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Thinkers Lodge Summit on Nuclear and Climate Crises

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Interviews with the Thinkers

Climate Grief: Up Close and Personal

by Karalee Clerk

“Climate Grief exists in relationship to climate anxiety, centered around a feeling of powerlessness that loss is a foregone conclusion. What that loss is varies person to person.”

Amita Kuttner

Too hot, too cold. Too much water, not enough. Weather patterns unpredictable, the fate of habitats unknown.

After decades of denial, the reality of Climate Change is here, up close and personal.

Accompanying the acceptance of uncertainty and the chasm of what is and what will be no longer is a sense of loss, deep and wide.

It’s called Climate Grief.

Three Thinkers share their thoughts on the climate—the changes and the grief—and what it feels like to live in a situation not of their making.

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Amita Kuttner



30-year old Amita Kuttner was born in North Vancouver, British Columbia. With environmentalist parents attuned to the fact that the earth’s ecosystems were changing at a rapid pace, they gained awareness, insights and instincts that much was amiss at an early age. But they had faith.

They'd seen that human-produced CFCs had caused a hole in the ozone layer, and then they'd watched as human action and ingenuity, for the most part, solved the issue.

They remember knowing climate change as a problem, but one the world viewed as distant and not urgent, dire or existential enough to require immediate action. They were also cognizant that the earth was either cooling down or heating up, and that, in time, one of the theories would prove correct. But they believed that humankind would rally to solve the issue, as they'd seen them do, before it was too late.

By the time Amita was in their early teens, the illusion that people would get together and do something was dissipating. And then, at age 14, their own world shifted dramatically and forever when a mudslide took the life of her mother and left their father permanently damaged. Climate Change, that far in the distance problem, was a contributing factor. The formation about how they felt and how they wish to act, regarding climate impact and grief began its path forward in their life in this moment.

Getting through monumental loss, at a young age...

I lost everything as a teenager. People say I'm resilient, and yes, I am. I survived.

A lot of factors contributed to what happened to my family, particularly Climate Change and government inaction. It was through my grieving process that I learned that after experiencing trauma you can put the pieces back together. What I also realized was that I want to provide something through my existence. The formation about how I feel and how I wish to act about climate impact came from my loss.

Climate Change in motion...

The ongoing loss is seeing the destruction of the world in real time—watching species die off, shorelines die or disappear, trees obliterated by fire or dying because the water table is no longer there. When I was a kid, everything was still there, and the rapid change to our systems shows that collapse is obvious. It's difficult to see anything that is doing well other than cockroaches and jellyfish.

I grew up in North Vancouver, and on a smaller scale, I noticed, in my very short lifetime, significant change in the local climate. It was apparent simply in how green everything *used to be*. Over time, I noted when we would start having dry grass and that water bans began earlier and earlier.

While it's understood that there are going to be variations in patterns, when change continues over number of years, the accepted 'norm' becomes significantly different because we don't exist in a timescale that we so easily notice that change. So, we continue with our daily lives until something happens to break the pattern, like the massive event I went through, and then reality shatters.

It takes a lot for people to get there, but now we have these massive fires and tornadoes and weather shifts, and there is a acknowledgment that “*This is worse,*” though many still remain in denial.

I do understand why people, the deniers, are reacting this way. As a species, memory is short, and people become less aware, over time, of how things are. This is also how we, as animals, process risk, by living with it and normalizing it. It’s innate to the human condition.

What you see before you, right now...

There are a certain set of things we can care about when we don’t have to worry about the basics, and I’ve been frustrated for a while at the way we’ve used that opportunity on this planet.

Of all the things we could do with our lives—art, culture, family—we choose paperwork, we choose bureaucracy, we choose not doing things to give us hope or allow us to explore our existence. We somehow got into this lull of accepting *this* is what society is like. And now, we don’t have a clear path of what is ahead. We have some of version of it, but it’s crumbling, that much is clear.

Climate Change is really hard to digest, and answers to ‘normal’ questions—how do I have kids? Where do I live?—are radically altering. I’m watching my community and their lack of preparedness for the collective trauma that comes with Climate Change. We don’t always have the capacity to manage trauma or handle huge change because what we’re missing is what to do with grief. It’s a cultural problem, the general ability to grieve. We’re sad for a while, have a funeral and that is that.

Facing grief...

There’s no easy way to institute grief. Looking back into our cultural heritage, the heart of what it is and the point of having a grief ritual is something we shut away.

What frustrates me is that we haven’t yet developed the tools to face our current reality, to face this Climate Grief. And that contributes to denial because people reduce the situation to two extremes—complete destruction is underway and we have to act now or everything is fine, so I’ll just live in it until the end. Right now, we’re doing something in the horrible squishy middle.

The experience of living in a semi-constant experience of loss with my family is something that I have learned to appreciate as okay, but change due to injustice and loss is not the same. This time of change feels too obvious to be withstood.

The grief I feel—I try to make space for it in my mind, to sit with the discomfort of the loss and the beauty and validity for what it was. It is certain trees are suffering, and I sit in time with them, appreciating what they are, as I grieve. After many iterations, I cannot feel anguish at the concept of loss. Instead, I hold other feelings with it—accepting the loss, honourings beauty and existence, holding that love inside, and remembering this

should not be happening. And I say no to more. I am going to try to my best to make sure this does not continue.

Getting from denial to acceptance...

People are going to have a difficult time. But, we are going through this, we need to get ready, and there is nothing we can do but prepare. We have to have that conversation to acknowledge that this is going to be difficult, and we are going to suffer and things will change, but we will come through the other side and learn to flourish, under the circumstances.

These are the frustrating conversations, but they're the ones that have the power to make change happen. We have to come to terms about what the world looks like now, and what we want it to look like years down the line. But we don't have to agree on one, singular future such that if we don't attain it, we'll be disappointed and sad. That is not a way for a civilization to function and progress through climate change.

From the current reality to the next iteration...

The pandemic response showed us the world is in a very precarious place, close to insolvency and 3 days from a food crisis. The pandemic helped alert us to the need for food security, and with ongoing heat waves and crop failures due to Climate Change, this will only become more obvious. Whether we like it or not, people will continue to experience these changes.

We have to assuage fears of no food and lack of shelter. But rather than center discussions around fear, the conversation can be built around protection and preparedness and the necessity to create infrastructure that will support the changes to come—ensuring water storage, food security, energy and more—while mitigating Climate Change impacts.

Plans need to be practical and focused, and there is a way to do this. For example, in British Columbia, we had 570 people die in the heat wave this summer. Cooling centres could help with that in the future. We can also increase mental health support, encouraging discussions that more openly address the fears of life being 'different.' And sure, maybe we don't like that word, and we've not quite determined the right delivery method, but we move forward.

We either convince people of something they aren't ready to do, or we work together and make change for another reason, finding ways to incorporate feelings of joy and connection. We have a huge amount of individual and community power to do this. Where we can start is locally, at the municipal level, as strongly as possible in a grassroots way. Those are the systems that can change first and fast, where we can create and then share the tools needed to get ready as we continue to challenge norms such as massive industry.

Shifting into collective action...

We need a massive shift from the personal of “*what do I want?*” to “*what do I want the world to look like?*” We need to start with ourselves and then our families and then our communities, working with what is available and re-sparking our imaginations. We make shifting part of our daily living by creating a sustainable framework for an equitable and just future.

The nitty gritty is about putting together new frameworks and to stop blaming the individual for what they are forced to use or do. We have to reframe blame and explore options on how to begin to make real change. Collective action is the only way to get things done.

Right now, what we’re missing is collective dreaming, an idea that came from reading utopia for realists, which is based on the concept that we have realized a previous utopia. Healthcare and food and shelter *were once* utopian concepts, so in many parts of the world, we have, or had, what we were striving for hundreds of years ago.

Walking the walk with a new dream...

Where I live now, I will have to renew the lease in 30 years, and what I think to myself is, *No, I won’t. Everything will be different.*

I live off-grid, and the dream for my friends and me is to find another property and live with the land in a community of our own, individual homes, creating a climate resilient life while still doing our work. This is not about having a separate, intention-based community. It’s about living near each other, yet being active and involved in our community, while maintaining empowerment for change.

I believe people very much can culturally change, and a massive shift from the personal of “*what do I want?*” to “*what do we need?*” is in order. I love working with youth because the imagination is there as is the willingness to change the paradigm to a very different world we can imagine for ourselves.

Right now, I work on a relatively short-term plan, helping my dad while I continue with the non-profit I co-founded, the *Moonlight Institute*. We’re working to create shareable frameworks to make the changes we need, encourage dreaming and help people down the road. The idea is to fill in the gaps by translating research into practical applications, rather than reinventing the wheel.

The ability to live as beautifully as possible is not gone, though we certainly messed it up. As someone who got to the other side of a great loss, I can say—Look at me. I’m just a person, and I don’t have super powers. Yet I am proof you can be happy again.’ Your life *still* exists, and hardship *is* survivable.

Lily Barraclough



23-year old Lily Barraclough grew up in Ontario and moved to Halifax in 2016. Currently, she is working on her Masters in Environmental Studies, an area that captured her attention at the age of five.

Growing up, Lily's parents were concerned about climate change, and raised her in an environmentally aware lifestyle. In school, climate change curriculum filled the gaps, but at times, learning about it filled Lily with terror and sorrow.

Acutely alert to a changing world, when she was 14, a winter of no snow and a February of temperatures 10 degrees or above sent Lily into deep research mode. She investigated weather patterns and historical trends more deeply, and the knowledge she acquired led her to a new understanding. All was irrevocably changing with the climate, and she wanted to do something about it.

Becoming climate aware ...

I often think of my parents as the catalyst for my climate awareness. For the most part, my moms had similar thoughts and worries, though as not as activists. But while they were concerned about climate change and understood and believed it was happening, it never held terror for them as it did for me.

My grief began very early. In school, we had climate change curriculum, and every day I went home crying as I learned more about it. I don't think my parents quite realized how big of an issue and how frightening Climate Change was for me and other young people.

What does Climate Grief mean, to you...

As an individual, the grief itself is intangible and challenging. It speaks to the feeling that you can't do a thing about the climate crisis because it's so all encompassing.

I can't plan any future because it seems silly to make a career plan if we're not going to be living in a livable place. I can't make any decision without considering its impact on the climate. Doing anything feels too large and too difficult and as if we don't have any power. That's not easy and creates a lot of stress.

This is the beginning, seeing the destruction of natural spaces, in my lifetime. The pandemic has made it even worse, bringing us all into this clear experience of a crisis without a back to normal.

My concerns about climate change and how it dictates my decisions in life is different from my peers, and it makes it an isolating experience. More people my age are concerned about climate change, but not to the same extent whereby all their decisions are connected to this awareness. I find it hard that other people believe this isn't a crisis

defining our lives. I also find it difficult to see that we are still continually bombarded by capitalism and consumerism, so opposite to what should be the focus.

How does it resonate in the everyday...

Life is built around convenience and accessibility, and no one has time to do the things that require time. Most issues arise around transportation, being too busy to choose a 40-minute walk over a 5-minute drive, or figuring a way to visit family who live far away, without driving. I want and should take the train or public transportation, but it takes exponentially longer. So, I feel guilty about owning a car and driving, but at the same time, I recognize my behavior is not making a dent on the problem.

I try as best to buy local and zero-waste, which means my partner and I will often put it off because it takes a lot of time to live that way, along with a ton of containers, and we have to drive to do it. It seems easier to go to a grocery store to get our food because buying local means we have to go to multiple places, which is back to driving.

And then there is just plain living and other activities you do in the day-to-day. Take streaming. It doesn't seem like it is bad for the environment, but I know that it takes huge energy via data storage, and that's not sustainable.

Not a day goes by I don't think of the climate crisis. It is my work as well as my volunteer activity. One of the ways I cope when I'm feeling heavy is to be with other people who are also caring.

Gathering the care you need, when you need it...

There is this misconception about self-care that we can turn it off, and say, "I'm not going to deal" because our survival is not dependent upon it.

Everyone is a victim of this crisis we're facing, and we're all part of this system. We're all chronically overburdened and overcommitted and doing too much. We need community care because the onus of self-care is just too much on the individual. We need community to foster connections that buoy others, with people taking turns helping each other out. On the whole, this is pretty rare.

There's another problem in coping with Climate Grief. I conceptually agree people shouldn't burn themselves out with 'busy-ness,' but there has to be a balance of doing things unrelated to climate change or social change or climate justice to free up the mind and help focus.

Creating a life to cope, to live, to help, in spite of...

I'm involved with and support a lot of research programs, boards, and organizations that centre on Climate Change. In addition, once a month or so, I go to an in-person events or gatherings, and I also share worldviews with my partner.

Getting involved is about finding the balance that works for you, with an emphasis on variety. Some find rallies and protests invigorating, for others, it's different. It's important to know and understand what types of activities you can handle.

My partner and I try to imagine our lives, within the context of this reality, but I always come back to the feeling that it's difficult to plan. Ultimately, my partner and I would love to have a small farm with horses, but whether to have kids or not is far more difficult a decision.

Lots of young people have pledged not to have kids until there is no climate crisis. While it feels unfair to bring kids into a world where they might not have a livable world, all generations have faced existential threats. And that train of thought—the idea of not wanting to subject humans to world that is not safe for them to live—can be applied to all generations and situations.

A vision of what life could look like in 25 years...

Since we cannot reverse Climate Change, I hope there will be a better future where we have completely transitioned away from fossil fuels and taken appropriate steps to mitigate Climate Change.

I hope that people can withstand the impacts on their communities, and that the focus shifts from the individual to a society where we can share and get what we want locally, rather than through multi-national organizations.

In that world, I hope people place value on more than money or jobs, which is a recipe for unhappiness. All society should have value, regardless of income or what type of work they do and have the time to explore nature, the mystic, and arts.

I hope for a world that has undone systemic harm to others to ensure that communities are free from discrimination and better processes are in place to hold people accountable.

I hope we return to a stewardship model, where impact on land is central to all decisions.

I believe these are all attainable, and we have the means to get there. A lot of small areas have worked to attain a lot of these already. We just need the political will to push for that, everywhere.

This is not a pipe dream. Everyone has the means to survive and thrive, where people work together in collaboration and empathy and everything we do benefits the earth. The land and earth provides a lot for us. We must recognize it is a two way relationship and take responsibility for actions.

Melanie Zurba



39-year old Melanie Zurba was born in Calgary, raised in Winnipeg and moved to the East Coast three years ago. She became aware of Climate Change as a child.

With a pro-environment family, Global Warning was topical, and her knowledge increased through dialogue with family and her avid interest in that information. She grew up knowing Climate Change to be a worldwide concern, and the narrative through line

she often heard from her parents was, *“We caused this problem, but your generation is going to have to fix it.”*

While she felt great pressure and responsibility at their words, what also felt was a deep motivation and commitment to be a part of the solution, and today, she is. As an Assistant Professor at Dalhousie University, Melanie, along with colleague, Erica Mendritzki, co-founded *Creating Vocabularies and Rituals for Climate Grief through Multiple Knowledge Systems and the Artistic Process* (Climate Grief Project), a research-based undertaking focused on creating the vocabulary to express and rituals to process and better understand Climate Grief.

Climate Grief, what it is...

I see the world changing, and I’m aware of the impact, both now and looming, and how the resulting grief exists almost in two states. It’s anticipatory as well as immediate, which is very different and unlike the finality of grief we’re most accustomed too, such as in of the loss of a loved one.

Climate Change is *ongoing*, and we don’t know where or if it will end.

The terminology many students use is *pre-Traumatic Stress Syndrome*—this need to deal with the present, living through the current disruption of a relationship with the land and the places we love, and a future, based on speculation of the unknown.

People are watching this all happen in the world, real-time, and that unearths deep and disturbing emotions that are difficult to express.

Walking the walk and talking the talk...

It’s impossible to put the blinders on and separate from the present state of our world and country—the pandemic, the Indigenous graves, Black Lives Matter, and Climate Change. We have to make space for people to express themselves in some fashion, which is what the Climate Grief Project is about. It’s a New Frontiers Project, funded by a specific research-based government program that focuses on funding interdisciplinary projects in frontiers, yet to be explored.

We begin with the engagement of diverse groups to understand what Climate Grief is to them. We use walking, common to all of us, as an artistic practice to encourage conversation. These walks are intentional. They're meant to facilitate an experience where the focus is on environment, walking within natural spaces, such as a forest or by the ocean. As we walk, we listen to people's thoughts about climate change from all perspectives—the science of it, the sensation of it, the thoughts and feelings around it—and we work to capture the vocabulary they use when speaking of these individual experiences.

The project has other activities such as engaging professional artists who are exploring Climate Grief and contributing to exhibits with a Boreal and Atlantic Coast focus, and many other events, such creating spaces for youth, newcomers, indigenous, artists and others. activities are centered on community-based work, which is about trying to understand place and people.

Keeping it real...

My predisposition is that of a realist. I've always had an interest in the environment, and as time when on, it became more focused on social ecological systems and understanding the connection.

I want to think that things are going to change and that we will be able to make a difference, but the most recent report says we have overshoot our tipping point. Now it is about how do we adapt, how do we layer the issues to come around health, society and more. The issues will compound and the more that happens, the less the focus will be on climate change.

We need fundamental change, with where we are and how quickly Climate Change is accelerating. I've found youth to have the most radical ideas how to do this, in a good way, with a sense of urgency and a *do it now* attitude.

Allowing grief to exist...

Everyone is effected, whether they admit or not, and we all have to be a little bit careful of grief. I'm one of those people who has a shut off switch, which is not always good. Going numb in the short term can help you get through, but in the long run, it will return back tenfold. When I feel that subconscious push to hit the off switch, I try and turn it back on to keep feeling the grief, however difficult, to stay attached and healthy by working through it.

As human beings, we're fortunate that we can feel complex emotions, going from happy and sad in the same day. Living with Climate Grief is about balance, as much as possible, and being aware of what brings joy alongside the sorrow.

If you lose your place or your connection to a place because it is sick and you are deeply sad, it's important to connect with someone who shares those feelings. It can help you feel safer and that what you are feeling is normal.

It's also important to listen to the diverse perspectives on climate grief, the variety of vocabulary and rituals that may be different for every community and individual. The more we support the differences, the better.

Climate Change and policy impact on the individual...

My individual actions can make a difference, but I don't know if I am really solving anything. So, my focus is on policy because if government doesn't make changes, I question the capacity of individual actions to make as much impact as they could.

Policy can give individuals motivation and rewards to do more. For example, I just bought an electric car, which seems to make sense in terms of sustainability. But I don't know if I could have afforded an electric car without the Nova Scotia government supporting that decision with a rebate program, whereby the policy actually supported my individual action and choice.

There is also the matter of substantive decision-making, ensuring equity seeking groups fit into policy making, the place where change happens. These groups require both a platform to speak out and a seat at a decision-making table because for voices to become more than heard, they must have an opportunity to contribute and influence as decisions are made.

We need a movement, but we also need change beyond discourse.