

Evidence of a deteriorating planet is pervasive. Climate disruption is occurring on every continent. Loss of biodiversity, the most vital aspect of earth's ecology and the result of 4 billion years of evolution, is devastating the earth. Poor people are particularly vulnerable to the effects of a hotter planet and extreme weather events. The global ecological and justice dimensions of climate disruption are apparent, though often overlooked by power brokers. We have entered the Anthropocene—the age where humans are the dominant drivers of ecosystem processes, and where we witness the blurring of boundaries between the physical, digital, and biological worlds. The trajectory of the Anthropocene is not yet fully formed, but it differs fundamentally from all previous eras because of humanity's outsized impact on the planet.

The Great Transitions Institute outlines three possible future scenarios. The first is a conventional path—where global actors advance an economic agenda using market forces, and collaborative government initiatives seek to address climate disruption through incremental ad hoc policy reform. The second is a barbaric path or “fortress world” – where nations experience the decline of democracy and populism rises, while increasing authoritarian leadership leads to resource hoarding and a breakdown of global collaboration. The third is a transformational path—where human systems mirror the resilience and adaptability of nature by embracing the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life and elements on a finite planet. This last scenario necessitates a transformation of the worldview held by the prevailing global powers and a wholesale reformation of dominant economic and political systems.

To address the innumerable challenges attendant with the Anthropocene, we must finally 'wake up' to our condition. For too long entrenched systems of power have used middling to low wages, mediocre to abysmal health care, overt and covert racism, political gamesmanship and corporate wealth to distract the country and discourage reform. Reality TV, the Internet and celebrity culture, and the necessity of working multiple low-wage jobs, have numbed or exhausted many to the quest for a full and meaningful life, which is our birthright.

The present uncertainty surrounding which path we will take is reflected in the rising rates of anxiety and depression and generalized level of dis-ease reported for every age cohort in the United States. If you feel a sense of disconnect in the world; that somehow we have become unmoored, you're in a painful but true place. We are very much in the process of laboring to give birth to a new worldview. As Carl Jung said, "There is no birth of consciousness without pain." Ervin Laszlo calls this a time of "exploratory self-reorganization." As a nation, we are 'trying on' different worldviews for fit. It's disorienting. Psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski calls this process "positive disintegration." He says it can feel like dying--because we are dying to old patterns. And yet, allowing ourselves to feel anguish and disorientation is an essential part of our spiritual ripening. It is the Way of Jesus to enter into the suffering of the earth and its people, and to use the truth of that experience to become empowered to heal the pain and redeem that suffering. Redeeming the planet means embracing its distress as a declaration of love and a daring step toward wholeness. It means going to places of suffering and finding God and God's power there.

In theory, communities of faith are well situated to respond to a human condition where unparalleled prosperity bumps up against emptiness, injustice, earth destruction and despair. Faith communities help us to answer the existential question: what does it mean to live a good and meaningful life? People of faith have the ability to lean into anguish and grief because they believe in the steadfastness of a loving God. And, in their own words and ways, all the major world religions and indigenous traditions affirm the goodness of nature and life.

Can faith communities help to steer us away from ‘fortress world’ and toward the path of transformation? Perhaps, but like all systems of power in the Anthropocene, faith communities must engage the crucible of change with clear-eyed humility and acknowledge that they cannot find a path forward by looking backwards to halcyon years long gone. The salient church of the Anthropocene may be post denominational, must have earth and human justice as its core value, and should be less focused on self-preservation. It will collaborate with secular entities to work for a just and sustainable future where all living things may flourish, not through charitable acts, but through a realignment of power and resources to the benefit of the greater good for the preservation of the world.

Clearly, the future is fraught. Whatever comes next, people will need ways to stay anchored to *that which is greater* than the threats posed by the tumultuous present. This is where faith communities may have a significant and constructive role in the Anthropocene. For example, spiritual practices help people to remain connected to and inspired by God’s benevolence. These time-tested techniques build resilience and strengthen individual character and collective resolve to channel Christ’s radical hospitality and persevere in a time of vast disruption.

Spiritual practice is an inoculation of loving-kindness in a world that is too often cruelly indifferent to its most vulnerable.

Likewise, spiritual practices enable us to interrupt rash behavior triggered by fear and anxiety by cultivating space, time, and a context for deeper thinking and grace that may guide us to more nuanced responses in these worrisome times. Faith communities may equip people to push back against suffocating fear and accelerating anxiety and to live grounded in hope, compassion, and generosity toward others.

Faith communities have long cared about equity and fairness across nations, species, cultures, genders, and time. Material simplicity and spiritual richness was once the wheelhouse of the church. With courage, communities of faith may stand in this dysfunctional miasma—as they have for millennia—and call us to another way of being in the world—a way of openness, curiosity, creativity, and love.

It's not by chance that nature, music, art, poetry, dances and fragrances figure greatly into human history and the rituals of faith. We are sensual beings. Alongside the angst of the Anthropocene stands delight and pure possibility. Nature has long been the muse of the creative spirit and a place to encounter God. Cultivating our inherent curiosity, rediscovering creativity, and experiencing nature is key to our mental, physical and spiritual well-being going forward.

Each of us has a gift of creativity and curiosity to contribute to the sacred work of the Anthropocene. Nurturing these creative gifts may ignite joy and passion and remind us that we

are co-creators of our planetary future and have the agency to restore integrity to our natural and human systems. Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer puts it this way, “The exchange of love between earth and people calls forth the creative gifts of both. The earth is not indifferent to us, but rather calling for our gifts in return for hers—the reciprocal nature of life and creativity.”\* The ancient Greeks believed that the universe buries jewels within us...and stands back to see if we can uncover them. What creative gift yearns to be born from the depths of your soul? And how might it soothe and sustain you in the world we’re called to build together?

\*Gilbert, Elizabeth. *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*. Penguin Random House, 2015.