



Resisting the cycle of apocalyptic overwhelm:

Exploring place, spiritualities and acts of resistance in the face of climate crisis

by Chelsea Size



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Abstract

This paper considers the confronting existential realities of the climate crisis and ways in which narrative practices can be used to help resist overwhelm and sustain climate activism. Recognising that stories shape our lives and the life of our planetary home, the paper examines both broad systemic issues and the everyday effects of living in a time of climate crisis. Recognition is given to modern/colonial ways of being and anti-colonial practices. Narrative questions are offered in connection to three themes: place, spiritualities and acts of resistance. The paper documents rich stories, insider knowledges and skills of living to invite further exploration of collective practice to respond to the climate crisis in urgent and significant ways.

Key words: *climate crisis; climate grief; climate anxiety; ecological grief; solastalgia; burnout; activism; place; spirituality; collective practice; narrative practice*

Size, C. (2022). Resisting the cycle of apocalyptic overwhelm: Exploring place, spiritualities and acts of resistance in the face of climate crisis. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (4), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.4320/IMRA1814>
Author pronouns: she/her

As I go about my daily life, awareness of the climate crisis travels with me everywhere. It lodges in my chest like a knotted ball of overwhelm. I constantly wonder: how do I continue to live my day-to-day life with the knowledge of the present and future dangers of the climate crisis? How do I sustain climate activism alongside the constant juggle of a young family, work and study? And how on Earth do I talk to others about this?

Sally Gillespie (2020, p. 3) noted that 'for many of us ... initiating and sustaining conversations about climate crisis is difficult. Sex is an easier dinner table topic than melting glaciers':

Too often the conversation halts with uneasy jokes about rising sea levels and a quick change of subject. People are left stranded, often not knowing what to think, because of the lack of opportunity to talk freely about the confusions, fears, frustrations and griefs that are a part of the climate crisis territory. (Gillespie, 2020, p. 3)

I wondered how narrative practice might assist individuals and communities to talk about the climate crisis, to examine the 'business as usual' stories that govern the way we live, and to respond in urgent and meaningful ways.

I decided to ask people involved in climate activism about their insider knowledge of resisting overwhelm, pursuing difficult conversations and sustaining climate action. This paper shares stories from conversations with seven activists of diverse backgrounds in relation to gender, class, race, sexual identity and connections to faith traditions. In addition to their reflections, the paper offers questions that were useful in guiding conversations about the broad systemic issues associated with climate change, and the effects of these on people's daily lives.

More than personal: Staring into the climate crisis

If it doesn't start personal, it does not start. But if it ends personal then it ends. (Pancho Arguelles, as quoted in Denborough, 2008, p. 191).

The climate crisis is pervasive and ongoing. It entails significant uncertainty. We may be forced to grapple with the reality that, as Rebecca Solnit (2021) put it, 'the world as we knew it is coming to an end' (Solnit, 2021).

The stories we tell ourselves at this moment in history could have profound existential effects for the health of our planetary home and the future of life for all species (Conyer, 2019; Gillespie, 2020).

While this paper draws on activists' personal experiences, the climate crisis and our response to it cannot be relegated to the personal. It is important to resist the individualisation of the climate crisis and continually ask how we might contribute to 'social movement' (Denborough, 2008, 2019). How can narrative practitioners work alongside communities and individuals to resist despair and support action?

To stare into and examine the climate crisis is to question the systems and discourses that our whole Western society is built on. Narrative practices responding to the climate crisis are inherently political practices. Liberal Seburikoko, a narrative practitioner from Rwanda, reminds us that 'the effects of climate change encroach far more on some communities than others, with direct and profound implications for people's lives, livelihoods and opportunities for continued subsistence' (Seburikoko, 2020, p. 11). As a narrative practitioner located within the dominant culture in Australia, it has been important that I am aware of how my way of life has been enabled by policies and practices of neoliberal capitalism and consumerism. Suša et al. (2022) identified four structural elements of this 'modern/colonial' way of being:

- 'the denial of the limits of the planet'
- the denial of the 'systemic violence' that underpins our current way of life
- the denial of our interconnectedness with each other and all living things
- 'the denial of the magnitude of the problems that we face' (Suša et al., 2022, p. 161).

Climate crisis affects us all. It is also important to remember that it has impacted and will continue to impact communities that are marginalised far more than others.

When the safe riverbank feels flooded

While exploring the multifaceted and distressing problems that are connected with the climate crisis with the seven activists, I drew on narrative practices to ensure the conversations did not contribute to an increased sense of overwhelm or despair. Narrative

practitioners who are working with communities and individuals who are worried about the threats of the climate emergency have found a number of ways to co-create a 'safe-territory of identity' or 'riverbank position' from which to have conversations. Safe territories of identity are places to stand and tell stories of difficulty or trauma without being re-traumatised or 'swept along by the current' (White, 2006, p. 89). When considering how I might create such places of safety in our conversations, I was drawn to further consider the 'riverbank' metaphor.¹ With crippling flooding happening in Australia, Pakistan and around the world, I wondered: What kinds of narrative conversations might help develop strong stories (Drahm-Butler, 2015) when the safe 'riverbank' feels *flooded*?

I had noticed that each of the published articles concerning narrative therapy and the climate crisis uses nature metaphors and connection to place and plants. Elizabeth Nicholas (2021) explored the forest aspect of the Tree of Life process to sustain and nourish climate activism. Beata Makarusanga (2020) used culturally resonant gardening metaphors to elicit cultural practices and local knowledge that could be applied to the care of children and their caregivers. She wrote: 'gardening offered many rich metaphors which people took up in creative ways, not only to describe their experiences, but also to connect with their treasured values ... it provided a shared language and foster[ed] connection' (Makarusanga, 2020, p. 9). Similarly, Liberal Seburikoko (2020) used the metaphor of kitchen gardens to work with children and their families experiencing severe drought. Alongside this, Seburikoko (2020) and the rural farming community enabled contribution and social action through regenerative agricultural practices such as enhancing soil health, agroforestry and climate resilience.

The climate crisis is an extension of stories, systems, actions and ways of life that necessitate an active forgetfulness of humanity's interdependence with the Earth and all living things. In consideration of the ways that narrative practitioners are working with communities around the world, it made sense that my work would also come back to this ancient wisdom about place.

Place of sustenance conversations

Drawing inspiration from these stories of practice (Makarusanga, 2020; Nicholas, 2021; Seburikoko, 2020), I began to explore ways in which conversations about a 'place of sustenance' (Trudinger, 2006) might help to develop safe territories of identity. From this grounding, I hoped that conversations might thicken alternative stories and encourage the resistance of colonising and neoliberal individualistic discourses. Mark Trudinger (2006) observed that:

Generally [in narrative therapy], such explorations of place are uncommon. In contrast, metaphors related to place are often used in narrative practice ... But the relationship to place itself to identity is not often explored. The 'territories of life' are usually metaphorical, not literal; we have re-engagements with history but not re-engagements with place. (Trudinger, 2006, p. 12)

In these conversations about connections to place, I wanted to remain accountable and committed to anti-colonial practices and stories. Aunty (Reverend, Doctor!) Denise Champion reminded me that the land is multi-storied too. In her book *Yarta Wandatha*, Aunty Denise wrote:

I always say Australia is like one gigantic storybook. There's a story in every part of the land and sky and sea. When we, as Adnyamathanha, gather and tell our stories we always say yarta wandatha – the land is speaking. We also say yarta wandatha ikandadnha. The people are speaking as if the land is speaking. So, the land is speaking to us and through us in these stories. There's a oneness there ... We are not separated from the land our mother. (Champion, 2014, p. 19)

I wondered what might be made possible if we explored rich stories that give room for the land to 'speak to us and through us' (Champion, 2014, p. 19).

Stories of place have shaped the way I see and understand the land, sky and waters that make up this planetary home of ours. I grew up on the land of the Barngarla people, on a farm on what is now known as the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia. My early identity stories and the way I saw the world were shaped through my settler-coloniser ancestry (mostly English and Scottish) and the rural farming community in which I lived. Growing up, I did not participate in or overhear any conversations in which families asked whose

land they had taken or about the ongoing impacts of clearing land and broad acre farming. Stories from my evangelical Christian family and community had me wondering whether we as humans were here to 'subdue' or 'steward' creation – or perhaps something else?

Weaving alongside these two dominant stories (among many other discourses) was an alternative story thread, which can be traced back to my dad. Dad introduced me to the practice and attitude of wonder and curiosity. My brothers and I shared the thrilling experience of being drawn into Dad's plans to put a nest box on top of the local grain silo to encourage the peregrine falcons to lay their eggs (and they did!). I grew flowers with Dad and arranged freesias, stocks and roses for our kitchen table. We raised chickens together, and camped among the emus, kangaroos and wedged tailed eagles in a local patch of scrub that, wondrously, Dad called 'Secret Valley'. All the while, I was caught up in the practice of curiosity and wonder, which led to a sense of interconnection with the natural world. If I was going to trace back my connection with both climate activism and narrative practice, it would be to here.

The place of sustenance questions that I used within my project were adapted from Trudinger (2006), Denborough (2019) and Freeman (2019).

- Can you tell me about a place in nature where you have experienced sustenance in your life? (It might be from growing up or more recently)
- Can you describe this place to me – the colours, sounds, textures?
- What would I notice if you took me there? (Plants? Creatures? Something else?)
- Can you tell me more about how you experience this place in your body?
- I am wondering about your relationship with this place. When did you first go there? How were you introduced?
- Has your relationship with this place changed over time?
- Is this a place that you revisit in person or are there ways in which you take this place with you?
- Do you hold this place with you in a particular way? As a picture? Feeling? Sensation? Memory?
- If this place could have a conversation with you now, what do you think the place might say?

- Are there things that this place has helped you keep in touch with that might not have been possible otherwise? Maybe possibilities, wishes or hopes for your life?
- I am wondering about the ways that this place continues to influence you and the way you see yourself, others or the world?
- Are there particular things that this place has taught you? Or ideas in society that this place might help you re-think?
- What is it like for you to reconnect with or remember this place?
- How might this place assist you in some of the situations you are currently experiencing?

The following conversation emerged when exploring some of these questions with Dani.²

Chelsea: What did you notice when you were outside? What made an impact on you?

Dani: Well, probably the one that really got me, and that actually got me into [my life's work with] salt marshes, was in northern France. There's an area along the coast that is all salt marshes, but they're not salt marshes like ours here; they're salt marshes with grass. It's called rice grass, or *Spartina*, and it does this in the wind [motions with her hands]. It looks like ripples, like the sea, when you're looking at it.

I was not much more than about two and a half, my father informs me, because that's when we were there. I can remember the grass all rippling in the salt marsh. And there were skeins of geese flying over, heading south to Africa, which they do every year. And it just stuck with me. I knew that I was never going to get out of the mud!

Chelsea: I'm wondering, that landscape in northern France, was that something that would visit you? Did you hold that picture in your mind?

Dani: It's always with me, and I hadn't realised until we came to Australia, but I actually navigate by plants ... I actually recognise all the plants and where they grow, and I carry them with me. When I travel, I write about the different habitats that we are passing through. Drives [my husband] up the wall actually!

Chelsea: I'm wondering what you think it is about navigating by plants, or carrying them with you, that might tell you about what you find sustaining or enriching?

Dani: It's the mystery of it. It's the realisation that I actually know very little about why things are where they are, and how the plant community and the animal community are interacting. There's a whole world going on in that little, tiny patch of green outside the window of your car as you go past that you know nothing about.

Chelsea: Holding these plants, taking them with you, documenting them and holding that mystery, how does it impact the way you see yourself in the world and others? Does something come to mind?

Dani: Yeah, that's an interesting one. The plants help me understand what I'm looking at and where I am in the world. They keep me well and truly grounded. I mean, plants survive in the most amazing places and the most amazing habitats that they feel perfectly comfortable in, even though we don't necessarily.

Problem stories and deconstructing conversations

Questions about places of sustenance provided a rich start to our conversations. Following this, externalising questions were important to consider both the broad, systemic problems of the climate crisis, and also the effects of these in the person's day-to-day life. This also provided opportunities to deconstruct discourses connected with the climate crisis. As Nicholas (2021, p. 7) highlighted: 'the externalisation of problems has a political dimension, and seeks to demystify and deconstruct the ways that external discourses operate in the realms of personal lives'. Externalising conversations also enabled rich double story developments through the use of landscape of action and landscape of identity questions.

Some of the externalising and deconstruction questions I used were:

- Can you tell me a bit more about your experience of living in a time of climate crisis? What types of problems might you encounter day to day in

relation to climate change? If you could give them a name, what would you call them?

- I am wondering if you could tell me more about the taken-for-granted stories you grew up with about the natural world/Earth/the environment?
- What impact did these stories have on the way you saw the natural world?
- What is your position on these stories? Were they negative, positive or something in between?
- Can you tell me about what led up to you changing the way you saw the world?
- What impact did this make on the way you moved through the world?
- Did it have you noticing different things or thinking in different ways?
- What might this say about your values, hopes or wishes in your relationship with Earth and all living things?

In my conversation with Kate, we used these questions to explore a personal and particular problem in relation to her whole-of-life engagement in climate activism.

Chelsea: Do you find that the 'feeling crazy' experience gets in the way of you sustaining your activism or are there other types of problems that affect you on the personal level as you try to maintain your activism?

Kate: I find it really hard to negotiate relationships with people who don't understand how much they don't understand. I've chosen to participate in [direct action climate activism] and my family are very conservative. They believe that I'm wasting my life. The numerous conversations I've had with my dad, who constantly asks me the question: do you think what you are doing is 'effective'?

I mean, I'm from the school of 'sitting on the couch watching the TV' would be even less effective than anything I am actively doing! So, the jury's out on whether what I'm doing is more 'effective' than anything else I could be doing. There is no meter I can consult to make sure that I'm being effective.

I'm doing the things that I think are mine to do, like most people. I'm doing things in my day-to-day life: composting, guerrilla gardening, et cetera, et cetera. And I'm

doing things in the banal activism kind of way. Like signing petitions online. I'm doing a whole lot of things. I'm writing letters to politicians. I'm not convinced that they are effective, but they're not hard to do, and I'm prepared to do them. And then I'm also doing civil disobedience because I do not know how else we can break through on the need for people to understand the seriousness of the situation and the urgency of the need to respond.

Chelsea: It's interesting that the question your dad poses is around 'effectiveness'. It makes me think about cultural ideas about what effective is – what's the story underneath what is deemed 'effective'?

Kate: My dad's bringing capitalism and entrepreneurialism to the table, and asking for an economic rationalist assessment of my activities. And I mean, I want my activities to be impactful. And even assessing that is quite difficult. Social change is just not a straight line from cause to effect. I've studied a lot of social change movements in an attempt to make myself more impactful as an activist, but that does not mean that I have some kind of crystal ball capacity to figure whether what I'm doing is effective.

One of the things I find a little bit heartbreaking is those situations like talking to my brother-in-law, who really is a climate denier. He won't come out and say so, but I think that he is, based on the things that he says. Every so often we've come up with a kind of détente. We don't talk about it. And my partner and I rehearse conversations that could keep us from getting on to the rocky shores of family conflict.

Chelsea: I wonder what might be some of the effects of the 'rocky shores of family conflict' on the way you see yourself and the world?

Kate: That I feel heartbroken. That I feel distressed. I know more about the science than they do because I've read the science. I've now taken to just saying: 'I know you are a highly intelligent person and I know that you are capable of understanding this

issue. I've read the science and I invite you to do the same thing, and here's where you can find it.' That there's a consensus of the world's scientists and it's available. The UN has published it. It's not complicated. I don't know what it would take to break through there. Quite possibly, I just need to burst into tears in the middle of one of these conversations.

Spiritualities of the surface

In my work alongside communities of faith as well as through my climate activism, I get many rich opportunities to connect with people of diverse faith traditions, spiritualities and none. Through this, I have become interested in ways in which spirituality is expressed through people's connection with climate activism. Griffith and Griffith (2003) highlight the possibilities that can come from conversations that hold space for exploring connections with faith and spirituality. Therapists have the opportunity to:

... speak about spirituality with those persons for whom it is culturally appropriate and relevant, and [to] not speak about it when it is not appropriate or not their desire ... to be receptive to the varied presentations of spiritual and religious life, to be discerning of those times when it becomes a destructive force, and to be responsive in ways that honour and strengthen the circles of community, tradition and faith that sustain and connect. (Griffith & Griffith, 2003, p. ix)

It was important to make room for multi-storied reflections on the ways in which faith may have been sustaining and also times when religious doctrines had been a part of fostering 'hegemonic domination by humans over the natural world' (Conyer, 2019, p. 6). I was interested in having narrative conversations that explored embodied practices of spirituality and faith and avoided getting caught in discussion of disembodied ideas or theological doctrines. It was important to respect the diversity of people's theologies, which may include meaningful connection with essentialist understandings of the self and truth. With a posture of respect and curiosity, my narrative questions continued to provide opportunities to explore identities, experiences and society through a poststructuralist lens. This built on Michael White's interest in what he called, the 'spiritualities of the surface'. He wrote:

I am more interested in what might be called the material versions of spirituality. Perhaps we would call these the *spiritualities of the surface* ... This is a form of spirituality that relates not to the non-material, but to the tangible ... The notion of spirituality that I am relating to is one that makes it possible for me to see and to appreciate the visible in people's lives, not the invisible. (White, 2000, p. 132)

I developed the following questions to invite exploration of stories connected with faith and spirituality:

- I am wondering if there are stories, rituals, scriptures or people connected to your faith tradition or spirituality that have affected the way you see Earth or nature?
- Did these move you towards the natural world? Away from it? Or move you in another way altogether?
- What were the effects of these stories on your life and your relationship with Earth? Were they positive, negative, neutral or something else?
- Can you tell me more about the values/hopes/dreams that might connect with these sacred or important stories?
- In what way have these stories influenced your climate activism?

In conversation with Amelia, we traced the history of the connection between her faith tradition and her respect for all living beings. As a young child, Amelia lived in Kuala Lumpur. She told me this story:

There is one clear moment in Kuala Lumpur when I'm riding a tricycle all around our little driveway. And Ah Lam said, 'Amelia, Amelia, what are you doing?'

And I said, 'I'm riding my tricycle'.

And he said: 'No, no. Come look.'

And I'd been riding all over an ant line, all over an ant trail. And there were just dead and dying ants everywhere, because I'd been riding all over them on my tricycle and just not even thinking. And I was so heartbroken and shocked. It really had a deep impact. I would've been six.

And I think that has been at the core of my connection to the Mahayana Buddhist faith: may all living beings be free of pain and suffering. At the core of my climate grief is that impact on other species and ecosystems and the heavy footprint of humanity.

Buhjah, after describing the small everyday practices that sustain her activism, made connections with the faith principle of moderation:

Chelsea: At the beginning of our conversation, you mentioned the Islamic principle of 'moderation'. I am wondering if there are connection points between the principle of moderation and the simplicity of your engagement and connections with your cat, surfing and camping? And what might you call that value?

Buhjah: I think so, definitely. I guess the principle of moderation in Islam can be looked at from many different ways, right? The way I apply it to my activism, I see in broadly three different ways. One is in terms of consumption and prioritising relationships and experiences over stuff and buying things. So something like camping or surfing is great because you can have your gear and you can use it over and over again and just keep chipping away at something that's fun and you just keep improving yourself.

And then another way that moderation applies to activism is being moderate in my public-facing actions. Because I feel like when people adhere too strongly to ideology, that's when things start to get quite extreme and that's alienating. I think that whole 'angry activist' thing—I guess I'm not in a position to be that person, even though I do experience anger and frustration. The outlet for that is not what I say in public on behalf of the campaign or the [climate group I am a part of].

And then the third way that moderation is a good principle for me is to value incremental progress and to be able to sustain the work for the long haul. We've got a long fight ahead of us, and I don't want to burn out years into doing the work. There's a lot that I want to do, and I just have to be smart about how I approach the work. Moderation is working quite well for me for the time being.

Conversations around dominant discourses and structures of power were also kept alive during our conversation.

Chelsea: Who introduced you to that principle of moderation? Was that something that you grew up learning about? Could you tell me a bit more about that?

Buhjah: I guess it's just one of those like principles or moral teachings from prophets and scripture and other religious sources that people accept in theory, but don't imbue in practice. And I don't know if there's any one person or one teaching in particular that made me latch on to the concept of moderation.

One thing that I thought a lot about as a young woman was the idea of modesty. It's well known that Muslims are expected to dress modestly. And I think that's fine, that makes a lot of sense. But the focus on modest dress is almost always on women: this over-policing of women's dress and how we portray ourselves in public. I started questioning that and feeling that the application of modesty should be wider than just what women wear! I think it's absurd. It's of no consequence what a person chooses to wear on the collective morality, or whatever it is that people want to pin it to. So I decided not to wear the hijab but to practice moderation in other ways.

Chelsea: It sounds like perhaps you are resisting ways in which teaching can remain disembodied and not applied to our lives? What is it like to trace these connections or dots across the whole conversation in the way that you have been living out broader interpretations of the principle of modesty?

Buhjah: It's something that I guess I've more recently been verbally exploring in this deliberate and emergent way. I've also been thinking about it and speaking to my Muslim friends. We don't feel particularly welcome at Mosques because in diaspora politics there's toxic patriarchy and all that kind of fun stuff. We still want to have a spiritual practice and worship is still important, but how do we seek to fulfil those needs in our way, in a way that feels authentic to ourselves?

And so, I do think that working in climate is a form of worship. I may not pray enough times a day, but I approach climate work from the point of view of meeting the calls

from God and from the Prophet to look after the environment and stand up for justice. And all those kinds of lofty principles! I find that working in climate is a way that I can try to work towards that sort of higher calling.

Epiphanies of the ordinary

Within the conversations that I had with activists, there were so many examples of rich double-storied accounts of skills of living, resisting overwhelm and maintaining climate activism. Bruner (1986, p. 13) talked about James Joyce's view of the 'particularities' of our stories as 'epiphanies of the ordinary'. This phrase felt resonant as I gathered and documented stories of everyday acts of resistance.

The following is a small collection of 'epiphanies of the ordinary' or insider knowledges that different activists shared with me. These tell of the diverse daily ways in which activists resist overwhelm and maintain their contributions to social action in the face of the climate crisis.

There's something about making, even if it is just toast

We were part of the pandemic sourdough mob! We started making bread and now actually we make better bread than we can buy. There's something in just enjoying that. There's something about creating. It's a making thing that is so satisfying. I fold paper cranes as a thing that I can do with my hands. It doesn't require any thought. I can do it in a meeting. It keeps me focused. It is the making and creation that is a little bit soothing. And it's like, 'Oh look, I've done this, and if nothing else today, I've folded 60 paper cranes!' There's something about modelling that and inviting people in. It's so satisfying to be able to create something for yourself and for other people, even if it is toast!

The tonic of just being there

There are different things that I do to give my brain a break from thinking too much or from wanting to project so far into the future or wanting to tackle big, complex problems. It is like forcing the brain and your attention to do things that are very immediate and help give you some sort of a break. When I am surfing, I think 'I'm going to catch a wave. There's one coming. Where do I need to be to position myself so that I can catch it?' When I am camping, I am asking 'Is this spot flat enough for us to sleep on tonight? Can we have a

fire? Where can we find wood? What are we having for dinner?’ It’s such a lovely tonic to not just think about how everything that’s crap is interconnected. You’re only one person with a limited amount of time and resources – you can’t fix everything. And so, I guess it’s just what I can try to do to keep myself going for the long run.

The practice of plain speaking in life and science

Plain speaking is a Quaker thing. I blame the Quakers for my bluntness. It *is* actually a skill. There’s a lot of things that plain speaking allows you to do. It allows you to actually name the stuff that’s bothering you without getting aggressive about it. It allows you, right up front, to clarify where the non-negotiables are. It comes down to integrity and honesty.

I use plain speaking a lot in science because I talk to people about systems. The downside from a scientific point of view is that scientists who don’t know me make an assumption that I don’t know. Those scientists who’ve known me all my life, they obviously know.

There is a similar problem with publication. We are taught in science to publish in the third person. As a scientist, I push back against that. As a scientist, you bring yourself to the observations you make, and you can change something just by looking at it. And yet for publishing, it’s all as if you weren’t even there. When you read the early scientific work of Darwin and all the rest, they are right in there! Their writing is so alive, so present. You can read it as bedtime reading! What we’ve done with publication now is that people try to pull themselves back from the science so much. And I refuse to do that. I’ve frequently got papers back that said, ‘You have to remove yourself from here. This is not scientific writing’. I always argue with the editors and say: when people make an atom bomb, they need to say, ‘I did this. I did that’. Not ‘the bomb did this’. You have to take responsibility and that means that you have to put yourself into the writing. An ongoing discussion in science is whether or not we’ve gone too far into removing ourselves from the data.

A conversation between the feminist movement and the climate movement

I think the feminist movement and the climate movement have to get together and have a conversation. I just wrote a song last week which asks ‘Which side are you on?’ Because with feminism, it was all or nothing (at that time, not now). There was absolute urgency! Now there *is* an urgency in climate change, but people are different. With climate change,

it’s overwhelming because it’s not that tangible in every day. I know it gets a bit hot and a bit cold, but if I lived in Lismore and had three floods then it would hit me. And the women’s movement hit us there every day. Like *you always gave yourself the burnt chop and the husband got the good chop*. And the husband got the best, then the kids, and then mum. And so it was very tangible every day to the smallest little detail. Climate change is in the abstract because it’s not every minute of the day. When you have a bad day or the weather’s different, then you think, *Oh God, this is scary*. But then you can put it away because the next day’s perfect.

I don’t read the news

I don’t read the news. I accept that we are in a climate catastrophe. I’m not effective if I look at all of the things that are hard in the world, so I have pretty strong filters around what I see.

Creating space and time containers

After one friend in particular died, I was given a little tealight candle when I left the funeral. And for a long time afterwards, I would light that candle and recite the little Leunig poem that was handed out with the candle and maybe have a few tears. And then blow out the candle and go to bed. It was sort of like creating a little space and time container for leaking out some of that grief. Over time I’ve just noticed some things about the way that I grieve.

When my partner and I walked through France, then went to Rome and to parts of Greece, we encountered visual reminders about the suffering of Jesus at every turn, presumably from preliterate times. These reminders were literally everywhere, and I was both confronted, horrified really, and also fascinated by that. One of the things I thought about it was, if so many people in so many places over such long periods of historic time have needed everyday reminders of these things that are deep and significant in their lives, what makes me different? Why would I think that I don’t need that? And when we got back, I began to try and figure out, well, what would be helpful?

I’ve gone through various different iterations: thinking about the earth that I’m standing on. The qualities of the earth and the fact that the earth here is Kaurna land and that it’s been stolen. Thinking about water and it being a requirement for life. Thinking about life being fragile and diverse and all around me and wanting to take action in the defence of life and to do so with others. I would go out on my run or walk or whatever, stop in a place near water and just, if there were no

people around, I'd say it out loud. It has changed and developed over time. It is really about revisiting what is essential. The water cycle, air and atmosphere, these things bring together all non-human life with all human life. This turned out to be another container. Sometimes I would just have a few tears there or just feel some feelings. And at the end of that I would always commit to taking action, with others!

These practices are not just expression. They are iterative and they're intentional. What I'm trying to do is I am trying to *remember*. I think it's quite hard. One of the reasons I think other people find it harder to persist is because they're not able to remember why persistence is important. They can't remember. They can't hold on to *Why am I doing this?* I practice not running my life according to my emotion and not giving in to overwhelm.

The importance of the collective

History does not finish with us, it goes beyond.
(Freire, 1999, p. 39)

These interviews were underpinned by the principles of collective practice (Denborough, 2008). In an early conversation with an experienced activist, she reminded me of the importance of giving the stories back to the community. We considered a number of questions that continue to inform the ongoing development of this work:

- What happens once the initial conversations finish?
- How can we ground the work in something tangible that moves beyond the individual?
- How could a project be developed that does not just sit on a shelf?
- How could the ideas be connected to a collective and contribute to local action and social movement?

Denborough (2019, p. 211) suggested that we need to develop a framework by which to reflect on our work and to explore the ways our work might diminish or enlarge possibilities for social action and contribution. Many of the activists who shared their stories with me told of the influence of other social movements on their sense of identity (Denborough, 2019, p. 199). Our conversations traced the history of the impact of social movements (including feminist, queer and anti-war movements) on the activists' lives, hopes and how they have shaped their climate activism. I hope that further

conversations will continue to explore learnings and knowledges from these movements and how they might speak to climate activism.

This work is, without a doubt, something ongoing. The acts of resistance and responses collected in the 'epiphanies of the ordinary' section above, alongside other stories from these conversations, will form the beginnings of a 'living' collective document that can support wider engagement with and contribution to the climate movement. I began with double listening to rich stories from individual activists, and now hope to move beyond the personal into the communal to support both local action and a wider climate movement. In the face of the severity of the climate crisis, collective practice has to be foundational to our therapeutic response as '[t]he current privileging of individualised models of care will leave far too many people without support' (Conyer, 2019, p. 10).

There are still not yet a handful of published journal articles that explore the use of narrative practice in response to the problems connected with climate crisis (Makarusanga, 2020; Nicholas, 2021; Seburikoko, 2020). Whether the research is published or not, the scale of the climate crisis means that narrative practitioners across the globe have the opportunity to show up in these conversations and contribute to the communities they live in through innovative forms of practice and togetherness.

Conclusion

We will be coming to terms with the urgent realities of our climate crisis for the rest of our lives. We all need to get comfortable with this fact – in a very uncomfortable way.
(Shugarman, 2020, p. 1)

There are rich stories from all around the world of people and communities engaging in creative acts of resistance and care in the face of the climate crisis. I am incredibly grateful to the seven activists who shared with me sparkling and difficult stories of their lives and their resistance to what I came to call the 'cycle of apocalyptic overwhelm'. It is uncomfortable, confronting, personal-political (Hanisch, 2006) work for us all. The sharing of stories and direct climate action has made this work more bearable and the possibilities brighter (Bendell & Read, 2022). The community of care, the sharing of insider knowledges and solidarity with communities of climate action has been like a raft for me to cling to when my 'safe riverbank' feels flooded.

Notes

- ¹ The riverbank metaphor was first offered to Michael White by Caleb Wakhungu in Zimbabwe (Denborough, 2019, p. 201).
- ² All participants are referred to by pseudonyms.

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