

In a Climatic Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Global Healing as Sacred Choice?

By TIMOTHY LEDUC

We don't know what we need, and so long as we stay in the hungry ghost mode, we'll never know. We haunt our lives without being fully present.

—Gabor Maté

Images of families, friends, and strangers expressing so much grief and consoling each other for their common losses fill our screens these days. I could be referring to floods in Bangladesh, a hurricane like Sandy hitting America's eastern seaboard, or another record-setting extreme event that is now more norm than aberration. The shocked faces that are fresh in my mind as I write these words are those from Fort McMurray, Alberta, which in May of 2016 experienced a devastating forest fire that consumed its homes, neighborhoods, and sense of safety. Such anguish is the real image of today's climate changes as they intensify in response to our unsustainable use of energy, as is supported by evidence that warming trends over the past decades have extended and intensified the forest fire season. Despite an increasing awareness of this changing reality, within a couple days of Fort McMurray's evacuation the media reports were focussed on the immanent re-opening of camps for the close-by oil sands as central to getting the community back on its feet.

Something about the way we are responding

to the turbulence of our time resonates for me with Gabor Maté's description of the hungry ghost realm of people caught in addiction.¹ At the core of one who is addicted is a painful emptiness that cannot be filled by all those things we desire so dearly and try to maintain a firm grasp on. The addiction to a substance and way of living eventually brings the individual into a darkening cycle that intensifies the grasping and undermines their lives as they know them, as well as the lives of those who love them. Drawing upon a Buddhist cosmology, Maté describes the bound inhabitants of this haunting realm "as creatures with scrawny necks, small mouths, emaciated limbs and large, bloated, empty bellies." By contemplating this hungry ghost diagnosis, we can get a different view on the continuing difficulties in our climate change responses as human and ecological communities suffer from intensifying impacts.



Caption: Ft McMurray Wildfire near Highway 63

The December 2015 Paris Climate Conference offers a contrasting global political view on the climatic realm of our energetic additions. Amid a barrage of optimistic headlines like “Unprecedented Recognition of the Risks of Climate Change” (*The Economist*), “Nations Approve Landmark Climate Accord” (*New York Times*), and the *Conference’s* self-acclaimed “Major Leap for Mankind,” some critics expressed more restraint. With unprecedented floods hitting India and Britain as the negotiations proceeded, Bill McKibben made the point that these places are where the real climate news was arising.² What he saw emerge in Paris was “voluntary pledges” to reduce carbon emissions that would have been groundbreaking in the 1990s. The best-case scenario for this unenforceable climate accord is one where, he writes, the planet warms by “3.5 degrees Celsius, above preindustrial levels. And that is way, way too much.” Expressing a similar critique was Naomi Klein who, in her book *This Changes Everything*, describes climate change as “a civilizational wake-up call” that is speaking powerfully “in the language of fires, floods, droughts, and extinctions.”³ Using addiction imagery, she depicts the agreement as saying something like this: “I acknowledge that I will die of a heart attack if I don’t radically lower my blood pressure. I acknowledge that in order to do that I need to cut out alcohol, fatty foods and exercise every day. I therefore will exercise once a week, eat four hamburgers instead of five and only binge drink twice a week and you have to call me a hero because I’ve never done this before.”⁴

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Perhaps the strongest critics of Paris and international climate negotiations generally have been Indigenous activists representing various global communities on the front lines of today’s changes. The Indigenous Environmental Network has “long spoken about the failures of the UN process and the environmental movement as a whole” for their catering to corporate interests.⁵ This is something many saw playing out again in Paris, including McKibben, who said that the agreement was calibrated just “enough to keep both environmentalists and the fossil fuel industry from complaining too much.” But it was far from having the energy to “push the renewables revolution

into high gear.” The added concern for Indigenous peoples was that the American and European delegations “caused reference to the ‘rights of Indigenous peoples’ to be cut from the binding portion of the Paris Agreement, relegating the only mention of Indigenous rights to the purely aspirational preamble.” This colonial dynamic is like a ghostly reminder of the 1783 Paris peace treaty that came to define the borders of what became the United States and Canada without mentioning the land’s Indigenous peoples. Indigenous voices clarify that a sustainable response to modern society’s energetic addiction, not climate change, must be mindful of its cultural and historic roots in colonial processes.

But what I am primarily concerned with is facilitating a dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous understandings of what is needed to heal modern ways of being in the world. Offering an Anishinaabe view, Herb Nabigon says that when we are caught in an addictive pattern there comes a time when it is clear two paths are available. The first “is a dark and anxious way” where people predominantly “see the Earth only as a resource to be exploited.”⁶ This is the realm of hungry ghosts that Maté explains is more common “in cultures that subjugate communal goals, time-honoured tradition and individual creativity to mass production and the accumulation of wealth ...when we place a supreme value on selfish attainments.”⁷ When this way predominates then, Nabigon learned, the “nurturing Mother will become the dark Mother,” an understanding resonant with our intensifying turbulence. But another path is also open to us that, he explains, holds “the land in trust” and renews us to a role of “service [that] is directed towards Mother Earth, Sky Nation, or Spirit World.” Before considering what such a healing choice entails and what it might mean in the context of our global issues, let’s first consider the multi-scalar addictive patterns that haunt our climatic relations.

A GHOSTLY GLOBAL ADDICTION

Watching clips of the Paris climate conference from a screen across the ocean, I was struck by the images of sleek signage, global leaders in power suits, climate activists, and fly-ins of concerned pop-culture stars. The gathering looked so buffered from the stark experiences of communities that are being burnt, flooded, and blown to new realities. While LEED buildings, carbon offsetting of travel, renewable energy, and other efficiencies marked the event,

a lot of energetic behavior was still on display. I am reminded of the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference that required an estimated 1,200 extra limousines to be shipped in from neighboring nations for dignitaries, as well as the 140 private jets and massive public air travel that stretched the airport to capacity.⁸ The discord between “what is done” and “what needs to be done” leads me to muse that a deeper issue may be fuelling these meetings. Returning to the diagnosis of Maté, addictive behaviors are “meant to calm anxiety—an unease about life itself, or about a sense of insufficient self . . . described as ‘brain lock’—the stuck neurological gears that cause thought to be acted out before the action can be stopped.”⁹ Technologically buffered within these displays of modern power and ingenuity, there is a confident sense of calm that almost seems to maintain a stuck neurological gear as the world becomes more turbulent.

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In my book *A Canadian Climate of Mind*, I connect our climatic situation to an addictive energetic bind using Gregory Bateson’s seminal analysis of an ecology of mind.¹⁰ In attempting to understand the discrepancy between modern ways of living and the emerging sense of worldly interconnectivity, Bateson found the realm of addictions to offer some helpful insights. At the core of the addiction is a feedback loop that keeps us from attentively minding maladaptive patterns of relating, what Maté describes as “brain lock” and Bateson characterizes as “double binds.” Someone caught in an addiction is guided by unconscious beliefs, with the most prominent being the sense that they are in control of their addiction and can resist the substance. This belief is continually called into question by their predisposition to take risks that challenge their capacities to control the situation. As the addictive behavior escalates, they become more socially isolated from the concerns of family and friends, which further enables the addiction. What makes the ghostly realm of addictions troubling is that there seems to be no *rational* way out of double binds in as much as a response is required, and yet the response is enmeshed in historic ways of relating that brought about the issue.

A similar dynamic can be seen playing out in climate change. For example, an urban center is increas-

ingly impacted by summer heat due to a combination of warming trends and the urban heat island effect, and these impacts encourage more fossil fuel use to power air-conditioning that releases more greenhouse gases. On a global scale, the Paris meetings bring together global leaders of political, cultural, and activist interests to address greenhouse gas emissions through acts that momentarily intensify our energetic participation in the climatic issue. Then there is the Fort McMurray fire. Since the 1970s the forest fire season has lengthened in many regions around the world, and in Canada this is connected to a doubling of the areas being burned over the past four decades. While there are other issues related to forest management, the regional warming and resulting fires is what models of global climate changes are projecting.¹¹ This is something the IPCC has further connected to human greenhouse gas emissions. And yet within a couple of days the response to the loss was the need to get the oil sands camps running again. Seemingly highlighting our energetic bind, the winds changed a few days later and blew the fire toward the camps consuming one and requiring “heroic” defenses of others. Meanwhile, a few weeks later a deluge of rain fell across the ocean in Western Europe and swelled the banks of the Seine River to flood parts of Paris.

For Bateson, the ghostly nature of the double bind highlighted an isolation and pride-in-risk that also has certain resonances with my Canadian nation’s response to economic and climate uncertainty. There has been a historic colonial tendency for resources to be central to the nation’s economy, with the oil sands being the latest. While Canada’s new Liberal government was a strong advocate for the Paris climate accord, it has nonetheless remained committed to a more regulated development of oil sands extraction and shipment to markets through pipelines. We could echo McKibben’s words that this national response is calibrated to restrain environmentalists and industry. In light of climate change there are many issues with extracting tar-like bitumen, not the least of which is that for every unit of energy required to extract and process returns less energy than conventional oil. As with the escalating double bind, these economically rational acts are less efficient, produce more greenhouse gas emissions, and thus further the climate’s destabilization. In a sense, bitumen extraction, fracking, offshore development, and even carbon storage are analogous (on national and global scales) to those dark corners where the modern addict tries to secretly

maintain energetic ways that are hitting climatic bottom.

While there are various local, national, global, and cosmological dimensions of our bind that I consider in *A Canadian Climate of Mind*, I want to highlight here

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one more dynamic before moving onto the insights of a healing response.

The push for greater technological efficiencies in energy

use is a vital part of any climate response because of its broad everyday connections to people’s lives, and yet there are difficulties related to how people engage such solutions. These responses are often limited by a rebound effect where energy use continues to rise despite efficiency gains. For example, household energy use has increased by more than 30 percent since 1978 largely because the efficiency gains have been paralleled with more than a doubling of average house size over the past half century, and these houses have more appliances and fewer people. Similarly, automotive fuel efficiencies has occurred in a context of us driving further, with some research indicating we drive on average four times the distance than in the 1950s. The point is that efficiencies and technological responses promote a feeling of progress that is of value, but are simultaneously rooted in core values of modern ways that can conceal our binds.

What we are addicted to is not primarily fossil fuels, but rather the speedy, opulent, limitless, and virtual ways of being that the modern world wants to hang onto as central to any climatic response—this is what was on display in Paris. Such an approach makes human power seem infallible, while simultaneously fostering a feeling of disconnect from the increasing turbulence. What we need is an ever-vigilant mindfulness of these processes as we enact them, for such “awareness is the key to unlocking the automatic patterns that fetter the addicted brain.”¹² The world is responding to our binds, waiting to see if we can slow down, heal, and transform deeply ingrained patterns. We are being asked, in Maté’s words, to learn the great art of expressing “our vitality through the particular channels and at the particular speed Nature foresaw for us.”¹³ This is an involuntary climatic initiation akin to what Bateson described as “a spiritual experience,” one that we need to attend if we are to no longer hungrily fuel an increasingly turbulent climate.

A SACRED CHOICE

The ghostly addiction at the core of modern ways is what Anishinaabe healer Herb Nabigon depicts in the title of his book *The Hollow Tree*. It is, he writes, “a metaphor for what Western culture has become, an empty shell” where individual self-interest rules over communal needs.¹⁴ The experience of addiction and its healing allowed Nabigon to see this hollowness within himself and then without in the colonizing culture that so impacted his life. He saw this only after his elders told him he was at a moment of choice: “You can either pick up your sacred bundle or you can die from drinking.”¹⁵ If Nabigon wanted to live, it was time to remember his sacred connections and “transform that hollow tree into the sacred tree it was meant to be.” It is a fateful choice that comes to many addicts. On a climatic global scale, we are in the midst of a similar moment of truth when the Earth is asking whether we can re-affirm the sacredness of life.

In Nabigon’s Indigenous tradition, taking up a sacred bundle requires one to confront the urge to individual self-interest and profit as the primary means to living. When I scale up what such a sacred choice may look like for national and global communities, I am drawn to the decision of Ecuador and Bolivia. In these nations that have large, politically active Indigenous populations, “Nature has been granted its own basic constitutional rights.”¹⁶ People can now “fight corporations on behalf of the Land” as a legal entity. This is not simply a symbolic gesture, for it nationalizes an Indigenous approach to human-nature-spirit relations that has globally sustained over 20 percent of the carbon stored in tropical forests. Those traditions that informed this conservation record were again threatened in Paris by an initiative aimed at “mobilizing carbon markets as a means of conserving forests,” something Indigenous groups saw as violating their “sovereignty and sacredness of their lands.” The ghostly focus on unending self-interest and profit is what we are bound to, even as a sacred choice starkly confronts its globalizing tendencies.

The decision to heal led Nabigon to Poundmaker’s Lodge, an Indigenous treatment centre that combines the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) twelve-step recovery program with Indigenous approaches to healing. What does AA and related programs offer? According to Maté, they take people through steps for becoming more behaviorally responsive to their addictions. As research shows, the bind is “rooted in malfunctioning brain circuits and in implicit stories and beliefs that do

not match reality.”¹⁷ For Nabigon, drinking gave him a feeling of control and escape from the loss of identity related to colonial violence. But what the drinking actually made him was a darker person who was “anti-social, unreasonable, angry, and full of resentment”; it isolated him in a pain that then called for more numbing behavior.¹⁸ Treating such a condition begins by recognizing the locked behaviours have arisen from a “brain dysfunction” or illness that was learned over time in various social contexts.

While we cannot control the addictive urge, the next steps teach how we can control the brain’s automated responses to the desire by being mindful of the pattern. The aim is to create space for new behaviors and understandings to emerge, a process which took on Indigenous features for Nabigon. Beyond abstaining from the addictive substance, he also engaged a series of vision quests that utilized fasting. His elders asked him to fast in the four sacred directions so as to heal by coming into a world of greater spirit and meaning. In these purifying rituals one may ask for and receive blessings like imagery that can be a guide through life. Discussing a similar process, Maté says creating a healing environment “entails removing what is toxic—the stresses that enhance the addictive drive and trigger addictive cravings,” but it is more than abstinence, as the healing must be grounded in “an ecological and sustainable perspective.”¹⁹ The Indigenous fasting ceremonies not only remove the toxic substance, but replace toxic ways of living that fuel the addiction with a world of meaningful relations.

Offering us an important reminder on what such change feels like, Nabigon states, “I won’t lie to you, suffering is part of the healing.”²⁰ Maté agrees when explaining arduous effort is needed because the “compulsions entice her to behaviours that, contrary to other distressing conditions, promise pleasure.”²¹ Such sober reflections are what often feels so absent from a climate meeting like the one in Paris where the willful urge to more climatic modernization leaves one with the impression that this is all very manageable; the images say more than the media bytes about the need for a communal effort. What Nabigon and Maté highlight is that significant changes in bound behaviors is painful, but will also have its glories. On the deepest level, this effort aims to renew our sense of relationship to others and the source of life. While there is a clear spiritual dimension in Nabigon’s Indigenous approach and AA in general, Maté clarifies that this basically means recognizing “the truth of our oneness with

all that is, an ineffable sense of connectedness.”²² The fast of Nabigon brought him to the awareness “that I was part of Creation,” an insight that reduced his ego as he “realized I was nothing without the help of Nature and the Great Spirit. I felt very humble.”²³ Humility about our human position is also what Ecuador and Bolivia have enacted on a national scale in recognizing Nature’s rights.

“What we are addicted to is not primarily fossil fuels, but rather the speedy, opulent, limitless, and virtual ways of being. Perhaps what keeps us from enacting a sustainable climate of mind is the way in which the modern belief in controlled man-

agement makes it so difficult to surrender our actions to a broader sense of wholeness. We are talking about the will to surrender addictive binds to a more encompassing sensibility of our relations. This is not about denying efficiency options, carbon offsetting, electric vehicles, climate change policy, and more, but making these technical responses a small part of an approach that actively recognizes our participation in something more. Such surrender almost seems to arise in calls to shift toward renewables as a means for reducing the consumption of global energy. But we also need to conceive renewable energy as part of a large-scale fast or detox that is responsive to our modern binds, not as a means to maintain modern levels of consumption. In the spirit of AA programs, renewables must be less a technological end than a means for creating space for more sustainable ways of being to emerge.

This is what Nabigon’s fasting rituals point toward, a social re-orientation of our ways so as to heal the deeper levels of our addiction to speed, limitlessness, and virtualizing ways. Undertaking the hard work of renewal was how he affirmed the decision to take up his sacred bundle and thus help move the healing on. His bundle came to hold tobacco, sweetgrass, sage, cedar, a sacred pipe, and the sweatlodge. These medicinal and ceremonial presences have their own teachings that he could facilitate in relation to others who need healing; they are not just material realities. This sense of humble dependence on the Creation’s gifts as the basis for service to others is consistent with the latter steps of AA wherein the journey that began in isolation shifts toward service to others as an affirmation of interdependence. The sacred bundle is for Nabigon a reminder of the need to walk the sacred path the Creator intends. Our climatic changes are urging us to

pick-up a comparable sacred bundle before the depths become too dark to find a collective way out.

What are some of the sacred objects that we may find in such a climatic bundle? Perhaps the medicine of a sacred tree like Nabigon's cedar that reminds us of what trees give us, including their uptake of carbon. It can also remind us of their centrality in many spiritual traditions across the planet, and the need to follow the Indigenous inspiration of Ecuador and Bolivia in legally recognizing Nature rather than trying to profitably market everything. The renewables of Sun, Wind, and Water must be represented, but not simply as energy sources for maintaining consumeristic ways of living. My book considers the Earth Hour as an emerging purifying ceremony that could be connected with the fasting ceremonies found in a diversity of spiritual traditions. What about an Occupy-scale movement based on carbon fasting from luxury emissions like many of our flights? As with Nabigon's ritual, the everyday aim is to abstain from consumeristic self-interest so as to open space for the spirit of our interconnectivity to change and heal us. Finally, something in this bundle must remind us of the need to slow down and bring our ghostly ways back into the Creation through whatever cultural wisdom we have in in our traditions.

CONCLUSION

"Why is no one talking of the need to become soldiers, to put our bodies on the line to save the planet?" I received this question in response to a talk on these ideas, and it makes sense if we are receiving a "civilizational wake-up call." It made me think of a short essay by economist Lester Brown where he concludes by utilizing World War II as an exemplar of how quickly we could shift to a renewable economy when we see the need and have the will. As he explains, the American president informed the automotive industry that they would be able to focus on the war effort because he was "going to ban the sale of cars in the United States."²⁴ Responding to the Paris agreement, McKibben similarly states that what we need is "to leave almost all remaining coal and much of the oil and gas in the ground and put the world's industries to work on an emergency basis building solar panels and wind-mills." A war-like effort is needed to enact the arduous change.

Yet we also need to be careful of the limitations in using such a metaphor, for the reason we have not been able to muster such an effort is because there is no clearly demarcated external enemy to fight. Though

we can point to energy companies and other powerful interests whose tendrils reach into national governments and international processes like Paris, the war is against a modern way of living that is without and within. As Maté learned, we can never fully defeat addictive binds because "triumph and defeat" are war metaphors that fail to recognize how "addictions arise near our emotional core."²⁵ Waging a war against ourselves eventually leads "to inner discord and more distress." That said, a more peaceful change will be no less difficult and painful. As Nabigon relates: "I had to suffer so much to understand what liberation meant", but only after being "compelled to walk on the dark side first."²⁶ It was by looking at this dark path that he could start to pick up his sacred bundle with the hope of shedding "light on the darkness of humanity's shortcomings, exemplified so horrendously nowadays in our materialistic greed."

A warrior-like effort is required to move with the sacred transformation that is before us, but with a humble intent that can look at our binds and engage a broader realm of healing presences. What brought Nabigon to his fateful choice, as with many addicts who choose healing, was the experience of hitting bottom. A host of human and ecological communities are today being brought into the experience of what it means for modern systems to "hit bottom" on a global scale. It is an experience that Bateson described as a state of panic reflective of someone "who thought he had control over a vehicle but suddenly finds that the vehicle can run away with him."²⁷ An arising awareness of not being in control is challenging for modern ways based in managed control. Putting ourselves into increasingly risky situations, we want to respond by increasing an addictive dependence on the technological and economic ingenuity that promises to maintain the speed and limitlessness so on display in Paris.

What will collectively jolt us out of the climatic realm of hungry ghosts is difficult to foretell, as it is for any individual bound by their addiction, but it more often than not seems to entail some extensive pain on the way to a more heart-felt response. Watching a place like Fort McMurray suffer can feel so abstract and distant—that is, until I remember the feeling of loss that we all have from our past, imagine it on a community or cultural scale, and envision my family in the midst of it. Then my heart awakens to the need for an energetic change of my life, especially when I recognize that the rising turbulence is coming to a community near most of us over the coming decades.

With this heart energy we may be able to affirm with Nabigon our intent to not let the addiction have power over us and to recognize that we must humbly ask for help in bringing about this healing change. The hope is that wise choices can still be made before the collective health of our communities and planet descends too far into a dark, haunting bottom.

23. Nabigon, *The Hollow Tree*, 79.
24. L. Brown, "The Race to Save Civilization," *Tikkun Magazine*, September/October 2010, <http://www.tikkun.org/nextgen/the-race-to-save-civilization>.
25. Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, 330.
26. Nabigon, *The Hollow Tree*, 91.
27. G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 330.

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NOTES

1. G. Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addictions* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Vintage Canada, 2009).
2. B. McKibben, "Falling Short on Climate in Paris," *New York Times*, December 13, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/14/opinion/falling-short-on-climate-in-paris.html?_r=0.
3. N. Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2014), 25.
4. Cited in D. Beers, "Naomi Klein and Bill McKibben Knock Paris Climate Deal," *The Tyee*, December 14, 2015, <http://thetyee.ca/Mediacheck/2015/12/14/Klein-McKibben-Knock-Climate-Deal/>.
5. M. Paquette, "Indigenous Rights Cut from Paris Agreement: Why It Concerns Us All," *IC Magazine*, January 13, 2016, <https://intercontinentalcry.org/indigenous-rights-cut-from-paris-agreement-why-it-concerns-us-all/>.
6. H. Nabigon, *The Hollow Tree: Fighting Addiction with Traditional Native Healing* (Montreal, Quebec, and Kingston, Ontario, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 58.
7. Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, 391.
8. Discussed in the conclusion of T. Leduc, *Climate, Culture, Change: Inuit and Western Dialogues with a Warming North* (Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: University of Ottawa Press, 2010).
9. Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, 353-54.
10. The analyses of G. Bateson and others who consider issues of ecology, climate, energy, addictions, and spiritual healing are covered in more detail in my book, and the reader can refer to it for more detailed references of what is discussed here: T. Leduc, *A Canadian Climate of Mind: Passages from Fur to Energy and Beyond* (Montreal, Quebec, and Kingston, Ontario, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016).
11. M. Flannigan, <https://www.ualberta.ca/~flanniga/climatechange.html>, accessed on August 7, 2016.
12. Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, 344.
13. *Ibid.*, 362.
14. Nabigon, *The Hollow Tree*, xvii.
15. *Ibid.*, 33.
16. Paquette, "Indigenous Rights Cut from Paris Agreement."
17. Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, 355.
18. Nabigon, *The Hollow Tree*, 23.
19. Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, 373.
20. Nabigon, *The Hollow Tree*, 76.
21. Maté, *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, 343.
22. *Ibid.*, 389.