

Hope, resilience and climate change

by Margaret Bullitt-Jonas

Climate change is no longer a distant threat. Its impacts are already being felt across the U.S. and around the world, with even more devastating impacts ahead unless we change course quickly. As 350.org founder Bill McKibben writes, “Our old familiar globe is suddenly melting, drying, acidifying, flooding and burning in ways that no human has ever seen.”

Given what we know about the climate crisis, how do we face our fear and grief without being overwhelmed? How do we move beyond denial and despair into a life filled with purpose, even joy? What sustains our spirits as we struggle to sustain the Earth?



Here is a three-part framework to “hold” the climate crisis in a way that helps us to respond wisely and creatively: We develop an awakened heart, a broken heart and a radiant heart.

An **awakened heart** is deeply, frequently, and intentionally attuned to love. People with an awakened heart learn to see themselves and others with eyes of love. We discover that we — and all beings — are cherished. When our heart awakens, we perceive the beauty and preciousness of the world, and respond with gratefulness, wonder, amazement, and awe. The world’s religions offer many disciplines, from mindfulness meditation to practicing gratitude or participating in worship services, which help our hearts awaken.

Experiencing our inherent preciousness and dignity is a powerful antidote to the message that human beings are a “cancer” on the planet or a “virus” taking down life. I understand the anger behind such statements, evoked by the damage that humans are doing to the eco-systems on which life depends. It’s true: Our industrial economy, based on fossil fuels and endless growth, is indeed acting like a cancer that takes down life. But the only way forward is not to heed the voice of self-hatred but to listen to the inner voice of love, which is always sounding in our hearts and which alone can guide us on a new path.

Next we experience a **broken heart**. Of course, none of us wants to move to this second stage of the journey. There are many reasons we fear and repress our grief. As Joanna Macy, the Buddhist eco-philosopher, points out, we don’t want to feel pain; we don’t want to look morbid; we don’t want to bring other people down; we don’t

want to seem weak and emotional. Yet we do feel pain for the world. We can't help it. No one is exempt, because everything is connected. Suffering in one place sends out ripples everywhere.

As you consider climate change, where do you feel grief? What are the tears you need to shed? What is breaking your heart? How do you open to the pain of our precious world without drowning in the pain? Sharing vulnerability and honest feelings with a trusted person or group builds community and makes our relationships more honest, lively, and real. Pain becomes easier to bear when we experience it within the embrace of love. As a Christian, I also express my grief in prayer, for I believe that everything within us — our fear, anger, grief and guilt — is perpetually met by the mercy and love of God. One way or another, all the world's spiritual traditions teach that there is no escape from suffering and, paradoxically, that a broken heart can be the gateway to hope, even joy.

As we cultivate an awakened heart and accept a broken heart, eventually we want to express a **radiant heart**: we want our lives to bear witness in tangible ways to the love that has set us free. Filled with love, and open to the world's suffering, we want the love flowing into our lives to pour out into the world around us.

This third part is where we take action. What we feel led to do takes many forms. Commitment to create a just and sustainable society affects what we buy, how much we drive, how we invest our money, how much we re-use and re-cycle, and how quickly we join with other people to push for the enormous systemic changes that are required.

Yet being busy doesn't necessarily mean we're manifesting a radiant heart. Sometimes I get super-busy because I lose touch with my basic preciousness: I think I must prove my worth, demonstrate my value. Then I remind myself, "Remember you're cultivating an awakened heart. Rest in God's goodness, breathe in God's love, recall how loved you are. Let that energy carry you into the next situation."

Or I get busy because I want to stay one step ahead of my feelings: Who wants to feel pain? I'd rather keep moving. Then I remind myself, "Remember you've accepted a broken heart. Feel what you're feeling and share it with the One who has loved you since before time began."

When we feel cherished to the core and when our anguish is met by ever-merciful divine love, our actions are more likely to spring from wisdom, not fear or compulsion. We live with a new sense of spaciousness and freedom, unattached to results.

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