

Eco-Justice Notes

The E-mail Commentary from Eco-Justice Ministries

Climate Fear and Anxiety

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We live in scary times.

My stress levels jumped this morning when I read this extended newspaper headline: "Record heat in the Arctic could cause the melting of major glaciers in Greenland, the thawing of carbon-rich permafrost and the worsening of wildfires in Alaska." (The Denver Post story was an excerpt from [a more extensive article in the Washington Post](#).)

That's not a vague prediction about the far future. The article displayed a prominent temperature map of the world, with last month's data, that was dominated by dark red blotches of high readings. The caption read: "Not only was January the hottest ever, the new temperature was the biggest increase over the previous record in more than a century of records".

How's *your* emotional temperature now?

Dealing with those emotions is an essential part of an effective climate strategy. And the emotional piece may be one that can be addressed especially well in faith communities.

The challenge of these emotions is more complicated than I'd first imagined. (That happens to me a lot!) Today, I'll toss out some of my thoughts about climate fears, and make a special point of inviting your feedback. What is your experience? How do you define the terms? What do you think can be done constructively?

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I was part of a panel discussion recently exploring some of the "spiritual and psychological implications" of the climate calamity. The first speaker ran through a disturbing set of slides showing rising temperatures and melting ice and other trends identified by climate scientists.

That was followed by a comment about that data from someone in the audience -- a well-informed and highly-committed leader in Colorado's environmental community. Jeff referred to the a disconnect between human biology and this crisis. We're hard-wired to deal with immediate dangers, with [a fight-flight-freeze response](#). But climate is a gradual, generational crisis, and our fear responses don't work in the long term.

I'd heard that before, and you probably have, too. There's certainly some truth behind that observation about the difference between immediate and extended responses. Jeff's words, though, led me to two insights which may be very important.

1) Jeff's list of climate fears may be far too small. The worry about deadly summer heat waves, extreme weather events, rising seas, and such does tend to look into the future, and have a certain level of abstraction. These are not the sort of dangers that trigger rapid action from the "lizard brain" of our fear responses.

But as I listen to -- and participate in -- debates about climate policies, many other fears are evoked, and some of them are far more immediate.

Twice last summer, I wrote about conflicts in the Rocky Mountain West between initiatives to cut carbon emissions, and jobs in fossil fuel industries ([here](#) and [here](#)). For the miners and power plant workers who spoke at a hearing on US coal policy last August, the issues are immediate and personal. Their testimony spoke of lost jobs, financial crisis, and shuttered communities. Their fear is not pointed out into the

distant future, or concerned with broad statistical impacts. A court case being decided at the time could have shut down big mines within weeks.

On the other side of the conflict, the call to "leave it in the ground" is being given powerful momentum by people who are confronted with oil and gas drilling operations taking place in their own communities. Wells are drilled, fracked, and operated next door to homes and schools. Noise and dangerous fumes are an everyday threat.

As our society tries to deal with the accelerating reality of climate chaos, there are members of our community who are caught up in the immediate, short-term, visceral forms of fear responses. Flight from that fear is hard. Some, when faced with those close at hand threats, do freeze up, and drop into an emotional and functional paralysis. And the folks that I encounter are definitely in fight mode. At hearings on public policy, and on the streets in protest events, the danger that they face evokes a biological response that is ready to take on the foes.

Fear, in the most clinical sense, is a driving factor in the developing debate about how to formulate responsible climate actions that reduce emissions. The easily-triggered fight response isn't a very helpful addition to complicated discussions on economic and environmental policies. There's a difficult challenge in both honoring the fear, and in creating settings for debate and planning where the bio-physical responses of fight and freeze are toned down.

2) I have learned, while exploring this week's topic, that our language about climate stress is often sloppy. The words "fear" and "anxiety" are often used interchangeably, even in the literature and practice of psychology. But, writes Mary Lamia, [they are actually quite different](#). She notes that fears of the unknown, fear of death and catastrophic fear (like the climate crisis) are actually experienced as the emotion of anxiety.

Fear, she affirms, brings on the fight, flight or freeze responses. "In contrast to fear, anxiety is a general state of distress that is longer lasting than fear and usually is triggered by something that is not specific, even though it produces physiological arousal, such as nervousness and apprehension."

Anxiety is an unpleasant emotion, and it does take a physical toll. Anxiety, though, allows a greater range of response. Anxiety may lead toward heightened levels of awareness and alertness, without avoiding the situation. Being anxious, being intensely concerned about real dangers, is a motivator that can push us toward action that is appropriate in the face of the looming climate crisis.

Anxiety can lead us toward a highly energized search for ways of reducing the danger, and it can motivate us to be deeply involved in that long-term work. We're not in a momentary fight for survival, and we're not fleeing or freezing from dangers that we can't fight. Anxiety lets us feel the reality and the urgency of the threats around us, and it can enable us to work long and hard for change. Climate anxiety -- not fear -- can keep us engaged in this generational work.

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We live in scary times. The dangers are real. As we seek -- individually and as a society -- to address those dangers, it is helpful to recognize the differences between fear and anxiety.

Whether the setting is a professional giving pastoral care, or a public meeting dealing with controversial policies, fear and anxiety are different responses to danger. I'm realizing the importance of being careful and respectful in the presence of real fear. And I'm starting to appreciate the value of anxiety as a more thoughtful and longer-lasting motivator.

[Let me know](#) -- how does this strike you? Do these distinctions help you to understand your own feelings, and the dynamics of your community? How can fear and anxiety be acknowledged most constructively as we seek healing and justice in the presence of climate change?

Shalom!

Rev. Peter Sawtell

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