HOW TO MANAGE ECO-GRIEF

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OVER THE YEARS, I TURNED MY YARD into a wildlife sanctuary. Sparrows, nuthatches, doves, and flickers raised babies in the spring and found shelter and food in winter. A bit of warm water in the birdbath transformed it into a fountain of splashing, chattering exuberance. There was a continuous wild cacophony of birdsong.

I loved it. But now it is gone. My yard is quiet.

I live in a fast-growing region where urban wildlife habitat is being decimated. In spring 2025, four blocks from my home, a 30-acre urban forest was razed and ancient rock outcroppings blasted into oblivion to build a massive housing project. Shortly thereafter, rats invaded my cul-de-sac.

Within weeks the songbirds were gone. No nests were built in the houses or knotholes that had long been prime avian real estate.

My neighbor started trapping. I hate killing animals and detest trapping because it isn't always a clean kill, but as the rats became more plentiful, I, too, set traps. So far, we've dispatched more than 80 creatures. As I feared, the traps sometimes just injure, and the killing comes down to me. I had a pet rat once. I like rats. But I can't allow the infestation. It's a sickening choice.

As a professional environmentalist, I've spent my life open to the pain of knowing too much about what we're losing. Many readers, colleagues, and friends have expressed similar eco-grief. Some of us miss the verdant, wild places of our youth that no longer exist. Younger people are experiencing skyrocketing climate anxiety and grief.

Here are some strategies for pain management in a damaged world:

Acknowledge the grief, anger, and depression. Some forms of knowledge warrant discomfort. If you know what we're losing—the irreplaceable places being destroyed and how many animals, including humans, are suffering—and you are *not* upset, something's wrong. You grieve because you love. You feel sadness, depression, and anxiety not because you're broken, but because you care. You long for humanity to do better. As Krishnamurti noted, "It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society." And as Rumi advised, "These pains you feel are messengers. Listen to them."

Joy is the ability to demonstrate "hallelujah anyway," to see beauty and goodness beyond the darkness.

Appreciate the remaining beauty. My yard is still beautiful in its quieter, less vibrant state. Scrub jays still take the peanuts I offer. I recently visited a friend on the outskirts of town. Her property contains juniper forest, fields, and a small pond. Even in winter, it was alive with birdsong. My heart ached for what is now missing from my own home, but I was glad to know wild birds were thriving in some places.

Exercise agency. Taking action with heart-centered intention helps ease grief. We act, and if it proves insufficient, we reassess and try something else. It's key to act not out of anger or fear but out of love and a sense of honoring the sacred. There is much that can be saved and restored.

Exercise agency over your mind. Meditation, unplugging, and exploring wild places are all medicine.

Develop joy muscles. Joy is more than a momentary flash of happiness. Joy is the ability to demonstrate "hallelujah anyway," to see beauty and goodness beyond the darkness.

Celebrate Earth's regenerative power. Nature is incredibly, heroically resilient. Right now, rhinos are roaming Uganda for the first time in decades, a record number of right whale calves swim alongside their mothers, and 30 percent of the world's oceans exist in protected reserves.

The Earth can heal. Humanity can evolve. And we can grieve a hurting world without being destroyed by our love. &