Introduction

Embracing Life in the Anthropocene

Imagine yourself thriving in a climate-changed world. What does your life look like? What needs to happen to you, and what needs to happen around you, to make you feel you have been successful in your efforts to flourish and to improve the lives of others? Imagine ten years from now, being thanked by the next generation for your role in achieving this vision. What exactly are they thanking you for?

Recently, I used these questions in an exercise with my environmental studies college juniors to help them plan their next steps in working toward climate justice. This "vision-change-action" exercise was inspired by community organizer, activist, and professional facilitators Abigail Reyes and adrienne maree brown. I thought my students would love the exercise's concreteness, its centering of their desires and hopes, and its action-oriented, DIY, problem-solving spirit. They often express frustration that their courses are full of information about how bad things are, without giving them ways to tackle those issues. I hoped this exercise would lead them to define the problems themselves and to articulate their own action plans.

In order to figure out what our next steps would be, we needed to imagine the endgame, the ideal state. I asked students to visualize

what it would feel and look like to live in a climate-changed future in which all the positive results of all their collective efforts had come to pass. After this visualization exercise, I explained, they would break down the big changes they wanted into doable parts and start strategizing next steps.

This exercise was supposed to be empowering, to free them from the immobilization we all feel in the face of a problem as enormous and intractable as climate change. But it bombed, and in a way I hadn't anticipated. The students *could not visualize a future.* When I asked them about their ideal future state, I heard crickets. When I pushed them to answer, they confessed that they couldn't even form a mental image of the path ahead, much less a future that they could thrive in.

At first, I was confused and even angry with them, mistaking their reaction as short-sightedness or weakness, or an unwillingness to work hard, or a desire to bury their heads in their iPhones. I worried that they were surrendering their agency and using the mounting evidence of apocalypse as an excuse to not roll up their sleeves.

But I soon discovered I was off the mark, and that those who think that "kids these days" are coddled, entitled, and have no grit—that they are "snowflakes"—are simply wrong. The generation growing up in this age of global warming is not lazy or feigning powerlessness. Instead, they are asking *why* they should work hard, and to what end. The bigger problem comes back to their being so frozen by their fears that they are unable to desire—or, yes, even imagine—the future.

The Climate Generation

We live in the Anthropocene—a geological age marked by the irreversible ways in which human beings have affected the climate and

environment. Climate change is affecting everyone alive today, and the topics I address and the approaches I offer in what follows are meant for people of all ages. But those of you born between the early 1990s and the early 2000s, at the tail end of the Millennial generation through what is being called Generation Z, or iGen, are the first to have spent your entire lives with the effects of climate change. This is "the climate generation," and I'm addressing you not only because you are uniquely affected by global warming, but also because, more importantly, it is you who are poised to organize and bring about real change.

Your cohort is larger than the Baby Boomers or Generation X. You exist at a time of improved global health, longer lifespans, fewer wars, and greater access to education. But you face a bleaker forecast about the viability of life on this planet than the generations before you. Members of your generation share a mounting awareness that the effects of climate change are not abstract or predicted in some distant future, but are already being felt. The problems on the quickly advancing horizon will diminish the quality of life for everybody.

Your generation shares many characteristics:

- You care greatly about climate change and social justice, and you see a link between the two.
- You feel financially insecure. If you are in college, you will owe on average $40,000 by the time you graduate. If you have graduated, you are worried about finding a job. And you're the first generation that is more likely to be less well off than your parents.
- You're troubled by the increasing disparity between rich and poor.

- You were raised with smart phones, social media, and unprecedented internet access to global networks and information. Although you are more connected, you are also more lonely, suicidal, and depressed than previous generations.
- By the time you reach college, 66 to 85 percent of you have experienced some form of trauma, including sexual assault, violence, loss of a loved one, or bullying.
- Your generation is the most ethnically diverse generation in US history.
- You are the most stressed but also the least likely to vote.

Understanding these distinct qualities of your demographic will better enable you to understand why you're feeling the way you're feeling and how to navigate these turbulent waters.

In 2018, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) released its fifth report warning of the effects of a 1.5°C (2.7°F) rise in global temperature. The report summarizes the most up-to-date and comprehensive science on climate and the future of the earth from experts around the world, and it also sets targets for emissions reductions. Its 2018 conclusions are far more grim than those of previous assessments. It brings into stark relief that climate change is a fact, not a "belief" that is up for debate, and suggests that the effects of climate change across class and continents will only grow. Climate disruption is no longer something happening "out there" to other people in other places. Sea levels are rising not only in Bangladesh but all along the US coastline. The Mississippi River's banks are overflowing, hurricanes are becoming more extreme along the Gulf and the Eastern Seaboard, and in California the fire season now extends nearly

year round. As climate change becomes felt by more people, the boundary between those who worry about a future apocalypse and those who are experiencing that apocalypse right now will further blur. The climate generation is at the cusp of that story.

You are resentful that you are inheriting the problems of previous generations, who have seemingly doomed you to this fate. Earlier generations have reaped the benefits of an extractive, fossil fuel–based economy; they may talk about a looming crisis, but they likely think that serious disruptions will not happen in their own lifetimes. Meanwhile, they may find it difficult to acknowledge their failure to do anything effective about a problem they have seen coming for decades.

Your generation is demanding that climate advocacy attend to social justice as part of any plan for ecological health. Your environmental politics are also eminently *cultural;* unlike your predecessors, you see how important culture and society, not just science and technology, are when it comes to addressing environmental problems.

Yours is the most ethnically diverse generation in US history. For indigenous youth, the issue of climate change has always been connected with colonialism and your own people's stories of genocide and environmental disruption. Many of the rest of you have become politicized around issues such as ocean health, climate refugees, disaster preparation, environmental racism, and the "slow violence" of human suffering that spirals from climate change. Your generation may also be feeling profound despair about the rise of nationalism, xenophobia, and authoritarianism around the globe, together with a lack of progress toward a sustainable and just future. You see daily news cycles of sectarianism, exploitation, and destruction, of which you are often the object. Feelings of grief,

mourning, fear, and overwhelm are giving rise to a new vocabulary, including such terms as *climate anxiety, vicarious trauma, solastalgia, pre-traumatic stress,* and *secondary grief,* which are discussed in the next chapter.

A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety argues, however, that a bleak picture is just one side of the story. A shift in climate politics is occurring across the globe, and many are attributing it to Gen Z's burgeoning activism. In the United Kingdom, Extinction Rebellion is a movement of activists who are trying to prevent the extinction of humans by climate change and social collapse. In the United States, the Sunrise Movement is working to bring about a Green New Deal that would regulate emissions at the federal level, even as they focus on organizing local politics toward the same ends. European student climate marches and school strikes inspired by the protests of Swedish student Greta Thunberg suggest that change is coming, and the climate generation is driving it. Along with veteran organizations such as 350.org, the Union of Concerned Scientists, and the Environmental Defense Fund, these groups together constitute what might be termed "the climate movement," an amalgam of many groups that emerged from the broader environmental movement of the 1970s and have taken climate change as their main focus for the current historical moment. By contrast, a combination of younger and social justice groups are reshaping climate conversations and activism around questions of equity, structural violence, systems of power, and identity. Those bridging social justice issues with environmental ones might more likely characterize themselves as a movement for climate *justice.*

Climate change is an on-the-ground issue. The entities that benefit from social injustice are often the same entities that drive

climate change, and the polarization of contemporary politics inhibits progress on addressing these issues. Yet the next generation will likely force the Republican Party to change its tune on climate change. Conservatives in Gen Z care about it, while older conservatives do not. It is counterproductive, therefore, to think of climate change as just an issue for Democrats or "liberals," and far more important to begin mobilizing along generational lines.

Your demographic has unique potential: At least 70 percent of your generation cares about global warming, which is about 10 percent more than the general public. You have skills and attitudes that the planet needs: social media savvy to create innovative forms of civic life and community organizing; a lack of faith in existing institutions that will motivate you to reorganize those structures; and awareness of the necessity to face an existential crisis with resilience and solidarity. You are crafting your own emboldening story about yourselves, no longer listening to the stories that older generations are telling about you.

The story you tell about yourself will be crucial in your effort to cope with the changes that are fast coming and to reimagine how the world can be organized. Your story can rise above self-erasure and hatred for humanity, vanquish myths of powerlessness, reject the seduction of denial, and turn away from the distractions of consumable happiness (figure 1). By politicizing your angst, you can focus your energies on collective resilience and adaptation. Making these stories true will require you to nourish, not deny (as much environmentalist doctrine seems to demand) your body and soul. Or, to put it another way: reframing environmentalism as a movement of abundance, connection, and well-being may help us rethink it as a politics of *desire* rather than a politics of individual *sacrifice* and consumer *denial.*

FIGURE 1. "Seashell," by Michael Leunig. Reprinted by permission.

Empowerment and Imagination

Echoing Greta Thunberg, the 1.4 million global youth climate strikers of 2019 were questioning what purpose there was in working hard in school for a future that may never come to pass. They had lost faith in the experts who fail to take the crisis seriously enough. Yet fear and feelings of helplessness and eco-grief (sadness over the destruction of the earth and its species) make it difficult to take long-term action. Such feelings are not good for us or for the planet. Instead, we need to turn them on their heads and tread a path from despair to hope and, crucially, empowerment. For my students, the first step toward progress was the hardest, but as humanities scholar and palliative care expert Marie Eaton explains, we will get nowhere if we do not first "*imagine* the future we hope to live in."

Most of the people disseminating climate messages in the media (80 percent of which are framed in negative terms) are not paying enough attention to the relationship between narrative, emotion, and individual decision-making. That's where environmental humanities comes in. With its focus on storytelling, narrative frames, environmental meaning-making, and ways in which discourse shapes human behavior, this interdisciplinary and wide-ranging field is well situated to help fill this gap.

In this book I look at the research on emotional reactions to climate change and ask, as I asked my students, why throw in the towel? There is a lot of work we can do—problem-solving, building alternative solidarity economies, reducing waste, getting politically organized, making change through our involvement in engineering or politics or law, organizing community, educating. We already have many spheres of influence, and our actions can snowball, opening ever more spheres of impact. How and where and how much to intervene is up to us all individually, and we all need the energy and desire to engage with, not turn away from, the crises we face.

This is not a "how to" guide that will give you practical tips on *how* to do this work—there are already many resources available to help with those kinds of activities. Instead, what you will find here is a focus on actions you can take in how you think about yourself—what I refer to as your "interiority"—drawn from the scholarly knowledge and wisdom I have gained from working with college-aged students for twenty years.

My purpose in writing *A Field Guide to Climate Anxiety* is to support you, the climate generation, and to support the people who work with and care about you. There's no silver bullet that will stop climate change. But we will need a lot of capable and energetic people—i.e., *you*—to navigate the coming storms. This book offers

many ways to build and maintain that energy and commitment to climate advocacy, including:

- tools to avoid burnout and to sustain yourselves, your hope, and your community in what trauma worker Laura van Dernoot Lipsky aptly calls "the age of overwhelm"
- techniques to help you find purpose in the climate crisis and to uncover emotional and existential approaches to climate change, sometimes called "adaptive" strategies as opposed to "technical" solutions
- strategies to cultivate personal and collective resilience in the face of the depression, anxiety, fear, and dread that many of us feel when we think about a climate-changed future—or in the face of climate emergencies that are already happening to many of us right now
- tactics to address the doom-and-gloom discussions of climate change in mainstream media
- ways to integrate pleasure, desire, humor, and optimism while pursuing the work of climate justice

Your existential health is the soil in which the future you desire will germinate, as well as the nourishment required to make it a reality.

If the feelings I explore in this book, such as climate anxiety, environmental trauma, and eco-grief, are causing you to feel suicidal or have suicidal ideation, or if you suffer from severe anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder related to these issues, you might benefit from professional assistance. This book is not a replacement for psychological support.

In *Emergent Strategy,* adrienne maree brown asks, "How do we cultivate the muscle of radical imagination needed to dream

together beyond fear?" As a matter of survival, we need to think beyond eco-apocalypse and nurture our visions for a post–fossil fuel future. Our radical imaginations will also make visible all the good things that are being done, allow us each to see ourselves as a crucial part of a collective movement, and replace the story of a climate-changed future as a frightening battle for ever scarcer resources with one that highlights personal abundance—where there is plenty of time and energy to do the work needed to ensure that we can all be good ancestors to the many generations yet to come.

My Story

Early in my teaching career, I saw my purpose as giving students the intellectual tools to grasp the connections between different kinds of environmental and social problems. I tested students on such concepts as environmental justice, structural violence, and externalities. I asked them to deconstruct their assumptions about nature and the way ideas about nature shape how different communities of people are treated. I taught them how issues of social injustice are tied to environmental issues. They learned about colonialism, capitalism, patriarchy, racism, and how all these -isms can be connected to ecological degradation, and vice versa. I thought my job was to dazzle them with the extent, scale, and scope of interconnected problems, just as environmental science instructors see their mission as disseminating information about how ecosystems work and how human activities impact ecosystem health. Our content may have been different, but our subtext was the same: "if you're not horrified by all of this, then you're not paying attention."

I measured my success by my students' ability to see *more* problems in the world and to question cherished truths. My assumption was that the more students learned about the problems and questioned their own intentions, the better equipped they would be to address environmental problems in a socially just way. Most environmental messages, from documentaries to news reports, are crafted with a similar premise: when audiences can see the problems of the world, they'll be more likely to go out and try to fix them.

I felt I had done my job when I crushed my students' naive, tree-hugging idealism and replaced it with a critical analysis of power. Love wilderness? Don't be a fool! It's socially constructed! Love animals? How childish! You're just projecting your anthropomorphism onto them, when you should really be concerned about the chemicals in your water! Love natural beauty? How elitist! You're just a privileged American! Love science? Don't be duped! It's the product of patriarchal colonial capitalism!

It took me a long time to figure out that these assaults on students' passions were not just creating "discomfort." I had made the students feel guilty about pursuing any kind of pleasure, in nature or otherwise. I hadn't accounted for how their feelings shaped their ability to process the course material, much less do anything about it. I suddenly realized that their emotional responses to learning the extent of the planet's problems, and of their own complicity in those problems, could derail our efforts together. Worse, their despair about the state of the planet and their feelings of guilt (leading to powerlessness) could threaten their ability to show up to class, stay motivated to graduate, and then go into the world with the resolve required to tackle all these problems.

Much to my chagrin, my office hours and classrooms became group therapy sessions, and I found myself totally ill-equipped to

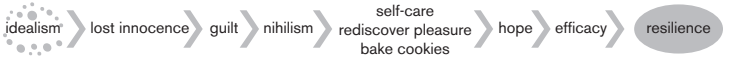

FIGURE 2. The affective arc of environmental studies curricula, by Sarah Jaquette Ray.

manage the demand. Every time a student came to my office, I wondered what crisis, existential or otherwise, I would be expected to sort out this time. The course material was not just a rite of passage, challenging my students to mature into critically thinking adults. It, combined with myriad other stresses of college, was sending my students off the rails, and they were taking me with them.

As I researched emotional reactions to our global crisis, I realized that emotions cannot be separated from what we can think or do about climate change. I began to see patterns in students' emotional responses to the material, which I started to call an "affective arc" of our curriculum (figure 2). I showed students how to reflect on their feelings as stages in an ongoing process and how to understand that this journey was shared by their peers. The vision change workshop I described above, along with the work of adrienne maree brown, led me to think differently about my role as a teacher.

I started to wonder whether it was just as important for students to be asked to address their feelings as it was for them to learn about environmental disruption and injustice. I started to see that instructors needed more tools to help students process the principles of climate disruption in both intellectual and emotional terms. Climate change education rarely accounts for students' emotional lives, even though research shows that emotions are central to our ability to retain and act on information.

Training an emotional lens on climate change debates will enable us to build personal resilience, attend to the social inequities of

climate change better, cultivate better relationships and networks, and learn how to talk with a wider range of people, a point I take up in chapter 5. This starts with looking inward, unpacking ourselves, and taking stock of our resources.

The 2016 US presidential election called me to attention. My colleagues in social justice circles were not as shocked as I, and they reminded me that my response was a function of my lack of direct experience with racism and poverty. I knew that I needed more humility; I also needed more tools, and to translate the tools I already taught into more explicit, resilience-building strategies for students. So that's also what this book is about—facing climate grief and injustice with the climate generation, so we can all keep getting up in the morning and doing the work the planet and our community need us to do.

How to Use This Book

Typically, field guides assist with identifying some aspect of the natural world—geology, bird life, tree species, and so forth. They are meant to accompany you in the field, so you can quickly orient yourself and gain richer knowledge of an unfamiliar terrain. They don't tell you everything about a species, but they open the door to intimate knowledge by starting with a name and basic description. This book will lead you through your own interior terrain and help you identify the feelings associated with the environment problems you're working to change. Mindfulness, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence will be your guides on the journey to manifesting the world you desire.

Each chapter explains a strategy for cultivating resilience. The strategies synthesize academic research on emotion, social move-

ment history, affect, and environmental philosophy. They draw on my expertise as an environmental justice and environmental humanities scholar, as well as my experience as a mother, professor, program leader, and certified member of the age of overwhelm.

The chapters need not be read in sequence, nor does the book need to be read in its entirety, though chapters do at times refer to information in other chapters, and many of us struggle with all of the problems the chapters discuss. The various tools may appeal in different ways to different people—or to you differently at different times of your life. Checklists at the end of each chapter distill the key wisdoms. They are refreshers of what the chapter guided you to think about—you might even use them as mantras to orient yourself to the day. The chapter notes at the end of the book describe key concepts in more depth, for further digging and research.

Read through the following chapter summaries, then dive into the chapters that resonate with you.

Chapter 1, "Get Schooled on the Role of Emotions in Climate Justice Work," surveys the research on climate change as it affects mental health. We'll explore the feelings associated with environmental change and how—shaped by class, race, gender, sexuality, power, and identity—they influence our emotional lives. Becoming knowledgeable about these feelings is a first step toward staying cool on a warming planet.

Chapter 2, "Cultivate Climate Wisdom," enlists scholarship about mindfulness, affect theory, grief and trauma, eco-psychology, and emotional intelligence to help us understand the role emotions play in how we think about and work on climate change.

Chapter 3, "Claim Your Calling and Scale Your Action," dismantles two myths that act as barriers to action: (1) the "myth of