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How to Live with Constant Reminders That the Earth Is in...

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We know climate change is altering the planet. What do we do now?



Environmental protesters of the Extinction Rebellion group take part in a demonstration on December 21, 2018, in London, England. Photo: Tayfun Salci/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images
By Dan Zak

What does it mean to be alive right now? Right now. Right this second, right this *epoch*, as mankind alters the Earth beyond recognition.

In Arizona, in the summer, the pinyon pines don't smell like they used to, says Nikki Cooley, and the wind sometimes feels in error, like it's blowing the wrong way, at the wrong time of

year. She knows these are feelings, not data, but she is measuring them nonetheless. Cooley, 39, grew up without running water or electricity on Diné Nation land, herding her grandmother's sheep and sleeping in corn fields. She became one of the first members of her family to get a master's degree, in forestry, and now she has her dream job, co-managing a [tribes and climate change program](#) in Arizona, acting as an emissary between her ancestral world and the modern one that upended it.

"If you talk to elders, who are some of the most revered people in our tribal communities," says Cooley, "they're like, 'We told you so, we have been saying this.'"

Scientists, too, have been saying this. Data, not feelings: [A United Nations panel reported in October](#) that we have around 12 years to act if we want to keep the Quite Horrible from becoming Truly Terrible. [A report this month](#) says that Antarctic glaciers are melting faster than we thought. Last week, environmental dangers occupied the top three spots on a survey of the biggest global risks, as compiled by the World Economic Forum.

They told us so. Are telling us so.

But here's where you stop reading, because you have a mortgage payment to scrape together. You have a kid to pick up from school. You have a migraine. The U.S. government is in shambles. You're sitting at your desk, or on the subway, and deep in the southern Indian Ocean, blue whales are calling to each other at higher pitches, to be heard over the crack and whoosh of melting polar ice. What do you even do with that?

Screw the epoch.

"I don't believe it," President Trump said of his own administration's [November report](#), which stated that "climate change is transforming where and how we live."

How do we live? Day by day, mostly. Many of those days are spent trying to be stable, happy, prosperous. Americans are increasingly certain that human activity is causing global warming, according to [a report published Tuesday](#) by Yale and George Mason universities, but who has the willpower or the luxury to always think generationally, *geologically*—to the end of this century, to the uncertainties beyond?

"This is a great time to either collapse or to make great changes," says Rep. Alan Lowenthal (D-Calif.), a member of the three-year-old Climate Solutions Caucus. "And we don't know which way we're going."

The midterm cycle flushed out nearly half of the 45 Republicans in the caucus, a blow to its bipartisan stability, but it swept in Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.)—and suddenly Capitol Hill was talking about a Green New Deal, about the waywardness of the capitalist adventure.

"The world is going to end in 12 years if we don't address climate change," Ocasio-Cortez said Monday in New York, with a doomsayer's zeal. "And your biggest issue is how are we going to pay for it?"

Climate change is a "huge issue," the acting head of the Environmental Protection Agency told a Senate committee last week, but not our "greatest crisis."

Photo: Ricky Carioti/The Washington Post via Getty Images

An issue, not a crisis. The charred graveyard of Paradise, Calif., is an issue, not a crisis—unless, of course, you lived in Paradise, Calif. The Cassandras among us look at Paradise, smote by a wildfire without precedent, and see the future in miniature: drought-stricken and evermore flammable.

We freak out, but go about our business.

The problem is clear, but it has yet to consume us.

And so there is no crisis, just an accumulation of curiosities and irritants. Your basement now floods every year instead of every five or 10 years. Your asthma has gotten worse. You grew up wearing a winter jacket under your Halloween costume in Buffalo, and now your kids don't have to. The southern pine beetle that made its home in South America 400 years ago is now boring through trees on Long Island.

"There needs to be a few cold nights to freeze them, and we're having less and less of those," says entomologist Claire Rutledge.

"Stealthy effects" is the term Michael Paolisso uses. He's a professor of anthropology who's studied the Chesapeake Bay for years. He has a small house on Deal Island, Md. When there is flooding in the county, school starts late; bus drivers are advised not to traverse standing water if both sides of the road are submerged, so what if you have to go to work and your kids haven't been picked up?

"They're the day-to-day sort of grind," Paolisso says of the stealthy effects. "And soon people will be planning their trips to town—our marshy areas and coastal peninsulas—based on the tides."

Climate change is more sly than time-lapse video of a disintegrating glacier. It's the creep of bay water into ditches, and then onto roads.

It's a smell. A nuisance. A crinkling of the calendar.

In the soybeans fields of Carrington, N.D., the first frost is scooching from Labor Day toward October, while the last frost is backing out of May into April. Charles Linderman has watched it happen over his 43 years of farming there. A longer growing season, right now, is good. "My concern," Linderman says, "is if it keeps going this way." Cool-season crops like barley would suffer; milder winters might spare certain pests. North Dakota could start to feel more like Kansas.

Being alive right now means rethinking boundaries, pushing on the walls of your imagination. It means feeling around in this world for another one.

If you have an infant daughter, she is expected to live 81.1 years, and so she will be here for 2100, a year that is no longer mythical. She may see the world's largest naval base, in Norfolk, swamped by rising seas. If she lives in Phoenix, she may feel nearly double the amount of 100-degree days. During her lifetime, the oceans will acidify at a rate not seen in 66 million

years. One research team suggests that by her 29th birthday, there will be no more saltwater fish.

If it keeps going this way.

Alice Major has lived in Edmonton, on the edge of Alberta's boreal forest, for nearly 40 years. She remembers six weeks of minus-20-degree weather; now the mercury sinks that low only occasionally, she says. In 1949, the year she was born, the planet had around 2.5 billion people on it, and it had taken all of human history to get to that point. In her lifetime alone, the population has grown by about 5 billion.

As Edmonton's first poet laureate, Major has written a book of verse titled "[Welcome to the Anthropocene](#)," which is the name given to this moment, this epoch, when humans have become a planetary force. The anthropocene—whether it began with agriculture, the colonization of the West, the Industrial Revolution or the atomic bomb—was born of human ingenuity. That's what empowered us to create this mess, and what empowers us now to see it.

So, how clever are we? Will we invent our way out of this? Alice Major answers:

Immured in cities, we forget we live

on a planet that is more inventive

than ourselves.

Photo: Diego Diaz/Icon Sportswire via Getty Images

It's possible to read the epoch itself like a poem. Rutledge, the entomologist, has been knitting as part of the Tempesty Project, which assembles yarn kits and geolocation data for crafters to color-code a year of temperatures—rendering climate change into a rainbow of pleasing wool colors, such as "fjord" blue and "firecracker" red.

Each loop a part of a day, each row a day of the year. Lines following lines.

"It's a way to spend time with something," says Rutledge, who lives in North Haven, Conn., "to force yourself to slow down and think about it, to manage the anxiety about climate change because it's just so overwhelming."

That's the riddle. To grasp the problem, we have to slow down. To respond to it, we have to act fast. We have both no time and more time, says climate scientist Kate Marvel. Climate change is a slope. We can ease our descent. But we don't think about it this way.

"We want there to be a really simple story: You do this, and then everything will be okay," says Marvel, who works for NASA in New York. "And everything is not going to be okay."

That's the opposite of what a mother says, the opposite of what we all tell each other about the latest worry—about the job interview in the morning, about the lump in your wife's breast, about a report in the newspaper screaming through a muffle of data that we need to stop everything we're doing and pull together in the same direction, or else everything we are building for our children may soon be overtaken by water or fire.

Everything will be okay. We say it even when we don't believe it.

Maybe we should stop saying it. There is opportunity in this acceptance. Marvel thinks we need courage, not hope. We must know what's coming, we must realize it will hurt, and we must be very strong together.

Hold the problem in your mind. Freak out, but don't put it down. Give it a quarter-turn. See it like a scientist, and as a poet. As a descendant. As an ancestor.

"It is an immense privilege to be alive at this time," Alice Major says from Edmonton. "We owe it to ourselves to try as hard as we can to understand what's going on. And to give meaning to it. . . . Only by understanding our lives as meaningful can we hope to create meaningful change."

The wind feels wrong in Arizona, and Nikki Cooley listens to the elders. The Diné know what it means to be driven from land, to adapt, to survive from one epoch to the next, even though things are not okay.

She is their daughter. A line following a line. She has figured out how to be okay, for the time being. To give it meaning. The feelings. The data. All of it.

"It does take an emotional toll," she says, "but I have to remember that these people keep going, and have been going since the colonial settler stepped foot on this land."

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