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Global Warming Deniers

Over recent years, I have engaged with mountains of media information dealing with the general subject of Global Warming and Climate Change and overall, the argument 'for' has been very convincing. So I pause at this point and own up to holding the view that the earth is indeed warming at an (alarmingly) accelerated pace, however I acknowledge this is by no means a universally shared perspective.

Because whether TV panels, for example, are stuffed with experts, celebrities or politicians, all clever people according to their profiles, opinion invariably remains polarised and divided as to whether there is actually a problem at all?

On the one hand, there are those who consider it to be '*bleedin obvious*' that we have a developing crisis on our hands. They look at the global story as it continues to pan out in graphic and frequently dramatic ways, often with catastrophic community disruption and/or terrible loss of life and they say – yes – there is incontrovertible evidence that things are radically different from times past, and getting more so with each passing day. They base their view on what has been a vast accumulation of raw experiential data to date and as such, they apply the criteria of frequency, severity, consistency, progression and informed ecological history to inform and conclude. Then they – quite logically in my view – state that, yes indeed, we really do have a real and growing problem on our global hands.

In opposition, there are those people who say, 'tis only natural and cyclic' – wait a while and everything will be back to normal again. If not this, another opinion of similar kind is that a little change won't do the planet any harm at all – it's pretty robust having survived as long as it has done so leave things alone and the world will naturally adapt; we'll all adapt.

In this sense and depending on where we sit in the world, adaption may be that we won't need to go abroad for our suntan anymore or if we want a boating holiday, there will be more landmass under water to pick from. OK, things may be a little different from what we've been historically used to, continues this mind-set – only a little by the way – so don't listen to those negative scaremongers who just seem to derive perverse fun from unsettling you and potentially ruining your day as a result. Sit back, don't think too much – or rather not much at all actually – and just enjoy the ride.

In light of the overwhelming evidence supporting the position that our beloved planet is beginning to overheat, it is somewhat fascinating to me that we still have divided opinion at all on the subject and as we patently do, the question has got to be asked – why is this? What's going on?

Within such a polarised climate, can we bring psychological understanding to the party and see if it can make sense of why there remains such persistence for some to describe the ecological glass as half full rather than the reality of it being half empty and unhappily draining away as I write?

At the simplest of psychological levels, to dismiss such 'in your face' evidence for the dangers of Global Warming seems to have more than a sprinkling of denial about it.

It's like standing with that often quoted elephant in a room and saying with absolute conviction – 'elephants above, what on earth are you talking about!' In reality the elephant's faeces sits on the carpet and its muddy footprints are littered everywhere but this mind-set still insists – what elephant?

Would such an elephant denier be considered entirely sane when set against the usual criteria? When I have listened to those who doggedly refuse to accept the full and factual nature of the Holocaust for example, I have similar thoughts.

Yet so often I watch high profile people on popular TV programmes spending valuable air time, their time and my time, promoting the view that the earth is not warming at a worrying rate, so surely it cannot be as simple as that the person I'm listening to is either rather ignorant or even slightly deranged. Something else must be going on? What is it?

What allows an often politically dominant and thus highly influential collective of people nationally and internationally to maintain that the world is flat and not only continue to 'get away with it' for far too long now, but somehow remain highly credible in the public eye as spokespeople on this particular subject, as well as many other subjects too?

Countless professionals are involved in the manufacture or delivery of high level psychological understandings from many different perspectives and more often than not their expertise is accepted without argument when it comes to the subject of the human condition. So surely one or more

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of us 'experts' from the field of psychology could authoritatively expose those Global Warming Deniers for exactly who, what and why they continue to defend what is actually an untenable position? In an ideal world this would then allow all of us to move on without further impediment in what needs to be a united effort to drag our planet back from the brink?

The problem is that as human relations experts, we're not sure if we're allowed to adjudicate, we're not sure if we should and we're not sure if it's our place to step into such a political arena in the first place? Because it all comes down to politics in the end and as we're usually smart enough to know but not always confident or enthusiastic enough to want to recognise, one of our therapeutic feet may stand in psychological insight but the other will always invariably stand in politics.

Lynne Layton (2009, p. 118) sets out to drag the reluctant therapist into a full awakening of where they stand in reality, like it or not, in saying:

> *'There is a strong pull to collude – it has become part of what is considered good practice to separate the psychic from the social; those who broach these topics are often criticized for importing politics into the sacred realm of the clinic'.*

Harvey (2005) tracks the development of the prevailing neoliberal free market ideology with its rejection of government intervention as being responsible for breaking apart the post Second World War compromise between labour and capital, thus portraying the concept of paternalistic big governments in entirely villainous terms.

In the UK, for example, no such thing as Society Thatcherism symbolised this ideological change all too clearly in terms that have found no significant shift away from it by any governing party since. The breaking apart of political and social fabrics in such a manner has led Sennett (2006) to conclude that corporate and political cultures have thus positioned themselves as being increasingly less accountable for the effects of their actions in relation to their citizens.

Just witness, for example, the BP Oil Spill of 2010 where, according to official US government figures, more than 200 million gallons of crude oil bled into the delicate eco-system making it the biggest oil spill in US history. Formal inquests following on from the disaster would suggest that Sennett's (2006) conclusions of strategic positioning to minimise corporate responsibility are not exaggerated.

Rodger (2003) argues that the same social and economic changes as Harvey (2005) describes, have all resulted in a weakening of 'functional democracy', the latter being a functionally binding, reciprocal dependency between social classes or groups – a form of 'containment' in therapeutic terms. Significantly, Rodger (2003) claims that such a weakening has led to possible 'de-civilising tendencies' generally along with a decline in mutual empathy between people.

He claims 'post-emotionalism' may be one by-product of such an interconnectedness breakdown between people and systems which brings with it a breakdown in mutually held knowledge as well as the increasing intellectualisation of feelings.

From an ecological as well as psychological viewpoint, this contemporary splitting of the socio-political framework in order to accommodate a wider Capital agenda is highly significant when one considers the consequent breakdown of mutual and collectively held knowledge as cited.

If Sennett (2006) considers that such a breakdown has conveniently allowed corporate and political cultures to increasingly distance themselves from assuming appropriate responsibility for their actions, Rodger's (2003) 'post-emotionalism' cuts deeper into psychology by suggesting that such corporate cultures may indeed consider they have been granted an implicit permission or acceptance to 'forget' about their actions very soon after committing them. Meaning in essence they have been accorded free licence not to think much.

Presumably, the next 'de-civilising' stage down the hierarchy from this would be to forget at the point of committing the act or even forgetting prior to committing? Rather like that elephant in the room again, holding no conscious cognisance at any point whatsoever of their defecation process.

These divisive social and political changes bringing with them a decline in mutual empathy as Rodger (2003) claims, suggests a profound shift in the quality of human to human relating and indeed impacts greatly on relationships of all kinds. For example, he describes the rise of 'amoral familism' as being the increased tendency towards feeling accountable only for self and significant others within your worldview. It could be coined as the 'we're alright Jack' syndrome and it would thus follow that if we're alright then everything and everyone else must be alright too. Yes?

Taking all this into account, Lynne Layton (2009, p. 109) sums up by saying:

> *'But in social conditions . . . .where fear is constantly stoked, yet vulnerability is deemed shameful, it is unlikely that empathy* ***would*** *be experienced as a two-way state, that is, a state in which the one who does not seem to suffer would feel called upon to acknowledge some complicity in or commonality with the suffering of the other'.*

The 'fear' as described arises from a socially divisive loss of community and connectedness with others and increasing isolation of and between individuals as a result.

An authentic demonstration of empathy is likely to occur when the impact of one person is felt upon the other and vice versa. The retreat into increasing intellectualisation of feelings as a defence against felt vulnerability makes it all the less likely that we will feel able to generate the necessary personal ingredients to offer up to others in order to reach out to them in a genuine state of empathy. So we fake it.

Faking empathy seems to be a sign of our times. The mass media often does it very well indeed, from 'let it all

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hang out' so called entertainment shows to certain aspects of news broadcasting. *'I know what you mean'. 'Tell me how you felt'. 'How did you feel when all that oil landed on your life and your only means of livelihood?'* They know how to fake asking the 'right' questions to elicit the 'correct' sound bite feeling response and from that point on, no real listening is necessary because authentic answers are far too weighty for so many commercial reasons. It is as if the fact that a feeling response was triggered is in itself good enough which then signals permission to – disingenuously – move on from there.

Fake empathy is the manufacturing of undisclosed difference and distance within the relationship which thus affects the quality of the human to human encounter for the benefit of the empathy giver – actively distancing yourself but pretending you have not. Patronising in a word and being so from behind the considered safety of a psychic wall.

Real empathy on the other hand is a two-way process distinguished by the genuineness of feeling as expressed and reciprocally felt by both or all parties. The process itself is more likely to be effective if we hold a broader and more inclusive sense of personal accountability generally thus allowing others into our frame and seeing their inclusion as necessary and valuable for our own growth and development. If the wider social and political context is telling us to manage our psychic experiences otherwise, how much harder is it to find the motivation to seek real, as in authentic, meaning in self-other relating?

In summary, if indeed there is a contemporary cultural crisis of accountability and empathy this distancing mindset or way of being will manifest itself throughout every aspect of self–other relating from the personal all the way to the relationship between Capital and labour, between corporate superpower and those they relate to for purposes of profit.

Meaning that the quality of interpersonal relationships across the board will all receive the same 'poor service' and in the corporate world, if this crisis is not witnessed in the original service delivery then certainly it will be seen in the relative quality of 'after care' if things do not go according to how the business plan defines it.

Assuming appropriate responsibility and accountability for all aspects of the corporate business – cause and effect – would seem the moral choice to take when disaster hits. To accept the profit end but not the clear-up end conveniently turns the business phrase 'joined-up thinking' on its head whilst aptly demonstrating the 'amoral familism' that Rodger (2003) describes.

Where do our political leaders fit into all this? Leaving the power and influence of others aside, these are the people who confidently make claim to having the best interests of their citizens in mind when environmental policy is formulated and sold. Like the Cricket Grounds man or woman, their decisions prepare the pitch for the readiness of the game. Exercised through the systems they have largely designed, politicians establish the ground rules upon which corporate and multi-national businesses then play their game for profit – and with insufficient accountability in my view.

So it would seem unsurprising that these leaders are also subject to the strong collusive pull to accept the less than acceptable that Layton (2009) describes. Unfortunately, following the 'pull' they largely seem to cave in, particularly the ones with more to lose in terms of money, power or prestige as a result of continuing resistance. Turning a blind eye springs to mind. In bed with business is another collusive phrase.

All this may account for why the 'global warming deniers' as I term them are able to remain so. In large part they reside, along with their careers, within collusive political systems and make a choice to think collusively from 'within the system' rather than independently from a more outside and ethical position.

To justify their behaviour they then spout that the '*bleedin obvious*' does not have enough evidence to exist and partly because they are good politicians and partly because the rest of us are largely anaesthetised within 'post-emotionalism' (Sennett 2006) and 'amoral familism' (Rodger 2003) they get away with it. In short, we find ourselves colluding with those who collude.

What about the role of the therapist in this? Along with Layton (2009) I argue that the psychic is indivisible from the social which does indeed bring politics into the clinic. I consider the two as always having been partners anyway, like it or not, and that this contextual truth should be recognised generally as another '*bleedin obvious*' relationship dynamic, needing to be welcomed into the therapeutic space for due consideration.

Layton (2009, p. 118) makes a spirited call to arms for us to wake up and smell the politics in saying:

> *As clinicians, academics, artists, activists and citizens, it is important that we recognise where, how and why we collude with the damaging dictates of neoliberal subjectivity. And it is important for us to think about how we might render conscious the pain we inflict and the losses we incur when we take refuge from the gross inequalities of contemporary life in vulnerability-denying distinction.*

I would furthermore argue that collusive thinking that strives to keep the physic and social apart does not mean that politics slopes off dejectedly for having been ignored. On the contrary, it runs riot outside the consulting room, causing damage, creating havoc and demanding that others clear up after it has rapaciously moved on – rather than accepting accountability, doing the responsible thing and at the very least clearing up its own mess without complaint.

The disruption that 'politics' creates when continuously kept isolated outside the clinic is likely to stop the therapist from being able to fundamentally listen and relate to the client which returns us to the dangers inherent in post-emotionalism and fake empathy.

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Such a diminished ability to resonate with the fullness of client concerns would defeat the often stated purpose of trying to keep politics outside the room in the first place, namely that it is too intrusive and anti-therapeutic.

Much better is to let politics come inside and for the therapist to keep an eye on it, thus ensuring that it behaves itself properly – democratically speaking.

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