ECOLOGICAL GRIEF

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A Little Hope Remains

You are a child of the sun, you come from the sun, and that is something true with the Earth also... your relationship with the Earth is so deep, and the Earth is in you and this is something not very difficult, much less difficult than philosophy. Thich Nhat Hanh

It's rather challenging today to have any sense of hope for the future when so many headlines remind us that extinction, due to the climate crisis, is happening to many species, and ours might be gone by 2030 or 2050, depending upon the article you read. There's so much reason for concern, but amongst it all, there still is some hope if we look for it.

Ecological grief, a term I coined almost 20 years ago, means the grief reaction stemming from the disconnection from, and loss of relationship with our natural world. Sadly, we see examples of this all the time in our daily lives. We are so disconnected from nature that we don't even realize how much.

Our habits keep us addicted to plastic, fossil fuels and sometimes sheer ignorance. While we know plastics are found in the corpses of animals from birds to whales, it's also found in the bloodstream and digestive tract of humans. Fossil fuels are destroying the planet, yet in the United States we continue to drive gas-guzzling cars because we can. As for ignorance, that one seems to be the issue that concerns
me most about whether or not hope remains.

While young people are becoming more environmentally active, we still find those pockets of people who consider a “like” in social media worth the life of an animal. Consider those who post a selfie of themselves with a baby dolphin. I saw an image like this and was horrified to see people crowded around a man who was holding up a baby dolphin at the ocean’s shore, while taking photos of himself. Others were grabbing at the baby and also taking photos of themselves with the baby dolphin behind them being thrust in the air. IN THE AIR! I’m not sure what the outcome was for the baby dolphin, but I’m sure it wasn’t good. Imagine the trauma of being grabbed out of your home environment and then thrust about while people are grabbing at you and touching you. People were clamoring about, thoughtlessly putting themselves first with no consideration to the welfare of the dolphin. The baby was a prop for people to get more “likes” or followers for their social media.

Trophy hunters infuriate me. Let’s wrap our heads around the fact that humans intentionally murder animals, only to place the head of the animal on their wall, or for other human-centric reasons. The animal is murdered because some people think it’s entertaining. Perhaps those people share a mindset with those who profit from human trafficking.

For those of us who care about our planet and see how some of our own species trample on the only home we have, our reaction is that of grief.

Sometimes grief pushes us to take action. When it comes to ecological grief, I would like to see people acknowledge their grief because if you suppress it at all it will find a way to come out and it usually does so at an inconvenient time.

Use the ecological grief you have to do something to save your backyard, community and planet. We often find ourselves reaching for a weed killer that is toxic, and using cleaning supplies that are deadly to animals. It’s too easy to find products that make our lives easier, but also are deadly to nature and even ourselves, yet we continue to use them. I’ve had to fight with repair people who want to use one product or another that is completely toxic. We must be willing to pay more for healthier options. Thankfully, people share their DIY concoctions online for others to learn about the amazing cleaning virtues of baking soda, vinegar, diatomaceous earth and other household products that aren’t toxic.

Indeed, there is a lot of despair and sadness out there and reasons to grieve, but all of that, grief is bringing some people together to take action and make change. In May, I attended the Global Earth Repair Conference in Port Townsend, WA. What was going to be a three-day conference ended up being five days, and even longer for some who wanted to take advantage of seeing the sights and sounds of the area. There were so many 1 ½ hour sessions that it was challenging to choose which to attend because they were all interesting. One afternoon I participated on a panel discussion about grief. There were five people on the panel, with one woman moderating. The audience was larger than I expected due to the fact that there were many other workshops on at the same time. A few of the people on the panel perform grief ceremonies and rituals to help those who need to acknowledge their grief with others in a safe space. Later that evening, they offered such a ritual.

The next day, I offered a workshop on environmental grief, the grief reaction stemming from the environmental loss of ecosystems, caused by natural or man-made events. I originated this term at the
same time as ecological grief almost 20 years ago, as I mentioned. At that time, my research focused on environmental grief and the decline of the Southern Resident Orcas (SROs) for my doctorate in thanatology, the study/science of death, dying and bereavement.

Later that day, I participated on another panel discussion on the Rights of Nature. There's one group that I've been working with that truly gives me hope. Three years ago, I learned about the Rights of Nature movement where Nature herself is given rights similar to that of humans. Some countries have included Rights of Nature into their constitutions. There are rights for rivers and ecosystems, and we're working on getting Rights of Nature for the Southern Resident Orcas in the Salish Sea. This isn't an easy task in the United States, given the power corporations have to destroy wherever they want. Corporations seem to have carte blanche when it comes to exploiting and destroying the planet, but animals don't. However, people are becoming more aware of our need to protect our own communities from environmental destruction. Rights of Nature is about changing the environmental laws in this country to finally benefit and serve the environment, and not only corporations. Simply put, it reminds us once again that we are connected to Nature and that she is not our property or something that should be our entertainment. The Southern Resident Orcas should have the right to autonomy, a healthy habitat, and the right to thrive.

During the time I attended this conference, I felt hope. There were so many people there, appearing to come from various backgrounds with the one goal of saving the planet. It was a reminder that we're not alone in this. There are people around the world working very hard to change the direction we're going, from utter destruction and catastrophe to beauty, healing and community.

Hope? My hope is that we use our ecological grief to change laws and give Rights of Nature to Mother Earth. Perhaps when humans finally give up the folly of dominance and replace it with the wisdom of empathy, all species will then have a healthy future.

![Cartoon by: Ronalyn Pacho-Vidal from Antipolo City, Philippines](image-url)