



Healing collective heartbreak



Surviving the grief of climate change requires us to rediscover the intelligence of the unconscious, says Halina Pytlasinska

Are we too broken-hearted to face the truth about climate change? As therapists and coaches, can we help to heal our collective heartbreak?

During lockdown, grieving the demise of our bee population, I opened to the truth about our environmental emergency. Searching for solutions, I read David Attenborough's witness statement outlining the need for collective action within five years, if we are to avert annihilation.¹ My heart weeps for the species we have wiped out, for the farmers driven from their homes by drought or flood, for the toxic seas and the overarching threat of extinction.

When survivors of sexual abuse talk about their pain, they use words like numb, broken, frozen. This feels like my experience of eco-anxiety - cut adrift from the wisdom of the body, in limbic distress, trust shattered.

Self-worth and ecocide

Facing the painful truth about climate change triggers childhood wounding, the split from a sense of self as being an interdependent whole. In infancy, I was fascinated with all life forms - spiders, strawberries, dirt. Everything was explored in my parents' garden, where I crawled about. I didn't yet have a sense of separation and shame. Then, shaped narrowly into being a person, a sense of inter-being was lost. Personal identity became a lens through which all information was assimilated.

Facts about the environmental crisis are perceived through 'the story of me', by each apparent individual. This self-identity seems to inhibit the information from being acknowledged and acted upon. The individual cannot face the truth about climate change.

What can we trust? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines trust as a 'firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something'. I cannot trust myself to resolve this ecological disaster. I am too small. It triggers original trauma, the misconception that I am separate. Eco-anxiety lessens as I reach out to others and join organisations like Extinction Rebellion and the Climate Psychology Alliance. To find that trustworthy aspect of self, I determine to build mutual trust with others. Alone, I am powerless to avert ecological disaster; together we are powerful.

It feels important to act now, as we are running out of time, but fear is not a wholesome guide for restoration. I need a foundation

of trust to envisage a future and find the momentum to work towards renewal. I need to find a larger 'something' in which to place my trust. It is hard to trust humanity as we have created the problem.

Diversity and equality

We are dealing with fundamental trust issues in our communities. The former President of Ireland and UN Special Envoy on Climate Change Mary Robinson describes how this ecological disaster is interwoven with injustice and inequality.² The desire to dominate and control which has driven the climate crisis is a symptom of colonisation. To address climate change, we must also acknowledge systemic racism.

The botanist and poet Robin Wall Kimmerer recounts how land ownership is not recognised in indigenous cultures.³ Our Western concept of ownership is a false belief that denies the natural cycle of inter-being.

Pressurised by ever-increasing house prices, we work like drones, allowing ourselves to be bullied by workplace demands and misguided leaders. We have no time to devote to climate change issues, as we are too busy 'keeping the wolf from the door'. Striving to meet our own needs, we forget to share Earth's resources. Poverty, created by our social systems, evidences this breach of trust.

Collective denial

As a relationship therapist, I provide a space for couples to rebuild trust. When infidelity causes relationship breakdown, clients tell me the worst aspect of betrayal is the lie.

The lie, in climate terms, is our collective denial. Sally Weintrobe refers to this denial as living in a climate bubble.⁴ We keep the lie alive in social groups. As we emerge from our bubbles, we seek different company to share new-found eco-awareness. The

‘The more I love all of what I am and let go of false beliefs, the more present I am for clients, and the more confident I feel that together we can turn around climate change’

realisation that we have profoundly damaged the planet is shocking - like an abuser acknowledging the hurt they have caused to those they have violated.

The pain of betrayal reaches deep, triggering the inner wounded child. If your nearest and dearest is dishonourable, who can you ever trust? Where is safe? In the case of climate emergency, I feel like the betrayer and the betrayed. Can I ever trust myself or my own species again?

Affairs bring up the theme of powerlessness. The one who is betrayed did not give their permission. Clients often describe the way they felt compelled into an affair, acting out of character. A denied and shamed part of self was driving their action. In this climate crisis, the damage has been done before it is registered, and it continues to be done by others who we don't seem to have the power to stop. We protest, but the ancient woodland is still hacked down. If there is a hidden aspect of self driving the destruction, are the policy makers too ashamed to look internally? How can we hold up a mirror to help them to look at themselves?

Body awareness

When we work with clients who have poor body image, we work with the pain of the 'I-It relationship', a phrase coined by Martin Buber to describe our objectification of self and others.⁵ In her book, *The Body Is Not an Apology*, the poet Sonya Renee Taylor suggests that all prejudice is a projection of self-loathing towards our own bodies.⁶ When we reclaim a mind-body awareness our perspective changes. We treat ourselves and others with respect.

David Abram, the ecologist and philosopher, urges us to reclaim our animalistic senses, to immerse in nature, our true identity, rather than seeing animals and our own bodies as commodities.⁷ When we deny our physical being, we fail to appreciate the body of our planet.

I practise the ancient movement technique qigong, in between seeing clients, to help me attune to the wisdom in this body, the impersonal life force that feeds me and holds everything in the world.

I dwell on the message inscribed in our wedding rings, 'to totally love and deeply let go'. The more I love all of what I am and let go of false beliefs, the more present I am for clients, and the more confident I feel that together we can turn around climate change to avoid

SHUTTERSTOCK

extinction. It is hubris to think of these steps as saving the planet - we are saving ourselves. If we commit ecocide the planet will go on without us.

Restoring balance

Psychotherapeutic theories help us to become authentic. Can we combine theory with lived experience to help people face ecological crisis? Gabor Maté claims that mental health problems and addictions are caused by childhood trauma.⁸ Children neglected or abused do not have their feelings validated. Yet many of us who have been relatively nurtured throughout infancy still feel traumatised and at times cut off and lonely. Our trust in our true nature is shattered systemically during infancy, through the transgenerational belief that we are separate from the natural world. We are all, in a sense, addicted to the self.

This is described by John Welwood in his book *Perfect Love, Imperfect Relationships*.⁹ He outlines the way that we look for love outside of ourselves, through seeking approval, forgetting that the source of infinite love flows through us all. In the age of the individual, we believe we are separate from each other and from our environment. We have forgotten that our essence, our life force, is the love we seek. The climate bubble is deeply entwined with these false notions.

Therapeutic healing emanates not from what is said but from what is shared in the space between us. Driven to re-enact the past, or caught up in worries about the future, leaves

'Now that our professions have been accepted, are we afraid of breaking away from the climate bubbles of denial? Can we help lead society towards climate awareness?'

us stranded. Present and mindful, we help our clients to let go of perfectionism and trust in their own sense of being.

Therapeutic politics

Carl Rogers worked extensively with organisations and governments towards conflict transformation.¹⁰ Since I trained 30 years ago, therapy and coaching have carved out a trusted place in society. Now that our professions have been accepted, are we afraid of breaking away from the climate bubbles of denial? Can we trust ourselves and each other to help lead society towards climate awareness?

To trust is to have a sense of belonging, to feel at home in your heart and body, to express your authentic self with others, to feel held in love. We need to learn to trust our place in the world and our true nature of interdependence, to see the bigger picture rather than focusing on ourselves as being separate individuals.

We have objectified the environment as being 'out there' rather than realising we are the environment. We talk about our creations as being man-made, as if we are not part of the natural world.

In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer describes the culture of the Native American peoples.³ The Potawatomi identify themselves within a greater world view. They feel equal with other species, appreciating them as brothers and sisters rather than commodities. There was not a market economy but a gift economy, based on reciprocity and gratitude. People feel grateful that Mother Earth provides resources. Can we help to rekindle similar values?

New languages

Broken-hearted, yet inspired by Kimmerer, I attune to the languages of other species, listen wholeheartedly to birdsong, the whispering of leaves on the trees, the roar of the ocean. I pay attention to the natural world, and am inspired by a Mary Oliver poem, 'Wild Geese':¹¹

... *Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh
and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

Stuck in thought, I remain bewildered. Experiencing myself as part of nature and connected to the earth, I am re-energised.

Writing new stories

In *The Myth Gap*,¹² Alex Evans describes how we need new collective myths and legends to restore our trust in humanity - stories that connect humankind to the planet in a biodiverse life cycle.

Through the tradition of storytelling and sharing myths, indigenous peoples carried forward wisdom from the natural world. Kimmerer chronicles how we can learn from different species who survive by co-operating with each other. By acknowledging our dependence on earth, sunlight, rain, plants and other species, we find our place, beyond the confines of our own species, within the family of all life.

Kimmerer shares the lessons that she learned from the strawberry plant through observing and interacting with it. She recounts the way this knowledge was contained in the Native American creation myth of 'Sky Woman'. Strawberries grew from the place where she buried her beloved daughter. They arose from her heart, so are known as heart berries, the leader of berries, leading from the heart. A gift from the earth. In lockdown, I join a dream group, share a dream of strawberries, and think of Sky Woman.

A way forward

As therapists, we listen receptively; if we pay attention and are truly present, can we help our communities trust nature? Can we rediscover the intelligence of the unconscious through sharing metaphor and dreams? There is a greater intelligence beyond the human thinking mind. Thoughts cannot grasp life. Yet we remain biased towards thought form. As Kimmerer suggests, we need to learn a new language, to be open and receptive to other species, to allow nature's voice to guide our steps, as the indigenous peoples of this Earth have done for centuries.

When I tap into the wisdom of my dreams, I see signs of our ecocide. In a recurring nightmare from my childhood, all life forms move to a rhythmic heartbeat. The environment is sickly, appears yellow. Hollow straw men chase and threaten to eat me. I try to fly away. The straw men are reminiscent of the creatures from TS Eliot's poem 'The Hollow Men'.¹³ They consume but are never satiated. Our economy is based on consumerism. We are encouraged to feel needy rather than grateful for nature's abundance. We fail to

'We need to learn a new language, to be open to other species, to allow nature's voice to guide our steps, as the indigenous peoples of this Earth have done for centuries'

share the Earth's resources. Creating unjust and unequal economic systems drives the fear of lack.

The poet and philosopher John O'Donohue describes how we may venture forward in our animal being to:

*Leave our locked minds,
And with freed senses
Feel the earth
Breathing with us.*¹³

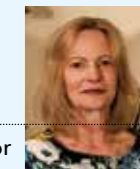
And so, I embrace my broken-heartedness, caught in a paradox, knowing that my child could witness the end of days, yet feeling at times a sense of wonder. I am learning how a broken heart lets in light and allows space for joy to enter. What I am is beautiful beyond words, the stuff of dreams, magically embodied, interacting with this wild planet. When I humbly sense my animal nature, acknowledge my interdependence with all species, I take my place in the family of things.

What can we do?

To have any impact, we need to respond at scale to climate change, shift our focus away from the individual. As a community of therapists and coaches, can we meet to explore new perspectives to help humanity? Aligned with the values of our ethical framework, using therapeutic skills to facilitate change, we can support groups in the transition from climate bubble to eco-awareness. The life force that courses through our bodies animates every creature and plant, all waterways and landscapes, each star in the sky. Can we help weave new stories that support humankind to restore ecological balance through a sense of inter-being? Can we learn to trust our greater nature, shed the concept of separation and embrace our place within the family of life? ■

REFERENCES

1. Attenborough D. *A Life on Our Planet*. London: Penguin; 2020.
2. Robinson M. *Climate justice: hope, resilience and the fight for a sustainable future*. London: Bloomsbury; 2018.
3. Kimmerer RW. *Braiding sweetgrass: indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. London: Penguin; 2020.
4. Weintrobe S. *Psychological roots of the climate crisis*. London: Bloomsbury; 2021.
5. Buber M. *I and thou*. London: Bloomsbury; 2013.
6. Taylor RS. *The body is not an apology* (2nd ed). London: Berrett-Koehler; 2021.
7. Abram D. *Becoming animal*. New York: Random House; 2011.
8. Benazzo M, Benazzo Z. *The wisdom of trauma*. California: SAND; 2020.
9. Welwood J. *Perfect love, imperfect relationships*. Massachusetts: Trumpeter; 2006.
10. Rogers C. *A way of being*. London: Houghton-Mifflin; 1995.
11. Astley N (ed). *Staying alive: real poems for unreal times*. Hexham: Bloodaxe; 2002.
12. Evans A. *The myth gap*. London: Penguin; 2017.
13. Eliot TS. *The complete poems and plays*. London: Faber & Faber; 2004.
14. O'Donohue J. *To bless the space between us*. New York: Doubleday; 2008.



About the author

Halina Pytlasinska MBACP (Accred) is an integrative, humanistic-transpersonal therapist in private practice, delivering couples and individual work, clinical supervision, CPD workshops and workplace training. Since qualifying 30 years ago, she has worked for charities, universities and colleges as a counsellor, trainer and lecturer. An eco-activist, Halina is passionate about developing an eco-therapeutic vision. halina@clipzonk.com