

Discussion Guide

A CALL TO LIFE: Variations on a Theme of Extinction

Writer Kathleen Dean Moore and pianist Rachelle McCabe, in concert



Photo by Kim Heacox

Welcome. Whether you are an individual, a college class, a church group, a neighborhood, an activist organization, a conservation group, or other community of caring, we invite you to watch the video, “A Call to Life: Variations on a Theme of Extinction” and join with your group to share your responses – all of the ideas, emotions, questions, answers, and actions that the viewing inspires or provokes. Here, for you to use as fits your needs, is a guide to discussion.

Thank you for your deep love for the beautiful, battered world.

Kathleen and Rachelle

Kathleen Dean Moore is a philosopher, environmental advocate, and award-winning writer whose recent books are *Great Tide Rising: Toward Clarity and Moral Courage in a Time of Planetary Change* and *Piano Tide: A Novel*. Distinguished Professor of Philosophy Emerita at Oregon State University, she speaks around the country about the moral urgency of stopping a global carbon catastrophe.

Rachelle McCabe, concert pianist and Professor of Music at Oregon State University, enjoys an international career as an artist-teacher and as a solo recitalist and highly respected chamber musician. She has performed extensively in the United States, Canada, Southeast Asia and England, and has been heard on NPR's *Performance Today*, the CBC, and PBS television.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Theme	A world half as wonderful	Engagement Free writing Discussion questions Applications
Part I	The fire of Earth's life, five times almost extinguished, five times rekindled – and now, the Sixth Extinction	Engagement Free writing Discussion questions Applications
Part II	Rage against the dying	Engagement Free writing Discussion questions Applications
Intermezzo	Wondering love	Engagement Free writing Discussion questions Applications
Part III	The work that calls us	Engagement Free writing Discussion questions Applications
Coda	Redemption	Engagement Free writing Discussion questions Applications

Introduction to the Discussion Guide

Structure

The discussion guide offers an abundance of materials linked to each of five sections of the performance of “A Call to Life.” This structure invites organizers to create a five-part discussion series – perhaps a weekend workshop or weekly meetings. On the other hand, organizers might choose to create an afternoon workshop, beginning with a viewing of the performance and moving to discussion guided by a selection of the materials here. Or individuals, having viewed “A Call to Life,” might find their experience enriched by thinking through the ideas and quandaries posed.

Materials

The discussion guide offers an abundance of materials, in the following categories, with the invitation to groups to choose the most useful and fitting among them. If there is time and inclination in the group, this is a useful ordering of activities for a meeting. The ideas are designed to unfold like a peony, beginning with an activity that engages the group and culminating in a determination to take action.

1. Engagement Here is a river of words, a song, a poem, or a guided meditation to bring the group into a shared space of fruitful, respectful reflection.

2. Free writing Here is a writing prompt, a phrase intended to jumpstart a brief period of quiet, private writing. This is a time to brainstorm on paper, to say what you feel, to gather your thoughts. Whatever thoughts present themselves to be written, write them down. Just a few minutes, just for you. The recommended procedure is to write the phrase offered to you and then just keep on writing without stopping. Maybe a minute, maybe two.

3. Questions for discussion To get the discussion started, these are a few probing questions.
In a good discussion, there is equal time for all voices, and all voices are carefully considered. It is always useful to discuss procedures and expectations before the discussion begins. Some ideas: Leave a little time between comments, for thinking. Know that questions are sometimes more useful than answers. Silence is sometimes a very good thing. To allow all voices to be heard, switch regularly from popcorn-style discussion (anybody speaks up whenever they want) to a council-style discussion (where the members of the circle speak in a clockwise order, unless they choose to pass). Vary the discussion from an entire group to pairs to small groups, because people differ in their willingness to speak. Emotion is okay. Ideas are okay. Grief is to be expected. So is laughter. Action is the wind in the wings of hope.

4. Applications These are ideas or prompts to move from an abstract discussion to a very particular action, individual or group.

Theme **A world half as wonderful**

Engagement

Go around and around the circle, each person saying the name of a being – an animal, bird, plant, etc. – that has special meaning for you, that brings you special joy or wonder. The flow of words, one after another, will become a rising spiral of celebration.

Go around and around the circle, each person saying the name of a being you now seldom see, beings that are missing from your life or are now rare. As you go around the circle a second time, let your voices get quieter, then fall silent. Let the silence linger for a few moments.

Free writing

Write this phrase and keep on writing: “When I actually stop to think that the world is half as abundantly beautiful as when I was born, I feel . . . “

Discussion questions

1. Tell about an animal in your child’s or grandchild’s favorite picture book. How is that species doing?
2. Kathleen claims that a tide pool is a complete “repudiation of the idea that human beings are better somehow, that we are in charge, that we are the point of the whole thing.” Really? How can that be?
3. Rachel Carson says that “There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature.” Kathleen agrees: “All the years, we humans have been lifted by the assurance that birds would go and birds would return, that storms would come in season and storms would blow back to sea again, that fish would scatter eggs before they died.” If climate change is shattering the “repeated refrains,” are we losing as well their comfort and healing power? Can you think of examples?
4. Rachmaninoff wrote the “Variations” during a dark period in his life. Living in exile, he spoke out in defense of a dissident musician – and Stalin banned Rachmaninoff’s music from being performed in his beloved Russian homeland. What emotions do you feel in “Variations”? Why do you think music has the power to enter so directly into a person’s heart?

Application

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that “we have art in order not to die of the truth.” Are the facts of the sixth extinction so horrible that we are unable to confront them? What art might you make, or sponsor, or gather in a show, which would open people’s hearts to the facts of extinction, without breaking them?

Part I The fire of Earth’s life, five times almost extinguished, five times rekindled – and now, the Sixth Extinction

Engagement

This ice-breaker is a variation of an experiment designed by Joanna Macy. Because it’s sort of a dance, you might even want to play some dance music in the background. Begin by gathering everyone into a loose group on the “dance floor.” Each person, without telling anyone, chooses two other people. The dance begins, like so: Everyone moves wherever they want, as long as they stay equidistant from their two chosen people. (Note that you don’t have to be between the people in order to be *equidistant* from them.) You will see that a lovely and complicated movement evolves, where each person changes in response to the movement of another. Once the dance is well underway, the organizer taps one person on the shoulder and removes him or her from the dance floor. You’ll see some confusion result, but people will probably carry on. Now, remove ten percent of the people from the floor – this is decimation. See what happens. Now, remove thirty-nine percent – the percentage of terrestrial wildlife species that are recently extinct.

What happens to the dance of interrelatedness? How is this like and unlike what happens in an ecosystem when species are removed?

Free writing

Write this phrase and keep on writing for a minute or two: “I remember when birds . . .” Discuss your response, or not.

Discussion questions

1. The planet has seen five mass extinctions, when evolutionary development started over with what was left. So it matters a great deal how many and which life forms remain after the Sixth Extinction. What difference does it make if one of those life forms is human?
2. Kathleen claims that the common causes of extinctions – deforestation, habitat loss, overharvesting of oceans, poisoning of land and air, agricultural expansion, and climate change – are caused by a constantly growing, all consuming culture. Others say there are just too many humans. Period. Do you think it’s possible for 8+ billion humans to live – far more simply – on the land without destroying it? Desirable?
3. “The greatest extinctions are in the poor countries, with losses of 58 percent, where the wealthy countries are outsourcing their environmental destruction.” But surely there is an internal sort of “outsourcing,” where wealthy communities are outsourcing destruction to poor communities. What can stop this injustice?
4. The current wave of extinctions is a “cosmic crime,” Kathleen says. But if so, who is the criminal? What laws are violated? Who is the judge? Or is this just a bad analogy?

Application

Read the following aloud, with one person reading the parts of God (in italics), another reading the boldface text, and another reading the remaining text. Then consider these questions:

- “And it was good” appears again and again; it is the chorus to creation, the repeating refrain. Clearly it has an overriding significance in the creation story. What is its moral significance?
- Can God weep?
- Is there any grief greater than a parent’s grief over the moral ruin of their children?
- Does the Earth itself express grief? How?

- If you were to adopt a species, as one might adopt a child, which would it be and how would you provide for it?

Genesis 1 (from the King James Version of the Bible, adapted for classroom use).

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, *“Let there be light.”* and there was light. **And God saw that the light was good;** and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day.

And God said, *“Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.”* And God made the firmament and separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And there was evening and there was morning, a second day.

And God said, *“Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.”* And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. **And God saw that it was good.** And God said, *“Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seed, and fruit trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth.”* And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind. **And God saw that it was good.** And there was evening and there was morning, a third day.

And God said, *“Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth.”* And it was so. And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. **And God saw that it was good.** And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

And God said, *“Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the firmament of the heavens.”* So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, with which the waters swarm, according to their kinds, and every winged bird according to its kind. **And God saw that it was good.** And God blessed them, saying, *“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”* And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day.

And God said, *“Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth according to their kinds.”* And it was so. And God made the beasts of the earth according to their kinds and the cattle according to their kinds, and everything that creeps upon the ground according to its kind. **And God saw that it was good.** Then God said, *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”* So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, *“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.”* And God said, *“Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.”* And it was so. And God saw everything that he had made, **and behold, it was very good.** And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.

Part II Rage against the dying

Engagement

Read the following poem from Wendell Berry:

Questionnaire

1. How much poison are you willing to eat for the success of the free market and global trade? Please name your preferred poisons.

2. For the sake of goodness, how much evil are you willing to do? Fill in the following blanks with the names of your favorite evils and acts of hatred.

3. What sacrifices are you prepared to make for culture and civilization? Please list the monuments, shrines, and works of art you would most willingly destroy.

4. In the name of patriotism and the flag, how much of our beloved land are you willing to desecrate? List in the following spaces the mountains, rivers, towns, farms you could most readily do without.

5. State briefly the ideas, ideals, or hopes, the energy sources, the kinds of security, for which you would kill a child. Name, please, the children whom you would be willing to kill.

—Wendell Berry

Okay, well. Let's think about this. What makes this such a heart-wrenching poem? Consider: We do, of course, eat poison, do evil, sacrifice cultures, desecrate lands, and kill children. We don't, however, often think of what we get in return. To think of these sorts of exchanges as deliberate market transactions or trades is excruciating. So why is it easier to make these trades if we don't think of what we give and get in return? Consider: We can bear to think of the damage we cause in general terms, perhaps. Why is it so much more terrible when we are forced to name what and whom we destroy?

Free writing

"A list of what I would *never* trade away for *anything* includes . . . "Fold this list and put it in your wallet.

Discussion questions

1. What trades has your community made recently? What new roads, buildings, housing, and at what cost?
2. Choose one thing that you have recently acquired. Do your best to look back and see what has been required to produce that product; then look forward to foresee the consequences of its production.
3. In “A Call to Life,” wildlife advocate and Earth First! founder, Dave Foreman, is quoted as saying that “. . . we of course have an obligation to wild things of all species . . . to honor their intrinsic value.” Intrinsic value is the value an animal, say, has in-and-of-itself, apart from its value as a means to human ends (which is instrumental value). Philosophers have devised an experiment, the Last Man Problem, which will tell you whether you believe that the life on Earth has value apart from its usefulness to us: *If you were the last person on Earth, stepping into a rocket ship to sail away forever, and no humans would ever return to Earth, would you press a switch that would destroy all the life left on the planet? Would you? But why? Or why not? Your answers will speak volumes about how you value Earth’s lives.*
4. In a recent article in the *New Republic*, climate activist and author Bill McKibben argues that we should declare war on climate change. He insists he is not speaking metaphorically, but rather that we need to mobilize all our industry and efforts to stop this enemy from destroying the future of life as we know it. What do you think of his way of thinking? If not war, then what?

Applications

Many of the bad trades we make have to do with the food we eat. Pineapples from Hawaii, palm oil from Indonesia, strawberries from toxic California fields, hamburger from deforested land in Brazil – all come at terrible cost to plant and animal diversity and human health. So an important step in halting extinctions is to reform our eating patterns.

Now, everyone choose one change that you would be able and willing to make. It doesn’t have to be big. Maybe you’ll give up meat on Fridays. Or beef forever. Or something else. Write it on a piece of paper, fold the paper, and put it in the center of the room. When all the participants have added their papers, go back to the center of the room and choose a paper other than your own. That is your assignment. Go around the room, telling what your new assignment is and indicating whether this is something you can do. Trading assignments is perfectly appropriate at this point.

Intermezzo Wondering love

Engagement

Listen again to the Intermezzo, 30:49 – 41:43, when “even the music extemporizes.” And indeed, this is some of the most beautiful music in the piece – imaginative flights of invention, arpeggios rising and falling like our own spirits in a troubled time, unfinished thoughts, and in the end, at the transition to Variation XIV, a glorious, heart-stopping change from the minor to the major key.

Once you have listened, begin a tone meditation. In a tone meditation, the group stands in a close circle with their eyes closed. One person, the leader, hums a tone. The others respond to it with sound – matching it, pulsing it, creating harmony or dissidence, or responding in some other way that requires careful listening. At any point, the leader changes the tone, and the others, listening, respond to the change. In this way, the circle creates an intermezzo, an extemporaneous movement of sounds that envelopes the group – changing, resonating, like waves converging and diverging on a beach. After four minutes or so, the leader signals the end by breaking off her sound, leaving some silence, saying thank you.

Free writing

Write, and keep on writing, “Forgiveness is too much to ask. I would ask for only this . . . “

Discussion questions

1. In Civilization and Ethics, Albert Schweitzer wrote: “I am life which wills to live, and I exist in the midst of life which wills to live . . . Just as in my own will-to-live there is a yearning for more life . . . so the same obtains in all the will-to-live around me, equally whether it can express itself to my comprehension or whether it remains unvoiced. Ethics thus consists in this, that I experience the necessity of practicing the same reverence for life toward all will-to-live, as toward my own . . . It is good to maintain and cherish life; it is evil to destroy and check it . . . The ethics of reverence forces one to decide for themselves in each case how far they can remain ethical and how far they must submit themselves to the necessity of destroying and harming life and thus become guilty. A good conscience is the invention of the devil.” What, then, is a bad conscience?
2. Why does it matter that “a hundred years from now, salmon are returning to the streams, children are kneeling to watch lightning bugs in the grass, red-legged frogs are burbling underwater”?
3. “Be prepared for anger and for grief.” It is understandable that grief is a natural response to the world’s losses. And how beautiful are the human responses to grief – the sculptures, the requiems, the poetry, the communities created from sorrow. But anger? Is anger ever a positive thing? Does anything lovely ever come from it?
4. “It is wondering love that brings us to the work ahead of us.” Do you think so? Others might say it is fear or self-interest or technological imperatives.

Applications

In a remarkable poem, ‘A Conference in Time,’ Ursula LeGuin imagines that all the gods and goddesses of all time are called to “meet in council in eternal Rome.” Allah, Jehovah, Jupiter, Zeus, “Jesus healed from wounding,” Freya, Athene, Aphrodite, Pan leaping like a goat, “the gods of Egypt stalk[ing] with head of cat or hawk or vulture,” “old, old crude, fat, headless Venuses of Chalk out of the barrows and the shallow graves,” Corn Woman and White Shell Woman, the Plumed Serpent.

“What is to be done?” asks the one who gathered them all.

The breath of God says, “Mourn.” The anger of God says, “Have I not destroyed them in their iniquity before?” The power of God screams “War.” The mercy of God murmurs “Forgive them.” But the Gods who are women . . . the women say . . .

Take on the identity of one of these Gods, or another one, and together decide the fate of the humans.

Part III The work that calls us

Engagement

“So this is the question each of us asks, individually and collectively: what destruction can we stop? What oil terminal, what parking lot, what GMO crop, what coal train, what poison-spraying truck, what clear-cut?” That’s the challenge of “A Call to Life.” Go around the room, each person naming a destructive project or act, large or small, local or distant, that your group has the power or potential power to stop. As they listen, invite the group to slap their knees like drums, in response or assent.

Free writing

“I want to build an ark to save . . . “

Discussion questions

1. Music has played an important role in social change – the civil rights movement, anti-war movements, etc. How can music help in the fight against extinction, either to encourage positive action or stop destructive action? Can a church choir really stop a bulldozer?
2. Noah protested, “I’m old, I’m tired, why me o lord?” And as it turns out, many environmental activists *are* elders, retired from their professions and turning to their passions. They are old; they may be tired. But brainstorm: What assets do elders bring to the struggle to stop or slow extinctions? What particular assets do young people bring? How might they come into alliance?
3. In Canada and the US, in Africa and South America and Asia, indigenous, land-based people are turning out to be the most steadfast, courageous, and effective defenders of wildlife and wild lands. What elements of their activism might become a model for activists around the world?
4. What are the sources of your courage? What moves you to act, when others are complacent or even derisive?

Applications

Go to the whiteboard or chalkboard. Make a chart. Across the top, on the X axis, make three columns that correspond to the three categories of actions that ecophilosopher Joanna Macy says must be done:

1. Stop the harm.
2. Create a better way.
3. Think in new ways about our place on Earth.

Along the left side, on the Y axis, list five or six extinction-related issues your group cares most about. That might be food or pets or climate change or consumerism . . .

Now you have a chart on which you can list possible actions for each category.

For example, a couple of lines on the chart might read:

FOOD 1. Stop aerial spraying of poisons in this county. 2. Teach people to turn their parking strips into gardens. 3. Hold a harvest festival of local healthy food.

PETS 1. Pass a local ordinance prohibiting cats from running free. 2. Plant native seed plants for birds. 3. Teach school children to recognize familiar bird calls.

FISH 1. Launch a campaign to stop local food stores from selling endangered or threatened species of fish. 2. Stand at the fish market and hand out the Monterey Aquarium's "Seafood Watch" guide to sustainable fish eating. 3. Press your government to set up reserves and other wild places.

After a lively brainstorming session, circle one thing your group will do. Circle what they will do once that has been accomplished. Shake on it. Set up the committees.

Engagement

Create a group blessing.

Begin by reading the beginning of the blessing that Kathleen wrote for an early draft of “A Call to Life.” Then, go around the circle, each person adding a line to what will become a poem.

*On the reeling planet that we hold in our hands,
 May gentle rain fall forever on green fields.
 May ice always return to glaze the bays.
 May frogs lay eggs in lavender orchids.
 May batwings whisper forever in dripping caves.
 May children hum themselves to sleep in the safe and sustaining night.
*

Free writing

“When I think of all the work that has to be done to save the plants and animals, I feel . . .”

Discussion questions

To each person, hand out a copy of the following guide to action. Ask people to read the list and respond to each item, as follows.

- For each item you have already accomplished, put a check-mark.
- For each item you can commit to doing, put a star.
- For each item you believe you cannot manage to do, put an X.

After this is accomplished, go around the circle. Each person reads an item that he or she has marked with a X. The other members of the group, with compassion and imagination, brainstorm ideas about how it could, in fact, be done.

What Can I Do to Stop the Dying?

1. I can stop making it worse.

___ I can stand in the way of practices that cause habitat destruction, like mining, drilling, subdividing, clear-cutting, poisoning roadsides and fencerows, bulldozing meadows. Stand. On my feet. In the way. Singing.

___ I can eat from the honorable harvest, refusing beef and pork raised in ways that trash the high desert, rainforests, and streams, refusing farmed salmon, refusing genetically modified crops, turning away in noisy disgust from food raised in poisoned field — and celebrating the pleasure of fresh, healthy food.

___ I can refuse to buy poisons — any products that poison land or water (or children) — and refuse to allow it in my home.

___ I can keep my cat inside and badger my friends to do the same, given that cats are the leading cause of death of birds and mammals in the US.

___ I can join with others to push, PUSH my elected representatives at all levels of government to pass powerful legislation that will stop greenhouse gas emissions. No more infrastructure for fossil fuels. A true price on carbon.

___ I can be responsible about reproduction, planning ahead to bear exactly the number of children I choose and no more.

___ I can renounce air travel or I can tithe, donating ten percent of my travel costs to organizations that are effectively protecting habitat and advocating for species diversity. This includes eco-travel; air-miles don't know their destination.

___ I can understand that just because I can afford it, doesn't mean I have to buy it. I can refuse to be a foot soldier in the consumer culture's war against the world. I can be a joyous and careful consumer.

___ I can stop pretending that a person can be an upright citizen who kills wild creatures in the course of his business, or causes them to be killed, or profits from the destruction of their habitat. The time has passed for that.

2. I can protect, create, and restore habitats.

___ I can lead a true sanctuary movement – in my yard, in my churchyard, in the school grounds, in my neighborhood – ripping out the unholy lawns and planting homelands for species of all kinds.

___ I can give my time, money, and sweat to restoration projects – planting trees, slowing rivers, monitoring air quality, turning a vacant lot into a patch of prairie.

___ I can sell off my investments in companies that profit from death and deceit. Then I can use the money to buy unspoiled land and keep it safe.

___ I can give my money, votes, and time to those who create natural reserves – marine reserves, wildfowl reserves, wilderness reserves, public land trusts, urban wilderness parks, and other places where plants and animals can thrive.

3. I can imagine new human life-ways.

___ I can decide not to take more than I need from nature's bounty, understanding that what I take is taken from some other creature who has an equal right to the conditions for life.

___ I can celebrate and I can grieve, taking children by the hand to show them a nestling, crying with my neighbors in the silence of a morning that once was graced with birdsong.

___ I can radically transform my life, reclaiming the right to live simply and joyously.

___ I can push, PUSH for real democracy (not oligarchy, not plutocracy), but a government of all the people, by all the people, and for the planet that sustains us all.

___ I can stop asking what *one person* can do, and join with others to save the blessed world.

Applications

Take the list home with you. Let your commitments and your imagination make you into a fierce defender of the world you so deeply love. May your life never be the same again. May you find new purpose and energy in your work for the world. May the world thank you with its songs.