



Painful Consolations: Re-Imagining Soul Care in a Time of Climate Crisis

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Abstract

This essay argues that the ancient practice of “the care of souls” needs to be re-imagined amid a climate crisis that is taking an increasing toll on people’s emotional, psychological, and spiritual health. Drawing on recent work on climate emotions while acknowledging critiques of the seemingly privileged nature of eco-anxiety discourse, the author suggests three dimensions of a re-imagined soul care while suggesting spiritual resources and practices from Christian history that may help people navigate difficult climate-related emotions in ways that move them beyond hopeless despair and debilitated inaction.

Keywords Eco-anxiety · Care of souls · Compunction · Discernment · Desert Fathers and Mothers · Ignatius of Loyola

Introduction

On a hot North Texas summer night a few years ago, when my daughter was 12, I found her absolutely distraught and in tears when I went to do our bedtime routine. It took several minutes for her to choke out a few words to explain her distress to me: the mention of climate change at the dinner table earlier in the evening had “scared” her, she said. She was referring to a flippant, passing remark her older brother had made as we ate; it was intended to be humorous in the context of our table talk and nothing else was said about climate change during the rest of the meal or as the evening progressed. Still, the mere mention of it had left her undone. I struggled to respond in a meaningful way, recognizing at that moment that nothing in my daughter’s or my faith formation or my pastoral and academic training had equipped us to have a hopeful yet realistic conversation about climate change and its effects. This was my first encounter with the phenomenon I later learned has a name: eco-anxiety.

At the time, researchers in various fields—social work, nursing, public health, philosophy, psychology, youth and young adult studies, sociology, political science, trauma studies, and others—had developed a significant body of literature about eco-anxiety and other climate-related emotions, but it was just beginning to gain the attention of mainstream and

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popular media. Since then, there has been an explosion in the literature—both scholarly and popular—addressing the psychological and spiritual phenomena related to climate change and mental health.¹ While the first known mention of eco-anxiety appeared in a *Washington Post* article about efforts to protect the Chesapeake Bay in 1990 (Leff, 1990), an internet search at the time of this writing produced more than 40 million hits. Tellingly, given the themes of this essay, under Google’s “people also ask” section that appears on its search results page, the first question on the list was “How do I get rid of eco-anxiety?”.

While practical and pastoral theologians have begun to address the ecological and climate crises in recent years, relatively little attention has been paid to difficult climate-related emotions.² Here, I am addressing one aspect of practical and pastoral theology—namely, the care of souls—in response to climate-related emotions. What does the work of soul care look like amid climate chaos? What are the tasks that soul care must undertake in response to the prevalence of eco-anxiety in our culture today? What are some of the spiritual resources and practices in Christian traditions (or *are there* such spiritual resources and practices in Christian traditions?) that can help us navigate the rocky terrain of climate-related emotions to engage the overwhelming circumstances we face in ways that do not fall into hopeless despair or debilitated inaction? As climate researcher and theologian Panu Pihkala (2022b, p. 13) has noted, theological education especially, and practical theology more generally, must find resources and means to address the difficult and acute emotions related to climate change and eco-anxiety in the formation of spiritual caregivers and pastoral leaders.

The care of souls has a long history in Christianity, as it does in other religious traditions.³ Practices of soul care have included—but have not been limited to—things such as spiritual direction, confession and penitence, discernment, corporate worship, contemplative prayer, and pastoral counseling. Attention in soul care has been focused almost exclusively on the human—because, for most of Christian history, the human alone has been assumed to possess a soul—and most often has focused on the state of a person’s soul or spirit, imagined as the nonmaterial or transcendent core unique to each human person. While pastoral theology has developed a robust account of how care must address material conditions of injustice and suffering, rarely in Christian history has care of souls focused on embodied being in the world.⁴ Seldom has this care been imagined as including the more-than-human realm, either as the context for human soul care or as the object of soul care itself.⁵ If soul care is to be responsive to the new and threatening ecological circumstances in which we live and equip caregivers to respond generatively to expressions of eco-anxiety and fear, it must be re-imagined. In this essay, I first explore some recent work about climate emotions and eco-emotions—of which eco-anxiety is an example—and suggest how this work might inform the practice of soul care today. Then I suggest three tasks

¹ For a succinct overview, see Kurth and Pihkala (2022a, b).

² See, e.g., LaMothe (2016, 2022, 2024), Miller-McLemore (2022), McCarroll (2022), Pihkala (2018, 2022b), and Swain (2020).

³ The classic and most extensive, if now dated, history of soul care is John McNeill’s (1951) *A History of the Cure of Souls*. For a recent succinct account, see McClure (2011).

⁴ I am grateful to a reviewer for reminding me of the body of scholarship that has developed over the past few decades by pastoral theologians addressing care in light of intersectional embodiment and material realities.

⁵ Bonnie Miller-McLemore (2020) has recently begun to address this, critiquing her own innovative use of “the living *human* web” as a metaphor for pastoral theology’s subject matter and arguing for an expansion to the more-than-human world.

for carers of the soul today, identifying some practices from within Christian spiritual traditions that may contribute to that work.

Eco-anxiety and its discontents

The writers of a report published by the American Psychological Association and EcoAmerica in 2017 identified what they termed “eco-anxiety disorder,” describing it as “the resounding chronic psychological consequences” that accrue to those processing our current ecological circumstances. In short, they defined it as “the chronic fear of environmental doom” (Clayton et al., 2017, p. 68). Hua Wang et al., (2023, p. 2) define it thusly: “*Eco-anxiety* generally refers to an individual’s cognitive, emotional, physiological, and behavioral response to environmental doom,” going on to note that a number of other terms have been coined to refer to the experience, including but not limited to climate anxiety, environmental distress, eco-angst, eco-guilt, eco-paralysis, climate grief, and solastalgia. Pihkala, who has written extensively on this topic, has done detailed work delineating the complexity of the phenomenon, but in general, eco-anxiety or climate anxiety refers to various emotions related to the state of our planet and its future: fear, nervousness, worry, grief, guilt, despair, etc. Pihkala (2020, p. 2) outlines some of the ways that the term is used. It can mean (a) an emotion that is related to fear or worry about the future; (b) a complicated psychological phenomenon resulting from *repressed* emotions (such as occurs when we try to deny or ignore the matter); or (c) a “mental state related to being human and wrestling with fundamental questions of life, death, and meaning: in other words, an existential anxiety.” According to Pihkala, feelings of uncertainty, unpredictability, and uncontrollability, which are “classic ingredients in anxiety,” all characterize what people identify as eco-anxiety or climate anxiety.⁶ While the aforementioned document used the term “disorder,” Pihkala and others caution that eco-anxiety should not be classified as a *disorder* in the usual sense of a pathological condition; rather, eco-anxiety is fundamentally an *adaptive* response, “an understandable reaction to the severity of the ecological crisis” (Pihkala, 2020, p. 2; Wang et al., 2023, p. 2; Wray, 2023, pp. 15–35). As the title of a qualitative study on the subject puts it: “My Worries Are Rational: Climate Change Is Not” (Verplanken & Roy, 2013).

Studies have shown that anxiety or fear related to the state of our ecosystems and climate particularly affects young people. A major study conducted by a team of researchers and reported in 2021 found that among 10 thousand persons between the ages of 16 and 25 in 10 countries, 59% were extremely worried about climate change and 84% reported feeling at least moderately worried. Among the emotions reported by at least half of the respondents were the following: sadness, anxiousness, anger, powerlessness, helplessness, and guilt. Almost half of the respondents reported that their feelings about climate change negatively affected their daily life and functioning, while 75% believed the future was “frightening” (Hickman et al., 2021, p. 863). As if to affirm my experience with my daughter in 2017, in a national poll conducted in 2019 57% of teens reported that climate change made them feel afraid (Clayton, 2020, p. 4).

⁶ While Pihkala (2022a) has examined the nuances of various climate emotions in detail, producing an extensive and helpful “taxonomy,” I am using the terms “eco-anxiety” and “climate anxiety” as representative of the broader phenomenon of strong eco-emotions or climate emotions.

It is not only young people who are affected by climate-related anxiety, of course. Studies have reported, for example, the grief of older adult environmental activists (Dennis & Stock, 2023) and the emotional states of people living in coal mining regions from eastern Australia to eastern Kentucky, persons facing rising seas in the Marshall Islands, and communities impacted by Hurricanes Irma and Harvey in the United States, among other places (Albrecht, 2019). Support groups such as the Good Grief Network have emerged, creating ritualized processes for “people overwhelmed by collective injustices and eco-anxiety / climate grief / eco-distress.”⁷ Finally, therapists are reporting increasing numbers of clients expressing various feelings of distress related to climate change (Barry, 2022; Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Jarvis, 2023).

This surge of attention to eco-anxiety and its related emotions has come under scrutiny in some quarters. Some now argue that talk of eco-anxiety is a privileged discourse or that it is a waste of time to talk about *feelings* when there is urgent hard work to be done. Reports of climate anxiety and eco-grief have been critiqued as manifestations of white fragility; as Sarah Jaquette Ray, author of *A Field Guide to Climate Emotions*, explained to an interviewer, the term climate anxiety “seems more applicable to folks who haven’t experienced existential threats before,” as opposed to persons and communities who have long faced existential threats such as colonialism, slavery, genocide, dispossession, food insecurity, and environmental injustice (Wray, 2021). In a short article titled “The Unbearable Whiteness of Climate Anxiety,” written the year after her book came out, Ray (2021), noted that the vast majority of interest in her book was coming from white people and questioned whether climate anxiety is “a form of white fragility or even *racial* anxiety? Put another way, is climate anxiety just code for white people wishing to hold onto their way of life or get ‘back to normal,’ to the comforts of their privilege?” Her concern is that feelings of fear, dread, or anxiety that are evoked by the experience of awakening to climate-related threats may, among people of privilege, lead to racialized blaming, xenophobic exclusion, and even fascism in response. Climate researcher Britt Wray (2023) writes of how she came to realize in the course of her research on difficult climate emotions how her privileges as a white, cisgendered, economically secure woman were stoking her own eco-anxiety. “I have the luxury of dreading the future,” she writes, recognizing that her “lack of personal experience with existential threats meant I had a lower reserve of existential resilience to rely on” (p. 9). At the same turn, African American climate justice writer Mary Annaïse Heglar (2019) reminds us that people of color and other marginalized populations have much to teach more privileged groups about survival, courage, and resilience in the face of existential threats.⁸

These are important caveats that need to be taken seriously. Indeed, we have already seen some of Ray’s warnings playing out as wealthier nations in the global North have responded in a panic about the refugees who have been driven from their homes in recent years seeking haven in wealthier nations from, at least partly, climate-related traumas. Such panic figures prominently in electoral politics today as parties stoke fear about migration and seek to build walls, literal and legal, to seal off borders. As Bruno Latour (2017, pp. 1–11) puts it, many wish to deny that they share the Earth with the rest of the world while simultaneously denying that there is a climate crisis. However, I think that rather than dismissing climate-related emotions—whether sadness, anxiety, fear, or despair—as the

⁷ Good Grief Network, home page, <https://www.goodgriefnetwork.org/>.

⁸ For an Indigenous perspective on this point with reference to Native American experiences, see Charleston (2023).

luxury of the privileged, these cautions invite us to engage them in carefully nuanced ways and to exercise discernment in how we interpret them.

In *A Field Guide*, Ray (2020) insists that “our ability to respond to climate change and to work on climate issues is shaped more by our emotional selves than by our rational selves” (p. 30). Wray (2023) insists that our capacities to address our current ecological and climatic realities depend on how we tend to the emotions that these realities threaten to overwhelm: “Are we going to let our feelings overrun and deplete us, or are we going to use our feelings to overrun the systems that are making us so unwell?” (p. 33). Spiritual care in these times calls for careful attention to the complex landscape of climate-related emotions. We need to hear the range of insights they can provide about both ecological and social suffering as we seek to respond effectively with care, both to the emotional lives of suffering persons and to the material conditions of a suffering creation. Emotions *can* indicate the desire to avoid the loss of privilege, but they can also be sources of information, epiphanies about the state of ecology and society, and an impetus for action and engagement (for emotions in general and this notion in particular, see McClure, 2019; for climate-related emotions, see Pihkala, 2022a).

Two illustrative cases

Two case studies in two very different communities conducted by the environmental sociologist Kari Marie Norgaard, appearing almost a decade apart, are suggestive of how climate-related emotions research might inform the work of soul care in response to the rise of eco-anxiety. The first study took place in a privileged Norwegian community and the second among the Karuk Tribe of the Klamath River basin in the land now known as Northern California. In her first book, *Living in Denial: Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*, Norgaard (2011) shares her research in a small, rural, Norwegian town she calls Bygdaby (a pseudonym), where she found that climate change “was both deeply disturbing [emotionally] and almost completely invisible” in terms of moving people to action (Norgaard, 2006, p. 373).

Bygdaby’s population is affluent and educated. The outdoors is an important part of the town’s activity and identity; snow skiing, ice-fishing, hiking (all of which attract tourists), and farming and sheep raising are part of everyday life and of the people’s sense of themselves. Like Norwegians in general, the people of Bygdaby are concerned about human rights and equality and “are proud of their awareness of nature, environmentalism, and leadership on global environmental issues,” including climate change (p. 377). At the same time, Norway is one of the world’s largest producers and exporters of oil; at the time of Norgaard’s study, it was the sixth largest producer and the second largest exporter in the world. This has made Norway a wealthy nation, one that has benefitted greatly from its oil production, and this has also made it one of the “larger per capita contributors” to global carbon emissions (p. 382). An educated, well-informed, politically active, and idealistic population, Norwegians are well aware of the changing climate and its adverse effects; the year Norgaard spent in Bygdaby was one of its warmest on record at the time, and the townspeople noted the late snow, the early melting of lake ice, and the effects on the local economy. They were not uninformed, but Norgaard was curious about the noticeable lack of political activism around the issue of climate change. She documents a complex set of emotions that emerged from these contradictions between a sense of national identity and values around the environment and complicity in the problems, and between

knowledge and action.⁹ Noticing that conversations about climate change were “emotionally charged and punctuated by awkward pauses” (p. 373), Norgaard found that the people of Bygdaby were concerned and caring about the issues, but their most often expressed emotions included sadness, fear for the future, a sense of helplessness to do anything, guilt and shame. On the last topic, one woman expressed fear of “being [seen as] a bad person” (p. 379–381).

The contradictions between the people’s identities as being environmentally responsible and their awareness of their complicity in contributing to the problems—awareness of how climate change is a matter of global inequities and injustice—caused great discomfort (p. 382). However, rather than using these uncomfortable emotions as sources of information and motivation to act, the people of Bygdaby, in various ways, chose to manage their emotions through avoidance, selective attention, and conformity to other culturally accepted emotional norms such as optimism, toughness, and national pride. As one woman told her, “I don’t really know what to do, so I just don’t think about that” (p. 386). Reflecting on the situation, a man said to her, “People want to protect themselves a bit” (p. 379). What Norgaard found was that “the presence and management of unpleasant and troubling emotions associated with [climate change] worked to *prevent*” people from engaging in social action to address the crisis. She calls the process she encountered “the social organization of denial” (p. 391) whereby the management of emotions to fit social expectations “reproduce[s] larger political and economic conditions” (p. 384). It seems that Ray’s and Wray’s concerns about the climate emotions of privileged people being expressions of their reluctance to give up privileges are manifested here.¹⁰

We can draw different conclusions from Norgaard’s more recent work, reported in her 2019 book *Salmon & Acorns Feed Our People: Colonialism, Nature & Social Action*, in which she engaged the people of the Karuk Tribe in the Klamath Basin of Northern California. The Karuk, along with other indigenous peoples who are their neighbors, were once considered to have been some of the wealthiest people in the land now known as California. Today, though, in Norgaard’s words, “A wealth of indigenous cultural knowledge and ingenuity exists alongside intense disenfranchisement, poverty, substance abuse, and domestic violence” (Norgaard, 2019, p. 1), the result of violent settler colonial disruptions to the Karuks’ traditional ways of life. Norgaard’s work is a complex study that addresses the intersections of settler colonial violence and land theft, the suppression of traditional indigenous ecological and cultural practices, ecological decline, gender, race, and the social psychology of emotions. Norgaard focuses on two related themes throughout the book: first, traditional foods and the ways that the Karuk have managed them with controlled fire, along with the role that burning, fishing, hunting, and gathering have played in forming social identity and familial and social bonding; and second, how settler colonial violence has altered the land, diminished access to traditional food species, and strained social bonds. Norgaard invited Karuk people to share their emotional responses to ecological decline and the disruption in the intimate partnership they shared with the land. She investigated the role that emotions play in situating persons and communities within systems of power.

⁹ For more recent research about the complexities of climate emotions in Norway, see, e.g., Marczak et al. (2023).

¹⁰ For a conceptual map of climate emotions and a sociological analysis of “emotional dynamics that are responsible for concealing and denying ecological problems,” see Neckel and Hasenfratz (2021).

Karuk creation stories establish the foods people are supposed to eat: salmon are prominent, of course, along with eel, acorns, deer, and mushrooms. These food species are vital not only to Karuk diets but also for spiritual practices, ceremonies, stories, and the social organization of daily life (Norgaard, 2019, p. 9). Fishing, gathering, hunting, and burning—that is, engaging in “traditional management” that evolved over many centuries—have ordered daily life and social connection while traditional ecological knowledge and practices have ensured the flourishing of other species upon which the people rely. In Karuk cosmology, the food species they cultivate are not merely products to be produced and consumed; they are considered relations, and the Karuk have a sacred responsibility to tend to their relations in the river and the forest. Indeed, they do not think of themselves as “cultivating” anything but as *relating*. Rather than doing something *to* the land, ecological systems prosper because humans and nature work together to fulfill their mutual sacred responsibilities toward and *with* one another (p. 21).

Settler colonialism has disrupted all of this, however, reorganizing “the material flow of organisms and bodies and altering the spiritual flow of energies that move in and out of human” and more-than-human communities (p. 73). Land theft, forced removal, fire suppression, damming, herbicides, erosion, monoculturing timber species, the commodification of land, the degradation of land, and the colonial erasure of indigenous cultures have gone hand in hand. Salmon runs, for instance, have been reduced to roughly 4% of their historic productivity. The Karuk have traditionally managed the species of their food culture with fire, but colonial settlers instituted fire suppression policies in the nineteenth century because forest managers regarded burning as wasting *commercially* viable conifer species. This has contributed to the decline of oaks, acorns, and deer, as well as the buildup of fuel in the forest understories, which in turn enhances the catastrophic wildfires we have seen ravaging California in recent years. If climate change was not the initiating proximate cause of colonial alteration of the land and destruction of Karuk culture, the logic beneath the capitalist, settler project *is* at the root of the fossil-capitalist driven climate crisis so that now the ongoing settler project of commodifying and terraforming the land combines with climate change to enact an insidious feedback loop, a form of violence thrust upon the ecosystem and its inhabitants, now threatening both colonized and colonizers.¹¹ The ecological destruction rooted in capitalistic commodification of ecosystems, along with the colonial need to eliminate the people who have historically occupied and managed the land in noncapitalistic ways, denies people like the Karuk *access* to the food resources needed to sustain themselves and their culture. Further, the change in diet is linked to a host of negative health outcomes among Indigenous peoples that are, in turn, blamed on the people themselves. As Norgaard notes, this whole process has been “an onslaught against a *spiritual* order that supported and governed an entire field of ecological, social, and political relationships” (pp. 12–13, emphasis added).¹²

The Karuk people expressed emotions ranging from joy to grief, shame, anger, and a sense of hopelessness to Norgaard. In terms of joy, a traditional fisherman recalled that his first conscious memory involved being at the falls on the Klamath River. “That’s where my

¹¹ Wray (2023) writes that scholars “have shown how the climate crisis is also an exponential amplification of the environmental harms inflicted upon Indigenous peoples for more than five hundred years. Global warming is not only a natural result of burning fossil fuels, it is an extension and outcome of colonization as well” (p. 29).

¹² For an incisive account of these dynamics and how they establish the condition of climate injustice from an Indigenous perspective, see Whyte (2017).

life source comes from. That's who I am, that's what defines me as a person, as a Karuk person. Being on the river" (p. 202). Other interviewees described a similar sense of joy, which speaks to an identity tied to the health of the land.

The most commonly expressed emotion by the Karuk was grief—grief for the degraded water quality and for the diminished quantity of fish. "It saddens me," said one, "to see the salmon dying, to see the algae and all the toxins, it just saddens me that they continue to allow this to happen" (Norgaard, 2019, p. 203). For some, the grief was related to social interactions that take place at the fishing grounds or in the ceremonies related to salmon. One fisherman lamented that he could not pass along the traditional ways of fishing to his son. Others grieved the loss of social and familial connections that take place through the managing, harvesting, processing, and even eating of traditional foods, in which everyone in the community has a role (p. 205). People need salmon and eel in the river and acorns and mushrooms in the forest to perform activities that construct identity and meaning. A Karuk woman said: "Let me ask you this: if I can't collect enough acorns, I have to buy bread. If I don't have enough berries, I have to buy oranges. So what does that make me? Am I going to feel like an Indian at the supermarket picking out oranges?" (p. 207). Thus, for many, their grief speaks to a loss of personal and communal identity; the degraded conditions of the river and forest rob them of the joy that they find in their belonging to the land.¹³

For others who bear responsibility for catching and sharing fish with the community, there is grief that they cannot "make things right" for either the fish or the human community. As one said, through tears:

What else can you do? You can only do so much. You . . . can make your prayers . . . you can go down there and pray at the falls, you can go to the ceremonies, but at some point . . . it's just beyond your ability to do something and when you reach that point . . . and you can't do anymore, that's when it's lost . . . you can't be the one who makes the water ten degrees cooler like it needs [for the salmon]. (pp. 203–204).

Grief, according to Norgaard, "serves a signal function indicating both awareness of the degraded environment and one's location in a system of power" (p. 204).

A related emotion Norgaard reports is shame. As with the grief expressed at not being able to make things right, when someone is unable to fulfill a traditional role, it is a source of shame. As one traditional practitioner and fisherman put it: "Just the whole sense of being able to be a provider... you know, a fisherman that's able to catch fish and provide for his family is just as good as anybody else in the professional world... so if this is your way of living... if it revolves around the fish, you know, providing for your family... now the fish are gone then now you can't provide" (p. 204).

These are two studies on the role of climate emotions from the same researcher set in two *very* different contexts—one examining a wealthy community bearing a high degree of responsibility for climate change, a responsibility that their emotions, such as ecological guilt, suggest to them but that they seek to suppress; the other in a subjugated community not bearing a high degree of responsibility for climate change and ecological destruction, whose emotions illuminate and connect them to the losses they experience, both ecological and social. These two contrasting studies illustrate the complexity of this discourse. It is unhelpful to reduce attention to climate or eco-related emotions to only seeking a quick fix ("How do I get rid of climate anxiety?"), as, for example, a tool of denial for the privileged,

¹³ For another account of the types of ecological grief experienced within Indigenous communities, see Cunsolo et al. (2020).

or to dismiss them as trivial matters. Each of these studies helps us see how emotions connect to systemic realities and gives us clues about how to engage them. How might these insights into climate-related or eco-related emotions inform the work of soul care in our time? In what follows, I suggest three dimensions of soul care amid climate crisis informed by this work on eco-emotions. This is meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive, extending the discussion about how we might re-re-imagine the care of souls in response to the climate crisis and its attendant emotional and psychological impacts.

Dimensions of soul care amid climate crisis

To what are carers of souls called in these days? What is the “great work”—to borrow Thomas Berry’s (1999) phrase—that soul caregivers, leaders of faith communities, and those engaged in the work of public advocacy and social change are called to in these times? What is the spiritual dimension of this work? What kind of spiritual practices might help form persons to engage their eco-anxieties in generative ways?

First task: Remaining

First, a primary task for soul guides and spiritual caregivers today is to help people to remain with difficult emotions. Psychologist Robert Romanshyn (1989) has written: “The destruction of the earth is, for the incarnated human soul, whose entire history is inseparable from and has been shaped by its place on the earth, an unbearable reality” (p. 24). As Ray has warned and Norgaard’s study in Bygdaby shows, one way that people respond to this unbearable reality is to avoid, deny, stifle, and deflect. However, psychologist Maria Ojala (2005, 2016, 2023), writing about adolescents’ experience of eco-anxiety, states that “striving to overcome anxiety and worry is not always the best strategy” (2005, p. 335). Rather, we must attempt to live with our eco-anxieties and fears so we may learn from them and employ them for beneficial purposes. Norgaard (2006), drawing on emotions scholar Arlie Hochschild, reminds us that emotions can provide information and help inform people as they engage with difficult problems (p. 373). This is true not only for the care of individuals but also for engaging systems. Pastoral theologian Nancy Ramsay (2010) has argued that emotions can be useful tools for understanding the costs of injustice and oppression, contending that oppression affects everyone, whether they are in the dominant group or the subjugated one. The effects show up among the privileged as guilt, shame, and anxiety, borne of the suffering to which they contribute, but these emotions are often repressed, denied, or ignored. To make them useful, privileged people must learn to be curious about what these unpleasant emotions are trying to tell them, but people often find this work intolerable (p. 343). In addition to denial, sometimes the emotional management strategies of the privileged show up in other emotions such as anger or outrage, causing them to lash out and dig in.¹⁴ Like the woman in Norgaard’s Bygdaby interview, no one wants to be thought of as a “bad person.”

¹⁴ The most obvious and notorious current example of this is seen in the many legislative efforts to forbid teachers and textbooks from engaging the true history and nature of white supremacy, racism, and colonial conquest in the United States because politicians and administrators do not want white people to feel uncomfortable.

But shame and guilt can be illuminating. They are signals that something is wrong, that someone has been wrong, and that the person feeling these emotions understands their complicity in perpetuating that wrong. They are what some have called “moral emotions” that invite and motivate persons to engage in reparative work (Fredericks, 2021; Pihkala, 2022a, b). Working with these feelings can invite people to understand their participation in the harm and to seek reparation.

Spiritual practices: Compunction (Mourning, Confession, Repentance) Two practices from Christian contemplative traditions can serve as a starting place for helping persons and communities work with difficult climate emotions and resist the temptation to retreat from them. The first is compunction—the anxiety that arises over awareness of guilt—which is a practice deeply embedded in the history of Christian spiritual awareness (see Hausherr, 1982). “When I declared not my sin,” laments the psalmist (Psalm 32:3–5), “my body wasted away... my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. When I acknowledged my sin, and I did not hide my iniquity” the psalmist goes on to say, “... then you forgave my guilt.” The psalmist’s confession leads to a resolution to change.

Spirituality scholar Douglas Christie (2012) has written beautifully about the gift of tears—*penthos*—that accompanied feelings of compunction and was a central element of the spirituality of the early Christian ascetics of the Egyptian and Syrian deserts (aka the Desert Mothers and Fathers). Tears evoked by a sense of grief and the recognition of one’s complicity in wrongdoing, writes Christie, have served in spiritual traditions as “crucial means by which persons and communities are able to seek healing for what has been broken asunder.” Christie suggests mourning as a spiritual practice that may heighten our attention and connection to what is being broken asunder and lost in the natural world. Tears of compunction, for the desert monks, helped usher one into a new existence. Christie (2012) quotes Abba Poemen, who said: “Whoever wishes to be liberated from sins is liberated from them by shedding tears, and whoever wishes to acquire the virtues acquires them by shedding tears.” Observes Christie: tears helped the monks “to express and make possible an honest reckoning with one’s life” (p. 74).

One may also experience feelings of compunction about one’s participation in sinful actions, in systems of oppression that are destroying communities of life, social and ecological: “Grief and mourning can be seen not simply as an expression of private and personal loss, but as part of a restorative spiritual practice that can rekindle an awareness of the bonds that connect all life-forms to one another and to the larger ecological whole” (Christie, 2012, p. 75). Along these lines, environmental researcher Ashlee Cunsolo Willox (2012) argues that mourning functions ethically as “a source of insight into the responsibilities that we share for and to one another” because grief emerges from a recognition of the fragility and vulnerability that we share with other humans and with other creatures (p. 150). The anxiety, fear, and grief evoked by our current climatic realities are not only expressions of existential dread at the prospect of personal loss, but they also indicate our attachment and feeling of connection with suffering others, calling forth a sense of responsibility for our fellow sufferers.¹⁵

Compunction has been expressed in practices such as confession and repentance—both private and corporate—penance, and lament. Creating space for persons to express eco-related emotions such as grief in traditional therapeutic forms of soul care such as spiritual

¹⁵ See Malcolm (2020) for a number of poignant reflections on climate-related guilt, grief, and lament.

direction, confession, pastoral care, and pastoral counseling is important.¹⁶ Performing public ritual expressions of eco-related compunction is also vital. Liturgical acts of confession and lamentation serve an important function in soul care as they indicate that ecological injustices are central concerns of the church's mission and affirm the validity of worshippers' feelings of eco-anxiety. Ritual acts of eco-mourning and lamentation, whether in ecclesial spaces or the public square, provide opportunities to protest acts of ecological and environmental injustice and form communities of solidarity and resistance (e.g., Hessel-Robinson, 2011; Willox, 2012). "Ritual acts of mourning," according to Christie (2012), can "play an important role in restoring balance within a society" (p. 74). An example of such a ritual is described by liturgical scholar Cláudio Carvalhaes (2019), who, along with a class he was teaching on rituals of mourning for the Earth, led a controversial chapel service at Union Theological Seminary in which participants confessed their eco-sins to plants. According to Carvalhaes, "Confessions... are forms of mending relations, healing, and changing our ways."

Spiritual practices: Discernment A second practice from the Christian tradition that might help people to engage difficult climate emotions is discernment. Like compunction and tears, "the discernment of spirits" is a practice that reaches back to scripture and earliest Christianity.¹⁷ Theologians like Origen in the second and third centuries theorized about the sources of influence on human thoughts and emotions. John Cassian, the great fourth- and fifth-century chronicler of the desert monks, recorded a great deal of the Desert Fathers' teachings on discernment.¹⁸ These ancients were constantly scrutinizing their inner lives trying to distinguish the influence of "good spirits" and "bad spirits" on their thoughts and behaviors as they sought to submit themselves to God's will and work in their lives. Many models of discernment have evolved throughout Christian history, emerging in and for particular religious, theological, and cultural contexts. Perhaps the most commonly known model today, and one that is most widely discussed in contemporary discernment literature—popular and scholarly—is Ignatian discernment, which originated with the sixteenth century founder of the Jesuit order, Ignatius of Loyola, and it is an element of Ignatius's rules for discernment that I focus on here.

The "Rules for Discernment of Spirits" enumerated by Ignatius of Loyola (1991) are embedded in Ignatius's larger work *The Spiritual Exercises*, originally composed in the 1520 s. In the Exercises, Ignatius lays out a process whereby a retreatant embarks on a four-"week" contemplative journey of ever-deepening experience of God, the ultimate goal of which is to "find God in all things," that is, to discern God's presence and activity in the whole of creation. The treatise itself is intended to be used by the retreat director, the spiritual guide, and contains instructions for the guide to accompany the directee in their discernment. According to Ignatius, spiritual exercises include "every method of examination of conscience, meditation, contemplation, vocal or mental prayer" (Ignatius, 1991; Liebert, 2009, p. 200). Although the rules for discernment are part of a larger work, there are several particular practices commended within the *Exercises* that have been pulled out and adapted as discrete spiritual practices in recent history—such as the examen or imaginative prayer—and may be found in many venues where people are seeking spiritual guidance.

¹⁶ Confession was for many centuries largely embedded within the spiritual direction relationship, but contemporary practices of spiritual direction engage a much wider field of religious experience. Also, practices of pastoral care may be helpfully informed by initiatives in ecopsychology and ecotherapy; see Buzzell and Chalquist (2009), Jordan (2015), and Davenport (2017).

¹⁷ For a succinct summary of discernment, see Buckley (1993).

¹⁸ Cassian transmitted the desert ascetics' wisdom to the West, exercising great influence on the evolution of Western Christian monastic life and spirituality.

Discernment is a similarly employed practice. Further, although Ignatius's language itself and many of his ideas are grounded in and express an early modern Christian theological worldview—including much the same world of good and bad spirits assumed by the desert monks—the *Exercises* also assume a high degree of flexibility and adaptability and have been tailored to fit many different spiritual and religious contexts over the years.

Ignatius of Loyola, born in 1491, was injured in battle when a cannonball shattered one of his legs. He requested reading material as he convalesced with his wounds, but the only material available to him was translations of *The Life of Christ* by the Carthusian Ludolph of Saxony and *The Lives of the Saints (The Golden Legend)*—a far cry from the tales of chivalry and romance to which he was accustomed. However, as he read these works repeatedly, Ignatius began to be aware of his thoughts and feelings, his affective responses to the content. He reported noticing differences among his reactions as he engaged different types of material; he was fascinated, he reports, upon reflection to realize “from experience that some thoughts left him sad and others joyful.” Ignatius came to understand that various “spirits were stirring” within him as the sources of his various feelings (Liebert, 2009, p. 198–199). From this experience, Ignatius developed his rubric for sifting one's affective experiences through critical reflection in order to determine the source of their origins and faithfully respond to God in the everyday circumstances of life. Ultimately, Ignatian discernment aims to nurture a sense of God's presence, but it also serves to help persons make moral choices and take right actions.

For the sake of brevity, I will focus on a specific aspect of Ignatius's rules for discernment: feelings of consolation and desolation. Ignatius identified these two different kinds of feelings or affective movements within the soul that lead us in different directions. Feelings of consolation include joy, peace, love, contentment, and the like, and, generally, these affective states “draw us to God where that helps us to... open out to others in generosity, service, and love.” Jesuit scholar David Lonsdale (2000) states that “the main feature [of consolation] is that their direction is toward growth, creativity, and a genuine fullness of life and love in that they draw us to a fuller, effective, generous love of God and other people, and to a right love of ourselves” (p. 98). Feelings of desolation include sorrow, grief, confusion, unrest, and despair. These feelings cause us to resist moving toward God and God's intentions, and, according to Lonsdale, they tend to “lead us to be self-centered, closed in, and unconcerned about God or other people” (p. 98). In Ignatius's practice of discernment, one scrutinizes one's feelings in response to one's daily activities, experiences, and potential decisions to determine whether one is responding to one's circumstances and possibilities in consolation or desolation. Decisions about one's choices and actions are guided, in this model, by the assurances one gains about whether those choices and actions are of God or not based on the kinds of feelings they evoke. Feelings of consolation grant assurance that one's actions align with the leading of the good spirit; feelings of desolation indicate the influence of other spirits.

This is subtle work, however, for Ignatius goes on to warn that feelings can be deceptive. Quoting the passage in 2 Corinthians 11 about the devil's capacity to appear as an angel of light, Ignatius identifies what he calls a deceptive form of consolation. That is, when a person is not intent on pursuing God's intentions for themselves or for the world, they may experience feelings of peace and contentment when their own desires are being fulfilled. According to Lonsdale (1993), for someone who is pursuing self-gratification rather than the reign of God, experiences of inner peace would tend to confirm their present direction, “neglectful of God or of any greater good in order than the satisfaction of their own desires and need.” Likewise, feelings of desolation—such as turmoil, conflict, anxiety—might actually be “signs of the sting of conscience, of the beginnings of a spiritual awakening” (pp. 78–79). Lonsdale (1993) describes what he calls “painful consolation,” in which feelings of shame, humiliation,

sorrow, or confusion might be evoked by a confrontation with one's weakness and failure, and suggests the need for reconciliation and repair of some kind; or, desolation can be "the sorrow, anger, or fear that we feel when we look at the pain, oppression, and injustice in the world around us," rousing us to act address such conditions (p. 81). The key to discernment in the Ignatian form is to be as clear as possible about one's motivations and desires so that we become free to act in response to the feelings that are inviting us to wholeness.

With regard to strong eco-emotions, Ignatian discernment invites us to stay with these emotions when we notice them and to seek more information from them. What are the sources of our eco-anxieties? Are they, as Ray's (2021), Wray's (2023), and Norgaard's (2011) texts suggest, indicators of an attachment to privileges that we fear are disappearing and that we wish to maintain by denying, deflecting, and repressing our feelings? Or might those anxieties, griefs, and fears be "painful consolations," inviting us to notice, name, and resist the destructive forces that are devastating the planet and its people as well as our complicity with them? Might they motivate us to act in generative ways that contribute to healing and greater justice?

Rather than dismiss the feelings of eco-anxiety, eco-shame, and eco-guilt expressed by privileged people, one task of the soul guide today is to accompany people into these uncomfortable feelings to make an honest reckoning of things. Caring for souls today must involve *helping people to remain with difficult emotions*; this means, especially, accompanying communities of *privilege* into a deep engagement with the difficult emotional landscapes with which these times confront us. The purpose is not to wallow in despair or to retreat into complacency to find what comfort we can by insulating ourselves—emotionally and materially—from the worst effects of the chaos. Rather, the intent is to open us to the pain so that we might understand what our emotions are communicating and act to address the destruction. Can we learn and help others to learn to distinguish our painful consolations and generative desolations from our false consolations?

Second task: Affirming

A second task for carers of souls today is to *affirm* the difficult emotions that accompany awareness of ecological and social devastation as valid and important. Norgaard (2019) notes several times in her work on the Karuk that the impact or "harm" of the Karuk people's emotional experiences is heightened by their *invisibility*—the lack of legitimacy granted to them by the dominant culture (p. 219). Grief expert Ken Doka (1989) has proposed the term "disenfranchised grief" to identify "grief that is experienced but cannot be acknowledged or publicly mourned." Judith Butler (2004) introduced the concept of "grievability": "Some lives are grievable and others are not," she writes. "The differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of... what counts as a livable life and what counts as a grievable death" (p. xvi). Butler was referring to those marginalized based on gender, sexuality, and race, but we might add all of the more-than-human ones who suffer from human actions to those who are often placed beyond the realm of grievability (see Willox, 2012, p. 147).

The dominant, industrialized, colonizing social, economic, and political order refuses to recognize as valid or valuable the deep emotional ties shared by Indigenous societies and the ecosystems with which they share kinship; it refuses to identify the harm industrial practices cause to the more-than-human as morally significant—these are outside the realm of grievability. Karuk (and other Indigenous) cosmologies in which the Earth

is animate, alive, and agential and human and more-than-human species share relational bonds and mutual responsibilities are considered by industrialized, extractive, capitalistic powers to be naïve or superstitious at best or satanic at worst (the latter according to some early European colonizers of North America). Young people, too—those who are reporting such prevalent experiences of eco-anxiety, dread, fear, and grief—frequently have their feelings and actions dismissed, ignored, or attacked by politicians, teachers, and corporate leaders, such as has happened frequently to Greta Thunberg, to young people who are part of the global youth climate movement, to those participating in the youth climate school strikes, and to members of the Sunrise Movement (Diffey et al., 2022).

Such assumptions, along with the refusal to recognize grief or anger about the degradation of landscapes as valid, not only dismiss the importance of ecological destruction but nullify an entire cosmology. They invalidate a theological anthropology that says that we—humans—*belong* in and to the rest of the community of life and that we have a sacred responsibility to treat our kin with respect, care, and love.

Our economic and industrial systems attempt to fragment the psychological and spiritual from the ecological and economic. This, at best, ignores and, at worst, pathologizes emotional responses to losses in the more-than-human world. Ecological losses are not seen as connected to psychic, emotional, and spiritual distress. We are encouraged to ignore our embodied responses to destruction, the feelings, intuitions, and awarenesses that our bodies communicate. We are supposed to contain or ignore anxiety, pessimism, and hopelessness, which sidesteps the underlying ecological problems and suppresses the faculties that are trying to alert us to them (Kidner, 2007, p. 138).

Pastoral theologian Barbara McClure (2019) has argued that emotions help connect the private and individual to the social and systemic when we pay careful attention to them. Emotions such as grief or anger help subjugated communities identify what is happening to them, name their experiences as unjust, and identify the destruction of the land as immoral. Emotions such as anger, when channeled well, can even spur resistance, as Norgaard (2019) also found in her conversations with Karuk people.

Rather than dismissing, distancing, or disenfranchising these embodied experiences, soul care must affirm and validate them, inquiring into them for what they are telling us about the health of our ecosystems and our own health and wholeness. Ecopsychologist Sally Weintrobe (2021) says that eco-anxiety is “on the side of life; it is care’s alarm call to face reality and to act in the face of danger” (p. 236). To summarize the first two tasks of soul care amidst climate chaos, the work of soul guides, in the words of ecopsychologist Andy Fisher (2019) includes building “emotional and spiritual holding environments necessary to tolerate and grow” from a truthful understanding of our circumstances.

Third task: Awakening to oneness

A third task for carers of souls amid climate chaos is to help us *remember and reawaken* our oneness with the rest of the community of life, to help us expand our notion of the soul as embodied and entangled in society and the rest of nature. This calls for a re-examination of the history of soul care.

The logic of unregulated, industrialized capitalism driving settler colonialism, which wants to separate us from our embodied, emotional experiences, finds a friend in much of the history of soul care, starting with how the soul has been understood, especially in the West. For instance, John McNeill (1951), in his classic history of the cure of souls written

in the middle of the last century, said that the soul, as the essence of the human personality, is related to but not contained by the body; the cure of souls, in his estimation, has to do with “matters that reach beyond the requirements of the animal life” (p. vii).

The history of Christian soul care, shaped by a theological anthropology reliant on what theologian Kelly Brown Douglas (2005) calls a “Platonized tradition” that instilled a mistrust in the body and the material world from its early stages, has conceived of the soul in pre-existent, immaterial, and hierarchical terms (Douglas calls this a *heretical tradition*) (pp. 3–103). For masters like Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Palamas, the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*, and other classic figures, not only was *salvation* to be enjoyed in eternity by immaterial souls that transport the person’s essence to an otherworldly realm when their bodies expired, but the body in the material world, distracted as it is by sense perception, bodily needs, and emotional entanglements, is something to be disciplined. Bodily urges and appetites are suspect or corrupt, distracting from the pure contemplation of God. Through ascetic discipline and intellectual contemplation, one can ascend beyond earthly distractions to enjoy union with God. A whole architecture—an itinerary—of the soul’s journey to God was constructed out of these ideas of the soul as a discrete entity separate from the body trying to escape the material world, and soul care was conceived of and practiced as aiding the person in this itinerary. Further, of course, this account of the soul was wholly interiorized. Pastoral theologian Ryan LaMothe (2024) has recently called this trend an “ontological rift between humans and other species” that is foundational for how Western Christianity has constructed religious experiences.

But what if we thought of soul not as the possession of individuals, an entity that disconnects us from our bodies and differentiates us from the world, but rather as the “connective fabric” that bonds us more tightly to the living world with which we are already one? Pastoral theologian Bruce Rogers-Vaughn (2016) describes soul as a way of “existing within [the] entanglements” connecting us to selves, to other persons, to society, the planet, and to the Divine as a way that is characterized by love, attachment, appreciation, wonder, and longing” (p. 183). We find soul not within individual subjectivity but inhabiting a collective home (p. 213). Ecopsychologist Bill Plotkin (2008) understands soul as something’s or someone’s “ultimate place in the world” (pp. 30–31). That is, the soul is not a tangible object, but it is publicly observable in the same way that a love affair is observable or a theatrical performance or an embarrassment. Plotkin’s notion of soul is rooted in this world; it is relational, as well, and is something in the process of becoming: “a thing’s place corresponds to the set of relationships it has with other things in the world.” The fundamental insight of pioneering ecopsychologists such as James Hillman, Theodore Roszak, and Joanna Macy is that the human psyche, the human soul, have coevolved with the rest of the community of life; we *are*, in fact, deeply one with the rest of the natural world, and it, too, possesses soul, and it is by entering into the unity and reciprocity of relationship that our souls expand. Of course, this is something Indigenous peoples have long understood. Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2001), drawing on Indigenous worldviews, resists understanding things as independent of their relations. To exist means “to be positioned in a certain environment and committed to the relationships this entails. Reality, then, is relational through and through” (p. 185). According to Kidner (2007), “From this perspective, there is no ontological discontinuity between self and land: self reaches out empathetically over the land, which is in turn experienced as an extension of self” (p. 128).

As the Standing Rock Sioux scholar Vine Deloria Jr. (1999) has stated, “The first dimension of Indian feeling about the land is that we are part and parcel of it, physically” (p. 253). What’s more, writes Deloria, “The sacredness of land is first and foremost an

emotional experience. It is that feeling of unity with a place that is complete, whatever specific feelings it may engender in an individual” (p. 251).

The ideological system that has colonized our civilization denies our ultimate dependence on natural processes, and human freedom is conceived as our capacity to transcend and control “nature” through technological means.¹⁹ What’s more, this system is perfectly happy for us to comfort ourselves with nostalgia and symbolic gestures of appreciation for “nature”; it is happy for us to take family vacations to sublime wilderness locations such as our national parks and to name the streets in housing developments that have been built on top of wetlands and estuaries things like “Heron Way” or “Pelican Drive.” Those driving the system do not want us to pay too much attention to our disorienting and uncomfortable emotions because this would lead us to question their hegemony and potentially threaten their profits. In this denial of our “already oneness,” we cause suffering, both for the planet and for ourselves. Eco-anxiety or fear is a sign of this rupture and a call for its repair.

Can Indigenous creation stories and the emotions of those who have seen their lands diminished, who grieve for the rupture of kinship relations in the community of life along with ecopsychologists, help Christians read our own sacred stories anew? While Western Christian interpretation has traditionally emphasized alienation between humans and other creatures, privileging the human above the rest of the world in the Genesis creation accounts, Native American scholars note that Indigenous creation stories focus on relationships among things, emphasizing creaturely kinship among humans and others, reciprocity, and balance (Deloria, 1994, pp. 78–97; Kidwell et al., 2001, pp. 32–51).²⁰ In the second creation account in the Hebrew Bible, in Genesis 2, the Creator fashions human and animal alike from the same ground, the same soil.²¹ The Creator breathes the breath of life into these creatures—and they become *nephesh*, *souls*—into human and animal alike. The *nephesh*, the soul, of the Creator infuses and ensouls the whole web of life: it is that connective fabric that enlivens all, connects all, expands all as we live into our entanglements that are physical, emotional, and spiritual. Our difficult emotions—as well as our happy and joyful ones—around our relationships with the things of Earth and sky and sea and land are trying to remind us of this sacred oneness; of which we often live in forgetfulness. Caring for souls today involves *reminding* and *reawakening* us to this expanded notion of soul.²²

¹⁹ Ecotheologian Norman Wirzba (2021) offers a masterful account of how the Western efforts to transcend “nature” culminate in current eco-modernist and transhumanist aspirations to escape creaturely limitations through technology and how these efforts are congruent with theological accounts of human transcendence over and separation from “nature” (pp. 3–60).

²⁰ It should be noted that there is no single “definitive” creation or origin story among Native Americans. Still, the themes identified here are widely shared among various First Nations accounts (Kidwell et al., 2001).

²¹ The creation accounts in Genesis have received an enormous amount of attention from Christian scholars since the appearance of Lynn White Jr.’s well-known accusation that Christianity bears great responsibility for the ecological crisis because of the way that the “dominion passages” of Genesis 1:26 have been used to assert human dominance and privilege over the rest of the Earth. It is far too much to examine White’s argument and to trace the history of responses to it here. While acknowledging that the command to the first humans in Genesis 1 to “subdue” the Earth and have “dominion” over its creatures presents problems, what I am here suggesting is that alternatives to separation and domination present themselves when we consider the Yahwist’s creation account in Genesis 2 and read the Genesis accounts alongside and with Indigenous accounts. See White (1967). For a thorough evaluation of White’s essay and its impact, see LeVasseur and Peterson (2016). For a detailed study of the language in Genesis 1 and 2 and its relation to the rest of the Hebrew Bible, see Craven and Kaska (2011).

²² See earlier reference to Buzzell and Chalquist (2009), Jordan (2015), and Davenport (2017) for examples of initiatives in the world of ecotherapy that can be instructive for Christian and other religious soul caregivers.

Conclusion

I have referred to the Google search question “How do I get rid of eco-anxiety” a couple of times in the course of these reflections. However, “getting rid of” eco-anxiety is not a soul care question, nor is it the task of soul care in a time of climate chaos. As numerous authors have noted, eco-anxiety and other strong eco- and climate-related emotions are not signs of disorder but adaptive responses. They are signs of attachment to and love for what is being lost amid the massive assaults of carbon-fueled, industrial capitalism on the planet’s ecosystems and peoples. They are indicators of the assaults and injustices being perpetrated upon human and more-than-human communities. They are warnings about the spiritual, psychological, and emotional havoc that the climate crisis is wreaking on young and old, privileged and marginalized. It is vital for those who care for souls and those who form spiritual caregivers to re-imagine the shape and tasks of soul care and to find resources and practices that help us to remain present to the realities of our time, to not give in to despair, to not give up, and to continue to confront the forces threatening to destroy the planet. I have made some modest suggestions for re-imagining soul care amid climate chaos that may, perhaps, help us remain engaged with our painful consolations and find a call to generative action in them.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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