

# Explorations in Climate Psychology Journal

Issue 5: January 2024

The edges of chaos



**FACING  
DIFFICULT  
TRUTHS**

Climate Psychology Alliance

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Cover photo, *Edges of chaos*, by *Toby Chown*

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# The edges of chaos

By the Editorial Team

If the task of the Climate Psychology Alliance is to face difficult truths, then one of them is that our world is on the edges of chaos. This chaos shows itself in the breakdown of ecological reality into chaotic weather that brings floods, fires and displaced people. It brings anxiety to those displaced, and hovers at the edges of those who are less immediately affected. The edges of chaos are now woven deep into our culture and are unravelling it, releasing storms into every aspect of our life, drawing us towards tipping points that we can't see but feel are coming.

We asked for pieces that could clarify the position of climate psychology on the edges of chaos. The articles we publish here reveal the dimensions of these edges – the chaos on the edges of nature, within our mind, and in our political life and culture.

Joseph Dodds, author of *Psychoanalysis and ecology at the edge of chaos*<sup>1</sup> takes us into the relationship between chaos theory and psychology. Dodds writes of the way that nature makes use of edges of chaos; how new order arises from a necessary loosening of the structure of the self. Change, he writes, can happen in unpredictable ways; here appearing like a sudden transformation, there like an incremental process. Dodds reminds us that although new states of self-organisation arise from the edges of chaos, “there is no guarantee that what emerges will be better” – as even our concept of what is better is subject to chaotic flux.

Sally Gillespie takes us into the frontline of the climate crisis in Australia. Australia has suffered severely from bushfires, heatwaves, floods, animal deaths and storms, as stable weather patterns become chaotic. Sally introduces us to the work of community circles set up to address the trauma of climate chaos. She connects the damage from this trauma to colonialism – especially apparent in Australia, where the legacy of Britain's colonial programme directly impacts ecological systems and peoples. She shows how some of these groups have worked alongside First Nation peoples, establishing a much-needed space to build community and mitigate trauma, whilst recognising the value of a people who have long been subjected to a dehumanising level of violent chaos.

The Climate Psychology Alliance discussion group tackles the many dimensions of the chaotic moment that is “approaching us like an express train”. The housing crisis, food insecurity, a lurch towards authoritarian politics, farmers who can't make crops grow. How do we offer therapy when the therapists are going through the same crisis? How will the elderly, the vulnerable cope as and when the comforts of techno-industrial society crumble? In the discussion come two poignant observations: “I am more afraid of cruelty than of death” and “The order that arises out of chaos is different from the order that's imposed on it”.

Tony Cartwright gives us a clear-eyed presentation of what this ‘order from chaos’ means in scientific terms: of an infinitely patterned world that continually moves ‘far from equilibrium’ at all levels; of a world breaking apart in ways that make it hard to find stability and order.

The connection between a ‘system’ breaking down, and the human

experience of this is taken up further by Chris Robertson. He maps out a wide variety of connections to different dimensions of climate chaos – which he defines as “a cultural threshold that involves a range of feelings such as dismay, bewilderment, disgust, fury and despair at government collusion”. Chris moves us towards an understanding that the human experience of crossing into climate chaos may be paired with the experience of betrayal. This may be a feeling of being betrayed by the human powers in the world, or of having betrayed the wild ourselves. He leads his readers to a point where we consider with him that it may take a betrayal of our social codes and bonds to reconcile human power in the world with the power of the wild.

This feeling of betrayal is often felt most keenly by the young. Ro Randall reviews a remarkable book that maps Charlie Herzog Young's journey from a young man's involvement with climate activism to suicidal, life-altering despair, and back from the edges of death into a new life, with a new story to tell. Peter Reason reviews the young adult cli-fi book, *The last whale*,<sup>2</sup> which imagines a necessary entanglement of young activists and AI with the future of the whales.

Poems by Elspeth Crawford and Toby Chown round off our issue, with images of the need for an alarm to sound to prevent the “slow drift of a world burning” in ‘Presence’, and of a call to honour the chaotic within our experience, in ‘13 broken symbols’ and ‘Chaos’.

1. Dodds, J. (2011). *Psychoanalysis and ecology at the edge of chaos: complexity theory, Deleuze/Guattari and psychoanalysis for a climate in crisis*. Hove: Routledge.

2. Vick, C. (2022). *The last whale*. London: Zephyr – Bloomsbury Publishing.



# Insight and change in turbulent times

By Joseph Dodds

Over a decade ago, I wrote *Psychoanalysis and ecology at the edge of chaos* (Dodds, 2011),<sup>1</sup> so I was pleased to receive invitations from the *Explorations in Climate Psychology Journal* for an article on this theme. Since then, the world has changed almost beyond recognition, and I thought it would be useful to reflect on aspects of the theme of chaotic dynamics and the emergence of patterns and order from chaotic systems, in the context of the current world, clinical practice and psychoanalysis, including possible sources for hope in these difficult times. Chaos theory and complexity theory have much to offer us in our clinical work with patients, and in making sense of our world, including its ecological systems. It also offers us something to hold onto in the face of so much hate, pain and despair. I find increasingly helpful the findings that complex and beautiful patterns and structures emerge from chaotic systems, especially at the boundaries, the 'edge of chaos'. For a more theoretical and technical structured account of the role of complexity theory as foundational for ecopsychanalysis, please see Dodds (2022a, pp.68-86).<sup>2</sup> Here I wish to provide something more personal and reflective.

Watching smoke rise from the candle flame, we see a shifting dance of light, air and smoke. A column rises into the air and flickers, its oscillations increasing in rapidity and power as the smoke shifts from laminar to turbulent flow, and the column bifurcates into two or more streams. These can then merge back together, or divide further, until a state of turbulent chaos is reached – a process known as the 'march of chaos' through bifurcation (period doubling, see Camazine et al, 2001).<sup>3</sup> Patterns can then periodically emerge again from the swirling vortices; beautiful effervescent structures between the order of the single column and the chaos of the turbulent churning smoke. (Technically, these dynamics revolve around three different 'attractors': the point attractor of the single column; the periodic attractors of two or more bifurcated streams; and the chaotic attractor of turbulence proper.) Structures can repeat as fractals on multiple scales. Entire worlds come into being and evaporate. The dynamics of turbulence can be found as much in our emotions and our politics as in fluid dynamics.

We have much to fear from chaos, as our world seems to be rapidly breaking down. Our social-political, ecological and psychological systems all seem increasingly fragile and under threat. But chaos also has much to offer. In laminar flow (see OpenStax),<sup>4</sup> for example, the single, straight, rising, smoke-trail layers of air flow without mixing, kept apart, whereas with turbulence the layers of air mix, offering new possibilities of combinations and structure-generating processes (Nazarenko, 2014).<sup>5</sup> The hypnotic dance of the candle flame, the swirling eddies in a stream, the patterns of sand dunes, the colourings and stripes of a zebra or a



Image by <https://pixabay.com>

leopard, the swarms of ants and the flocking of birds. Once we start seeing the edge of chaos and emergent pattern formation, they are all around us. There is a deep beauty to be found here.

Complexity science shows how biological systems tend to occupy the edge of chaos, the fractal border zone between stability and instability, providing maximum ecological flexibility and the most fruitful ground for emergent pattern

1. Dodds, J. (2011). *Psychoanalysis and ecology at the edge of chaos: complexity theory, Deleuze/Guattari and psychoanalysis for a climate in crisis*. Hove: Routledge.

2. Dodds, J. (2022a). Ecopsychanalysis, complexity and a nonlinear Earth. In Turz, J. and Gargiulo, G. (Eds.), *Enriching psychoanalysis: integrating concepts from contemporary science and philosophy*. Abingdon: Routledge.

3. Camazine, S., Deneubourg, J.-L., Franks, N., Sneyd, J., Theraulaz, G., and Bonabeau, E. (2001). *Self-organization in biological systems*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

4. OpenStax College, Physics. Viscosity and laminar flow; Poiseuille's law. Available at: <https://philschatz.com/physics-book/contents/m42209.html> [Accessed October 2023]. In OpenStax CNX, at: <http://cnx.org/contents/031da8d3-b525-429c-80cf-6c8ed997733a@11.1>.

5. Nazarenko, S. (2014). *Fluid dynamics via examples and solutions*. Boca Raton, Florida: CRC Press – Taylor & Francis Group.

formation. A healthy heartbeat shows more turbulence and irregularities than a more rigid one, neural patterns are in a more chaotic state when the organism is open to potentially new experiences, collapsing into more simple structures when a familiar experience or perception occurs (Solé and Goodwin, 2000, p.138).<sup>6</sup> In psychoanalysis, we can see how small pieces of insight and experience self-organise into ever-larger structures and meanings (Palombo, 2007),<sup>7</sup> and even the 'self' can be understood for Deleuze and Guattari (2003)<sup>8</sup> as a multitude, where larval subject and partial objects self-organise into assemblages with emergent properties, below and above the traditionally conceived human subject, including human and non-human elements, living and non-living, representational and material.

Sitting in a consulting room behind the couch, the free association of the client opens up a space of chaos held in the containing frame of the analytic relationship, the temporal setting and the room. The swirling patterns of emotions, memories, fantasies, symptoms and chance experiences play out in the dance of the transference-countertransference and the wider social and ecological worlds we are both embedded in. Too much order leads to deadness and stagnation, where nothing new can come, but within which there can be a certain security, even if it involves a lack of life. Too much chaos can provoke terror and anxiety, and lead to fears of falling into pieces or annihilation, but can also bring excitement and aliveness, and at least a temporary escape from the deadness of non-being.

The dynamic interplay between the security of the frame and the chaos of free association is central to the psychoanalytic work. As we move through the analytic space, the 'fitness landscape' shifts and evolves (Palombo, 1999),<sup>9</sup> and where we need to be can change, as both patient and analyst oscillate between growing capacities to tolerate uncertainty and the need for the security of the known and familiar, even if it leads to remaining fixed in pathological patterns. Part of the art of the work involves intuitively following the shifts as the space we operate in is itself morphing under our feet, like the distortions of space-time described by Einsteinian physics. In part, we ourselves are partly causing these rippling changes and look for ways to move the system forward; and partly we need to learn how to surf the turbulent waters we move through, responding to the undulations and vortices that come towards us.

As I listen to a dream, I also allow my own mind to move in a looser way, and wonder at the particular images, pieces of music, memories, or other associations that occur to me. Out of the chaos, new structures emerge, fractal-like, captured to some extent in Bion's (1962)<sup>10</sup> notion of the selected fact, which retrospectively gives order and meaning to previously disconnected strands of associations. Can we tolerate not knowing, being without memory, desire or understanding? Can we hold open the space long enough to allow something genuinely new to emerge – 'O' – in the analytic encounter (Bion, 1965; Jacobus, 2005)?<sup>11,12</sup> These moments, if we are open to them, also offer possibilities for joy. At times, there is almost the appearance of a joke, a joyful moment of sudden realisation as everything shifts in meaning into a new frame or perspective. In my recent

paper on joy (Dodds, 2022b),<sup>13</sup> I noted with surprise how little the word joy appeared in the entire PEP-web database of psychoanalytic journals and writings in English. There were only 58 references and about a third of those were to people named Joy. There were three references in Freud's writings and none in Jung's.

In the edge of chaos experience, there is a need to be open to the possibilities of a joyful rearrangement of the self, our relations to others and the world, and even our basic framing, for understanding reality. For Heisterkamp (2001)<sup>14</sup> joy represents a successful restructuring or a new beginning, the counterpart to anxiety, where there is a failure of structuring. We can't form new structures unless we allow the previous ones to loosen up, relax their grip, even to fall apart – just as in Winnicott's writings on the fear of chaos when the False Self begins to disintegrate. We need such restructuring on every level, fractal-like, from intrapsychic to global ecological and social-political structures. There is joy in excitement over developmental progress, both as individuals and societies, as new psychological, social and physical capacities are experienced and played out.

Joy is also found in the shared experience of relational resonance, as the dynamic relation is experienced, recognised and reflected, whether in the gleam of mother's eye, the collective experience of a music event, or the connection to animals and pets with all the love, play and connection they include. One of the key insights of ecopsychology is that people's relationships to non-human animals is never merely a reflection of human ones, even though, of course, this also plays a role; rather they are real relationships in their

6. Solé, R., and Goodwin, B. (2000). *Signs of life: how complexity pervades biology*. New York: Basic Books – Hachette Book Group.

7. Palombo, S. (2007). Complexity theory as the parent science of psychoanalysis. In Piers, C., Muller, P., and Brent, J. (Eds.), *Self-organizing complexity in psychological systems*. Lanham, Maryland: Jason Aronson – Rowman and Littlefield.

8. Deleuze, G., and Guattari, F. (2003). *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

9. Palombo, S. (1999). *The emergent ego: complexity and coevolution in the psychoanalytic process*. New York: International Universities Press Inc.

10. Bion, W. (1962). A theory of thinking. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 63, pp.4-5.

11. Bion, W. (1965). *Transformations*. Reprint, London: Karnac Books, 1984.

12. Jacobus, M. (2005). *The poetics of psychoanalysis: in the wake of Klein*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

13. Dodds, J. (2022b). Dancing at the end of the world? Psychoanalysis, climate change, and joy. *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 2022, 67, 5, pp.1257-1269.

14. Heisterkamp, G. (2001). Is psychoanalysis a cheerless (Freud-less) profession? Toward a psychoanalysis of joy. *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 70, 4, pp.839-70.

own right. Yet, it does take some humility to move from a narcissistic relation to an animal, where we demand they fulfil our needs and become the image we project onto them, to a more relational perspective, involving a genuinely empathic attempt to see their world through their eyes, however difficult this might be (see Deleuze interviews, 1988-89).<sup>15</sup>

When we turn to the literature on chaos and complexity in biology, we see how all kinds of heterogeneous structures form what in Deleuze and Guattari's (2003)<sup>16</sup> terminology can be called assemblages. The termite mound includes living and non-living components, dirt and faecal matter, air flows and pheromones, as well as the swarm intelligence involved in the interaction of all the individual termites with each other, the emerging nest and the world around. Irregularities of the environment, or even the shape of the queen, can also act as templates around which the self-organisation of the dense heterarchy forms, but never in predictable ways. Humans can create vastly complex assemblages involving words, electronic data, emotions and thoughts, local and global ecologies, music and culture, ideologies and phantasms, diseases and philosophies. The human is never only the human but includes all the interconnecting webs and flows of which we are a part. Embracing complexity and chaos theory means to change our understanding of what it means to be human, and gives us room to reimagine different kinds of connections and dynamic flows that can emerge when we no longer see ourselves as closed off by the skin, as Bateson (2000)<sup>17</sup> pointed out in his ground-breaking book *Steps towards an ecology of mind*.

In the world today, there is so much horror, terror, chaos and pain. Too much suffering and trauma has occurred to be easily digested. It is hard to imagine how we can find ways to move forward and forgive when so much has been damaged and destroyed. Freud's writings on war can be helpful here, as he tried to find ways to come to terms with the horror of the First World War (Freud, 1933, 1916, 1915).<sup>18, 19, 20</sup> Chaos theory can also give us a potential for hope despite everything going on around us. Out of the chaos, new orders and structures can emerge, and we need to try to remain open to the possibilities that different forms of connections may lead to. Like the patterns forming in the chaotic smoke swirls, or the shoaling of fish, we need to stay alert in ourselves, our work with patients in psychotherapy, and in the wider social and ecological worlds we are embedded in, to new relational patterns, potentialities, assemblages and webs of connectivities. The self-organisation of emergent phenomena at the edge of chaos found in nature has much to teach us about how we see the mind and the human, which builds on the work of Bateson (2000)<sup>21</sup> and Deleuze and Guattari (2003).<sup>22</sup> It is less about conscious control and decision-making, while this of course remains important, but rather about being open to intuitively following emergent movements and structures as they form as fractals on all levels, moving with the dance of life.

Psychoanalysis involves the 'destabilisation' of what Busch (2007)<sup>23</sup> calls pathological infantile attractors in the co-evolving ecosystem of analyst and patient; attractors that

keep us stuck in old patterns, drawing all new experiences into their orbits like black holes. While most change in psychotherapy is absorbed by defences and confined to the local level, as the system reaches self-organised criticality the tiniest local shift can lead to cascades of disorder and subsequent reorganisation throughout the entire system. Such dynamic models of change can be of great help in navigating our social world in the context of climate catastrophe. We may feel stuck and unable to shift into a positive direction. It is easy to get demoralised in the face of so much opposition and hate for even the most modest proposed actions on climate change. However, change can sometimes be swift and dramatic. At times, a single small action of an individual can change the world: the butterfly flap that creates a storm; Rosa Parks not changing her seat on the bus; a school kid sitting outside the Swedish Parliament.

Crucially, this is not because there is necessarily anything special about that person (but there can be, of course) but rather that the wider system had reached a state of self-organised criticality, from the countless actions of people, sometimes over a very long period. In our psychotherapeutic work, we hold onto the hope that there's always the chance that a new piece of insight, or a new experience in the world outside, can start a cascade of changes that leads to a dramatic reorganisation of the psyche and the potential for a more fulfilling life. It is partly that hope that sustains the analytic process during periods when it seems stuck, at least on the surface, but gradually the whole system may have been moving towards a dynamic shift; a phase transition, like an earthquake that occurs only after the slowly shifting plate tectonics of the earth reach a critical point and are suddenly released with tremendous power.

Within the chaos and instability we face in the world today, it can be helpful to consider that chaos is often a normal and

15. *L'abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* (1988-89). [Documentary film interviews with Claire Parnet]. Directed by Boutang, P.-A. Re-released, Paris: Editions Montparnasse, 2004.

16. *Op. cit.* (see page 5).

17. Bateson, G. (2000). *Steps towards an ecology of mind*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

18. Freud, S. (1933) *Why war? The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 22, pp.195-216.

19. Freud, S. (1916). *On transience. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 14, pp.303-307.

20. Freud, S. (1915). *Thoughts for the times on war and death. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 14, pp.273-300.

21. *Op. cit.*

22. *Op. cit.* (see page 5).

23. Busch, F. (2007). 'I noticed': The emergence of self-observation in relationship to pathological attractor sites. *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 88, pp.423-441.





Photo by Peter Thompson

necessary stage on the path towards greater self-organisation. But there is no guarantee that what emerges will be better. Even our idea of what 'better' means can dynamically change, as our beliefs are part of a wider, ever-changing, psycho-social-ecological assemblage. Dynamic systems on all scales (psychological, natural, physical, chemical, social) have their own properties concerning how they function and are put together, and how they can fall apart. But they also have a surprising amount in common and we would do well to understand what we can concerning non-linear dynamical systems of all types. The task, in both psychotherapy and in the wider social world, becomes both intuitive and experimental, as we look (and feel) for crucial pivots to open up the potential for radical transformation. Trying to keep open a space for such change to occur is a crucial part of our therapeutic work, as well as keeping a space for joy in our connection to the living forces of the world. Our engagement with the chaotic systems of the earth can provide crucial possibilities for understanding that can guide us in our search. The future is still open.

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See also:

Cadence CFD Solutions. The differences between laminar vs. turbulent flow. [Online] Available: at <https://resources.system-analysis.cadence.com/blog/msa2022-the-differences-between-laminar-vs-turbulent-flow> [Accessed October 2023]

Strogatz, S.H., (1994). *Non-linear dynamics and chaos: with applications to physics, biology, chemistry and engineering*. Reprint, Colorado: Westview Press – Perseus Group, 2000.

# Learnings from the frontline: community therapies in disaster-affected regions in Australia

By Sally Gillespie

It is the first day of October, early spring in Australia. Here, on the unceded lands of the Gadigal and Wangal people in inner city Sydney, hot winds buffet trees in the 36C degrees heat. Elsewhere, there are reports of out-of-control bushfires down south and up north. Across the whole of the East Coast of New South Wales people are sheltering from the heat while wrangling traumatic memories of previous bushfires, particularly the conflagrations of the Black Summer fires of 2020, which burnt 17 million hectares of land, killing three billion animals and 33 people. With a hot, dry, El Niño summer forecast, tension and fear is ramped up across the country. Local volunteer firefighters are training up to protect their communities yet again, while mental health professionals and allied services are very aware that there is more disaster recovery work ahead, while their clients, and possibly themselves, are still carrying trauma from the fires and floods of recent years. Holding all this in mind, I sit down to write about emergent therapeutic practices in disaster-affected communities here in Australia, to help climate psychologists everywhere consider how they can tend to their communities as the effects of the climate crisis intensify.



Image by Bonnie Porter Greene

## Climate catastrophes in Australia

Australia is on the frontline of escalating climate disasters, with the majority (80%) of Australians experiencing some form of disaster at least once since 2019 (63% heatwaves, 47% flooding, 42% bushfires, 36% drought, 29% destructive storms and 8% landslides).<sup>1</sup> Research estimates suggest that 25-50% of disaster survivors will experience immediate mental health impacts, while 10-20% may experience post-traumatic stress disorder in the following year.<sup>2</sup> On-the-ground mental health care is vital, yet often hard to come by. In Australia, established agencies fail to keep up with the demand for support and are often not trauma-informed in their approaches, while local helping professionals are struggling to keep up with the demand. The worsening crisis demands widespread community-based practices, with trauma-informed programmes and perspectives that recognise the gravity of the situation, and the systemic causes that are driving climate and ecological crisis.

Much of Australia's vulnerability to climate catastrophes reaches back to the profound and ongoing damage inflicted on this continent by colonisation over the last 250 years. When European settlers arrived in the late 18th century, they found a land which was well tended by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose unbroken cultural history stretches back well over 60,000 years – the longest living culture on Earth. Early explorers described Australian land as a well-managed estate, with fertile and productive soils supporting large quantities of crops and grasses, harvested and stored by the local peoples.<sup>3</sup> They also observed that the small-scale, highly nuanced burning of the land by the local traditional owners encouraged soil fertility and biodiversity,

prevented wildfires and aided hunting.<sup>4</sup> As Aboriginal peoples were massacred and driven from their ancestral countries, and cultural burning was banned, productive agricultural land rapidly reverted to highly flammable dry scrubland. In addition, the settlers' introduction of widespread sheep and cattle grazing, land clearing,

1. Climate Council (2023). Survey results: National study of the impact of climate-fuelled disasters on the mental health of Australians. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/survey-results-climate-disasters-mental-health/>
2. Black Dog Institute (2021). *The nexus between climate change and mental health: briefing prepared by Black Dog Institute for COP26*, p.2. [Online.] Available at: <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Climate-Change-and-Mental-Health.pdf>
3. Pascoe, B. (2014). *Dark emu: Aboriginal Australia and the birth of agriculture*. Broome, Western Australia: Magabala Books.
4. Steffenson, V. (2020). *Fire Country: how Indigenous fire management could save Australia*. Sydney, NSW: Hardie Grant.



irrigation and dam building decimated topsoil and biodiversity, while reducing Australian soil carbon stocks by 20 to 70 per cent.<sup>5</sup>

## Indigenous wisdom and cultural care

Even while contending with the ongoing legacies of genocidal policies and practices of a brutal colonisation process, Australia's First Nations peoples, like other Indigenous peoples worldwide, lead the way in addressing ecological and climate crises. This leadership is grounded in immense, traditional ecological knowledge, accompanied by a custodial kinship ethos which places the highest values on 'caring for Country', sustaining ancestral wisdom and living within community.<sup>6, 7, 8</sup> These values are vital for understanding and negotiating the climate and ecological crisis; both for Earth care and for cultural and community care.

In researching emergent community therapeutic practices, it is heartening to hear how many are led by, or conducted in collaboration with, First Nations people. This is vital because not only are First Nations people on the frontline of climate trauma and loss, but also because Indigenous perspectives support all of us to break out of a dominant cultural trance mired in extractivism, exploitation and apocalyptic narratives. Tyson Yunkaporta observes that "Indigenous pattern-thinking process" can insightfully critique contemporary systems and "impart an impression of the pattern of creation itself",<sup>8</sup> fostering an understanding of the complexity and sacredness of all life.

Jem Stone is a First Nations woman, educator and wellness practitioner who is passionate about integrating original knowledge systems and decolonised learning methods into the lives of individuals, organisations and communities. She is a facilitator with We Ali-li,<sup>9</sup> a training organisation in a culturally informed trauma-integrated healing approach, and a practitioner and trainer of Wayapa Wuurk,<sup>10</sup> an Earth connection practice based on ancient Indigenous wisdoms shared worldwide. Jem's stories about how she and her colleagues have responded to recent climate catastrophes in Australian communities highlight how Indigenous cultural perspectives and trauma-informed practices can lead the way in addressing the climate crisis and its effects. Jem acknowledges the significant trauma caused by the devastation, but a broken system cannot necessarily fix what it has broken. She also believes it's not "all doom and gloom, if we have the commitment and the knowledge of ways that we can adapt and start doing things better in relationship with the Earth, to care for her in our daily actions, which brings wellbeing through a sense of purpose and belonging in stewardship, drawing on Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing".

## Responding to the trauma of the Northern Rivers floods

The necessity of caring for Earth and all her beings is heightened after disaster. Following the devastating Northern Rivers floods of 2022 (see Catherine Falco's article in Issue 4 of this journal),<sup>11</sup> Jem facilitated regular Wayapa Wuurk online sessions for the community via The Northern Rivers Community Healing Hub to address high levels of traumatisation.

She observed that there was a terror, or demonising, of rain, so that "anytime there was a few drops of rain, people would go into a trauma response, understandably, from what they've just been through". The Wayapa Wuurk approach involved unpacking the



Image by Bonnie Porter Greene

causes of devastating flooding to identify that rain was not the culprit, but rather, the disconnection by dominant Western cultures from Earth wisdoms and knowledge.

The Bundjalung people, the Traditional Owners of this region, warned early settlers not to site the city of Lismore on lands which they knew would periodically flood – advice that was ignored with tragic consequences. Now, increasing climate and ecological destructions have led to catastrophic flooding, breaking all known records. As Jem says:

*These decisions of a disconnected system continue to be made here and around the world, ignoring original, place-based knowledge with the arrogance of thinking they*

5. ATSE (2022). What's the dirt on soil carbon? [Online]. Accessed at: <https://www.atse.org.au/news-and-events/article/whats-the-dirt-on-soil-carbon>

6. Pascoe (2014), *op. cit.*

7. Steffenson (2020), *op. cit.*

8. Yunkaporta, T. (2019). *Sand talk: how Indigenous thinking can change the world*. Melbourne: Text Publishing, pp.19-20.

9. Online at: <https://www.wealli.com.au>

10. Online at: <https://wayapa.com>

11. Falco, C. (2023). The river wants to move. *Explorations in Climate Psychology Journal*, Issue 4, June 2023, pp.4-6. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org/images/files/ExplorationsIssue4June2023v3.pdf>

*can operate above nature and thousands of years of knowledge, causing harm to Country and people.*

Indigenous knowledge holds a place-based systemic understanding of factors contributing to the catastrophic flooding. We A-li supports traumatised survivors to focus on the necessity of creating communities of care and practice within connected systems, while the Earth-based practices of Wayapa Wuurrk help reconnect to rain as a life-giving force, and to the healing and regenerative capacities of Mother Earth.

The Northern Rivers floods are a tragic example of how unprepared governments are to support communities at the frontline of the climate crisis. Northern Rivers community organiser and activist Annie Kia observes: “We discovered that the institutions that are meant to look after us are riddled with climate denial, so that they’re failing spectacularly.”<sup>12</sup> In a “culture of uncare”,<sup>13</sup> feelings of abandonment and betrayal by governments have become a major theme in the narrative of disaster survivors, further intensifying trauma. At the same, says Annie, there have also been feelings of liberation for herself and many colleagues, as their local communities became self-organising in ways that strengthen community cohesion, place identity and emotional and physical care.

The Northern Rivers Community Healing Hub (NRCHH) was set up immediately after the floods by Bundjalung and Jiman woman, Associate Professor Carlie Atkinson, to address community trauma and mental wellbeing. It is “a self-organising network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members and professionals, creating a community healing space to support recovery that is grounded in the trauma-informed, grounding and regulating practices of First Nations peoples”. Carlie Atkinson, who is also the CEO of We A-li, observes that:

*Trauma is familiar to our mob across this country, particularly collective trauma, community trauma. And the most powerful things that can happen when there’s been a collective traumatic event is to bring community together to provide a sense of belonging. So the first thing that we do, particularly at the healing hub, is just try to regulate people’s nervous systems. It is why things like body work and massages are incredibly important, because trauma is stored in the body.<sup>14</sup>*

This inclusive service has earned wide community respect, strengthening Aboriginal culture, while providing thousands of wellbeing sessions for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in a community which is undergoing a severe and ongoing mental health crisis following the floods.

### Creating safe spaces for sharing stories

A central practice in Indigenous-led trauma recovery is the telling of stories in protected spaces, such as yarning or weaving circles. Jem Stone describes traditional yarning circles as non-hierarchical spaces where “we’re all learning together” through the presence of many perspectives. Michele Laurie, an Aboriginal trauma specialist of Gumbayngirr and Yaegl heritage, who volunteers at the Hub, explains that Aboriginal people have traditionally used “the ancient concept of sitting together in circle and telling yarns, while practically using your hands and interacting”. It’s a practice which works well for trauma regulation as it “allows the space for everyone to come together in that circular kind of motion, which is a really significant symbol for Aboriginal people”.<sup>15</sup>

Trauma-informed group practices, including sitting in a circle, opening and closing rituals, and group agreements about respectful listening, closely follow Indigenous ceremonial protocols long practised to foster community resilience, safety and bonding. Jem Stone’s We A-li colleague, Georgie Igoe, who is a Gestalt and relational therapist of Irish descent, describes the establishment of safe space in trauma-informed work as:

*...a ceremonial priority, so however long that takes, that’s the work. In some senses, it’s simple work, yet it’s also extremely profound... it is just such an anomaly in this culture that we live in... to actually have a space to breathe and to hold each other in our experiences, [to] not shy away from raw experience and emotion. It feels like part of the decolonisation process... which is transformative and really important in the process of building and rebuilding.*

Haaweatea Holly Bryson, a psychotherapist and Māori healing practitioner, similarly emphasises the need to create a strong container first up when working with trauma in communities. She says that there is a way we can “hold ceremony in how we speak and how we listen”, which enables us “to stay present in our bodies”, so that we don’t get overwhelmed, or go home “to process all we have heard alone”.<sup>16</sup> Many of these ways may seem simple yet, taken seriously, have a profound effect on people. Haaweatea notes that:

*[T]here is something in the tracking of one another that happens in a circle [which] creates safety with one another and that allows things to happen... [while] good timekeeping drops us into something... rather than letting time be nondescript, so that people start to dissociate and get overwhelmed.*

In talking to survivors of the recent climate catastrophes on the East Coast of Australia, I hear repeatedly of the need to have safe community places for telling stories and sharing feelings, and of how rare the opportunities are for this. Jem Stone observes:

*Other than Indigenous ways, I don’t think there’s many models or frameworks that are actually able to really hold the story, creating that regenerative system where, within the circle, we all hold each other in communities of care and practice.*

12. Climate Psychology Alliance (2022). Six months on from COP26: psycho-social reflections – what have we learnt? [Recording of Eastern Zone opening and panel discussion on 4 May]. [Online]. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WnkgKYA2aJWJoZsjPTksqr5h2IMAzBZg/view>

13. See: Weintrobe, S. (2021). *Psychological roots of the climate crisis: neoliberal exceptionalism and the culture of uncare*. London: Bloomsbury.

14. Small Business Secrets (2022). The Indigenous trauma specialists working to ease a growing mental health crisis in flood-affected NSW. [Online newsfeed]. Available at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/small-business-secrets/article/the-indigenous-trauma-counsellors-working-to-prevent-a-mental-health-crisis-in-flood-affected-nsw/c5map6g1f>

15. Ibid.

16. Climate Psychology Alliance (2022), *op. cit.*



This was apparent in a We AHi trauma-informed care and practice training Jem facilitated for a Bundjalung community some 18 months after the floods, where people were able to safely share their flood stories – some for the very first time.

Without the safe space provided through trauma-informed practices, such as somatic grounding, taking pauses, timekeeping and respectful listening, survivors can find themselves in situations where they or others spill out their stories in ways that are re-traumatising for listener and hearer. Jo Dodds, the President of the Bushfire Survivors for Climate Action (BSCA), recalls that in the local supermarket after the Black Summer fires, “I could hear, on every aisle, people just pouring their stories out, and a sense of ‘I’m now so overloaded with stories I can’t hear anymore’”.<sup>17</sup>

Jo’s neighbour Jan Harris, who lost her family home on Yuin country to bushfires in 2018, and who is also a BSCA core member, recalls how after the fires there were endless meetings of being given instructions about what to do, where there was no sensitivity to, or safe holding of, trauma and grief. Jan recalls that “other people tell you what’s good for you, not letting people pause while being incredibly sad... [T]he message is you’ve got to move on, you have to do things and be practical”; an all-too-familiar theme in mainstream ‘burnout’ culture. Many times, Jan left meetings feeling dismissed, unseen and re-traumatised.

For Jan and Jo, the most helpful, safely-held community space for sharing stories and grieving was provided by a weekend workshop based on Joanna Macy’s *The Work that Reconnects*,<sup>18</sup> which was run 18 months after the fire by Psychology for a Safe Climate. Jan tells me this was fantastic:

*There wasn’t this assumption that you’re just grieving for yourself, which I don’t think for most people is true. I think the majority of people are empathetic to other people’s loss, also for the environment that we lived in, which had been so damaged. So... you could see your own grief in a broader context.*

Haaweatea Bryson observes that when we can listen safely to others’ stories of experiencing disasters it can bring an understanding that “your story is also my story” and so that “instead of it being a competition or a conflict of parts, through our interconnection [it becomes] ‘I don’t need to voice my story, because I just heard mine and yours, and where we are now’”. This then helps move people beyond what she describes as a “western model of self-care vs other-care, where we think there’s a tension or a choice to be made. This system/way of thinking feeds the survivor’s guilt”. From her own experience and that of others, she observes:

*When it’s easier to help someone else than to be with the trauma in my own body, that nourishment to another can also be deeply nourishing to me, when we enter into this place where it’s multi-directional, and we’re co-regulating together.*

This recognition of a commonality in stories and emotional processing provides a basis for creating shared care and meaning making, which disaster survivors and their communities can incorporate into recovery projects that address the climate and ecological crisis. The work of BSCA, a highly effective political lobbying group, which formed in the wake of the Tathra fires of 2018, is a good example of this, with its dedication to the common purpose of making a safer future, while also fostering empathic collegial support for shared experiences of disaster.



Image by Bonnie Porter Greene

## Facilitating grounding and resilience

The development of an eco-systemic worldview, grounded in the primacy of Earth and community care, is at the core of what is needed to effectively engage with the climate and ecological crisis. “This vision of reconnection to natural connected systems”, says Jem Stone, facilitates grounding and resilience “in that truth of who we are, in our purpose as Earth people, we’re able to heal in reciprocity with our environment, to manage the many things that come our way”. Jem’s words resonate with the work of Lisa Brown and her colleagues in Gumbaynggirr country on the mid-North Coast of NSW, a region which has been heavily impacted by fire, floods and storms in the last four years.

Lisa is a psychologist who teaches groups mindfulness-based stress reduction, mindful self-compassion, and yoga for trauma recovery. In her practice, she has seen a dramatic rise of stress in her clients, as well as witnessing high rates of traumatisation in her community. In response, she called on colleagues she had previously worked with: Jude Baderle, another mindfulness teacher and a somatic therapist, and Bernard Kelly Edwards, a Gumbaynggirr poet, multimedia artist and community facilitator. Together they designed a two-day trauma-informed workshop, which was funded by the North Coast Primary Health Network in partnership with OzGreen, to teach mindfulness, self-compassion

17. Climate Psychology Alliance (2022), *op. cit.*

18. Online at: <https://workthatreconnects.org>



## FEATURE

and connection with *waajar* (land and home), which was delivered in four North Coast communities over 2022-23. The participants' feedback was that they loved the nurturing combination of connection, yarns, mindfulness practice, poems and yoga, which helped them work through difficult emotions and regulate stress. When I asked Lisa what was crucial in the workshops' success, she nominated the strong relationship between the facilitators, negotiated group agreements around safety and confidentiality, mindfulness-based practices for trauma recovery, and Bernard's sharing of Earth-based wisdom and 'connection to Country' practices.

Lisa and her colleagues are committed to trauma-informed community work to bring mindfulness-based skills, insights from modern psychology and the wisdom of First Nations perspectives to support personal and community health and wellbeing. The demand and need are ever-growing, says Lisa. However, the sticking point is funding: "I'm a clinician and a therapist, I'm not a grant writer or a marketer. Without supportive organisations or funding bodies, it can leave you feeling burnt out." For now, she and colleagues are offering a regular, free, community Dharma group that includes Gumbaynggir community members, where "we share a meal, listen to a short Dharma talk, followed by meditation and a sharing space to process experience and create possibilities together".

### Conclusion

As climate catastrophes worsen, there is an urgent need for accessible, inclusive, place-based therapeutic groupwork which helps people to regulate trauma and anxiety, process grief and cultivate fortitude and creativity for the future. It is critically important that facilitators are trained in evidenced-based trauma regulation, somatic awareness and groupwork, so that they can create safe and therapeutic spaces. It is also crucial that traditional Indigenous cultural and ecological knowledges are present and respectfully acknowledged. Not only because the causes for climate and ecological disasters stem from colonising and extractive cultures that are deeply disconnected from Earth in their values and understandings, but also because Indigenous cultures hold ancestral healing wisdoms grounded in community and ceremonies that nurture Earth connection and care.

Jem Stone, like many First Nations people, emphasises that all humans have Indigenous roots:

*[with] ancestors who lived deeply connected to the Earth. Through reconnecting to the Earth, our cellular memory activates an ancestral knowing of our own lineages and ways that our ancestors originally connected with and cared for the Earth, which we can embrace today regardless of where we live.*

Recovery from, mitigation of, and adaptation for climate disasters requires community approaches which support a decolonising of minds and hearts, and the stimulation of regenerative meaning-making and collective action. Just as disturbed or burnt ground can throw up new seeds and growth, so too can disasters propagate Earth-connected community healing initiatives, facilitated by a diverse alliance of practitioners, fostering wise ways of caring for people, places and planet.

*My sincerest thanks to everyone interviewed for this article.*



Image by Bonnie Porter WGreene

### About the images

The images are from an interactive community arts project *Re-Heal/Palimpsest*, by Bonnie Porter Greene, presented in multiple bushfire-affected communities between 2021-23. Each board comprises a base layer of local bush and native flowers, over which is pasted images of the bushfires. Participants are encouraged to scratch or peel off parts of the top layer to reveal underlying growth. Bonnie writes: "I have had very positive feedback about the physicality and enjoyment of being able to interact with an artwork, and the accessibility and the opportunity for it to create a safe gentle space to talk."

**Sally Gillespie**, PhD, lives on the unceded lands of the Gadigal and Wangal people in Sydney, Australia. Her book: *Climate crisis and consciousness: reimagining our world and ourselves* (2020, Abingdon: Routledge) explores the psychological challenges and developmental processes of climate engagement. She is workshop facilitator and trainer for Psychology for a Safe Climate.

**Bonnie Porter Greene** explores her love of the landscape through reflective studio practice and *en plein air* excursions, resulting in direct and honest painted memories of the landscape. Her paintings imbue her connection and concern for the environment.

# Climate psychology at the edges of chaos

Edited by Els van Ooijen

For this issue we invited Jacqueline Mackenzie, Jennifer Ramsay, Judith Anderson, Nancy Blair, Rob Porteous and Els van Ooijen to discuss climate psychology at the edges of chaos.

Els started the conversation by asking, "What comes up for you as you think about this?"

## How to live at the edges of chaos

**Jacque:** I'm surprised how many people didn't see Y2K<sup>1</sup> as a trial run for what is coming. With all that data out there, why were more therapists not ready? I'm working in deep adaptation; the theory is to be there for each other. Connecting people in all spheres of life to foster mutual support and collaboration in the process of anticipating, observing and experiencing societal disruption and collapse. To be there for each other, not necessarily have any answers but to be non-judgmental. In a meeting, you just listen. That's what people are missing; so many people don't listen and that's what we need. We really don't have any answers. I'm an elder, almost 77, and I don't have any answers.

**Rob:** Perhaps, if we start listening, we'll find a global situation that is beyond our control. So we focus on individual symptoms – a hurricane, a fire, a sea-level rise, a tsunami or whatever – that appear to be quite chaotic. If we could listen to the earth as a living being, rather than as an inanimate object, we might have a different attitude to what's going on.

**Judith:** I'm struck by the ambiguity of the title. Did it mean: how does climate psychology face the edge of chaos? Or is it something to do with climate? Psychology itself being at the edge of chaos? I came into this 18 years ago when I heard Mary-Jayne Rust speak at the Making the Sea Change conference I helped organise. I thought this is the defining issue of our time, the whole package of environmental and biodiversity loss and climate change.

I feel I've been living on the edge of chaos ever since. What we're seeing now is an unfolding of that chaos that we have been both living with and predicting; that was known about since someone wrote about limits to growth. The Indigenous wisdom has been there for centuries, about what happens when you don't take care of Earth's boundary.

Exponential changes are happening. At a conference last week, a major fundholder of climate change research said that they'd changed their funding model to give grants quicker. Usually this takes a year or 18 months. It's not only the catastrophes in Libya and Morocco, or the unfolding catastrophe in the Horn of Africa, and Pakistan etc., but the fact that, in Europe, the weather in October is three degrees higher than average; it is exponential.

The chaos is approaching us like an express train. The question is, how do we live at the edge of chaos? How do we inhabit that? For me, personally, being involved in CPA since its beginnings, that's been part of what we're about.



Photo by Toby Chown

## Scenes from around the World

**Nancy:** Judith mentioned Mary-Jayne Rust. The paragraph at the end of her book on ecopsychotherapy<sup>2</sup> got me through the summer. It's the whole thing about fire and floods and kindness. Canada's a very big country and I've been working with the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association for six years. We have a peer group of counsellors across Canada and, in September, the topic was: "How do you counsel when you're going through a climate

1. "Y2K was commonly used to refer to a widespread computer programming shortcut that was expected to cause extensive havoc as the year changed from 1999 to 2000. The change was expected to bring down computer system infrastructures, such as those for banking and power plants." See: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/y/y2k.asp> [Accessed 2 November 2023]

2. Rust, M.,-J. (2020). *Towards an ecopsychotherapy*. London: Confer Books.



## GROUP DIALOGUE

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emergency yourself?" It can be terrifying. It's really going on in Canada! The temperature is going up and things are changing very quickly. We got the smoke in Nova Scotia from Alberta yesterday. We are in a time of chaos. Hurricane Lee came through and we've lost most of the apple harvest. We lost the grapes last February, because we had a deep freeze. So, issues with food security in what used to be called Canada's playground. People come because they think it's cheaper to live here. We have a terrible housing problem and we don't have enough doctors. We are in chaos now!

Judith asked whether it's psychotherapy that's in chaos? For the last six years, the CPA's been incredibly important for me. When you and your clients are in a climate emergency, it can be really tough, so I'm glad we had the peer group. I have clients who are in crisis. I've learned so much from my clients.

**Jennifer:** In Spain it's a massive issue. Today, it was 38 degrees in Seville. In my village in the foothills of Madrid, it's 26 degrees and that's in October! I try not to panic, and I'm preparing in every way I can. Here, people don't really talk about what's happening. People know, because it's been so hot you can't deny it anymore. It's like a desert in the centre of Spain. There are a few pockets of green where everyone wants to live now, but where it's almost impossible to find a house. Food security is an issue. Spain is one of the biggest producers of olive oil in the world. Lots of olive trees don't produce any olives this year – it's too hot and dry. It's such a massive issue here because the olive oil crop is still being exported to other countries. You go to buy olive oil in the supermarkets and may find there's a security tag on it.

I'm very worried about politics. At the moment, it's a hung government. For the conservative right wing to get in, they need the support of the extreme right party Vox. Vox do not believe in the climate crisis. Their policies would just be a total disaster. Spain has a culture of going out, having a good time, so you can't talk about it to lots of people. They're not talking about it in government, so where can you talk about it? I run climate cafés, because I believe in the power of story to get people talking. I'm a professional storyteller, and also connect it with nature. It's what keeps me going, just knowing that I'm here and I'm preparing all I can for whatever is to come.

**Els:** I'm struck by you saying that you can't talk about it, even though it's really hot and it's so obvious.

**Jennifer:** Two years ago it was impossible. So many people have died after two incredibly hot summers, so many vulnerable people. It's beginning to get talked about, in little pockets and little groups, but it's not easy.

**Els:** How is it in Ecuador?

**Jacquie:** We moved to Ecuador 10 years ago – both because it was the most eco-sustainable country and also because of my husband's health. This is a blue zone; a good place for him to be able to breathe. He just celebrated his 83rd birthday, which is unheard of for somebody who spent four years exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam.

It's 206 hectares on top of the mountain; a river on either side, an incredible permaculture place. We built this eco Hobbit house. We live among Indigenous farmers; they are just frantic. We only have two seasons. In July, the temperature was the highest it's ever been, 86F, the lowest it has ever been is 58F. It's a really narrow window. Many things don't grow because it's not hot enough. Now,

suddenly, it's not cool enough. Nothing that they've grown for years and years is growing, because it's too dry. And the wind, that we used to only have in June, is now off and on all year. We're getting these little sprinklings. You check your watch when you hear the sprinkle start; 90 seconds later it has passed – but it used to be torrential rainstorms. I'm almost 77 and my husband is 83, but we're not moving. As Rob said: the earth is alive, but we've killed our home. Carl Sagan said, see that blue dot? Only home we've ever known. There's no planet B.

**Rob:** I think stories are really important. We need to reimagine the stories that place us in connection with the earth as part of the natural environment, rather than above it in a superior position. I'm 80. For 60 years, people have known that there are things that we ought to be doing with regard to the climate, with regard to population, with regard to pollution, etc., and we haven't done them. We need to understand why people who have power seem incapable or unwilling to act on what they know. I don't see how anything is going to change. In my counselling sessions, I now talk much more directly about climate change. *Silent spring*<sup>3</sup> was published in 1962, but the awareness was pushed out of sight.

**Els:** Fossil fuel companies like Shell were well-informed about climate change, but actively suppressed it and brought in so-called evidence that it wasn't happening. Yet it's their future and their earth too.

**Jacquie:** Just the six of us here together today is so comforting and encouraging. We're empowering each other and that's what we have. The only outlet we have right now is to empower each other, and listen.

**Nancy:** It's Truth and Reconciliation Day in Canada on Saturday. First Nations people are recognised more and more, and are able to do their ceremonies. There's a lot of publicity about residential schools. It will take generations to recover from the trauma of colonisation. It's good to see this coming up front because I'm here, too. I'm on Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People. I think that it's important that I say the acknowledgement in this group.

I find this idea of having a safe place ironic. You have the same damn smoke in the UK as Nova Scotia. Why are there big fires in Canada, but not the Soviet Union? Very soon there's no safe place on this planet. If that exists now, I'd be very curious.

**Judith:** They do have fires in the Russian tundra.

**Nancy:** Thanks, Judith. We're not hearing about them. Isn't that interesting? The fires are terrible, it's not smoke! It's the ashes of living creatures, and we're breathing it. Smoke is bad for your brain, especially babies. I want everybody to realise that there is no safe place on this planet at all. Then we could just deal with it.

## The eye of the storm

**Judith:** I'm struck by what Jennifer said about people dying. Perhaps it feels to us that we're on the edge of chaos, but Jacqueline is in the middle of chaos. I want to speak up for so many vulnerable people who are absolutely in the middle of chaos, even in our

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3. Carson, R. (1962). *Silent spring*. Reprint, London: Penguin Classics, 2000.





*Disintegration. Photo by Toby Chown*

northern climes. I heard a statistic. Nancy, you'll probably know, that eight percent of people with psychosis in British Columbia died because of the heatwave. It's because people on antipsychotic medication, which they may well need, don't manage heat well. And, psychologically, they don't have the resources to get to cool places. For their bodies, temperature is a killer.

I'm really pleased that in this conversation we're not pussyfooting around. It's easy with a title like 'at the edge of chaos' to philosophise. As everybody has said, there is no safe place. Right now, people are dying because of climate change, it's lethal through temperature. But the recent disaster in Libya, where tens of thousands of people were washed into the sea, was due to a wicked combination of Government ineptitude, not maintaining the dam and, something I only recently heard – there is a name for a 'Medicane', which means a hurricane in the Mediterranean. They are well-known weather phenomena, getting worse because of climate change. This storm had gone round the Mediterranean and hit Libya with gallons of water. So, when we talk about the edge of chaos, maybe that is what it's like for us. But it's pretty much the eye of the storm for so many people, and they are the most vulnerable and often the poorest.

Research in Australia about 12 years ago, into the effects of repeated droughts, found that city dwellers maintained their mental health because there were more nights when they could eat out. But farmers became depressed. They started killing themselves when they can't grow the crops. They needed to feed

their families and their communities. So many people are right in the eye of the storm, not at the edge.

**Els:** Yes, Jacqueline appears to be right in the middle of chaos, and it sounds like Nancy, you are on the edge, but certain parts of Canada are well over the edge. Ditto Spain, and of course Libya, and there's also the whole of Africa, Asia, etc. There must be so much happening everywhere that we don't hear about.

**Jennifer:** In Andalusia, in the south, you can't go out between 11 in the morning until about 9 at night. All those elderly people who are on their own. How do they do their shopping? How can they leave their house? So, all these people spend their time in the summer and, even now, in this record hot October, indoors, with all their blinds down, with perhaps only a telly for company. Also, lots of people come from Africa looking for a safe haven in Spain. The conditions that they are in here are just ridiculous. Many are working legally or illegally in agriculture and then sleep in plastic tents under this ridiculous heat.

### No safe space

**Els:** You mentioned migrants. So many people will be displaced, because life in their own countries is becoming impossible. They come to Europe where there's complete chaos and they're not welcome. I wonder how many people have died both in the Mediterranean and in attempting to cross the Channel.

**Rob:** We need to build communities of people working together to make changes, some perhaps quite small, in local communities: that will begin to make a difference. Yet there is this energy which is going in the opposite direction, of people building walls and trying to hold on to what they've got by excluding others. I have family in Israel and I've been to Bethlehem, which is on the other side of the wall that the Israelis have built between Israel and the West Bank. There is a guy there, Mazin Qumsiyeh, who runs the Palestinian Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability. But the effort to connect with the land, and the wisdom that the land has about what needs to happen, is overwhelmed by this huge need to be safe, and build walls to exclude others. And it doesn't work. The fear remains.

**Els:** So, we do the opposite of what we should do – build communities, be with each other, listen to each other, help each other. When you spoke Rob, I felt that people are imprisoning themselves in order to be safe. But of course, as Nancy was saying, nowhere is safe.

**Jacquie:** I am taking a free, nine-week, online course: 'Resilience and acceptance in the face of collapse'.<sup>4</sup> We are already facing, as Jennifer pointed out, people dying because they're vulnerable. Vulnerable people are also dying because they're killing themselves. A study of young people between 16 and 24, in 13 different countries, found that many of them think they don't have a future, so they are killing themselves. The United States is keeping track of how many young people come into the emergency room because they've tried to take their own lives. A friend told me: "My daughter thinks she has no more than eight years left to be alive." She's 23; that is really scary.

We need to decide how to act. As Rob says, we need to have communities. When Nancy is putting on a climate café, she's

4. Online at: <https://acceptingcollapse.com>



## GROUP DIALOGUE

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expressing love to me and love to the earth, and the end result is, “Oh, thank goodness, I’m not nuts” – unless Nancy is too.

**Nancy:** It’s important to give the CPA credit for being a touchstone. When you think you’re crazy, you need others saying you’re not crazy. Humans are dying, but I’m concerned about the ecosystem dying, the water, the air, all the biodiversity. In Nova Scotia, we’re going to lose coastal land, that’s almost a given! But to lose the fish, the birds, the insects! Naomi Klein’s brother Seth,<sup>5</sup> wrote a wonderful book on what we can do, using the example of World War II mobilisation. I also want to mention the therapists who are doing this work all the time. We’re always sitting on the edge of chaos with our clients. It is really hard sometimes because we may be afraid of the same things. All of us are dealing with an existential situation, and the more you work with clients who are having these fears about climate, the more informed you get. I say to clients and to therapists, it’s hard work, but it’s important to face what’s going on and help others face it, and to realise the importance of community.

### Listening is so important

**Jacqui:** Over the last three years, when I’ve been in CPA meetings, people have said exactly what Nancy said. Two people in the same room, one’s a client, one’s a therapist, with the same questions. That’s why listening is so important. As a minister, I’m doing the same thing on a pastoral level. But I’m mostly just listening, because what else can I say? I can’t give advice. I tell them the same thing,

Photo by Peter Thompson



Rob, listen to Mother Earth. Go out there, look around, see what’s happening. Look at your own plants and animals.

**Els:** At the start of a recent talk, the speaker said that by the end of this hour, a number of species will have become extinct. That really brought home that extinctions are happening all the time. And that’s terrifying because, as Nancy said, they’re killing the ecosystem. But we need the ecosystem. We need to live in it. We’re part of it.

**Jacqui:** We lose 250 species a day.

**Els:** Terrifying.

**Judith:** I’m much more afraid of cruelty than death.

**Els:** And how we treat one another. Absolutely.

**Jennifer:** I would like to give a special mention to everyone risking their lives to give a voice to all in the earth’s system: the animals, the plants, all the natural beings that are disappearing, or are in danger of disappearing. In Spain last year, some scientist activists were outside the Spanish Parliament with a big banner saying “We’re scientists, please listen, the climate crisis is real”. They also threw a bottle of watered-down, beetroot juice against the Parliament. They are now being accused of terrorism and face up to eight years in jail if found guilty. They just want to save the planet! So many people are risking their life. How can we all get together, so that these voices can be heard, and we won’t be

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5. Seth Klein (2020) *A good war: mobilizing Canada for the climate emergency*. Toronto: ECW Press.

accused of such ridiculous things. Something similar is happening in the UK; people being tried for protesting, just wanting something to be done.

**Els:** When there's a court case, they're not even allowed to mention climate change!

**Judith:** I heard from a colleague in the Philippines that death rates of activists is highest in the Philippines; third only in the world behind Brazil and Colombia. Some of this is state-sanctioned killings of young activists. It indicates that leadership – both governments and politics in general – is in chaos. Rather than doing whatever needs to be done, they're in denial and punish people who say, "Hey, there's that great chaos. Something needs to happen".

### Order arising from chaos?

**Rob:** Krishnamurti said that the order that arises out of chaos is quite different from the order that we impose on it. We could reimagine what needs to happen. I don't think the Earth needs saving. We simply need to stop damaging it. If we got out of the way, things could get back to a place of homeostasis. The tragedy is that so many people are committed to keeping the status quo going, and won't allow protests or change.

**Judith:** I agree. How lovely it's been to be sitting in this group of people from Spain, Ecuador and Nova Scotia, and yourself and Rob. I think it's sown some seeds in my mind that I'll go on thinking about.

**Jennifer:** I would just like to add, before we leave, the word 'hope' in this crazy darkness we've got ourselves into. I hope that a critical mass will come together sooner rather than later. I'd like to be able to celebrate the lives of all those living beings who have gone – all the animals and insects and plants – and to look toward to the future as a community.

**Jacquie:** A question that keeps coming up: are the doomers and the deniers in the same space because they don't want to do anything, or because they're afraid to? A famous minister once said: "You've got to say that there should be hope, because if they have none, they need some, and they're only going to get it from somebody they respect." So Jennifer is exactly right.

**Nancy:** Take action. You will have hope.

**Els:** Holding the hope. Thank you all for taking for taking part.

**Nancy Blair** is a Registered Counselling Therapist in Nova Scotia, Canada. She is a member of the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) Climate Informed Chapter and founded the CCPA Climate Informed Peer Group in January 2022.

**Judith Anderson** is a Jungian psychotherapist based in Oxford, UK, who has been involved with CPA since its founding and is currently Chair of the Board of Trustees.

**Jennifer Ramsay** is a Scottish storyteller living in Spain. She is a qualified Gestalt therapist, specialised in art therapy, ecotherapy and psychodrama. She works with story medicine in private practice and as a creative group facilitator.

**Rob Porteous** is a therapeutic counsellor working in Bristol. He has been practising movement medicine, a shamanic dance practice, for the past 25 years.

**Jacquie Mackenzie**, PhD, is a retired exceptional students educator, non-profit administrator, neopagan minister and deep ecologist. She and her husband reside in Ecuador in an eco-Hobbit house they built on leased land.

**Els van Ooijen**, Dpsych, is a retired psychotherapist and lecturer in counselling and supervision. Her current interests include the intersections between decolonisation and climate change. Els lives in Bristol, UK.



# Chaos: scientific and human perspectives

By Tony Cartwright

I didn't study natural science at university, having chosen the humanities in the sixth form at school. As a result, I grew up scientifically illiterate in the 'two cultures' atmosphere of the last century. Art and human sciences seemed much more interesting than natural science anyway. It wasn't until I started looking into the creative science writing of biologists like Richard Dawkins and Stephen Jay Gould that I realised how fascinating science really is.<sup>1,2</sup> The difficulty was that, without a scientific education, there was a limit to how far one could go, scientifically speaking. Understanding the revolutions of relativity and quantum mechanics, for instance, seemed to require a knowledge of advanced mathematical logic and the esoteric equations used in following it.

At first I was quite angry with an educational system that separated students into two distinct cultures, but, when reading up about quantum mechanics – that branch of science even scientists proclaim they can't understand! – I was fascinated by its insights. For example, the findings that merely observing something changes it or that an 'atom' is not a fixed entity, but sometimes a particle, sometimes a wave, depending on how you are looking at it. Quantum realities seemed to be breaking down the Newtonian certainties of the 17th century Scientific Revolution and the European Enlightenment which followed it; in particular the idea that the universe is a fixed, objective reality we freely and harmlessly observe.

While both the 20th century revolutions of relativity and quantum mechanics challenged the empirical science of the Enlightenment and its encyclopaedic view that we only needed to accumulate more knowledge, or data, to have a complete understanding of the universe – a view still held, consciously or unconsciously, by many orthodox scientists – the revolutions of physics in the early years of the last century only went so far. Many of the famous physicists of that time were, in fact, of a mystical persuasion. In their understanding, the universe was essentially mysterious and ultimately unfathomable to the rational or linear mind. Chaos and complexity theory have built on those revolutions and taken their understandings further, in a way that the 'non-scientific', more contemplative mind can understand. In particular, for instance, the notion that complexity is not so complicated, but essentially built up by the infinite replication of simple geometrical forms.

What makes chaos exciting, as the *Introducing chaos* graphic guide confirms,<sup>3</sup> is that, while modern Western science aims to present a universe at once predictable and conforming to fundamental physical laws, chaos theory suggests that it – the universe – is also a place of disorder, complexity and unpredictability. In fact, according to chaos theory, predictability is a rare phenomenon. Chaos theory explores the subtle relationships between randomness and orderliness and, like the ancient Chinese Taoist tradition of yin and yang, illustrates how they are not two, but identified the one with the other. Both are needed to begin to make sense of the world.

At the same time, as ourselves a species of nature, we are humbled by our limited, intellectual understanding. The universe – and its chaotic nature – are very beautiful. As Shakespeare's Hamlet said,



Photo by Peter Thompson

famously, to his friend, Horatio: "There are more things in heaven and earth than dreamt of in your philosophy." Chaos seems to point not just to the orderly randomness, but to the corresponding beauty itself – of the universe and all phenomena in it, including ourselves.

How chaos links simplicity and complexity is something that the science writer, John Gribbin, struggled with, until he realised that 'complexity' originates with simple and initial forms that find a regular and rhythmic response in the environment to create the complex phenomena of nature.<sup>4</sup> The flapping of a butterfly's wings creating storms on the other side of the world is a well-known example, but also take Benoit Mandelbrot's concept of fractal geometry, for instance, which James Gleick made popular in *Chaos: making a new science*.<sup>5</sup> Mandelbrot coined the term

1. Dawkins, R. (2006). *Unweaving the rainbow: science, delusion and the appetite for wonder*. London: Penguin Books.

2. Gould, S.,J. (1997). *Life's grandeur: the spread of excellence from Plato to Darwin*. London: Vintage.

3. Abrams, I., and Sardanapalus, Z. (2008). *Introducing chaos: a graphic guide*. [Kindle edition]. London: Icon Books, 2014.

4. John Gribben suggested that the business of chaos and complexity is based on two simple ideas, "the sensitivity of a system to its starting conditions and feedback". See: Gribbin, J. (2004). *The simplicity of complexity. Introduction to: Deep simplicity: chaos, complexity and the emergence of life*. Reprint, London: Penguin Books, 2005.

Gleick, J. (1987 ). See chapters: A geometry of nature; Images of chaos. In: *Chaos: making a new science*. Reprint, London: Penguin Books, 2008.

'fractal' from the Latin *fractus*, which describes a broken stone – broken and irregular. Fractals are geometrical forms that, unlike those of Euclid, are not regular at all. But, at the same time, they manifest a mysterious coherence. They look, for instance, the same on a small or large scale; a quality Mandelbrot referred to as “self-similarity”, and which reminds one of the poet, William Blake’s, “World in a grain of sand”,<sup>6</sup> or the Dalai Lama’s, “Universe in a single atom”.<sup>7</sup>

It is a fantastic idea – and image – that our complex, and seemingly complicated, world could be built up with self-similar forms, replicated infinitely to account for all the myriad phenomena of the universe, simultaneously in a regular but irregular pattern. You can see how it is beautifully manifest in nature in the growing form of any tree. But chaos theory suggests how the same figuration can be seen everywhere: in the world of meteorology of course, but also, for example, in economics and industry, the human body and architecture, demographics and cities, and, of course, in the human mind (male and female) – everything in fact.

Chaos also showed how ‘randomness’ was not random but had an order that European modern science had missed. As Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stenger demonstrated in their landmark book, order comes out of chaos.<sup>8</sup> Prigogine was a Belgian chemist who won the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1977 for his work on what he called “dissipative structures”. This term implies that all phenomena, particularly when they are in a “turbulent” condition, or “far from equilibrium”, are apt to “dissipate” – as it were, self-destruct. But, as Prigogine suggests, a dissipative system also has a capacity to “self-organise”. Biological and social systems are open and readily exchange energy and information with their environment. Therefore, understanding them in mechanical terms – the machine metaphor is the driver of orthodox modern science – will not work. Prigogine maintained that most of reality is actually unstable, and therefore full of disorder and change, but capable of self-organising at the same time.

According to him, there are distinctions between systems that are “in equilibrium”, “near equilibrium” and “far from equilibrium”.<sup>9</sup> In systems that are far from equilibrium, matter dramatically reorganises. This reminds one of Rebecca Solnit’s “paradise built in hell”.<sup>10</sup> There is a transformation from disorder – “thermal chaos” for the natural scientist – to order. New dynamic states of matter may originate, resulting from a new interaction between a given system and its environment.

To understand how, Prigogine introduced the notions of reversible and irreversible time.<sup>11</sup> Newtonian thought saw the universe as mechanical and reversible. Time – or evolution – did not enter into the realm of classical physics, which posited a system “in equilibrium”. Only in irreversible time did dynamic time really become manifest, in conditions that were “far from equilibrium”. Chaos, in fact, could be said to reveal “the arrow of time”. But, for Prigogine, irreversible processes were also the source of order. Self-organisation could happen, and it did so spontaneously. To quote Prigogine: “Far from equilibrium, studies led me to the conviction that irreversibility has a constructive role. It makes form. It makes human beings”.<sup>12</sup> In other words, irreversible time is creative. In times of turbulence, when nature is “far from equilibrium”, new forms emerge.

We are certainly in a time now of turbulence, and, from a social and ecological perspective, very far from equilibrium. In our

understandable anxiety and fear of catastrophe, people find it difficult to see the principle of self-organisation, leading to a new equilibrium. In the arts and humanities, we are well acquainted with issues of life and death, the transience of all things, the value of the resurgence of new life following sorrow and despair, grief leading to joy and renewal. Perhaps, in chaos and complexity studies, science is beginning to free itself from the dominance of the closed system of classical physics and to associate itself with more open systems with a more ecological focus. Perhaps we are also seeing the end of the ‘two cultures’ culture and embracing the notion of infinitely plural cultures, in welcoming a global, rather than simply Western view.

The idea of self-organisation also counters the entropy view of the second law of thermodynamics, which says that the universe and everything in it is winding down. In the closed system of classical physics this may appear to be the case, but, when the death of a life form is viewed within an environmental or ecological perspective, it is seen to be regenerative and transformed.

Prigogine also defined self-organisation as the phenomenon by which a system self-organises its internal structure independently of external causes. In other words, chaos also relies on sensitive responses, or feedback, from individual entities. Where we – human beings – are concerned, this is about a consciousness which is aware of the principles of non-linearity, fractals, dissipative and regenerative structures and so on. But are we not also aware of a ‘modern’ psychology that, like classical physics, may be operating in a system of thought that is inadequate to the challenges of our times?

I ask this question because the speculations of contemporary scientific notions of chaos are echoing what has always been known to non-Western cultures, and to practices and thinking in our own alternative traditions. Chaos is akin to the void, abyss or ‘emptiness’ of Indian Vedanta and Buddhism for example, and to the worldview of many Indigenous traditions that Western imperialisms have suppressed. There is a place for Western science, since its achievements have materially benefited the world, but that doesn’t mean we can’t also be aware of how it can be seen as a closed system of thought. We might look to ways in which it can be open to new practices and thinking.

6. Blake, W. (1803). *Auguries of innocence*. Available online at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>

7. Dalai Lama [Tenzin Gyatso] (2005). *The universe in a single atom: the convergence of science and spirituality*. Reprint, New York: Harmony – Crown Publishing, 2006.

8. Prigogine, I., and Stengers, I. (1984). *Order out of chaos: man’s new dialogue with nature*. Reprint, London: Verso – New Left Books, 2017.

9. *Ibid.* See ch.5, s.3: ‘Far from equilibrium’.

10. Solnit, R. (2010). *A paradise built in hell: the extraordinary communities that arise in disaster*. Reprinted, London: Penguin Books, 2020.

11. *Op. cit.* See the preface: *Man’s new dialogue with nature*.

12. Cited in Abrams and Sardanapalus (2008), *op. cit.*

## FEATURE

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In our psychotherapeutic culture this might be viewed not just in the way of finding new treatments for the climate change anxieties of clients, but how practitioners themselves might come to address their own anxieties and the challenges of a “far from equilibrium” world. This is both an individual challenge and a cultural one: individual insofar as we professionals are able to experience the real chaos in our own lives, each in her or his individual way; and cultural in understanding the political and social challenges we face in this new century. We might consider, especially, the interconnected and global nature of the political identity issues of race, class, and gender. Chaos can open up the ‘fractal’ capacity of both our individual and social minds.

**Tony Cartwright** worked in mental health for local government and the NHS, first as a social worker and then as a family group and systemic psychotherapist in an adult psychotherapy service. He is now retired. He has been involved in green politics since the 1980s. He joined the CPA in 2012. In 2022, he published *Everything and nothing: essays on climate change and cultural transformation* (UK: Vital Press), a book of essays on climate change and cultural transformation. He plans to publish a longer book this coming year. He posts further essays and articles on this theme on his website at: <https://www.thetimelessaxis.com>



Photo by Peter Thompson



# At the edge: climate psychology, chaos and betrayal

By Chris Robertson

## Introduction

It is characteristic for clients or participants in CPA workshops to report a shocked waking up to the climate crisis. How could they have been so blind? How can oil companies continue to be subsidised by governments to hasten an ecocide? How have I, and those in the Global North, betrayed the earth? This is a painful awakening to how we as a culture have been sucked into a deadly denial of reality.

The subtitle – ‘A matter of life and death’ – of the recent climate psychology book<sup>1</sup> makes clear that the climate crisis is not an abstraction, a technical problem waiting for a higher cognitive solution or even for managing uncertainty. It is a cultural threshold that involves a range of feelings such as dismay, bewilderment, disgust, fury and despair at government collusion. Feelings linked to betrayal include anguish, anger, remorse and shame at our own complicity with the widespread destruction of the earth’s ecosystems.

Following the stability of the Holocene, and the rise of industrial consumer societies, come the terrifying elemental ruptures to the planetary biosphere and near-catastrophic instability in human culture. Whether or not the term ‘Anthropocene’ is a valid name for our present crisis, normal service cannot be presumed. The shift to unpredictable, non-linear interlocking complexity is more than a self-centred culture can manage. The scary, disorienting failures of transport, food security, economy alongside extreme weather of fire, flood and storms appear as harbingers of the end of human dominance.

This article explores what happens at the threshold moment of a rite of passage. How can the apparent catastrophe be lived rather than avoided? Learning to enter the edges of chaos, and turning to face the fear, can allow the release of extraordinary energies and deeply significant learning. I shall be exploring edges of chaos from a variety of perspectives at the margins of systemic thought that are tipping points within human culture.

## Strange edges of chaos

*One must still have chaos in oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.* Frederik Nietzsche<sup>2</sup>

The social understanding of ‘chaos’ is still unfolding. There are many uses of the term chaos – going from the mess of a child’s bedroom, or Laura Kuenssberg’s recent BBC TV series ‘State of chaos’, to the apparent disorder of a writer’s desk or a painter’s studio, which, if ‘tidied’ would destroy a subtle order. Weather patterns are an example. They seem chaotic despite increasingly sophisticated models of prediction. Small fluctuations in weather systems can lead through positive feedback loops to huge differences, as with the ‘butterfly effect’ – the idea that a butterfly’s wings might create tiny but critical changes in the weather, so through the domino effect of positive feedback loops precipitate a storm.

The edge of chaos marks a transition space in many dynamical



*Abyss.* Photo by Toby Chown

systems that cross the boundary between order and disorder. It is a curious place, like Alice found in Wonderland,<sup>3</sup> that occupies the liminal space between a well-ordered dynamic and a chaotic one. Lewis Carroll’s dream-like saga drew on his mathematical and logician’s background. It explores what happens when we fall down that magical rabbit hole. This rabbit hole has come to symbolise logic-defying journeys that can be either distracting dead-ends or lead into strange wonder-lands.

1. Hollway, W., Hoggett, P., Robertson, C., and Weintrobe, S. (2022). *Climate psychology: a matter of life and death*. Bicester, Oxfordshire: Phoenix.
2. Nietzsche, F. (1883). *Thus spoke Zarathustra: a book for all or none*. Reprinted, Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1997.
3. Carroll, L., (1865). *Alice in Wonderland*.

## PERSONAL REFLECTION

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### Order and chaos

Having been enraptured by the creative possibilities for radical thought within systems and chaos theory, I studied family systems for three years in the early 1980s. Then, as a psychotherapist, working systemically with couples and groups using the Milan approach<sup>4</sup> of neutrality and circularity, I came to miss the intensity and drama of feelings. The Milan process was wonderfully containing. The circularity brought a hypnotic holding and its neutrality avoided polarising conflicts – both good for disturbed family systems. It seemed like a balanced neutrality within a family system was an implicit goal that bracketed out the disruption of intense feelings.

The Nobel prizewinning chemist, Prigogine<sup>5</sup> explored how living systems defy the deterministic rules of thermodynamics. He suggested a narrow path between predictable, linear, ordered systems and random ones that were entirely chaotic. Between these two is a third possibility, ‘dissipative systems’ that draw energy and information from the environment to create their own order. Our planet is one such dissipative system; one that operates far from equilibrium. The insight into how the chaos of dissipation creates new levels of order led James Lovelock<sup>6</sup> to explore the earth as a self-regulating entity and to name it Gaia Theory.

In the quotation cited on page 21, Nietzsche<sup>7</sup> warned that future generations may not know that inner chaos can lead to unexpected wonders such as dancing stars. His provocative metaphor links inner creativity with that of the galaxy and warns us against the suppressive dangers of too much order.

### The deliberate experience of chaos

In a workshop designed to explore personal and professional edges of order and chaos, I placed a rope on the floor. I then asked participants to imagine the rope as an edge and invited them to locate themselves at what they imagined this edge signified. The purpose was not to discover whether or not they would step over it, but to experience what it felt like to be at the edge.

What was this  
edge  
an  
edge  
of?

The experiment demonstrated how scary it felt to touch the edge, to allow the disorientation, the not-knowing, bewilderment and startling potency, all of which are pertinent to our collective planetary poly-crisis.

### Wild edges

The abstract language of science often misses something of the intense experience of an edge of chaos. A colleague wrote to me of the workshop:

*From wild order to human order: in making one small impermanent sculpture I have learned an enormous lesson of my own purpose.*

*On the sodden ground, a bunch of seemingly chaotically tumbled feathers lay in disarray. I picked them up one by one and placed them in a wheel, quills facing inward and*

*the wet strung-out feathers facing outward. On them, in the centre, I placed a bright lichen and a softly rotten acorn; too old to germinate, it too lost its chance of life and is slowly returning to the land.*

*By making order from seeming disorder, I could have missed the truth of the story: what is wild is not chaos. What is wild is the REAL truth that my imperma-sculpture is pretending at. By touching the artistic, I opened to the message of the feathers and the true meaning of my life. Who is trying to tame this wildness in me?*

Such a significant question: “Who is trying to tame this wildness in me?”

The simple answer is that we are; those of us who live in domesticated, safe, fenced, walled houses. It is a custom in our culture. As Rilke says:

*Even the knowing animals are aware  
that we are not really at home in our interpreted world<sup>8</sup>*

### Betrayal

In adapting to a domesticated world, we in the Global North have betrayed a wilder, more attuned way of being in the world. There is a need to expose the lies inherent in our privileged Global North – such as, for instance, the lie that we can have infinite growth on a finite planet. To speak out against these lies is to begin to redeem that betrayal.

There are many contexts for betrayal, including romantic love, war, group belonging and loyalty. Key to all these is that a trust is broken. This was made clear by Greta Thunberg in her address to the UN Climate Action summit in New York, in 2019:

*You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say we will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this.<sup>9</sup>*

Psychotherapist and researcher Caroline Hickman states that climate anxiety is not just about environmental problems, but coupled with despair, disillusionment and betrayal by people in power failing to act. She elaborates:

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4. Brown, J.M. (2013). *The Milan principles of hypothesising, circularity and neutrality in dialogical family therapy: extinction, evolution, eviction... or emergence?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

5. Prigogine, I., and Stengers, I. (1984). *Order out of chaos: man's new dialogue with nature*. Reprint, London: Verso – New Left Books, 2017.

6. Lovelock, J. (2007). *The revenge of Gaia: why the earth is fighting back and how we can still save humanity*. London: Penguin Books.

7. Op. Cit.

8. Rilke, R.M. (1923). First Duino elegy. Cited in: Totton, N. (2011). *Wild therapy: undomesticating inner and outer worlds*. Manchester: PCCS Books, p.51.

9. Thunberg, G. (2019). Address at the Climate Action Summit 2019. [Official video]. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9KxE4Kv9A8&ab\\_channel=UnitedNations](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9KxE4Kv9A8&ab_channel=UnitedNations)





*"It's older generations failing to do the right thing by younger generations, and that is felt as a form of betrayal and abandonment. Some of the young people that I'm working with are suicidal because of this betrayal. Not because of environmental problems, but because they feel so devastated by being horrendously abandoned by people in power who are supposed to take care of us."<sup>10</sup>*

*Photo by Peter Thompson*

Feeding on our own body is another metaphor for our consuming society. Erysichthon is in the grip of this all-pervading consumer complex. He sacrifices all that was precious to him, even his daughter. Through underestimating the power of the cultural complexes that grip us, we may be in danger of consuming the future lives of our children.

Hickman explains that this betrayal can cause moral injury. It erodes trust in social structures, which are supposed to give shelter and care. This is what Sally Weintrobe calls the "culture of uncare",<sup>11</sup> which is characterised by "the narcissistic, perverse, consumerist, extractive, entitled, arrogant, psychopathic, instrumental and manically triumphant culture". This is a more systemic perspective in which it is not individuals or groups who are to blame, but a cultural complex to which we have all been exposed and to which we all contribute.

### Uneasy paradox

I claimed in the introduction that the tragic ruptures to our planetary ecosystems are catastrophic openings to renewed life in our estranged modern world. Climate chaos offers an uneasy paradox characteristic of transitional space and liminal states. Stepping to the edge, into liminal states, brings high degrees of anxiety because these are essentially unknowable and uncontrollable. And it is this very vulnerability that makes them potentially creative

### Envious attack

This deeper sense of betrayal, beyond personal abandonment and rejection, takes us to the human-planet relationship. We (at least those in the Global North) have broken a primal trust with the earth whose generous life-giving powers have supported and sustained human life. Far from gratitude, those embedded within the industrial complex have plundered her riches as if in an envious attack that would rather destroy than respect.

The recent chopping down of the long-admired Sycamore Gap tree<sup>12</sup> at Hadrian's Wall is a sad example of this envious attack. It is reminiscent of the tale of Erysichthon,<sup>13</sup> a vain and boastful man who paid little attention to what other people said, even less to the gods. He insists on cutting down an oak that is sacred to Demeter, even when it bleeds red blood. A terrible hunger is visited on him. Demeter's curse is that no matter how much he eats, it will never be enough. He ends up consuming his own body.

10. Hickman, C. Quoted by Bellens, L. (20 October 2021), in: Betrayal and grief: young people suffering from climate anxiety demand action. *France Inter*. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/environment/20211022-grief-and-hopelessness-young-people-suffering-from-climate-eco-anxiety-demand-action> [Accessed 3 January 2024]

11. Weintrobe, S. (2018). The new imagination in a culture of uncare. In: *Architecture and resilience*. Abingdon: Routledge.

12. See: *BBC News* (13 December 2023). Sycamore Gap tree: the story so far. [Online]. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-66994729>

13. *Wikipedia*. Erysichthon of Thessaly. [Online]. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erysichthon\\_of\\_Thessaly](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erysichthon_of_Thessaly)



## PERSONAL REFLECTION

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and transformative, which is why they have been used in rites of passage and initiation rituals.

According to Winnicott<sup>14</sup> transitional space is a paradox. It is an area that is both real and illusory. “The potential space between baby and mother, between child and family, between individual and society or the world, depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living.”

### Between order and chaos

The space-between has a potent aliveness which we can't know or predict ahead of time. It is a pregnant void that might be experienced as a vulnerable one. The caterpillar dissolving into a cellular soup, in order to transform into a butterfly, is only possible because of the containment afforded by the cocoon. This cocoon is a proto-womb that allows transitional states with high potential levels of disorder and the potential for creative transformation. It is the means through which small deviations can be amplified and new potentials nurtured.

Our planet is an enormous cocoon that has fostered life through its many forms, including human. The planetary shift we are transiting is precarious. Edges of chaos are vulnerable spaces as well as potent points of change. Emotional vulnerability is evoked by the uncertainty of the process and a lack of safe containment. Climate change vulnerability describes the susceptibility and exposure of ecosystems to climate change. This different use of the concept of ‘vulnerability’ is more a function of the biophysical and social (such as the capacity of households to cope with drought), than the psychological.

When a containing cocoon is infected by poisonous feelings or fractured, its containing powers are diminished and potential breakthroughs can become destructive ruptures. These edges of chaos can create a cascade of multiple ruptures, for instance the conjunction of rising tides and tsunamis, which triggers radical shifts into unsustainable worlds such as the horror of the Fukushima nuclear accident. Cascades can also be triggered in human systems such as economic collapses.

What is pertinent to our present climate crisis is that the human-planet relationship is at a critical phase of ruptures. Chaos theory suggests that at bifurcation points the system could go two ways; a potentially creative far-from-equilibrium way or a return to the normative. In case of the latter, business as usual will bring further ruptures until earth-systems will collapse. Earth's life support systems have been so damaged that the planet is “well outside the safe operating space for humanity”, scientists have warned. Their assessment found that six out of nine “planetary boundaries” had been broken because of human-caused pollution and destruction of the natural world.<sup>15</sup>

Leading climate scientist Professor Michael Mann states:

*When we look at all these past episodes, we come away with a sense that we're not doomed yet – we have not yet ensured our extinction. But if we continue on a fossil fuel-dependent pathway, we will leave that safe-range we see in the evidence from past Earth history. That's what makes this such a fragile moment – we're at the precipice.*<sup>16</sup>

### Necessary betrayal

From a psychological perspective, the edge of this precipice is guarded by a strong taboo. It is as if there are bonds of loyalty to unconscious cultural complexes that feel taboo to break. These bonds may be based in rigid traditions and/or collective traumas that do not allow change. Just as the only way out of the Garden of Eden was through the betrayal of Eve, the only way through our present planetary crisis may be to break bonds of social belonging. This can feel like treachery to one's tribe. As James Hillman writes:

*What one longs for is not only to be contained in perfection by another who can never let one down. It goes beyond trust and betrayal by the other in a relationship. What one longs for is a situation where one is protected from one's OWN treachery and ambivalence, one's own Eve.*<sup>17</sup>

Rather than heroically trying to change the planetary forces unleashed in the Anthropocene, humans, especially those in the Global North, would be better attending to their own Eve, who might assist them awakening out of a delusional blindness to the betrayal of the earth.

### End reflections

We know from Prigogine and Lovelock that nature itself creates new levels of order not in an orderly way, brick by brick, but from the chaos of dissipation as old structures collapse into patterns that seem very disordered. We can experience this dissipation in small doses, as a rite of passage found within workshops or our creative process. However, a much larger and uncontainable process is going on in the face of climate change. This process brings us to face betrayal. We are living in a culture that, like Erysichthon, has unleashed an insatiable hunger. A world that devours itself rather than acknowledge that Demeter's trees bleed with red blood just like us. We may feel that we have either betrayed ourselves, through allowing ourselves to be tamed; or we may feel we have been betrayed by this Erysichthonian culture, with its lies of infinite growth, and its betrayal of its children. In either case, the crossing of the threshold over the edge of chaos involves an encounter with betrayal.

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14. Winnicott, D.W. (1967). The location of cultural experience. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 48 (3), pp.368-372.

15. Carrington, D. (13 September 2023). Earth ‘well outside safe operating space for humanity’, scientists find. *The Guardian*. [Online]. Available at : <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/sep/13/earth-well-outside-safe-operating-space-for-humanity-scientists-find#:~:text=Ocean%20acidification%20is%20also%20assessed,safe%20operating%20space%20for%20humanity.%E2%80%9D> [Accessed 3 January 2024]

16. Carrington, D. (30 September 2023). Interview: ‘We're not doomed yet’: climate scientist Michael Mann on our last chance to save human civilisation. *The Guardian*. [Online]. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/sep/30/human-civilisation-climate-scientist-prof-michael-mann> [Accessed: 3 January 2024]

17. Hillman, J. (1975). *Loose ends: primary papers in archetypal psychology*. Washington D.C.: Spring Publications.

We may experience ourselves as betraying social or professional bonds, as some activists have discovered. We may discover, like my colleague, a force within us that we have betrayed, something trying to tame the wildness within us.

Both the taboo threshold of breaking bonds and the engagement with risky uncertainty of the edge of an unknown are inherently unstable and challenging states to tolerate. The complete loss of control, along with feelings of helplessness and abandonment, are similar in each. Betrayal brings out an existential aloneness as ties and social duties are forsaken in response to recognising the potential for self-betrayal – of being untrue to the soul. Those who have risked the fury of colleagues when exposing hidden lies, know that cost can be high.

A parallel passage through an edge of chaos requires the courage to forsake the knowing mind and trust the necessity of a creative process without signposts. Both types of passage are relevant to the climate crisis. Learning how to bear what feels intolerable is a characteristic of psychological opening to the terrifying reality of our climate crisis.

The emotional work at the edge of chaos involves staying with and being present to the pain and seemingly endless grief – but is too much for most of us as individuals. We need the support and companionship of a community. But how to be true to oneself and be in a relationship with those that are not? This is where so many idealistic communities wither in disillusionment. It is the same moment that whistleblowers speak out against their colleagues' misuse or abuse of power. We risk reactive attack when perceived as rupturing social bonds to align with an inner truth or purpose. Yet there is an emotional cost of remaining silent and betraying ourselves.

The deafening silence in the denial of the climate crisis has morphed into a subtler diffusion and disavowal of responsibility. Climate is in the headlines but has much changed? Civil disobedience as practised by Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil is one way of betraying a social contract of legal citizenship that prevents exposing the real state of the climate crisis. How a whole culture awakens to its betrayal of the other-than-human on our planet is part of the edge we may be tiptoeing around.

Instead of trusting in the earth's ecosystem to support us, we in the Global North behave as if we are independent, having created a separate technical network without pangs of conscience. Reflecting the Garden of Eden story, the industrial revolution was a betrayal led by an 'Eve' who promised unlimited growth. In order to not betray the earth, we will need to betray the consumer culture in which we are complicit participants. This active refusal to be complicit requires a collective cultural rite of passage in which we put the earth first.

This will still mean passing through a portal of climate and cultural chaos. To do this requires the emotional resilience to tolerate extreme discomfort and anxiety, but also the inspirational support of a wild edge that won't allow another betrayal.

**Chris Robertson** has been a psychotherapist since 1978. He is the ex-Chair of CPA and co-founder of Re-Vision, a psychotherapy training with soulful perspective. He is co-author of *Climate psychology: a matter of life and death* (2022) and 'Culture crisis: a loss of soul' in Mathers, D. (Ed.) (2020). *Depth psychology and climate change*. Abingdon: Routledge. Find Chris at: <https://www.culture-crisis.ne>

# The last whale, by Chris Vick

Reviewed by Peter Reason

*The Last whale*<sup>1</sup> is a fiction book for teens and young adults that covers serious themes in an engaging story. The narrative threads together tragedy and hope, tempers purposeful action with luck and disaster, and portrays the love and tension that must coexist between generations; all the while addressing the calamitous and very real problems of climate change, ecological collapse, artificial intelligence, and the dominance of capitalist organisations.

Abi Kristensen is a young teenager who is at odds with her parents and teachers: she has been excluded from school and is being whisked off, against her wishes, on a family visit from England to Norway. She won the NewTek Challenge competition and as a prize has been licensed to use a portable artificial intelligence device called AI, for ecological research. Contrary to her licence, she is not returning AI to NewTek: it is not stolen, she says, but 'borrowed'. She intends to use the device as part of her radical Earth Crisis activism to help her disrupt the Global Environment Summit. Her activism is stymied now she is on a remote island with no internet access. But then Bestemor, her Swedish grandmother, casually remarks, "Well, be sure you do not miss the whales", and it is from here that her adventures really begin.

The plot is intricate and multi-dimensional, and the writing absorbing and pacy. The protagonists are young people who can be impulsive and foolish, who get themselves into scrapes from which they have to be rescued, but who also show wisdom, foresight, and courage beyond their years. They wrestle with those who don't understand (teachers and parents), enemies (NewTek and its drones), and get help from surprising allies (Abi's little sister Tig and Bestemor). All these characters are convincingly portrayed; their relationships believable.

Amy discovers another dimension to the ecological crisis through a curious family history which AI helps to uncover. Whales are fast becoming extinct and their loss as top predators will lead to ecological collapse of the oceans and the death of earth. Halfway through the book, when all seems to be lost, the story jumps a generation to the near future, when the state of the world's ecology is gathering to a crisis. Abi is now the grown-up and her daughter Tonje is the key young protagonist.

Through this ecological story is a thread of science fiction (although how far 'fiction' is debatable given recent development in AI). The device that is called AI in the first chapter soon becomes Moonlight and 'she' (so named by Tig, much to Abi's initial annoyance). Moonlight develops close relationships with the children, who increasingly show her affection and treat her as a person. She becomes deeply linked in with whales and the wider ecology. And so, over the course of the story, Moonlight develops self-awareness, a sense of purpose, and eventually the ability to make choices. She becomes, in some sense, an independent actor: a kind of consciousness that can inhabit different devices and networks. The implications of this are lightly and optimistically touched on.

The book also draws on deep understanding of the crucial part whales play in the ocean ecology, which itself will fascinate

readers, both young and old. Chris Vick knows about whales; he has long been closely associated with the Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society.<sup>2</sup> His author's note points out that the ecological science on which he bases his story is very real – even if he has been imaginative rather than 100% accurate in his book.

This book is an exemplar of climate fiction that addresses our predicament head on. It is engaging and entertaining with a strong narrative and characters that I think many young people would identify with.



**Peter Reason** is currently engaged in a series of experiential co-operative inquiries exploring living cosmos panpsychism. How does land and the community of life speak to us? How do we learn to listen? He is writing about this inquiry in a series of posts headed 'Learning how land speaks' on Substack at: <http://peterreason.substack.com> His most recent publications, with the artist Sarah Gillespie, include: Reason, P., and Gillespie, S. (2023). The teachings of Mistle Thrush and Kingfisher. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 39, (3). [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2023.4>; Also: Reason, P., and Gillespie, S. (2021) *On presence*, and *On sentience*. Both available online at: <https://www.peterreason.net/art-ecology> Peter is also on Twitter at @peterreason

1. Vick, C. (2022). *The last whale*. London: Zephyr – Bloomsbury Publishing.

2. Online at: <https://uk.whales.org>



# Spinning out: climate change, mental health and fighting for a better future, by Charlie Hertzog Young

Reviewed by Ro Randall

Charlie Hertzog Young opens his brilliant new book with the words, “I am pretty mad, by conventional standards” and dedicates it, “For the mad, the weird and the wild – all those who dream awake”. At the heart of his book is the insight that to be mad can also be to be in touch with realities that others deny – in Charlie’s case the reality of climate change and ecological destruction. The heightened states that madness brings can force an unrelenting awareness of what is happening around one. “It hit me like a planetary death drive”, he writes, “a bodily horror that made me want to disappear.” It is an awareness that can sometimes be impossible to bear, as Charlie’s own life demonstrates.

Charlie’s own personal journey through climate activism and psychological difficulty came to a head in 2019 when he jumped from the six-storey roof of his psychotherapist’s consulting room. He survived, but only just, and both of his legs had to be amputated. Part of his slow recovery has been the writing of this extraordinary book.

The book has many strands. Part of it describes his activism, which began as he entered adolescence, talking, agitating, demonstrating, taking part in direct action and working with NGOs. Part of it is an account of his journey through a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, deep depression, hallucination and despair, and his interactions with psychiatric and therapeutic practices that wouldn’t acknowledge the complex web of relationship between a disordered self and the disordered state of the world. Part of it speaks to his desire for reparation for the distress and despair suffered by his family and those who love him. He writes very movingly about his parents and his awareness of the trauma they suffered in their attempts to keep him safe. Most importantly, perhaps, it is an exploration of the relationship between psychological distress and the state of the world. In the CPA, we have often focused on the minds of those who hide from the reality of climate change. Charlie’s book focuses on the minds of those who are brave enough to see and to name what is happening. It is an analysis of how the politics of late capitalism divides, alienates and disorders those who struggle against the climate crisis, and it looks across the world – away from a Western, individualistic, biomedical model – for its answers.

At the heart of Charlie’s book is his plea for a psychology that starts from a focus on what is wrong with the world, rather than a focus on the individual. He wants a psychology that responds to personal trauma and pain with political understanding and collective solutions. One of the most interesting parts of the book is the detailed case studies from around the world: in Nigeria, Pakistan and Mexico. His analysis features the depressing interrelationships of colonialism, disrespect for indigenous culture and environmental destruction, but hope comes in the stories of mental health professionals and community organisers who are trying to break the mould of conventional responses and the Western biomedical approach.

There is much in this book that will appeal to Climate Psychology



Photo by Suki Dhanda

Alliance members. We may be familiar with psycho-social theory, with the tenets of liberation psychology, and with the work of community psychologists like David Denborough and Ncazelo Ncube Mlilo, but Charlie’s voice offers us a raw and unique encounter with a young person reaching out beyond self to make sense and to make community in a senseless, fragmented world. In the title of the workshops spearheaded by Chris Robinson, one of the key struggles for our membership is how to be ‘through the door’. How can we leave behind the comfort of our consulting rooms? How can we use our skills in the service of communities rather than individuals? How can we develop a community of practice that is fit for the troubles of our times?

The third (and longest) part of his book provides Charlie’s answers to these questions. His key audience is probably his fellow campaigners, but there is much here for us as mental health practitioners, particularly in his accounts of his own and others’ psychological struggles as part of the climate movement. There are challenges here for us about our practice as well as signposts to what we should be doing.

The idea that action brings relief from climate distress is a familiar one, but Charlie’s emphasis is on the transformative power of what he calls “regenerative rebellion”. “The act of doing something loving and rebellious, like kickstarting a mini ecosystem, is powerful”, he writes. He organises his key ideas under four headings:

- Resist – how to stop the bad stuff
- Reconnect – how to get together
- Remedy – how to change the things we cannot accept
- Movement culture – how to keep us safe and happy

1. Herzog Young, C. (2023). *Spinning out: climate change, mental health and fighting for a better future*. London: Footnote Press.

## BOOK REVIEW

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For some, the main interest of this section will be in his kaleidoscopic and enthusiastic list of possible actions and campaigns, or in being pointed to writers (for example Saul Alinsky, Marshall Ganz, Rebecca Solnit) or ideas (deep canvassing, power mapping for example) that they are not familiar with. For me, however, and I suspect for other CPA members, it is the psychological insights that will be most important. He makes a neat distinction between climate despair and climate trauma, reserving the latter term for those who are suffering the direct effects of climate breakdown. He details the experiences that make up that despair and that trauma. He foregrounds the importance of building connection and support, of working in a web of interconnection and with an awareness of the fragmentation encouraged by late capitalist society. He writes with real sympathy about the difficulties of getting involved, feeling your way into unfamiliar spaces and finding what it is you are capable of. Not many people write about the fear of turning up to an unfamiliar meeting place, or their appreciation of the small acts of kindness that give them a place. He is also acutely aware of the risks of burnout and isolation, and features not just his own story but those of other campaigners who have learned the hard way about their limits.

This is an unusual, fascinating and subtle book. Its combination of political analysis, personal history, campaigning enthusiasm and psychological insight means that it is one that should definitely be on the shelves of CPA members.

**Ro Randall** is a retired psychotherapist, climate campaigner and community organiser. She is co-founder of the Carbon Conversations project and co-author of the CPA's 'Living with the climate crisis' project. She has written widely on climate psychology and her videos on coping with the climate crisis can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCsRN4nXuxewofTVBhxtexsg>

# Possibilities

By Elspeth Crawford

This morning I baked bread,  
 set the timer so I would not forget  
 the loaf in the oven. Though I should  
 not forget as the loaf itself reminds me  
 by offering a baked bread smell that stretches  
 from the kitchen to the hallway to me  
 when it is fully baked, warm and tempting.

But the timer is needed  
 as the rising aroma comes unnoticed  
 like the frog in cool water that rises to boil,  
 gradual increment is not smelt or felt.  
 Could that be why the moth flies to the flame,  
 scorching those diaphanous wings beyond repair?  
 Was the light a glimmer seen in the distance  
 where faint warmth went unnoticed?  
 Nearer, the warm gets warmer, slowly,  
 attracting light is brighter, then aflame.

Frogs in boiling water, moths to flames,  
 Metaphors, frogs and moths, no timer  
 queries the pleasures of warmth and light.  
 No way to stay the gradual coming of disaster.

I remember I did not notice  
 the smell of new baked bread.  
 Now when baking the timer is set  
 measures time passing, takes care of self,  
 so unaware of possibilities, bread baked or burnt.  
 So many possibilities I do not know.

What care will bring alertness  
 to the slow drift of a world burning?



Photo by Elspeth Crawford

**Dr Elspeth Crawford** is a psychosocial practitioner, long-since retired from the School of Education at University of Edinburgh. Over the years, Elspeth drew on Bion's ideas and psycho-social practice to bring social justice and emotional education to students. Her doctorate is on the history of science discovery, not-knowing and learning negative capability, which, in practice has affected everything, however hard it is to find. Email Elspeth at: [elspethcr@gmail.com](mailto:elspethcr@gmail.com)



# 13 Broken Symbols

By Toby Chown

I cough up a broken symbol –  
it speaks nonsense,  
it arrives with the morning and  
it wishes to greet you.

It seeks the point  
where the flame becomes marvellous  
crumples the paper  
sets a match.

**ii**

I can't explain the broken symbol  
the way it is not mine yet speaks me,  
how it is both empty and chattering,  
both hummingbird and barbed wire fence,  
a pressure that would crush cans,  
and a tombstone whose  
inscription can no longer be read.

**iii**

Rilke wrote angels on the page  
and they came at his call  
out of the paper,  
wings and searing fires  
chanting prayers  
for mankind  
sorrow and ecstasy.

I've never seen an angel;  
On my way home  
sometimes I hear  
A blur of wings, but the moment before  
I set the key in the lock  
It breaks.  
I forget to write them in,  
These moments,

So when I sit to write  
I feel the ragged shards  
of a broken symbol.

**iv**

I fly down the hill,  
with my skull cased in  
polystyrene,  
pray that i won't  
strike metal,  
that my bones and flesh  
won't become a broken symbol.

**v**

Where did the broken symbol break?

In the unmet dream  
or the daily routine?

In the animal  
that flees wildfires  
or the day's iron rod?

In the microbeads in the toilet bowl  
or the dignity of man?

In the illusion of money  
or the formation of a corporation?

the constellation of stars,  
Or the synaptic charts of the brain?

In the sighs of the ancestors?  
Or the failure of their gods?

Where to find a handle to pick up the smooth  
Frames, each filled with perfectly unbroken symbols  
that spool into my eyes and deliver the world,  
So I can put them to oneside.

I would place in their place  
A broken symbol.

**vi**

I think it's an attitude I crave  
 some distance from all the sincerity and irony  
 a place to let the symbol breathe, and break.

a dark cave, a cloak of leaves,  
 smell of earth, dank and muted,  
 a place where things break slowly apart  
 and grow mycelial skeletons.

**vii**

Who to speak to of broken symbols?

To those split by  
 fictions of wholeness  
 In doomscroll media,

To those that quiver  
 in fear of a cop in their head,

without church, or means to place  
 a holy wafer on my tongue,  
 without science, just a bundle of  
 nerves, skin, meniscus, bones,

With only a mouthful  
 Of broken symbols  
 For company.

**viii**

What does it mean to sing  
 in the key of the broken symbol?

A book with teeth.

A cave where babies crawl  
 out into the light from a  
 virgin's skirt towards  
 A black hole in the sky

**ix**

the broken symbol  
 keeps haunting me  
 i want to explain it  
 but instead of words  
 crucifixes and blue  
 flowers come out.



*Photo by Toby Chown*

**x**

Oh to walk  
 down the road and for the road  
 to greet me!

Oh for the hedgerows to come to life once more.

Where are the cracks in slabs  
 of concrete that paves the nightmare streets?

Where are the breaks in the words that will let me in?

**xi**

Each dream negates another one,  
 until nothing happens at all –

The dreamer  
 who touches and moves  
 to the whispers,  
 Who reshapes  
 the material  
 Into song

first has to break it apart,  
 then has to speak in broken symbol



### xii

I never learnt to steal properly  
I stole a pair of sunglasses from a surf shop once,

but

What I really wanted was a blue flower  
Stolen from the arcadian sky,  
and the blurred silver on the  
nightblack sea,

the uplift of energy  
from the company of  
fellow travellers,

The places where certainty breaks apart into  
friendship

### xiii

My soul was in a thin and narrow thought,  
that whirred like a clockwork beetle

an overvaluation of thoughts.

The symbol broke and  
Birds flew out  
like a magician producing flowers  
From his sleeve, flocks of birds  
they sing in a language  
that breaks all that hear them  
into song.

# Chaos

By Toby Chown

This poetry game is chaotic;  
Anything I say invokes its opposite;  
If I praise beauty,  
A dull grey woman bows her  
Shapeless head  
When I speak of kindness  
A scale grows on my heart  
I don't know what to make happen –  
My incompetence allows the cherry blossom  
to fill the gutter  
I inherit a theatre company  
And then long to be  
free of stories  
I write of acceptance and  
The ocean bulges with plastic  
It's a cinch,  
But then i try to repeat it –  
The words become thin and no one listens.  
Yet the one who dances with a necklace of feathers regardless  
The father who returns from death, addiction and shame  
to teach his kid to ride a bike  
The black hunger that vomits up gold  
Yet only wants friendship,  
The king that sleeps beneath the hill on the chalky downs  
All belong to the day just like sap to a tree,  
A bee's wing pattern to the iris that sees.




Photo by Toby Chown


**Toby Chown** is an author, dramatherapist, imaginal ecologist and a member of the CPA Explorations in Climate Psychology.


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