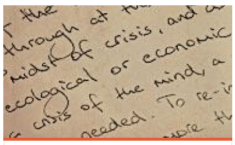
Beyond Doom and Gloom: An Exploration through Letters

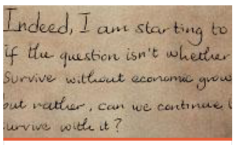
Elin Kelsey

"Doom and gloom" has become the de facto cultural construct not only for environmental communication but for the environmental science it seeks to communicate. We are interested in engaging in deep conversation about what it means to shift beyond "doom and gloom," and to create movement toward more hopeful, solutions-oriented environmental narratives.

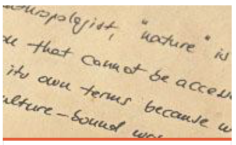
About this Project: Collecting Letters to Those Who Inspire Hope



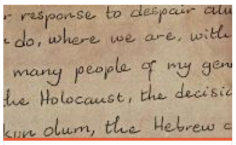
Letter from Eliza Encheva to Charles Eisenstein



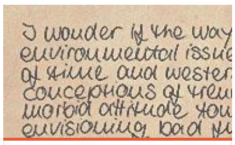
Letter from Rachel Shindelar to Tim Jackson



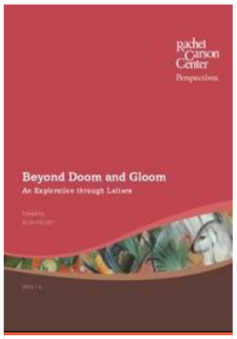
Letter from Susanne Schmitt to the Oceans and Lakes Aquarium



Letter from Richard Kool to Sam and Cohen



Letter from Massimo Moraglio to Elin Kelsey



RCC Perspectives: Read the Special Issue on this Topic

SEND US YOUR LETTER, INSTAGRAM US YOUR PICTURES: Who and What Moves You Beyond Doom and Gloom?

Reader Response: Richard Christian

Reader Response: Mark Wilson

How to cite:

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About the Exhibition

Elin Kelsey

> We need to overcome the narrative of hopelessness as much as we need to overcome environmental devastation. The environmental crisis is also a crisis of hope.
>
> —Elin Kelsey

This virtual exhibition invites people all over the world to post letters about hope and the environment. By sharing emotional tensions and complex feelings, contributors to this site seek to move beyond the "doom and gloom" narrative that dominates the ways we characterize life on planet Earth. Such personal stories and visions have the power to change landscapes, to "move mountains," as Christof Mauch points out in his essay on "The Magic of Environmental History and Hopes for the Future."

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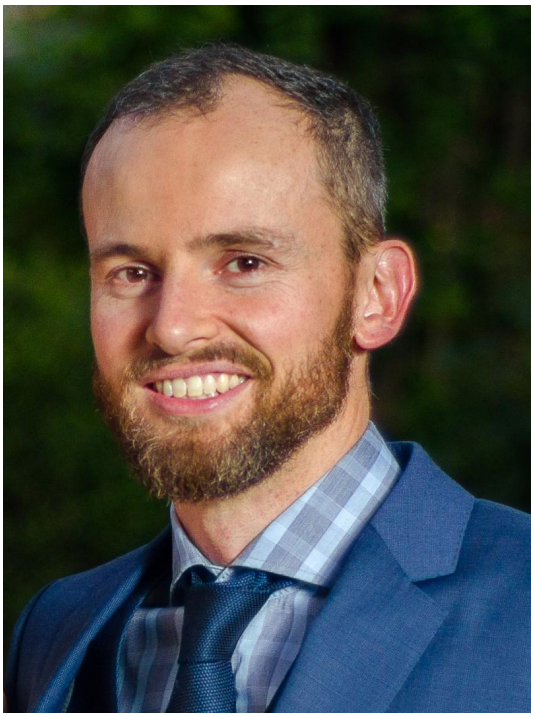
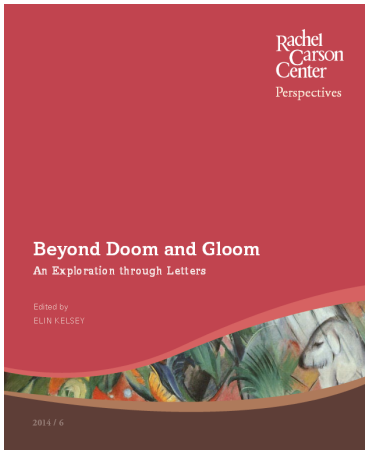


Cameron Muir

Why hope is controversial

> *When I consider hope right now, I can't help thinking about the advice that the British government published in the wake of Field Marshall Douglas Haig's 60,000 casualties in one day on the Somme: "How the civilian may help in this crisis: Be cheerful. Write encouragingly to friends at the front. Don't think you know better than Haig." There's a fine line between the optimism that wills people on in times of adversity and one that eschews reality, one that becomes self-censorship, one that serves the status quo. Hope starts to seem like an emotion designed to comfort the helpless, the passive.*
>
> *—Excerpt from Cameron Muir's letter .*



Click here to read more letters online at the Environment & Society Portal website.

RCC Perspectives

Cover of the RCC Perspectives issue: Kelsey, Elin (ed.), "Beyond Doom and Gloom: An Exploration through Letters," RCC Perspectives 2014, no. 6. Design by Stefan Zinsbacher. Cover photo courtesy of Wikipedia Commons . Copyright by the Rachel Carson Center.

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Why hope matters now

"My whole generation has spent our lives writing obituaries of nature ," says conservation biologist Nancy Knowlton, Sant Chair of Marine Science at the Smithsonian Institution. Environmental issues are real and horrific. But failure to separate the urgency of environmental issues from the fear-inducing ways we communicate them blinds us to the collateral damage of apocalyptic storytelling. For a richer exploration of these themes, please watch this video of a lunchtime colloquium Elin Kelsey delivered at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society.

Conservation psychologists now speak about "environmental grief," "eco-fatigue," "ecosystem distress syndrome," and "eco-despair." By bombarding people with issues that feel hopeless at scales too large to surmount, we inadvertently cause them to downplay, tune out, or shut down. This is an important issue with respect to public engagement, as findings, including a 2014 study by the Yale Climate Change Communication Program , indicate that hope is particularly critical as a motivator in the doom-heavy world of climate change activism.

About the virtual exhibition

Participants of the workshop hosted by the RCC in 2014

Photo by Susanne Schmitt.

Discussion at the workshop hosted by the RCC

Photo by Susanne Schmitt.

This virtual exhibition emerged from a workshop hosted by the Rachel Carson Center (RCC) in 2014. We gathered as a group of academics from a variety of countries and environmental humanities disciplines. Our interest in creating cultural movement in the ways we characterize the environmental drew historic inspiration from the Blue Rider artists who lived and worked in the Munich borough of Schwabing where the RCC is based. We began the day visiting the Blue Rider collection at the Lenbachhaus museum, and then adopted the spirit of "movement" by conducting a "Walking Colloquium" in which we shared ideas while exploring the streets and parks of Munich. Here are some of the questions that guided our walk:

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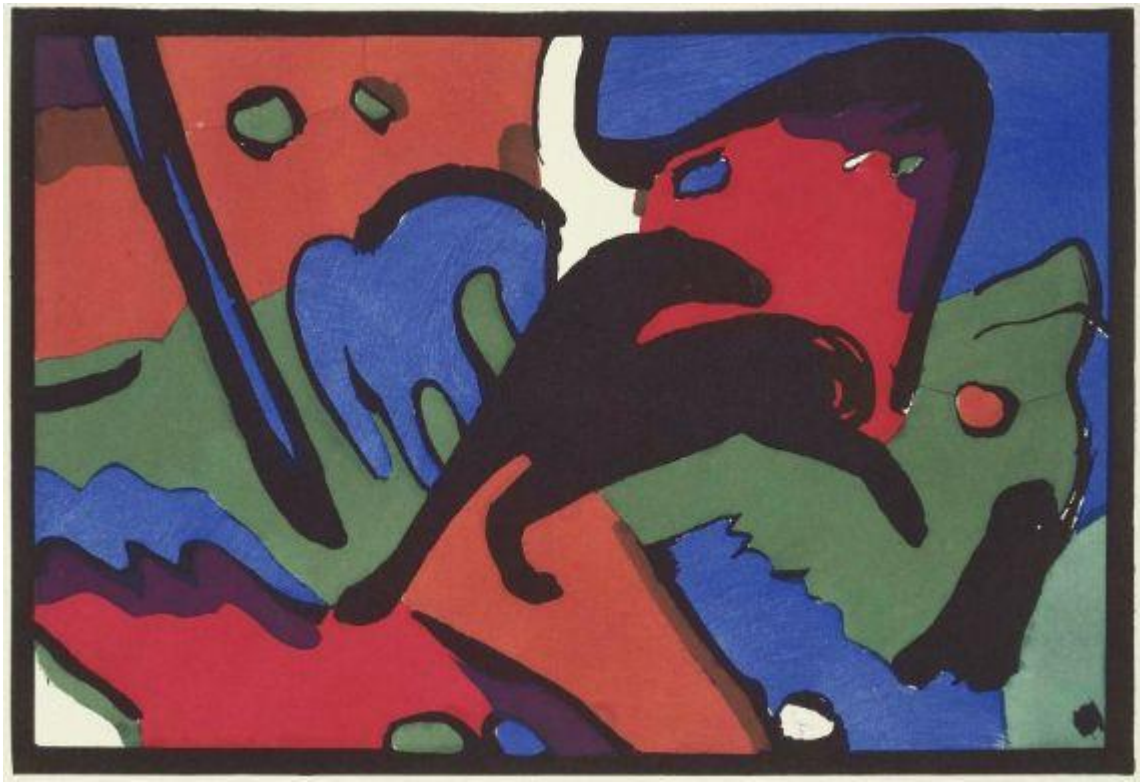

The Blue Rider by Franz Marc, 1912

This image can be found in the Wikipedia Commons .

- How can we best influence and enact a shift beyond "doom and gloom"?
- How do we overcome the pervasive belief that if we speak of hope, we must not know how bad things are?
- How do we address the fear that if we acknowledge the capacity for resilience, we risk fueling complacency, or feeding the rhetoric of environmental skeptics?
- How might we "hack" our rational response to shifting environmental narratives in order to embrace more holistic, integral, emotive, perceptive, creative ways forward?
- How do we bring the Digital Age, new stages and structures of collective consciousness, the capacity for agency in the other-than-human world, and other emerging trends into the ways in which we imagine and invent new environmental narratives?

We hope you'll feel moved to add your own voice to the conversation.

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The Rise of #OceanOptimism : More than 50 million tweets!

Screenshot of the #oceanoptimism hashtag on twitter (March 2016)

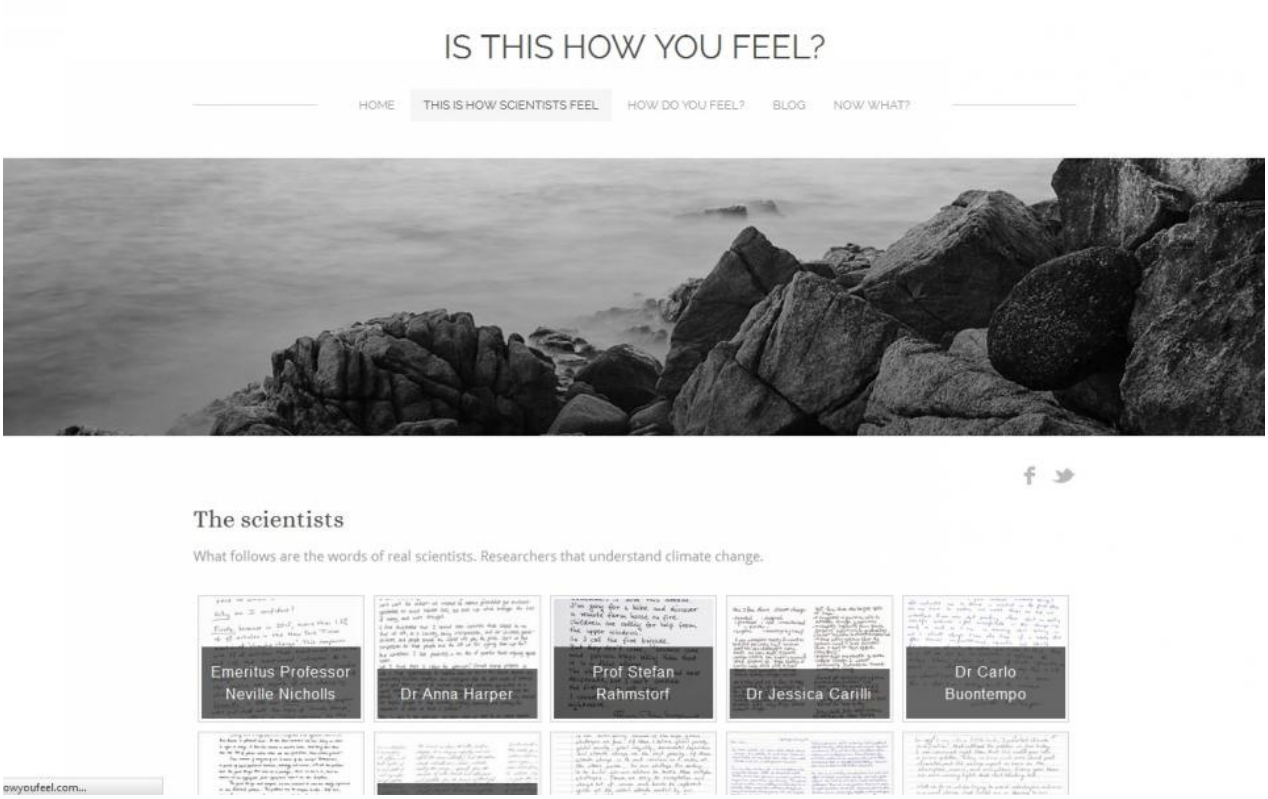
In May 2014, Elin Kelsey built upon the interest in hope generated through the RCC walking colloquium by co-hosting a 48-hour workshop in London, England, with a small group of conservation biologists, young journalists, environmentalists, and designers. Together, they launched an #OceanOptimism twitter hashtag and encouraged others to share hopeful, marine conservation successes. On World Oceans Day (8 June 2014) the tweets came in thick and fast, going viral to reach over 30 million users in its first year. More than 58 million users were using the #OceanOptimism by the time this virtual exhibition opened in March 2016. See more at www.elinkelseyandcompany.com .

Acknowledgements

Elin Kelsey would like to thank all those who contributed to the virtual exhibition: Eliza Encheva, Massimo Moraglio, Rachel Shindelar, Richard Kool, Susanne Schmitt, Mark Wilson, and Richard Christian.

The author is also grateful to the team of the Environment & Society Portal: Dr. Kimberly Coulter, and Katrin Kleemann. A special thanks goes to Eliza Encheva for her ideas, conceptualization, and coordination of the exhibition. She was a driving force behind this project. Thank you also to Max Fath for the graphic design of the handwritten thumbnails and the header.

What do other scientists think?



Screenshot of the website "Is this how you feel?"

Screenshot of the website "Is this how you feel?"

"Is this how you feel?" website

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Screenshot of the "Letters to the Future" website (March 2016)

Screenshot of the "Letters to the Future" website (March 2016)

"Letters to the Future" website

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Related links:

- #OceanOptimism https://mobile.twitter.com/hashtag/oceanoptimism
- www.isthishowyoufeel.com http://www.isthishowyoufeel.com/index.html
- The Guardian: Writing letters to complete strangers can make the world a better place (22 January 2013) http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/jan/22/writing-letters-strangers-make-world-better

Websites linked in this text:

- http://www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives/2011/3/future-environmental-history-needs-and-opportunities
- http://www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives/2014/6/beyond-doom-and-gloom-exploration-through-letters
- http://www.environmentandsociety.org/perspectives/2014/6/beyond-doom-and-gloom-exploration-through-letters
- http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21328460.200-ecologists-should-learn-to-look-on-the-bright-side/
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LOfvsDmzLc
- http://grist.org/climate-energy/to-motivate-climate-activists-use-optimism/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_term=Daily%20June%2027&utm_campaign=daily
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- https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/6524

Websites linked in image captions:

- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Franz_Marc-In_the_Rain%28Im_Regen%29_%281912%29.jpg
- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Blue_Rider_by_Franz_Marc_1912.jpeg?uselang=de

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Send Us Your Letter

How to post your letter

How do you feel when you think about the environment? Where do you find hope? Who do you want to receive your letter? In our inaugural collection of letters , Russian academic Anna Mazanik addressed her letter to an imprisoned environmental activist. German academic Daniel Münster addressed his letter to a farmer in southern India. Seth Peabody , a US scholar, addressed his to a CEO.

Send us your letter

"Mailboxes," photo by Thomas Galvez, Flickr. View source.

We would love to see your vision, hear your response, or read your comment. You can send us an email , write us a letter, send us a photo of your letter, a postcard, leave a comment below or below every letter in the exhibition, a comment on our Facebook page , a tweet via #beyonddoomandgloom or tweet to @env_and_society , or send us a picture of something that gives you hope via Instagram with #beyonddoomandgloom .

We invite you to respond to any of the letters in our collection, or to create a new one of your own. Feel free to post it with your name and contact information or to send it anonymously. We will publish a selection of responses.

We look forward to hearing from you!

Our email address is: portal@carsoncenter.lmu.de

Our postal address is: Environment & Society Portal, Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society , LMU Munich, Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY.

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Chapter: Send Us Your Letter
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/7313
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Send us your letter

"Briefmarken, Briefe & Karten," photo by HydaspisChaos, Flickr. View source.

Further reading

Qureshi, Huma. "Writing Letters to Complete Strangers Can Make the World a Better Place. " *The Guardian*, 22 January 2013.

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- https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?button_hashtag=beyonddoomandgloom
- https://twitter.com/intent/tweet?screen_name=env_and_society
- https://www.instagram.com/environment_and_society_portal/
- https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/beyonddoomandgloom/
- http://www.carsoncenter.uni-muenchen.de/index.html
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Letter from Eliza Encheva to Charles Eisenstein

Eliza Encheva *is a former member of the Environment & Society Portal team and holds a master's degree in English, Spanish, and German Literary Studies from LMU Munich, Germany.*

Charles Eisenstein *is a philosopher, author, and public speaker living in the USA.*

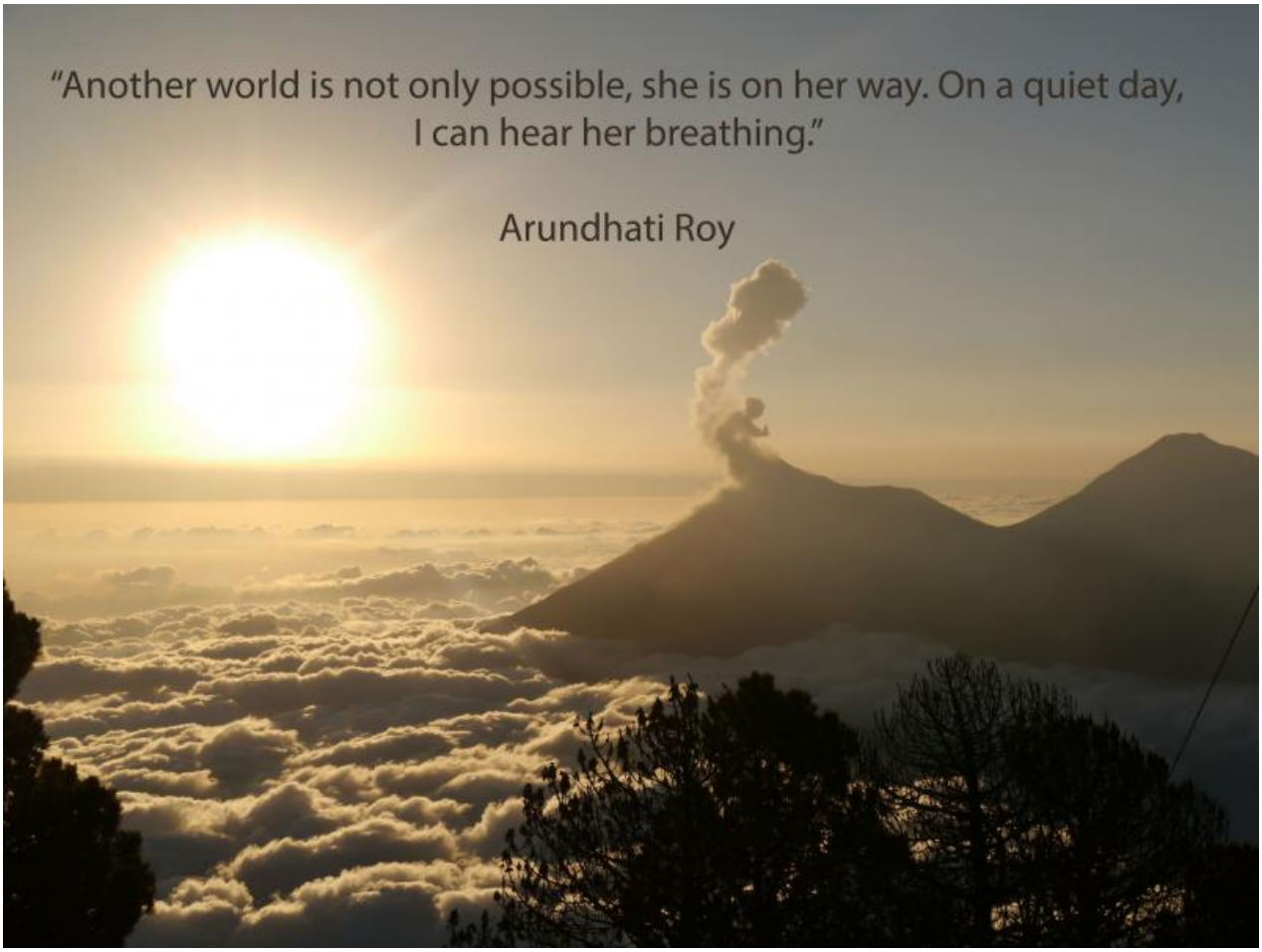

Photo of the active stratovolcano Volcán de Fuego in Guatemala, taken at sunset from the nearby Volcán de Agua. Almost miraculously, the smoke assumed the form of a lady bowing down to the volcano

Created by Eliza Encheva (2013).

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Chapter: Letter from Eliza Encheva to Charles Eisenstein
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An open letter to Charles Eisenstein

Dear Mr. Eisenstein,

Your writings and lectures resonate deeply with my own experience. By expressing your thoughts in a simple yet beautiful way, you manage to share a story that we "have heard and want to hear again" and that we "can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably" (quote on the nature of great stories from Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things*). I am writing to you in an attempt to make sense of the transition that so-called western societies are undergoing at this moment. It seems to me that the current crisis is not only ecological or economic but ultimately also a crisis of the mind, which calls for a reinvention of ourselves, or in other words, a new story of self.

In the talks you give around the world, you often speak about the "old story" that is based on the scientific "myth" separating ourselves from each other while subjecting us to the impersonal forces of an external universe. Your latest book, *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible* , deals with this "Story of Separation" as the primal cause for hopelessness, impotence, and despair. In a universe of separate selves, hardly anything one does is of great importance unless one exercises a great amount of force, for example with the help of money and the power that comes with it. Facing the overwhelming effects of global ecological and financial crises, individuals and their actions seem to matter only marginally. If we are highly idealistic, we might set out to accomplish "big" things—writing books, fighting for peace and social and ecological justice in war-torn regions, or trying to stop deforestation. Most of these individual efforts, however, are bound to fail since they tackle mainly the symptoms rather than the roots of the problems.

One of these underlying issues seems to be the urge to leave a trace in the cultural memory of wider society. And this, according to the "Story of Separation", stems from the angst-inducing thought of leaving no trace at all and having to face our own finitude. Every time a loved one passes away, we are reminded of our own fragility, our vulnerability in the face of the eternal cycle of life and death. On a larger scale, investments in technology and military equipment, in political and economic regimes, as well as in conservationist practices promise to guarantee certainty and security, and preserve things as they are. George Bush, for example, in response to the attacks of September 11, addressed the nation and the world by saying that the USA would show "no sign of vulnerability." The performance poet, actor, musician, and activist Saul Williams links this attitude to the age-old oppression of the feminine and the upholding of characteristics like physical strength and invincibility that have historically been associated with men. "Your weapons are phallic—all of them," Williams proclaims with a sense of urgency on several tracks of his anti-war album, *Not In My Name.* The "Story of Separation" also lacks the feminine element of birthing and nurturing, thus perpetuating the disbalance caused by male dominance. Gradually, the "Story of Separation" slowly has started to crumble since the second half of the 20th century in the face of two world wars, the horrors of fascist and communist regimes, and many dreadful ecological disasters. Yet, the attacks of September 11—or more precisely, the responses that they triggered—catapulted the world back to the rather male mentality of "an eye for an eye."

In the face of this I would like to point to a sign of hope: Some of the declarations of Pope Francis and his sharp critique of the capitalist system, combined with his acts of humility, like driving an old car and giving up the

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papal residence, strike a chord with me. Pope Francis, it seems to me, is not just giving new options but is telling a new story. In doing so, he reminds me that anyone can be a such a much needed storyteller, a shepherd to guide us through times of transformation. Even though I sometimes wonder whether words are enough to ignite the transition we need, or whether we are able to manifest this new reality by using a new language, I am inclined to believe that words provide a good starting point, no matter how limited our language and thus our construction of social reality is. They invite us to question what feels right, and equip us with new means to express ourselves in times of rapid transformations.

The following serves as an illustrative example. Each year thousands of people gather in the bleak and hostile lands of Nevada's Black Rock Desert at an event called *Burning Man*, which goes beyond common labels like "transformational festival," "art event," "temporary city," or "experiment in radical self-reliance." Burning Man stands for the end and the beginning of man, for the cycles of nature and human civilizations. These cycles come and go, just like the Burners—or Burning Man's citizens, as the event's participants are called—who erect a city in the middle of nowhere and leave the desert a week later almost without a trace.

Aerial view of Black Rock City, Nevada, USA, 2010. In 2015 the population reached 70,000

Created by Kyle Harmon.

Black Rock City, as the Burners call the festival site, is a microcosm of its own, a utopian vision of a society, which almost magically turns into reality at the end of August. While it is a celebration of love and joy of life, its citizens celebrate its principle of radical inclusion also by embracing facets of self-expression. Each year a different

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work of art functions as Burning Man's Temple. The Temple provides a place for grief and commemoration, with little altars or caves for Burners to leave remembrances of their lost ones. Even the construction of the Temple can be a process of deep emotional transformation for the people who build it in service to the whole community and also as part of their own process of grieving and letting go. The burning of the Temple at the end of the event, then, just like the burning of a large wooden effigy symbolizing "the Man," appears to be a sacrifice and a rite of passage. Its catharctic effect on Burners has been described by many as an overwhelming feeling of release.

I feel that this process of renewal, of "sacrificing", and stepping into a new story of self, is much needed on a global scale. The challenge of our age is both learning how to die , as the Iraq war veteran Roy Scanton puts it, and at the same time remembering how to live , as Ian MacKenzie, the director of the poetic short film about the guardians of the Temple , attempts to remind us. Both learning how to die and remembering how to live are part of the same story. They are essentially one and the same, just as giving and receiving are two sides of the same coin.

Burning Man is not a solitary manifestation of a new vision of self and society. Examples of communal self-organization abound in the form of ecovillages, other transformational festivals, Transition Towns, guerilla gardening initiatives, alternative media outlets, activities by the Reclaim the Streets and the [freespace] movements, unconferences, Random Hacks of Kindness events, or other forms of civic hacking that help "deprogram" societal and mental structures. Many of these events and activities share Burning Man's radically participatory ethic, its principles of decommodification, gifting, radical inclusion, communal effort, civic responsibility, and immediacy.

Together with the leave-no-trace principle (which should be expanded to embrace various forms of sustainability), these make up a promising list of guidelines for the society I would love to live in; and it seems as if more and more people around the world are having the same urge. At some point in life, usually after a crisis which shows that you have not been turning your gifts toward their true purpose, this urge becomes unstoppable. It nags us until we finally let go of our habits or modes of thinking; to let go of whatever it is that is confining us to a life of limited freedom or disconnection from the world.

When that happens we find ourselves living into what you, Mr. Eisenstein, like to call the "Story of Interbeing" or "the Ecological Age." It is a story that gives us the feeling of belonging, connectedness and emotional integrity. As I understand it, it is a world(view) in which neither the principles of the feminine and the masculine, nor the states of being and doing are diametrically opposed to each other but rather equally engrained in how we operate as humans.

We already live in a world in which kids and teenagers around the world join NGOs to tackle issues like global warming (think of Felix Finkbeiner's organization Plant for the Planet), young adults team up with scientists and engineers to clean the oceans of plastic (think of Boyan Slat), and former child soldiers start give yoga classes in slums (think of Tambia Fayia), and build schools and educational programs (think of Emmanuel Jal). These individuals channel their pain to create something sustainable that transcends their individual selves. So when Emmanuel Jal raps, "I'm a war child [...] I believe I've survived / for a reason to tell my story to touch lives," his

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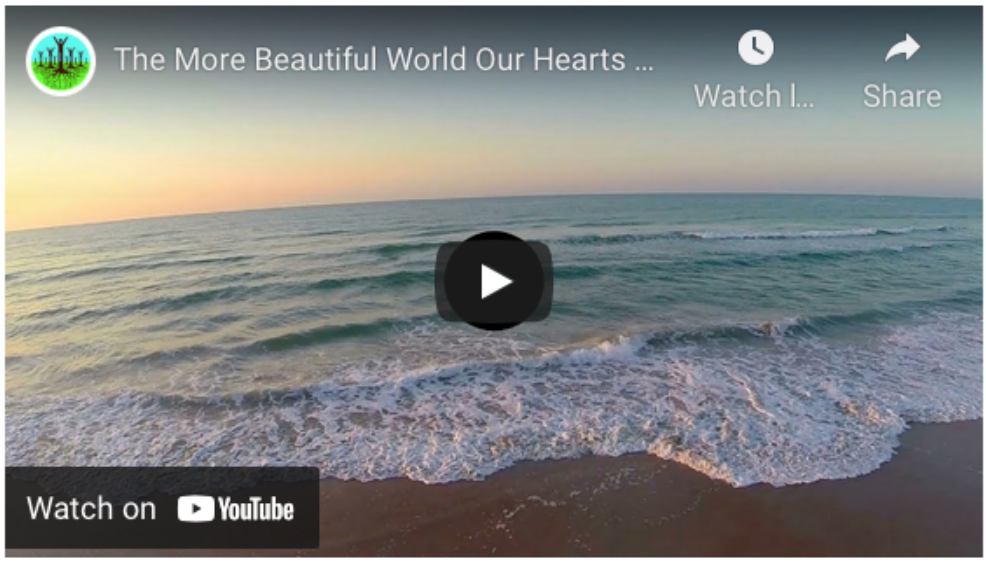
story seems to resonate with that of Earth itself.

Thank you, Mr. Eisentein, for telling your story. And for reminding us that it may be wiser to not rely solely on our intellect and our capacity for critique, but to listen to our inner voice when it comes to creating the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.

Sincerely,

Eliza Encheva

The original virtual exhibition includes the YouTube video "The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible" (5:07 min), directed by Ian MacKenzie and produced by Sustainable Human. View the video here (https://www.youtube.com/embed/_oevXkJY-fE).



Trailer: "The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know Is Possible". Directed by Ian MacKenzie and produced by Sustainable Human .

Websites linked in this text:

- http://charleseisenstein.net/books/the-more-beautiful-world-our-hearts-know-is-possible/
- http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/?_r=2
- http://www.ianmack.com/learning-how-to-live-anthropocene/
- http://www.ianmack.com/dear-guardians/
- http://sustainablehuman.me
- https://www.youtube.com/embed/_oevXkJY-fE
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Chapter: Letter from Eliza Encheva to Charles Eisenstein
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/7314
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:23

Letter from Massimo Moraglio to Elin Kelsey

Massimo Moraglio *is a senior researcher in urban planning history, currently at the Technische Universität Berlin, Germany.*

Elin Kelsey *is an educator, researcher, and author, currently teaching at the Royal Roads University in British Columbia, Canada.*

Dear Elin,

Your inquiry about the "doom and gloom" mind-set that marks the environmental perspective is very sharp. On one hand, we all know that climate change is something negatively affecting our lives. So, there are plenty of reasons to be worried, and surely not so many to feel hopeful. Yet on the other hand, continuing to hopelessly list further losses of the world as we know it leaves us nailed in despair.

I do wonder if one of our duties as scholars working on environmental studies shouldn't be to address the issue of doom and gloom in a reflexive way. Shouldn't it be our responsibility to analyze the reasons behind the widespread impotence we feel when we discuss the state of the environment? Shouldn't we explore the cultural background of hopelessness?

In the spirit of that investigation, I think it is important to notice how the whole discussion of environmental issues is framed by time. Experiencing climate change, witnessing the deterioration of nature, and discovering loss in the planet bio-diversity can only be done only from a historical prospective. Such issues demand that we compare the present to the past. And as we process that data, we develop trends and project these trends into the future. We make forecasts for coming generations.

I wonder if the way we frame environmental issues in terms of time and westernized conceptions of trends fuels a morbid attitude toward envisioning bad futures. Let's have a look at some of the most famous depictions of the future in the twentieth century. We can count on Orwell , Huxley and Shiel : they all depicted dystopian futures in which humankind is burdened by natural or social oppressions and despairs. Are we secretly happy to read about misery? And if so, why?

I also wonder how much environmental doom and gloom is associated with the concept of decline. In many civilizations, and in ancient Greece *par excellence*, time was conceptualized in terms of deterioration. A golden age of better times always existed before some current stage of poorer outcomes. In other words, have we simply inserted "the environment" into some larger core idea of the world as one of decay: the past was better, the future will be worse than the already pitiable present? I wonder how much of the anxiety we feel about the loss of nature is reflecting our broader anxiety of living within the concept of decline.

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The idea of decline can be pushed further. It can be pushed to the point of collapse. The concept of the apocalypse is an anthropological refrain in many civilizations. Could that be why much of environmental doom and gloom is cast in apocalyptic terms ?

Yet perhaps it is in the concept of apocalypse where hope can emerge. Apocalypses are not just bad things. They are fresh starts, at least for the happy few who survive. They re-open the time cycle and herald new eras of civilization. They carry with them the hope that we can re-create a new pristine world. You find a lot of this idea in the contemporary debate, as for instance in the 1960s hippies' vision or in the post-consumerist lifestyle, as well as in in past. In Matthew Phipps Shiel's novel *The Purple Cloud*, published in 1901, an environmental disaster (namely a volcanic eruption in Indonesia) kills the entirety of humankind and all the animals, but one man, called Adam, and naturally his companion, a girl (no, she is not called Eve) survive and made a new start for the humankind. Hopeful beginnings arise from bad futures.

Our negative and pessimistic visions of the environment and of nature have several other positive elements. First, they reveal how we are (finally) aware of our footprint on the planet, how our lifestyle is harming ecosystems, how we must change our relation with nature. Secondly, they also reveal that we are indeed seriously worried about ourselves and the coming generations. If we compare our worries about the future with the debates of the 1970s and 1980s, I believe we are at a turning point. In those decades, we lost any expectation about future. As the 1977 Sex Pistols' song puts it, there was "No future" .

I do think that today we can "smell" a growing attention to tomorrow in the cultural discourse. That tomorrow may be expressed—so far—in deep concerns and in "doom and gloom." But there is still a tomorrow. And, in those worries, I find a lot of possibilities for a better future. And for hope.

Massimo

Websites linked in this text:

- http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21337504
- http://www.huxley.net/
- http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11229/11229-h/11229-h.htm
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Chapter: Letter from Massimo Moraglio to Elin Kelsey
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/7310
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:25

Letter from Rachel Shindelar to Tim Jackson

Rachel Shindelar *is a communication and advocacy associate of the United Nations University Institute for Integrated Management of Material Fluxes and of Resources (UNU-FLORES) in Dresden, Germany.*

Tim Jackson *is a ecological economist and professor of sustainable development at the University of Surrey, United Kingdom.*

Dear Tim Jackson,

Every time I encounter your work, I go away feeling somewhat more hopeful. A strange experience, since your research focuses on the failings of our current economic paradigm and looming ecological and social crises. But it is not the subject of your research that leaves me feeling optimistic. It is the way you frame the future—as an unprecedented opportunity.

In the discourse and rhetoric surrounding the environment such a perspective is disturbingly rare. The media, environmentalists, politicians, and academics all seem committed to using the most devastating stories, pictures, and statistics available to drive home how dismal life will be. They foretell a future full of doom and gloom.

For quite a while, I too believed this was the only possible legitimate narrative for the state of the environment and humankind's future on Earth. I would throw horrific facts and devastating prognoses at anyone whose behavior wasn't "environmentally friendly" enough for me. Your work has helped me realize that this doom and gloom narrative is not the only valid narrative,

It seems to me that doom and gloom would neither be possible nor necessary as a narrative, if our society was not so fixated on material consumption and economic growth. We seem to believe that our wellbeing is inherently dependent upon them.. The ecological crises, therefore, is an economic crisis. And it, has been since the environmental movement began. One need only to look back at *Limits to Growth*[1] or the *Stern Review*.[2] Prices of commodities will soar. Energy will become scarce. Climate change will damage country credit ratings. Economic growth will slow down or even—god forbid—stop all together. We do not fear the end of the planet, but rather, the end of economic growth and development.

The publication of the Fifth IPCC Assessment Report provides a wonderful example. Following its release, headlines such as "Panel's Warning on Climate Risk: Worst Is Yet to Come"[3] dominated the media. My two favorites were "Climate Change Threatens Economic Growth,"[4] and "Climate Change Report 'Should Jolt People into Action' Says IPCC Chief."[5] They so clearly illustrate the fear-mongering that I find most disturbing.

Does this type of rhetoric motivate individual efforts to live more sustainably? Does painting a picture of doom

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and gloom inspire action? Apparently IPCC Chairman Rajendra Pachauri thinks so, and he is not alone. You only need to spend a few moments skimming the most recent newsletters from your favorite environmental activist organization to see that this strategy is widespread. The more dire the message, the more catastrophic the picture, the more frequently it is printed, posted, and ironically—"liked." There is something disturbingly similar with this type of activism strategy and the scare tactics used by national governments in the cold war era.

Don't get me wrong, I am fully aware that the environment is undeniably in a catastrophic state, that the economy as is will suffer dearly, and humankind's relationship to our planet is in dire need of a makeover. But I cannot help wondering, how many times does someone have to be told "if you're not scared, you're not paying attention" before they completely lose all faith in their ability to make a difference? Before they decide to give up. Have you, Prof. Jackson, encountered this in your own research? The stifling effect of so much negativity?

To move beyond this suppressive narrative, I believe we must also move beyond the suppressive, growth-obsessed economic paradigm practiced around the world. Like you, I question whether the end of economic growth truly is the worst thing that could happen. I agree with you when you say that humankind can prosper without growth. Indeed, I am starting to wonder if the question isn't whether we can survive *without* economic growth, but rather, can we continue to survive with it?

I am convinced that in a society that does not equate economic growth to human wellbeing there would be much more room for a narrative of hope, opportunity, and even freedom. Making the transition to a sustainable society would not be about giving up benefits, but about winning them. It would not be about changing human nature or denying prosperity, but about allowing ourselves the opportunity to become fully human. You mention a few of these benefits in your work: reduction of systemic inequality, freedom from status competition through material consumption, resilient social communities, freedom from fossil fuel dependency, increase in cultures of trust, and so many more.

But most importantly, the hope of a positive future!

I share your conviction that the transition to a sustainable society means a transition to a new economic paradigm. Perhaps the first step in this direction is going beyond the doom and gloom narrative: empowering people with a vision of the future that disentangles human well-being from material consumption and economic growth, and positions quality of life as its primary goal. In your book, you frame the reality of living on a finite planet not as a crisis but as a "unique opportunity": an opportunity to improve our lifestyles and our democratic institutions. We need more newspaper headlines that read: "Climate Change: The Opportunity of a Millennium" or "There is Hope: The Benefits of Combating Climate Change."

What could be more motivating than hope? Thank you for helping me find it again.

Sincerely,

Rachel Shindelar

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Chapter: Letter from Rachel Shindelar to Tim Jackson
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[1] Donella Meadows, Dennis Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and William Behrens. *The Limits to Growth* . New York: Universe Books, 1972.

[2] Nicholas Stern. *The Economics of Climate Change: The Stern Review.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[3] Justin Gillis. "Panel's Warning on Climate Risk: Worst Is Yet to Come ." *New York Times*, 31 March 2014.

[4] Mike Scott. "Climate Change Threatens Economic Growth—UN Report: How Should Investors React? " *Forbes*, 3 April 2014. Accessed 25 June 2014.

[5] Suzanne Goldenburg. "Climate Change Report 'Should Jolt People into Action' Says IPCC Chief ." *The Guardian*, 31 March 2014. Accessed 23 June 2014.

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Jackson, Tim. *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet*. London: Earthscan, 2009.

Related links

Professor Tim Jackson's Biography (University of Surrey)

Jackson, Tim. "An Economic Reality Check ." TEDGlobal 2010. Filmed July 2010.

Wikipedia article about Tim Jackson

OECD Better Life Index

European Commission Beyond GDP Initiative

Further readings:

- Constanza, Robert, Gar Alperovitz, Herman E. Daly, Joshua Farley, Carol Franco, Tim Jackson, Ida Kieszewski, Juliet Schor, and Peter Victor. *Building a Sustainable and Desirable Economy-in-Society-in-Nature.* New York: United Nations Division for Sustainable Development, 2012.

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• Jackson, Tim. *Prosperity without Growth: Economics for a Finite Planet* . London: Earthscan, 2009.

Related links:

- Professor Tim Jackson's Biography (University of Surrey) http://www.surrey.ac.uk/ces/people/tim_jackson/
- Jackson, Tim. "An Economic Reality Check". TEDGlobal 2010. Filmed July 2010. http://www.ted.com/talks/tim_jackson_s_economic_reality_check
- OECD Better Life Index http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/about/better-life-initiative/
- European Commission Beyond GDP Initiative http://ec.europa.eu/environment/beyond_gdp/index_en.html

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PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:38

Letter from Richard Kool to Sam and Cohen

Richard Kool *has a background in biology, ecology, and teaching, he is an associate professor at the School of Environmental Sustainability of the Royal Roads University in British Columbia, Canada.*

Sam and Cohen *are Richard Kool's grandchildren.*

Dear Sam and Cohen,

When you read this in 2040, the world will likely be quite different from the one I came into when I was born at the cusp of the twentieth century, in early January 1950.

While the great democracies had triumphed over militarism and fascism in a war that had ended five years before I was born, in our family, a grief was unarticulated but nonetheless present: most of our relatives had been murdered during the Holocaust, and no one was willing to talk openly about this. In spite of the economic boom of the 1950s and 60s, many Jewish families had a darkness, a gloom just under the surface, a despair about what had happened and an ever-present fear that if an attempt at annihilation had happened once before, it could happen again.

We don't get to choose the times we are born into.

The fantasy trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* had this to say:

> Frodo: I wish the Ring had never come to me. I wish none of this had happened.
> Gandalf: So do all that come to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us.
> —The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (2001 film)

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Chapter: Letter from Richard Kool to Sam and Cohen
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6527
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:39

Hester Waas with the three young children she cared for while she was "hidden" in the Netherlands, taken some time in 1945.

The original photo is in possession of Richard Kool.

Neither your great-great-grandmother or grandfather chose to be Jews in a time of annihilation nor did your great-grandmother Hester choose to be a hidden child, nor did I choose to carry the burden of survival and obligation coming from the Holocaust. "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us." And that is what you have to do with the time given you.

Dealing passively with doom and gloom is not something that is given to us. You two, like me, were not meant to walk on Earth. Inasmuch as my mother, your great-grandmother, was not meant to live, you and I were not meant to exist. We owe our lives to the people who didn't simply moan about the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, but acted to save at least one Jewish girl's life.

Our response to despair always has to be to do what we can do, where we are, with the tools available to us.

For many people of my generation, children of survivors of the Holocaust, the decision was to engage in work of *tikkun olam*, the Hebrew conception of "repair of the world." The world we grew up in, the families we grew up in, were broken by a great tragedy and many of us took as our life's work that of serving society as doctors, teachers, social workers, psychologists, writers and critics, environmental scientists and educators and more, in order, we hoped, to create conditions that would forever prevent the fascistic and xenophobic responses that led to the disaster that befell our families.

Perhaps in Hebrew school, we studied the tractate called *Pirkei Avot*, the Wisdom of the Fathers, where we

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PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:39

would read:

> Rabbi Tarfon says: The day is short and the task is great, and the laborers are lazy, and the wages are much and the Master is pressing.
> He would say: It is not incumbent upon you to finish the work, but you are not free to abandon it.

What do we do with the time that is given to us? Rabbi Tarfon tells us that our own lives are short, we'd rather put off what needs to be done, and yet the rewards for deeds are significant. And most importantly, he reminds us we don't have to do everything, but we have to do something, something to move towards the completion of the work whatever that work is. None of us can do all the work, whether it is solving the problems in the world, in our country, in our society, in our city, in our family or ourselves. Time is short, Tarfon tells us, and we must do what we can do, where we are, with the tools available to us.

Our tradition offers us models for doing what can be done. Many times in the Hebrew Bible, God calls people to action and accountability, and the appropriate response, uttered by Adam, Jacob, Isaac, Moses and other prophets and leaders was *hineini*, "here I am." When faced by crisis, the tradition tells us "show up"; stand up and take the risk to do what needs to be done.

My favourite example of this comes from Exodus. After Pharaoh told the Israelites to leave Egypt and slavery, they head out into the desert and arrive at the sea: and looking back towards Egypt, they see a dust cloud—Pharaoh's army coming to bring them back to slavery. Some Israelites think that perhaps slavery wasn't so bad and say to Moses "Let us alone that we may serve Egypt! Indeed, better for us to serve Egypt than our dying in the wilderness." In Exodus 14:21, Moses stretches out his hand over the sea, the waters split, and the Israelites scurry to safety, leaving Pharaoh and the Egyptian army to drown as the waters reconnect. But the rabbi's ancient commentaries say that, with the Egyptian army on its way, the Israelites stood there on the shores and waited for something to happen and nothing happened until a young man, a prince of the tribe of Judah, a young man named Nachshon, walked into the water. He walked in having no idea as to what would happen, but he knew that he was not going to go back to slavery. He walked into the water with a faith based on what he had just experienced, that of his God allowing him to walk out of Egypt from slavery to freedom, and that faith was being translated into action as he walked up to his knees, his waist, his shoulders, his chin, and up to his nostrils. Walking his prayer into the danger and uncertainty of the sea and away from slavery and oppression, he walked into the water ... and then the seas parted.

In the face of fear and a sense of doom, Nachshon walked into the sea and the Israelites followed, walking from slavery to the uncertain freedom we all continue to live in even today.

Our tradition is one of deeds as being more important than faith, of action being more important than endless study attempting to gain complete understanding. A month after Nachshon walked into the water, the Israelites were at Mount Sinai. There, Moses presents the Covenant, a new law we call the Ten Commandments, a new way of seeing and understanding the world, and this new law he offers to the Israelites just as they begin their wanderings toward freedom, a freedom that the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes as a

"difficult freedom."

Why difficult? Because on hearing the Revelation at Sinai, the people said "*Na'aseh V'nishma*"—we will do and we will then understand (Exodus 24:7).

The difficult freedom of Levinas is that the Jewish people promised to *do* before they *understood*, accepting that real knowledge comes from the deed and not from reason alone. They accepted the difficult tension that comes from acting on inadequate and incomplete knowledge, the tension that comes from knowing that your deeds might not be correct and you're only going to learn that through the doing. The temptation of temptations, according to Levinas, is the desire for security in knowledge prior to the risk of action. At times, we have to confront the necessity of acting with necessarily incomplete understanding instead of putting off what needs to be done until we are sure that our knowledge is complete, which of course it will never be.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (second from right) and Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. (center) participating in the civil rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, on March 21, 1965
Used with kind permission of Susannah Heschel. View source.

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PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:39

This emphasis on the doing of deeds—moral and/or sacred deeds—runs as a distinguished thread throughout both Jewish sacred and secular writings. In fact, the twentieth-century scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that "Jewish law is, in a sense, a science of deeds" (Heschel 1955, 292). The passage from the prophet Micah (6:8)—"What does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God"—is emblematic of this concern with deed. To the rabbis, this passage is the sum of the Law in a single verse: note that there is nothing here to tell you what you must know! The only injunctions here are what you must do; there is no call to faith, only to action.

The world you will live in is not something I can imagine, although I am sure of some things: the climate will be warmer, sea levels will be higher, there will be fewer species and more competition over certain natural resources that will become increasingly scarce. The issues that you may have to deal with will be large and complex and won't be solvable by one person, or even a group of people at one time, but will likely take many people lots of work over much time, generations perhaps. My work to engage as a teacher in *tikkun olam* will not be completed: my efforts will not repair the broken and damaged world. Neither will your efforts. Yet our tradition tells us that we have no choice but to be part of the solution. How you are part of that solution is up to you; how you organize your family and community and society will be a reflection of your intellect and skill.

I have always felt the only antidote to despair is action.

Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the death camps, wrote that, based on his experience of life under totally extreme circumstances, no matter what situation we are in we can find meaning in our life even if not hope for the future "by creating a work or doing a deed; by experiencing something or encountering someone; and by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering" and that "everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances."

Your ability to choose your attitude in the face of difficult situations is yours to exercise. The history we are part of gives us guidance and can instill in us a sense of obligation: we are not to succumb to despair but, as the prophet Moses tells us just before his death, to always choose life.

Websites linked in image captions:

- http://jwa.org/media/abraham-joshua-heschel-on-selma-march-1965

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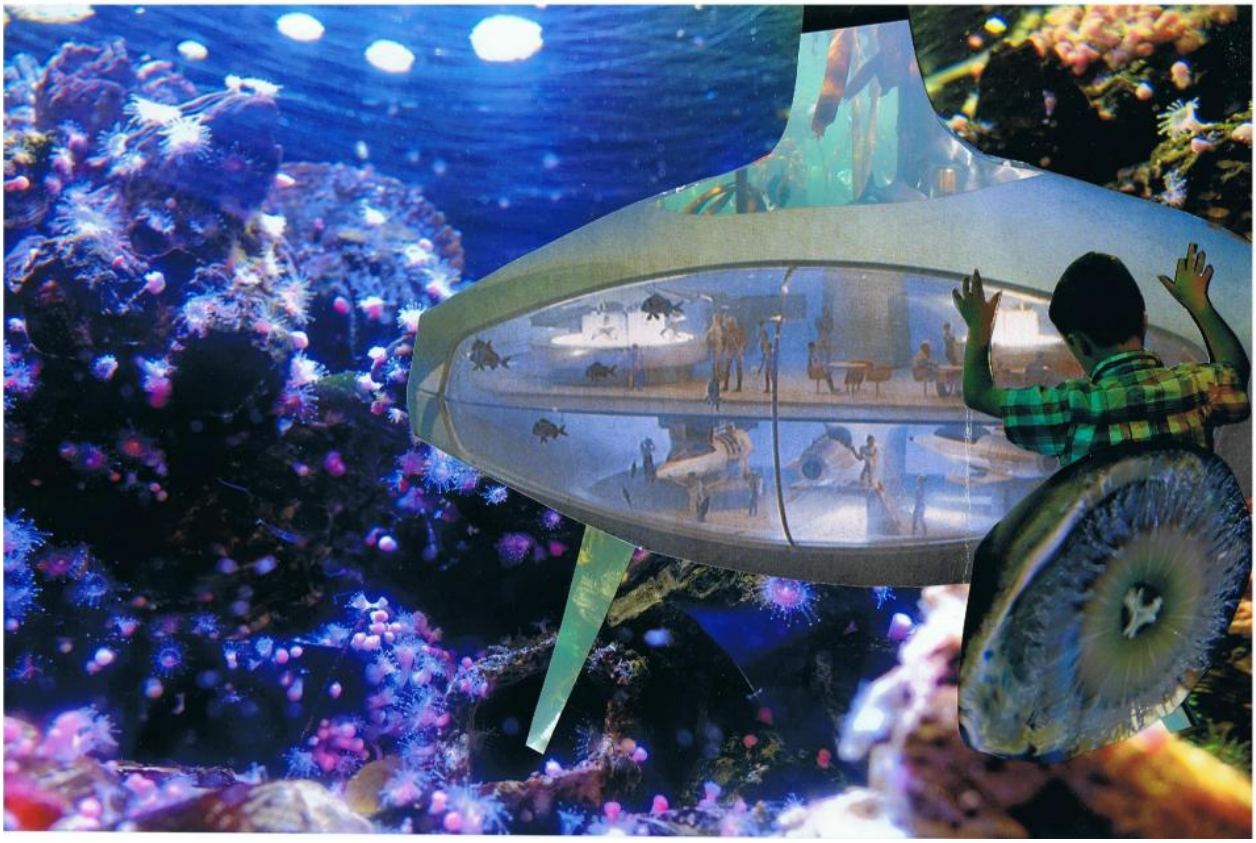
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:39

Letter from Susanne Schmitt to the Oceans and Lakes Aquarium

Susanne Schmitt *is a social and cultural anthropologist interested in design, emotion, atmosphere, and multispecies ethnography, currently at LMU Munich, Germany.*

The Ocean and Lakes Aquarium *is a fictional addressee.*



Mixed media collage, Susanne Schmitt.

Susanne Schmitt
Milchstraße 11
81543 München

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Chapter: Letter from Susanne Schmitt to the Oceans and Lakes Aquarium
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6528
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:40

Oceans and Lakes Aquarium
Preservation Junction 12
81764 Utopiaville

Munich, May 12th, 2014

Dear friends,

I am just getting around to having a thorough look through the pictures I took at the Aquarium last month. I picked a few and want to send them along, together with my most sincere thanks for your friendliness and your hospitality, and some thoughts.

Our conversations about emotion and the environment have been very important to me. We come from different backgrounds—marine biology, environmental studies and the like on the one hand, and anthropology on the other—and our understanding of what 'nature' and the environment could be are not the same. To the anthropologist, "nature" is a human phenomenon that cannot be accessed on its own terms (an does not, in fact, even exist independently) because we perceive of it in culture-bound ways. The environment, too, is everywhere; we are each other's, along with everything else. "Nature begins where humans end" was a definition a wildlife biologist recently gave me when I asked him what his idea of nature was. Aquariums complicate those definitions of nature.

I keep thinking about our conversation about the aquarium as an emotional and emotive site, and as a locus of both the political and the phantasmatic. Now that I have met even more conservationists like you who consciously attend to the affective qualities of the stories they are telling and the images they are producing, and who try to talk about telling stories that are enabling rather than crushing, I want to look a bit closer at what kinds of stories and feelings materialize in aquariums when regarded through that lens.

Let me first say a few words on the two affective labels that float through this conversation: hope and optimism. Hope to me carries a gospel-like promise, a sensation against all odds. Admittedly, the odds are very bad, and we all know that. Hope has a quasi-religious connotation which is interesting because it is tied to a sensation of association, attachment, and absorption. There is a notion of religious energy, of dissolution of the individual and her boundaries into a larger community, into the social sphere around her, carried away completely by what Freud called an "oceanic feeling." Incidentally or not, "immersion" is one of the creative paradigms of contemporary aquarium design also. Not only do all the different exhibits present different ecosystems and sub aquatic ambiances, but the whole experience of aquarium going is carefully designed to create an all-encompassing aquatic-oceanic (?) feeling. Visitors are made to feel completely em-placed, they both witness aquatic life and become absorbed by it.

Optimism, on the other hand, speaks of agency and possibility. It is directed towards the future. No aquarium visit is ever complete without the kind of bio-pedagogical advice that wants to enable visitors to save the oceans through their own effort. Optimism can be cruel though, writes Lauren Berlant: optimism is a form of

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Chapter: Letter from Susanne Schmitt to the Oceans and Lakes Aquarium
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6528
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:40

attachment that may be betrayed (and so is hope, of course). The cruelness of optimism comes from the possibility that this attachment is a hurtful one if things do not come out as planned.

But back to the pictures. On top of the stack in front of me there is this one—a view of the meetings and functions room right behind the visitors' entrance, aptly named "Tranquillity."

The "Tranquillity Room," Two Oceans Aquarium, Cape Town. The Tranquillity Room is a function room providing space for business meetings or private events such as weddings. The large window allows for a view onto the kelp forest.

Courtesy of Susanne Schmitt.

When you are in the room, you can see right into the kelp forest. The giant seaweeds rhythmically sway from one side to the other. I could sit there for hours. The natural daylight shines in, painting streaks of sunlight across the tank. Fish swim by. The longer you look, the better you recognise their particular patterns of movement. Swarms form, move around together between the kelp. The larger fish swim more slowly. After a while, you recognise individual fish, and they recognise you, turning towards your figure behind the glass wall. A little later, I look up and see foam and sunlight, all the way up the kelp that grows upwards like a magic beanstalk. As I look down, I see sand and pebbles, and smaller forms of life, living their own existence without even knowing they are in what

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Chapter: Letter from Susanne Schmitt to the Oceans and Lakes Aquarium
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PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:40

humans think is a kelp forest. I wonder if the life at the other side of the tank wall experiences their being there as tranquil? I doubt it, I believe it comes with all the stress and intensity that life usually brings, even in the absence of predators. Someone is always being eaten in the end.

Kelp forest. The Ocean Basket Kelp Forest Exhibit at the Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town. Kelp forests thrive along the South African Coast where the cold Atlantic seawater washes over the rocks and shores and sends nutrients up from the ground.

Courtesy of Susanne Schmitt.

Narratives of doom and gloom are usually geared towards the future, and so are stories of hope and optimism—that things might get better or at least not worse. This picture, now one I glued to my notebook while I visited you, speaks to me not only of an interesting sense of presence, but also of a phantasm of the space age: human undersea habitation. The idea of humans living undersea has been a literary, architectural and scientific trope at different times when people tackled futurist ideas.

Undersea habitation presents itself in architectural dreams, in an aesthetic of the last frontier, both spaced out and ecologically sound. Most contemporary spin offs of those architectural dreams are resorts that evoke Captain Nemos's holiday home, located near shore at the most beautiful diving locations.

Just look at that one: the draft of a library at the Poseidon Underwater Resort in Fiji. Although only a sketch by now, the way it looks—minimalist interior design and a window looking out, a submersed space, really speaks to me about the ways we organise and instrumentalise human–non/human oceanic entanglement through design. The sea here is both the actual event and the decorative framework for an interior. Just like the books in the

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PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:40

shelves. What fascinates me most, however, is what you see when you look through the windows of these architectural sketches: happy, thriving marine life. Anything might happen here, all kinds of stories unfold, inside and outside. They unfold with the life in the ocean, inside the books on the shelves, they travel with the people who will come and stay there, and the people who made the computer animated design in the first place. Stories that bring about the whole complexity of feelings beyond doom and hope.

But what about funny stories, slightly depressing stories, cheesy stories, boring stories, never-ending stories? Stories whose tone shifts with every sentence? So many books, so many fish, so many empty seats, so many ways of telling a story beyond the hope and doom binary.

The image shows a 3D draft of the Poseidon Resort's planned underwater library. Poseidon resort was envisioned as the world's first sea floor resort located on a private island in Fiji. It has never been realized. Underwater hotels, however, remain touristic and architectural visions, with several companies currently working to build them.

Image courtesy of the Poseidon Undersea Resort's press kit.

Maybe the library has a book on Jacques Rougerie's "Village sous-marin" (1973), architecture playing with organic forms and bionic design. Is this starfish-shaped dwelling and research site an expression of doom and gloom, or of optimism? What do you feel when you see it? Is it an expression of human expansionism and hybris? Of research that needs to be done so we can document and prevent further damage to the oceans? Or of attachment to the life aquatic?

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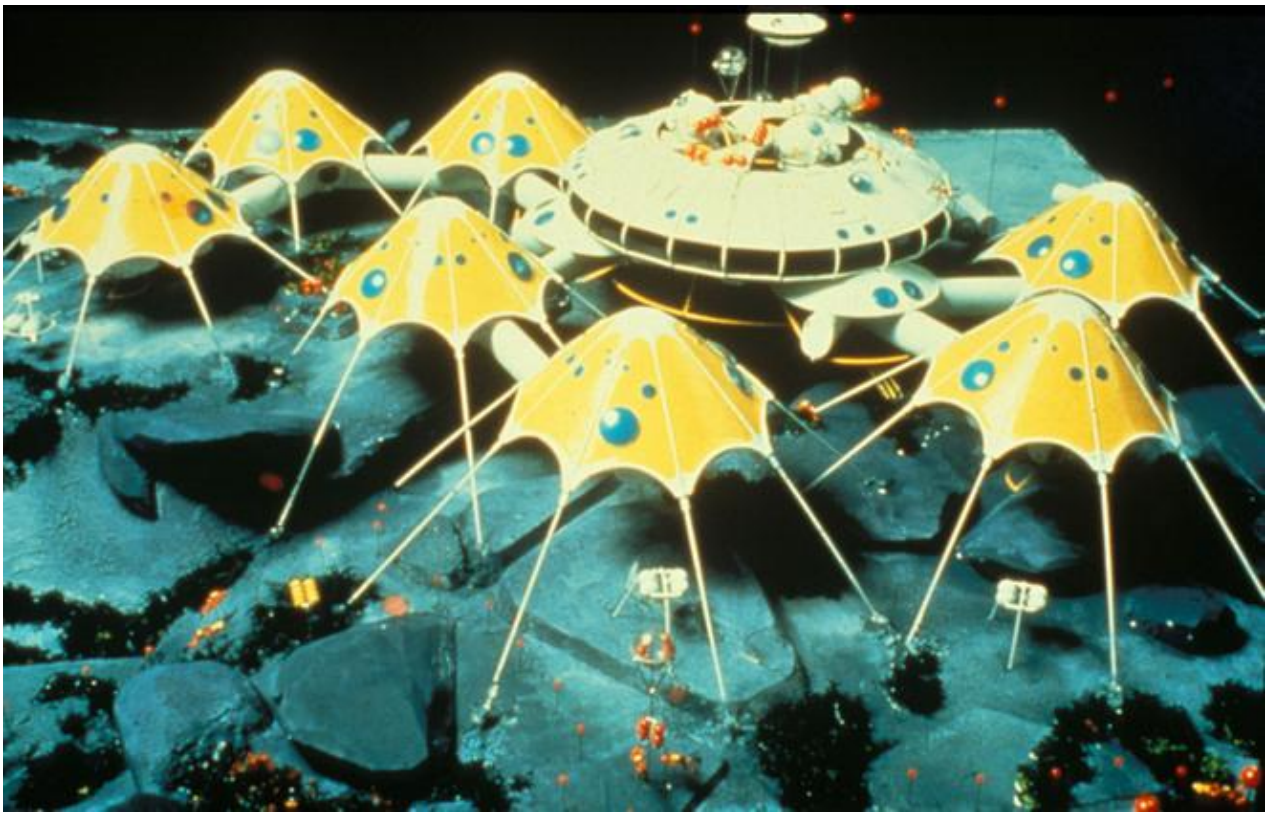
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:40



The Village sous-marin, an underwater research and astronaut training center. French architect Jacques Rougerie has designed marine research labs and observatories, underwater habitats and villages. Inspired by bionics, futurism, and Jules Verne, he now plans to apply principles of underwater architecture to space exploration and habitation

Image courtesy of Créations Jacques Rougerie.

The two undersea dwelling sites that the Tranquillity Room makes me think of speak to the ways in which the oceans are imagined. In the popular imaginary, the oceanic is a site of excitement, beauty and well-being for the privileged, and a crucial resource, as well as a site of the threatening and the threatened. What I find so special about these phantasies of underwater living is their internal contradiction: they are often designed towards a future where living on dry land has become more and more difficult—the air polluted, the planet overcrowded, the soil poisoned. Yet the ocean we see when we look through these windows is clean. There are no dead reefs, no grey mud and empty ground where scurrying life should be, and swarms of plastic waste floating around. In those architectural fantasies, the very reason why humans would eventually abandon earth never eventuates.

Aquariums and other sites of audience-focused conservation have an educational mandate that aims at preventing us from ever having to abandon the earth. They educate through both information and feeling because they present that which should be conserved as worthy of protection because it feels good to look at. Their moral imperative comes from aesthetic impressions. They educate on the diversity of life and its potential

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PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:40

futures. This future looks grim. Most aquariums I know try not to pretend that it is any different. But they show ecosystems that work. Aquarium exhibitions that truly reflected the state of the planet's water systems would include lethal plastic trash, dead coral reefs killed by extensive tourism, industrial waste, and industrial fishing techniques that are not exactly sustainable. Both ways of perceiving of the aquatic and its future are real human ways of telling the story.

If you give in to them, if you dedicated yourself to them, aquariums exude a sense of presence, of immanence and submersion. Look at those two:

Making contact. A child leans on the a tank's glass wall gazing inside and spreads out this hands at the Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town. A West Coast rock lobster (*Jasus lalandii*), a species endemic to the coast of Southern Africa and the Cape of Good Hope, looks back.

Courtesy of Susanne Schmitt.

Do you see how hands and antennae mirror each other in their movement? I see that, but I see the glass wall too. I come to believe that preservation of the environment is about empathy, about wondering what it would be like to have antennae and sit in a tank all day. Do they feel melancholy? Is the child simply spacing out, thinking nothing, looking for new details? Are they playing? Is he making plans to rescue the other life form behind the glass and let it run free into the ocean at the beach? Does he wonder what it will taste like? Has somebody told him this is nature? Do you think he is thinking about doom or hope? What do those abstract concepts even mean to any of those two? Nature, the environment, discourses of doom and gloom and hope are for those who share those concepts, who know what they mean and what they feel like.

Preservation carries the notion of presence. Presence never happens; it is already over when we write about it. It is a feeling. Emotions are positioning us towards doing. Since I read preservation in that way, I am more optimistic. How do you feel about that?

All the very best, Susanne

Further readings:

- Berlant, Karen. *Cruel Optimism.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Hayward, Eva. "Sensational Jellyfish: Aquarium Affects and the Matter of Immersion." *Differences* 23, no. 3 (2012): 161-96.

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PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:40

Letter from Mark Wilson to Rachel Carson

Mark Wilson *is a historian who studied at the Northumbria University, United Kingdom. Currently he is teaching English in Beijing, China.*

Rachel Carson *was a US marine biologist and conservationist; she was the author of the book* Silent Spring.

Rachel Carson (1907-1964), American marine biologist and author of Silent Spring

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Chapter: Letter from Mark Wilson to Rachel Carson
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6534
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:41

Beyond Hopelessness

Dear Rachel Carson,

I should begin by saying thank you. When I was a kid I would have said my "heroes" were Yoda from Star Wars, and perhaps also Indiana Jones. As an adult, you would be at the top of my list.

I first heard of you when I was a master's student. My supervisor suggested I write about you and your work, and how it was received in Britain.

It was the beginning of a long journey with you, which I have only recently completed, in an academic sense, but which I have yet to finish in a personal one. I have not read all your published work yet, though I was lucky enough to talk about you—on a podcast for an environmental history website.

The environment—or more particularly, the destruction of the environment—affects me greatly. My Facebook wall and my Twitter feed are filled with articles reposted or retweeted about the environment, most of it negative. It is clear that the climate is changing, mostly for the worse, something which you hinted at in your work, but which you did not have the chance to expand on.

I wonder what you would think of the environmental movement today. In the film *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, the opening reminds me of the opening chapter of your most famous book, *Silent Spring*. Professor Xavier describes the future as a dark, desolate world, a world of war, suffering, and loss on both sides. In the film, mutants, and the humans who dare to help them, fight an enemy they cannot defeat. It causes me to wonder: Are we destined to follow the same path? Are we destined to destroy ourselves as we have destroyed so many species before us? Or can we evolve fast enough to change ourselves and thus, change our fate? Is the future truly set?

Silent Spring is a warning for the future. But equally it conveys a sense of hope. Your words make me feel that all not lost. Your words are your most powerful weapon. You were an early environmental historian, even before the discipline formally existed. The first chapter of your most famous book is only a page or two long, yet, it sets the scene for the rest of the story, and whilst it is about a mythical town and warns against the perils of uncontrolled and unquestioned science, underneath it, I read a rallying cry to act, and to do more to stop this future from actually coming true.

...

In researching for my master's dissertation, I read up on your life. You came from relatively humble beginnings, and money was always a problem. There was something of a loner about you. I saw that in myself too. You had an intimate, intense relationship with nature and I only wish I had come upon you sooner. Perhaps I would have stayed on and studied science in university, rather than history.

You also showed me, when I was really struggling with my PhD, that it is possible to be successful without attaining that degree. Through your experience, I realized that a PhD isn't the be-all and the end-all. I know you wanted one but I think not getting one was actually better for you. Had you spent years in college, you might not

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PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:41

have had the opportunity to write what you did, when you did.

There is a general sense of hopelessness in much of the environmental literature, news stories, and documentaries that I read and watch. We hear that climate change is getting worse, wildlife are becoming extinct, and pollution is increasing. It can be difficult to find a positive. I think, however, if you were here, you would be projecting a message of hope. You would remind us that we are not all forsaken and that we can act. Even if we go down fighting, we should at least try, as you did.

I read that your favorite work was not your most famous book. *The Sense of Wonder* is a book about your walks through woods and along the Maine coast with your nephew, and it was written specifically for children. You negate any sense of hopelessness with which the environment might be perceived when you write:

> Those who dwell the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. Whatever the vexations or concerns of their personal lives, their thoughts can find paths that lead to inner contentment and to renewed excitement in living. Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.

And so, Rachel Carson, thank you. For opening my eyes to the wonder of nature; for the relationship I have developed with you through scholarly research; and for being so humble and quiet yet being so brave. You never once ran from the fight which you were faced with, whether it was your cancer or the responses to *Silent Spring*. You are my hero. But, above all, thank you for replacing despair with hope; for your legacy as the "nun of nature" and as a founder of the modern environmental movement; and for your delight at the wonders of the natural world. If we all saw the wonder of the environment, as you did, perhaps we would all take more time to care for it.

Thank you.

Websites linked in this text:

- https://www.eh-resources.org/podcast2011/

Websites linked in image captions:

- http://digitalmedia.fws.gov/FullRes/natdiglib/Rachel-Carson.jpg

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Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6534
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:41

Reader Response: Richard Christian

Richard Christian *is a philosopher who is currently working on problems of social justice due to climate change at the University of Manchester, United Kingdom.*

Richard Christian. June 2015.
r.p.christian@runbox.com

Against doom and gloom
To my peers: a response to some letters that counsel hope

Our sense of doom; we foresee disaster.

Outside, the wind is blowing. The trees have at last revealed their leaves; their greenness is luminescent. Spring is here. But in our thoughts of nature, a mood of foreboding prevails: gazing out over the future of life on Earth, we see disaster, a dark tide, in constant approach. An end-time is coming.

> For behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven, And all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble; And the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.'
>
> —Malachi 4:1.

Our synthetic world; science must tell us how the earth fares.

We are small and shuffling animals; we each perceive only a short span of time and a small region of space. We sniff the air, and push the soil with our feet. The consequences of our collective action are still mostly hidden from us. We move in an increasingly synthetic world, its scenery bounded by cities, and our experience mediated by screens.

The internet is a timeless, deathless realm. It is the completion of our project; it is a purely human world. It is a world composed only of our own ciphers; we see in it only ourselves, reflected infinitely. It is cleansed of the non-human. Here there is no element to oppose us, no wind nor storm to restrain us, neither root nor grain of soil, nor motion of animal. There is no decay. All time is compressed into an eternal present. And when you lift your eyes to look beyond it, you see only the embodiments of our deeds, and our detritus.

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Chapter: Reader Response: Richard Christian
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6535
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:42

If you notice the loss of a species or the decline of its population, you are unusual. We rely on science therefore to tell us how the earth fares. Our knowledge must come from the testimony of scientists. It is they who drill the cores of ice, measure the recession of glaciers, count butterflies and bats, and track the dispersion of trees.

Bad news from the scientists.

The news from the scientists is bad. They have registered our impact on the earth by declaring that we have ended the Holocene, the stable and temperate geological epoch which began 11,700 years ago with the end of last ice age and which enabled the birth of agriculture and the growth of civilization. We have entered instead the Anthropocene: it is the epoch of the domination of humankind which began with the industrial revolution at the end of the eighteenth century. Future geologists will know that a great dying and transformation occurred in our time: the traces of our action will still be visible in the strata of the earth 100 million years from now.

There are two great ecological problems: climate change and the loss of biodiversity. Carbon dioxide, exhaled as a by-product of our burning fossil fuels to power machines, is increasing in concentration in the atmosphere; by radiative forcing it traps the heat of the sun, and so warms the earth. Its concentration, which before the industrial revolution was 270 ppm (parts per million), is now over 400 ppm, and is predicted by the IPCC to reach up to 500 ppm by the end of the century. It was last that high in the Eocene epoch, around 50 million years ago, when "palms grew in the Antarctic, and crocodiles paddled in the shallow seas around England" (Kolbert, Elizabeth. *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, 171. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014). There will be a delay in the warming, so that the earth will not warm to those temperatures in the near future, but the IPCC predicts that the temperature of the earth will increase by around between two to six degrees Celsius by the end of the century. The certain consequence of this will be the suffering and deaths of many millions of people. About a third of the CO_2 we release is absorbed by the world's seas, where, dissolved in water, it forms carbonic acid. Our emissions have made the seas more acid. They have lowered the pH of the seas from 8.2 to 8.1, which is already hindering the calcification of many sea creatures, the process by which they, the barnacles and starfish, the mollusks and coral, build the shells and exoskeletons which are their homes and scaffolding. The calcifiers are very important in the ecology of the seas: their loss will do great damage to marine life. As the atmospheric store of CO_2 increases, the acidity of the oceans will increase, and their pH is predicted to drop by end of the century to 7.8. This would be very bad indeed. A similar drop in alkalinity contributed to the massive biotic collapse of the end-Permian extinction 252 million years ago, in which 96% of marine species and 70% of land species went extinct. (The acidification then was caused by CO_2 released by a very large volcanic eruption, which also caused global warming, but which in its yearly addition to the atmospheric store was more restrained than human industry.) Biodiversity is in steep decline, and the rate of extinction of species may be several hundred per day; certainly, it is many thousands of times higher than the natural background rate. Ocean acidification is of course only one cause: much diversity is being lost by the destruction of natural habitat for agriculture and mining; many species are going extinct because they cannot adapt to a warmer world or to the predation and competition of invasive species; and many species are still being hunted to extinction, most notably the rhinos, the big cats, and the large fish and mammals of the seas.

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Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6535
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:42

More bad news; the disputes of nations.

That is the report of the scientists. It does indeed look bad. There has of course been much discussion about what we the international community should do. To curb the suffering and destruction, it is certain that we must greatly reduce our emission of CO_2. But the wealth of our society depends now on the massive combustion of fossil fuels to power the machinery of production of goods; unless we substitute new sources of energy or more efficient machines, we shall hinder the production of wealth, and few people unfortunately seem willing to accept this. (I think it is not so straightforward as is often supposed to create now a world with fewer commodities but more contented people: historically a yearly loss of more than 1% of consumption of energy is associated only with recession and upheaval. The collapse of the Soviet Union registered a yearly loss of just 5%. We are like a man running downhill, who must keep running faster to avoid falling down.) Emissions however must be constrained, internationally and by law. There is otherwise no way to ensure that a reduction in one place (for instance by the increase in efficiency of burning, or the reversion of some people to simple lives) is not wiped out by an increase in another (for instance by an increase in the production of goods). But again unfortunately efforts to unify the international community have so far failed, and it is not clear what could be done differently. Certainly, some nations have no desire to set limits on their emissions and have with more or less subtlety obstructed all attempts to do so.

Moral philosopher Prof. John Broome wrote last year for the *London Review of Books* about his experience as a lead author on Working Group III of the IPCC. With restraint and faint irony he describes the farcical compilation of the Summary for Policy Makers. It is an enlightening document , and I urge you to read it.

A possible consolation; the hope of redemptive change.

Things look bad. Our tendency is towards gloom. Should it be so? I want to think about reasons for consolation. Or at, least, I will think about reasons to dispel your sense of doom and gloom.

Firstly, things are not so bad as they are sometimes said to be. The popular environmental writer Derek Jensen often says that the earth is dying, and that the collapse of civilization is imminent. This is not true. It is an exaggeration intended to give support to his counsel that we destroy all industry now and become hunter-gatherers again. The earth however is not dying: it will certainly survive this, the latest of several biotic crises in its history. It is hard to know whether civilization will collapse in the foreseeable future. The IPCC at least lists this outcome as improbable and indeed predicts that, despite climate change, world economic growth will continue.

One response to the crisis is to say that we can change, indeed dramatically, that the past should be no guide to the future, and that in their experiments with new forms of life, some people have prefigured this change. We can make a new world in which we live much simpler lives; our motion and desire for goods will be constrained. By our restraint we shall permit a resurgence of the earth and return to a life of harmony with it. This thought is standardly combined with other parts of humanism: our lives will be simpler, but they will be happier. We shall

travel less, or hardly at all, but we shall have a sense of belonging, and of authenticity in our culture. **We shall work again with our hands; but this will feel rewarding. In throwing off the false ideas that have corrupted us and caused us to dominate nature, we shall throw off other forms of domination too: capitalist will no longer dominate worker, men will no longer dominate women, one race will no longer dominate another.** In its most refined form, we are able now to move towards a world free of all domination, and the crisis of the earth has in a sense opened this opportunity for us. In its most extreme form perhaps it is rendered in the manifesto of Deep Green Resistance, which envisages a wave of left-wing militias, disciplined in the principles of human rights, passing over the industrial world, demolishing its dams, power stations and factories, and liberating humankind back into pre-agricultural society.

Redemption denied; the consolation of anti-humanism.

These are green ideas, but they are also humanist. They show, I think, the difficulty we have when we speak of the earth of not speaking of ourselves. Peering into its crisis we divine the resolution of our own frustrations. These visions stand in a long tradition of religious eschatology, of the description of an end-time, when human life will move into a new and final phase which will differ from all that has come before it.

> And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.
>
> —Revelation 21:4.

They inherit the humanist idea of self-transformation, itself an inheritance of Christianity: that we might rise in unity and defeat those who oppose us and throw dust in our eyes. It is the myth of Babel in reverse: that our discord is the consequence of some influence external to us; shaking it off we will take command of our destiny, be united in our vision of the good, and act in concordance.

To my mind, these ideas do much harm: it is the assumption of humanism that is the source of much of our gloom. Humanism has elevated the human animal into something that it cannot be. When we consider this crisis we see then the defeat of the myths we tell of ourselves. By attempting to take a naturalistic view of our species we might see our problems in a better light. If we accept that a species cannot control its own destiny, and that we shall never make a perfect world, we might then take a more accurate view of what is possible. We shall feel less gloomy. How much in the end can we really control? We live in a world more of our making than our choosing.

Our earliest ancestor, *Homo erectus*, the first bipedal ape, arose in Africa around 2 million years ago. Its success was due its strong throwing arm, its omnivorous diet, its intelligence in making weapons and other tools, and its ability to cooperate. Radiating from Africa around 120,000 years ago, one of its descendent species, *Homo sapiens*, came to dominate all continents. Wherever it went it hunted to extinction most large animal species. A collapse of megafauna is the best indicator in the geological record of the arrival of humans. In the Americas 70-

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Chapter: Reader Response: Richard Christian
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6535
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:42

80% of large vertebrates disappeared as humans migrated south after crossing the Bering Strait. Before the first humans arrived 50,000 years ago, Australia was a tropical rainforest, populated by megafauna most abundant and strange. There were diprotodons, rhinoceros wombats, and the 3-meter-tall short-faced kangaroo. By hunting all the large herbivores to extinction, humans caused the amassing of a great excess of vegetation, which provided fuel for the massive fires that destroyed the rainforests. What remained was the relatively barren landscape populated by dry-adapted plants now familiar to us. The megafauna associated with Africa—lion, rhino, elephant—once populated most of the Earth's dry land. Examples have survived in Africa only because their ancestors co-evolved with and so learned to evade humans. There was no golden age: ecological damage has always accompanied the spread of our species. (Interestingly, this is not true of *Homo neanderthalensis*, a related biped and co-descendent of *Homo erectus*, which lived in Europe for 100,000 years in balance with other vertebrates, but which after some interbreeding with *Homo sapiens* was made extinct, presumably by its competition. There is something unique to humans in their vigor of killing and radiation.) By their removal of prey and competitor, and their lack of restraining predator, humans are in their reach beyond Africa characteristic of an invasive species.

You are restless and dissatisfied. Every desire satisfied creates a new dissatisfaction. Every striven-for good turns to vapor in your hands. But it is the madness of humanity that you share in: it is the madness that drove men and women constantly onward, across the barren desert and over the polar ice and out to certain death, their rude ships smashed endlessly by violent seas against rocks, in search of new land.

> If only men, even as they clearly feel a weight in their mind, which wears them out with its heaviness, could learn too from what causes that comes to be, and whence so great a mass, as it were, of ill lies upon their breast, they would not pass their lives, as now for the most part we see them; knowing not each one of them what he wants, and longing ever for change of place, as though he could thus lay aside the burden. The man who is tired of staying at home, often goes out abroad from his great mansion, and of a sudden returns again, for indeed abroad he feels no better. He races to his country home, furiously driving his ponies, as though he were hurrying to bring help to a burning house; he yawns at once, when he has set foot on the threshold of the villa, or sinks into a heavy sleep and seeks forgetfulness, or even in hot haste makes for town, eager to be back. In this way each man struggles to escape himself: yet, despite his will he clings to the self, which, we may be sure, in fact he cannot shun, and hates himself, because in his sickness he knows not the cause of his malady; [...]
>
> —Titus Lucretius Carus, On the Nature of Things , trans. Cyril Bailey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), 141-42.

Humanity is a mass of contention, and its essence is dispute. Seven billion people are locked in diverse and ancient conflicts; men meet in battle and destroy themselves for religious dreams. This is our history; why think that it will change? Lost at sea, in the darkness of night, storms blast us, and waves throw us. On this ship of fools, what meaning has any hope that she will steer right onward? Five men grapple for the rudder, and ten who

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Chapter: Reader Response: Richard Christian
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6535
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ought to make fast the sail are busy inspecting the stitching. Midshipmen, asleep in the hold, are lost in dreams of unity, or theorise future principles of navigation. The captain is a god that never was. Why think that we could command this vessel any better than the rats and cats that ship with us? In this latest convulsion of the Earth and its collapsing biodiversity, they share our fate; but they are at least spared the twin folly of hope and despair. Paragon of animals, we shall perhaps bring to a close the Eremozoic (term coined by E.O. Wilson), and end the reign of mammals.

For the lover of the Earth—I will call her a gaiaphile—there is reason for sorrow. Much beauty will be lost forever, and as climate change proceeds, the suffering of human and animal will increase. But there is no reason for doom and gloom. Those fears are reserved for the humanists, the lost children of Christianity: the anarchists, the utopians, and the pan-liberationists. On this view there is no reason for despair because there was never any reason for hope. **Hope and despair are twins in the mythology of humanity: they are bound together with the belief that by the extension of reason and correct principles of morality, we shall cleanse our eyes and hands of evil, shall shake off the prejudice of our religion, and rise up together in unity, advancing towards a better age, cleansed of oppression, and in harmony with the Earth. It is this hope that is the source of our gloom.**

A second consolation; the promise of resistance and rewilding.

Perhaps I have overstepped myself. I have tried in a slightly poetic way to show that there might be some consolation in taking a view of human life sub specie terrae. I do not however wish to counsel conservatism and resignation, for there is much that we can do. We should not dream of an age of peace when all wars have ceased: human beings are too violent and contentious for that. But with the instruments of law and arbitration we can do much to discharge their aggression. We can work for peace. Likewise, **once we shake off the dreams of humanism, we shall think more effectively about what we can do for the earth.** We can shore up the wild, barricade the habitats of animal and plant, and parry the destructive hand of man. We can liberate disused land for new regions of wilderness. It is to act in the spirit of resistance and the hope of rewilding. By facing ourselves more honestly, we might better hope to restrain our damage. **By resisting the dominion of man, we shall give new release to the force of life.** This then is my second source of consolation: that there is much that can be done.

In the northern reaches of the occupied territory called "British Columbia," the Unist'ot'en clan of the Wet'suwet'en nation have resettled their traditional land. Before the clearances for logging and mining by the Canadian government they had lived there, hunting, fishing, and gathering, since time immemorial. By a fortunate accident of history the whole of British Columbia is land still officially unceded to the crown. It belongs by legal right to its indigenous peoples. The Unist'ot'en reoccupied their land to block the construction of new pipelines by the oil corporation Kinder Morgan. The pipelines are planned to convey oil from the tar sands of Alberta to Kitimat, a port in the Great Bear rainforest on the West coast of BC. The Unist'ot'en say that the new pipelines will triple the rate of extraction of oil, that the massive tankers that will file through the estuaries of the Great Bear will wreck that ecosystem, and that the pipelines themselves will poison by leakages

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Chapter: Reader Response: Richard Christian
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6535
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:42

the lands and waters of their territory. Blockading the dirt road that enters their camp with trucks, they now refuse access to anyone associated with the oil industry. Surveyors from Kinder Morgan who attempted to enter by helicopter were chased down and forced to leave. They were issued with an eagle feather—symbol of a final warning for trespass—and their equipment, confiscated by the Unist'ot'en, is still held at camp. I stayed with them in December 2014 while traveling through the Yukon, Alaska and British Columbia. Sharing in meals of beaver tail and moose nose, I and other volunteers helped shore up their supplies as they kept watch through the extreme cold of winter. They are heroes; we should praise them.

At that time I had come from Vancouver, where in a similar act of resistance, the Coast Salish First Nations had attempted to stop TransMountain corporation from running a second pipeline through Burnaby Mountain, which rises at the eastern border of the city. TransMountain had won an injunction against protestors who had obstructed their work, and on the day of its coming into force, Coast Salish elders guarding a sacred fire were cleared by riot police to make way for company surveyors. These uprisings are part of a larger movement of indigenous peoples in Canada called "Idle No More." They show a new spirit of resistance.

Tom Lovejoy is a US biologist who coined the term "biological diversity." Working for the WWF he invented debt-for-nature swaps, in which foreign debt of developing nations is forgiven in exchange for the protection of wilderness. By his efforts around half of the Amazonian rainforest is under some kind of legal protection. His progress is due to his pragmatic and imaginative use of existing institutions, and seems to me to show a path forward. Around 4.5% of the land area of the USA is shielded from industry in "Wilderness Protection Areas." There is good in the ecumenical spirit of groups like EarthFirst! who have pressed for their expansion into de facto wilderness, and so fought for legal protection by a state they believe to be unjust.

George Monbiot has written well recently on rewilding. His book *Feral* gives new hope. It shows how quickly wilderness can recover when human influence recedes. As logging and farming decline in the USA, trees are returning quickly to much of the land that was formally forested. Farming is declining in economic importance in Europe, and 30 million hectares of arable land might be abandoned by 2030. This is land that that could be returned to the wild. Through the planting of native trees and reintroduction of lost species we can greatly accelerate the recovery of local biodiversity. Fauna like wolves, rhinos, and elephants can, by an effect called trophic cascade, transform a landscape and reopen it to other lost species. Predators can return a landscape to a condition in which their prey flourishes. After centuries of persecution, wolves are now returning to continental Europe. Their populations are growing rapidly in France, Germany, Spain, Poland, and Italy. The population of bears in Europe has doubled in the past 40 years to 25,000. In the mountains of Switzerland and Slovenia and in the Bohemian forest of the Czech Republic, the European lynx, once on the edge of extinction, is thriving and seeking out new habitats. The European bison, extinct in the wild at the end of WWI, was reintroduced in 1952 into the Bialowieza forest and now roams again through western Poland. These species are being assisted by some members of our own, who, united in groups like Trees For Life, Rewilding Europe, and Pan Parks Foundation, propagate trees and extend the native forests, replace lost species and extirpate the invasive. The recovery of biodiversity in degraded land can proceed exponentially.

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Chapter: Reader Response: Richard Christian
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6535
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New myths for our time.

These examples give hope, and are consistent with a modest view of human power. If we shake off the confusion of utopian dreams and take a sober view of the human animal we might still accept the consolation of effective action.

But **perhaps, being human, we cannot live without myth**. There is a myth latent in anti-humanist thought which might be useful to us. An age of peace will return with our death to the Earth, in which the pain of consciousness will be extinguished and the diversity of life restored. Like Noah, builder of ships, we the righteous prophets of Earthly life must gather in our hands its seed, various and strange, and transmit it at a time that will succeed, when "the windows of heaven are stopped, and the rain from heaven restrained" (Genesis 8:2).

Paragon of animals, we shall perhaps bring to a close the Mesozoic and end the reign of mammals. Some other kingdom, phylum, or species will gain in ascendency. New forms of life, insect, perhaps, or piscan, most varied and strange, inconceivable to us, will repopulate and transform the Earth. Let us bury our faith in the regenerative power of the Earth. Nature, abundant and gay, so exultant in her power, so exuberant in her creativity, will thrive. The pageant of life will go on.

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Chapter: Reader Response: Richard Christian
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6535
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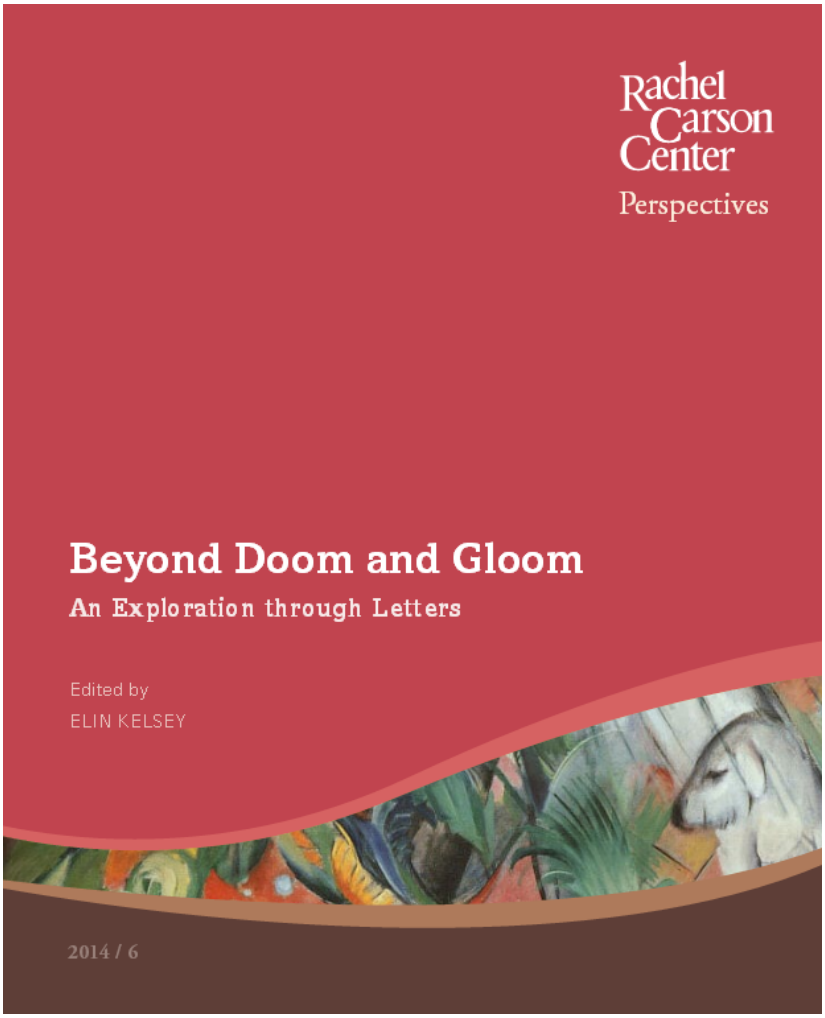

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Contents

Introduction

Kelsey, Elin. "Beyond 'Doom and Gloom'. Letters from the Rachel Carson Center." Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2016, no. 1. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/6524.
Chapter: RCC Perspectives
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6538
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:43

Between People

Crossing Space

Across Generations

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Chapter: RCC Perspectives
Source URL: http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/6538
PDF created on: 20 May 2021 14:01:43

Author

Elin Kelsey, the author of the virtual exhibition, on her porch

My work intersects conservation biology, environmental communications, and creative non-fiction. I focus on the prevalence of "doom and gloom" environmental narratives; the hopelessness, shame and other emotional issues that arise from them; and their impact on conservation scientists, environmental communicators, children, and the broader quest for public engagement with environmental issues.

I am particularly interested in the capacity for community and ecological resilience that emerges through social networks—human, and other-than-human. While human social networks crowd-source humanitarian responses to crises, fungal networks that trees use to communicate, support faster recovery of forests following disasters. Elephants with stronger social networks have higher breeding successes. Social networks between humpback whales drive humpback population recoveries in the north Pacific, even as the marine environments in which they live grow noisier and more impacted by pollution, shipping and overfishing. For a richer exploration of these themes, please watch this video of a lunchtime colloquium I delivered at the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society.

Recognition of the emotional impact of fear-based environmental narratives, and their implications for engagement with conservation, biodiversity and sustainability initiatives is gathering momentum in both academic and popular contexts. In May 2014, Elin Kelsey built upon the interest in hope generated through the RCC walking colloquium, by co-hosting a 48-hour workshop in London, England with a small group of conservation biologists, young journalists, environmentalists and designers. Together, they launched an #OceanOptimism twitter hashtag and encouraged others to share hopeful, marine conservation successes. On World Oceans Day (8 June 2014) the tweets came in thick and fast, going viral to reach over 30 million users in its first year. More than 58 million users were using the #OceanOptimism by the time this virtual exhibit opened in March 2016. See more at www.elinkelseyandcompany.com .

Websites linked in this text:

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- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9LOfvsDmzLc
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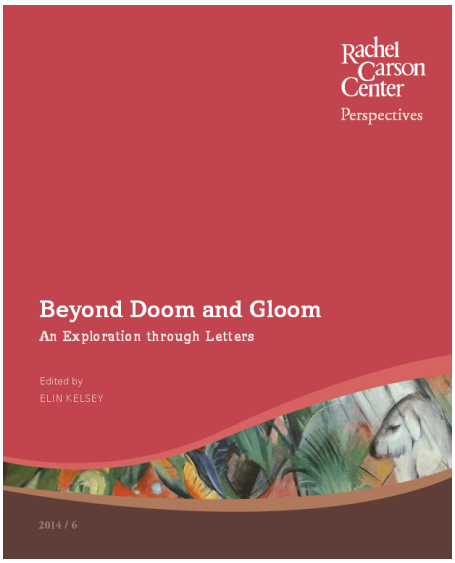

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