



Climate Crisis Forces Us to Ask: To What Do We Devote Ourselves?



A video journalist is silhouetted by a smoke-obscured sun and sky as the Holy Fire approaches the McVicker Canyon neighborhood, which was under mandatory evacuation in Lake Elsinore, California, on August 8, 2018. Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times via Getty Images

By [Dahr Jamail](#), [Truthout](#), Published May 6, 2019 Part of the Truthout Series, How Shall We Live?

“The universe says
loss demands birth
and the two
are lovers.”

—*Deena Metzger*

During the times when I’m being as emotionally honest with myself as I’m capable — when I truly ponder the idea that this industrialized version of our species may well have already baked enough warming into Earth’s life-supporting biosphere that all of us may very well be on the way out — I feel at a total loss as to what to do.

From that point of numbness, my life force begins to ask, “What next, then?” Cycling through this process for years since I’ve been reporting on the climate crisis, and most intensely during the research and field trips for my book [The End of Ice: Bearing Witness and Finding Meaning in the Path of Climate Disruption](#), circumstances (namely my own grief and despair) have inevitably forced me into contending with my emotions.

I’ve learned, through a lot of pain and struggling, that the only way forward is to allow myself to deeply feel and express the fear, rage, shock, panic, sadness,

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anxiety and despair. Only then can I move into a place of taking some of the deep breaths which accompany acceptance of the grave situation at hand.

You, dear reader, who are paying such close attention to the unraveling of all that we know, must share in many of these feelings. When you see another of these grotesque, pasty-white iterations of humanity stuffed into a glossy suit, acting as nothing more than a fossil-fueled ventriloquist's puppet, do you, like me, burn inside with rage, a rage that threatens to incinerate you? Do you fantasize of their demise? Of somehow bringing them, at least, a taste of the pain their soulless and heartless actions are bringing to the fish searching for food atop the bleached-out coral reefs? To show them the starving polar bears swimming for hundreds of miles to find no ice to rest upon? At these times, I wonder if any of these so-called humans can feel a goddamn thing anymore.

Do you feel the emptiness inside when you become aware of [emperor penguin chicks drowning](#) from collapsing ice resulting from planetary warming? Or the fear that comes when we understand our [ability to feed ourselves](#) is now very much under threat?

First: Accepting Reality

When you read of how 1.5 acres of rainforest are vanishing *every, single, second*, does your heart clench in fear? Or when the last of another of the rare frogs existing within said rainforest is lost from this world forever, do you shed the tears that come from a seemingly impotent sadness?

When you come to understand what co-founder of [Extinction Rebellion](#) Roger Hallam, himself a former organic farmer, has previously [told the public](#), all of these feelings set in even more deeply. In the aforementioned lecture, to paraphrase Hallam, he pointed out how we have already warmed the planet 1.2 degrees Celsius (1.2°C). Based on observational data, we are easily within a decade of losing the summer sea ice in the Arctic. Within another decade, Earth will warm another .5°C due to the melting ice alone. There is already another .5°C warming to come from CO2 that has already been emitted but we've yet to experience the warming. The water vapor effect from these events (and other processes already in motion) doubles the impact of warming from other sources, adding another 1°C warming. Hence, at 3°C

warming, most of the Amazon rainforest is lost, which in itself adds another 1.5°C of warming. At this point, most likely, Earth is tipped into a hothouse state, possibly into conditions that render it uninhabitable by humans.

Perhaps you might think this sounds too extreme, the stuff of science fiction. If so, consider this: the level of CO2 in the atmosphere today hasn't been seen in 12 million years, and this level of greenhouse gas is rapidly bringing Earth back into the state it was in during the Eocene Epoch, 33 million years ago, when there was no ice on either of the poles.

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At that point, there was very little temperature difference between the poles and the equator, according to Harvard University Professor James Anderson, who is best known for [establishing](#) that chlorofluorocarbons were damaging the ozone layer, in an interview with [Forbes magazine](#).

“The ocean was running almost 10°C warmer all the way to the bottom than it is today,” Anderson said, “and the amount of water vapor in the atmosphere would have meant that storm systems would be violent in the extreme, because water vapor, which is an exponential function of water temperature, is the gasoline that fuels the frequency and intensity of storm systems.”

He warned of the folly of those who believe we can recover from this track we are on simply by reducing CO2 emissions — unless we undertake a deeply radical transformation of industry and the economic system, coupled with halting carbon emissions alongside removing what is already in the atmosphere, all within five years' time.

“The chance that there will be any permanent ice left in the Arctic after 2022 is essentially zero,” Anderson [said](#), while reminding us that 75 to 80 percent of the permanent ice has already melted in just the last 35 years.

Anderson warned that people have failed to come to grips with this, along with the [pending collapse of the Greenland Ice Sheet](#), which by itself will raise sea levels seven meters.



“When you look at the irreversibility and you study the numbers, this along with the moral issue is what keeps you up at night,” Anderson said.

Second: How Shall We Be?

“My sense is that only seldom is the problem that we “don’t know” — or, at any rate, that we don’t know enough,” Chris Goode, author of *The Forest and the Field*, has written. “The real problem is that we don’t have a living-space in which to fully know what we know, in which to confront that knowledge and respond to it emotionally without immediately becoming entrenched in a position of fear, denial and hopelessness.”

On Earth Day I was part of a panel at the Brooklyn Historical Society. The panel discussion, titled “[Chroniclers of the Climate Apocalypse](#),” was comprised of climate journalist Oliver Milman, climate and health reporter Sheri Fink, and myself.

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During the Q and A session, someone asked me a question along the lines of this: “What do you do, Dahr, or how are you being, with the grieving that comes from how far along we already are?”

I laughed dryly, thought for a brief moment, and then answered honestly: “I don’t know? I get to figure it out all over each day. Each time I give one of my book readings, it is different, because I’m having to evolve every day.”

And that is my truth.

My unsettledness around the question arises for two reasons: One, it always forces me to look into my heart to answer, rather than my head, which means I must experience all of the emotions brought about by the crisis within which we all must live; secondly, when I do this the right way, each moment it shifts and I must live on those emotional front lines, caretaking myself alongside listening, deeply, for what I am called to do next for the planet.

For Roger Hallam, his 20 years of organic farming connected him deeply enough to Earth that when a series of climate-disruption-fueled floods made it impossible for him to continue, he knew what he needed to do: work on his Ph.D. research on the

dynamics of political power with particular reference to radical campaign design.

He then co-founded [Extinction Rebellion](#), a group that [describes itself](#) as “an international movement that uses non-violent civil disobedience to achieve radical change in order to minimize the risk of human extinction and ecological collapse.”

I asked Hallam why it is imperative for people to rebel.

“Life is short and all we really know is that it pays to live a good life — whatever happens,” he said. “And that means the golden rule — do unto others as you would have them do unto you. This rule is broken in the most grotesque way ... particularly by way of what we are doing to our kids.”

To those who feel there is no point in rebelling or taking other actions for the betterment of the planet, who feel that all is lost, Hallam had this to say: “We are in this life to do good, not to bargain with outcomes that are out of our control, anyhow.”

In other words, it is imperative to do what we can to protect the planet, even without a guarantee of success.

Third: To What Are We Devoted?

By way of the corporate capitalist industrial growth culture within which most of us have been raised and immersed, we have become disconnected from the planet we are so deeply part of. This, I believe, is the root cause of the climate crisis we now find ourselves in. Hence, the first step toward answering the question of “how to be” during this time, which must be answered before any of us can decide “what to do,” is to connect ourselves back to the planet. For we cannot begin to walk until our feet are on the ground.

Each day I wake and begin to process the daily news of the climate catastrophe and the global political tilt into overt fascism. The associated trauma, grief, rage and despair that come from all of this draws me back to the work of Stan Rushworth, Cherokee elder, activist and scholar, who has guided much of my own thinking about how to move forward. Rushworth has reminded me that while Western colonialist culture believes in “rights,” many Indigenous cultures teach of “obligations” that we are born into: obligations to



those who came before, to those who will come after, and to the Earth itself.

Hence, when the grief and rage threaten to consume me, I now orient myself around the question, “What are my obligations?” In other words, “From this moment on, knowing what is happening to the planet, *to what do I devote my life?*“

Each of us must ask ourselves this question every day, as we face down catastrophe.