

species, such as symmetry.

A Call to Embrace Ecological Grief

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Audience: artists and educators

Themes: activism, ethics, forests (habitat), fostering awareness, social and community practice

Overview

Every year the reports get worse. Mountainsides flecked with brown become forests of parched skeletons, until everything goes up in a smoky haze that blankets the skies for days, if not weeks. Frogs disappear, or their bodies are turned to stone. Colonies of bees collapse, while bats fail to emerge from hibernation, their corpses found littering their winter abodes. Every time I hear of such news, I wonder, Where is the public outcry? Why is society not attempting to stop these calamities? Now as I write, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the impact wrought by ecological devastation directly to human

populations. How do we respond to these mounting losses?

As Aldo Leopold lamented, “one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.”¹ If everyone keeps these wounds to themselves, how will the conditions that give rise to these injuries ever change? Ecological activists and artists are frequently admonished not to focus on losses, on doom and devastation, because this can lead to paralysis, despair, and isolation. How, then, does one work with the heart-break and desolation of the devastating losses that are increasingly apparent to any reader of this volume?

This provocation is a plea to recognize the centrality of public expressions of grief in contemporary ecoart practice. It builds on the understanding that daring to feel the pain of loss and come together to express grief publicly galvanizes response. It is an appeal to bear witness, to testify to the wounds and losses of the places or species that have touched our hearts. It is a call to commit them to public memory by providing spaces for rituals and memorials where the public can mourn.

Discussion

Writing in the 1980s, Phillipe Aries, in “Invisible Death,” bemoaned the abandonment of public traditions of mourning and the medicalization of death during the twentieth century. He bluntly stated, “The tears of the bereaved have become comparable to the excretions of the diseased. Both are distasteful. Death has been banished.”² We live in a time of schizophrenic contradictions, where the dominant culture has banished death, while many scientists warn of the sixth mass extinction.

It is challenging to recognize the magnitude of the ecological crises, the ever increasing multitude of losses. Psychologist Renee Lertzman argues that it is not apathy or lack of concern for environmental degradation that thwarts an active response from a large segment of the population, but *environmental melancholia*, a term she coined to define a condition of those who care deeply but are “paralyzed to translate such concern into action.”³ Classically, melancholia is a state of suspended bereavement, since there is no resolution, no active mourning, no releasing of the object of grief. This paralysis, characterized by withdrawal, silent disappointment, restrained sadness, and passivity, can be understood as a way to cope with loss and anxiety in isolation.

The challenge of the environmental activist or ecological artist is to address this isolation and paralysis, to

speak to the caring heart that has been muffled, submerged in quiet despair, accepting of the profusion of losses for which there is seemingly no remedy. Simply reinforcing fear with bad news and dire depictions of devastation may be counterproductive. This fear can create a negative emotional feedback loop, where each new loss, each piece of dire news, reinforces psychic numbness—fear of feeling.

While the recognition of this negative feedback loop leads to frequent admonishments to emphasize the positive, another approach, one central to Buddhist teachings, is to embrace the fear and explore it. As Montaigne wrote, “The man who fears suffering is already suffering from what he fears.”⁴ Leaving this fear of pain and suffering unexamined allows it to fester, leading only to increasing passivity or helplessness. In contrast, as Joanna Macy explains, “[h]onoring our pain for the world is a way of valuing our awareness, first that we noticed, and second, that we care.”⁵

The activist response to the AIDS epidemic suggests strategies that ecoartists may find fruitful. For example, at the beginning of the epidemic, mourning was privatized and hidden. The deep relationships of those left behind were not recognized or valued, while the deceased were largely regarded as ungrievable, with little

or no standing in society, just as ecological losses are today. Meanwhile, losses kept mounting and a sense of melancholia, of ongoing but not explicitly articulated losses, set in.

Lertzman explains that the “high price” for not specifically naming these losses includes not only the inability to grieve but also the impossibility of touching the outpouring of creativity, love, and agency that accompanies active mourning.⁶ AIDS activists ruptured the passivity or helplessness of melancholia through acts of public naming. The AIDS Memorial Quilt memorializes those who have died, identifying their names and sharing the stories of their lives. Portions of the quilt, which has grown much too large to be displayed in a single setting, are presented in over a thousand venues each year.⁷ As Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and others have argued, melancholia can become a “politicized way” of continually acknowledging loss “in the midst of a culture that fails to recognize its significance.”⁸ The continued proclamation that survivors will never forget allows for the work of memory to bring losses back into focus continually.

Public ritual and mourning provide safe spaces to begin to touch the pain and suffering caused by loss. Feeling the impact of death takes courage. There may be a sense of unfamiliarity, vulnerability, and uncertainty.

The sense of self may become less solid. The structured, contained space of ritual allows for both the expression and witnessing of grief. Public mourning also engenders the sense of interrelationship central to ecological thinking, as our feelings are recognized through our mutual bonds.

Along with the washing of tears—the dissolution—comes an opening of the heart. Sense perceptions, which had been previously blunted by resignation, heighten. One is able to feel, see, and hear more keenly. With a loosening of self-reference, the surrounding world becomes more vivid.

Most important, the heart that cracks open to grief is the heart that cracks open to love and gratitude for the wonder and beauty of being alive. Martín Prechtel describes the relationship between gratitude and grief most eloquently: “Grief is praise for those we have lost.... If we do not grieve what we miss, we are not praising what we love. We are not praising the life we have been given in order to love. If we do not praise what we miss, we ourselves are in some way dead. So, grief and praise make us alive.”⁹



Ruth Wallen, (detail) *Remember the Trees*, Mesa College Art Gallery, San Diego, California, 2018.

A heart cracked open to sadness also opens to outrage. Judith Butler asserts that “without the capacity to mourn, we lose that keener sense of life we need in order to oppose violence.”¹⁰ Armed with the motto of Silence

= Death, AIDS activists sought change. Douglas Crimp's well-known essay, "Mourning and Militancy," articulates a thoughtful interrelationship between the two states, suggesting that while mourning is a necessary reminder of our vulnerability, it is only when grief becomes public that it can lead to action.¹¹ Activist organizations such as ACT UP took to the streets, demanding accurate information and research into the causes and treatments of the disease.¹² Similarly, ecological artists can propel investigations into the full nature of the causes of ecological devastation as well as actions that will help alleviate future losses. As an example, my installation *Remember the Trees* commemorates the more than 150 million trees that have died in California since 2010 due to drought exacerbated by climate change and introduced species. It provides a place to share gratitude for the wonder of trees, grieve their loss, and envision alternative futures.

Conclusion

Since I first drafted this provocation, there has been a growing recognition of the pervasiveness of climate and ecological grief. Instead of shying away from sorrow, it is time to lean in, to give full expression in intimate, per-

sonal, but public ways to this pervasive facet of contemporary experience. Francis Weller, a leader of elaborate public grieving rituals, refers to this process as one of "apprenticeship," emphasizing the learning process involved.¹³ Ecoartists can support this idea by inviting others to share individual stories and images of living beings or places that have been lost, creating memorials, both ephemeral and more permanent. It is not necessary to provide resolution so much as to create loci for the continuous work of memory so that the full brilliance of once-thriving ecosystems is not forgotten. By creating public rituals and revitalizing traditional forms of mourning, ecoartists can provide vital spaces for the recognition and expression of grief. This public embrace of mourning will serve not only as a refusal to suffer in silence but as a powerful public embrace of feeling, of love, and of outrage over the deep ecological losses that mark our lives. As we move toward a future of increasing losses due to the climate and extinction crises, the capacity to mourn will allow us to retain our humanity, experience our full range of emotions, touch the wonder and beauty of being alive, develop the capacity for compassion and empathy, and ignite the will to do what we can to change this perilous course of ecological devastation.

Bio

Ruth Wallen is a multimedia artist and writer whose work is dedicated to encouraging dialogue about ecology and social justice. She creates public artworks and exhibits widely. She was a Fulbright scholar and is currently co-chair of the MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts Program at Goddard College. See www.ruthwallen.net.

1. Aldo Leopold, *Round River* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 165.
2. Philippe Aries, "Invisible Death," *The Wilson Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1981): 111.
3. Renee Lertzman, *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 4.
4. Michel de Montaigne quoted in Miriam Greenspan, *Healing Through the Dark Emotions: The Wisdom of Grief, Fear, and Despair* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 45.
5. Joanna Macy and Chris Johnstone, *Active Hope: How to Face the Mess We're in Without Going Crazy* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2012), 71.
6. Renee Lertzman, *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Engagement* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 101.

7. National AIDS Memorial, "The History of the Quilt," <http://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history>.
8. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies," in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 333.
9. Martín Prechtel, *The Smell of Rain on Dust: Grief and Praise* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2015), 36–37.
10. Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October* 51 (Winter 1989), 18.
11. *ibid.*
12. Douglas Crimp, ed., *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).
13. Francis Weller, "Letting Grief Open Us to Grace," <https://newrepublicoftheheart.org/podcast/030-francis-weller-letting-grief-open-us-to-grace/>. See also Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2015).