

“Ecological Grief, Environmental Education and Circles of Learning”

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I am deeply concerned about the messages of ecological loss and degradation children receive almost daily and the void of opportunity to address their emotional responses to these devastations. Children are bombarded with knowledge of environmental destruction from information-intensive school curriculums, not to mention from the media and its preference to sensationalize fear and disaster.

The ecological impact of our industrialized civilization is more than apparent: global warming, species extinction, deforestation, pollution and on and on. Research shows that all this ‘bad news’ is increasing a sense of anxiety and hopelessness within us, children included. David Sobel says the accumulation of environmental loss and degradation knowledge has begun to breed “ecophobia”, what he calls a fear of the natural world.¹ Glen Albrecht calls the emotional phenomenon “solastalgia”, which includes a sense of melancholia and the loss of hope.² I use the term *ecological grief* to describe this phenomenon, as I have found a parallel between our emotional responses towards the loss of the natural world and the experience of loss in general (e.g. death of a loved one), essentially grief. How is all this hopelessness and grief being addressed in education? How might we change the way we are doing things to make space for exploring our psychological relationship to the natural environment? Is exploring ecological grief an essential component of environmental education?

We worry about how to explain death to our children when someone they know and love passes away. Recently someone close to me described how she tried to explain death to her two young children. She told them it was something not to feel sad about, but rather happy as they remember the loving memories that they have. While understanding her need to spare her children from pain, I wondered, “What’s wrong with saying it’s okay to feel pain or grief or sadness?” Death, dying, decay, and destruction are a part of life too – in fact, this is the part of life where we are most likely to learn how to live. Is it possible to create safe social structures within educational settings where our children feel comfortable to explore such sensitive topics?

There is plenty happening each day to cause grief where the environment is concerned. How, for example, did people deal with hearing the recent news report that the Western Black Rhino is now extinct?³ And what if tomorrow it is the Orca, the Humpback, or the mighty elephant? These animals are significant characters or concepts in our minds: they are in our children’s stories, they are toy figurines, movie characters, but most importantly, members of our earth community and a part of our global family. Whether we lose a loved one or lose a part of nature, the stages of grief we can experience are the same: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I wonder then, might landmarks of closure like funerals or celebrations of life help us to cope with what’s happened? Who will

¹ Sobel, D. (1995). *Beyond ecophobia: Reclaiming the heart in nature education*. Great Barrington, MA: Orion Society.

² Albrecht, G. (2005). ‘Solastalgia’ a new concept in health and identity. *Philosophy Activism & Nature*, 41-55.

³ Boettcher, D. (2011). Western black rhino declared extinct. *BBC News & Science*. Retrieved from: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-15663982>

host the funeral for the Rhino, where's the day of remembrance for the 62,000 species that are no longer with us?

Ecological grief is not a topic often discussed in formal or informal educational settings. Grief, for that matter, is generally the social 'leper in the corner' we are told to stay away from in any setting and to talk about it seems like act of social maladjustment. I wonder if our inability or unwillingness to grieve openly, talk about grief, perceive grief as normal, necessary and healthy, etc. has impacted our ability as human beings to prevent and reduce environmental devastation. This has significant implications for environmental education where the common question arises, "How can we change the way we are behaving so that we can change the way we are living?" because love is not absent from grief, for when we grieve we remember what we love about, our connections to and relationship with what or who we grieve for, including the natural world. It is possible that learning grief skills can help us to live more sustainably. So how might we learn these skills?

From deeply studying 'Circle' as the subject matter for a masters thesis in *Environmental Education and Communication*, I have come to know this exceptional communications process as valuable for where the teaching, learning and communicating of ecological or environmental concepts can be found, including ecological grief. Without a doubt, the Circle experience creates a way for us to connect to our self, to others and nature in a more substantial way, where we can gain context about our relationship to nature and our contribution towards environmental integrity, address our diverse feelings concerning the planet, and discover a sense of well-being and wonder in the process.

To define it simply, Circle is a social structure where people gather together for a shared purpose or intention to engage in meaningful speaking and respectful listening. This communication process is governed by commonly shared values, principles and practices which are essential to help create a safe and comfortable space (unlike other social spaces), in which we can engage in a deeper way with each other. One practice is the use of a talking piece to aid communication: the person holding the piece does the talking while everyone else listens, the piece is passed around from person to person until everyone has had an opportunity to contribute if they so choose to. Another key component of Circle is deep thought-provoking questions put forward to empower self-reflective story-telling and meaningful sharing.

It is possible to address ecological grief, and to teach our children grief communication skills when we gather together for the intention to "speak and listen from the heart about the things that matter most to us about planet Earth". When we share our stories, the ones we carry within us, including the more sensitive ones where ecological grief may arise, we may become aware of how they influence how we live and the relationships we foster with others and the natural world; and in doing so, we have the opportunity to more fully understand our place in this world and improve upon our circumstances. Also, when we acquire the skills to communicate grief, we also acquire skills of love or loving. And love has everything to do with creating a more sustainable world in which to live; after all, "real change begins with the simple act of people talking about what they care about".⁴

⁴ Found on p.26 in "Wheatley, M. J. (2009). *Turning to one another: Simple conversations to restore hope to the future*. San, Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc."
