

Gratitude, Grief and Finding Your Yes by Terry Patten

No one can say with certainty how our civilizational crisis will play out. We don't know exactly how much suffering and destruction—human and nonhuman—might lie in store for us, or how soon. But we do know, with increasing certainty, that the actions of human beings have created horrific disasters and an existential predicament; and we also know that the actions of human beings—for good or for ill—will determine the future of our great grandchildren and the great grandchildren of thousands of other living beings. The stakes could scarcely be higher. We cannot wait to “see what happens” before we act on this awareness. Rather, we are obliged right now to do whatever we can to help prevent or mitigate the horrific scenarios that we have set in motion. What could be a greater moral imperative?

Only human beings can protect and defend the future of life on Earth from human beings. It will take conscious individuals making deliberate choices based on the best information available—people presuming responsibility to make a difference. Nothing could be more honorable and worthwhile.

The word “activist” conjures images of sit-ins, people circulating petitions and raising money and marching and organizing and meeting and getting people to the polls. But it also means doing research, starting businesses, making loans, and changing one's diet. When people creatively act on their moral intuition, all kinds of things happen. The world of activism is very big, diverse, and dynamic. And it requires—and helps us along in—transcending the collective trance.

Spiritual life involves growing into a wise and healthy relationship to reality. The word “spiritual” points to the deepest level of being—essential and existential. Spiritual growth and development enable us to glimpse the bountiful grace in which we live—the beauty of the world, and the privilege of conscious embodied existence. Gratitude is universal spiritual wisdom, and it is sufficient.

Such gratitude is awake. It is realistically in touch with loss and death and threat—not in denial. Saints are grateful even while resonating empathically with suffering. Everything we love is mortal, even the living Earth. Everything regenerates, and yet can also be threatened and wounded. The heart breaks to see the destruction of vulnerable people, living creatures, and wild places. We want to protect them. We want to help. As Joanna Macy so sagely puts it, “If everyone I love is in danger, I want to be here, so I can do what I can.” Activism is simply acting on the impulse to “be of benefit” to something greater than yourself, in a whole variety of ways. Not all of them look like overt “activism,” but many do. All are natural expressions of human maturity.

But exactly how can we effectively address the totality of this crisis? If addressing it requires knowing exactly how the crisis will unfold and exactly what it will take to prevent

it, then we can't. We face so many truly "wicked" problems, we are facing a predicament. There is no way that we can address the whole tangle of causes and consequences—everything is connected to everything else. Our predicament requires a revolutionary transformation of every aspect of human life—a "Great Transition" or "Great Turning." It will ultimately require revolutionary changes in human consciousness, behavior, culture, and the physical, economic, and political infrastructure of our whole civilization. It is so vast and intricate, it easily seems impossible. We might be tempted to despair, but we can't reside there: despair easily becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because this huge transformation has so many aspects, every one of us can readily find ways to magnify love and sanity and beauty and truth and human connection. Every one of us can find many things we can actually do.

Paradoxically, the many little things we can do—each of which may seem in itself woefully insufficient to our total predicament—may well be a good start. We will continue to see the endings of life all around us, and we will grieve for all of the losses we witness. Our spirit and consciousness will go through a transformative ordeal as we take in new terrible truths about our predicament. But many actions on many levels, when collectively engaged (and perhaps further catalyzed by positive black swan breakthroughs) may ultimately add up into a single great action. At our micro level, there are many things we can do, and are doing, to address even our mega crisis.

To be an effective agent of change does not mean we have to know everything. But it does require opening to another level of transformation and creativity. Our predicament presents us with a vast demand and limitless opportunity for growth. Our crisis seems overwhelming, and yet we live in a universe of awe-inspiring creative potential—in nature, in our fellow humans, in the evolutionary process, and certainly in ourselves.

The story of evolution is a story of miracle after miracle. We must simultaneously take in the magnitude of the problem—grieve for much inevitable suffering—and do what we can on behalf of creative solutions, on every scale. To do both requires great openness on our part—openness to growth and to creative responses that we didn't know were possible. We give ourselves over to something that feels true. We magnify health and wholeness, even in the face of fragmentation—and in our trust of the larger process, we also become more effective. Our souls are positively stirred, and conscripted. This process of growth is clearly never-ending.

The first stage of the journey into spiritual activism is grounded robustly in gratitude and appreciation. In the second stage, we awaken from denial, apprehend the enormity of the challenge before us, and allow a great grieving process to transform the soul. We benefit even from the awful moments of hopelessness—because despair is not just the end of our conventional hope. It is also the beginning point for a new possibility, a third stage—perhaps a kind of unreasonable affirmation.

The Wisdom of Grieving

Not only is grieving a stage of the spiritual activist's journey, but the grieving process itself often unfolds in stages, which can be described using Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's famous five stages of grief. These five stages—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—describe the process of psychologically responding to the prospect and reality of any catastrophic loss.

Denial can be said to be a defense against suffering and grieving. If reality is too painful, don't face it. Maintain equilibrium and good humor by closing the metaphorical eyes, or

the mind. Turn off the news, doubt its veracity, change the channel.

While we can certainly criticize people's motivations for disengagement, it is also true that the attitudes communicated in media are often reactive and draining. So there are good reasons to practice skillful, selective disengagement from the 24/7 news cycle. Making intelligent and economical use of media and politics disciplines tendencies toward both mindless addiction and reactive avoidance.

Anger easily becomes a habitual defense against feeling loss, sadness, and fear, and it can perpetuate the cycle of hurt. But there are very good reasons to be angry. And anger cannot be bypassed. It is the energy to change what needs to be changed. But healthy anger rises and falls, rather than becoming a chronic state, and it stays in touch with everything it cares for.

The next stage is bargaining, an attempt to regain lost equanimity, perhaps by imagining alternative scenarios that mitigate the sense of loss. Whereas true equanimity is based on opening up to all of reality, including its darkness, bargaining seeks to keep painful realities at bay. It is a more sophisticated form of denial.

The fourth stage is depression. When it is clear that heartbreaking loss cannot be avoided, the being is at least temporarily shattered. We begin to fear losing something we have always depended upon and taken for granted—such as the company of a loved one, the restorative and healing grace of Mother Earth, or the ability to live in a prosperous, secure, open liberal society without doing anything to protect or defend it.

Mature, responsible adults are charged with staying intelligently related to the realities of our lives. But that requires us to pass through all the harrowing stages of grief into acceptance.

True acceptance recognizes the reality of our situation and accepts responsibility to arrive in basic equanimity and a capacity to act. We find a way to choose life, even in a world that includes horrific losses. We choose engagement with reality, including the gritty and not always pleasant involvements with people we may not like and in situations we would prefer to avoid. We know we have arrived in acceptance when we are in motion, doing what we can to make a positive difference. We find deep equanimity in activism itself.

Grief as Gateway

Grief is not weakness—it is a form of moral intelligence and even wisdom. It takes us through a necessary gateway.

It took me decades to fully appreciate how holy it is. I have learned from a whole series of “dark night” journeys dating back to the 20th century. But then, in 2016, the gates of grief swung open more widely than ever before. I had for so long lived such a blessed and joyous existence, I was a bit unprepared. But for me 2016 was not just an election year with all the shock many of us felt about the outcome; it was also a year of an alarming series of record high global temperatures and extreme weather events, and deep grieving over the grave damage we are doing to our living planet.

One of grief's great lessons is patience—an attitude of self-compassion. Under these kinds of circumstances, my imperfections rise to be noticed. Even under the most serious circumstances, I will be imperfect, maybe a bit of a klutz or unconscious in some moments, or seeking what cannot be found. Those limitations don't simply go away—not

for me, nor for you, nor for anyone. But we are privileged (even if awed) to be present in these very interesting times, facing realities that people before us couldn't countenance without horrified despair. It may take us many tries to get this right (and even then, we are never perfect), and our failures may even be costly. But, with self-compassion, self-forgiveness, and generosity, we can see our way through.

On the other side of all disillusionment and even despair, there will also be joy, and goodness, and beauty. Like spring after winter, or new growth after a fire, gratefulness and celebration have always sprung from the soil of loss and grief. We will be alive, and life is good. However difficult circumstances become, we can become able to savor the beauty of life in each present moment.

Seeing an overwhelming army massed on the horizon was anciently seen as the test of a soldier's mettle—it was the time to get strong, fierce, and inspired. Ancient warriors would often roar out an ecstatic war-cry. The battle was coming! And right now, in the meantime it is thrilling to be alive. (And really, the “meantime” is all any of us have ever had anyway!)

May we all be instructed by William Blake's beautiful quatrain:

He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy
He who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise.

Finding Your “Yes!”

Spiritual activism emerges from the stark recognition that we really are the cocreators of our world. We wake up from the trance in which we had imagined ourselves to be passive observers of the world, standing somehow apart from it. We recognize that we are not “in the stands” watching the action from an objective vantage point, and we never have been. We have always been on the field, and the ball is in play. When we realize we are full participants, we awaken into activism, and our practice becomes to engage with the game completely, holding nothing back.

One reason we give it all we've got is that nobody knows what will come. The future is indeterminate. It will emerge, and we have a part to play in determining what exactly will emerge. This uncertainty calls for sobriety, humility—and the aliveness of unreasonable hope. We do not and cannot know enough to justify despair and passivity.

Scientists and environmentalists have predicted that we have ten years to make radical changes, to launch a society-wide mobilization to convert our presence on the planet into a sustainable trajectory. This estimate is not just a wild guess. It is based on real data, and I take it seriously. But it doesn't serve to “believe” it in a way that drives me mad with embittering urgency.

Human knowledge is far too incomplete to quantify our opportunities. The real bottom line is that even though the world may be seriously out of balance, we just don't know—and can't know—exactly how bad (and good) things really are. We don't know how severe, sudden and pervasive our coming climate changes will be. We don't know what technological and social miracles will emerge. We don't know how much positive or negative extremes will catalyze what's best in human beings. We don't know how disruptive the transition will be from our unsustainable global financial, food, and

transportation systems to sustainable ones. We cannot and will not be able to know how much (or how little) disruption, pain, loss, and degradation are in store for us and those we love.

But we don't have to figure it all out. We don't have to become tangled up in our unknowable future as if it were an unsolvable dilemma. We don't have to handicap the odds in this high-stakes evolutionary horse-race in order to respond. We can cut through all the mind chatter by asking a deeper and more essential question:

Can I find in myself a no-matter-what commitment? Under the worst-case scenario, can I still tap into the well of uncaused, unreasonable happiness? Can I still relate to my fellow humans, and to all of life, with care and love? Can I still, to the fullest extent possible, remain present as a force for good in every moment?

A no-matter-what commitment resolves all dilemmas. Even if our predicament were hopeless, incapable of being anything but horrific, we would still be capable of loving one another, capable of enjoyment, capable of doing whatever we can to make life better, and capable of surrendering to the unknown.

We can be deeply spiritually happy if our happiness is not based on external certainties (or "reasons"), but rather on our ultimate connectedness with the source of all life. And this noncontingent happiness is free to express itself in the service of others and of creation. If we do these things, we are saying a resounding "Yes!" to life. And that "Yes!" makes all the difference.