

INTRODUCTION

WE ARE IN A MOMENT OF ACUTE COLLECTIVE SUFFERING. Suicides are up — at their highest point in 50 years — and are now the second leading cause of death for Americans under age 35.¹ One in six Americans takes psychiatric medication, primarily for depression and anxiety.² Opioids kill more Americans than car crashes.³ Virtually all of us resort to something for numbing and distraction: We watch 33 hours of TV a week, scroll endlessly on social media, play video games, and watch pornography.⁴ We drink too much, eat too much, work too much, compete too much, and buy too much. Simply put, Americans — and people all over the world — are in pain.

There is, of course, an enormous self-help industry dedicated to helping us feel better. Books, podcasts, and seminars say we're unhappy because we are disconnected from other people and overconnected to technology; they say that we are harshly self-critical and care too much about what other people think, that we live in a suspended adolescence, that we don't manage our money properly and don't take enough emotional risks, that we aren't living our best lives, and that we don't practice enough self-care. Others rightfully point to the glaring realities of inequality, poverty, and precarity as the cause of our pain. These narratives are each important and true to some degree, and they may offer some help. But there's something else going on; something is eating at us. We are in pain because our world is dying and, through our passivity, we are responsible for killing it.

This may sound strange at first. We are so profoundly dissociated from the natural world that we may not register its destruction as something that can profoundly affect our mood. However,

think about what happens to you when you see wildfires consuming the Amazon, Australia, and California, floodwaters drowning farmland in France and the Midwest, and hurricanes decimating Caribbean islands. How do you feel when you notice the changing climate in your city? Do you feel terror, grief, anger, and dread? Or is it vague, gnawing anxiety? Do you feel overwhelmed? Or do you feel nothing at all — are you numb to the seemingly impending catastrophe?

Inside all of us, a battle rages. It's the battle between knowing and not knowing, between fully facing the truth — emotionally, as well as intellectually — and shrinking from it. We sense we're in a climate emergency and mass extinction event, but we have a deep-seated psychological instinct to defend against that knowledge. The pain is shouting at us: "Everything is dying!" Somewhere inside, we know that humanity and the natural world are in peril. Indeed, we *feel* the horrors of civilizational collapse and the sixth mass extinction of species, in our bodies. Our minds attempt to shield us from this pain — we avoid, distract, deny, and numb ourselves. But these defenses work only temporarily: When we fail to process our emotions and mourn our losses, the pain takes on tremendous power. It follows us around like a shadow, and we become increasingly desperate to avoid what we know.

This pain has several dimensions. It is the fear we feel for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for all humanity; it is the empathy and grief we feel for the people and species already immiserated or killed; it is the crushing guilt that we feel for continuing to let this happen. Our pain is the consequence of our participation in a destructive system. We have allowed ourselves to become killers — a plague on the rest of life. We share, to varying degrees, guilt and responsibility.⁵ Our pain may feel terrible, but it is rational, appropriate, and deserved. It is an internal reflection of external reality: The biosphere — all life — is suffering or threatened. Of course we feel sad and anxious. We are caught in an economic and political system that fosters our collective

participation in our planet's daily degradation. Why would we expect to feel good, and good about ourselves, while we are a part of killing all life on Earth, including ourselves and everyone we love?

On one hand, we are victims. No one asked to be born into this broken system that treats human and other life as disposable, allows for unprecedented levels of inequality, and has ignored the climate and ecological crises for decades. We have been failed by the people and institutions that were tasked with protecting us — first and foremost our governments and elected representatives. Our government's failure could not be more complete. The total abdication of duty to protect humanity and all life has made the social contract between government and citizens a sick joke. But the government is not alone: Media outlets, universities, churches, museums, labor unions, environmental organizations, professional associations, and countless others have also failed to acknowledge and protect us from the climate emergency.

And, of course, corporations, such as fossil-fuel companies like ExxonMobil (and their executives) bear an enormous amount of responsibility for the coming global cataclysm. For decades, the fossil-fuel industry has run a multibillion-dollar campaign of lies and climate denial, and it has successfully sowed doubt in our society and blocked anything approaching an appropriate response from our elected leaders. The level of cravenness required to lie to the public about catastrophic warming to continue our addiction to fossil fuels is appalling, criminal, and terribly dangerous.

Many other corporations are also implicated. Big agriculture (particularly Monsanto), big banks, airlines, carmakers, and others have pursued a similarly environmentally devastating business model — contributing to a coming mass death in exchange for short-term profits.

But we are not *merely* victims. Through our participation in this system, through our passivity, we are also perpetrators. We have failed ourselves and each other. We've plundered our home

without consideration or restraint, and now we are watching it burn. Although humanity has become almost godlike in our power to create and destroy, we have remained childlike in our use of that power.



In 1956, psychoanalyst and antinuclear activist Erich Fromm wrote *The Art of Loving*, which examined the psychological impacts of a consumer–capitalist society on individuals. Fromm argued that people are alienated from their work, from themselves, and from each other. Fromm noted that people had been sold the view that life was one big competition or marketplace and that people were commodities who should try to maximize not just their money but also their popularity and attractiveness. He observed that people in these societies treat themselves like commodities in a competitive market, adopting false selves to fit in and be liked, while abandoning their authenticity and sense of true purpose.

This ideology still prevails today and fosters the following beliefs:

- You are an isolated individual, defined by what you achieve and what you buy.
- You should focus on competition with others and personal indulgence.
- The only way to have love and acceptance is to own more things.
- There is no community, and there is no web of life.
- Other people are threatening, especially people who are a different race or are from a different culture.
- You have no moral responsibilities. In fact, you are a deprived victim who deserves much more than you get.
- You are living at the pinnacle of human achievement, defined by constant economic growth, and it's naïve to think there could be anything different.

- You may be feeling unpleasant feelings, but they will go away if you buy something.

In his essay, “Love of Death and Love of Life,” Fromm postulated that the only reason people would not rise against the possibility of worldwide nuclear destruction was that they were *already* experiencing devastating destruction, internally. On some level, Fromm reasoned, the destruction must have felt appropriate and even appealing — better, at least, than a bullshit, dead-end, alienated, and humiliating life. Otherwise, why did our society allow the risk of mass nuclear obliteration to threaten us for decades? Fromm believed that if people inherently felt their lives were precious and worth living, if people felt engaged in life and saw that engagement reflected in others, if people were not housing a deadness within, they would *demand* an end to the creation of weapons of mass destruction. They would refuse to accept the possibility of the end of all life.⁶

When it comes to the climate crisis, we must ask ourselves the same question: When faced with our current and coming ecological disaster, why are we passively accepting collective suicide and the mass murder of all life? Have we come to feel the pull of death more powerfully than the pull of life?

When we see the media address dire scientific reports in a few stern sentences before cutting away to celebrity gossip; when we see passivity and resignation to our fate from friends and community members; when we hear the common refrain of “We’re fucked”; we have to conclude that the coming ecological crisis must feel like an *expected* and maybe even an *appropriate* end to our obviously degraded society. How are we otherwise able to make sense of the fact that people aren’t rioting in the streets at the imminent destruction of their lives, their children’s lives, and the entire web of life? Do we want to live? If we do, we need to wake up and grow up — right now. We are about to lose everything, but we aren’t dead yet.

Fromm describes the pull of death as “necrophilia.” This concept is informed by Freud’s theory of the “death instinct.” It isn’t a sexual dynamic — it’s a deeply personal orientation. Necrophilia is a love “for all that is violence and destruction; the desire to kill; the worship of force; attraction to death, to sadism; the desire to transform the organic into the inorganic by means of ‘order.’”⁷ Necrophilia prioritizes things over people, and possessions over experiences. “The necrophile,” writes Fromm, “lacking the necessary qualities to create, in his impotence finds it easy to destroy because for him it serves only one quality: force.”⁸

Our society treats life — human life, plant life, animal life — as if it were a cheap commodity rather than the most precious, sacred thing there is. By doing so, we’ve not only ensured the coming ecological crisis; we’ve inured ourselves to it. It seems to us to be an appropriate end: Worldwide annihilation reflects the emotional and spiritual annihilation we’ve internalized.



It doesn’t have to be this way. In fact, we can face climate truth and choose not to commit passive suicide.

We can choose to turn away from illusion and distraction. We can each decide to face climate truth and make the choice that *now* is the time to do everything in our power to wrest life back from the jaws of extinction. We can each help to initiate a collective awakening to the climate emergency and a World War II-scale response that protects humanity and the natural world and builds a beloved community.

To do so, we must shake off our resignation and our narcissistic, consumerist, necrophilic orientation, and denounce the lies that aid and abet denial. Each of us must do our part to reestablish our connection to all life and to recognize our bottomless responsibility to protect it. We must acknowledge that responsibility. We must take on the mantle of “protector” or “warrior” with joy and pride. We must join the team to protect humanity

and all life. We can allow ourselves to face the truth and to accept the reality that we must transform — *now* — individually and together, to respond effectively to the climate crisis.

Socialism has experienced a resurgence in recent years — partly because many people see capitalism as squarely to blame for the climate emergency. It's true: Capitalism, with its dependence on endless growth, its staggering levels of inequality, its treatment of workers as disposable and the living world as expendable, and its relentless use of advertising to make good citizens synonymous with good consumers, is a key part of the problem.⁹

However, it's simplistic to blame capitalism alone. Governments and citizens worldwide have perpetrated the damage to our planet, and it hasn't taken place solely under the auspices of capitalism. The communist, totalitarian Soviet Union was approximately as damaging to ecosystems as the market-based United States¹⁰ and was the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases during the 1960s, '70s, and '80s.¹¹ China, with its mostly state-driven economy, has now become the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases. The social democratic state of Norway owns 67 percent of Equinor, formerly Statoil — an oil and energy company.¹² The change we need to make is *even bigger* than shifting to socialism.

To solve the climate and ecological emergency, we must transform our destructive economy into a *regenerative* one, and we must do it at emergency speed. We don't just need zero emissions in every sector; we need huge carbon drawdown projects that restore ecosystems and the soil. We need permaculture and food localization; we need an end to mass consumerism and endless growth; we need to give back half the Earth to nature to restore biodiversity;¹³ and we need to create a society based on protecting and healing humanity and the natural world. This means transforming not only our energy, agricultural, transportation, and industrial systems — it means transforming ourselves

and how we relate to each other. We need to rethink our basic concept of who we are and what matters.

And we need to do it all *right now*.



This is a self-help book, but its goal is not to make you feel less pain. Its goal is to make you feel your pain more directly and constructively: to turn it into action that protects humanity and all life. In this book, I argue that your *pain is a signal* — it’s telling you something critically important. The pain is demanding to be acknowledged, and I want to show you how to listen to it. I want you to face the pain of the climate and ecological emergency, and to feel it in a focused, conscious way so that you can initiate a process of transformation — first in yourself and then in society as a whole. This large-scale change must be our goal, as Pope Francis wrote in his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Sí*. To stop the climate emergency, he says, we must “become painfully aware, to dare to turn what is happening to the world into our own personal suffering and thus to discover what each of us can do about it.”¹⁴

We can use our pain to effect tremendous change. I know because I’ve been through this process myself: I’ve felt the pain, I’ve faced it, and I’ve used it to motivate myself and others for change. Before I started a climate advocacy organization, I was a young professional in New York City — a clinical psychologist working on a doctoral degree, preparing to enter private practice and start paying off my six-figure student debt. I wasn’t a climate denier, but I was willfully ignorant and disengaged. I avoided thinking or reading much about the climate because it made me feel terrified and helpless. I would read the first sentences of articles about global warming, say to myself, “Nope! I can’t do it,” close the article, and distract myself with something else.

But in October 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit, and New York City came to a standstill. Destruction was everywhere. I vividly remember seeing a car that had been smashed by a huge branch.

It had a cardboard sign on the shattered windshield that read, “Is global warming the culprit?” Seeing the message caused something in me to shift. I *knew* the answer to that question, though my knowledge was diffuse, even unformulated. But that sign helped me bring my awareness into stark focus: If global warming had smashed that car and the whole city, what else could it do? How bad was this situation, and what did our collective future hold? With these questions in mind, I started to educate myself. I began to finish the articles that had previously overwhelmed me. I started to seek out books on the climate and ecological emergencies.

What I learned shook me to my core — and caused me to reassess my life. I realized that it was my responsibility to do everything I could to halt and reverse the coming catastrophe. So I left the field of psychotherapy — which I loved — to found and direct The Climate Mobilization (TCM), an organization that tells the truth about the climate emergency and advocates a WWII-scale transformation of our economy and society to protect humanity and the natural world. To give TCM the best chance of success, my husband and I focused on necessities, moving into a small, affordable apartment so that I could build the organization as a volunteer.

Through my work at TCM, I have had hundreds of conversations with people — as diverse as elected leaders, climate scientists, stay-at-home moms, hedge-fund managers, and janitors — about how to process fear and respond to climate truth. I’ve facilitated discussions about “life in the climate crisis” and how to turn “pain into action” for all kinds of groups, whether in person, on phone calls, or through Facebook. Through my work, I have seen individuals perform extraordinary feats of service — people rearranging their lives, leaving their jobs, spending their savings, moving in with their parents — to go “all in” for this mission.

I have also seen a powerful movement arise. I have seen Extinction Rebellion (XR) use nonviolent, direct-action strategies to declare that the government has fundamentally broken

its social contract and that rebellion is our best hope of survival. I have seen students walk out of their classes *by the millions*, demanding that adults take responsibility for solving this emergency. I have seen the Sunrise Movement mobilize for a Green New Deal — a WWII-scale response to the climate emergency. I have seen the beginning of a collective awakening, with more and more people deciding that they will not sit quietly while the world around us dies.

There is a movement being born, and I am proud to say that I helped bring it into existence. The members of this movement are not content to numb our sadness with money and things. We're not willing to ignore the Earth as it burns. We're going to fight for what matters. We know that we can face climate truth and let it transform us.

This book will show you how to join our ranks as members of the climate emergency movement. In it, I will ask you to tap into your fear about our current climate crisis and the future we are careening toward. I will help you mourn what has already been lost and what we continue to lose every day. I will help you transform your despair into a collective effort to build power for the movement.

It's not going to be easy. It's going to be the opposite of easy. But acknowledging the truth of our climate and ecological emergency, grieving the past and the future that has been lost, and taking the heroic path of the climate warrior will make you confident and strong. It will give you a mission and purpose beyond anything you have experienced before. It will allow you to, at long last, heal your pain and feel genuinely good about yourself. It will connect you to your fellow humans, and it will connect you to all life. It will give you real, meaningful hope because it is based on your real and incredible potential to affect change. Most importantly, it will help give humanity a better chance of canceling the apocalypse and protecting itself and the living world.

It will be a difficult journey, but I can promise you that when you commit to taking it, something wonderful will happen. You

will feel hope; you will know that you are part of the solution; you will know that you are doing your part to save the world. You will become a climate warrior, leveraging your strengths and your capacities and mobilizing to save the world. You *can* transform yourself with climate truth and become the hero humanity needs you to be. No one is coming to save us, but together we might be able to save ourselves.



Questions for Reflection and Discussion

- Do you feel anxiety, depression, or have other painful psychological experiences that you struggle to define?
- How might some of those feelings be driven by the climate crisis and species extinction?
- Have you experienced any sense of the inner-deadness that Fromm describes?
- How and to what extent have you replaced your love of life with a love of objects?
- What do you most love about humanity and the living world? What do you most want to protect?
- Can you imagine yourself as a hero? As a protector? As a climate warrior?