

“The Doomed Earth” Waiting Room

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“It is, I promise, worse than you think. If your anxiety about global warming is dominated by fears of sea-level rise, you are barely scratching the surface of what terrors are possible, even within the lifetime of a teenager today.” (opening words) **The Doomed Earth Catalog**, David Wallace-Wells

My psychotherapy office and waiting room sits below grade in a 1901 Parkdale 3-story. Despite being underground there are south and east facing windows that invite ample morning and afternoon light to spread upon the floor’s terra cotta tiles. A small refrigerator stands in one corner, and kitty-corner, a pine-laminate table with two chairs. There is a small bookcase and two faux-suede re-upholstered armchairs that once sat in the Edmonton den of the house into which I was 1950 born.

On the table lie three stacks of books, including analyst Stephen Mitchell’s **Can Love Last** - *“Renouncing our claims to centrality has made it possible to regard ourselves as participants in something so extraordinary, so vast, that it would have been unimaginable to Copernicus, and even to Freud...”* - and poet Mary Oliver’s **Upstream** - *“Attention is the beginning of devotion...”* - and a large photography book, **The More Than Human**, and a few magazines, such as...

...the July 10 - 23, 2017 issue of *New York Magazine*. The cover headline, **The Doomed Earth Catalog**, is boldly lettered above a photo from space of a browning Earth. The essay quickly became the most-read article in *New York Magazine*’s history, in volume, and in kind.

Harold Searles wrote the following passages in his 1960 book, **The Nonhuman Environment in Normal Development and in Schizophrenia**, *“Why has there not been formulated, before this, a more comprehensive psychoanalytic theory than we have at present, a theory which takes into account not merely man in his human environment, but man in his total environment (including, that is, the nonhuman environment)?...we have been hampered not only by ignorance...but also by another factor: anxiety...concerning our relatedness with the nonhuman environment....maturity involves a readiness to face the question of what is one’s position about this greater portion - by far the greatest portion - of one’s total environment, rather than fleeing to some pat explanation...[like] (modern-day psychiatry’s predominantly assuming it to be only a frame for psychologically meaningful human living, rather than an - in many respects - integral part of such living).*

The Doomed Earth Catalog continues: *“The Earth has experienced five mass extinctions before the one we are living through now....many climate scientists will tell you they are the best analog for the ecological future we are diving headlong into....all but the one that killed the dinosaurs were caused by climate change produced by greenhouse gas. The most notorious was 252 million years ago; it began when carbon warmed the planet by five degrees, accelerated when that warming triggered the release of methane in the Arctic, and ended with 97 percent of all life on Earth dead. We are currently adding carbon to the atmosphere at a considerably faster rate; by most estimates, at least ten times faster.”*

Are you still with me? Has “anxiety concerning” your relationship to the nonhuman environment, or Nature, filtered in to this reading space between us? I would expect yes. Why wouldn’t there be? What if there isn’t a trace? Is there pertinent analytic, environmental, and cultural meaning in Searle’s reflections on maturity’s willingness “to face the question of what is one’s position about this greater portion - by far the greatest portion...of one’s total environment...”?

These questions have been part of my unrelenting curiosity and passionate preoccupation for the past 8 years, preceded by years of conscious interest and concern, and semi-conscious anxiety. How do I situate myself as an analytically-flavoured psychotherapist, and citizen, now long-in-tooth after almost 44 years in the field of clinical social work, psychiatry and psychotherapy, whilst in the midst of a genuine, down-to-earth, gathering storm of scientific environmental crisis data that includes global warming, as well as other symptoms, like the Sixth Great Extinction (**The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History**, Kolbert, 2014).

What does this mean to my patients who may, or may not, make any mention of “by far the greatest portion” but nonetheless, possessing bodies and being creatures like you and I that emerged from the Earth’s alchemy of water, soil, fire, and air, surely know in the bones that something is up. I think of systems scholar Joanna Macy’s words: *“We tend to live our lives as if nothing has changed, while knowing that everything has changed...unprecedented in the history of humanity, the awareness lurks there...Until we find ways of acknowledging and integrating that level of anguished awareness, we repress it; and with that repression we are drained of the energy we need for action and clear thinking...Uncovering the deep roots of repression is part of what psychology can offer environmentalists.”* (in **Psychoanalysis and Ecology at the Edge of Chaos**, Dodds, 2011)

It remains unusual for direct environmental crisis references to enter my patient’s narratives and dreams. However, they have increased over these recent years,

particularly as I've begun listening for and explicitly responding to links - a favourite pet; the ubiquitous "weather"; a childhood's favourite tree; the sweep of a breeze upon the back of the neck; the family lake cottage; a dream of the melting ice caps - and following-up on threads of meaning that I suspect may have some roots in apocalyptic anxiety, or overwhelm, or fear of the future. When assessing a new patient I will, for instance, ask how much time they spend outdoors in Nature now and did as a child, and what their experience was like; and, what does Nature mean to them. Vital questions in these times, yet, I imagine, still rarely asked by clinicians of all stripes. Truth is, I tend often to forget to ask, until later in the assessment, when I wake from my dissociative habits.

In an early session, a new patient says, *"when I return home it is like re-entering my body. I spent so much time as a child amidst the trees and rock and ocean of a lake that nowhere else I have lived has felt so inside me, nor has my body felt so at home."*

Another, a 70 year old woman, says, *"I've been taking it in [the environmental crisis] in my head but not down here [she points to her belly]. I am really so upset."*

A 76 year old woman I've been seeing for several years asks me if I believe climate change is real, and if I don't, and she does, what will that mean for her, for us.

A 43 year old man chides me for the waiting room's environmental literature, sparse as it is, and springboards into a tirade against doom-sayers, that no one is going to take away his hard-earned privileges; and what hidden judgments do I hold of his life-style? He punctuated this with a statement of his belief that his two children will just have to figure the future out like he did, and if it was as bad as "Anthony" believes it is, then all the more reason to live for the now. Searles wondered in a 1972 paper, **Unconscious Processes and Environmental Crisis**, whether *"our fear, envy, and hatred of formidable oedipal rivals makes us view with large-scale apathy their becoming polluted into extinction."*

And Jessica Benjamin writes: *"...the tension according to which each Self [you, me] must give the Other [future generations; Lake Ontario; the Right Whale] recognition breaks down, and the two terms - recognizing and being recognized - split apart....First, the Self finds it intolerable to bear the vulnerability of being dependent on an other subject whom he does not control, indeed who [Nature] is independent and can demand the same recognition as the Self. Second, the Self is trying to master and deny the vulnerability of its organic bodily existence."* (**Beyond Doer and Done To: Recognition Theory, Intersubjectivity and the Third**, 2018)

All to say, I feel an assortment of intentions, wishes, and guilt about placing **The**

Doomed Earth Catalog upon my waiting room table. It's all there: my frightened outrage; my long-cultivated self-reflective clinical restraint tugging at me to remove it; and my projective concerns that I am unloading onto/into my patients my own unreflected-upon personal demons of *"individualistic egoism"* (**Climate Crisis, Psychoanalysis, and Radical Ethics**, Orange, 2017), guilt, shame, and destructiveness.

Do I have some Anthropocene duty to warn, together with some moral and clinical obligation to not impose my concerns upon my patients, but not to hide them either, all of whom, all of us, being in this 21st century lifeboat together?

"But when we do truly see the world we've made, they [scientists] say, we will also find a way to make it livable. For them, the alternative is simply unimaginable."

So **The Doomed Earth Catalog** concludes, as does this brief ramble, my attempt to draw you and the collective analytic mind into the conversation about what got us here, so powerful a species that *"every extreme event now has a human fingerprint"* (**Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene**, Hamilton, 2017); and so vulnerable to the dysregulated earth systems we have provoked.

In coming to acknowledge (individually and collectively) this historically unprecedented situation, this *"ultimate wicked problem"* (**Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change**, Marshall, 2014), what now will turn the tide, with haste, from our disavowal and dissociation, from our emotional freezing and pretending not to know the scientific facts, towards a *"far-reaching emotional dialogue in which the Angst can be collectively held and borne..."*? (Stolorow, 2013, in Orange, 2017)

How can we analysts and psychotherapists contribute to the creation of that *"far-reaching dialogue"*? What do we need to do, who do we need to become, to be able to bear the facts and hold this dialogic space, within, between, and without?

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