Climate Trauma:
Toward a New Taxonomy of Trauma

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Abstract

The disarmingly innocuous term "climate change" expresses a psychosocial defense mechanism that prompts us to recoil when we consider the implications of climate science. When viewed honestly through the lens of traumatology, this deepening existential crisis presents an entirely new, unprecedented, and higher-order category of trauma: Climate Trauma. What is unique about this category of trauma is that it is an ever-present, ever-growing threat to the biosphere, one that calls into question our shared identity: What does it mean to be "human" in the Anthropocene? Because it is superordinate, Climate Trauma is continually triggering all past traumas—personal, cultural, and intergenerational—and will continue to do so until such time as it is acknowledged. Climate Trauma provides the missing narrative explaining our dissociated unresponsiveness to the climate crisis, and suggests an alternative approach to effecting the kind of fundamental societal change needed to remedy our collective dissociation. The first steps toward effecting this kind of ambitious sociocultural change are naming the disorder and reforming the taxonomy of psychological trauma. Key Words: Climate change— Trauma—Ecopsychology—Dissociation.

Introduction

As a long-time climate activist who began intensively studying the psychology of the climate crisis from a sociocultural and ecopsychological perspective in 2012, I recently arrived at the conviction that the psychological community-at-large has somehow missed the single-most important point about this unparalleled global phenomenon. After years of viewing the crisis through the lens of cultural trauma, it finally dawned on me that we are making a grave mistake by relegating trauma theory to the "symptom box" in our analysis of the climate crisis, rather than seeing the crisis *itself* as a new form of trauma. In other words, the climate crisis does not just *induce* trauma under certain circumstances—it is a new form of trauma that pervades the circumstances of our life.

By way of illustrating this point, consider the following passage from the American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica's noteworthy contribution to the psychology of the climate crisis, *Beyond Storms & Droughts: The Psychological Impacts of Climate Change* (Clayton, Manning, & Hodge, 2014):

> Disasters carry the potential for immediate and severe psychological trauma from personal injury, death of a loved one, damage to or loss of personal property (e.g., home and pets), and disruption in or loss of livelihood... Terror, anger, shock, and other intense negative emotions are likely to dominate people's initial response to a disaster... Acute traumatic stress is typical... High levels of distress and anxiety are often prevalent among people who have recently experienced an acute trauma... In a study of young people in a drought-affected area, Carnie, Berry, Blinkhorn, and Hart (2011) found that young people felt high levels of distress and reported being concerned about their families, overwhelmed, isolated, and worried about the future. (internal cites omitted, p. 18)

Are we conflating symptoms and disease here? What if, rather than thinking of trauma as being a potential symptom of episodic events *associated* with climate change (see, e.g., Clayton et al., 2014, p. 25), climate change *itself* were to be considered as a new, superordinate form of trauma? After all, when we say the words "climate change," are we not talking about a pervasive, continual assault on the global biosphere? One that threatens mass extinction and overwhelms our emotional capacity? Is this not the very definition of trauma?

Having experienced this quantum shift in perspective, I have now begun to reassess my view of the climate crisis in relation to trauma

theory. This thesis offers a more coherent narrative than has yet to be propounded for explaining our collective paralysis in response to this existential threat. It suggests, as well, alternative approaches to the climate crisis than simply setting up psychological triage tents in the wake of increasingly common, unnatural disasters, which is not an altogether unfair characterization of ecoAmerica's assessment.

We humans have a natural tendency to dismiss thoughts of trauma, which presents a distinctive challenge in propounding a new theory about a superordinate form of trauma. Psychologists are culturally embedded human beings, after all, and as a community we have always been slow to recognize new forms of trauma. In spite of clear evidence from two world wars and the Korean conflict, PTSD was not included in the DSM until the 1980s (Andreasen 2010). In her introductory chapter to *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), "A Forgotten History," Herman places this aversion in the context of our own psychological defenses: "To study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature" (p. 7). This reflexive resistance to the very idea of climate trauma thus calls for some historical context.

Rethinking Trauma

According to Kira (2001), "Trauma theory is a special case of stress response theory. Traumatic events are the ultimate or most severe stressors" (p. 73). Psychoanalysis originated as an experiential theory of trauma and its consequences in the sexually repressed culture of 19th-century Vienna. Due to sociocultural pushback from the beginning, psychology's continuing relationship with trauma has been one of initially minimizing and distorting it. This began with Freud's repudiation of his own (and Janet's) observed connection between hysteria and childhood sexual abuse. This established a pattern of repeatedly acknowledging and then "forgetting" psychological trauma,[1] like a neglected stepchild, in the periods following the world wars (Herman, 1992). So we can see now, in retrospect, that trauma theory and trauma denial are intricately linked from their inception in psychoanalytic theory. It is thus helpful, in considering the relationship between the emerging climate crisis and trauma theory, to remember that "[d]enial, repression, and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level" (Herman, 1992, p. 2).

The climate crisis presents potentially fatal consequences for the very perpetuation of higher life-forms on planet Earth, along with a readily observable and psychologically rooted disconnect between that existential threat and our muted response. Never has society

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[1]Herman refers to this as a history of "episodic amnesia" (p. 7).

been in more *dire need* of prescient and salutary guidance and insights from psychology and related disciplines, especially concerning the relationships between trauma, response/recovery, and social connection in this radically altered context of anthropogenic climate mutation (Clayton et al., 2014). We must therefore recognize that the climate crisis is not just a crisis *in relation* to and with episodic trauma but instead represents an entirely *new order* of trauma itself.

The Greek word *trauma,* or wound, originally referred exclusively to physical insult or injury. Over time, however "trauma" has come to be understood in the distinct sense of a wound not on the body but in the mind. "The word trauma is used to describe experiences or situations that are emotionally painful and distressing, and that overwhelm people's ability to cope, leaving them [feeling] powerless" (Muhammad, 2015, p. 2). According to Herman's influential work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), traumatic events are characterized by their ability to "overwhelm the ordinary human adaptation to life" as well as "the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (p. 33).

Thus defined, and setting our cultural blinders aside, it is impossible *not* to see the climate crisis as a form of trauma. According to the *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry,* the common denominator of psychological trauma is a feeling of "intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation" (quoted in Herman, 1992, p. 33). Because of unprecedented anthropogenically induced levels of CO_2 and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, the heating of the oceans, the melting of the ice caps, and the continuing plunder of minerals, forests, and fisheries by an exponentially expanding human population, there is no question that the entire biosphere has come under a sustained assault, a kind of global holocaust unfolding in slow motion. See, for example the publisher's description of *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History,* by Elizabeth Kolbert, the 2015 Pulitzer Prize Winner in General Nonfiction: "The sixth extinction is likely to be mankind's most lasting legacy; as Kolbert observes, it compels us to rethink the fundamental question of what it means to be human" (Henry Holt, 2015).

As we humans are ourselves an integral part of the biosphere that is under assault, and are wholly dependent upon the natural world in which we have evolved, there is no protecting us from this sweeping assault on the life-support system we share with all beings. The logical implication, then, is inescapable: The global climate crisis needs to be seen as an entirely new and unparalleled kind of trauma. It appears to us as an unfolding cascade of unnatural (or at least anthropogenically induced) events that are placing unprecedented, almost inconceivable—but clearly lethal—stressors on the entire biosphere. Included in this sphere of influence are our own bodies and minds. It is a crisis of our relationship with nature that, naturally,

affects us at all relational levels—interspecies, sociocultural, communal, occupational, and familial. It also affects us at the level of individual psyche, which is at least related to, if not intimately connected with, Earth as a living organism herself.

This entirely new form of trauma forces us to rethink all that we have learned about trauma in the past century. For example, consider Climate Trauma in light of the observation that "[a]ll the subtle and insidious forms of trauma [] are pervasive and, when experienced chronically, have a cumulative impact that can be fundamentally life altering" (Muhammad, 2015, p. 3). In a paper published in the "Long Emergency" edition of the journal *Ecopsychology*, psychotherapist Benjamin White alludes to this cumulative potential with the following poignant observation: "Climate change seems to embody a trauma response on a grand scale—*the greatest trauma on the grandest scale*" (2015, p. 196, emphasis added).

Trauma is both a personal *and cultural* experience linked to place (Michelle, 2008). In fact, Caruth has advanced a contagion theory of traumatic experience, according to which we become implicated in each other's traumas.[2] In the newly christened anthropocentric age out of which the climate crisis has emerged, the Anthropocene (see, e.g., Waters et al., 2016)—an age marked by the advent of instant global information and rampant social media communication—one can now readily observe a kind of social contagion effect. Against a backdrop of culturally reinforced psychosocial defense mechanisms,[3] what we see is that the more chaotic our climate system becomes, the more these elevated levels of chaos are reflected in the cultural and political expressions of group pathology (Woodbury, 2018). A current, succinct example would be the startling assertion that "truth is not true," or there exist "alternative truths," and that we should therefore not believe what we see, hear, or read. Such a post-truth worldview offers a comforting form of cognitive dissonance in the face of an existential crisis, one that is especially attractive given the time-lag between carbon emissions and their climate impacts (Zickfeld & Herrington, 2015).

Climate and Trauma: Rethinking the Unthinkable

"The study of psychological trauma has repeatedly led into realms of the unthinkable and foundered on fundamental questions of belief" (Herman, 1992, p. 7). The climate crisis represents more than just

the "greatest trauma on the grandest scale" (White, 2015, p. 196)—though that is undoubtedly true as far as it goes. It also presents us with an entirely new form of trauma that upends existing taxonomy. It is a magnitude of order above other categories of trauma, and it has its own unique characteristics. Decades-long brow-beating from climate scientists and activists has demonstrated that, at least on a social level, we lack the necessary psychological framework for understanding the dynamics of this crisis.

I can no longer, in good conscience, refer to this accelerating threat as "global warming" or "climate change." *Climate Trauma* is emphatically a more descriptive, and notably more useful, term for what we are now experiencing.

Generally speaking, the current schema for assessing how humans experience trauma includes three overlapping categories, or inter-related valences: generational (epigenetic) trauma, which recent studies suggest we may inherit through a kind of genetic stunting of RNA (Hughes, 2014); personal trauma, most often carried forward somatically with implicit memories of physical and emotional insults that overwhelmed our emotional capacity at the time they were experienced (Yalom & Yalom, 2010); and cultural trauma, which results from a shocking *collective* wounding of the psyche.[4] Examples of cultural trauma include the assassinations of Kennedy and King during the tumultuous 60s and, more recently, the attack on the World Trade Towers. The memory of these traumas calls into question who we are as a people and, left unresolved, can result in a dramatic loss of identity and meaning as a society. As cultural trauma most closely parallels, and is implicated in, the climate crisis, it is instructive to differentiate it from the superordinate category of Climate Trauma.

In *Cultural Trauma: A Social Theory*, Alexander (2012) suggests that "cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (p. 6). Now, contrast these elements with Climate Trauma:

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[2]Herman (1992) supports this theory: "Trauma is contagious" (p. 140).
[3]For example, someone with confirmation bias against settled science of climate chaos can self-select social media forums and news outlets that affirm their bias, thus avoiding grief response to natural loss or anxiety about their family's future.

[4]Congruent with this developing theory of Climate Trauma, Neil Smelser (in Alexander, Eyerman, & Giesen, 2004) defines cultural trauma as

   a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative affect, (b) represented as indelible, and (c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions. (p. 44)

- "members of a collectivity" in cultural trauma usually refers to a social structure, such as a race of people who have experienced genocide, while with Climate Trauma we are talking about the entire human race.
- "feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event"–with Climate Trauma, there is no past tense. This is a crucial distinction, which imparts to Climate Trauma its superordinate character. We *are being* subjected, in real time, to the threat of the most horrendous event imaginable–extinction–or, at the very least, the end of life as we have known it for the last 11,000 years.
- "that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness"– again, with Climate Trauma there is no past tense, and it is incumbent upon us to contemplate the abnormal changes that are occurring in our group consciousness, which are as close as today's headlines: unprecedented levels of polarization, to the point of renouncing scientific and historical facts; increased prevalence of victim mentality; unprecedented levels of displacement and migration giving rise to extreme forms of nationalism; mass denial/distraction/addiction; obscene concentrations of wealth (hoarding); and increasing instability at the highest levels of governance, including elevated threats of nuclear and/or world war.
- "marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways"–Climate Trauma is altering our anticipation and conception of our (and all life's) future prospects. As the saying goes, "extinction is forever."

Indeed, Climate Trauma challenges *the very idea* of a shared future in a way that fundamentally indicts our *present* identity as a species. It calls into question what it means to be human, according to both science (Holt, 2015) and religion (the Papal encyclical *Laudato si'*), along with all that we have ever thought about humanity and our place in the cosmos. As Alexander (2012) suggests in a related context, cultural trauma "is not the result of a group experiencing pain. *It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity's sense of its own identity"* (p. 15).

With Climate Trauma, this acute discomfort has risen to the level of chronic psychological dis-ease, distress, and depression. With our dual role as both perpetrators and victims, the source of our demoralization is always present. It is implicit in everything we do, forever threatening the stories we continue to tell ourselves about ourselves (Eisenstein, 2013). Climate Trauma is the elephant in the room of every human interaction.

The Case for a New Taxonomy of Traumatology

The importance of having a coherent taxonomy of trauma is that all categories of trauma dynamically interact, so it is difficult to understand any without understanding all. One of the key insights in dealing with the destructive role trauma plays in our lives, our communities, and in the world, is how we carry unresolved traumas in our somatic memory (our bodies), and in the dysfunctional patterning of families and cultures. Because of these "buttons," whenever we have a fresh experience of trauma, all our past traumas become *present*. This has been the key in learning to deal effectively with chronic trauma responses like PTSD.

From the standpoint of classifying Climate Trauma, it becomes just as important to appreciate that *absent* the trigger of a new traumatic injury or insult, *all past traumas remain in the past*. Though implicitly carried forward in our defensive posture, no limbic response (fright, flight, or fight) is elicited without a new source of stimulation. Now consider how White (2015) speaks to this point in the climate context:

> The persistent state of traumatic stimulation and vigilance that develops in response to trauma exposure is most relevant to our understanding of climate change. The residue of traumatic experiences from our lives is present when we encounter anything that may be traumatic or threatening. As such, trauma is quite alive in our relationship to nature itself and to climate change. (p. 195)

If "climate change" was merely composed of stochastic events–like heat waves, megafires, and killer storms–then it would resemble the other forms of trauma. Only the experience of such events would serve to trigger past traumas, both individually and collectively. In such a case, it would not inhibit appropriate responses at both the individual and societal levels. Once the traumatic natural event had passed, there would be sufficient time for recovery, reflection, and healing–free from the limbic paralysis we see with Climate Trauma–thus allowing us to rationally effect positive changes designed to lessen the impact of the next trauma-inducing event. That, of course, is not what we observe in our individual or collective struggle with the climate crisis. In fact, such a limited view effectively equates the climate crisis with weather, which also "changes" and only sometimes happens to include the violent forces of nature. Natural catastrophes are familiar to us, something we have lived with and adapted to since the beginnings of civilization. The climate crisis is noticeably different.

Such a conflation of Climate Trauma with weather enables the kind of marginalization of the crisis that supports repression of any difficult feelings it engenders, along with suppression of any

appropriate responses. We find ourselves locked into a perpetual limbic cycle through our responses: fright (inconvenient truths/obsessing over science), fight (polarized political discourse), and flight (distraction/addiction/avoidance). Of course, while severe weather events are symptomatic of the climate crisis, the crisis itself involves much more than a change in the weather—we are fundamentally altering the chemistry of the oceans and atmosphere. At its root, the climate crisis calls into question our basic relationship to nature, and what it means to be human in the Anthropocene.

Climate Trauma is ever-present

Herein lies the riddle of our pathetic, pathological collective and individual unresponsiveness. Climate Trauma is an *ever-present existential threat,* with a bevy of constant cognitive reminders—melting ice caps; eroding shorelines; waves of homeless refugees; the ravaging storms, floods, and fires broadcast into our homes 24/7; and the constant roll-call of disappearing species, vanishing rain forests, and dying coral reefs.

There are certain things in life that we cannot "unsee," and Climate Trauma indelibly stamps our consciousness in that way, fundamentally altering the way we see the world and our place in it. Once we become aware of its true scope, depth, and accelerating pace, we then begin to view everything else through the traumatic lens of the climate crisis— from weather anomalies to political crises and polarized dysfunction, from the threat (and memory) of nuclear war to the absence of songbirds and honey bees on our nature walks, from apocalyptic developments in the Middle East to the latest superhero movie. How could anyone with a reasonably realistic, educated worldview *not be haunted* by the perpetual specter of Climate Trauma when considering fundamental life and identity choices? Decisions like whether to bring children into the world, what career path to follow, or when and where to settle and raise a family suddenly become weighed down by the fate of the world.

As pointed out in Caruth's (1996) psychoanalytic theory of trauma, it is not the *experience itself* that produces traumatic effect but rather *the remembrance* of it. In her account there is always a time lapse, a period of "latency" in which forgetting is characteristic—indeed, welcome—between an event and the *experience* of trauma's impact. While this is certainly apt in relation to individual and even cultural traumas (e.g., the perpetrator trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki), how does it fit with the unrelenting, increasingly ominous assault of Climate Trauma? A period of latency may follow the shock of first realizing the existential implications of what is unfolding before our eyes, but how is "forgetting" psychologically sustainable in the face of an ever-present, ever-advancing denouement?

It is not unlike learning you have a terminal condition. You may put it out of your mind for spells, but the grief associated with prospective loss comes at you in waves. Similarly, the "remembrance" of Climate Trauma is like inhabiting an inhospitable, even dystopian world. There can no longer be any question that life as we know it is now ending. This is signified rather prophetically by the end of the Holocene Age in which civilization arose and the advent of the Anthropocene Age in which it is now sinking. Psychologically, this abrupt transition is creating a kind of "solastalgia" writ large: "the distress that is produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment" (Albrecht et al., 2007, abstract, noting a worldwide "increase in ecosystem distress syndromes matched by a corresponding increase in human distress syndromes").

Our existing clinical paradigm for addressing trauma does not really fit this new, over-arching category of Climate Trauma. A much more ecopsychological, Earth-oriented paradigm is called for, one developed outside the limited and limiting box of Western psychology and the (Cartesian) scientific-materialist worldview from which modern psychology sprang forth. One way of appreciating this dire need is to look to those who have been striving to bring the heart-attack seriousness of the crisis to our attention—the scientists among us:

> Camille Parmesan, a lead author of the Third Assessment Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, [observes]: "I do not know of a single scientist that is not having an emotional reaction to what is being lost" (Thomas 2014, p. 2). It naturally follows that as the findings are more extensively read, and the climate impacts more widely felt, the psychological distress will also increase proportionately (Davenport, 2017, p. 18).

Of more pressing relevance than latency in considering the implications of Climate Trauma is the idea of dissociation in the face of emotional overwhelm. "Dissociation is the human capacity to mentally escape an insufferable reality" (White, 2015, p. 194). Could this natural human capacity be both the understandable response to Climate Trauma—the most insufferable reality we could possibly impose on our world or our children—as well as a potentially salutary explanation for the lack of any cogent moral or spiritual responsiveness?

White would seem to support that theory. Just as he suggests that climate change embodies trauma response on the grandest scale, so too he posits a grand, dissociated responsiveness to climate trauma:

In relation to climate change, a traumatic reality that often seems hard to acknowledge, dissociation is a blatantly relevant concept, and dissociative processes are likely applicable at several levels of the phenomenon of climate change. The prevailing view of climate denial implies a conscious choice not to accept the reality of climate change. Dissociation is a concept that transcends the notion of denial and, since it is tied to trauma theory, offers more promising suggestions for steps toward resolution. (2015, p. 194)

This is reminiscent of the finding by Stanislav Grof that our fear of death has less to do with mortality and more to do with our history of trauma (2006, p. 310). Perhaps the reason people shut down when confronted with climate science is not that they fear the future but rather that the grim prospects it conjures trigger memories of their own repressed traumas. It is therefore worth considering whether it is the most traumatized segments of our society that are the most dismissive of climate science, due to hardened psychological defense mechanisms.

In truth, we are all somewhere on the spectrum of climate denial, as evidenced by the near universal use of the term "climate change." Continuing to view the climate crisis in terms of "realists versus deniers" *is itself* a form of denial. Dissociation from Climate Trauma is both enabled and reinforced by our cultural milieu at this most critical time in the history of our civilization. Those who have most to fear, or lose—parents and grandparents, say, or the most affluent (secure) social classes—also have the greatest incentive to partake in the grand dissociative illusions of endless economic growth and technological progress.

As White puts it, trauma "distorts our ability to see our world clearly, to relate to it as it is" (2015, p. 195) since it "lurk[s] beneath a veil of power or competence or behind a complex network of unconscious dissociative processes" (2015, p. 193), such as the *American Dream* (the myth of progress), which politicians and advertisers alike continue to urge upon all good consumers, enticing us with unrealistic expectations, endless distractions, and easy access to mind-numbing drugs to assuage any sense of personal failure. Endless consumption and perpetual growth are clearly at odds with promoting a realistic view of the climate crisis. Simply stated, we will not resolve Climate Trauma by continuing to perpetuate fight, fright, and flight syndromes. "[T]rauma is redeemed only when it becomes the source of a survivor mission" (Herman, 1992, p. 207).

Climate Trauma and Recovery: A Palliative Proposal

Shifting from a "climate change" paradigm to a "Climate Trauma" paradigm has profound ramifications for how we respond to the climate crisis. Continuing to repress climate trauma by perceiving it as a problem "out there" feeds into the paralysis-by-analysis of political polarization. In this conventional paradigm, both the problem and the solution are perceived as institutional, to be approached with the same incrementalist approach with which we have always addressed environmental externalities. Hillary Clinton embodied this mind-set, advancing global fracking of natural gas as a bridge from coal and oil to renewable energies.

Seeing the crisis as a new form of trauma that is triggering us all individually and culturally, by contrast, makes it more personal. Climate trauma is a systemic assault rather than a technological externality, and the self-awareness promoted by this paradigmatic shift in our outlook engenders personal responsibility and leads to more responsive social movements once we begin hacking at the root of the crisis rather than pruning its symptomatic branches. "We require a new and universal solidarity" (Catholic Church and McDonagh, 2015, p. 14). "Social action offers the survivor[s] a source of power that draws upon [their] own initiative, energy, and resourcefulness" and creates "an alliance with others based on cooperation and shared purpose" (Herman, 1992, p. 207). The solidarity produced by participating in such a movement yields "protection against terror and despair" and serves as "the strongest antidote to traumatic experience" (p. 214).

By way of illustrating how this shift in perspective could alter the political landscape, consider that approximately two thirds of Americans agree that something more needs to be done to address the climate crisis (Climate Reality Project, 2018). By viewing this crisis through a personal trauma-lens, rather than a global politics-lens, members of this "super-majority" could choose to shift their activism from the dysfunctional "acting out" of blaming and/or trying to convert the unbelievers, with voting and marches viewed as the ultimate expressions of power, to a more functional and rational reaction of organizing among themselves to exercise their power more directly and effectively.

For example, similar to the way traumatized vets were empowered by "rap groups" in the 1970s, inspiring women to participate in "consciousness-raising" groups, self-proclaimed "climate survivors" could take their cue from "death cafes," choosing to hold "climate cafes"—creating safe public spaces to affirm climate truths, to share their grief over what is being lost, and to promote personal "respond-ability." Thus empowered, we could agree among ourselves to exercise our vast *consumer* powers, promoting better-informed, mutually reinforced choices (e.g., dietary changes supporting regenerative agriculture), and/or engaging in targeted boycotts (e.g., of factory farms, plastics).

We should never underestimate the power of individual awareness to promote healing, freeing up latent energies, or the power of shared

awareness to transform social structures. This kind of sociopolitical change tends to happen slowly, slowly—and then all at once. Nobody could have anticipated the fall of the Berlin Wall or the Soviet Union, Arab Spring, or even the popularity of Bernie Sanders. In this age of socially engaged media, shared awareness is a powerful political tool, while consumer power holds great potential for social change that is not beholden to political institutions.

The "Truth & Reconciliation" model is an obvious cultural elixir for the post-truth world of polarization and victimization that currently paralyzes the American people. As Herman notes, holding trauma honestly and openly in community "is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world" (1992, p. 70). Thus, the social phenomena of Truth & Reconciliation, as modeled in South Africa in the aftershock of apartheid, is a natural palliative for cultural traumas, one level beneath Climate Trauma.

It would be unrealistic, however, to think that we are going to suddenly adopt an institutional Truth & Reconciliation process on a global, or even societal, scale. No matter—thanks to the trigger of Climate Trauma, the "Truth" portion of Truth & Reconciliation is already well underway. "Truth" in this context involves bringing collective awareness to repressed, unresolved traumas. And that is exactly what we have been seeing in relation to patriarchal systems of sexual abuse, with the #MeToo movement and empowerment of women; slavery/racism and the Civil War, with Black Lives Matter and the deconstruction of odious monuments; and genocide/ecocide, through the global Water Protectors movement inspired by indigenous cultures who have borne the brunt of that trauma. All of these movements are succeeding by bringing increased awareness to the collective traumas underpinning our social structure.

Accepting the proposition that Climate Trauma is triggering these cultural traumas, bringing them to the surface in ways that demand reconciliation, we begin to see these movements not as distractions from the work we have to do on the climate front but rather as necessary components of a broader social upheaval that is removing the psychological barriers to effectively addressing the climate crisis. Similarly, by bringing increased awareness to the role Climate Trauma is playing in this social upheaval, reconciliation of cultural traumas is seen as a moral imperative. The oppressed supermajority can then begin to appreciate the broad, systemic changes that must accompany reconciliation of our relationship with the natural world. As Naomi Klein has observed, "the urgency of the climate crisis could form the basis of a powerful movement, one that would weave all these seemingly disparate issues into a coherent narrative about how to protect humanity" (2015, p. 8).

The great, transformative power of that movement remains latent, however. Connecting personal trauma to cultural and climate trauma has the potential to unleash that potential, since as Herman notes: "Helplessness and isolation are the core experiences of psychological trauma. Empowerment and reconnection are the core experiences of recovery" (1992, p. 197). "When we stop distancing ourselves from the pain in the world, our own or others', we create the possibility of a new experience" (Epstein, 2013, p. 176).

Conclusion

In the Grail Legend that was the basis for T. S. Eliot's epic poem "Wasteland," the melancholic, dying natural world of the fisher king is restored when the knight Perceval asks the mortally wounded king the simple, heartfelt question *"What ails thee?"* What ails humans today, in our dying natural world, our home, is a pervasive and quickening trauma that, though it is triggering all our other traumas, has yet to be acknowledged. Psychologists should promptly join forces with scientists, sociologists, ecologists, social activists, and others to seek out a remedy for what ails us, and to help answer the question of what it means to be human in a world shaped by humans.

The times we live in demand no less of us.

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