ON EDGE: God-talk on the Cusp of Ecological Collapse

David R. Weiss, February 26, 2022
Process and Faith Twin Cities Connection

Thank you for the invitation to share my thoughts on the challenge of "God-talk on the Cusp of Ecological Collapse."

Several weeks ago I wrote a sweet poignant poem that I titled "Love Letter to my Church." I have a *complicated* relationship to the church in general, so I was a bit surprised to find myself reaching for words to voice something close to gleeful joy.

I share that this morning because in a significant and perhaps unexpected way, this talk is an addendum to the poem. It is rooted in and shaped by my lived experience in a vibrant faith community. I have come here to say some hard things—but to speak them with love … and with hope for the promise of gleeful joy. And I can do that today because I have a faith community for which these things are profoundly true.

Just two weeks ago in church we heard this benediction, originally from William Sloane Coffin: "May God give you the grace not to sell yourself short, grace to risk something big for something good, grace to remember that the world is now too dangerous for anything but truth, and too small for anything but Love."

That whole benediction is worth bearing in mind as I speak today, but the phrase—"too dangerous for anything but truth"—that's where we begin.

You see, we are in a *kairos* moment regarding our relationship with the planet—and with one another. *Kairos*, you may know, is Greek for time. But not just any time. *Chronos* is Greek for chronological time: clock time, calendar time, *ordinary time*. *Kairos* is time in its most consequential mode. It means *fraught time*. Time that is swollen, pregnant, bulging with promise … or peril. Choosing to play it safe in a *kairos* moment is not simply unwise—it's impossible. *There is no safety*. Everything is at risk. And there are wise risks, foolish risks, communal risks, selfish risks, generous risks, perhaps even evil risks. But safety? That's off the table.

The *kairos* moment we face poses deep questions about the task of theology and the vocation of the church; indeed, about the very nature of the human enterprise. You know some of that, no doubt. But I'm going to "turn up the volume" today because these questions have an urgency that hasn't yet been fully reckoned within the church.

I've arranged my presentation in two parts. First, I'll set forth the existential stakes of ecological collapse: that is, the threat posed to human life itself by the conditions of this moment. Then, I'll lay out what I regard as some of the theological stakes of ecological collapse. This includes the responsibility to engage in *strident … vigorous* godtalk and to actively fashion our life together in faithful response to the threat of ecological collapse. Silence or inaction in this moment is an act of betrayal against our neighbor, our fellow creatures, and God.

You will, I suspect, find some of my presentation alarming. I provide references for some of the key articles and books that have shaped my perspective at the end of this essay. This morning, rather than debate the science, I want us to engage in hard theological conversation, and my presentation is pitched to provoke that. You're welcome to approach it as a fanciful if dystopian thought experiment if you prefer.

I think all of us would *like* to meet our dismay over the climate crisis with one more round of resolute conviction, believing that if we all just try a bit harder—somehow summoning the personal and political will that has been lacking until now—we can still turn this thing around. But for the next two hours I want us to ask together, "What if we *don't*? Indeed, *what if we can't turn it around any longer?*" What THEN do we say of God? What form THEN ought the church take?

The <u>existential</u> stakes of ecological collapse

We begin with my family. Margaret and I have a blended family of six children, aged 26 to 40, four of whom have spouses, and we have nine grandchildren, ranging in age from 5 to 15.

You don't need to know more than that, but you need to know that much: I have children and grandchildren. I have a family that I love dearly. And I do *not* envision them living with the looming threat of ecological collapse as we do. No, I envision them—in their lifetimes—*experiencing* ecological collapse in the world. And almost certainly not from afar, but on their own doorstep.

You need to know about my family because only so can you appropriately gauge the weight of what I will say today. There is no detached cynicism in my words. No misanthropic glee. Rather, there is a great yawning sadness … MATCHED by a *dogged conviction* that there *are* yet things that we—theologians, pastors, church members, parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents—*can do*. Not to prevent the calamity that is soon upon us, but to *preserve the humanity* that is in us … even as we face the collapse of the very ecological and societal systems in which we "live and move and have our being."

Now, as you start shifting uneasily in your seats, let me remind you of that love letter I wrote to my church. I am here to say hard things. Very hard things—*because I am so deeply moved by the luring promise of gleeful joy*.

I don't know exactly how collapse will unfold or what exact conditions it will bring. You can imagine some of them yourselves. Wildfires, drought, melting ice, rising seas, bigger storms, crop failures, waves of refugees, and HEAT. All things we've experienced, just amplified beyond what our imaginations can easily imagine. The pandemic gave us the mildest foretaste of others. Empty store shelves, broken supply chains, overwhelmed health systems, economic dislocations, inward despair, pitched civil discord. Collapse will unfold in scattered waves with disparate impacts around the world, *but no corner of the globe will be spared*. And it will involve human suffering on a scale *never before seen*—even if the worst of it does not reach our shores immediately.

Here is one metric. We are on path to reach a global population of 9 billion in another decade or so. I imagine we will. But during active collapse, from 2040-2100, that is, *in the latter half of this century*, global human population will likely *plummet* from 9 billion to 3 or 4 billion—or less.

That is A LOT OF DEATH. Not even counting the animals, whose deaths will outpace ours by far. My children will behold at least the start of this. *My grandchildren will experience much of it*.

You are alarmed by now—and you should be. This type of talk doesn't make the ten o'clock news, the Sunday talk shows, the front page of the newspaper, or the latest issue of *Christian Century*. Yet I am committed to speaking truth as clearly and eloquently as I can, in the conviction that despite the tumult that is headed their way, there ARE things that we can do today that will decisively shape their capacity to weather the years ahead. Today your willingness, as theologians, pastors, lay leaders, and congregants to hear me out and then engage my presentation may be

crucial in determining whether theology has a vital voice in the decades ahead and whether churches can bear gospel without being swamped by the tumult to come.

You know something about climate, I'm sure. It paints a daunting scenario for tomorrow. Here are just four of the reasons why climate change, already more accurately framed as *climate crisis*, is likely to become *climate mayhem*.

First, as much as we lay people track the rising CO2 count with a sort of abstract dread, the heat-trapping impact of that CO2 doesn't reach its maximum until it's been in the atmosphere for 10-15 years. That means that right now the climate tumult we're experiencing is driven by CO2 emitted soon after the turn of the century. And the CO2 emissions that have risen consistently year by year since then have locked in heat increases—and all their accompanying effects—for at least the next decade or longer. Even with no further emissions, our temperatures will coast upward until the mid 2030's, *and there's no way to stop that*.

Of course, that reference to "even with no further emissions" is folly, because in the fifty years since understanding that putting CO2 in the air might have harmful effects—and in the thirty years of direct warnings about CO2 emissions—we have continued to burn fossil fuels like there's no tomorrow. Even on our best behavior, the situation will get significantly worse before it gets better. The pandemic was a tiny test case for what it would mean to act collectively on our best behavior; it has not been a promising result. And industry leaders and politicians continue to be pursue profits and economic growth rather than the science of climate.

Second, climate change and temperature rise don't occur in a vacuum. Rising temperatures melt ice, exposing either land or water. In response, those surfaces absorb more new heat than the ice did, driving more warmth producing yet more melting in a feedback loop. Something similar happens when permafrost thaws in the far north. As it thaws because of increased global warmth, it releases both carbon and methane into the atmosphere, trapping yet more heat unleashing more carbon and methane. Deforestation, driving by human activity in the Amazon threatens the rainforest's self-sustaining integrity. That forest has already shifted from overall absorbing carbon to emitting it, fueling regional climate changes that further weaken the forest with global repercussions. There are multiple opportunities for climate change to set off self-reinforcing feedback loops like this.

If these feedback loops gain enough momentum, they become unstoppable and can act as tipping points in the overall climate, pushing regional or even global climate dynamics toward a new normal—and doing so with abrupt force. The IPCC initially believed—back in 2001—that tipping points were unlikely shy of a 5° Celsius increase in global temperature. But in three different reports from 2018-2021 the IPCC emphasized that new research indicates that some tipping points could occur *anywhere between just a 1° and 2° Celsius rise in global temperature*. We're already at 1.1°; many climate scientists believe we're already *locked-in* to a rise of 1.5° within the next decade or so based on current emissions; and likely to reach 2° by the middle of this century or soon after. In fact, if we simply meet the current national pledges by countries party to the Paris Accord, we're on track for 2.7° by 2100. *At any point from here on*, we could pass a tipping point that could push us tumbling toward an abrupt change in the entire climate system that might not stabilize until 5° or warmer. That climate would be conclusively incompatible with organized global human society; it might well be incompatible with human existence altogether.

Third, as exciting as talk of Green Energy is—and we own a Prius Hybrid and have solar panels on the roof of our home—it brings with it a host of as yet *intractable* challenges. Under current technologies wind turbines—which thus far have only a several decade lifespan and no feasible means to recycle their components—cannot be manufactured without relying on fossil fuel; no other heat source generates temperatures high enough. Similarly, commitments to solar cells and batteries on a scale sufficient to power the planet, *also* commit us to intensive and ecologically destructive mining and exploitive human labor. Hydropower, except when very carefully designed, means reshaping ecosystems in ways that are destructive to virtually all but the human inhabitants in a region. And nuclear power, on a planet tilting toward collapse, is simply a ticking timebomb for millennia. Even something as simple as increasing energy efficiency is a problematic promise because historically EVERY increase in energy efficiency has been offset by a further increase in energy demand.

I don't mean to be playing "Green-Grinch," but while all these technologies are worth further development, NONE of them singularly or put together present a scalable realistic alternative to the amount of fossil fuel consumption that is heating our planet.

Fourth, in a bit of tragic irony, the industrial pollution created by burning fossil fuels has been BOTH warming and cooling the planet. While the CO2 and other greenhouse gasses released trap more of the sun's heat in the atmosphere, the particulates in pollution—anything that's not a gas (think dust, smoke, soot) reflect sunlight *back* before it reaches Earth, lessening the amount of heat that can get trapped. As we slow the burning fossil fuel, the concentration of particulates in the atmosphere will steadily decrease (we saw this happen within weeks of the industrial slowdown early in the pandemic) but the greenhouse gasses linger for decades. So even when we finally do right by the atmosphere, it will make global warming *worse* in one final and possibly dangerously fierce series of temperature rises. We have put both the rock and hard place in position—and now we find ourselves caught between.

It's true that climate scientists and others debate the details of all these things. But the indisputable bottom line is that our situation is *far more precarious* than we are acting like. If we were airline pilots and saw this amount of turbulence on our radar screens, we'd immediately flip the "fasten seat belt" sign on and give our passengers a heads up that a rough ride is just ahead. As theologians, pastors, and lay leaders we owe our communities no less.

Unfortunately, as serious as our climate situation is, it's only one symptom of a much larger and more threatening predicament: *overshoot*.

Overshoot is what's really going to crash the social and ecological systems we take for granted and drive human population backwards … with a vengeance … starting in twenty years or sooner. And as unprepared as we are for climate mayhem, we aren't even thinking about overshoot. And overshoot is about to re-write human history. Or, more accurately, *complete* the story *we've already written*.

Overshoot is a simple concept. In a closed, finite but dynamic and self-renewing system—like planet Earth—life can persist indefinitely, so long as it remains within the limits of Earth's "carrying capacity" … but we have chosen in a structural, systemic, *even religious* way to ignore those limits. We've built an entire global economy and culture on the idea that endless growth—beneath which lies endless extraction of finite resources and endless exploitation of ecosystems, fellow creatures, and human siblings—is not only possible, but necessary, destined and deserved.

Because we live on a such a bountiful planet, and because we've had access to plentiful and cheap oil, we've been able to sustain this ecocidal illusion for several centuries. Of course, the roots of what we regard as modern "civilization" go back several *millennia*. Spun out of anthropocentrism, patriarchy, and the advent of accumulative wealth and its accompanying socio-economic inequity, these expressions of human society have done immeasurable harm since they emerged. But only from around the sixteenth century onward—with the scientific revolution, followed by colonialism, industrialism, capitalism, and white supremacy—did a constellation of values and power arise … *that could damage the planet as a whole*.

And only last century did our numbers and the global reach of our technological power become such that we began to outstrip Earth's ability to recover from our excess. With the beginning of the Anthropocene, often dated to the period known as the Great Acceleration, around 1950, the global capitalist expression of human society took off and became THE defining influence on planetary well-being.

We're not, of course, the only influence. Earth System science has identified nine interacting "planetary life support systems" that play key roles in maintaining an Earth hospitable to human life. Together, these systems (including climate change, but also biosphere integrity, phosphorous-nitrogen flow, ocean well-being, atmospheric health, and more) give Earth its personality: a personality that for 12,000 years (known as the Holocene period) has held steady the conditions in which humanity has been able to flourish. You might imagine them as nine pairs of hands holding a trampoline taut so that there's a sweet spot for humanity to bounce on.

But since the Anthropocene, human activity has started bumping these critical systems around, sort of like banging away on their fingers at the edge of that trampoline. Scientists estimate that we've clearly transgressed four of these boundaries and likely two more. That's what overshoot does, and if it pushes these systems too far out of a safe range they might well snap into a whole new equilibrium … perhaps without any sweet spot left for us to bounce on.

By now we've become culturally, psychically, socially, economically, politically, structurally, and perhaps even religiously *addicted* to overshoot—to the rush of stuff and the idol of growth—that we can't really even imagine any other way of living on the planet. No other way than the one we're seemingly locked into, which is undercutting the planet's capacity to host humanity in its current expression … *perhaps undercutting the planet's capacity to host humanity at all*. That's a harsh irony. The period we've christened the "Anthropocene"—naming it after ourselves since we're now the decisive planetary influence—may, in fact, become the period in which—under our own influence—Earth moves forward … without us. ☹

Since 1970 we've been in *active* overshoot—consuming more resources than the planet can replace and jettisoning more waste that it can process. Each year since then we've been living at a planetary deficit … and carrying on as though that doesn't matter. And each year, with few exceptions, we hit overshoot a little earlier than the year before. In 1970 we used up our year's allotment of global resources on December 30. Last year we hit overshoot on July 29; every day beyond that for the next five months was *deficit consumption*.

Now think about that: not every country (or individual within a country) consumes at an equal rate. So, the fact that right now, as a whole, humanity is consuming 1.7 Earth's of resources in a single calendar year means *both* that some of us are consuming resources that "belong" to others

living right now—and *also* resources that belong to those who will live here tomorrow. Resources without which their future lives will be immeasurably poorer than ours today.

But it's actually worse than that. Given U.S. consumption patterns, WE'LL hit overshoot for 2022 … in just 15 more days. By March 13 we will have consumed as much as Earth can annually provide for—were *all* humans to consume at our rate. We're acting as though we can magically consume FIVE Earth's worth of resources without somehow bankrupting the planet itself. We KNOW that's not true, but we cannot imagine shrinking our consumption to one fifth of what it is as Americans. And yet, NOT TO DO THAT is to actively, willingly, make an ecocidal pact with the planet and a genocidal choice toward the next generations. It is sheer madness—and *moral evil*.

Overshoot means we are about to discover what it feels like when Earth chooses to exercise its own "stand your ground" moment. In the next twenty to thirty years—before some of children reach my age—overshoot will flip planet Earth from its illusory coast on fading abundance into a crashing collapse that will shake the foundations of human society and culture.

Of course, there are differing perspectives about our prospects. But *this* perspective, even if alarming and largely kept outside the mainstream, *is* grounded in well-reasoned science and in peer-reviewed literature. It is shared by a range of ecologists, climate scientists, engineers, as well as a growing number of philosophers and spiritual teachers.

They agree this is about *much more* than the climate. At the end of every IPCC report or news story about the climate crisis, there is inevitably this offering of a thin sliver of hope: "but there's still a tiny window of opportunity for humanity to respond." But it *simply and entirely misses the point*. It's not just that we have abjectly failed to find the political will to address climate in all the decades it's been clamoring for our attention. No, it's that we are in *active overshoot*—driven partly by our sheer numbers on the planet, but much more so by the rapacious greed with which we ransack God's good but oh so finite creation. We are presently stressing Earth systems *on so many fronts—simultaneously*—that to focus only on reducing CO2 emissions so we can continue to plunder the planet through a "green growth economy" is a delusion that will cost future generations EVERYTHING. There is NO future on Earth for a humanity that doesn't acknowledge and embrace the limits of this planet. NONE. *Those are the existential stakes of ecological collapse.*

The <u>theological</u> stakes of ecological collapse

That's why I want to invite you to *engage* with the *very real possibility* (in my mind, *the damning likelihood*) that the people and communities which we love, guide, lead—and in which we also live and move and have our being—*are in stark peril*. Already now, but *so much more so* in the near future. If we are to exercise our gifts and skills and passions and love FAITHFULLY, we need to begin asking seriously and with urgency, what does it mean to *do godtalk* and to *be church* on the cusp of ecological collapse?

I've been thinking about climate change as a theologian for six years now, after having first considered it briefly 24 years ago in grad school. Over the last three years my learning has shaken me to the core. When I returned to this topic in 2015, I anticipated adding my voice and my creativity to the challenge of turning back climate change and averting crisis, even if only at the last moment. *I must confess I no longer believe that is possible.* Which is why I have begun to ask in earnest what role theology and churches might play in helping us meet this approaching collapse, the effects of which we might still lessen, but the totality of which we can no longer avert.

I am not trained in process theology, although my thinking often moves in similar directions. But I know that process theology leans willingly into hard questions, seeks to conceive of God in ways that cohere with a scientifically-informed worldview—whether that is comforting or discomforting—and recognizes vulnerability, solidarity, relationality, and compassion as primary features of God … and of those who live in the image of God.

I will offer some provisional thoughts that strike me as helpful as we seek a theological voice and a communal faith that hold promise in the face of such stark peril. They are "provisional" because my own thinking is unfolding in real time. And because the challenges before us require that we see theology and church as *fully participatory enterprises*. We will need to ALL be invested in real-time thinking and acting in response to the prospect of collapse. There is no time to waste and no place on the sidelines for spectators.

First, this is a matter of "both/and." I am *not* saying that climate crisis or overshoot or collapse are the only concerns that matter anymore. I *do* think they necessarily ought to frame our entire context of theology and ministry. *But everything else goes on*. We will continue to baptize, confirm, teach, worship, marry, bury, and otherwise accompany people through life—and that will continue to be holy work. Indeed, *that accompaniment will become all the more important as every stage of our lives is met with precarity from increasing angles*.

And we will continue to work for justice in our churches and communities on every front—racial, economic, immigrant, sexual, gender, environmental, electoral, and more. Each of these issues will become more pitched and more polarized as the fabric of our supposed security frays on the forefront of collapse. I understand, few of us have free time on our agendas these days, but the truth is that in every era we *do theology* and we *are the church* amid the whole of life. *And right now, the whole of life is under existential threat.* So, whatever we *do* theologically and however we *are* as church … must take note of that whole.

Second, six years ago when I first began this work, I chose to organize my thoughts around this overarching evocative theme: Becoming an apocalyptic, evangelical, prophetic church … at home on Earth. I selected the first three words both because they have such rich meanings in the biblical tradition and because they name ways of being church that liberal-mainstream churches have mostly been uneasy with. I wanted to ask whether there are neglected "postures" in our past that might be useful today. The last phrase "at home on Earth," was my suggestion that we need to stop viewing this planet as merely a place we hang out until we reach "the real deal": heaven. We need to stop regarding Earth as "beneath" us. We need to embrace it *as home*.

Today I still regard these three "postures"—apocalyptic, evangelical, and prophetic—as evocative. But I am less interested in neatly distinguishing between them, as though some ways of speaking or being fit neatly in one category versus another. These postures mutually inform one another and mutually shape our godtalk and our community.

Apocalyptic is that dynamic that unveils what must now be known; that declares the endings of worlds whose time is up; and that summons us to deep grief for all that is being lost. *Evangelical* is that dynamic that announces astonishingly good news when none seemed possible; that declares vulnerability and solidarity (and not in omnipotence) as constitutive of God; and that births a community that echoes God by choice even as creation echoes God by nature. *Prophetic* is that dynamic that reads these times against the Time that is God's; that speaks truth to power on behalf of the voiceless; and that calls for repentance as the whole reorientation of our individual and

communal lives away from death and toward life, even when life seems no longer possible. To speak of God and to be the church on the cusp of collapse will involve all these postures, often interwoven in novel ways to meet any given moment.

Besides these postures from within our tradition, there are ideas and practices beyond it that I've found insightful as well. I will mention SIX of them.

1. *The Spiral of Active Hope* is the fruit of Joanna Macy's decades-long honing of a process that provides personal and communal grounding and empowerment in the face of overwhelming situations. She presents it as a four-fold dynamic. It begins in the practice of gratitude, not as a moment of perfunctory thanksgiving, but as attentively opening ourselves to awe. Beguilingly simple, coming from gratitude shifts the very ground beneath our feet. From heart rate to breathing to mental and emotional openness, coming from gratitude bathes our being in grace.

From that place we open to and honor the world's pain. This is daunting and overwhelming—because the cries of the world are so pitched in this moment. From the human family to our animal siblings to entire ecosystems, there is anguish asking to be known. And mostly our attention is put elsewhere. The pace of our lives, the press of media, the desire for inner calm, all conspire to tell us, "Nothing to see here; just move all along." But Active Hope says that this pain calling out to us is the cosmic echo of our inter-relatedness. It speaks the truth of who we are. And when we dare to pause and be with it, we find a kinship just waiting to reclaim us, and we rekindle empathy as the power we were made to run on. There are apocalyptic, evangelical, and prophetic dynamics at play all at once in this act of opening to and honoring the world's pain.

With empathy reanimated—more accurately re-animating, because it is an ongoing process—we begin to widen and deepen our perceptions. We feel the depth and strength of connections that stretch across place and time, to others near and far, past, present, and future. We touch in our deep awareness the communion of saints. Even more, we discover our place in the community of being. And we find, perhaps, that *kairos* time can be invoked in the midst of such deep communion. Time becomes molten—measured not by minutes or years but by yearning: God's yearning joined to ours.

Finally Active Hope goes forth in action. It incarnates itself in speech, in deed, in news ways of being. It is called The SPIRAL of Active Hope because it is not a once-and-done process, but a cycle that begins again from wherever you find yourself.

Macy grew up Christian but her adult spiritual practice has been Buddhist and her academic training is in systems theory. Active Hope is grounded in the conviction that relatedness is THE truth of the cosmos—and that by practicing the spiral we *can* reconnect to ourselves, one another, our sibling creatures—and to a near mystical sense of Life itself. These connections then join us to an energy that can steady us in tumult and even empower us to live with "active hope." I've used the book, *Active Hope*, which explains the spiral and teaches it through exercises, at my church and have even written a liturgy that seeks to ritualize it. I can attest to its transformative power. Active Hope has many powerful touchpoints with Christian faith. It could easily, fruitfully, and faithfully be an active partner in theological conversation and communal faith practice here on the cusp of collapse.

It is worth noting that Macy wrote *Active Hope* in 2012. The book discusses overshoot and collapse, but at the time she felt that the Spiral of Active Hope could play a role in bringing about The Great Turning, the transition to an ecological way of living, in time to prevent collapse. Over the past

several years, Macy, now 92 years old, has come to believe that humanity has missed the window of opportunity to avoid collapse. She now says that what Great Turning there may be, will unfold through collapse, not prior to it. I would place my work in this context as well: fashioning a church that can hold out the possibility of a Great Turning even within a shattered, fractured world.

2. *The Transition Town Movement* is another source of inspiration. Founded in 2005 as a community-based movement anticipating the end of cheap oil and recognizing that we are not at all prepared for a "post-carbon world," Transition Towns operate by four key assumptions. (1) We are better off to *plan* for a less energy-intensive future than simply "hit the wall." (2) We need to build communal and structural resilience among us to weather the host of disruptive shocks that will come our way. (3) We need to start acting collectively, practically—in concrete ways—and with deliberate intention *now*. And (4) when we release the "collective genius" within our communities in this cause, we will discover ways of living that are more locally rooted, authentically connected, deeply rewarding, AND in touch with the limits of our planet.

Transition is rooted in permaculture, a philosophy that looks to the wisdom of Earth's evolved cycles and systems, initially for agricultural practices but soon for broader life ways as well. You might say permaculture is a non-theistic, "down-in-the-dirt" practical theology expression of biblical Wisdom hailed as the architect of creation. Transition seeks to be an urban implementation of permaculture practices. And Transition acknowledges that fundamentally it aspires to evoke an *inner shift* in thinking and desires.

When Transition describes—and indeed incarnates in actual communities—a deep sense of joy at connecting to our neighbors in full presence, this is a vision of community that any church would envy. Because Transition is specifically focused on the practical steps in building healthy life-giving communities that can weather a tumultuous future, it is a most worthy conversation partner for a church preparing to face collapse.

3. *Deep Adaptation* as a concept was introduced in 2018 by Jem Bendell, at the time a professor of Sustainability Leadership in the UK. In an online essay that went viral—it's been downloaded more than a million times—he reports on the growing body of evidence suggesting that we have *crossed* the threshold of stopping catastrophic climate change. He argues that a variety of systemic-structural-academic obstacles as well as psychic denial have delayed any coherent representation of this view at large. In his essay he concludes that it is time to engage in "deep adaptation," which is to brace ourselves in creative, constructive, compassionate ways for what he calls "likely near-term societal collapse" driven by abrupt and widescale disruptions in both ecological and social systems in response to the climate crisis.

Deep Adaptation runs avowedly *counter* to an individualist or tribalist "prepper" mentality. It promotes a communally-grounded posture toward life framed by what are called "the 4 R's," paired with four questions. *Resilience:* What values and behaviors do you want to keep in our culture and your daily life? *Relinquishment:* What values and behaviors are you ready to let go of? *Restoration:* What are the values and behaviors that you used to have in your culture or another culture that you'd like to adopt? And *Reconciliation:* With whom do you want to make peace while you can? Over the past two years Deep Adaptation has become a movement in its own right, providing a framework for practical and philosophical-spiritual conversation as well as collaborative practice among a growing decentralized community that seeks to anchor humanity in hands-on compassion in the face of approaching ecological collapse.

4, 5, and 6 are all concepts that might help us "thicken" our understanding of what has gone so wrong that we find ourselves here on the cusp of collapse today.

4. *Wetiko* is a Native American word—specifically Cree—although the idea appears in other Native languages under slightly varied spellings. It literally means something like "cannibal," but its full meaning is *a person who lives life without regard for the community, who lives utterly at the expense of others, someone who consumes the world*. Cannibalistic in *that* sense. It was viewed as a sickness of the soul—and a contagious one, such that persons regarded as wetiko must either be cured or driven from the community lest they "infect" others.

As Native peoples watched the way white men moved across the land—seeming to kill for the joy of killing—they came to view white people in general as *wetikos*: an entire society of cannibals afflicted with a soul-sickness that drove them to live with wanton disregard for balance, relatedness, or any life except their own. *Wetiko* is like socio-ecological amplification of Luther's notion of sin as *incurvatus se*—the state of being curved inward upon oneself. *Wetiko*, viewed as a genuine madness—a disconnection from others and from the natural order that manifests in diabolical deeds—names the culture in which we find ourselves today. The notion of *wetiko* brings the non-Western wisdom of Native peoples into a crucial conversation about the roots of our predicament.

5. *Terror Management Theory* offers another angle on this. Rooted in Ernest Becker's 1970's book, *The Denial of Death*, this theory argues that because human beings are uniquely (so far as we know) aware of our impending *non-being*—our death—we make enormous psychic and cultural investments in denying death. Becker viewed this inexorable existential dread—the seeming inescapable cost of self-consciousness—or more accurately our active efforts to suppress this as "the mainspring of all human activity." We—at least some of us, maybe most of us—are driven by a relentless attempt to prove our worth and establish meaning in a universe that just as relentlessly erases us.

Becker suggested that entire cultures, religious beliefs, building projects, and even most of our mundane choices are motivated by the persistent awareness that *we will die*, an awareness we seek to submerge beneath every bit of civilization we can build over it. Except now, having exhausted the finite resources of the planet in an attempt to escape our own finitude, we have brought the planet itself to the edge of dying. And have likely hastened our own death in the process. Becker and those who have developed his theory more recently suggest that even though religious beliefs offer us comfort in the face of death, to the extent they portray death as unnatural, as divine punishment, as somehow offensive to the human spirit, they merely press this terror beneath the surface, where it multiplies and leaks out elsewhere in our lives.

Can we imagine, within our Christian tradition, ways to name and embrace death as a *goodness* within the order of life? Worthy of neither stoic acceptance, nor defiant resistance, but willing embrace of the wisdom of God who made a finite world and called it "very good"? Is it possible that the only true *moral* agency must necessarily be *mortal* agency—ethics on the far side of making peace with death?

In fact, psychologists working in Terror Management Theory report tests that demonstrate that practices of humility, gratitude, and authentic bonding make us less prone to existential anxiety. They help settle us into a sense of being at home on Earth. In other words, the very practices endorsed by Deep Adaptation, Transition Towns, and Active Hope actually work to endow us with

mortal agency—a sense of empowerment even in the face of death. Churches, too, have claimed to do these things. But rarely as though our lives depended on them. *Today they do.*

6. *Moral injury* names what happens when we find ourselves ordered or compelled to act in ways that fracture our own moral compass. Soldiers who find themselves doing things on the battlefield that constitute a very betrayal of their core self, experience moral injury. Employees required to operate in ways that put the bottom line or company loyalty above human decency or environmental respect experience moral injury. But ALSO: *simply living in an extractive capitalistic system inflicts moral injury upon every member of society every day.* We are compelled to meet our own daily needs at the expense of others around the globe and at the expense of the planet itself.

To find ourselves with no clear option except to live in contradiction to the values we claim, displaces us from our very moral identity and from our sense of what it means to belong to the human community to the story of humanity itself. Moral injury has been described as numbed living, living with a sense of being dead, or worse, living in the suspended awareness of one's moral dying. It is to awaken to the terror of the world's pain—and to recognize our complicity in that pain without knowing how to withdraw our consent. If we are honest, this is the damning predicament for every person of faith today (indeed for every *human* person)—we are caught living-dead in a system that we KNOW is genocidal toward the poor and ecocidal toward the planet and yet we have no way out.

The only adequate response to moral injury is to transform the systems that inflict it. And that is a *big* task. It may be that the extractive capitalist system is so thoroughly embedded in our culture and society today that only collapse will effect system transformation. But here, too, the practices modeled by Active Hope, Transition Towns, and Deep Adaptation work to link us more authentically to one another—seeking to honor finitude and to promote the flourishing of all. This does not change the world system directly, *but it offers us access to a counter-system within the belly of the beast*—a way to link our lives to a community that is life-giving, a community that may become the seeds of what can be NEXT … if we can endure collapse itself.

All three of these notions deepen the contemporary relevance of Paul's talk of "principalities and powers" in Ephesians 6. Paul seems to have an awareness of human-made systems with an inertia that is greater than any individual person—an inertia that seemingly takes on a life of its own. Not a consciousness, per se, but an *institutionalized energy* that can *will* forward a set of assumptions backed up with power that can have dehumanizing, inhuman consequences. Are such systems are afflicted with *wetiko*? Were they first shaped by existential terror? Do they not mercilessly inflict moral injury? We must press ourselves to fathom the dynamics that disorder our world today.

To return to my initial themes:

Godtalk on the cusp of ecological collapse will have, at least at times, an *apocalyptic* tone. It will unveil the extent to which our way of living today is in fact dedicated to uncreating God's creation. It will announce the ending of one world, declaring that our future is about to be radically disconnected from our past. The fact that we find such an apocalyptic tone disconcerting is, in fact, evidence that we've made quite a bit of peace with the oppressive world that is ending. And it will be apocalyptic in summoning us *to sustained lament* for the suffering playing out on the planet in this moment. It is the last thing we want to do. *Right now, it is the ONLY thing that grounds the legitimacy of anything we do.*

Godtalk on the cusp of ecological collapse will have, at least at times, an *evangelical* tone. It will whisper a humble but defiant "nevertheless" of good news. It will remind us of a truth always easier to offer to others: that even in the worst of times, God's daring choice is to be vulnerably present alongside us—a choice written across the cosmos. From the forests that feed us oxygen to the microbes in our guts that enable us to feed ourselves, *radical relationality is the truth of the universe*. And it will invite us to gather in communities that creatively foster mutual relationship as the expression of *imago Dei*, both in how we be church to one another and to the world.

Godtalk on the cusp of ecological collapse will have, at least at times, a *prophetic* tone. It will not shrink from reading the signs of these times for the people who look to it for guidance. It will speak for those whose speech goes unheard—the poor, the animals, the ecosystems. It will call out—even by name—those particular institutions, corporations, and individuals whose agendas and actions represent crimes against creation and crimes against the future. And it will not only call us to repent and to change our ways, but will also dare to imagine a way forward where none seems possible.

And godtalk on the cusp of ecological collapse will teach us—perhaps for the first time—that we *are at home on Earth*. This will mean telling stories and fashioning rituals that exercise our imaginations in powerful ways regarding the blessing of finitude. Other traditions have found ways to do this. We are late to this game, but the planet is waiting for us to embrace it as home. Whatever other worlds or lives might be, in *this* world and in *this* life, it is a deep goodness to be at home on a pale blue dot. More than enough, it is grounds for awe and joy.

Finally, being at home on Earth is profoundly practical theology. In light of overshoot, we must explore what "One-Earth living" might mean—that is, to live as people who annually take no more than what one Earth can offer and renew in one year. This implies two uncomfortable but *non-negotiable* ecological truths. Simplicity is neither an optional virtue nor something we must resign ourselves to: *simplicity is the very essence of love on a finite planet*. Second, choosing to thoughtfully restrain our population is a undeniable corollary. Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on care for creation, *Laudato Si*, is remarkably insightful on many fronts, but its complete silence on the moral imperative of responsible reproduction renders the rest of its wisdom "a noisy gong or a clanging symbol"—that is, wisdom far short of ecological love.

I'll close with one final thought.

Sometime last fall I was in a group discussing the role the church could play in addressing the climate crisis. I said that I expected congregations could play an important role … "as the world unraveled." The tone of my words did NOT carry any upbeat cheer or hint at expectation of any late-in-the-game rally on our part. A friend asked me, with quiet alarm, "You haven't given up hope, have you?"

I was not quick to respond. Partly because she has young children. So, she *ought* to have a vested interest in hope. Then again, I have children and grandchildren of my own. But I also hesitated because that's such a complicated question for me right now.

I have a near heretical degree of faith in the potential of human beings for good. Tangled as we are in forces that oppress us, and prone as we can be to selfish impulses, and ambiguous as we can be in our inner worlds, I remain persuaded that the "very good" God uttered over creation lingers still, even if worn and tattered a bit. Perhaps on account of our own theological missteps we have

been quick to think too little of our capacities for good, and have played into the hands of forces all too willing to twist them for ill. I continue to believe that Christians and Christian communities can bear good news and embody gospel in our shared living still today. Even as the world collapses. (I actually think this is true of humans and human communities as well.)

And I have near absolute conviction that in every moment God offers us the chance to do what is right. Even as those chances get twisted by circumstance and choice and outside forces, the activity of God in the world is perhaps nothing more and nothing less than the presentation of freedom yet again in this moment and then the next.

I have *uncommonly* high expectations for human beings and for God. But here's where it gets complicated: I also have high expectations for the reliability and dependability of the laws of nature. I believe, even at the last minute, we might see the error of our ways and that wide swaths of human society might choose a different course. I don't know that that's likely, but I think it's possible. Because God meets each and every human being with that offer of freedom in each and every moment of their lives. So, absolutely possible, even if unlikely.

But that carbon dioxide and methane will act differently in the atmosphere? Or that Earth will somehow magically generate infinite resources for our absurdly inflated population? Or that the planetary system will be "sympathetic" to our anguish, even if expressed too late? Not a chance.

Our future will play out under the same laws of nature that it has in the past. And that means, as far as I can tell—and sweet Jesus, I wish it was otherwise—that collapse is coming. And I'm not at all convinced that we have any chance any longer to avert it.

Fifty years ago? Perhaps. A hundred or two hundred years ago? Yeah, theoretically so. Though, truth be told, the cultural and religious distortions that we wed ourselves to millennia ago have chased us across history. But, YES, there have been times when multiple futures were possible.

Even today, *multiple futures are possible*. I simply believe that now every one of those multiple futures includes some version of collapse. What makes these futures multiple is our *response* to collapse. So, Yes, I have "given up hope" for a future that does not include collapse. Because physics doesn't grade on a curve.

But to my dear friend, and to you, I would also say, I hold out vibrant hope that even in collapse there can be communities worthy of gleeful joy. Because compassion, mutuality, solidarity, vulnerability, radical relationality—these truths *can* be embraced, even under the most trying conditions—and when they are, the result is always gospel. Good news. The presence of God erupting in human life.

I suppose you could say my hope these days is in a different key. But it is hope, nonetheless. And I continue to nurture it for the sake of my children and grandchildren and so many others. And I'm eager to help build communities where gleeful joy shines brightly … and the tumult has not overcome it.

* * *

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