

It's the End of the World?

Debbie Leaman



I admit it – I don't read newspapers as thoroughly as my politically minded mother would have liked. I'm either too busy, too lazy, or maybe I just don't want to read disturbing news from around the globe. Just the other day, I glanced at the paper, catching a glimpse of a front page article on global warming; scientists fear it's worse than previously thought. The rapid rise in the earth's temperature is approaching a level not seen in one million years. I was on my way to go grocery shopping. What was I supposed to do with this information?

We live in a new reality. Images of war, genocide and natural disasters are a click away as a constant stream of news reports filter through us: nuclear proliferation, avian flu, depletion of the ozone layer, bioterrorism and airline threats. As common as the weather report, they become ambient noise. Yet we trudge along, living our lives as if this is normal. Well—it is normal. But is it healthy?

How do we cope with information bombarding us from across the globe without falling apart ourselves? Where does all of this negative psychic energy end up in our minds? Our bodies? How do we process the potential annihilation of our species and planet?

Some suppress fear and anxiety by hiding behind a 72-hour food supply and a carton of duct tape. But for others, the terror and feelings of hopelessness go much deeper into the psyche, rendering them unable to live fulfilling and productive lives. This misery, whether acute or mild, can be called environmental despair.

In a society which values optimism and “looking on the sunny side of life,” few forums or outlets exist to discharge pent-up fear and anxiety. Nobody wants to hear complaints about impending disasters. However, these feelings can be tapped into and used as seeds for change. Using environmental despair, loss or trauma as a catalyst for transformation, Theresa Holleran, a therapist at Red Rock Counseling & Education with 31 years of experience, helps heal her patients. She encourages valuing these disturbances and looking inward, “because therein lies the wisdom.”

Symptoms of environmental despair should be respected, viewed as tools for understanding deeper issues within the self. When there is an inversion in Salt Lake City, Holleran uses the inversion as a means for uncovering underlying disturbances and working through issues by having people actually role play and become the inversion. She challenges them to identify those things, like the muck trapped inside the heavy, enveloping cloud, that don't belong inside of them, thoughts that may need to be expelled. The inversion invites opportunity for introspection.

Holleran is an avid follower of Joanna Macy, the author of many books and a leader in creative sustained social action. She recalls hearing Macy at a transpersonal psychology conference in the early '90s. “Macy said, ‘If we cut down the

rainforests in South America, I will not be able to breathe in California.” Holleran adds, “What happens in Chernobyl or the rainforest does affect me here. We are not separate.”

“As we work to heal the earth, the earth heals us,” writes Macy in “World As Lover, World as Self.” It’s a natural feedback loop whereby helping yourself causes you to help others; helping others can create change within. And, Holleran says, you have to start with the self. “It’s very easy for us to judge what’s happening on the other side of the world, but we have our own internal warfare.” If you can make peace with your demons, you bring light into your shadow. “If I can do that with my own material,” she continues, “then I can also work on that with my family, my intimate others, my friends, my community. Then I will be contributing to transformation on this planet.”

Holleran also draws upon the teachings of other cultures to guide her patients deeper in the transformation process. She works with yoga and meditation practices for quelling anxiety and mood disturbances; she advocates the benefit of service.

“In the West we don’t realize how important it is to be of service,” she says. “Service can be to our own children, it can be to trust that our creativity has something to offer someone else or the developing world.”

This reminds me of the Hebrew phrase *Tikkun olam*, which translates to “repairing the world”—performing human acts of kindness (*mitzvot*) to bring the world closer to perfection, thus avoiding negative and social consequences.

What to do if you are experiencing environmental despair? Holleran encourages asking yourself, “Is there anything in this moment I can express or do that will help the situation?” It might be to start recycling in earnest, buying organic, becoming a social activist or voting for politicians who are moral and respect the environment.

Or, it may be as simple as not watching the nightly news. How can that help?

In “Abandoned Soul, Abandoned Planet,” renowned Jungian analyst and author Marion Woodman is interviewed about environmental illness and despair. She discusses negative imagery literally changing the body’s cells and its immune response, and advocates the “sword of discretion” in ridding ourselves of negativity. Referring to watching horrific images on the nightly news just before bed, she challenges us to ask ourselves, “Is this program of value to me? Is this the right time to watch it? Is it sapping my energy?”

Marion continues, “Questions such as these have to be asked about ideas, relationships, possessions, anything that may be becoming destructive to the soul’s growth. What is destructive has to be, first of all, recognized; and, secondly, cut. That takes courage.”

But courage also requires support. During times of transformation, Holleran says, “we need a structure, or as Marion Woodman calls it, a ‘container’ that can hold us as we’re working with the disturbances or losses. Certainly therapy can be a container. Having the ability to mirror yourself to yourself in some way through art, music, dance, journal writing; taking an art or writing class, listening to a meditation tape, talking with a spouse or a circle of friends whom you really trust that can mirror you and reflect back to who you are—these are some ways to find structure. Take time out of ordinary life for reflection.”

In times of such disturbance, Holleran continues, “find a container in creativity, prayer, service work, social activism or spiritual practice, whatever religion or practice you observe.” Maintain a “deep presence for the ones you love and a deep presence and empathy for your own inner state. Have an attitude of curiosity because that disturbance may take you to some new territory.”

Holleran also invites clients to feed themselves healing images of the positive feminine or the positive masculine. For those without such a positive figure in life, she suggest looking for one and beginning to create it in their own psyches.

The importance of positive role models and mentors cannot be underestimated in helping us guide our way in the world. Find an elder. “Not valuing the elderly is a tragedy. We think that being fit and holding onto our youth is where our values should be rather than letting the luminosity of wisdom shine through our bodies as we age.” Holleran encourages us to find teachers, mentors, and some wise elders to learn from—in person if you can do it; if not, through books, classes or retreats.

Growth and transformation sometimes require suffering. It's part of the human condition. "In order to step into a more authentic life we have to have an ability to face our own suffering and loss," says Holleran. And it is human to feel both pain and happiness. "To be an evolved human being, you have to be able to tolerate that paradox." She adds, "It's been times when I've been in the most pain, that I've dug down into my deepest sense of self and experienced the most growth and sense of grace." Surrendering into whatever life gives us and being able to let go is to live a fuller life.

Ironically, living a full life also requires the process of death. Every generation has some terrible challenge to face, bringing to consciousness the nearness of death. "Many indigenous cultures view death as the ally, sitting on your shoulder as a way to make you feel present in the world," she says. Time is fleeting and the task is to figure out how the specter of death "can be our ally in making decisions to create a vision that is in the service of life." She quotes Marion Woodman: "Birth is the death of the life we have known. Death is the birth of the life we have yet to know."

But there is hope. "On one extreme, because of the Internet we have images and information about the worst that's happening around the world," says Holleran. "But, we also have access to spiritual wisdom and guidance that has never been available before. We have real help. There are teachings and practices that can really help us as individuals to cope and evolve our own consciousness so that we can face these things."

Resources

Red Rock Counseling & Education. 150 South 600 East, Salt Lake City, UT 84102. 524-0560.

www.mwoodmanfoundation.org – The official website for Marion Woodman's work

"World As Lover, World As Self," by Joanna Macy. This collection of talks and essays deals with issues of environmental despair and transformation.

"The Places That Scare You," by Pema Chodron. A guide to fearlessness in difficult times.

"Man's Search for Meaning," by Viktor E. Frankl. The renowned psychiatrist's own experiences in Nazi concentration camps and his ability to survive. Frankl believes man's motivation for survival lies in purpose and meaning.



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Debbie Leaman has written for Catalyst and other Utah publications. A former Certified Financial Planner, she left the investment world to pursue writing.

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