The Anguish of the Age: Emotional Reactions to Collapse

Contributed by Robert Jensen
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Editor's note: this is a chance for reader feedback for an important work in progress.

We live amidst multiple crises -- economic and political, cultural and ecological -- that pose a significant threat to human life as we understand it.

There is no way to be awake to the depth of these crises without an emotional reaction.
There is no way to be aware of the pain caused by these systemic failures without some experience of dread, depression, distress.

To be fully alive today is to live with anguish, not for one's own condition in the world but for the condition of the world, for a world that is in collapse.

Though I have felt this for some time I hesitated to talk about it in public, out of fear of being accused of being too negative or dismissed as apocalyptic. But more of us are breaking through that fear, and more than ever it's essential that we face this aspect of our political lives. To talk openly about this anguish should strengthen, not undermine, our commitment to political engagement -- any sensible political program to which we can commit for the long haul has to start with an honest assessment of reality.

Here is how I would summarize our reality: Because of the destructive consequences of human intervention, it is not clear how much longer the planetary ecosystem can sustain human life on this scale. There is no way to make specific predictions, but it's clear that our current path leads to disaster. Examine the data on any crucial issue -- energy, water, soil erosion, climate disruption, chemical contamination, biodiversity -- and the news is bad. Platitudes about "necessity is the mother of invention" express a hollow technological fundamentalism; simply asserting that we want to solve the problems that we have created does not guarantee we can. The fact that we have not taken the first and most obvious step -- moving to a collective life that requires far less energy -- doesn't bode well for the future.

Though anguish over this reality is not limited to the affluence of the industrial world -- where many of us have the time to ponder all this because our material needs are met -- it may be true that those of us living in relative comfort today speak more of this emotional struggle. That doesn't mean that our emotions are illegitimate or that the struggle is self-indulgent; this discussion is not the abandonment of politics but an essential part of fashioning a political project.

I would like help in this process. I've started talking to people close to me about how this feels, but I want to expand my understanding. By using the internet and email, I am limiting the scope of the inquiry to those online, but it's a place to start.

My request is simple: If you think it would help you clarify your understanding of your struggle, send me an account of your reaction to these crises and collapse, in whatever level of detail you like. I am most interested in our emotional states, but any exercise of this type includes an intellectual component; there is no clear line between the analytical and the emotional, between thinking and feeling. An understanding of our emotions is connected to our analysis of the health of the ecosystem, the systems responsible for that condition, and the openings for change.

Because I may draw on this material in public discussions and for writing projects, please let me know how you are willing to have your words used. Your writing could be: (1) "on background," not to be quoted in any forum; (2) "not for attribution," permission to be quoted but not identified; or (3) "on the record," permission to be quoted and identified. If you don't specify, I will assume (2).

My plan is to report back to anyone interested. If you would like to be included on that distribution list, let me know. Please send responses in the body of an email message, not as an attachment, to robertwilliamjensen "at" gmail.com.

Whether or not you write to me, I hope everyone will begin speaking more openly about this aspect of our struggle. If there is to be a decent future, we have to retain our capacity for empathy. Most of us can empathize with those closest to us, and we try to empathize with all people. The next step is to open up to the living world, which requires an ability to feel both the joy and the grief that surrounds us.

[The follow up report "Struggling to be ‘Fully Alive’: Reports on Coping with Anguish" is at http://www.culturechange.org/cms/content/view/663/1/">culturechange.org/cms/content/view/663/1]

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