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CLIMATE CATHARSIS

**A Psycho-spiritual, Sociocultural Model
of Anthropocentric Transmutation**

by Zhiwa Woodbury

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Climate: the prevailing attitudes, standards, or environmental conditions of a group, period, or place.

Catharsis: A psychological technique used to relieve tension and anxiety by bringing repressed feelings and fears to consciousness.

Anthropocentric: viewing and interpreting everything in terms of human experience and values.

Transmutation: the transformation of one species into another.



Only birth can conquer death—the birth, not of the old thing again, but of something new. Within the soul, within the body social, there must be -- if we are to experience long survival -- a continuous 'recurrence of birth' to nullify the unremitting recurrences of death.

~ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

Introduction

Scientists tell us that, as a species, we are now ending the Holocene epoch of the last 12,000 years, and entering the [Anthropocene](#) - a new geologic age of our own creation. While the term “anthropocentric” has always been used pejoratively, the truth is that from this point forward humankind really is at the center of everything we know and care about. We hold the fate not only of all humankind in our hands, but of all life on the planet. While much of that life is ending, thanks to the anthropocentric extinction that is now underway, all living beings will be

forever changed by the actions of our species over the past 250 years, and all life hangs in the balance awaiting our response over the next 25 years to the mess that we have made of things.

The Chinese curse “may you live in interesting times” has never been more poignant. While it is undoubtedly true that life as we have always known it is hurtling to a heart-rending conclusion, it is equally true that something quite new and even panoptic is emerging, as would be anticipated by Emerson’s natural law of compensation: “Our strength grows out of our weakness. The indignation which arms itself with secret forces does not awaken until we are pricked and stung and sorely assailed.”¹ Or, as Naomi Klein puts it, “*climate change isn't just a disaster. It's also our best chance to demand—and build—a better world.*” And just as, in this country, the generation that was strongest in spirit and resolve arose from the ashes of the Great Depression to conquer the most demonic force ever assembled against humanity, Hitler’s industrial death machine, so too should we anticipate that a great spiritual force will arise in response to the unprecedented material and biological impoverishment that is now spreading across the planet because of our *own* industrial death forces - fossil fuels, petrochemicals, factory farms (livestock production), marine destruction, and nuclear wastes.

While Hitler created gas chambers, we are gassing the entire biosphere. Not out of evil intent, but instead as an exercise in the banality of evil. It can safely be asserted that, for vast majority of human beings, people driving their children to soccer matches or sitting down to a steak dinner, “they know not what they do” (Luke, 23:34).

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841), *Compensation*.

The necessary and natural compensation for all this material and biological destruction will be spiritual awakening.² It has to be, because it is the forces of spiritual darkness (greed, avarice, and ignorance) that are at the root of our descent into madness. Those who continue to look to these same forces for solutions, let alone salvation, are tragically deluded. Meanwhile, those who are tending to the spiritual needs of society without being overly distracted by the intense melodramas of world politics are already sensing this spiritual re-awakening, or shift in human consciousness, taking root. It is these roots that will grow from the soiled ruins of industrial civilization. Therein lies our only realistic hope for redemption.

But is it realistic? What is the reasoned basis for such hope? Why should we not instead despair, or follow the [advice of James Lovelock](#), originator of the Ghaia hypothesis (world as living organism), who contends that we should simply, hedonistically enjoy what time we have left? That is the question this paper attempts to address in some depth.

In the paper *Planetary Hospice: Rebirthing the Earth* (2014), I attempted to apply [Kübler-Ross](#)' classic model for the stages of grieving at a collective, psycho-spiritual scale to America's response to the climate crisis.³ This was very much intended as a preliminary assessment at that time, and never really sat right with me. After giving it a lot more thought, I came to believe that I had missed the mark by a rather wide margin. After taking it all into a more holistic, contemplative realm, what seems to have emerged quite suddenly and almost of its own force is a new model of climate catharsis. This model may prove useful to mental health professionals and climate activists alike. Furthermore, and quite apart from any conscious

² For an interesting essay on the spiritual implications and applications of Emerson's natural law of compensation, see: [The Law of Compensation](#) by Rev. Alan A. Rowbotham.

³ Unfortunately, it is principally America's values that are at the heart of the Anthropocentric epochal shift, as we have been so successful in creating a hegemonic global trade empire, and as we remain the largest stumbling block to effective (or even ineffective) political change in response to the climate crisis.

intention on my part, it seems to actually provide the reasoned cause for hope alluded to. Because once I fleshed this model out at spiritual, psychological, social, and cultural levels, it slowly became apparent that we are much further along in the collective grieving process than I had surmised in *Planetary Hospice*. While there are many in this movement who are concluding that near term human extinction is somehow inevitable, a serious consideration of this model may give even them pause to reconsider the hastiness of their (unfortunate) conclusions.

THE KEY: East/West Model of Consciousness

The key that unlocked the door to this model in my own mind, allowing it to emerge whole from some deeper realm, was a synthesis of the Buddhist model of consciousness with Carl Jung's own model as presented in Rob Preece's book on Buddhist alchemy *The Psychology of Buddhist Tantra* (2006, Snow Lion Publications), thus achieving a holistic, synthesized model of consciousness capable of universal application. From the standpoint of Buddhist tantra, "[t]he mind is seen as having three levels of subtlety, beginning with gross consciousness, moving deeper into subtle consciousness, and deeper [still] into extremely subtle consciousness" (p. 91). Preece, a long time Buddhist and Jungian psychotherapist, relates these directly to Jung's model of the mind, with gross consciousness being synonymous with Jung's notion of personal consciousness, subtle consciousness the equivalent of Jung's personal unconscious mind, and extremely subtle consciousness commensurate with Jung's unique (in Western Psychology) idea of the collective unconscious realm from which archetypal images and primal forces emerge into our individual minds, take shape in our dreams, and find expression in mythology and astrology.

One significant difference between Jung's model and the Buddhist model is that Jung maintained that the contents of the unconscious realm are not readily available to our personal

consciousness, that it is effectively a one-way street, whereas Buddhists maintain that this uniquely Western notion of the “unconscious” is simply a matter of *clouded awareness*. The more refined one’s mind becomes, especially when developed through quiescent meditation, the more clear and expansive one’s awareness becomes, allowing one to fathom the depths of consciousness all the way down to “the deepest level of awareness, the one that takes us beyond the personal into relationship with the essential nature of reality” (Preece, p. 91). While Buddhism seems to have a more sound basis in experience, for our purposes we can rectify this relatively inconsequential difference, and synthesize these readily compatible models, by utilizing the term ‘awareness’ in the broadest possible sense. We can posit, for instance, that we all share a base level of primal awareness, though we may only rarely become conscious of its contents. This would explain where intuition comes from.

The key to applying this synthesized, East/West model of the human mind to our largely suppressed grieving process over the loss of life as we know it on planet Earth is to then relate it to the equally congruent ideas of the world soul, or *anima mundi*, and the Buddhist notion of interdependent origination. We and the Earth which sustains us are inextricably linked - even at the deepest level of consciousness. Thus, even if our awareness is clouded, or if we repress the ideas and feelings emerging from this deepest level of collective, interdependently arising consciousness, by our very nature as “earthlings” we all still ‘know’ at the core of our being what is going on with the life support system that is our planet, our ground of being.

Thus, long before the scientific evidence is amassed and presented to us, we all are aware at some primal, base level of consciousness when something is amiss. We may not be conscious of that *gnosis* (direct knowledge), we may well not permit it into our personal consciousness in

thought form, or we may repress and distort it if it does enter our field of consciousness -- but we feel it nonetheless, probably even more so *because* of our failure to allow it full expression. From this depth psychological perspective of expansive, interdependent, interpenetrating awareness, then, the collective grieving process that has become associated with climate change over the past half century can be brought to light.

An Integral Perspective on the Planetary Grieving Process in American Culture

Planetary Hospice was not the first attempt to correlate climate grief with the Kübler-Ross model. Nobel Laureate Steven W. Running did so at the level of the individual in a [2007 talk](#) in my former home town, Missoula. The following year, ecotherapists Sarah Anne Edwards and Linda Buzzell reported on a pattern of psychological responses in their clients that mimicked the five-stage grief cycle, which they referred to as the “*waking up syndrome*.”⁴

Of the two, the waking up syndrome is the one that perhaps comes closest to the insights attempted in *Planetary Hospice*. Both, however, consider the grieving process from the perspective of the individual psyche, while *Planetary Hospice* attempts to relate suppressed grieving and societal mental health at a societal scale. This paper is intended as a corrective of that particular section of *Planetary Hospice*.

The starting point remains the same; that is, a consideration of the societal mental health profile in relation to the stages of grief attendant to the growing realization that life as we have known it during the Holocene Age is now ending. The explicit assumption here is that at a base level of awareness, that level at which we are all connected to our planetary life support system,

⁴ *HopeDance* magazine (Jan/Feb 2008), included in anthology *Ecotherapy* edited by Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009, Sierra Club Books

we intuitively ‘know’ what is transpiring. However, because evolution has not really prepared us to deal with such an existential threat at this grand a scale - since we have only very recently reached and exceeded the planet’s carrying capacity, and gained the kind of mastery over it that started to become apparent after WWII - there is a natural, reflexive tendency to suppress this awareness before it emerges into consciousness, and to continually repress it thereafter.⁵

Finally, while the grieving process varies from individual to individual, and the stages of grief do not necessarily unfold in a linear fashion, it does seem that when the grieving process is considered at the societal level there is a kind of collective *zeitgeist* (spirit of the time) that characterizes a majority of the people - with significant outliers on both ends - as we move through these suppressed stages in a more-or-less linear direction.

What we are talking about here is admittedly unquantifiable, qualitative, and complex. While it is probably 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 direct relationship to the *anima mundi*. For illustrative purposes, and at the risk of over-simplifying, we could state as our hypothesis that Americans as a cultural collective are in the middle of this grieving process - the third stage, bargaining. This would perhaps be evinced by pervasive attempts to avoid the inevitable with various unrealistic strategies. But it would not mean that many Americans were not still regressed at the stages of denial or anger, or that many more had not progressed from

⁵ Clinical psychologist and psychotherapist John Wellwood, Ph.D. posits that the “most basic problem people have is that [we] are afraid of [our] experience. Because feelings and emotions often seem overwhelming and threatening, they become suppressed, avoided, or denied...” *The Sacred Mirror*, Prendergast et al. (ed.’s), 2003, at pp. 156-57 (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House). This problem is heightened in the context of the staggering threat of mass species extinction, including the potential for near term human extinction, posed by unnatural climate changes.

bargaining to depression, nor would it infer that there were not already many outliers who had progressed to the level of acceptance. The culture and the dominant mental health trends, on the other hand, *would* necessarily reflect where the majority were in this collective grieving process.

What is essential to understanding this methodology is that because of the evolutionary stakes, because of the inherent difficulty in grasping this unprecedented knowledge, at *every* stage of grieving a loss on this vast scale, both individually and collectively there is bound to be cognitive dissonance caused by our psyche's natural resistance to, and suppression of, the relevant information. Even the information that we do assimilate must thereafter be consistently repressed, as a matter of practical necessity, since the alternative is to become one of those caricatures walking up and down the sidewalk in a flowing white robe and carrying a sign reading "The End Is Near" - *nobody wants to be that guy!* It is this natural phenomenon that then gets reflected in shadow forms by the trends in mental health, with those least equipped to deal with the emerging awareness the most likely to dissociate and/or act out in harmful or unproductive ways that reflect our collective societal neuroses and psychoses.

Thus, mental health trends become reliable markers for where we are in our collective grieving process. These mental coping mechanisms are also reflected in popular *cultural* trends, though not all mental health trends are treated as problems by mainstream psychology. This last point is significant. One mental health trend that *Planetary Hospice* completely overlooked, effectively skewing the conclusions, was the incredible scale of greed and promotion of self interest that was first celebrated during the Reagan revolution, and then ran rampant during the Clinton/Bush era. Any sane society would certainly have viewed this kind of behavior as symptomatic of severe neurosis, if not actual sociopathy. But in modern American culture,

narcissistic personality disorder not only flies largely under the radar,⁶ it is actually *rewarded* with advancement in the corporate, political, and entertainment spheres. Indeed, unlike most mental disorders, in the U.S. narcissism is said to occur along a continuum from “healthy” narcissism to psychopathic narcissism. As further support of its social acceptability, [recent studies](#) have shown that narcissists not only don’t hide from their personality disorder, but tend to boast about it.

Finally - a mental disorder Americans can be proud of!

This foolish pride is reflected in almost all segments of American culture, in our politics especially, and helps explain why the richest society in world history not only consumes a disproportionate share of the world’s resources, but has become the largest obstacle to addressing the climate crisis.

Early Stages of Collective Grief

Planetary Hospice correlated the overlapping epidemics of anxiety and then depression in America from roughly 1960 to 2000 to our growing awareness of the imbalance between humans and nature, as well as the progression of the problems from local to global. This analysis, while sound in approach, was probably over-influenced by focusing on pharmaceutical trends, and ended up speculating that we were only just beginning to transition from the first stage of grieving, denial, to the anger stage. If our focus is switched to the level of base awareness that is driving the process, then a very different picture begins to emerge.

After World War II, there was a fundamental shift in the way Americans lived their lives, from a largely rural, mostly agricultural country dotted with a few big cities here and there to a

⁶ Though in 2009, *Twenge and Campbell* conducted studies suggesting that the incidence of Narcissistic Personality Disorder had **more than doubled** in the U.S. in the prior 10 years, and that 1 in 16 of the general population had experienced NPD in their lifetime. Source: *The Narcissistic Life*, Bergemeester, A. (2014).

largely urban/suburban country sprawling out into formerly rural areas, with the largest cities becoming connected by metropolitan corridors, and with family farms being supplanted by industrial mono-culture heavily dependent upon chemicals. We doubled our population within fifty years, and today over 70% of us live in one of nearly 500 urbanized areas.

The advent of suburbia in the 1950s brought with it a preternatural obsession with manicured lawns that gave rise to the ritual of gathering leaves every autumn for transport and disposal somewhere out of sight. We had no room in our world for something as natural and timeless as leaves on the ground. Every neighborhood had access to a well-manicured park, and forest preserves on the outskirts of civilized existence were converted into picnic areas for family getaways (never mind the ants). It is safe to say that by the time Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in 1962, we Americans were increasingly, if not painfully, aware of our growing alienation from our natural environment. However, it was during this era that we also honed the fine art of denial. As long as the lawn got mowed, weeds were removed, and water came out of the faucets, we couldn't really be bothered as a culture about some vague notions of a more "natural" lifestyle. We were modern! Living the dream!

This can be seen as the Golden Age of Anxiety, which continued into the mid-1970s and was abetted by the growing availability of Valium and other anti-anxiety drugs, as well as by escapist entertainment in the form of silly situation comedies on T.V., Bond movies and musicals at the movies, and the growing popularity of spectator sports. One thing that is interesting to note is that many of the popular sitcoms of the 60's depicted fantasy realities: *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Bewitched*, *Green Acres*, *My Favorite Martian*, *Get Smart*, *The Flying Nun*,

Addams Family, Mr. Ed, The Munsters, etc. It is as if we were intuitively aware just how silly our life divorced from nature really was.

Gradually, from the mid-60s onward, our collective awareness shifted from a growing imbalance with nature, which was relatively easy to suppress, to an awareness of increasing ecological devastation. Our rivers and lakes began dying as foul smelling and multi-colored effluents poured into them from industrial pipes, our national forests were being liquidated with updated “bunch-felling” machinery (clear cutting), like mowing a big lawn, and the air in big cities started to become unbreathable. Suddenly, the effects of our unnatural lifestyles became alarmingly evident. Humans were having quite a dramatic impact on their environment, and the idea of endless growth and prosperity that fueled the American Dream came into question. We can roughly mark this shift culturally from around the time of the first Earth Day in 1970 and into the early 1980s, when the awareness of human impacts began to shift from devastation of our local environments to our impacts on the global climate and, eventually, the oceans.

By this time, anti-depression prescriptions began to supplant anti-anxiety drugs, with the combination of those two doubling until nearly one in ten of us was being treated for depression -- from 16 million Americans in 1962 to roughly 31 million in 1975. In retrospect, this very much appears to represent the second stage of grieving - depression being a form of suppressed anger - though we were not yet fully aware of the global scope of our impacts. We were a very *angry* country during those years, waging an unconscionable (and *ecological*) war in Southeast Asia, bringing it into our streets and to our political conventions with police riots, and culminating with American soldiers actually shooting protesting students dead. While they certainly did not represent the norm at the time, it is no coincidence that those same rebelling

youths advocated for a more natural lifestyle and began protesting polluters as well as warmongers. The wave of rebellion broke with the deposing of the president in 1974, and arguably there was a sea-change in our culture at that time as well. We began to clean up our waterways and our air sheds, we abolished the draft, the human potential movement took hold, and we even elected a conscientious *farmer* as president - a politician who was actually spiritual and cared about human rights!

Culturally during this same period, those inane sit-coms progressed from silly fantasy realities to what could easily be called 'angry sit-coms,' like *All in the Family*, *Maude*, *Sanford & Son*, *The Odd Couple*, *The Jeffersons*, and *M*A*S*H*, which were set in ordinary reality.⁷ The *Godfather* movies were wildly popular. Meanwhile, we become increasingly fascinated by aliens and outer space as forms of escapist entertainment, including *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), and climaxing with the phenomena of *Star Wars* (1977). This was also the time when the pornography industry took hold.

Certainly, these kinds of juvenile/primal escapist fantasies are all consistent with the need to release repressed anger and frustration. Looking to outer space can be seen as a suppressed fight or flight response to ecological plunder here on Earth, or alternatively as looking for salvation from the heavens, the sense that we need to be saved from ourselves.

Middle Stages of Collective Grieving Process

Anxiety and depression have become endemic to American culture as the pharmaceutical industry has grown, and as the underlying causes from an ecopsychological viewpoint have never really been adequately addressed (e.g., ecotherapy is still relatively obscure, our consumer

⁷ The only notable exception to reality-based sitcoms in the 70s was *Mork & Mindy*.

lifestyle continues to disconnect us from nature). However, beginning right around 1980, when denial was practically enshrined in a presidential campaign ad announcing it was “morning in America,” our base level awareness entered an entirely new and previously inconceivable phase, a phase for which our only preparation was the sudden potential for nuclear annihilation which had dawned less than a generation earlier.

Suddenly we were supposed to believe that our hairspray was depleting the tropospheric ozone layer! How could this be?

Even in retrospect it has a preposterous ring to it. The unmistakable consequence, however, was observed as a gaping hole opening up in the thin bubble that encapsulates our home planet, allowing geologically unprecedented levels of UV radiation through to suppress the immunity systems of all living beings. In other words, we now became aware, for the first time ever, of an existential threat to life as we know it from our own, rather mundane daily routines. It wasn't long at all before immunodeficiency related diseases began increasing, as had been predicted in studies conducted for the National Academy of Sciences, including the AIDS epidemic from a virus that has been around forever. Forest ecosystems started to sicken, with trees no longer able to fight off the pests that they had co-evolved with, frogs began disappearing (when was the last time you saw a frog in nature?), or showing up with gross deformities, kangaroo blindness became epidemic down under, and humans were warned to avoid direct sunlight.

Think about that for just a minute. Please avoid the source of all life on Earth.

Arguably, it was time to amp up our collective coping mechanisms as well. Paradoxically, our elected leaders began to roll back environmental protections, even going so far as to ridicule

concern for the environment as a sign of weakness. For example, Al Gore became “the Ozone Guy,” said with a sneer of superiority by a man famous for making movies with a chimp named “Bonzo”!

Like Reagan himself, politics became all hat and no cowboy.

Now it is one thing to acknowledge that dumping sewage into rivers kills fish, and quite another thing altogether to acknowledge that the consumer culture -- our reward for enduring the Great Depression and the hell of WWII in quick succession -- could end up killing the planet. So while many environmentally awakened people responded to the new paradigm by becoming even more alarmed, it seemed like our culture as a whole reverted back to the comfortable illusion of Ozzie & Harriet’s American Dream - before all these ideas that the selfish pursuit of happiness for oneself and one’s loved ones was fundamentally flawed. A wide rift opened up between ideology and reality, one that our political system would never recover from.

Welcome to the bargaining stage of grief.

At the individual level, this stage is often associated with unrealistic, magical thinking - along the lines, for example, that if only God will take our disease away we promise to devote our life to noble causes. At the cultural level of 1980’s America, it manifested more as a mad scramble for a secure future. This marked the beginning of a near-pathological hoarding of wealth, retreat into gated communities while warehousing the under-privileged in an expanding, for-profit prison system, class warfare between corporate hoarders and the labor force, predatory corporate takeovers involving liquidation of assets and funneling the wealth up to obscene CEO salaries, derivative wealth, and ostentatious displays of obscene wealth. Think Donald Trump

here, or better yet - Gordon Gecko in the popular movie *Wall Street* (1987): “Greed is good” and “Money never sleeps.”

Vampires became quite popular during these final decades of the twentieth century, sucking the lifeblood out of their victims. They weren't depicted as mysterious caped Transylvanians, either, but rather as looking just like you and me. They are an almost perfect metaphor for what corporations had become in America and throughout the world - immortal and powerful beings that not only preyed on society, but actually have the power to assimilate those individuals who they seduce into their ranks, to prey on others.

Welcome to Corporate America. It would not be long before the highest court in the land would declare that corporations were people, too.

Subconsciously, this all makes so much sense. If the gig is up, I better get mine while the gettin' is good! It's the American way. If not money, then a huge cache of guns and ammo and canned goods to retreat into the woods with and await Armageddon. Ruby Ridge and the Branch Davidians in the Waco siege (1992-93) were typical of this kind of lunacy, not to mention the Oklahoma City bombing a few years later. Meanwhile, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* enjoyed an extended voyeuristic run from 1984-1995 (Reagan-to-Clinton), state-run lotteries became the norm rather than the exception, gambling spread from a rapidly expanding Vegas to just about every state, and everyone started playing the stock market through their Individual Retirement Accounts, or stockpiling gold coins or sports memorabilia (not just for kids anymore). For a while there, even our *vehicles* began to take on ridiculous proportions, stopping just short of personal armored tanks. Celebrity worship became so heightened that it has become a regular feature on the once-staid evening news. Sports became more about wealthy superstars

than winning teams, while the teams themselves are all about winning now, without much regard for building into the future.

In short, it seems that during this extended bargaining stage, our culture morphed into something that no longer just *reflects* our suppressed grief, but is instead the enabling *means* of that suppression. The dominant message that emerged culturally in America during this span of time, as it has become apparent that we are facing the gravest threat in our species' history, is that '*distraction cures all ills*' -- just stay distracted 24/7 and you will never have to be bothered with worrying about your future, let alone your children's and their children's.

Obviously, this dysfunctional social strategy is not compatible with the well-being of the individual psyche. At the collective level, our awareness has progressed from the simple *dawning* of an existential threat, the idea that we as a species could actually somehow threaten the continued existence of life on this planet, to actually *carrying out* that threat. Now we have a growing awareness that the Sixth Great Extinction is underway, that the cumulative absorption of carbon by our oceans over the course of the Industrial Age has altered their chemistry and is breaking critical links in the food chain, that extreme weather events are slowly becoming the norm, and that it's all happening at an accelerating pace that consistently outstrips the climate scientists' predictive models.

Perhaps most unsettling of all, we have the dispiriting awareness that our political leaders are either unwilling or incapable of addressing this rising tide of threats to life on planet Earth. In point of fact, they seem to be throwing gasoline on the fire with increasingly widespread and insane warfare and accelerating extraction of previously inaccessible or unprofitable fossil fuels (fracking, tar sands, deep sea drilling, etc.). Our President, who promised us he would reverse the

tidal forces of climate change, now expresses eloquent concern for the climate out of one side of his mouth, then brags out the other about turning America into the world's leading exporter of fossil fuels with his "all of the above" energy extraction policies.

So while the global-stakes bargaining escalates with resource wars, repressed rebellions, oppressive 'austerity' programs, and plutocratic trade agreements, and while it seems our political leaders will forever be stuck in this hellfire spiral on the corporate-sponsored world stage, the *rest* of us, when we're not distracted, have mostly moved on from the bargaining stage to the fourth stage of grieving - depression. This may be the most repressed stage of all.

It is quite understandable that the intolerable situation which has developed over the course of this prolonged dysfunctional bargaining stage has given rise to much dystopian pessimism about our collective future from the growing segment of the population that is *consciously* aware of the gravity of our situation. Suicide rates are climbing, with the rate among baby-boomers - that generation which has witnessed the entire spectacle - surging by nearly 30 percent in the first decade of the new millennium.⁸ More recently, suicide has become quite prevalent among high-level executives in the financial industry.⁹ Mass killings happen with chilling regularity, with the overall incidence of mass shootings tripling since 2008.¹⁰ We now 'escape' to movies about apocalypse and dystopian futures, which are legion, and it is very telling that we've progressed from a widespread cultural fascination with blood-sucking vampires to a rather morbid fascination with the *walking dead*.

⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/03/health/suicide-rate-rises-sharply-in-us.html> Retrieved 12.24.13.

⁹ [Twelve deaths](#) among finance industry CEOs in eight months, prompting *Fortune Magazine* to ask: [Is there a suicide contagion on Wall Street?](#) (Feb. 27, 2014).

¹⁰ <http://rt.com/usa/holder-mass-shootings-triple-519/>

Yes, zombies are all the rage, and an appropriately iconic symbol of depression over the dismal state of affairs on planet Earth. Many scientists have concluded that the human race itself is tantamount to a “dead man walking.”

That’s pretty damned depressing... Pass the popcorn!

And as might be expected, there has been yet another dramatic shift in mental health trends associated with this, the most troubled of all stages of grieving. How much psychological pain are we in as a nation? Well, [beginning in 2010](#), *opioids* have now become the most prescribed class of medications in America!¹¹ “Opioids are a class of controlled pain-management drugs that contain natural or synthetic chemicals based on morphine... effectively mimic[ing] the pain-relieving chemicals that the body produces naturally” (*Psychology Today*). In 2011, there were over *238 million* prescriptions for narcotic analgesics, prompting the [National Institute of Health](#) to declare it an epidemic, with opioids “now responsible for more deaths than the number of deaths from both suicide and motor vehicle crashes, or deaths from cocaine and heroin combined.”

We are not just medicating ourselves, we are becoming our own palliative care providers!

Whether opioids have actually passed anti-depressants as the drug of choice in America depends on which study you consult, as they are actually quite even.¹² In other words, the combination of opioid and anti-depressant prescriptions annually in the U.S. far exceeds the number of Americans living here. Of course, we still have free access to alcohol, increasingly free access to potent strains of marijuana, and heroin has made a big comeback with significant

¹¹ Nora D. Volkow, Thomas A. McLellan, Jessica H. Cotto, Meena Karithanom, Susan R. B. Weiss. “Characteristics of Opioid Prescriptions in 2009.” *JAMA*, 2011; 305 (13): 1299-1301 DOI: [10.1001/jama.2011.401](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2011.401); Nora D. Volkow, Thomas A. McLellan. “Curtailing Diversion and Abuse of Opioid Analgesics Without Jeopardizing Pain Treatment.” *JAMA*, 2011; 305 (13): 1346-1347 DOI: [10.1001/jama.2011.369](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2011.369)

¹² For example, in 2010 [253.6 million](#) prescriptions were filled for anti-depressants.

drops in price to compete more effectively with the flood of synthetic opioids on the street. Let's not even talk about cheap meth - the drug of choice among zombies everywhere.

It seems, culturally speaking, we have a choice between endlessly distracting ourselves, numbing ourselves out, or alternating between the two.

Of course, there is a third choice.

Late Stages of Collective Grief - World Shift Through Spiritual Emergence

Is all of this gloom and doom really as oppressive as it seems? Or are we just missing the big picture due to our own inability to fully acknowledge and effectively process our deepest fears? This is a question everyone who looks closely at this issue needs to ask themselves if they start to feel despair creeping in.

Despair, like guilt, is a rather pointless, and largely unnecessary, emotional response in any context. It's just like the Dalai Lama says about worrying: if something can be done, then worrying is pointless, and if nothing can be done, then worrying is pointless. The alternative to guilt is always regret, and healthy alternatives to despair are resolve and learning to value our broken-heartedness. In other words, despair is nothing more than unresolved (repressed/unprocessed) grief, and unresolved grief is rooted in unacknowledged fear. Fear is only a problem when it is not acknowledged - otherwise it is an invaluable evolutionary aid (e.g., fear of heights by the edge of a cliff). Accordingly, when we find ourselves in despair, it is a strong indication that either we took a wrong turn somewhere or we simply have some work to do. The most counterproductive thing we can do is to dwell in despair, because if we dwell in any powerful emotion long enough, we begin to identify with it. And tragically, people who identify with despair end up seeing suicide as the only way out.

In the present context, *we can actually take heart* and find hope in our current state of affairs. Do not be distracted by all the dysfunction we are witnessing right now, or even by all the disruption and dislocation that is to come. Instead, *look at where we are* in the grieving process. As Prigogine's theory of dissipative structures holds, these kinds of systems need to reach their highest tolerable degree of chaotic disorder before a quantum leap to a new and unprecedented level of order can transpire. Or, as the aphorism says, it is always darkest before the dawn.

In *Planetary Hospice*, I fretted over what it would take, and how long it might take, to get America from stage 2, anger, to the final stage of grief - *acceptance*. But according to this new, more sound model, and with everything discussed up to this point - including the intuitively congruent cultural markers - it now appears that *we are actually already on the verge of acceptance*. This is good news! All of the stages of grief are obviously still in play here, and as the situation degrades over the coming decades, as it must given the inconvenient 40-year lag time between carbon emissions and climatic uptake, we might even anticipate spiraling through these stages repeatedly.¹³

But perhaps the most pertinent question we should be asking ourselves right now is whether we might not actually be *emerging* from this dysfunctional cultural paradigm of suppression and repression, and entering into the one stage of grieving that is not really susceptible to repression. If this could be the case, then what are the clearest indications of that societal emergence, and how might we best advance it?

Consistent with this integral model, however, the first question that really needs to be answered is *just what is it* that we are becoming aware of at the deepest level of collective

¹³ In my recent paper, *The Planetary Hospice Movement*, I discuss the idea that we are all in denial at some level, and indeed it seems that the stages of grief in relation to the unfolding climate crisis is a multivalent process.

consciousness in relation to this final stage of grieving the end of life as we know it? What is the culmination of the progression in base level awareness from imbalance (ca. 50's and 60's), to ecological destruction (ca. 60's and 70's), to existential threat (ca. 80's), to the Great Dying and the losses associated mass extinction (ca. 90's to present)? If we were prone to spiritual nihilism, we might be quite justified in concluding that near term human extinction is inevitable. The other extreme (spiritual eternalism) would support the kind of narrow view associated with Christian prophesy; that is, 777,000 of God's chosen are about to be lifted up to the heavens while the other 7 billion or so (and, presumably, most other sentient beings) are left behind to bake.

The middle way, of course, is the much more natural and sensible conclusion that we are in the process of experiencing regeneration through death and rebirth. In a word, the awareness associated with acceptance should be... *awakening*. Not in the traditional Buddhist sense, really, but something beyond (*trans-*) personal, something *generative* that is capable of thriving through the adversity we will be increasingly confronted with. It should be experienced as a growing awareness of something new and quite unprecedented dawning in the spectrum of human consciousness -- a new perspective, a different way of seeing ourselves in relation to all that is other. Radically interpenetrating interconnectivity, perhaps, breaking down the age-old barriers of self/other, mind/matter. Rather than trying to channel primal awareness here, however, let us look for clues in our own milieu, since these kinds of new paradigms always emerge first in a few individuals or groups who are ahead of their time¹⁴ -- harbingers of what only in retrospect will be acknowledged as a quantum shift.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Bucke, R. 1901. *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind*. Perhaps the first Western scientist to study this phenomenon, and himself a harbinger of the century to come. As Bucke concluded: "This consciousness shows the cosmos to consist not of dead matter governed by unconscious, rigid, and unintending law; it shows it on the contrary as entirely immaterial, entirely spiritual and entirely alive..." (p. 17).

[Stanislov Grof](#) is one such extraordinary thinker who has always seemed to be ahead of his time, and always seemed to be in on the ground floor of seismic shifts in human society. One of the more colorful illustrations of this point is [his story](#) about opening a box from Sandoz Laboratories in 1954, during his internship in psychiatry, with an enclosed note from Albert Hoffman that someone needed to do some research into the extraordinary properties and potential therapeutic applications of the enclosed capsules of LSD-25. Years later, when his research along those lines at John Hopkins in Maryland was shut down, he moved to an obscure hot springs resort called *Esalen*, and helped found the human potential movement in the late 60's - including coining the term "transpersonal psychology" in conversation with Abraham Maslow and others to create a "new psychology" intended to "honor the entire spectrum of human experience" ([Grof, p. 3](#)).

And so it should come as no surprise that Grof himself was one of the first to point out this new form of human awareness as it began to bubble up from the gnostic depths of our collective psyche, at a time when the existential threat of climate change was just starting to get the attention of scientists. In his 1985 book *Beyond the Brain*, Grof's "central point" was that we were just beginning to see "a paradigm shift of unprecedented proportions," a course alteration that is changing "our concepts of reality *and of human nature...*" (p. 16).

Other visionaries could surely be listed here, not the least of which would be Arne Ness and Wendell Berry from the deep ecology movement that also took hold around the time global environmental issues started to become evident. However, a watershed event was the publishing of Joanna Macy and Molly Young Brown's book *Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect Our Lives, Our World* (New Society Publishers) in 1998, announcing a "silent revolution" in

“the ways we see and think and relate” (p. 6) which has only grown in scope and influence ever since. As Macy put it in her introduction:

I imagine that future generations will look back on this period and call it the time of the “*Great Turning.*” *It is the epochal shift from a self-destructive industrial growth society to a life-sustaining society* (p. 6).

Coming Back to Life noted that the most basic dimension of this Great Turning that the authors were witnessing in their work on the cutting edge of this nascent movement was “*a profound shift in our perception of reality... both as cognitive revolution and spiritual awakening*” (p. 21). This is nothing other than the base level awareness welling up from the most subtle level of collective consciousness that supports and gives birth to an acceptance of the end of life as we know it, and the birth of something new. Macy described her own deeply felt sense of this shift at the time as an ‘ongoing revelation’ - and indeed she has since carried that work forward into what fellow ecopsychologist Andy Fisher would call ‘ever-widening spheres’ of meaning and participation.

That is the compensatory spirit of climate catharsis that can and must breathe life into the transmutation of the human species if we are to survive in the short term, the next several decades, and thrive in the long term. It is the same spirit that has given rise to [The Earth Charter](#), a principled expression of this shared awakening, pointing the way forward to “a change of mind and heart... [and] a new sense of global interdependence and universal responsibility.”

The Great Turning as Transmutation

The Great Turning adroitly captured and expressed the appropriate response to our growing awareness of the potential transmutation of the human species that is now starting to be deeply felt by a substantial segment of globally conscious and conscientious, increasingly

interconnected people. To get a better picture of how this revolutionary awareness is manifesting socioculturally, it helps to place it into some additional context.

Certainly, following on the heels of the transpersonal psychology and human potential movements, and bridging them with the deep ecology movement, ecopsychology itself represents something radically new in our world. As Stan Grof pointed out in *Beyond the Brain*, “[s]cientific revolutions are those noncumulative episodes in which an older paradigm is replaced in its entirety, or in part, by a new one that is incompatible with it” (1985, p. 8). And as David Abram put it in his introduction to Andy Fisher’s 2002/2012 book, ecopsychology “neatly explodes [the] age-old divide between mind and nature, between the psyche ‘in here’ and nature ‘out there’” (*Radical Ecopsychology*, p. ix).

What better place to look for the emergence of something radically new in the human psyche than in the field of psychology itself? After all, ecopsychology is not just some new branch of psychology, as some have tried unconvincingly to reposition it. Rather, it aims to supplant the dualistic worldview of mainstream psychology in much the same way that quantum physics is radically altering the way we conceive of mind and matter.

Andy Fisher best expresses the emergent spirit of ecopsychology. He grounds what he terms ‘radical’ ecopsychology in humanistic principles intended to support people in (1) “finding their place in both human and more-than-human society;” (2) “perceiving a world beyond the boundaries of strictly human reality;” and, (3) “learning to see their own lives symbolically mirrored and bound up in the flesh of all living things” (p. 187). Significantly, Fisher recognizes that “the Egoic mode [of Western civilization] is so antagonistic to and split from nature, ecopsychology is called toward a *spiritual* mode, one that would overcome Ego” (*Radical*

Ecopsychology, p. 98). That pretty well sums up the challenge facing the human species; that is, as Macy would have it, replacing the ego-driven industrial growth society with a spiritually motivated life sustaining society “bound up in the flesh of all living things.”

From the world of systems thinking, yet another [important movement](#) that began in the late 60's, we look to the prolific Hungarian philosopher of science, systems theorist, and classical pianist Ervin Laszlo -- and in particular his 1996 book *The Whispering Pond*:

The paramount feature of the emerging quasi-total vision of cosmos, matter, life, and mind is subtle and constant interconnection... The current shift in science's concept of the world from a life-less rock to an interconnected and quasi-living universe has intense meaning and significance for our times. The concept of a subtly interconnected world, of a whispering pond in and through which we are intimately linked to each other and to the universe, assimilated by our intellect and embraced by our heart, is part of humanity's response to the challenges that we now face in common. Our separation from each other and from nature is at the root of many of our problems; overcoming them calls for a recovery of our neglected, but never entirely forgotten, bonds and connections... The insight that emerges is both meaningful and timely. It confirms psychologist-philosopher William James' image: we are like islands in the sea - separate on the surface, but connected in the deep (Rockport, MA: Element, pp. 217, 224-25).

More recently, Laszlo commented on the shift with this telling statement:

“The breakout from the old has started already, but it is not yet committed to a breakdown or to a breakthrough.”

I was once informed by a wise old Jewish-American Tibetan monk from New York that the only difference between a breakdown and a breakthrough is whether or not there is an adequate support system in place. It is up to those who have accepted the fact that life as we have always known it on Earth is ending to actively build the support system that will be necessary for their to be a bright light illuminating the end of the presently waxing dark age. For those who are waking up consciously to this shared awareness, it is the challenge of our lifetime. It is also an

incredible honor to consider oneself a light-keeper in a dark age. As Laszlo put it at the end of the same linked essay: *“Choosing our future by consciously furthering and steering the burgeoning worldshift is the greatest opportunity ever to have been granted a generation in history. It is up to us to seize it -- and ensure the future of humankind on the planet.”*

Organizing Hope: For a Future to be Possible

So much of this life is a matter of perspective, and perspective in turn depends on what we choose to focus on. It is so easy to give into despair or distraction if one focuses one’s attention on world events and politics. But that perspective is merely a reflection of the lamentable paroxysms of a dying age, which are all the more noticeable because of the heightened desperation of these failing institutions and empires (and their domination of the corporate media).¹⁵ While these can obviously only be ignored at our peril, they should nonetheless not be permitted to dominate our attention. The only real utility of staying apprised of world events, preferably through alternative media, is to inform our activism and fuel our compassion.

Once one has some perspective, grounded in a spiritual world view and practice, once one accepts that we are on the cusp between a depressed stage of grieving and a sobering acceptance of our current situation, then it actually becomes quite easy and even encouraging to focus on the signs of this awakening awareness that are all around us - though of no interest to corporate media. A few that have crossed my radar are worth mentioning, just by way of illustration. There are many others I know of, and undoubtedly many more I’m not aware of.

¹⁵ A wonderful perspective corrective on this point is Chalquist’s [Conscious Apocalypse](#) on YouTube.

This, then, represents just a flavor of the kinds of adaptive permutations that are already laying a foundation for the transmutation of the human species.

In terms of pragmatic spirituality, one that is not too far out there to be taken seriously, there is [The Shift Network](#):

[Empowering] a growing global movement of people who are creating an evolutionary shift of consciousness that in turn leads to a more enlightened society, one built on principles of sustainability, peace, health, and prosperity. Through our online Summits and Courses we have already served more than 200,000 worldwide who are committed to shifting our world's operating system.

Two hundred thousand people is a significant chunk of humanity, though not yet a critical mass, and they are able to offer much of this without charge.

As for economic justice, a very inspiring organization with a timely vision and impressive credentials is the U.K. NGO [Share The World's Resources](#):

If humanity is to survive the formidable challenges that define our generation – including climate change, diminishing fossil fuels and global conflict – it is necessary to forge new ethical understandings that embrace our collective values and global interdependence. We urgently need a new paradigm for human advancement, beginning with a fundamental reordering of world priorities: an immediate end to hunger, the securing of universal basic needs, and a rapid safeguarding of the environment and atmosphere. No longer can national self-interest, international competition and excessive commercialization form the foundation of our global economic framework.

The crucial first step towards creating an inclusive world system requires overhauling our outdated assumptions about human nature, reconnecting our public life with fundamental values, and rethinking the role of markets in achieving the common good. In line with what we now know about human behavior and psychology, integrating the principle of sharing into our economic system would reflect our global unity and have far-reaching implications for how we distribute and consume the planet's wealth and resources. Sharing the world's resources more equitably can allow us to build a more sustainable, cooperative and inclusive global economy – one that reflects and supports what it really means to be human.¹⁶

¹⁶ *Rethinking the Global Economy: The Case for Sharing* (Rajesh Makwana and Adam Parsons, 2010).

Of course there is Joanna's pioneering [Work That Reconnects](#), building "motivation, creativity, courage and solidarity for the transition to a sustainable human culture." Canadian journalist and free thinking intellectual Naomi Klein, who believes that "climate change should not be framed as a disaster, but as an enormous opportunity to reshape the political paradigm and the fight for global justice" ([Queally, J.](#)) has come out with another new book, *This Changes Everything* (2014). I and many others believe Stephen Jenkinson's wisdom concerning [bringing grief onto our path](#) is another amazing example of the shift in consciousness that is emerging from the deepest levels of our shared spiritual awareness. Heck, hospice itself is still a pretty nascent movement, as is the palliative care movement from which Jenkinson emerged.

The growing solidarity movement between humans and animals is yet another example of this collective spiritual awakening -- we're not just awakening to a shared awareness amongst ourselves, but thanks to harbingers like Jane Goodall and Peter Singer, we're starting to relate to animals in a whole new way. One in every ten American's now consider themselves to be mostly vegetarian, if not actually vegan. This of course relates back to the emerging consciousness of our deep interdependence. It's not just a meme.

So there is plenty of evidence to support this idea that we are starting to transition into the acceptance stage of grieving over the loss of life as we know it on Earth, and that a new, adaptive kind of awareness is emerging that will sustain us through what promises to be a most difficult era of mass mortality, migration, and dislocation. There is one other critical conscious shift that needs to be addressed to fortify us against the potential for despair, and it has to do with the complicated issue of how to organize ourselves as a newly emerging sociocultural force amidst a time of incredible strife, chaos, and the oppressive nationalism of Big Brother.

While it has not received nearly the attention and recognition that it deserves, a common feature of any idea that is slightly ahead of its time, Margaret Wheatley has hit on a really vital systems theory in her books *Leadership and the New Science: Learning about Organization from an Orderly Universe*, and *A Simpler Way*, co-authored with Myron Kellner-Rogers. Wheatley sees our organizational thinking as stuck in a Newtonian mechanical world view of linear causes and effects with the associated spatial and temporal limitations.¹⁷ But history teaches us that compelling ideas and myths tend to emerge simultaneously without such logical connections. By looking to quantum mechanics for clues about how change actually transpires at a human scale, similar to the earlier citation of Prigogine's theory, Wheatley has identified a non-obstuctive organizing principle that she calls 'boundaryless' organization:

Acting locally allows us to work with the movement and flow of simultaneous events within [a] small system. We are more likely to become synchronized with that system, and thus to have an impact. *These changes in small places, however, create large-systems change, not because they build one upon the other, but because they share the unbroken wholeness that has united them all along.* Our activities in one part of the whole create non-local causes that emerge far from us. There is value in working with the system any place it manifests because unseen connections will create effects at a distance, in places we never thought. This model of change - of small starts, surprises, unseen connections, quantum leaps - matches our experience more closely than our favored models of incremental change. (pp. 42-43)

As ecopsychologist Betsy Barnum concludes:

I see this as a description of how change within even a single person who adjusts her life and energy to the flow of the Universe, and begins to live according to and in sync with the Universe's inherent pattern of order, can have impact way beyond the incremental notion of influencing those directly in contact with her. And then when more people join together in connection with each other and with the connecting fields around them, the incremental increases in people working in

¹⁷ For a more thorough discussion of Wheatley's books, refer to Betsy Barnum's thought-provoking review, *Activism and 20th-Century Science: Think Universe, Act Locally*.

sync with the flow of universal energy greatly increases the potential power of possible non-local impacts.

This is my inspiration for announcing a [Planetary Hospice Movement](#). It isn't that I've founded anything new -- if anything, I'm a late-comer to the movement. It's just that I have a different take on things that happens to resonate with others around the world who are becoming conscious of the same emergent awareness that I am. We are united by this awareness, but it is something that transcends any one individual. As Joseph Campbell would say, it is both immanent and transcendent. My intention is to do whatever I can do to help alleviate the suffering that is going to continue to be fomented by the climate crisis, to be inspired by others engaging in similarly constructive efforts, and network with them to inspire others to do their own part in their own creative ways, working within their own communities and social networks. And I have faith that it is the [morphic field of resonance](#)¹⁸ underlying and feeding off of all these compassionate activities that will crystallize one day into the kind of catharsis that will effectively transmute our species into a more caring, cooperative, conscientious and loving community of survivors on this nurturing planet we hold so dear in our hearts.

As the Indian guru and sanyassin Satyananda Saraswat said:

Transformation comes not from discussing our problems and looking for alleged culprits. Transformation is only possible if a critical mass of people make the leap from unconsciousness to awareness. If we – you and me – ask ourselves what part we are playing in any present problem.

What part will you play?

¹⁸ Yet another key emergent development pioneered by the British biologist Rupert Sheldrake.