

Full Catastrophe Ethics

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Essays · 3 min read

Full Catastrophe Ethics.

How do you react to news of climate change and forecasts of ice-caps melting, cities flooding or burning, widespread drought and famine, breakdown of essential services like water and electricity, hundreds of millions of refugees seeking homes in temperate regions like ours? Do you shrink into a ball of anxiety and disbelief? Weep? Pound your fists in frustration and rage? Numb out? Feel totally out of your depth and inadequate? Trust the scientists to find a way out?

Any or all of these happen for me depending on circumstances. Afterwards I might be prompted to read some relevant articles, sign a petition, donate to an environmental cause, re-commit to living sustainably, toy with the possibility of learning basic survival skills. Then I'll turn back to more immediate concerns. Till the next depressing news bulletin.

The 'out of my depth and inadequate' feeling I find particularly troublesome. It begs so many questions. Surely there is something I can do to help myself face what might be coming down the tracks?

I was relieved and grateful therefore to come across a bioethics paper suggesting ethical maxims that we can practice to help us face the environmental and social disaster that the authors see coming as soon as 2031 – only nine years away!!!

The paper was publicized in a recent Zoom event featuring Joanna Macey, the renowned author, climate activist and Buddhist scholar in conversation with the authors of the paper. She enthusiastically endorsed their suggestion to prepare ourselves so as to behave with as much integrity as possible in the face of environmental and social breakdown. Here's a brief summary of their suggested maxims:

Work Hard to Grasp the Immensity. The possibility of environmental and subsequent social collapse is inconceivable for most of us. We enter a fog where we no longer know how to think, where right and wrong become meaningless. And yet that incomprehension may be a necessary steppingstone to the next maxim.

Cultivate Radical Hope. This not based on optimism that some solution can be found to restore the social security we now enjoy. Having worked through grief and anger and a depth of despair, hope takes the form of faith that some values are worth preserving to the end - kindness, not abandoning people, behaving with integrity.

Radical hope sees openings for positive action, finds gaps in the gloom.

Have a Line in the Sand. Know that there are some things you will not do, some actions you will not embrace. Be prepared to die rather than cross your red line.

Appreciate the Astonishing and Unique Opportunity. Acknowledge what an extraordinary transition is coming for humanity and the biosphere. Appreciate what is vanishing before your eyes, be glad for every blade of grass that is still green, every tree still standing. Practice gratitude for being alive now, able to breathe now.

Train Your Body and Your Mind. Develop the capacity to deal with despair. Learn skills for getting beyond the limits of ego. Climate collapse will bring widespread physical, psychological, and spiritual trauma. As our physical and social resources

shrink, our mental and spiritual resources will become ever more valuable to ensure human survival and flourishing.

Act for the Future Generations of All Species. Think beyond yourself and your immediate circle. Act for the benefit of the poor, future generations, other species, forests, seas and mountains. Act, personally and politically, to limit the damage - every 0.5° C increase avoided will save millions of lives, species, resources. We are all in this together, interconnected, a multiplex unity.

The authors of the paper aren't proposing these maxims as absolutes, but as a bare beginning that will provoke discussion. Personally I feel very grateful to have this skeleton upon which I can begin to take on board the spiritual challenge that is to come.

Over the coming months I hope to examine each maxim in more depth, see how it ties in with the Dhamma, see how we could put the maxim into practice in our meditation and daily life. I hope to be back with a series of tips on the subject and if any of you would like to practice alongside me on this, please get in touch.

i https://media2-production.mightynetworks.com/asset/39337730/Schenck_-_Ethical_Maxims.pdf

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.