

Collapsing ... Toward Joy?

David R. Weiss – April 8, 2025

In this essay I aim to briefly sum up what I've shared in my five previous "Conversations at the Edge of Hope" beginning last fall—and conclude with some initial reflections on Collapse and the possibility of Joy. Next month we turn to what I'm calling "The Bio-Physical Drivers of Collapse."

I began with my "Incomplete Introduction" way back in October and November. Then, my "Prelude: on Collapse, Hope, and Joy," was interrupted both by my dad's health crisis and my own cancer diagnosis. So, it seems important to bring everything together this month—albeit very briefly—as I wrap up my "Prelude" with a bit about Joy.

Granted, these words about Joy will be only *initial* and *sparse*; ultimately, I'll fill them out in the concluding chapter of the book. But given the gravity of my project, I want you to know that even as I am ushering you into the world of Collapse—even as I tell you that I remain unconvinced that hope is a useful word—I *am* convinced that Joy will be possible in that collapsed world. And against the temptation to give in to despair or fear—or, worse, to be drawn toward survivalist aggression—against these, I want to set Joy as our North Star.

To review my "Incomplete Introduction" very briefly.

I begin by acknowledging the incompleteness of even introducing myself. We are, all of us, in flux, shaped unceasingly by forces inside us and beyond. That's been proven true—with unexpected force—by my prostate cancer diagnosis in January. My opinion about the likelihood of Collapse has not changed on account of my diagnosis, but the way I engage my work is different. My inward sense of timing is shifting. The metaphors that color the texture of my *daily life with cancer* are now in active conversation with my thinking about Collapse. And the tools I am still just learning to help manage my feelings about living with cancer are new partners in my work on Collapse.

Proven doubly true by Donald Trump's election and the speed with which he is dismantling the infrastructure of democratic government and the guardrails of civic life. Collapse will tilt *many* societies toward authoritarianism, but I think few of us expected this would happen *so swiftly* here at home. How—and even whether—we can recover from this onslaught of intentional chaos is yet unknown. But our conversations around Collapse will now play out in real time under the specter of a government, abetted by the anxieties of a population that is reacting to Collapse unaware, that is acting in ways that will hasten the pace at which Collapse overtakes us all.

Despite admitting—and already proving—that any self-introduction would be incomplete, I said it was also necessary, because we—you, my conversation partners, and eventually my readers—are entering into a *relationship*. And so, you have some genuine vested interest in knowing something about who I am. Even if it's provisional and subject to change. This relationship matters more than many because this is no casual meet-and-greet chit chat we're having. We are venturing as companions *into Collapse*—as a concept, and all too soon, as a reality that will define our lives. In short, we have chosen to explore together the texture of a future-soon-present in which the ecological, socio-cultural, and economic-political realities we've taken for granted are simply no more. Collapse means a world unraveled to a degree we cannot imagine, so perhaps the best we can do is stick close, pay attention, and take care of each other.

I have offered to "lead" our little pack as we inch forward. To share my insights and reflections in ways that will hopefully evoke further insights and reflections for you. In ways that help us to anticipate and understand collapse so that we can meet it with awareness, resolve, some measure of planning, and an abundance of care.

My gifts are not as a climate scientist but as a theologian, poet, and human being. In other words, although I read the lay level science of climate and Collapse more deeply than most, it is not my academic training. My academic training, as a theologian and ethicist, has prepared me to be “fluent” in the work of meaning-making and disciplined in critical thinking. These “soft science” skills will be essential as we make our way into the unfamiliar terrain of Collapse—and face the multitude of ethical challenges it will present to us as people.

I recount my theological journey from growing up Lutheran, studying Christian theology in seminary and graduate school, becoming a progressive Christian theologian, and more recently choosing the Unitarian Universalist tradition as my home. I’ll prune back some of that long saga (especially the extensive list of my writings) in my editing, but I’ll keep these two salient points at center. First, as a theologian, whether using god-centered or human-centered language, I aim to explore how the ultimate values we hold shape *the ways we become human*. That skill is priceless as we meet Collapse. Second, I feel particularly drawn to questions of *where we fit* in a world framed by finitude and, subsequently, *how we grieve* for a dying world. These particular interests will also be crucial as both finitude and grief will haunt or horizon.

As a poet, besides directly weaving words in verse or song, my *perspective on and approach to these things is poetic*: I attend to a wide range of ideas, metaphors, notions, feelings ... and I’m able to sense unexpected connections that bring fresh meaning. From the interdisciplinary range of my reading to the choices of words in my writing, the poetic perspective/practice is also a gift that is useful in this journey.

Finally, as a human being. From my childhood adventures in sand dunes and woods, beneath starry skies, and up close with grasshoppers, I have known myself *in and through* the natural world. As a child, sibling, husband, and parent, I continue to be steeped in relationships that matter to me. Hence, my skills as theologian-ethicist and my poet’s perspective are tethered directly to my lived experiences and my relationships. I confront Collapse not as an indifferent observer, but as a human being entangled in the joys and sorrows, the wonders and worries, of this world and the people I love.

That’s the briefest re-cap of who I am.

Next, to re-cap my project.

My goal is to produce “A Field Guide to Meaning-Making as the World Unravels.” Given my skills and gifts, I want to write about the *inward aspects* of Collapse. I believe I can help us in three ways: (a) to understand the *psychological/spiritual forces* in our lives that have made Collapse now inevitable; (b) to grasp the *attitudes and appetites* that must shift if we are to meet Collapse with a chance at surviving it; and (c) to chart the *inward dispositions and skills* that will be essential if we hope to preserve our humanity as Collapse overtakes us.

Of course, there will be *lots* to do—and we will be tempted to put *all* our energy into *doing* things—in part to preserve our illusory sense of control and to distract us from the feelings of panic and grief that Collapse brings. But *unless we also do the inner work* that sustains our capacity to care for each other and prepares us for *meaning-making* as the world unravels, *our doing will fail us*. So let’s be clear: *the infrastructure of our future life lies inward*. And that’s where I can help.

Let me then briefly explaining the choice of words in my (tentative) title, *Collapsing with Care: A Field Guide to Meaning-Making as the World Unravels*.

Collapsing: We *are* collapsing and *will be* collapsing for the rest of our lives. *Collapse is our future.*

... with Care: Whatever “hope” we want to hold for that future now has to do with our character and compassion *as we collapse*. Cultivating a capacity to *act with care* toward ourselves, one another, our fellow creatures, and the planet itself, is the foundation of our humanity. And in Collapse it must rest in the conviction that compassion—the concrete practice of care—is worthwhile *no matter what*.

A Field Guide: I imagine this as a book that helps *orient* us to unfamiliar terrain: specifically *the inner terrain of our hearts and minds* as we move into Collapse.

... to Meaning-Making: I've been long persuaded that our capacity (our *hunger*) for meaning-making is *the quality that confers humanity on us*—and that anchors our capacity for care. This “Field Guide” aims to assist us in meaning-making when the terrain beneath our feet—and beneath our souls—becomes entirely unsteady, allowing us to process collapse in ways that hold faith (that anchor our deepest conviction and values), nurture love, and practice care.

... as the World: Collapse is *all-inclusive*: it will undo the natural world as well as the institutions and assumptions that have framed our social world. And it will shake to the core the roots of our inner worlds: religious beliefs, moral convictions, and even our most basic humanity.

... Unravels: Collapse is *not* a singular event; it is a *process* that will be long, with predictable turns and unpredictable twists. Some aspects will be precipitous; others will unfold more slowly (across generations—if we're lucky). Right now, we are “caught” between worlds: in *liminal time—unable to prevent Collapse, yet (perhaps) able in some crucial ways to brace and temper our outer and inner worlds for what is to come*.

My part in that is *contributing to the bracing and tempering of our inner worlds*. A lot will need to be happening—and on many different fronts—but this one piece is more than enough to keep my plate full. And I'm grateful for your company as I roll out and polish my thinking in these “Conversations at the Edge of Hope: On Climate, Collapse, and Care.” You will, in some very real ways, become co-authors of this work.

In December, I turned from that Introduction to a “Prelude: on Collapse, Hope, and Joy.”

And in December I focused solely on Collapse, writing, “I fear it's likely you've underestimated my meaning. *Because I underestimated my meaning* for years before it settled in.” I warned you that now, “I am going to break your heart.” And over several short, bleak, grim, devastating pages I set forth in broad brush strokes what Collapse will mean for our planet and for us as people. We're going to re-visit that in much greater detail in the months just ahead, so I will not spend much time on it here.

Suffice to say that primarily because of *overshoot*—the ecological situation in which human beings have outstripped not only Earth's capacity to supply our endless appetite for resources but also its ability to absorb our equally endless production of waste—because of this, *our entire world is going to collapse in a series of cascading failures*. They will be climatological, ecological, economic, social, political, and cultural.

These failures are happening already, felt in some places more than others, but over the next fifty years or so, Collapse will overtake our entire planet. Such that between 2050 and 2100 we are likely to experience the greatest decades of dying in human history. That will include plants and animals, both individuals and whole species. And we will be traumatized by those losses. But even more so, during the last half of THIS century—and perhaps even sooner—we will see the human population on Earth plunge from 9 billion to just 1 billion. *Or less.* Heat, disease, hunger, violence will reduce us to a bare remnant. *If we're lucky.* There are competent, compelling, sober voices who expect humanity itself to be swallowed by the sixth great extinction, which we started.

This is why, in a world beset by so much suffering and death across every category of life, *we'll need to attend to our inner resources for feeling grief, making meaning, and continuing to practice care*. Even if it becomes apparent that we—as individuals, as communities, and perhaps as a species—are among those who will be lost to Collapse, *we can choose to face this recognition with our humanity intact*. Not easily. Not cheerily. But we can.

This is an almost unthinkable prospect for those of us raised white because it is an assault on the entire premises of our whiteness: *that we are in charge*. But countless others who are not white have known life is possible under conditions of absolute precariousness. We are about to learn that for ourselves. If we choose.

This is NOT the whole of my work—simply to assert that Collapse is inevitable and all-inclusive. *But it is the starting place.* And the rest of my work—our work together—hinges on facing this reality.

When we reconvened in February, I continued my “Prelude,” this time sharing my misgivings about hope.

And I got a lot of pushback. I’m still wrestling with all the pushback. I don’t want my distaste for a word, really my distrust of a notion, to alienate you or my readers. On the other hand, if my misgivings are grounded in an accurate intuition about the substantive peril of allowing ourselves hope, then I need to hold onto them and find a more persuasive way to articulate them.

It’s pretty clear to me that hope is not a helpful disposition regarding the idea of preventing Collapse. There was a moment on the Titanic when hoping that the ship could turn became the enemy of launching the lifeboats. *We are at that point.* Yes, there are actions we can take today which will (perhaps) slow the pace of Collapse and (perhaps) buy us some time to build more lifeboats. And those actions are worth doing. But there is nothing we can do any longer to turn to the ship. And any hope we place here distracts us—which is a polite way of saying it PREVENTS us—from attending to more needful things.

I recognize this is a HARD ask. But while we often think of hope as the motivation for our action, there are some very pointed critiques of hope that claim that *in practice* hope functions to DELAY action. These critiques suggest that hope is most often a buffer between what we would prefer and our actual decision to act. It acts as an opiate, dulling our perceived need to act, because hope suggests there’s still time—to wait. Only when we set hope aside do we come to a place where we accept, that *either we do or we don’t*, but the time for hope has elapsed.

However, I don’t regard the absence of hope as despair. I think that’s a false binary that keeps us suspended between inaction or misdirected action. If we hold on to hope until it cannot help but disappoint us (because math and physics and chemistry don’t do hope), we’ll have nothing left but despair. But if we release hope now, we may have the energy to invest in other choices.

I’ve considered *Dark Hope* and *Feral Hope* as ways to recast hope so that it might be useful to us in the days ahead. Dark Hope, as a way to highlight my conviction that we will have agency even in the darkness. Feral Hope, as a way to speak of a wild hope that is unframed and unconstrained by the conventional ideas that have brought us to this point of ruin. But I have to admit, I still worry that both of these are attempts to smuggle something bit of our familiar but dysfunctional past into a future where it will once again undermine us action. *I don’t trust hope.*

It seems like such an innocent and essential disposition, but I remain leery.

For example, it’s almost impossible for those of us who have been identified as *white* to think of ourselves as anything other than white—even as we come to realize that “whiteness” is an unnatural category *created solely to set up relations of oppression.* Whiteness is an intrinsically harmful, exploitative, destructive category—but it has colonized our consciousness to such an extent that we can’t step outside it without finding ourselves wholly disoriented.

We now know that the atomistic view of the universe—that notion that reality can finally be reduced to *discreet things*: tiny, disconnected bits of matter that stand on their own—despite making “good” scientific sense for generations, was never truly accurate. In fact, it obscured the very nature of reality as radically interconnected, relational, and alive. Nevertheless, for centuries, *our knowing was beholden to a notion that undercut our knowledge.*

My gut tells me that HOPE falls into these categories. And that if we turn to it now as “essential” to how we meet Collapse, we are investing in an attitude that will betray us. But your pushback tells me I have not

yet found the words to say this in a way that reaches past my intuition. So, for now, I can only say, *we are not yet done with hope.*

Lastly, I have promised to conclude this “Prelude” with a word of JOY.

Where, in the hellish landscape of Collapse, do we turn for joy?

I will name three places, maybe four. But first, a word about *praxis*.

I first encountered the concept of *praxis* in seminary when I studied Latin American Liberation Theology. It is, in essence, an ongoing feedback loop between ideals and intuitions and practical insights gained through real-world experience. Latin American “base Christian communities” were something like community-empowerment Bible study groups. They might be led either by a priest or a lay person; in either case they were centered on a deep passion for social justice. In these communities, small groups gathered to read passages from the Bible together—often from the prophets or the Gospels and the Book of Acts. Then they asked themselves, “What do these words tell us about our lives today?”

Because the passages often spoke of injustice, oppression, abusive power relations, or the image of a genuine caring community, the ensuing conversation would inspire the people to listen for intuitions and imagine ideals that viewed their own world in new ways—and then to *live* differently as a result. Later, they would come together again to ask how their new views and choices were shaping their actual lives—and to consider which choices were most effective. They would read more, discuss more, and experiment in life more, always working to refine their actions. *THAT’S PRAXIS: an ongoing cycle of reflection-action-reflection-action*. It’s close kin with Gandhi’s notion of “experimenting with truth.”

Because Collapse is going to be such an unknown, unpredictable, ever-changing condition of life, we will only meet it well through the discipline of *praxis—an ongoing cycle of reflection-action-reflection-action*. Which means I can only suggest some of the beginning places for JOY. We’ll need to hone our skills at seeking out JOY together as we go.

1. Counterintuitively, one key place to begin is with grief. This is for two reasons. First, the more we guard ourselves from the depth of hard uncomfortable emotions that are REAL and asking to be felt, the less we can access the “lighter” emotions, like Joy. When we keep the heartbreak of the world around us at arms’ length, we end up also numbing ourselves to the possibility of Joy. Second, when we allow ourselves to feel grief—not for ourselves, but *for the world*: for animals and ecosystems, for fractured landscapes, for whole life webs torn asunder, and for the beings and the places that we hold dear—when we let *this grief* enter us and course through us to our very depths, we discover *viscerally* a lost truth: *we are indeed kin to the world around us*.

This begins as a painful truth. What have we done?! How can it be that our own family has been laid waste by our actions?! And yet, beneath this grief is the deeper truth: *we are one with Earth—and all that lives on it*. Always were. Always are. Always will be. That thin silver thread becomes a beacon to welcome us home.

And coming home—embracing both finitude and family as the inescapable *blessings* of our membership in the Earth community—is a source of Joy simply because it accords with the truth of who we are. The ebb and flow of life and death is a challenging mystery, *but it is not ultimately tragic*. It is we who have cast it as that. In truth, it is the miracle of creation: pulsing, rising, and receding in its turn. Coming home invites us to be *humble*: we are here in this moment and then gone. Yet it also invites us to be *noble*: we are the echo of stardust able to dream, able to love. An insight honored too late, remains an insight, nonetheless. And owning this truth of finitude and family will be a healing moment for those of us who choose it.

Another part of that homecoming is the recognition that we humans have never been “the center” of Earth’s big story. We’re a blink of the eye on a planet with 4 billion years of history. Indeed, many of our

closest cousins in our *homo* family tree have had chapters in Earth's story *as long or longer* than our own. Yet even though they, too, had the inklings of imagination and culture, they were not the climax of the story. So, it is entirely possible—increasingly likely—that while Collapse, in fact, represents *our effort* to center ourselves in Earth's story, it will turn out to be a chapter that ends abruptly as Earth's story leaves us, like our forebears in the dust. And yet, we might still come to know an ironic sense of JOY at a story that *will* continue, even if our chapter closes.

2. Even on a badly wounded planet, there will be beauty and there will be moments of grace: sunrises and sunsets, gentle rains, wildflowers, mountains, and more. Knowing, perhaps most fully for the first time, that this is *our home*, we will find JOY in the beauty and grace of nature. I am not saying it will not be a JOY tinged with sadness. It will. At least sometimes. But it will also be a source of JOY. And we as “make peace” with our place in Earth's big story, we may find it possible to feel less sadness and more joy. Only time will tell.

3. In each other. Beyond the natural world around us, we will continue to be in relation with one another as Collapse comes upon us. We will be hardly the first humans to face the choice of whether to endure or give up in times of hardship. History is filled with tales of human communities that chose to endure—and found instances of joy within that choice. We will still love. We will still befriend one another. We will still make music and art, debate ideas, and shape a culture. In all these things we will carry on the legacy of humanity—even as the world breaks. And in making our choices, both mundane and momentous, with as much care and dignity as we can, we will know moments of JOY.

4. Finally, I will tell you, JOY *does not rest on outcomes*. Joy is NOT the “thrill of victory,” nor is it dashed in the “agony of defeat.” JOY is *felt integrity*. It is known as we deepen, even imperfectly, our connections to and our solidarity with the natural world and one another. It lies in our shared perseverance in compassion, love, and care. In our relentless experiments with truth—our ongoing praxis of reflection-action-reflection-action in pursuit of care.

We might have preferred a JOY that was the realization of universal abundance, leisure, and good cheer. That is NOT the Joy that awaits us. And if we hold out hope for it, we will not only be sorely disappointed, we will likely also find our motives and our actions distorted by bitterness.

Collapse represents the ending of a world we have known all our lives. It is a world we thought was fine—or at least worth polishing up. It was, in fact, *for all of our lives*, a world already tilting toward Collapse. Just out of our awareness until very lately. As such, everything we have known before now as “joy” has been a mixture of reality and unreality. As Collapse remakes our world, we will have a very different range of options for Joy.

But *Joy will be there*, if we seek it on terms closer to Earth's fundamental truths. Within the finitude and family of the whole Earth community, which is our home. Within the beauty of Earth itself—its beings and its processes. Within our relationships with each other—including our creativity and community. And within the character we cultivate to carry on in compassion no matter what. If we look here for JOY, we will find it. We may even, in the midst of Collapse, find it in abundance.

Let's see.

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