

Climate Change and Psyche:  
Conversations with and through Dreams

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### Abstract

In the last few years, awareness of anthropogenic global warming has become widespread as its effects are felt across the globe and warnings from scientists have become increasingly urgent. Psychological research into human reactions to reports of climate change has predominantly focused on mechanisms of denial, and cognitive strategies for effecting changes in behaviour. This paper presents research inquiring into the psychological realities of those who are actively engaged with climate change issues, asking questions about how such people can be supported, and what can be learnt from understanding their psychological processes. Utilising a depth psychological approach, a co-operative research group of activists, researchers, policy makers and social communicators met in Sydney, Australia to share their daily experiences and concerns, and nightly dreams, articulating frustrations, griefs, hopes and fears in relation to global warming. The shared dreams acted as a provocative voice within the research, facilitating in-depth discussions of topics and perspectives that might otherwise have been avoided or repressed. This paper describes the research methods used to support dream sharing in a co-operative research group situation, and reflects upon the value of doing so within the framework of a depth psychological inquiry.

## Climate Change: Conversations, Myths and Dreams

Reser, Morrissey and Ellul (2011) point out that alongside its actual science, climate change operates as a social phenomenon with cultural narratives of threats, risks and changes to life and world as we know it. They observe that:

While the impacts of a changing climate taking place in biophysical environments and human settlements, and in the context of more structural social and governance systems, are being closely monitored and, to the extent possible, addressed, there are few corresponding evaluation or monitoring exercises taking place with respect to the human landscape of individual and community experience, risk perception, sense making, and psychological and behavioural responses (p.27).

It is becoming more apparent that global warming scenarios with their irreversible tipping points and deathly consequences are triggering defensive mechanisms of denial, distancing and suppression that impede constructive thought and action (Bodnar, 2012; Connor, 2010; Dickinson, 2009; Lertzman, 2013; Weintrobe, 2013a). The phenomenon of denial and disavowal understandably dominates socio-political and psychological analyses of climate change responses. But what of those people who immerse themselves in climate change issues? The research focus presented in this paper concerns the psychological processes of those who accept and engage with the emerging realities of anthropogenic global warming on a daily basis. It investigates the nature of their experience and asks how they might be

supported in confronting issues that are often sidelined, if not denied, within mainstream societies.

Acknowledging the scientific realities of anthropogenic global warming severely undermines the premises of modern and post-modern worldviews which have held sway within industrialised societies such as Australia's. The old myths of industrialisation are giving way to newly emergent, and as yet uncertain, myths which recognise that human and non-human existence on earth is being irrevocably altered by climate change. Ginette Paris (2007) observes that: 'The psychic space between the new myth and the old myth often feels like a deadly zone. It is. This is the zone for which depth psychology offers a map' (p. 83). Paying attention to those who are highly engaged with climate change concerns provides insights into the psychological journey from an old worldview to a new one, within which personal and social identities and meanings are profoundly challenged.

Ethnographic work suggests that openly engaging with climate change concerns is not only psychologically stressful in its direct encounter with survival anxiety, but can also be potentially transformative in its finding and telling of new stories about self, society and world (Pearse, Goodman, & Rosewarne, 2010; Randall, 2009, 2013). The depth psychological research presented here produces a map of this transitional zone of stress and transformation, based on ongoing discussions and dream sharing by a group of individuals in Sydney, Australia throughout 2011.

### **Depth Psychology and Climate Change**

Central to the theory and practice of all schools of depth psychology is the acknowledgement of unconscious dimensions within the psyche. While Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic approach focuses on developmental processes and the function of the personal unconscious as a repository for repressed energies and desires, Carl Jung's analytical psychology extends the focus to the cultural and collective dimensions of the unconscious, and to the recognition of the unconscious as an autonomous and creative region of existence (Jung, 1969). As climate change challenges individuals and societies, provoking destructive and creative responses, and regressive and progressive imaginings, both approaches are of value in researching psychological responses to climate change awareness.

At a cultural level, climate change carries symbolic and mythic resonances in its global imagery and concerns. As Jonathan Marshall (2011) writes:

climate change is big, so big that we cannot, as yet, conceptualise it... and so it becomes symbolic, invoking existential issues about the meanings of life, death, distribution of suffering, relation of humans to the cosmos. We imagine and feel with its images; floods, deserts, storms and drought are already parts of our psyche and our dreams (p.267).

Furthermore climate change discussions generate global perspectives which collapse old distinctions between natural and human histories (Chakrabarty, 2009). These perspectives reveal their mythic dimensions through narratives which portray the human species as an agent whose actions are both determining a new geological era (increasingly referred to as the Anthropocene), while also endangering its own existence. Promethean and Faustian references abound as we question the powers and limits of human agency.

At an individual level, the overwhelming nature, diversity and complexity of science and media reports about global warming provokes charged emotional responses ranging from denial and despair, to activism and millenarianism. For those accepting the realities of climate change, there can be repeated encounters with feelings of anxiety, grief, confusion, shock, anger, guilt, frustration, fear and hopelessness. Sally Weintrobe (2013a) writes of the ongoing hard emotional work involved in engaging with climate change where illusions must be mourned and self-idealizations challenged. Rosemary Randall (2009, 2013) describes the psychological processes of facing grief and ecological indebtedness, as the destructiveness of our lifestyles and the realities of our ecological dependence are fully acknowledged. Such profound encounters have the potential to activate personal and political developmental processes (Alshuler, 2006; Samuels, 1993). Psychoanalytic theorists and researchers emphasise the ways in which climate change awareness trigger primal emotions that resonates with infantile states of terror and anxiety (Dodds, 2011; Weintrobe, 2013b). Depth psychologists, following Jungian and post-Jungian perspectives, investigate the archetypal dimensions of such confrontations (Marshall, 2009; Romanyshyn, 2008; Rust, 2008). Ultimately all agree that a greater level of individual and social maturity is required to act responsibly and innovatively, and that depth psychological approaches can contribute to this process.

### **Depth Psychological Research**

Depth psychology's research methodology draws upon its phenomenological roots with their attention to complex and rich descriptions of lived experience, inter-subjective fields and 'relationships of intentionality in which the things of the world wish to show themselves at

the level of essence' (Coppin & Nelson, 2005, pp. 32-33). It is a methodology which encourages a 'being with' through reflection and dialogue, along with an ongoing process of 'seeing through' the apparent to the less apparent (Hillman, 1992, pp. 140-145). In order to elucidate the many layers of consciousness and unconsciousness at play in ourselves and the world, depth psychological research employs a practice of 'careful attention that is sustained, patient, subtly attuned to images and metaphors, tracking both hidden meanings and surface presentations' (Watkins, 2008, p.419). Its particular focus is on symbolic language, memories, fantasies, dreams, feeling states and somatic responses and its analysis is grounded in the recognition of unconscious forces and dynamics. Depth psychology's inquiry into the layered meanings of events, opens up a richness of possible responses (Hillman, 1992a, Coppin & Nelson, 2005) offering antidotes to the rigid denials, disconnections, confusions and paralysis of positions that often mark climate change discussions. It offers a perceptive mirror to contemporary societies whose tensions, fears and struggles with climate change can be interpreted as symptoms of a poorly acknowledged and largely unconscious relationship with nature and its ecosystems (Chalquist, 2007).

"A depth psychologist has as a credo that he or she is in whatever is being analysed whether patient, political problematic, or art work" (Samuels, 1993, p. 11). Depth psychological researchers accept that their unconscious assumptions, biases, concerns and perceptions inevitably shape their work at all stages, and that an in-depth self-reflexive practice is essential to produce rigorous and examinable research (Romanyshyn, 2007). Throughout this inquiry into climate change and psyche, I drew upon and extended the self-reflexivity I had developed as a Jungian psychotherapist to map myself – intellectually, emotionally, somatically, imaginatively and spiritually. I designed and participated in this research, which was partly inspired by a series of dreams referring to climate change (Gillespie, 2009), with the knowledge that my increasing engagement with climate change issues was

psychologically stressful in ways which were entirely new to me. In many respects my research was driven by my need to find out more about what I was going through, how to care for myself, and how to extend this inquiry to a group of others in similar situations (Romanyshyn, 2007).

My research process began with the reflexive ethnographic practice of journal writing (Ellis & Bochner, 2003), which provided both data and a containing vessel for the ongoing hard work of staying with many confronting statistics, images, emotions and dreams relating to global warming. Critical self-reflexivity requires being as alert and questioning as possible whilst acknowledging confusion, projections, ambiguity and paradox are ever present. Recording and working on my dreams through journal writing and somatic awareness (Bosnak, 1996) played a vital role in bringing unconscious thoughts, feelings, assumptions and perspectives into consciousness. Through focusing on my dreams I was able to recognise and articulate suppressed feelings, question my social attitudes and biases, and find new insights and creative strategies in relation to the research.

Robert Romanyshyn (2010), in writing of his own response to global warming, comments that:

As psychologists in service to soul we have an obligation to stay in touch with the experience of anxiety, examine it, and not benumb ourselves to it, particularly and specifically when the response of denial is so widespread in the cultural circumstances of our time (p.277).

While, at worst, an auto-ethnographic approach risks the production of nothing more than a memoir or confession of the researcher's psychological complexes or issues (Romanyshyn,



2007), at best it can provide an in-depth picture of an incremental and developmental journey taken by the researcher, which can evidence both psychological and behavioural changes as well as provide a model of change for others who encounter the research (Ettling & Guilian, 2004). The fact that I could recount something of the process and effects of exploring my dreams, thoughts and feelings in relation to climate change, acted as both model and trigger for the group in their own reporting.

### **Collaborative Group Inquiry**

Climate change is a collective problem which requires a collective response and engagement. This research is grounded in data gathered from group discussions which focused upon capturing something of the collective dynamics and processes involved in responding to climate change. Through these research conversations, multiple voices shared responses and experiences, allowing complexity and contradictions to emerge and be observed, while the primacy of my voice as researcher was minimised (Madriz, 2003; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). A further effort to decrease my influence as a researcher was made through recruiting co-participants from mailing lists to which I did not belong, so that all, with the exception of one acquaintance, were unknown to me at the outset of the research. What bonded us was our commitment to engaging with climate change issues.

Our co-operative research group was informed by critical participatory action research with its emphases on subjective knowledge, collaborative research and reflexive processes, drawn from action research and feminist research methodologies (Watkins & Shulman, 2008).

Watkins and Shulman envision collaborative research groups generating significant questions, critical understandings and liberatory actions informed by psychological

experience understood within social and historical contexts. A major aim is to encourage dialogues in which multiple perspectives can be articulated thus helping ‘people break out of closed systems of symptom and isolation’ (p. 277).

The seven people who joined me in our participatory research group were already engaged with climate change issues as activists, artists, policy makers, researchers and social communicators. We were all tertiary educated and not from particularly marginalised communities, although economic status and ethnic background was varied. However, all of us acknowledged the alienation we felt being immersed in a topic that is collectively and individually marginalised, if not denied. Together we created the space to discuss a subject of vital importance and major concern, which is fast becoming a new taboo in social conversations (Randall, 2013). The fact that no one withdrew from the research despite the high levels of commitment required, suggested that our discussions were satisfying a need and rewarding in their directions.

Another group model that informed our research group was the Carbon Conversation established by British psychotherapist Rosemary Randall (2012) with the aim of helping ‘people face the reality of climate change and reduce their personal impact on the problem’ (2012, p. 231). In her work, Randall stresses the importance of acknowledging the complex emotional terrain of facing climate change realities for individuals and societies alike. This is the terrain that our group sought to identify, articulate and analyse. Unlike Carbon Conversations groups, our focus was not on specific goals of behavioural change but on an open-ended exploration of questions which supported the growth of self-knowledge, reflexivity, meta-cognition and critical social thinking, all of which have the potential to stimulate personal and /or social awareness and change (Armstrong, 2007). Over the course

of twelve two hour meetings, spread over seven months, we spontaneously reported back about the effect of the group's interaction and discussions on our personal, social and professional lives.

While I was very interested in any spontaneous changes of behaviour or consciousness that might have occurred for participants (including myself) throughout the research process, I adhered to depth psychological theory and practice of following and supporting participants in their psychological process without predetermining specific desired outcomes (Stein, 1982). At our first meeting, a group decision was made not to use stimulus materials in our discussions, as we were already so immersed in climate change information. The goal was set by the group to focus directly on our own thoughts, feelings, stories and dreams.

At our fourth meeting, Linda <sup>1</sup>shared a dream about setting sail into open seas on a well-equipped vessel. She elaborated:

I was setting off but who knows where to?... had that mythical property looking out through the Heads [of Sydney Harbour] and trying to imagine... when it was just bush, when it was just waves, when it was just weather, just sky... I was embarking into that kind of territory... of the unknown I suppose, and the bigness and the wideness and no script...

This dream had both personal resonances for Linda, and for us as a group, as each meeting we ventured further into unknown territory without a script, other than our commitment to

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<sup>1</sup> All participants have given permission for use of their material in this paper. Some have chosen pseudonyms as indicated.

observe and report to the group our thoughts feelings, fantasies, dreams, somatic and behavioural responses to climate change news and reports. While I proposed some general beginning questions we did not consciously use them to structure our discussions. Instead participants spontaneously raised questions throughout our meetings, some of which included:

What made us accept climate change as a reality?

What motivates our involvement?

How do we respond to feelings of environmental despair and guilt?

How does our worldviews affect our responses to climate change, and vice versa?

How has knowledge of global warming changed our lives and future expectations?

What has been our group process and what effect has being in this group had on us individually?

### **Dreams in Research**

In depth psychological research, unconscious dynamics are of major concern. In this research identifying unconscious dynamics not only contributed to validity, it is also vitally increased understanding of psychological responses to climate change awareness. Jung (1974) wrote that ‘because dreams are the most common and most normal expression of the unconscious psyche, they provide the bulk of the material for its investigation’ (p. 73). Today there is mounting evidence that dreams often express unconscious feelings, thoughts and insights, whether they be repressed as Freud emphasised, or compensatory as Jung observed (Bulkeley, 2008; Hartmann, 2001). Within our research discussions sharing dreams proved to be highly valuable for identifying and accepting some unconscious elements in our responses to climate change, as will be discussed in the following section.

Carl Jung (1977) observed that some dreams had images and resonances that went beyond the individual dreamer's personal life. He suggested that 'Collective dreams have a character which forces people instinctively to tell them... such dreams do not belong to the individual; they have a collective meaning' (p.112). In our first meeting I proposed that we spontaneously share any of our dreams that we feel have a place in our group discussions. While most had little or no experience of dream work, all were intrigued enough by my suggestion to be receptive to it. To help explain my research interest in dreams, I talked about how the German journalist Charlotte Beradt (1968) recorded her fellow citizens' dreams during the rise of Nazism. Beradt observed that the dreams she collected were explicit in content, stemming directly from the social and political atmospheres in which the dreamers lived. These dreams clearly revealed attitudes, feelings and dilemmas that could not be openly acknowledged or discussed at the time, as they vividly portray the way totalitarianism worked its way into the psyches of Germany's citizens.

While the phenomenon of human-induced climate change is not comparable to the phenomenon of political dictatorship, there are some mutual resonances in our responses to them. Both situations threaten major disruptions to the safeties and familiarities of life, while personal responsibilities and accepted autonomies are under question, if not surveillance. Furthermore with both phenomena, there has been a strong tendency to deny the seriousness of the threats, when the unwelcome nature of the problem first presented. Along with other dream researchers (Bulkeley, 2008; Hill, 2004), I anticipate that contemporary dreams are acting as antennas for the personal and collective tensions and conflicts inherent in a growing awareness of global warming, as well as depicting threats that are being minimised or denied.

The premise that dreams shared in a group can illuminate not only the group's concerns and purposes but also wider social and political concerns, motivated Gordon Lawrence (2005) to develop the practice of 'Social Dreaming' at the Tavistock Institute. In this practice, dreams are shared in a large group whose exclusive focus is on the dream and the way 'it captures the social, political, institutional, and spiritual aspect of the dreamer's social environment' (p.ix). Lawrence's observation that 'the dream is an imaginative replay of our state of being in our social world and a rehearsal of how we are to become in relation to our environment' (p. 28) fits well with many of the dreams shared within our research group's discussions.

In its focus on the examination of the social unconscious, Social Dreaming follows a tight prescription of methods designed to discourage conscious relating and personal discussions during its practice (Lawrence, 2005). For the purposes of our research, Lawrence's methods prove too restrictive. Instead our group developed its own spontaneous practice of including dream accounts at any time in our discussions. These accounts often opened the way for the expression of unspoken about or unconscious dimensions in our discussions, as discussed in the stories below.

As a participant researcher, I attempted to avoid using my position of power to impose a set of dream sharing rules beyond maintaining ethical guidelines to ensure emotional safety, such as encouraging participants to monitor their own levels of comfort and discomfort at all times, and committing to limit or stop discussions that become too personally distressing for any participant. While our agreed focus was on the larger social concerns of the dream in accordance with our overall research priorities, no suggestion was made by me, or any other group member, that sharing or reflecting on personal elements in a dream was inappropriate. Like all other forms of sharing in the group, it was deemed to be a matter for each member's

discretion. Following safe therapeutic practice, I did, however, ask members to refrain from attempting to interpret each others' dreams. I suggested instead that we help open the space for dream and dreamer to speak for themselves, by firstly asking questions to elucidate the dream and the dreamer's responses, and then sharing our own responses. These guidelines, based on a phenomenological approach to dream work (Bosnak, 1996; Bulkeley, 2003), were followed throughout meetings without any significant disruptions or diversions away from the group's focus, possibly reflecting the high level of commitment held towards our research topic.

### **The Dream's Voice**

Dreams proved to be a significant, but not major, part of our research discussions. Given that including dreams in the research was my idea, I did not push further for dreams to be shared, although I often shared my own. By the end of our meetings everyone shared at least one dream, and dreams were shared at every meeting except the final one. At times the discussion around them was very brief, at other times extended. As our meetings progressed and we became more at ease with dreams, their material became more interwoven into our discussions, rather than treated as a separate topic. We learned to trust that any dream a co-participant chose, or at times felt compelled to share had something to say to us as a research group, and that we all had the ability to listen and respond to them with sensitivity and perception. When a dream was shared, the subject and tone of discussions invariably changed or shifted in some way. There were times when the dream expressed something that could not be broached by the group in any other way. At other times dreams illuminated and guided discussions through their evocative images and narratives. To illustrate, I present four brief vignettes.

## Nightmares

In our third to fifth meetings, a number of nightmares were shared, confronting us with frightening visions and terrifying threats. Through these dreams we were encouraged to share our worst fears. Our nightmare sharing began with Sam (pseudonym), who was sceptical about the meaning and value of dreams, who was nevertheless shaken by a vivid nightmare after making a joke about zombies. He told us:

It was a horrible dream... I had lost contact with my family. I had a last phone call and then there had been a cut off... then months later somebody found a phone that had belonged to one of my parents... and there were photos in there of my [family]. I woke up with this horrible... sense of anguish, of they were dead and gone... And it stayed, like that for days... Which after having made light – ‘let’s talk about zombies next time’ – wow it’s quite something isn’t it?.. I think the initial meaning of it is pretty straightforward; it made me feel if there are dangers in the world, it’s the people we love the most... that’s how we feel it right? We see it as death of the family.

Simon (pseudonym) immediately said that he had also been having bad dreams, the clearest of which was of a recurring home invasion. At an individual level these nightmares were possibly compensatory to consciousness as Sam and Simon consciously strove hard to hold optimistic viewpoints throughout our more fearful discussions and imaginings about the consequences of climate change. However by the end of our meetings all of us had reported at least one nightmare. These dreams helped us to name and explore a number of difficult to



face topics and feelings including death, loss, grief, mourning, despair, guilt, disempowerment and hopelessness, which unavoidably shadow climate change awareness (Bodnar, 2012; Randall, 2012). As a group, we bonded through sharing our worst personal fears through dreams, while strengthening our resilience through facing common existential terrors. Through their imaginings, nightmares helped increase our motivation, readiness and adaptability to meet possible future changes and threats in the world (Bulkeley, 2008). Lisa observed that for her:

Since the very beginning session... there were very disturbed dreams... but what I found is that this reconnecting with the ability to dream... helped me in my everyday life. It's just been profoundly effective in helping me to sort things through, and to sort out emotions from clear thinking... I've found it really, really clarifying and powerful... coming here and just listening to other people's dreams, and having the dreams... feeling safe in this environment, has allowed me to make good use of the dreams... I can't even explain it. It's not logical but it's worked. Something's really shifted there.

The fact that Lisa, who identifies herself as a rational atheist, accepted the value of dreams reassured and encouraged other participants to be receptive to dreams.

### **Identifying Projections**

Climate change awareness easily leads to scapegoating dynamics as we attempt to rid ourselves of the knowledge of our destructiveness, guilt, grief and fear by unconsciously displacing it on to some 'other' through projection (Randall, 2005). The withdrawal of

projections is a vital step in developing both psychological and political consciousness (Alshuler, 2006). In our group discussions we acknowledged the importance of identifying our individual and collective projections in order to explore our unconscious defences to climate change awareness as well as to help us understand the responses of those who we wanted to communicate with about global warming issues.

One reason dreams can be confronting is that they have the ability to portray aspects of ourselves that we deny and then project on to others. Dreams can help identify and withdraw projections when we recognise aspects of ourselves in our dream figures. One dream I told the group about a despairing woman, opened up an exploration about feelings of hopelessness; an emotion that is much collectively defended against, but which inevitably invaded our consciousness in one way or another. In this dream:

[there was] an old friend... who was very caught up in this view of the world around climate change which was that it was all completely and utterly hopeless...I was sort of talking at her... haranguing her... 'The children', I said, 'You can't raise children without any hope'... that just kind of horrified me.

I admitted to the group that I was uncomfortable with both my defensive haranguing and my friend's hopelessness, while recognising the dream brought to consciousness internal conflicts provoked by spending day after day immersed in climate change concerns. I found it hard to remember this dream, let alone think about it, however the group's questions and responses skilfully helped me to examine my unconscious conflicts. In this discussion I was neither research expert nor facilitator but participant, while Linda stepped forward to take on the work of data analysis:

*Linda:* Were you cross with your friend for having such a harsh outlook?

*S:* I was impatient with her. I was critical and quite judgemental. I thought ‘Oh really she’s taken up a view and she’s made it her worldview’... I thought it wasn’t quite her in some way.

*Linda:* Did that invalidate the worldview she had, so it was less alarming?

*S:* I don’t know if I was exactly thinking like that in the dream. I think I was seeing it as a blanket worldview that was just too encompassing... It was sort of like ‘you take on the view and suddenly that’s your whole life’... clearly this is something to do with me and feeling influenced by others... And that the implication of whatever I believe, if I hold it absolutely adamantly 100%... takes over every aspect of my life, and that doesn’t seem very healthy, even while at the other level, it’s a bit like [asking]... what sort of values – well not so much values, as opinions – do I hold if they’re not absolute or 100%? So I don’t think I came out with any right or wrong, but just a lot of sense of unease...

As I talked, I heard how pulled I could be into an absolute viewpoint, as if it was a mark of integrity or honesty. This discussion helped me to withdraw my projections of hopelessness and absolutism on to others, so that I could consciously explore them within myself. I confessed to the group how I resisted saying the word ‘hopelessness’, and how buffeted I felt by the storms of opinion and the certainty with which some predictions were made. We could then discuss the fears and dangers of being engulfed by feelings of hopelessness, prompting questions about how to proceed knowing what we know, and also what we do not know. In the ensuing conversation the group explored how to accept and validate views which were

uncertain and variable, as well as to hold contradictory and shifting feelings, such as hope and hopelessness.

Within a depth psychological viewpoint being able to accept ambivalent and contradictory feelings and positions expands possibilities of thought and engagement, as dualistic positions are avoided (Marshall, 2009). As our ability to sail the currents of optimism and pessimism increased in our discussions, our fears and our dreams became less apocalyptic, giving way to more recognisable scenarios within our present world and selves. Our hysteria lowered as our ability to hold, and reflect upon, paradox increased. Articulating and sharing the tensions thrown up by global warming's contradictions and confusions proved to be dynamic, creative and often humorous. I observed that more grounded conversations about the nitty gritty of our daily engagements with climate change issues often followed discussions about our seesawing optimism and pessimism.

### **Challenging Habitual Behaviours and Thoughts**

In one discussion Linda shared a puzzling and distressing dream which expressed something of the struggle and horror she felt as a climate change activist. She told us that her dream was about:

a connection with family and friends... I was doing 'the angel', in that... I was an observer... And I knew that something murderous was going to happen to these people who were dear to me... [who] were just interacting in a very normal way, completely unaware that something dreadful was going to happen, and that I knew. And the crux of the whole thing was that I woke up feeling 'I didn't say

anything, I didn't act. I didn't intercede. I just observed', and that filled me with horror... it was really odd. I felt very bad all day because I hadn't intervened; I hadn't taken responsibility and acted. So it was good that I was dreaming.

While it was reassuring for Linda that it was only a dream, it was still unsettling her. She commented:

I always identify myself with somebody who sees the elephant in the room and says so, or puts their head above the parapet, who does act, and quite often gets shot down, but absolutely convinced that it's the right thing to do. So it's curious in the particular dream I was doing quite the opposite.

Knowing Linda, and her long history of activism and community development work, we too were curious and perplexed by her dream ego's behaviour. The group moved into a questioning mode, highly engaged in simultaneously producing and analysing data:

*Veronica [pseudonym]:* So you weren't consciously withholding in your dream?

*Linda:* yes I was.

*Veronica:* You were consciously withholding?

*Linda:* Yes I was absolutely! I was aware in the dream I was not acting.

*Sara [pseudonym]:* So you chose not to act?

*Linda:* In the dream [asking myself] 'Why are you doing this? Why are just observing?.. Are you hiding in the bushes? Or hiding behind someone, just observing?'

*Veronica:* You're certain of your certainty? That something terrible was going to happen?

*Linda:* Yes absolutely.

*Sara:* And you felt that ... you had the power to change it?

*Linda:* Yes absolutely.

Sara and Veronica's repeated questions verified Linda's actual dream experience while also revealing how unsettled they were too by the thought of Linda knowing something bad was going to happen, and not acting. This dream threw the group as a whole, into shadowy territory, as it demonstrated that within our group's ethos, non-action in the face of impending disaster was a clear and defining taboo. Linda identified what was most disturbing was:

that I was entirely protecting myself, and that's what appalled me that... I wasn't acting courageously.

This admission opened up an analytic focus on feeling and belief in our discussion:

*Veronica:* So was there a bit of logic in your dream that if you would have spoken you would have become vulnerable too?

*Linda:* I would have become equally as vulnerable... I would have been a victim to the danger too then, I guess.

*Veronica:* Well for me that makes you not quite such a villain.

*Linda:* Mm, yeah, well not in my mind.

*Sara:* It shapes, it gives a different feel to the dream.

Our questions opened the way for Linda to try approaching her dream from a different viewpoint:

*Linda:* I suppose it was about responsibility, and how you act out your responsibilities. Is that what it was about? Not sure actually, was it?

*S:* What makes you responsible, as opposed to another potential victim?

*Linda:* Um exactly! [Pause] Exactly!

My question clearly hit a nerve in Linda. It had always been a given for her that she took on the role of being the one who was responsible, and must act to protect others. In the face of global warming this is an impossible and overwhelming task. Linda reflected back:

What interests me is what S. asked me: that I take on, I wear that hat... 'Who's responsible? It's me! I'm responsible. I've got the power to make a difference.'

Well, who says?

This was a powerful questioning by Linda of something that had always been an unconscious assumption. Through this process she was able to start acknowledging feelings of powerlessness; an individual shift which resonated at a collective level. Lisa fed back:

*Lisa:* Listening to your dream... I got a sense of you being part of this collective consciousness, that you often describe... I was reading into it... this inability or lack of action that is amongst many of us. That's what I felt... It's not an age of heroes.

*Linda:* I too can be a coward.

*Lisa:* Mmm. Is it being cowardly?

*Linda:* that's how I was feeling I suppose... I was feeling very cowardly when I woke up, but perhaps not. Perhaps I was being unkind to myself.

Linda's disorientation allowed her to consider the possibility of viewing herself and her situation through a radically different lens; one which was not so much about her failings, but was about being in a time and situation where her habitual beliefs cannot guide her. Jung suggested that when we find ourselves acting in a dream in a differing way to our habitual behaviour, the dream performs a compensatory function, through which an unconscious aspect of oneself can come to consciousness, balancing a former one-sidedness (Jung, 1974). Such an analysis emphasises the developmental nature of dreaming, in its expression of repressed, or undeveloped, elements of self seeking conscious integration (ibid). This latter perspective emphasises the value of traversing the 'deadly zone' where old beliefs and behaviours are shed in preparation for an enlarged and contemporary understanding of self and world. This dream's interruption of self-identity, offered an opening for new questions and feelings to emerge, which stimulated both psychological and political developmental processes (Samuels, 1993). Linda's dream speaks to a wider audience than herself in its challenging of perceptions and assumptions.

### **Dream as Catalyst**

In a discussion about the frustrations of waste, Lisa shared a visceral and graphic dream which acted as a catalyst for feelings of overwhelm, urgency and shame to surface. This process began with Sara's outburst about her disposal of dead batteries:



I am not going to spend hours upon hours thinking about where I should put the batteries. I want things to be easy for me... if I can find an ecological solution to something, fine – but if I can't, then I have to accept I have to put it into the rubbish bin... because it does my mind in thinking about it.

Veronica responded with her own frustration:

I have them hidden in one of my kitchen drawers. One day they will take over my kitchen and I'll be like 'Shit! I got to do something!'

We all had stories about the difficulties of disposing batteries safely. I reflected on the larger story of the 'battery drawer':

I'm thinking of... the analogy that somehow we all have this box of batteries which are those things you don't know what to do with – we know we shouldn't do the old, because it's not really ecologically sound, but we don't know what the new thing is, or the new practice hasn't been established.

Lisa declared that she had just had a dream about this very problem, and that it was a really embarrassing dream about shitting:

I didn't know where to do it. I was surrounded by people. I surreptitiously just did it in a deckchair [laughter]. And it's about shit. It's exactly what we are talking about... And I've had this dream before... I just couldn't bring myself to

tell. It's so strong, I couldn't possibly forget it, and I have to say it now because it's so appropriate.

Sara immediately felt the connection between this dream and her feelings about dumping her batteries, prompting Lisa's further reflection on the lack of functioning toilets in her dream.

Lisa concluded:

I just had to do it ...everybody was just going on with their lives...I was just intensely embarrassed and uncomfortable... not knowing how to dispose of it without doing something gross...the dream was very visceral animal kind of thing. So when I woke up ...my first thought was out of control, like I was out of control, and then I thought the way I'm living, we're all living, is out of control.

[Pause] It's a mess.

Just as individuals can feel overwhelmed by collective guilt in the absence of responsible social action, so too can individuals be overcome by shame, as collective consciousness and practice denies the need to dispose of refuse safely. Paradoxically Lisa's 'embarrassing' dream seemed to free us from shame about our dealings with collective waste, in its honest and urgent embodiment of the undeniable necessity of shitting and maintaining appropriate waste facilities. It particularly helped Sara to understand her 'battery drawer' moment:

Mentally... I'd had enough. I can't leave this stuff in my house anymore. I'm going to put it in the rubbish bin, and if it's the wrong thing to do, I need to do that – because it's not an easy process for me to figure it all out... I like recycling... I put it all out there, it's fantastic! Why can't I have that for all the

rest of it? So I got a little bit irate and upset with... governments, because I think it's such an easy process to implement.

The graphic way in which Lisa's dream suggested her problem was created by a lack of adequate facilities, helped Sara to connect with how stymied she felt by our society's lack of systems to deal with the disposal of its messes. Lisa's dream catalysed a shift of focus in Sara from personal failure to addressing the collective problem of responsibly and effectively dealing with waste. In naming the problem and the possibility of a positive solution, Sara could move from being an isolated and overwhelmed individual swamped by waste problems, to becoming an irate citizen demanding what is ecologically necessary. For the group, the 'battery drawer/shitting dream' metaphors served to illuminate waste dilemmas and solutions within contexts that liberated and motivated us.

### **Conclusion**

For the individuals involved in this research, being able to participate in extended reflective discussions yielded psychological insights into climate change engagements and responses that were of both personal and collective relevance. The inclusion of dreams in particular served to highlight paradoxical and confused understandings and responses which arose through our embrace of dualistic conceptions such as life and death, neglect and care, hope and despair, acceptance and denial, individual and social. The group's conscious and collective engagement with dreams helped to bridge these oppositions through traversing the challenging and ambivalent territory that underlies their tensions. While not explicitly pursuing therapeutic outcomes in the research, the research was nevertheless deemed to be therapeutic by its participants, particularly in addressing issues of despair, burn out and

isolation. At our final meeting each participant spoke of feeling more mature, empowered and grounded. Understanding and discussing the collective dilemmas of climate change in a safe and free ranging discussion group was crucial to this outcome, allowing a greater understanding and validation of our own and others' complex responses to climate change. As a result we felt better equipped and more motivated to work with others to engage with global warming issues.

Combining co-operative group research methods with depth psychology methodology and analysis were fundamental to the outcomes of this inquiry. By participating in a co-operative research group, participants were able to collectively construct understandings based on their own, and each others', experiences and insights, as revealed within the interactions of the group. Differences between participants were highly utilised and valued in their ability to deepen and broaden understandings. As primary researcher, I was usefully challenged by my co-participants on my unconscious assumptions and biases, often revealed through my dreams. The depth psychological lens enabled an experiential exploration of the ways in which individuals and communities can acknowledge contradictory desires, recover repressed conflicts, re-examine core values and work through the difficult emotions of profound change. Sharing dreams in particular facilitated the development of empathy while revealing hidden dimensions in ourselves and our discussions. Taken together the research methods supported participants in their development of personal and social insights, creativity, co-operation and maturity, to yield a depth of understanding of both the psychological effects of engagement with climate change, and the individual and political developmental demands and opportunities arising from such a vital encounter.



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