
Facing Our Fears Associated with Climate Change

Anxiety has an unmistakable relation to expectation.

—Sigmund Freud

I am giving a presentation to a church group. I look at the audience, especially the expectant faces of the younger people. I have been asked to talk about climate change, to provide them with the current scientific understanding of what is happening in the world. I describe how the last two decades have been the warmest on record, with an accompanying record-setting loss of Arctic sea ice. I present the latest facts: that in the United States the number of days with record high temperatures is now more than twice that of record lows, that it is estimated that one-third of land animals and over half of plant species could lose their habitats over the next eighty years. As I look out into the audience, I sense that something has shifted in the room. The expressions on people's faces tell me that various moods now populate our gathering. I have seen this before and realize it is time to move on from describing the facts of global warming. I pause for a moment to ask how people are feeling. There is absolute silence, as if they have never been asked this question before. Then I see a hand rise slowly: a young woman expresses how helpless she feels in the face of such

immensely challenging information. After her brave, heartfelt admission, others begin to raise their hands and share feelings about our changing world and what they fear losing. The moods expressed include sadness, hopelessness, anger, denial, guilt, numbness, and fear. We sit together in silence, holding the multitude of moods. Giving voice to these silent spirits inhabiting our hearts brings a certain warmth to the room. In sharing our feelings about these issues a door opens, connecting us. Our humanness, our ability to suffer loss in our world, is perhaps the very thing that will lead to our transformation. Our shared feelings evoke within us a profound depth of caring.

Over years of presenting the scientific facts on climate change I have come to expect tremendous emotions around this issue. This awareness caused me to shift from presenting only the scientific facts to allowing time for people to express their feelings about those facts. The emotional response of anger about what is happening to the world, the feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and denial about our role in this, including feelings of dissociation, are all indicators of trauma. No wonder a presentation on the science of climate change is so difficult to hear—it is a traumatizing experience!

Today we face many such traumatizing issues. Fear-filled feelings inhabit much more than the issue of climate change. People worry about the state of the economy and have concerns around health and aging or about how safe they feel in the world. We express deep-seated fears and anxieties about being in such a complex world. What comes to the fore when I listen to people's emotional responses is the tremendous sense of felt and perceived loss in their personal worlds.

Whenever I consider our changing world I experience feelings of loss as well. I reflect on the rapid changes in a climate

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system beneficial to all life on Earth. I consider the loss of clean oceans and the threats to the existence of so many species. I also recognize that these losses extend far beyond my personal sphere into the wider world. It is important to stay with and reflect on these feelings of loss, for we often experience that initial inclination to drift away. Dwelling with loss places us in the realms of sadness, emptiness, and ennui. If we are not careful, these feelings may lead us into a state of listless torpor, or apathy, perhaps even dark melancholia. Even reading this may be making you feel listless, but the cure for this is to stay with the feelings encircling our sense of loss rather than following our natural inclination to flee, that feeling of "Get me out of here as fast as possible!" Rather than fleeing, I invite you to stay a while with our mutual sense of loss. If we flee from the feelings, we may lose an opportunity to find meaning embedded within them. Dropping down into feeling and experiencing the sense of loss ultimately brings understanding and resilience to our lives.

Loss opens us to strong emotions, bringing with it a sense of separation and loneliness. Fundamentally, we are caring and relating beings who need to feel connection, and loss creates unfinished bridges. In the moment of deep loss, we are thrust into a world of solitude and sorrow. Feelings of anxiety, loneliness, helplessness, and sorrow are unwelcome in life. They lead us away from happiness and a sense of comfort. Is it any wonder that we avoid dwelling on anything that allows these uninvited shades to enter our lives? Indeed, we have become adept at closing the door on them so that we don't feel so lonely in the world.

Loss also creates a yearning for what is lost. We hold an inner image of the lost object and continue to look for it in the outer world. We may even project the inner image of the lost

one out onto the world, but this projection can never alleviate our yearning. We continue to search but inevitably fail.

In loss, the visible becomes invisible! An object of importance disappears. We fear losing things, especially things we value. Often our fear of loss creates a barrier to thoughtful action to prevent it. Loss ranges from the trivial to the traumatic. Think about the last time you lost something of small value to you and how this initial experience grew in importance. I walk out of my house and discover that I don't have my keys to lock the front door. I don't have my car keys either, so I am going nowhere. A sense of *dis-ease* settles over me. I feel panic rising within. Damn it, I need to get to that meeting, but I can't lock my house, and I can't drive my car. I run back inside the house, trying to remember where I had last seen my keys. A hectic, rattling mystery begins to unfold in this most inopportune moment. Soon, I am in a full-blown panic, and I lose it. My reaction to the missing keys is completely out of proportion to the situation. Now my panic prevents me from finding my keys! Of course, feelings of panic and fear are far more intense when we are threatened with the loss of something of great value: the people we love, a job that provides us with our livelihood, or our strongly held beliefs. Such losses can seem unbearable, and we may emotionally "lose it" for a very long time.

Psychologically, the moment we lose it, we become blocked and are in the grip of a complex. Complexes are emotionally charged, coherent patterns in the psyche that behave like autonomous actors within us. Their particular form is influenced by our experiences with parents and peers and the social norms that pervade our life. Complexes can be thought of as scripts that have been written specifically for us and that determine what we see and guide how we behave. Under

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given situations, these old scripts can be triggered, and we act out the role, which often can be very different from who we consciously think we are. With the right stimulus a complex bursts into our lives like an uninvited guest at a party. I begin to worry about my financial situation, and this starts playing the script composed by my money complex. This particular script or autonomous role taps into my fearful feelings about being unable to support myself and family. What began as a simple passing thought rapidly grows into rampant worry. In that moment, the complex or script has taken over my life.

Beyond the personal, social and conditioned factors governing the development of scripts, complexes also arise from instinctive or archetypal patterns within the unconscious. Such complexes are most apparent when large groups or whole nations become emotionally overwhelmed and possessed. Highly emotional reactions to news stories are often examples of such archetypally rooted complexes. Even on the personal level, our scripts can tap into these more deep-seated patterns. Behind our personal father complex—be it positive or negative—lies the larger image of the Father in our psyche. The important thing to realize about complexes is that they can grab us and take center stage. Have you ever become so upset with someone only to ask yourself later: what came over me? The answer is that a part of you was triggered into following an old script, a complex. When I became emotionally distraught over my lost keys, so emotionally distraught that I overreacted to the situation, I was in the grip of a complex. This actually prevented me from solving the problem of the missing keys. We never get rid of complexes, but we can learn to live with them.

I have described complexes in detail, for they are the bridge between the stimulus of incoming information and activity

from the outside world and our emotional responses to that information and activity. Complexes, in a sense, determine how strongly we react in a given situation. Will I be mildly annoyed or emotionally overwhelmed when confronted with what is happening out in the world? When we feel disempowered upon hearing the facts about climate change, we are experiencing the power of a complex. Whenever I give presentations on climate change, people always express their powerlessness around the issue. They just do not know what to do. Our reactions to this information can be so strong that we are unable to act. More disturbingly, others can manipulate these inner scripts in order to evoke strong reactions in us. Advertising is based on the effective use of evoking emotional responses around particular products. We all have a money complex; we all have some concern about our financial situation. If we are told that taking on the problem of climate change will cause personal financial distress, we will fear the loss of job and income. This fear may be so great that we will be unable to contemplate rationally doing something about the issue. Since loss evokes strong emotions, complexes are naturally connected to it. There are times when loss evokes valid strong emotions within us, but what of situations where complexes lead to over-the-top responses? It is for this reason that we need to explore our feelings around loss and how complexes affect our response to loss.

Loss may be tragic, like the sudden death of a loved one or an unwanted separation or divorce. Loss can also occur in the form of betrayal. Loss can be experienced as a disjunction between what we expect and what is. We feel the missing "other" in a very palpable and profound way. Our soul yearns, our hearts break, and our bodies tremble. An experience like this places us in the realm of darkness, where the shades of the

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missing dwell. Once the loss occurs we turn our eyes to the past; we look back in remembrance or with yearning. These are the most difficult losses to deal with because there is no going back, no way to change the past to recover what has been lost. In these situations we are thrown onto the path of mourning.

Unlike *experienced* loss, which pulls us into the past, *anticipatory* loss occurs when we expect a loss to occur in the future. Have you ever been in a relationship in which you feared your loved one would leave you? As a parent, have you looked into the future when your children would leave home? The emotions associated with these future events are in reaction to an anticipated separation or loss. The emotions experienced in anticipated loss can be as intense as those of experienced loss. They may imprison us in a state of inactivity, but the key difference is that with anticipated loss, we still can do something about it, for it has not yet occurred. The fact that we often do not act to change the future is evidence of the internal power of complexes associated with the fear of future loss.

The concept of anticipated loss can help us understand the feelings that arise around the issue of global warming and why some of us are unable to accept this reality. Accepting the reality of climate change would ultimately mean having to do something about the problem. For those heavily invested in fossil fuels, any action to reduce the use of fossil fuels opens them to anticipated financial loss. The anxiety associated with this loss triggers defenses to reduce these strong feelings. Rationally, we know that fossil fuels are limited resources and that the cost of extracting them is going to increase. We also understand the environmental consequences of the continued use of fossil fuels, yet this understanding is negated by the anxiety associated with the perceived loss of the bounti-

ful income associated with these fuels. A reasonable business strategy would be to develop new forms of energy that ensure continued financial stability with accompanying environmental benefits. This approach, however, is overridden by the deeper fears of loss. Illogical? Yes—but understandable from a psychological perspective.

Another perceived loss related to inaction on climate change involves those who are invested in notions of individualistic autonomy, who fear the loss of their basic right to choose how they live. Truly to address the issue of climate change will require some form of government intervention; the problem is so large that it will need national and international coordination. Legal decisions leading to personal limitations on how and what we consume are tremendously threatening to those who, above all else, value autonomy.

Some whose religious beliefs view God as the one divine being solely capable of determining Earth's climate will fear a loss in faith were they to accept the fact that humans are changing the climate. Perhaps the most pervasive anticipated loss regarding action on climate change is the fear of losing such basic needs as job security or the ability to provide for one's family.

What emotions are associated with these forms of loss? *Experienced* loss precipitates grief, sadness, and mourning. *Anticipated* loss generates anxiety, fear, and many of the emotions that arose in, for example, my meeting with the church group. All of these emotions threaten to overwhelm us. In experienced loss, we go through a natural grieving process, and in many cases we heal. In anticipated loss, we find ourselves in a liminal place of anxious anticipation in which our imaginations run wild. These emotions can incapacitate us and make us overly vulnerable, and with such persistent anxiety we are

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unable to function in the world. Luckily, however, means exist to avoid such emotional impairment. In moments of intense emotional instability, defense mechanisms arise within to restore a semblance of stability.

I'd like to pause and gather together these reflections on loss. When presented with the possibility of loss, we have a natural tendency to react emotionally. We become anxious about the future. These emotions are guided and amplified by our past conditioning and cultural values, which have created scripts, or complexes, within us. The "complex" reaction can become so dominant in life that we lose our ability to deal effectively with the perceived loss, whether real or imagined. The means by which our psyches unconsciously attempt to modulate or alleviate our rising anxiety and overwhelming emotions is through defense mechanisms. If successful, we regain the ability to engage with our world and change course if necessary. However, there is a shadow side to defenses; they may actually become so pervasive in our attempt to avoid anxiety that they keep us locked in crippling habitual patterns of behavior.

Defenses are a product of evolution; they provide us with the physical and psychological means to protect ourselves against perceived or anticipated threats. The fight-or-flight response is perhaps the oldest coping mechanism in the psyche. Defenses evolved and developed for good reasons. As we consciously evolved, we needed more options than merely instinctual fight or flight to adapt to our environment. Keeping a society together requires developing the capabilities to deal with the increasing complexity of interpersonal interactions. Defense mechanisms moderate these interactions. They also prevent individuals and groups from being overwhelmed by

anxiety. It is only when defenses keep us from adapting to new conditions that they become a problem and prevent us from making positive changes to address serious issues. The defenses that make us resist the reality of disturbing news, such as a troubling medical report on our health or the news of climate change, also prevent us from changing our behaviors to deal with these problems. In these cases, defenses are ultimately counterproductive, harming our well-being and that of others.

We have many ways to defend against anxiety and the experience of overwhelming emotions. Freud was the first to note the various forms of our defenses, and over many years of working with clients I have witnessed a number of them. We certainly note them in ourselves and in our interactions with others. A few of the most prevalent defenses include denial, rationalization, compartmentalization, distortion, dissociation, and projection. How do each of these affect our ability to deal effectively with challenging issues like climate change?

Denial is deeply rooted and is difficult to overcome. In the face of the most convincing evidence we may turn away from the facts. Dissonance arises between what actually is and what we perceive or feel. Presented with disturbing information or news, our initial reaction is often “I just can’t believe it” or “I can’t accept this, I can’t believe this is happening.” Denial is not just a conscious process; it may also operate unconsciously, whereby we are unaware of our intense state of resistance to disturbing news until someone points it out. Denial exists to maintain the status quo, a situation clearly evident with the issue of global warming, in which the scientific evidence that humans are warming the planet is overwhelming. Still, many turn away from these scientific facts and live in a world of

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denial. I have often heard “I can’t believe this” after presenting the facts of climate change. These facts create tremendous anxiety and are so intense that psychologically the only way some deal with the emotions is to deny reality.

Others may deal with the anxiety of disturbing news by rationalizing it, by inventing reasons to explain away our disturbing experiences. “It isn’t that bad” is often heard when, in reality, the situation really *is* that bad. This defense, coupled with our ability to intellectualize, leads to ill-conceived explanations for climate change, such as “It’s really all because of the Sun.” In fact, this can’t be. Others may state, “There is warming, but it is just a natural cycle,” “The effects are overblown,” or “More carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is actually good for plants.” There are those who do accept the scientific facts but then argue, “We really can’t do anything to stop the warming.”

We compartmentalize by keeping conflicting ideas or beliefs separate, allowing us to live in a state of cognitive dissonance. This often takes place in cases of trauma, in which the memories of past trauma are kept separate from the feelings associated with the painful event. With regard to climate change, I see this defense present in scientists who are knowledgeable about the facts yet hold a belief or value system in direct conflict with them. They package away these two parts of themselves so they can go on with everyday life.

Distortion involves bending the facts to conform to acceptable beliefs or values or to make the disturbing facts palatable. This is our ability to “see the world through rose-colored glasses” despite the reality of the situation. Someone under the pervasive sway of this defense lives in his or her own world. Distortion is a common means of dealing with global warming’s anticipated losses, and some consciously distort the facts to confuse the public on the issue.

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Projection is an important unconscious process because it strongly affects how we relate to the world. Certain aspects of ourselves, at odds with our conscious views, are projected out onto others. We project onto things as well as people, and our projections create a veil that effectively separates us from our environment. For example, I once spoke to representatives of the electric-power industry. This is an industry that depends mostly on coal for generating electricity. Their response to my presentation on the effects of increasing greenhouse gases was to point out that they were serving their customers, who wanted energy for all of their home appliances. They were projecting the problem completely onto the consumer and absolving themselves of any role in the problem.

Finally, dissociation occurs when we reach a point where the pain of the trauma is too much. Clinically, this defense appears in those who have suffered severe abuse, but all of us can dissociate around issues that are disturbing. While giving a presentation on global warming, I stopped to ask how people were feeling. One woman stated, "You know, in the middle of your talk I just spaced out; I can't remember what you said after that." My presentation was so disturbing to her that she dissociated in order to deal with the overwhelming emotions welling up.

Defense mechanisms exist to regulate the amount of anxiety we experience in a situation, but if the defense mechanisms become too strong, we become disabled and lose the ability to deal effectively with the causes of our anxiety. Our defense has turned against us. Again, all of this occurs in the unconscious; were it happening consciously, we would be able to stop the process.

We are faced with the disturbing facts of climate change. The facts ignite fears of loss, personal and collective, and defenses

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come to our rescue. If they are too reactive, we end up in denial about the issue or choose to distort the facts. However, the facts still exist. The climate continues to change. We need to break this complex cycle to create our flourishing future.

How do we work to break the perpetual cycle of fear-complex-defense? We must address it when the feeling of fear first arises. Often we experience fear and anxiety as overwhelming, but in sharing our experience with others we can tolerate these overwhelming feelings. This is the basis for any healing process. I believe this process has its roots in our earliest beginnings as communal beings. Sitting around the fire and telling our stories is an effective way to heal wounds and envision a future. So one step in breaking this cycle of fear-complex-defense is to be mindful of our feelings and share them with others. After I gave a presentation and asked how people felt, a young woman stated how helpless she felt. When others began to share a similar feeling, the woman felt relief. She told us that she had held this feeling in because she believed she was the only one who felt this way. Perhaps social media is serving this purpose for the younger generations. Though lacking the contribution of direct physical presence, these media do allow for a sharing of feelings. To date much of the communal exchange on climate change has focused on thoughts, ideas, and disagreements. It is time to broaden our sharing to feelings.

Another step in dealing with the fear is to ask what old scripts are being triggered in us when we sense fear or anxiety around the issue; this requires us to be more attuned to what is going on within. We can train ourselves to become more aware of our feelings, which includes how our body is reacting. We pick up the thread with the first stirring and follow it: When did I feel this way before? What old story does this remind me of? Have I been here before? An image may come

to mind or, more often, a sensation in the body, which is the first sign of the activated complex, the old script you know so well—even if “know” only unconsciously. Bringing our scripts into conscious awareness can be transformative. We now understand this old familiar pattern and can see how it plays out. This is the power of awareness. We can then look for these old stories in others and in everyday events. Can you detect how these stories are showing up in the world? Our “growth complex” states that we must continually increase power and wealth. It is at the core of the climate-change issue. Asking where this complex appears in us and in the culture opens us to transformation. We become conscious of a strong force within our psyche.

Finally, looking at how we are reacting to our anxiety or fear sheds light on what defenses are active. Do we find ourselves questioning the very existence of the problem? Do we prefer an alternative explanation to the more accurate (but more upsetting) one? Do we place the cause of the problem on someone else? By asking these simple questions we begin to understand how we are responding defensively to fear-inducing factors. This takes some level of conscious awareness, but we need to ask these questions. If we are willing to do so, we reap the bounty of understanding why we behave the way we do.

In that church, opening our hearts to how we felt about the disturbing facts of climate change allowed us to experience our connection to the issue and to one another. We took the first step in transformation by sharing openly our feelings about climate change. We listened to one another’s stories. In another gathering, an older gentleman talked of his passion for cross-country skiing. Since his youth this is what he looked forward to every winter. He had grown up in the Pacific Northwest and had his favorite locations to ski. Now,

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however, because of changes in the climate, he could no longer fulfill his passion in these places. He said he now travels to northwestern Colorado to find good skiing, but recently these places have lacked sufficient snowfall as well. As he told his story, I felt the tremendous loss this man was experiencing. He was living testimony that the climate is changing and how it affects all of us. Here was a man who was losing the thing that had given him joy throughout his long life. How many others can tell such stories?

I feel we need to share more of our stories about how the changing world affects us. In telling them, we make contact with the feelings and anxieties surrounding what we are losing in our changing world, and we begin to recognize how we are defending ourselves against these changes. In ancient times we would have gathered into small groups to share stories and feelings, but those were simpler times. We have grown to a tribe of over seven billion. We live in cities populated by millions. How do we share our stories given this global lifestyle? How do we feel the effects of the world on individuals and communities? The creation of a flourishing future depends on our ability to connect with one another. I believe we can do this. Imagine more of us working toward an awareness of our feelings, our old scripts, and our defenses against our felt worlds. Imagine using our wonderful technologies to connect us in new and interesting ways. We are at the threshold of transformation. We need to step across it to create a better world.