



1.5 degrees warming: Too close for comfort

BASS COAST Groundswell – Friday 19th Feb 2016

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There is a tremendous amount of work ahead for those of us who understand the huge inadequacies of the so called Paris agreement to limit warming to 1.5 degrees. Our task - to engage with people to foster understanding and of what needs to follow, and to pressure governments to do it.

Tonight I will focus on the challenges to this engagement with a view from a psychological perspective.

Scientists, like the early climate activists, believed that clear headed well explained science would be all people needed to engage with the climate as a threat, and believed that appropriate action would follow. Alas It is the emotional aspects of climate change that both engages people, and, provokes them to keep their distance.

Our group Psychology for a Safe Climate was formed by a group of psychologists to foster emotional engagement with climate change – engagement with the heart, not just the head - and to help people understand the psychological processes that get in the way of engagement.

I want to start with talking about growing tomatoes – bear with me for a minute or two.

Many of you possibly like me do this each summer. I begin very optimistically. It's simple I say to myself and very successful. Anyone can do it.

This year very early in the season it was evident to me there was a problem – the leaves were yellowing and withering progressively from the base, while the top of the plant was looking healthy and flourishing.

I discussed this problem with my husband, but he couldn't see a problem.

This puzzled me. Why couldn't he see it? What was going on? What would be the implications I wondered if he did see a problem?

Well first of all the ideal of tomatoes as being easy to grow, and his belief that any-one can do it, would be in question.

Secondly action was needed to think about the problem, to research the causes and to find possible solutions.

And this would raise a thorny problem. What if chemical intervention was suggested? How could he hold his head up high with his organic gardening friends?

My husband asked a neighbour who knew about such things. In the light of the moon he too couldn't see a problem – so that in his mind settled the question. There was no problem, and anyway there were already tomatoes, so I was imagining it.

What has this to do with climate change?

It illustrates many of the difficulties - every day human difficulties with climate change. First of all denial of there being a problem, and this denial can take many forms, and secondly the importance of how one sees oneself in relation to others in the world – our beliefs and values.

So let me start with denial. I don't mean the denialist movement – I mean denial of the everyday form we meet: the first form of denial is plain negation that there is a problem at all. This is what I got from my husband about the disease on the tomatoes.

The second form of denial is when there is expressed 'knowing and not knowing' at the same time - characterised by acknowledgment there is a problem but at the same time denying the seriousness, denying the urgency, or denying the scale of massive systemic change that is needed before the planet undergoes irreversible systemic changes we can't influence.

I didn't get as far as hearing 'knowing and not knowing' there was problem with the tomatoes from my husband. He was stuck in negation. Later he did acknowledge a slight problem but didn't think it was so bad we needed to do anything – the plant would adjust and cope and we would still have tomatoes. Sound familiar?

We humans are wired to deal with an immediate threat, such as a bushfire or a flood, with fight or flight. My husband is diligent at locking up our chooks at night to protect them from the danger of being killed in the nightly visits of the fox as he does the tour of along the Yarra river valley in inner Melbourne.

The problem is we humans have trouble committing to making effort and spending money when a threat is in the future and doesn't make an immediate impact, and also when we assume it will have greatest impacts in other distant places. But we do take out insurance on our houses even though the chance of them burning down in the city are not high.

We would think that the occurrence of bushfires and floods was a time when the dots could be joined about climate change – but this too is psychologically difficult.

When people have been threatened and survived, their energy goes into telling stories of fear, misfortune and bravery and survival, and then into pulling together in rebuilding their homes and their community. And most energy goes into dealing with the shock and grief they are suffering at all that has been lost despite their personal survival. At such a time a focus on life threatening events being repeated is the last thing they want to hear. We never want to discuss death.

Generally speaking as a society and a species we are addicted to feeling pleasure and avoiding all pain. We don't want bad news about climate impacts.

Bad news disrupts our sense of security in life being predictable and as safe as it has already been in the past. Threatening news can deeply frighten us. We just want to return what made us feel secure in the past.

Sound familiar in politics too? At a recent talk author David Marr described many leading politicians as frightened of the future, as a way of explaining their ultra conservative views and tendency to cling to the past.

Cartoon: New Yorker



"I'm doing so much better now that I'm back in denial"

This is why the denialist movement's message that 'humans causing climate change is a grand hoax' has had enormous appeal. By clinging to the idea of a hoax, with certainty, there is no need for fear, no need to ponder change, nor deal with all the anxiety that goes along with it. Life can go on with business as usual without another thought – thought being the operative word here.

No need to worry about the future, my responsibility, my guilt, or my complicity in stealing the future from the next generation. To do so is hugely complex and emotionally laden.

It takes courage and strength to face reality, to think about it, to consider the complexity of the problem and to not immediately know the answer - to live with uncertainty. To be uncertain is often seen as weakness or even failure – particularly in politics.

It takes strength to allow oneself to feel worried, angry, guilty, responsible and not let this overwhelm. It is perfectly understandable that people feel troubled by the damage they notice already. We need to accept our grief at the losses people suffer now, let alone those inevitable in the future. Naming and accepting feelings is actually helpful to our brains.

Facing reality may mean questioning many of our existing beliefs – which is hugely unsettling. It can risk placing us in conflict with dear friends and family. To take a position at odds with those we usually trust is gutsy and can take us into unknown territory.

It is tempting instead to shut off from this conflict within ourselves and join the huge array of distractions on display in this world.

One writer Anne- Marie Norgaard studied the response to climate change of a community in the skiing areas of Norway. She found people were confronted with loss of snow and diminished skiing areas. Nevertheless, she found no-one spoke about it. There was a powerful social collusion not to acknowledge the change and everyone unwittingly participated. In the jargon it's called bystander apathy – the tendency for us not to notice or take action if we don't see others doing so.

Perhaps there was as similar collusion by world leaders in Paris - to defer the problem to the future, so they could go on with business as usual.

Cartoon: New Yorker



***Too early to begin
working on***

***Too late to do
anything about***

Our beliefs and values

We acquire our beliefs by a combination of reasoning and emotion.

We form a belief based on the feeling of rightness. The beliefs then become our values, and are the guiding principles in our life.

When we hear new information we try to fit it in with our current view of the world and ourselves. We feel ill at ease if it doesn't fit. We tend to check the new information with our peer group, and their view is hugely influential in resisting any change. So if the information doesn't fit the existing world view of the group to which we belong we tend to dispense with the information rather than change our world view. Even if it's a comforting lie.

Value groupings

Researchers have found 2 main groupings of values:

The first group – self-enhancing include values like wealth, status, and power. These conflict with the second group of self-transcending values like altruism, and concern for the welfare of others.

Those who have the self– transcending values are more likely to be engaged in accepting climate change while those with self -enhancing values are not so likely at the present.

The problem is that when a message about climate change appeals to the values of one group they are less likely to appeal to the values of the other.

So this means people from either values grouping might express care for the future of their children. But those from the self-enhancing group might be worried that climate change would diminish the wealth they expect to pass onto their children, and the capacity for their children to have the future careers and prospects they have their sights on.

Those with self- transcending values on the other hand might express their concerns about the world their children will live in being impacted by a daunting climate refugee problem, food shortages, disease and a struggle for many to survive.

What can we do?

So what can we do to create the Groundswell where enough people are doing something so that others feel compelled to join in.

First, we need be able to recognise how at times we might be like the people we find just don't seem to 'get' climate change. This means we need to recognise how we respond when we hear information we don't want to know about. For example, it could be news about our health – that we need to exercise more, not eat certain foods or rest more. How do we respond? Do we deny the information, do we defer it to the future or fight it? Can we think about it and reflect on what it requires of us?

Have our values at times been challenged by new information. How did we respond?

When we are most connected with these processes in ourselves then we are able to be more present to others. Then we might be able to listen with more empathy to what we hear. This will certainly help us connect with people and their feelings about climate change.

The message dilemma

But it also raises the conflict that has plagued the climate movement - the conflict between the message of the critical urgency of there being a zero carbon budget left, and saying what won't scare or alienate people.

I can remember when I first came across Beyond Zero Emissions (BZE) and also their first incarnation as Zero Emissions Now (ZEN). Zero emissions sounded a far-fetched idea and way beyond the realm of reason or possibility. Then the change to Beyond Zero Emission seemed even more fanciful and farfetched.

It wasn't long before I really grasped the need for 'zero emission' and 'now' and then more. But at first it did alienate me from the group's message and their people.

Cartoon: New Yorker



"I wonder why we're not getting any new converts"

So we need to bear this in mind and allow for people to deepen their understanding and hopefully their engagement over time – as they come to understand the enormity of the problem. An incremental approach before we go the whole hog!

Support people

We also need to support people as they come to understand the urgency of the problem. This is made all the more difficult when there is no climate leadership from our political leaders. This failure of our leaders can frighten people or create cynicism, and can lead to a turn off in despair or hopelessness.

There seems to be little tolerance in our society for people reflecting on why they feel sad, to legitimately express it, and in time using those feelings to mobilise change in themselves and society. So we need to support people as they come to understand the reality we are dealing with. This can be best done in groups of peers or friendships where feelings are able to be expressed and respected.

Making a shift

We need to make a shift so we can connect with those who belong to the self transcending group. This is the group we most need to get on board with climate change so that it shifts from being a left/right issue in Australia. We need to pull together with a sense of collective concern and action if we are to be successful.

It is of critical importance that the person talking about climate change is recognised as credible by having values that are similar to those of the audience or group or individual.

They need to find common language that connects with what they share in values and be able to express why climate change is a concern to themselves.

Stories of success and financially do-able transformations are essential. Both of the value groups need to hear that change is possible. This is where the BZE plans - the latest being how Australia can become a Renewable Energy Superpower - are invaluable. People have been found to shift from denial or apathy to support climate action when they appreciate there are solutions.

The fact that this report was launched by Malcolm Turnbull when he was simply the member for Wentworth shows the appeal of technological 'can do' stories to the right in politics, and also the savvy of the BZE team in asking him to launch it.

Stories like the ones raised in this book Going against the grain about farmers' experiences of climate change and their adaptations are of course invaluable in the country.

Our group – Psychology for a Safe Climate

Our group has written a couple of booklets we hope can be helpful and further develop some of the material covered in this talk.

Let's Speak about Climate Change and Facing the Heat: Stories of climate change conversations. Both are available for purchase, and can be ordered or downloaded on our site from this [link](#).

C4C

Climate for Change, a Melbourne group have successfully developed a supportive program to help people hold discussions in their homes with 8 to 10 friends. Climate for Change provides a trained facilitator to help with the discussion and to support the host. They use the Tupperware model in finding new hosts for the next gathering from each event.

Climate for Change use peer to peer discussion, and begin events with their feelings about what they care about most in life. So discussion is immediately anchored in people's values.

This is one way in which we can continue to do what I am sure you already do. Research shows that far more people in Australia are concerned about climate change than most of us think to be the case. This indicates there is an enormous reservoir of people potentially able to be engaged.

Active Hope

We need to continue the work with the spirit described by Joanna Macy - of *active hope*. Hope without the *active* in front is hope that is passive – more like being hopeful, and can get blocked easily. *Active hope* on the other hand requires us to know what we would like to happen and to then set about being engaged in doing things that help bring it about.

We need lots of that!