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Contemplating extinction

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I've often found that when grassroots work is most successful, the experience can be electrifying. Activism is all about mobilising people around common or overlapping concerns and big ideas. Yet it is important to remember that it can also be about a meeting of hearts, as we approach issues on the basis of a common sentiment: whether hope or terror. There is a dark side to affirming the felt side of activism inasmuch as issues can become strangely fuzzy. This is particularly the case with extinction. As I have attended climate marches and now Extinction Rebellions across the country as a scholar/activist over the past decade, it has often struck me how a range of divergent concerns can coalesce under a common banner like 'environmental crisis' or 'extinction'.

What exactly do we mean when we say 'extinction'? When I've asked this question of Christians and other faith-based activists, the answers have ranged widely. Some people have in mind the extinction of specific local plants, animals, insects, or birds; for others it is the eradication of whole species. Still others are thinking of the disappearance of indigenous populations worldwide; or at the most severe, the disappearance of the human species from Earth. On the one hand, we can appreciate that these extinction

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concerns are intertwined. But on the other hand, I want to ask whether these different concerns carry us into action in different ways. There are different motivations or emphases lurking here: is our concern local or distant? Are we talking about the extinction of our own species or other creatures? Our work under this big tent and our active pursuit of solidarity can conceal these kinds of differences. As I'd like to suggest here, these different interpretations of extinction are important inasmuch as they carry us into different kinds of spiritual practices.

By contrast, when I ask people to describe how they *feel* about extinction, there is a much more consistent response. We feel deeply sad about the state of our earthly home, often to such a level that this work functions as a kind of lament. To a great extent, the work of environmental activism has in past years been procedural: about mobilization, campaigning, and trying to promote a response to scientific observation and communication. Only recently has the global community begun to appreciate the importance of the way that things like extinction *feel*, and recognized the importance of those communities which nurture reflection on the felt experience of the crisis, including churches. As many readers will relate, we can feel paralysed, out of place, or hollowed out from the regular confrontation with environmental issues. So I want to underline the importance of more holistic activism which attends to emotional work at the outset, before digging into some of the complexities which lie in the midst of our felt response to these extinction crises.

To sharpen my question a bit further, what is it that we are *mourning* with the issue of extinction? Is it the loss of

specific species? Like Martha, the last passenger pigeon? Few of us will have had the privilege to live in biodiversity hotspots to tangibly and relationally witness species decline, so it is unlikely that we have ever had an actual embodied experience of these extinctions. Though our mourning may be sharp, the object of this outpouring of emotion remains fuzzy. Here, it is quite possible that lament might serve as a sort of hiding place or proxy for our lament of other deeply felt personal losses such as the loss of ‘home’ or the loss of access to rural landscapes. Given the way that so many of us are now urban and highly mobile, our primal loss might be something much more abstract, such as the loss of a feeling of familiarity towards our local world as climate change makes the experience of different seasons or places feel suddenly and sharply foreign. Our daily lives are now full of much more frequent changes of home, career, relationships, and community in a condition that Zygmunt Bauman has called ‘liquid modernity’. Is it possible that on some level we are lamenting the absence of stability and stasis itself?

This last subject of lament becomes even more interesting when we consider how, even more paradoxically, we may be mourning things which are not yet lost. The trouble with mass extinction is that as an event, we can’t be certain it has happened until decades or centuries afterwards. So it is possible that the event which Elizabeth Kolbert has described as the “sixth extinction” has not yet occurred. Instead, it remains a very concerning projection, just on the brink of happening. On a more individual level, many of the creatures which we lament are not *gone* but are *nearly* extinct, like the so-called ‘ghost species’ who are on an

unavoidable trajectory to extinction as their habitats have already been permanently reduced to a size or condition which cannot sustain future generations. Theologians use the word 'proleptic' to speak of this kind of anticipatory concern. I'd be the first to admit that much of my own lament is caught up in proleptic elegies. In my experience, this is a kind of mourning which is not diminished, but actually intensified by the fact that I can watch helplessly as these creatures and habitats proceed on a seemingly inevitable path towards destruction.

There are also some hazards lurking here. Particularly in the ways that our processing of eco-grief can be caught up in the kinds of privilege that people like me enjoy. The historian Patrick Brantlinger, in his study of the British colonial project also uses this term "proleptic elegy" to describe forms of mourning for far away things which might yet be lost. However, he points to the way that recurrent proleptic mourning for things far away might also serve as a kind of liturgy which trains people to mobilize paternalistically in response to these imagined threats. If we believe that a creature, community, culture, or place is about to disappear forever, more radical interventions seem far more appealing and may also receive less scrutiny. The result of this was the generation of support for the unnecessary and harmful takeover of whole communities in far off places, particularly in places like Tasmania. Personal grief can be both a strong and persistent source of motivation, and these past events remind us that personal grief for an imagined loss can underwrite processes we wouldn't ordinarily support, such as the wholesale disenfranchisement of other persons.

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Are there sharp, perhaps hidden edges to our campaigns which arise from this kind of fear and are not adequately chastened by compassion?

This sensibility can also implicitly underwrite exclusion. As other authors in this book have highlighted, the impacts of extinction, climate change and habitat loss are highly variable, with impacts falling more acutely on people in the global South and within specific places, upon those with fewer financial resources. So while I might experience climate change as a sudden and novel disruption of everyday comfort and security, the relatively recent occurrence of this sensibility is the product of white privilege. In my experience, I have realized in retrospect that some of my eco-lament can serve as a more noble stand-in for white fragility. Kathryn Yusoff writes of “A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None” in order to highlight the problems of exclusion which have been present in environmentalism.

There are two consequences of this which may be relevant to other white campaigners and should be highlighted here. The first lies in the tendency, especially for white Christians, to assume implicitly that our own challenging experiences are universal. Whilst climate change is a global problem, its impacts are unevenly distributed. To put this another way, in our lament, we may miss the fact that our suffering could actually be much worse, and that others are already contending with far more serious impacts. So whilst I may be (rightfully, I would emphasize) lamenting the inevitable near-future loss of beautiful landscapes which have been important to me, others are lamenting the active disappearance of their homes, livelihoods, and

subsistence. I'd like to suggest that, now that we have finally sharpened the sense of threat and emergency in the public discourse, white Christians like me need to spend some time reconceptualizing solidarity.

One way to do this is to set aside our sense of universality of experience and listen to non-white activists more attentively. This is particularly important, not just because it will help to add a level of badly needed intersectionality to our activities, but also because those persons are likely way ahead of us in developing forms of resilience and response to extinction. A second practical outworking of this concern as a form of attentive listening is that white activists need to think more carefully about who they speak for. Solidarity is a crucial aspect to effective mobilization, so there is often a desire to speak for 'the earth' or the 'global community'. White justice-oriented Christians are used to speaking up for victims of injustice, and this is a good impulse, well justified as a Christian discipline. However, there are opportunities to let those victims speak for themselves. So whilst we attend to our own grief as an important aspect of the work of contemplating extinction, let us be careful to note where these losses are real and where they are forecasted, and be careful to reckon with the way that loss is tangled up with our personal experiences and entitlements.

I've watched with interest as a number of recent protests, among them Extinction Rebellion, have been a laboratory for revealing the lack of intersectionality in eco-protest. In particular, people of colour have highlighted the ways that casual, even enthusiastic, engagement with police in the midst of civil disobedience invokes white privilege.

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Exposing these fault lines is a good thing and long overdue. It's the opposite of failure – rather the indication that a very challenging process of maturing our activism and our collaborations is now underway. If anything, this suggests that we may finally be arriving at a moment when white Christians have an opportunity to do the work of reconceptualising solidarity. Are we speaking for someone else when they have a voice that might be listened to and amplified instead? Or, in a similar vein, is our mourning as comprehensive as we *feel* it to be?

To return to my broader concern here, around contemplating extinction, I want to suggest that there is some important work to be done here, not just at the picket line, but in a much wider sense of cultivating the forms of spiritual discipline which might underpin compassionate and inclusive earth-focused activism. I think there hasn't been an adequate appreciation of the ways in which many environmental activists and campaigners are engaged in ministry as “wounded healers”, as Henri Nouwen put it. So here we might try to emphasize more fully the important role of self-work as preceding and underpinning our more performative occasional actions, just like any minister or chaplain practices spiritual discipline throughout the week in order to preach and minister.

Sometimes the (very welcome) emphasis on the urgency of action to prevent extinction can make activities like contemplation seem frivolous and unimportant. What I am trying to suggest here is that there is some important work here to be done linking up the facilitation and leadership we'd like to bring to our communities on the issues of

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climate change and extinction with some of the self-work that is required to develop personal resilience as we grapple with the shocking scenarios that are represented in both extinction and a climate emergency. One of the XR core values which activists often highlight, but which doesn't appear as much in the media is the work of fostering 'regenerative culture'. This kind of work is not a matter of veering away from the urgency of these crises, but rather about recognizing the need to weave ongoing practice of the disciplines of silence, solitude, and meditation into this vital work.

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