

Kate Schapira

Climate Anxiety Counseling, an excerpt

What did I do?

I cried all winter about the effects of climate change, present and possible future—by myself, on the couch with my partner, in my office with the door closed. When spring came, I spent three hours a day, five days a week, in Kennedy Plaza—opposite Providence's bus terminal, and just outside a big downtown park—with a Lucy-from-*Peanuts* style booth, inviting people who stopped to share their anxieties with me: “So the thing I’m most anxious about right now is how the changing climate is gonna affect the world, and especially Rhode Island, because I live here and I love it here. So I wanted to find out if other people were anxious about that, or what they’re anxious about. Is there anything you’re anxious about, that’s pressing on your mind?” I asked if I could write down what they said, and sometimes I responded, or asked more questions.

When no one was talking with me, I wrote poems using their words as starting points, or make more cards to give away--little drawings with RI organisms on the front and a link to the project website, the Environmental Justice League of RI (recipient of the requested 5-cent donations, which were often larger), and Resilient RI on the back. Here are two days of conversations, poems, and reflections.

DAY 11: 5/27

Some conversations:

Being stuck at my current job. I don't have freedom to speak as I'd like or do as I'd like. I'd like to be a counselor of some kind for high school students.

Do you know what steps you'd take to do that?

No, but the counselor at my high school was really good, so I might ask her.

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I'm taking medication for this [indicates sign]—two weeks. I've been having some nightmares, but sometimes I wake up in a good mood.

What do you do when you start to feel really anxious?

I put on headphones and music and I try to not think ... The problem is, I know how to deal with it, but I can't. I don't like taking medicine because I was in the hospital all the time when I was a little kid. I had eye surgery for a really bad lazy eye, and for three years I was in the hospital every day. And now I have an internship where I work in the hospital!

Does the anxiety get worse when you're in the hospital?

Only when I work in the children's part. But I work on computers, so if the computer in there breaks, I have to go in there! I don't like kids, kids are cruel.

Are the kids in the children's part rude to you?

No, they're mostly just sick. You're the first random person I've ever talked to, even in my country.

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Him: The heat—it's too hot.

Right now or always?

Him: Always.

Her: If I don't get the bathing suit I want I'm gonna be upset. [It later developed that she knows what bathing suit she wants, knows where it is, and can get it.]

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What's making me anxious and nervous about climate change right now is the massive change in temperature making the ice caps break. I'm thinking terrible waves and tsunamis that could take off all of us—East Coast, West Coast, North, South, it doesn't really matter to the water. It will go where it will go. And animals—it's taking a really big toll. They're not surviving, not thriving, as well as they should. The circle of life is being affected ecologically. And the most--there's so many people on this earth, there's overpopulation, and too many people don't care. There are a lot of wonderful people doing a lot of hard work, even scientists, and it doesn't seem to matter to a lot of people. Any given city, you see pollution everywhere. When I see factories, all I see is smog. All this terrible God-knows-what going into the earth. We have free will, we make choices. If we would just come together in a big way—I'm afraid that something terrible's gonna happen, something truly irreparable, damage that cannot be reversed, and that in the wake of that tragedy, people will ask, "What should we have done?" That by the time we acknowledge it, the answer to "What should we do?" is gonna be, "Tell your loved ones and your dear friends that you love them very much, and say your prayers." It's not a small thing. This is all we have, this earth, and we're damaging it, we are causing so much damage ... I just really want this problem to be solved and I'm afraid that we're past the point of solving it. And I'm afraid that the more we try to fix the damage, they don't know enough and they'll make it worse.

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I'm concerned about it. Where's U.S. agriculture gonna be in another 10 years? We've been observing how in the South we're losing oranges, grape fields, cornfields, potatoes in Idaho. How is the U.S. gonna provide for themselves, support themselves, instead of depending on other countries? Let the grass grow again! Or blow up or dynamite so the water can go where the drought is! If you can put a man on the moon, you can't end a drought? ... Let's put the ground back together. The earth is the ground, the dirt. Once you kill the ground, you kill everything, the trees—we're gonna be extinguished. We're gonna be extinguished.

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Speaking for myself, I have huge climate anxiety. It's the biggest problem we're facing, and we should be devoting huge amounts of resources to it. Instead, they're still having debates about whether to give oil and gas leases in national parks. We're putting the earth, the country, and the climate at risk by looking for oil and gas. It won't be helped by a piecemeal approach. And I'm not hopeful. I don't think governments have the guts to face up to oil and gas interests. I think we're doomed. And my biggest concern is not so much for humans-- I'm worried that we'll make it impossible for anything else to survive. We don't begin to take this seriously enough. Most people are ignorant about it. It involves making sacrifices, using less water—my parents lived in Southern California, and people moved there from the Northeast and the Midwest and brought their habits with them. They kept building houses, kept building golf courses, and development always won out over concerns over resources.

Do you talk to people about this?

People I know, or people I don't know?

Both.

I have conversations, but about small stuff, like recycling. To people I know, I talk about it a lot. I go to a Unitarian church, many of whose members are left-leaning. But the church can't even get recycling right. I'm discouraged on a personal and political and countrywide level. They say gas is cleaner, but if getting the gas requires the kind of stuff that's going on in Canada—I think if we devoted sufficient money to alternatives, in 10 years we could prevent a catastrophe, but we don't have the will.

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For me, anxiety is social. If nature's doing something, that's danger.* It's not a threat to your identity, I'm not gonna be ostracized by society. I guess there are people who are anxious that they're bad people for being part of climate change. One time I was reading this article where they were claiming, this particular scientist was claiming that we're gonna have extinctions climate change in the near future, that peak temperatures will rise above what animals can survive, and I realized that I was automatically thinking about Fahrenheit, not Celsius—a rise of 3 degrees Fahrenheit is not a big deal. But the idea that all humans could die, just get hotter and hotter and lie down and not wake up, seemed like the

opposite of anxiety. It's not like a punishment, it's pointless—it undermines human moral grandiosity. It's like a romantic revenge of nature, like Godzilla would show up—a simple physical mechanism. This could be idiosyncratic, but I'm only anxious about things where a negative meaning is ascribed to me, I only have anxiety about getting in trouble. It's hard for us to estimate the balance of the sufferings of other beings. There's a super naive mechanical collision of atheism and Buddhism that suggests we'd all be better dead. ...You haven't really counseled me at all.

*Upon reflection, I wish I'd followed up with this a little more.

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Person 1: I worry about what my grandchildren are gonna be dealing with because of what my generation and the generation before that have done. One thing that I do, that's a small thing, is I'm part of a group that rescues blueback herring. There's this dam that they can't get over, and we scoop them out and bring them up above the dam so they can get into the 10 Mile River and the spawning ground in Newman Reservoir. This dam is a hundred years old, and they still come back every year to spawn, during the month of April—toward the end of March, the beginning of April, we start looking out for them. I work two jobs, and I still make time to do this. One guy's been doing it for 40 years. They were going to start a fish ladder program, but there was a complication with the engineering. When they were about to put in the last stage, they ran into an active gas line—the DEM, the Army Corps of Engineers, the state and federal departments, and none of them knew that line was there. The dams aren't really doing anything anymore, but the 10 Mile River was really polluted by the jewelry industry, they used to dump all their chemicals into the water and eventually into the ocean, and there's still sediment that nobody wants to disturb. Dams--nobody wants to get into them. You gotta start small and work big.

Person 2: The police state. I'm more worried about that. It's omnipresent, it's out of control. You don't see it until you get involved with it, or it gets involved with you. Like you [Person 1 is taking a picture of the map], you could be a cop right now.

Person 1: No, I was just showing her the video of the fish I save.

Person 2: When you say you save fish, how do you save them?

Person 1: The herring come in every year, according to the change of light and water temperature, and we help them up over this dam in laundry baskets. We need permits, licenses, because they're endangered, you're not allowed to catch them or eat them or sell them, but we can touch them to save them. You need multiple people, because they're a defiant fish.

Person 2: It weeds out the weak. That's what's wrong with people.

Or we could say that the fish get to survive because another species helped them.

Person 2: Yeah, but who's gonna help us?

Everything is already helping us. I don't mean on purpose, but trees help us breathe, birds help us not get totally destroyed by insects.

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You got anything you're anxious about?

Nope, just homeless. Homeless, jobless.

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My colleague runs climate modeling labs and he faces this problem: how do you make sense of something when in order to prove its claims, it has to be too late? It makes you feel sort of frozen. That may be why I've deprioritized it among the activist-oriented things I do ... It's always delayed. It's always too late.

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Today's poem:

We who are already here
have received so much.
We who are about to die
surrender our collections.
We who are apparent show
what has sunk into us.
Imagine if we had to give it back
All of it, every molecule.
Of air. Of flesh. Every cell
we build. Every waterdrop.
We are terribly concrete.
Made terribly of everything.

Reflections on Day 11:

I started the booth project hoping to build a language for talking about ecological devastation and the fear of it, to make room for public grief and fear about a public topic, to find ways of thinking about it that were neither falsely hopeful nor wholly despairing, and to see if anyone could help me figure out something better to do. Some of today's conversations felt like failures in all of those regards—I responded particularly badly to the guy who was talking about climate change as a "romantic revenge of nature." But he did help me reinforce my sense that if something matters around the time that it happens, that

counts as "mattering." And the survival-of-the-fittest guy and the herring guy, between them, helped me create a reframing that matters a lot to me: the *fact* that humans receive necessary help, help without which we would die, from the nonhuman world. Everyone and everything is weak, is needy. If we could act with interdependence rather than instrumentality as our guide, the human and the nonhuman might be able to have a little more time together.

DAY 16: 6/1

Some conversations:

Friend 1: The government. They're frauds. Changing stuff around.

Like what?

Friend 1: They're trying to lower the population, make it so there's one world leader. There's all these wars to reduce the population.

How does it affect you?

It affects me because I got love for everybody! I don't want people to die for no reason.

Friend 2: Not only that, but the rich stay rich, the poor stay poor.

How can people help take care of each other?

Friend 1: People build themselves up. Helping the lower class become middle class.

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[To her preteen son] You're not worried about the climate? [To me] Maybe you should educate him a little bit!

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Him: I saw you in the paper! I was talking to some of the folks at Clean Water Action and they told me something I didn't know, that distressed me, which is that the Bush administration gutted the Clean Water Act and their campaign is to restore some of its protections. How could Congress approve that? How could the Democrats let that go by? And another thing, I was reading the news every day during that time, and it was not covered. It was a completely silent action.

Her: I worry about gas prices going up, that this suburban lifestyle we've been living—

Him: —is unsustainable.

Her: Is unsustainable. We need to change our way of living. We should consider public transit, not for everything—sometimes you do need a car. And the other thing I'm anxious about is the water problem.

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You don't wanna die but you don't wanna see what's coming. At this point I'm more like, I'm not gonna worry about that, I'm just gonna go home and feed my cat. I'm not at the stage of not buying green bananas—you know that expression? I'm still buying green bananas. I was reading all the EcoWatch articles, Food and Water Action, MoveOn. My anxiety was off the charts. I wanted to do something. Then I found out about Mercy Ecology—have you heard of them? They do environmental education and eco-spirituality. They're all retired nuns—well, they're still nuns, but they're in their 70s and 80s. I went to Catholic school, I know about that nun with the habit and the ruler, but they're not like that. They're out in the garden, with their hands in the dirt. I'm redoing their website, so they can reach more people.

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I don't have any new anxieties since last time.

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We changed everything in the house to energy-saving. The car that I drive is half-and-half hybrid.

What made you make those changes?

So much stuff that's happening around the environment, even sickness. I'm very sensitive, it affects me, and it affects humanity too—how people think and react

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I'm ex-Navy, I've been all over the world, and I've seen a *lot* of water. I'm also a scuba diver, and I've seen those things, those plastic things, wrapped around the necks of turtles. And I've taken them off them. But with fish, they get caught in the, the gills. It's despicable ... The first time I ever saw a leech, it was swimming—but swimming like this, like a worm in the water! I dove in just about every lake there is.

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My daughter will love this ... What bothers me about the climate is that people don't throw their trash in the cans. They just go throw it on the ground.

Why do you think that is?

They don't wanna take the time to throw it in the garbage can.

Is that what you think it is, a time thing, like it's too much work to find a trash can?

Maybe there's not trash cans where they are? I'm gonna tell my daughter about you, she'll love this. Hopefully she will be a good advocate. That's what I hope.

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I'm a little afraid of becoming a junior. I'm not afraid to grow up, but I don't know what the future holds for me. Oh—and I was just reading an article about how people use "climate change" versus "global warming", how global warming is scarier.

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The government's controlling the weather. If you know how nature works, it usually has seasons, and it didn't this year. There were no April showers, May had all the showers. And the birds left in March, they know how it's supposed to be. It doesn't add up to me. The way animals are behaving—and the trees and stuff, we're not gonna have oxygen to breathe.

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Person 1: I heard a Republican minister was telling his congregation that global warming was the sign of the Second Coming of Christ.

Person 2: Like all things being made new—

Person 1: —Instead of all things being burned to a crisp. Impending glory instead of impending doom. I think the kids are the ones who really feel it. In schools, they're exhorting kids to save the earth.

Person 2: Oh yeah, I remember—did you have that book in school, *50 Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth*? It was like, "Turn the water off when you brush your teeth," and that's good, but it's not gonna save the earth.

Person 1: That's too much. Don't put that on them, saving the earth. Just teach them how to live right, to do the right thing because it's right.

Today's poem:

Hope comes later locked
into the body of someone
younger like an achievement
you push it forward
your job is making
their I mean mine
I have always said
I'm sending them out
it isn't enough
a fragment of hope
lodged in each chest
wall like shrapnel to do
something about later
the children of later
the people of
the future locked in
a molecular chain
as long as the whirlwind
and bound to itself
the need we breathe
the need we give birth
I'm thinking about it
I'm still thinking about it
here comes the lock
locking you to the future
I mean I mind
I have always said
this is a job
for someone else

Reflections on Day 16:

Real and rhetorical children came up a lot during booth time. When insisting on the reality of climate change, and as a focus of their fears, people often talked about the world their children would live in; the people who came to the booth today stressed another facet of it, the idea that "future generations" are the ones *responsible* for "saving the earth." By doing this, people are putting both hope and fear in the future, which, I guess, is where they go and what they're about—but that also means putting the reality of ecological devastation and the need to respond to it in the future, not the present.

What will I do next?

The phrases I heard most often at the booth: "I don't know what to do." "I wish I felt like I could do something." "I feel like the things I can do on my own aren't big enough." "I wish there was something I could do." I wish that, too. I want to set up an online resource library of medium-scale actions—actions for communities, geographical or digital—that are of practical help in mitigating or adapting to climate change and its effects. I'm seeking the aid of climate scientists and modelers, ecologists, urban planners; of designers and website builders; of activists and lobbyists. Then I can do some of the things, and you can, too.

I'm talking with and listening to other artists who are making climate change-related and ecologically motivated work, and looking for other ways that the project could both stimulate and sustain. I welcome your ideas and questions.

Readers can see my record of the booth days, my weekly reflections, and related writings, links and updates at <http://climateanxietycounseling.wordpress.com>. I continue to write in response to what people told me, as well as what I read and hear about global warming and ecological vulnerability, to figure out what I think, how I feel, and what to do.

Kate Schapira is a poet and teacher living in Rhode Island. She's the author of four full-length books and nine chapbooks of poetry. She co-runs the Publicly Complex Reading Series, teaches nonfiction writing at Brown University and poetry for Frequency Writers, and is holding Climate Anxiety Counseling sessions in downtown Providence through June 7th, 2014. You can see more at **Climate Anxiety Counseling**, where some of this material also appeared.