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### How to Face the Mess We're in without Losing our Minds

The issue of climate change is permeated with emotion, which is driven by global environmental impacts and its consequences for human and environmental life. Fear, hope, anger, and guilt are pivotal emotions for climate activists that drive these individuals' motivations and mobilizing strategies in fighting the climate crisis. While some of these are definitely negative, these emotions are actually equally as important as hope in driving climate action. The paralyzing nature of fear is mediated by hope: hope drives action, while collective and personal action generates hope and manages fear. Instead of inhibiting action, fear can motivate action. Hope is essential as it drives action that will inherently generate more optimism in the face of the climate crisis. In the larger picture of social and political organizing, hope spurs action, which is equally as important in situations where we believe our chances of success are limited. Ultimately, the most important thing in any type of activism is to be joyful in the fact that we get to do this essential work in the first place. On a personal level, I definitely struggle with climate anxiety, but I have begun to understand that, among many other things, the climate crisis is a leadership crisis, which has launched me into political organizing for the purpose of working to elect candidates who prioritize powerful climate action.

My perspective surrounding climate change originates from my childhood. I was lucky enough to grow up with my father, who is a climate scientist for Climate Interactive, a major climate change think tank. As a child, my dad definitely shielded my younger brother and me from the climate worst-case scenarios, but he also taught us that personal action does

matter in climate change mitigation. This perspective largely came from growing up in a house with solar panels on our roof, a huge garden and compost pile, and rainwater barrels used for our gardens. My dad also taught us the importance of climate adaptation, which is a community's ability to cope with and respond to the consequences of climate change. This was framed with the mindset that the longer major political figures and decision-makers wait to take ambitious climate action, the more dramatic the impacts of climate change will be and the more difficult cleaning up our climate crisis mess will be. Maybe this perspective is naive, but this anchored me as a child when I was overwhelmed with the sheer scale and severity of this crisis. My dad also helped develop EN-ROADS, a climate simulation model that allows individuals to play out scenarios and see what actually works when addressing climate change, and learn how to keep global warming below the threshold requirement of 2 degrees celsius. The most powerful aspect of this model is that its accessibility and easy usability allows people to develop a much deeper understanding of the changes that actually need to occur in order to address this crisis. By working with this model, I have seen that mitigating climate change is definitely within human reach, if we emphasize the importance of monumental baby steps towards improving the sustainability of our energy supply, transportation, and land/industry emissions. To save life as we know it, we need to dig deep, connect with each other and the natural world around us, and balance our standard daily sustainable practices with applying major pressure on the major forces that are preventing progress.

Taking personal action to mitigate our own impact on the climate is essential, but we also need to recognize that real, long-lasting progress also comes from voting for progressive candidates who prioritize the protection of the natural environment. Unfortunately, I was largely passive in political issues until the results of the 2016 presidential election came flowing in.

After dealing with a significant amount of heartbreak and fear for the most vulnerable members of my community, I vowed to do everything in my power to prevent a similar outcome in the 2020 general election. This is definitely embarrassing, and is a reflection of the inherent amount of white, cisgender, female privilege I have. By combining this with the belief that a much better world is possible, I launched myself into the campaign world as a campaign intern with the North Carolina Coordinated Campaign. In this campaign, we worked to elect current President Joe Biden, Governor Roy Cooper, Cynthia Wallace (the democratic candidate for NC Congressional District 9 Representative), and the other North Carolina democrats up and down the ballot. My primary responsibility was phone banking, where I called NC voters and attempted to get them to volunteer with us. I was able to hear these individuals' hopes of a better future for their children and grandchildren, fear of continued lack of climate action, and dreams of a much better future. My team of organizers did not win every race we worked so hard on, but being a small part of getting Biden elected was monumental, but I also recognize that the work is far from over. Most importantly, I discovered that grassroots organizing allows me to be able to be joyful that I have the privilege and duty of doing this work, rather than feeling pessimistic and powerless in the face of this climate and political crisis.

Being able to work incredibly hard for a better world is empowering and instilled a certain degree of faith and confidence in myself. I was able to find a way to combine my deep-rooted existential dread related to the climate crisis while firmly believing that a better world is possible and worth fighting for. The major thing that separates community organizing from other approaches to social change is its focus on creating major power shifts, which is rooted in the large-scale and continued involvement of people on a fundamental level, and the strategic aspects of community organizing. The most important part of being a grassroots organizer is simply talking to people and trying to get them engaged in these political

movements. By getting these individuals engaged, this campaign was able to build a strong coalition of individuals dedicated to the fight to build people power. In a study conducted by political scientists Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, the importance of people engaging in activism was further emphasized by revealing that successful campaigns require only 3.5 percent of a population getting active, which includes people voting on climate, donating money, taking to the streets, and talking to their neighbors. That is not a large portion of a community, which shows just how important political and environmental organizers who are good at getting people engaged truly are. We are assigned the immense task of finding these needles in a haystack. This is the most difficult part of grassroots organizing, but the individuals on my organizing team did find an essential role in the success of this campaign. Most importantly, the key to successful grassroots organizing is being joyful that millions of other people and I get to engage in this essential work that has the potential to create essential political and social paradigm shifts needed to combat the climate crisis.

While I firmly believe that climate change is a crisis of leadership, I absolutely recognize the failings and corruption that inherently comes with major political figures. At a time where courage and unapologetic motivation and drive is needed most, some politicians put their heads in the sand and completely ignore these problems. I am immensely proud of the absolutely essential work that my organizing team did, but I recently have been grappling with the uncomfortable yet accurate fact that political figures are simply not doing enough to mitigate the climate crisis. There is so much gridlock in the American political system that implementing the ambitious climate legislation needed is much more difficult than it should be. I think it reaches to the very core of all the political failings the American people see on a daily basis. Getting Biden successfully elected does not magically alleviate these problems, but this does open room for compromise between both political parties. While not ideal, there is an

understated importance of working to elect political candidates who are willing to compromise with each other. Furthermore, electing candidates who can be pushed to be much more progressive and are willing to be held accountable by their community members is essential for creating these necessary changes. While my fellow organizers and I are definitely aware of the shortcomings of the United States government as a whole, the firm belief that a world with climate-savvy, progressive political figures who prioritize their communities above their own personal self-interests drove us to work much harder to create the possibility of a much better future. My fellow organizers and I all knew how much was at stake--the health of our planet, all communities, and future generations--based on the results of this election.

By working in electoral organizing, I have learned there is a significant amount of passive support, and we need to translate this into active action that will directly challenge the current status quo of ineffective political movements. I learned how to channel this energy after the 2020 general election, which has played an absolutely remarkable role in my trajectory as a grassroots organizer. This launched me into being an organizing intern on the 2021 Senate Runoff race team in Georgia to elect Jon Ossoff, which was a monumental victory and gave democrats majority control of the Senate. This solidified that I want to continue grassroots organizing post-graduation. Nothing has empowered me and given me deeper connections than fighting tooth and nail with a powerful group of individuals dedicated to creating changes in their communities. While there is definitely a firm status quo in place that prevents the acceleration of major climate change, there are significant opportunities now that Democrats have majority control of Congress and the White House. The possibilities for what we can achieve together are only limited by our imagination and our will to build a movement so big and powerful that is impossible to ignore. By fighting tooth and nail to make the climate crisis a top priority in American politics, there is an opportunity to dramatically change this toxic status

quo. Varshini Prakash, one of the founders of the Sunrise Movement, writes “I quickly fell in love with organizing because it’s about changing politics, not just lightbulbs, and challenging the status quo--and because building a social movement means practicing democracy beyond the realm of elections and political parties, in ways that are vibrant and inclusive (...) we needed a movement in America that could bring together millions of young people to build power and make climate action, rooted in racial and economic justice, a priority in our nation” (188). The climate movement goes beyond just political organizing, and requires building a much bigger social movement that is rooted in racial, social, and economic justice. There is a growing “blue wave” that will have tremendous impacts on climate policy moving forward, and every single individual has the opportunity to shatter the political status quo and replace it with powerful climate action.

Being joyful in the work that climate activists and grassroots organizers have the privilege and responsibility of practicing is essential for dealing with the much harder emotions of climate existential dread, anger, and guilt. Before I wrote this paper, I believed that hope and fear related to the climate crisis cannot coexist, but I have realized that these two powerful emotions go hand-in-hand and build on each other to construct a powerful climate movement. I previously thought in these black-and-white terms simply because I did not want to confront my own climate existential dread. However, I have realized that climate activism cannot exist without these emotions. Hope gives individuals the belief that a much better world is possible, and that addressing climate change is within human reach. Anger provides individuals with the inextinguishable fire that drives us to hold incompetent politicians and corporations who are not being accountable for their impact on climate change to much higher standards. Climate fear provides us with the image of the worst-case scenario of environmental and societal destruction that all climate activists and movements are aware of, which drives us to fight tooth and nail to prevent this future. I do not believe that this terrifying future is

inevitable, given that I firmly believe in the importance of grounded hope and that addressing climate change is within human reach. Ultimately, grassroots organizing around the climate crisis combines all of these feelings, which draws upon the very foundation of what we value as humans and connects us to each other, such as our health, human relationships, and the well-being of our communities.

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