

# FACING THE HEAT

STORIES OF CLIMATE  
CHANGE CONVERSATIONS

*Psychology*  
*for a Safe*  
*Climate*



We are a Melbourne based group of psychologists and helping professionals working to foster emotional engagement with climate change. Our goal is to help people become free to act, rather than withdraw in despair from the climate reality.

We publish papers and speak at events. We provide training, workshops and discussions, and offer consultation to community groups. We also develop tools that will help engage people at an emotional level with climate change.

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# INTRODUCTION



Every day more and more people are connecting the dots between what we see happening around us and what climate scientists are telling us about climate change and our part in it. As people accept its seriousness and urgency, they often feel the urge to begin a conversation with friends, family, neighbours or work colleagues, only to discover it is not always as easy as expected.

Climate change conversations are not simply about rational scientific debate. They touch upon people's identity, beliefs and emotions. These conversations are laden with complex feelings and values, often about what people feel matters most in life.

In speaking about climate change, people may experience discomfort, silence, opposition, and sometimes conflict. Such negativity can make us feel as if we are 'breaking the rules,' and can leave us feeling isolated, dispirited, and even ashamed. Yet effective conversations can bridge gaps, plant seeds for new possibilities, promote understanding, and strengthen commitment to act on climate change. It is through conversation that we connect with each other and find our shared humanity. This is the power and value of conversation.

Psychology for a Safe Climate (PSC) is responding to the difficulties and challenges of engaging with others by reflecting on true experiences related to us by friends and colleagues. In order to protect the privacy of

the individuals concerned, we have made some minor changes to some stories, and have used pseudonyms.

Not all conversations have gone well. Some have had unexpected outcomes which might seem too good to be true. Fact can indeed be stranger than fiction. These stories illustrate what might be going on between people below the surface, and explore some constructive ways to manage when the going gets tough.

Throughout life we use stories as we dream, learn, laugh and weep. We hope our stories are useful and feel relevant to your experiences. We hope to stimulate your interest and curiosity in initiating your own conversations. This booklet is a companion to our earlier one *Let's Speak About Climate Change*, which discusses from a psychological perspective our community's struggle to confront the reality of climate change. We hope both these booklets will foster greater reflection, discussion, and connection between people. We need each other.



# STORIES OF CLIMATE CONVERSATIONS

## THE POWER OF CONVERSATION

**The apology:** Jan's story  
**Planting a seed:** Claire's story  
**It can take time:** Ella and George's story  
**When minds meet:** Simon's story

## LISTENING BEYOND WORDS

**Finding common ground:** Maggie's story  
**Third time lucky:** Josie's story

## BEING CAREFUL OF ASSUMPTIONS

**Many shades of green:** Stephanie's story  
**The complexity of silence:** Alexander's story

## BEING REAL

**Climate change at Christmas:** Linda's story  
**The dinner table thump:** Judy's story  
**A bungle in the Warrumbungles:** Ron's story  
**Space for change:** Jane's story

## AT TIMES, DISAPPOINTMENTS ARE INEVITABLE

**The wink:** Helena's story  
**Then you lose:** Jon's story  
**Being the scapegoat:** Frank's story

## IT TAKES COURAGE

**Gems from young people:** Claire's story  
**Standing firm:** Anna's story

Conclusion



# THE POWER OF CONVERSATION

Conversations can be powerful. They have the potential to either connect or divide, to console or distress, to inform or deceive.

## The apology: Jan's story

'When venturing to share my concerns about climate change, there have often been attempts to silence me. At times it has felt like being slapped across the face. One experience in particular is seared in my memory. It occurred the morning after Black Saturday. I was driving to my son's hockey match and heard the news that Marysville had burned down. I was shocked and very distressed, as only last summer our family had chosen to camp at the Marysville Camping Ground. We had thought it safer from fire risk than camping in the Cathedral Ranges.

The news that morning spoke to me of a new form of ferocity I thought could only be explained by global warming. I arrived at the hockey match feeling quite shaken, and immediately shared the news and my thoughts with one of the parents I knew well and considered to be a friend. I was not prepared for his dismissive and mocking response. He said, "Oh, come on Jan. I did hear the news. It's dreadful but for goodness sake, it's summer! We have fires at this time of year." When I ventured to suggest that this year the fires seemed to be particularly ferocious and widespread, he responded, "Look, we've had fires before and will have them again in the future. I'm so sick of you people trying to find any excuse to bolster your conspiracy theories about so called climate change."

I felt stunned and offended by his hostility. I said, "Evan, that's enough!" I turned and strode towards the clubhouse, struggling to hold back my tears.

I knew in my heart that Evan had rejected a reality I could not turn away from. I felt a great sense of isolation as the news of the fires continued to unfold during the day. My sense of trust and connection with Evan had almost been destroyed by his belittling attitude.

Some months after the event however, Evan approached me. He had become aware that his behaviour and anger had been offensive to me and said he was sorry. Because of this apology, our friendship started to repair. I was able to explain to him my own journey in coming to understand the dynamics and implications of global warming, and my growing engagement with the issue.

To my surprise, Evan has gone on to become very committed to working on local environmental projects.'



*In this story Jan felt stung by Evan's response because she had taken a risk by expressing her fear of a connection between the fires and climate change. Importantly she was aware of how she felt and realised there was no point in arguing with Evan. Her strong stand in the face of his contempt had acted as a wake-up call to him. Her vulnerability became her strength. It seemed Evan was moved by Jan's clear response to his outburst, and perhaps this had led him to reflect on his own feelings.*

## Planting a seed: Claire's Story

'I belonged to a psychology group that met each fortnight to read papers and discuss issues related to our work. At our annual Christmas dinner, there was a real air of festivity at the popular restaurant we had chosen. Everyone was celebrating, winding down and looking forward to having an enjoyable holiday break.

There was lots of conversation and laughter. I am not sure what led to the subject, but I found myself pondering aloud about climate change and the worrying predictions from the climate scientists. Suddenly a heavy blanket of silence descended upon the group. The festive atmosphere evaporated. Uncomfortable tension descended. I felt I had completely spoiled our night out.

I retreated into my shell, and nothing more was said on the subject. I was left feeling ashamed for having raised what was apparently a taboo subject.

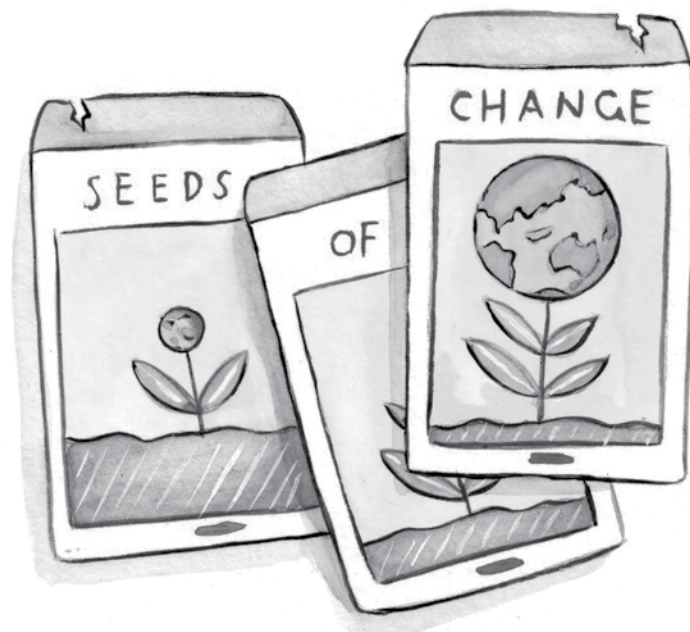
Two years passed and our group continued its regular meeting. I continued to make comments about climate change from time to time when it seemed appropriate.

Then unexpectedly one of my colleagues, who had been present at the dinner, approached me. She was planning a professional development schedule and asked, "Would you consider presenting a paper about psychological responses to climate change in our community, particularly regarding denial?" How ironic! I happily accepted the invitation.

At the presentation I was able to speak about how difficult it can be to have conversations in social settings about climate change. In the audience were all my colleagues who two years previously had been silent. They all commented that they valued the opportunity to be able to speak about the subject in a supportive environment.'

***How are seeds best planted? People are most receptive to new ideas when they feel relaxed, at ease, and in a respectful, trusting relationship. When people trust a communicator, it can be the single most important component in acceptance of their message.***

***Claire had needed to know when to back off at the dinner, and how to manage her feeling of embarrassment. Perhaps because of Claire's continued presence in the group, and her sensitivity in keeping the subject alive, over time the group members were also able to bear thinking about it themselves.***



## It can take time: Ella and George's story

Ella had been convinced about the science of climate change for some time. She worried about what a changed future would mean for her children and grandchildren. She feared not enough was being done to avert the dangers predicted by climate scientists.

Ella's husband George was sceptical about the science. He had been a businessman all his adult life and had experienced the difficulties of maintaining profitability and balancing the budget for his employer. George believed the government's priority was to protect the economy.

Over several years Ella and George had many conversations and differences of opinion about whether climate change was human-induced, the implications, and what needed to be done. It was usually Ella who brought up the subject for discussion. Ella knew that George needed to find his own way on the subject and tried to be open to listening to his point of view. However, she often felt quite sad and bewildered by her husband's views, which differed so markedly on a subject that she believed was so serious and urgent.

Meanwhile George seemed to be focusing on any information to support his belief that if climate change was occurring, it was probably caused by factors out of human control. He found support and confirmation for his ideas within his group of friends who were also very involved in the business culture of growth and consumerism. These values were a large part of all their lives and identities.

After George retired he needed to adjust to a new life and activities outside of the work environment. He loved his garden, and began to observe the impact of hotter, drier weather. This seemed to trigger his interest in climate reports in the news. He began to make comments about his fears for the future quality of life of his beloved grandchildren. He spoke with warmth about special trips with them to the Great Barrier Reef, and how in awe they were at its beauty. He was alarmed when he realised this priceless treasure was in danger.

A critical change occurred one day when Ella and George were visiting friends with whom climate change conversations had become out of bounds. In the past, Ella had been the one to raise her concerns and it had resulted in tense conflicts of opinion. To Ella's surprise, George this time raised the subject with them. He stated his acceptance of climate change and expressed the concerns he held. He even listed climate solutions he had been studying on the web. The couple listened to him quietly with the husband this time non-committal, rather than argumentative, and with his wife saying that she was now coming to accept the science. She too could see the changes in her garden.



*George had been faced with the uncertainties of adjusting to a new identity outside of work. With time his deeper values came to the fore, and he began to reassess his previous overarching belief in the importance of growth and consumption.*

## When minds meet: Simon's Story

'The day after the carbon tax was scrapped my electricity supply was suddenly cut off. I thought, what a strange co-incidence. When the electrician came to fix it I started a conversation about the cause with him, and jokingly threw in, "Is it because the carbon tax was abolished?" There seemed to be no other explanation!

The electrician energetically took up this invitation to chat about climate change and his view that it didn't exist. I tracked his reasons, but there seemed to be no logic. Every time I tried to follow what he was saying he shifted to another point. I gave up trying to be logical. He seemed to want me to give up, and I certainly felt it was useless trying to have a discussion.

Then I paused for a while and watched as he tried to solve the supply problem. It gave me time to think. I wanted to understand what this guy believed or what motivated him, and realised I hadn't made a very good start. So I had another go at the conversation. But when the electrician put forward his views of the shortcomings of all science, including climate science, I started to worry about whether he would even be using science to solve the electricity problem! What was going on here, I wondered?

I decided to ask him whether he had children. "Yes" the electrician said. "Are you worried about them and their future?" I asked. At first he said he wasn't, and then after a long silence he said, "We should have done something about this sooner, years ago." It was only then I understood. The electrician was indeed aware of the problem, but thought we had been too slow to recognise the seriousness. This seemed to make it hard for him to think clearly about it. He seemed to be latching on to any argument he had half heard to tell him climate change wasn't a problem.

The atmosphere immediately softened. I too am really concerned about whether we have been too slow to act, so together we were able to shift the conversation to discussing this question without coming up with any hard and fast answers.'

*The electrician illustrated the difficulty of accepting climate science when the implications are too difficult or painful. In fact, the electrician knew it was true, but he thought it was too late for action. Rather than bear his anguish, he denied that climate science was true. By shifting the focus of the conversation from a rational argument to joining the electrician at an emotional level, Simon was able to break through.*





THE POWER OF CONVERSATION

# LISTENING BEYOND WORDS

The following two stories highlight the value and importance of really listening. Not only listening to the actual words, but to what might be happening beyond or beneath them.

## Finding common ground: Maggie's Story

Maggie, a young member of a community climate action group, found herself quite challenged. She was discussing climate change with a parliamentarian at a community festival. She found herself arguing about climate science with a vehemence that felt very uncomfortable. After noticing her own strong feelings she stopped speaking and began to really listen to him. She picked up that the person she was talking with was actually also concerned about climate change, but worried about how his government would gain support for further action.

Maggie shifted the conversation by acknowledging what she was hearing behind their tension. She ventured, "You and I are really on the same side – we are both very concerned about the future and how our country can act accordingly."

Once that was said, the two became more amiable. They were able to consider climate change action as allies, facing the huge problem of government inaction.

*Maggie had managed to shift the mood from conflict to collaboration.*



### Third time lucky: Josie's Story

Josie was volunteering on a stall at her local annual community sustainability fair when she overheard a dispute about climate science. She watched intently as Jake, one of her fellow stall volunteers, spoke articulately about climate science while a visitor, a tall man in his fifties, refuted every point.

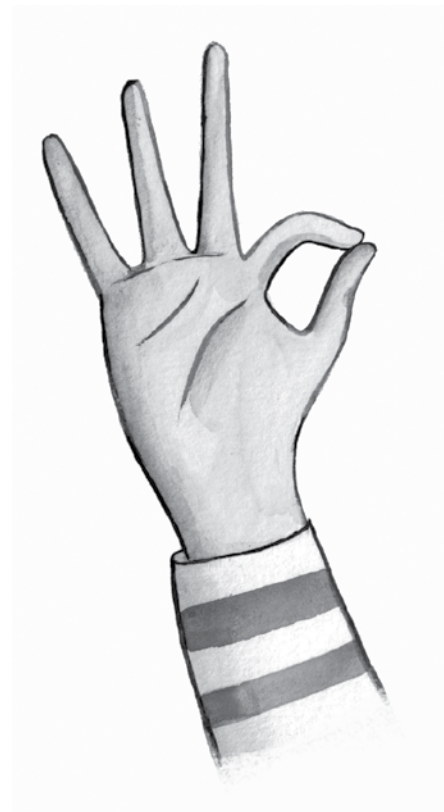
The conversation soon took on a heavy tone. Words became strong, voices loud, tones firm. They stayed true to their own perspectives, with admirable persistence, and no compromise. But the conversation was getting nowhere. Josie related to the stuck-ness and utter futility that can be felt when the other person is unable to see your perspective. Suddenly John, another volunteer, stepped in and Jake gladly passed on the baton. John stepped right into same role of explaining the science.

Again, the conversation started politely, but quickly turned sour. Josie thought there had to be another way. She had been in this situation too often herself. She pondered the contradiction: the visitor was at a sustainability fair, which was packed with people who accepted the reality of climate change science, so why was he there? Perhaps on some level not evident to himself, he actually did sense the climate problem. Perhaps it disturbed him so much that he fought reality, trying to disprove it.

Josie, from the sidelines, wanted to try an alternative conversation, one of connecting rather than converting. She considered how to steer the interaction onto safer ground, to a space where neither needed to feel defensive.

Josie introduced herself to the visitor and asked if she could share an observation. "It seems to me that you both seem frustrated and stuck in this conversation. Isn't it so hard to talk about this stuff?" For the first time the visitor smiled, and gave a sigh of relief saying, "Isn't it ever!" Josie felt relief.

Her acknowledgment of feelings defused the tension. The conversation shifted. She shared her love of bush walking, which he loved too. She returned to the difficulty of talking about climate change and offered him a booklet on our difficulty in speaking about it. He gracefully accepted. The conversation continued for a short while, before ending on friendly terms.



***It was time to get creative – to think outside the square - and Josie did. It's helpful to listen with the intent to understand, rather than the intent to reply or to dispute.***

# BEING CAREFUL OF ASSUMPTIONS

**When conversing with those who differ from us it is easy to slip into making assumptions. Assumptions are often based on stereotypical views we may have absorbed over time with or without our awareness. The following two stories show how being mindful of assumptions can be productive.**

## **Many shades of green: Stephanie's story**

'What do we think of when we consider someone who talks about climate change, goes to rallies, pesters their co-workers about recycling and brings up the carbon tax in everyday conversation? What kind of person does this? It seems almost inevitable that a person such as this will be labeled a 'greenie'.

For years my understanding of an environmentalist has been clouded by the most extreme examples. Often these have been well-known figures who have given a public face to the green movement. Significantly, one enduring theme has been that environmentalists are outsiders – apart from society, raging against progress and conventionality. They apparently chain themselves to bulldozers and exist on sunflower seeds and kale! They seem to have made the choice to align themselves with very different values from the majority of the population, including me.

Who do they think they are? Annoyingly, they seem to believe that an individual such as themselves or group of people can 'save the world'. It is easy to write these people off as narcissists. It is much harder to see the themes behind the movement, the real concerns for future generations that lie behind their actions.

My uncle has been my benchmark for a greenie for as long as I can remember. He ran a printing business that did cheap work for environmental organizations. He rides his bicycle everywhere, even if it takes him hours. He rode from Brisbane to Coolangatta the other day, to get to my dad's sixty-fifth birthday party. He worries, really worries, about his carbon footprint and the future of his children and grandchildren. Most notably, he talks about this a lot in everyday conversation, around the dinner table, and with strangers.

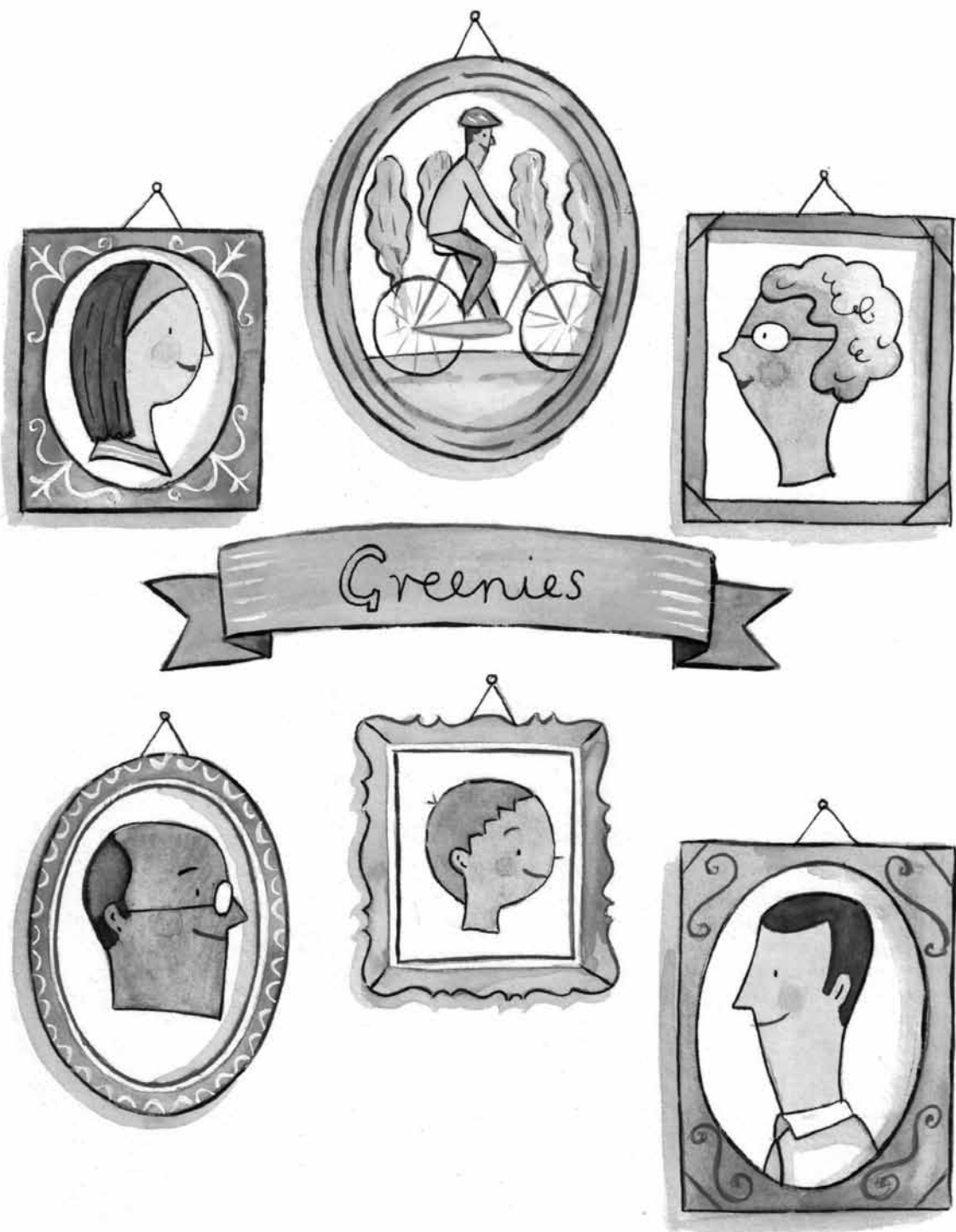
It is so easy to label him a greenie and write off his concerns as a fantasy of self-sufficiency. Our family jokes about his fanaticism, and puts it down to his need to be different, to be 'better'. It feels so much easier and safer to do this than to listen, really listen, to what it is he is talking about.

I suppose the question for me is how can I separate the greenie stereotype – fanatical, extremist, combative – from the reality: the individual who cares deeply and dares to step outside the norm and stand up for what they believe in. If I could, it might free me up to engage more deeply with climate change myself instead of being afraid I am going to be labeled or categorized.

As a mid-twenties professional, I still struggle to engage in discussion about climate change even though I am deeply concerned about it. Perhaps I'm too scared to take the step of starting a conversation at work or at a dinner party, for fear of copping all the baggage that comes with it. I believe the threat is real, imminent, and catastrophic – but it doesn't seem that way when I sit around a table with friends, laughing and drinking wine. Who wants to be the person who brings down the mood and starts talking about annihilation and catastrophe?

Some might think, "What's the point of even bringing it up if there is nothing to be done, if we can't effect any change?" But then I think that surely there is always something we can do. I need to stand up for my uncle for a start and stop belittling and labeling him. Then I can stop being afraid of being called a greenie myself and start speaking up for what I believe in. Facing the reality is an important first step. Engaging deeply with the reality, and ignoring the stuff that doesn't matter, is the second. '





*Facing reality is indeed the challenge of our day. It entails the process of grieving about what is, what was, and what will be. There are numerous ways in our society to avoid reality. It is replete with distractions. Recognising how caught up we all are in this culture is the first step, as it was for Stephanie.*

## The complexity of silence: Alexander's story

Alexander was part of a lunchtime discussion group formed by some of the staff in his big organisation. The group of ten to fifteen people had been meeting monthly for several years to consider their views on controversial current affairs and community issues. One month Alexander decided to suggest they discuss the lack of concern about climate change at their next meeting.

When he raised the suggestion it was ignored. Someone proposed another topic and that was readily taken up instead. He made another attempt the next month. Once again the suggestion was met with a deafening silence and a different topic was put forward and accepted.

Alexander was puzzled. At first he came to the conclusion the group was not at all interested in the topic. It was tempting for him to drop the subject altogether. Later he thought more about what had happened. It occurred to him the group was mirroring the way climate change was so often dealt with in the community, with silence, and a rapid shift to some other seemingly more interesting issue. He decided to have one more try at the next meeting.

At that meeting he tested out his first assumption that no one was interested. He raised his concern that no one had said anything on the previous two attempts and said he was interested to know why.

After some discussion, to his surprise, it emerged the group members were actually very interested in the topic and supportive of him for raising it. They encouraged him to say more about what he had in mind, which he did.

Some said they had remained silent because they felt very ignorant about the subject of climate change and did not want to embarrass themselves. Others feared there was no point as they had come to believe there were no solutions. After the meeting, a few people individually came up to Alexander and told him they were grateful to him for continuing to raise his concerns. They realised they needed to be pressed to think about the issue, not because they lacked interest, but because it felt so overwhelming, and yet so important.

*This story is a sobering reminder of how easily we can misinterpret people's lack of engagement as disapproval, lack of interest or apathy. When there is silence in a conversation we tend to fill the blank with assumptions.*

*This group of people who were familiar with discussing their views and feelings were unwilling to engage with climate change. This was not because they were all in denial or lacked interest, but because it seemed they lacked confidence in talking about it, or possibly feared revealing their lack of knowledge. Some feared there were no solutions. When people believe there are no solutions they are more likely to reject climate science or simply disengage.*



BEING CAREFUL OF ASSUMPTIONS

# BEING REAL

## Climate change at Christmas: Linda's story

'Every Christmas my family and I have lunch with our relatives on my father's side. Although I only see my cousins annually, most of us feel emotionally close. One Christmas lunch I asked my cousin Gabby what her thoughts were about climate change. With little hesitation she replied, "It's a beat up. Even if it is happening, Australia has such a small impact on the planet it's not worth thinking about." Another cousin joined in and jokingly quipped, "Oh Linda, what cause are you on about now?" Their comments left me feeling patronised and different from my family. In that moment I was alone with my concerns.

The following year, my cousins were talking about the long drought. No one mentioned climate change. I decided to have another go and said, "I think Australia's droughts are getting longer and more serious as a result of climate change." A very short conversation ensued about that possibility, but the topic quickly changed to the Boxing Day cricket match.

Two years on, Gabby and I were discussing the recent floods in Queensland. I tried again, "I really think there is a connection between these recent weather events and climate change." I listed several other catastrophic weather events that had occurred over the previous year in different countries.

Gabby looked pensive. "I know I have knocked your beliefs about climate change in the past. But I guess we really have to face the facts now, don't we? Do you reckon you could lend me a good book that explains it all?"



***Conversation may feel too slow, given the urgency and lack of community action, but we have no choice. We must be patient, otherwise we might drive people into closing down, or into angry rejections. It is important to accept that while we might feel urgency about the issue, we also need to allow time for trust and awareness to develop.***

***Each Christmas Linda quietly and respectfully stated her views connecting the dots, and she hoped that at some stage someone would listen. Perhaps there were several ingredients which led to Gabby's change of heart: Linda's persistence, close family ties, the high number of extreme weather events, Gabby's ability to listen, and her flexibility to change.***



## The dinner table thump: Judy's story

Judy and Alan were having a dinner party at their home with two other couples. They had all been neighbours and friends for most of their adult lives. They had brought up their children together and had many years of fun and laughter as a group.

After a delicious dinner and wine the conversation turned to politics. Judy brought up the recent election results and her concern about the proposed changes to the carbon tax. To her shock one of their friends, Peter, thumped the table and said forcefully, "Judy we are not going to discuss climate change at the dinner table!"

Alan intervened, saying to Peter, "Surely we can talk about our views together here and agree to disagree at least? We are just talking."

Peter started to shake and looked as though he was about to explode. He got up and went outside and there was an embarrassed silence at the table.

Judy felt furious that her dinner party had been hijacked in such an aggressive way. "How dare I be silenced at my own dinner table," she thought. But she decided it wasn't productive to keep talking at that point. So with the hope of keeping the peace, she eventually said, "Anyone for dessert?"

*Most often as adults we strive to find our own unique identity, while also longing for connection with others, and this remains a central tension of life. When conflict with others arises, the challenge of holding one's own view can be very difficult. It can feel almost impossible to think in these circumstances.*

*Importantly, Judy was able to hold in and manage her anger, and not impulsively react. She was able to pause and be aware of how she was feeling. Instead of unthinkingly retaliate and throw fuel on the fire, she made the decision that for the sake of the friendships it was best to back off and allow things to cool down.*



## A bungle in the Warrumbungles: Ron's story

Ron would often go camping with Ted into the outback. They had been good friends for many years and both loved the bush. They considered themselves environmentalists. They cared about the bush, the streams, the bird life, the lizards, and the whole natural environment. The red rocky mountains looked like they were full of iron ore. They both wanted the landscape kept in its pristine state, not mined into oblivion. They could sit for hours looking over the scenery from the top of any mountain they climbed. They would talk, or often as not, just sit and absorb the state of nature far from civilisation.

The two friends now sat on the top of the Split Rock Mountain at Warrumbungle National Park. It had taken them an hour and a half to climb. The park itself had been burnt to a cinder a year ago. From their vantage point they had a 360 degree view of the result of that fire. The rocky cliffs were visible in a way never before seen, because the foliage of the trees which had previously hidden them, was now gone. Burnt away. There was the slightest tinge of green about as the re-growth had commenced, but the whole park was dominated by the black stick trunks of burnt trees against the background of rocky mountain crags and cliffs. The few flat plains visible were green with some new grass and shrub growth, but the signs of the fire were everywhere with scorched ground and bare patches. The thousands of hectares of the Warrumbungles had been burnt out in just a few hours by the most intense fire ever known in the area.

Ron wondered out loud to Ted about how the environment was changing. He mentioned the increasing number of bush fires and their increased intensity. He asked Ted whether what they saw then in front of them was related to the changing of the climate through global warming. This Warrumbungle blaze had been one of the fiercest to have ever occurred in Australia. Ron had never spoken to Ted before about climate change, but what they were now looking at just seemed to raise the question so conspicuously.

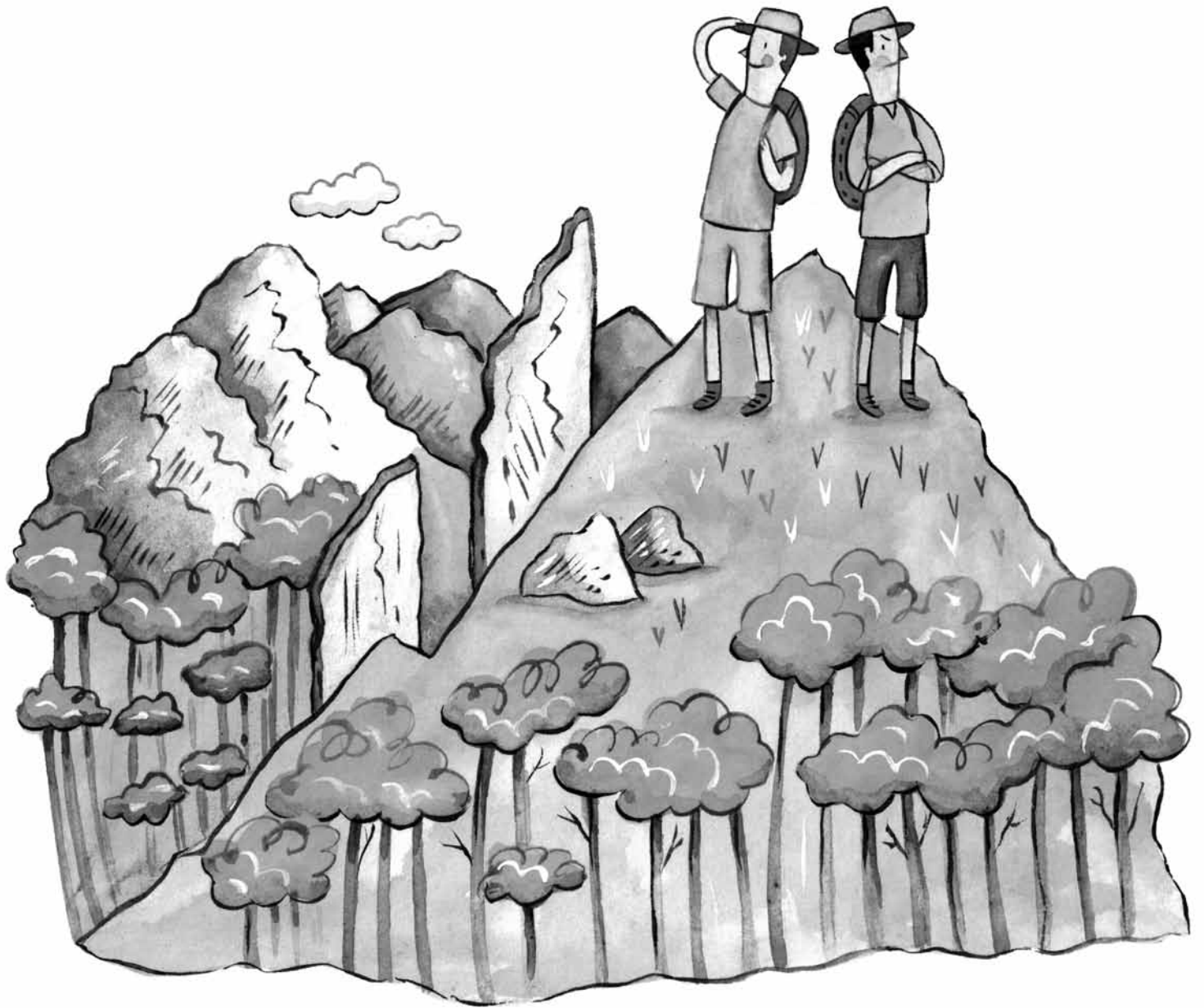
"Nah," Ted said. "It's just a fire. Australia burns mate. What are you saying Ronnie? That just because there's this huge fire out here, that the climate's changed? Hey, I know you better than that. If the world's getting warmer, it's going through a cycle. It's always gone through cycles. Ice-ages and all that. Don't tell me you're caught up in that load of greenie rubbish. You can't believe that stuff. There's nothing in it and you're too smart to be impressed with it. You've never talked about this stuff before. Where's it all coming from? Come on!"

The outburst stunned Ron. He sat silently. His friend seemed not to notice. "Anyway," he continued, "if we get rid of coal, Australia will be stuffed, the economy will be stuffed and you and me will be stuffed. You studied economics didn't you? Anyway, you're having me on, you bastard," he said breaking into a wide grin.

Ron felt absolutely stumped. Ron felt this was about far more than economics. He greatly valued his old friendship and decided against arguing for the time being. He felt afraid of drawing Ted into a conflict. He didn't want to disappoint Ted, nor raise his ire. Ron was afraid to cause a split with his friend, which might injure or place the strength of their long-lasting friendship in doubt.

As Ron reflected on the outburst on top of the mountain, it occurred to him that the degree of heat in Ted's tirade mirrored the Warrumbungle's recent fate. He smiled when he thought that the influence of the environment had been blistering on Ted.

Sometimes one needs to know when to remain silent, Ron thought. Friendship is hard sometimes.



*To express one's real thoughts and feelings can be challenging when friendship is at stake. Ron felt in conflict about threatening his relationship with his friend. It seemed to him that Ted had crossed a boundary in the friendship with his assumptions about him. In response, Ron appeared to have to draw a boundary of silence around himself to cope with Ted's intrusiveness. Each person's way of coping was self-protective but it left the future of the relationship uncertain. Would they be able to repair the relationship so they could be open with each other again?*

## Space for change: Jane's story

'I had a wonderful teacher at school who inspired in me an enduring love of biology. Our textbook, 'The Web of Life', explained the awesome inter-connectedness of all life on earth. It became like a bible to me. Little did I know then, how central this would all become later in my life. As a young adult, I remember loving a TV program called 'The Good Life', where a couple tried to live a sustainable life in an English backyard garden. Later, I chose to live in the bush to raise my children. I think all of these experiences prepared me for my current involvement in climate activism.

I joined two climate action groups and spent much time at meetings and rallies. My social time with my husband, friends, and family was often taken up with talking about these concerns. However, it soon became obvious that they were fed up with the subject, and no longer wanted to discuss it. They just ignored me, or rolled their eyes to each other, as if to say, "Here she goes again". I felt like a wet blanket in social conversations, and had great difficulty understanding why no one seemed to want to talk about global warming, or what mankind was doing to the planet.

However, I could think of little else. Workshops on how to reduce our family's carbon footprint, and how to make our home more sustainable, became the norm for me. I wanted the family to eat less meat, and was hoping we would all become vegetarians. I wanted to cancel a planned holiday to Bali because of the carbon miles. After attending a sustainable expo, I came home with brochures for solar panels, solar hot water, DIY double-glazing kits, and floor and ceiling insulation.

My husband became really angry. He said that he couldn't cope with the new activist woman I had become, and he wanted his old unsustainable wife back. We argued long and hard about our thoughts and feelings. I think we both actually thought our marriage might not survive these tensions. My fears about the emergency of climate

change were really threatening our family stability. It was ironic to me that my concern for the future was causing so much conflict in the present.

After much soul searching, I decided to make some changes. I was very emotional when I finally admitted to my husband that I realized the time and energy I spent on climate change was driving a wedge between us. I made the decision that from then on, I would avoid disrupting the family with my climate activities, and constant talk about it.

After several months, finally he and I were feeling more relaxed with each other. I continued my voluntary climate activism work, and individually made as many small, sustainable changes as possible, without anyone noticing. But I also bit my tongue a lot!

A year or so later, my husband was reading the paper about the lowering costs of solar panels, and to my amazement suggested that we get a quote. I was elated. Gradually, over the next couple of years, he became keener and keener on reducing our carbon footprint, and began reading some articles about climate change and its causes. Thank goodness we could now speak openly. I think by backing off a bit, or actually a lot, I allowed him the space to rethink the issue for himself without my constant pressure.'



***We all probably know couples who struggle with their differing views on various subjects. The couple in this story faced a challenge to their normally compatible relationship. They were confronted with finding ways to tolerate their differences.***

***It can be necessary, and ultimately fruitful, in a strained couple relationship for the 'agitator for change' to back off and contain their own thoughts and feelings. Paradoxically, the other person then has the freedom and space to find their own truth, without having to deal with feeling pressured by the other's beliefs.***



# AT TIMES, DISAPPOINTMENTS ARE INEVITABLE

## The wink: Helena's story

'One day, as I was sitting chatting with my brother-in-law Nigel, he told me he was concerned about the dangers of the coal seam gas industry to the land and water table. I was blown away! Even though he had become a farmer in recent years, a substantial part of his working life had been as an oil and gas engineer. I had expected he would have endless faith in the technology of that industry. He explained the reasons why the process was unsafe in great detail. I had subsequently quoted him, as his views were informed by his work experience and therefore significant.

Eighteen months later, however, at a family dinner, he slipped in, "Actually, I now support the exploration of the coal seam gas industry". I was flabbergasted, and felt he had pulled the rug out from under my feet. Here we go again! My brother-in-law and I were going to have yet another argument, when I had thought at last we saw eye to eye on a subject so important to me. I kept my cool and asked him why he had changed his mind. He said he thought coal seam gas was needed for our energy supply. I realised the whole family had become our audience, and this put me on my toes to ensure I was reasoned and logical as I knew this was a loaded emotional issue for me on many levels.

Nigel was now dogged in his defense of the technology of coal seam gas. He dismissed the threat to land and water as real, but insignificant, and spoke as if he had always held these views. Especially since Nigel had become a farmer, and an organic one to boot, I was bewildered by his willingness to take risks, and his seeming change of heart. After what seemed to be ages, the discussion

eventually came to an uneasy impasse. As I turned towards the 'audience' out of the corner of my eye I saw Nigel wink.

I felt foolish for having believed this had been a serious discussion. Then I felt a surge of rage. Why had he winked? Was he sending me up? Was he mocking me? Had it all been a joke? Was he trying to have the family collude with him?

For days later I reflected on the meaning of that wink. Perhaps Nigel had felt uncomfortable with the exposure of his views. He may have felt unsure of himself, or foolish. Perhaps he had felt that the rug had been pulled from under his feet and he had to grab it back with a wink?



***Self-protective strategies are often employed in an attempt to feel more in control. One such strategy is 'getting rid of', (technically called projecting), uncomfortable feelings. Nigel had changed his mind about the safety of coal seam gas development. Perhaps he was uncertain about his argument and had employed the wink as a self-protective strategy, in an attempt to restore his emotional equilibrium. Helena was certainly left feeling discomfort and confusion.***



### **Then you lose: Jon's story**

Over the last decade, rain had slowly changed its character. Once, it seemed to come more politely, and leave more deferentially. The garden would drink and the drains would take the run-off away. Occasionally, a storm would bite and slosh the ground, and then pass on. The last few years, however, had seen more of a stormy attack upon the earth. The ferocity had much increased. Floods would now appear where before water flowed away.

After the third furious torrential rainstorm in half a year, Jon was confronted with having to clear debris from flooded earthen drains which had once been sufficient to clear the water, but no more.

As he worked at the front of his property, a middle-aged woman approached him along the street. She was walking her dog.

"Hard work?" she asked, pausing to speak with Jon.

"Certainly is," Jon replied.

"Looks like quite a mess here," she said.

"It's a mess," Jon responded with resignation in his voice. He continued, "That rain last night was so stormy and torrential that it just has to be part of the climate change. I've been here for the last 16 years and it's only in the last 5 that we have had these incredible storms happening, once, then twice a season. It's just been an extraordinary change," Jon went on, happy to have a break.

"Well, you know, the climate has always been changing", she said as she turned and walked away with her dog – and away from the conversation.

The abruptness of the woman's departure left little doubt in Jon's mind that she was unwilling to enter into the conversation which she had actually begun. He guessed it had become less than comfortable for her.

Jon considered what he had just experienced and wondered about what this woman knew. Had she lived through the last two decades in this area to know how it had changed? Or was she just a recent resident who had little sense of the weather changes over time? He had never seen her before. Maybe she thought this torrential storming was normal for these parts.

Jon had felt the urge to call after her and just ask her what she knew about climate change, but she had crossed the road and disappeared around the bend.

In the evening Jon related the story to his partner, Mary. He told her about his frustration of a half-commenced conversation being killed. What else could he do? Mary said, "Well if you see her again, greet her and finish the conversation!"

"She didn't seem like the conversing type in that sort of conversation," Jon countered.

"Unfortunately, then you lose," Mary concluded.

***The conversation about climate change with a person who is neither a friend nor an acquaintance can take on a flavour of its own. If we feel we've been dismissed we may be tempted to retaliate in kind. A flash of contemptuousness and resentment is not an uncommon response, but if you can let it pass quickly it's possible to regroup for another day.***

***If your partner in conversation turns away, the conversation certainly dies, but one can hope that a seed has been sown which will grow over time to reap a wise harvest in the future. No seeds, no harvest.***

AT TIMES, DISAPPOINTMENTS ARE INEVITABLE

## Being the scapegoat: Frank's story

A group of friends were gathered at Frank's place for a BBQ after their mid-week indoor soccer match, when Frank opened a discussion on climate change. He told them about an article he had read in the newspaper about the current scientific findings, and dire predictions of climate scientists. There was a mixed response.

One friend, the team captain, questioned the severity of the problem. Another agreed that there was a problem, but saw nature as being able to cope to restore the climate balance.

Frank's engineer friend believed that technology would resolve the issues, while yet another said that the climate has always been changing and all we needed to do was adjust, as we always had.

After they had all given their opinions, one of the group summarised the discussion by saying to Frank, "It looks like you're the odd one out here, Frank, because no-one else here sees climate change as such a big problem."

*Members of a group might protect themselves from conflict by designating one person as the outsider or scapegoat. By doing so they may then leave the outsider to bear feelings such as discomfort or conflict they do not want to face in themselves.*

*The temptation for the scapegoat may be to abandon the conversation in order to restore a warm co-existence with one's friends. It's easier to engage in 'similarity'. But then what is given up?*



AT TIMES, DISAPPOINTMENTS ARE INEVITABLE

# IT TAKES COURAGE

## Gems from young people: Claire's story

'My two grandchildren, Lachlan aged fifteen and Sophie aged twelve, asked me about my work on climate change. They are always interested in the topic, and Sophie had even asked me to arrange for a climate specialist to be her VIP guest speaker for her class project.

I told them I was writing an article about the strengths people need to deal with knowledge of climate science, including the emotional impact of knowing the implications. I also told them I was interested in the strengths needed to assist others to negotiate this path. Spontaneously, I thought I would ask them, "What comes to your mind when you think of a strong person?" They amazed me by working with each other to come up with a comprehensive list, which I have summarized:

To have courage, be brave, be able to take on challenges and not be shy.

To have confidence, good self esteem, be optimistic, think positively and believe something can be done.

To be mature by which they meant being responsible and able to think of consequences.

To be aware, observant, able to take in the circumstances, and to think before speaking.

To be knowledgeable and therefore able to make smart choices.'



*Lachlan and Sophie had identified the inner strengths that help us all achieve in our day to day lives. These are also the qualities required to really 'know' the climate change reality. We need to have inner strength in order to be open emotionally to the painful feelings aroused by this knowing.*

*It also takes courage to speak to others about the subject, and so risk possible rejection or conflict. This is well illustrated in the previous stories and in the following one about Anna.*



## Standing firm: Anna's story

'I sat in the hall crowded with people from my local community. Most of the people there were eagerly waiting to hear confirmation from the new local federal politician about the government's commitment to repeal the carbon tax, introduced by the previous government.

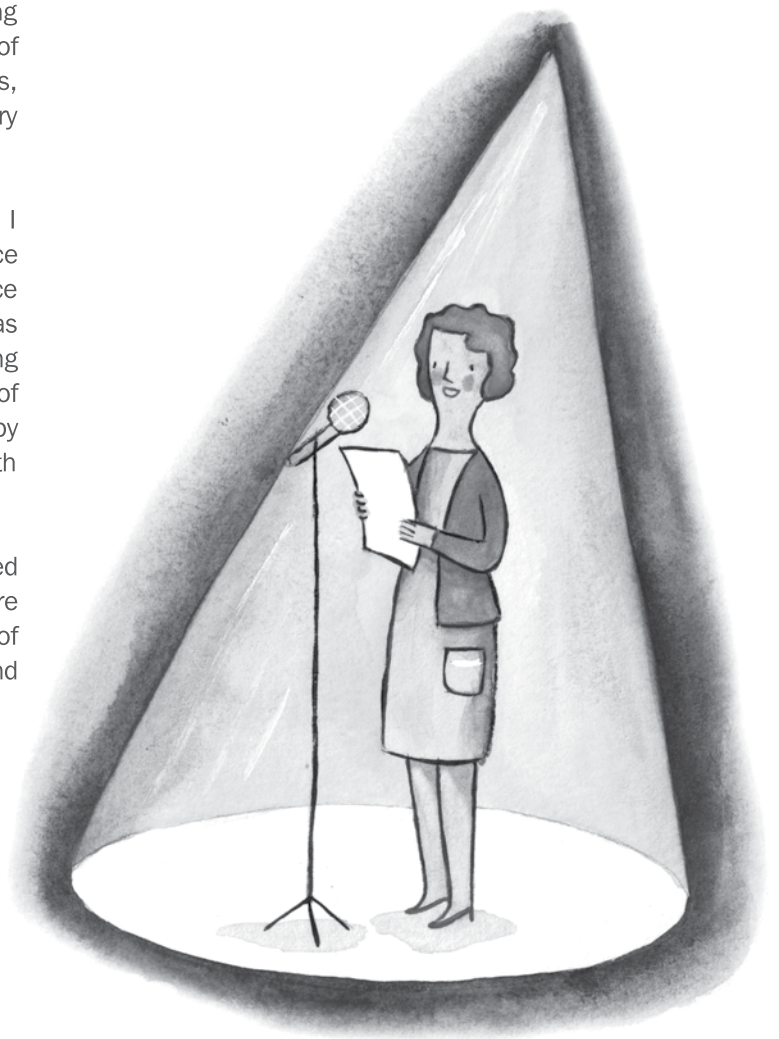
I was not excited at all. In fact I was feeling upset and angry. Looking around me, I was acutely aware of being one of a small minority in the community who accepted the carbon tax as a necessary, yet insufficient step, towards dealing with fossil fuel emissions. How could I possibly speak up in defense of the tax without ridiculing the proposed policy change, and alienating this group of government supporters? I decided to express my views, even though I suspected that in this setting it was very unlikely my opinion would make any difference.

I stood, breathed deeply, and held on to what I knew. I was invited to speak. I did not attempt to try to influence change, but only to represent to the group my acceptance of the science, and the implications of it. I knew I was out-numbered, and that by speaking up I risked being the one who was ridiculed and alienated by the rest of the group. However I was sustained and empowered by my belief in the importance of commitment to the truth as I saw it.

When I had finished speaking I took my seat and waited for the fallout. However, to my relief and surprise, there was a brief silence in the room before the convener of the meeting thanked me for my interest in attending, and for expressing my views.

As I came out of the hall at the end of the meeting, a woman came up and said, "I don't agree with what you said in there, but it takes great courage to stand up and speak like you did." As the woman turned to go, she looked back and said, "I wish I could do it."

My contribution that day may not have made any difference to the view of those in the meeting. Importantly, I felt pleased that I had been able to express my views in a manner that allowed me to be true to my own beliefs.'

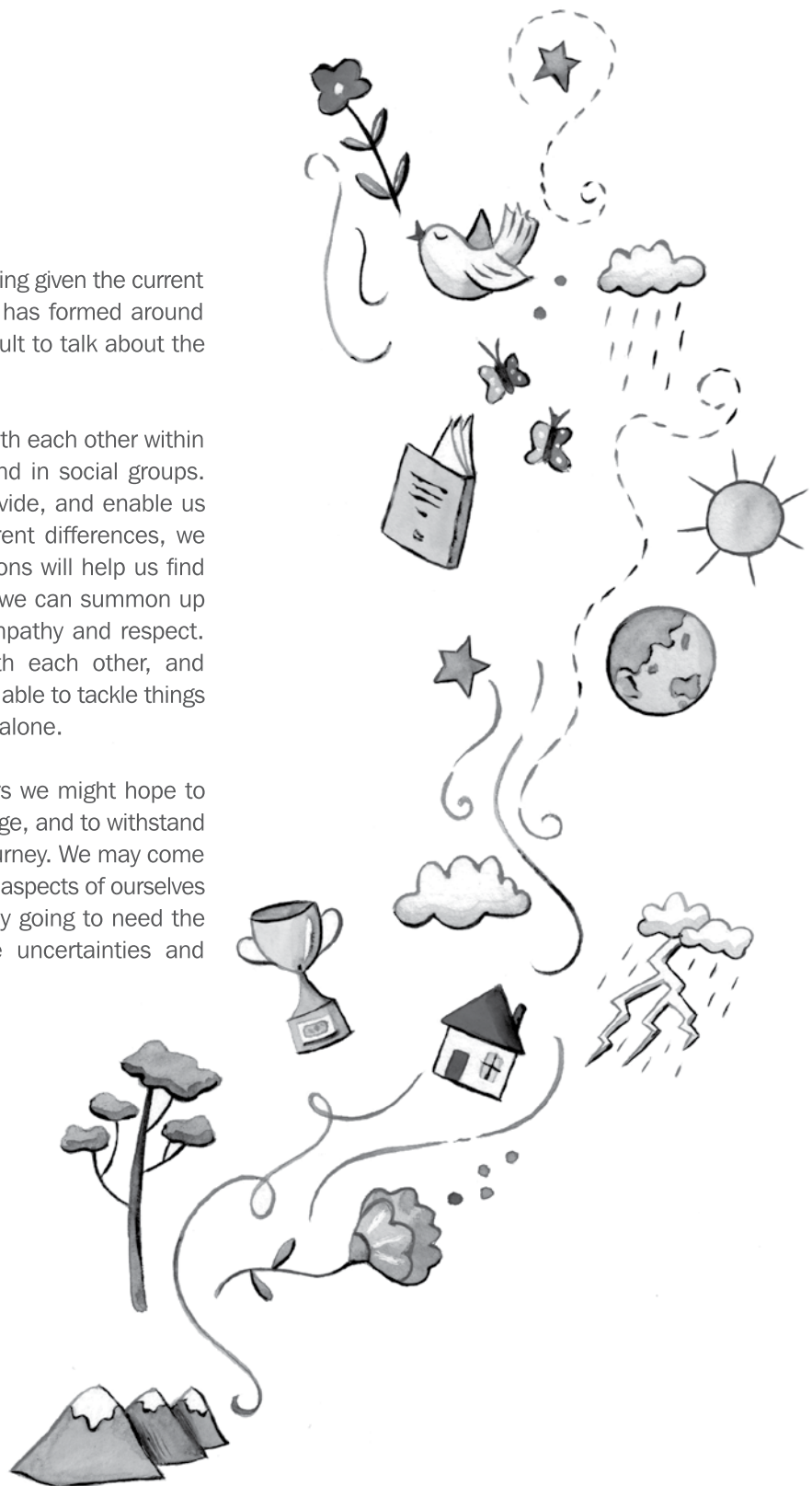


# CONCLUSION

Discussing climate change is challenging given the current political and social polarisation that has formed around the topic. It can be profoundly difficult to talk about the subject with the depth it demands.

Conversations help engage people with each other within families, friendships, workgroups, and in social groups. They can help bridge the political divide, and enable us to recognise that despite our apparent differences, we share much in common. Conversations will help us find those common interests as long as we can summon up our capacity to really listen, with empathy and respect. Conversations help us connect with each other, and through that connection we are often able to tackle things we would not dream of dealing with alone.

Through our relationships with others we might hope to find the courage and support to change, and to withstand any disappointments on the rocky journey. We may come through to a place where we discover aspects of ourselves we didn't know before. We are surely going to need the ability to change to deal with the uncertainties and challenges of the climate reality.





### **Don't even think about it: Why our brains are wired to ignore climate change.**

With wit, depth and in everyday language, George Marshall covers a wealth of social psychology explaining our difficulty accepting and engaging with climate change. He concludes that we are in fact wired for action because of our universal drive to defend our own descendants and social group. He concludes with invaluable ideas for digging our way out of the hole we are in.



### **Relevant, immediate, local: guide to communicating climate change in Australia.**

This guide from the Climate Council, is to assist those communicating on climate change to do so accurately and effectively. It provides a simple framework for communication, and includes up to date facts on climate science, impacts, and solutions here in Australia.



### **Climate Outreach and Information Network.**

COIN is a 'think and do' tank focused on connecting people to climate change and climate change to people. Invaluable resources documents, including *A new conversation with the centre-right on climate change*.



### **Common Cause: The Case for Working with our Cultural Values.**

To build a more sustainable, equitable and democratic world, we need an empowered, connected and durable movement of citizens. What are the values that either promote or inhibit these movements?



### **In Time for Tomorrow? The Carbon Conversations Handbook.**

A handbook to help people start constructive conversations about climate change, and to take practical action.



### **The Yale Project on Climate Change Communication.**

Conducts research on public climate knowledge, risk perceptions, decision making and behavior; Designs and tests new strategies to engage the public; Empowers educators and communicators.

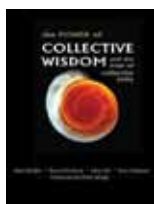


**Climate Access** is a global network of climate and clean energy communicators. Through the network, members are connected to a diverse group of experts, cutting-edge research and proven techniques for mobilizing audiences.



### **The Good Life.**

Hugh Mackay's research concludes that a good life is not measured by security, wealth, status, achievement or levels of happiness. A good life is determined by our capacity for selflessness and our willingness to connect with those around us in a meaningful and useful way.



### **The Power of Collective Wisdom and the trap of collective folly.**

Stories and historical examples illustrate how collective wisdom has emerged in a range of cultures, settings, and traditions. The book emerges from a deep conviction that we all have a stake in each other and that what binds us together can be greater than what drives us apart.



### **Stories of the Great Turning.**

Stories of how ordinary people in their everyday lives have responded to the challenges of living more sustainably. It includes tales of practical transformations, but also stories from people changing how they live their lives and the inner transformation this demands.

The most powerful climate change communication comes in the form of personal stories that express commitment and conviction. For people who refuse to accept the underlying science this may be the only way to reach and persuade them. Psychology for a Safe Climate's excellent new booklet is built of such stories, reminding us that conversations and negotiations between friends, family and workmates may be as important for social change as the fattest scientific report.

**George Marshall, founder of the Climate Outreach and Information Network in UK, and author of *Don't even think about it: why our brains are wired to ignore climate change*.**

These stories have deep resonance! I felt I had experienced almost all of them. What I loved was that they don't preach or provide "right answers". I was often left pondering what action I might have taken. I'll think of them when I meet these circumstances again, - a wiser woman!

**Carolyn Ingvarson, Convenor, Lighter Footprints.**

This booklet hits the mark beautifully. It takes the science, research, and distilled wisdom of a group of psychologists and brings it to life in a series of compelling stories of climate change conversations. The climate change challenge is huge, urgent, but achievable. Above all, people need to be engaged with it. This booklet shows us how to overcome psychological and cognitive barriers to talk effectively with others.

**Susie Burke, Senior Psychologist, Public interest, environment and disaster response, Australian Psychological Society.**

Talking to friends and family about climate change can quickly become a highly complex and abstract discussion of science, policy and the economy. To have effective conversations, it is crucial to draw on examples that are relevant, immediate and local. This timely publication features remarkable personal stories that encourage us to keep these important conversations going.

**Amanda McKenzie, CEO Climate Council.**

The steepest barrier to the world responding to climate change isn't the science, economics, or engineering. It is the complex human condition. *Facing the Heat: Stories of climate change conversations* taps into people's deepest concerns and drivers, and through personal experiences, helps the reader understand what's really at play when discussions turn to conflict.

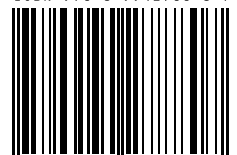
**Adam Majcher, Manager, The Climate Reality Project Australia and the Asia-Pacific.**



### **Let's speak about climate change**

Also written by Psychology for a Safe Climate, *Let's speak about climate change* offers a psychological perspective on the challenges of understanding ourselves and others in our difficulty engaging with climate change. It describes the path to acceptance, as well as the obstacles, and encourages collective action.

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