



Teaching at Twilight

Ahmed Afzaal's Newsletter

On Becoming Collapse Aware

Dear Reader

Last month I had the opportunity to participate in a panel discussion at the *Parliament of the World's Religions* annual conference in Chicago. The panel was titled "Religion, Education, and Deep Adaptation in the Time of Collapse." Other panelists were [Rev. Lauren Van Ham](#) (organizer), [Scott Quinn](#), and [Carol Dolezal](#). I share below an extended version of some of the points I had jotted down in preparation for the panel.

The following mystery has puzzled me for several years: Why is it that a large number of otherwise well-informed and intelligent people are *still* largely oblivious to the state of the world and the direction in which the world is headed? Why is it that "collapse awareness" has not yet become a society-wide phenomenon? Why do collapse-aware individuals still feel

alone, isolated, and ostracized? After all, the information we need to recognize that modern civilization has entered its twilight phase is right in front of us, easily available to any literate individual with access to a public library or the Internet. So why is it that so many people who already know much of this information, and who are obviously smart enough to connect the dots, are still acting as if none of this were real? What is going on with them? Why is information not enough for these people? That's the mystery, and the reason for my interest in this mystery is that I was one of these people not too long ago.

Religion, Education, and Deep Adaptation in the Time of Collapse

Wed, Aug 16 • 08:00 am – 09:30 am

📅 Regular Session

📍 E265



My first full-fledged introduction to the ecological crisis occurred in graduate school, starting in my very first semester (fall 1999). After that, I remained engaged with ecological issues in one way or another throughout my graduate studies and my early academic career. I taught an undergraduate course on [“Religion and Ecology”](#) in the fall of 2005. In the following spring, I watched [An Inconvenient Truth](#) in a movie theater, and read large chunks of Derrick Jensen’s two-volume work [Endgame](#) during summer. In 2009, I closely followed the UN Climate summit in Copenhagen (aka COP15) on [DemocracyNow!](#) A few years later I published an [academic paper](#) on religion and the ecological crisis.

And yet, despite all of this exposure and engagement, I still failed to apprehend the bigger picture. I could see bits and pieces of what was going on,

but the significance and long-term implications of this information still eluded me.

With the benefit of hindsight, I believe I now understand one of the main reasons why it took me so long to recognize that modern civilization was inherently self-destructive and that its collapse was already underway. The delay was caused by the fact that my exposure to, and engagement with, the ecological crisis were primarily *academic*, in the sense of being abstract, disembodied, and purely theoretical. Everything I knew about the loss of biodiversity and the worsening state of the climate was confined to my thinking mind. The crisis wasn't fully "real" to me, since I had not yet experienced any of it as a felt reality in my body. I wasn't explicitly denying what I knew, and a part of me was aware that the situation was truly horrible—but I wasn't *feeling* it. The information was all in my head, where it had to compete with countless other matters that seemed no less important. Throughout those years, the ecological and climate catastrophe was just *one* topic among a dozen other topics in which I was interested.

It wasn't until the summer of 2012 that I began to experience climate change as something real and concrete. That summer, I started to seriously research the topic for the first time, and within a few months I had learned enough to realize that the chances of escaping this situation were very, very slim. By the end of that year, the seriousness of the situation had become an embodied awareness. It had become "real." I started to experience physical symptoms of this realization—a sinking feeling in the pit of the stomach, palpitations, shortness of breath, an invisible weight on my shoulders. I also began to empathize with climate change deniers, because I understood for the first time why someone would take such an obviously incorrect position. I could appreciate the appeal of believing that climate change was a lie or a hoax, because I was experiencing the distress of knowing that it wasn't. I desperately wanted it not to be real, but there was no honest way of denying it.

So the lesson here is that having access to the relevant information is a necessary but insufficient condition for becoming collapse-aware. Information that comes to us through discourse, whether oral or written, or even through images, is always a *representation* of reality at best. It is not reality as directly perceived, but as mediated through symbols—such as words and concepts. That’s why the knowledge that such information produces is initially abstract, not embodied; it is conceptual, not experiential. Such knowledge doesn’t feel quite real even when it is recognized as true. It has the potential to *become* real, but that requires additional work.



I suspect that academics and other professional intellectuals are particularly vulnerable to this phenomenon. These individuals spend so much of their time in the *mental world* of symbolic representations that, if they are not careful, they can easily lose touch with the concrete, material reality. When that happens, a theoretical framework can feel more real and more compelling than one’s own direct experience and common sense.

Two Updates

Earlier this summer, I brought my Zoom-based book club, BIBLIOPHILIA, back from hibernation. So far, we have read and discussed three books: *The Limits to Growth* (1972), *Four Futures* (2016), and *Small is Beautiful* (1973). In September, we plan to tackle two more books: *Sacred Instructions* (2018) and *Cathonomics* (2022). To join the book club, sign up [here](#).

The second update is about my book, *Teaching at Twilight*. I don't have a publication date yet, but I anticipate that it will come out towards the end of September. I got lucky a few weeks ago when [Katie Teague](#), who is a talented and accomplished film-maker, agreed to create a short trailer/teaser for the book. Click the image below to watch the video, and please share it far and wide.

