

Contemplative Inquiry on Climate Change: Playing with Perspectives
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One hand on the beauty of the world, one hand on the suffering of all beings
and two feet firmly grounded in the task of the present moment.
-from the Cathedral of Autun, France

Hour long contemplative exercise to explore the psychological, emotional and spiritual dimensions of learning about climate change. Students are guided through a perspective-taking exercise in small groups of 3-4 students.

Why contemplative practices

- Development – to allow the challenges we face (climate change, species extinction etc.) to transform who we are.
- Integration – to support integrating the learning and processing our experiences of it through our bodies, hearts, mind and spirit.
- Resilience – to develop capacities for adaptability, flexibility and resilience.
- Creativity of our responses – we cannot solve our problems from the mindset that created them – contemplative practices can support the transformation of mindsets.

Introduction

In this contemplative exercise, we will explore the psychological, emotional and spiritual dimensions of learning about climate change. We will experiment with taking three different perspectives to understand the gifts and challenges of each, how each informs or inspires action and inquire into what it is like to hold all three simultaneously.

This exercise is an opportunity to expand and deepen capacities and skills for working effectively with diverse viewpoints. It can also be a contemplative tool for self-understanding and self-awareness, and to expand empathy and compassion.

See what you can learn about yourself, others in your group and climate change. Notice if any of these perspectives are easier or harder to take and consider why that might be? Notice what the gifts and challenges of each are? And explore what it is like to hold all three simultaneously?

The exercise isn't intended to promote any one of these 3 perspectives, but to practice holding all three as a dynamic whole. It also offers an opportunity to explore whether we have a preference for one of the perspectives over the others and how that preference or tendency shapes our experience and orientation to climate change, as well as others who might take a different perspective.

“We know a great deal about what leaders do and how they do it. But we know very little about the inner place, the source from which they operate....The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor. The blind spot of leadership... is the internal state of the change agent...what we source our actions out of.” (Scharmer, 2008)

In this guided exercise, we will:

- explore three perspectives on climate change: the polarity that things are getting worse and that things are getting better, and then a third possibility that things are simply what they are;
- dive into each of these perspectives and notice what they bring forth;
- inquire into preferences for specific perspectives and what those preferences might imply;
- share our experiences in small groups;
- engage in reflective writing;
- bring our reflections to the full group.

With each of these perspectives, be honest and sincere – don't pretend. Do your best to see if you can find this voice in yourself.

Things are getting worse, better and are simply what they are (10 min intro)

These are different perspectives on the state of the world. You might hold one more than the other, or hold all three simultaneously. Others are likely to experience these differently and inquiring into them can deepen understanding and empathy. Additionally, you can consider these as three different aspects of your own experience and engage them as a form of inquiry and contemplation.

The intentions of the exercise are

- to experience each of these perspectives and what they bring forth and in the process to learn about oneself, and to more deeply understand others
- to recognize preferences for any of these perspectives and what the implications of these preferences might be
- to Integrate or learn to work with all 3 perspectives – move from either or, to both and to one within the other thinking
- to develop new approaches to communicating and advocating for a position

Divide into groups of 3-4. Sit together in close enough proximity that you can hear each other and aren't distracted by other groups. Considering what you are learning about climate change, take a few minutes to sink into your feelings and thoughts about the challenges we face in the Anthropocene.

1) Things are getting worse and worse (20 mins)

Take turns (4 minutes each) to share about climate change from the perspective that things are getting worse and worse. Allow yourself to really sink into this perspective. Be certain to include both your thoughts and your feelings. Really listen to one another (in silence) and yourself as you share. Listeners simply listen in silence – it's best not to respond or comment on what you hear from each other. If the speaker finishes early, simply sit in silence together. (Instructor use a bell to indicate when it's time to shift to a different speaker, and then again when it's time for silent reflective writing)

Silent reflective writing: (4 mins) What arises for you as you listen to others? How does this perspective inform your choices? How does it feel? Does it miss anything? Or distort in any

way? Is it a common or easy perspective for you to take, or is it challenging and unfamiliar? Are there ways that you tend to avoid it?

How does it feel in your body? What is your time frame like? Space frame? What does this liberate or motivate? Do you feel stuck or bound in this?

Take a few deep breaths, breathing all of this in through your heart: what others shared, what you shared, the thoughts and feelings and let it go as you exhale.

2) Things are getting better and better (20 mins)

Consider that things are getting better and better. If it helps take a broader timeline, or do whatever it takes to help you experience this perspective. Share, again for about 2 minutes each.

Silent reflective writing: What arises for you as you listen to others? How does this perspective inform your choices? How does it feel? Does it miss anything? Or distort in any way? Is it a common or easy perspective for you to take, or is it challenging and unfamiliar? Do you tend to avoid it?

Take a few deep breaths, breathing all of this in through your heart, what others shared, what you shared, the thoughts and feelings and let it go as you exhale.

3) Things are simply what they are (20 mins)

Holding all that you have heard, felt and spoken, allow yourself to begin to feel into the perspective that everything is simply what it is and even has a wholeness to it – in its own way. Consider that each of us were born for these times. How might the Anthropocene be the catalyst for new or ancient ways of being human? Allow yourself to open to this perspective. Exhale and find a resting place in being with things and yourself as you/they are. Instructor – read the following quote if it fits the group you are working with.

Everything Has a Deep Dream

I've spent many years learning how to fix life, only to discover at the end of the day that life is not broken. There is a hidden seed of greater wholeness in everyone and everything. We serve life best when we water it and befriend it. When we listen before we act. In befriending life, we do not make things happen according to our own design. We uncover something that is already happening in us and around us and create conditions that enable it. Everything is moving towards its place of wholeness always struggling against the odds. Everything has a deep dream of itself and its fulfillment.

by Rachel Naomi Remen

Speakers take 3 minutes each.

Reflective writing for 3 minutes. What does it look like and feel like to come from this place of resting in the simplicity of things as they are. How does this feel? Do you see climate change differently from this place? Are you more or less energized? What does this offer you? If it's hard for you to access this place, simply pretend or imagine that you were coming from this place – what might that look and feel like?

In this view wisdom reveals that there is nothing to protect and compassion that everything must be perfected.

Closing – thank each other – come back to the whole group

Discussion and closing (10 mins)

Optional additional reflective writing prompts or discussion prompts:

Reflective Writing: After you have finished sharing, reflect in writing about how it was to take these three different approaches to your issue. How was it to share and listen? What did you notice? Is it possible to hold all three simultaneously? Do you have a preference for one over the other? Did you learn anything about yourself in the process? Did the exercise offer you new insights or awarenesses?

Poems and quotes can be used as a part of the context setting for the 3rd perspective or as a part of the closing.

THE PEACE OF WILD THINGS

When despair for the world grows in me and I wake in the night at the least sound, in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake, rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water. And I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.
~Wendell Berry

“There is only One Thing happening, not some things that are good and others that are bad. This includes fragrant ecosystems, fresh and unsullied wilderness on spring mornings, and it includes urban industrial megagrid, ghettos and famine zones and the extinction of wild species. Life and death. Even television”.
-John McClellan

“Knowing that nothing need be done, is where we begin to move from” Gary Snyder

Can we surrender to all the destruction and beauty arising throughout the Earth and vow to be in nonattached service to all organisms and ecological processes as well as humanity and civilization?
(Hargens, *Integral Ecology*).