

Who Gets to Cry? by Trebbe Johnson

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"Why don't you switch channels and see if there's anything else on?" That's what the husband of a friend of mine would say during those weeks in the spring of 2010, when oil from BP's Deepwater Horizon well was spewing into the Gulf of Mexico and his favorite news channel showed him yet another image of dying wildlife: a brown pelican struggling to raise heavy wings drenched in oil; a pod of dolphins plowing through viscous pink and blue ribbons of petroleum, expelling oil through their blowholes; a gull, barely alive, peering out through the thick confection that coated its head at a world it could no longer fly toward or away from. My friend's husband would make his request casually, as if he were merely curious, and then, after a few minutes, he would suggest she switch back to the original program. The truth, she told me, was that the sight of those helpless animals made him so sad he couldn't bear to look at them.

This man felt that he himself was being assailed when the TV network forced him to consider wildlife being tortured to death by oil. Those images opened in him a reserve of sorrow and pity that threatened to release a flood of something overwhelming if he didn't move quickly to contain it. Because, really, what could a person do? Volunteer to go down to the Gulf and help clean the birds off? Send a check? In any case, it didn't do any good to sit around moping about it. You can't cry over a pelican. Everyone knows that.

If you're someone who does give vent to expressions of sorrow and pity for animals and plants, you open yourself to ridicule. You're seen as weak, emotional. You're dismissed as a "tree-hugger" and presumed to care more about pelicans (or dolphins or moss or snail darters) than people. You may be accused of lapsing into that ultimate form of mushy thinking, anthropomorphism. Scientists and environmentalists are so eager to protect themselves from this career-tarnishing label that they often hasten to assure reporters or audiences that "I'm not anthropomorphizing, but—" as they begin talking about some place or species they want to protect. Anthropomorphizing, of course, means endowing a nonhuman being with human feelings; it does not mean having personal feelings oneself about a nonhuman. And yet, conservationists desperate to avoid the charge insist that not only the species that inhabit a place but also they themselves have no emotional stake in what happens to it. The concern must be objective and detached.

"When I think about it, even now, I feel a sadness and I get angry," Dot Fields, a biologist at Virginia's Department of Conservation Resources told me after she learned that a court ruling would permit development on a beach she had found to be one of the prime habitats in the world for the rare *Cicindela dorsalis dorsalis*, or tiger beetle. On a warm summer day a couple of friends and I had walked with Dot along the white-sand beach at

Savage Neck on Virginia's Eastern Shore. Our gazes did not scan the gently meandering coastline or the sun-glazed waves rushing toward the shore; they were pinned resolutely on the sand right in front of our feet, scoping out tiger beetles. "There!" called Dot. We looked her way just in time to see half a dozen of the iridescent silver insects scuttling together across a patch of beach before diving under the sand.

These beetles spend their whole lives along this intertidal zone, eating small invertebrates as well as dead fish and crabs and ducking underground for cover. The female lays her eggs just beneath the surface of the sand, and when the larvae hatch, they burrow even deeper to a more protected environment, where they feed on small organisms that creep past. As they get older, tiger beetle young come into possession of a rare skill for getting from one place to another. It's called "wheel location," and it entails leaping up into the air, rolling into a ball, bouncing back to Earth, and then allowing oneself to be propelled by the wind, wheel-like, along the beach. Now, this particular beach, one of the tiger beetles' last remaining habitats in Virginia, was under threat by development. Millions of the beetles had been crushed when the state government had dumped ten thousand cubic feet of sand on the beach to allay the fears of seaside homeowners that their real estate was shrinking. Future threats to the insects included more housing permits, the installation of septic systems, and additional sand dumps to beef up the beach for human residents.

For me the afternoon spent at Savage Neck with Dot Fields and the tiger beetles was an entirely different kind of beachcombing than I'd ever engaged in. All our attention was fixed on tiger beetles. Tiger beetles were the one thing we cared about spotting. Tiger beetles, for those hours, became rare, skilled, lovely beings whose continued life in this place was of extreme importance. When we spotted them racing and ducking like soldiers on a dangerous reconnaissance mission, we would shout out to one another exultantly. And Dot had been working for years to protect them.

When she learned a few months later that the beach would be open to development, "I pretty much cried," she told me over the phone. Even as she said it, she doused her words with a little laugh. "It was something that I spent a lot of effort on and time on. The best way to describe it was, it was a grieving thing. What I had fought for had died, and there was nothing I could do about it. It wasn't going to be stopped." Was there any way she could express this "grieving thing" with colleagues? I asked. "I tend to turn thoughts inward," Dot answered. "I kind of keep the thoughts to myself and keep going until it settles out. Basically I internalize it." [1]

DENIAL AND THE DOUBLE REALITY

Joanna Macy has proposed several reasons why people avoid admitting to sadness and despair about the state of their world. Some are afraid that their feelings will be interpreted as negativity by their friends, who will then themselves fall prey to it. Others worry that getting emotional about the decline of nature shows lack of faith in God, who they believe has a plan for all things, or even that it is unpatriotic, since it counters the treasured American archetype of the optimistic, can-do individual who can hack through any problem a wild, untamed place confronts him with. [2] Still other people are under the impression that it's not really the state of the natural world they're upset about, but part of their own psyche. In one of her essays, Macy describes a session with her psychiatrist who, after listening to her describe her anxiety about poverty, nuclear proliferation, and environmental pollution, suggested that her concern was not really about those things at all, but was merely an outward projection of suppressed feelings about her childhood. Once she had uncovered and resolved that old trauma, the therapist assured her, she

would cease to care so much about issues over which she had no control.

Mainstream psychology has “pathologized and individualized personal pain,” writes psychologist and educator Sarah Conn, who has studied the relationship between the health of the environment surrounding a person and that person’s mental health.

When we act, we tend to address specific personal problems, or sometimes social, economic or political issues, without much attention to how they are interrelated or affected by the larger context of the degradation of the biosphere. We have, in short, cut ourselves off from our connection to the Earth so thoroughly in our epistemology and our psychology that even though we are “bleeding at the roots,” we neither understand the problem nor know what we can do about it.[3]

Although psychologists have focused for more than a hundred years on how the personality shapes itself, like skin around a splinter, according to the ways in which parents, spouses, fourth- grade teachers, and bosses have gouged it, they rarely examine the effects on the psyche of the condition of the living environment, the boundary and constant of all those other influential phenomena. Psychotherapist and author Miriam Greenspan has noted that, in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) IV, published by the American Psychiatric Association and the therapeutic bible of symptoms and their causes, “not one of the approximately 360 diagnoses ... makes any connection between our emotional disturbances and the state of the world.”[4] In her own book, *Healing through the Dark Emotions*, Greenspan discusses war, poverty, terrorism, and other social problems as batterers of the psyche and suggests as a remedy that people spend more time in nature. Yet even she seems to take for granted that nature will always be instantly available, a comforting ally whenever you need it. Increasingly, of course, the ally itself is under assault. As the psyche’s refuges disappear, the psyche becomes increasingly frayed.

Another reason we swallow our tears, says restoration ecologist William R. Jordan III, is that a pervasive sense of shame about our human complicity in harming our earthly home burdens us. We are further burdened because we cannot bear to acknowledge this shame:

If I am to blame, even slightly, should I not be forbidden from mourning the outcome of what I have set in motion? Shame is different from guilt, Jordan points out:

It is not the response of the conscience to what we do, but of our consciousness of what we are.... Shame, in this sense—what I call existential shame—may arise from a wrongdoing, but it is not associated only with moral failure. It is rather a sense of existential unworthiness.[5]

When I feel shame, I know, achingly, that there is nothing I can do to make amends, that my debts are so great I’ll never be able to repay them. Jordan believes that collective human shame first arose from the imperative to kill animals, especially animals that one has raised from birth, so one’s family and oneself might eat. Many indigenous cultures had rituals for acknowledging and making reparations for the collective shame of being human and having to take the lives of nonhuman beings and plants. A Navajo elder I used to spend time with in northeastern Arizona would apologize to the plants she cut for ceremonial use and explain to them that she was doing so “with all good intention.” But the modern West not only has no such rituals, but denies the ecological shame that has become a persistent ache in the human psyche. I myself do not have to slaughter an innocent pig for my dinner; I myself am not dumping toxic chemicals into a river.

Therefore, I can claim personal guiltlessness and insist that the real culprit is Big Business, The Government, or People with Money. Nevertheless, if I'm honest, I must admit that I can't be alive and not take, use, and throw away, and hence I am implicated in that killing, that dumping. As long as I deny my shame, I cast the blame outward and stave off the lamentation burning within me.

There is another reason for fending off sorrow about the loss of the wild natural places we love to visit and the communities where we live, and this is perhaps the hardest one of all to accept and overcome. Many of us are simply afraid that if we allow ourselves to wade, even for a moment, into the feelings of sadness for the living world that lap at the edge of our consciousness, we will find ourselves pulled so ruthlessly into grief and despair that we will never emerge.

Sociologists have observed that when a natural disaster hits a community, people suffer, but they rally quickly. A hurricane, a forest fire, an earthquake take lives and cause massive suffering, but even the people most severely affected know that there's nothing they could have done to prevent it. They may wish they had done certain things that might have mitigated the damage, but the thing was going to happen. Besides, a natural disaster occurs and then it's over. You start picking up the pieces, and with that gesture, that first reaching down into the chaos to see what can be rescued and where you have to start all over, you're saying to yourself and your neighbors and your God, Okay, I'm broken, but I'll survive. Here I am, digging myself out. Even in the midst of suffering and grieving, people rally around one another, help where they can, open their arms and their homes to those who have lost even more.

But when the disaster is caused by humans, it's another story. With a nuclear power plant leak, a chemical spill, or a coal mine collapse, there's no end in sight. You can't just pick up the pieces, because the pieces are too toxic. You have no idea when it might be safe for you to return to your home or your work: a week? A month? Never? Victims of a human-caused environmental calamity automatically look for some person or some corporation or government agency to blame. Somebody was responsible for this upheaval and needs to be made to pay. Even those hurt by the event feel guilty and depressed. In the two months after BP's rig began spilling oil into the Gulf, calls to Louisiana's suicide prevention line increased from 400 to 2,400. Arguing and drinking increased. The mayor of Bayou La Batre, Alabama, reported that incidents of domestic violence went up 320 percent since the start of the spill, and calls per day to the police increased 110 percent.[6] An atmosphere of suspicion hovered around communities like a swamp gas. When your world collapses because of an accident that resulted—or even might have resulted—from human error, you have no idea when or if things will ever be built back up again. A sense of panic rises in you many times a day: How am I going to manage? What will become of my family? I am all alone. The negative affects can go on for months, even years. The tangible, physical manifestations of the disaster may or may not be visible in the world around you, but you never stop wondering about the invisible effects. Is your water safe to drink? Are you sucking in poison with every breath you breathe? That pain in your ears—is it the first symptom of a brain tumor? When will the next explosion, the next collapse, the next leak arrive to shatter you all over again?

And as the repercussions of climate change become more evident and more violent, the line between what is "natural" and what is "caused by humans" becomes harder to distinguish. In the summer of 2017, wildfires scorched nine U.S. states and British Columbia; 1,200 people in India, Nepal, and Bangladesh were killed and more than 40,000 made homeless by monsoon flooding; and in Bali, rain pelted the emerald green crop terraces weeks beyond its regular season, destroying the rice, cloves, and coffee harvests

that farmers rely on to supply their incoming for the next year. Within a two-week period from mid- to late August, three hurricanes, Harvey, Irma, and Maria, wreaked havoc and took lives in Houston, Florida, Puerto Rico, and the Caribbean Islands. The entire island of Puerto Rico lost power, and supplies of clean water, food, and medicine on the island territory became scarce within days after the winds died down. Tearfully the mayor of San Juan, Carmen Yulín Cruz Soto, told the press, “We’re dying here.”[7]

Those who must cope with the damage done by environmental disasters in their immediate vicinity have no choice but to deal with them as best they can. But now, in the era of looming climate change, even if you have not yet been so challenged, you know that you, too, must consider how you will manage loss, displacement, and the end of the familiar, not in the present, perhaps, but certainly sometime in the near future. If you fail to do so, you will probably be told by environmental activists that you’re in denial. Actually, there are two kinds of denial. One is a refutation of fact. People who claim that global warming is a hoax levied on the public by liberals or the Chinese perpetrate this kind of denial. The other kind of denial, frequently confused with the first, is what Dorland’s Medical Dictionary for Health Consumers calls “a defense mechanism in which the existence of unpleasant internal or external realities is kept out of conscious awareness.” The former denial says, No, that is not happening; the latter says, It may be happening, but I can’t deal with it, so I’m just going to go along with this helpful little story I’ve concocted about why it’s not all that important for me to think about it just now: I’m too busy; it’s not yet that urgent; somebody somewhere is surely working on it and will get it fixed by the time I do have to concern myself.

Calling this second reaction “denial” is not the most helpful way of dealing with it. A 2013 poll by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication discovered that, although 63 percent of Americans believe that the Earth is heating up, 43 percent feel helpless to do anything about it.[8] Chances are, these people are not in denial; they just feel powerless. So they try to switch channels, like the man who couldn’t stand to watch Gulf creatures smothered in oil, by knowing and not knowing the truth at the same time. Sociologist Kari Norgaard encountered this coping mechanism, which she called a “double reality,” when she was studying responses to climate change in a small Norwegian village that was so buffeted by unusual and unpredictable weather patterns that the ski slopes didn’t open until December—and then only after repeated applications of artificial snow. Nevertheless, nobody in town would talk about what was happening. One man illustrated his method of adaptation to the truth by holding his hands in front of his eyes. “We need to protect ourselves a little bit,” he told Norgaard.[9]

Glenn Albrecht, the Australian philosopher and activist who coined the word solastalgia, has also invented a term to describe this sense of extreme helplessness: eco-paralysis. People do not refrain from acting because they are incapable of acting, Albrecht argues. They simply can’t bear to confront the immensity of the problem that both surrounds them physically and plagues them emotionally. It is too painful to register, and they have no way of either expressing the pain they feel or transmuting it into some kind of action. They turn, therefore, anywhere but to the monster itself. “The intractable nature of the problems, the fact that they are tied to the very foundations of our present economy generates dilemmas not seen before in human history.”[10]

Ultimately, writes Susan Griffin, fear of the irremediable destruction of the Earth, a danger “bordering on the continuity of life itself,”[11] is so severe that it cripples the ability to contemplate the forces that could have led to such a predicament and hence to a

platform from which to consider solutions. How to deal with it? It's not hard to understand why many simply feel they can't.

Ignored, however, the fear, grief, shame, and despair we try to sidestep can turn into a monster as big as the monster that spawned them in the first place. Not only must the victim of a mud slide or a hazardous waste incinerator cope with problems of health, safety, and property values, she must also do her best to carry on with her life amidst a swarm of difficult feelings. Miriam Greenspan describes how what she calls a "triad of dark emotions" takes its toll in insidious ways:

Aborted or suppressed grief easily devolves into depression, anxiety, and addiction. Benumbed fear often turns into xenophobia, psychosomatic ailments, and acts of violence. Overwhelming despair can lead to severe psychic numbing or express itself through destructive acts to oneself and others, including suicide and homicide. The inability to tolerate the dark emotions is a major cause of addictions such as alcohol, drugs, technology, work and sex, which afflict our civilization. In short, unattended grief, fear, and despair are at the root of the characteristic psychological disturbances of our time.[12]

Since there's a chance I could shrivel up just by turning around to face this hovering, heavily armed mob of feelings, I'll just keep my back to it, thanks. I know it's there, but don't tell me I'm in denial when I'm pretty sure I know exactly what I'll be dealing with if I don't protect myself.

I asked the president of one of the leading environmental organizations in the United States if his company provided any way for staff members who have worked to protect some rare and beautiful place to express their sorrow if the place they were devoted to ends up falling to the drill, the saw, the dozer. "Absorbing loss is not really what we're interested in," he replied. "That would be counterproductive. We have to move on to the next goal, not wallow in the past." Wallow? Is expressing grief really wallowing? Would it demean the disciplined work ethic of these dedicated activists if they were to spend just an hour or two sitting together and sharing their reactions to the loss of a place that commanded their attention and their hearts for months or even years?

[1] Dot Fields, conversation with author, July 20, 2009.

[2] Macy lists several other "causes of repression," including fear of appearing stupid, fear of provoking disaster, and fear of sowing panic. Joanna Macy, *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1983), 6-12.

[3] Sarah Conn, "When the Earth Hurts, Who Responds?" in *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind*, eds. Theodore Roszak, Mary E. Gomes, and Allen D. Kanner (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1995), 161.

[4] Miriam Greenspan, "Healing Through the Dark Emotions in an Age of Global Threat," in *Transforming Terror: Remembering the Soul of the World*, eds. Karin Lofthus Carrington and Susan Griffin (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 143.

[5] William R. Jordan III, *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 46. Jordan, citing religious scholar Jonathan Z. Smith, posits that shame arose when agriculturalists began to kill for food the animals they had raised.

- [6] Mac McClelland, "Depression, Abuse, Suicide: Fishermen's Wives Face Post- Spill Trauma," Mother Jones, June 25, 2010, <http://goo.gl/Mgd57L>.
- [7] "Puerto Rico—'We Are Dying,' Says San Juan's Mayor—Video," The Guardian, September 30, 2017, <http://goo.gl/VaSGt9>.
- [8] Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, "Climate Change in the American Mind: Americans' Global Warming Beliefs and Attitudes in November 2013," January 16, 2014, <http://goo.gl/yXMhRx>.
- [9] Kathy Seal, "Why Isn't Climate Change on More Lips?" Pacific Standard, December 14, 2011, <http://goo.gl/x7v6NE>.
- [10] Glenn Albrecht, "Ecoparalysis," Healthearth blog, January 31, 2010, <http://healthearth.blogspot.com/2010/01/ecoparalysis.html>.
- [11] Susan Griffin, *A Chorus of Stones: The Private Life of War* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 65.)
- [12] Miriam Greenspan, "In a Dark Time," in Carrington and Griffin, *Transforming Terror*, 144.