

Opinion – Academics Opening Their Hearts for Climate Actions

Written by Louise Taylor and John Barry

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LOUISE TAYLOR AND JOHN BARRY, JUL 3 2023

It can be argued that there is a need to encourage academics and scholars to engage in collaborative and courageous approaches when addressing the intellectual and ethical challenges associated with the climate and ecological crisis. This short piece will focus on a proposed remedy to address the issue; love as a both a motivating agent of meaningful and sustainable social and political change will be discussed through the epistemological lens of philosophy and feminism. The concept of opening the heart relates to forming an affectionate, caring, and respectful relationship with an object, the object in question is earth and all that depends upon her for life.

We cannot force anyone to love someone or something, but we can encourage, guide, and educate on the reasons that loving our planet is beneficial to all. The love that we want to encourage in the academic community and within the most esteemed educational institutions on the planet, is the love of educators in disciplines not often or regularly interested in environmental matters. Their minds and skills are needed urgently if we want to see the collective planetary mobilization that is needed to avert catastrophe.

Universities are places of education, research, and consciousness-raising. It was the philosophers who first recognized and nurtured intellectual contemplation and conceptual and theoretical exchange of ideas and concepts as the bedrock of the advancement of humanity. As bell hooks wrote in her seminal work *All about love*, 'The word "love" is most often defined as a noun, yet all the more astute theorists of love acknowledge that we would all love better if we used it as a verb.' (hooks, 2001, p4). To be academically and intellectually loving involves actions and innovation, it should also involve cultivating agency to promote action.

There are many different types of love, which Erich Fromm wrote about in *The Art of Loving*, one of those is the Love of God, which other philosophers have referred to as Agape. This type of love seems to be most aligned with what is required for a heart-centered academic approach to the climate crisis, in an era of rapid and accelerating climate and ecological breakdown. In his text, Fromm equates the high levels of disconnection amongst the population with the development of oppressive and destructive power structures and dynamics. He writes, 'Since the evolution of the human race shifted from a mother-centered to a father-centered structure of society, as well as of religion, we can trace the development of a maturing love mainly in the development of patriarchal religion.' (Fromm, 1995, p53). Caring has often been associated with women, mothers and feminine qualities; however, stewardship is a widely held religious thought and doctrine and it seems that faith leaders and religions have an important part to play when redressing the imbalances that have occurred over the last few centuries. The publication of *Laudato Si'* by Pope Francis (2015) was a small, but significant step in the right direction when he wrote regarding the climate crisis; 'Humanity is called to recognise the need for changes of lifestyle, production and consumption, in order to combat this warning or at least the human causes which produce or aggravate it.' (P. Francis, 2015, p20).

Using a shared language rooted in values that are accessible and easily understood by as many people as possible, is the first way that intellectuals may become more compassionate, caring, and connection focused. To be needlessly jargonistic and rooted in languages that alienate us from fellow scholars is counter to being loving and creating spaces and locations of authentic and progressive dialogue in academic communities. By placing love central to ecological and research-focused practices and processes, we can begin to create powerful and beautiful foundations

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and conditions for innovation and creativity, both much needed when addressing the climate crisis. When adopting these practices academics will make themselves vulnerable and it is in this vulnerability that our interconnectedness and dependence upon each other can be honoured and used as a catalyst for change and progress. Paradoxically, it is in our collective vulnerability where we will be our most powerful and inspired to take climate action.

To love is to invite grief

Grief is an experience of loss and pain, and it is strongly aligned with love. When asking academics to open their hearts, the request is invariably asking them to walk towards heartache and suffering, and for many that pain is what they want to avoid, and herein lies the biggest challenge we may face. Joanna Macy has written on how to navigate and respect this process in her work, *Active Hope* (Macy, 2012). She believes it is in our shared pain and grief that we can support each other by honoring the sorrow and coming together collectively to engage in life-sustaining and healing climate actions. This is where interdisciplinary academic and intellectual work is our best remedy and may soothe any heartache and pain that occurs when scholars allow themselves to fully accept the greatest threat to humanity that we face. Many people of power and privilege, particularly political leaders, choose to look away from disaster, discount the science and consider climate activists as alarmists and political deviants. By embracing the crisis and allowing ourselves to feel all the pain, we may then be more intellectually focused and driven when coming together and facing this challenge. In taking principled, ethical, and compassionate focused actions, we move from feeling helpless, to actively engaging and collaborating to come together in the best interests of humanity worldwide.

What is to be done?

Universities are vast and sprawling institutions where many academic disciplines stay within their confines and boundaries, they often seem to write journals and research for fellow academics in their areas and it would appear that the desire to connect across disciplines is absent. This creates an environment that is detrimental to building respectful and caring interdisciplinary communities. For these communities to come into existence, there needs to be a shared aspiration and willingness among individuals to initiate and establish them. Trust and respect are vital components. Furthermore, consistent action and progress must be demonstrated to ensure their meaningful and sustainable existence. When we implement a focus on planetary love in a climate crisis context we have the opportunity to build caring, cross-disciplinary communities that crave environmental, and climate-based intellectual and engage in academic action.

Actions for wellness for those academics who want to open their hearts

It would be a normal response for many intellectuals to feel despondent and concerned about how they might maintain their own mental health and wellness if they were to embark upon this journey. And while we must consider that everyone is unique, some things help us stay hopeful and optimistic in a time of climate crisis. Biophilia is recognised as an experience when an individual has a deep appreciation of life and the Biophilia Hypothesis, first coined by the conservationist Edward Wilson, states that humans have an innate need to connect with the natural world and non-human species (Wilson, 2003). Wilson describes biophilia as an experience that 'stands for wilderness, and the conception of nature, for natural beauty and aesthetics, and for breaking free and healing.' (Arvey, 2018, p3). Therefore, spending time in the natural world and being connected to species-rich environments is an antidote to any distress that this work may evoke and in also one way to challenge overly institutionalized thinking and welcome in more freedom of thought. Our lives are dependent on our environments and spending time in natural settings helps personal restoration and remembrance our place in the global ecosystem as one of interdependence and interconnectedness. Imbalances in the ecosystems can be felt and experienced within all species, COVID19 served as one dramatic reminder of this reality.

It is the time for tough love and climate action

As the climate crisis escalates and environmental disasters are occurring with increasing frequency, the time for some tough love and home truths has arguably arrived. It is time, to be honest about the part academics have to play and how their lack of love may inadvertently endanger our collective future. Most academic institutions are built on

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past epistemologies and are not embracing a brave new world and loving paradigm, that encourages thinkers to connect and collaborate from a place of concern, care, and compassion when providing solutions and innovations to protect humanity from climate and ecological collapse and destruction. For this to happen there must be a collective re-imagining of how things could be and what needs to occur if we are to begin to find ecological balance and health in our shared home.

Bring on the utopian thinkers, the visionaries, and the radical free thinkers and less of the conformity, gatekeeping, and competitive hierarchical game-playing. It is high time for the academy and intellectuals to make efforts and take decisive action to come together and collaborate on the climate crisis. These communities might fail to deliver, but the question academics should consider before deciding whether it is plausible or effective is what harm would be caused by trying to bring more love into our institutions, work, and our hearts.

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