

Dealing with despair: The psychological implications of environmental issues

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Dr. Richard Kool

Dr. Elin Kelsey

Royal Roads University, Victoria, BC Canada

To speak of sorrow
works upon it
moves it from its
crouched place barring
the way to and from the soul's hall...
Denise Levertov (1967)

Environmental education, like many forms of education that are global in scope (i.e. peace education, global education etc.), serves to problematize the world. From its early emphasis on “nature study”, and “conservation education”, environmental education has evolved, in part, into the study of threats to, and loss of, the natural world; threats that take the form of increasing levels of pollution, to accelerating loss of species, to regional and global atmospheric phenomena such as acid rain and ozone depletion, and more recently, global climate change. This focus on loss and threats can be seen in these two examples from the earliest days of the field's development:

The spirit of the seventies is a spirited concern for environmental quality. We are figuratively and literally sick and tired of a mis-development of America that diminishes daily the quality of the human experience: water pollution; air pollution; soil erosion; forest, range and wetland deterioration; waning wildlife; urban sprawl; pre-empted open spaces; vanishing wilderness; landscapes scarred by highways, litter, noise, and blight- a not so quite crisis of decreasing beauty and increasing contamination that threatens not only the pursuit of happiness but life itself.
(Schoenfeld, 1971, p. 1)

First, should environmental education be considered to have a high priority for public education? It is now widely recognized by the global community of scholars and increasingly by political agencies throughout the world that environmental problems of very serious magnitude threaten the biosphere. Principal among these problems may be overpopulation and environmental pollution, but certainly environmental problems are not restricted to these two areas. It is not productive to overemphasize the potential “crisis” situation inherent in environmental problems, but it is important to realize that concerted action is necessary now if these problems are to be eliminated and if the process of environmental deterioration is to be reversed. (Shaw et al., 1972, p. 1)

The litanies of familiar environmental problems today are not much different today than those espoused by Schoenfeld and others over 30 year ago. Days and weeks can be spent in classrooms studying species extinction, climate changes, population issues, deforestation and desertification,

and more. Even when we celebrate the wonders of nature, the experiences of wild places, the beauty of biodiversity, it is often clouded with the hint that even these places, even these species, are at risk; we celebrate them now with the knowledge that they too might be lost within our lifetime. And while teachers may be comfortable in talking about the science of species extinction, or about the geography of urban sprawl and land conversion, or about ozone holes and global climate change, the emotional implications of these subjects appear to be unexplored, unexamined, and in truth, unexamined.

The environmental education literature is strangely silent about dealing with the emotional implications of the environmental crisis. Words like hope, grief, mourning, sadness, despair or anger rarely appear in our writings: there is virtually nothing in our literature addressing appropriate ways to deal with the emotions associated with environmental degradation. The seminal work of Joanna Macy and David Sobel raised this issue in past decades (Macy, 1983; Sobel, 1996), yet the word “hope”, for example, appears once in a title in *Environmental Education Research* (EER) and not at all in the last ten years of the *Journal of Environmental Education* (JEE) (Hicks, 1998; Orr, 2004; Sobel, 1995). Furthermore, “hope” shows up in about 60 articles/book reviews, less than 1% of the articles and book reviews in those publications. Similarly, the word ‘despair’ has appeared only five times in the past ten years of JEE publications, and not once in EER since 2000. We may talk about ‘no tragedies before ten’ (Sobel, 1995), but what do we do with the eleven-year olds? University of Toronto professor Edmund O’Sullivan (pers. comm.) said at the 1992 *World Congress for Education and Communication on Environment and Development*, “As educators, despair is not our business.” And yet, one wonders how we can actually talk about the environmental crisis, something that most of us teach, without expressing a profound sense of grief, despair and anguish at what we see happening in the world (Nicholsen, 2002).

Yet children are very aware of the implications of the growing environmental crisis, and, perhaps sadly, speak to us through depressing publications such as the post-UNCED *Rescue Mission: Planet Earth* (Children's Task Force on Agenda 21, 1994), where the theme of death seems to pervade the pages: in that document, the first page of the first section, *Atmosphere Alert*, has a poem Death, by a 17 year old Pole; the next page spread has a section entitled *Spit-roasted Planet*, the next page spread has a box *A carnage of Death*, two spreads later, the title is *Chainsaw Massacre*, and on it goes. This book, a “child’s guide to Agenda 21” and widely distributed through many countries around the world, and with its contributions of art, prose and poetry by children, is a document of deep despair. While environmental educators may want to encourage a child’s “sense of wonder” (Carson, 1956), we believe that environmental education can also fuel a child’s fear for the world and it’s future through its focus on the real-world problems that confront us. And while we don’t mean to imply that we shouldn’t focus on the real problems, we are concerned that there are psychological implications to that focus that environmental educators have been unaware of.

Environmental education’s focus on the problems of the world, and on our tendency towards advocating an individualistic approach to the solving of those problems (rather than proposing a collective, corporate or political approach to analyzing situations and to finding solutions), echo a thesis put forward by Susan Steinberger in her book, *Having Faith* (2001)). Steinberger argues that by placing the onus for growing a healthy fetus entirely on the mother (in the form, for

example, of alcohol and cigarette warnings for pregnant women) governments avoid or ignore the potentially more damaging effects of air and water pollution or the bioaccumulation of toxins in the food chain that exist and can only be remedied at a broader societal level. In the same way, trying to place the burden of solutions to environmental problems such as air pollution on individuals who, for example, may not have transportation alternatives, absolves governments from their responsibilities.

For most of our history, humans lived lives that were not appreciably different from their parents. For the past few centuries, and increasingly in the 20th century and as predicted for the 21st, that pattern has changed: we are constantly dealing with change, and one essential response to change is a sense of loss (Marris, 1975). Species extinction, logging of old-growth forests, elimination of wetlands and wild places, growth of the ozone hole, all are examples of losses. And we experience a sense of loss through, in part, the emotion of grief. Unending loss and the practical lack of ability to do anything about it can result in the emotions of helplessness. Presenting issues that we can seemingly do nothing personally about, and yet implying that we as individuals should be held personally responsible for, seems to be a recipe for the loss of self-esteem and an increased feeling of helplessness, as we all have to confront how far we all live from the things that we espouse. And clinicians have noted that from feelings of helplessness comes feelings of hopelessness, depression and despair (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989). This kind of helplessness in the face of rapid change, and rapid environmental change, may be something that we actually teach, as what we teach in EE has all the attributes of the 3 “P’s” associated with the theory of *learned helplessness* (Seligman, 1975):

- 1) Personal - they may see themselves as the problem; that is, they have internalized the problem;
- 2) Pervasive - they may see the problem affecting all aspects of life; and
- 3) Permanent - they may see the problem as unchangeable. (Grohol, n.d.).

And from helplessness can come the progression to *learned hopelessness*, depression and despair.

We ask each of the students entering our graduate program in Environmental Education and Communications to write an environmental autobiography. So many of them, as in the following excerpt, include poignant memories of attachment to wild places or wild experiences and the subsequent grief that accompanies their loss.

If I had to point to a moment when the connections and affiliations I experienced began to solidify into a commitment to preserve the world’s special places, there would be two defining moments. The first was the collapse of the cod fishery, the main source of sustenance for hundreds of outport communities for hundreds of years. The groundfish moratorium resulted in a profound sense of loss felt keenly by all Newfoundlanders whether at home or living away. How could this once bountiful resource, which teemed from buckets dipped in the water in John Cabot’s day, be gone? What would happen to our unique culture, our way of life? Who was responsible? Many blamed the federal government for the gross mismanagement of the resource and the scientists for their paternalistic attitude toward the inshore fishermen who had warned of dwindling stocks for years. In the end, we had to accept the reality of, and some of the responsibility for,

what was lost and would never again be the same. My father, though he had retired some years earlier, never got over it.

John Bowlby, in his now classic study of Attachment and Loss, describes the nature of attachment between child and parent, and the emotional implications for the rupture of that relationship. It is clear, however, that many of the features of attachment, for example that attachment behavior can lead to affectional bonds, that “the formation, maintenance, disruption and renewal of attachments give rise to the many of the most intense emotions that humans experience” (Hansen, 2004, p. 2), that some of the important determinants of adult ability to form healthy relationships are determined by the quality of attachment relationships in childhood, noted by Bowlby, may also be generalized to attachment to place, to species, to our environment in general.

Within attachment theory, a feeling of loss results from a break in the attachment relationship, in a break in our affectional bond. Interestingly, Hansen notes that it is not only with people that we have bonds that can be ruptured resulting in the experience of loss, but also with *things, places, and intangibles*. For the latter “examples include loss of a dream or a vision, a change in ideas, a shift in values, ..., or an atmosphere of apprehension/distrust/fear.” (Hansen, 2004, p. 18)

Bowlby writes that “mourning’... is used to denote a fairly wide array of psychological processes set in train by the loss of a loved person irrespective of their outcome” (Bowlby, 1985, p. 17). All human beings, in every known culture, normally grieve when they suffer severe bereavement (state of sorrow over the death or departure of a loved one) (Marris, 1975, p. vii). When a child is separated from her mother, Bowlby (1960) identified three stages of response: 1) Protest (related to separation anxiety), 2) Despair (related to grief and mourning), and 3) Detachment or denial (related to defense). Do we have any ideas as to whether children, hearing about endangerment and extinction, grieve and mourn for the lost species, despair for us and the rest of the living world, and then take a stance of detachment or denial in response to the overwhelming-ness of the issue before them? Do we go through the same trajectory of despair, grief, mourning and detachment that we do with the loss of a parent when we hear of loss of species etc.

Environmental educators have historically talked about the importance of a sense of place, and the necessary attachment to place that may lead to people taking action to protect and preserve it. But what do we do with the larger places, the commons of the atmosphere, the lakes, the oceans, the prairies, places that are beyond our personal attachment in their immensity, When we hear about ozone holes, can we find the emotional response appropriate to the scale of the issue? We believe that environmental educators need to take these issues quite seriously when we teach about the huge problems, real problems, and then only address the cognitive aspects of the message. David Sobel (1999) makes a similar point: “My fear is that our environmentally correct curriculum will end up distancing children from, rather than connecting them with, the natural world.” While Sobel has a fear, it seems as though there is psychological evidence from both attachment theory (mentioned previously) , and what has been called *terror management theory* (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1998), to back up his fear.

Terror management theory (TMT) grows from the work of the sociologist Ernst Becker (Becker, 1973), who claimed that humans expend a great deal of psychological energy keeping the terror

of their mortality at a distance. Solomon et al (1998) and their associates have developed a considerable literature testing Becker's initial insight, and seem to be able to assert with some confidence the essential correctness of Becker's ideas. According to Hart, Shaver, & Goldenberg (2005, p. 999) "... much of human behavior is directed toward maintaining a sense of psychological security and minimizing conscious and unconscious apprehension and anxiety about personal vulnerability—including, ultimately, death." Further, they note that "... human beings are seen as trying to prevent psychological injury and disarray (or, conversely, to preserve security) through various strivings" (p. 1001). We seem to strive towards maintaining, for example, a vision of the world as "stable and fair", yet our professions' focus on loss and problems presents a message of the world as being anything but "stable and fair". Presenting hopeless-seeming problems to young people may reduce their sense of psychological security and increase their sense of vulnerability and apprehension, thus leading to fear, a sense of loss, and a sense of despair for the future. This may be an important line of future research.

According to Solomon et al, (1998, p. 25), "if a psychological structure provides protection against the potential terror engendered by knowledge of mortality., then bringing thoughts of mortality into consciousness should increase concern for maintaining that structure". The terror theorists argue that our cultural worldview, a worldview that places all of nature in the service of humans, a worldview that sees nature as a place of infinite resources and infinite sinks for waste, is such a psychological structure that works to reduce our fear of mortality. What they have found is that when thoughts of mortality are presented to a range of research subjects, or even when research subjects are asked to do certain tasks in a context that might remind them of their mortality (i.e in front of a funeral home), those subjects cling more aggressively to their cultural worldviews, what the researchers call 'worldview defense', and in particular "denigrate those who violate important cultural precepts and ... venerate those who uphold them" (Solomon et al., 1998, p. 26). Based on the TMT model, the presentation of EE's traditional litany of environmental problems and disasters should result in those exposed to the message of impending disaster referring to much more traditional beliefs based on our anthropocentric worldview, and not move towards an increasingly ecocentric worldview. And while there is no research in this area, we need to know if our efforts might, in some circumstances, actually prove counterproductive. If, in fact, the presentations of overwhelming environmental crisis, whether true or not, provides a serious challenge to the psychological security system of children, of which attachment and terror management may be significant components, what are we to do in response?

If we take seriously the idea that through our work, we are not just presenting cognitive challenges to young people, but also unacknowledged psychological challenges to them (and, it should be noted, to us as teachers as well), then we need to consider how we can help our students, and ourselves, to cope with the psychological burden of knowledge of loss in the natural world. Slap-Shelton (n.d., citing Leick and Davidsen-Nielsen) notes four tasks that someone dealing with loss needs to engage in to integrate their experience of that loss into their lived world. All of these are the kinds of work that we might consider exploring with our students and colleagues as we confront the feelings associated with environmental losses.

1) Recognizing the Loss

Can we, along with our students, accept the world as it is, with all the losses out in front of us? Can we do this clearly, understanding that many things have happened in the past that we cannot control and that while we may be angry about those things, we have to accept their reality. Can we do this clearly, as well, recognizing that there are trends clearly identified by science, that we can now do little or nothing about in the short term, although long-term solutions are possible. Slap-Shelton notes that we might first be able to accept these losses intellectually, but we must ultimately come to accept them emotionally: that what is lost is not going to return. Often in EE, we do confront the loss of species, the reduction in natural areas etc., but we fail to go beyond this, keeping our public knowledge of loss in the cognitive realm, but failing to bring it into the affective realm.

2) Releasing the Emotions of Grief:

Are there rituals that we might use to release our emotions of loss and sadness? As noted earlier, all cultures have mourning rituals to help survivors cope with loss. Joanna Macy and her colleagues have developed a range of activities all helping us to deal with “grief work” (Macy, 1983; Macy & Brown, 1998, and see <http://www.rainforestinfo.org.au/deep-eco/EEQ2.htm>). Physical projects such as memorials, monuments and remembrance books can all become a focal point for the emotions of loss, places of memory for what is grieved over. From the cognitive to the affective, even here we have not finished the job of how to deal with our sense of loss. To simply release the emotions of grief and do nothing more with it would keep ourselves, and our students, paralyzed in feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. Releasing grief is not enough.

3) Developing New Skills:

So what can we do about the losses? What new roles can we take on, and can our students take on, as we try to change the world? Environmental educators have long talked about the skills of an environmentally literate person (e.g., Hungerford, 1996; Hungerford & Volk, 1990; Roth, 1992), and skills are clearly needed for us to make a transition to a sustainable society. Motivation for developing skills will likely be related to the experience of previous steps in dealing with the emotions of loss: we recognize the loss, we grieve, and then we get on with what we can do. It is likely here that we can help young people feel the power of their individual actions brought collectively together for a common good.

4) Reinvesting Emotional Energy in the Present:

There is tremendous work for us to do, all of us, from where we are, with the tools that we have at hand. Beyond despair and detachment is hope and engagement and this is the important point of dealing with our losses. Beyond the feelings of hopelessness about the environmental situation of the day is the power of creating a meaningful response, and this response needs to be as meaningful to us as educators as it is to our students. Yet we still have to honestly confront the fact that our bicycle riding, for example, may in fact do nothing to change the carbon budget of the atmosphere.

Psychiatrist Victor Frankl, survivor of Auschwitz and author of the classic text *Mans' search for meaning*, notes that there are three “main avenues on which one arrives at meaning in life” (Frankl, 1984, p. 146), and all of them are relevant to dealing with the emotional implications of environmental education. First, he says, “is by creating a work or by doing a deed.” Action is a core component of environmental education, and with skills and abilities, we can respond to loss

through our deeds of restoration and healing, of reduction, of caring and kindness. Actions of this sort can come from, and can give us, hope. Second, Frankl speaks of “experiencing something or encountering someone” (p. 146). As we connect children with nature, and as we connect them with other youth and with significant adults, we can help create meaning to counter the despair of environmental loss. But finally, Frankl poses the hardest avenue to create meaning, and what he calls the most important means, a test that he himself experienced directly while in Nazi concentrations camps: “even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation, facing a fate he cannot change, may rise above himself, may grow beyond himself, and by so doing change himself” (p. 147). The possibility of transcendence and growth into a more powerful and committed human being can be an inspirational outcome of confronting environmental loss, and we can see this in those individuals who stand out as leaders through their actions and in those not willing to succumb to despair.

But none of this is easy. We are becoming clearer about the nature of the environmental problems we face, we are becoming clearer about the causes of them and what needs to be done about them. We become clearer too that the correct locus of action is not always at the individual level, but instead there are necessary collective actions, actions taken by governments and by business. So what do we do when we know our individual actions are not sufficient, and when even our collective actions will not change things for a generation or more?

It is clear that in many ways, the way that most people deal with loss, despair and grief is through their spiritual traditions. So since we come from the Judeo-Christian tradition, let us present two teachings that may relate to this problem. First, from the Jewish Bible, from the Book of Exodus. When Moses told the Israelites that G-d wanted to give them Torah (the Five books of Moses), the Sages teach that the Israelites replied unanimously and without question, saying "Na'aseh v'nishma (We will do, and we will understand)." Here, likely, is one important guide for us. Sometimes, as current ads tell us, you just have to “do it.” For the Israelites, and likely for many of us, the way we come to understanding, to authentic lived understanding, is through doing the deed. Our response to environmental grief might truly be found more in the deed, and in this case, and keeping within the Jewish tradition, with acts of “tikkun olum”, of acts of restoration and healing in and for the world.

Secondly, within the Jewish tradition there exists a great deal of discussion about the relationship between what we know and what we do with what we know. We’d like to close with this piece of wisdom from a tractate called *Wisdom of the elders* (Pirkei Avot 2:20-:21): “Rabbi Tarfon said: The day is short, the task is great, the laborers are lazy, the wage is abundant and the master is urgent. He used to say: It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task. Yet, you are not free to desist from it.”

This is the final response of hope in the face of loss. We don’t have to complete the task of restoring the natural world and providing justice and decency for all, but none of us are free to not begin the work.

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