Cassandra’s Message! Nuclear Threat and Climate Catastrophe. The Endgame?

I recently attended a paper presentation and panel discussion hosted by the Institute of Psychoanalysis which was looking at how a psychoanalytical approach can inform and explain different responses to the climate emergency.

The keynote speaker was Charles Strozier from New York City University who started by outlining the importance of the foreknowledge of death in highlighting the importance of creating a meaningful life. Making life meaningful/figuring out the point of living only becomes important because we are aware death is waiting for us. He ran through stories and traditions and how they give meaning to life and how religion has a focus on new and re-deemed life.

He then drew attention to a change which occurred with the use of nuclear weapons, which gave the capability for millions of people to die immediately. People now had the power to end human life: apocalyptic power. This would be death without God as arbiter: no chance of salvation or redemption. If the meaning we find in life comes from having confidence we continue symbolically after death through our communities and our children, this meaning is shattered by an apocalyptic event.

In the face of this threat to the meaning of life, some people retreat into religious fundamentalism: seeking meaning and re-assurance in a return to the ideas of a caring God when he seems so un-necessary in the nuclear age. He quoted T.S. Elliot: we may go with a bang or a whimper. The earth may survive but not mankind. He then drew a parallel between the environmental devastation of a nuclear war and the environmental devastation brought on by the climate emergency. The paper finished on a note of hope that we can choose to change our course as a species.

The subsequent discussion was enlightening: Strozier discussed work from the 1960’s which showed that there was opposition to government programmes which encouraged people to prepare to survive a nuclear attack. He talked about psychological numbing and mind-blindness: that people would rather not make any changes and face death rather than take steps to survive. Instead, it was more helpful to encourage people into activism through avoiding focusing on the impending apocalypse.

We walk a fine line when discussing the climate emergency between hysteria and psychological numbing and entropy. If we want people to act to ace the challenge of climate catastrophe it is important not to make things worse by terrifying people, leading to people choosing psychological numbing and lack of action.

Philip Stokoe a panel member from the Tavistock clinic suggested that from a Kleinian perspective psychological numbing can be seen not as a primary destructive drive, but a drive which is a response to an intense emotional response (fear). Therefore one way to encourage engagement with the climate emergency is to reduce the intensity of feelings around the debate to avoid psychological numbing. The need to retreat from these painful feelings can lead to a psychological retreat either towards a parent figure (God will save you), or a disavowal of the evidence: the unconscious beliefs which protects people from engaging with the evidence. One way to combat this would be to describe the unconscious belief, then re-activate curiosity and discuss what is real.

Strozier then talked about Awareness and Formed Awareness of the climate emergency. You might be aware of climate change, but formed awareness is when you realise you are implicated in climate change: that all of our behaviours are implicated in the current trashing of the planet, leaving no home for our children. He framed this very strongly as a moral problem. Once you have formed awareness, to choose not to act he stated was morally evil.

The end of the session was taken up with discussing how we build a life affirming culture: how do we act in a way that uses our power to promote wellbeing for ourselves, the planet and our children?

There was a discussion of using personal conversations to bring people to confront their own mind-blindness. Using climate cafes models can help with this (I am training to deliver this with the Climate Psychology Alliance) or using props such as beer coasters to discuss drivers to open discussions on how society operates. This requires us to become leaders in our own right in having these conversations and developing tools to support other people to become leaders in this.

We can draw on social identity research by being aware of the importance of challenging norms of social behaviour and using the power of the group to create new environmentally active and aware social norms. Once behaviours which promote the wellbeing of ourselves and the planet become the norm they will become easier for people to adopt. This tied into a discussion of the importance of place and how indigenous and traditional cultures, including Gaelic culture, are imbued with place based knowing. There is work ongoing in this area, and it ties into research showing that having a connection to the natural world and to place supports people in being open to discuss climate action.

For myself, being a leader in this area means exploring how psychology can help us engage more people in necessary climate actions. This includes writing this article, and becoming a climate café leader. I am also involved in a research bid looking at developing community based sessions combining walking with learning about the natural habitat and birdlife, learning about the culture and history of place, and having those climate conversations leading to change.

I will be running some climate café sessions soon: look out for them coming through in your emails if you wish to take part. For more information on psychology and climate try these resources:

[Home (climatepsychologyalliance.org)](https://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org/)

[IAPS Association | International Association People-Environment Studies (iaps-association.org)](https://iaps-association.org/)

[IAAP: Division 4: Environmental Psychology (iaapsy.org)](https://iaapsy.org/divisions/division4/)

[Home | British Environmental Psychology Society (breps.co.uk)](https://www.breps.co.uk/)