

NWRPA Newsletter January 2020

Denial, Fatalism and Psychological Health in a Sick Planet

Jim Davis and Kieran Nolan

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Summary by Frank Kelley

Jim Davis has been a psychotherapist for 30 years and views the personal as fundamentally political.

Dr Kieran Nolan has been a psychotherapist for 18 years. He has been reading about climate change for many years and is a member of Extinction Rebellion.

The reading Kieran recommends is:

- *A Farewell to Ice* by Peter Wadhams
- *Heat* by George Monbiot
- *This Changes Everything* by Naomi Klein
- *How Bad Are Bananas?* by Mike Berners-Lee
- *Six Degrees* by Mark Lynas
- *Out of the Wreckage* by Georgia Monbiot
- *Don't Even Think About It: Why our brains are wired to ignore climate change* by George Marshall

Jim and Kieran wanted to promote a conversation to counter the profound silence about climate change and talk about what needs to be done. They achieved this magnificently with the involvement of an attentive and concerned audience.

In our publicity Jim and Kieran introduced their presentation as follows. *Like many other social and political issues, global warming raises challenges in relation to our focus remaining solely at the individual level. There is a growing need to account how cultural and political factors create collective 'dis-ease', and for a return to the early days when Transactional Analysis psychotherapy was seen as a social psychiatry. The recent past has been characterised by a fundamental retreat into social isolation, cynicism, loss of meaning, and a pervasive passivity that cultivates denial and discounting in relation to the safety of our planet.*

Part of the denial is that climate change campaigning has often been reduced to a left-right split. This split gives the impression that climate change denial is the property of the right wing with the financing and powerful support of the big oil and energy companies. It is remarkable how very few climate scientists support these climate change sceptics. However the constant drip of scepticism has eroded a clear scientific message about the reality of climate change through human agency. Evangelical Christians have also used climate predictions as a sign of the End of Days. Of course being the fulfilment of prophecy and the will of God means the Apocalypse cannot be altered by human agency.

George Marshall has tried to change this split meta-silence by talking to right wing groups like the Tea Party. However, left and liberal individuals and organisations also maintain this denial. Weaning ourselves off carbon production is immensely difficult, particularly as it involves the curtailing of our own freedoms. Our relentless narcissistic consumption can be confused with happiness.

Denial is easier because the changes that are causing suffering now are happening to other people in other countries, for example the mass movements of people in Africa.

A major source of denial is avoiding facing powerful anxieties. The science of climate change is the kind of big scary thing that can frighten all of us into silence and inaction.

In *Six Degrees* Mark Lynas has been realistic about the severe climate changes facing us already and up to the six degrees of average temperature increase possible this century if nothing is done. A Guardian review summarised this. *After one degree, he says, droughts will probably devastate Nebraska, the Amazon ecosystem may collapse and Australian coral reefs will be reduced to rubble. After two degrees, polar bears will be extinct, Europe scorched by heat waves and Canada packed with refugees from the USA, searching for water and arable land. After three degrees, Manhattan will be swamped by regular floods and most of Holland will be under water. After four degrees, southern Europe will be a desert and London will have the climate that Marrakech has today.* It is surprising how often reviewers use the word *Apocalypse* about the very sober scientific account in this book.

A hidden kind of denial is that we can moralise about change while actually changing very little. There is a Transactional Analysis game called *isn't it awful*. This is when we focus on and bemoan our fate but without realistically facing our problems or coming up with solutions.

Of course forgetting is a form of denial. These concerns about our ecology are not new. Jim and Kieran reminded us about the *Limits of Growth* (Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, and William W. Behrens III). This 1972 book sold thirty million copies. This was about population and economic growth in a world of finite natural resources. The ecological message of the book had faded although it helped promote lead free petrol and action on holes in the ozone layer.

Jim and Kieran thought change would be difficult without the kind of social activism that has led to previous political change. Joining an organisation like Extinction Rebellion is a way of doing this. They also advocated working within our professional bodies like the UKCP. An inspiration here is that Richard Horton, Editor of *The Lancet*, has urged all doctors to become climate activists.

It is also worth noting that these issues are an integral part of our working life. *Eco-Anxiety* is becoming an increasing and prominent concern for our clients in their sessions. Climate activism may seem outside the scope of a therapy organisation. However it does seem compatible with the original idea of Transactional Analysis as social psychiatry.

Thank you very much to Jim Davis and Kieran Nolan. The people who come to NWRPA seminars are always enthusiastic and like to join in. This seminar was more energetic than most. This passionate involvement came from our concern about climate change and Jim and Kieran's skill in promoting this conversation.