

Dealing with staring into the abyss for activists

Some feelings and thoughts I have had while abyss staring

It is lonely.

Everyone else is getting on with their normal life and having parties while the ship sinks.

It is consuming.

My life is getting eaten by thinking time. There is no time to do anything else.

Everything except abyss staring feels pointless or destructive, or both.

It is confusing.

My mind wants to make the feared future go away, make it better, make it not happen.

I ask everyone in the world about it in case they know how to make it stop. Texting, emailing, speaking to colleagues, family, friends.

People say “it won't happen”.

Or “it is too late, fuck it”.

Or “it might not happen if you give up everything in your life to prevent it”.

Or they say to read this or that, but not this and not that. People say there is a political solution. People say trust in God. People say do yoga, or meditate.

It is frustrating.

No matter how horrific the scenarios thought up, or how often they are thought about, the frustrating thing is that they get no more or less likely to occur, they are ever present, unavoidable possibilities.

When I was staring at the abyss all the time I could do very little. I was an absent parent. I had no sexual interest. I didn't want food. I couldn't sleep. I saw the future as pain and death for me and for my little boy. I cried about him not being able to grow up. I mourned his death while he was alive there playing with his lego and asking me to be Pepper Potts.

I spoke to strangers about it locally and some people rolled their eyes and laughed at me. And others connected with me and are now friends. I cast the net wide.

Things to work on

Have faith in something. It doesn't have to be religious, and it is hard work because your mind tells you it is stupid and pointless to have faith. But it is not stupid or pointless if it allows you to live. Find a voice of good in yourself that will guide your decisions. Making decisions is hard otherwise.

Live in now, notice nature. Enjoy the weather and nature, **EVEN IF IT IS FUCKED UP**. Even if it is hot in February, or if the raspberries are three months early. Allow yourself to enjoy the tasty raspberry or the sunny weather.

Trust that you can cope with your feelings, and then prove it to yourself.

Accept what you can't change, and that includes other peoples' behaviour, and the fact that you and those you love do not get to live forever, or to live free of pain and fear, because no creature alive gets to do that.

Learn to be able to be a bad guy, accept that you do sometimes mess stuff up, and are not always going to make good choices, you are just a creature. And you might do some horrible stuff if you get desperate, just like anyone might.

Helpful mottos & difficult truths

Don't let perfect be the enemy of good. A wise lady looked me in the eye and said this to me as I sat in the rain preaching the end of the world and refusing to eat.

That old chestnut about having courage to change things, serenity to accept what I can't change, and the wisdom to know the difference. I read it painted on a church wall at my son's toddler group.

Speaking of kids: 'He has to have a childhood, no matter what is in the future'. My father-in-law, usually jocular and never judgemental, took a serious, critical tone of voice with me one day when I was abyss staring. I realised I was being selfish allowing myself to focus on unhelpful visions.

The earth is dying and I can't bear to witness it

If a friend was dying would you want to see them and be with them, or avoid them?

I am like Frodo, I don't want the task of an activist, why did I have to be alive now, when the world is heading for its end?

My mother replied:

“When would you rather have been alive? During the 1st World War? In a Victorian cotton mill? A Medieval witch hunt? The Crusades? The fall of Rome?

Life has never been easy, comfortable or pain free.”

Being vulnerable

Question things. Some people hold strong opinions. That doesn't mean they are right, but you are vulnerable to believing things when you are abyss staring because you may be desperate for answers.

People can't tell you to believe something you know is false. Call it out, don't go along with it.

If family and friends say you are not well and the people you are interacting with are not helping you, the chances are you are not well, and you may be being exploited.

Finding focus as an activist

An activist can focus on Myself or Other people, or both. There are people who can help you find focus, other activists for example, or even professionals, life coaches and therapists.

I can obsess with altering the minutiae of my actions. I'm not talking about a household audit of my carbon emissions and practical steps to change it, that could be useful. I'm talking of 'I can't eat lunch or shower because, er, waste and destruction'. This is a kind of safety behaviour, meaning I feel momentarily safer from my anxiety if I do it, and that is the main reason I do it, not because it makes

much practical impact. The impact environmentally is probably minimal, but the impact on anxiety is great. It magnifies my anxiety by getting me addicted to the relief of each behaviour, "phew, I got the bus instead of driving today, maybe we won't all burn in flames, but I know we will so I will skip making tea, less food waste, then maybe we won't all burn in flames, but I know we will...." etc..... forevermore until we all do burn. Something which snapped me out of this pattern was meeting a long-term environmentalist at her lovely allotment, and she gave me tea, and a biscuit out of a packet. I was shocked she could partake in such a thing as a packaged biscuit, which she found most amusing.

If your focus is on yourself, try focusing on changing what matters rather than the small detail. What will actually have the biggest impact environmentally in changing your day to day life? E.g. Do a proper household audit. What is important to your future in difficult times e.g. Do you want to be someone who can entertain themselves or others without tech? Or a tech wizard? Someone who puts family before self? Someone who grows things? Fixes things? Saves people? Saves trees or animals? Is courageous and honest? Is strong no matter what? Then focus on living that out when you are making big decisions, and don't worry about small decisions.

If your focus includes others there are some interpersonal pitfalls.

I can very easily bully my friends and family to change their lives. This might end my relationships and make me a controlling partner or parent. If my values become completely estranged from family values I would have to learn to coexist in 'different rafts' or find some compromises.

I can also mither the rest of the world / the internet / the village / my community - this is what most people think of as activism. It is simultaneously an impossible and back-breaking task, but also small and achievable. I think you need to be somewhat likeable in order to do it. So you can't be entirely abyss staring, because abyss staring people are boring, self-involved, and they don't listen. And they take everything MUCH too seriously.

If we are going to be afraid, in pain, and lose loved ones, watching them suffer (which we all are because all creatures have to live that no matter what age they are born into) then we must learn to laugh, dance, love, play, even fight- it may not be popular with all the non-violent-ness of the current environmentalist groups, but there is such a thing as a brave and noble fight. We must find a way to be in the world, even if it's crap, or dying, or cruel.

One day I was looking for some horrible stories and pictures to brood and cry over in my *Medecines Sans Frontieres* leaflet and I saw in the background of a war torn and bomb shattered photograph two young teenage boys laughing together.

Abyss staring is a kind of rumination. It stops you being productive, it is a bit like procrastinating. It is also, to some degree, part of a process of accepting very bad news, so it might be something you do just need to do, but only for a while.

A practical tip

I googled therapeutic techniques often. This is one to pull out in the midst of strong emotion to help take back control:

"S.T.O.P.P."

Stop.

Take a breath.

Observe how you feel.

Perspective - the usual questions to help get perspective about anxiety need to be reversed here I found. It is unhelpful to ask "how big an issue is this really?" Or "how much will I care about this in 5 years?" which are the usual perspective questions to ask yourself when anxious. The answers to these are anxiety inducing when your anxiety is about environmental destruction, or nuclear weapons, for example. Instead the perspective shift in these cases is about being back in the now: "how much is this affecting my real life right now?" Or "does an answer need to be found for this problem by me, and in this moment?" Or even finding a way to laugh at yourself/not take yourself so seriously here can help.

Proceed - take action, but an action that you have decided on. Just one action, for right now. This could be distraction/relaxation for this moment, e.g. Get up and go out for a walk, or chat to someone about a completely different topic. Or focussing on doing something small but in line with what you want to achieve overall, e.g. Do a small admin task for your activism, water your plants. Or doing something to give you confidence (e.g. something you are good at) just purely to help you learn that you are strong.

When we live in a world where doing almost anything is damaging to our habitat it is hard to do anything, and easy to stare at the abyss. So, these tricks take some practice. If you can gain control over the abyss staring then that will be a skill for life, in our difficult future.

~

“Alice”

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