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CLIMATE COMPASSION

MAIZY LUDDEN

At first I thought it was the water: I assumed the searing cold enfolding my heart was just a physical side-effect of standing with my feet submerged in the meltwater streaming from Grinnell Glacier. But when I heard the park ranger repeat that this glacier in all its ghostly glory would be completely gone in 30 years, I realized the bitter cold gripping my chest was emotion: a fear so strong it paralyzed me, leaving me standing frozen with a heart just as cold as my pallid, icy toes.

I had spent all morning scrambling up the granite flanks of Mount Gould, a hulking peak that dominates the horizon of Montana's Glacier National Park. I was grateful to sink my weary feet into a glacial pool after winding my way through fields of wildflowers draped like so much jewelry across the alpine slopes. I knew, of course, that all this beauty was endangered by the ever-growing suite of impacts our human race has unleashed on the natural world. But in that moment, as the park ranger's words settled over me like a chilling snow, I truly understood the paralyzing power of fear. The threat of losing something you hold dear—a landscape, a loved one—can darken even the joy of mountain sunlight on your cheeks and stop you cold in your tracks. But fortunately for me, the paralysis did not last. Barely a minute had passed before the white fog of worry gave way to something else, melting beneath an onslaught of smoldering fury.

I knew it wasn't the water that boiled inside me this time—this was a concerted rage, an incredulous hatred directed towards a certain sector of the society I knew awaited my return from this pristine peak. At the foot of Mount Gould, I would have to face an insidious culture of denial that leads so many people to ignore the fact that climate change is threatening this glacier and the entire planet we call home. I was furious, and my anger did not abate as I descended

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through fields of flowers that now seemed so fragile in the face of society's refusal to acknowledge their peril. I struggled to grasp how anyone could deny what thousands of scientists agree is reality—that our atmosphere now contains over 406.7 ppm of carbon dioxide, that the temperature is projected to rise nearly 4 degrees Celsius by 2100, that gems like Grinnell Glacier will soon be nothing but memories.[1] Despite this warning cry, and what I perceived as an echoing sense of urgency amongst other members of my generation, a plague of denial is afflicting our nation and the world. It is infecting a range of individuals from government officials to ordinary citizens cruising around in cars that contribute to a problem they refuse to acknowledge as reality.[2] Yet the science is clear on climate change, and its impacts will be devastating for more than just remote and fragile habitats like those I visited in Glacier National Park.

Humanity depends on the integrity of our planet and its ecosystems for everything from food and fuel to the clean air we breathe. Science has shown that this is the truth, and that it is our species that is undermining these services on which we rely. We are faced with an enormous problem of our own creation, and unless we act now to transform the way we treat our planet, we will destroy the very systems that support our existence on this Earth. Solving this dilemma will require action at all levels and in all sectors of society, both public and private, personal and collective. But there can be no such unified action without unity in our understanding that the problem exists.

In the past, obstacles to collective problem solving have revolved around ignorance. Cholera ravaged the streets of London despite the best efforts of doctors and politicians simply because science had not yet given a name to the adversary the city was trying to fight. The development of germ theory allowed the people of London to put an end to cholera once they realized the source of their illness was a microorganism lurking in their water supply. With this knowledge, the city enacted a series of public works that reorganized waste and water distribution, separating drinking water from the human waste that was the ultimate source of the deadly cholera illness.[3] Cases like this demonstrate how dangerous ignorance can be; overcoming this lack of understanding is the first step to solving many of our most pressing issues. Yet in the case of climate change, there is no problem of ignorance. Observatories around the world have captured changes in temperature, carbon dioxide levels, and many other variables, and the international scientific community overwhelmingly agrees that "Human interference with the climate system is occurring, and climate change poses risks for human and natural systems."[4] If these effects are measurable, if scientists from every corner of the planet have come to a consensus about our impacts on the environment, then why are we still unable to turn this knowledge into a solution?

For years I pursued an answer to this question, motivated by the fire of rage that had consumed me on the slopes of Grinnell Glacier. My anger only worsened as I continued to encounter deniers in my community, at school, even the grocery store. But it's no wonder they seemed to be everywhere: a quarter of Americans think that there is no evidence in support of climate change, and another quarter believe that if the phenom-

Layout by Camila Wanderley Mendonça. Artwork by Jill Pelto

enon exists, it has purely natural causes.[5] Despite this depressing trend, I found solidarity in the contrasting attitude of my peers. College students are much more likely than older generations to believe not only that climate change is real and caused by humans, but also that it is a serious problem.[5] We gather in masses at climate marches, organize ourselves in student groups and community forums, and vent our frustration with the inability of our civilization to make addressing climate change the priority we know it should be.

These and the many other actions of young people around the world comforted me in my efforts to fight denial, offering visible proof that I was not alone in my feelings of frustration. I was glad to see that I was not the only one to hold a smoldering anger towards those who are so stubbornly complacent about the destruction of the planet on which we depend.[6] Indeed, many of the students and young activists I spoke with at marches, rallies, and other gatherings seemed to agree with my initial belief that climate denial must be motivated purely by greed. What oil tycoon, senator or congressman wants to acknowledge that the industry fueling their wealth (or funding their election campaign) has wrought so much destruction? A profit motivation would be more than enough for these individuals to deny the truth, if it would mean preserving their money-making machines or their political careers. I went about my life, thinking always of the dwindling lifespan of Grinnell Glacier, trying to figure out how we could force these people to change their selfish ways. I imagined myself to be fighting a battle, casting climate deniers as villains who deserved to be brought down. But war is a tiresome pursuit, and I soon became disillusioned with this endless fight. No matter what I said, what evidence I presented to the opposition, there seemed to be no hope of changing their minds.

Clearly more knowledge is not the cure to the proliferation of denial in our society. Using facts as ammunition is not going to solve our problem, for its roots run deeper than science alone can unearth. Yet, blinded by our anger, we are unable to see this fundamental truth. We find it much easier to justify our fight against the deniers when we can characterize them as corrupt, selfish, or evil. So we continue our steadfast refusal to engage in meaningful discussion with our opponents, contributing nearly as much to our current gridlock as the people we say we're trying to defeat. It is time for us to open our eyes and rethink our strategy, for it is only producing more distrust in the population we hope to change. What we need now is not hatred, but understanding. It's time we acknowledged our "enemies" for what they truly are: human beings with flaws and imperfections, just like us.

No human is a perfect model of rationality and efficiency: we are more than just preprogrammed bundles of neurons that process information and spit out logical behaviors. Even when we have access to all the knowledge we need to make rational decisions, we don't always do so. Amongst the many explanations for this phenomenon is the "confirmation bias," in which people accept without hesitation knowledge that confirms their existing beliefs while rejecting even the soundest of evidence that challenges their ideological core.[7] The confirmation bias certainly helps explain the ability of climate deniers to ignore even the most rigorously proven climate science: the desire to create a coherent story

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of the world and stick with it is incredibly strong. However, there are other, even stronger players that can lead us astray from rationality—the most powerful of which is fear.

Fear is deeply engrained in our psyches, its influence strengthened by the constant evolutionary battle between predator and prey. As our response to a perceived threat, fear drives us to avoid or remove ourselves from situations that could cause us harm.[8] Without fear, we would not have made it past our infancy in the early years of human evolution: lacking the ability to identify and respond to threats, we would have been more likely to saunter right up to a saber-toothed tiger than run away or prepare ourselves to fight.

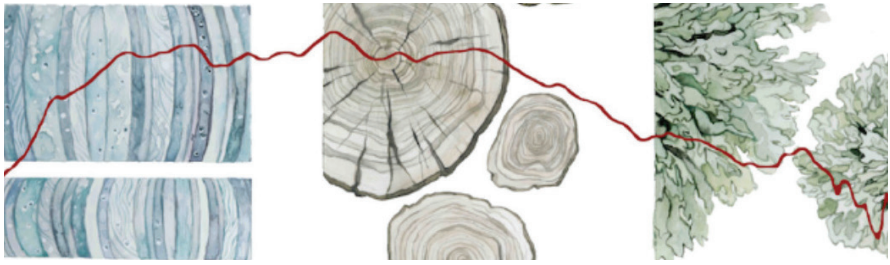
Thus, the ability of humans to feel fear has been central to our success as a species, and it's clear that we need to be very afraid of climate change if we want to survive its impacts. The physical threat climate change poses to our wellbeing is obvious: it is visible in the devastation of storms like hurricane Katrina and the droughts that breathe hot destruction across sub-Saharan Africa. Stories of these disasters race like an apocalyptic feature-film across our TV screens, generating headlines thick with death tolls and filling our ears with the cries of people whose hometowns are threatened by rising seas. And while these impacts may at first seem far away, they are increasingly reaching us here-as well. Just think of Superstorm Sandy—how many people lost their homes, their families, their lives. That climate change so clearly can threaten these things that we love only adds to its power to freeze us in fear.

What's worse, these visible losses aren't the only threats we face. For many, the actions we can take to prevent this destruction are frightening as well. Much of the legislation that can limit carbon emissions carries with it the stigma of "environment over economy," implying that any policy meant to mitigate climate change must come at the price of economic growth. For industry CEOs this registers as declining profit margins, and for those on the opposite end of the spectrum this may conjure images of rising electricity prices or layoffs in the coal mines or factories they depend on for work.

Finally, it doesn't help that the focus on these global-scale impacts can make fighting climate change on an individual level seem hopeless. It is terrifying enough to confront the enormity of the losses climate change will cause, but even more so to think that there is nothing we can do to protect ourselves or the things we care about from these devastating effects. Surely, we tell ourselves that taking a shorter shower won't change the course of this disaster. So what's the point in trying?[9] It seems our fear of being powerless in the face of climate change is just another factor enabling us to ignore the reality of its existence:

we simply convince ourselves there's no problem rather than deal with the fact that this problem might be too big to solve alone.

Thus is born the dilemma of the deniers: it's easier to deny that climate change exists, than to face the scary truth. There is some comfort to be found in this newfound understanding. It is a relief to realize that the many people who refuse to acknowledge climate change are motivated by more than ruthless greed. But this does not solve our dilemma, for if fear is one of our most basic emotions, it is also the most difficult to overcome. If we are to have any hope of changing our civilization's march towards climate crisis, we will need unified action to confront this fear, and soon. But it seems the ranks of our governments, industries, and neighborhoods are still populated with those who've given in to the immobilizing grip of their fear.



As the years left in Grinnell Glacier's lifespan continue to tick away, I have told myself again and again that there must be another way for deniers to cope with their fright. I have tried to use my own experiences to find this new way forward, examining the things that make me want to fight climate change rather than give in to my fear. At first what saved me from paralysis was the fire of passion, a rage that filled me with hatred for those who casually dismissed the destruction of an environment I hold so dear. But like the fossil fuels we currently depend on, the energy of anger is not sustainable: it burns out quickly, leaving only ashes and an acrid tang of disappointment. What motivates me now is a much steadier fuel, but it is no less powerful, no less hot than the brightest ember of fury. Now it is the love I have for our beautiful planet and all its inhabitants that keeps my heart from freezing over with fear, giving me the motivation to help bring about the transformation our society desperately needs. As I have built an understanding of these forces in myself, I have seen them mirrored in those who are working at my side. And this unity suggests a solution to the dilemma we're determined to solve.

Unity—a sense of connection and group membership—is a key factor in any effort to overcome challenges big and small. Part of the reason for our success as human beings is our ability to work together, which is evident in our capacity for social organization and collective problem solving.[10] While not entirely unique among the many members of the animal kingdom, this ability has certainly given us a leg up in the evolutionary game we all play. It is much easier to bring down a mammoth with 20 spears at your side than it

is to do so alone.

This simple fact played a crucial role in our development as a species, because groups that engaged in cooperation were able to obtain resources and protect their members more efficiently than lone individuals or groups that lacked cooperative behavior.[11] This resulted in the more cooperative groups out-competing their less collaborative rivals, reinforcing both social and biological motivations for cooperation and group formation through the processes of natural selection.[11] The new field of "complexity research" suggests this process has produced an intrinsic predisposition to cooperation in human beings, which manifests in a set of behaviors termed "strong reciprocity."[10] Despite what appear to be obvious personal costs, we consistently act in altruistic ways and even punish those who do not cooperate or comply with the group's collective perception of right and wrong. The entrenchment of social norms surrounding cooperation reinforces the engrained predisposition to conform to group attitudes and opinions, as those who fail to do so are ostracized and even excluded from groups.[10]

It is this last factor that may be most important in understanding how we can help transform our society's efforts to address climate change and overcome the division between deniers and those who accept the necessity of action. Just as evolution has shaped our reaction to fear, this process has left a mark on our values and identities as well. Humans have evolved to depend on group cooperation for survival, whether in prehistoric hunting missions or current systems of labor division between vital production processes.[11] Thus, being left out of a group can be equated with a threat, a challenge to our ability to meet basic needs. If fear is a response to threat, and if failing to conform to group social norms results in the threat of expulsion and thus the inability to meet basic needs, we have every right to be afraid of acting in ways that challenge group norms. This fear is enough to skew our perception of the truth, and prevent the action that our crisis truly demands.

The necessity of action is apparent in our efforts to address the challenge of climate change, for every second of inaction contributes to a more dangerous, uncertain future. Yet we are not pursuing effective group action—not at a global scale, at least—because of the very fear that evolved to motivate our participation in groups to begin with. This is because our society has become divided into smaller groups along ideological lines, groups with rigid social norms that are upheld to the strictest standards. Nowhere is this more evident than in the divide between conservatives and liberals, a fissure that constitutes one of the most polarized and deeply entrenched political divisions our society has ever seen.[12] Membership in one of these camps, while certainly not necessary for survival, nonetheless carries with it the same feelings of group belonging and the same fear of being ostracized. Thus, defying the norms of your ideological cohort is a no-go, an action that inspires fear in the parts of our brains that have evolved to see group membership as so vital to survival.

How does this concept of group membership apply to the problem of inaction we currently face? When we look at the profile of deniers in the US and in other countries where their influence is strong, it becomes clear that these individuals tend to associate

with conservative political groups.[5] Decades of polls show that such groups tend to value freedom and individual responsibility, placing a strong emphasis on economic growth, free markets, and limited government intervention in economic affairs.[15] Furthermore, conservatives often tie their identities to power, prestige and social status, valuing dominance and refusing to back down from beliefs even when such stubbornness results in little progress being made.[13]

Clearly many of these values are challenged by either climate change itself, or the responses that are needed to allow our society to deal with this problem. Regulations to limit pollution, curtail unequitable economic growth, and ultimately transition away from the highly-profitable fossil fuel industry are seen as threats to personal liberty and the free market as well as to the economic growth that forms the "core priority" of conservative political agendas.[14] Even more frightening is the fact that accepting the reality of climate change can be seen as a form of defeat, an admission of our inability as human beings to dominate and control our planet.

Thus, it is easy to see why conservatives are nearly 8 times more likely than other adults to believe that climate change is not happening.[15] The strong insistence on conforming to social norms, and equally strong punishments for those who fail to do so, make it especially scary for conservatives to go against the grain and accept the science of climate change. Conservatives are essentially trapped in a state of inaction by the fear of ostracization, the same fear of losing group membership that has been driven into the heart of the human psyche by millennia of evolution. Is it possible to challenge this fear, to bypass one of our most powerful emotions and work together in overcoming the rest of our worries about what climate change may take from us? Or is it futile to believe we can convince deniers to take the scary step of accepting climate science, when doing so means acknowledging the possibility of loss, and even expulsion from a group that is so essential to their identity?

I believe it is not futile at all to consider this possibility. In fact, it is crucial that we do so, for failing to overcome our political and ideological polarization can only perpetuate our state of paralysis just when we need action the most. Our answer may actually lie within the same evolutionary predisposition that causes so many people to turn to denial, stemming from the same drive to be a part of a group and claim membership in a larger whole. We must create an overarching community and culture of acceptance: acceptance of climate change, and of the need to work together to protect the things we value against its devastating effects. We need to claim our membership in a group that is larger, and more important psychologically, than the political or cultural subdivisions that presently dominate our concepts of self. This global coalition should be our priority: we can no longer let ourselves be afraid to lose membership in ideological clans at the expense of being part of a planetary push for change.

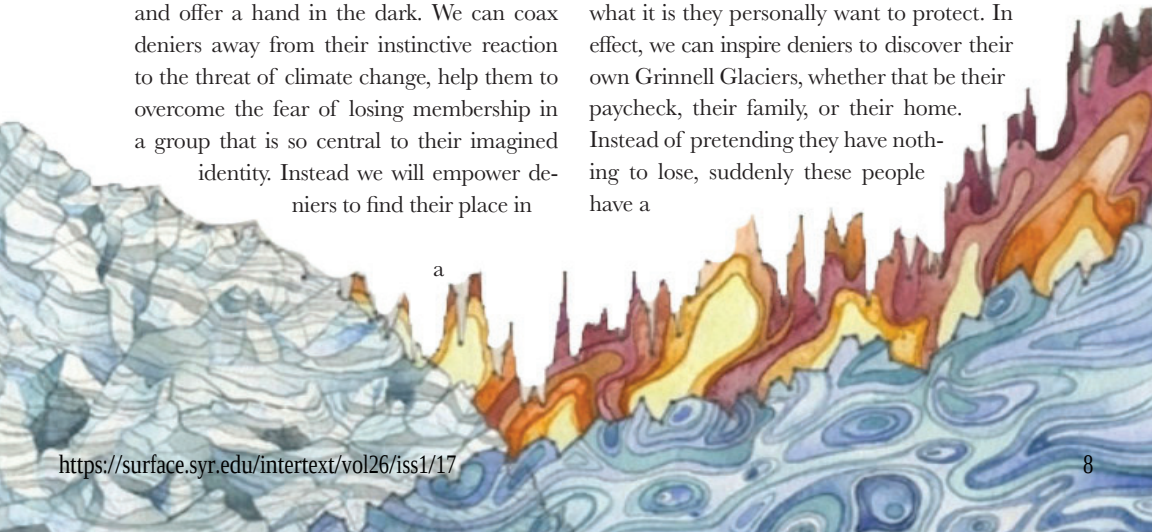
How can we achieve this momentous feat? How can we enable people to put aside their fear of disobeying the social norms of denial, in favor of joining a global community that accepts our precarious reality? Ultimately I believe what we need is a little "Climate Compassion." The realization that we're all human, we're all afraid to accept that climate

change threatens the things we hold dear. We must leverage this shared emotion to connect with those whose fear has lead them down the wrong path. When we speak with those who have succumbed to the lure of denial, we must allow ourselves to be vulnerable and admit that we, too, are scared for the future. Acknowledging our worries is scary in and of itself, especially for those who value individual strength and power. But admitting our fear also means acknowledging our values, the reason for our fright, and finding strength in the fact that we care. We all care for different things, it's true—but whether it's our love for people, profits, or national parks, the power of our love is the same.

This is the common ground that links all of humanity: our ability to fear, and to love. From this universal starting point we can offer deniers solidarity, and build a global coalition for change. We must discuss our shared concerns and values rather than challenge beliefs. For we know now, the beliefs of deniers are not rooted in ignorance or greed; they are the result of a fear that motivates us all. Instead of attacking these beliefs and those who hold them, we can approach with compassion and offer a hand in the dark. We can coax deniers away from their instinctive reaction to the threat of climate change, help them to overcome the fear of losing membership in a group that is so central to their imagined identity. Instead we will empower deniers to find their place in a new group, the common cohort to which all humanity belongs.

Ultimately what defines this team is the shared capacity of all its members to fear, but also to love. We are all scared to face the reality that climate change may take away the things we value, but the fact that we value things at all is what will empower us to overcome this crippling fright. We must inspire people to let go of their desperate denial, discover both what they fear and what they value and want to protect. Only then can we enable people of all ideologies and beliefs to feel a part of the larger group in which all humans have a place.

To do this, we must begin to tell our stories, our personal accounts of love and fear of loss. While it may already be too late for me to save Grinnell Glacier, there is hope for the rest of the planet if I share its story with the world. I can talk to people about my fear of losing Grinnell Glacier, and I can describe the passion for protecting the environment that has kept this fear at bay. By communicating meaningful stories and values across the gap that seems to divide our society in two, I and others like me can help deniers find what it is they personally want to protect. In effect, we can inspire deniers to discover their own Grinnell Glaciers, whether that be their paycheck, their family, or their home. Instead of pretending they have nothing to lose, suddenly these people have a



reason to care, to acknowledge that climate change is real and needs to be addressed. There is no changing the fact that it's frightening, but if we are there to say that we're scared too, then admitting to fear is not a sentence for social exclusion. Instead, it is the ticket to joining a larger, stronger human team.

This larger team is exactly what our world needs to face our climate crisis, though we may convince ourselves our generation has the strength to act alone. While there is power to be found in the marches and rallies we seem to be so fond of attending, these events won't cure the problem we're trying to solve. In fact, they may amount to giant "echo chambers," amplifying the cries of our allies but leaving deniers just as deaf to the truth.[16] What we need is to look beyond the group we have created for ourselves—beyond the confines of our generation and its activist goals. We need a larger drive for action than our generation alone can provide if we want to salvage our climate, and our future on this earth. We may be determined to create the change we need, but we can't keep this passion to ourselves: we must widen our circle to draw in those who have shut their eyes to the scary truth. Our whole society must change its point of view on climate change, and we can't afford to wait for denial to "die off" with older folks.

This means engaging with our mothers, our fathers, our uncles and our aunts, helping them overcome their fear by sharing the things that drive us to overcome our own. But it also means reaching out to deniers beyond our family circles, engaging with the local politicians, teachers and other leaders our society respects. It may seem difficult to approach such individuals, especially when family bonds aren't present to bridge the initial gap. In fact, it can be downright scary to talk with people whose beliefs are so different from the ones our generation holds. But if we're going to challenge deniers to look past their fear and accept the truth, we have to be willing to fight a fear of our own. The truth is we're still locked in division, too scared to talk with the "other side." But we must overcome this fear, exchange perspectives and advice, for climate change demands a solution no one perspective can inform.

To find this more holistic answer, we must do more than march in the street. We must carry our marches onward into classrooms, churches, and other places where our communities meet. These are forums for discussion we can use to foster change, if we talk and share ideas with the people we once fought. We may have different visions of the future we hope to create, but we're all striving to reach a better world, where our Grinnell Glaciers await. With the warmth of this shared conviction we must melt our denial away—for if we want to defend those glaciers, we have a climate of compassion to create.

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