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Hope in a time of climate chaos – a speech to psychotherapists

Posted on November 3, 2019 by jembendell

Professor Jem Bendell, Text of keynote at UKCP Conference, London, October 19th 2019.

Thank you to the UK Council for Psychotherapy for inviting me to speak at this conference on climate anxiety and what therapy might do to help. It's a surprising and somewhat daunting invitation, as I'm someone who has never read a book on psychology and I only sat on a therapist's couch for the first time earlier this year. So I'm here for my own journey learning about counselling and psychotherapy because I believe it is so important to our climate emergency.

We gather in London after 2 weeks of climate activists rebelling across the city. So to open, I want to recognise those thousands of people, who non-violently offered up their freedom to show us how climate change has become the most important thing in their lives. People like my friend Jeffrey Newman, a Rabbi who is 77 years young, arrested outside the Bank of England. If you don't know anyone who has been arrested for nonviolent civil disobedience, I invite you to take a moment to consider what it might be that affects someone so much that they sit in a road and await the police, sometimes for a painful arrest?

Their concern is not so unusual now. Out of 28 countries polled by YouGov, in all but 4 countries a majority of people said they thought climate change would have a "fair amount" or "great deal" of impact on their lives.

I am not here because of the growing numbers of people asking for help from counsellors as they suffer emotional distress about climate. I am here because our society is changing and I see how people with knowledge and skills in psychotherapy could be useful in communities. I have been witnessing a growing social phenomenon that could be both a challenge and invitation to psychotherapy. It is the reaction to our climate crisis where people are rebelling against social norms on censoring their own or others' feelings, and recognising the validity of public grief and shared despair.

For some, the shocking news on our climate situation is a catalyst towards living differently, whether as activists or something else. Because there is something very powerful in the meaning and love that is found from living with unsolvable difficulty. If we can help each other to allow our despair, then what emerges may correspond better with the situation humanity is now facing. Therapists, just like anyone, can wake up to this changing situation. If not, there is the risk of being part of a stale resistance to the spiritual revolution that our climate tragedy now invites.



Scroll down to the end for the video of this

keynote speech.

Growing Through Trouble

I missed the latest wave of environmental rebellion because I was with my Dad in Devon, exploring treatment pathways for his cancer. With his doctors, we were comparing a treatment pathway that has a 1 in 3 chance of survival past 5 years with another that is a 1 in 2 chance of survival, but with nasty side effects. It puts a different complexion on things. But in some ways it was one of the nicest weeks I've spent with him. When I cried, he got up off the bed and gave me a hug. A former Lt Commander in the Royal Navy. Growing up, we didn't often express much emotion – not as far as I recall. In the subsequent decades we would talk about career, finance, and cricket, but not really feelings. Facing a predicament that is unsolvable and experiencing feelings that are not fixable, is something that is shifting our relationship. Perhaps not just to each other but to everything else as well.

There is some criticism of people like me who warn of societal collapse being either likely or inevitable due to climate change. A few times people have said that we would never tell someone with cancer to give up, so why are we telling humanity to give up? I am not telling anyone to give up acting from conscience for the good of all. I will come back to that. But that comparison with cancer patients reveals assumptions that are problematic. Helping a loved one explore what they want from their life as it is now, to make conscious decisions, not arising from either fear or denial, seems the right thing to do. My Dad's doctors first advocated those options for longevity above all else. They were surprised Dad had as much concern for quality not quantity of life. In the same way, it is normal to me that when faced with the unfolding disaster of climate change, we ask how we wish to live and what we can learn from this predicament. Only by looking at what is happening with open minds and open hearts can we begin to have meaningful dialogue about our options.

To the uninitiated, that can seem a bit bleak or melodramatic. So I will give a quick summary of the climate situation as seen by myself and the many thousands of people who now anticipate societal breakdown as a result of climate change. The information I will summarise now is terrifying. So before that, I want to say that I believe that none of us here today are in immediate danger.

Science Suggests Danger

Climate change is worse than we were told. It's already 1 degree warmer globally since 1850, or near 1.5 degrees warmer since 1750. That does not sound much but that's 11 percent more energy in the atmosphere than 1750. Which makes our weather more extreme. More droughts, floods, heatwaves, and storms. Affecting agriculture and settlements.

Our climate is changing faster than what was predicted. A recent study found that Arctic permafrost is melting at a rate that was meant to happen in a worst-case scenario seventy years from now. A geophysics paper published this year estimates we could lose the Arctic summer ice by 2030. That matters because self-reinforcing feedbacks heat our planet further. For instance, melting releases methane, a gas that warms the planet more intensely than carbon dioxide. Another feedback is the loss of the reflection of white ice. According to a top polar scientist, losing all the Arctic ice would heat the planet by an amount equivalent to 50 percent of all heating caused by all human emissions. Other feedback loops come from our soils drying and forests burning, both of which release carbon dioxide. [References for all these points are found in the Compendium [here](#).]

We should do what we can to cut emissions now. But we should not ignore where we are at, whatever we do. There is a time lag in the impacts of our past pollution. It can take 40 years for existing CO₂ to exert its full warming effect. And now we know about 90% of all the additional heat from human activities has gone into the sea, which will continue to heat the air over time (again, consult the [Compendium](#) for sources).

One peer reviewed paper calculated that humanity has a 1 in 20 chance of going extinct this century because of climate change. Their paper was unusual. But the latest computer models of climate change, which will be used by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) next year, are showing up to 7-degrees potential rise by the end of the century.

Hearing such astonishing information, some people turn to the IPCC. Didn't they say we have until 2030 to change course and avert the worst? Yes, we may be able to avert the worst. And it's important to cut emissions and drawdown carbon. But to make their figures seem less scary for policy makers, in their 1.5 degree report last October, the IPCC had to imagine that negative emissions technologies, which don't exist yet at scale, will strip 250 Gigatonnes of carbon from the atmosphere to give us a 50/50 chance of staying under 1.5 degrees.

But our emissions are going up. [If mapped on a graph since 1850](#), they appear exponential. Despite decades of debate and initiative. Dr Wolfgang Knorr calculates that at current rates of emissions increase we will have used up any remaining global carbon budget by 2025. So there is strong evidence for the view that we are heading for climate chaos.

Societal disruption from climate change is already here. The UN secretary general said last month that "climate disruption is now and everywhere." Climate change is

leading to increased hardship, water shortages and hunger in many countries, disease, and worsened natural disasters, as well as migration and conflict. Last month the Red Cross reported that two million more people each week need humanitarian aid because of climate chaos.

I realise that many people who are new to the topic of climate change do not realise what it means for their own lives. People can start talking about switching off lights, stopping flying, planting trees, or more solar panels. All good things, but irrelevant to net carbon emissions in comparison to an industrial growth society that burns fossil fuels for everything. Huge amounts of energy derived from fossil fuels are used to feed us, to heat and cool our buildings, transport people, make things and power our lives. All our food from the supermarket depends on fossil fuels for its production, processing, packaging, distribution, refrigeration, advertising, retail, cooking and waste processing. For over thirty years people have tried to do something about climate change within our current economic system and, as far as the atmosphere is concerned, completely failed. The graph shows it well – a near exponential rise in emissions since the start of the industrial revolution.

The risks of climate change are now coming to haunt the modern world. Last year production slumped across Europe and UK for most vegetables and grains, around 20 percent down, due to the drought. In the UK we import so much of our food, with some estimates at about 60%. Last month a parliamentary committee reported that 20% of our fruit and vegetables come from areas at risk of “climate breakdown”. The UK Environmental Audit Committee chair Mary Creagh MP said: “We are facing a food security crisis.” So the West is no longer immune to a destabilising climate. This situation means that we could now begin to consider “what if our society will break down, whatever we do next”? It is a shocking question, and many people do not want to even allow such a discussion. For me, I think that resisting that conversation means we are wasting time to explore and prepare for what may be arriving soon, if not already underway.

Some experts debate whether it is more responsible or not to imagine some hope for our societies continuing without massive disruption. Yet there appears to be a growing recognition amongst the general public about how bad things are, as that YouGov poll indicated: a majority of the people polled in July thought climate change may cause world wars and even human extinction. So these are anxious times. To be anxious about our environment is natural. So, asking people to be less pessimistic about the future is a weak response, either intellectually or emotionally, and, I wish to suggest, therapeutically. But first, I will share a bit about my own journey with this issue.

Opening through Despair

For years I had believed the argument that we must not give up hope of a better future, as otherwise we would stop trying to create change. But as I looked at the latest science and measurements in 2018, it seemed dishonest to let that attachment to hope prevent me from processing what I was seeing. I began to consider, privately, the idea that it is too late. I discovered many personal fears to do with my own

identity. I was scared that losing hope of having a positive impact through my efforts on the environment would mean that I would see my past efforts and struggles as pointless. I worried it would mean I had no idea what to do. I worried that without an idea of how to be useful I would feel pointless. And I worried that it would be unbearable to live with such a bleak outlook on the future. But after a time I allowed my own shock, grief, regret and confusion to unfold into despair. The paper I wrote on Deep Adaptation to our climate tragedy was part of my process. Looking back now I see part of it was like a written scream of anguish.

I have discovered that allowing this despair can let many other things begin. It meant that I could no longer work on the environment in the way I had done over the previous 20 years. I gave up the idea we could reform this system. I don't just mean capitalism but also the industrial growth society and the assumptions of progress that it is based upon. I also gave up the idea we would change things to another system in time to prevent devastating consequences from climate chaos.

I started to ask deeper questions about the meaning of hope, and what we could hope for and work towards.

Hope Beyond Hope

At various times over the past year I have been told that people must have hope. Also, that people like me should not undermine people's hope. Such views are often stated as if so obvious that they do not need explanation. However, I believe that unthinking allegiance to hope is part of the way our culture invites us to be averse to emotional pain and uncertainty. I believe that needs to change for us to try to reduce harm. So, today I want to unpack the notion of hope in our time of climate crisis.

I was wondering how possible that would be in a speech such as this. Because I have found that it is only in conversation that I can get somewhere interesting with people on this topic. On a course I was co-leading, one of the participants said to me "we need hope" and that "society benefits from having hope." I asked him to try and own that statement as a provisional one about what he thought about his own way of being. So I invited him to say "I need hope" rather than "people need hope" and then discuss with me what the nature of that hope is and why he thought he needed it. We were then able to explore the nature of the emotions associated with the possibility that there is no hope of the kind he thought he had. In that discussion he realised a number of things. First, that the emotional pain of sensing current or future suffering is not something that can necessarily be resolved. Instead it can be witnessed. Because it does not define him, it is an emotion happening in him. Second, he realised he did not need to believe that we can preserve this society in order for him to act. He did not need to believe we won't see massive suffering in order to discover how to be and what to do. Instead, he began to see a new basis from how to be and act. A basis founded in discovering what is his truth and living according to that truth more fully right now.

But as this is a speech and I am an academic, I will attempt to offer a step-by-step breakdown of the concept of hope in a time of climate crisis. First, we can explore what we mean by the word or concept “hope”. Second, we can explore what the vision or goal being hoped for actually is. Third, we can explore why we think hope is useful for ourselves or for people more generally.

Starting with definitions – many people who tell me that we must not lose hope do not say what they mean by that word. Some people mean their wish for the future that either other people or a divine force will make happen. Some people mean their expectation for the future, based on what they see or choose to agree with. Some people use the word hope to mean their plan for the future, and what they are working towards in quite specific ways.

For each of those forms of hope, it seems that they are not things that we must not give up. Because learning about our lives and situations is an ongoing process of dropping certain wishes, expectations and plans. So why not drop certain hopes? Perhaps because hoping is seen as a state of positivity. “We must not lose hope” is really a statement that we must stay positive. This reflects how we live in a culture that is averse to difficult emotions and to impermanence. In the face of climate chaos, many people like myself have come to a newly positive place, but not through attachment to being positive.

A second unpacking of hope involves exploring what the vision or goal being hoped for actually is. People who, like me, believe that climate-induced societal collapse is now likely or inevitable, begin to explore new goals and visions, which then inform our lives. I hope for a liveable planet and loveable world. One which maintains the possibilities for life, including for us humans, and where more of us are living lovingly towards each other and nature. I wish for that and work for it, but do not expect it. For me, accepting that it is too late to stop climate chaos wrecking our way of life is not giving up but waking up to a wider and deeper agenda. It’s an agenda that includes questions of how we reduce harm, save what we can, learn how this tragedy came to pass, and seek meaning and joy in the process.

A third unpacking of hope is to explore why we think hope is useful for ourselves or for people more generally. Whereas some people seem to be encouraged by believing a story of a preferred future, others are helped by dropping such stories, even if painful for a time, and then engaging fully in the moment, with passion for living their truth and yet more equanimity with whatever is ahead. In this sense, for some people, accepting that there is much suffering is to come from climate chaos does not mean that they feel helpless, but they feel powerfully ‘hopefree’ and newly engaged in life.

The Freedom to Grieve

The allegiance to hope and to positivity in our culture also means we don’t allow as we might the public sharing and discussion of our emotions of sadness, confusion, and grief. Nor our longing to connect and to experience wonder at life. Rather, in

public and professional life, we invite each other to be happy, positive and capable. But that is only half the picture. Because we exist within a world with mass communication, with corporations shaping our worldview. The news media invites us to sneer, scoff or pity others. While the adverts invite us to feel incomplete without the latest brand or experience. None of this is inviting us into ways of relating that welcome our pain about society and nature. If we suppress difficult emotions in ourselves, and ignore or somehow fix them in others, then we are alienating ourselves from an important way that we experience the world.

Most people don't seek psychological support. Like I did for a long time, they may be suppressing difficult emotions of sadness and fear, in ways that lead to the secondary emotions of anger, blame, and even hatred. These offer an escape from pain for a time, but can make matters worse. So it helps to support each other in allowing and exploring suppressed emotions of sadness and fear. It is why, at the opening of the International Rebellion of the Extinction Rebellion, in April 2019, in Oxford Circle, I said "The truth is we are scared and we are brave enough to say so. The truth is we are grieving and we are proud enough to say so. The truth is we are traumatised and we are open enough to say so."

Therapy on Climate Anxiety

I am here because I am interested in the role of psychotherapy in this age of climate anxiety. I've only started learning about this profession. I read that the website Patient.info publishes clinical information certified to meet NHS England's Information Standard. So I was interested to see one of their writers mention my work on Deep Adaptation. I quote:

"In one case, a viral academic paper scared people so much that it reportedly caused people to go into therapy, quit their jobs and move out of the city. With seemingly nothing but bad news coming our way, how can we feel more positive and care for our mental health in the age of climate anxiety?"

Well, perhaps one way might be if people go into therapy, quit their jobs and move out of the city? Sounds a great idea. The people I know who have sought therapeutic support, quit their jobs or reduced their hours and moved out of the city have discovered a wonderful new way of experiencing life.

The article listed a range of useful things for emotional wellbeing, such as taking some exercise and having some fun. But it also talked about a sense of helplessness some of us have in the face of climate change. Where we sense that we can't do much about the problem. The author used the theory of "learned helplessness" to suggest that a lack of self-efficacy could lead to depression. I am new to psychology, so I should be cautious here. So, may I tentatively offer my provisional view that this is complete bullshit.

Of course, the theory itself has horrible origins in electrocuting dogs. But leaving that aside, citing theories like this one may be an unconscious attempt to protect the

author and the intended reader from their own difficult emotions. As a Professor, I know well that impulse to seek refuge by feeling more knowledgeable than others. As such, it can be a narcissistic defence mechanism that would impair the usefulness of psychotherapy in a time of climate chaos. Instead, I recommend psychotherapists dialogue with people who are experiencing anxiety about the state of our environment, to discover the myriad ways that people are being affected. But if psychologists talk with people expressing anxiety about climate change from an assumption that they have a problem, rather than humanity having a problem, then we won't get very far. Faced with the latest climate news, anxiety is natural. Moreover, looking at the future we face, despair is natural, despair is valid, and despair can be transformative. Therefore, I wonder whether psychotherapists will offer that much on climate anxiety if, first, they haven't allowed themselves to live with such anxiety. We need to be in this together, because therapists are in danger from climate change just like the rest of us.

Now at a top conference of psychotherapists, I am not going to recommend people get depressed. I have not experienced depression myself but have witnessed how tough it is. I have been told by some therapists that in the society we live in now, depression is natural, valid and can be transformative. I hear from people who have been in depression that it is a crisis of purpose, even a spiritual crisis, and that it has helped them to become more loving, to both themselves and to others. But some have told me that this positive aspect of depression could be better helped with some guidance. In a time of climate crisis, could we begin to see depression as a rite of passage? A horrible but useful means of the positive disintegration of our old stories of self and the future? A means by which we can discover forms of meaning and wellbeing which do not depend on stories of fitting in better with this society – one that is committing mass destruction of life on Earth? If so, how might we support people who experience it? I do not have answers here for you. But I know that if psychotherapy focuses on helping people function better in our current destructive society, then I won't mourn it if it collapses along with everything else.

So What Can be Done?

So what can be done? The future looks really tough. Humanity risks making matters worse, as our fear drives us to uncooperative and even violent behaviour. Part of the reason for such a response may be unrecognised emotions, covered up by a move to anger, blame and hatred.

I am new to this topic and do not know much about psychotherapy. But as a layperson, I think what's important is learning to not react from unconscious emotions or from our aversion to those emotions. Therefore, it will be useful to help make conscious some of the emotions of sadness and fear that are being suppressed. How do we do that? In my experience practices outside of mainstream psychotherapy have proved helpful to me, such as authentic relating or circling and Vipassana, or insight, meditation. What has also been helpful are practices which move us beyond our mainstream stories of self and society, including the assumption of a separate self. For that, practices which invite non-ordinary states of consciousness have been important for me. These have included breathwork, shamanic journeys and spiritual dancing.

I wonder if the power of these consciousness-expanding practices is in helping address the deepest trauma that we all share. Which is the trauma of existing as a conscious separate self, who knows they will die. Ultimately, with the right guidance, the consciousness-expanding practices could invite people towards their ‘undiscovered self’. By transcending a sense of separation, one might be freer of all kinds of anxiety. Therefore, I recommend psychotherapy explores these practices more in future – and that you start with yourselves.

Reaching Society

I hear that good psychotherapy is not available to many people. And even if it is, then not regularly unless you are rich. It is also something that most people don’t look for. I was 46 years old before I ever considered seeing a counsellor. People who do not seek emotional support may be suppressing difficult emotions of sadness and fear, in ways that lead to the secondary emotions of anger, blame, and hatred, as a means of escaping from their pain. That will make matters worse. Consequently, to help reduce harm from disruptions to our societies, there is a need for psychotherapeutic support to be provided, without request, across the whole of society.

How could that happen? To scale, it will need to be done through intermediaries. Through people who are supported with approaches to host gatherings in settings that are accessible to lots of people. Such facilitators could be offering processes through schools, universities, faith organisations, trade unions, professional associations and activist groups. Psychotherapists could advise on processes, provide counselling for facilitators, and be available at events.

This need and opportunity for helping people come together on climate emergency to explore difficult emotions and future choices is central to our work at the Deep Adaptation Forum. We are discovering the ways that training and guidance can be offered through video conference, then to be offered in person in multiple locations.

Our hope in a time of climate chaos is promoting other ways of responding than fear or anger. Our hope in a time of climate chaos is that experiencing the fragility and impermanence of life can lead more of us to greater gratitude for the present and less involvement in the judgements and tactics of our minds. We can be freer to love and forgive each other and ourselves, and so do what we can to help, whatever may come.