarier and more devastating than many of the details reported by mainstream media. Yet, after she wrote it, she reflected, "Who do I send this to? Who really wants to read this sad news?"

Sociologist Barbara Katz Rothman has a phrase for information that makes life seem ever more complicated and disturbing than it already is. She calls it "incapacitating knowledge." When we are on overload, almost all information can become incapacitating knowledge. Lately I've been using the term "distractionable intelligence" in contrast to "actionable intelligence." Distractionable intelligence gives us no ideas for action but upsets us greatly.

One night before dinner Jim asked me to sit and have a

glass of wine with him. That day he had overseen the installation of a new heating and air-conditioning system after a tree had crushed our old one. That same week our refrigerator needed to be replaced. And suddenly our dishwasher wasn't working properly, either. I'd been writing and working hard at the time and I said, "I'll sit down with you as long as we don't have to discuss the fate of the earth." Jim agreed readily and added, "I don't even want to discuss the fate of our appliances."

An example of the crushing power of good information without actionable intelligence comes from a night when Jim and I attended a lecture by a Nobel Prize-winning scientist on the topic of the climate crisis. We had to push ourselves to go. It was a rainy night and both of us wanted to read by the fire. However, we decided it was important to support speakers like this. So we found ourselves sitting in a large, windowless university classroom beside students who were required to attend and their professors.

The scholar knew his science. He gave a PowerPoint presentation with graph after dismal graph, lines running up at alarming slopes to alarming heights. He convinced the already-convinced that the brink of doom was nigh. But his presentation was humorless, dull, and utterly devoid of hope.

Equally important, the scientist didn't speak to the most crucial questions. What do we do about this? What are the effective ways to make changes in ourselves, in our communities, and in our policies?

To be fair, the speaker was a climate scientist, not an expert on changing behavior. Yet, after he delivered his

terrifying information about energy-saving benefits that could have made a difference.

By the end of the lecture, the classroom was empty. The effort to educate about the climate crisis never wanted to change.

I felt dispirited. I wasn't upset about the lecture. I was despondent about the speaker's message. The speaker countered who was responsible for the collapse. I thought this man the most responsible than I thought.

I was sure that action. I could not see the end. Of course, the critical is how to

Psychologists have shown that once leads to a certain amount of anxiety but not so much. Anxiety should be taken into account. Anxiety is difficult to manage. Most impossible for people.

terrifying information, he suggested we ride our bikes, use energy-saving bulbs, and recycle. Any middle school student could have made those recommendations.

By the end, I was almost too whipped to walk out of the classroom. While I respected the man's knowledge and his effort to educate the public about our situation, I felt as if I never wanted to attend another lecture on global climate change.

I felt dispirited that I'd wasted a perfectly good evening. I wasn't upset about the information. I knew it already. But I was despondent about the lack of help and hope in the speaker's message. I better understood all the people I'd encountered who didn't want to hear lectures on environmental collapse. I thought to myself that if this is the message and this man the messenger, then we are in even deeper trouble than I thought.

I was sure that this lecture would not lead to uplift and action. I could see the resignation in the faces in the audience. Of course we need good, solid information. But equally critical is how and when information is delivered.

Psychologists know that delivering too much bad news at once leads to emotional shutdown. But sugarcoating facts doesn't inspire positive change, either. In therapy, clients need a certain amount of anxiety to propel them toward change, but not so much as to discourage their hopeful efforts. Therapy should be tailored to each client. This mix of optimism and anxiety is difficult to get right one person at a time and is almost impossible when talking to or writing for large groups of people.

How do we extrapolate from the therapy session to the culture? How do we change a country's thinking and behavior about global climate change and other overwhelming issues?

Climate educators must balance information with action suggestions, motivational elements, and aspirational framing. If we want people to listen to and process traumatic information, then we must be able to frame that information in ways that allow our listeners to be hopeful and calm.

Information must be carefully paired with people's emotional ability to absorb and process it. We must not only be able to acknowledge and talk about a problem, but we must also be able to conceptualize it in ways that allow people to act upon it as human beings.

Object Instructions

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