HOLDING HOPE

TALKING TOGETHER ABOUT THE INNER IMPACTS OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

By **MARINA SCHAUFFLER**

2023 may be remembered as the year when weather norms became obsolete. Amid a deluge of disasters, choking wildfire smoke and temperature spikes on land and at sea, we learned that Earth's global average temperature had officially surpassed all previous records.

As our planet enters uncharted terrain, so do we. Katharine Hayhoe, chief scientist with The Nature Conservancy, routinely asks audiences how they feel about climate change and hears similar responses everywhere: anxious, frightened, overwhelmed, hopeless, horrified, frustrated, devastated, heartbroken.

"Our experiences of identity, place, home, security, predictability and familiarity are all shifting," says Rebecca Weston, a psychotherapist and co-president of the Climate Psychology Alliance North America (CPA-NA), an all-volunteer nonprofit of counselors working for greater resilience and equity. This uncertainty can take a huge emotional toll, particularly on youth. A study published last year of 10,000 young people aged 16-25 in 10 countries found that 59% were "very" or "extremely" worried about climate change, and 45% reported that climate-related feelings diminished their daily life and functioning.

"Nearly every person and profession must now grapple with the emotional implications of climate change," Weston observes. "This is part of what it means to be alive at this time."

↑ Morning light at Hayden Valley in Yellowstone National Park.

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> Even while resolving to limit the damage, we can mourn. And here, the sheer scale of the problem provides a perverse comfort: We are in this together. The swiftness of the change, its scale and inevitability, binds us into one, broken hearts trapped together under a warming atmosphere.
>
> **KATE MARVEL,** climate scientist

'TALK ABOUT IT'

The COVID-19 pandemic brought heightened attention to the mental health challenges of global threats, and the systemic stressors on individuals. Yet even that increased recognition failed to diminish a long-standing taboo against discussing the climate crisis. A Yale University survey conducted last December found that 63% of respondents "rarely" or "never" talk about global warming with friends and family.

Breaking that uneasy silence, though, may be critical to mobilizing a more effective climate response. "The single most important thing that anyone … can do to bring people together is, ironically, the very thing we fear most. Talk about it," Hayhoe argues in her book, "Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World."

Even those who manage to converse about climate science and policy may hesitate to broach how this global crisis affects us personally. "There's a silent mourning that's happening for a lot of people," reflects Jeannette Tuitele-Lewis, executive director of Big Sur Land Trust in California, where local communities have endured both wildfires and severe flooding in recent years. "The more you know, the harder it is," she says.

Clinical terms like climate grief and eco-anxiety (which can encompass an array of environmental threats) are moving into common use, affirming that these personal responses are far from pathological; they reflect increasingly dire global disruptions.

To cope with the emotional toll of the climate crisis, a growing number of individuals are seeking ways to reduce stress and reconnect with nature, such as meditation, mindfulness practices, journaling and forest bathing. Some land trusts are hosting sessions on their preserves (often led by community practitioners) to support people in gaining the therapeutic benefits of contemplative time outdoors.

"A lot of us are good at bypassing the grief," explains Naila Francis, owner of a grief coaching practice outside Philadelphia called This Hallowed Wilderness, where she often works with individuals and groups outdoors, including on a preserve of the accredited Natural Lands. With planetary as well as personal losses, Francis reflects, "it's all about how you learn to carry your grief, so it doesn't overwhelm or paralyze or incapacitate you." That may require what some therapists call "toggling," moving repeatedly between feelings of grief and overwhelm to a sense of greater resolve and resilience. It's important, Francis says, "to do this work collectively, not in isolation."

As beneficial as contemplative outdoor practices or individual therapy can be in maintaining personal equanimity and effectiveness, Weston says, they cannot take the place of the collective conversations needed about how the climate crisis is reshaping inner landscapes. Dialogue about climate's affective impacts needs to happen in families, among friends, in workplaces and at every level of government. But "naming something that is diffuse, a gray sense of dread, can be hard," Weston acknowledges. "It's terrifying and overwhelming to face this."

'POWDER KEGS OF EMOTION'

Organizational leaders may see conversations about the emotional impacts of climate and ecological disruptions as unscientific or a distraction from pressing practical work. But in the experience of Susanne Moser, a climate adaptation and communications researcher and consultant who often guides such discussions, "It doesn't mean it becomes unprofessional or ineffective; in fact, it's just the opposite."

The greater danger, in her view, is to have staff become "powder kegs of emotion" who lack settings where they can safely voice difficult feelings. The ongoing effort that goes into suppressing those emotions, Moser observes, is "energy not available to do the work."

Moser, who works primarily with scientists and environmental professionals, often witnesses a "profound disconnect" between their growing sense of "existential dread" and an obligatory optimism expected of them at work. Employees, particularly those with young children, can't necessarily share perspectives on the climate and ecological crises at home. If the same holds true in their office culture, Moser says, emotions can be stifled, which research indicates can lead to depression, anxiety, burnout and illness.

"It's a shadow that's always there in the work," Tuitele-Lewis reflects. "We acknowledge and see it's there, but we don't have focused conversations about how it's affecting our personal well-being." It can be especially hard for land trust leaders, who feel under pressure to project a positive and bright vision to the community. There are times, she adds, when "finding that well of hopefulness is hard."

BUILDING EMOTIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

To help those working at the forefront of climate adaptation equip themselves and others to deal with pervasive uncertainty, trauma and transformative change, Moser and colleagues established the Adaptive Mind Project, which offers facilitated workshops and trainings. Within the environmental and scientific fields, she says, the capacity to navigate inner terrain will be "as important as any technical skill a person must have." She invites organizational leaders to consider whether they are encouraging employees to "bring their whole selves to the places where [they] spend so much time and passion."

There is inestimable value to building emotional connections within organizations and with allied groups before local crises occur. The skills needed when disaster strikes, Weston notes, are "to trust people who are offering support, express what we need, and repair material and emotional infrastructure." Given the likelihood of more shocks ahead, it's vital to have "people who have grown the muscle of tolerating hard feelings," she says, "and can both stay present with a problem and find meaning and connection even if they're scared."

Land trusts navigating the aftermath of disasters are learning this lesson firsthand. Long before the 2020 Holiday Farm Fire tore through the Western Cascade Range in Oregon, local groups had approached the accredited McKenzie River Trust about a community-led effort to prepare for climate-induced trauma, its executive director Joe Moll recalls. But at that time, the initiative seemed too abstract. He saw the value of that preparatory work differently immediately after the fire and in the intervening years. "The collective drag on emotional energy is very real and is still very much with us," he observes.

Starting these conversations after extreme events can be hard practically as well as emotionally. "In the moment, it's very hard to have any time to process anything like grief," reflects Tuitele-Lewis. And then, she adds, "there are the demands of cleanup."

Hurricane Ian made landfall in Florida last fall, causing devastating flooding in several of the counties where the accredited Conservation Foundation of the Gulf Coast works. Land trust preserves weathered the storm quite well, says Christine Johnson, its executive director, but many homes in the area did not. One employee's family lost their home to waist-high flooding, initiating months spent settling claims, dealing with demolition and getting permits to rebuild.

Facing extreme disruption, Johnson has come to realize, "you don't get over it, you get through it." The Foundation sought "to respond with kindness and empathy," she says, and to be completely transparent so that everyone "understands what's required to get your life back together." Accommodations for paid time off, and policies for flex time and work from home changed, and the organization made sure health care coverage included mental health counseling—and that everyone knew how to access it. "We give time for people to process," she says, and "encourage staff members to talk."

Strengthening an organization's emotional infrastructure can also help staff members cope with increasingly challenging ambient conditions. Extreme heat and wildfire smoke, for example, can undermine mental as well as physical well-being, particularly for those "sitting with the reality that we're not going back to summers of before," Weston says. Opportunities to share feelings with colleagues can be an immense relief, she adds, "when we've been holding our breath emotionally."

A COLLECTIVE PATH TO ACTION

To prevent individuals from feeling helpless in the face of global crises, organizations often promote personal actions that can help combat carbon pollution. Individualized approaches can empower people, but they can also lead to feelings of overwhelm, inadequacy, guilt and shame, Moser observes. The fossil fuel industry has long used that personal emphasis—focusing people on their carbon footprints, for example—to deflect attention from corporate responsibility and systemic injustices.

A collective focus, in Weston's view, can make members of an organization more resilient and less prone to burnout than emphasizing personal action. "The crises we face are not going to be changed by singular actions taken by individuals on a given day," she says. "The outcomes of our actions are not always immediately visible or known, and to sustain ourselves requires an embodied conviction and sense that we are part of something collective."

Employees can feel greater solidarity when organizational leaders openly encourage dialogue. "It really does matter that these conversations are not seen as a distraction, as soft or as wasting time," Weston observes.

Initiating shared dialogue about responses to the climate crisis can help people find collective approaches to change that draw in a wider circle of the community. Since climate impacts of all kinds—including psychological—often fall most heavily on those who already suffer from environmental injustice, communal conversations can help focus attention on ways to address inequities.

Climate dialogue need not be guided by a consultant or professional therapist. The Climate Psychology Alliance, for example, trains a diversity of people to facilitate groups of eight to 10 people, called "Climate Cafés," that Weston says are "oriented not toward next steps for action but toward helping people tap into love, connection to Earth, sadness and grief." In her experience facilitating these sessions, "they often begin with downcast eyes and tears but invariably end with joy, warmth and collective ideas about what should come next." Moser has witnessed similar transformations in the course of multi-session Adaptive Mind workshops.

CULTIVATING HOPE

Conversations about emotions can become a vital seedbed for hope, growing the collective resolve to take meaningful action. Many climate leaders, from Katharine Hayhoe to activist Bill McKibben and writer Rebecca Solnit, nurture hope despite increasingly dire warning signs. "Hope often starts in a very dark place," Hayhoe has observed. "It's going to take a lot of work to end up in a better place, and it's not guaranteed that we're going to get there."

Land conservation can help us "get there"—not only with preserves that store carbon and ameliorate the effects of climate disruptions, but with places that help kindle hope and with heartfelt conversations about how climate is reshaping inner and outer landscapes and how we depend on the natural world.

In Moser's view, land trusts are perfectly situated, to lead communities in cultivating an active and engaged hope—"one that sees the reality we're in and uses love for the land and other species to save everything we can."

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RESOURCES

- **Saving Us: A Climate Scientist's Case for Hope and Healing in a Divided World** (book) by Katharine Hayhoe.
- **Generation Dread: Finding Purpose in an Age of Climate Crisis** (book) by Britt Wray, author of "Gen Dread" newsletter.
- **Warmth: Coming of Age at the End of the World** (book) by Daniel Sherrell.
- **How to cope with all the climate feels,** "A Matter of Degrees" (podcast) with Katharine Wilkinson and Leah Stokes.
- **Talk About It: How Climate Conversation Groups Inspire Action** (article) by Katherine Rapin.
- **Climate Psychology Alliance of North America's Climate Cafés**.
- **Adaptive Mind Project**.

Scan the QR code for links and additional resources.

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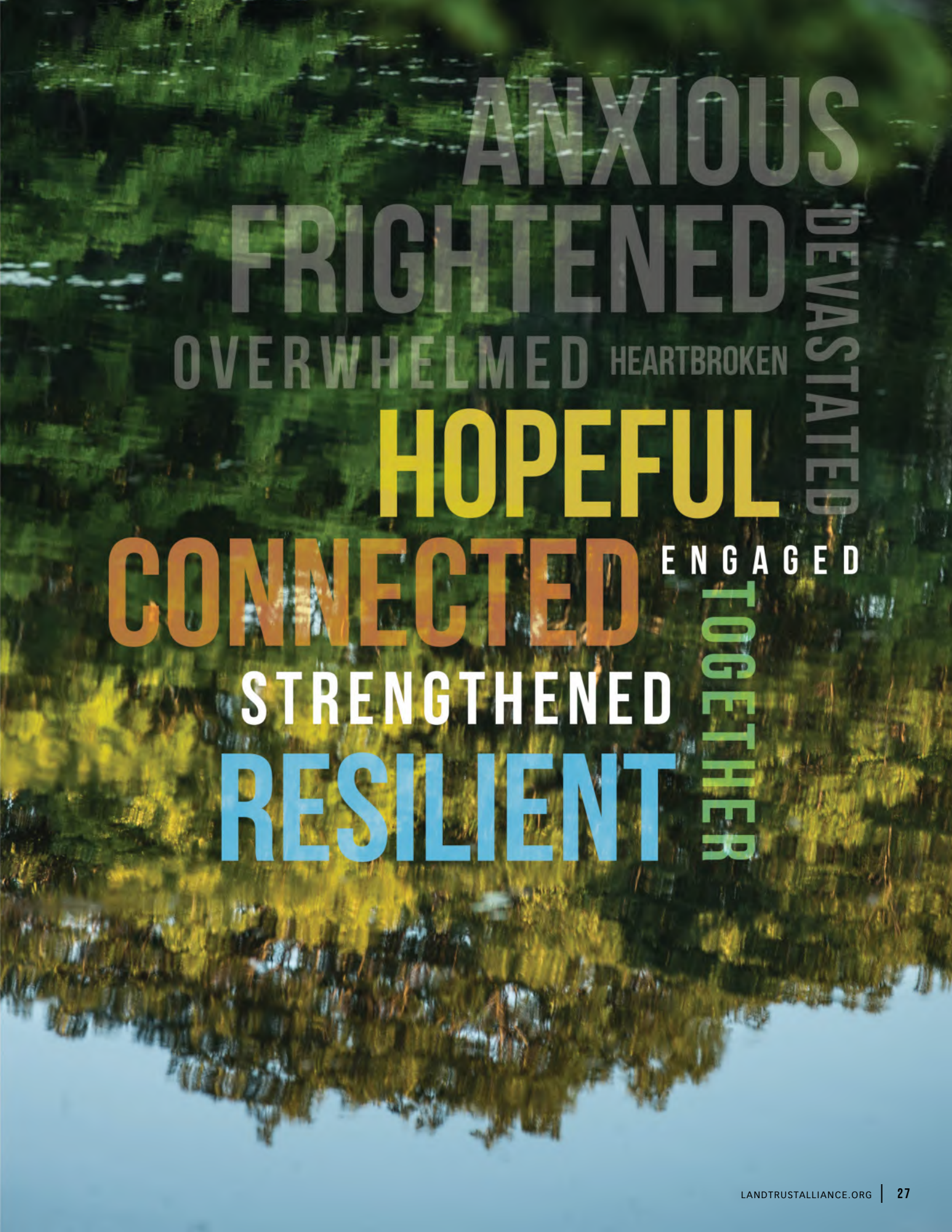
WE'RE LAUNCHING A CONVERSATION OF OUR OWN.

Saving Land **invites readers to share stories about how you are navigating the inner impacts of climate upheaval at work and in life. The Land Trust Alliance is also planning opportunities for land trust leaders to learn more about facilitating organizational conversations on this topic.**

Share and connect with others on our forum at lta.org/climatestory.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CONNECTED
ENGAGED
TOGETHER
STRENGTHENED
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