

Is climate change the business of psychoanalysis?: Carol Ride

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Abstract: Facing and accepting reality are very much at the heart of psychoanalysis. In the “Wolf Man”, Freud wrote of the resistance to reality which included the reality of the very findings of psychoanalysis itself. At first people were content to dispute the reality of the facts, but then followed a recognition of the facts, but the elimination in understanding of the consequences of those facts by means of twisted interpretations.

This is not unlike the responses in the community to news of climate change. Examples of negation and disavowal of climate change are considered as illustrations of defences against the anxiety aroused: projection, splitting and denial. Omnipotence and grandiosity too are considered, particularly as examples of defences against our dependence on the earth.

As the climate science becomes more urgent and alarming, the international response is indeed perverse as it becomes ‘acceptable’ to tolerate a temperature rise of 2 degrees warming and beyond (based on pre-industrial temperatures) rather than adopt a sound scientifically based strategy to avoid this. The technology is currently available and the cost is affordable to address the problem.

This perversity is considered from a psychoanalytic perspective as an avoidance of the depressive anxieties of sadness, shame, guilt, and of the anxieties associated with responsibility and reparation. To face these emotional states and work through them requires the courage to mourn and to accept change and loss. Support is essential, as therapists know, for this process. This paper considers the need to foster the development of a community of climate concerned citizens able to work through these feelings so as to play a part in mobilising national and international action commensurate with the scale of the problem.

Is climate change the business of psychoanalysis?

The aim of this paper is to illustrate that the way we as individuals and as a society have responded to news of climate change is best understood using many of the key elements of psychoanalytic theory. Further, our understanding of human nature from a psychoanalytic perspective can contribute a great deal to the difficulty of engagement with this urgent and critical issue – the most critical of our time! Yes is the answer to the question - climate change is very much the business of psychoanalysis.

Freud in the introduction to *Wolf Man* (Freud, 1918 [1914]) wrote of human resistance to reality, including the reality of the very findings of psychoanalysis itself.

“In the present phase of the battle which is raging round psychoanalysis the resistance to its findings has as we know, taken on a new form. People were content formerly to dispute the reality of the facts asserted by psychoanalysis: for this purpose the best technique seemed to be to avoid examining them. That procedure appears to be exhausting itself; and people are now adopting another plan – of recognising the facts, but eliminating, by means of twisted interpretations, the

consequences that follow from them, so that the critics can still ward off the objectionable novelties as efficiently as ever.” (Freud, 1918 [1914]).

His observation of human nature responding to unwanted and disturbing information is pertinent to our society’s current response to climate change.

Many of us are content to allow the fleeting news in our media of climate change waft past us, without wanting to enquire further, and this has been exploited by the climate denialists who are organised, planned, intentional and ideological (Cohen,2013).

Oreskes and Conway in *Merchants of Doubt* have written convincingly of the link between the tobacco industry and denial of the health risks of smoking which delayed serious government action to raise community awareness and harm minimisation. They describe how in a similar manner the fossil fuel industry has been found to be behind an active campaign to discredit the climate scientists. The workings of these vested interests have fuelled the development of denial of the science of climate change which has taken root in our community, simply because we don’t want to know the facts. Engagement with climate change is too anxiety provoking.

Doubts about the facts of global warming in the minds of the community have spread like a contagious virus. As with any virus only one person needs to initially become infected for it to spread quickly. Its tentacles can reach out to become a pandemic which can spread around the world, because unlike a medial virus this virus is comforting.

Even if we are not supportive of the organised denialists, how many of us have deferred knowing more about climate change till later - when we feel better, when we have more time or whatever we can come up with consciously and unconsciously. I was certainly in this category for a long time having two key climate books sitting beside my bed to read at a later date – never touched until prompted to do so by a friend who had read Tim Flannery’s *The Weather Makers*. She was so alarmed that she wanted me to join her in thinking about how concerning the issue was and what we could do. I did read *The Weather Makers* – and my life changed because I couldn’t not know what I had learnt. But it took a trusted friendship to coax me to face

what I was avoiding.

The merchants of doubt have gained a foothold into the psyche, engaging defences that are well established to avoid the anxiety. Climate change arouses anxiety because our security is being threatened, our regenerative capacity is in question, and the great future we trusted would be passed on to our children and grandchildren is being shattered. Our leaders politically are not taking responsibility for the change that is necessary and that is frightening. It is stressful to lack certainty and to feel out of control, and this is especially so for those who already feel overloaded as so many people do.

Primitive defences are drawn on to protect us from engaging with this awful reality. Splitting is one such defence used to protect us from the more complex and challenging need to bear and integrate what on one hand we want and think we deserve - with a painful reality on the other. When we feel alarmed, frightened, and helpless, splitting renders the climate message bad, misguided, a conspiracy, scaremongering and idealistic. Splitting preserves our self image, but worse it fosters a narcissistic cocoon of self focus, self-satisfaction and obliviousness to other.

By projection we can denigrate those bearing the news as people unlike ourselves; worriers, pessimists, trouble makers, greenies, environmentalists, and people who are just too passionate. We can even encourage these 'others' to keep doing what they are doing so as to further distance ourselves from being involved, while feeling relieved someone is doing something about the problem. This way our concern and disquiet is carried by others, no matter how burdened they are, and we can continue as before. Then we don't have to bear the troubling dissonance arising from examining and digesting the facts at all.

There are hundreds of people in Australia working away on promoting climate awareness, opposing coal development and export, opposing coal seam gas fracking in country areas, and promoting renewable energy and other climate solutions. The denigration of those urging action I believe causes these groups to be less outspoken about the scale of change needed to respond to what is a climate emergency. Instead campaigns are watered down to seem more acceptable, and the message they deliver falls short of what is really needed. The real tragedy is that the

denigration contributes to time slipping away for real action to create a safe future. And it leaves those who know about the seriousness of the situation burdened and guilty for not advocating the strength of action required. This is such a powerful case of projective identification.

Freud went on to say that in relation to psychoanalysis, once the “procedure of avoiding the facts appears to be exhausting itself”, people adopt another plan – ‘of recognising the facts, but eliminating, by means of twisted interpretations, the consequences that follow from them, so that the critics can still ward off the objectionable novelties as efficiently as ever.’”

What is meant by twisted interpretations in relation to climate change?

In *States of Denial* Stanley Cohen (2001) provides two categories for this twisting, or in psychoanalytic terms *disavowal*. The first is called *interpretive denial* – where raw facts are given a different meaning from what seems apparent to others. Instead there are minimizations or rationalisations: such as the alcoholic claims to be just a social drinker, or a speeding driver claims that his behaviour is acceptable because he is a good driver.

With respect to climate change we hear comments such as:

"Climate change is not new - its been happening for eternity - it's natural."

"Some more warmth in winter will be great for our crops."

"Climate scientists are not sure of what the changes in climate will be in the future so we can't do anything yet."

"Australia's emissions are negligible."

This disavowal or twisting minimises the facts and thereby reduce potential emotional unrest. The facts, however, are disturbing and I will take a look at these later.

The second category of disavowal used by Cohen is *implicatory denial* - where the moral, psychological and political implications that are conventionally followed are denied. Both the fact and the seriousness of the fact are admitted but rationalizations and justifications are used:

"It's got nothing to do with me."

"What can an ordinary person do?"

"Why should I have to lose sleep, or take a risk, or change anything."

"Someone else will deal with it."

"I deserve my lifestyle because I work so hard."

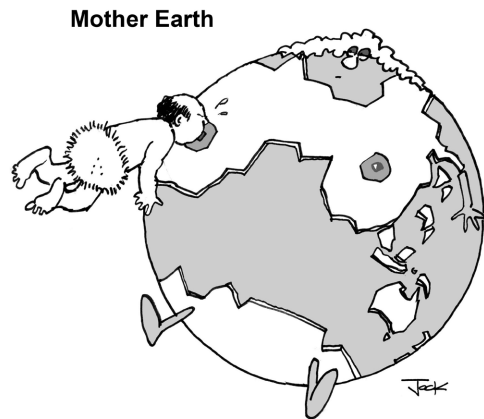
Freud described the purpose of this twisting being to avoid the consequences of objectionable *novelties*. By the term *novelties* he meant new thing, new experience or originality. We can avoid the novelties of change implicit in the facts of climate change and instead come up with truly novel and magical ideas that we believe will solve the problem without requiring any change. These magical ideas appeal to our narcissistic selves, filled with self importance and grandiosity, determined to assume we are the centre of the universe and that nothing need disturb that position.

One example of this magic is belief that technology will painlessly come up with solutions protecting us from any serious engagement with the need to face massive changes in our lives. Another, the so called *Green Wash* (Pearse, 2012) of products and schemes that support the fantasy that with a small tweak we can still have everything we want and not strain the capacity of the planet to provide.

Most significantly in our omnipotence we dispense with the need to care for nature by blocking out our dependency. This enables us to endlessly assume we can use the earth as both a sewer and powerhouse without giving a second thought to where the waste goes (Macy,2012). And this fits well with economists, politicians and business leaders promoting the idea that we can endlessly grow the economy and exhorting us to buy more, more and more goods we don't need, don't want and don't use - to help it grow. Instead we need to grapple with the necessity to 'de-couple economic growth from material and population growth' (Save the Planet, 2013).

Omnipotence annihilates a painful reality and helps foster the illusion we can hold onto what we want and think we deserve, and to the belief we are more important than nature. Recognition of our dependence on 'Mother Nature' is painfully linked with our utter dependence in early childhood on our mothers, so it is perhaps not surprising that the threat of losing Mother Earth's endless goodness is dealt with

unconsciously by denying we need her anyway. When the *Psychology for a Safe Climate* group published the booklet *Let's speak about climate change*, this cartoon (by Jock MacNeish) drew derision from one reader who equated it with pornography. This illustrates the strength of the need to disconnect early experiences from our current dependency.



Simple denial of the facts without any twisting distortions is known as *negation* in psychoanalytic terms and called *literal denial* by Cohen. Literal denial is the assertion that something did not happen or is not true. This form of denial is considered more hopeful as it often precedes a willingness to look further and an openness to shift position. This is in contrast to the often more rigid positions adopted with those using the minimisations of interpretive denial, and the rationalisations and justifications of implicatory denial discussed above. These latter more rigid views betray a capacity to both a *knowing and not knowing* at the same time.

As psychotherapists we are all aware of personal denial and the power of its deeply unconscious roots. In our work we are familiar with the power of denial of a life threatening medical diagnosis, of a mother in denial of the sexual abuse of a child by her husband, or of a partner having an affair. It is often just unthinkable for it to be true. But in each case there is usually a both knowing and not knowing underlying the denial, however deeply buried.

Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, the director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany, and advisor to German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, is reported to have told the *Four Degrees* conference in Melbourne in 2011 that he had not told

her about some of the impacts associated with a four degrees Celsius warmer world because “some things are too difficult to tell”. “There is no doubt that he knows the facts but he left it unclear whether he meant too difficult *personally* or too difficult *politically*. Both are relevant. Even amongst policy makers and world leaders the personal impact of confronting the enormity of the challenges we face may be overwhelming. At a political level, those who tell unpalatable truths risk being denied access to those with the power to make decisions” (Submission to Climate Change Authority Caps and Targets Review). This diffidence has been challenged by one Melbourne writer recently, who called on climate scientists to become social leaders as well as scientific leaders, a precedent set after the second world war when scientist denounced nuclear weapons (Cass, 2013).

Denial operates beyond the personal as a public and collective process, and can be officially sanctioned by the modern state. Governments can be highly organised in covering up famines, political massacres and international arms boycotts, writes Cohen (Cohen, 2001). Closer to home in Australia we are familiar with claims of military success in Afghanistan and Iraq, and as a society we mostly tolerate the discrepancy between what we are told and the signs of failure. “We are vaguely aware of choosing not to look at the facts, but not quite conscious of just what it is we are evading” (Cohen 2001).

Denial can operate across whole societies where there is a ‘flip into collective modes of denial’. “People pretend to believe information that they know is false or fake their allegiance to meaningless slogans and kitsch ceremonies”, writes Cohen (2001). We just have to look back at the recent election campaign in Australia to see this operating.

Norgaard, a sociologist, writes of the cultural organization of denial by which individuals collectively distance themselves from information because of norms of emotion, conversation and attention, and that they use an existing cultural repertoire of strategies in the process (Norgaard, 2011).

In her study of communities in Norway described in *Living in Denial*, she found a state of *knowing and not knowing* that was supported by community

norms of not acknowledging climate change, even when it was readily evident that climate changes were limiting the usual much loved sport of skiing. Yet when she interviewed individual people she found that many knew there was a deterioration in skiing conditions but had joined the cultural norm of denying their vulnerability.

In our psychotherapeutic practice we try to get to the bottom of what is presented to us that seems perverse - the contradictory, the unreasonable, the ideas which are stubbornly held to, but that don't make logical sense. Yet as a society we tolerate what is evidently a perverse cultural response in relation to climate change. We hear both *knowing and not-knowing* in many of the responses of the government to climate change.

For example, in Australia the Government claimed that we as a nation need to take the threat of climate change seriously, and as one measure introduce a price on carbon in some form to force a limit to CO₂ emissions. At the same time that same Government was also advocating continuing exploitation of our mining industry to develop every conceivable opportunity for new coal mines, for new export facilities for coal, and to explore new gas reserves and markets. This contradiction is very confusing for the public, but also very familiar in our culture.

While this state of mind is tolerated, a pervasive cynicism about political solutions is aroused, which feeds into individuals being disconnected and apathetic. A psychic numbing develops as we live a double life.

As the climate science becomes more urgent and alarming the greatest perversity of all is the agreed international position with regard to setting a guardrail or limit on warming. One of the main outcomes of the UN climate meeting in December 2010 was "that global warming should be limited to below 2°C above pre-industrial average global temperatures. The two degrees 'guardrail' was intended to protect us from tipping points leading to runaway climate change. However with less than one degree of warming, extreme weather events provide evidence that climate change is already impacting severely. Australia's 'Angry Summer' described by the Climate Commission in *The Critical Decade: Extreme Weather* (2013) attests to this. We are currently on track for a global average temperature rise of 4°C from pre-industrial

levels and this is well outside the relatively stable temperatures of the past 10,000 years in which human civilization developed (Climate Change Authority, Issues Paper, 2013). Graphics 1 and 2 illustrate that the earth is already too hot.

How is it that we as a society accept this. Why don't we protest and say this is too risky for ourselves, let alone future generations. I suggest that because we can't bear to fully know the climate change facts, that we therefore disown our responsibility and project it on to our political leaders whom most of us charge with keeping us ignorant, and with doing just enough behind the scenes to help us believe something is being done, but with not doing too much to make any big changes or make it look too serious. Our political system of short termism and not rocking the boat from business as usual colludes with this perfectly.

Further there is a general social collusion with the denigration of those who do speak out that not enough is being done about climate change. For example many joined forces in the recent election to turf the Greens Party out of office because they are said to be too out of touch with reality. And further when they had power in the minority government and forced a carbon tax on a reluctant Government, they were accused of working to hurt the economy. Their connection with reality of climate change makes *them* the unbearable, rather than *the feelings* climate change stirs up being acknowledged as unbearable. Perhaps it has never been truer that we as a society get the politicians we deserve!

It is more and more evident that we need to return to 350 ppm of carbon dioxide or below, well below the current level of 400ppm (Hansen, 2013). The world is already too hot and our remaining carbon budget is zero. Research by the Potsdam Institute calculates that to reduce the chance of exceeding 2°C warming to 20%, 80% of reserves of fossil fuels must remain in the ground (Carbon Tracker). Yet despite the need to leave most fossil fuels in the ground being supported by the International Energy Agency (2012), our global emissions in 2013 are growing by 3% p.a. This is alarming. Graphics 3 and 4 to illustrate the need to leave fossil fuels in the ground.

But why would we accept a 20% or 25% chance of catastrophic climate change? The precautionary principle requires that the risk of an aircraft crash be less than 0.1%.

The Climate Commission reports that the 2 degree C limit no longer appears to be appropriate as a dividing line above which climate change can be considered 'dangerous'.(Climate Commission 2013). There is a risk that tipping points in the climate system could be reached by the time the 2 degree C temperature is reached, the Commissioners report. But to limit warming to below 2 degrees C warming, or 1.5 degrees C warming as small island states such as our Pacific neighbour Tuvalu are urging, action needs to occur decades before those warming values are reached. As in the turning of a battleship, delaying action makes the danger more difficult to avert (Climate Commission, 2013).

It has been argued that a ten year transition is possible, but only if large changes begin immediately and emergency action is taken that is outside business as usual, and politics as usual. For example, researchers at the University of NSW have demonstrated that the additional cost of 100% renewable energy network could be paid for by redirecting current subsidies for the fossil fuel industry, or by increasing the carbon tax in place at the time (April 2013) to between \$50 and \$65.

Why wouldn't we pull out all stops to solve the problem? Again we need to return to acknowledging anxiety. It is too difficult to face doubt and uncertainty. As Keene (2013) describes, in our society with minimal tolerance for anxiety it is "managed by taking a position of moral superiority in place of knowledge and is followed by the search for who is to be blamed and punished". "Witch-hunting and conflict are more exciting and satisfying than painstaking evaluation of evidence". (Keene, 2013:148) As well, he continues, "societies are particularly vulnerable to the acts of immature narcissistic leaders who promise to relieve all anxiety but, being out of touch with elements of their internal world, only attempt to satisfy [the community's] 'I want' wishes and desires."

Does this mean that all is lost – that there is nothing we can do because of human nature? Let us look at what would be required of us individually and as a local, national and international community to face the anxiety, the doubt and uncertainty.

We need to bear to experience feelings associated with depressive anxieties of sadness, shame, guilt, and of the anxieties associated with responsibility

* My insert

and reparation. We need to allow ourselves to feel loss and grief.

We need to create the conditions where it is possible for people to process their grief about climate change, as in the case of other losses in life. Accepting climate change requires us to come to terms with the reality of a changed future. It requires us to acknowledge we have a short window of time to act - five to seven years in which to pay our ecological debt to future generations (Randall, 2009). That this will require transformative change.

This arouses guilt, shame and anger at damage done to our beautiful natural world, to those already suffering climate displacement. At not letting ourselves know the facts earlier, at delaying action that makes the task so much more daunting.

The task of grieving climate change loss has been described by Randall (2009) as at first an intellectual process as we learn about the subject, challenge our prejudices and resistances.

Then it is an emotional task to realize we have strong feelings that we may not have recognized. The emotions associated with grief: despair, guilt, fear, anger, shame, sadness, longing for things not to be so, and perhaps a bewildering state of not quite knowing ourselves.

Fear, anxiety and guilt can be paralyzing if it is not expressed. To ignore is a verb and it takes work! Grieving is a slow and difficult process, but often results in new energy being found for hitherto unexpected directions, maybe with a desire to learn new skills and make new connections.

Having the courage and willingness to allow for this process will often result in a new view of oneself, of one's life, of what matters and what one wants to prioritize.

"You must give birth to your images.

They are the future waiting to be born.

Fear not the strangeness you feel.

The future must enter you

long before it happens.

Just wait for the birth,

for the hour of new clarity."

Rainer Maria Rilke

If we fail to grieve, the danger is that we will remain in denial - in the state of both *knowing and not-knowing* about the meaning and impact of climate change - present and future, and in denial that even if we act now with urgency there will be changes that can't be reversed. If we fail to grieve we could become fixed in helplessness, passivity, bitterness and remain constantly angry.

If we fail to grieve we may shut off emotionally, or numb our pain with alcohol or drugs or by becoming manic with activity such as shopping, travelling and modern media. We could become withdrawn and depressed. Worse, we could escape from living and never want to attach and love again.

As therapists we know people need support and containment for the demands of the emotional work required to reach a place of acceptance of climate change, followed by recovery and a capacity to focus on the future (Randall 2009). To date grief about environmental loss is largely a solitary activity, but people need each other to hold the grief safely and honorably (Moser, 2012). This is something our profession could contribute – once the therapists themselves have done the work. To be able to be a leader one must be at ease one's own grief so as to offer a strong container to that of others (Moser, 2012).

What else do we need? We need more community leaders who can bear reality and not ones who propose idealistic solutions, leaders who can carry responsibility, provide support and direction, but who do not need to have all the answers. Leaders who can themselves resist and help others resist the response of

ideological hardening, defensiveness and blame that we have already seen in the political polarization around climate change (Moser, 2012). Knowing there are leaders who understand the reality provides courage and support for others to follow (Moser, 2012).

There have been magnificent community leaders in the past on significant social issues. Huge transformations have occurred throughout history, often in a short period of time. Changes have been forthcoming that could not be imagined at the beginnings of the social movement.

We need creative outlets for a multiplicity of ways of expressing the reality and emotions evoked by climate change: stories, artistic works, and community projects. For example, a group of grandparents and seniors set up an organization called *A Grandstand for the Environment*, who initiated Table Talk discussions at the domestic kitchen table, wrote and produced the play *Turning the Titanic*, an allegory on climate change denial. This is a very good example of a group using creative and artistic means to express and reflect upon the climate change response.

We need to foster recognition of our dependence on this wonderful planet for our life and abandon the illusion of our autonomy so that we can then care for our earth (Susan Murphy, 2013).

We also need to find people who are courageous enough to learn for themselves the state of climate affairs. People to risk speaking out, risk being scapegoated, risk being expelled by the group especially when urging for a more meaningful group. To talk about the scale of change we need to face the realities of global warming in the time frame needed.

“The bravest thing is to take this first step: get real. Facing the truth, and letting it sink in”. (Moser, 2013).

Speaking out can be fraught. Paradoxically “the sane self suffers survival anxiety if it

speaks out, and survival anxiety if it remains silent. But the sane self can also feel puny in the face of a social group that threatens it with rejection, social exclusion or worse.” (Keene, 2013)

Nelson Mandela described courage as not the absence of fear, but the ability to inspire people to move beyond fear. As Keene writes, “contrary to the widespread fantasy, in group life *not* to act or speak is not to do nothing. Rather it constitutes collusion with whatever is happening.” ...He concluded quoting the words of Hanna Segal in her opposition to nuclear weapons: “Silence remains the real crime.” (p156

"When the whole exquisitely wrought balance of our astounding blue-green world begins to crumble before our eyes under the weight of so many billions of us straining to live far beyond the physical means of the earth, then the 'fact for which I must accept responsibility' is so vast that it either threatens to become the final shame from which there can be no recovery or else offers to be the making of me as a human being", Susan Murphy, 2013.

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