

WORKSHOP REPORT

Facing the Shadows of Extinction

A Climate Change Matrix event for Extinction Rebellion, with David Wasdell,
Meridian House, London, 28 February 2019

A report by Jo Woolley

I knew little about David Wasdell before I arrived at his residence for a one-day intensive workshop, on 'Facing the Shadows of Extinction' which began on the evening I arrived. The workshop was gifted to Extinction Rebellion in the hope that it would support us all in resourcing ourselves to face whatever the future had to offer through dynamic outer activism and inner reflective process work.

Evelyn, David's long-time partner and wife, warmly met us at the front door and attended to the immediate practical matters of dispensing with our coats and luggage, and showing us where the facilities and kitchen were. As other attendees arrived we were ushered into the dining room, where we ate a shared supper of simple and wholesome fare, whilst introducing ourselves to one another.

This atmosphere of friendly informality was continued after supper in the sitting room, dubbed the 'process room' by David. There were sofas and chairs arranged in a round, so that all participants were facing each other and included in whatever discussions or talks might take place. Both Evelyn and David held the space, and were candid about a current serious

health condition that David was facing. This intention to face the reality of their circumstances with rigorous honesty and self-compassion provided the foundation resonance from which all of our own consequent inquiries unfolded. This was the case when David gave us a short talk, with slides included, on the very erudite research he had himself carried out regarding the facts of climate change and the potentially catastrophic future humanity will be facing if we collectively, as a species, do not begin to address the current ecological emergency.

It was intensely sobering to face this life-threatening, existential crisis through the detached logic of rigorous scientific assessment, and to realise that the special IPCC report on the attempt to keep the increase in global heating below 1.5 degrees C (brought out in October 2018) had not taken into account all of the Earth's slower feedback systems, which indicated that our current global predicament is far more serious and immediate than the more generous allowance of 'we have ten or twelve years to take action'. David looked at indicators of change, including: the sensitivity of global temperatures to changes in carbon dioxide

levels, the sensitivity of the global climate to changes in temperature, the sensitivity of human civilization to changes in global climate, and the sensitivity of the drivers of the human response.

This brought us to the consideration of ‘the roots of the common unconscious’. It is David’s want to use symbols and associations to draw attention to deeper levels of consciousness, which it might be fruitful for individuals and groups to explore. He had used the well known saying of ‘there’s an elephant in the room’ to point to the factors that the IPCC report had ignored or passed over. These ‘elephants’ have already been indicated above. What David brought out then was a model of the three monkeys: ‘Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil’. He suggested that human beings develop all sorts of strategies to avoid what is uncomfortable; that collectively, we are encouraged to avoid feeling, speaking, hearing, seeing what we don’t want to face. But this approach tends to limit our experience: for what is unbearable cannot be felt; what is inarticulate cannot be spoken; what is unimaginable cannot be seen.

This led to a consideration of the human ‘shadow’, both individual and collective. We suffer from splits; the split between what we don’t want and reality; the split against insight and the caul of our shadow. David pointed to the fact that we have a cultural habit of suppressing; this fosters an emotional illiteracy which is very unhelpful in the current crisis. It is why it is important, in his opinion, to explore what is felt as fully as possible, through every means available to us, in order to expose our shadow and thereby gain greater wisdom and understanding so we are more fully equipped and resourced to face this ecological emergency with resilience and expediency.

He/we reflected on the fact that the gravitational pull of the global capitalist economy is no longer serving us collectively; in fact, it could be said that it is a main contributor to the destructive, rapacious practices which have marked our relationship to the Earth and Her natural resources. This old paradigm no longer makes any sense in the light of what we now know of the ecological effects of the fossil fuel industry and other financially driven industries, such as the agro-chemical and pharmaceutical industries. David quoted Thomas

Berry who wrote about the power of narrative; a new story is desperately needed, but has yet to fully form.

Following all this informative and profound discourse, we then arrived at the practical arrangements for the following day, in order to explore as fully and as deeply as possible our inner edges. For this purpose, there being nine of us, we were divided into a series of triads arranged on a horizontal and vertical axis – i.e. our names were placed in a grid, and depending where we were on that grid dictated whom we would be working with. Following this grouping arrangement, we then chose the physical space to which we would adjourn in order to continue our discussions in these triads.

I was in the house’s basement with two younger members from the central Extinction Rebellion team. We had the rest of the evening to share with each other what David’s presentation had brought up in us. Whether it was the ethos that David and Evelyn had introduced through their own candour and intensely driven focus on the shadow looming before humanity, or our own willingness to engage with what had been discussed, or the mixture of our personalities, our conversation that evening flowed very easily. We seemed to touch into deep areas quite quickly, which proved both affirmational and provocative for all of us, leading to further questions and explorations. These were embarked upon on the following morning, when we met once more to engage with what had arisen over the course of the night, after there had been some time for an initial integration of the material which had been presented.

After a break, I then joined my secondary triad, which was in the room called ‘the arc’, being where much of David’s extensive research papers were stored. With two older individuals at a different stage of life than my two companions in my base triad, the tenor of our explorations in the secondary triad were naturally of a different scope and focus. What came up was lineage and the cultural unhealed scars that we carried as a result of this.

We met before lunch in the larger group again, returning to the room with a circular seating

arrangement, where David encouraged us to share whatever had arisen for us. In the temporary silence that ensued this request, I spoke about what we had been reflecting on regarding the ancestral scars of the First World War and Second World War. This provoked further interesting observations. Evelyn shared with us the historical trauma of Lewis, one of the Scottish Isles. At the end of the First World War, a first group of surviving soldiers returned to be successfully reunited with their families. There were too many soldiers to embark on the first ferry. Tragically the ferry carrying the second group was wrecked in storm conditions within sight of their homelands. The ferry sank, drowning nearly all the returning servicemen aboard. The small tight-knit island community was devastated. Donald Trump's mother had been born before the War, and was only seven years old at the time. When she was about 18, she left the traumatized community behind and emigrated to Canada, eventually marrying and becoming the mother of the man eventually elected as the 45th President of the USA.

David then invited us to consider the current president's obsession with building a wall across the Mexican border. What was Mr Trump trying to keep out through that wall? The suggestion was that there are deep unhealed wounds of loss that President Trump has not been able to look at or escape, and so these wounds get projected outwards into the public domain. This is why the inner work we undertake, to face our own shadows, is so important, as by doing so we are performing a service for the collective and helping to heal the ancestral wounds that others have not had the agency to face.

What I also found both extraordinary and exciting about the way David and Evelyn conducted our explorations in the larger group was how all the symbols, images and artefacts they had placed in that room were also used as sources of inspiration and potential triggers to expose the unconscious workings of our minds. So sometimes we were asked where our attention was being placed, what our eyes were falling on, in my case an image of

the River Thames and all my feelings about water – the miracle of it. When I moved, then I looked at an image of an elephant and bear, which provoked the grief I feel at so much loss of biodiversity and other life forms. In effect, David indicated that nothing was random, and that we only process consciously a tiny part of the information that impacts upon us on a daily, minute-by-minute basis.

We had lunch and then met for the last time with both our base triad and our secondary triads, before gathering in the larger group for some final reflections. I found this whole process extremely rich and very exciting. I felt that the way David and Evelyn worked, with a mixture of extremely erudite considerations alongside a complete openness to the feeling state and the realms of intuition, offered up a treasure-store of abundant material, ripely harvested and held by the two of them.

I felt enriched as a result of this day workshop, and inspired to live ever-more fully in the moment. For it is through engaging as fully as we can in the day to day – being in what Eckart Tolle has dubbed 'the power of the now' – that we can access our intuitive gifts, uncover more of our unconscious, and discover the solutions that humanity is in such dire need of in this current era of mass ecocide, and the consequent trauma we are all suffering from as a result of it.

About the contributor

Jo Woolley / Jozette Khimba has a degree in Psychology, and is a qualified Emotional Therapeutic Counsellor, a teacher/tutor of looked-after children, and a writer and performer. She founded the Global Peace Party in Stroud, and has been an environmental activist for many years. She was one of the first 'Conscientious Protectors' – as a legal trustee of Earth – to use this as a legal defence in January 2018, after being arrested at PNR (Gates) Community Protection Camp to protest against fracking alongside Dr Gail Bradbrook.