

# Eye of the Storm

Facing climate and social chaos  
with calm and courage

Terry LePage

Copyright © 2023 by Terry LePage

All rights reserved. No part of this book, except for brief review, may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means— electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the permission of the author. Permission will probably be granted if you ask; contact [terry@opendoorcommunication.org](mailto:terry@opendoorcommunication.org).

Published by Open Door Communication  
[Opendoorcommunication.org](http://opendoorcommunication.org)

Cover design by Aleksandar N. Blowkowsky. Cover photo © Dmitri Vetsikas.  
“Breathing Under Water” by Carol Bialock, from *Coral Castles*, © 2019. Used by permission.

“What Love Looks Like” by Terry Tempest Williams, *Orion*, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/what-love-looks-like>. Excerpt used by permission.

The publisher has made every effort to assure that website URLs referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been overlooked, the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

#### Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: LePage, Terry

Title: Eye of the storm : facing climate and social chaos with calm and courage / Terry LePage.

Description: Irvine, CA: Open Door Communication, 2023.

Identifiers: ISBN 979-8-9882257-1-3 (trade paperback) | ISBN 979-8-9882257-0-6 (ebook) | ISBN 979-8-9882257-2-0 (KDP paperback)

Subjects: BISAC: SCIENCE / Global Warming & Climate Change | SOCIAL SCIENCE / Activism & Social Justice | SELF-HELP / Stress Management

*To my friends and fellow travelers  
in the Deep Adaptation Forum*

## CONTENTS

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <i>Preface</i> .....                                 | ix  |
| Read this first: Is this book for you? .....         | 1   |
| 1. Facing the storm .....                            | 7   |
| 2. Stories shape us.....                             | 27  |
| 3. Stories for courage in dark times.....            | 57  |
| 4. Practical emotional support .....                 | 79  |
| 5. Befriending grief.....                            | 107 |
| 6. Belonging and reverence.....                      | 129 |
| 7. Resigning from the rat race.....                  | 149 |
| 8. Connection and compassion.....                    | 165 |
| 9. Letting go.....                                   | 189 |
| 10. No more flying solo.....                         | 217 |
| 11. Young people and those who care about them ..... | 235 |
| 12. Planting seeds.....                              | 253 |
| 13. In the meantime .....                            | 269 |
| 14. Endings are beginnings.....                      | 285 |
| <i>Annotated bibliography</i> .....                  | 291 |
| <i>Notes</i> .....                                   | 298 |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> .....                         | 310 |
| <i>Beyond this book</i> .....                        | 314 |

## PREFACE

In the past three years, I have supported hundreds of people who are facing or anticipating great loss from climate chaos, ecological devastation, and social upheaval. I have met them in my local community and in an international online group called the Deep Adaptation Forum, whose purpose is *embodying and enabling loving responses to our predicament*. I have witnessed their fear, their grief and despair, and their struggle to make sense of the strange new world unfolding around us. Species and habitats are disappearing before our eyes. Climate change, it turns out, means cataclysmic floods, epic fires, unprecedented heat waves and droughts, and other life-changing disruptions. Meanwhile, many governments and social systems seem to be crumbling before our eyes.

I have observed what helps people cope and what empowers them to take constructive action. I am inspired by so many people whose response to the breakdowns we face is to serve others, human and nonhuman. I participate in activist networks in my area but I don't expect to save much. Instead, I aim to help human and nonhuman communities live well, to proclaim the value and dignity of that which may be lost, or to act simply because it seems the right thing to do. I offer this book as a companion and guide to help you cope and respond to our predicament with compassion, creativity, and courage. Then you will find your particular ways of service and action.

I have worked as a research chemist, so I have some understanding of the scientific evidence around the climate crisis and the limitations of predictive models. I have been privileged to support people at the end of life and their families, and to train people in Nonviolent Communication as taught by Marshall Rosenberg. I bring my experience as a transitional minister in liberal Christian churches to this

book. In times of transition, I have been the eye of the storm, the nonanxious presence who invites others into a space of calm reflection on how to put their values into practice despite an uncertain future. I know the power of framing our experiences through stories that express our values.

I wish for you, reader, to hold your ground amid fear and trouble, make the best choices you can with what you have, and make meaning and joy, whatever the state of the world. By doing this, you can be a refuge for others to shelter from chaos. You can be the eye of the storm.

*Read this first: Is this book for you?*

In 2018, I first began to take in the likelihood of severe and irreversible climate disruption in the next decade or two. At that time, almost all scientists and pundits were saying, “We can reverse climate change.” Even now, researchers delivering the most dire predictions are expected to finish their horrific lists with an appeal to reverse the trend: “It’s not too late.” I find this stance dishonest. Although the time courses are uncertain, there is no more time to prevent massive losses of vast swathes of life on the planet, loss of global industrial consumer society, and loss of many human lives and cultures. I am watching the losses begin to unfold now. If you acknowledge this reality, this book is for you. If you do not know how to face this reality, this book may be for you. If you do not want to face this reality, this book is not for you.

Maybe you have already witnessed a beloved forest, farm, or river mined or laid waste for human gain, or seen a long-championed human or nonhuman rights cause fall to greed, scapegoating, or power plays. Maybe you grew up watching those in power over you extracting freedom and sustenance away from you and your community. If so, you have experienced one of the many kinds of collapses that have always been happening around the world. You already have valuable experience in knowing how to weather some form of collapse. I am sorry you have that hard-won experience. Know that you are not alone. The choking of ecosystems and the crushing of human rights and traditional cultures are often intertwined. Be warned: you may only be aware of a small part of what I believe is coming. Still, I hope you will join in conversations like the one in this book. Others may learn from your experience.

You may be contemplating possible futures, imagining the unimaginable, and it feels like looking over the edge of a cliff. That unmoored feeling comes in part from the loss of the stories we have

told ourselves, stories about how the world works and our place in it. Now you see those stories for the lies they are, and you may be in existential free fall. Worldviews fall hard. You need a new story. Take your time to find one worth living by. Perhaps you will find a story or two to guide you in Chapter Three, Stories for courage in dark times. And please take time to study Chapter Four, Practical emotional support.

We do stand before a kind of cliff. It marks the end of what people like me in the industrialized world know and what we have relied on to live; things like somewhat predictable weather, birds in the trees, governments that more or less function, forested mountains, living reefs, the ocean off the streets, groceries on the shelf, and water in the tap. If you suspect that you will see the end of some of those things, you have glimpsed the cliff as we hurtle toward it. Recognize, though, that people are already making a life at the base of this cliff, and some have done so for generations. Where I live in California, some of those people are African Americans and Mexican Americans. The rest of us owe people who have lived this struggle deep respect, and we have much to learn from them.

If you see the cliff and feel overwhelmed, if you want to contribute but do not believe you can bear the emotional load, be kind to yourself. Do not force yourself to read more than you are ready to read. No “saving the world” is on offer here, so you are free of that burden.

If you feel that you are to blame for what is happening, this book may support you in shifting that view.<sup>1</sup> Industrial consumer society set up our Earth home for destruction, and those of us who grew up in this system are trapped in it; most of us do not know how to survive without it.

If you have had to flee your home to escape fire or flood, or were driven from home by violence or financial ruin, or have been living in fear or oppression because of your identity as a person of color, immigrant, or gender or sexual minority, you may already have stepped over the edge of that metaphorical cliff.<sup>2</sup> In this book, I’ll go with you in spirit. I’ll share a few stories like yours, mourn with you,



and speak up for you. I can't bring you to safety. I can witness and affirm your worth, humanity, and creativity as you improvise to survive and live your values. I hope this book is of use to you. If you are already too familiar with the kinds of peril that await the rest of us, perhaps you can give this book, or portions of it, to the people in your life who do not yet understand your experience.

Maybe you refuse to acknowledge that any collapse is unfolding. I don't blame you. Why give up hope that sufficient numbers of world governments and their citizens will start acting responsibly, that limits and tipping points of our Earth home have not been exceeded, that technology will save us, and that life as we know it can continue despite the destruction of the global household that makes it possible? I don't blame you, but I can't join you. And this book is not for you.



The ideas and tools in this book are first for inner adaptation, to aid you in adopting a worldview and some practices that will allow you to face disruption and hardship with calm and courage. With such a base, you can then choose the outer adaptation work to which you feel drawn or called. This book explores only a few of those choices and emphasizes one: with what you learn from your own experience facing unfolding crises, you can be the eye of the storm, the calm center, for others. We will need as much calm as we can muster to weather the coming storms with wisdom, compassion, and the least possible harm.

We are all in the same storm, but not all in the same boat. Throughout the book, I frequently use the term "we." From the context, it should be clear whether I am referring to all of humanity, to people who are facing our predicament, or to people who are living in or benefiting from industrial consumer society. I write from the perspective of a wealthy, university-educated, white woman in the U.S. with liberal views, and with some sense of the invisible knapsack of privileges I carry.<sup>3</sup>

You will find the perspectives of dozens of people in my local community and the Deep Adaptation Forum<sup>4</sup> international commu-

nity. Most of these sections are excerpts of my interviews with them, or based on those interviews. Their voices provide a wider range of experience than I could give alone. I am deeply grateful to them for sharing their stories.

Throughout the book, you will find quotes of voices other than the author's that look like this. This different style is used to aid the reader in recognizing long quotes and lists of quotes. Quotes may be from a person who was interviewed by the author or a comment on the Deep Adaptation private Facebook group. In that case, the words you see may be excerpted from the full quote. Brackets [like this] contain comments from the author.

This book touches on a wide variety of subjects without exploring them fully. Refer to the bibliography at the end of the book for more depth on some of those topics. If you are looking for a detailed guide to practical political action, community organizing for mutual aid, regenerative agriculture, ecosystem restoration, or other specific responses to our predicament, you will have to look elsewhere.

You will find a variety of writing styles in this book: essays, quotes, perspectives from many voices, poems, lists, and stories. If you are not interested in poetry, or technical stuff, or mental health tools, just skip those parts. You can read this book in order. You can skim or skip sections. Or you can consult the Table of Contents and choose a chapter, or even a section within a chapter, that appeals to you now, and a different part at another time. In this book, you will find dozens of ideas and suggestions. They are resources for you to choose or let pass. I hope some of them will support your own loving responses to our predicament.

- *Chapter one: Facing the storm*  
What we face, and the emotional impact of realizing what we face, in prose, poem, and story.
- *Chapter two: Stories shape us*  
Stories that don't work, and stories that may work, to frame our situation.

- *Chapter three: Stories for courage in dark times*  
Three stories to describe our predicament. They do not have happy endings. They have courageous endings.
- *Chapter four: Practical emotional support*  
Your toolbox for dealing with difficult emotions.
- *Chapter five: Befriending grief*  
Learning the skill of grieving to honor love and loss of all kinds.
- *Chapter six: Belonging and reverence*  
Finding meaning and wonder in relationships and in daily living.
- *Chapter seven: Resigning from the rat race*  
Slowing down and opting out of industrial consumer busyness and status.
- *Chapter eight: Connection and compassion*  
Tools for practicing compassion when it matters most.
- *Chapter nine: Letting go*  
Ways people are letting go of industrial consumer society and having fun doing it.
- *Chapter ten: No more flying solo*  
Ways people are building relationships for mutual support.
- *Chapter eleven: Young people and those who care about them*  
How we might be of service to those who inherit this mess.
- *Chapter twelve: Planting seeds*  
Gardening as activism and relationship.
- *Chapter thirteen: In the meantime*  
Ways people are living their values now.
- *Chapter fourteen: Endings are beginnings.*

Anxiety is contagious. Calm is contagious. And courage is contagious. Using the tools in this book can help you to find calm, purpose, and even joy in hard times. And you can share these things with others. You can be the eye of the storm.

Now, let us step into the storm together.

CHAPTER ONE

Facing the storm

This chapter introduces the predicament we face. It is more than a problem. Problems invite solutions. A predicament has been defined as “a difficult, perplexing, or trying situation from which there is no clear or easy way out.” The chapter is made up of short sections on the following topics:

*Sighting the storm.* My dawning awareness of the depth of our predicament.

*Not saving the world.* The solace that comes from releasing ideas of fixing the unfixable. It sounds like giving up, but it's not.

*Perspective: It's really that bad, and I am not alone.* Kat's realization of the depth of our predicament and her discovery of a community that shares her awareness.

*A healthy form of avoidance.* A warning against listening to pundits who predict we will all be dead or nomadic shortly.

*Perspective: Getting real.* A list from Karen Perry of what we can still do after we envision a future of catastrophe.

*Don't do this alone.* My experience finding like-minded people and a plea to find yours.

*Many voices: Living in two worlds.* People share how they navigate living in the world of industrial consumer society's “business as usual” while holding an awareness of our predicament.

## Breathing Under Water

*I built my house by the sea.  
Not on the sands, mind you;  
not on the shifting sand.  
And I built it of rock.  
A strong house  
by a strong sea.  
And we got well acquainted, the sea and I.  
Good neighbors.  
Not that we spoke much.  
We met in silences.  
Respectful, keeping our distance,  
but looking our thoughts across the fence of sand.  
Always, the fence of sand our barrier,  
always, the sand between.  
And then one day,  
– and I still don't know how it happened –  
the sea came.  
Without warning.  
Without welcome, even  
Not sudden and swift, but a shifting across the sand like wine,  
less like the flow of water than the flow of blood.  
Slow, but coming.  
Slow, but flowing like an open wound.  
And I thought of flight and I thought of drowning and I thought of  
death.  
And while I thought the sea crept higher, till it reached my door.  
And I knew, then, there was neither flight, nor death, nor drowning.  
That when the sea comes calling, you stop being neighbors,  
Well acquainted, friendly-at-a-distance neighbors,  
And you give your house for a coral castle,  
And you learn to breathe underwater.*

– Carol Bialock<sup>5</sup>

## *Sighting the storm*

I was in a cafe in San Luis Obispo, eating breakfast with my husband Scott, in the summer of 2018. We had driven on spectacular Highway 1 down the central coast of California, returning to Southern California from a visit to family in the San Francisco Bay Area. This two-lane highway winds precariously along the rocky shore on fragile sandstone cliffs. Highway 1 at Big Sur has been washed out repeatedly and was unusable recently for more than a year. Rockfalls and sections of one-lane road are routine.

While sipping our coffee, we were scrolling through news and social media feeds on our phones, as is our habit. I stumbled across a paper, self-published weeks before, by University of Cumbria Professor of Sustainability Jem Bendell, entitled "Deep Adaptation."<sup>6</sup> Over a tiny crumb-filled table, my world swayed. Puzzle pieces I had been collecting and filing away tumbled into place, forming a scene out of nightmare. Climate change was not some evil looming on the distant horizon. It was picking up speed, possibly about to upend civil society, and had already disrupted one thoughtful man's life. Strong coffee was not the cause of my shivers.

When I felt present in my body again, I was astonished that I had taken so long to realize what Bendell had written so bluntly. I had known about greenhouse gases since high school in 1977. I had been hoping Peak Oil, the decline of world petroleum production as reserves become harder to extract, would limit human carbon dioxide output to within livable ranges. I had foreseen the long game: at some point, I believed in the next couple hundred years, most of the ice on Greenland and possibly on Antarctica as well will melt or slip into the sea, some of it quickly. Industrial consumer society won't survive a roughly 215-foot sea level rise (66 meters). I fancied myself a far-seer. But it's one thing to see that on some far-off day, all our coastal cities and ports will be no more, and my home at 260 feet above sea level (80 meters) will be on a blocks-long island above an inundated city.



It's another thing to picture the destruction of cities in one's own lifetime. As Bendell's paper clearly spelled out, most of us have strong cognitive protections against acknowledging the likelihood of this reality. His paper removed those protections from me.

I returned to work as the transitional pastor of a small church. Those people loved to hear me proclaim the sacredness of Earth and our duty to care for her. They were not ready to hear about the end of the world. I never said that, exactly. I just kept going to dark places in spite of my attempts to moderate my preaching. Repeatedly, I cried in the pulpit. I felt the irony: for twenty years I had been preaching against Christian end-of-the-world thinking and the unsound theology of "rapture." (It's still unsound. God will not teleport anyone out of our predicament.)

If we were facing only the depletion of Earth's resources, such as oil, fertile soil, water, ocean fisheries, and pollinators, we might experience a slow erosion of industrial consumer society. We might have enough time and farm-friendly weather for sections of humanity to (re)learn a more Earth-respecting way of living. Instead, due to the baked-in heating of the planet, we are experiencing ever-increasing regional catastrophes across the globe from storms, fires, floods, droughts, crop failures, and heat waves. A barrage of local, regional, and specific collapses on an uncertain time frame against a background of more general decline seems to be in store, rather than one grand collapse. As these disasters keep multiplying, we will deplete the materials, supply chains, and goodwill we need to recover from them. People now experiencing local or regional collapses are already having trouble rebuilding something like their former way of life.<sup>7</sup> Social, political, and economic systems in many places will become dysfunctional. In some locations, they are already doing so; more is to come. This is the storm we face. I wrote the following poem in the summer of 2020, when the sky over my suburban California home was red with smoke from some of the four million acres of fires that burned in California that year.

*You told me to just be.  
You told me to pay attention.  
You told me to be humble.  
(I am not you.)*

*I didn't strive.  
I witnessed.  
What I saw broke my heart.  
(A world lay inside one little heart.)*

*Then  
I ran away.  
I hid.  
I put a tight lid on that unruly heart.  
(But I can't live like that for long.)*

*Today  
I walk gingerly  
Shaking, crying,  
Into the fire with you.  
(The heart burns but is not consumed.)*

Fear is contagious, calm is contagious, and courage is contagious. Those of us who have some idea of what is unfolding can prepare ourselves mentally, emotionally, and spiritually to be (as we are able) centers of calm, compassion, and courage. We can be ready to coach others to hold onto their values in hard times. Because we will have pre-processed some of the loss that others will deny for a while longer, we will be able to support them when they finally face what comes.

## *Not saving the world*

*Once I dropped from my shoulders the self-imposed burden of having to “save the world,” I could breathe a sigh of relief and ask myself, “What can I still do?”*

– Deb Ozarko

“Finally, I’ve found people who understand me.” This response is typical in the groups I host. Hundreds of people have come to Grief Gratitude and Courage workshops, Deep Adaptation Welcome Circles, Compassionate Communication practice groups, Death Cafés, Grief Circles, Mutual Care Circles, and other groups I facilitate. Over and over, newcomers express profound relief and gratitude. They can voice their fears. They are not chided for “being a doomer” or “being too negative.” They can be heard when they speak of the devastation they are witnessing, the despair and grief they are feeling. And they don’t have to strive to save the world.

As I write, the term “collapse-aware” is in danger of becoming a tired meme. Yet it has served me well over the past few years. Collapse awareness means acknowledging that some things have gone too far to repair. The future, in one or ten or fifty years, will look radically different from the present, with losses that are hard to fathom. Saving the planet and happy endings are not on the horizon. There are no solutions for the complex predicament of interconnected unfolding tragedies we face. This sad truth is hard to swallow. Still, we can take constructive action.

When I first talked to my friends about my new awareness that climate chaos is irreversible and incompatible with industrial consumer society, they gently brushed me off. One touchingly honest friend said, “I can’t believe what you are saying, Terry. If I did believe it, my world would be turned upside down.” Indeed. Why subject yourself to that kind of thinking? Unless you want to base your actions on reality, not fantasy.

When I became collapse-aware in 2018, this was considered a fringe view. After the extreme fires, floods, and heat waves of the past few years, collapse awareness is no longer so fringe. But still, almost every worsening prediction by scientists, almost every dire news article, ends with an obligatory, “And here’s what we must do to stop climate change.” Those save-the-world lists allow authors and readers to bypass the reality of our predicament. They offer false hope, even as so many people begin to feel in their bones and their daily lives the unraveling of ecosystems and social systems.

If we accept that huge losses in the human and nonhuman world are inevitable, then what? Are we giving up on humanity or on the planet? No. But it will look to those around us as if we are giving up. We may feel like we are giving up because so many things on those save-the-world lists no longer make sense to do. We are giving up on wishful thinking. The goal is no longer to save the world. The goal is to love the world and the humans and nonhumans in it and to care for them as best we can, while we can. Each of us will express that love and care in different ways. Some ways will be practical, some spiritual. Some ways will be political, some entirely earthy and home-bound. Some ways will be very local, and some will be wider in scope. Our actions can affirm the value of human and nonhuman life, ease suffering, and foster supportive community instead of cruelty.

This shift from the goal of saving the world is hard mental work because it requires letting go of the stories of modernity that are embedded in us, those of us raised in industrial consumer society anyway. More on that in the next chapter. Giving up on saving the world is also hard emotional work. Coming to terms with the immense losses it implies is heartbreaking. Further, it is hard on the ego: do I have to let go of so much? Can I really only do so little? The industrial consumer ego has been vastly over-inflated.

As they decide how to live honorably and well with the reality of loss, people are discovering new priorities and new values. Better understanding our limits means that the loss of a job, a personal project, an organization, a home, a beloved landscape, a human right or freedom, or a community, may be a part of the process of collapse.

As hard as it is to live through, it is not a personal failure or a sign of incompetence. Knowing that any of us can experience such a loss, we can commit to supporting each other through hard times. And we can learn to live as if Earth matters, with humility and gratitude, as if we are one small part of a wondrous planetary metabolism, our Earth home.

*Perspective: It's really that bad, and I am not alone*

Kat has been the Coordinator of the Deep Adaptation Forum. She hosts and participates in as many gatherings in the Forum as she is able. She also runs a nonprofit ecological consultancy and makes a home with her family on an acre in the north of Scotland. She is sometimes found in her new garden, scheming, digging, chasing chickens, or weeping. She is often found in one of the Forum's many Zoom meetings, holding space for people facing our predicament. These are her words about discovering others who thought like her about the state of the world:

Sustainability, the climate crisis, and ecological challenges of biodiversity loss and extinctions, that's been my career. Because of the circles I move in, Jem's paper "Deep Adaptation" came to my attention within just a couple of weeks of it being published in August 2018. I was in the car park at my office, about to start my drive home. An email came in with Jem's article. I clicked on it. I thought, "I'll just have a quick scan and see if it really is something I want to read. And then I'll put the music on, and I'll make my 90-minute journey home, and I'll have dinner with my husband, and everything will be lovely, and I can forget all the troubles of the day." I opened the article to start scanning it, and I was still in the car park *three hours later*. And then I sat still for a long time. I just thought, "Someone said it out loud." Finally, someone, a voice from within the system, has written it down and said it out loud. I was overwhelmed.

I wrote to Jem on that day. I sent an email saying, "I can't believe what you've done. It's paradigm-shifting for me. Congratulations on having the courage to put yourself out there to actually write all this stuff down and say it in public." Because these aren't things that you were allowed to talk about within the sustainability sector. It was unacceptable. You know, quiet, hushed conversations at the back of a conference room. Questioning or challenging some assumption that had been made was the closest you could get. For my entire career, I've held the knowledge that the system was probably going to collapse within my lifetime. I'd held that on my own. Me, thinking, "Maybe I'm mad, what do I know? I'm just a scientist. I'm not a global expert on anything." So there was always that second-guessing of the self. But you feel it. Sensitive people, we might not ever be able to articulate it or describe it. But there's a sense of the *dis*-ease in your system as you observe the world around you. It can be in really simple situations. There's a *dis*-ease in you. This is not right. This is not right. Jem's paper was saying, "Damn straight, it's not right. Here's a really good illustration of all the ways it's not right and where they're going."

So when I discovered that the Deep Adaptation Forum was being convened, I joined. Within a day or two, I'd had an email welcoming me to the community and asking me, Would I be prepared to volunteer? And here are some of the gaps that they were looking to fill... So I agreed to volunteer. I felt like I had found my tribe. I was 49, and suddenly it was okay to talk about the things that I'd held in my body since I was 13 years old. Not only did I now have a vocabulary, but I also had a community of people with whom I could share this knowledge. It was joyful, and it was hideous. It was joyful, because of the ability to make those connections, because of that sense of not being alone. And it was hideous, because although I'd carried that knowledge in my system throughout all of my life, I hadn't really accepted it, because I hadn't heard it from anyone else. No one ever spoke about that *dis*-ease. No one ever spoke about their observations about how the world was unraveling.

So it was a mixed blessing to find the Deep Adaptation community. There was this relief. "Ahh, it's a bunch of people who feel the way I do." And then there was the, "F\*\*k, there's a bunch of people that feel the way I do. This is f\*\*king real." The grieving process, particularly in the first year, was at times debilitating. I remember being in the car and seeing something and thinking, "For how many years will I observe that?" This poignant, beautiful moment, and having to pull over at the side of the road and weep wracking sobs of grief over what is being lost.

The comfort, camaraderie, fellowship, and belonging have strengthened in the three years that I've been part of the community. And the grieving has never eased. Now I grieve more, deeper, and for more things. I have found [my participation in the Deep Adaptation Forum] to be strengthening. It's enhanced and built my capacity for being with what's broken and messy and untidy. My capacity to be with grief has grown sufficiently so that it's never overwhelming. And it's inspired me to do things with my community for resilience as well.

### *A healthy form of avoidance*

Do you feel obligated to attend to all the tragedies of the world? You are not. Truly. Nor are you required to be up on predictions of future catastrophes. Know how much exposure to suffering that is not your own is too much for you to process. Then do not subject yourself to that much.

Thanks to the internet, negative news is relentless. It is easy to fill our eyes and ears with stories we don't need to know. We were not meant to hold the disasters and outrages of the whole world in our tribal-sized minds. Notice which news sources and types of articles are informing you of something new versus articles that are redundant or mostly gossip. Consider limiting disturbing news and social media posts to a small portion of your day, or even of your week, so that you have time to live, love, and create.

Occasionally I run into people who are sure that humans will be extinct in five to ten years. They have usually been listening to Guy McPherson and his colleagues. Things are bad and getting worse, true. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) underestimates the severity of our predicament every time, true.<sup>8</sup> Yet we do not know enough to predict a schedule for our various collapses.<sup>9</sup>

Seeking a clearer understanding of our predicament, I listened to a video presentation by Guy McPherson. I had hoped to gather data and graphics showing the science of climate and ecological collapses, present and predicted, to include in this book. I found none of that. All I got was the punch lines from various scientists and pundits. “This system will collapse.” And, “That system will die.” His report contained no science, nothing informative, just pronouncements of doom. The worst prognosis from each scientific and nonscientific report was clipped out of context and read by McPherson. He has already predicted several demises that have failed to come on schedule. Among these, in 2012, he predicted that global warming would kill much of humanity by 2020.<sup>10</sup>

While our minds crave certainty and our predicament offers little, creating false certainty is not helpful. Therefore, I avoid Guy McPherson and his term “Near Term Human Extinction.” Our Earth system is very complex and defies accurate predictions. Each of us faces personal extinction at our death; we always have. Loss of a way of life, a life, or even many lives is far from the extinction of the human species. Let’s live, grow, create, and love in the face of uncertainty.

Another author, Michael Dowd, finds it helpful to accept the possibility of worst-case scenarios. Yet he does not spend his time making predictions. Instead, he ponders ways to make sense of collapse, ways to cope, and ways to be of service. He writes, speaks, curates, and records the work of others at the website [postdoom.com](http://postdoom.com).



## *Perspective: Getting real*

Karen Perry stewards the Chickenfoot Ranch in Northern California with her partner Jordan, and expects the worst. She wrote the following guide for responding to our predicament. She calls it GRAC/E: Getting Real about Collapse/Extinction. She writes:

The civilizational way of living has never been sustainable. The 10,000-year experiment of living differently, separate from the rest of the community of life, has always risen and then fallen. Global industrial civilization is collapsing, just as every civilization model before this one has done. This time, however, the harnessing of fossil fuel energy has made our species "Homo colossus," giants with the ability to destroy the natural systems required for our survival. The result is, in addition to societal collapse, the biosphere we depend on for life is also collapsing. This is a predicament, not a problem, thus requiring wise responses, not false solutions.

1. Before the truth will set you free, it will likely make you angry. Don't shoot the messenger.
2. Let go or be dragged. Get through the grief and know that freedom and benefits exist in acceptance.
3. Grab a buddy who won't pull you down. It's harder to get real alone. Expect other crabs in the pot to constantly yank on you. Resist the urge to pull others down if you slip back into denial.
4. Abandon Hopium. Hope and false solutions are placeholders for inaction. Both are harmful responses to our predicament and can foster even more denialism.
5. We all would benefit from becoming much more comfortable with death and dying.
6. Nature is primary. Period. No more humans first. Making amends to the rest of the community of life, while attempting

to clean up the mess, needs to be a daily life way. Every day is Earth Day.

7. There needs to be an urgent conversation about setting the younger generations free and what that can look like. Continuing to pass along the dominant culture denialism is super abusive.
8. If the response feels predictable and familiar, it's not the right response. Our species is really being challenged to elevate. It's not about becoming more clever. Predicaments do not have solutions. We need radical responses equal to this radical situation. Logic says if it's a cancerous growth and growth is the issue, the first response is to stop growth.
9. Apply GRAC/E (Getting Real About Collapse/Extinction) [this list] to daily living and let it guide all decision-making. If you have privilege left in the game, what will you use it for?
10. Bottom line, we have to get comfortable talking about it. Continuing to bury our heads in the sand is not the path to enlightenment. People say, "Well if this is happening then there is nothing we can do about it so why think about it, too depressing." I say see numbers 6 [*nature is primary*] and 7 [*setting the younger generations free*].

### *Don't do this alone*

*I believe that the community—in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures—is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms.*

– Wendell Berry

Find your people. Find the people who will support you through hard times, and through the changes you want to make to face hard times. And recognize that you are a small part of a vast interconnected Earth home that is sustaining you. You will hear this call to human and

nonhuman community many times in this book because it is so essential.

Industrial consumer society relies on the illusion of separation, the belief that people are independent of the human and nonhuman systems that sustain us through long and often exploitative supply chains. We in the U.S. have made independence a virtue. And no wonder, in a society where most of our interactions are transactional, buying and selling, owing and paying debts, and competition for status and stuff, rather than respectful and reciprocal relationships. We have paid a dear price: a cultural epidemic of loneliness, and the loss of many of the skills and strategies of our ancestors that allowed them to live and work together for the common good.

To face the storm that so many ignore, we need people who understand us. Few people can sustain a new identity and values in the midst of the old unless they spend time with people who support those new values and that new identity. They need not be our family, neighbors, or closest friends. Who supports you being you? Who can you talk to about how you might want to live, about what matters, and how you want to show up in these times? Who is already living the values you want to live?

Respectful relationships with nonhuman entities have been devalued, suppressed, or forgotten by industrialization, colonialism, and extractive capitalism for generations. That forgetting has allowed industrial consumer society to ravage the planet. The barriers to recovering these essential relationships are formidable. Modernity does not even allow language for the interconnection of the human and the nonhuman. Attending to relationships with the nonhuman world with respect and wisdom is new to me. That attention can look many different ways, but it is a key practice for affirming that we all rely on our Earth home for belonging and sustenance.

For the past two years, I have been talking with people around the globe who are exploring ways of living outside (or in the cracks of) industrial consumer society. The first gift of these online friends was to support me in grieving our losses, even as I supported them, and to plot together ways to live and love in the face of loss. This book is

possible only because of my friends in the Deep Adaptation Forum. These friends have changed me in other ways. Some of them refuse to fly. I had been in the middle of the pack with my (mostly well-off) friends. They profess concern about carbon emissions but fly for business or pleasure every chance they get. Now I think long and hard before flying.

Modern life makes it easier technologically to create groups of like-minded people supporting each other. And it leaves us without the relational skills to sustain these groups. Cultivating and maintaining relationships requires time, skill, and commitment. Industrial consumer society has convinced us that time is for producing and consuming, not for building relationships. Still, finding your people is necessary to begin to live outside the values of industrial consumer society.

We will return again and again to this challenge of community and solidarity in the eye of the storm.

### *Many voices: Living in two worlds*

Once we know about unfolding collapses, we can't un-know them. And we probably can't force others to know them. Facing the denial in our culture, we will have to figure out how to live in two worlds. If you are struggling with this, you are in good company.

Someone asked on the Deep Adaptation private Facebook page, *"How do you psychologically manage doing "business as usual" (driving in your gas-burning car to your capitalism-serving job...) and being collapse-aware, wanting to or trying to live as if earth mattered?"* People from around the globe answered. Here are some of their responses:

- I don't. I just have frequent breakdowns.
- I call it, "living in the twilight zone." I find it difficult every day.
- This conundrum has plagued me for years. My head tells me, "Oh s\*\*t we need to do something," and my actions seem to say,

“Another day, another dollar.” It causes me to feel self-loathing at times.

- It is a surreal feeling, to say the least.

Here is how some people navigate the cognitive dissonance of living in two worlds.

- It’s called compartmentalization. I know it [the reality of collapse] is there all the time, but I need to distract myself from it in order to live life. It’s hard.
- For me it’s distinguishing my work from my side hustle. My side hustle is “the business as usual” that I need to do to stay alive. My work is to heal my inner realm, to transform my trauma, leading me to find my life purpose.
- Managing small steps I can tackle on my own that contribute gives me some calm. I live in Southwest Florida. Need I say more? The only thing I can control is my reaction to anything.
- Take some action. Even a very small action will make you feel more positive. Even just having a plan to take action is a start.

People offered particular actions that help them live in two worlds.

- I wish I could stop participating, but then I don’t know how I would support my family. It’s not like we can be hunter-gatherers anymore when every acre of land is owned by someone now. So I am trying to build an eco-friendly business and helping to start a community garden.
- Sending emails to politicians. To companies. Showing up for every town meeting I possibly can. Showing up to every political meeting I can. Organizing.
- I work in solar. So even though I know collapse is coming, I know that my work helps buy us time as a planet. It helps people save money, and get better prepared for emergencies.
- I walk most places. It’s certainly limited my “reach.” I look at it as a psychological adaptation to collapse. I feel like a good example of living differently, my version of “in this world, not of it.”
- I do hospice volunteer work.

Some people have chosen to quit their jobs, or live very simply, in response to the tension of living in two worlds.

- I quit that stupid job in 2020 and got a permanent work-from-home job. It's still 40 hours a week, which is unhealthy, but at least I don't waste any time commuting. I have more time to try and grow food and do other household stuff that keeps our consumption to a minimum.
- For me it was important to stop. I didn't have dependents so I could handle financial and housing vulnerability. I closed my company (didn't sell it as that would have meant its ecological impact continued.) I moved into a low-impact tiny house, swapping a little labor each week for use of land. I use my time growing vegetables and offering support and information to others on how to navigate these times, how to need less money, and adaptation.

Living in two worlds, we face deep loss, both ongoing and anticipated, and a whole culture surrounding us that refuses to acknowledge that loss. That is why grief work is a necessary part of being the eye of the storm. We need this work; grief is addressed later in this book.

Strangely, the loss that may most disorient people is a loss of meaning. Cultural stories that once defined and guided us no longer ring true. So part of being the eye of the storm is discovering different stories that are not part of the systems of denial and destruction, but instead are life-giving in this time, stories that affirm meaning and identity despite great loss. The next two chapters are about stories, the stories that are killing us, and some stories that invite us to live differently.

## *Summary and reflection*

- In 2018 I came to a gut-level realization of our unfolding predicament. That realization came with an awareness that “saving the world” as we know it does not seem possible.
- In groups I have hosted, participants express relief that they don’t have to pretend that we can save the world as we know it. Together we are finding meaningful ways to live and love in the face of great loss.
- Kat knew from adolescence that business as usual was not sustainable. She remembers the power of discovering that she was not alone in her thinking. She now has a community to support her in this heartbreaking reality.
- We don’t know enough to make accurate predictions about timelines for the losses I am calling collapse. As uncomfortable as it is, living with uncertainty is better than making dire predictions that send people digging their own graves.
- Karen Perry’s guide to GRAC/E, getting real about collapse/ extinction, in ten steps, is practical and wise. There is much good work to be done.
- Strong community, human and nonhuman, is essential to meet the unfolding storms. Fear is contagious, calm is contagious, and courage is contagious.
- Find the people who will support you through hard times and through the changes you want to make.
- Living in two worlds, that of business as usual and that of collapse awareness, is not easy. People are using various strategies to cope and to live differently.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Stories shape us



In this chapter, we will examine cultural stories: stories that serve life and those that don't. We will challenge stories you may take for granted and explore stories that honor interdependence with people and the nonhuman world.

*The power of stories.* Telling stories is the best way to convey meaning.

*Stories of disconnection, stories of interdependence.* A list of stories from industrial consumer society that no longer serve us, and suggested replacements.

*Perspective: Pop culture stories.* At fan conventions, Daniel shares his reflections on popular fiction that he finds helpful for understanding our predicament.

*Hidden stories.* Approved histories have left out the parts where nature and powerless people were destroyed.

*Nihilism as a failure of stories.* How to know when your stories are failing you.

*The limits of science.* Some reasons science has failed to address our predicament.

*Perspective: One shattering detail.* What the International Panel on Climate Change didn't tell us changed Tim DeChristopher's life.

*Perspective: The story nobody wants to hear.* Sven found holes in biofuels, climate predictions, and tech fixes to our predicament.

*Perspective: Stories to PLAN by.* Academics can tell stories, too; here are some good ones.

*Choose your stories wisely.* Alternative stories require careful examination. They may have issues of their own.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Endings are beginnings

*In a time of destruction,  
create something: a poem, a parade, a community,  
a school, a vow, a moral principle;  
one peaceful moment.*

– Maxine Hong Kingston<sup>123</sup>

As this book ends, how will you continue to cultivate your calm and compassionate center? Being the eye of the storm might mean living like this:

- Admitting the reality of the complex intertwined crises undermining our Earth home, and navigating the complex feelings that arise from that knowledge.
- Accepting uncertainty about what the future will bring.
- Letting go of stories that invite further destruction; instead lifting up stories that don't require happy endings, but offer beauty, meaning, and purpose in the face of loss.
- Anticipating, bearing witness to, and grieving loss and pain, human and nonhuman.
- Finding meaning and purpose despite losses, without resorting to denial or quick fixes.
- Cultivating and sharing a non-anxious presence that will help ease the fears of others, using a toolbox of emotional and spiritual practices.
- Staying connected with people: neighbors who support each other in living, and kindred spirits who support each other in living out our values.

- Looking ineffectual or foolish by the standards of industrial consumer society, because you live by different stories than those upholding industrial consumer society.
- Respecting limits, including the limits of our own bodies and minds.
- Savoring and nurturing life and love, beauty and wonder, courage, and compassion, no matter what happens.
- Experimenting with ways of living simply, ways that respect humans and nonhumans near and far, ways that you enjoy.
- Taking action to serve and love humans and nonhumans, generously and authentically, without expecting to save the world.

Your way of being the eye of the storm in these strange times will be unique. There is no one right way to be or act in the mapless territory we have entered. I hope that the lists, ideas, and conversations in this book inspire you. Remember that you need only take in a few at a time. I trust that you can find portions to support you now, and set aside the rest of this book to consult later.

You may want to reflect on whether your stories about industrial consumer society and your place in it have shifted while reading this book. Perhaps you question a story that seemed to you to be fact. Or you now have affirmation of a hunch that you had never heard voiced before. You may find that your worldview continues to shift over time.

Remember to find your people, and don't give up if it takes a few false starts. If you are still alone in your awareness of collapse, one approach to finding kindred spirits is to start a reading group of this book, online or in person, with people who care about ecological and social justice.

Throughout the book, people have noted that action can be calming. I invite you to take small actions to break out of any routine that is not serving you. Walks, conversations, with neighbors and possible kindred spirits, communing with the non-human world,

cooking a new recipe, meditation, or journaling are some ideas. Notice I did not include social media on this list.

Please take your time to experiment before committing to a life change or a large project. Drastic action before deep reflection is not the goal; it's what got us into this predicament. Think and explore long before starting any large project from scratch. It's much more fun, and less work, to become a supporter of an existing project. Don't expect to make a living with your efforts; instead, make a life. Remember that tending, sustaining, and befriending are all honorable work. And remember that tending the back end, whether composting your waste or doing administration of groups, is also love in action.



Anxiety is contagious. Calm is contagious. And courage is contagious. Our lives ahead will almost certainly be deeply challenging as we face heartbreaking and disorienting losses. Yet, in the company of others, we can imagine and start living into a future that respects limits and treats humans and the nonhuman world with dignity, whatever unfolds. We can create that world, at least in fragments. With the tools and references in this book and with kindred spirits, we can create calm, purpose, gratitude, and even joy in our lives now, and we can share these gifts. We can be the eye of the storm, creating calm and courage to shelter others.



If you have found this book helpful, please share it. And remember that endings are also beginnings.

## Epilogue

*Leaving an oasis of pine and cool breeze,  
We descend into dry canyons dotted with scrub.  
We are provisioned with abundant gifts of  
Beauty and wisdom, birdsong and soft woodland duff,  
Perspective and resonance, cold water and ancient fossils.*

*We are full.  
We are affirmed as co-creators breaking out of imposed chains,  
Alive to the presence of tiny treasures at our feet,  
Deep canyons of meaning that have no words,  
Senses that grant superpowers if we but attend.*

*The canyon is in us.  
The birdsong is in us.  
The charred sentinel pines are in us.  
The seeping water and the squishy mud are in us.  
All is beauty  
All around us  
And in us,  
All Earth's precious jewels.*

## BEYOND THIS BOOK

You are welcome to contact the author at [terry@opendoorcommunication.org](mailto:terry@opendoorcommunication.org). She may be able to match you with resources appropriate to your needs and interests. Some of her groups can be found at [deepadaptation.info/events](http://deepadaptation.info/events); you are invited to join.

[Opendoorcommunication.org/eye](http://Opendoorcommunication.org/eye) is the website for this book. On this website you will find:

- Ordering options for this book in paperback and electronic forms, including international orders,
- A copy of the endnotes with clickable links to websites, and
- Additional resources related to this book and some of the topics in it.