# Struggling to be ‘Fully Alive’: Reports on Coping with Anguish

Contributed by Robert Jensen
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"I don't have anything to say that hasn't been said many times over the centuries."

That may have been the most insightful response to my essay asking people to report on how they cope with the anguish of living in a world in collapse.

That simple statement is a reminder that (1) the social and ecological crises we face have been building for a long time and (2) the best of our traditions have, for a long time, offered wisdom useful in facing those crises.
The unjust social systems and unsustainable ecological practices of contemporary society started with the agricultural revolution 10,000 years ago, when humans began dominating each other and the planet in evermore destructive fashion, and intensified dramatically over the 250 years of the industrial revolution. (For a historical perspective, see "The delusional revolution.")

And for nearly that long, some people have resisted the power of elites and tried to protect the land. (For a contemporary example, see "Where agriculture meets empire.")

So, we struggle in the moment with complex problems that defy simple solutions -- problems that may be beyond our capacity to solve in any meaningful way. But describing the basics needed for a better world is not difficult if we draw on that wisdom. Here's my condensed version:

We need to transcend systems rooted in human arrogance and greed that lead us to believe that any individual is more valuable than another, that any group of people should dominate another group, or that people have a right to exploit the living world without regard for the consequences for the ecosystem. Because each of us has within us the capacity for constructive and destructive actions -- for good and evil -- our collective task is to shape a society that helps us act with caution and compassion.

This radical message of humility and solidarity comes from a deep conception of respect: Respect for oneself, for other people, for other living things, and for the earth as a living system. That message animates the best of our philosophy, theology, poetry, and politics, and it was at the heart of nearly all the 300 responses to my essay. This notion of respect wasn't defined as "being nice" or "not being judgmental." Respect takes work -- to understand the other, make judgments, and engage constructively when there are disagreements or conflicting needs.

Along with those calls for love, there was a lot of anger in the responses, much of it directed at elites -- the politicians, business executives, and media propagandists who so often not only promote arrogant and greedy behavior over humility and solidarity, but also rationalize and prop up the political/economic/social systems in which the destructive behavior is fostered.

And many wrote that the while the anger we may feel toward elites is justified, we have to start with self-critique and examine our own place in these systems. For example, the anger toward BP officials over the "hole in the world" at the bottom of the Gulf of Mexico co-exists with the recognition that we all live somewhere in the system that demands that oil:

"I speak of the oil spill going on and I acknowledge how implicated I am in it. My lifestyle -- despite efforts to eat wild foods, look at waste streams as resources, and live frugally -- depends heavily on oil. It's like there are these [oil] stains on my hands, all over my hands, my body and the ground around me."

In such a world, it is easy for those of us who live in affluent societies to be drained by an awareness of all this:

"My personal ambition seems to decrease in proportion to the increase in world suffering. I think that's part of my emotional reaction to crisis. I don't think I am fully alive. I'm not depressed, just weirdly diminished."

Why would someone feel diminished today? For almost all of the people who responded, the heart of their struggle was in the realization that the human species, locked into industrial societies dependent on high-energy/high-technology systems to produce food and fuel, is on a path leading to the edge of a cliff. No one offered predictions for an end time, but:

"[W]hat I see as the reality of our situation -- ecologically, politically, economically, and culturally -- is that we are in the last days of our species, and I just don't know what to do with that. The emotions are much too powerful, the grief, the sense of doom -- how does one deal with the real possibility of the extinction of not just millions of species, but of one's own species?"

Feeling isolated but resolved to act

Where does that reality leave us emotionally? My essay inquired specifically about the feelings that accompany the intellectual understanding that we live in a world in collapse. That question led not only to descriptions of those emotions, but strategies for dealing with them. No single comment could sum up so many different people's responses, but this one comes close:

"So I feel hopeless. I feel sad. I feel amused at the absurdity of it all. I feel depressed. I feel enraged. I feel guilty and I feel trapped. Basically the only reason why I'm still alive is because there are enough amazing people and things in my life to keep me going, to keep me fighting for what matters. I'm not even sure how to fight yet, but I know that I want to."

One common response was gratitude for having a place to communicate these thoughts without worrying about being ridiculed. Many wrote about how isolated they felt, even from friends and family who don't want to talk about these matters and either deny there are reasons to be concerned or ignore the evidence:

"I'm a drug addict with over 20 years clean, and I know all about using up my future and farting out lame excuses. I promised myself an honest life to stay clean, and the double-edged sword is that I started seeing just how much our culture swims in denial."

Pressing these importance questions about systemic failure and collapse leads to resistance from others, who then assert that the real problem is anyone who wants to talk about collapse:

"I have been writing for a year and a half on a lot of things as it pertains to humanity's lack of awareness and the potential to reconnect before we destroy the earth and each other.  People get angry at me for it and call me 'dark' and 'negative' and 'sinful' telling me to instead move to the 'light,' 'positive' and 'love.'  Whatever."

Some see a general "desensitization to the destruction of our planet [that] is nothing short of heart breaking" and worry about what the loss of the capacity for empathy means:

"It is considered feminine and naive to care about trees or animals. ... In addition, it is also considered weak and feminine to empathize or display a proper emotion. We are becoming a nihilistic culture which is creating citizens who are numb to their emotions. This is doing us all a disservice. We are missing out on our bodily wisdom and becoming less and less in tune with our earth."

Though people have different views on the role of high-technology responses to ecological collapse, everyone who wrote recognized that more gadgets aren't going to save us:

"I have thought for a long time that the human species, notwithstanding its endless self-flattery, really is not very intelligent. One of the signs of its stupidity is, in fact, the very way that it equates intelligence with technological prowess."

One of the most compelling comments on advanced technology came from a doctoral student in engineering at a prestigious university:

"I have come to this firm conclusion that any more technological development is purely unnecessary and technological progress is hyper-glorified by the developed countries just as a tool to continue their agenda of robbing the resources of

our planet from the third world (and perhaps soon from neighboring astronomical bodies, too). And what is glorified as the rational, intellectual research that folks like me are doing over here is just a means towards facilitating this robbing activity; this implicit imperialism; this invisible killing of our planet earth."

People also recognize the inadequacy of technological solutions to the end of cheap, plentiful energy. While endorsing more research on alternatives to coal, oil, and natural gas, those who wrote to me were wary of claims that alternatives can magically replace the concentrated energy of fossil fuels and allow us to motor on in our affluence:

"[T]he only way that the terrible catastrophes on the way could have been softened would have been for everyone on the planet to have dropped business as usual 10 or 20 years ago, and to have started retooling all of society while there was still a reasonable surplus of high EROEI (energy return on energy investment) fossil fuel left to power the *energetically* costly conversion process of re-engineering energy production, housing, cities, suburbs, farming, fishing, and transport. That didn't happen. And having lived through the period, it would have been completely impossible to motivate in the first or third world. But just as important, it is *even more* unlikely that this will begin to happen now. This is because growing energy scarcity will cut into our flexibility as people scramble to prop up floundering systems."

In addition to these critiques of life in the affluent world, many wrote of the grotesque disparities in wealth in the world today. As we struggle with fears of the future, billions of people cope with severe limitations in the present:

"[W]e in the U.S. are essentially living behind a military barricade. I heard a quote recently that 'collapse means having the same lifestyle as the people who grow your coffee.' I really, really liked that."

And in many of the critiques of the affluent First World, there was an understanding that the heart of the problem is the United States:

"Americans today are living with a profound and apparently irreconcilable disparity between what we say we are, and what we actually are. Between the promise of democracy and the reality of a crumbling empire. The result of this schism, I believe, is the national equivalent of a disassociated personality. And it's not just our shared history of betrayal and abuse that has caused it. It's the myth of freedom as well. In the mythology of freedom, democracy was supposed to empower us all to make a change for the better."

Although some wrote with certainty about their conclusions, more people expressed confusion and weariness over the effort needed to understand such a complex world:

"I spend a lot of time in my own head going back and forth over theories, philosophies, etc. Pretty much going through a process once a month of discarding everything I thought I knew and re-learning it. While this may be a good thing in the future, it does not feel good now. Sometimes it makes me feel like I am alone and lost and that I can't find any truth in anything because I have so many different voices telling me what is right and wrong. Yet, I can never stop going back and looking at what's happening to this real, physical, lovely and loving planet and feel outrage, sorrow, and confusion and why this culture is so insane."

Even with all this talk of their own struggles, the people who wrote were not asking others to feel sorry for them. Instead, the focus was outward, on how this affects others. That was clear in the comments not only of parents and grandparents, but also of people who chose not to have children -- what is the fate of future generations?

"Being the parent of a young child right now is a mixed blessing: He's my reason for waking up every morning and doing whatever it takes to keep up some semblance of normalcy, but it also frightens and worries me deeply when I think about his future."

In the face of challenges that feel overwhelming -- in the face of problems that may have no solutions -- what should we do? Very few of the people who wrote suggested we should give up; most are committed to action:

"I guess the best thing we can do ... point out problems, suggest solutions, work for radical system changes and not just reforms that too often are more cosmetic than substantial, and above all: keep the faith ... and we need to project to others that we have the faith, or get the hell out of the work and retire or just wait for Armageddon."

Many responses focused on the need not only to act collectively but also to reduce our consumption individually:

"I read a statement in the book Hard Times by Studs Terkel that I really liked: 'Security is knowing what I can do without.' Every day, I find something new that I can do without. My fiance and I now grow much of the food we eat, we purchase necessities only, we shop at the Goodwill."

and learn skills that have atrophied all too quickly in an affluent, high-energy culture:

"I'm not an old hippie that wants to return to sex, drugs and rock and roll on the commune. ... I believe in hierarchy, rules

and skills, but we must start something new, difficult and dangerous. We must also learn to not trust power and create small, subsistence communities. Instead of trying to mend the empire we should be teaching ourselves skills of our rural grandparents."

Tipping points and panic

But still the question haunts us: What if the unsustainable systems in which we live are beyond the point of no return? There certainly are rational reasons to assume that we are past a tipping point.

For example, the March 2005 report of the United Nations' Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, based on the work of 1,300 researchers from 95 countries who spent four years examining 24 ecosystems worldwide, offered this "stark warning":

"Human activity is putting such strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted. ... Nearly two thirds of the services provided by nature to humankind are found to be in decline worldwide. In effect, the benefits reaped from our engineering of the planet have been achieved by running down natural capital assets."

This kind of knowledge can be so overwhelming that people feel it's not safe to open up emotionally:

"I would like to mourn but have not been able to let my guard down.  I could understand 9/11, but now I am witnessing the destruction of the planet and I don't understand the magnitude of what that means. I feel on edge. I feel like I am waiting for the other shoe to drop."

How to live in that world and remain fully engaged, intellectually and emotionally? This comment sums up the task and a path:

"Recently several of our visionary thinkers have moved from the illusion that 'we have 10 years to turn this around.' They now say clearly that 'we cannot stop this momentum.' It takes courage and faith to speak so plainly. What can we do in the face of this truth? We can sit face to face and find the ways, often beyond words, to explore the reality that we are all refugees, swimming into a future that looks so different from the present. We can find pockets of community where we can whisper our deepest fears about the world. We can remain committed to describing the present with exceptional truth. We can cultivate a practice that enables us to witness suffering with hearts and minds open and with our faces turned toward one another."

It would be easy to close on that note, blunt but positive. But for many, that kind of approach is difficult. I sent my essay to a political activist who is one of the most well-informed people I know in matters concerning politics and ecology. His response:

"I guess my emotional reaction is actually to suppress the emotional reaction. ... [P]anic, which would probably be the emotional reaction, is something to be deferred until the situation is relatively safe. So I try to think about what is to be done and can be done, and promise myself that if we do get past these crises, I will enjoy the moment to panic about how dangerous a situation we were in."

My response:

"I understand what you say, but it seems to me that an appreciation of the nature of the crises is necessary for sensible strategy, and I don't know how to engage that intellectually without having emotional reactions. ... My fear is that if we don't discuss it, those of us struggling with these emotions will fade away from collective action. So, instead of this kind of discussion necessarily leading to political paralysis, I think it can prevent paralysis in some people."

My friend didn't contest my analysis:

"I don't advocate for my emotional response, but it is what it is."

Though he didn't argue with me, I didn't feel as if I had won an argument. Emotions are what they are, and we don't "win" by telling people what they should feel. It's enough of a struggle to understand what I feel and why I feel it; I don't think I'm qualified to dictate to others what they should feel. In dealing with multiple crises on all fronts -- economic, political, cultural, and ecological failures that pose a significant threat to human life as we understand it -- it's folly for any one of us to imagine we figured out the right approach, or that there is a single right approach, or that there is any right

approach at all.

The only thing I'm sure of is that, to quote singer/songwriter John Gorka, "the old future's gone." The future of endless bounty for all, which some once imagined would be the product of the application of human reason to problems of the world, is not the future we face. How can we open a conversation about what's coming when so much is unknown and so many resist? Rather than pontificate, I will end with the reflections of an elder:

"I'm about to celebrate my 70th birthday. I live in a rural intentional community, close to land that feeds us and supports us. I've lived long enough now to be very aware of how different the world has become, how the cycles of nature are off kilter, how the seasons and the climate have shifted. My garden tells me that food doesn't grow in quite the same patterns, and we either get weeks of rain or weeks of heat and drought. This is the second year in a row that our apple trees do not have apples on them. But most people get their food in grocery stores where the apples still appear, and food still arrives, in season and out, from all over the world. This will soon end, and people won't understand why. They don't see the trouble in the land as I and my friends do. I grieve daily as I look on this altered world. My grandchildren are young adults who think their lives will continue as they have been. Who will tell them? They can't hear me. They, and many others, will have to see the changes for themselves, as I have. I can't imagine that anything else will convince them. My grief for the world, and for them, is compounded by this feeling of helplessness because there is no way we can have the collective action you speak of when the 'collective' is still in denial. Thank you for listening."

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Culture Change recommends a documentary film relevant to this dimension of modern existence:
"What a Way to Go - Life at the end of empire"

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About the author:

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The essay to which this article is a sequel is: The anguish of the age: Emotional reactions to collapse (link at top).