

The Waking Up Syndrome

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by Sarah Anne Edwards and Linda Buzzell

"Humankind cannot bear very much reality." — T. S. Eliot

Just dealing with our daily lives keeps most of us too busy to worry about whether or not the sky is falling. We focus on getting to and from work, paying our bills, doing our errands, and, if our time-stressed schedules allow, enjoying a little time to relax with friends and family.

But we're deluged of late with dire pronouncements from high-profile newscasts, documentaries, and scientific reports about global warming, melting ice caps, dwindling oil supplies, and a looming imminent economic collapse. Closer to home, we've experienced climate-related disasters: floods, wildfires, hurricanes, wildfires, and severe droughts.

While the sky may not be falling, this day-after-day onslaught of alarming news is making it more difficult simply to overlook the triple threat of environmental, climatic and economic concerns. It's leaving many of us feeling like Alice in Wonderland, being sucked down a Rabbit Hole into some frighteningly grotesque and unfamiliar world that's anything but wonderful.

Few of us are eager to contemplate, let alone truly face, these looming changes. Just the threat of losing chunks of the comfortable way of life we're accustomed to (or aspiring to) is a frightening-enough prospect. But there's no avoiding the current facts and trends of the human and planetary situation. And as the edges of our familiar reality begin to ravel, more and more people are reacting psychologically. A noticeable pattern of behavior is emerging.

We call this pattern the Waking Up Syndrome, and it unfolds in six stages, though not necessarily in any particular order.

Stage 1 - Denial.

When we first get an inkling of the shifting environmental reality and its potential impact on both the national economy and our daily lives, most people begin by denying it. We slip into one of four common ways to discount things we'd rather not deal with:

“I don’t believe it.”

We simply deny the existence of any such concerns and refuse to consider them. This might include latching eagerly onto any few remaining naysayers for confirmation and comfort.

But as the number of reputable naysayers dwindles, more people are forced to face the fact that “something” is happening.

“It’s not a problem.”

We may admit there’s a change taking place, but deny that it’s significant, seeing such things as climate change and economic fluctuations as part of a normal pattern that is nothing to concern ourselves with. Or we may incorporate the changes we see happening into our spiritual and religious beliefs, regarding them not as a problem, but a test of faith, a sign of a global spiritual awakening, or evidence of a long-awaited Apocalypse. Some may believe focusing on such problems makes them worse and that we should instead visualize, meditate, or pray for the world to be as we want it to be.

“Someone will fix it.”

We may admit major problematic changes are underway but conclude that there’s nothing we personally can do about them and we needn’t worry because technology, scientists, the government, or some expert authority will come up with a solution in time to save us.

“It’s useless.”

We may believe there’s nothing anyone can do about macro-problems, so why do anything, except perhaps eat, drink and be merry. What will be, will be.

Stage 2 - Semi-consciousness.

In spite of the various ways we may try to discount what’s happening to our environment (and consequently to our economy and whole way of life), as evidence mounts around us and the news coverage escalates, we may begin to feel a vague sense of eco-anxiety. Some express this as virulent anger at all this discussion about global warming. Others dissociate from their growing concern and misdirect their feelings toward other things in their lives, perhaps blaming family members or jobs for their undefined discomfort.

Stage 3 - The moment of realization.

At some point we may encounter something that breaks through our defenses and brings the inevitability and severity of the implications of our collective problems into full consciousness. We might read a particularly compelling article, learn more about the

aftermath of Katrina, hear a news broadcast about polar bear deaths or rampant fires and flooding, see a documentary like “An Inconvenient Truth” or “The End of Suburbia.” Or — most dramatically — we might experience a natural disaster ourselves with all its personal and economic costs.

At such moments, suddenly we realize no matter how we try to explain away the changes that are happening, they are and will be accompanied by huge challenges to life as we know it and cause considerable pain and suffering for many, including ourselves and those we love.

Even if we believe all these disruptions are leading to a global spiritual awakening or a long awaited Apocalypse— even if we think some helpful new technology is going to emerge (hopefully soon)— we nonetheless begin to understand on a visceral level that the changes taking place will have dramatically unpleasant implications beyond anything we’ve faced in our lifetimes. In fact, we realize many of these uncomfortable changes are already underway and will be growing in coming months and years, affecting most of the things we love and cherish.

But like the character Neo in the 1999 movie *The Matrix*, even at this point we still have a choice. We can choose to swallow the metaphorical red pill and find out just how deep this rabbit hole goes and where it leads. Or we can take the soothing metaphorical blue pill and choose to “escape” from the nightmarish Wonderland of the rabbit hole we’ve fallen into by slipping back into the comfort of our favorite form of assuring ourselves that all is well.

But if, like Neo, we take “the red pill,” we wake up to the reality of our individual and collective situation. We get that the triple threat challenge facing us is a real Medusa monster. Once we’re awake, the problem is full-blown in our consciousness. It’s right in our face. It won’t let us turn away, and the force of it makes “waking up” incredibly painful.

The moment we realize — even briefly — that we’re slipping into a dangerously threatening new world that no longer makes sense according what we’ve always believed, our genetic wiring kicks in with predictable physiological and emotional threat responses that can take many forms.

Some of us become obsessive newswatchers, documentary filmgoers, internet compulsives or book readers, wanting to know more and more about what’s really happening. Loved

ones may think we've gone nuts. Spouses may consider divorce; kids may decide mom and dad are hopeless cranks.

The more fragile or vulnerable among us may get depressed or experience panic attacks. If something about this current eco-trauma retriggers earlier traumas in our lives, we may have a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) reaction. Even the more resilient may throw themselves obsessively into save-the-planet and other activities, soon to become exhausted and weary from trying to do what no one person can.

Others, once they realize what's happening, see it as a new business or political opportunity. These green business ventures can sometimes be helpful and productive, but at other times can actively circumvent or sabotage the efforts of those who are trying to solve the problems.

Stage 4 - A Point of No Return.

Once awakened, especially as economic and environmental changes intensify, most of us find there is no turning back. We find ourselves traveling deeper and deeper down the rabbit hole. Whatever methods we've used to avoid facing the coming changes is no longer successful to quell our personal concerns. We can no longer help but notice the continuing rapid progress of the bad trends – more expensive energy, higher costs of living, a weaker economy, more species in trouble, rising temperatures, more devastating severe weather events, increasing political, economic and military competition (wars) over remaining resources, etc. It all starts to make a dreadful sort of sense as we let in the enormity of the situation.

One of the most difficult aspects of this stage is the profound but unavoidable sense of isolation and disconnection we may feel when living in a different world from most of those around us, a world we can no longer escape from, but one few others seem to notice. The result is a bizarre sense of surrealism. Interaction and communication can become a challenge. How do we relate to a world that's no longer real to us, but is business as usual to most? Do we try to reach out to others about the ugly new reality and endure their defenses? Is it better to indulge those who don't yet see the reality we've stumbled into and act "as if" nothing has changed just to get along? Or might it be easier to withdraw from life as we've known it and turn into a hermit?

5. Despair, guilt, hopelessness, powerlessness.

The realization sets in that one person or even one group or community can't stop the effects of such things as climate change and peak oil and their economic consequences from impacting millions of people around the planet and at home. We see this thing spiraling out of control and realize that our species, and even we individually, are responsible for much of what's happening! As the mayor of Memphis said to the *Los Angeles Times* when a major heat-wave hit his city and most of the Midwest and South last summer, "This is pretty akin to a seismic event in the sense that there is no solution that we here in this room can come up with that will take care of everybody."

Some have suggested that this stage is similar to the traditional grief process, and indeed, this is a time of grieving. But there is a significant difference between this awakening and the normal experience of grief. Grief that occurs after a loss usually ends with acceptance of what's been lost and then one adjusts and goes on. But this is more like the process of accepting a degenerative illness. It's not a one-time loss one can accommodate and simply move on. It is a chronic, on-going, permanent situation that will not only not improve, but actually continue to worsen and become more uncomfortable in the foreseeable future, probably for the entire lifetime of most people living today. This is what author James Howard Kunstler calls "The Long Emergency."

Our grief and sorrow are also amplified by having to bear the pain of upbeat acquaintances who go merrily along in their denial, discounting their own uneasiness about what's happening and wondering why we're so "negative."

Stage 6 - Acceptance, empowerment, action.

As we come to accept the limits of our general powerlessness, we also find the parameters of the power we do have in this strange new situation. We discover we no longer need to resist our current and emerging reality. We don't need to feel compelled to save the entire world or to hold onto a world that no longer makes sense. We are freed, instead, to pursue what James Kunstler calls "the intelligent response," seeking and taking whatever creative, constructive action will best sustain those aspects of life that are truly most important to us in the context of the changes unfolding around us. At this point our curiosity and creativity kick in and we can begin following our natural instincts to find what is *both feasible and rewarding* to safeguard ourselves, our families, our communities and the planet.

And indeed, growing numbers of people are beginning to respond with a plethora of

creative, socially and personally responsible actions along four paths that are similar to those identified by Joanna Macy in her book *World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal* and Richard Heinberg in *Peak Everything: Waking up to the Century of Declines*. We are finding individual and collective ways to:

Resist making matters worse.

What's going on may or may not be inevitable, but we don't have to speed it along. We can do at least one thing to ease or lessen the negative impact of these changes. We can join an environmental action group, plant a tree, bike to work, help with a protest march or write letters to our congressperson. Just doing our little bit to limit the damage eases the psychological distress we're feeling, even if we're not "saving the whole world." Taking even a small stand for what Macy calls "the life-sustaining society" (as opposed to the life-destroying one) gives us back our dignity and sense of agency.

Raise our level of consciousness so we can maintain some serenity and not burn out in the midst of all this change. We might adopt a spiritual practice of some kind, take up meditation, expand our understanding of ecology or history, or spend time reconnecting with nature, learning to live our lives in harmony with the rest of the earth.

Build a lifeboat for ourselves and our loved ones.

Many people are already taking steps to create a richer yet more sustainable way of life better suited to weathering the new economic and environmental realities. Some are moving to less vulnerable or expensive locales. Others are simplifying their lives, starting to lower their energy use, or creating personal and community permaculture gardens. Still others are changing into more sustainable careers, joining relocalization efforts to safeguard their local economy, or adopting alternative ways to exchange needed goods and services. Learning more about these positive possibilities is vital. Until we can see that there are options, there's no way out of despair except to return to dissociating or denying, which only makes us more vulnerable to the difficulties around us.

Join with others in small communities

for support and understanding. Don't try to cope with this enormous challenge alone! Find others who share your concerns and views. Some people have formed reading or study groups around books like David Korten's *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community*, Richard Heinberg's *Powerdown: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World*, Cecile Andrews' *Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life*, or *Middle Class Life Boat* by Paul and Sarah Edwards. Others are becoming active in relocalization efforts like those

described on www.relocalize.net . Still others are joining together to turn their neighborhood into a sustainable “eco-hood” or exploring options for co-housing or eco-villages.

Taking some action in each of these four areas prevents us from getting stuck in panic and paralysis. It energizes us and re-establishes a sense of confidence and security in life. Does it mean we will no longer be plagued with concerns, doubts or even fear at times? No. The threat of what we face is huge and relentless. There’s never been anything like it in human history. All who awaken to the enormity of the challenges before us still slip and slide somewhere along this continuum at times. One day we may feel encouraged with our forward action, the next we may be back to despairing. Or we may need to take a mental holiday altogether for a few days or weeks so we can come back refreshed and reinvigorated, ready to work again on the survivable future we’re creating for ourselves and our loved ones.

When asked in an interview with *The Turning Wheel* if there are times when she ever thinks “Oh, no! This is impossible,” even Joanna Macy, who has been a leader in championing ways to address these changes, replied, “Every day.” But she goes on to explain that while she does think this at times, such times pass because she can’t think of anything more engaging and enjoyable than addressing the most pressing issues of our time.

Such wisdom seems to be the secret to living positively while navigating the painfully difficult stages of awakening until we get to the point where we can enjoy the daily challenges our dismaying situation presents to our imagination, our creativity and our deep and abiding love for the most valuable aspects of life.

To Learn More

Books

Circle of Simplicity: Return to the Good Life by Cecile Andrews.

World as Lover, World as Self: Courage for Global Justice and Ecological Renewal by Joanna Macy.

The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community by David Korten.

The Long Emergency: Surviving the End of Oil, Climate Change and other Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-first Century by James Howard Kunstler.

Middle-Class Life Boat, Careers and Life Choices for Staying Afloat in an Uncertain Economy by Paul and Sarah Edwards.

Permaculture: Principles & Pathways Beyond Sustainability by David Holmgren

Peak Everything: Waking up to the Century of Decline by Richard Heinberg.

Powerdown: Options and Actions for a Post-Carbon World by Richard Heinberg.

Reconnecting with Nature by Michael J. Cohen.

Documentary DVDs

The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream.
www.endofsuburbia.com/previews.htm

Escape From Suburbia: Beyond the American Dream

The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil

What a Way to Go: Life at the End of the Empire. www.whatawaytogomovie.com/

Crude Impact

Organizations

The Post-Carbon Institute www.postcarbon.org

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