

The Rising Tide Within: Climate Grief, Algae Blooms, and What We Do Now

By Dorian Hartwood | write@dorianhartwood.com



Image credit: pixabay

The Moment the Ocean Cried

It was supposed to be a homecoming.

I hadn't been back to Puerto Rico in years. Life had done what life does—it pulled me into obligations, deadlines, and an ocean of distance between myself and the island that first taught me how to love the sea.

But when I finally returned, something was off.

I stood at the shoreline of Jobos Bay, one of my favorite places on Puerto Rico's southern coast, where turquoise waters usually danced with life. But instead of clarity, the water was cloudy and brown-green. It stank—of rot, of something suffocating. Fish floated belly-up. Coral skeletons peeked through murk. And I knew, even before I checked the reports: the algae blooms had come.

What once felt sacred now looked like mourning.

I didn't say anything at first. I just stood there, gut-punched, staring at an ocean that felt like it was grieving itself.

What Is Climate Grief?

If you've felt that sudden wave of helplessness while reading climate headlines—or the guilt, or the quiet dread—you're not alone.

There's a name for it. **Climate grief.**

The American Psychological Association defines it as “a chronic fear of environmental doom”—a mix of anxiety, sadness, and anticipatory loss tied to ecological decline. Dr. Susan Clayton, a leading researcher in this space, notes that “climate change is not just an environmental or political issue—it's a mental health one.”

In a 2021 global survey published in *The Lancet*, 59% of young people aged 16–25 said they were “very or extremely worried” about climate change. Over half reported feeling “sad, anxious, angry, powerless, helpless, and guilty.”

This is not theoretical. This is lived. Especially for communities on the front lines—like Puerto Rico, where storms like Maria didn't just take homes, but futures. Where rising seas eat away at coastline and algae blooms suffocate the very waters that once sustained life.

When the Ocean Can't Breathe, Neither Can We

The bloom I saw wasn't just ugly. It was deadly.

Warm ocean temperatures—accelerated by climate change—mix with excess nutrients from agriculture and sewage, and suddenly, marine ecosystems collapse into chaos. These harmful algal blooms create zones of low oxygen, suffocating fish, coral, and seagrass. According to NOAA, the frequency and intensity of these blooms have increased over the past two decades, especially in tropical and subtropical waters like the Caribbean.

It felt like a betrayal. But it was more than that, it felt like a mirror.

The water couldn't breathe. And neither could I.

The Psychological Weight We Carry

Here's the thing: Climate grief isn't just sadness. It's a form of love.

It's love for forests we'll never walk through again. For species already gone. For the rain pattern that used to mean planting season. For the glacier that will never come back.

But grief—especially grief this big—can paralyze.

It shows up as burnout in activists, numbness in students, and avoidance in everyday people who mean well but don't know where to start. And for many Millennials and Gen Zers, it becomes an existential ache: Why plan for a future when the future feels so uncertain?

But here's the truth I had to learn while staring at that dying bay:

Grief is not the end. It's the beginning of care.

So What Do We Do With All This Grief?

We metabolize it.

Not by drowning in it. Not by ignoring it. But by transforming it.

Here's what that looks like:

1. Name it.

Climate grief isn't weakness, it's proof that you're awake. Naming it helps us stop running from it. As Dr. Clayton puts it, acknowledging these emotions is the first step toward building resilience.

2. Build community.

Grief in isolation festers. But grief in community transforms. Join climate support groups. Organize with friends. Go to a local action, even if it's just to listen. Shared grief becomes solidarity. And solidarity breeds hope.

3. Connect to place.

We grieve what we love. Reconnect to the places that ground you. For me, that means returning to Puerto Rico not just as a visitor, but as a steward. Planting mangroves. Supporting local conservation. Listening to elders.

4. Take small, fierce action.

Grief wants movement. Write the op-ed. Reduce waste. Call your legislators. Donate to youth-led climate orgs like Fridays for Future or the Sunrise Movement. Small actions don't fix everything, but they shift the weight. They keep us from disappearing into despair.

5. Hold joy, too.

Despair doesn't cancel out joy. In fact, joy can be its counterweight. The laughter in protest. The music at a climate march. The shared meal after a beach cleanup. These moments aren't distractions—they're resistance.

The Surprising Science of Climate Hope

Here's something that might surprise you: Research by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication found that **over 70% of Americans are worried about climate change, but think others aren't.**

This misperception fuels silence. Silence fuels inaction.

But when we break that silence, we unleash something powerful: collective agency.

Climate psychologist Renée Lertzman calls this the “middle space”—where people are concerned but unsure how to act. When we acknowledge grief and show a way forward, people engage. Not just because of facts—but because of feeling.

A Final Reflection: The Ocean Still Breathes

The last time I visited Jobos Bay, I brought a notebook.

The water was still murky in places. But the tide was moving again. A few schools of fish darted in and out of the shallow rocks. A kid laughed as he played in the small ripples. And for a second, I remembered:

The bay is wounded—but it's still alive.

And so are we.

We who grieve must also rebuild. We who cry must also plant. We who rage must also sing.

Because the grief that breaks us can also bind us—to each other, to action, to the still-beating heart of the planet.

This Is Your Invitation

To feel. To care. To act.

Not perfectly. Not all at once. But fiercely, honestly, and together.

Because grief is a signal—not of defeat, but of depth.


And we need deep hearts for the deep work ahead.

Sources

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