

The Psychology of Collapse

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Introduction

Honestly, dealing with the world and everything that's going on, all the time, is so exhausting. I try to take breaks pretty regularly, but it's not like I can ignore everything that's falling apart. I can't lie to myself and say "This is fine" when it really isn't.

And I'm not alone. My network of peers and comrades are all dealing with similar feelings of exhaustion and hopelessness over the state of the world and our future. It got me thinking, and got me researching, about what people are going through in such a stressful time, how they're responding, and how we can deal with all this. I've looked at a variety of sources, as well as drawing from my own experience, to come to a sort of "self theory" about how my fellow humans and I are dealing with this...collapse.

I don't think I need to dive too deeply into what I mean by collapse. I'm referring to the degradation of society by businesses and states, the destruction of our environment, and the devastation of our human potential. The culmination of all the interlocking issues that plague our modern life. The acceleration of the processes that will lead to the end of the world as WE know it.

I want to look at people's awareness of what we face and how people are responding. And perhaps, do my best to provide some sense of what we can do and how we can shake ourselves and others out of inaction. I'm splitting this video into two sections to keep things organized and easy to follow: First, stages of awareness, which I've largely pulled from Paul Chefurka's Climbing The Ladder of Awareness, linked below. I'll use Morty as a stand in to walk you through the stages. After that, we'll look at responses to collapse once people are aware. Let's begin.

Stages of Awareness

Dead Asleep

At this stage, Morty just vibin honestly. Of course he can see there are some issues in the world, here and there, but that can be fixed right? All we gotta do is organize a bit better, change our behaviour slightly, and tweak the rules, then we'll be fine? Right? Right?

Awareness of One Fundamental Problem

Okay, so it seems everything is not cash money. Morty just found out about systemic racism or imperialism or overfishing or dying sea turtles or plastic pollution or fracking. And he is freaked out. He's panicking and mobilizing, or at least bringing awareness to the issue. He's just trying to get people's attention. Just so they know, "HEY! SOMETHING IS WRONG! LET'S FIX IT!" The one problem seems to consume him entirely. So he keeps learning. And...well...

Awareness of Many Problems

The more Morty learns, the more he worries. He takes in all sorts of information, and begins to see how complex and multifaceted the world's problems are. Now it's hard for him to even prioritize which issue needs to be dealt with first. In fact, he's so overwhelmed that he may be reluctant to acknowledge new problems. For example, if Morty has become aware of and is fighting against climate change, he might be reluctant to recognize indigenous oppression

and environmental racism. He might feel like, “aw jeez Rick, I’m already dealing with so much, y’know? I don’t wanna get distracted with so much other stuff!” Alas, Morty cannot ignore the other problems forever. Not unless he wants to keep running in circles.

Awareness of the Interconnections Between the Many Problems

It’s beginning to dawn on poor Morty that no solution is without its problems. Shutting down factory farms might lay off millions and leave perhaps hundreds of millions without a complete meal. Or our efforts to raise the standard of living in the developing world through industrialization is just accelerating the Earth’s destruction and profiting a select few. Morty has begun to...ascend, in some sense. He’s thinking on the system level now. Beyond the symptoms, towards the source. Perhaps there is no one solution? Perhaps the gravity of such a solution may be too much to bear? At this point Morty has likely withdrawn to discuss these issues with like-minded individuals, like small discussion groups, so they can explore the depths of the issues.

Awareness that the Predicament Encompasses All Aspects of Life

Morty is beyond woke now. He might even pine after ignorance, as he realizes that this series of problems, or rather, this All-Encompassing, CAPITAL P Predicament includes everything we do, how we do what we do, how we relate, and how we affect the entire planet. The Predicament is so massive, Morty perhaps comes to a point where he’s just like...there is no CAPITAL S Solution to this CAPITAL P Predicament...no easy answer, no quick fix, he can’t do it alone, so now what?

Chefurka believed that each stage contains roughly a tenth of the number of people as the one before it. So for example, 90% of humanity might be on Stage 1 but only one in ten thousand people might be at Stage 5. Fyi, I haven’t seen any evidence of this, and I disagree personally. He makes it clear that it’s just his personal observation, so take it with a grain of salt.

I’m going to go through the different responses people have to collapse, again borrowing from my own research and personal experience.

Responses to Collapse

Slumber

I’d say a good chunk of people fall into this category. Perhaps they catch a whiff of what’s going on and decide to just...turn over and go back to sleep. To embrace ignorance purposefully, disregard new information, and shun any understanding of what’s going on. Perhaps they’re guarding their fragile sanity, which is understandable. But, we need to face these issues, cuz they’re not going anywhere. What we need is courage.

Denial

This is where people, when faced with reality, reject it and construct their own. Or they search for information that comforts them, rather than exposes them to the truth. They construct a media bubble that shields them, or a social circle that can protect them and reaffirm their core beliefs. Everyone is capable of denying reality, but it’s become quite prevalent in the age of technology,

where we can easily shut out any truths that make us uncomfortable. Like, for example, losing an election or the reality of human-caused climate change.

Apathy

Easy come, easy go. A little high, little low. Anyway the wind blows, doesn't really matter to these people. No motivation. No feeling. The embrace of utter gray. Like slumber and denial, people respond with apathy to protect themselves in some way. After all, if nothing really matters, there's no need to try. No need to think. No need to bother. Bombarded by the media with distant pains, it's easier to just....disconnect. Retreat into one's shell, or, alternatively...well, let's continue.

Preoccupation

This is more the fault of our system, but people these days rell busy. Like, not everyone can afford to invest in exploring and understanding the worlds' problems, even if the threat is so existential that their office busywork or retail slavery would ultimately amount to nothing. I'm not talking about those people though. I'm talking about the people who respond to the issues of the world by distracting themselves with busywork. Constructing a convenient excuse to not challenge the structures they are under or maintain. Like, they're running away from the Predicament. But the Predicament catches up to all of us, sooner or later.

Hedonism

On the flipside of the people who busy themselves with busywork are the people who dive into mindless consumerism. This is coupled with apathy to some extent. If nothing matters and everything's falling apart, might as well just...consume. Indulge. Distract yourself with games, music, partying, drugs, and drinks. It's like slumber, except you're aware of the reality and are just plugging your ears. But at least for those that plug their ears, they don't face...

Overwhelment

Yes, I'm inventing a word. That's what language is for. Deal with it. The Predicament that is collapse is quite complex and multifaceted. Some people respond by trying to wrap their minds around it all and just end up losing their minds altogether. There is no human mind that can consume and comprehend every minute problem that we face. That's why we're a social species. We're supposed to be working together to understand collapse. As individuals, it can be hard to deal with something so complex, abstract, far-flung, and frightening. We're going to need to come together, not just subject ourselves to a form of self-torture via mental isolation with humanity's existential threats.

Blind Hope

This is a trap that a lot of us almost naturally fall into. Humans are biologically predisposed towards optimism, the general attitude or belief that a specific endeavor or outcomes in general will be positive and desirable. We tend to hold onto hope in some future outcome that'll

just...y'know, work out. That's why I call it blind. It can't adjust to the ever-shifting reality. It goes beyond rose-tinted glasses, it's more like a whole VR headset.

We lose our ability to see clearly and take realistic, necessary action. We give up our agency and leave things in the hands of the leaders and the experts. We stay...passive. We waste time, precious time that could be spent on real harm reduction, just going with the flow. We prevent necessary conversations with blind hope when we fixate so much on whether we can fix "it" and how we can fix "it", without considering what we need to do if we can't fix "it". What happens then?

Blind hope manifests in a few different forms, which I'll get into next, but let me address those in this stage right now. Blind hope inevitably leads to disappointment. Waiting forever for a future that won't come. That exists solely in your mind, irrespective of reality. It's ultimately a form of denial, but it's the woke kind of denial. Ultimately, It takes a bit of a journey to move towards a greater level of emotional maturity. But once we can get rid of false hopes, like the idea that somehow we'll reverse the damage our planet has been dealt scot-free. Well, we can strengthen our resolve and prepare for what has already been set in motion. To take action with the knowledge that no, our leaders are not going to do anything substantial enough and no, this moves far beyond reform. It's a hard pill to swallow, but if you can take it, you'll be better off to resist. We don't need blind hope.

Individual Change

These are the people with the blind hope that with a few tweaks here and there, we can continue our perpetual growth easy peasy. All we gotta do is switch to veganism, recycle, and maybe carpool every once in a while and the world's ills are as good as gone. They place stock, and blame, in individuals entirely, ignoring wider structures or society.

Progress Worship

I do want to do a video on how our understanding of progress has been so corrupted, but this is tied to blind hope. There's almost a cult of progress outchea. That any and all growth is good. That no matter the consequences on our finite Earth, we can just expand and expand. Eternally. Those who worship progress blindly place a lot of trust in folks like Elon Musk and other so-called tech geniuses to just...solve all our problems. They have an absurd level of techno-optimism, believing that with a little innovation, we can solve every problem on Earth, without accounting for the risks and consequences of current or future technology. They tend to fall into the trap of Capitalist Realism, losing any sense of alternatives to the current, environmentally and socially destructive economic order. They also tend to feel privileged by the current order, or at least comfortable enough to not want to threaten it.

Leader Worship

There are a lot of people who just...have the utmost faith in our leaders. Who believe that, once we just get the right people in office, things will work out. But as Michael Jackson famously said, they don't really care about us. The truth is, the system corrupts even the best intentions. Politicians are a class unto themselves, and their actions reflect, ultimately, their own interests.

Nationstates, governments, rulers...it's in their job description to maintain structures that ultimately harm humanity. There's only so much they can do to affect the status quo. Placing our salvation in their hands is an exercise in futility. Investing your future in the confines of electoralism is a waste. But it also demonstrates how effectively mass media and schooling has broken down and limited our imagination. You can call it Statist Realism...the idea that there's no alternative to a hierarchy of rulers and ruled. That people just need to be submitted to the wills and whims of others, rather than organizing, through democratic consensus, for themselves and their communities.

Apocalypse Worship

This is gonna sound a bit strange, but worshippers of the apocalypse also hold to a form of blind hope. Accelerationists, doomsday preppers, cultists, extreme survivalists, zombie videogame enthusiasts, or believers in the End Times (think the Great Tribulation, Rapture, and other Fundamentalist beliefs). There seems to be a lot of people who are almost...excited for collapse? Or fixate really heavily on their ideal version of the end of the world. Like, they can't wait for the world to end. Whether it be so Jesus can finally return to Earth or so sinners can be cleansed or so they can finally be vindicated in the eyes of those who disparaged their doomsday bunkers.

Honestly, people who respond in this way freak me out. Those who look at what's going on and...instead of resisting or trying to change the circumstances, they just accept it as things going according to schedule/prophesy...or try to make things worse. Like, you ever wonder why so many Evangelicals support the state of Israel, and lobby so heavily in support, despite its brutal violence against Palestinians? It's because according to their theology, Jewish people need to return to Israel ASAP so Jesus can come, Palestinians be damned. Literally. Moving on...

Despair

Oh boy. These are the people who tend to sit around and bemoan our fate. They probably talk like Eeyore too. They're worse than the apathetic, because they weigh down our actual efforts with pessimism. They see the worst, expect the worst, and live in utter defeat. Defeat without any struggle. According to those in despair, nothing we do has any power to affect our future. Honestly those on the doomer pill are just as misguided, in my eyes, as those hyped up on hopium.

So is there any way out?

Like I said before, we don't need blind hope. And as is clear, we definitely don't need hopeless despair. That's an utterly false dichotomy. So how do we respond to this Predicament?

What we need is sobriety. Clarity. Lucidity. There are two more responses. Paul Chefurka points out in his article that those in Stage 5 Awareness, who see that the Predicament Encompasses All Aspects of Life, look to one of two paths. There's a third, a rejection of both paths, but for those people, he recommends some serious counselling. I've adapted, interpreted, and remixed the two paths, so they're not one to one what he had in mind, but I think the gist is there.

The Two Paths

The Inner Path: Self-Healing

For some, the inner path seems most viable. It's a manifestation of that fake Gandhi quote: "Be the change you want to see in the world." It digs in deep and personal, to look at collapse and retreat within to develop your self-awareness. "To heal the world, first heal yourself." That old spiritual cliché still holds some truth.

Some people take this to mean some sort of hyper individual thing, and it lowkey is, but if you tilt and twist your head slightly, perhaps you can see it in a different light. It doesn't mean becoming a monk or an ascetic. It doesn't mean denying systems or ignoring the painful truth. It involves taking in the gravity of what we're dealing with. Such a grand scale issue, and putting it in a personal context. Unabstracting it and understanding it through a more manageable lens. Taking your insights to influence and interchange with the insights of others. That's how I see it at least. But I also don't see this path as satisfactory to me. What clicks with me, is...

The Outer Path: Balanced Realism

Balanced Realism is, well, hard to balance. There are a lot of people who confuse realism with pessimism. Bitter people who think realism is when everything bad. Ignore them. Truthfully, taking the outer path of balanced realism means shaking off the burdens and blinders of pessimism and optimism. Banishing alarmism, denialism, fatalism, hedonism, and all other setbacks. Loosening yourself from your own hopes and fears. Those on the outer path recognize and accept any number of possible outcomes. In the face of such a grand Predicament, maintaining realism is difficult, but necessary. You agitate for the best but prepare for the worst.

If you're on the Outer Path, you've let go of naivety and passivity. You're moving. Acting. Doing. Adapting. Think of the permaculture movement, Rojava, Transition Network, Resilience.org, Post Carbon Institute, Cooperation Jackson, and all the other ongoing movements and projects, none of which are perfect mind you, none of which are going to save the whole world or anything, but they're looking local and they're making a difference. Forget wasting our time with party politics, we're acting right now. Realists on the Outer Path are building networks, building community, building sustainability. Bravo.

Conclusion

Do you recognize these stages and responses? In yourself and in others? Like I always say, we need each other, so reach out if you see that some are faltering and falling down a harmful path. I'll leave some resources in the description for those moving towards Balanced Realism, those who choose the outer path and want information and support. For those choosing both paths, I don't have as many resources for self-healing, so please, share resources in the comments. Let's keep the conversation going. Take care everyone.

Peace.

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