



Black and white thinking is simpler

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Before 2005 I have to admit I was in denial about climate change. Not an active denier or skeptic, but perhaps representative of the community who don't want to know or face knowing about climate change.

Deep down I must have known there was a problem, because I had bought two books about climate change but they remained unopened on the bedside table for a couple of years.

All this changed when a friend insisted I read Tim Flannery's *The Weathermakers*. This book was certainly a wake up call and set me on a journey of see-sawing feelings, as I lurched from concern - to anxiety - to guilt - to alarm. I found myself seeking out learned people for reassurance that all was well - only to find that those who offered this reassurance were just wishful thinkers! I gradually came to see this baby boomer generation that I belong to has lived in the most stable times since WW2, yet has silently poisoned the future for our children and grandchildren.

As a core member of the community group Darebin CAN and later the Climate Emergency Network, I expected the growth of a citizen movement would follow our initial activities. Instead we have seen the growth and entrenchment of the climate change denial movement.

As a psychologist I have reflected on my own struggle - not wanting to know, seeking reassurance from people I respect, reading everything I could lay hands on desperately seeking some comforting news that I could rest easy. At the same time knowing deep down something was seriously wrong.

Denial is a necessary psychological process for survival. It's our first response when we hear bad news: 'oh no' we exclaim on hearing sad or shocking news. And many acts of bravery could not occur without denial of the dangers involved. But it is also a way we avoid pain, anxiety, guilt, responsibility and the need to change.

We also are inclined to deal with conflicting feelings with denial. We humans have a tendency to polarize our feelings: footy fans love their team but have nothing good to say about their rivals - they can only disparage them. People fall in love but can then equally passionately fall in hate. Countries fall out with each other and end up at war.

Black and white thinking is simpler! It is complex to bear conflicting feelings - to bear dissonance - internal contradictions.

What are the contradictions we need to bear? On one hand we love nature, we love the life we lead and we love our children and grandchildren. On the other hand climate science is telling us that our lifestyles are damaging the planet, threatening the future for our children and their offspring. We have to make changes and big ones and have a responsibility to do so!

How do we bear to know this? How do we bear the disquieting pain, the anxiety, the uncertainty?

We can push it away by becoming immersed in busier and busier lives. We can deny the science, or look for 100 % certainty in the science - which is itself a denial of the scientific method. We can blame other countries, or become apathetic because 'no-one else is doing anything'. Or we can opt out with 'faith' that nature will fix it, or more that technology will one day fix it.

On the other hand, we can bear to know: face the feelings of disquiet, the uncertainty, the guilt and the responsibility. We can resist the tendency to polarize and with this comes the need to not shift from denial to despair!

We can accept the need to act responsibly.

Psychology for a Safe Climate is a group project aiming to explore the emotional responses of the community to climate change, to develop ways of supporting people as they face reality, to help them stay connected with themselves and with others.

We want to assist with understanding of the impact of climate change loss on the psyche - loss of life as we know it, loss of security and loss of nature.

We want to contribute to the work of the alliance of groups formed for the work of the Transition Decade, to the climate movement, and to the community.

Deep down we know we are in trouble: the deniers, the avoiders, the frantically too busy folk, the climate activists, the politicians.

We are all in the same boat- sinking Titanic earth - shifting deckchairs - unless we work creatively together....

Because.....

Deep down we know

The waiting storm

We are beginning to fray

The silence is gone

Deep down we know

(The words from a song by Emma Tonkin - *Deep down we know*)