Overcoming Fear, Denial, Myopia, and Paralysis

Scientific and Spiritual Insights into the Emotional Factors Affecting our Response to the Ecological Crisis

Mark D. Hathaway
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto
mark.hathaway@utoronto.ca

Abstract

Drawing on insights from neuroscience, psychology, Buddhism, and the Beatitudes of Jesus, this paper explores the role emotions play in influencing human responses to the ecological crisis. While political, technological, and economic factors contributing to this crisis are often analyzed, emotional factors tend to be neglected or underestimated. Humans may be suffering from a condition analogous to the “myopia for the future” described by Antonio Damasio which impedes both our perception of the crisis and our response to it. Traditional Buddhist psychology’s analysis of the “three poisons” provides helpful insights into why humans may fail to respond to distressing information. At the same time, emotions have the potential to empower humanity to overcome the interwoven dynamics of denial, despair, and addiction and to facilitate a collective response to the ecological crisis. Joanna Macy has developed an integrated set of interactive, spiritual practices to enable persons to reconnect emotionally to the entire Earth community, overcome both despair and myopia for the future, and take meaningful action to heal the world. The Aramaic version of Matthew’s Beatitudes as interpreted by Neil Douglas-Klotz also models a spiritual process for overcoming despair by working with and through emotions to empower restorative action.

Keywords

Somatic marker hypothesis, ecopsychology, climate change, Buddhism, biophilia, Beatitudes, Work that Reconnects
Introduction

Despite overwhelming scientific evidence that humanity is facing the gravest ecological crisis in its history – including the mass extinction of species (Barnosky et al. 2011), rapid climate change (IPCC 2014), and ocean acidification (Fabry et al. 2008; Mitchell 2009) – the response to this crisis falls far short of what is required to ensure an ecologically sustainable future for humans and other species. Indeed, after thoroughly reviewing the current evidence, Ehrlich & Ehrlich (2013) conclude that our current global civilization is threatened by collapse unless we undertake concerted action to address the most serious problems threatening the well-being of the entire Earth community. Yet, “simply informing people of the scientific consensus on a serious problem does not ordinarily produce rapid changes in institutional or individual behaviour” (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 2013: 5). While there is widespread awareness that political and economic obstacles play a significant role in this phenomenon, emotional factors inhibiting an adequate response to this crisis are often neglected. Even though science has contributed invaluable knowledge about both the nature of this crisis and the practical means to address it, these insights may prove insufficient to actually resolve the key problems involved unless we apply a more sophisticated understanding of the role that human emotions play in both blocking and facilitating an adequate response to the challenges we face.

Antonio Damasio (1994a) describes a phenomenon in persons suffering from certain forms of frontal lobe damage which impairs the emotions (resulting in behaviors similar to those in people under the influence of many intoxicants) which he calls “myopia for the future,” characterized by neglecting future consequences in favor of immediate gratification. Damasio (1994b) notes that, collectively, humans often seem to demonstrate a similar short-sightedness when confronting large global issues such as population growth, pollution, or nuclear armaments.

At the same time, Ehrlich and Ehrlich (2013: 4-5) observe that from an evolutionary perspective, our ancestors may have had few reasons to respond to long-term threats and that “the forces of genetic and cultural selection” exerted few pressures to create “brains or institutions capable of looking generations ahead.”¹ In the past, the greatest threats to life were often immediate, such as being attacked by a wild animal or an invading army, making it through a difficult winter, or surviving a deadly epidemic. Today, however, many of the

¹ Albeit it is noteworthy that some Indigenous cultures seemed to have developed this capacity in the tradition of contemplating the implication of actions seven generations into the future (Clarkson et al. 1992).
most lethal threats develop over relatively long periods of time, at least from the perspective of a human lifespan. Often these problems may pose a far greater threat to future generations than our own, providing less incentive to make sacrifices in the present for benefits which may accrue to others. This is particularly true in societies that have now become addicted to overconsumption, even though this consumption is one of the major drivers of the ecological crisis. In such a context, providing information about threats like climate change, future food and energy shortages, or impending water scarcity may be insufficient – especially when the systems and habits generating these problems may seem to yield short-term benefits, at least to those enjoying a relatively wealthy lifestyle. Effectively, consumption is functioning much like an intoxicant, urging us to focus on short-term gain in exchange for dangerous long-term costs. Ehrlich and Ehrlich (2013) conclude that humanity needs to develop a new “foresight intelligence” enabling us to look ahead and act for the good of future generations, even if shorter-term costs are involved. As shall be seen later in this paper, skillfully engaging emotions may play a key role in developing such an intelligence, something that accords well with Damasio’s somatic marker hypothesis.

Damasio (1994b: 144) observes that developing the kind of intelligence which would enable us to address such long-term concerns will require a rationality “informed by the emotion and feeling that stem from the core of every one of us.” If the emotional aspects of rationality have not been adequately developed – or if these emotions are unduly suppressed – persons, or even entire cultures, may come to act in pathological ways. Damasio believes that “sizable sectors of Western society” now behave in ways analogous to “developmental sociopaths or psychopaths,” characterized by “a decline in rationality… accompanied by diminution or absence of feeling” (Damasio 1994a: 179, 178). At the same time, though, some emotions – particularly fear – may in themselves “give rise to irrationality in some circumstances” (Damasio 1994a: 192). We may not be able to respond effectively to the ecological crisis, then, unless we first thoughtfully and carefully engage the emotions in a fashion that enables us to both understand and work through fear, denial, and grief while simultaneously discovering emotional resources that can empower us to act. This process could be understood as one of developing emotional intelligence.

From a spiritual or religious perspective, the current ecological crisis threatening the well-being of the Earth community arguably poses the most significant ethical challenge of our time. Thomas Berry refers to this process of destroying the very systems that support life as “biocide” and “geocide” – which
we might alternatively term “ecocide” – and asserts that it constitutes a moral watershed for humanity:

We find ourselves ethically destitute just when, for the first time, we are faced with ultimacy, the irreversible closing down of the Earth’s functioning in its major life systems. Our ethical traditions know how to deal with suicide, homicide, and even genocide; but these traditions collapse entirely when confronted with biocide, the extinction of the vulnerable life systems of the Earth, and geocide, the devastation of the Earth itself. (Berry 1999: 104)

Once again, though, it can be argued that this ethical challenge will require an effective engagement of human emotions. As Lakoff and Johnson (1999: 327) observe, one of the conclusions that can be drawn from Damasio’s somatic marker hypothesis is that “moral deliberation always requires emotional monitoring and an interplay of affect and reason.” In addition, it is the assertion of this paper that spiritual traditions have the potential to contribute significantly to the process of awakening, focusing, and engaging emotions in such a way as to enable persons to overcome fear, despair, and addictive behaviors; widen their sense of empathy and compassion to encompass other species and future generations; and, in so doing, develop the kind of foresight intelligence and concern that will enable humanity to effectively address the ecological crisis and the threats to survival and well-being this crisis represents. To do so, the paper will first draw further on Damasio’s work together with insights from ecopsychology to more clearly understand how some emotions – particularly fear and guilt – may actually impede an effective response to our current crisis. Then, employing an analysis of the traditional “three poisons” in Buddhism, the paper will seek to clarify some of the psychological dynamics involved in order that these may be more fruitfully addressed. Finally, the paper explores two spiritual practices – Joanna Macy’s “Work that Reconnects” (based in part on Buddhism) and the Aramaic Beatitudes of Jesus – to gain a clearer understanding of the positive role that emotions can play in empowering persons to respond fruitfully to the threat of ecocide.

Fear and Paralysis

Damasio’s somatic marker hypothesis states that “individuals make judgments not only by assessing the severity of outcomes and their probability of occurrence, but also and primarily in terms of their emotional quality” (Bechara et al. 2000: 305). What happens, then, when a situation – such as the
ecological crisis – evokes feelings of fear, guilt, or even dread? Until the mid-twentieth century, most generations of humans lived with the tacit belief that other generations would follow. Indeed, in a society marked by an ethic of progress, Western cultures have increasingly lived with the belief that life would be better for each succeeding generation. The possibility of nuclear war and, more recently, of ecological collapse, effectively undermines this belief and may conjure a sense of dread so strong that it leads to denial, addiction, and paralysis rather than action to avert catastrophe. As Macy and Brown (1998: 26) observe, “the very danger signals that should rivet our attention, summon up the blood, and bond us in collective action, tend to have the opposite effect. They make us want to pull down the blinds and busy ourselves with other things.”

Because of this, trying to motivate people to address key ecological problems by eliciting fear is particularly problematic. As Milton (2008: 75) observes, Damasio essentially affirms that “people act in order to feel better.” In the case of fear, its primary purpose is to evoke a response enabling a person to escape from danger by either fighting or fleeing. With an issue such as climate change, however, fleeing (save in the psychological sense of denying or repressing) is not an option. As for fighting, large and complex issues are inherently difficult for individuals to address. In such a situation, a person may opt instead to simply “manage” their internal feelings. So, while fear may be effective at gaining attention in the short term, it is difficult to sustain fear or to use it to motivate action. Instead, as noted above, it may actually have the opposite effect. Indeed, in a study employing images to motivate response to climate change, O’Neill & Nicholson-Cole (2009: 374-375) conclude that, while “fearful representations of climate change appear to be memorable and may initially attract individuals’ attention,” they actually tend to “distance and disempower individuals in terms of their sense of personal engagement with the issue.”

Insights from Buddhism

To better understand the role that unpleasant emotions may play in impeding action, traditional Buddhist psychology may provide helpful insights (Walsh 1984). Buddhism states that “three poisons” are at the root of suffering (or dukkha). All three – in their attempt to repress, placate, or avoid suffering – also create forms of internalized powerlessness that tend to inhibit effective action. All three are driven, at least in part, by fear and the desire to avoid pain.

^2 Dukkha also includes anxiety, dissatisfaction, or the inability to be happy (Loy 2010).
1. *Aversion*\(^3\) can manifest itself as compulsive avoidance, anger, fear, defensiveness, or aggression (Walsh 1984). Aversion is particularly evident in the dynamics of *denial* – avoiding or dismissing information that causes fear, concern, or anguish. In the case of climate change, denial may actually be reinforced by certain actors (including sectors of the fossil-fuel industry) whose economic interests are threatened by efforts to reduce greenhouse emissions. As Macy (1995) observes, when confronted with information that evokes uncomfortable emotions (including fear and guilt), persons tend to react in one of three ways: Through outright disbelief; by disputing the facts (or arguing about their severity, or ascribing to a simplistic belief that the problems will resolve themselves); or by living a double life in which the knowledge of what is happening is repressed, resulting in a kind of psychic numbing that leads to a decrease in vitality, personal satisfaction, and the ability to experience other emotions.

2. *Attachment (or greed)*\(^4\), in Buddhism, is characterized by “sticking to the object or wanting an object” (Sumanacara 2012: 130). As Walsh notes, this clinging may encompass, not only objects in the sense of inanimate things, but also “any person, or experience, including relationships, beliefs, and self-images” (1984: 31) as well as collective beliefs and ideologies. For Walsh, this kind of clinging often takes the form of addictive behaviors. Greed, clinging, and addiction relate to aversion insofar as they are another way to escape from our fears. Perhaps the most pervasive form of addiction in modern industrialized societies is that of consumerism. Ironically, the consumerist addiction is also one of the key drivers of economic growth and the use of fossil fuels which, in turn, are key causes of the ecological crisis.

3. *Delusion*, Walsh notes, is a state of mind that is “neither clear, optimal, nor wholly rational,” in part because “our addictions, aversions, and faulty beliefs color and distort our experience in important yet subtle, unrecognized ways” that are “rarely appreciated because they are culturally shared” (1984: 33). In Western societies, perhaps one of the most pervasive beliefs is that we are separate from the greater community of

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\(^3\) In Pali, *dosa*, also translated as “hatred,” may include aversion, ill-will, denial, and anxiety (Sumanacara 2012).

\(^4\) In Pali, *lobha*, may include greed, clinging, lust, and other forms of attachment (Sumanacara 2012).

\(^5\) In Pali, *moha*, includes as well the ideas of ignorance, “blindness to certain facets of reality,” and “concealing the nature of an object” (Sumanacara 2012: 130)
life. The psychic numbing resulting from denial may deepen this separative tendency, causing us to isolate ourselves from others in the hope of avoiding pain. On the one hand, this sense of separation may blind us from perceiving the consequences of our actions while on the other it may leave us feeling isolated and disempowered. Buddhists consider the very sense of a separative self to be a delusion. David Loy notes that it is “no exaggeration to say that for Buddhism the self is dukkha” (2010: 254). To move away from this delusion, I must deconstruct the very sense of self and to wake up and “see through the illusion of self: I am not inside, peering out at an objective world out there” but rather that “I am one of the ways in which the causes and conditions of the world come together” (Loy 2010: 256). Similarly Walsh (1984) notes that overcoming delusion entails finding a new sense of interdependence and interconnectedness. As will be seen in the following section, moving from a sense of separation to one of connection is also a key way of overcoming despair and empowering effective action for sustainability.

Biophilia, Ecopsychology, and “The Work that Reconnects”

While fear – as well as guilt – are emotions that may serve to disempower and even inhibit effective action to address the ecological crisis, other emotions may serve to motivate a meaningful response. Edward Wilson (1984: 85) suggests that humans share a deep emotional bond to the Earth which he describes as “biophilia” – defined as the innate “urge to affiliate with other forms of life.” Wilson maintains that other organisms are “the matrix in which the human mind originated and is permanently rooted” (1984: 139). Similarly, Thomas Berry (1988) affirms that the human psyche could only develop in a rich ecological context that nurtured our imaginations and sense of beauty – that the psyche is deeply rooted in communion with the wider Earth community. Ecopsychologists speak of the core of the human psyche as being the “ecological unconscious” which is understood as the “compacted ecological intelligence of our species, the source from which culture unfolds as the self-conscious reflection of nature’s own steadily emerging mindlikeness” (Roszak 1992: 304). The repression of this “ecological unconscious is the deepest root of collusive madness in industrial society,” while, “open access to the ecological unconscious is the path to sanity” (Roszak 1992: 320). Reawakening to biophilia, our psychic connection to Earth, and to all living beings is the key to healing both ourselves and Earth’s ecosystems.
Biophilia – as well as the related experiences of awe, wonder, and gratitude for the gift of life and beauty of Earth – may constitute the kind of positive emotions that can empower humans to act fruitfully to address the ecological crisis. Joanna Macy has developed an interactive transformative learning process called “The Work that Reconnects” that builds on this insight (Macy and Brown 1998) and which also draws on ideas and practices from Buddhism, systems theory, deep ecology, and ecopsychology. Among the key assumptions implicit in this work are that we are more than our sense of a separate self, that the world is alive, that all reality is interconnected, and that our deepest experience of the world springs from this sense of interconnection. The process of the Work that Reconnects may be visualized as a kind of spiral with four different stages.

The spiral begins – not with guilt, fear, or pain – but rather with gratitude. Gratitude enables participants to first root themselves in their experiences of the goodness and beauty of the world, including their relationships with other people and the greater Earth community. This sense of gratitude builds a sense of community and trust and may also build self-esteem that empowers persons and motivates them to act. Exercises6 used at this stage of the process may include simple breathing meditations (where breath itself is perceived with gratitude and as a common element of interconnection), open sentence exercises enabling persons to share what they find most beautiful or what they care most passionately about, or brainstorming on signs of hope present in the world.

Only then does the process move on to look at the devastating manifestations of the ecological crisis and honor our pain for the world. As previously noted, the fear that the ecological crisis evokes when we allow ourselves to become fully aware of it can actually cause us to “close the blinds and busy ourselves with other things” via denial or addictive behaviors. This results in a kind “psychic numbing” that attempts to shield us from fully experiencing our pain. As Laura Sewall (1995: 202) observes, “full awareness hurts… In a culture with the luxury to do so, we turn down the volume.” In practicing this denial, though, we also block out much beauty and joy in the process. At the same time, we allow ourselves to continue the very kinds of behavior and attitudes that sustain the systems destroying our Earth community. Our denial, then, while caused by the crises we face, also perpetuates them.

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6 A complete description of all the exercises mentioned in this section may be found in the book Coming Back to Life: Practices to Reconnect our Lives, our World (Macy and Brown 1998).

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The conspiracy of silence concerning our deepest feelings about the future of our species, the degree of numbing, isolation, burnout and cognitive confusion that result from it – all converge to produce a sense of futility. Each act of denial, conscious or unconscious, is an abdication of our powers to respond. (Macy 1983: 16)

Honoring our pain for the world attempts to overcome this conspiracy of silence by providing a safe space to express and share our fears – not only our personal anguish, but our fear for those whom we love. Using both silent meditations – such as one where participants are invited to “breathe through”
their pain – as well as interactive exercises where persons are able to express their deepest emotions (fear, pain, anguish, guilt, anger, despair, etc.), this honoring of pain is not morbid, but rather liberating. As Macy (1995) points out, feeling pain for our situation is both natural and healthy – it is only morbid or dysfunctional if we deny or repress it. We hurt because we care, and we care because we are compassionate beings who are deeply interconnected to others.

In contrast, repressing or hiding our fears and anguish requires tremendous energy which saps us of our vitality and dulls our minds and spirits. When we unblock and express our pain, we also unblock the energy of a power that comes from deep within. At the same time, sharing and expressing pain can actually weave a connection to others – and indeed a connection to the greater web of life – and help generate an authentic sense of empowerment-with-others (Macy, 1995).

In delving deeper into our shared pain, we are also opened to the deep interconnection that bonds us to other people, other living beings, the Earth, and the entire cosmos. We can then begin to find ways of nurturing compassion and building community and solidarity. In so doing, we start to seek a deeper understanding of our situation and new sources of wisdom to guide our action. As we deepen our compassion and build community, we can also learn how to focus our attention and energy more effectively. At the same time, we can seek out a new vision and sense of purpose to inspire us and motivate us in our efforts to heal the Earth community.

This brings us to the third stage in the spiral, that of seeing with new eyes. Besides for integrating perspectives from systems theory to gain an understanding of transformation in complex systems, this stage focuses particularly on developing a sense of “deep time” – both past and future – that seeks to overcome the problem of myopia for the future and develop foresight intelligence. In seeking to connect with our ancestors – both human and non-human – participants gain a new perspective infused with a deep sense of gratitude and connection for all who have walked this Earth before us. In the exercise “Harvesting the Gifts of the Ancestors,” participants physically walk backwards in time to remember all they have received from those who have lived before and then walk forward, back into the present, with the gifts in mind.

Many other exercises connect creatively with the future. For example, in the “Double Circle,” participants carry out an imaginative dialogue where a person from our current time speaks with a person two centuries into the future. The latter asks questions about how we managed to undergo the transitions necessary to bring about a sustainable and just world – provoking deep reflection on the actions we can take now to create a better future. The exercise also builds
a sense of connection with our future descendants, effectively building compassion with the generations who will follow us. In another exercise, “Widening Circles,” each person speaks with the voice of a different actor involved in an issue that concerns them (for example, a proposed mining development): First one speaks from one’s own perspective, then from that of a person with a widely different opinion, then from the perspective of a non-human entity that will be affected (an animal, tree, or even a river), and finally from the stance of a person living a century into the future. In the process, once again, a sense of deeper emotional connection with others – including both non-humans and persons living in the future – is built. This resonates strongly with Einstein’s call to develop a deeper and broader vision of reality by expanding our compassion through space and time:

[Human beings are] part of a whole, called by us the “Universe,” a part limited in time and space. [We] experience [ourselves], [our] thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of [our] consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. (As cited by Sullivan 1972: 20)

Finally, in the stage of going forth, participants in the process are challenged to embody their shifts in perception and understanding through concrete actions and an ongoing commitment to heal the world. Possible exercises include a focus on overcoming obstacles, planning possible actions, and often being invited to take a self-chosen vow to undertake some concrete change in one’s own life.

From a spiritual perspective, Macy clearly acknowledges the source of many of the exercises and practices in Buddhism, particularly the Tibetan branch that she herself practices. One exercise, called “The Dance to Dismember the Ego,” is inspired by the traditional Tibetan lamas’ dance. Macy also frequently uses a version of “The Shambhala Prophecy” as recounted by Choegyal Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist teacher living in northern India. At the same time, though, Macy recognizes the gifts and teachings of other religious traditions and integrates all of these with insights from systems theory, psychology, and ecology.

Having participated in fifteen days of intensive training myself with Macy, I can attest to the profoundly spiritual presence that infuses the entire process. There is a deep integration as well of emotional, imaginative, and embodied...
learning with more intellectual concepts (which Macy often refers to as “brain food”). This form of learning accords well with the findings of modern neuroscience, particularly Damasio’s (1994b) insight that rationality and ethics are intrinsically integrated with emotions as well as Lakoff and Johnson’s (1999) assertion that reason is both embodied and imaginative. Indeed, in participating in Macy’s workshops, I have come to a personal appreciation of the connection between imagination, empathy, and compassion: It is the ability to imagine one’s self in the place of another (be they human or non-human, be they in the past, present, or future) that enables one to genuinely empathize and extend one’s compassion.

**Insights from the Aramaic Beatitudes**

While the Work that Reconnects uses positive emotions like awe, gratitude, and beauty to awaken a commitment to work for change, it also seeks to work through difficult emotions – like our experience of pain for what is happening to the world – in order to overcome fear, denial, addiction, and despair. Additional insights into this process may be discovered by contemplating the spiritual teachings contained in the Beatitudes of Jesus. Neil Douglas-Klotz (1990; 2001) – using traditional Middle Eastern forms of midrashic interpretation which contemplate the images and sound-qualities associated with the ancient roots of each word (Douglas-Klotz 1999b) – offers compelling insights into the multi-faceted meanings found in the Aramaic versions of Matthew’s Beatitudes and the spiritual process they describe. For the sake of brevity, the discussion here will focus on the first three Beatitudes (Mat. 5:3-5) which are particularly relevant to understanding both lament (honoring our pain for the world) and reawakening to our psychic bond with the wider Earth community. Douglas-Klotz (1990) has also developed a series of personal and communal spiritual practices based on the Beatitudes which draw on insights from both somatic psychology and traditional Middle Eastern mysticism, particularly on practices preserved in certain schools of Sufism. Most of the personal practices involve work with breath and sound while the communal practices combine the chanting of each Beatitude in Aramaic with simple movements in the form of meditative practice.

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7 Somatic psychology views the *soma* (or embodied self) as a unified whole integrating mind, body awareness, emotions, and spirituality (Douglas-Klotz 1997). Douglas-Klotz draws on somatic psychology – including the work of pioneers such as Gerda Alexander, Wilhelm Reich, Elsa Gindler, and F. M. Alexander – to understand embodied spiritual practices that focus on breath, sound, and body movements.
circle dances. All of these practices seek to integrate ideas and emotions in an embodied way that understands body, mind, and spirit as an inseparable whole, once again mirroring the insights of Damasio (1994a) as well as Lakoff and Johnson (1999) regarding the emotional and embodied nature of rationality and mind. While Douglas-Klotz does not explicitly link these practices to ecological activism, his own background in ecological justice work and environmental journalism (Douglas-Klotz 2010), his work reflecting on the “Jesus of Ecology” (Douglas-Klotz et al. 1997), and his use of ecological language in much of his writings all suggest an implicit link which, perhaps, is most evident in his reflections on the third and eighth beatitudes.

Throughout the Beatitudes in Aramaic, the first word (normally translated as “blessed”) is *tubowyhu*; which can also be understood as meaning “healed,” “ripe,” or “fruitful.” The word is closely related to the Aramaic word for “good,” *taba*, which carries the sense of an action that is appropriate for a given time, place, and circumstance. The roots of this word “point to something that maintains its integrity and health (T) by an inner sense of growth in harmony with what surrounds it” (Douglas-Klotz 1999a: 131). Being “blessed,” then, carries a sense of being in harmony with one’s surroundings – not in the sense of passive conformity, but rather a sense of deep connection with other beings or cultivating an inner rhythm with the divine presence in all of creation. The Beatitudes as a whole can be understood as a spiritual process of healing, of putting ourselves back into sync with God’s ruling principles as they are manifest in the processes at work in nature. With respect to the fear, turmoil, despair, and psychic numbing that may make up part of our emotional response to the ecological crisis, the Beatitudes point to a process of healing that seeks to reconnect us to the divine presence in all of creation which in turn empowers us to act fruitfully to address the crisis. By so doing, the Beatitudes echo the insight that, via biophilia, we are deeply connected with other living beings and that we share a strong psychic or spiritual bond with the wider Earth community.

One way to understand the first Beatitude (“blessed are the poor in spirit...”) would be: Healed are those who find their home in the breath and who devotedly hold fast to it as though it were all that was left; they shall be empowered with the sense of ‘I can’ (kingdom) that illuminates and shines through all. The phrase *l’meskenae b’rukhu* (poor in spirit) carries the image of the breath (or spirit) finding

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8 All the transliterations from the Aramaic used here, as well as the interpretations of the Aramaic phrases, are drawn from the work *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus* (Douglas-Klotz 1990).
a home or holding fast to something. Malkuta (“kingdom”) can be understood as the ruling principles or even the sense of empowerment that enables one to say “I can” against all odds. The word dashmaya (“heaven”) can be understood to refer to a realm of vision and possibility – which might include the kind of vision resulting from the “foresight intelligence” needed to imagine a world that could be sustainable for generations to come and then act to bring it about. More theologically, dashmaya suggests a kind of “anticipatory fidelity” to God’s vision for the world. This phrase suggests that, when in deep emotional turmoil (as when confronted with pain), returning to an awareness to the breath constitutes a first step toward being healed. This insight echoes that of many other spiritual traditions, for example the breathing practices found in yoga and Buddhism. As a spiritual practice, Douglas-Klotz (1990: 49) suggests that “when feeling out of rhythm with yourself or your surroundings,” you should endeavor to feel the sound of the word rukha (breath, spirit) as you intone and breathe it, allowing the “breathing to touch the entire body.” The simple act of paying attention to or “finding one’s home in” the breath opens the first step to healing and fruitful action.

The second Beatitude (“blessed are those who mourn…”) can be understood as meaning: Fruitful and ripe are those who are weak and confused, who wander and grieve as they weep for their frustrated desire; they shall feel their inner flow of strength return and see the face of fulfillment in a new form. The word normally translated as “mourners,” lawile, also refers to those who long deeply for something to come about and who may feel a deep emotional turmoil, anguish, or fatigue from this yearning. In the context of the ecological crisis, the anguish one may feel for the destruction of so much of beauty and value, the resulting suffering of people and other creatures, and the longing for deep healing in the world come to mind. The word often translated as “comforted,” netbayun, also evokes the image of being “returned from wandering” or “seeing the arrival (literally, the face of) what one longs for” and being restored to wholeness (Douglas-Klotz 1990: 51).

Like Macy’s idea of honoring our pain for the world, this Beatitude suggests that the way of lament is more than a process of simple catharsis. Once repressed feelings are unblocked, energy is released. “As each of us breaks the old taboos and conditioned responses, we begin to sense this promise within us; we feel new possibilities stir. We are like organisms awakening from sleep, stretching an arm, bending a leg, making sounds” (Macy 1983: 19). Lament is more than simply a release or letting go of pain, it is an opportunity to connect via our emotions to others who suffer and to find a deep source of transformative power in this interconnection. The images in this Beatitude of returning from one’s wandering,
seeing the fulfillment of longing in a new form, and being renewed by an inner flow of strength and energy coincide with Macy’s observations about the power of lament or “despair and empowerment work:”

To present despair and empowerment work as just one of catharsis would suggest that, after owning and sharing our responses to mass suffering and the prospects of mass annihilation, we could walk away purged of pain for our world. But that is neither possible nor adequate to our needs, since each day’s news brings fresh cause for grief. By recognizing our capacity to suffer with our world, we dawn to wider dimensions of being. In those dimensions there is pain still, but a lot more. There is wonder, even joy, as we come home to our mutual belonging—and there is a new kind of power. (Macy 1983: 23)

As a personal spiritual practice to accompany this Beatitude, Douglas-Klotz (1990: 51) suggests breathing in the word lawile and breathing out netbayun and, while doing so, to “embrace all of what you feel and allow all emotions to wash through as though you were standing under a gentle waterfall.” Then, become conscious of the source of these feelings and consider the meaning of these emotions in this time and place so as to discern the action appropriate for the moment at hand. In communal practice, persons chant the Beatitude accompanied by simple movements that evoke the sense of both sharing one’s pain and suffering with others while also unblocking the flow of pain from repression. Shared grief becomes one way of reuniting with a greater community of love, of joining with something greater than one’s own small ego-self.

The third Beatitude (“blessed are the humble…”) could be interpreted as meaning: Fruitful and healed are those who have softened all inner rigidities; they shall receive the physical strength and vitality of the Earth as their inheritance. The word l’makikhe, often translated as “humble,” “meek,” or “gentle,” portrays the image of having softened or liquefied any kind of unnatural hardness or rigidity within as well as letting go of suffering or repressed desires. This might also be extended as well, in light of our previous discussion of the “three poisons,” to letting go of addictive behaviors, including the desire for unnecessary consumption. The word nertun (inherit) points to receiving from a deep source of transformative, reciprocal strength. “Softening the rigid places within leaves us more open to the real source of power – God acting through all of nature, all earthiness” (Douglas-Klotz 1990: 54). Those who soften these inner rigidities will be renewed inwardly and be filled with the living vigor of the Earth itself. The image here suggests harmonizing with the
energy present in all of nature, of reconnecting deeply with the greater Earth community, and acting in concert with it. As a communal spiritual practice, the movements Douglas-Klotz uses to accompany this phrase suggest tapping into the deep healing energies present in the Earth itself. This process of opening ourselves to the deep healing potential found in all of creation resembles what Thomas Berry described as “inscendence” (Plotkin 2011) – a path of descent into both the depths of the soul and the heart of the phenomenal world that simultaneously enkindles vision and wisely guides action.

The next Beatitude (“hunger and thirst for justice...”) conveys the image of a person watching through the night, waiting for something to happen, and in some sense creating a deep vortex of desire for justice and harmony that bears fruit in the birthing of new possibilities. The fifth Beatitude (“blessed are the merciful...”) speaks of a deep compassion coming from the rahm, or womb, providing an image of compassion as an act of birthing. Then, the next Beatitude (“the pure in heart”) points to a renewal of purpose that energizes our actions and fills us with vitality. The seventh Beatitude (“the peacemakers...”) presents an image of planting peace each season, becoming a channel for the divine purpose, and embodying sacred communion. Finally, the eighth Beatitude blesses those who are dislocated and shattered for trying to heal the imbalance in the world, for to them belongs the malkuta – which can be understood as a deep sense of empowerment flowing from the ruling principles or the hidden, divine potentiality immanent in the very fabric of the universe. It is here that Douglas-Klotz most explicitly links the Beatitudes to activism in favor of justice and sustainability, noting that “society does not easily tolerate the prophetic spirit and one is likely to run into opposition;” Jesus “places the reactiveness of society in a cosmic context” and suggests that his followers who “are dislocated for justice, consider [their] new home to be the planet – or the universe” (Douglas-Klotz 1990: 69). Taken together, then, the Beatitudes constitute a process of deep spiritual healing that draws on our emotions to renew a sense of communion and empowerment aimed at healing the Earth.

Conclusion

Empowering action to address the ecological crisis requires a deep emotional intelligence that can enable humans to overcome the myopia for the future that currently seems to characterize modern industrial cultures; work though emotions like fear to unblock energy for change; and cultivate a deep sense of compassion and love to motivate and sustain fruitful action. Modern neuroscience demonstrates the need to consciously work with emotions to
develop the kind of ethical rationality required to address the ecological crisis. The traditional Buddhist teachings on the three poisons of aversion, attachment, and delusion provide valuable insights into how emotions can at times impede effective action. Spiritual practices such as the Work that Reconnects and the Beatitudes of Jesus provide concrete ways to work with and through emotions to motivate fruitful action, widen our circles of compassion, cultivate care for others (including humans, the wider Earth community, and future generations), and build community and solidarity.

In this time of deep ecological crisis when the future of human civilization and the lives of countless other species hang in the balance, an urgent challenge for all communities and persons of faith is to seek out wisdom and practices from our different traditions and to share these widely to awaken people to the challenges we face, help them to deal with the powerful emotions this may evoke, and seek deep sources of power – such as gratitude, awe, beauty, love, and compassion – to fruitfully address the crisis. At the same time, we should be willing to adapt these practices to our time, integrating insights from different scientific disciplines and dialoguing with other spiritual traditions in the process. Both the Work that Reconnects and the path of the Beatitudes demonstrate concrete practices that integrate traditional sources of wisdom and modern science in new ways to create powerful processes to work with emotions to empower and enlighten work to heal the Earth community as a whole.

References


