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Explorations in Climate Psychology Journal

Issue 7: May 2025

Cultivating community

FACING DIFFICULT TRUTHS

Climate Psychology Alliance

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To comment, share something or to contact the editors, including to suggest a contribution, please email: els@nepenthe.org.uk, or tobychown@gmail.com

Cover photo, Carnival in Montevideo, Uruguay, by Els van Ooijen

Cultivating community

By the Editorial Team

A Martian walking along any busy high street might be forgiven for assuming that humans don't like each other; as many of us appear actively to avoid contact by wearing headphones or looking at our phones. It illustrates how in Western society an extreme form of modernity has taken hold, which champions individualism above society, with disastrous consequences for our mental health and general sense of wellbeing. The reality, however, is that we do need each other, particularly now that we are in an ecological and climate crisis as well as political and social emergencies. There is an important role for psychological professionals to play in developing practices and trainings to support people to regain a sense of community, belonging and sharing. In this issue, we therefore focus on the importance of cultivating community and connection.

We start with an account of developing a climate café programme for people across Australia; online and face-to-face. Christie Wilson illustrates the importance of connecting people and creating communities, especially for those who feel isolated in their climate distress. Often, in Australia, people have directly experienced climate-related disasters, such as bushfires, floods and extreme rainfall. This has led to the development of a trauma-informed and culturally aware climate café facilitator programme, alongside an ongoing peer-learning space, called InterVision. Reported outcomes of the climate cafés include increased political engagement and intergenerational dialogues.

Rachel Cakebread convened a group dialogue in which participants reflected on the nature of communities and how in Indian, Latin American, or African contexts, people are not isolated, but live intergenerationally. This contrasts with the Western, capitalist, way of living, where people are often not born into a community and so need to put a great deal of effort into finding people and communities where they feel they belong. Other themes emerged, including the value of art, the expression of feelings, authenticity, truth and relationship.

Photo by Toby Chown

In 'Dreaming into the dark', Toby Chown writes how "all art is basically a form of sharing", then shares some of the poems from his recently published book of the same name, within a reflection on the way community forms, and is felt in the human and more-than-human world.

In her short story, Els van Ooijen tells the story of the journey of a frozen snowflake from the high mountains to the sea, reflecting on the threats of climate change as changing water cycles disrupt traditional ways of living.

Mrittika Bhattacharya shares her feminist participatory research with communities of women in the Indian Sundarban region; an environmentally vulnerable area with frequent cyclones and floods. As most of the men move to work in the cities, the women are left to look after and feed their families in a harsh and precarious environment. They do this through a strong sense of community and sisterhood.

Themes of community formation in response to ecological precariousness also feature in Rembrandt Zegers's review of Jem

Pictured left: Food Forest working bee, Wangal Country, Sydney Australia. Photo by Sally Gillespie

Bendell's book, *Breaking together*. Bendell argues that collapse of our current system is a process, not an event, and that it is already in progress. After examining the root causes for collapse, he advocates collaborative dialogues and work that supports self-reflection and re-invention, as old systems constrict and fail. This is followed by Tim Pilgrim's poem, 'Sea Ceremony', which evokes ritual to highlight the interplay of day and night, human and more than human.

Paul Hoggett interviews Julian Manley about his involvement in workers' cooperatives in Spain and Preston ('the Preston Model'); an involvement which was, in part, sparked by social dreaming. Although originally not particularly environmental in its goals, in practice the devolving of decision-making to the local level has led to a 'massively' reduced carbon footprint in Preston, offering encouragement for other communities.

The last section of the journal includes Tree Staunton's tribute to Donna Orange (1944 -2024), as well as three book reviews. In Cli-Fi Corner, Maggie Turp reviews Rachel Kushner's novel *Creation lake*, about the infiltration of a community of climate activists by a spy; Cath Falco reviews *Climate, psychology, and change: new perspectives on psychotherapy in an era of global disruption and climate anxiety*, edited by Steffi Bednarek; while Els van Ooijen reviews *Being a therapist in a time of climate breakdown,* by Judith Anderson et al. The two edited collections provide a wealth of stimulation for rethinking and reconfiguring psychological traditions and practices that have been largely individualistically focused, into more systemic and collective frameworks. This ongoing work lies at the core of CPA's agenda.

We hope you enjoy this expansive issue. Please write in to us with feedback, or if you feel you have something to contribute for our next issue, due in October 2025.

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Photo by Els van Ooijen

Climate cafés across Australia

By Christie Wilson

I acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People as the First Nations, Traditional Custodians of Australia. I acknowledge their connection to land, air, sea and continuing culture. I pay my respect to Elders past and present and walk alongside the emerging leaders of today. I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded, and I grew, live, love and work on Aboriginal Land.

The birth of PSC's climate café programme

Climate cafés are carefully facilitated gatherings designed to foster supportive connections and meaningful conversations about climate change, biodiversity loss, environmental degradation, climate justice and the broader impacts of the climate crisis. These spaces invite participants to listen deeply – to each other and to themselves. They provide a contained and facilitated environment, where individuals can lower their defences, allowing them to face difficult truths with openness. In these shared experiences of loss and distress, participants find both solace and strength, confronting the realities of ecological collapse, while fostering collective resilience.

Hearing others' stories helps people reframe their own – bringing renewed energy, clarity and a vision for engagement. It can also bring deep reflection on one's life. The ripple effects of these insights extend from frontline activism to everyday acts of care – how we tend to our local environment, make financial choices, vote and live our lives in ways that support living systems.

Climate Café, Narrm, Melbourne. Photo by Chris Grose

> *Not only have the climate cafés provided a space to express feelings of climate grief and distress, but I have learnt so much from listening to others speak about their experiences.* **PARTICIPANT**

In 2022, Psychology for a Safe Climate (PSC), an Australian health promotion charity supporting people psychologically through the climate crisis, launched a climate café programme. I was one of the initial facilitators, InterVision mentors and the programme manager, following my experience of facilitating climate cafés in Extinction Rebellion global support. The programme began simply, as a monthly online gathering for people across Australia.

> *People working in climate and energy normally only share edited versions of their fears and feelings about the climate crisis, which can be lonely and prevent processing those feelings. The climate café was a revelatory and healing experience.* **PARTICIPANT**

Early on, it became clear that many attendees felt deeply isolated in their climate distress. Some had endured direct climate-related disasters – the devastating 2019-20 bushfires, followed by floods, extreme rainfall, Covid-19 lockdowns and the escalating risk of further disasters. Others struggled with the global climate emergency and the failure of political leadership.

Climate change was no longer a distant future threat – it was already at Australians' front doors. A 2023 Climate Council report found that 80% of Australians had experienced at least one climate-related disaster since 2019: 63% had faced heatwaves, 47% flooding, 42% bushfires, 36% drought, 29% destructive storms and 8% landslides. The climate cafés became spaces where these statistics turned into real, lived stories.

Holding space for climate grief and trauma

As a climate-aware psychotherapist and facilitator with many years of experience, I was not immune to the deep emotional weight carried into these cafés. One story that stayed with me was from a woman who had been in bushland during the fires, listening to acres of animals screaming. After three days, the bush fell silent – a chilling relief that the suffering had ended, yet a haunting reminder of loss. The suffering had ended – but at what cost? It was estimated that three billion animals, including mammals, reptiles, birds and frogs, were killed or displaced during the megafires.

As someone who has always loved animals – especially Australia's unique wildlife – this story cut deep. I live with an Alpine dingo named Sky. Listening to these accounts reinforced the importance of community spaces where we can process such profound grief. We need ways to collectively hold our heartbreak, to engage in grief rituals, and to transform sorrow into connection and care.

Developing a trauma-informed climate café model

> *"The opportunity to connect around feelings rather than around constant doing and action is a rare and wonderful thing in the climate movement. To slow our bodies, hearts and breath, to be together and to process the grief of the climate crisis, is a vital yet frequently neglected part of the change in climate justice movements, and PSC brings enormous skill and deep care to holding space for this through their climate cafés.* **PARTICIPANT**

Recognising the intensity of the trauma, grief and climate emotions arising in climate cafés, we successfully sought funding to develop a trauma-informed, culturally aware facilitator training. This training incorporated anti-oppression and decolonising practices and honoured Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wisdom, particularly the tradition of yarning circles. These circles, practised for millennia, foster learning, respect and trust through deep listening and community sharing. In 2023, we trained 10 climate-aware practitioners from PSC's practitioner membership and directory. We also created an ongoing peer-learning space called InterVision, where facilitators could reflect, support each other, and explore the challenges and stories emerging in cafés. This space has become one of the richest sources of learning for facilitators; fostering continuous growth and adaptation.

As the training expanded to the public, climate cafés reached an even wider range of practitioners: educators, scientists, researchers, social workers, mental health professionals, community leaders, doctors and activists. Participants included BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color), LGBTQIA+ individuals, young people, parents, older women, neurodivergent and disabled individuals, those with chronic illness, regional and rural Australians, farmers, activists and scientists. The most consistent feedback was a profound sense of relief: people no longer felt alone in their climate grief.

Photo by Christie Wilson.

Climate cafés as a community-led mental health response

Community mental health calls for the design of support systems that are collective rather than individualistic, and that are flexible in response to feedback and changing conditions. PSC's climate café model, with its emotional and relational infrastructure, was the first of its kind in Australia, reaching those in need of them most, such as climate activists, young people and researchers. Its pioneering approach both facilitates emotional support and nurtures resilience. Through participant feedback and facilitator insights, the model continues to evolve, ensuring it remains responsive to the communities it serves.

> *"Here, we can be who we are in this world of fluid emergent change, listening and maybe reflecting on where we presently are. Held warmly in this group, observations bubble to the surface, and we breathe together, stronger in our common grounding.*
> **PARTICIPANT**

Climate cafés create spaces where those who feel profound loss can share their experiences and find solidarity, rather than suffering in silence. In Darwin/Garramilla (on Larrakia Country), a climate café has been running for a year, consistently attended by activists and environmental advocates frustrated by political inaction. One young volunteer with Australian Parents for Climate Action attended the local Senate inquiry, probing $1.5 billion in federal funding promised to a Northern Territory gas processing precinct. Speaking out about her community's climate anxiety to lawmakers, she said: "I know I'm not alone in my community. We now have climate cafés run by volunteers, offering a space to share our feelings about the climate crisis." Her testimony highlighted for the attending Senators that even in Australia's remote regions, people were motivated to gather and create their community spaces to process environmental grief. Her testimony was inscribed into the parliamentary record.

> *Providing climate cafés to the community in Garramilla/Darwin over the last 18 months has been a very rewarding process. For those willing to acknowledge their distress around the climate and polycrisis, the cafés provide a much-needed outlet to share their experience and connect with others. My sense is that a growing section of the population in the Northern Territory recognise the need for, and benefits of, such opportunities.*
>
> **CHARLIE WARD, FACILITATOR**

Climate cafés are also addressing 'Reef Grief'; helping people channel their grief into connection and resilience. Research from CSIRO (the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation), the University of Exeter and James Cook University found that half of those who live, visit or work on the Great Barrier Reef experience profound grief over its decline. With the reef experiencing its fifth mass bleaching event in eight years, feelings of loss and grief are intensifying. Climate cafés are providing a sanctuary and container for those at the frontline of the reef's destruction; including parents mourning that their children may never see a thriving reef, and divers reckoning with the reality of once-pristine ecosystems in collapse. Yolanda Waters, a marine social scientist, described her recent experience witnessing coral bleaching as "confronting and heartbreaking".

> *I feel so fortunate to live on one of the 900 islands in the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage Area. Climate cafés offer a chance to stop, take stock and process our emotional responses to these threatened, precious places together.* **CHLOE WATFERN, FACILITATOR**

In Lutruwita/Tasmania, where climate impacts are often underestimated, climate cafés are opening up a space to express ecological grief over dying forests, disappearing kelp forests and unprecedented ocean heatwaves. Facilitator and ecologist Therese Smith has worked with her school principal to introduce climate cafés into their school, supporting young people who are acutely aware of their changing world. Parents also regularly seek guidance for helping their children cope with climate distress.

In the Australian Capital Territory, traditional Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country, a group of lawyers, environmental campaigners and land-care professionals came to a climate café facilitated by myself and author Tim Hollo. Participants' feedback emphasised the need for a process to talk about feelings in response to the state of the world, as well as the psychological impacts of climate science and blatant political inaction.

> *Climate cafés are a tremendous space for sharing our feelings about the climate crisis and the world we find ourselves in. As someone who's been involved in campaigning for the last 25 years and who has done a lot of very direct facilitation, it's quite unlike anything else I've experienced in its openness and freedom, which enables a very genuine space of sharing to emerge. I'm still learning so much about it, but all of my experiences have shown a lot of promise for a very different way of showing up for this enormous, existential challenge.*
>
> **TIM HOLLO, FACILITATOR**

Through the climate café programme, PSC is helping groups and communities navigate the emotional weight of the climate crisis/polycrises. Too often, emotions are seen as private and secondary to action – but our feelings reveal what we care about and for whom. Climate cafés support people in voicing their care for each other and the living world, sense making and fertilising the ground for greater engagement and collaborations. Only through real community connection can we create new narratives about how to live, work, raise children and advocate with compassion, purpose and meaning, given the depth of uncertainty in these turbulent times.

The growth of climate cafés and their impact

Climate cafés continue to grow in response to community needs, with new facilitators stepping up from a variety of backgrounds in diverse locations and contexts. These spaces provide much-needed emotional support, while also nurturing deeper engagement with climate action. As facilitators hold space for grief, anger and uncertainty, they find this also creates openings for forms of hope, connection, and resilience.

In some communities, the cafés have led to greater political engagement, as participants feel emboldened to advocate for climate policies and share their stories in public forums. In others, they have become a bridge to intergenerational dialogue, where younger and older people come together to share their experiences, wisdom and fears about the changing world.

The model is ever evolving, shaped by the lived experiences of participants and the contexts of the cafés. The strength of climate cafés lies in their adaptability – whether in urban centres, regional communities, frontline activist spaces or schools, they offer a vital meeting place for collective emotional processing. As more people awaken to the reality of the climate crisis, these spaces will become ever-more essential, helping to sustain both individual wellbeing and the broader movement for climate justice.

Christie Wilson is a climate-aware therapist and the Climate and Mental Health Manager at Psychology for a Safe Climate, where she leads the climate-aware practitioner professional development and climate café programmes. She has extensive experience in facilitating trauma-informed group processes around climate emotions, and in supporting climate leaders' mental health.

Cultivating community

Convened by Rachel Cakebread

For this issue, our group dialogue brought together CPA members Rachel Cakebread, Antony Guillemin, Amruta Huddar, Deepa Mirchandani, Rebecca Nestor and Maggie Turp.

Our conversation began with a reflection from each participant on the theme of 'cultivating community', which led us to belonging and the difficulties of building community within existing capitalist systems.

Antony: Are our communities just the physical places we live in, or are they within the people we engage with and spend time with? How can community develop organically when everyone is too busy or lacking in resources to contribute?

I feel a level of frustration as to which communities people choose to be part of or not. I come from an academic perspective, so I can see where problems are coming from, the cracks. But not everyone is looking at it through the same lens. I want people to understand but that's not how these things develop. That's how you lose trust.

Does that traditional community really exist anymore, when everyone comes from somewhere else, they have lived here for a year or two and work outside the places where they live?

Deepa: We've got to be clear where and which cultures we're talking about when we say 'we' and 'our'. What you describe sounds familiar to me from a British context, but that's not the majority world context. Growing up in a British but Indian culture, or a Latin or African culture, there is intergenerational living and there are interactions like responsibility for childcare or food.

I don't know my neighbours in London, but coming from a culture where there is an open-door policy, that feels different to me. When we talk about isolation, what are the cultural roots of that? What are we losing by living in these isolated pockets? My conflict personally is that my lived reality culturally goes against who I am, which is jarring.

Maggie: My situation is like yours Antony, except I'm much older. I moved five years ago and I had to actively create community for myself, to find places where I felt happy and I belonged. In urban Bristol, I didn't find those things in my street, I found them through doing things I'm interested in with other people: on an allotment; in a guitar class; in events at the library. I think there is something about urban living in the West that means you have to make a big effort to have places where you belong. It doesn't just come from living somewhere and knowing people all your life. It's very atomising.

Amruta: I'm hearing it's an individual responsibility to find community, but why? We are humans who are born and survive when we are in community. There is something wrong with the way our economic system works. It is easier to pay for every commodity, everything at our house from the water we use to the soil that comes into the garden. Living in India, for my grandparents, everything was shared. You only used how much you needed, not how much you could buy. You kept how much you needed and then if there was a surplus, you shared it.

Wild daisies, Wanstead: community of beings. Photo by Rachel Cakebread

I think the world we live in now is so fragmented. In the race to survive, there is no way to form community in the traditional sense, because nobody wants to get to know each other, because if you do, you have to be vulnerable. If you're vulnerable with each other, it means you have to care and might have to spend your resources, and therefore lose out. That's where my anger at systems comes in. When we're paying for everything and everybody wants to own as much resources as possible, how can we cultivate communities?

Rebecca: I am noticing a recurrent theme of focusing on the difficulties and the barriers, a sense of shared horror or despair. I wanted to acknowledge it because one of the things that I think is important in creating community is trying to hear what's happening at a feeling level for people.

Deepa: For me, the question is where does collective belonging exist anymore? How are we going to get people to collectively care about the planet if there is no shared responsibility and believing in something bigger than ourselves? I think there's something about the separation from faith, where you are meant to be in service of the collective, that worries me. Where is the idea of being in service being cultivated?

Rachel: It feels like we're believing in the scarcity mindset and therefore there isn't space to feel that you can fulfil other people's needs, because you think your own needs aren't being met. The system perpetuates scarcity. You never get to a place of abundance. If we do focus on what we have, are we able to be more of the things we want to be?

Maggie: Perhaps being older than other people, I do find places to be of service and I think many retired people do. Our allotment has a growing together scheme where we grow food that we give to food banks and co-ops. My son, who's more like some of your ages, has such a different experience. He's got two teenage kids and a very demanding job, so he doesn't have time to do much more. There is a way in which the neoliberal system has us work so hard to get enough money to rent, or to try and buy, to pay nursery fees. It's so hard not be on a wheel in a cage isn't it?

I get so much pleasure and satisfaction from working on the allotment with other people and I'm aware that for people who work full time that's not even a possibility. So there's a real divide between retired and working age people to take into account.

Rebecca: That evokes the question of what's the role of elders in community? We've got to come together and listen to each other,

Work on allotment, bountiful Bristol. Photo by Maggie Turp

to think together. To do that we need to feel trust and interest. It doesn't have to be about age, but there is an elder role, where I can ask the playful questions, bring in the absurd. To help people feel they're being held and attention is given to their needs that might enable us to be able to connect with each other. We're in such an absurd world now and everything is turning upside down and back to front, maybe there's something about leaning into and playing with that.

I'm very touched by what Amruta was saying about it being hard to feel generous or inclined towards reciprocity because we're worried about survival. And if we're worried about survival, then all the worst aspects of our ourselves come to the surface. Elders need to be there to help us access other parts of ourselves.

Antony: For me, I can feel I'm more reciprocal or generous than anyone around me. When I'm acting in a reciprocal way towards people it's not always received. It doesn't feel right to me not to be generous or reciprocal, but it's so rarely returned, it creates a layer around what I do or how I interact with people that I don't want to be there.

Deepa: I had a similar conversation with someone else about how to show up continually with grace, when you can get increasingly frustrated or disheartened, or pissed. He talks about radical love, about how to show up without having expectations of what the other person can give. Or how to show up when you disagree with somebody. And that's a big part of community building. It's nice to live in our pockets of people who agree with us, but how do we build bridges towards the people who we disagree with?

I think it goes back to abundance. It's okay for you to do you, but I'm going to do me. I'm going to show up with this act of love or service and you will have the capacity to receive it in whatever way you can. Because otherwise you're diminishing yourself and denying who you are because of the reactions of other people. And you end up numbing yourself. Then how do you show up? Well, a little bit smaller.

Maggie: There's something here about self-care. Perhaps there are places you describe as your pocket, where you get nurtured because you know you're with like-minded people. But there are also places where you hold a stance of understanding and generosity where the other person may not. You need food from one to continue with the other.

Radical love Findhorn (source: Deepa Mirchandani)

Trust, art and power dynamics

The body as expression: Amruta Huddar

Amruta: One way to cultivate community is through art. There's something so profound about art that lets you connect in shared feelings when the words aren't there. It also allows for uncomfortable conversations to be had, because there has been a shared connection. Binaries or different opinions can exist in the same space.

As an artist, dancer and a therapist who works with the body, I often find fragmentation that exists in the world, also exists within us. There are parts we are disconnected from. For example, with the rise of anxiety and other mental health issues, it seems the connection is lost with the body. We see the same thing elsewhere: that we have lost connection with nature, with the world around, that we're only here (heads) and not as much here (our hearts, our bodies).

When we come together to create something – sing a song, read poetry, move together – those are the times when I feel the connection between us and the world around is bridged. There aren't enough spaces where that happens. It's also a good way to connect without trying to convince somebody community is needed.

Deepa: I think there's also something about weaving things in without telling people what it is. There's something undercover about it. Creativity, play or bringing in the personal is part of creating interactions for connection. Art has a role to play, without people necessarily thinking about it.

Antony: I work in the community I live in, for an organisation which is trying to rebuild connections between people in the neighbourhood. There are lots of people who have lived here for a long time and they don't trust me. They've had organisations in the past parachute in and then disappear. People switch off as soon as I start talking about this organisation, because they've heard it all before. Even though they want to do all the right things, it can be hard to bring art and build relationships because people have learned not to trust those relationships in the past. It's not a problem you can throw money at. Getting over the threshold is a big challenge.

Deepa: It's meeting people where they're at, not using development language. Just saying to people, what do you need? And then it's not about building confidence, building connection, building community. It's about bringing people together and showing up consistently.

Maggie: This reminds me of the classic barriers to individual psychotherapy. You need huge empathy for the fact that people have been disappointed many times. The prospect of being disappointed yet again is so painful, they don't want to hope. That is the understanding to bring and even articulate. It's very hard to risk being disappointed again.

Amruta: It's reminding me of a project I worked on where we were trying to reform one of the oldest psychiatric institutions in India. I was working for a philanthropic organisation which provided funding to the government, and I came with a very corporate structure in my role. The position the philanthropic organisation held was they were giving so much money, it had to work, I had to engage. I felt so much pushback, the community not wanting to listen to us. We had protests. I think the role and the power you hold becomes very important when you're cultivating community.

Rebecca: That's a lovely example of what we can't escape. You couldn't get out of the role you held, even though you wanted to. But maybe there is something that can be done through naming the experience that is behind people's refusal to engage. I think by inviting in expressions of what happened in the past, a huge transformation can occur. There's resistance to doing that because of the pressure to 'get things done' and to 'stay positive'. But when people are able to say, "That was really shit, I hated it and I'm furious", by expressing those emotions there is a possibility of change. That's what happens in psychotherapy if it's going well. There's an opening up of the ability to do things differently that arises from having been heard.

Deepa: There's also not having all the answers. I think organisations in the power dynamic of "We've got the money; we've got the will" need to pay attention to the interactions that must happen for confidence to be built. Whether it's Gloucester or villages in India, people are fed up of being asked for information and then nothing happens – of wasting their time.

There's also something about authenticity, honour and respect that builds trust. You can't go in and say, we're going to create trust in the community. What's your plan for cultivating that? What are we willing to put in without a harvest (to take the cultivation metaphor full circle)? What points of interaction are contributing to the belief that maybe you'll do what you say?

Antony: Time is a big factor, isn't it? In our capitalist societies, time is scarce, everything has to happen now. These systems are in conflict.

Rebecca: It's also really tough to be in an organisation that is making mistakes, especially if you have really seen the value of making a promise or commitment. Then you find that the organisation where you work has done something which you said they wouldn't, or it hasn't done something you said they would. It's a painful place to be. The tendency or temptation is to withdraw, to hide and blame, when what's needed is the showing up.

Task, relationship and unheard emotion

Rebecca: How can the dynamic between tasks and relationships in groups or communities be generative rather than oppressive? It feels as though there's tension between the two. In a group it's almost special if you don't have a task, so you can just be together. On the other hand, a task provides a shifting of attention so that it's not too overwhelming to be together. The idea that all the secrets come out when you're doing the washing up, or driving in the car, because you don't have to look at each other. Or the psychoanalytic idea of play being at the edge of something and something emerging out of play; which you can think of as a task, but not one that is overwhelming or capitalist.

Deepa: I worked for a global network of social entrepreneurs and my job was to get people to come together for collective systems change. Challenges arose as we started with the tasks and didn't

spend enough time on getting to know each other and our shared values. So we began creating points of interaction like: what do we know about each other's lived experience?; what do we know about each other's challenges?

It was interesting that there were people who'd been in each other's orbits, but it wasn't until they were part of this community that people connected on a personal level because the container was different. They got to be in spaces and share what they were going through in a really personal way; they were vulnerable.

Maggie: It keeps popping up in my mind that there are also people who build very strong communities around things which we find difficult. Was the Ku Klux Klan a community? Are the anti-vaxxers who demonstrated also communities? I don't want to idealise community; that it's always for a better purpose. People are building communities with very different agendas to ours.

Antony: Something I'm exploring is the loss of a commons of knowledge; a common set of ideas that we all accept and agree exist, or are real, that have really disappeared, especially since the onset of Covid. Anti-vaxxers and the Ku Klux Klan are agreed on a set of knowledges they see as real. I think that can be done for good, but it needs to be built because it's being eroded by Global North capitalism, which is actively opposed to community and Indigenous knowledges. How can we rebuild a diverse range of knowledges which also interconnect and agree on what is real? How we do that when lots of methods of communication are privately owned is difficult.

Amruta: I would categorise community as where there's a shared emotion with which people are fighting for something. When you come together in that shared emotion, something is created. I often think loss or fear, when shared, builds strong communities as it makes people want to hold on to each other so that they don't feel lonely. The second wave of Covid was really bad in India with a lot of loss, and I see bonds have strengthened with people trying to do more tasks, experiences and trips than before. Of course, it's on us when we judge the intentions of communities as good or bad, or attach other labels to them.

Deepa: The danger lies in us putting value judgments on the good and the bad because we further divide and then don't understand where others come from. I have many people in my life who live in the US and their brains are boggled about how they know so many people who voted for Trump. People that they love, who are looking after their kids, or that they work with. They're having to have conversations now, otherwise they're isolating themselves.

Antony: That's the 'Make America Great Again' community. A community of people who believe in the same ideas, coming together around the loss and grief at the collapse of the American dream. Grief that's there to be harnessed.

Rebecca: It's worth paying attention to these emotions because there mostly isn't space to put those feelings into words and to have them heard and held. And I do think that we're human beings and if we don't get a listening ear and containment, we put them into a task. Then a community comes together around a shared task infused by loss and grief that is unavailable to be thought about. It's a hill that people are going to die on because it's so infused with unbearable emotions.

Maggie: I think, when we look to build community in the service of ideals that we share, we're not operating in a neutral space.

Trees in Derby: Knowledge commons (source: Rachel Cakebread)

There's all kinds of people building other kinds of communities and all those communities are coming into existence. It's very complex.

We also haven't mentioned the climate crisis and ecological collapse. I think one of the great losses is a loss of hope that the future will continue to get better. When I was young, there was the idea we could have an education. My parents had been in the war, and they were damaged by it, so it wasn't a very emotionally nurturing environment. So, I also had the feeling life could be better for my kids than it had been for me. We were on an upwards trajectory that I now feel is completely lost. I think nobody really believes the future is going to be better for the next generation. That colours everybody's mood and is an unconscious source of resentment or anger, of the need to find somebody whose fault it is.

Rebecca: And that loss is in difficult ways characteristic of the Global North, woven up with entitlement and exceptionalism and an expectation that the laws of physics will be suspended for us. I feel what you've described myself, and we need to offer each other space to express those feelings. I'm also conscious this may be an entirely Global North phenomenon, and not the experience for many communities from where resources have been extracted.

Antony: I think what people have lost is not a faith in the future but hope that we can change it; as if it's out of our control.

Deepa: We've created a mess. It feels like the Earth will be fine, the real challenge is with the human. It's an acknowledgement of our role in it and if we were better connected, if we had a sense of community and of connectivity to nature, then our relationship to the Earth would be in a much healthier place.

Separation, symbiosis and practice

Amruta: When a child is born there's the umbilical cord, but that's not the only form of connection. There is the intersubjective realm that a mother and a child also share. If something goes wrong in that intersubjective realm, the child grows up and perceives the world and other relationships in a certain way. It is that connection that feels severed; the connection to the world outside, the ecology or the ecosystem. It's that connection that needs to be mended more than anything else. I think it's giving space to acknowledge that it's there first of all; that itself is a far-off conversation for some people.

Deepa: We talked earlier about reciprocity. But symbiosis is another side of that. I need you to be successful in Gloucestershire, Antony, just as much as Rachel in Spain and Amruta in India. Our successes are interdependent. If we don't recognise that we're nurturing each other then it all breaks down.

Maggie: I think this exploration is an act of hope that we can retain some compassion for each other's struggles and try in some small way to be there for each other. I don't want to get controversial about collapse, but I do think that we can hope to retain this kind of humanity and care for each other. That feels an important thing to hope for.

Rebecca: And to practise. Both in the sense of rehearsing for something in the future and as a daily practice that becomes part of us. I think something that fosters human community but also fosters reconnection with the more than human is where we're at. At the beginning of climate cafés, we speak from, or through, or with, this feather or stone or leaf that I have in my hand, to provide the kind of third space that a task gives. It also provides that connection with this world that we've lost the umbilical connection to. When they are helpful in fostering community, it's because of that process at the beginning. But they aren't always. There can also be suppressed competition and frustration. People being polite to each other, but not really listening. And I want to honour that as well; that's part of the reality of being in a community.

Rachel: To struggle and try but know it's not always going to work. The West may have lost its connection to the more-than-human world, but others haven't. Reciprocity is one principle of Indigenous peoples. So we can be reciprocal, but what if we continue to extract and pollute? I think the struggle is to continue to see the whole. Do we need to like everyone in community and do we like all the parts of ourselves? Maybe we need to struggle with that and accept a messier place.

Deepa: There's something about assuming community is a good thing in providing belonging and connection. And that we're better individuals when part of something bigger, whatever that may be. From book clubs to putting our hands in the soil together, or just showing up. I am better today because of all of you. I'd like to honour and respect that. For however brief or long you are part of something, I think we go away collectively better because we're individually touched, and I feel grateful for that.

Climate café listening circle table. Photo by Rebecca Nestor

Rachel Cakebread (she/her) is part of the Explorations team and a climate café listening circle facilitator, exploring how regenerative practices and imagination can pattern different futures.

Antony Guillemin (he/him) is an academic in political economies, post-capitalist and sustainable futures, with an interest in building societies for universal wellbeing and centring the right of all nature (including humans) to exist beyond any justification of its value.

Amruta Huddar is a creative arts psychotherapist, mental health entrepreneur and Indian classical dancer, integrating embodiment, symbolism and expressive arts in her work. She is deeply influenced by her identity as an Indian classical dancer, alongside other artistic practices.

Deepa Mirchandani is the founder of Deep & Meaningful, focusing on social justice and societal transformation through creating collaborations for systems change.

Rebecca Nestor is the CPA co-chair, a facilitator and researcher supporting people and organisations in facing the climate and ecological crisis. She trains facilitators of climate café listening circles.

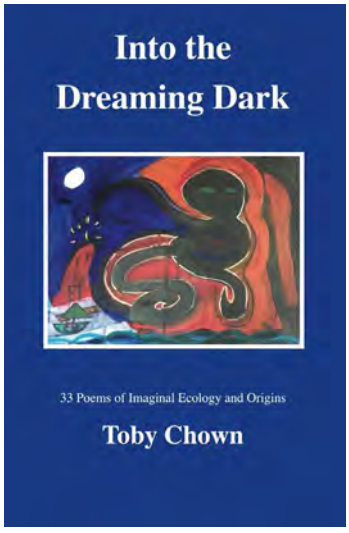
Maggie Turp edits the *Explorations* 'Cli-Fi Corner', contributes through conferences and journal papers to the discussion of attachment to the other-than-human and offers therapeutic support to people distressed by climate and ecological issues, as part of a CPA team.

Dreaming into the dark

Text and images by Toby Chown

They demolished the old market and built luxury flats on top. They took away the benches on New Road because the homeless souls drinking, begging and sleeping there were frightening the tourists outside the Theatre Royal. The Victorian water fountain outside the Royal Pavilion runs dry, its bowl cracked. The youth centre and the ambulance station are abandoned; good only for late-night adventures for teenagers or squalid shelter for the desperate and addicted. Security guards patrol the private green areas that surround the newly built offices and flats.

Communities need communal spaces, water, benches. But they also need to be imagined, as quite what a community feels like or consists of resists definition. I spent five years collecting and writing poems for *Into the dreaming dark: 33 poems of imaginal ecology*.



It felt like a solitary book. Its initial inspiration was a fast of four days and four nights, which took place alone in a very old woodland near Dartmoor. Sitting in this thinned state, entering into a deep life review, becoming slow to the roots and beetles, the pulsing hum of the forests' web, the shadowy illuminations and sudden terrors of its dark branched night, wracked with dreams and memories, songs, surrounded by the dead corpses of trees, ticks, crows and squirrels, the occasional rat gnawed bones of deer. Entering into that wild rose state, one poem yearns:

> *To sway all night with the wild owl's cry*
> *amongst a tangle of roots,*
> *Ferment your soul within the dark cauldron sky.*
>
> *For a tongue*
> *as articulate as hawthorn.*
>
> *For the eyes that flash silver as*
> *coins under the full moon at midnight*
> *In the telling of my story.*
>
> (From 'Taste the Wild Red Rose')

The four days and nights were spent alone, but in the company of other intrepid souls, also alone in other parts of the wild wood. Guides prepared us for the journey, watched over at a distance at base camp and helped us to come back to life afterwards.

The return is the hardest part of a journey into the dreaming dark. There is both an intense hunger for, and a deep denial of, the kinds of experiences that undergird the rational. I think this simultaneous hunger and denial runs through most people; or certainly through me. I feel it in the presence of artists very clearly. One of the poems, 'Mirror Without a Frame', speaks to the experience of hearing a woman sing:

> *In this haunted world,*
> *there's always*
> *more ghosts to purge,*
> *more medicine to swallow.*
>
> *More ghosts grow*
> *to take their place.*
> *But for those of us*
> *who won't be cured,*
> *sickness cracks the heart open*
> *to what's always just beyond our grasp;*
>
> *that glimpse of the world's broken promise:*
> *the mirror's net of woven silver,*
> *the tangle at the water lilies root,*
> *the black mess of cables by her feet.*
>
> (From 'Mirror Without a Frame')

The dreaming dark is beautiful, but beauty hurts, it leaves a mark. Leaving the human community behind to enter the dreaming dark, turns out not to be so solitary as it seems. We can expand our sense of community to include other animals and plants. We can have a sense of places as persons, a location for a member of a community.

Communities don't just need benches and water fountains, they need old crumbling hill forts and temples to forgotten gods, copses of ancient beech trees littered with sheep dung, and phallic lords and ladies poking up. One of the great losses of our times is the loss of wild places, where we can renew our connection to the pulse

1. Chown, T. (2024). *Into the dreaming dark, 33 poems of imaginal ecology and origins.* Brighton: Doplin Books.

and hum of the life within and around us, surrounded by the majesty of what happens when it's allowed to. The places so often fenced off, overgrazed, hemmed in, concreted over, signposted off. If we can't dream in wild places we are in trouble.

A lot of *Into the dreaming dark* was to do with what kind of art – what dreams, poems, songs, stories and artwork – come to you if you soak yourself in moss and twilight. Once, I walked alone from Chanctonbury Ring to Blackcap. My body, city softened, unused to the rigours of 20-mile walks, responded by falling into an unstoppable fever of walking, and the old blackthorn-topped hill winked at me and gave me a poem:

Blackcap, a high point on the South Downs Way

Grandmother Blackcap
and her many wild faces
Tough as the moss
with her head full of daisies
Old as the bark on the broken oak tree
Smooth as the breeze though the high blackthorn leaves;

High Lady Blackcap
and her many wild faces
Queen of the Downs
of the wild purple hazey

Green as the hillside
White as a bone

Fingers of moss
Dew of alone

Nectar of seashells
Raised to the sky

Mouth full of kisses
And wishes and time

Communities knit together when bound by a common need, desire or practice. In a world where dreams are degraded into memes, and to 'friend' someone means to have access to their data, to truly share something is almost a revolutionary act. Yet all art is at heart simply a form of sharing. It has to be shared to become art. To be shared it has to have been private. So solitude lies at the heart of community, just as solitude allows entry into a community of imaginal, animal and plant realms. Mature ecosystems offer a vision of communities whose appetites and desires interweave into an ecosystem that has a life beyond its parts, just as bodies and deaths offer food and homes to new life in the old woods.

Art is the vision of this unseen, and its vision offers a great hearth, whose embers draws us together into a community to warm our bones, to commune with the fire of imagination. Of course there are forms of creativity that are private and healing, but art offers us a means to heal not only ourselves but our culture; to rebind us to the tangled fire of green.

In the final analysis, community needs people to go into the dreaming dark and to return with news from that castle of nothingness – the imaginal realm that sustains even the snaking briars and the weasel's killing jaw.

All performance takes place around this hearth; the hearth is the warmth of the listener's heart. The warmth of the audience heart is the only thing equal to the cold illuminations of the dreaming dark.

So I will share two more poems. One is called 'Hearth', from the section called 'elemental praise' and the other 'so it is with songs', which is a poem of tangled roots. May they sustain the communities of your imagination in the reading.

Hearth

You are motherheart
red licked warm like
A birthslick faun

Settle blood down
Calm as a cooling kettle

The centre dig down
Stone lined
Levelled out

Hearth you are that
warmth before
Dark dreams claim me
Fuzzy ecstatic still

Still glow hypnotic
Oh hearth you magician
Of lullaby

You chanter of circle
Each to her own thoughts
Thoughts I can't hear

Or the company of strangers
Changed to milk and honey

The unexpected hearth
A jewel that glows

Embers and visionary charcoal
You small Sun
Death of trees

Hearth, you bowl of flame
You tabernacle
You Bible

You guide of souls into darkness

You lamp
You stove
You mother
You father

You ruby child curled up in embers
You warm angel hidden in trees

Hold me when I fall
Or stray

In that immutable embrace
Of warmth and vision

So it is with songs (they grow on you)

I stumbled into the forest
Because my guitar
No longer wanted to sing.

It had become songsick, ended,
Freighted with a problem of song,
With misgivings of audience,
Singing songs like
They were Tombstones
Or Harnesess,
Or Adverts.

So, I took my guitar out to where songs
Come from,

Down muddy chalk paths,
Purple daisy meadows
Bracken, fern and stream
Where the sudden death of mice
And the vanishing flank of muntjac
Disappear into warp of wild clematis and thorn…

I came upon a moment of stopping,
As I slipped guitar from case
I found the moment of stillness
And that stillness created a place.

And in the creation of such places songs came sure enough,
A tangled studio of thorn and branch,
Of badger's skull and midnight oak.

Into the alone, into the self,
Where a bird woman perches

On the chests of sleeping men.

Into the moss and beetles,
Where the dying roots of trees
Loosen their grip on old stories.

I took my guitar

I took a dead heart, I took a black love
I took a lost Father, I took a trapped dove.

Sometimes it felt best not to touch the strings,
or disturb a wing's leaf silence in the shape of its fall,

And sometimes the songs flowed like honey wine
Rivered into vine melodies
sunsets, birdsong, pulses in time.

And I became riddled with songs
Like tree carcass laced
with bracket fungus
And I wanted to get home

So I stumbled out of the woods,
But the guitar neck like a swan's neck
Was courting a wild rose

And my black heart had become a nest of emerald beetles
And my beard was full of moss
And my Father was a movement of the ash leaves in the breeze
And the dove a woodpigeon in the wild arbour.

Well, So it is with songs;

They come from wild places
They grow on you.

Toby Chown is a dramatherapist, poet and storyteller, living in Brighton. He has written two books of poetry, *Haunted evaporations* (2018)[2] and *Into the dreaming dark* (2025). Toby's Substack newsletter, 'the imaginal ecologist' explores the intersection of nature and psyche. He has 14 years' experience of working with families affected by addiction.

2. Chown, T. (2018). *Haunted evaporations*. Brighton: Doplin Books.

The snowflake

By Els van Ooijen

High in the mountains a snowflake fell. She was one of many millions of snowflakes, falling steadily for a long time. The snowflake fell on top of countless others. Gradually they formed a thick, white carpet of snow, covering the rocky ground. It got colder, and colder. On and on the snowflakes fell, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, millennium after millennium. The glacier grew, growing wider and deeper. One of many others. Impenetrable, beautiful.

It was cold, very cold. The snowflake went through many summers and winters. Deep among layers she was unaffected, seemingly there forever. But then, after millions of years, something changed. It got warmer. At first only the top layer melted, but then it got colder again and more snow fell. But the following summer it got warmer again and more layers melted. Each summer, more and more ice melted. The glacier shrank until the snowflake melted too. She was now a droplet of water. Gradually, she began to move – at first slowly, but then faster and faster until she was part of a huge river rushing down the mountain. Faster and faster, swallowing everything in its wake: bushes, trees, animals, all tumbling down. A huge, unstoppable torrent.

A man was working in the field. He looked up when he heard a roar, and suddenly the river was upon him. He struggled and went under. He opened his mouth to scream for help, but the water got into his mouth, his nose and his lungs. The man drowned and was swept along, until finally he was thrown onto a sand bank, where he got stuck in some rushes. Someone found him and buried him in a grave.

For the snowflake, now a droplet, this was the end of one phase of the journey, but the beginning of another, under the ground. She was one of many others who ended up in the lungs of men, women, children and animals. A village destroyed, but the river roared on, unto the sea, making it rise and rise – slowly, ever so slowly..!

Photo by Mihika on Unsplash

Els van Ooijen, D.Psych, is a climate advocate, writer and retired psychotherapist.

In the land of Bonbibi:[1] sisterhood and the resilience of the women of Sundarban

By Mrittika Bhattacharya

"I left after Aila[2] and have not been able to go back home", said a teary-eyed 29-year-old, Rumiya[3] from Bangladesh, on a rainy morning in Jharkhali – a village on the Indian side of the Sundarban region (a UNESCO World Heritage Site). Literally translated, Jharkhali – "a place with frequent storms" – is the entry point for the Sundarban Tiger Reserve, surrounded by the Bidyadhari river and mangrove forests. In my six-month-long participatory project, I also worked in the Goranbose village, named after the mangrove tree Goran and nestled on the banks of the Matla river.

To give some context, after gaining independence from the British Raj in 1947, Bangladesh and India witnessed cross-border mobilities owing to the historical ties, cultural commonalities and porous borders. In recent years, a compelling push factor of Bangladeshis, particularly of women moving to India, is the rapid decline of environmental resources directly impacting their lives and livelihoods. There is a lack of relevant data due to stricter border policies and the irregular nature of these mobilities; factors which add to the material and emotional toll on the women.

With a family history of refugeehood from Bangladesh to India, and a strong belief in environmental justice, I wanted to work in the Indian Sundarban region – an extremely environmentally vulnerable area. Joining hands with the NGO Goranbose Gram Bikash Kendra (GGBK), which has worked here for more than three decades, I conducted feminist participatory research in the villages, with the help of methods like storytelling and participatory workshops, aiming to bring the lived experiences of the woman to the forefront.

The storytelling acted as a means of getting to know about the migratory journeys of the women who moved to India in the last 10 years, both individually and in groups. I had conversations with the women in their houses and public places like chai[4] shops and bazaars,[5] about why and how they moved from Bangladesh, their perceptions of adaptations and the post-migration difficulties they faced. The participatory workshop was more structured than that – aiming at understanding the way the environmental stressors impact the women. I held the workshop at the GGBK office during one of the employment training programmes. It took the shape of an *adda* – a friendly banter, characterised by purposelessness, informality, reciprocity; a quintessential part of Bengali sociality. We created a safe collaborative space, where issues which the women do not otherwise have the chance to discuss were raised, because of the assumption that nobody will hear them out and the discomfort of discussing feminine and tabooed issues publicly. Some of the women already knew each other and the *adda* session re-established the sisterhood among them. It further built trust between those who did not know each other from beforehand.

Top: Matla river in Goranbose Village. Bottom: the Bidyadhari river in Jharkhali village. Photos by Mritikka Bhattacharya

1. Bonbibi, the 'woman of the forest', is worshipped by individuals engaged in activities like fishing, honey-collecting and hunting, and belongs to all religions and castes in Sundarban, in both India and Bangladesh. As perpetuated by folklore, it is believed that she protects the forest and the local people from the monster, 'Dakshin Rai', who is disguised as the man-eating Royal Bengal tiger and kills those who enter the dense mangrove forest. Bonbibi thus symbolises feminine power, syncretism and environmental conservation.

2. A devastating cyclone, which impacted both India and Bangladesh in 2009.

3. The names of all participants have been changed to maintain the anonymity and safety of the women.

4. Tea.

5. Marketplaces.

The burdens of the environmental crises on Sundarban's women

During the participatory workshop that I conducted in groups, the women ranked the environmental stressors in accordance of their severity and negative impacts on their lives and livelihoods as follows:

Floods	Cyclones	Sea-level rise	Rainfall pattern	Drought

Floods

The women cited floods as bringing the most negative impacts, along with cyclones. Sunita working in fish aquaculture reminded me: "*Didi*,[6] you remember I had shown you the riverbank next to our house when you visited us that day? Water gushes into our houses when there is a flood."

After a flood in Goranbose Village in 2022. Photo shared by GGBK

Other women also talked about the worsening situation for those staying near the riverbanks. They explained that there is largescale short-term displacement for many families since the mud houses with thatched roofs are not strong enough to resist the strong tidal flows. They discussed how the intrusion of saline waters into the agricultural lands makes those lands uncultivable for at least a year and impacts fish aquaculture. A gender-specific hindrance highlighted by the women was that sarees take much longer time to dry and increased exposure to wet clothing for these women increases coughs and colds amongst them.

When discussing the rescue shelters, the participants raised issues such as the lack of proper sanitation, sharing common spaces with men, sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

Cyclones

The region faces at least one or more cyclones every monsoon. Some cyclones, like Aila (2009), were so catastrophic that the women calculate their migration from Bangladesh as being before or after Aila. Zainab who moved to India after marrying her husband five years ago, exclaimed: "My father's house was destroyed. Our roof flew off!" To date, the cyclone shelters are colloquially referred to as 'Aila centres' – a memorial of the ravages caused by the cyclone.

Picture provided by GGBK, after the cyclonic storm Yash in 2022

According to some, the early warning signs have improved and there are increased precautionary announcements in the villages now. Previously, lack of warning caused more human mortalities and hospitalisations because of injuries; particularly for those who live near the riverbanks. But Monami, with a sense of despair in her voice, said: "Yes, there are fewer deaths and injuries. But that doesn't stop our houses from getting wiped away!"

They gathered the strength to talk about the trauma and stress associated with such disasters. Many reported sleeplessness following announcements about any cyclone hitting their villages. In the post-disaster period, there is acute stress because of the largescale destruction of lands and properties. They talked about how hurtful it is to build their 'homes' from scratch every year after rapid-onset calamities like these and highlighted the support received from GGBK, the local government and the village community at large. The women also pointed out that there is more anxiety and uncertainty among women because of additional childcare and elderly care responsibilities.

Sea-level rise and saline water intrusion

Slow-onset environmental stressors were perceived to be less calamitous and disastrous by these women. They have noticed a rise in water level in recent years, but it is not as clearly observable as when floods occur. Sumana who helps her family financially by stitching *lehengas*[7] on a contractual basis commented: "My grandma talks about how fertile our land was before. Being in the coastal areas, it has always been salty. But the situation has never been this bad."

In the search for alternative sources of livelihood suited for the saline soil, a large group of people have shifted to fish aquaculture. Often, they help each other to find contractual jobs in fish aquaculture farms nearby, or in converting their agricultural lands to *bheri(s)*.[8] Fish aquaculture requires women to stay in knee-deep

6. *Didi* means 'elder sister' and is a term of respect and affection used to address an older female sibling, or an older woman.

7. Heavily embroidered traditional Indian outfits, consisting of a skirt, blouse and a scarf, worn by Indian women on special occasions and to celebrations.

8. Small plots of lands, filled with water to practise fish aquaculture.

saline water for at least four to five hours per day and they experience a variety of skin infections, blisters and skin peeling.

The uncertainties connected to crop cultivation owing to saline water intrusion affect the women's emotional wellbeing in a variety of ways, and they and their families must continuously look for precarious jobs in the cities. The taboos associated with rural women moving permanently to the cities, or even travelling on a daily or weekly basis, means additional psychological distress for them.

Rainfall patterns

The women agreed that rainfall patterns are extremely important indicators in an agriculture-dependent society, because the impacts are more clearly observable and somewhat quantifiable in comparison to sea-level rise. They talked about how the seasonal rainfall has become more abrupt and that there is often inadequate rainfall during the rainy season. Mumtaaz pointed out that untimely rainfall makes it even more difficult for them to plan their yearly yields. Another rainfall pattern discussed by the participants was *Akash-Banya* – the literal translation being 'sky-floods'. The heavy rainfall not only causes the water from the river to overflow and salt water to enter into the agricultural lands, but also pushes the fishes out of the ponds and from the *bheri*, causing damage to fish aquaculture.

Drought

They explained how lack of adequate rainfall causes drought in the region – a recent change, which was not the case even a decade ago. The situation is worse for women engaged in agricultural work or fish aquaculture, as they are in the fields during the day when the temperature reaches its peak. Additionally, they are more susceptible to heat stroke since they perform many household activities, like washing clothes and taking care of domestic animals, outdoors. Since their mud houses are quite small, many women prefer to cook in their courtyards using *unun*,[9] which heat quickly and reach very high temperatures.

They shared stories of fainting in the fields, often helping each other to reach home safely. They discussed that a majority of the household activities performed by them involve spending long durations of time in open air, which gets extremely difficult for them during the summer months.

Sisterhood and resilience in the face of environmental stressors

The environmental stressors described by the women in the participatory workshops were similar on both sides of the border in the Sundarban region, which led to further discussions about the reasons behind crossing the borders and moving to an equally environmentally vulnerable region. Most of the women responded, "to feed my family". They said that they moved to India because: "Kolkata is closer than Dhaka", that is, the nearest city to them is in India, possibly with better employment opportunities. It made me realise that the environment is such an integral part of their 'being' that this is relegated to the background when talking about cross-border mobilities.

Their daily interaction with environmental resources and intergenerational knowledge reveals that there have been rapid environmental shifts in the recent years. The efforts in responding to the stressors and giving feedback to governmental authorities, with support from GGBK, have helped them in identifying the impacts of the key stressors, as discussed by the women. But, considering their existing uncertainties in generating income, their priority is looking for a job, wherever available, either in the villages or cities, either in Bangladesh or India.

During discussions in the workshops, public spaces, or the homes of the participants, about how they cope with the environmental stressors, surprisingly enough, none of them cited moving to India as a coping strategy. Rather, they talked about the everyday practices they follow to respond to the environmental crises. For them, 'adaptation' is 'sticking by'; particularly because most of the male family members move to the cities for employment opportunities. Under such circumstances, Manoshi recalled how a group of women helped her. "Last year, I was all alone at home with my two-year-old when the flood waters started coming into my courtyard. I was feeling helpless until I heard my neighbour's voice. She had come with her kids and a few other women to help me get to a safer place."

The participants discussed how they work with GGBK to collaborate with villagers and report back to the governmental authorities on the issues they face. Mala explained: "I have previously received employment training from them and have been working with them for the last two years. My role is that of a leader. I help in spreading information both before and after disasters, locating families that need immediate support and bringing other women in for volunteering, particularly when it comes to distributing relief items in the post-disaster scenario." The other women leaders I met also provided insights on the collaborative framework developed by GGBK where there are different leaders looking after aspects like agriculture and fish aquaculture. Through an active network of the leaders and participation of the local communities, they support each other in responding to the environmental stressors.

In addition to the NGO support, the women highlighted the coping strategies they adopted on an everyday basis, with limited resources. According to Bibha, who moved from Bangladesh a year before: "It is extremely difficult for us. But, we look out for each other. I am so grateful to have them around (speaking about her neighbours), especially when my husband is away from work."

During my field visits, the participants talked about how they respond to specific environmental stressors. As discussed earlier, they ranked floods to be the most devastating stressor, along with cyclones which occur every year, sometimes even more than once a year. In the case of floods, some of the coping strategies include: keeping documents and money at higher levels; moving the domestic animals to safer places; building human-made river banks with tree barks, tripal,[10] tin etc; moving to governmental shelters if possible; or moving with other villagers to higher roads till the water level subsides; and arranging for dry food items like puffed rice, flattened rice, jaggery, etc, which can be carried easily.

9. Traditional clay ovens which use dried leaves and tree barks as combustibles.

10. Plastic material used for covering houses.

Before cyclones strike, not only do the governmental authorities and GGBK help in spreading early-warning information, but the villagers themselves play a major role in informing one another. The families further assist each other to carry the valuables, move to the 'Aila' centres and support others during their stay. The sisterhood is even more evident when the women help out pregnant women, assist younger women when using toilets often shared with men, and in ensuring enough privacy for menstruating women. Ashima explained: "For many like me, our husbands are working in the cities. We have kids and elderly family members to cater for as well. We would not have been able to get these done if we (the women) did not support each other."

With regard to more slow-onset environmental stressors, they talked about adopting long-term strategies: growing crops only in the rainy season; shifting to alternative sources of livelihoods like sewing and stitching; practising fresh and brackish water aquaculture, organic farming, floating gardens, etc. Arifa mentioned: "Ruksana Di put me in touch with the man who gives orders for stitching *lehenga*. Now, I can at least support my father!" Not only do they help each other in finding employment in the village, but also in Kolkata, where many of them travel together in the women-only compartments of local trains on a daily basis to work as domestic help. Often, they recommend each other and find opportunities for other women through word of mouth.

Picture shared by GGBK, showing the women building a riverbank

These everyday coping strategies are facilitated by a sense of community and network amongst the people on both the sides of the border; right from deciding to cross the borders, to the selection of the locality where they will stay, to the search for contractual jobs for both men and women. Many women confided in me that they can survive in such adverse environmental conditions only because of the support they provide to each other – both materialistically and emotionally. The sense of belonging felt by the women can be attributed to the commonality emerging out of ethnicity, language, history and kinship, as a result of the shared histories and porous borders. The ethnic, territorial, linguistic and historical affinities of West Bengalis with Bangladeshis constitutes 'Bengaliness' across borders, further strengthening the sisterhood amongst these women, as they acknowledge. The common grounds of the individual stories and experiences shared by everyone not only point towards the community spirit of the people of Sundarban, but also highlight a sense of solidarity and sisterhood. The merging of the 'local' and the 'international' in their everyday struggles, particularly in the face of the ever-increasing impacts of the environmental stressors, is truly inspiring.

The storytelling sessions and the participatory workshops helped me to understand that the women do not see adaptation as a single, one-off incident, but rather as taking place continuously, on a daily basis. The 'everydayness' of these coping strategies includes managing and responding to environmental and socio-economic stressors repeatedly. What my project reveals is that while migration and mobilities can be an impactful way of adapting to environmental stressors, it is often more complicated than that. A focus back to the multiple dimensions of human mobilities, the contextualities and the self-perceptions of the individuals involved is the key to understanding the interlinkages between environmental stressors and human mobilities. What stayed with me is how the resilience of the women of Sundarban, and their sisterhood, surpass societal and political boundaries.

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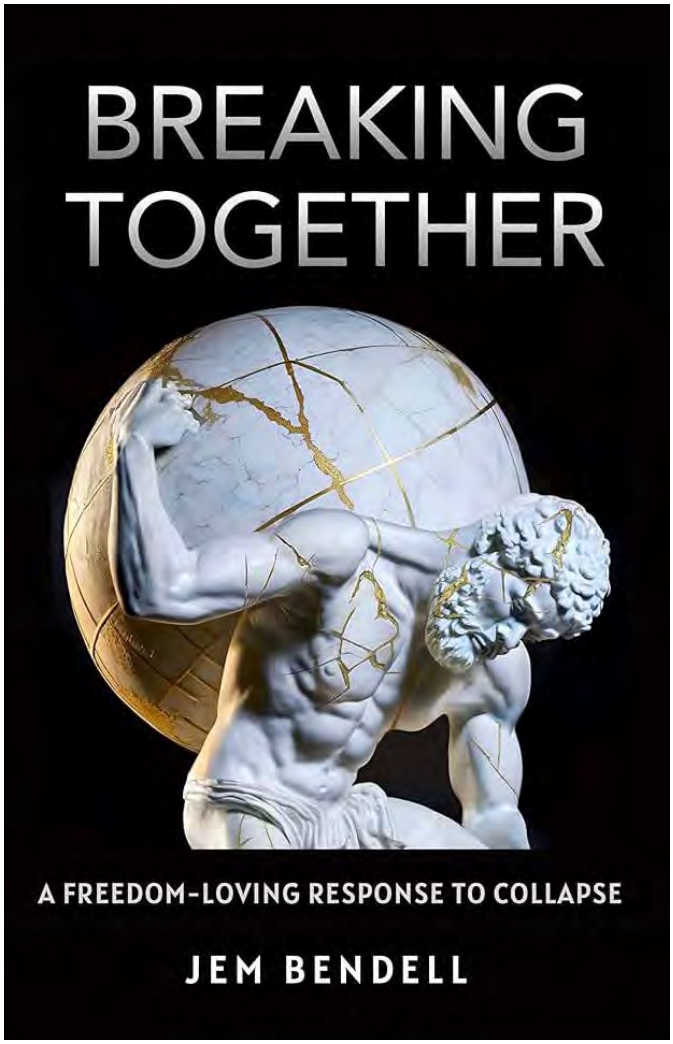
Breaking together: a freedom-loving response to collapse, by Jem Bendell

Reviewed by Rembrandt Zegers

Jem Bendell's experience as a professor and change agent in the sustainability field taught him that despite many initiatives and much campaigning, industrial consumer society continues to resists change. His paper 'Deep adaptation' (2018)[1] had over a million downloads, but was also heavily criticised for not being scientifically rigorous enough. Since then, Bendell and his team of co-researchers have carried out a "critical interdisciplinary research analysis" (p. 248), which led to the publication of his book *Breaking together*[2] in 2023. Since the publication of 'Deep adaptation', collapse has become a widely shared and discussed view of the future of society, embraced by many networks and academics. Breaking together is 567 pages (including end notes). Bendell states: "this book is the result of a complex process of inquiry, dialogue and writing", and he mentions about 30 collaborators by name. The book is rich, precise, well documented and impossible to summarise in a short review.

The first part shows that collapse is already happening. Bendell traces the root causes to our politics, collectively held assumptions and institutional arrangements, that together are continuing a regime of economic growth and use of resources. But what is collapse?[3] Bendell sees collapse as a process, rather than an event, that we are all caught up in. He says that collapse as a concept enabled him to see that mainstream society is no longer capable of providing sustenance, shelter, health, security, pleasure, identity and meaning. Bendell sees collapse as related to



planetary boundaries as well as the illusion of eternal growth and progress in Western thinking. He focuses on seven interrelated areas: economic; monetary; energy; biosphere; climate; food; and, finally, society as a whole.

Economic: Bendell shows the data illustrating global decline of 'progress' in terms of human wellbeing and quality of life. **Monetary:** Bendell demonstrates the role of private banks in growing the economy through issuing money, to avoid their own demise. **Energy:** he lays out the inconvenient truth about peoples' basic needs depending on fossil fuels, while the monetary system requires increases in energy consumption for economic stability (p. 138). **Biosphere:** Bendell gives the reader an overview of the many parts of our earth system that are collapsing. **Climate:** The climate system is becoming unstable, with an increase of the severity of extreme weather events. **Food:** Bendell identifies six hard trends that are already happening, contributing to the collapse of food systems. Society as a whole: In this chapter, Bendell

1. Bendell, J. (2018). Deep adaptation. IFLAS (Initiative for Leadership and and Sustainability) Occasional Paper 2. University of Cumbria. Several versions available online at: https://jembendell.com/2019/05/15/deep-adaptation-versions

2. Bendell, J. (2023), *Breaking together: a freedom-loving response to collapse*. Bristol: Good Works, an imprint of the Schumacher Institute.

3. Collapse awareness, acknowledgement and readiness are different aspects of how collapse as a concept is being explored and worked with. See:

Cottle, S. (2023). Reporting civilizational collapse: research notes from a world-in-crisis. *Global Media and Communication,* vol. 19(2) 269–288. https://doi.org/10.1177/17427665231186934

Machado de Oliveira, V. (2021). *Hospicing modernity. Facing humanity's wrongs and the implications for social activism.* Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books.

Servigne, P., Stevens, R., Chapelle, G. (2015). *Another end of the world is possible: living the collapse and not merely surviving it.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Servigne, P., Stevens, R. (2020). H*ow everything can collapse: a manual for our times.* Cambridge: Polity.

analyses how the cultural cement of society breaks down, increasing power asymmetries, backlash against democratic values and human rights, decreasing trust and eroding state legitimacy, and unprecedented levels of protest and violent conflict (p.251).

In the second part, Bendell examines the question of what can we do, or even how to live when it is clear collapse is inevitable. The main argument is that psychological and social factors (not material ones) keep us bound to our culture and the economy we are part of. Bendell argues that the belief that material growth and consumption equal wellbeing, and a purpose in life, are mistaken. In general, we are not free because 'Imperial Modernity', as he calls it, is in service of 'Money Power', which invests in technology and extracts resources for ever-growing markets. In this part of the book, he discusses six kinds of necessary freedoms. **Freedom to know:** "If we don't get better at understanding our thinking, and the way our thinking is shaped by external forces and internal emotions, we risk not being as wise as we could be" (p.285). **Freedom from progress:** "The consensus view of scholars for over a century has been blinkered by an assumption of linear progress towards agriculture and urban settlement" (p.333). **Freedom from banking:** "How did generations of people allow the money-power to manipulate, cajole and coerce us all to behave in such oppressive and destructive ways? (p.364). **Freedom in nature:** "Various ancient wisdom traditions, and contemporary accounts from people who experience non-ordinary states of consciousness, point to forms of knowing about such matters which are beyond concept and language" (p.376). **Freedom to collapse and grow:** "I felt a desire to support responses that would fairly address the unequal suffering that currently exists, and that will become worse over time. I also wanted to defend the freedoms of everyone from harmful reactions of the ruling classes, who respond to defend their own interests rather than reduce suffering" (p.415) and **Freedom from fake green globalists:** "Together we would do well to reflect on and discuss: what power could we collectively reclaim to reduce harm and improve possibilities?" (p.459).

Bendell's next questions whether we can exercise these freedoms. He discusses his own difficult experiences in research, campaigning and conversations at the heart of social power like the UN, IPCC and economic conferences, which makes him ask to what extent free will exists. By the way, he concludes free will does exist in stepping outside of the current 'system'. In chapter 11, he discusses our relationship to nature, giving evidence that people can live within nature without completely destroying it. But, he says, the dominant system encourages us to experience less of ourselves and of nature, promoting positions where we care less and accept planetary destruction as necessary for more material and financial wealth.

Bendell's book is called *Breaking together*. 'Together' here does not refer to the idea of changing the system on 'systems terms' – but is a way of realising freedom in dialogue with others. In his analysis, this kind of freedom is more than an escape, or a spiritual freedom, rather it is the freedom to self-investigate and reinvent ourselves. This takes hard work, made harder by the accusations of being Doomsters (p.426). Bendell acknowledges how easy it is to be ridiculed by and isolated from mainstream culture, and shows what it means to step into the storm of resistance and experience the forces that want to keep things the way they are; both outside and inside ourselves. Bendell calls out those in power who are actively working to deny reality.

This second part of the book is testimony to living through the fracture, the existential crack, that our culture is rapidly exposing us to, while exercising the freedoms he talks about. In his personal life, Bendell has stepped away from 'the system', living off the land, while also responding to the call of collapse and working with others to express this and grow as human beings ('Positive policy agenda', p. 427). Next, he addresses the lack of direction for breaking together by introducing several pathways, including a 4R model[4] and proposes the new words, Evotopia[5] and Ecolibertarian[5] (p.403).

Breaking together is written in academic format, presumably because the academic language is familiar to him and increases the chance of being listened to. However, this doesn't make the book less personal in approach, as he is frank about his work, his journey and making radical choices.

To find out more about Jem Bendell's work you can find him on Youtube at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYsxwpxlF5o

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-voPbrefR0

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXw2WYf0g0o

Rembrandt Zegers, PhD, is a philosopher of nature relations, organisational consultant and Gestalt psychologist.

4. *Resilience:* what do we most value that we want to keep, and how? *Relinquishment:* what do we need to let go of so as not to make matters worse? *Restoration:* what could we bring back to help us with these difficult times? *Reconciliation:* with what and whom shall we make peace as we awaken to our mutual mortality?

5. *Evotopia:* Bendell: "An Evotopia is the idealised scenario where humanity better beholds natural reality so that both destruction slows and beauty flows."

6. *Ecolibertarian:* recognising that free will exists in the natural world while also seeing that everything is related.

Sea ceremony

By Tim Pilgrim

Oregon surf, waves swirled to black,
our drumbeats pummel bonfire, invoke
Mother Earth. We summon power,
the ancients, let go unkindness of ravens,
murder of crows, gulls in a row.
We whirl on damp sand, let loose chants.
Sea-healer floats in from shadows,
brings spirit gifts – salmon, berries,
myrtle chips – sifts them into embered ash.
We add driftwood bits, bring back bright fire.
Night retreats, plays dead. Sparks rise,
blow past dunes, beach grass, collected, bagged
plastic trash. They ignite the new moon.

Photo by Peter Thompson

Timothy Pilgrim is a US Pacific Northwest poet, a Montana native and emeritus university professor. He is the author of two poetry books and has had over 600 poems accepted at journals like *Seattle Review* and *Santa Ana River Review* in the US, *Windsor Review* in Canada and *Prole Press* in the UK.

Julian Manley: dreaming of cooperation

With Paul Hoggett

***Julian Manley** has been an active member of CPA for more than a decade. He has served on its Board for several years and had a vital influence over it becoming a Community Benefit Society, co-owned by its members. This reflected Julian's longstanding interest in sociocratic and cooperative principles of governance; an interest first triggered through his involvement with Mondragon in the Basque Country in Spain, and more recently manifested through being one of the key figures involved in the Preston Model of Community Wealth Building development in the UK.*

In this interview with Paul Hoggett, Julian describes how his involvement in another social innovation, social dreaming, brought about his connection to Mondragon, a massive network involving more than 70,000 worker cooperative members producing everything from high-tech goods to consumer durables. Later, through this connection, Julian was able to contribute to the seeding of a similar initiative in Preston. The Preston Model offered a very different model of economic and social regeneration, one which flew in the face of neoliberal globalisation, and it quickly caught the eye of leftist policy makers in various parts of the UK. The connection between this model and green approaches to community regeneration is explored in the latter part of the interview.

PH: So Julian, when you were living in Spain in the 1990s, from what I remember, you became interested in the cooperative model. And I'm wondering what was it that started to light your interest in this different way of doing things?

JM: It's not as if I planned any of this. The strange thing is that although these things have come by accident, they're all intertwined and interconnected in ways that I think speak to complexity. My interest in cooperatives came about when I was invited by the people in the Mondragon University to give a talk on social dreaming. I was amazed that they were interested in social dreaming at all. I was an outlier. I didn't know what Mondragon was, I didn't even know it was a group of cooperatives working together in a big business group. The minute I turned up, I felt that this was an unusual place, something a bit different. Mondragon University is the only truly cooperative university in the world, with a different approach to organising speakers. There was a sense of greater listening and acceptance of different positions and points of view. For example, with social dreaming, which you know, I often get challenged about, they were prepared to simply soak in it and attempt to make connections with the way they worked and felt and thought. So, I was gobsmacked, totally gobsmacked. And, from that moment on, I wanted to delve into cooperation and cooperatives and try to understand if this was possibly a different way that people could interact with each other, and deal with group psychodynamics, but still make money, still make businesses that work in the world. It goes against all the accepted neoliberal positions about the functioning of businesses and the way people

Humanity at work: Mondragon headquarters

work, and how they are motivated and incentivised to proceed. It goes against all of that. And yet it works.

PH: Just to pause very briefly, what do they actually do or make there? Because I understand that they are one of the major manufacturing organisations in Spain. We're not talking about something small.

JM: In Mondragon, you have 70,000 worker cooperative members, working in big factories and producing things like advanced technology parts for cars. They produce electronic components, white goods, steel products, they have furnaces, and so on. So, I was fascinated that they were interested in social dreaming. You know, very few people in those days knew about me or social dreaming, but they were interested. I later realised that they were interested because of the value they put on the human aspect of their work. And the association they have with working together, being well with the place that they live in and their culture and their history, and they could see something in social dreaming that was related to all of those worlds.

Photo of Mondragon in the past

Mondragon today

PH: A strong link with place as well in that sense.

JM: A strong connection to place and 'place' meaning both geographically, in terms of land and nature, and culturally, in terms of the history and culture of the Basque Country. They are concerned that the 'founding fathers' of cooperation in Mondragon are now passing away and young people may not be as committed as the older generation to cooperation. And so they were interested to understand if social dreaming and associated ways of working could foster a regeneration of interest in these things.

Who would have thought that all this could have been started off in Franco's Spain, after the Civil War when the economy was in tatters? The priest who set this up was Father José María Arizmendiarrieta. He was interested in a particular version of Catholicism. For him, Catholicism had to be based on social action. It's opened my eyes a little bit to certain, potentially positive, aspects of faith-based practice. The ironic paradox of all this was that because Franco's Spain was based on Catholicism, they couldn't touch a priest. The young people in Spain today don't have that. Catholicism is absolutely on a very downward slope in Spain as everywhere else, I suppose. Hence their interest in other ways of understanding humanity, emotions, feelings, spirituality, and so on. I think that there is a sort of hidden connection between Catholic social action and feelings that might be generated by social dreaming and I haven't quite figured this out yet. There is always a peculiar feeling of bonding that happens after social dreaming. You sort of de-individualise yourself and work towards the matrix or the group. You actually feel more bonded and more closely related to people. And I think what maybe happens to churchgoers – I'm not a churchgoer – is that people leave the church feeling bonded.

PH: I didn't know your involvement in social dreaming predated your involvement in cooperatives. So let me take you back. How did you encounter social dreaming in the first place?

JM: Well, in your course, the MSC in Group Relations and Society. I remember it very clearly. Because I was steeped in Tavistock Group Relations type work, the thought of going into a group, and telling people something about your personal dreams – I thought would be absolutely disastrous. I thought: "It will be awful." You could only ignite incredibly negative dynamics in the group. And people would feel humiliated and shamed by expressing their personal dreams and so on. That's on the one hand, and on the other hand, it would be incredibly boring, because who's interested in someone's dream? I just thought it was terrible. And, you know, I had to do it because it was part of the course. Basically, I was forced to do the social dreaming. And, to my amazement, none of that happened. There was no shame, there was no humiliation, there were no dynamics. By the way, I think that's absolutely fascinating, that the group dynamics that you're taught about and you had experienced simply seemed to fall away completely with social dreaming. I just couldn't believe what was happening. And so, I was hooked, because I couldn't understand it. I just needed to know, what on earth was this? Here was some kind of group work, where dynamics didn't seem to exist. I just couldn't get it. Even today, I'm quite surprised. So yeah, that's why I became fascinated by it.

PH: So, I'm interested, Julian, how in each of those experiences you encountered something which challenged your preconceptions, and yet, rather than reacting in a way which simply confirms your existing preconceptions, they led to new encounters and horizons. And that doesn't sound like a typical way of proceeding to me.

JM: Yes, well, I think typical ways of proceeding are very damaging. And they set people into routines, and a sort of pre-acceptance of something that is familiar. And I think this is part of our current problem with the neoliberal state; where we think of the state as in a 'state of mind' which insists there is no alternative. So, I think 'the typical' actually moves people away from their lived experience. And that something that has shaken the pot a little bit has been the pandemic, the Covid pandemic, where many people suddenly had an experience of what life might be like, which was not typical. I think that's been quite beneficial, actually. Not only are some people deciding not to go to work at all, but the huge numbers of people now working from home means that the work-life balance has been radically altered.

So, I think that one of the things that social dreaming can do, and one of the things that understanding cooperation can do, is take you out of the routine, typical way of doing things. That's not actually radical, that's actually quite normal: my interest in social dreaming and cooperation, it's not pie in the sky, it's not utopia. Actually, I've just written an article about utopia. It's not a utopia in the sense that Mondragon is not perfect. It's not ideal. But it is something in your phantasy, and in your imagination, that enables you to think in a certain direction. Even if there's no end to that road and there's no utopian object that actually exists, the process of moving towards it is a positive and enriching process in itself. And all of that goes against routine and typical ways of understanding things, for example, targets. You never achieve your outcome and you never satisfactorily achieve your targets. So you're going to carry on, on the treadmill, until you get to a place you can never get to, but you falsely believe you can get to it. And of course that leads to stress, depression, burnout, a place where you're never good enough.

PH: Just to go back to the cooperatives for a moment. How then did this – let's call it new social imaginary – arising out of radical Catholic social action in the 1940s and '50s suddenly resurface in Preston of all places, soon after the global financial crisis?

JM: Well, that's a difficult question. I just say in passing, in the late 19th century, Preston was the place with the largest Catholic population in England. So, I suppose that lots of different factors come into play here. Some of them are about the place itself. And some of them are about actors that happen to be around. Preston

is, if you like, just the right kind of place. It's not too big, and it's not too small. So, it's not so big that everyone is anonymous. And yet, it's not so small that it's very, very parochial. About between 120,000 and 140,000 people live in that place. It has a strong industrial background. In other words, it has communities that still remember what it was like to be a mill worker, for example. So, there's that kind of background. And then, by chance, there were people around who were able to react in a certain way to a particular economic disaster; the collapse of an urban regeneration strategy, in Preston in 2011. Preston was left with absolutely nothing, because in those days, that was it. If there was no inward investment, there was nothing. And luckily enough, at that time I joined the University of Central Lancashire, which was based in Preston. I was fresh from Mondragon where I had been doing some training and consulting with them. So, I invited people from Mondragon to come to Preston to talk about cooperatives and cooperation. And I made sure that those were public lectures, and at one of them I met a Labour councillor called Matthew Brown, who was trying to understand what the hell they could do in these circumstances. And we immediately understood that cooperative ideas would fit in with ideas of generating local wealth, and with ideas of anchor institutions spending more locally, retaining local wealth. Providing quality jobs was something that could easily be married to cooperatives and cooperation; particularly with a background of deliberative or participatory democracy, as enshrined in cooperative governance. And so all of these ideas started kicking around, made possible by the vacuum. The vacuum of the collapse of the regeneration project meant that there was something that had to be filled, and it was filled with that kind of thinking. People are very proud of being Prestonians, and were more open to these possibilities. So, when we talked to anchor institutions about the possibility of changing their procurement habits from externally focused to internally, people were not exactly embracing, but prepared to give it a shot, prepared to have a listen, and prepared to work with different finance officers and anchor institutions.

By 'anchor institution', we're referring to an institution that is anchored in the area, come what may. It could be a hospital or a university. They all spend a lot of money, employ lot of people and they're not going to disappear; not here today and gone tomorrow. So the idea was to persuade finance officers in these institutions to change their procurement habits. The first objection we faced was the cry that tendering had to be competitive. We challenged this typical mindset with the idea that it was possible to cooperate with businesses that were locally based. We quickly found out that these businesses never bid for these anchor institution contracts because they were too big. Joe Bloggs with his van couldn't cope with that, nor could they fill in the forms which were too complex. So, we persuaded anchor institutions to cut up their massive tenders into small bits so that suddenly local contractors could compete. Then we persuaded these institutions to offer training to fill in their forms. It changed the dynamic. Local people could now work for the anchor institutions. The contracts were going to local people not to global corporations. They were going to people who were known, with whom you could have relationships. So, we created the Preston Cooperative Development Network to encourage the creation and networking of worker-owned cooperatives, governed by democratic principles, in the area. It teaches people through participation and experience what democracy is. There is a social and philosophical agenda, we were members of Jeremy Corbyn's Community Wealth Building Unit, which was set up by John McDonnell. The idea of democracy was fundamental to his thinking.

There are 10 new, worker-owned coops in Preston following the sociocracy model of democratic governance. We've created the Preston Cooperative Education Centre which offers a sociocracy course, training and support for fledgling coops.

Preston Model stakeholders with Jeremy Corbyn (Julian Manley is pictured on far left)

PH: These are precarious times for fledglings. As the Model continued to evolve, was it, for example, affected by Covid?

JM: Well, this is being researched right now. It is widely assumed that Preston dealt better with the pandemic because we already had mutuality and cooperation in place when it came to food distribution and other tasks. The pandemic demonstrated the validity of the model. There is no definitive view of this yet, but the feeling is that 'yes', the Preston Model helped to support communities during the pandemic.

We have sometimes been criticised for being too local, even parochial. However, the way the design of the Preston Model is developing is to combine the local with the national. A great example of this is the Cooperative Councils Innovation Network (CCIN), where 37 councils in England have got together and formally committed to working to cooperative principles and values inspired by the Preston Model. In terms of national governmental strategies, there is the example of Scotland, where you have a Minister for Community Wealth Building and a national policy influenced by Neil McInroy, who previously led the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES), and in Wales you have the foundational economy, a circular economy approach. So, you have national designs in Scotland and Wales and an 'under the radar' national movement through the Cooperative Councils Innovation Network in England, so it's not just about Preston.

The Preston Model can easily be connected to green and environmental policy, maybe along the lines of Kate Raworth's 'doughnut economics',[1] where the outer ring of the 'doughnut' represents the ecological limits of the planet and the inner ring represents the human or social limits of communities. The Preston Model can be seen as being a way of filling in the 'inner ring', so to speak. When we started off there was nothing environmental or green about it. As time's gone on, we've been developing social

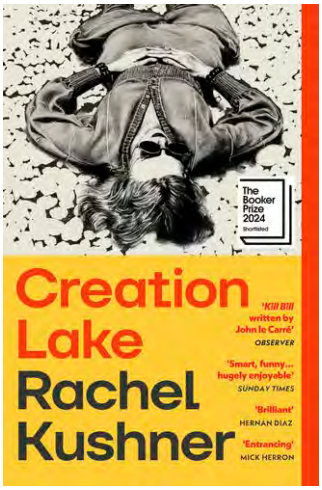
1. Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut economics: seven ways to think like a 21st-century economist*. London: Random House Business.

value policies which include environmental policies, which fall naturally into community wealth building. When anchor institutions had massive contracts with global corporations, planes would be flying in and juggernauts coming up from Europe, whereas now it is local Joe and his van from a couple of miles down the road. The carbon footprint is massively reduced. There's something natural about this process, and other connected processes, such as local food being provided for the local area. Community wealth building is more than bringing the money in to local households. If you are proud of where you live, then you don't want to live in a place of unhealthy noise and road pollution. It's no coincidence that one of the new cooperatives is Preston Pedals, a group that encourages cycling and bicycle maintenance. You want people to have enough opportunities to live and work locally. You want your neighbour to have the same. If you do have more consumer wealth, then you may also want to make better, more ecological, organic consumer choices. Green policies fit entirely naturally into local wealth building development, almost by accident.

Paul Hoggett, is an Emeritus Professor of Social Policy at UWE, Bristol, and co-founder of the Climate Psychology Alliance.

Creation lake, by Rachel Kushner

Reviewed by Maggie Turp



The plot of this Booker prize shortlisted cli-fi (or perhaps eco-fi) novel[1] starts with the arrival of spy-for-hire Sadie Smith in rural France, tasked with infiltrating a group of eco-activists. Events unfold in a way that keeps the reader turning the pages, but, for me, the novel's most interesting aspect is the exploration of the psychology of a person sufficiently cynical to engage in work of this nature. Readers are no doubt aware of the all-too-true stories of undercover police officers who infiltrated groups in this way; some making quasi-intimate relationships with group members that resulted in the birth of children. This book is not an easy or particularly enjoyable read; the main character is, to say the least, unsympathetic. However, for those who, like me, have asked themselves what kind of person it takes to act in this way, being vicariously inside the mind of a person like Sadie offers real insight, and for that reason I would thoroughly recommend the book to readers. A possible criticism is that we are given no details of Sadie's pre-spy life. We are left to wonder whether she suffered emotional trauma as a child or whether the dominance of neoliberal politics and its associated values and states of mind throws up characters such as Sadie, with no further explanation required.

As the first-person narrative proceeds, Sadie reveals herself as a woman with a fake name, without a single authentic relationship. She has begun a sexual relationship with Lucien, solely on account of his historical friendship with Pascal Balmy, the founder of the commune she is being paid to infiltrate. This relationship causes her some difficulties but, notably, no moral dilemma.

> *But these thoughts, my own actual thoughts, of Lucien breathing all over me, might remain. I might be stuck with the memory of him rolling me toward him at the hotel in Marseille, overpowering me and pinning me down in a manner he was convinced was right and good for both of us. Revisiting that, unable to block it, I wondered if I was getting paid sufficiently for this work (p.231).*

Sadie's account is full of envious, bitter attacks on others such as the commune members, who have what she does not: values, places and groups where they belong, relationships where they can be themselves and work that doesn't have to be hidden from the world. In her mind, she is the winner and doing just fine. Her ruthlessness is revealed in a story from the past, when she tried to have a young man sent to jail for 20 years by entrapping him into buying fertiliser – ostensibly for a bomb – by pretending to be in love with him.

We come to understand that the commune members are in real danger: she will entrap them, regardless of what they have or have not done, in order to be paid for her work. Her comments about the commune are derisive and for the most part we see it only through her jaundiced eyes – middle-class Parisians living on land that no sensible person would choose to try to farm, and grubby ill-cared for children kicking sand in each other's faces. By mentally reducing them to worthless low life, she justifies her persecution of them; a story all too familiar from real-life history. However, a passage quoting Pascal, the commune leader, when he is called in for questioning, offers the reader an entirely different perspective. He tells the police:

> *Sir, we hoe a row. We plant potatoes. We don't use pesticides. We nurture pollinators. But here is how the state does things: they have a deer population that's getting out of control, so what do they do? They bring in lynx. When farmers get upset about the lynx, the government introduces wolves. The wolves kill livestock, so the state makes it legal to shoot them. Hunting accidents increase, so they build a new clinic, whose medical staff creates a housing shortage, necessitating new developments. The expanding population attracts rodents, and so they introduce snakes. And so far, no one knows what to do about the snakes (p.66).*

Another significant thread in the book – one that I personally found less persuasive – takes the form of emails to Pascal, intercepted by Sadie, from 'Bruno', a character who has retreated to a cave and communes in his mind with former inhabitants, the Neanderthals. Bruno's mental state is an original response to the escalating worldwide climate disaster and drought affecting his local region. Seeing no way forward, Bruno looks to the past. Sadie finds in his writings a thread to hold on to, something she can identify with and that can offer an alternative to her cynical and destructive attempts to survive at the expense of others.

To return to the character study central to the novel, I recently attended a talk by Paul Hoggett where he examined in depth the phenomenon of disavowal. Being placed vicariously within Sadie's point of view brings the reader chillingly face to face with many of its crucial facets: the way that thinking is split off from feeling, the normalisation of a crazy reality, and the way in which cynicism and nihilism annihilate meaning, reducing everything to a means to the end of profit, with no further justification required.

Maggie Turp, PhD, edits the *Explorations* 'Cli-Fi Corner,' publishes on attachment to the other-than-human, and offers therapeutic support to people distressed by climate and ecological issues.

1. Kushner, R. (2024). *Creation lake*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Remembering Donna (1944-2044): "I more than all the others"

By Tree Staunton

A dedication to our much-loved colleague and friend Donna Orange is entirely fitting in this issue of *Explorations*, focused on cultivating community. Donna was internationally known, and a part of communities across the globe. Furthermore, she created community wherever she went; generating the 'hospitality' which she wrote of, to each and every 'stranger' she met.

Donna was a committed member of Climate Psychology Alliance – both CPA-UK and CPA North America – and though she rarely commented in our chat forums, her support was ever present in the background. She generously wrote the Foreword for our recently published book *Being a therapist in a time of climate breakdown* (2024)[1] where she recognised that "these essays come from long and serious conversations fostered within and around CPA".

In the introduction to her own *Climate crisis, psychoanalysis and radical ethics* (2017),[2] Donna tells us she never wanted to write the book. Instead "at this point in life, beginning retirement from clinical practice, hoping to slow down, I would have wanted to write something reflective, even more literary". She goes on, "unfortunately, the looming threat to our common home, and to its most vulnerable members, felt too demanding to proceed at leisure. Literary aspirations must wait" (p. xv).

She concluded:

> *A radical ethics differs from other similar ethics…. it never begins and never ends. The face of the suffering other demands response from me before any agreement ever made. (yes, I am my other's keeper), and this responsibility continues.*
>
> *'I more than all the others' as both Dostoevsky and Levinas repeatedly wrote (p.129).*

Lamentably, Donna will not have the chance to write at leisure or to follow her own desires. This gesture of giving to the community speaks volumes about her life work and her dedication to what called her: her responsibility to the other.

Few have done more to unify the disparate branches in the field of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Donna engaged enthusiastically with our different modality theories and practices, dedicating herself to helping us develop our clinical thinking. She wrote prolifically for all contemporary practitioners and addressed us all under the same umbrella – "psychoanalysis and other forms of humanistic psychotherapy" – such that we all felt acknowledged, respected and included. She believed that all practising clinicians are also practising philosophers; speaking of the 'ethical turn' in contemporary psychoanalysis – the requirement to always 'put the other first'. In *Nourishing the inner life of clinicians and humanitarians: the ethical turn in psychoanalysis* (2015).[3] she introduced us to her 'internal chorus' of philosophers, and teachers – past and present – who ongoingly supported her and offered personal and spiritual resources to sustain her in her work. She was added to my 'internal chorus' without me ever naming it, lending a helping hand, a clarifying thought or calming presence when I needed it. She will be much needed in the difficult times ahead, and thankfully she has left us so very much.

An online memorial event took place on Sunday 12 January, hosted by the International Association of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology. Colleagues and friends from around the world joined to pay heartfelt tributes to Donna, honouring her life, her clinical work, her writings and teachings. Colleagues' contributions came from the Freud museum in Vienna to the Hiroshima peace memorial museum in Japan; from Italy to Israel, South Africa to New Zealand. All spoke of the profound impact Donna had had on their work and on them personally; of her humanity, her warmth, her love for people, and her ability to care. "Her compassion for our poor scorched planet", "She was radical and fierce speaking up against harm in all its forms", "Speaking at this time of wildfires… it was exactly what Donna spoke to – our planet, our survival and our ethical responsibility."

She was beloved in her US community, as well as across the globe.

Rest in Peace, Donna.

Tree Staunton is a UKCP Honorary Fellow, and an Emeritus member of Bath Centre for Psychotherapy and Counselling (BCPC), where she was Director from 2011-2023. She has been a Registered Body Psychotherapist, Supervisor and Trainer for over 30 years, and is a long-standing member of Climate Psychology Alliance, UK.

1. Anderson, J., Staunton, T., O'Gorman, J., and Hickman, C. (eds.). (2024). *Being a therapist in a time of climate breakdown.* Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge.

2. Orange, D.M. (2017). *Climate crisis, psychoanalysis, and radical ethics.* Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge.

3. Orange, D.M. (2015). *Nourishing the inner life of clinicians and humanitarians: the ethical turn in psychoanalysis.* Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge. This book won the clinical category of the American Board & Academy of Psychoanlysis for best books published in 2016.

Climate, psychology, and change: new perspectives on psychotherapy in an era of global disruption and climate anxiety, edited by Steffi Bednarek

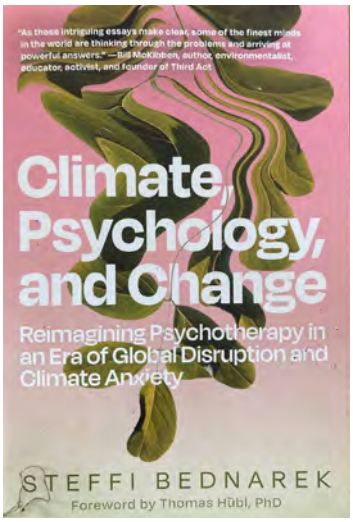
Reviewed by Catherine Falco

Climate, psychology, and change[1] is an expansive anthology, carefully curated by Steffi Bednarek – a psychotherapist and a consultant in climate psychology. Bednarek's work is informed by living systems theory and complexity thinking, and the book reflects this – landing in our laps as a whole that is more than the sum of its parts.

Hāweatea Holly Bryson uplifts the essence of this book, posing what feels like an invitation: "Psychotherapy promises its clients transformation. This urges the question: can the profession of psychotherapy undergo its own transformation to meet the demand of our time?" (p.92). This collection suggests yes, it can – if it is willing. Filled with examples of the many ways its contributors have broadened the psychotherapeutic lens to embrace the realities of a changing climate, it offers guidance for therapists to take a step back and engage the relational and contextual. It also acts as a generative text, igniting sparks of creativity – for ideas to emerge within the reader – allowing us to find our own ways towards connecting with others and the living world. While the discipline of psychology is ontologically tied with individualism, abandoning ship is not what is being proposed here. Instead, we are offered possibilities for ways to grow our profession – to stretch and broaden its boundaries, embracing a collective lens that includes "approaches that are complex, interrelated, systemic, and decolonial" (Bednarek, p.2).

The comprehensive 'Overview' section does an excellent job at preparing the reader for what lies ahead – provocation and inspiration for psychotherapists, psychologists, social workers and mental health practitioners to engage in a reimagining of psychotherapy in an era of global disruption and climate anxiety. I was left feeling enthused and enlivened by the contributions. I also felt a soothing sense of community, as a practitioner working in the climate change space – less alone and more connected – mirroring the book's central message; that climate work calls for community. Paradigm-shifting ideas are presented, such as: decentring the human to address the violence of anthropocentrism; the necessary decolonising work that is required in both environmental movements and psychotherapy; and what societal collapse might look like through stories from therapists in connection with the war in Ukraine. While these topics are large, the theme of broadening the individualist perspective provides a coherence that brings the text together.

I appreciated the attention given to the therapist; something which is essential when working with presentations related to the climate and ecological emergency. This book unflinchingly raises questions psychotherapists must face – about burnout; listening to our bodies and our dreams; and catching inadvertent acts of collusion. Trudi Macagnino's informative research project illuminates the importance of engaging in reflexive practice and therapists exploring their defences. Wendy Greenspun asks this compassionate and important question: "how do we clinicians find ways to face this vast hyperobject without becoming overwhelmed or turning away ourselves?" (p.67). Sally Gillespie shows us the gifts held within dreams and how her stepping towards ecology eventually led to a stepping away from practising psychotherapy, bringing her heart and psychotherapeutic wisdom with her to other spaces. And then, by Bednarek, the call for facing difficult truths on the professional level, suggesting the examination of "where psychological theories and assumptions collude with aspects of the neoliberal paradigm that is costing us the Earth" (p.151).



Understanding anthropocentrism, and the harm that is caused by human exceptionalism not only to the living world but towards ourselves – and the need to actively unlearn centring the human – is addressed by several contributors. Vanessa Andreotti and her colleagues explain how the "illusions of separation and superiority… have damaged our relationships with our own selves, each other, other species, and the land/planet we are part of, with deadly consequences for all involved" (p.202). Matthew Adams defines anthropocentrism and introduces the reader to the late environmental philosopher, Val Plumwood, whose work brings a powerful ecofeminist critique to Western worldviews in relation to nature. Rhys Price-Robertson and his colleagues approach decentring the human by drawing from the wisdom of beloved poet, Mary Oliver, and her message to consider all living beings as our family. The authors offer this gentling question: "how can we encourage our clients to occupy a more humble position in the family of things?" (p.130).

The necessary work of decolonisation is explored in 'The long shadow of colonialism'. Hāweatea Holly Bryson offers this vision of possibility to non-Indigenous therapists: "Rather than an extractive process of taking from Indigenous perspectives in order to heal our current predicaments, a decolonization of psychotherapy itself is required, which has the potential to restore, reunify, and a re-Indigenize the collective" (p.92). Nontokozo Sabic and Malika

1. Bednarek, S. (ed.). (2024). *Climate, psychology, and change: new perspectives on psychotherapy in an era of global disruption and climate anxiety*. Berkley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Virah-Sawmy also point to the urgent need for decolonising work and the ways in which "Racism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression are baked deeply into the global predicament of climate change" (p.87). These authors invite a spaciousness, rather than a headlong, approach to the task and remind the reader: "None of us can know what decoloniality looks like. We are living a journey into the unknown. The destination is unknown. The result is unknown" (p.88).

Psychotherapists working within the context of war bring a precious, perhaps futurist, form of wisdom to this collection. Peter Philippson writes: "it is difficult working with trauma in a war situation where the trauma is shared by the therapist. In this situation, it is particularly important for the therapist to attend to their own grounding and pacing"; an essential and relevant insight for climate-aware therapists (p.163). And Inna Didkovska generously shares her collapsing and transformative experiences as a psychotherapist working in Ukraine. She shares with the reader that before the war, "I felt it was important that psychotherapists take a nonpolitical stance and be as neutral as possible. This has changed. Now I have a definite political position" (p.179). Through the eyes of a reductionist culture, the ideas presented in this book could seem impossible – but the thoughtful layout of bite-sized articles means these difficult topics are more easily metabolised.

Bednarek impressively holds a large and potent space for her contributors and their words, enabling this book to co-become a collective creation of promise. This book evokes the possibility that a decolonised and ecologically-inclusive practice could become as natural to the profession as the exchange of plant breath for animal breath, where "The focus on the individual is the in-breath, but the out-breath needs to spill out into the streets, into the education system, urban communities, forests, rivers, and beauty of the world" (Bednarek, p.5).

Catherine Falco (she/her) is a psychologist & systemic family therapist in her private practice, Caldera Psychology, on Bundjalung Country in northern New South Wales, Australia. She is completing a research PhD at the University of Sydney investigating ecological emotions and systems thinking, focusing on community-based practices in regions prone to disasters.

Being a therapist in a time of climate breakdown,[1] edited by Judith Anderson, Tree Staunton, Jenny O'Gorman and Caroline Hickman

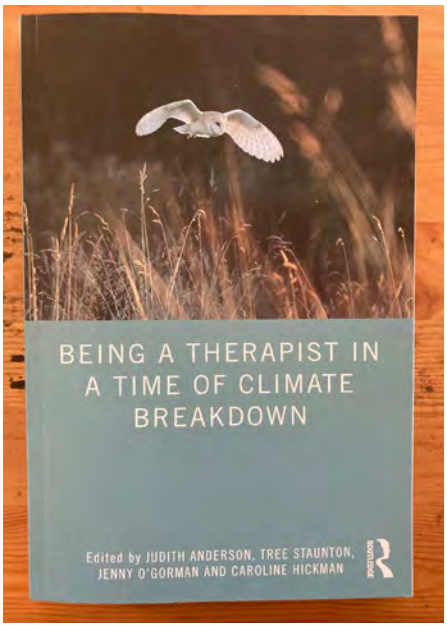
Reviewed by Els van Ooijen

Whilst I was reviewing this book, there were catastrophic flash floods in Spain, which caused many people to be trapped in their cars and resulted in more than 250 deaths. In Europe, we can no longer pretend that climate catastrophe is only happening elsewhere. A few days later, a hard-hitting article in the medical journal, *The Lancet*, reported that despite an alarming increase of heat-related illness and deaths, "governments and companies continue to invest in fossil fuels, resulting in all-time high greenhouse gas emissions and staggering tree loss, reducing the survival chances of people all around the globe".[2]

In addition, there are continuing wars in Sudan, Ukraine and Gaza, where bombing and destruction cause untold suffering. From an ecological and climate point of view, all these wars are having a disastrous effect on the natural world. The same can be said for the American election, where people have voted for a president who is a known climate-change denier and fossil-fuel advocate.

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that many therapists report that clients increasingly bring their feelings and emotions about global issues into the consulting room. There is much talk of climate-related depression and the terms 'eco-distress' or 'climate distress' have become very familiar. However, although there are by now many books about climate change, few of these focus specifically on the role of therapists. This book is therefore timely and important, containing a wealth of helpful contributions from 23 writers, as well as many brief 'voices' of young people, activists, mothers and artists, who express their climate anxiety in prose, poetry, or visual art. As it is not possible to comment on all the contributions within a limited space, I focus on the main issues.

At the start of the book, Peter Kalmus, a climate scientist, opens up about the emotional cost of facing and communicating the bleak reality of climate and ecological breakdown within a culture where there is widespread denial and lack of action. He and many other contributors argue that as therapy involves caring about people's wellbeing, therapists cannot hide behind denial. Kalmus writes, "we need climate aware therapy, and we need it now!"



However, there are two important issues here. Firstly, simply being aware that the climate crisis is real does not make one a climate-aware therapist. Many of the book's authors argue that to become a climate-aware therapist it is essential to first face one's own feelings and emotions, and to metabolise the trauma of the ongoing climate crisis. The Climate Psychology Alliance has been providing training and running workshops to help therapists with this process, so that they can then help their clients through it too. Therapists also need to become aware how climate distress often intersects with other issues such as racism, sexism or other traumas.

A second issue regarding the development of climate-aware therapy is psychotherapy's traditional focus on clients' internal worlds, which may cause therapists to individualise a client's climate-related distress or see it as an issue requiring medication.

Indeed, the book contains several accounts by clients who felt that the therapist saw their climate distress as a personal issue originating from their history. Jenny O'Gorman argues that this disconnect between therapeutic practice and clients' needs and experiences is an ethical issue that needs to be addressed. She writes that there is an urgent need for professional organisations to revisit and update their ethical codes, as well as their training curricula.

Many therapists agree that therapy (as well as counselling) in general have perhaps been overfocused on the individual and what is going on inside. However, our internal world is affected by the wider context in which we live. This is recognised by organisations such as PCSR (Psychotherapy and Counselling for Social Change)[3] and TASC (Therapy and Social Change network).[4] Although one-to-one therapy clearly remains very important, many contributors suggest that therapists may also like to step outside their consulting room and engage with groups of people. To some extent this is already happening, as several organisations (the CPA included) have been running climate cafés for several years now. Other social approaches

1. Anderson, J., Staunton, T., O'Gorman, J., and Hickman, C. (eds.). (2024). *Being a therapist in a time of climate breakdown.* Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge.

2. Romanello, M., Wallawender, M., Hsu, S.-C., Moskeland, A., Palmeiro-Silva, Y., Scamman, D., et al. The 2024 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: facing record-breaking threats from delayed action. *The Lancet*, vol. 404, issue 10465, 9 November 2024, pp.1847-1896.

3. https://www.pcsr.org.uk

4. https://therapyandsocialchange.net

discussed include developing social dreaming groups, as well as climate resilience training within organisations. Chris Robertson mentions the value of a "collaborative journey" where people can support each other in facing difficult feelings of loss, grief and sorrow (p.264).

Several authors discuss in more detail the need for budding climate-aware therapists to develop an understanding of the defences people use against difficult emotions, such as denial, disavowal, splitting or projection. They explain that as the evidence of climate change mounts up, denial breaks down and emotions such as anger, anxiety, fear and depression break through. The various contributors agree that it is important to help clients feel and process these emotions. Above all, coming to terms with reality and facing the enormity of the loss brings about deep grief. This kind of grief differs from other losses and often feels overwhelming and guilt-inducing. In the Global North, clients may also feel 'colonial guilt', which, as Panu Pihkala suggests, may result in a "manic response" (p.160). He suggests that it should be one of the climate therapist's tasks to watch out for over-intense climate action in clients, which may result in burnout.

The book offers a wide and varied discussion of how climate change affects people and what therapists need to take on board to be helpful. Chapters could perhaps have included more personal examples and stories, such as the various contributions by 'voices', as they facilitate a more direct engagement with the material. Perhaps this could be another book?

Overall though, I heartily recommend this book to any therapist or counsellor, including those still in training, who want to become climate-aware therapists.

Els van Ooijen, D.Psych, is a climate advocate, writer and retired psychotherapist.

FACING DIFFICULT TRUTHS

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