

Introductory Exercise

I'd like if I may to ask you to do something. Please take a couple of deep breaths, breathe deeper, feel your feet on the floor, relax shoulders and now think about climate change, and simply be aware, notice what's going on inside you, bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, (breathe x 2) and now just find, without thinking too hard some single words, that might describe your sensations, your thoughts, your feelings just single words up to 5 words,Got that? (breathe x 2). Then turn to someone near to you and just in a couple of minutes tell that person what words came into to your mind..... Anyone prepared to let us know as a group? (Brief group discussion followed fear, despair frustration were mentioned amongst other things, as well as motivation to act)

Lecture

This is a painful subject; human-generated climate change and biodiversity loss are manifestations of the increasing threat our species pose to the planetary ecosystem, and therefore to ourselves, and because there is threat I think we have to factor in the effect of trauma on thinking, the effect of trauma on our capacity for thought. It is certainly painful for me in trying to think about climate change. I have been working in this area for some years, organising conferences, and many meetings, and I noticed in the process of preparing for this event a tendency for my mind to jump around, I found it difficult to concentrate, I kept hoping someone else had the answer, I found distractions to take me from the task.

One way of thinking about trauma is that it is a state in which the person affected by something that is too much to bear can't tell a clear story. Parts are blocked out, other parts of the story intrude in a way that is out of control, so the person is both fully in the grip of being affected, but finds it difficult to understand process, and reflect on those effects.

Environmental activists, people who are well informed about climate change and its consequences, sometimes, unless they have good self care techniques, describe symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with intrusive thoughts, and nightmares. For an account of this see Gilliam Caldwell's blog¹. A colleague of mine adapted the Impact of Events Scale (a rating scale used to evaluate PTSD) to look at feelings about climate change. I have used it in discussion groups of psychotherapists as a starter to conversations about the emotional impact of climate change. What emerges is that not uncommonly, individuals report:

Intrusion – e.g. I think about climate change when I don't mean to, pictures of climate change pop into my mind, I've been having waves of strong feelings about climate change.

They identify with the following:

Avoidance – I've been actively trying not to think about climate change, I have a lot of feelings about climate change, but I haven't been dealing with them, I feel as if climate change isn't happening, or is unreal.

Hyperarousal – feeling irritable or angry, jumpy, having problems sleeping.

Clearly, those living with the threat of climate change at close hand, e.g. low islanders or even more importantly those affected NOW by extreme weather events, in part driven by climate change, are certain to be devastated and already overwhelmed by impending threat. Meanwhile witnesses to this, such as ourselves, are likely to be defending ourselves against the presence of this suffering to us.

I'd like to approach the subject further by way of an analogy from my work as an expert witness in Children Act proceedings. I am asked to assess parents, and the questions are

broadly along the lines of - what's wrong, why can't they parent and what can be done to help, can they change?

Of course many of the parents whose children have been removed have very deprived backgrounds themselves, with neglect and abuse at home and in the care system. They have been in conditions where emotions have not been contained and need to recover the capacity to think, when it's not been fostered, modelled, or in some cases even permitted.

In making an assessment, one of the things I am looking for is what is called narrative competence. This concept derives from attachment theory....where the nature of someone's attachment style can be inferred not only from the content of what they say but from their way of talking about their history. As Sue Gerhardt² points out Mary Main discovered that when adults talked about their emotional lives and their important relationships in growing up, their current emotional security depended much more on having an internally coherent and consistent narrative than on the actual story they had to tell. It didn't seem to matter so much for their current emotional security whether they had a happy childhood or not.

The question I am holding in my mind then, is - can the parent give an account of their difficult past in a way that shows reflection and meaning making? Or at the very least, do they show some signs of being able to use a process that will help them do this? So I may make a comment, feeding back a way in which their story might make sense to me to see if they respond. I have also had the experience of writing a report where children are removed and then seeing a parent a couple of years later when the next child is born. Sometime the parent will say 'it really helped to see the story about me written down, it all began to make sense', and they've used the process to begin to make positive changes.

What does not bode well is a dismissive avoidant style of narrative, dismissive of feelings, the child's and their own, dismissive of the concerns of others and any attempts to make meaning. Neither is the converse helpful, an enmeshed, pre-occupied and disordered narrative, where the listener is unclear who is being described or when, and the parent is resistant to attempts to help with standing back and reflection.

The capacity to reflect on the past meaningfully in this way is one good prognostic sign as to whether the parent can think about the child, and care for them; this then becomes useful evidence for the Court in deciding whether rehabilitation of the child may be possible.

I guess it's clear where my thinking is going.

The question for me is can we as individuals and collectively develop a coherent ecological narrative account of our own lives including our blindness about climate change. The story is complex one for each of us, involving not just the psychological but the economic, ethical, and in the broadest sense, spiritual. It's a tall order; can we include in that account an understanding of the personal and societal dynamics that have pressed on us that have made us unable to think and feel; can we include how individually and collectively we have lived in ways that aren't consistent with love for the future of our children, and our children's children.

Our capacity to care for the future and take action may depend on this. Of course, there is no value in staying stuck with self-recrimination, but our capacity to think depends on our recognition and containment of our history.

We cannot look after our children, the world's children, and I mean this symbolically, as well as literally, unless we do this.

As my work with parents shows we can't do this on our own, the ability to tell the story is relational and constructed in conversation.

A psychotherapy colleague, Rosemary Randall, developed a methodology called Carbon Conversations³. This was driven by her appreciation of the vital part that psychology can play in bringing about social change. Carbon Conversations Groups offer a supportive group experience that enables people, in practical terms, to halve their personal carbon footprint. In the process of these groups they deal with the difficulties of change by connecting to values, emotions and identity. The method was selected by the Guardian as one of the 20 most promising solutions to climate change and featured at the 2009 Manchester Festival.

The importance of addressing the area of values, emotions and identity is also why the first strand of the climate change policy that psychotherapy colleagues and I are developing for the UK Council for Psychotherapy is to promote conversations amongst our colleagues, to raise awareness, to plan that every psychotherapy training includes a consideration not just of human relations but our relationship with the environment.

That seemed to us to come before our next 3 priorities, however vital, namely:-

2. Developing Links with other organisations and campaigning
3. Walking the talk by reducing our environmental footprint
4. Risk assessment for the organisation

Psychotherapists and psychologists have also contributed to *Common Cause: The case for Working with Values and Frames*⁴, an important work which recognises that to facilitate change we need to understand the values and frames that individuals live by, in other words, what lies behind observable behaviours.

Creating a clear reflective narrative to take us forward to action is of course work in progress, perhaps the direction and intention is as, if not more, important than the end point. As Clive Hamilton⁵ says at the end of his book, *Requiem for a Species*, Despair then Accept then Act and each of these stages involves a complex process.

What if we can't do this? Unfortunately there are competing stories and here psychotherapy can contribute in identifying familiar ways in which we defend ourselves about what is unbearable, the 'defences' we work with every day in our shared attempts with clients/patients to change. Into the place of thought incapacitated by trauma, psychology can help to put words to ways we may be protecting ourselves from trauma – overt mechanisms such as denial and projection.

We notice subtle, powerful resistances to change.

It's not safe...

It's not safe to think about climate change, what will I feel, can I bear the grief, the guilt?

I'll lose my identity...

I'll lose my identity if I think about climate change, I love my lifestyle my cars, I won't be the same person.

It won't benefit me...

It won't benefit me to think about climate change, I'll have to give up so much, I'll lose my business, what about our lovely holidays, my parents in India, my kids in Australia, collectively what about economic growth,

I'm too angry and hurt...

I'm too angry and hurt to think about climate change; notice that hurt and anger are always two sides of a coin

Consumerism is an area where I suggest we see our capacity for thought has been degraded. The narrative goes: 'I/we can't manage without stuff, (in the developed world) we can have it when we want it, and as much as we want and not think about the consequences'.

I would like to suggest that what we really need is a different kind of materialism in the sense of valuing, honouring and respecting what sustains us; an embodied mattering of ourselves and the ecosystems we depend on, instead of displacing our preoccupation with matter into consumerism.

In one of the more thoughtful debates about the recent riots, there was a recognition that we all shared in the materialism of the looters. The UNICEF report on the welfare of UK children⁶ is damning of the way goods are substituted for time and love, with no return in the way of happiness. In Clive Hamilton's book *Requiem for a Species* (ibid), he notes that even if in this generation we can curb our consumerism, *'the market has planted a poison pill deep within affluent society – a generation of children consciously moulded into hyper-consumers. In 1983 US companies spent \$100 million annually advertising to children. By*

the end of the boom they were spending more than \$17 billion. A British study found that for 1 in 4 children the first recognisable word they utter is a brand name.'

Mary-Jayne Rust is a Jungian Psychotherapist who draws on her experience from the consulting room. In her paper 'Consuming the Earth'⁷ she draws parallels between our over consumption and eating disorders.

It's as if we are stuck in a giant eating problem. We've trashed the family home and we've binged on all the reserves; oil and gas may well have peaked already, we overfish, clear-cut forests, and extract everything that can be sold for profit. Then we throw it up, undigested, into landfill sites.

Now we must rein ourselves in, go on a green diet, measure our ecological footprints, count our carbon calories, and watch carefully how much we consume. But this green diet won't work (she says) unless we also address the emotional hunger underneath the drive to consume.

She is addressing our dissociation from our sense of being part of a complex ecosystem on which we depend and which depends on us. We may know this but all too often we behave individually and collectively as if it were not the case.

So, in getting the message across we need to recognise that this may be traumatising, that the reactions in individuals and groups will be very varied and we are more likely to convey reality with compassion and understanding, and in a way that does not trigger others into reactivity if we have processed some of these issues ourselves.

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Judith Anderson MB ChB MRCPsych MA

Jungian Analytical Psychotherapist

Consultant Psychiatrist

judith.anderson@btinternet.com

References

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- ² Gerhardt S (2003) *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby's Brain* Brunner-Routledge UK
- ³ www.carbonconversations.org
- ⁴ <http://valuesandframes.org/>
- ⁵ Hamilton C (2010) *Requiem for a Species: Why we Resist the Truth about Climate Change* Earthscan UK
- ⁶ www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14899148 *Our children need time not stuff*
- ⁷ www.mjrust.net/?page_id=16

Other reading

Roszak T, Gomes ME and Kanner AD (1995) *Ecopsychology: Restoring the Earth, Healing the Mind* Sierra Club Books
www.ecopsychology.org.uk
www.reep.org The Religious Education and Environment Programme