



Leibniz-Junior Research Group

Urban human-nature resonance for sustainability transformation

Leibniz Institute of Ecological Urban and Regional Development (IOER)

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Where is the love?

**Sketches of wonder, self-compassion, and an encouragement in the face
of multiple crises**

Introduction

Humans never cease to impress me with their intelligence in developing engineering skills with millimeter precision, which then creates telephone lines across continents and oceans, produces razor-sharp images of remote galaxies, or results in beautiful sustainable transportation options such as urban cable cars ([beautiful because they are quiet, consume less energy than other public transportation, spread no pollutants, and are less prone to failure](#)).

Just one miracle of engineering: The world's densest urban cable car network in La Paz, Bolivia, 2016 (Photo: S. Müller)



Sometimes, however, I wonder if human intelligence and resources are being used in the right direction, for example, when towers are built with such precision and immense resources as [the world's tallest tower under construction with a peak of 1,000 meters](#), asteroids that could [potentially hit the Earth in the future are shot down to protect people](#), or [smart technologies can be used to measure individual people's nutrient stocks](#) and then provide them with pinpoint digital instructions for health maintenance. I don't want to be misunderstood, the thoughts behind all of this are genius, which I want to acknowledge. At the same time, Albert Einstein already said in the 20th century that ["there are no great discoveries and advances as long as there is still one unhappy child on earth."](#)

The fact that there is a large number of unhappy children may be hidden behind the following figure: [In this country, for example, the number of domestic violence offenses has continued to rise in the Corona pandemic, and the consequences for vulnerable children are massive.](#) But children are not the only ones affected by current crises: [One percent of the world's population is on the run, according to the UN Refugee Agency.](#) [And the ecological extinction of species is immense - around 150 species disappear every day.](#)

This raises the following question for me:

Why do we develop the most impressive technical innovations and at the same time do not take care of the suffering of so many living beings?

Tracking down the why and a feeling

Many people of different professions deal with this question. I found a possible answer in the form of a question within the song "[Wir halten uns](#)" by Sarah Lesch: Where is actually our love in the world? In her touching song, Sarah Lesch goes on a spatial search for the feeling that hides behind impressions like *Nothing is enough in our lives* and behind everyday scenes like *The children play war in the garden*. Finally, the musician finds the love *sitting and smoking in a bar - hurt and badly offended, while the rebellion is at school learning how to sit still*.

From numerous philosophical views and scientific disciplines one knows the statement "*We only protect what we love*". But what does this mean for the current crises? Do we love too little and why? And - before one goes over to lapse directly into activism - which in my opinion is also important, that I will come to later - is it not first of all sad to admit the possibility of this assumption? That we possibly love ourselves too little and accept circumstances, although it sometimes screams inside us? That we love our friends too little and sometimes begrudge them the joys of life? Or that we don't care enough about the ground we live on and instead take more and more from it? That physical touch is vital for us humans, [but that there is too little of it here in Western societies?](#) [And that such a lack of love has been proven to make people ill?](#)

It makes me very sad, especially since love, connection, and resonance with the world actually exist. In every moment my breath is with me. Some would say – including Hartmut Rosa – *it breathes me*. In every moment I can feel, if I allow it, that I can be grateful for something. The Sufi mystic [Rumi](#) said about this that it is not our task to search for love, but to seek out all the obstacles we have placed in her way....

Victory of love over...? (Photo: S. Müller)



Mindful Self-Compassion for loving resonance

... and the best place to start practicing is usually with oneself. How can I go into resonance with myself and the mixed feelings that the current crises trigger in me, in order to ultimately track down inner and outer obstacles? One tool therefore can be Mindful Self-Compassion (MSC), which I was privileged to explore and apply in more detail for my research.

A brief excursus:

Self-compassion comes from Buddhism and was first scientifically studied by US professor [Kristin Neff](#). It has been proven to promote a loving approach to oneself, alleviates anxiety and depression, and also strengthens partnerships.

The core question of self-compassion is: What do I need? What is the need behind my feeling? According to Kristin Neff, the following three aspects help to give an answer to this:

❖ *Mindfulness*

It starts with a mindful inventory of what is vivid in me right now: In relation to the ecological crisis, I find myself stunned that some people I know are foregoing so much and taking risks for the sustainability transformation (e.g. not flying anymore for 10 years, deliberately not having children, or like the [Last Generation, who stick themselves to the streets in courageous actions to force concessions from politicians](#)) while for others hardly anything changes in their everyday lives in terms of sustainability. In this regard this is also referred to as an [individual](#) as well as [collective](#) free-rider problem in the climate crisis. After all, the earth is the basis of life for everyone and thus everyone should participate in its protection. In addition to ecological issues, the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine overshadows all of our lives, creates fear and [stirs up social tensions](#). So, in the spirit of self-compassion, I turn mindfully to the feelings present, as a good friend would do: "Wow, I'm seeing a lot of grief right now. Maybe sadness, too. Admiration for the strength of the Ukrainian people. Anger at the injustices. I see it all."

❖ *Connectedness in being human*

I then show my feelings that they are not alone in this. [Many people currently feel anxious and angry about climate change, among other feelings. Psychologists for Future emphasizes that this is a healthy reaction to a challenging situation and should not be confused with an illness](#). And reacting to threatening gestures around nuclear weapons with mixed and quite strong feelings can therefore be understood as resonating with the crisis. According to Kristin Neff's concept, however, it is part of life to feel pain as well as happiness and joy, and this range of different feelings unites us in being human.

❖ *Self-friendliness*

With the help of self-friendliness, I then try to give myself what my previously identified feelings and needs require. And yes, that is first of all being seen, being comforted. But there is also anger, and in this case it needs something else. In general, [psychologists widely agree that anger wants to contribute to justice](#), which I also learned practically in some anger workshops with a professional emotion researcher. My anger wants to change something on the outside, to contribute self-effectively to more justice. It is then not so easy to identify to which justice it wants to contribute. Certainly to climate justice. But also to a social justice, namely to appreciate merely visible people who make a special contribution to the world and bring up positive values such as courage, perseverance and care. As, for example, the musician Stromae does in his song "[Santé](#)", which he dedicates to all people who, in his opinion, are not sufficiently appreciated in our societies.

Sharpening the (self)caring gaze (Photo: S. Müller)



All these three components - mindfulness, connectedness in being human, and self-kindness - can help to identify, in Rumi's sense, the obstacles we have placed in the way of love, in order to (re)feel the everlasting love, to connect with it, and to express it to other beings. That love or its absence make a huge difference to the lives of us humans is shown in a [book written by Tenzin Kiyosaki in 2021, for which she accompanied dying people and asked them at the end of their lives if they had any regrets](#). The answers lie mostly with the inner values and feelings: For example, many said they regretted not having passed on their love, not having lived their true dreams and not having overcome resentment. These statements are consistent with a [book](#) published in 2012 by palliative care nurse Bronnie Ware, according to which dying people often regret not having summoned the courage to stand by themselves emotionally and be happy. A neurobiological encouragement to implement this in the here and now can be [Gerald Hüther's book "Was wir sind und was wir sein könnten"](#). It invites us to rethink the limits of what is apparently possible individually and socially, to take responsibility for our own actions and inactions, and finally points to the power of our own emotions.

Outlook: The circle is closing!

I recently experienced again that love is possible - even in rough times and under difficult conditions: I had wanted to go to the rose garden with a friend having fled from Ukraine with her little son, but then I felt very sad because of the numerous crises in the world and was also a little ill. Then, during the day, these pictures reached me from her – specifically from the rose garden together with a heart <3. There is love, I thought! It still exists. I was and I am impressed how a person who has to suffer so much hardship can give so much affection and

appreciation. How does she manage to do that? She consciously and actively chooses the positive every day.

Unexpected lovely greeting from the Dresden rose garden, 2022 (Photos: С. Можейко)



This affection and the conscious-positive orientation give me in turn strength and motivation, so that I can devote my attention to my work. Thank you!

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If you have any comments or question on the essay, feel warmly invited to contact the author (s.mueller@ioer.de).

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