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# **Facilitation for Deep Adaptation: enabling loving conversations about our predicament**

## **IFLAS Occasional Paper #6**

**Katie Carr MA and Jem Bendell PhD**

[www.iflas.info](http://www.iflas.info)

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### **Occasional Papers**

Occasional Papers are released by the Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability (IFLAS) at the University of Cumbria in the UK to promote discussion amongst scholars and practitioners on themes that matter to our staff and students. This paper follows on from two previous Occasional Papers on the climate crisis, written by Professor Jem Bendell (#2 on Deep Adaptation) and Professor Rupert Read (#3 on the approaching end of our current civilisation).

### **Acknowledgments**

As this is an emerging field of practice, the ideas in this paper have emerged or been refined with the help of dialogue and experimentation with the volunteer facilitators in the Deep Adaptation Forum (DAF), including our colleague in the Core Team, Zori Tomova. We have also benefited from the work on facilitation and critical theory of the IFLAS Visiting Professor Richard Little and circling methods by John Thompson and colleagues at Circling Europe. The research for this conceptual paper was through integrating insights from a diverse range of literature and reflective practice over a few years, and so no specific data is used from our engagement with participants in the DAF.

### **Abstract**

This paper supports people with designing and facilitating gatherings on Deep Adaptation, whether online or in-person. The term 'Deep Adaptation' describes an agenda and framework for responding to the potential, probable or inevitable collapse of industrial consumer societies, due to the direct and indirect impacts of human-caused climate change and environmental degradation (Bendell, 2018). It involves the inner and outer, personal and collective, responses to either the anticipation or experience of societal collapse. Gatherings on this topic within the Deep Adaptation Forum have given attention to how we can cultivate a state of presence, connection, and equanimity, from which

engaged action may arise. A facilitator to support participants to learn collaboratively and experientially has been key to that focus.

In this paper some of the aspects of Deep Adaptation facilitation that have emerged from a community of practice of volunteer facilitators are summarised. These aspects include containment, with the intention of enabling co-responsibility for a safe-enough space for difficult conversations to occur with difficult emotions. Another key aspect is welcoming radical uncertainty in response to the anxieties people feel, as their sense of self, security and agency are challenged by the anticipation of collapse. A third aspect of this facilitation is making space for grief, which is welcomed as a natural and ongoing response to our predicament. A fourth aspect is a curiosity about processes of othering and separation. That arises due to our assessment that a seemingly innate process of imagining separation, and therefore 'othering' people and nature as less significant or meaningful, has been a habit in modern society that impedes responses to social and environmental crises.

Three specific modalities are summarised. First, Deep Listening groups are small gatherings in which participants are invited to share honestly and openly about how they are feeling, and what they are experiencing, as they grapple with the implications of the unfolding climate tragedy. Crucially, they are not dialogic. Second, Deep Relating circles invite people into a relational meditation practice, or an approach to relating with others in a way that is grounded in a detailed awareness of present moment experience. Third, Death Cafes provide a safe and confidential setting for people to talk about death and dying, so with that awareness they might clarify what they want to do with their finite lives. Many other modalities are emerging in the Deep Adaptation field, which can be found from the links provided in the paper.

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## **The context of collapse anticipation**

The term 'Deep Adaptation' describes an agenda and framework for responding to the potential, probable or inevitable collapse of industrial consumer societies, due to the direct and indirect impacts of human-caused climate change and environmental degradation (Bendell, 2018). The term became popular after the release of an Occasional Paper (in the same series as this one), which caught the attention of readers and media far beyond its intended audience of sustainability professionals, and has now been downloaded around around a million times. In response, your authors helped to develop the Deep Adaptation Forum (DAF), to provide a means for people to connect with each other for dialogue, support and initiative based upon the anticipation of societal collapse. With the term 'societal collapse' we mean an uneven ending of industrial consumer modes of sustenance, shelter, health, security, pleasure, identity, and meaning. Rather than an environmental, economic or political collapse, the word 'societal' is important as these uneven endings pervade society and challenge our place within it. The term collapse does not necessarily mean that suddenness is likely, but a form of breakdown in systems that is comprehensive and cannot be rebounded from to return to what was before. The word 'deep' is intended to contrast the agenda with mainstream approaches to adaptation to climate impacts (Klein, et al, 2015), by going deeper into the causes and potential responses, both within ourselves, our organisations and societies.

People who engage in dialogue and initiative for Deep Adaptation believe that societal collapse in most or all countries of the world is either likely, inevitable, or already unfolding. Typically, such

people believe that they will experience this disruption themselves, or that they have already begun to do so, while recognising that the disruptions are being experienced first and worst by people in the Global South. Therefore, Deep Adaptation describes the inner and outer, personal and collective, responses to either the anticipation or experience of societal collapse, worsened by the direct or indirect impacts of climate change. There are over 100 volunteers in the DAF, who support over 15,000 people from all walks of life and many corners of the globe, engaging in-person and online about this topic. The ethos is to embody and enable loving responses to our predicament. In our work on this emotionally challenging topic, we have found that the way we gather together in groups is key to the benefit that participants gain from such interaction and the quality of the initiatives they then decide to pursue. Therefore, to support people in designing and facilitating such gatherings, whether online or in-person, in this Occasional Paper, we share some of the concepts and theories behind the emerging practice. It is, therefore, a paper that will be of interest to people who take an intellectual as well as practical interest in either dialogue and facilitation practices or collapse anticipation, or both. As this is a new and emergent field of practice and inquiry, we welcome engagement on it within the DAF (via [www.deepadaptation.info](http://www.deepadaptation.info)).

## **The importance of facilitating groups in the face of collapse**

Upon reflection, Deep Adaptation (DA) is not actually a ‘map for navigating climate tragedy’, as the subtitle of the original paper suggested. When framing DA in that paper as a series of questions (Bendell, 2018), it was an invitation for a global conversation. Rather than offering a map, DA is more an invitation into *maplessness*, where all of the landmarks that we’ve previously relied on are found to be a mirage. Those landmarks include mainstream science, assumptions of progress, and the superiority of humankind on Earth. Instead of scientific certainty, little seems certain anymore. The triumph of scientific empiricist discourse over all other ways of being and knowing, which took root in Europe during the Age of Enlightenment and has become well-nigh ubiquitous since, has begun to lose its power in orienting people in their world (Rabkin and Minakov, 2018). Stories of progress, in which it is assumed that tomorrow will be better than today, are also losing their dominance (Greer, 2015). Even the belief in the superiority of humankind amongst all other life, expressed in our self-labelling as *homo sapiens* (which in Latin means ‘wise man’) seems a narcissistic conjecture that ignores our driving of mass extinction of life on Earth (Diaz et al, 2019), including a growing risk even to our own species (Xu and Ramanathan, 2017).

By *maplessness* we mean that we cannot rely on previous 'perceived certainties' - including our stories of progress, meaning, purpose, and identity. Maps can be a useful tool, but are neither true to the complexity of any landscape, nor without an assumed intention of how one engages with a landscape. They can create an illusion of safety through the sense of being in 'chartered territory'. They condition us to take notice of certain features and ignore others. Road, footpaths, streams and boundaries are included, but not the smells, sounds, and emotional responses to a landscape. They focus on unchanging landscape features, not the seasonal migration of birds, changing colours, or the life and death that inhabits every place. Although a map is never the territory, and a model not the reality, the implicit suggestion of both maps and models is that to map is to measure and name in order to know, and to know is to control. The trend towards ever greater mapping and detailed measuring of our infinitely complex and changing world reflects the aim, since the Enlightenment, to attain a sense of safety through protecting ourselves from the mysterious. The mapping impulse is therefore an expression of the ideology of e-s-c-a-p-e, with its attachment to the illusion of surety, control, and progress (Bendell, 2020)

In the 2020s, as we witness both ecosystems and societies increasingly break down, so the processes of mapping and modelling are challenged. That is not only because those breakdowns reveal that we are neither 'safe' nor in control. Rather, the breakdowns are occurring because sufficient numbers of people, over centuries, have used the power of mapping life to exert a destructive power, and have not been able to understand our living world so as to avert its destruction. The anticipation of societal collapse is therefore to acknowledge a crisis of epistemology, and a collapse of the hitherto dominant ways of seeking to know the world. That anticipation invites us to explore other ways of understanding life and our places within it. It means people become interested in relinquishing reliance on redundant and harmful mental 'maps' of who we are, who we are not, and how the world is, and rediscover or restore forgotten ways of being and knowing. This means bringing the somatic, the affective, and the relational - the wisdom of our bodies, hearts and communities - wholly to bear on how we face into the unfolding predicament. DA is primarily a container for dialogue that begins with an invitation to unlearn, to let go of our maps and models of the world and to not prematurely grasp at any new ones. That can be difficult, because a habit of needing fact, certainty, and right answers means people are often uncomfortable being with uncertainty or 'not knowingness'. It is for that reason that alternative ways of relating in groups on all aspects of our predicament is so important. Which is why facilitation of group processes is so central to DA.

Unfortunately, the difficulties of late capitalism, as more of us are pressured to compete with each other in distorted markets, while we increasingly perceive the turbulence both around and ahead of

us, means that anxieties are on the rise in many parts of the world and for many age-groups (Servigne et al, 2020). One indicator of this process is the increasingly damaging approaches to young people's education in many countries. Katie worked with schools for many years, and witnessed an increasing tendency towards measurable knowledge. She saw a shift in the way children would respond to open questions from teachers, to which there are no right or wrong answers. Where there used to be creative expression of multiple ideas, there is increasing hesitancy because of a belief that there should be a memorisable or logically calculable correct answer to any question. The impact of a classroom with walls covered with correct answers and, particularly, a weekly testing regime from a very early age is one reason for this shift (Carr & Bindewald, 2019). As adults, within our modern cultures, we have also been schooled to feel fearful of not knowing. A growing sense of vulnerability, due to increasingly precarious personal circumstances and perception of a more turbulent world, means we can grasp for 'correct' answers rather than allow for more 'not knowing' and more maplessness. Providing spaces for each other where we can build our resilience for experiencing difficult emotions such as the fear associated with uncertainty, without grasping at quick and simple answers, is therefore an important activity.

The aim of people we know involved in DA is to reduce harm in the face of societal collapse. To pursue that aim, there must be an understanding of the socio-cultural mechanisms that have led to humanity's failure to live in a way that is harmonious with the wider system of life on earth, of which we are part, and to understand the ways in which these mechanisms are not 'out there.' Rather, we exist as part of a culture, the fabric of which is socially constructed. We are products of that culture, and we constantly reproduce it through our actions. It is this culture and the ideologies within it that will prevent us from reducing harm (Bendell, 2020). A central part of that culture and ideology is what can be described as alienation; the imagined separation of ourselves (or large parts of ourselves), from each other and the wider web of life.

For a few years, we have been facilitating dialogue about these issues, and witnessing and experiencing the intensity that comes from an anticipation of societal collapse in our own lifetimes. From that experience, we discovered that facilitation for deep adaptation can help participants to experience ways of relating that can bring awareness to the unconscious patterns we have just described. Group processes can be an opportunity for us to experience a different way of relating to difficult information, difficult emotions, and to each other. We can help each other learn how to be with our difficult emotions, without suppressing them and consequently reacting by unconsciously grasping for habituated ideas or stories that might offer relief or distraction. Our intention is that more of us will avoid adopting simplistic narratives of blame or salvation, and the unhelpful actions

that might then arise. More of us may discover alternative ways of responding to our feelings of anxiety than blaming the Chinese for coronavirus, or voting for a proto-fascist government, or building walls around our vegetable gardens or countries. To help with that process, facilitation needs to be effective in providing a container for radical uncertainty, a 'liminal space' in which people can build stamina for being with insoluble dilemmas and the challenging emotions surrounding them, through developing skills of self- and co-regulation. It needs to invite ongoing courageous self-inquiry and a willingness to let go, within a wider container of compassion, acceptance, forgiveness, humility, and accepting mistakes (our own and others').

### **Understanding 'othering' and its remedy with facilitation**

As people engaged in inquiry and dialogue about the reasons for such oppression and destruction, we have been on a journey to consider the deepest reasons and how they can be practically addressed. We recognise there are various theories about how this predicament has arisen. We also sense that as the anticipation or experience of societal collapse spreads, so people will offer explanations that align with their pre-existing worldviews, or to seek to justify their future actions. In our inquiry, we have sought to be neither strategic nor defensive in our exploration of causes and lessons. That has led to an exploration of the way our own mental and relational habits maintain an ideology that is oppressive and destructive of ourselves, others and nature (Bendell, 2020). Looking more closely at those habits, we conclude that they all relate to a seemingly innate process of imagining separation.

The 'Other' as a philosophical concept and psychological phenomenon, was first introduced by Hegel in the 18th century, to describe the necessary counter-image to the 'self'; in order to hold a sense of self, we must construct a 'constitutive [individual or collective] Other' which we define as different from, and 'less than' or 'inferior to' oneself or to the group to which one identifies as belonging. Othering is a psycho-social process which is implicated in discrimination of all kinds (race, gender, class, age etc). It is closely connected to Marx's concept of 'alienation' (the 'worker' is alienated from aspects of their humanity through being reduced to an economic entity in service of capitalism), and has been influential in the evolution of feminist theory and sub-altern and critical race studies. The process of othering makes it easier to dehumanise people or groups, and conclude that they are unworthy of respect or dignity, and scholars are increasingly incorporating an analysis of othering in theorising about genocide and nationalist ideologies (Murray, 2015). Othering can also be seen at the root of the imagined separation between humans and non-human life, and the desacralisation of



nature. A 'Deep ecology' perspective invites an non-anthropocentric account of the relationship between 'humans' and nature (Naess, 1977). The cultural assumption of humanity's assumed superiority above all other non-human life - and therefore our entitlement to manage and consume - is central to Western worldview, and is often traced to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and translations of the bible that give 'man' dominion over the earth.

If we valued all other life, human and non human, as much as we value ourselves, or that with which we identify, could we participate in systems of oppression and destruction? We do not know, because we are all immersed in our internal processes of othering.

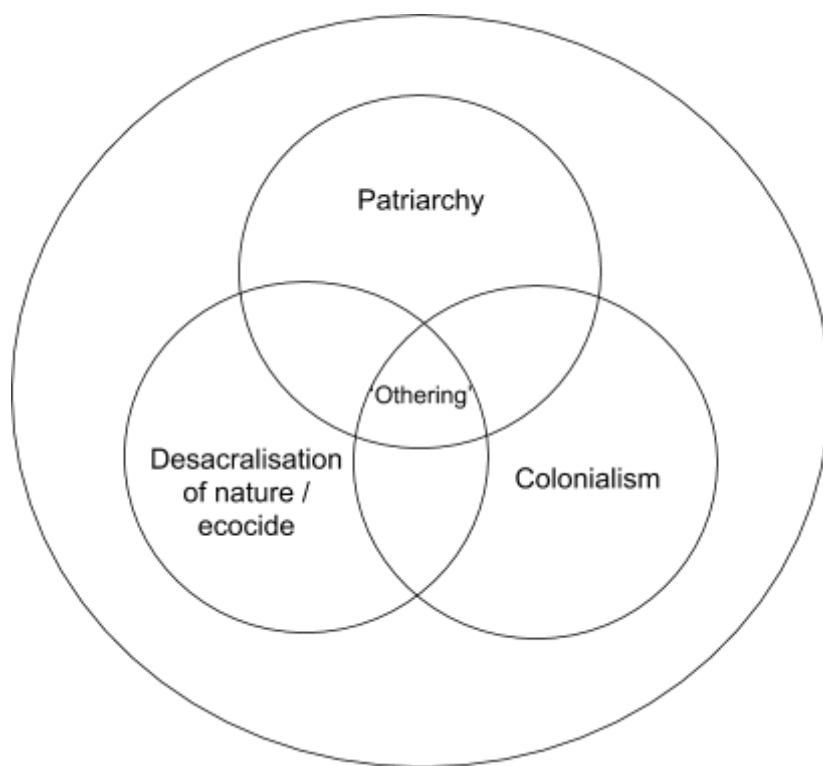
Othering occurs because our self-construal is predicated on identifying that which is not ourselves - whether that is other views, other behaviours, other people, and even other life at large. Othering is, fundamentally, a process of objectification; by naming and defining something, someone, or group of someones, we are subtly separating ourselves - as the agentic subject - from the other, as the passive object upon which we act. The modern worldview considers a person as the subject who observes everything else that 'he' encounters, which involves the objectification of whatever is encountered. We use the masculine pronoun purposefully here, referring to the feminist critique of rational objectivity as being inherently patriarchal (see, for example, de Beauvoir, 2011). Martha Nussbaum (1995) distinguishes seven features of objectification: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity. Because this worldview is embedded in the very building blocks of the way we communicate - our language of subjects acting upon objects - we can call this a 'grammar of being' which both reflects and enables othering.

The process of self-construal that requires othering is accentuated if we assume or wish for a fixed and unchanging self, rather than a fluid and uncertain phenomenon. It is also accentuated if we assume or wish for that self to be the autonomous author of our lives, rather than the expression of complex relations. More so, if we assume or wish for our self to be good and better than others. Therefore any attachment in us to the idea of a self that is whole, sovereign and good, makes 'othering' more compulsive. Paradoxically, this means that the belief that one can become a self actualized good human being can be a contributor to further oppression and violence.

The rise of the ideology of e-s-c-a-p-e in the modern era (Bendell, 2020) is predicated upon, and further galvanises, our inner processes of othering. For the mental habit of Entitlement, we must consider ourselves differentially worthy of good experiences. For the mental habit of Surety (another word for certainty), we must consider the rest of life to exist meaningfully only in ways that we

choose as mattering to us. For the mental habit of seeking to **Control**, we must objectify and diminish the subjectivity of that which we seek to control. For the mental habit of assuming our **Autonomy**, we must reduce the significance of all which influences and creates who we are. For the mental habit of assuming **Progress**, we must consider the world primarily as material to be shaped. For the mental habit of **Exceptionalism**, we must consider ourselves to be better than other people. Therefore, if we wish to become less unconsciously oppressed by this ideology, and less involved in reproducing it in society, it is useful to become more aware of our inner processes of othering.

The diagram below illustrates how the ideologies that are commonly cited as being instrumental in the destructiveness of the modern Western culture, and which have brought the planet, can each be viewed as cultural manifestations of a subtle but catastrophic process of institutionalised othering.



When we became aware of how othering is at the root of both oppression and destruction, we wondered what could be useful in our work as educators and facilitators. We learned that othering is constituted relationally when people interact (Frosh, 2018) and so an approach which enables people to 'notice' this widespread phenomenon as it arises within them and find ways of making choices that are less driven from that impulse, will be essential to the cause of reducing the potential for future harm. We found that insights from Critical Theory and Buddhism, and the connections between the two (Hattam, 2004) to be particularly helpful, alongside experiences of sitting in circles with the intention of unusually transparent and vulnerable sharing of thoughts and emotions.

Critical theory is useful as it brings attention to how processes of othering, and the ideology of e-s-c-a-p-e, are expressed through language and culture in ways that crystallize unequal power relations. Critical theory is a movement in social and political philosophy which seeks not only to understand those processes, but to dismantle them in order to reduce inequality and oppression (Sim & van Loon, 2004). Such theory invites us to become more aware of the language, symbols and behaviours that we use and that surround us, and how they are all involved in reproducing power relations. For instance, a newspaper headline, an advert, a form of speech, or manner of dressing, can all be stimuli that convey meanings with normative or power-laden dimensions (Fairclough, 2001). By becoming more aware of such processes, we develop what is described as critical consciousness or criticality (Freire 2005). That is a way of interpreting the world and oneself, where attention is given to possible normative or power-laden dimensions of any meanings intended or received from any stimuli so one can choose to either disengage or disrupt. Although there are modalities suited to classrooms, such as the 'critical reading' of texts, our climate predicament invites modalities for the development and everyday application of critical consciousness, particularly in group settings. We therefore concluded that it would be useful that facilitation for DA includes efforts to invite critical reflection on any cultural norms, often as expressed in language.

Another source of insight for us on how facilitated processes could bring attention to, and hopefully overcome, processes of othering, has been Buddhist philosophy and practice. One of the basic tenets of Buddhist teachings is the realisation of impermanence. The perspective that the self is an unchanging, separate, and coherent phenomenon is not recognised in Buddhism. Instead, we are invited to consider, and through insight meditation to experience, the self as a moving assembly of sensations, emotions and thoughts (Hagen, 1989). The potential of experiencing self in that way is that we become less attached to the processes of self-construal, as we described above, and therefore less engaged in unconscious othering. Through meditation practice, we are also invited to notice how we are either averse to or desirous of certain thoughts and emotions, in ways that can influence our decisions about what to focus on or what to believe to be true. That level of detailed attention to our inner thoughts and emotions can help reveal the moments when we label and judge stimuli of any kind, and whether we accept an idea or not. If people can bring that greater awareness into the moment of interpersonal interactions, to maintain an orientation towards inter-subjectivity in their relations with others (Irigaray, 1985) and a more 'critical' interpretation of everyday culture, then there is greater opportunity for disengaging or disrupting systems of oppression and destruction.

Our experience is that the kinds of facilitation techniques outlined in this paper are helpful for promoting 'critical consciousness' in general. By that, we mean an understanding of the way that each of our assumptions and thoughts are shaped by culture, in ways that reflect and reproduce power relations. Assumptions can be as deep as those around certainty, progress, grief, or 'unwelcome' emotions. Typically, critical social theory has been taught in ways that invite us to analyse texts for their ideological content and effects on readers (and the people or lifeforms being described in those texts). Such a deconstruction of texts can be revelatory, especially if it invites a focus on our inner emotions and how that influences how we adopt or reject certain framings of reality. With DA facilitation, there is an invitation to go deeper in exploring how our own identities can be usefully regarded as a text, both reflecting and reproducing ideologies. Therefore, we have found processes like Deep Relating (described below) to be useful in deepening participants' ability to notice our inner processes of the social construction of power and ideology. This provides opportunities for a transformation of people's self-construal and ways of being in the world. Therefore, we recommend educators consider using some of the processes of facilitation described in this paper, particularly when intending to support critical consciousness.

## **Principles and aspects of facilitating Deep Adaptation**

The ways of relating that we will describe in this paper is at the very heart of what we mean to deeply adapt. Given the uncertainty of the future after the 'end of progress', the vision that many people share in the Deep Adaptation field is a vision of being rather than a vision of doing. Whatever we end up doing to try to reduce harm, the ways we show up can be different to the ways of relating that have produced the predicament we are in. For some people this represents a kind of hope, and yet for others it could be better described as a form of 'hope-free-ness,' where people relinquish attachment to outcomes, and instead experience joy in discovering new ways of being. In particular, those ways of being involve attention to how we are - individually and together - cultivating a state of presence, connection, and equanimity, from which engaged action may arise. To support that aim, a trained and experienced facilitator can be really helpful.

The role of a facilitator is someone who supports the empowerment of individuals to learn collaboratively and experientially in a group, and whose legitimacy in this role is consented to voluntarily by members of the group (Heron, 1999). The specific context for facilitation for DA, above, is relevant for all kinds of groups, whether concerned with 'inner' deep adaptation (the psycho-social, the emotional, or the spiritual aspects of integrating collapse-awareness), or 'outer' deep adaptation (the practical aspects, e.g. exploring and putting into practice realistic measures for

addressing food security at community or country level). Throughout several years of working with people in groups on this seemingly all-encompassing topic, we have observed how easily people can move into practical conversations, from a place of urgency, or a felt need for productivity or usefulness. What we have realised, over time, is that people who have been socialised in a modern, Western culture do not need encouragement or practice to activate their impulse to 'get busy', valuing productivity and outcomes above connection and process, and this impulse can easily become a distraction or means of escape. Fortunately, there are many approaches that exist to support more democratic, participatory, practical collaboration. Ingredients and practices from Sociocracy<sup>1</sup>, Micro-solidarity<sup>2</sup>, and Liberating structures<sup>3</sup> are all being used to support collaborative working by members of the DAF. But without hosts and participants giving adequate attention to the ways in which dominant cultural ideas are transmitted and enacted discursively, these approaches, in themselves, are not immune to enabling the reproduction of harmful assumptions. Spaces can still be dominated by the same confident voices, and even the language of 'agility', 'producing better results', and 'social benefit' can confer subtle assumptions of patriarchy, colonialism, and anthropocentrism. That is why our focus in the next two sections is on ways to cultivate critical awareness of 'how we are' when we show up, rather than 'what we do', underpinned by the belief that meaningful, engaged collaborative action can arise from empowered acceptance of our predicament.

What follows is a summary of some key aspects of facilitation for deep adaptation, which have emerged from the engagement of a lively community of practice of facilitators for deep adaptation, who bring together a wide range of relevant backgrounds, from psychotherapy and counselling, somatics, mindfulness, social work and community development, psycho-spiritual development, as well as expertise in distributed and collaborative leadership and participatory decision-making.

## Containment

*What if we all felt safe enough?  
Safe enough to play?  
Safe enough to share?  
Safe enough to give?  
Safe enough to take risks?  
Safe enough to slow down?  
Safe enough to feel pain?  
Safe enough to rest?*

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, <https://sociocracy30.org>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.microsolidarity.cc>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.liberatingstructures.com>

*Safe enough to create?  
Safe enough to dance?  
Safe enough to let go?  
Safe enough to love?  
Safe enough to cry?  
Safe enough to grieve?  
Safe enough to die.*

*Katie Carr*

A fundamental element of the process of group facilitation is to provide containment, described by Ringer (1998) as “group members having the conscious and unconscious sense of being firmly held in the group and its task”. Containment, in the context of DA, is creating a space, and conditions, in which people feel *safe enough* to feel and express their most difficult emotions relating to collapse, or to reveal the ways in which the discursive foundations of the micro-violences of othering are internalised and unconsciously enacted in our interactions with each other. Containment is a fundamental aspect of facilitation practice, and paramount in facilitation for deep adaptation.

Smit (2014) proposes two aspects of containment; external (“hard”) containment (or the structures that form the context in which the facilitation is taking place), and internal (“soft”) containment (or the qualities of presence that the facilitator brings to their role). External containment begins well before the gathering takes place, and includes the clarity of the ‘call’ or invitation (will people experience what they are expecting to experience?), administrative arrangements for participation, and joining instructions. It also includes (in face-to-face gatherings) giving intention to the space, accessibility, comfort, as well as ensuring that physical needs of the participants, and facilitators, are met. Internal containment includes such qualities of the facilitator as a non-judgmental presence, trustworthiness, support, empathy, and consistency, and practices that enable these.

Drawing on influence from deep ecology (Naess, 1977), we suggest including a non-anthropocentric, non western empiricist paradigm into creating a sense of containment. For some this may mean inviting and giving thanks to ancestors (human and non-human), or invoking the feeling of being held by and in service to the earth. For others, it means connecting with a higher power (implicitly or explicitly), connecting with our own teachers, and honouring the presence of collective wisdom rather than individual approaches.

Containment is often understood as the facilitator creating a ‘safe space’, however, this is problematic for a number of reasons. First, the context of facilitation for deep adaptation is not only inherently unsafe (considering the implications of the loss of security, sustenance, and meaning; Bendell, 2018), but also predicated on the fact that much of our harmful action throughout history

has arisen from a felt or perceived need for safety and security. Second, a sense of safety is a subjective experience; for example, what feels like a safe space for a male participant who is white may be experienced as very unsafe by a woman of colour, or anyone else who is a member of a group which has been systematically marginalised by dominant culture. Thirdly, the facilitator is not unaffected by what is being explored, so it is appropriate to positively acknowledge that emotional involvement to themselves and the participants. For these reasons, we recommend that spaces are always co-hosted by two or more people, and that careful and honest attention is given to the relationship between and amongst co-facilitators. In any group situation, our own boundaries as facilitators can begin to collapse; each of us has our own unconscious patterns and beliefs, which, when triggered, mean we may begin to lose a sense of integrity, and consequently our ability to 'hold space' energetically can be compromised. The concept of accompaniment in psychotherapy offers a useful metaphor: the collapse of stories of self, of previous architecture of meaning, requires the possibility of letting go into a liminal space:

*There is a river, it is in flow and unpredictable. The people in your group might be in that river, or it might be part of your intention for them to be able to explore that river. So you need to have one foot in the river and one foot on the bank. Working with co-facilitators means that one person can always have two feet on the bank.*

Given that the context of deep adaptation to societal collapse is a topic that is experienced as inherently unsafe, and that safety is relative and subjectively experienced, the aim of giving attention to containment and boundaries challenges the myth that it is possible to create a safe space. Instead, we give attention to holding a space that is *safe enough*, and inherent in that process is increasing our capabilities for self- and co-regulation. Facilitating for deep adaptation is about becoming more resilient, by building our stamina for tolerating difficult emotions, and the sobriety to be able to take considered generative action, rather than turn towards what feels more pleasurable, easy, or comfortable. Creating a safe enough space doesn't make what happens inside the container more comfortable; it makes it more possible for us to hold ourselves and each other in discomfort (see GTDF, 2020).

### **Denial and radical uncertainty**

These are unprecedented times, challenging people's sense of self, security and agency, with the fear of societal collapse and even human extinction, triggering fear responses (Bendell, 2019). As people from all walks of life, including climatologists and policy makers, feel anxiety, that can

encourage habitual responses which will be unhelpful for wise action. Of particular concern here is an over-emphasis on ever more detailed measurement, along with an aversion to diverse ways of knowing, holistic analysis, and consequent inhibited ability for wise discernment within ambiguity.

If we take the exponential increase of human-caused carbon emissions as our indicator, many decades of climate science have not had an impact in reducing the unsustainability of society (Bendell, 2018). We have become better at measuring and at producing more measurements. Stepping back from the specific researchers and their research, our society's emphasis on measurements can be regarded as a manifestation of contemporary discomfort with living in a state of uncertainty. That reflects the modern culture that has developed over hundreds of years since the scientific revolution. Within the culture of modernity, "man imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997; p16).

This emphasis on a positivist-scientific response to perceived threats is unhelpful when it maligns more diverse forms of insight as well as the state of not-knowing. In the worst manifestations of this ideology, people can condemn more holistic analyses and suppress anything uncertain and threatening. In addition, rather than remain in a state of uncertainty, people may unconsciously choose to adopt simplistic stories of blame and safety, such as political narratives characterised by racism, nationalism and authoritarianism.

With its emphasis on the social construction of our ways of knowing the world, critical theory teaches us that certainty is an illusion (Rorty, 1989). That view echoes many spiritual traditions. Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and indigenous worldviews suggest that human agency is not central; rather, humans are understood as being *in relation* with other forces within a reality we cannot fully comprehend. These sources of wisdom recognise the possibilities for a felt sense of interbeing, humble appreciation of our interdependence, and openness to integrate insights from multiple ways of knowing our world (Abhayananda, 2002).

Reducing culturally-produced resistance in all of us to letting go of our previously assumed certainties about the world, knowledge and personal identity, is therefore at the heart of facilitation for deep adaptation. Enabling people to feel more equanimity with uncertainty and ambiguity, within a context of people perceiving increasing vulnerability and change, is therefore a key aim of holding space for deep adaptation.

## **Grief**



The affective dimension of experience has been repressed in the western modern worldview, or relegated to a domestic and feminine sphere, outside of dominant discourse. That dominant discourse suppresses emotionality of any kind, but fear, and fear of death, in particular, has been a key factor in the denial of our predicament with dangerous climate change. As the implications of that predicament are becoming more widely acknowledged, the field of psychology has been exploring the phenomenon of 'eco grief' (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017). Within that field of expertise, the general agreement is that western culture is grief-phobic, meaning that unpleasant emotions associated with grieving are problematized and framed as needing to be relieved and overcome. A critical-theoretical perspective on this phenomenon suggests that "the social rules that govern the expression of grief, the role of attachment, social pain, and shame [are] potent forces that promote compliance with social rules" (Harris, 2010; p241). Suppression of different aspects of grief can result in becoming stuck in denial (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Collective acceptance of our predicament, by becoming enabled to move through all of the difficult emotional experiences, is one way of finding loving equanimity in collapse (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017).

To write about the emotion of grief by discussing expert analysis risks repeating the deadening patterns we have criticised so far in this paper. So we will take a moment to share with you in a different way. We know that grief decimates and destroys us. In the depth of the grieving process, we lose connection with our sense of self, and everything that previously seemed certain about the world, the familiar landmarks of our person, our relationships, and our social context. It feels unbearable. And in fact, the self that encounters it cannot bear it, because that self is not big enough to comprehend it. The boundaries of our self are broken down and expanded in order to become big enough (or have an increased capacity for) integrating the experience of loss. A new self emerges, one that is created during the journey of integrating the incomprehensible. In the depths of grieving, all becomes lost. There is no stable ground from which to orient. In order to locate ourselves and navigate, we need at least two known coordinates: where we are, and something else on the horizon to use a reference point. Without those, we become lost in a continually shifting landscape.

In a culture which is "death denying", and in which there is a paucity of death-related rituals (Thieleman, 2015), there is an important role to be played by providing spaces where the complex and challenging emotions involved in grieving can be shared and collectively witnessed. Experiences and expressions of grief and loss are not individual, but form an important part of community collective experience, and examples of such practices as grief tending, Death Cafes, and The Work That Reconnects offer (Macy, 2020)

## Examples of Deep Adaptation modalities and facilitated processes

The Deep Adaptation Forum is an international space to connect people, online and in person, to foster mutual support, collaboration, and professional development in the process of facing societal collapse. It was established as an emergent online community in early 2019, in response to the unexpected scale of the impact of the original 'Deep Adaptation' paper, published in July 2018. A community of practice of volunteer facilitators, with expertise in group facilitation, training, psychotherapy, eco-therapy, mindfulness, somatics, and a host of other associated fields relevant to DA, has been creating and offering regular and one-off online gatherings for DAF members, around the themes of resilience, relinquishment, restoration, and reconciliation. There follows a description of three 'modalities' or facilitated processes that have emerged, informed by the context described above.

### Deep Listening

*All of you is welcome here.  
The part that really wants to be here,  
and the part that wishes you were somewhere else.  
The part that knows and trusts yourself,  
and the part that doesn't believe in yourself.  
The part that can stand up and defend yourself,  
and the part that gets walked over.*

*The part that knows and can express how you feel,  
and the part that blanks out, goes foggy, detaches.  
Whatever you are feeling, you are welcome here,  
your joy, your anger, your fear, your sadness, your shame.  
Your YES and your NO are welcome here.  
Your experience, and your knowledge,*

*as well as your not knowing, and your questions, are all welcome here.  
Your doubt, and your trust, your sceptical self and your hopeful self*

*All of you is welcome here.*

*Jo Poyser, adapted from a piece by Nicola Kurk of Shadow Work*

These small group gatherings are a space in which participants are invited to share honestly and openly about how they are feeling, and what they are experiencing, as they grapple with the implications of the unfolding climate tragedy. Crucially, they are not dialogic. Rather, in small groups of 4-6, each person has equal time to share, while the others bear witness, without comment or judgement. (In this respect, the container has something in common with the firm boundaries established in an AA meeting, where there is no cross-talk allowed, positive or negative). As listeners, participants are encouraged to suspend their own process of self-referential sense-making

or judging, and instead to practice empathy, through active listening and bringing curiosity. These are not intended as therapeutic spaces, although this practice of active, attentive, and non-judgmental listening is an aspect of therapeutic practice. This space for sharing emotions that may have felt unbearable or unspeakable (particularly as many people in the DAF have joined because they feel isolated in their worldview) can be a powerful and healing experience. The modality is central to DA because it is a space where the affective dimension of experience is foregrounded, and negative or difficult emotions are not framed as problems to be solved. Many participants share their experiences of grieving aspects of the natural world that have already been destroyed or devastated, or grieving as they relinquish hopes they may have had for the future. This can play an important role in substituting for the lack of collective grief rituals in modern society. Crucially, this practice creates space for allowing and expressing difficult or 'negative' emotions, such as fear, confusion, anger, and guilt - all of which are arguably natural responses in the face of the magnitude of the climate crisis which is unfolding. The suppression of these emotional responses in a society which fetishises happiness and positivity, are implicated in denial and consequently in a kind of paralysis which prevents meaningful action towards either mitigation or adaptation.

## **Deep Relating**

Deep Relating is a relational meditation practice, or an approach to being in relationship with another person, or group of people, in a way that is grounded in a deep and detailed awareness of present moment experience. Participants are invited to speak from and of only what is arising in the 'here and now', which can include physical sensations (including what is seen and heard), emotions, and thoughts. Then trying to articulate what is experienced as clearly as possible with the intention of inviting the other into your world for deeper connection. People are invited to notice when the impulse to 'tell stories' arises, that is, to explain, justify, or evaluate experience by referencing past or future, or prior assumptions or frameworks of meaning. In this respect, it has some association with 'experiential' compared with 'narrative' modes of being as described in research into the impacts of meditation (see, for example, Farb et al, 2007). The focus becomes increasingly towards the minutiae - our impulses and judgements that may have previously passed under the radar of awareness.

There are generally no instructions as such, but a set of principles that guide emergent dialogue:

- **commitment to connection** with ourselves, each other and everything that arises in the present moment

- **staying with sensations** - noticing the sensations and emotions as they arise in the body in the present moment, and allowing them to be expressed and acknowledged
- **welcome anything** - we trust that whatever emotions and sensations are being triggered by our interactions are here to enable us and the group to shift into higher awareness and acceptance
- **owning our experience** by returning back to the independent observer within and examining closely the source of our experiences, especially when triggered by others
- **being with the other in their world** - while others are sharing, we explore what it's like to be this person, what sensations, emotions, and thoughts arise as we listen to them, and we ask questions that allow us to understand their present experience better.

This practice is similar to, and has evolved from, other modalities known as Authentic Relating<sup>4</sup>, Circling<sup>5</sup>, 'Focusing' in psychotherapy, and also the modern Buddhist practice of Insight Dialogue (Kramer, 2007). It is also influenced by Bohmian dialogue, so it is not goal-oriented, but invites "...a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us...[which makes] possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge some new understanding... this shared meaning is the 'glue' or 'cement' that holds people and societies together" (Bohm, 1996). The practice invites us to slow down, so we can become continually attentive and curious about our inner world, in a similar way to what occurs with insight meditation. That helps reveal to us our habitual entanglements of either perception or sensations, with our emotions and thoughts. Once these different phenomena and their entanglements are noticed, we can choose to act less habitually. Within a culture preoccupied by urgency and busy-ness, this slowing down in order to notice and acknowledge the ways in which we make sense of experience according to prior assumptions, can reveal - sometimes painfully - how we recreate and reinforce cultural bias and discrimination in micro-moments of relating. Put simply, not to allow time and space for acknowledging the micro-violences that happen unconsciously in our relating is how systemic inequalities are transferred between the personal and the cultural, and vice versa.

One of the ways in which Deep Relating is distinct from other similar practices is that 'collapse awareness' is explicitly present in the space, and named by facilitators. The intention is to remove any barriers to full expression around this topic; it doesn't mean that there is necessarily intention that this topic will arise.

The principles and practice of Deep Relating offer potential for exploring and surfacing the unconscious patterns of dominant western discourse described earlier that are important for addressing the mental habits that can result in othering, denial, and escape (Bendell, 2020), and so

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<sup>4</sup> <https://authenticrelating.co/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.circlingeurope.com>

the practice of Deep Relating can be an invaluable approach for deep adaptation. There is an emphasis on somatic and affective dimensions being as important as the cognitive or narrative; dialogue is emergent and not outcome-oriented; and that (ostensibly at least) anything is welcomed rather than there being rule-governed modes of participation. However, the presence of these ingredients is not sufficient to ensure critically conscious engagement. We have witnessed similar modalities which are framed as a way of revealing one's 'true' or 'authentic' self, a narrative which can amplify, rather than lessen, a sense of exceptionalism and entitlement, typical of what Foucault (1984) called the *California Cult of the Self*. That can be particularly attractive for some people whose anticipation of personal mortality and a loss of past identity in the face of collapse leads them to choose narratives, experiences and communities that offer to support them in the least complicated (or most enjoyable) manner. If a 'spiritual bypass' response to lessening one's conformity with society drives people's response, then there may even be a suppression of attention to questions of complicity and solidarity. Not only would that reduce opportunities for them to learn, engage and reduce contributions to unnecessary harm, it is an exclusionary narrative that might therefore align with the tendencies towards repressive politics that are occurring in many countries.

In the past we have witnessed hosts of similar processes embodying, enabling and legitimising subtle enactments of power-laden discourse. Therefore, if facilitators are not holding space with some of the 'critical consciousness' we described earlier, there is a risk of allowing or inadvertently reinforcing dominant narratives - about power, domination, entitlement, and progress - which will hinder the deep adaptation process. Therefore some attention to how we, as facilitators, can better avoid ideologies of e-s-c-a-p-e will be useful. A useful moment of reflection, either by an individual facilitator, or for within a group, is to ask: 'what might culture be producing, or reducing, in us right now?' Whether this aspect of Deep Relating needs to be developed into an additional principle to 'ponder culture' is something we are exploring through practice.

## **Death Cafes**

Death Cafes were set up by Jon Underwood in 2011, to provide a safe, confidential setting for people to come together to talk about death and dying, 'to increase awareness of death with a view to helping people make the most of their (finite) lives'<sup>6</sup>. Underwood was inspired by the work of Bernard Crettaz, a sociologist and anthropologist, who recognised the need, within cultures which are generally death-phobic, for a space where people could explore their relationship with death and

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<sup>6</sup> <https://deathcafe.com/>

mortality (Crettaz, 2010). Online 'DA Death Cafes' have been held during 2020, offering an opportunity for people to engage with death and mortality against the backdrop of cataclysmic climate change. They have offered a space in which people share and explore their experiences as they are coming to terms with the global predicament, species extinction, and possible collapse of societies. It is clear that people find great comfort and support as they share and deeply listen to others, also open and willing to talk about what these immense challenges mean to them.

Aversion to acknowledging our mortality can be understood as implicated in subtle as well as obvious forms of climate denial (discussed in Bendell 2018), and in the e-s-c-a-p-e ideology (Bendell 2020).

### **Box 1: Finding Resources to Host Spaces**

'Deep Adaptation Facilitators' is a community of practice, part of the Deep Adaptation Forum, for people who are hosting, holding space and facilitating groups within the context of deep adaptation to climate-induced collapse, both online and in person. Members bring expertise and experience from a diverse range of backgrounds, and share practice and support each other in this vital work. Many are offering their time and skills voluntarily to provide online gatherings for the wider DA community. The intention is that we can share practices and approaches that embody the '[Principles of Deep Adaptation Gatherings](#)', and support the growth of emotional resilience, dialogue, and self- and co-regulation.

Deep Listening, Deep Relating and online Death Cafes have been designed and hosted regularly, specifically for the Deep Adaptation Forum. Facilitators have also offered sharing and listening spaces, workshops for drawing on archetypes to support deep adaptation, 'open space' events online and in person, and are available to offer guidance for individuals and groups who want to develop their own skills for facilitating dialogue and community.

To find out more, or to join as a volunteer facilitator, visit [www.deepadaptation.info/connect/facilitation/](http://www.deepadaptation.info/connect/facilitation/)

## **Conclusion**

In concluding our discussion of facilitation for deep adaptation, we wish to point out that the theoretical frameworks, ideas, and modalities proposed here, in the conventions of academic written form, may serve to drain this topic of its vibrancy. Facilitation of groups towards deep adaptation to the unfolding effects of climate chaos, in line with the principles and context that we have expounded in this paper, is at once a crucial, challenging and rewarding endeavour. As much as

it is an honour to support people as they share in painful processes of personal and collective relinquishment, and build the resilience together that is required to face courageously the sometimes overwhelming feelings of uncertainty, disorientation, or fear associated with looming crisis, there is commensurate joy in accompanying people as they discover new ways of experiencing deeper connection with each other, renewed appreciation for life, restored capacities for playfulness and creativity, and find motivation founded in solidarity and determination to “extend the glide and soften the crash” for all of life on earth, not just their immediate neighbours<sup>7</sup>.

Our hope and intention is that the facilitated group experiences we outline in this paper, and others occurring in the DA field, will support us all in reconnecting with our sense of interbeing and active solidarity with all life. As well as feeling uplifting, it will necessarily and rightly continue to be messy and painful (GTDF 2020). We agree with critical theorist and philosopher Richard Rorty’s (1989) view that the only chance to eradicate exclusion and oppression is to expand the conception of ‘we’ until no-one is excluded. The possibility of this realisation for supporting groups in deep adaptation could be significant, in terms of finding ways to avoid the continuing emergence of parochial, exclusionary, or nationalist narratives in mainstream cultures as people sense greater uncertainty and vulnerability.

With this wider context in mind, we encourage the wider use of the approaches in this paper. Although the ethos and approaches of facilitation for Deep Adaptation have hitherto been in service of people from the general public who anticipate societal collapse, in future it may have wider applicability. First, it could be a useful way of helping climate scientists and other experts who influence the narrative around the possibility or likelihood of collapse to allow and process their difficult emotions, so any aversions may less influence either the scientific process, the analysis of implications or the approach to communication. A second area relates to the experience of disruption and its aftermath. We do not have knowledge or experience of working with communities that have experienced serious disruption due to climate change (unless one accepts the analysis of environmental causes of increased occurrence of zoonotic disease). However we are curious about whether this approach to facilitation may be of use in such contexts in future. We encourage experimentation and learning on that, given how disruptions of many kinds will inevitably increase. This is also important for how people involved in the DA conversation can better learn about and from people and communities who have already experienced, or are experiencing, collapse as a direct result of modernity. Third, we recommend these approaches to facilitation are considered within the professions that are typically involved in emergency readiness and response. It is probable

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<sup>7</sup> <https://jembendell.com/2019/03/17/the-love-in-deep-adaptation-a-philosophy-for-the-forum/>

that many members of the general public and government leaders will look to the armed services and the emergency services for guidance on how to prepare and respond in situations of societal disruption. It is also likely that in such situations, executives in organizations will look towards the people specializing in risk management and business continuity to provide strategic and operational direction. The risk we perceive is if emergency response and risk management is based on, and so subtly replicates, unhelpful or harmful mental models of othering and separation. We are not aware of the extent to which such professional sectors already have processes for enabling people to relate more consciously, particularly in groups, but hope this paper may resonate with pioneers in those sectors.



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