

PLANETARY HOSPICE



Rebirthing Planet Earth

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“Truly the blessed gods have proclaimed a most beautiful secret:

death comes not as a curse but as a blessing to men.”

- Ancient Greek Epitaph from Eleusis

Abstract

The pace of climate change continues to accelerate, and it now appears inevitable that the Great Anthropocentric Extinction currently unfolding will include the end of life as we know it. Characterizing this 'Great Dying' as equivalent to a terminal diagnosis for the human race, and assuming an ecopsychological perspective that sees a close relationship between planetary health and mental health, the author applies the stages of grief to this Great Dying, exploring connections retroactively and prospectively between societal mental health trends in the U.S., our awareness of the severity of the threat we pose to the planet, and the stages of grieving the loss of life, and questions the role mental health professionals should play in this context. Looking ahead from this same perspective, the author asks if it is possible to alleviate the pain and suffering that will be associated with the widespread extinctions, mass mortality, and forced migrations that are anticipated by scientific experts as a result of climate disruptions, beginning with the idea of what a "good death" would look like in relation to the end of life as we know it, applying principles from hospice and palliative care. Finally, he offers a hopeful vision that, with an expanding planetary hospice movement and appropriate containing myths, it might be possible to re-cast this Great Dying as a difficult, but spiritually progressive, death/rebirth experience for homo sapiens.

Introduction

There have been five great extinctions in the history of planet Earth during the 540 million years since complex life emerged. According to the National Geographic Society, "we are in the midst of the Sixth Great Extinction, an event characterized by the loss of between

17,000 and 100,000 species *each year*” (Nat. Geo. 2012).¹ The worst of the five extinctions, often referred to as “the Great Dying,” resulted in the loss of 95% of all marine species and 70% of all terrestrial species.² The severity of the Great Dying, which required ten million years to recover from, is largely attributed to mass releases of methane from the oceans and tundras triggered by (and quickly doubling) a spike in global temperatures of only about six degrees (from volcanic activity). Because of escalating releases of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere over the course of the industrial age, we are now starting to see a similar triggering of terrestrial and sea-bed methane, such that “[s]ome scientists fear that the situation is already so serious and so many self-reinforcing feedback loops are already in play that we are in the process of causing our own extinction. Worse yet, some are convinced that it could happen far more quickly than generally believed possible—even in the course of just the next few decades.”³

From an ecopsychological viewpoint, climate change is like the tip of the iceberg visible to the human eye, while just beneath the surface of our collective consciousness a far greater crisis is playing out. In fact, it is helpful to think of the oceans themselves as symbolic of our unconscious depths. Viewed from atop the Earth’s surface, climate change has the appearance of dramatic changes in weather patterns that are wreaking ever greater havoc on concentrated human populations - especially those on islands or along coastal areas. But look just beneath the surface and one sees a watery graveyard with ominous portents of our own collective, great

¹ See: <http://newswatch.nationalgeographic.com/2012/03/28/the-sixth-great-extinction-a-silent-extermiation/> Retrieved 11.8.2013. This rate of extinction is about 1,000 times greater than natural, making it “anthropocentric.” See: http://www.truthdig.com/report/page2/are_we_falling_off_the_climate_precipice_20131219 Retrieved on 12.24.13.

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Permian%E2%80%93Triassic_extinction_event Retrieved 11.8.13.

³ See: Jamail, D. “Are we falling off the climate precipice?” *Tom Dispatch* (12/19/13), p. 2., at: http://www.truthdig.com/report/page2/are_we_falling_off_the_climate_precipice_20131219 Retrieved 12.24.13.

dying. While we are mostly being inconvenienced by extreme weather events, the oceans from which all life emerged on this planet are in far worse shape.

I. Terminal Diagnosis

The Great Anthropocentric Extinction is upon us (*supra.*, fn. 1). Sober consideration of the current, cascading evidence leads to the inescapable conclusion that life as we have come to know it is, quite simply, at an end. While rising terrestrial temperatures are largely associated with atmospheric (climate) impacts of carbon dioxide, the fact of the matter is that the oceans have absorbed between one-third and one-half of all CO₂ released into the atmosphere since the beginning of the Industrial Age (525 billion tons).⁴ The cumulative impacts of this input, together with the unconscionable destruction of the ocean floor ecosystems from centuries of trawling,⁵ are dramatic changes in ocean water chemistry, increasing the acidity of the waters by 26% (*ibid.*), and severe losses in biodiversity.

According to the United Nations, “more than half of global fisheries are exhausted, and a further third are depleted. Between 30 and 35 per cent of critical marine environments — such as sea grasses, mangroves and coral reefs — are estimated to have been destroyed... and pollution from land is creating areas of coastal waters that are almost devoid of oxygen” (2012).⁶ The anecdotal evidence looks even worse. On a recent trans-Pacific voyage he had completed many times previously, sailor Ivan Macfadyen distressingly recounted his “shock and horror” at

⁴ <http://centerforoceansolutions.org/climate/impacts/ocean-acidification/> (Retrieved 11.10.13).

⁵ The practice of using a large, wide-mouthed fishing net dragged by a vessel along the ocean bottom, effectively clearcutting the affected ecosystem. “As a result of these processes, a vast array of species are threatened around the world...The net effect of fishing practices on global coral reef populations is suggested by many scientists to be alarmingly high.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trawling> (Retrieved 11.10.13).

⁶ <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs//2012/sgsm14287.doc.htm> (Retrieved 11.10.13).

the near absence of any life compared to his prior passages: “[I]t felt as if the ocean itself was dead.”⁷

Unfortunately, the news only gets worse. Once the planet heats up enough to trigger methane releases from permafrost and the oceans, it is not unlike having a gas leak in your home. While the Great Dying resulted from a rise of only 6C, under current (unenforceable) emission targets we are on track for about a 4C rise in temperature before the end of this century - this according to the World Bank.⁸ That is on the low end of the probable rise. A 2011 paper authored by Jeffrey Kiehl from the National Center for Atmospheric Research, published in the journal *Science*, "found that carbon dioxide may have at least *twice* the effect on global temperatures than currently projected by computer models of global climate."⁹ Contrary to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) worst case scenario of 6C by 2100, which itself would result in a virtually uninhabitable planet,¹⁰ Kiehl *et al.* distressingly conclude that, at current rates, we may actually see an unimaginable 16C rise by the end of the century. And the relatively conservative International Energy Agency just released a report in November 2013 predicting **a 3.5C increase by 2035**.¹¹ From a planetary perspective, this is tantamount to the

⁷ Ray, G., “The Ocean is Broken,” *Newcastle Herald*, Oct. 18, 2013 <http://www.theherald.com.au/story/1848433/the-ocean-is-broken/> (Retrieved 11.10.13).

⁸ All the extreme weather events we are seeing now, from chronic droughts everywhere, to unprecedented flooding in Pakistan and Thailand, to super-storm Sandy, to the mega-typhoon that just devastated the Philippines, are the result of only a .8C rise to date. <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/global-warmings-terrifying-new-math-20120719>

⁹ <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2013/05/18-1> (retrieved 11.11.13), Ahmed, N., “Obama's Arctic Strategy Sets Off a Climate Time Bomb,” *Guardian*, May 18, 2013.

¹⁰ A 3.5C increase would render this planet uninhabitable for humans due to severing the food chain at the fundamental level of oceanic plankton and prompting temperature swings would severely limit terrestrial vegetation. Humans have never lived on a planet at 3.5C above baseline. http://www.truthdig.com/report/page3/are_we_falling_off_the_climate_precipice_20131219

¹¹ <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-Issues/2010/1111/Global-temperature-to-rise-3.5-degrees-C.-by-2035-International-Energy-Agency> Retrieved 1.2.14.

“less than six months to live” diagnosis that triggers hospice care for an individual. In effect, we as a species are now on life support, teetering on the threshold of our very own Great Dying.

As an environmental attorney who studied environmental engineering and a life-long activist who has been tracking these issues closely for three decades, I can personally attest how difficult it is to accept this kind of dystopian reality as fact. While humans are actually hard-wired to focus on threats, we also have always been able to minimize them and adapt to changed environments, and the idea that we might not be able to do that this time is hard to fathom. But if there is any pattern to climate revelations over the last decade (the hottest on record, with each successive year being hotter than the last), it is this: reality continues to outstrip our ability to model worst-case scenarios, and it is all happening much faster than anticipated. In fact, “according to a recent, exhaustive study commissioned by the US Department of Energy and headed by a scientific team from the U.S. navy, *by the summer of 2015*, the Arctic Ocean could be bereft of ice, a phenomenon that will engender devastating consequences for the earth's environment and every living creature on the planet” (Rockstroh, 2013).¹²

And now methane has, in fact, begun to seep into the atmosphere from the oceans and permafrost at staggering rates, causing worldwide alarm of scientists and researchers (but not politicians or mainstream journalists). A NASA science team characterized these recent readings as “amazing and potentially troubling.”¹³ As one close follower of climate issues recently observed, we are at a critical turning point:

¹² <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2013/12/20> (retrieved Dec. 23, 2013), “Walking in an Anthropocene Wonderland.” According to current data, there is a 95% confidence level associated with the prediction that the Arctic will be completely ice-free by summer of 2018 and beyond. http://www.truthdig.com/report/page2/are_we_falling_off_the_climate_precipice_20131219 Retrieved 12.24.13.

¹³ NASA, “Is a sleeping climate giant stirring in the Arctic?” (June 10, 2013). At: <http://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/earth20130610.html#.UoBPPaWRpuY> (retrieved 11.10.13).

If we have triggered a self-reinforcing methane feedback - and there is growing evidence that we have - then there is little point in talking about solutions. *What is needed is a strategy for maximizing the quality of life for those of our species who survive the coming catastrophe.* There will be fewer of us, and we will consume far less, and the world will be a far harsher place. We will, quite literally, be inhabiting an alien environment, and our best bet is to prepare ourselves for the softest possible landing in this hostile new world (emph. added, Atcheson, 2013).¹⁴

All of this is only compounded by the *real* ‘inconvenient truth’ - there is a 40 year lag-time between global emissions (what we do) and climate impacts (what we experience). This means that average temperatures of the last decade are a consequence of emissions from the 1960’s, and that the acceleration in climate changes we are now witnessing is locked in till at least 2050.¹⁵ Beyond this, there is little hope for reversing global trends without visionary leadership from America. Unfortunately, politics - especially American politics - has never been more myopic and impotent. In an alarming 2007 report from the IPCC, normally staid scientists warned that world governments had *eight years* to take ‘drastic actions’ in order to avoid catastrophic climate change. Three years later, at the climate talks in Doha, S.A., President Obama not only ignored their call, his emissaries torpedoed any chance of taking *any* effective action globally, let alone ‘drastic’ action, before 2020, locking in accelerating climate change now until at least 2060.

Our world political leaders give no indication whatsoever that they intend to reign in the giant fossil fuel corporations that fund their campaigns and are currently sowing the seeds of our collective demise. Remarkably, politicians are so detached from reality as to view the melting of

¹⁴ <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2012/09/25-0> (retrieved 11.11.13), “Is Climate Change Hell Now Inevitable?”.

¹⁵ <http://www.skepticalscience.com/Climate-Change-The-40-Year-Delay-Between-Cause-and-Effect.html>

arctic sea ice as an ‘opportunity’ to go after even *more* petrochemical reserves,¹⁶ while the five largest corporations in the world mercilessly exploit the Canadian tar sands - the largest industrial project in the history of civilization mining the dirtiest carbon fuels in existence. Leading climate scientist James Hansen, who has consistently been the conscience of the planet from his position with the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Agency, calls the tar sands project “game over” for the climate. Tar sands mining is proceeding apace without any objections from our political leaders, and enthusiastic support from Canada’s own avaricious government.

Because of the dysfunction of politics and the stranglehold corporations now have over world trade, the idea that growth-obsessed political leaders will suddenly decide to address today a problem that is forty years in the future, by making big sacrifices during a period of extended economic disruption, is naive in the extreme. The most that can be hoped for is half measures - which are tantamount to leaping half way across a chasm - or a total and sustained global economic collapse.

In short, the Great Anthropocentric Dying is upon us.

Our situation is, regrettably, terminal.

II. Responding To The Great Dying: An Ecopsychological Perspective

While the mental health profession has a crucial role to play in the Great Dying, it is largely ill-equipped to do so, due to its historical exclusion of our larger environment from the accredited model of psychological health. Ecopsychology, on the other hand, is reinventing psychology by including “the psychological processes that tie us to the world or separate us from it” in a more holistic vision of the human psyche (Buzzel & Chalquist, 2009, p. 17) that views

¹⁶ <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2012/09/20-2>

humans and the world we inhabit as inextricably bound together. As the editors of the book “Ecotherapy” note, the mental health profession has a special responsibility in helping people to confront the harsh realities we now face:

At a time of planet-wide environmental crisis, it seems both outrageous and irresponsible that so few mental health clinicians connect the epidemics of mental distress in industrial societies with the devastating impact of our suicidal destruction of our own habitat and ecocidal elimination of whole species that used to share the Earth with us (Buzzel & Chalquist, p. 19).

So from an ecopsychological viewpoint, the question now becomes what is the role of mental health professionals in preparing society for the end of life as we know it. We can look to the model of hospice here, and apply its principles at a societal level, with the idea that the coming “catastrophe” does not necessarily have to be met with widespread panic, dread, fear and hostility. However, given the prevalence of guns and survivalist mentality, backed by a biblical mythos of Armageddon, if the mental health profession does not actively advocate for a more sane response to the stages of dying, then the grieving process will continue to be repressed and will most assuredly surface in exactly this kind of pathological behavioral reactivity. Simply stated, it doesn’t have to be that way:

The psychology of death is a psychology of life because it concerns human hopes, human motivation, human satisfaction, and human frustration. Human beings remain human beings when they are dying, and death brings out in humanity its goodness (with its capacity to love, transcend, grow) and its capacity to hate, to destroy, and to deteriorate psychologically (Zinker & Fink, 1966).

In an industrial civilization that elevated the medical model of a Cartesian world to the level of technological madness, and transformed dying from a natural process that took place in the home to a nightmare scenario that played out in the hospital room, the advent of hospice and palliative care has more recently empowered individuals to find meaning in death, creating an

intentional space for the natural goodness and tenderness of the dying and their extended families to surface and to define the passage into the unknown themselves. If we are able to apply the same principles at a societal scale, then ecopsychologists and planetary thanatologists can become the kinds of spiritual midwives that will be needed to transform the planetary death/rebirth process from a painful dislocation rife with suffering and regret into a healing process for both the human race and the Earth itself -- even into a Great Awakening.

III. An Ecopsychological Application of Kubler-Ross' Stages of Grief to the Great Dying

Denial. The starting point for planetary hospice is to consider what the societal mental health profile looks like in relation to the stages of grief that ensue from the time of rendering a terminal diagnosis. We have been in the grips of the first stage of grieving - denial - for some time now, and in fact even for those who now acknowledge the reality of global climate change, there is still quite a bit of denial concerning the seriousness of our situation and the pace of it.

One of the inspirations for ecopsychology, Theodore Roszak, coined the term “ecological unconscious” to denote our deep connection to the planet that sustains us - our mother, Earth (Buzzel & Chalquist, p. 36). Just as the special bond between a mother and her child gives rise to an intuitive sense of dis-ease when one or the other is imperiled, it is safe to say that our ecological unconscious has been troubled for some time now by the disconnection between our race and our planet - going at least as far back as Rachel Carson’s “Silent Spring,” which happened to coincide with the uneasy knowledge that the human race was poised on the brink of nuclear annihilation.

So while the 1960s marked the first time that collective human consciousness was faced with the prospect that we had the *power* to wipe out life on the planet, today we face the prospect

that we are, in fact, in the process of doing so, one species at a time. The effects of this kind of knowledge on mental health can simply not be over-emphasized, especially immediately in the wake of the Holocaust. In the face of such a devastating external threat, and with the need to carry on with life as we know it, it only makes sense that, collectively, humans will suppress or repress such knowledge, and that its shadow will then surface in the form of mental illness in the most sensitive members of the population.

While it is not possible to posit these relations in a provable cause and effect model, due to the complexity of confounding variables and the historic exclusion of environmental factors from mental health analyses, we can still approach the problem intuitively if we accept the connection of our individual psyche to a collective psyche that is in relationship to the *axis mundi*. For example we can ask ourselves what trends have been observed over this same time frame in the United States, from the 1960s to the present day, and how might those be viewed from the standpoint of the collective unconscious?

In 1962, 12 million Americans (6.5%) had been diagnosed with anxiety disorders, while another 4 million (2.2%) were labeled depressed.¹⁷ Certainly, a collective anxiety would seem to be an appropriate response to both the risk of nuclear war and the discovery that birds were disappearing at a vast scale due to the widespread use of pesticides. By 1975 - when the risk of nuclear war had been greatly diminished by improved relations among the superpowers, while awareness of our impacts on the environment had greatly increased - the number of Americans treated with anxiety was trending down as a percentage of population (13 million, or 6%), while diagnoses for depression saw a four-fold increase from just 13 years earlier (18 million, or 8.3%)

¹⁷ Nauert, R. 2010. "Diagnostic Trends in Mental Health." Psych Central: <http://psychcentral.com/news/2010/03/29/diagnostic-trends-in-mental-health/12411.html> (Retrieved on Dec. 23, 2013).

(Horowitz, 2010). By 2000, fully one out of every ten Americans was taking anti-depressants (Horowitz), and the incidence of people experiencing major depressive episodes had also increased dramatically from a decade earlier, from 3.33% to 7.06% (Compton *et al.*, 2006).

There are at least two conclusions that can be inferred from these statistics. First, whether or not these drugs effectively treat the symptoms associated with anxiety and depression, they do not seem very effective in alleviating the underlying dis-ease. If they were effective at “curing” anxiety and depression, we would expect to see long-term declines, or at least relative flatness (steady rate of turnover), in incidence rates. Second, we seem to have an epidemic of anxiety and depression in America over the last fifty years, along with an apparent progression from anxiety to depression. Collectively, would this not be a sane response to a progression in collective awareness from a suspicion that something was wrong in our relationship to our environment to a growing conviction that we are responsible for widespread extinction that may ultimately include our own progeny?

From an ecopsychological viewpoint, this would hardly be unexpected. As psychotherapist Linda Buzzell points out:

During this global environmental crisis, it is crucial for mental health clinicians to begin to understand the connection between the epidemics of mental distress in modern industrial societies and the devastating impact of the destruction of our own habitat... Most therapy clients don't realize that much of the grief, shame, emptiness, and fear they struggle with may be a natural response to the unnatural way we live. The loss and death of so many living beings, guilt over our individual and collective complicity in these deaths, and the ongoing distress of Earth, air, and ocean life all around us and in our very bodies are all sources of stress (Buzzell & Chalquist, p. 47).

Or, as the seminal ecopsychologist Andy Fisher puts it, “[m]odern society is in an extreme, pathological state of rupture from the reality of the natural world, as is indicated on a daily basis by the ecological crisis” (Fisher, 2002, p. 7).

This unnatural pathology plays itself out by repressing our dysfunctional relationship to the natural world as we immerse ourselves in our modern, urbanized lifestyles, refusing to acknowledge consciously the violence implicit in, say, driving to a fast-food restaurant for a hamburger, or spraying our manicured lawns with Roundup™ - only to have the collective shadow of our destructive choices surface as mental dis-ease. From the 1960s to the 1980s, from “Silent Spring” through Earth Day (1970) and Love Canal (1978), our environmental problems were local, and it makes sense that there would be widespread anxiety over our efforts to get a handle on cleaning up our lakes, rivers, air, and groundwater. Then, beginning with discovery of ozone depletion in the 1980s - which resulted in an overall suppression of biological immune systems, giving rise to sick people (e.g., AIDS and other immunodeficiencies) and sick forests (e.g., bark beetles) - and then escalating in the 1990s with the advent of global climate change and sick oceans, our environmental problems suddenly became pervasive on a previously unimaginable scale, raising the specter for the first time in human history that life as we know it was at risk.

Again, from the ecopsychological view of our collective shadow, it makes perfect sense that we would see depression grow by magnitudes of order in this same, relatively short time period in human history. Even for those with relatively stable psyches, it can be rather depressing to think about all this! Of course, if you choose not to think about it, to suppress your anxiety over our future prospects, then you are placing yourself at much higher risk of

succumbing to debilitating depression at some point, no longer able to get out of bed to face the world. Unfortunately, over this same time period, mental health professionals were not asking all the right questions when their clients presented themselves with symptoms of depression. They would surely ask about family dynamics, problems at work, or even explore social dynamics, but rarely would they ask the most obvious questions: “How do you see the future of the planet? Does it concern you that so many species are disappearing?” So from an integrated, ecopsychological perspective, the symptoms are addressed, a prescription is issued, the systemic, underlying causes of dis-ease are left untreated, and rates of depression continue to climb.

Anger. If this analysis is justified, then we can conclude that we have collectively been in a state of denial about the mortality of our species (and the effect we are having on creation itself) for some time now, and that this denial is associated with increasing prevalence of anxiety and depression in the population as a whole. It at least seems plausible. After all, most of the increases came during a time of growing economic prosperity when the quality of life for most Americans was improving. What other explanations might account for such an epidemic in these particular pathologies? And for most of this time, thanks to irresponsible reporting in mainstream media and a political system corrupted by money, it has been quite feasible to maintain this state of denial, such as by pretending that the science was equivocal. In just the past few years, however, scientists have become much more politically engaged themselves, and the evidence has become irrefutable. In other words, relating this back to stages of grief, we can say that we are likely (slowly) emerging from the first stage of denial. Of course, the stages of grief are not necessarily linear, and the lines of demarcation are not so clear even at the level of

an individual, and as alluded to earlier, there remains a lesser form of denial in relation to the severity of the crisis and its imminence (though this can be seen as a kind of bargaining).

Arguably, had psychologists placed the human psyche in its natural world container 50 years ago, and more fully assessed cases of anxiety and depression by casting light on the shadow of denial over the impacts humans are having on the planet, much suffering could have been avoided, or at least ameliorated. In the same way that scientists cannot link an individual weather event to global warming, it is beyond scientific proof at this point to maintain that the mental health profession could have had such a dramatic impact on rates of depression. However, that is the thesis of this paper. The immediate prospects for the next 50 years are not pretty. A new study indicates that we are racing towards an apocalyptic future in which major cities such as New York, London, Houston, and Bombay could become uninhabitable within that time frame.¹⁸ It is therefore incumbent on mental health professionals to adopt a more proactive, ecopsychological view of the pathologies they witness playing out in their clients' psyches.

This raises a very important question. If we are now seeing a progression in our collective psyche from the stage of denial to the second stage of grief - anger - what might the mental health impacts of *that* be on the more sensitive members of the population? This is an especially poignant question in relation to the younger generations, as they are the first ones to have to deal with inheriting a planet that is no longer functioning naturally, and as they will likely have to witness things no other generations of humans have ever had to witness. How will they be likely to act out? How are they acting out now?

¹⁸ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2451604/Apocalypse-Now-Unstoppable-man-climate-change-reality-end-decade-make-New-York-London-Paris-uninhabitable-45-years-says-new-study.html#ixzz2tKgeOiCz>

Two disturbing trends come immediately to mind. Ever since the Columbine High massacre in 1999, there seem to be regular mass killings carried out by disturbed young boys. According to Attorney General Eric Holder, the overall incidence of mass shootings has at least tripled since 2008,¹⁹ with thirty taken place in 2013 alone.²⁰ These young boys are certainly acting out horrific anger, and yet when the circumstances of their lives are dissected by the press, there never really seems to be proportionality between the problems they've experienced in their short lives and the terrible consequences of their planned actions. Perhaps of even greater concern, we are now seeing the same kind of spike in suicide rates that we observed with rates of depression in the 1990s. Interestingly enough, the rates of suicide showed a steady decline during the 1990s, at the same time of dramatic increases in anti-depressant availability - which may well indicate some measure of success in treating the symptoms of depression. However, since 2000, that trend has exactly reversed, and there has been a steady increase in suicide rates, erasing all the gains in prevention seen during the 1990s.²¹

In 2009, for the first time the number of deaths from suicide surpassed the number of deaths from vehicular accidents in the United States (Rockett *et al.*, 2012). While suicide has traditionally been concentrated in the teenaged and the elderly segments of the population, in the first decade of the new millennium, the suicide rate *among baby-boomers* (age 35 to 64) surged by nearly 30 percent.²² That happens to be the very generation that fueled the environmental movement from its inception, and is thus most keenly aware of exactly what is transpiring with

¹⁹ <http://rt.com/usa/holder-mass-shootings-triple-519/>

²⁰ http://www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2013/12/22/At-years-end-Washington-Navy-Yard-massacre-tops-2013-shootings/UPI-88561387706460/

²¹ <http://www.afsp.org/understanding-suicide/facts-and-figures> Retrieved 12.24.13.

²² <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/03/health/suicide-rate-rises-sharply-in-us.html> Retrieved 12.24.13.

rates of extinction and the peril to the planet, and how unsuccessful that movement has proven to be. And it is also the baby-boom generation that coined the term “ecocide” as shorthand for ecological suicide, the belief that the human race is in the process of destroying life on the planet -- a term that has gained wide currency in the past decade or so (e.g., 86,000 results for “ecocide” on Google from 1999 to present).

Remarkably, the N.Y. Times article cites numerous mental health experts speculating on the reasons for this dramatic increase, and they all seem to agree that people kill themselves for economic reasons. This is perhaps the clearest evidence of just how pathologically disconnected we have become as a culture from nature. We are in the process of ending life as we know it on planet Earth, and when an epidemic of suicide breaks out during the same decade when this terrible realization has begun to dawn on us, the mental health experts attribute it to a downturn in the economy! Based on a lifetime of study, Edwin Shneidman concluded that suicide is attributable to “psychache” - the “unbearable mental pain that is caused by the frustration of a person’s most important needs,” including “ruptured key relationships and attendant grief and bereftness” (DeSpelder & Strickland, 2011, pp. 455-56). Perhaps if the mental health profession would simply acknowledge that humans have an important need to live in harmony with their natural environment, and that collectively poisoning the planet and wiping out hundreds of species a day represents a “rupture” in a “key relationship” in the web of life we evolved within, then they might appreciate the fact that individuals would be grieving such losses on some level and, if not consciously out of actual despair, at least acting it out through transference in the form of being overly bereft over their inability to consume resources and shop at accustomed rates.

Mental states that are considered to be indicators of suicide risk include an affective state of hopelessness, a sense that nothing will ever get better, along with anger, agitation, anxiety, fearfulness, and apprehension (Bryan & Rudd, 2006). These would certainly be understandable emotional responses to the current ecological crisis. So, over the course of about fifty years, we have gone from: being vaguely aware that something was terribly wrong in our relationship to our mother, Earth; to a phase of denial that, in fact, we are in the midst of a great extinction of species and a threat to continued life on the planet in the face of mounting evidence to that effect; and, finally we have arrived at a time when nobody can credibly pretend anymore that we are not on a disastrous course - it is quite clear that life as we know it is coming to an end. During this same time frame, we have witnessed a progression in the American populace of dramatic increases in the incidence of anxiety disorders at the start, then widespread depression, and more recently, mass murder and suicide rates. The mass murders are increasingly associated with young adults and even youths, as in Columbine, and the spike in suicide rates is largely relegated to the baby boom generation that entered the world at the advent of nuclear brinksmanship and has watched rather helplessly as the environmental crisis has grown from a localized problem to the threat of ecological annihilation.

It is at least plausible, if not likely, that we can thus conclude that the first two stages of grief associated with the terminal diagnosis for planet Earth have, due largely to collective repression and suppression, played out in the form of widespread anxiety/depression (denial), followed by widespread depression/suicide (anger). We will leave mass killings aside for this purpose, though it would not be surprising to see a spike in teen and young adult suicide rates

over the next decade.²³ The question we should be asking ourselves at this point is what kind of mental health problems might we anticipate as society enters the grieving stages of bargaining, depression, and acceptance? More to the point, given that the mental health associations with the first two stages are posited as resulting from repression and suppression of the planetary grieving process, what mental health problems might we be able to avoid by incorporating the ecopsychological view of the human/nature connection into clinical therapy?

Bargaining. Because of the lag time associated with climate change, by the time humans fully appreciate the gravity of the situation, it will already be too late to avoid grievous consequences. However, it is inevitable that we will then do everything we should have been doing all along to reverse the process, especially given our unreasonable faith in technological fixes. And because of the incomprehensibility of the prospects, again it seems inevitable that a large part of the population will progress to yet another type of denial and repression. What one might anticipate with this level of frantic bargaining going on at the societal level in the midst of unprecedented ecological breakdown is an increasing incidence of dissociative disorders in the general populace. Dissociation from one's personal identity is thought to be a mechanism for coping through psychological disconnection from situations or experiences that are simply too traumatic to integrate into our sense of who we are.²⁴ Depersonalization disorders (feelings of detachment from one's own experience, body, or self) and selective amnesia (characterized by memory loss of a specific category of information) might be two kinds of dissociation that are logical responses to the shock of realizing on some conscious level that the planet is becoming

²³ In fact, according to the CDC, the suicide rate for 10- to-24-year-olds increased by 8 percent from 2003-2004, the largest single-year rise in 15 years. <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/09/070907221530.htm>

²⁴ http://nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/Helpline1/Dissociative_Disorders.htm

unlivable, especially as iconic species like polar bears, penguins, whales, elephants, songbirds, and tigers blink out of existence.

Depression. In the personal terminal situation, the stage of depression is brought on by the realization that no amount of bargaining is going to avoid the inevitable onset of death, after the reality of the situation has had a chance to really sink in. At the societal level, when we are collectively confronting the final, unintended and fatal results of the course we have been on since the advent of the industrial revolution, we can anticipate disengagement at a massive scale, marked by widespread apathy and withdrawal. This will actually be the critical stage for mental health workers, as without extensive psychological *triage*,²⁵ it can be expected to devolve from here into chaos, panic, and the survivalist mentality associated with apocalyptic delusions. However, with proper spiritual guidance, this stage could be revisioned as a kind of collective dark night of the soul, a fertile stage of turning inward and preparing for the death/rebirth phase that follows. In other words, it is only by lack of spiritual vision that this collective stage of grieving will be perceived as the end of the world, versus the end of life as we have known it. Given the appropriate spiritual container, it could easily become a time of coming together in our humanity, a collective turning inward instead of an isolated one, and a “Great Turning” (as Joanna Macy puts it) to a new world that awaits us on the other side of purgatory.

Acceptance. At the level of the individual:

The existential crisis evoked by knowledge of a terminal illness may result in considerable suffering as patients examine their lives in light of illness and impending death. Patients confront losses on many levels, with altered life roles, lost aspirations, and awareness that their loved ones are also suffering... [Some] patients despair when confronted with their own mortality, which may manifest

²⁵ That is, application of therapeutic techniques far outside the comfort zone of clinical settings.

itself in feelings of fear and foreboding, injustice, anger and rage at their illness and condition and sense of a foreshortened future. (Mack, 2008).

Multiply that by 7 billion, and it becomes quite obvious that the most critical issue from an ecopsychological perspective of planetary hospice care is facilitating a collective process of grieving that ferries society to the acceptance stage as fully and harmoniously as possible.

When nothing more can be done to stop the progression of the disease, the prospect of dying is difficult to avoid. The person may feel helpless trying to combat natural forces that have gone awry, forces that seem bent on destroying the body... We may fight to the end with the attitude "I've always outwitted the percentages. Why not now?" Or we may take a different approach, coping with the end of life by making the most of the time we have left... (Despelder & Strickland, p. 256).

Unfortunately, it seems all too predictable that a freedom-loving, gun-toting, substance-abusing, individualist country like America will approach the end of life as we know it with a fair amount of anti-social pathology, transposing the breakdown of our life support system into a breakdown in the social order, with many responding to the existential threat with paranoia and hostility, deciding it's "every man for himself" or, alternatively, seeking security in like-minded militias and religious cults. While there will definitely be pockets of this kind of resistance in any event (and, in fact, already are), the whole point of advancing planetary hospice is to provide a 'viable' alternative to social chaos: comfort in the face of helplessness; hope for those who despair; and, perhaps most of all, vehicles for finding meaning in the most tormenting circumstances faced by the human race since the Black Death of the 14th Century.

This is a really difficult issue, and a full treatment of it is beyond the scope of this paper. It would seem that the most critical aspect of acceptance may be promoting peace by re-defining hope - a common component of the hospice model. Spirituality is a key component of coping with the dying process, and involves fostering hope through spiritual meaning (Corr, 1991-1992).

If the human race itself were facing certain extinction, it would be difficult to reconcile that extinction with any harmonious religious world-view. Thus, it becomes imperative to hold out hope for the survival of our species. The end of life as we know it is not equivalent to humanity's end, and that is a message that needs to be clear. It certainly *should* mean the end of the Industrial Age, and its relentless exploitation of nature and human spirit. It most definitely means the end of the population boom, which has more than doubled in the relatively short lifetime of baby-boomers. In fact, it is easy to attribute climate change to the simple idea of endless economic growth through exploitation of natural resources in combination with exponential population growth -- the unsustainability of this model has been clear for many decades now. This is an important anchor against likely attempts by religious diatribes and other extremists to attribute the Great Dying to humans being inherently malevolent or to God's condemnation of us for our sinful nature.

Beyond the necessary end of "endless" growth and expansion at the expense of nature, it becomes difficult to speculate just what the end of life as we know it might mean -- other than perhaps what stories we would *like* it to mean: the end of empire, the end of colonial expansion, the end of hegemonic capitalism; and, most hopefully, the end of man's inhumanity towards man. The beginning, perhaps, of reconciliation, atonement, and sharing -- living once again according to natural laws, the 'golden rule,' and not arbitrary man-made laws driven by corporate agendas. As ecopsychologist Andy Fisher notes, "[i]f we truly are social animals, then there comes a time when this aspect of our nature surely comes to the fore" (Buzzell & Chalquist, p. 68). True crisis has always tended to bring out the best in humanity, and there is no good reason to presume our worst crisis of all will not call forth our very highest potential.

This kind of holistic view of the Great Dying as a death/rebirth process is something that must be organically cultivated through facilitated dialogue and the interpersonal, society-wide exchange of ideas - while we still have the communication infrastructure in place to conduct such dialogue. It is difficult to imagine that people will look to government institutions for this kind of leadership - the very same institutions that have failed us so miserably. Instead, we can be expected to turn to religious and spiritual leaders, mental health experts, and social media, and this is why a planetary hospice movement is needed sooner rather than later.

IV. Quality of Death

*And when the living agree with themselves to be dead, the dark fury begins.
The dark fury of life, refusing to die before its allotted time...*
(Rushdie, 2001, p.179)

The crux of the issue raised by the prospect of a great dying is whether or not a “good death” is even possible at the societal level in the face of mass mortality and migrations. There will certainly be an overwhelming amount of grief and lamentation involved as we struggle to adapt to an increasingly difficult living/dying environment. And yet, if we were given six months to live but told that we could anticipate relatively stable physical health during that final six months, or maybe told that a comet will hit the Earth in six months, ending all life on the planet, we would quite likely find more meaning during that six months than we have in any other part of our life. That is the elevating effect that appreciating the certainty of death and impermanence has on the human spirit. As the late Francisco J. Varela, co-founder of the Mind & Life Institute, noted just prior to his own death from cancer, “death always arrives on your

doorstep holding a gift under his arm.”²⁶ This elevation of life in the face of death provides the framework for creating an appropriate spiritual container for the Great Dying.

While on a planetary scale this Great Dying is sure to unfold with an unprecedented amount of ecological disruption and socioeconomic dislocation, and while there is little doubt that in some areas of the world this will precipitate horrific consequences,²⁷ it is imperative that we as a species continue to value and appreciate whatever blessings and beauty we retain in the midst of global distress and trauma - such as physical health, intimate associations, communal spirit, and human ingenuity, courage, and tenacity. In the face of the very real threat of nuclear extinction in the early Sixties, Dr. King urged human beings to think in terms of the ‘*beloved community*’ which interconnects all.²⁸ Perhaps the best parallel we might find in history for how to promote humanity under the most lethal circumstances is the Holocaust, and the person to look to for psychological insights in this regard is Viktor Frankl.

Clearly, Jews victimized during the Holocaust had experienced the end of life as they knew it, were facing extinction, and death was the overwhelmingly most likely outcome for each of the six million victims, including of course all those forced into concentration camps. In his 1946 book “Man’s Search for Meaning,” Frankl concludes that humans are able to find meaning in life in every moment of living, even in the face of suffering and certain death:

We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is

²⁶ From the documentary film *Monte Grande: What is life?* Icarus Films (2005).

²⁷ In fact, we already are seeing this in Syria, a civil war that was precipitated by mass migrations associated with climate-related food shortages, a fact glossed over by corporate media. See, e.g.: Fallows, J., “Why Climate Change May Be Responsible for the Horrors in Syria” (Sept. 2, 2013), at: <http://www.alternet.org/syria> Retrieved 1.4.14.

²⁸ Orosco, J., “Dr. King’s Lessons for the Climate Justice Movement,” *Common Dreams* (Jan. 6, 2014), at: <http://www.commondreams.org/view/2014/01/06-2> Retrieved 1.6.14.

to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation - just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer - we are challenged to change ourselves.²⁹

Indeed, if the hope for the end of life as we know it on Planet Earth is survival of the human race, then the key will be to confront and discredit the idea of 'survival of the fittest' - which was never actually asserted by Darwin, and certainly never intended to lead to social Darwinism - in favor of survival of the most cooperative, and to challenge the human race to transform itself through the Great Dying into a species that *deserves* to survive, one that has *learned* from its tragic fate, and is ready to inhabit the planet with symbiotic grace and organic wisdom. Clearly, we will not dig ourselves out of this deep hole with the same shovel we have used to dig ourselves into it -- the sense of manifest destiny and egomaniacal aggression that have given rise to genocide, the industrial age, and the industrialization of war and nature. Again, we can seek simple solace in the timeless wisdom of Frankl, who during the worst of his experience, being marched through a cold, blowing hell, prodded on by rifle butts, achieved perhaps his greatest insight:

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love*. I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way – an honorable way – in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment (Frankl, 1959, pp. 56-57).

²⁹ <http://www.quotationcollection.com/author/Viktor-Frankl/quotes> Retrieved 1.4.14.

This fits in nicely with ecopsychologist Craig Chalquist's idea of how the individual should face the climate crisis, which he characterizes as a 'crisis of consciousness':

[W]e all come equipped with an organ that specializes in what E. O. Wilson named biophilia—love of life: the heart, where introversion and extraversion, self-interest and other interest, imagination and practicality join and alternate in creative cycles. Solving, or rather dissolving, the psychological barriers that fuel the environmental crisis by isolating our minds from what's going on around us will require turning ourselves inside out, with the heart as the site of reconnection. Resurrect the heart from mechanicality and numbness and you resurrect the chamber or cauldron in which the future likes to brew (2007, p. 7).

Frankl noted that not all Nazi guards were monsters, that some were actually decent human beings, while some Jewish prisoners were not decent. As a lifelong environmental activist and long-time Buddhist practitioner, I have given a lot of thought to the idea of affixing blame for the worst of humanity's sins - like the Holocaust and the Eco-holocaust now unfolding. And the conclusion I have come to is that humans, without exception, have good hearts. I'm quite certain that Henry Ford felt he was making life better by making cars available to every working American, and I have yet to find evidence of harmful intent by a soccer-mom loading up her SUV with kids to threaten their future by emitting greenhouse gas. For whatever reason, collectively we humans are capable of the most destructive, unimaginable acts, while individually our heart breaks when we see a child or an animal suffer.

In my hospice experience, and even with my dogs, I have observed that the closer we come to death, the sweeter we tend to become. Anyone who has ever patiently held the hand of a dying person can attest to this. There is every reason to believe that, with appropriate spiritual counseling, psychological guidance and imagination, we as a society and we as a race of beings can and will find salvation through love and compassionate cooperation as we suffer together

through the ecological cataclysm of the Great Dying. This, too, is a kind of hope - one that we must be willing to stake our future and the future of the planet on.

V. Planetary Palliative Care

The World Health Organization defines ‘palliative care’ as:

...an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problems associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial, and spiritual.

The common goal of hospice and palliative care is “to restore or sustain a sense of equanimity and personal integrity despite the disturbances caused by illness” (DeSpelder & Strickland, p. 190). While there is clearly overlap, the idea here of planetary palliative care is more related to managing symptoms and alleviating pockets of suffering along the models of disaster relief, while planetary hospice is more focused on preventing unnecessary suffering by skillfully preparing our society to face the inevitable. In other words, planetary hospice is primarily concerned with establishing an appropriate socio-psycho-spiritual container by assisting in what will be an unprecedented grieving process, while planetary palliative care will concern itself more with helping to alleviate suffering in whatever forms it arises in. An obvious symbiosis suggests itself between the two, with one informing the other as we proceed into uncharted psychological territory.

From the perspective of planetary palliative care, existential and transpersonal therapeutic approaches would seem to offer the greatest potential for alleviating suffering. See, e.g.: Barnett, 2009. These disciplines have much to offer in terms of the search for meaning and purpose in the face of death and aloneness, shaping our reality by our beliefs, and penetrating “the mask of our separate and alienated individuality” in a way that allows us to “experience the underlying

interconnectedness of all life” (Boorstein, 1996, p. 28). While existentialism fosters a heroic attitude toward being in the world in the face of apparent existential inevitabilities, transpersonal psychology offers a way of transcending the existential dilemma by going beyond ego and selfish concerns (Boorstein, p. 29).

In truth, the idea of planetary palliative care envisions a kind of psychological *triage* in which any number of situations and symptoms will need to be met creatively with a full tool box of humanistic therapeutic treatments, without regard to any kind of orthodoxy. At the same time, an overall strategy will be needed to bring some kind of renewed social order out of psychospiritual chaos, and to be very sensitive to opportunities for continually facilitating spiritual emergence from what may appear to be psychological emergencies. As visionary transpersonal psychiatrist Stanislav Grof has noted, “[m]ainstream psychiatrists are unable to see a difference between psychospiritual crises, or even uncomplicated mystical states, and serious mental illness,” and therefore “tend to pathologize mystical states” (Grof, 2000, pp. 137, 140).

If mental health professionals are going to participate in re-birthing a new social order out of the painful contractions of the death throes of the old order, one of the worst things that they could do would be to adopt a “sedate-first-and-ask-questions-later” to widespread instances of mental turmoil. Pursuant to Prigogine’s theory of dissipative structures, for which he earned a Nobel prize, higher order emerges in any system only from the most chaotic state of affairs, with the mechanism being the introduction of a single catalyst and the re-ordering occurring as a crystallization process. We will never know what form that catalyst might take in the socially chaotic state of affairs that is sure to accompany global contraction, but it is likely to be in the form of a revolutionary idea that may sound crazy when it is first uttered, and so it is imperative

that individuals or even groups that are experiencing spiritual emergencies be not just respected, but actually encouraged to go through the kind of holotropic mystical states that Grof has copiously documented make it possible “for the unconscious (and superconscious) material to emerge into consciousness” (140). As Grof concludes:

Humanistic and transpersonal psychologies have developed effective experiential methods of self-exploration, healing, and personality transformation... There exist approaches with a very favorable ratio between professional helpers and clients and others that can be practiced in the context of self-help groups. Systematic work with them can lead to a spiritual opening, a move in a direction that is sorely needed on a collective scale for our species to survive... [I]f a sufficient number of people undergo a process of deep inner transformation, we might reach a level of consciousness evolution when we deserve the proud name we have given to our species; *homo sapiens*.

VI. Spiritual Midwifery

Ultimately, for a planetary hospice movement to take hold and have the intended effect, it will be critical to include an expansive net of ‘effectively’ qualified, spiritually motivated healers from diverse backgrounds, without much regard for the varied forms of their expertise. An apt metaphor for such a movement can be found in the spiritual midwifery movement begun by Ina May Gaskin. Gaskin spearheaded the ‘direct-entry’ midwifery movement in the 1970s by which midwives learn directly from their elders without first training as a nurse, and promote a natural, spiritual model of childbirth in contrast to the clinical model. In her seminal book *Spiritual Midwifery* (1977), Gaskin describes her philosophy quite succinctly:

In the Zen tradition, a line of succession of Zen Masters is supposed to be linked together by transmission of mind - pure thought transferred from mind to mind with no words. I think that with midwives there is a similar kind of transmission that can take place and link them together, and that is a transmission of touch (p. 10).

Similarly, planetary hospice workers will be linked by a transmission of intention - the intention to be spiritual midwives for the rebirth of planet Earth. Just as the hospice movement today relies heavily on trained volunteers, so will planetary hospice rely heavily on the efforts of any and all who share the vision of the Great Dying as the dark night of collective humanity's soul, and who are equally committed to ushering the human race through this difficult 'night sea journey' - during which the sun sinks into the sea only to be devoured by the water monster - into the dawning light of a new day (Washburn, 1995, p. 21). In particular, it will be necessary to include with honor and authority those indigenous spiritual leaders around the world who have been doing their best all along to counsel us in the ways of nature, as well as social workers, social media mavens, astrologers, game programmers, shamanic healers, permaculturists, story tellers, yoga instructors, breath workers, art therapists, deep ecologists, social activists, musicians, and of course pastors and chaplains from every denomination and faith, and to build networks upon networks without regard for any preconceived hierarchies.

Gaskin relates that the spiritual midwifery movement actually grew out of an intentional community of like-minded individuals motivated by love, who organized themselves on a farm according to a simple verse from the Bible (2:44-45): "And all who believed were together and had all things in common: and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need" (Gaskin, p. 15). It takes a village to raise a child. It will take a global network of spiritual midwives to guide humanity through the painful contractions of planetary death and rebirth. The first precept for caregiving developed for Zen Hospice Project by Frank Ostaseki should serve as the guiding principle in developing a planetary hospice project:

Welcome Everything. Push Away Nothing.

VII. Rites of Passage and The Importance of Mythos.

“Virtually every religious tradition acknowledges periods of severe difficulty that sometimes precede or follow spiritual awakening” (Washburn, p. 171), such as the dark night of the soul referred to in the preceding section. In times of great crisis, people naturally fall back on their religious and spiritual beliefs, and find sustenance in their collective myths. Just as hospice for individuals ministers to them according to their personal beliefs, so planetary hospice must be fully conversant in the various death/rebirth mythologies and belief systems in order to counteract despair with hope for a new age, a new race of human beings. More specifically, just as the hospice movement has helped change attitudes towards individual death, the planetary hospice movement must have a cohesive strategy for fostering a general attitude that, from a larger perspective, the difficult contractions and painful pangs of the Great Dying are cleansing and purification rituals on a grand scale necessary to usher in the golden age spoken of in so many different mythologies and religions. As an example:

Within the Hopi tradition is the teaching of “purification.” Throughout earth’s history, they believe, there have been four worlds, three of which have perished, and from their perspective this one is on an even more dramatic trajectory of self-destruction. According to the tradition, there must be a purification at the end of one world before another can begin. You might say that the Hopi have held in their psyches a profound sense of collapse and near-term extinction for millennia. It’s an integral aspect of their tradition as is dancing, singing, and a wicked sense of humor.

A useful practice with many indigenous people is this: Live as if every act, every task performed in daily life, every kindness expressed to another being and to oneself might be the last. This is one way I stay connected with the light in dark times. Walking in reverence, living contemplatively with gratitude, generosity, compassion, and an open heart that is willing to be broken over and over again.³⁰

³⁰ <http://guymcpherson.com/2013/12/finding-the-light-in-the-era-of-permanent-winter-solstice/>

One way to implement such a strategy in times of crisis may be to encourage and facilitate rites of passage in whatever ways, shapes and forms make sense from the perspective of afflicted communities. Grof's holotropic breathwork certainly lends itself to this kind of transformative experience, as it is so conducive to reliving the perinatal experience. Eliade notes that "the experience of ritual death and the revelation of the sacred... exhibits a dimension that is metacultural and transhistorical" (1995, p. 130). Fisher maintains:

[A] symbolic perception of the world lifts one out of one's Ego into a larger cosmic drama in which nothing, including oneself, has that substantial reality of the literal viewpoint. To undergo a symbolic death and rebirth, for example, takes the sting out of one's literal death. As Eliade notes, it even gives it a positive value, for one realizes that death is merely the end of a mode of being, a stage in the transformation of all things (2002, p. 152).

As the Great Dying will be accompanied by mass migrations and evacuations of areas that are no longer inhabitable, such as heavily populated coastal communities, one thought is to re-cast these migrations themselves as rites of passage at every scale (communal/family/individual). "To overcome the destructive, numbing effects of the denial and fear of death, we must, as always in conscious transformation, first recognize and acknowledge death and turn it into our friend and ally, into a happily anticipated final journey" (Metzner, 2010, 149).

Mythologies of the world peoples are replete with stories of the world ending in cosmic disaster, especially floods, and it is important in this respect to remember that "[a] limitless expanse of water is one of the commonest images of a world about to come into being" (Willis, 1993, p.26). It is remarkable how many myths and religions maintain that the world ended in flood the last time, and will end in fire this time. With the presently unfolding climate catastrophe, we actually see both -- a world heating up from trapped greenhouse gases, melting glaciers and polar icecaps, unleashing increasingly great floods (the vast flooding in Pakistan and

Bangkok in recent years portents of what is to come), raising the seas and engulfing islands and heavily populated coastal areas.

One wonders if a new myth is not called for to embody this story. Whatever story we tell ourselves about the Great Dying, it must include a powerful redemptive component along the lines of resurrection. “In some stories of the great flood, the world that emerges from the catastrophe turns out to be better than the one before” (Willis, p. 26). This, too, is the kind of hope that people will need to cope with trials and tribulations. The kinds of stories we most definitely do not need, and that will only add to suffering, are the stories like the now popular “taken” series, where the chosen ones are magically transported to a better world, leaving the rest behind to suffer, and the even more dangerous and associated Armageddon myths. Of course, it is not at all consistent with hospice to tell people what not to believe, but we can at least cultivate and reinforce more redemptive narratives, and do our best to put the more destructive ones into the psychological language of inner struggle.

It does seem that, with the advent of the Great Dying, our spiritual container will have been utterly broken, all of our notions of the future shattered, and the need will arise for a new world view to rise from the chaos like the Phoenix from the ashes. But we must also remember that just as we approach this metaphorical end-time, we are also at a point in the development of the human race when our knowledge of reality has never been closer to complete. It is rather stunning to contemplate the photographs now being captured of galaxies 12 billion light years out into the farthest reaches of space, offering a glimpse into the very creation of our universe, and based on similar surveys from Hubble telescope, it is now believed that there are about 100 billion Earth-like planets in the Milky Way galaxy, with another 50 *sextillion* habitable planets

included in the other 500 billion galaxies. At the other end of this nearly infinite spectrum, the discoveries of quantum physics continue to be assimilated with mind-boggling implications for our world view in general, and our notions of death in particular. Cardiologist Pim van Lommel has written compellingly about his own conclusions, from witnessing and studying now-common near death experiences, concerning “non-local consciousness [that] has and always will exist independently from the body” (2013, p. 41). Dr. Robert Lanza, who was voted the 3rd most important scientist alive by the NY Times, has joined a growing body of quantum physicists in the belief that all matter is an emergent property of consciousness, and not the other way around as mainstream science continues to insist, radically calling into question our notions of physical reality and what happens when we leave our physical bodies.

It is from this kind of liberating knowledge that a workable myth can emerge to contain our collective grief as the visible world around us crumbles and human populations plummet off the Malthusian cliff. In fact, the Near Death Experience itself may provide an appropriately mythopoetic motif for this purpose. As Joseph Campbell teaches us, a completely alive, new mythology must serve four functions: “to waken and maintain in the individual an experience of awe, humility, and respect”; to provide a cosmological image of the universe; to maintain and validate some kind of order; and, to center and harmonize the individual (1968, pp. 609-623). Unlike the more reactive stance of individual hospice, a planetary hospice movement will need to be more proactive, becoming an advocate not just of individual patients facing death, but of the planet Earth and the human race approaching death/rebirth. Consistent with the idea that the this movement will have to draw creatively from the arts, I will let the visionary English sixties

band “The Moody Blues” have the last word, as I believe it is a timely vision that strikes the right tone:

The Story In Your Eyes³¹

I've been thinking about our fortune
And I've decided that we're really not to blame
For the love that's deep inside us now
Is still the same
And the sounds we make together
Is the music to the story in your eyes
It's been shining down upon me now
I realize

*Listen to the tide slowly turning
Wash all our heartaches away
We're part of the fire that is burning
And from the ashes we can build another day*

But I'm frightened for your children
That the life that we are living is in vain
And the sunshine we've been waiting for
Will turn to rain

When the final line is over
And it's certain that the curtain's gonna fall
I can hide inside your sweet sweet love
For ever more...

³¹ *Hayward, J. Copyright 2000-2014: Tyler Music Ltd.*

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