

THIS ARTICLE IS A REPRINT FROM

# GreenSpirit *magazine*

Engaged spirituality for a living Earth

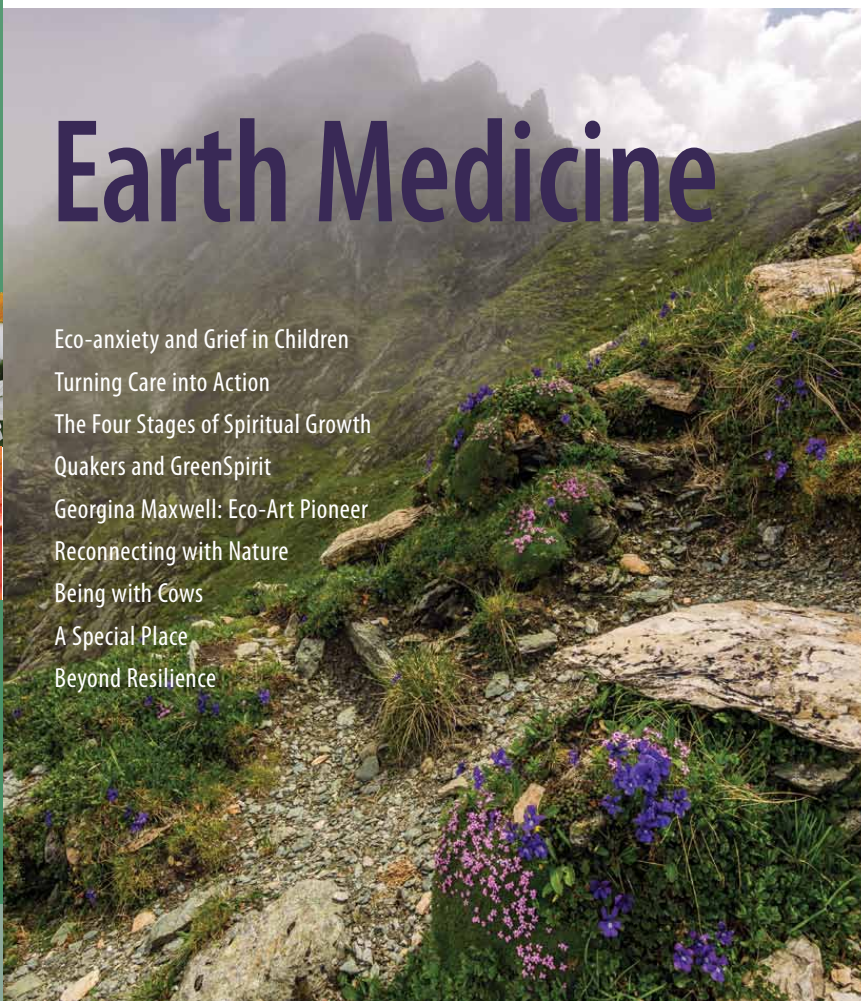
## GreenSpirit

Engaged spirituality for a living Earth

Volume 22:2 £3.50

### Earth Medicine

Eco-anxiety and Grief in Children  
Turning Care into Action  
The Four Stages of Spiritual Growth  
Quakers and GreenSpirit  
Georgina Maxwell: Eco-Art Pioneer  
Reconnecting with Nature  
Being with Cows  
A Special Place  
Beyond Resilience



[www.greenspirit.org.uk](http://www.greenspirit.org.uk)

# Eco Despair?

## *The antidote in grief and gratitude*

GAIL DAVIDSON

Over a third of Britons – 34% – are anxious about the environmental crisis, with 29% feeling overwhelmed, according to a Triodos bank survey in July 2019 called ‘How is the environmental crisis making us feel?’

That same summer in 2019, we saw over 2 million acres of the Amazon on fire, in the autumn we witnessed Australian bushfires that killed over 500 million animals, followed by a winter of extreme flooding in the UK where nearly 2,000 people lost their homes, and a spring where the entire world was locked down with the greatest pandemic in my lifetime, yet perhaps not the last. How does that make you feel? I know I can often feel hopeless, breathless, frozen and weak. But I know that there is a power in my hopelessness and grief, if I listen to the call from the natural world that holds us, to be fully alive in the regenerative cycle of life, death and rebirth. In this intimate dance of love and loss is a vitality, connection and power that we all need for the coming uncertain times.

### What is Eco Despair?

Eco despair is a psychological response to the loss caused by environmental destruction, as a result of climate change. It's an understandable response to the helplessness we are all feeling in the face of reports that tell us we have 10 years left to limit climate catastrophe.

For many, the vision of the world to come is a bleak one. And it's affecting our mental health, and the mental health of our teenagers – nearly two thirds (63%) of 11-18 year olds said the environment and climate change was one of their most important issues for the country in a survey by YouGov in November 2019.

So how do we live with these feelings of despair and hopelessness? *By not turning away. The longer we publicly deny the bleak reality before us and privately cope with our existential dread and pain, the more crippling despair*



becomes. This schizophrenic (sic) existence is a form of emotional abuse. It is imposed on us by a dominant culture that will not allow us to speak this tragic truth. Chris Hedges.

### Anticipatory Grief

Anticipatory grief is grief before impending loss or death. It is grief you have for someone who is still alive, but terminally ill. Whether we consciously acknowledge it or not, the tragic truth is that many of us are already living with anticipatory grief. We are living with the fear that we have gone beyond the tipping point, as we grieve what is being lost – the habitats, the water, the trees, the land, our children's future, their children's future.

We have turned away from our grief, and in doing so, we have learnt not to trust our emotions. We don't have the emotional muscle to be able to hold our grief – it needs training, much like the other muscles in our body, to keep us strong. As anticipatory grief has no clear end point, it is not a grief to be overcome.

The Climate Psychology Alliance states that: *the primary psychological need of those affected by anticipatory grief is for a safe context in which to process the trauma and grieve for what is lost or will be lost, to talk, to be listened to and supported.* Which is what happens in community grief tending rituals.

Psychologists Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman coined the term 'non-redemptive mourning'. They say: *Some losses, such as cultures that have been forever silenced, species that have disappeared, and traumatic events that affect whole communities and cultures, should be kept present in our communal memory. The experience of grieving in these situations is not intended to finish with the past and return to 'normal life,' but rather to keep the past from slipping away in a present that continues to deny it.* This too, we must learn to live with, by offering a place for what is being lost.



### The Antidote to Despair

Some might say the antidote to despair is hope. However, our societal construct of hope is linear, progressive and aspirational, with an expectation of some fulfilment. For those wishing for a different ending to the current climate narrative, what can we really expect?

Recently I joined 80 others online to listen to Bayo Akomolafe and Toni Spencer's talk: 'What do you do when there is no hope?' I had booked it several weeks before the COVID-19 lockdown was on the horizon. Bayo extrapolates that: *we've been here before, at sites of hopelessness, and that it is in the loss and grief and troubles that attend this place that new glimpses of power are known*. He says: *loss is the engine of emergence, that grief is generative*.

Part of the evening's programme saw us break out into pairs to ask each other what hopelessness looks like. As I closed my eyes to sense into it, I found that my hopelessness is nothingness – a deeply dark place in a vast universe of stars and galaxies, where I am paradoxically everywhere and a tiny speck of indistinguishable stardust at the same time. I felt, quite literally, as if I was kissing the void, with bated breath. This inhale of shock is a known trauma response in my body...but I felt a pregnancy in that pause, and a potency in what might come next.

Bayo describes how the hope of a seed breaking through the soil has a different texture, and that longing and yearning are a much larger part of the cosmology of hope, than our aspirations. The seed simply, yet fiercely, longs to see the sun.

So how do we come to know the shapes of our longing? By acknowledging our longings as a love letter to life. Seeing that the same creative life force in the seed lives in each and every one of us. And that our longings are a gateway to love, gratitude and belonging.

### Grief and Gratitude

*Pain for the world – the outrage and sorrow – breaks us open to a larger sense of who we are. It is a doorway to*

*the realisation of our mutual belonging in the web of life ... when we open our eyes to what is happening, even when it breaks our hearts, we discover our true size; for our heart, when it breaks open, can hold the whole universe.* Joanna Macy.

In a dance with love and loss, joy and sorrow, as our hearts contract and expand, in each

crack, each space for growth, we find the gift of gratitude – 'everything is a gift and nothing lasts'.

To be able to heal the pain of the world, we first need to feel it. By daring to feel, we restore life. And we make a place for all that is being lost. Francis Weller in his book 'The Wild Edge of Sorrow' says that: *grief has always been communal and illustrates how we need the healing touch of others, an atmosphere of compassion, and the comfort of ritual in order to fully metabolize our grief*. When we come together in shared circles and rituals, to see and hear each others' stories of love and loss, we open the door to healing. We find that the central energy of sorrow is a vital life force which, when welcomed and witnessed, can alchemise our sorrows. In the release and renewal, all walls guarding our tender hearts and all barriers – culture, race, language – fall away. What we are left with is a sense of oneness and belonging to a mystical web of life.

Now is the time to kiss the void, speak our longings, love fiercely, grieve deeply, because in those fecund liminal spaces, we give space for a new power to emerge.



**Gail Davidson seeds regenerative stories, and facilitates community grief tending rituals online and in Brighton and beyond.**

[www.bigseeds.co.uk/grief-tending-in-community](http://www.bigseeds.co.uk/grief-tending-in-community)

