

Climate Chaos and Collective Grief

Hannah Malcolm

“It’s the new normal,’ I think, as a beloved pear tree, half-drowned, loses its grip on the earth and falls over. The train line to Cornwall washes away — the new normal. We can’t even say the word ‘abnormal’ to each other out loud: it reminds us of what came before.” (Zadie Smith)

“It’s hurting. . . It’s hurting in a lot of ways. Because I kinda think I’m not going to show my grandkids the way we used to do it. It’s hurting me. It’s hurting me big time. And I just keep that to myself.” (Rigolet Community Elder, Nunatsiavut)

“The land mourns, and all who dwell in it will waste away with the beasts of the field and the birds of the air; even the fish of the sea disappear.” (The Prophet Hosea to the People of Israel)

MUCH of the Western Church is finally catching up to the idea of caring for this planet we call home. But, along with this responsibility to defend what remains, we cannot ignore those already lost, and those we are now powerless to save. Droughts have pushed suicides in the Indian farm sector to epidemic levels, and a temperature rise of just one degree during the growing season is linked to almost 70 more suicides a day.

How are we to rightly mourn the loss of human life, perhaps on a scale not seen since the Second World War? Or mourn the loss of our fellow creatures, and of the stability and beauty of the home that we share?

THE Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the word “*solastalgia*” to express this feeling of “*homesickness when you are still at home*”: the grief created by seeing the place you love come under immediate assault.

In the early 2000s, he was researching the impact of open-cut coal-mining in New South Wales, and he discovered that, along with the land and health impact experienced by the communities around the mine, they were also experiencing a form of chronic distress directly triggered by negative changes to their home. He realised that all of us, no matter whether it's the tree outside our bedroom window or our sense of place in the world as a whole, can experience a form of unnamed melancholy when places we love get destroyed.

This is solastalgia: a homesickness for what is lost. And climate chaos will create unavoidable homesickness for all of us.

But while solastalgia may be universal as an experience, it is not universalising — it will hit the most politically and economically marginalised, and therefore the least culpable, the hardest. And, as we march steadily through the world's sixth great extinction, the stench of death is rising to hit our nostrils. I do not believe that we are prepared to face self-inflicted devastation and the intense, homesick sorrow that will come with it.

IN *MERE CHRISTIANITY*, C. S. Lewis identifies a similar homesickness, suggesting that *“if we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.”*

It is tempting to apply this logic to the climate crisis we face — and, indeed, Lewis was right to identify such a desire. But he was wrong to say that we were made for another world. In fact, the opposite is true: we intimately belong to the rest of creation. This is the world in which the image-bearers of God reside. This is the world that God himself entered. This is the world that

God himself died for. This is the world in which God himself was resurrected. This is the world whose renewal we seek.

Solastalgia — homesickness in a dying world — is not just a natural response but the right response: the only response to the destruction of our home. It is not the pain of belonging to a different world, but the pain of belonging to this world — that has gone desperately wrong.

You see, the Church is not the last stop for an elect few as we wait to leave a dying planet: we are called to be co-mourners with a groaning creation. For the people of God, collective grief expresses our sorrow at sin and death; it is a sign of repentance, and an acknowledgement of our finitude as creatures looking to our Creator. The Church — and the wealthy, Western Church, in particular — must therefore engage with this solastalgic grief for what it is: the emptiness and decay that follow as a result of our sin.

NOW, I am not here to remind you to recycle more, or fly less, or eat less meat. For once, I am not going to ask you to respond to climate breakdown with a list of things to do.

Instead, I am going to ask you to sit amid the grief that you may already feel about our dying planet; and to mourn the brilliant, beautiful lives — both human and non-human — now extinguished by our violence and greed. Perhaps you can name them. Perhaps their names are now known only to God. Either way, they are worthy of your lament.

And yet mourning is sterile without hope. The scriptures of the Jewish and Christian traditions have always expected the world as we know it to come to an end. But they have also longed for and testified to its renewal.

As with other apocalyptic prophets, Hosea did not limit his vision to destruction, but instead called the people to a creation of peace:

*In that day I will make a covenant for them
with the beasts of the field, the birds in the sky
and the creatures that move along the ground.
Bow and sword and battle
I will abolish from the land,
so that all may lie down in safety.*

I believe that grief is a vital part of having a vision for a new future. The environmental-protest group Extinction Rebellion has already recognised the benefits of grief as part of action — and I believe that grief is a vital part of having a vision for renewed earth.

Extinction Rebellion calls on its members to practise what they call “*the skill of broken-heartedness*”. I believe that, as a Church, we must not be the last to recognise the wisdom of this collective grief; but, instead, we must seek opportunities to practise its right expression, discuss what those might be, and also seek opportunities to speak hope in the face of death.

In the words of Walter Brueggemann: “*The prophetic tasks of the Church are to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practices denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.*”

We are a wounded people, and we walk on a wounded earth. To whom will we go with our wounds? Who has the words of eternal life for a dying world? As the body of Christ, are we willing, and are we able to answer?

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