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**GRIEVING CLIMATE CHANGE:
A Psychological and Personal Exploration of Emotionally Processing the Climate Crisis**

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF A BACHELOR'S OF ARTS DEGREE IN
ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

PITZER COLLEGE
CLAREMONT, CALIFORNIA

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MAY, 2023

Content Warning: This thesis discusses topics of grief, loss, and mourning. If you feel uncomfortable, upset, or overwhelmed at any time, please do not feel any pressure to keep reading. That being said, grief and the emotions associated with it are often hard to face because we care deeply for the cause of our grief. I encourage you to allow yourself to feel your emotions freely during and after reading.

Abstract

The psychological concept of grief, although not typically associated with climate change, has strong applications to the emotional processing of climate change for human beings. Grief can be related to climate change in many ways, including the grief that individuals may feel over the anticipated loss of their future, losses that may be experienced due to climate-related disasters, and grief for the overall implications of anthropogenic climate change. A mixture of traditional literature analysis and creative nonfiction essays, which focus on personal narratives from interviews and the author's experience, are used to outline the ways in which the psychology of climate grief can intersect with the many facets of life. Specific types of grief, expert analyses, and personal stories demonstrate the various manifestations of climate grief. Creative essays, an outline and analysis of climate-aware therapy, and an explanation of the relevance of mourning rituals across various cultures provide insight in how to manage climate grief. The personal narratives feature the perspectives of Professors in the Environmental Analysis and Environmental Science fields at the Claremont Colleges, as well as several students studying Environmental Analysis at Pitzer College. This project provides a foundation that describes the importance of climate grief, but it also uses creative nonfiction writing as a tool to connect with the readers and evoke an emotional reading experience, perhaps providing some comfort and guidance to those struggling with climate grief themselves.

Keywords: *grief, climate change, climate psychology, loss*

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To my parents. Thank you for dealing with me. I'm sorry that you've had front-row seats to my journey through climate grief. I don't think you ever expected your child processing existential threat to be one of your parenting hurdles, but I am so appreciative that you always try to say the right thing. There is no right thing to say. I hate to admit it, but I think my desire to "save the world" or whatever comes from you two being the greatest role models a child could ask for. You've been saving the world for much longer than I've known you. I will never stop looking up to you.

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To anyone who is grieving. I'm sorry. Grieving is really exhausting. I'm sorry if this thesis is hard to read, but I think you should try to read it. You may feel less alone. We need each other to get through this. Each day we face our grief, we gain more clarity, even if it doesn't always feel like it. Keep sharing your thoughts and stories. We all have so much more to learn.

Introduction

It took me a while to come across the topic of “climate grief.” I had been researching around it, reading about climate anxiety, mental health and climate change, hopelessness, and the overall way that the human mind processes climate change. When I finally landed on the concept of climate grief I was incredibly excited, probably too excited, since the topic was literally about loss, death, and climate change. But it was like someone had handed me a book about my own life that was already written - well, more like half-written - and I finally found the concept that made sense of my turbulent and unrecognizable emotions.

When I first began learning about climate change I thought it sounded *pretty bad*, but I didn't fully understand its severity. It was my initial interest in the topic that led me to keep learning about it, and my view of climate change quickly shifted from something I was *pretty interested in* to something that *consumed my daily life and became my greatest fear*. I would read articles, watch videos, and go to classes that informed me that we were heading down a path of inevitable climate destruction, and I continued carrying the weight of that reality with me.

It may sound like I processed the climate crisis appropriately, but I handled my emotions in ways that fall far from grace. I cried a lot. I still do sometimes. I cried to my parents and tried, on numerous occasions, to get them to understand the severity of the crisis, to make them feel even an ounce of the dread and fear that was spilling out of me. I cried falling asleep at night when I was alone with my knowledge and without a friend or the endless realm of the internet to provide some temporary relief.

It was debilitating, and I was convinced that everyone around me was undeniably insane for not reacting in the same way as I was. How could you go on with your life as if the greatest existential threat is not looming over us?

After some time it occurred to me that I might actually be the crazy one. Why was I so personally affected by this knowledge if everyone else seemed just fine? I've always known that I struggle with anxiety and feel emotions strongly, so maybe this was just a byproduct of my personality? Maybe I had to learn to mask my fears, or just not feel them in the first place?

I wrote a personal essay for a contest in the spring of 2021 that was supposed to be about love. I wrote about climate change. I couldn't shake my climate anxiety when I probably needed to. I knew that if my voice was going to be heard, it was going to be about the planet. I'm not sure that I felt there was space to linger on the aspects of life that bring us joy, that distract us and pull us out of the darkness. Love, to me, was clouded by climate change.

I did not win that contest, perhaps rightfully so, but I am so glad I wrote that essay. It was the outlet I needed to release and structure my overwhelming emotions surrounding climate change and ground them within my own life story. It was my first recognition of my own climate grief, before I even knew what climate grief was. At the time, I couldn't tell why I felt lighter and calmer after I finished writing, but I know now that it was because I had just actively grieved the loss of my future. I had felt really scared, sad, angry, confused, and overwhelmed by it, but I had grieved it.

I believe that is the reason I can keep writing and learning about climate change today. I am still really scared and sometimes process my emotions in ways that I wouldn't recommend, but I have also developed a sense of hope and a will to keep moving forward. I don't think any of us can address climate change without grieving it first. Grief is necessary to process the losses of the past (or the future, in this case), but it is also an essential part of our continuous strength that allows us to proceed despite and in honor of what is lost.

This topic of grief and climate change is important because it adds to the human-based understanding of climate change perception and processing. As it turns out, learning about climate change has been an overwhelming experience for many of us, often leading us to feel paralyzed by the size of the crisis and anxious about what to do. By applying the psychological concept of grief to the processing of climate change, (something grief is not conventionally associated with) we aim to understand climate change on a deeper, psychological level. Ideally, the established psychological understanding of grief can be utilized to further our knowledge of how humans process climate change and what approaches should be taken to most effectively benefit the planet.

Grief related to climate change can also be applied in a more literal sense, since there are millions of people around the world who have already endured losses due to the effects of climate change. The number of people grieving climate-related losses will only grow, so it is important to understand that form of grief and what can be done to manage it.

Methods

This thesis project leans on both traditional academic and creative nonfiction writing to draw connections between the psychological concept of grief and the human processing of climate change. The literature catalogs what is known about grief from a psychological perspective, as well as the emerging understanding of climate or ecological grief. The ways in which climate grief affects individuals from various backgrounds and experiences is shown through explicit academic and research-based examples and through the interviews that were conducted for this project. The interviews, which featured insight from Environmental Analysis and Environmental Science Professors at The Claremont Colleges as well as Environmental Analysis students at Pitzer College, demonstrate how climate grief is felt by the various individuals in my community who engage with climate change-related content almost every day. Each interview was done individually and all interview questions were approved by the Pitzer College Institutional Review Board.

The creative nonfiction style of writing was intentionally incorporated into this thesis because I want any potential readers to enjoy reading about this topic, and to make a somewhat daunting topic to seem accessible to anyone who may find comfort in reading the stories of others. The professor interviews are written as profile-like stories that feature descriptions of the interview experience itself as well as the words of wisdom that each professor shared. The student interviews were combined to share overlapping themes and experiences of each of the students, and they rely heavily on direct quotes from the students themselves. The final interview that was included in this thesis was with a “climate-aware” therapist, and her insight is integrated into one of the final sections of this thesis about managing grief. This thesis turned into a much more self-exploratory and narrative-based project than I had initially intended, but I believe that

those perspectives actually draw meaningful conclusions and allow readers to connect with the topic of climate grief.

Background Literature

Background

As of 2021, over half of young people (aged 16-25) across Nigeria, Philippines, India, Brazil, Portugal, Australia, USA, France, Finland, and the UK believe that humanity is doomed. 55% believe they will have fewer opportunities than their parents, 39% are hesitant to have children, and 55% feel that what they value most will be destroyed (Hickman et al., 2021).

I first came across this study when reading the book *Generation Dread* by one of the study's researchers, Britt Wray. In her book, Wray explained how these feelings are disproportionately experienced among young people, leading this generation of young people to be distinguished from other generations not by their achievements or potential, but rather by their overwhelming fear of their future (Wray, 2022). Although the largest majority of people who feel scared for the future are a part of the younger generations, many individuals and communities across generations have expressed deep distress and fear for the planet's future due to climate change (Wray, 2022).

Climate change is clearly a problem, but not just for the reasons that we may initially believe. There are people who are experiencing very challenging emotions due to their knowledge of climate change, largely manifesting in feelings of anxiety, fear, and even grief. Grief, although not traditionally associated with climate change, is actually a very suitable term to apply to the emotions that are felt surrounding climate change. Grief is rooted in feelings derived from loss, and climate change will continue to bring about losses in an abundance of ways. Losses of habitats, wildlife, communities, lives due to natural disasters, natural resources, food security, access to clean water, and even our overall infrastructure have been felt by many

already, and they are lingering in the near future for the rest of us. Climate change is, ultimately, the loss of our planet as we know it, and that is certainly something worth grieving.

Climate grief is continually felt by communities across the world, mostly marginalized communities, but there are a plethora of individuals who are experiencing climate grief without a direct and personal experience that caused their grief. For many, the looming threat of climate change and the dramatic impacts it will have on our planet's future (and our own futures) is enough to send them into a spiral of anxiety and fear. As I mentioned before, the study done by Wray and her colleagues found that 39% of the participants were hesitant to have children, something that Wray herself was also in turmoil over (Hickman et al., 2021). She, like many people who have careers focused on climate change, was exposed to the reality of the crisis on a daily basis, and her fear for the future began to take a toll on her daily life and the way she envisioned her future (Wray, 2022). The thought of bringing a child into a world that will continue to threaten their existence is terrifying, and there are more than enough reasons to doubt if that would be a wise decision. But yet, people still want to have children, and they should be able to without feelings of guilt weighing them down as they partake in parenthood, something that many have intrinsically viewed as a natural part of the human trajectory.

Wray's points on grieving parenthood led me to revisit an article by Mary Annaïse Heglar (2019) that I read for my senior seminar class last semester called *Climate Change Isn't the First Existential Threat*. In this piece, Heglar states that although climate change is the most serious threat we have ever faced, marginalized communities have been living through existential threats for generations. For Black communities, "[s]lavery didn't end with freedom; it just morphed into a marginally more sophisticated, still deadly machine" (Heglar, 2019). Although that sentiment has continued to ring true, Black people did not stop having children due to fear that their next

generation will continue facing threats to existence on a daily basis, even if that fear becomes instilled in their children. “Black people of the not-too-distant past trembled for every baby born into that world” (Heglar, 2019). Examples like Heglar’s show us that marginalized communities have been grieving their futures for much longer than we recognize. They have continued to reproduce out of courage and hope for the future, because a part of living through existential threat is continuing to survive as a community and believing that a strong future is in the making.

Literature Review

Introduction

Climate change, and even climate change communication, is now a heavily researched topic (Hayes & Poland, 2018; Bourque & Cunsolo Willox, 2014). There is literature on the ways that humans perceive the threat of climate change and the anxiety that discussing or thinking about the topic may cause an individual or group (MacDonald et al., 2015). There is a newer idea emerging in the field of human perception of climate change that relates the psychological concept of grief to human perception of climate change (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2020; Cunsolo Willox & Ellis, 2018). Grief is also an extensively researched topic that has strong literature about its applications and manifestations within human lives when one experiences a loss (Hamilton, 2016; Sweeting & Gilhooly, 1990). There are also specific subsections within the existing research on grief that are particularly relevant to discussions of climate change such as anticipatory grief (Sweeting & Gilhooly, 1990), ambiguous grief (Boss, 2007), and even ecological grief (Cunsolo Willox & Ellis, 2018), which will be discussed in more detail in a later section of this thesis. In this literature review, I will draw connections between the existing

literature about both grief and climate change and discuss the emerging literature that combines the two concepts.

What do we know about grief?

Psychologists have been working to understand grief for decades, exploring how loss affects the human brain and influences our actions (Hamilton, 2016). From those studies emerged even more specific research that has split the concept of grief into various subsections (Sweeting & Gilhooly, 1990; Gharmaz & Milligan, 2006; Boss, 2007). These more specific areas of grief can aim to apply the concept to losses that might go beyond the traditional loss of a family member or friend, but rather they may be losses that are not as direct, visible, or may not have even occurred yet (Hamilton, 2016). C.K. Aldrich is referred to several times by authors discussing anticipatory grief since he characterized the difference between grief that is felt after a loss and grief that is felt prior to a loss (Sweeting & Gilhooly, 1990). The concept of grief has been studied in the field of psychology for many decades, but it wasn't until more recently that the literature on grief began applying the concept to other fields and forms of loss that go beyond the traditional loss of a close figure in one's life. Gharmaz and Milligan (2006) expand on the pre-existing research on grief with a more sociological focus. "We locate grief in its contested definitions and ground it in a sociological description of the experienced emotion that readers can juxtaposed against dominant psychological theories of grief" (Gharmaz & Milligan, 2006). The authors trace themes of grief to past social movements and analyze how emotions, emotional processing, and social bonds can be viewed when applying grief.

Another more recent subsection of grief with emerging literature is "ambiguous grief." Pauline Boss has authored some of the most notable literature on the topic and has contributed to

a greater understanding of how grief can be relevant to more than just what is traditionally thought of as loss. Although the literature on ambiguous loss theory doesn't expand much beyond the individual or family aspects of grief, it does aim to re-characterize the concept of grief to be applied more broadly. Boss highlights specific examples of where ambiguous loss theory might be relevant, such as a family member leaving for military deployment, learning about a missing child, or caring for a loved one with dementia or Alzheimer's (Boss, 2007). Pre-existing literature on topics such as ambiguous loss theory do not include any relation to climate change, but both the general and specific literature on grief can be linked to challenges of human perception of climate change and find relevance among those discussions.

Communicating and understanding climate change

The notion that perceiving and understanding climate change has an impact on humans is becoming more popular and prevalent in climate change literature. Issues of mental health have been connected to climate change from a multitude of perspectives, including climate anxiety, the stress of experiencing a climate change-related disaster, and connections between public mental health and climate change (Cunsolo Willox & Ellis, 2018; Head & Harada, 2017; Bourque & Cunsolo Willox, 2014). This development in literature has begun to bridge the gap between the fields of climate science, psychology, and sociology.

Hayes and Poland's (2018) article analyzes the validity of climate vulnerability assessments in accounting for and addressing mental health. These assessments are becoming more popular in cities across the world, and are emerging with proposed plans for adaptation and mitigation to climate change. The authors write from a perspective that is already cognizant of the impacts that climate change has on mental health, allowing them to focus the majority of

their writing on recommendations for integrating mental health into climate vulnerability assessments (Hayes & Poland, 2018). Their work displays a tangible and realistic, yet also literature-based, approach to incorporating what is already understood about the increased vulnerability to mental health issues that climate change poses, allowing those who come across this literature to apply it to their own city's assessments.

Expanding on the need to understand and implement the mental health perspective into climate change actions within our communities, literature is also touching on the increased need for public mental health support that will continue to emerge as the effects of climate change worsen. In relation to this emerging issue, the authors emphasize the increased burden that mental health professionals will be experiencing as climate change leads to a growing mental health crisis that could manifest in increased depression and anxiety, general psychological distress, and possibly higher addiction and suicide rates (Bourque & Cunsolo Willox, 2014). Similar to the expanding burden that climate change is adding to mental health professionals, there is also research that describes how climate scientists are also struggling with mental health-related issues, but it's generally from a more personal perspective. As individuals who spend the majority of their time focused on the depressing reality of climate change, Head and Harada (2017) write about the mental challenges that climate scientists face and the coping mechanisms they may use to manage their emotions surrounding climate change and the future. From their sample of Australian climate scientists, the authors discovered a trend of suppressing the difficult emotions in order to continue working. However they concluded that acknowledging tumultuous feelings such as anxiety and fear is a better and healthier practice. These emotions, although not yet recognized by this area of literature, can lead to or be categorized as climate-related grief.

In relation to greater risks of mental health challenges and their association to climate change, youth are now categorized as an at-risk population for impacts to their mental health and overall wellbeing (MacDonald et al., 2015). Since that fact was determined, some literature now focuses on how to manage mental health challenges that youth populations may be disproportionately facing. The Macdonald et al. (2015) article found that teenagers within the Inuit culture in the Canadian Arctic were experiencing high amounts of mental health related challenges from seeing rapid changes to their environment due to climate change, and the authors were able to identify key ideas and practices that could act as protective factors for those youths who were struggling. As the literature expands to address real-world implications of climate change on mental health and emotional wellbeing, psychological and environmental research is collaborating to understand how humans are processing the climate crisis and what can be done to properly address those challenges.

Climate change is something to grieve

The emerging collaborations between the fields of psychology and climate science have led to literature that is now discussing grief in relation to climate change. Although the literature is just scratching the surface of the topic, there is now specific literature that is addressing and acknowledging the emotion of grief as something that can be felt in response to climate change (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2020; Cunsolo Willox & Ellis, 2018). Cunsolo Willox has authored the majority of this focused research, and she has published work on this specific topic that highlights ecological grief and risk perception. An article that Cunsolo Willox and Ellis (2018) published characterizes ecological grief into three main categories: “grief associated with physical ecological losses, grief associated with the loss of environmental knowledge, and grief

associated with anticipated future losses.” This characterization helps to define the specific ways that the emotion of grief intersects with how human beings are processing and experiencing climate change.

The combined climate change and grief focused literature has also clearly indicated the disproportionate effects of ecological or climate grief that certain groups may feel. They include discussions of the groups that are most impacted, or most likely to be impacted, by climate change, as well as the groups that are most dependent on the land such as some indigenous communities and farmers (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2020). The authors also recommend that there is stronger awareness and preparation among public health and mental health professionals to prepare for the increase in climate change-related grief that will be felt more increasingly by both communities and individuals around the world (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2020).

Conclusion

It is now clear that grief has a clear connection to climate change in numerous ways, and the literature is continuing to develop and explore this emerging challenge. The existing literature is strong, but there is certainly room for much more research and analysis. I plan to utilize the existing literature on grief, climate change, mental health, and their intersections in my thesis, but I will also aim to expand on the existing literature and consider new subtopics within this idea. With an understanding that grief is a common and normal emotion to arise when processing climate change, I hope to question whether grieving a concept such as climate change creates the desire to mobilize and help the problem, or if it transforms into a paralyzing feeling. Additionally, the existing literature gives some suggestions as for what should be done to manage issues of mental health related to climate change, and I will aim to give concrete and

realistic examples for what can be done. Feelings of grief surrounding climate change are real and impactful, but we need to continue to strive to understand how to manage that grief and even use it to help us address the challenge of climate change.

Grief

In order to understand climate grief, we must first understand the concept of grief from a psychological viewpoint. The current research on grief is largely focused on attachment theory and cognitive stress theory (O'Connor, 2019). In a general sense, grief will often entail disruptions to one's executive functioning, including loss of emotional regulation, difficulty concentrating, and disruptions to one's typical appetite and sleep schedule (O'Conner, 2019). Grief entails much more than feelings of sadness, and as many of us may know from the Kubler-Ross model, grief can entail several stages of emotions (Kubler-Ross, 1969/2014). When grief is not tied to the traditional loss of life, our outward expressions of our grief can greatly influence how accepted those feelings of grief are by our greater social supporters. If you are a public figure with a large platform, your expressions of grief may even be at risk of judgment by society and challenge your public image.

I grew up watching Bill Nye The Science Guy during science class in elementary school, and I know I was not alone in that experience. Nye taught us so many essential science lessons that allowed us to view the world as amazing and science as the tool to understand it. Although my former classmates and I are all adults now and no longer look forward to a Bill Nye The Science Guy viewing in our science classes, we can actually still learn a lot from him. Through doing research for this project, I learned that Bill Nye is grieving climate change very publically. As a science communicator, Nye has taken his platform to spread awareness about climate change to as many people as possible, and he recently did so using the concept of climate grief. In a short documentary produced by National Geographic called *Bill Nye's Global Meltdown*, Nye uses the Kubler-Ross stages of grief model (1969) to break down his process of grieving climate change in a way that uses real-world examples and follows a personal narrative. In a silly

yet generally effective way, the film starts off with Nye lying on a “therapist’s” couch while he mopes about climate change. That therapist is quickly revealed to be Arnold Schwarzenegger, who makes the astute point that Nye seems to be experiencing grief, something that Nye didn’t believe could be felt towards a concept such as climate change. “Dr.” Schwarzenegger guides Nye through every stage of his climate grief, and Nye makes a conscious effort throughout the film to normalize his feelings of climate grief and ground them in truth by using the stories of others (Cassel, 2015).

Nye’s journey with climate grief ended with acceptance, or at least that’s how the documentary concluded. Nye stated in the last few moments of the film that “the last thing we can afford to do is let climate change grief get us down,” framing his new-found acceptance of climate change as the fuel that is propelling him to face the climate crisis (Cassel, 2015, 43:55). These emotions marked by acceptance are the typical conclusive feelings elicited by processing grief, most famously expressed by the Kubler Ross model (Kubler-Ross, 1969/2014). Those five stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance which emerged from Kubler-Ross’s book *On Death And Dying* (Kubler-Ross, 1969/2014). Kubler-Ross’s inspiration for creating this model came from her experience of working with terminally ill patients and feeling unprepared to handle the grief associated with that responsibility. The stages of grief were initially expressed as being from the perspective of terminally ill patients, outlining how they are coming to terms with their own mortality through the various stages of grief. The acceptance stage and conclusion of the book lean on the importance of a terminally ill person’s dialogue and overall communication with their family and caretakers as a way to best manage the associated grief (Kubler-Ross, 1969/2014).

Since *On Death and Dying* was published, this model of the five stages of grief has become the go-to framework for managing grief for the general public, as well as for many mental health professionals. However, as many experts in the field as well as Kubler-Ross herself have suggested, the stages of grief model are often taken out of proportion and misinterpreted (Stroebe et al., 2017). In a later book, Kubler-Ross says that the stages of grief were never intended to categorize the emotions of grief into a standardized model that pushes away overwhelming emotions. “They are responses to loss that many people have, but there is not a typical response to loss, as there is no typical loss. Our grief is as individual as our lives” (Kessler & Kubler-Ross, 2005/2014, p. 7). Other experts take that point even further by claiming that the stages of grief model can be responsible for stunting the practice and science of grief by confining the concept of grief to denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Stroebe et al., 2017). The stages of grief model gained widespread popularity for a reason, largely because so many of us who have experienced grief, especially in the traditional sense which involves the loss of a loved one, can relate to the stages and feelings outlined in the model. However, it is also clear that there is no right way to grieve, and those who are grieving in ways that don’t align with the stages of grief model may feel as though they are not grieving in the way that they are expected to (Stroebe et al., 2017). Presenting grief in the stages model has made an overwhelming and often taboo topic digestible for the general public, but grief is much more complex than five emotions that come in sequential stages allows for.

When trying to make sense of the psychological concept of grief in relation to climate change, three types of grief emerge as most applicable to this intersection: ambiguous grief, anticipatory grief, and disenfranchised grief. Pauline Boss, who I mentioned earlier and defined the notion of ambiguous loss, says that it is “the most difficult kind of loss because there is no

closure” (Boss, 2010). Ambiguous loss is generally tied to the loss of a loved one, however the loss occurs and manifests in a way that is not traditionally experienced, therefore making it difficult to grieve since it doesn’t appear in ways that loss of a loved one is generally seen. For example, if a parent has lost a child due to kidnapping, their loss is ambiguous. In this case, they are experiencing the current loss of their child with the additional uncertainty if and when their child will return as well as a very socially challenging loss to navigate outwardly. Another type of ambiguous loss can be seen when you are in the process of losing someone, however they are still physically present. This can appear when a loved one is diagnosed with a degenerative disease such as dementia, and you are experiencing the loss of that person as you’ve known them (Boss, 2010).

When ambiguity is involved in the loss, the process of grief can become stalled. The expression of traditional grief may not seem appropriate, and feelings of grief may not even be recognized by the individual experiencing the ambiguous loss and their typical social supporters. The situation causing the feelings of ambiguous grief are out of the control of those being affected, and they remain quite constant without an opportunity for closure. For many experiencing ambiguous grief, the death of a loved one can actually provide relief, since much of the grieving of their loss had been done before they were actually gone and death provides the opportunity for fully expressing grief. (Boss, 2010).

We can connect climate grief to ambiguous grief in many ways, but mainly in the sense that climate change often feels like it is like we are experiencing the slow death of our planet. We’re losing the world that we’ve always known in a way that feels out of our control. It’s a loss that is constant and doesn’t get better with time. There is an end in sight but we’re not sure when it will come or what exactly it will look like, so we don’t have closure. Climate grief is

ambiguous because it is not just one definable thing or person that we are losing, but it is everything. That grief, much like grief in the traditional sense, is felt differently by everyone because although we are all grieving the loss of this planet, our different life experiences have provided us with different things to lose. Some people may be grieving the loss of their home due to a natural disaster or their community's primary source of food or water. Others may be grieving the loss of the future they had always imagined for themselves as they realize that they might not be given the same opportunities as the generations before them. This all falls right in line with ambiguous grief, and just like those experiencing ambiguous grief due to the loss of a loved one, the outward process of grieving something so ambiguous does not feel socially normalized or acceptable.

This brings us to the concept of disenfranchised grief, which is grief that is non-death related and is not accepted within the typical social standards of grief and grieving behaviors. "When the individual's subjective appraisal of a loss falls outside general social norms and expectations, the experience of grief is compounded by isolation and pressure to deny the subjective account, creating a disparity between how a loss should be experienced (as determined by the dominant social narrative) versus how a loss is actually experienced by that individual" (Doka, 2019, p. 13). Grief of this nature is often forced to take place in private, since the fear of judgment from others will often dictate how we express our thoughts and emotions outwardly. However, societal standards surrounding the acceptance of different types of grief vary, so disenfranchisement of non-death related losses may be more prevalent in certain places. As Doka points out, much of the traditional standards around grieving are interwoven with Western ideals of rationality (Doka, 2019). To clarify, organizations will provide bereavement leave for employees who have lost an immediate family member, but bereavement leave is not typically

allowed for losses that fall beyond that scope. This is because we have defined grief as a Western society to typically only apply to losing a close family member or loved one. If we begin to expand our definition of grief on a societal level, then our organizations will have to adjust to provide support in a way that we currently do not view as rational in Western society (Doka, 2019).

Disenfranchisement of grief does not just come from outward forces, and feelings of grief can often be disenfranchised by the individual who is experiencing the grief. Because non-death related losses, such as the losses associated with climate change, are not viewed as grief by a majority of society, someone experiencing feelings of grief related to those losses may not even recognize it themselves, therefore not allowing themselves the proper emotional space to process the loss and may be hesitant to reach out for support. Although grief is a well-researched topic in the psychological and physiological aspects, the social aspect of grief is often neglected (Doka, 2008). Disenfranchised grief can be especially difficult for those experiencing it because the same social norms surrounding support for traditional grief do not exist for disenfranchised grief. When a friend or family member loses a loved one, support can be shown through sending flowers or attending a funeral. When someone is going through grief that is disenfranchised, friends or family might not know how to show support to those grieving, and it is also likely that they might not even recognize that their friend or family member is experiencing grief (Doka, 2008). That being said, grieving rules and standards differ by culture, and there are many non-western communities that have experienced and supported each other through non-traditional losses before (Doka, 2008). Marginalized communities, such as the Inuit Indigenous peoples have been battling disenfranchised grief in the form of climate losses for

decades, and they will continue to do so as their land is increasingly impacted by the warming planet (MacDonald et al., 2015).

Although the effects of climate change have already been felt by communities across the globe, for some, the thought of climate change is largely viewed as a problem of the future or one that will not directly impact them due to their various social and economic privileges. That being said, those who are not already directly impacted by climate change can still experience very genuine climate grief, and one of the ways that grief typically manifests is through anxiety and anticipation. Anticipatory grief arises when someone begins grieving a loss that has not yet occurred (Fulton et al., 1996). Anticipatory grief relates to both ambiguous and disenfranchised grief in many ways, including the feelings of bereavement before a concrete loss has actually occurred and the unclear ways to navigate the anticipatory feelings of loss internally and externally. Anxiety and grief intersect majorly through anticipatory grief, where the individual has framed their viewpoint of a situation as the “beginning of the end” (Kessler & Kubler-Ross, 2005/2014, p. 1). This grief can feel especially challenging to manage because the loss it is associated with is ahead of us, rather than behind us like in most cases of grief. With the processing of climate change, much of the loss is yet to come, so the grief we are feeling towards it is based in anticipation of the future. This makes it challenging to manage grief since the negative emotions that arise in the grieving process are not able to remain in the past and one is constantly being reminded of the loss that is ahead of them. As I said before, time is essential to the grieving process, and grief often becomes easier to withstand when the cause of the grief is in the rearview. With grief that is based on future losses, time does not serve as the anecdote to bereavement, but rather it is the factor that is making the anticipatory loss more eminent.

Teaching About the Climate Crisis: Our Professors Are Grieving Too

Professor Char Miller - Environmental Analysis and History

I had no intention of going to college in California. I was happy on the East Coast and wanted to stay relatively close to home. I knew by the time I started the college process in high school that I would study the environment, and I believed I could find a great environmental studies program within a great college on the East Coast. I did not believe my college counselor when she told me “Pitzer is your perfect school.”

That next spring, my parents and I walked up the steps of Mason Hall on Pomona’s campus to meet with Char Miller, a professor of Environmental Analysis and History at Pomona.

My college process was coming to a close, and Pitzer was actually starting to seem like a good option for me. It had been recommended to me that I go and speak with Professor Miller since I was undoubtedly going to participate in the Environmental Analysis (EA) program if I became a student, and he was apparently one of the best people to talk to in the field. I brought my parents with me because I was 17 years old and didn’t yet have the strongest grasp of my social anxiety (still don’t). They’re also really good at talking to strangers.

Professor Miller was beaming as he told us about all the great opportunities EA students could have at The Claremont Colleges. He talked about his time as a Pitzer student and how he revels in the fact that the mountains surrounding campus are now so much more visible than they were when he was a student in the 1970s. When I worked up the courage to tell him I was interested in learning more about climate change and environmental justice, he sprung up to his bookshelf and handed me a copy of *The Nature of Hope*, a book that he had co-edited. Before I left his office, he inscribed something on the book’s inside cover and gifted it to me. I left his office feeling certain that I would receive a great environmental education in Claremont. My dad even “borrowed” the book that Professor Miller gave to me because he was actually interested in the topic. *My dad? Interested in environmental justice? Big win for me!* I haven’t seen my copy of the book since.

Now, in my final year as a Pitzer student, I walked up the steps to Mason Hall and into Professor Miller’s office again - this time without my parents. I wanted to interview professors who teach about environmental issues and climate change and discuss the concept of climate grief with them. I had a feeling that Professor Miller, once again, would be a great person with whom to talk.

Within the first ten minutes of my interview with him, Professor Miller told me the story of an EA student in 2010 who had walked into his office and dropped her book bag on the ground.

“I remember that because of the thud, but I remember the thud because of what she then said, which was that every EA course needs to come with a psychiatrist.”

From speaking with this student, it became clear to Professor Miller that he and his colleagues were teaching their students the important information about climate change, but they weren't giving them much hope or guidance to hold on to if the students actually wanted to face the issues they were learning about. He realized that even though he was writing and publishing work outside of the classroom that was based more in environmental action, those same sentiments were not present in his classrooms.

“Here is this sophomore, 19 years old, telling me I wasn't doing my job.”

Professor Miller recalls being incredibly transformed by this conversation, leading him and his colleagues to attempt to address these concerns, which they soon found out were being felt by students across the major.

One shift that Professor Miller made to his curriculum came in the form of assigning readings within his EA classes that highlighted people who were confronting environmental challenges and demonstrating moments of activism, whether they ended successfully or not.

The book *Defiant Gardens*, which gives the example of Japanese-Americans in internment camps in the United States who created gardens despite their abhorrent situation, is assigned by Professor Miller in his introductory Environmental Analysis course (Helphand, 2008).

“Look, here are the people who are in severe stress, and the thing they do is they put their hands in the ground.”

Professor Miller's point made me realize, yet again, that there are countless stories of peoples, especially marginalized peoples, who have remained resilient under circumstances that did not offer much hope. Connecting with nature and community seems to often be the common thread linking these stories together.

His belief in the importance of a hands-on connection with nature extends to Professor Miller's teaching philosophy. Students in the EA department have several opportunities to take what they're learning through their academic studies and apply their passion to real-world scenarios through various projects and theses, often serving as an outlet for the grief and anxiety associated with this area of study.

“There are some really creative ways of responding to these issues, and I think part of it is letting students use their imaginations to answer questions that they feel must be answered for themselves.”

In this way, Professor Miller believes that grief can be transformed into action.

“You need to grieve, but it can’t be the only thing that happens, because in and of itself, it deflects you from steps you could take, not to stop grieving, but to channel it in a way to activate it. That might resolve some of the issues that are bearing down on you,” he said with a pause that allowed me to catch his gaze for a split-second. “And you, collectively.”

Professor Miller stressed the importance of addressing climate change to include both rebuilding the systems that we currently exist within and also remaining hopeful as we work towards change.

“Hope, unlike optimism, doesn’t expect change to happen. It expects you to be part of that force that’s pushing.”

When asked if he ever feels worried for the futures of his students, especially for those who are deciding to go into the EA field and will be forced to actively grapple with climate change on a daily basis, Professor Miller immediately began telling me about his current and previous students. He highlighted the careers they have gone into or what they are aspiring to be, which includes architects, sustainable urban planners, and science communicators.

When talking about those various careers, Professor Miller said, “you’re actually doing the work that needs to be done, and there’s a fulfillment to that.” He emphasized the idea that all kinds of work, whether directly related to climate or not, “is actually going to produce the resilience that you think is necessary.”

“I think that the kids who do EA have already chosen to come at these issues directly, and then figure out a way to mitigate, resolve, and help others.”

In order to gain honest and complete insight from my professors, I wanted to interview them as people, not just as the individuals who have taught me about the environment. They are people who decided to go into the environmental field as a career, who think and teach about climate change every day. They are often the bearers of bad news when it comes to climate change, having to watch as their students absorb and process the curriculum in dramatically different ways. They have parents and children and grandchildren. They are grieving climate change too.

Professor Miller has three grandchildren, and he told me that the last thing he wants to do is hand off a planet that is in worse-shape than before.

“The job of my generation surely is to make the world as resilient as possible. So that Sam, Campbell, and Nora can experience life as fully as I’ve been able to do.”

Nothing bothers Professor Miller more than the notion that the next generation is going to have to solve the issue of climate change.

“It has to be intersectional. It has to cross every boundary possible, and that includes generational boundaries. I’m also a resident, a citizen, a parent, and grandparent, and to slough off that responsibility onto our 14-month-old granddaughter seems pretty awful.”

I tried to end each of my interviews on a somewhat cheerful note, asking each person what makes them feel hopeful - about climate change or in general.

Professor Miller was quick to say that what we categorize as problems related to climate change are all human-driven and human-built, meaning that human beings have the ability to fix and rebuild them.

“The question isn’t whether we can fix them, it’s whether we have the political-social will and environmental desire to do so.”

Talking to students, both in and outside of the classroom, is one of the greatest joys of Professor Miller’s life. He has trouble envisioning a point where he would need to stop the work that he is doing.

“The issues aren’t going away and the students are not going to stop asking the questions of ‘where is the support here? You articulate the problem, what’s the resolution?’”

I shared with Professor Miller that I have begun thinking about time in relation to climate grief, since the ability to rely on time as the tool to move through traditional grief does not apply to a threat that gets worse as time passes. He spoke to me candidly about the concept of grief in relation to climate change, not sugarcoating the hardships that come with it nor wallowing in the losses.

“You don’t get closure when you lose somebody. You have lost them, and that loss is with you always. That is no less true with climate grief. There is a loss, and let’s acknowledge it.”

There was a minor shift in Professor Miller's tone, and I started to realize that he was now talking directly to me.

"That being so, you have to live in the world and you have to put your foot down and you've got to walk through it, in both physical and imaginative ways. Figuring out how each of us is going to do that is I think the goal?"

Was it my goal? I had stopped typing now.

"The answers are gonna be different, right? Because in part, people have biographies. They have lives that lead them to this moment in time when they're sitting with you and talking, and those lives are different."

I think that is my goal. At least one of them.

"I wish I could spend forever on this project," I said, thinking about all of the people I won't have the time to talk to.

"Well, you might!"

Professor Branwen Williams - Environmental Science

Flashback to Zoom school. It was brutal. I was in my bedroom in New York City staring at a screen for more hours each day than I care to admit. Logging into my classes was the only thing that gave me purpose, and yet I couldn't think of a single thing that I dreaded more.

I do have to admit that despite that being a difficult period in all of our lives, I actually learned a lot from my classes during that time. I took my first two environmental science classes, one of which was Global Climate Change taught by Branwen Williams.

I had met Professor Williams in the previous year, when a friend and I had stopped by her office hours to ask if she would speak at a climate rally being hosted by the Sunrise Claremont Colleges organization. She agreed to give a speech, and it was one that I remember being the perfect balance of informative and motivational.

I knew that if I interviewed Professor Williams for this project she would give me a thorough and clear scientific background of climate change. What I didn't know was how she was emotionally processing her job of confronting the scientific realities of climate change on a daily basis. This was something that she did not cover in her lectures.

During our interview, I was reminded of how passionate Professor Williams is about environmental science. She didn't gravitate towards the emotional side of climate change, which often feels natural to me. She recalled first learning about anthropogenic climate change (usage of the word anthropogenic -aka human-caused- is crucial here, and she corrected me several times throughout the interview when I would simply say "climate change." I'm afraid that I'm going to keep making that error throughout this thesis, so please bear with me.) Professor Williams wasn't concerned about anthropogenic climate change initially, in fact, she was simply fascinated by the science behind it.

She chuckled as she told me the story of her family's 24 hour road trip from Ontario, Canada to Florida when she was 10 years old. It was the first time she saw dolphins and whales, and catching a glimpse of the exquisite marine life within the ocean determined that she would become a marine biologist. It was later, in her undergraduate program in Marine Biology, when Professor Williams discovered that protecting the oceans was a much grander task than she anticipated.

"I realized that if I wanted to look after the oceans, the most harmful thing to the oceans was actually people."

At that same point, Professor Williams also discovered her passion for research, and especially using animals, plants, or geologic materials as sources of information for how our environment has changed. She walked the line between fascination with our climate's variability and the unsettling awareness that humans had caused this most recent shift in our climate.

Professor Williams did not intend on becoming a professor until halfway through her PHD program, when she realized that she could have a greater impact teaching than she could through work in another realm.

“I think that education is an incredibly powerful tool. My research is important, but my job educating is way more important.”

I asked everyone I interviewed how often they think about climate change, and I noticed quickly that I was getting very similar initial reactions to that question. Professor Williams' was no different.

“Oh everyday,” she said as we both laughed for a second. “Without fail.”

The answers begin to vary when I ask my next follow up question: how often do you have strong emotional reactions to climate change?

For Professor Williams, strong emotional reactions to climate change do not come every day, or even very often.

“I find it fascinating when I think about climate change itself, and it doesn't get overwhelming until I think about the impact on people.”

I had never thought of climate change as something that could be fascinating. Truly. It all seemed like bad news to me. It was eye-opening to hear Professor Williams discuss her appreciation for the science behind something so catastrophic. If you're able to block out its repercussions for a moment, anthropogenic climate change is pretty amazing. After speaking with Professor Williams, I believe that it is crucial to find the passion in your work, even if your work is focused on climate change. She has found a deep love and appreciation for the science that is pointing us towards a very dark reality, and that is clearly why she continues to do what she does. She processes the grief associated with climate change through a lens of fascination.

I'm not going to lie, taking Professor Williams' class was emotionally challenging for me. I would often close my computer at the end of class and stare at the notes I had just written with disbelief (and slight confusion because science lingo is not naturally processed by my brain). I would sit at the dinner table and my parents would ask how my classes were. On the day that we

looked at the geologic timeline in class, I tried to explain that anthropogenic climate change is unsettling because we can trace the cause to human activity. My mom said that sounded interesting and asked if I wanted more rice. On the day that we looked at the IPCC projections I was pretty overwhelmed and tried to show my parents a picture of the graph that we had just looked at in class. They said it was going to be okay even though I had just explained that it wasn't.

I learned to keep my emotional reactions to climate science to myself after a while. I couldn't talk with my classmates about how they were feeling because we would all log out of the zoom meeting as soon as class ended, conversing only if necessary about a group project or double-checking what the homework was. It didn't seem like any of them were as upset as I was. We had no idea what everyone else was thinking.

That being said, I am so glad I took that class. It allowed me to develop the vocabulary and understanding of the science behind an issue that I care so deeply about. While I was so consumed by my grief and emotions surrounding climate change (that were certainly heightened by the pandemic and my quality of life at the time), it never occurred to me what it must be like to teach students about the science that will likely alter their lives and their expectations of the future. I finally had the chance - and learned maturity, I guess - to ask what it is like to be a professor in this field.

Professor Williams stressed her desire for her students to gain some science literacy from her courses. She wants them to be able to decipher the underlying truth of the science and have conversations with people about it.

I shared with her a long conversation I had with an Uber driver who felt the need to tell me all of his personal opinions and doubts about climate change. I explained how I used a mixture of skills that I had accumulated from my Global Climate Change class and my Psychology of Climate Change class to appeal to his ego while simultaneously giving him the cold, hard facts. When I told Professor Williams what I said, she exclaimed "good job!" I was proving to her and myself that I was truly learning a lot in college, and that my education was going to help me navigate the real world.

I was surprised to hear that Professor Williams is not worried about her students. When asked if she is worried for their futures, she pivoted her answer away from her students to focus on the impact that climate change will have on more geographically distant communities.

"I honestly think that most of the people who are going to be impacted by climate change are people I'll never meet."

Professor Williams is scared for the Pacific Islander communities who are so close to sea level. She is worried for the communities that rely on melting water from glaciers. Most of her students or the people she interacts with are not from those communities. Their concerns about climate change are valid, but they do not elicit the same degree of fear in Professor Williams.

When discussing climate grief, Professor Williams did not seem to identify as someone who is grieving climate change.

“I haven’t experienced what people in New Orleans went through when the hurricane hit. I wasn’t in a community that burned down by a wildfire. I’ve always been one-step removed from that. I don’t think that being removed from that and hearing other peoples’ stories is enough to cause the same level of grief as if that were happening to me.”

Professor Williams speaks with her children about climate change, often explaining it in the context of what the world looks like now in comparison to what it will look like in the future. Having children did not change Professor Williams’ perspective on climate change, but she did notice a shift in her father’s perspective when he became a grandparent.

“All of a sudden he has a legacy and people he cares about who will still be alive.”

If she wasn’t doing so already, Professor Williams became very candid with me when I asked her about feeling hope about climate change. She focused on the goal of staying below 1.5 degrees of global temperature rise that is necessary to keep the planet at the equilibrium at which it currently exists.

“A couple years ago, I stopped thinking we are going to stop climate change. At this point, I do not think that we are going to keep it below the 1.5, and we now need to shift to how do we build up resilience in communities that are going to be most impacted.”

I knew this already, but it still stung a bit to hear it said to me directly.

“We are going to break some equilibriums, move into a new phase, and I am now going to put my energy into helping people who need the help using the resources that I can get.”

“That’s great,” I offhandedly said.

“Well it’s actually really depressing,” she replied. “When I realized that I had shifted mentally on that, that was quite a moment.”

Perhaps that moment was accompanied by some grief? A realization that climate change, something she had been working towards stopping for years and has catastrophic consequences, will not be stopped. That motivation was driving Professor Williams and it was gone. Somehow she reframed it, reignited the motivation so she could keep going. It sounds to me like she grieved it.

“People could actually solve the problem pretty quickly if we were willing to put the energy, the sacrifice, and the resources into doing so.”

She did mention that she is seeing exciting innovations in just the last couple of years that are focused on climate mitigation.

“Heads are not in the sand anymore. There is more momentum in the past two years than I had seen in the decade before. If we had had that momentum a decade ago, we would be having a very different conversation today. It’s a little bit too late, but it is at least finally happening.”

As I was packing up to leave Professor Williams’ office, we got to talking about my personal journey of landing on this topic of climate grief. I explained that although I have not been directly affected by a climate disaster and live a privileged life that will aid me in avoiding much of the worst that is to come from climate change, I have still experienced overwhelming grief for the planet. She was intrigued to hear that from me, and curious to know how I manage those feelings.

I told her that I try to limit my exposure to it and spend my free time doing things that bring me joy. I told her that I watch funny shows on TV and spend time with friends and listen to music, but I started doubting the words coming out of my mouth as I was speaking them. Was that really how I was managing this? I think it’s partly true, but it certainly can’t be the whole truth. Shouldn’t I, of all people, have some sense of how to manage climate grief?

Professor Williams told me that she sent the students in her Global Climate Change class from last fall some resources after a particularly tense class and forwarded me the email.

“Hi Class,

I know the end of the class was a bit of a downer, but I hope you use it as fuel for action, not one for paralysis. I do want to share a reading list from a seminar that might be useful to process how you might be feeling:

<https://news.climate.columbia.edu/2020/02/11/climate-personal-essay-reading-list/>. And remember - there is SO MUCH reason to hope - there IS a lot of energy (hah!) in the US right now for climate solutions. For example:

www.state.gov/driving-the-clean-energy-transition-a-progress-report-on-implementing-u-s-efforts-to-advance-clean-energy/. A reminder that on Wednesday we will discuss policy and next

Monday we will discuss approaches to take carbon out of the atmosphere. This is a solvable problem.”

I thanked Professor Williams and walked out of her office.

“Take care of yourself,” she said as I stepped through the door.

Susan Phillips - Environmental Analysis

I owe my discovery of the concept of climate grief to my Senior Seminar class, which was a required class for all seniors in the EA major taught by Professor Susan Phillips.

Each week, for a full semester, the group of seniors at Pitzer College who had decided to study the environment from a non-science perspective were put in a room together to discuss various environmental topics, begin thinking about our theses, and gain a sense of direction as our time in college was coming to a close.

I recall feeling somewhat confused about the goals of the class in the first few weeks. Professor Phillips had us spend parts of our class time discussing how to improve the aesthetics of our classroom, and we didn't start discussing the readings in our second class until a schedule determining who would bring snacks to class each week was set.

I felt cautious yet excited by the community that was being created - one where we could thoughtfully discuss the intricacies of climate change and then share our favorite food combinations 30 minutes later.

One particular week, the subject of hope in relation to climate change was brought up, and Professor Phillips bluntly told us that she felt there was no hope in stopping climate change. I felt my eyes water as I stared at the ground and listened to my classmates engage in one of the most earnest conversations I have ever witnessed in a classroom. Many of us pushed back at Professor Phillips' stance on hopefulness, leaning on hope as the tool that was going to keep us all moving forward with our goals of protecting the environment.

I knew that Professor Phillips was not trying to make us feel a loss of purpose or scare us away from a future in the field that we had just committed four years of our life to studying. She was being honest, wanting us to find ambition within a field that was fighting a losing battle. She was pushing us to grieve climate change.

Although I don't fully identify with the complete loss of hopelessness towards climate change that Professor Phillips feels (I think it would paralyze me), I am realistic about the future I'm getting myself into. As I - and I think many of us in that class - concluded, we are not stopping this, but we are going to continue finding hope within this hopeless narrative. Frankly, it's all we can do.

Professor Phillips has clearly worked her way around her own climate grief, and I knew she would add great nuance to this project, as a person and a professor of Environmental Analysis.

Taking a step back, I asked Professor Phillips, like everyone I interviewed, if they remember first learning about climate change.

As someone who grew up in Southern California in the 1970s, Professor Phillips recalls doing a project in second grade about saving water.

Professor Phillips mentioned that the 1970s featured many different environmental campaigns, such as a movement to stop littering and Smokey the Bear, but they were not connected to each other under a common issue of which everyone was aware.

“They weren’t linked together in the way that we see climate change and its impact on everything now.”

The environment was always a topic of importance for Professor Phillips, but she doesn’t remember learning about the detrimental and human-caused effects of climate change at a particular moment in time. By the 1990s, Professor Phillips believed that she and everyone else were pretty aware of what was happening to the planet.

However, Professor Phillips did not immediately go into a career that related to the environment; She began first as an anthropologist who studied gangs, prisons, and graffiti within the urban environment. Professor Phillips secured tenure in the EA department at Pitzer College because of her strong understanding of urban environments, and she then naturally became more immersed in environmental issues.

Professor Phillips artfully explained how her experiences as an abolitionist have led her to draw connections to environmental issues.

“Sometimes frontal attacks are not successful.”

As Professor Phillips described, building and supporting the communities around these issues is often what leads to success.

“Because of how little time is really left and how we’re really at this tipping point now, I feel very fortunate in the fact that I get to work on these issues directly. I don’t really want to do much of anything else other than that.”

After collecting some background on Professor Phillips’ life, the interview then switched to a more emotional focus.

Professor Phillips told me that she thinks about climate change dozens of times a day. She feels like she has a pretty strong grasp on her emotional reactions to climate change, but that doesn't mean the emotions aren't there. In discussing her emotions, Professor Phillips toggled between the darker and lighter feelings frequently.

"I'm interested in the fight. I'm interested in seeing what happens. I'm interested in being part of the solution."

This was then quickly followed by, "The idea of a solution will probably be a compromise of some kind. I'm very comfortable with ambiguity."

I immediately thought of ambiguous grief: A subsection of grief that I have connected to climate grief. Part of what makes the grief ambiguous is the discomfort that ambiguity carries. If working through ambiguous grief is a relatively important aspect of climate grief, then Professor Phillips is on her way to some healthy climate grieving.

Professor Phillips also recognized that ambiguity and uncertainty of the future can be much harder for young people to face. For her, she has found a sense of grounding in her work and the knowledge that she is doing something important, and this is what keeps her out of overwhelming depression. That same certainty and sense of purpose is not usually seen in her students.

"I see that our students, who have so many unknowns in their lives, can't feel that way. They don't know what their career is. They don't know where they're going to be living. It's hard."

With the knowledge that younger people are struggling with the emotional obstacles that result from climate change, I asked professor Phillips about what it feels like to teach students about such a challenging topic that will likely affect them personally.

"Yeah... sometimes I feel bad."

She then explained to me that in her senior seminar class, she tries to make it a fun and comfortable environment for the students. The room redesign activity, silly conversations, and snack breaks were starting to make sense to me now.

"It's been sometimes really odd to have a class that's literally about the end of the world, but come out of it feeling great."

Although it can be challenging, professor Phillips really does love teaching students in this field because she feels that she is helping guide them through this crisis in some ways.

“I always tell students the same thing, which is ‘you do not have to save the world yourself. What you have to do is work really hard to build community in whatever way you do that best.’”

Professor Phillips stressed the point that one does not need to be directly engaged in climate action to be fighting the climate crisis. She believes that students who want to go into careers such as green engineering or environmental policy, for example, are going to do important work, but work as a musician or artist is just as important when it comes to building community.

I asked Professor Phillips if she draws any connections between the feelings that arise from any traditional grief in her life and her climate grief. She began by saying that the process of mourning in both cases felt very similar to her. Professor Phillips then went on to speak candidly about the aspects of grief that are woven into her experience as a parent of transgender children.

She recalled being with her child in the hospital during a surgery and how she found herself drawing comparisons between the ideas of an “imperfect body” and an “imperfect planet.” She felt a genuine grief for her child’s future in a way that reached beyond their gender identity or the physical and emotional pain they were going through. She was simultaneously grieving climate change and grappling with the notion of “the end of the world,” for the planet and her child.

She then drew a stunning connection between gender and the environment, framing gender fluidity on the side of regeneration and gender binaries on the side of extraction. It was a compelling reminder that the environment intersects with every aspect of our lives and our society.

“I love both my kids so much, but it is very, very hard. But some of that grief and complexity is represented in my thoughts about climate change too. And actually climate change, in that sense, is a comfort to me. Because when I think about climate change, the issues of my kids being transgender are extremely small by comparison.”

In the realm of family, Professor Phillips and I bonded over our father’s sending us horrifying articles about environmental destruction and climate disasters as their method of showing us that they care about our interests. Parenthood is complicated enough. Discussing climate change with your children, of any age, is not a prerequisite.

When Professor Phillips began approaching discussions of climate change with her own kids, she realized that she felt underprepared to guide them through this crisis. That uncertainty led Professor Phillips to want to teach the Senior Seminar class for EA majors.

From teaching students for many years now, Professor Phillips has picked up on their uncertainty and doubtful feelings surrounding climate change and the future. Many of her students don't feel like they should have children for the sake of the planet, but Professor Phillips actually feels the opposite.

“If you believe that climate resilience is founded in strong communities, children have to be a part of that equation.”

As always, I had to end my interview by asking Professor Phillips about hope, and given her previous remarks on this topic, I knew her answer might be slightly different from the other professors I've spoken with.

“I always describe myself as being in a post-hope mode.”

What makes Professor Phillips feel happy is nature itself. She spoke gracefully about the joy she feels spending time with people and animals, and she finds beauty in the weather and the natural patterns that beings all over the world share. And on top of that, Professor Phillips truly enjoys her work with students.

“I love working with students because I learn more from them than I teach.”

Although that may be, I have certainly learned a lot from Professor Phillips.

Studying the Climate Crisis: Our Classmates Are Grieving Too

Choosing to study the environment comes with its obstacles. I know why I've chosen to go into this field, but I was curious to learn why my classmates picked Environmental Analysis (EA) as their path. I knew that there had to be passion for the planet within each of them, but I could never tell if they were being impacted by our curriculum in the emotional ways that I was.

Was an emotional response to climate change what drove them to study it? What were they passionate about within the environmental field? Did they ever feel overwhelmed leaving class or doing their homework? Have they experienced climate grief? How similar are we all? How different?

Luckily for me, a few of my EA classmates agreed to let me interview them about climate grief. They each sat down with me one-on-one and told me their stories. I asked them all the same set of questions.

First, let me introduce them.

My freshman year suitemate, *Ella Rosenblatt*, was among the first people I met in college. She is now one of my closest friends. Ella is from San Francisco, California and is deeply passionate about veganism, animal rights, and the environment. She is a caring friend and my favorite Writing Center Fellow. I interviewed Ella in her bedroom as we watched snow fall outside her window. We live in Southern California.

Dominic Arzadon is joy in the shape of a human being. They were a part of my freshman orientation group, and I sincerely enjoyed reconnecting with them through this process. Dominic is from Honolulu, Hawai'i, although they and their family are initially from the Philippines. They spoke about their homeland with unwavering love and honest concern for its future.

A new friend and fellow New-Yorker, *Sophie Arens* spoke about climate grief in an earnest and admirable way. She is a great listener, deep thinker, and is always wearing the coolest clothes. Sophie was drawn to Pitzer for its commitment to sustainability that reflected her own, and she is leaving college with that same drive to address climate change and even more tools to do so.

Sanjana Bhatnagar is wiser than most of us will ever be. She is from Scarsdale, New York and connects strongly with the concept of climate grief. She tackles concepts of existence and sense of place with intelligence and grace. We might all be seeing her philosophy books on shelves in the near future. Although I may be able to explain why we're grieving life on this planet, Sanjana can probably decipher the meaning of life itself.

I want to be *Izzy Dean* when I grow up. They are from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and have a compelling devotion towards environmental justice and community building. Their interview for this thesis left me in awe of their perspectives and eager to pick their brain again sometime soon. Everyone who meets Izzy wants to be their friend, and I'm happy to say that I've now made the cut. I hope?

Although my classmates are all quite unique individuals, I noticed that they did have a few things in common. Firstly, they all connected with the concept of climate grief with almost no hesitation. They are fully aware that this area of study can be depressing to an existential degree, and they have chosen this as their focus despite it all. But, taking a step back, I began by asking them their environmental analysis origin stories.

When did you first hear about climate change?

For Sanjana, it was a “green club” in elementary school. Ella also remembers “global warming” being discussed in elementary school. Actually, almost every student I interviewed could recall hearing about climate change at some point in their childhood, but it was never framed as something to lose sleep over.

When Sophie was in second grade, she remembers an announcement on Earth Day that encouraged her and her classmates to turn off the water when they brushed their teeth. She apparently took this very seriously. As a NYC kid, Sophie also has the image of a subway-ad from her childhood burned into her brain that depicted the Statue of Liberty underwater. She truly believed that the city would be underwater before we knew it.

For Dominic, knowledge of climate change came first from their grandfather in the Philippines. Their family is a part of the Ilokano ethnic group and they are a coastal people. They recalled accompanying their grandfather when he was fishing and farming, and how their grandfather explained that the crop and fish yields were decreasing because of temperature changes. In fourth grade, after Dominic's family had moved to Hawai'i, they remember climate change being discussed as a part of the curriculum, especially in ways that contextualized Hawai'i as a chain of islands that are especially vulnerable to climate change.

“I drew connections from the Philippines and Hawai'i in terms of experiences that Island peoples have faced and are facing and will continue to face due to climate change.”

We all are personally connected to this crisis in one way or another and, for many of us, choosing to study EA was born out of our personal connections and passions related to the environment.

“When translated into English, Ilokano means People of the Bay, so the very existence of my people and my very existence is dependent on the fact that we’ll have a coast to call home. So that was very overwhelming to process. But even now, I think that kind of informed my passion for environmentalism, because I knew that this was something more important than myself.”

During the summer after sixth grade, Ella became a vegan. She did so for animal rights reasons, but she remembers hearing that it was also better for the environment. It wasn’t until high school when Ella began engaging with the concept of climate change more personally and academically.

“I think the gravity of the problem didn’t hit me for a long time. I’ve been really dedicated to animal rights and plant-based eating and sustainable food systems for over a decade now and, when I think about that, it feels so grounded in climate justice for me now. But I guess initially that wasn’t really the motivation.”

So, when did the “gravity of the problem” really sink in?

As Sanjana expressed, “I didn’t understand the systemic qualities of it really until taking EA classes, but I think emotionally I knew I was pulled to the discipline. I was originally a philosophy major, and then one day I realized that every single paper I was writing was about spaces and how being in spaces made me feel.”

Sanjana shared that she has a strong fear of death that is often associated with obsessive thinking and compulsions. When she got to college and began spending time with friends outside, she noticed that those obsessive thoughts began to dissipate.

“We would go off into the mountains and jump into the ocean and hike. Just feel the sunlight. I realized that my fear of death disappeared when I was in nature because nothing seemed scary... So I think the confluence of those two factors, that my academic interests were really centered in spaces and that nature itself was kind of carrying my own lifelong anxieties and compulsions, was what brought me to EA.”

Izzy says that they find themselves thinking about their introduction to climate change a lot, however, they can’t actually recall a specific moment or time.

“I definitely remember it being a topic of conversation during the 2016 election. My high school didn’t have any environmental science classes, so I honestly didn’t really have any introduction to the field of environmental studies until college.”

Sanjana drew parallels to changes in her emotions surrounding the topic and when she began studying it.

“I think that especially in college, it felt like this messy, messy thing, ” Sanjana said. “I felt helpless. There’s not one system that I can think of that isn’t touched by things that cause climate change. There’s this fundamental feeling of like what the fuck do we do?”

Ella has also noticed a change in her emotional processing of the climate crisis as she’s gotten older.

“I think it’s definitely been in the past six or seven years that it’s started to feel a lot more burdensome, a lot more consuming for me mentally, and a lot more anxiety-producing than when I first learned about it.”

Why did you decide to study EA?

As Sophie said, “I feel like I always had that ‘environmental consciousness’ as a kid. I felt a pressure to not be wasteful. Then in high school, I was a part of the environmental club and really liked the idea of making a school more sustainable, more on an institutional level.”

Towards the end of high school, Sophie took her first environmental science class, which is what sparked her interest in studying the environment. She specifically chose Pitzer College because of its core value of environmental sustainability.

Ella came into the college process knowing that she wanted to study the environment.

“I think it was just a part of me that I was like ‘of course I’m going to major in that.’ Like I didn’t even think about anything else...I was craving a carved-out space in my life to have an opportunity to engage in this, and I think academics was that space. Even entering into college, it was still more based in a desire to explore food systems and animal agriculture, and overtime it has broadened my emphasis on larger issues of environmental justice and environmental degradation.”

Izzy had a similar passion for animal rights and veganism in high school and, although they were concerned about the climatic effects of agriculture, they definitely did not intend on studying EA in college.

When browsing the course catalog during their freshman year, Izzy came across an Environmental Justice class and thought it sounded interesting. They then learned that they needed to take an Intro to EA class as a prerequisite for Environmental Justice, so they enrolled in Intro to EA that spring. The following year, Izzy took an Indigenous Environmental Justice

Class as well as Science and the Environment, and their new and holistic view of the environment pushed them to stay within the EA major.

Have your feelings about climate change changed overtime?

For Izzy, it was during the pandemic when the effects of climate change struck them in a more elevated way.

“It just felt like the world is going to end one way or another, whether that be because of climate change or a global pandemic that wipes everyone out. I think that impending doom feeling fully solidified during the pandemic for me. And also just general anxiety. Like I never really considered myself to be that anxious of a person, but during the pandemic I developed a lot of social anxiety and a lot of anxiety about something bad happening to me and the people I love.”

Izzy reflected on having so much extra time during the pandemic to consume media and especially how George Floyd’s murder and the media attention and engagement that followed it was a reminder that we cannot turn our heads at challenging news just because it is challenging.

“I definitely felt like I need to make more of a concerted effort to be aware of what is happening in the world. To be consuming this upsetting news even if it’s upsetting. I just need to know and engage with it in some way.”

As Sophie shared, “I think there’s definitely a lot of ups and downs, especially studying environmental analysis, just because sometimes you feel a lot of dread and really negative about things, and that can put me in a rut sometimes. I think I naturally just come out of that pessimism.”

I asked Sophie what gets her out of the rut that she mentioned, and she drew on some memories from our Senior Seminar class with Professor Susan Phillips that every student I interviewed for this project participated in together.

On the day in class when we discussed hopelessness (which is kind of becoming an infamous moment at this point), Sophie found Professor Phillips’ framing of taking action against this crisis to be helpful.

“The framing of that [‘why keep trying?’ mindset] is kind of letting climate change win. If you keep fighting the fight, that is what you should be doing, even though it’s kind of a losing game...I think in general, that’s why I’ve studied environmental analysis, because I feel as though I have to do something, and studying it and making it my career has made me feel

comfortable in my day to day life, and also more comfortable with knowing that I can do certain things like eating meat or shopping at target.”

Ella shared a similar sentiment about how studying EA and engaging in climate activism can help with mental balance.

“If I really think about it, it’s like so upsetting, but by ‘doing things’ in my daily life, I can almost justify myself to not think about it in depth a lot, which sounds really twisted but, because I feel like I’m doing something, I don’t have to actively think about it as much and because I feel like a big part of my personal life is dedicated to this, feeling like I’ve done direct action helps me cope with the feelings of grief.”

Do you ever feel like you are carrying extra emotional weight because you study climate change?

“Oh definitely,” said Dominic. “It’s something that I am constantly thinking about in terms of like ‘why am I doing this?’ It’s very emotional work, especially when it’s tied to the person.”

I asked Dominic to elaborate on those emotions a bit more.

“It’s about my community. It’s about my homeland. To even have a ‘home’ to call a home is already very layered. There’s a lot of emotions tied to it, especially as someone who is now physically separated from my sense of home and what I always knew as home. So that kind of adds an additional layer to this work that I feel like some people can’t really grasp. That it really affects whole people, the lives of people, everyday people. I think even more so for me, because my whole identity is kind of predicated on me being a person of the bay - Ilokano.”

Izzy took Global Climate Change with Professor Branwen Williams in the Fall of 2021, and that experience truly opened their eyes to the emotional weight that participating in this major requires you to carry.

“I think that was the first time where I was like ‘I shouldn't have majored in this.’ Because it just felt really irreparable, I think, after being in that class. And even if it wasn’t actually irreparable, like even if there were concrete things that could be done and changes that we knew needed to happen, I was just so not convinced that they ever could or would happen.”

Sanjana connected strongly with the added emotional work that is being done by EA majors.

“I walk out of classes with some of the heaviest content in the world, like you can’t just enter and exit a classroom. Your whole worldview gets completely shifted, your expectations of your

future. We're not just planning our Master's. We're like 'how long do we have until whatever plan we construct for post-college just collapses into utter chaos?' Everything feels futile. The very thing we study is impending uncertainty. You can't compartmentalize it when you study it. It's every day."

In a similar vein, Sophie said, "Just knowing the facts and knowing all the information that is the reality of climate change is really, really difficult. I hear my friends who are not EA majors or my family or just other people talk about climate change and their perspective on it, and it feels like they have so much more ambition or hope that it's going to be okay but, when I hear them talk about it, I'm like 'this is not true. This is not how it's going to work.' And you kind of have to face that things are going to get really really bad, and I think EA majors in general are rationalizing that earlier than other people will have to, until it's actually happening to them."

"I convert my anger into sadness," Sophie found herself saying.

Even so, Sophie sometimes finds that getting lost in the academic component of the major allows her to compartmentalize a bit.

"Sometimes, because of studying it, I feel super desensitized to it. It can be pretty easy to disconnect yourself when you're in academic work surrounding it."

The realities of natural disasters, environmental injustice, and rising global temperature can start to feel less like a part of reality when you've got to submit a paper on those topics within the next four hours.

As Izzy expressed, "I feel like a lot of the things that are so upsetting in EA are also very present in a lot of other subjects. Things like colonialism, and white supremacy, and genocide, and social justice and injustice. I kind of feel like that added burden or sense of grief I feel from learning about climate change or environmental analysis generally comes more so from the knowledge of people suffering, and also just the history of the modern world, which I feel like has been a theme in all of my classes."

Ella reflected, "I think I do carry extra weight. It's hard for me to determine how much of that comes from studying climate change. It's kind of like chicken or egg. Like do I care so much and that's why I study climate change? Or through studying climate change have I created that additional care or weight?"

Ella then paused for a moment and asked if she could make a comment that wasn't related to the question I had just asked her. She reflected on when I first told her that I was going to write my thesis on grief and climate change, and how both of us initially just thought of the theoretical

ways in which an individual grapples with grief when thinking about climate change. We had some discussions at that time about the grief that is also associated with climate change due to losses of life from climate-related issues themselves.

“I don’t want to have my only role in your thesis be about animals and factory farming, so I’m sorry for harping on it so much. But when I think about the fact that every day, millions of animals are being killed, like every year 10 billion land animals are killed and so many more aquatic life in the U.S. 10 Billion! Every year in the U.S.! I can’t even conceptualize that number, but to me that’s such a big part of the idea of grief, and what drew me to the movement was the suffering and the death. So I think, when you think about grief and loss, that’s just such a big part for me. As a result of the process of factory farming, the issues of environmental degradation and environmental justice that plague low income communities of color sited near factory farms who experience higher rates of infant mortality and death, and then the wildlife that are also being killed and like the loss of biodiversity as a result of a lot of these fossil-fuel intensive processes. So to me, loss is at the heart of this.”

Just as I finished typing out the previous quote, Ella called me to tell me that she was thinking about my thesis again and wanted to know if I had thought about focusing more on climate denialism within the stages of grief. Several weeks had gone by since my interview with Ella for this thesis, but she was still thinking about climate grief. As my friend, she has been around to observe the various transitions that this project has gone through. She shared with me that even though she knows I strayed away from the “stages of grief” in this thesis, she was still feeling somewhat stuck on their connection to climate grief and wanted to know if I had time to at least write about climate denial. I was in the library when she called, so I texted her my response so as to not be that asshole on the phone in the library. Here’s what I said:

me: “that is genius
me: I really appreciate that
me: i feel like i will not be able to write this at the moment, but i would really like to sometime in the future
me: but just hearing what you think about this is really cool
me: and like general denialism/inability to act from people who actually believe in climate change is one of the things that I find most fascinating in life
me: I won’t forget this though and thanks for telling me”

“Ok well yeah I understand you don’t have time to write it now, but I just had to tell you before I forgot,” Ella said. “Ok! I have to walk into my class now, love ya bye!”

I love my friends!

Perhaps a deep-dive into the stages of grief and an emphasis on denial to act against climate change will be featured in a future edition of this thesis. For now, I will keep allowing my peers to inspire me.

My passion towards this project was especially reignited at one point during my interview with Izzy, when they finally spoke aloud the brutally honest words I thought I would never be able to admit to anyone but myself.

“Nothing feels good,” said Izzy. “Like there’s just so little to hold on to and feel optimistic and hopeful about. In a lot of ways I think that I still get very caught up in feeling selfish and almost self-hating for wanting to stick my head in the sand sometimes and like feel joy, and do things for myself and like hang out with my friends and ignore everything that’s happening in the world, because I have the privilege and the distance to do that and not everyone does. But then it’s also like, I can’t just overwhelm myself with suffering to a point where I’m debilitated and hateful and resentful of everything and everyone around me.”

This was it. This was why I wanted to write this thesis. I knew I wasn’t alone in this.

What did/does grief look like for you?

Dominic articulated, “I think there’s two sides to grief. For me, there’s both the pain and the heightened emotion that comes from it, and there’s also this feeling of relief.”

“I see interesting overlaps between grief and anxiety,” said Ella. “Because so much of my anxiety in general is future-oriented. In thinking about this type of grief as also anticipatory grief, the ways in which anticipation is linked to anxiety is something that I think positions me uniquely.”

I hadn’t prompted Ella about anticipatory grief, she just came to that categorization naturally. She touched on a point that I had been dwelling on for weeks: do anxious people experience more climate grief because our natural state of being often leaves us lingering in anticipation?

Do you believe you have experienced ecological or climate grief?

Dominic said, “Being in solidarity with other Island Peoples, I think about the Pacific Islanders in Tuvalu, for example, or Kiribati who are already experiencing loss of their homes due to climate change. Just thinking about how I can be more in solidarity with other Island Peoples I think adds to the grief that I’m experiencing in terms of climate change.”

However, Dominic tries to remain realistic about their climate grief and the effects it has on them.

“When I think about grief, as much as I want to dwell on the loss, I personally don’t think that is going to get us or me anywhere. So, I continue to do the work that I’m doing because I know that me taking action is going to cause more impact than if I just mope and sit in grief.”

Ella said, “I think grief is probably one of the most difficult feelings in the world, no matter what. And this type of grief has not been afforded a lot of attention and that does affect everybody in some way. So it’s also a unique type of grief in its universality.”

I’ll admit that at this point I asked Ella a question that I hadn’t planned on asking any of my interviewees, but I wanted her to reflect on our friendship for a moment. What has it been like to watch me find this particular interest in psychology within the environmental movement as someone who has their own separate passions within the environmental field?

“I think it’s been weird because I see you as probably my friend who I feel the most aligned with in terms of a deep care for this, but it’s been interesting also to see how we diverge in what we do to make ourselves feel better or feel like we’re making a contribution. Or like in what parts of the movement really strike us.”

I completely agree. So many of us care so deeply about climate change and relate to each other emotionally, but our interests within the movement can vary dramatically. Ella believes that she is positively impacting the environment by eating a vegan diet, and that should not be discredited by any means. I, on the other hand, have not gotten around to giving up cheese. Or butter. I feel physically nauseous and riddled with guilt every time I get on an airplane. I don’t think Ella shares that experience. We have different priorities within the same mindset, and I think that is okay.

As she affirms, “I think it actually speaks to the power of diversity in a movement.”

Izzy shared, “It feels like in some ways there’s nothing to grieve, because I haven’t necessarily ever known anything different. You know, it’s not like at any point in my life I was like ‘yeah the earth is thriving, we’re going to be here forever, humans are great.’ You know what I mean? It was just sort of like, I didn’t know and then I knew. And then like what do you do with that knowledge?”

I was laughing now. That was a really good point. One day, it just hits us. That realization may be accompanied by grief, but it isn’t always. Sometimes climate change feels devastating to think

about, and sometimes it just feels like something that is happening in the background of our lives.

“I think I’ve come to terms with the fact that a lot of the things that I do as an individual are just to make myself feel better. You know, like in the poem that I showed you about not dropping my cigarette butts on the ground,” said Izzy.

A few weeks before our interview, Izzy sent me a beautiful poem that they had written. It was about how Izzy never leaves their cigarette butts on the ground for the sake of the environment.

“I know that I’m probably not saving an animal’s life or preventing the fucking pacific trash thing from getting bigger, but it would make me feel like shit about myself if I was dropping my cigarette butts everywhere. And I think that that’s okay, like if that’s your rationale for doing certain things, I think that that’s okay. Obviously I don’t want to be like ‘charity like white-savior’ and only engage with these topics in order to make myself feel better, but I think that can be a motivator for a lot of people and is important too.”

Do you talk about climate change with your friends or family?

Dominic shared that they occasionally talk about climate change with their parents. “How does that usually go?” I asked. We both broke out into laughter for a moment. It didn’t need to be said. The agony over climate change conversations with parents seems to be a semi-universal experience.

“They don’t grasp it fully. I kind of have to explain it to them in terms that they understand.”

Both Sanjana and Sophie related to feeling like they have annoyed friends or family at times by talking about climate change too much and working it into conversations.

“My friends have honestly gotten sick of me talking about it,” Sophie said.

Sophie finds herself speaking about climate change in terms of facts and information, and although she recognizes that approach is not very effective, it is often what comes out.

“I had this conversation with my dad. He was on the beach and he saw a whale and was like ‘I’ve never seen a whale before at the shoreline and it’s so amazing,’ and I immediately was like ‘that’s just because....’ and talked about how water is warming and whatever.”

We both laughed and I nodded my head with familiarity.

“He was like ‘yeah, but isn’t it so beautiful? Don’t you feel so thankful that we can see that because of climate change?’ I think he knows it and tries to see the beauty in the bad, but I think I’m not there yet. And that’s maybe because I have more information about it than he does.”

“I also think it’s okay if you’re not there, ever,” I said. “Because that’s really really hard to do.”

Izzy concisely stated what speaking about the climate crisis with relatives and friends often boils down to.

“I feel like there’s no one in my life who I really need to convince that climate change is happening. Whether or not they give much of a shit is more of the question.”

Sanjana said, “It’s such a big part of me, the feelings that I have about climate change and the environment. When I can’t convince people around me, such as family, extended family, about how I feel, it’s almost as though I don’t feel seen by them as a person... I’ve started to feel more lonely with time, and I don’t know what to do about that. Because, on the one hand, there are such beautiful, beautiful communities around the world who are organizing and finding empowerment, but, on the other hand, my very own family has been feeling more distanced from me.”

Sanjana and I found ourselves bonding over the struggle of getting our parents to connect to this crisis emotionally in the ways that we do. We have both threatened them with claims of denying them any future grandchildren, something that we know seems utterly dramatic to our parents yet is a realistic quandary for many people our age.

Izzy spoke quite a bit about the future parenting dilemma.

“When I think about not wanting to have kids, it’s not because I think that their lives will necessarily be impacted by global warming or they won’t have access to water or whatever whatever. It’s because I just don’t see how I could raise a child in a world that is so fucked up in every way shape or form. And to just be like, ‘yeah everything is just tragedy and suffering all the time, but you just got to go on living.’ Because I don’t even think I’ve fully reconciled with that.”

They went on to share, “I feel so useless so much of the time and so ignorant for not constantly engaging with everything that’s happening. But then it’s also so overwhelming and painful to be engaging with that stuff all the time, which is definitely something that has been hard for me about studying EA, but also just existing in the world. Like I don’t know how to tell another person to deal with those feelings, let alone deal with them myself.”

Izzy and I then spent the next few minutes talking about kids in relation to their exposure to climate change and the overall problems of the world. Even though, in a lot of ways, our lives are just beginning, Izzy and I are both already incredibly stressed about kids today and how they're being impacted by issues like the pandemic and gender norms.

I had a bit of an epiphany about children that I blurted out to Izzy, but they were kind enough to listen and agree with me as I said, "I'm scared enough to have kids, just because like, the second they're born, everything you do has an impact on them. And then we bring in things [like climate change] that just feel completely out of our control and are going to unquestionably disrupt their futures, and it's so scary."

Sophie and I ended up also having a very similar conversation.

She said, "I really want a kid. I want to be a mother so so bad when I'm older, and I'm thinking about how my potential child will have a different upbringing than I did just in what they're able to see in the world. What's sad now is that you can't just have a kid. You're having a kid and thinking about what kind of world you're bringing the kid into, which is really sad because it's just something I want so bad."

What are you scared/distressed about losing due to climate change?

"I think more than anything, just the uncertainty," Sanjana added. "I don't really know what I will lose. I'm scared of losing a future, of normalcy, of peace, of settling down. I'm scared I won't be able to have kids. So I guess a loss of comfort. I know that's a privilege to say because I have been gifted that in my life prior."

"My home," said Dominic. "There's so much life and culture and history tied to place, and losing a sense of place is essentially losing a sense of personhood... Wow, yeah. Like what is going to happen to the Ilokano identity once there is no longer the coast that we once called our ancestral homeland?"

We sat with that recognition of loss for a moment before I pivoted to the hopeful.

Do you think there is something you can do about climate change?

"I think...yes?" Dominic and I awkwardly giggled for a moment. "But also I understand that my actions as an individual can only do so much, but that is not going to stop me from doing that work because there is still a sense of impact from the work that I'm doing. Just the sheer fact that I'm engaging in this work and I'm committed to this work, I think that in itself can cause change in the long run."

As Sanjana explained, “there’s no way one person can solve everything. And I don’t think there’s one path to solving everything either. It’s just like in which way you choose to fight. But it’s hard, because in choosing what you’re doing, it’s like ‘am I doing enough? Is it ever enough? Is anything we do when we step out of college enough?’”

What makes you feel hopeful?

“I think people like us,” Domic said with a smile. “Especially in terms of the different kind of work that we’re doing. Whether it’s on a small scale or a large scale, just the fact that we are passionate and committed to this work gives me so much hope.”

Dominic went on to explain that their “niche” within the environmental movement is food systems and food justice. They see so much potential for positive change in the varying areas of interest that their peers have within this field.

“Being in community with like minded people who share the same values, who share the same interests and passions for this cause, is what gives me hope.”

I couldn’t agree more.

Izzy shared, “I feel hopeful that people are going to keep taking care of each other in whatever way is possible. I feel hopeful that there are a lot of people, like a lot of my peers and people in our generation, who are not just gonna like sit with this knowledge and are also going to be more realistic about the way in which they try to address it.”

Sanjana said that she feels hope from all of her like-minded classmates and friends.

“We’re gonna be an unstoppable force when we get out there, and I’m so excited to see everyone do what they’re going to do. So in the same way that I know I’m facing a lot of uncertainty in terms of destruction, there’s a lot of beauty in the uncertainty of what everyone will do.”

How Do We Grieve? - Managing Climate Grief

If there has been one takeaway from this project, it's that there is no "right" way to manage grief. It really boils down quite simply. However, for the sake of this thesis, my own curiosity, and perhaps my grade, I will elaborate.

If we think about grief fundamentally, it is a response to love (Wray, 2022). The sadness associated with a loss is there because you loved what or who you lost before you lost them. The love remains, even after the loss has occurred. Grief, as sad or as difficult as it may be to endure, is a reminder that we have loved deeply, and the non-linear manifestation of grief is a reminder that we will love again.

Love is central to climate grief, too. I love this planet. Sometimes, I'm amazed by it. I love that I can drive up mountains and go on hikes. I love that I grew up swimming in lakes during the summer and rolling around in the snow during the winter. I love watching the sunset outside of my parents' bedroom window or on the walk to the dining hall. I love being reminded of how vast and powerful the ocean is when I go to the beach. I love snorkeling, and I really love sea turtles. I love being reminded of my love-hate relationship with tree pollen every year when allergy season rolls around. I love watching the seasons change and knowing that there will always be another summer. I love looking at the stars on a clear night and pointing and yelling at the sky when I see a shooting star. I love that it's always quiet in the woods. I love that there is life everywhere. I love that we all share this planet. I love that I teared up in the library writing this paragraph because I truly mean every word I'm writing. I love that every single one of us can think of something that we love about the Earth.

It breaks my heart to think about the hundreds of thousands of species that will be lost to a crisis that they had no part in creating. It was a normal part of my childhood to go sledding and

sip hot chocolate with my friends when a snow-day canceled school once or twice a year. It doesn't really snow in New York anymore, at least not in the way it used to. I don't like that every few summers are reaching "record breaking" temperatures now. The kids born in my neighborhood today are going to experience nature in a completely different way from how I did. I've never been good with change, but I grew up thinking that I could always count on nature being relatively consistent. That is no longer the case. Now, it sometimes feels like the natural world is changing faster than it can manage - faster than I can manage, too. As much as loss and death and grieving are a normal part of life on this planet, I don't like that we've created more loss than there needs to be.

So, I'm grieving because I love the Earth for a plethora of reasons, but I'm also grieving because I don't know what the future holds. I don't know exactly what will change and what will stay the same. But I know change is coming, and it's coming with a lot of loss.

It's time to grieve now. We may even come out stronger! Studies are beginning to demonstrate that "outrage, sadness, and grief can lead to increased motivation and support of environmental campaigns" (Wray, 2022, p.158). We become more capable of addressing our fears when we process our challenging emotions. It is certainly not easy to do, but it is overwhelmingly worth it. This planet is heading towards some tough times, and we cannot turn up our noses at it because it is too hard and sad and scary to face. There is much to still work towards protecting, preserving, and prolonging.

How do we grieve, then? How do we grieve climate change? As I've mentioned before, there is no correct way. That being said, I've picked up a few methods through my research that might serve as a good starting point.

Therapy. I know it well. Therapy can be life changing and I think everyone should have access to it. Not everyone does.

Interestingly enough, therapists are now prepared to work through climate-related grief and anxiety with their patients. Well, at least some of them. The Climate Psychology Alliance has created a directory of psychotherapists who are experienced and trained in issues of climate anxiety, climate-related loss, and the overall impact on mental health to which climate change is connected (Climate Psychology Alliance North America, n.d.). The directory currently only covers North America, but it has created extreme potential for individuals who are struggling mentally with the climate crisis and are able to access the support these therapists can offer.

I was curious to know what exactly happens inside the ecotherapy room, so I went to the Climate-Aware Therapist Directory myself and tracked down a therapist who was willing to speak with me about her specialty. Dr. Ariana Moran came across the concept of climate-aware therapy with intention after she began experiencing some grief and anxiety surrounding the climate crisis herself. Just recently, in early 2021, Dr. Moran discovered that “ecotherapy” was becoming an established practice in the field of psychology. Learning about the Climate Psychology Alliance was exciting for Dr. Moran, because she had been personally grappling with how to incorporate climate concerns into her work as a therapist, and she could now get trained through an established program.

As Dr. Moran told me, the training process for therapists through the Climate Psychology Alliance involved watching resource videos and reading the literature on the topic that they provided. She also had the opportunity to be a part of their inaugural climate-aware therapy course. After that training is complete, therapists are added to the Climate Psychology Alliance network of climate-aware therapists which is easily accessible online. Since Dr. Moran was

added to that directory, she has been gaining more and more clients seeking climate-aware therapy. Currently, Dr. Moran estimates that about 10% of her clients are coming to her specifically for climate-aware therapy, but she has also noticed that some of her usual clients who are not seeing her for climate-aware therapy are also feeling strong emotions about climate change.

Dr. Moran notices a similar pattern of emotions in her clients who are coming to her for climate-aware therapy; most notably she observes overwhelm, which is then followed by anxiety, fear, and panic, and is then followed by grief and loss. As she explained, “it’s usually high emotions. People who are extremely distressed and don’t know what to do with that. They feel isolated and they feel crazy.” As a therapist, the first thing Dr. Moran will do with someone who is experiencing these emotions is to validate what they are feeling, always informing them that they are actually having a healthy response to this crisis. She will typically say “it means that you care, and it means that you’re aware of the conditions that we’re living under.”

The next step for Dr. Moran is usually emotional regulation, which is when she helps her clients manage their overwhelming emotions so they can get to a point where they do not feel paralyzed by them. For climate-aware therapy, this can be demonstrated in a few different ways and is often done best by using a combination of methods. Dr. Moran may suggest that her patients get involved in climate action and connect with others who may feel similarly to them and are fighting for the same cause. Sometimes, a tactic that she finds impactful is simply helping her clients plan for their futures and giving them some sense of control by preparing for the uncontrollable. Another important approach within climate-aware therapy is helping clients reconnect with nature, especially when so many of us are leading lives that disconnect us from the natural world.

When asking Dr. Moran about the generational makeup of her clients who are participating in climate-aware therapy, she provided some fascinating insight. “You know what is so interesting?,” she said. “It’s like the tail end. It’s like younger folks, obviously, are feeling so distressed. But then it’s also some of the older generation, maybe in their 60s or 80s, who maybe used to be known as a ‘hippie’ back in the day and have been aware of this problem for a long time.” What has been interesting for Dr. Moran is that middle-aged people, mostly older Millennials and Generation Xers, are typically the age group that is not thinking about climate change often or feeling as distressed by it.

Since Dr. Moran is a therapist with several specialties that extend beyond climate-aware therapy, I was excited to ask her about the similarities and differences she notices with clients experiencing grief in the traditional sense and those experiencing climate-related grief. She told me that she absolutely notices similarities between the two dimensions of grief. “The lived experience of grief is the same no matter why you’re feeling that way,” Dr. Moran said. “There’s a lot of tolerance around learning how to live with pain that really won’t ever go away.” In Dr. Moran’s experience, she has found that working through grief, in almost all cases, is focused on gaining perspective and addressing the emotions existentially.

Dr. Moran then went on to highlight the difference between traditional grief and climate grief, stating that the losses associated with the climate crisis are not the standard losses that humans are more used to. As she explained, “it permeates a little bit more [than traditional grief] because it’s not something that you can ever just process and move on from. It’s something that you have to live with every single day for the rest of your life.”

Therapy, and climate-aware therapy especially, is clearly a helpful tool for those dealing with grief and overwhelm about climate change, but therapy is not accessible to everyone. I

wanted to know if Dr. Moran had any suggestions for those who may benefit from an ecotherapist but cannot access one. She reaffirmed my point that the accessibility of therapy needs to be addressed and discussed more frequently, but she also believes that there are many things that an individual can do outside of the typical individual therapy session. Dr. Moran returned back to some of her original points about connecting with nature and intentionally making time in your day to be outside. Additionally, she stressed the effectiveness of getting involved in climate communities. If individual therapy is not possible, then she suggested group therapy as a more affordable alternative, as well as online networking groups and organizations such as Extinction Rebellion and the Sunrise Movement. “I actually run the Sunrise Movement hub at my school,” I said. “Oh my god, I love that!” she exclaimed. “So you know the power of connection.”

Dr. Moran spoke briefly about the implication of the growing world of climate psychology. “In my field, we’re talking a lot about the utility of our skillset being so focused on individual healing and really thinking about how to expand that into having a broader reach in terms of how to help people.” She is also thinking about the ways in which the field can support people experiencing pre-traumatic stress or climate refugees with post-traumatic stress.

As our interview was wrapping up, I asked Dr. Moran if she had any final comments, and she shared a piece of advice that she wants those of us who are feeling hopeless and despairing to hold on to. “Try to find a sense of - I don’t recommend hope because not everyone can connect to that - but try to find a sense of intrigue or curiosity. Find someone who is doing work that inspires you, and see if that changes your emotional experience a little bit.” Before we hung up the phone, Dr. Moran thanked me for “all of the important work” I am doing and I felt touched. I thanked her for all of the important work that she is doing, too.

I have been to a handful of funerals. I'm sure most of us have. I don't particularly enjoy them, but I was raised with the knowledge that partaking in a funeral is the outlet from which we celebrate a lost one's life. It's a space for the people who knew the lost one to express their gratitude and love for that individual, to linger on the shared memories with that person for a moment before those memories no longer feel shared. Although grief is flooding everyone's minds during a funeral, what is *actually* occurring at these ceremonies is mourning: the exterior expression of grief.

Many scholars believe that mourning is a complicated yet necessary process to go through in the face of loss (Zeavin et al., 2022). If grief is not expressed through mourning, the risk of developing more serious emotional disorders is greater (Zeavin et al., 2022). If grief is properly mourned, an individual's emotional wellbeing is likely to become repaired and they may often experience psychological growth (Zeavin et al., 2022). The way in which an individual mourns is dependent on a multitude of factors, some of which may include the timing of the loss, the type of loss, their cultural background, and the grieving behaviors of others (Kastenbaum, 2008). People also tend to feed off of each other and adopt grieving norms that are situation-based, such as the spike in interest in spiritualism and belief groups that promised communication with the dead when many families lost loved ones after World War I (Kastenbaum, 2008).

In trying to research the cross-cultural differences of grief and mourning, I was met with the overwhelming realization that grief is almost entirely culturally constructed and culturally specific. The very notion of what to grieve differs cross-culturally, meaning that what seemed so revolutionary to me about climate grief is probably the fact that I was not raised in a culture that

grieved for losses beyond the traditional. However, as Rosenblatt reminds us, “Cultures are fluid, ever changing, filled with contradictions and ambiguities, and often entangled in blurry and complicated ways with other cultures” (Rosenblatt, 2008, p. 208). Trying to understand how or why someone is grieving in a certain way is never as simple as just their cultural background.

Some cultures and religions welcome the idea that the dead can communicate with the living, while others bear no connection to that sentiment (Rosenblatt, 2008). Many cultures also differ in the expected reactions of those who are grieving. For the Matsigenka people of Peru; the dead are thought to be grieving more than the living, and the ways in which the living grieve then influence the after-death life of the deceased (Rosenblatt, 2008). Some cultures, such as the Achuar, a Jivaro cultural group of Eastern Ecuador, believe in making a conscious effort to forget the deceased as a part of grieving, whereas other cultures grieve to let the memory of the deceased live on (Rosenblatt, 2008). However, in most cases, rituals are performed to commemorate the death in some way, whether that is to move on from the loss collectively, to honor the life and memory of the individual, or some combination of those intentions. Indications that someone is grieving also differ across cultures. The Zulu women of South Africa who are widows display their grief by wearing black for a full year and remaining isolated from others (Rosenblatt, 2008). For Bosnian Muslims, performing mourning rituals after a death is essential to the grieving process, and it is viewed as impossible to grieve and allow for the deceased's soul to move to heaven if those rituals are not completed (Pollack, 2003 in Rosenblatt, 2008).

Mourning is a plea for change. To publicly mourn in community after tragedy is a necessary and revolutionary thing to do in the face of threat. We see this in Black communities in the U.S. who come together after losses from police violence. There is power in naming Trayvon

Martin, Brianna Taylor, and George Floyd. There is a reason why their names and faces are the central messaging behind every protest and call to action. There is anger and fear and deep-seated grief erupting from those publically mourning, and it brings people together in ways that are rarely seen otherwise (Wray, 2022). During the AIDS crisis, public mourning and a communal recognition of the lives that had been lost was what ultimately led to public and political action. The same influence that comes from community-based public mourning can also emerge from the climate crisis. “By channeling our private grief into the public work of mourning, we can render ecological losses visible, point out their root cause, and bring the tragedies-from spoiled farms to vanishing species-into the realm of mattering” (Wray, 2022, p. 208). These crises are not the same and they should not be equalized, however, the influence that collective action and public mourning methods have had on these movements can be admired and shared with each other.

In the face of a loss, no matter the kind, mourning rituals provide guidance, purpose, and control during very uncertain and overwhelming times. “They also provide some structure and social support when the pillars of familiarity have been ripped out of our lives” (Wray, 2022, p. 209). Rituals done in community unite people and provide a safe space and process in which they can express their grief, and they also help us to channel our overwhelming emotions to be processed outwards rather than inwardly causing pain (Wray, 2022). A Species Remembrance Day was created in 2011 and now occurs annually on the 30th of November. On this day, people gather together to perform symbolic rituals that honor the various species that have been lost to extinction, allowing people to pause and mourn an aspect of this environmental crisis that often feels too big to comprehend (Wray, 2022). Since its origin, the day now includes a theme of

“original names” to draw connections between the lost species and their impacts on humans and overall ecological lives throughout various cultures.

If it hasn't already been made clear to you, Britt Wray's work has served as quite the guiding compass for me throughout this project. I was not able to interview her for my thesis, however, someone who works for her kindly responded to my email and sent me a list of resources that Wray and other collaborators had compiled through The All We Can Save Project for “working with climate emotions” (The All We Can Save Project, n.d.). If anyone is looking for a much more organized and aesthetically pleasing guide to dealing with climate grief than this thesis offers, I highly recommend googling The All We Can Save Project. For now, I will just share one highlight that I pulled from their resource list: The Good Grief Network, which is a new organization that helps people process difficult emotions around climate change through collective action. One thing that The Good Grief Network has developed is a flagship program called “10 Steps to Resilience & Empowerment in a Chaotic Climate” (Good Grief Network, n.d.). This 10-week program meets virtually once a week in a small group with two facilitators. The meetings serve as a space where participants can be vulnerable, relate to each other, and find comfort in sharing their emotions. They are meant to grieve both collectively and individually, ideally leading them to gain a healthy grasp on their climate-related emotions and feel empowered to continue mobilizing for change. I regret not signing up for this program while writing this thesis. I think it would have really helped me process my own grief as well as educate me on effective grieving methods to write into this project. I hope to become a participant soon. The learning and the grieving doesn't stop here.

There are plenty of ways to grieve. There are many more ways to grieve and reasons behind them than I have space or time or knowledge of to write about, but we all fit in somewhere. We need to grieve for this planet in the way that feels best to us. If it is leaning on your cultural traditions, starting therapy, or going for a walk outside every day that allows you to work through your grief, then that is wonderful. I, nor anyone reading this, is in any place to judge how you grieve. It doesn't have to happen all at once and it also doesn't have to linger over you forever. It doesn't have to feel scary or overwhelming or devastating, and it certainly doesn't have to be something you dread. It does have to happen, though. Grieving this crisis is the only way that we will be able to face it, and we have to face it. The process of grieving climate change itself is taking action against it. Grieve by finding joy in the natural world and remind yourself that it is the love you feel for the planet that is fueling your fear for its future. We are useless at rendering change if our thoughts are unclear and our emotions have no direction. I think the goal of our grief should be to fall back in love with the Earth. I think we need to remember to protect what we love.

Conclusion

To wrap this all up feels like a somewhat daunting task, so I'll try to keep this brief. I grew a lot throughout this process. I learned so much more about myself and clarified many of my goals for the future. I actively grieved climate change again and again while working on this project. I don't know if I've actually reached a conclusion in ways that are expected of a traditional Senior Thesis, but I guess this is not a traditional Senior Thesis. So, in conclusion, this is just the beginning.

I had to let go of a lot of the expectations I had for this project. I wanted to conduct dozens of more interviews with people from all over the country, or even the world. I had hoped to speak to climate activists, religious leaders, children, teenagers, teachers, farmers, grandparents, climate change deniers, leaders of environmental organizations, the list goes on. I wanted stories from as many different racial, ethnic, religious, career-based, political, age-based perspectives as I could get. I planned to devote an entire section of this thesis to people who are already grieving climate change due to natural disasters. About half-way through working on this project, I realized that I just simply did not have the time and capacity to make it all happen.

Narrowing the scope of this project to only tell my story and the stories of my professors and classmates felt really disappointing at first. I felt like I was going to be missing out on so many of the stories that are essential to expressing the depth and nuances of climate grief. In some ways that may be true, but after hearing some encouragement from my readers and friends, I realized that this project did not have to represent my final word on the subject of climate grief. It did not have to encapsulate every complexity of grief and climate change and their intersections because that would be quite impossible to do. My new passion for cataloging

stories of climate grief and sharing ways to cope does not have to end when I submit this thesis. I'm allowed to keep going with this, and I'm also allowed to move on from it.

I believe this thesis touches on parts of climate grief that have felt relevant to my life and my lived experiences. I hope it has also connected to the lived experiences of many of you reading this. Writing this thesis was really difficult for me. Not just in the difficulties of meeting deadlines, sifting through interviews, and doing research, but because this was an emotionally challenging topic to focus on for an entire semester. I was simultaneously re-opening and healing every emotional wound I had developed around this topic each time that I sat down for an interview or wrote a few pages of a chapter. My friends can attest that I often seemed a bit off after spending a few hours working on this project. I avoided making progress on this thesis more often than I'd like to admit, because it was just easier to forget about the reality and sadness of it all sometimes. Just like it can be easier to avoid grief itself, too.

Having said that, I wouldn't have done it any other way. Yes, I was sad, cathartic, overwhelmed, and kind of scared writing this thesis at times, but I also had the best time writing it. It felt so good so much of the time, sometimes at the same moments when it also felt really hard. I'm so glad I faced the grief, and if you've made it this far, then you've certainly faced it too.

I guess we just keep going through climate grief now? Hopefully we can do it together more often than not. I don't think this grief is ever going to go away, because this crisis isn't stopping or slowing down. It's getting worse with time and that is really quite scary. But I see grief as a good thing now. It's almost like our secret weapon to get through this, and we have to hold on to it. Sometimes it will be quiet and we might forget it is there, and other times it might

be all we can think about. Either way, it is propelling us forward and reminding us to love ourselves, this planet, and each other.

With love and grief and everything in between,

Hava (:

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