Turning towards our desire to turn away: Climate disavowal in the context of the Australian counselling profession

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Donald Winnicott (1960) famously said there is no such thing as an infant, there is only a mother and an infant. Similarly, we now see there is no such thing as a human being; there are only humans being embedded in the living biosphere. (Lewis, 2021, p. 369)

People who practise counselling, psychotherapy, and other healing modalities are humans who are shaped by the cultures they inhabit in a way that informs their understandings of the world and influences what they think, value, and do. Today, the dominant colonial culture is an anthropocentric one that positions humans as separate from, and usually superior to, the rest of the living world (Mawby, 2019). However, the challenge of climate change demands a return to an understanding of interconnectedness and interdependence that is in line with Indigenous perspectives and modelled on the biosphere (Haraway, 2016). While examining the opportunities and responsibilities of the counselling profession in relation to climate change, this paper attempts to position this issue in a more interconnected space, understanding individual human mental health as entirely dependent on the health of the wider, nested systems of which each individual forms a part. In this context, humans are understood to be simultaneously “acted on” by the climate system (feeling anxiety about climate change, being nourished in multiple ways by a thriving garden) and “acting on” the climate system (emitting carbon dioxide when we drive, increasing carbon drawdown when we plant trees) in ways that are cyclical and interconnected. This paper examines where practitioners currently find themselves in regard to some aspects of those cyclical and interconnected interactions between their own individual mental health and the health of living systems as a whole. It also investigates ways that practitioners can contribute to the health of both smaller and greater systems through their particular knowledge, skills, and personal engagement. Because the author’s experience is with the counselling profession, that is the main focus of this paper. However, the findings may also be applicable for psychotherapists, Indigenous healing practitioners, and therapeutic practitioners from other traditions.

Where is the Professional Discussion About Climate Change?

People who work in the counselling profession are inevitably engaged in a process of being with, and caring about, the suffering of others. Climate change is having serious and worsening impacts on mental health worldwide, triggering significant suffering (K. Hayes & Poland, 2018; Morganstein & Ursano, 2020). It is often the individuals and groups who have contributed least to creating the problem, and who were already subject to multiple risk factors due to social inequality, who are most exposed to harm (Lansbury Hall & Crosby, 2022; Tschakert et al., 2019). Given this, it seems surprising that the discipline of counselling has struggled to engage with climate change as a professional issue (Hilert, 2021). In Australia, where economic interests undermine political action on the issue (Tangney, 2019) and many sectors of the community rarely discuss climate change with their family and friends (Morrison et al., 2018), efforts at raising climate change as an issue within the context of counselling have so far been piecemeal and lacking in ambition. Silva and Coburn (2022), in their qualitative study examining eight Australian therapists' experience of climate change, found that all participants spoke of the lack of professional guidance and leadership on the topic of climate change. Psychology for a Safe Climate is an organisation founded in 2010 to support emotional engagement with climate change. Its founder and executive director, Carol Ride, states:

Prioritising and developing a psychological response to Climate Change and Mental Health, together with recognition of the need for Professional Development support for clinicians to engage with the emotional needs of their clients, has sadly not been a focus of the Counselling and Psychology Organisations and Training bodies to date (personal communication, November 11, 2022).

Knowing and Not Knowing: Coping Through Disavowal

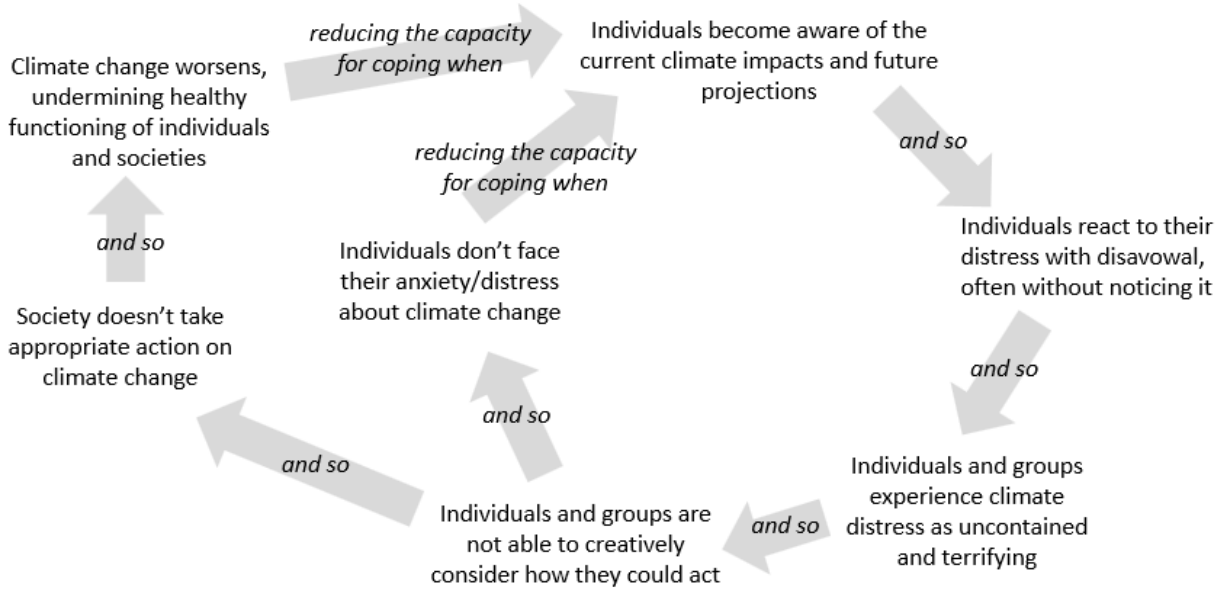
The general lack of engagement with climate change is not confined to counselling, but is pervasive and widespread (Brulle & Norgaard, 2019). While there are multiple underlying factors contributing to this nonengagement (Gifford, 2011; Leviston et al., 2014), some scholars argue that it is often not because of lack of awareness or concern, but is in fact partly because many people find their concern, and the ensuing uncertainty, so uncomfortable (Haltinner & Sarathchandra, 2018; Norgaard, 2011; Woodbury, 2019). This concern may be enhanced by direct experiences of extreme weather events, confusion about how best to take action, and a sense of powerlessness, or a feeling that no action taken by any individual will meaningfully change the situation (Albrecht, 2019; Gifford, 2011; Norgaard, 2011).

Weintrobe (2012a) uses the psychodynamic concept of "disavowal" to describe a strategy to manage this concern about climate change. Disavowal involves splitting so that the reality of climate change is both seen and not seen simultaneously, providing a way to manage anxiety. Other researchers have noted a similar phenomenon, with Leahy et al. (2010) describing the "two-track thinking" they observed in multiple studies when discussing the issue of climate change in the coal-dominated area of the Hunter Valley. On one hand, participants acknowledged the urgency of the issue and an apocalyptic vision of the future, and on the other they continued their everyday life unchanged by this

knowledge and held expectations of the future that did not reflect it. Cohen (2001) discusses a similar concept of “implicatory denial”, where people know the facts, but repress or turn away from the emotional, political, and social implications of these facts, thus removing the imperative to act: “We are vaguely aware of choosing not to look at the facts, but not quite conscious of just what it is we are evading. We know, but at the same time we don’t know” (p. 5). This leads to a culture that, while appearing passive, actively resists change, similar to that described by Alford (2001) in his book on whistleblowers: “not only does no one want to listen, but no one wants to talk about not listening” (pp. 20–21).

The turning-away and nonresponse of others intensifies the distress of those trying to raise the alarm about climate change, as they struggle not only with the knowledge that they bear, but often with feeling actively isolated in bearing that knowledge (Hoggett & Randall, 2018; Pihkala, 2020b). In the case of whistleblowers, it is those in management who refuse to engage, and their motivation for refusing to even consider information which threatens the company they work for is obvious (Alford, 2001). In the case of climate change, it appears that people who are embedded within the dominant culture may be turning away because they are protecting the cultural norms they rely on to lend them a sense of safety in an uncertain world. Brulle and Norgaard (2019) argue that this is the case, framing climate change disavowal as a coping mechanism in the face of possible cultural trauma. Cultural trauma may be understood as a wholesale disruption of the cultural basis of social order, triggering unwanted change on every level from daily routines to ideologies and worldviews (Alexander et al., 2004). Individuals embedded within a culture built on unsustainable consumption are likely to experience imaginings of both the dystopian, climate-changed future and the dramatic decarbonisation efforts needed right now to avoid it as potential cultural trauma (Brulle & Norgaard, 2019). This threat of cultural trauma may trigger prior experiences of trauma—including both individual traumas and ongoing cultural traumas like the intergenerational trauma experienced by Indigenous Australians in the wake of colonialisation—which may limit people’s capacity to respond appropriately (Woodbury, 2019). In this way, we can view the widespread apathy displayed towards climate change as not just protecting people from uncomfortable emotions like helplessness and guilt, but as deeply rooted and predictable attempts to maintain a sense of safety and security in the face of a serious threat through the defence of cultural norms. Brulle and Norgaard (2019) argue that this leads to social inertia on multiple levels: individual, institutional, and societal.

Figure 1. The Vicious Cycle Triggered by Disavowal



The Vicious and Virtuous Cycles

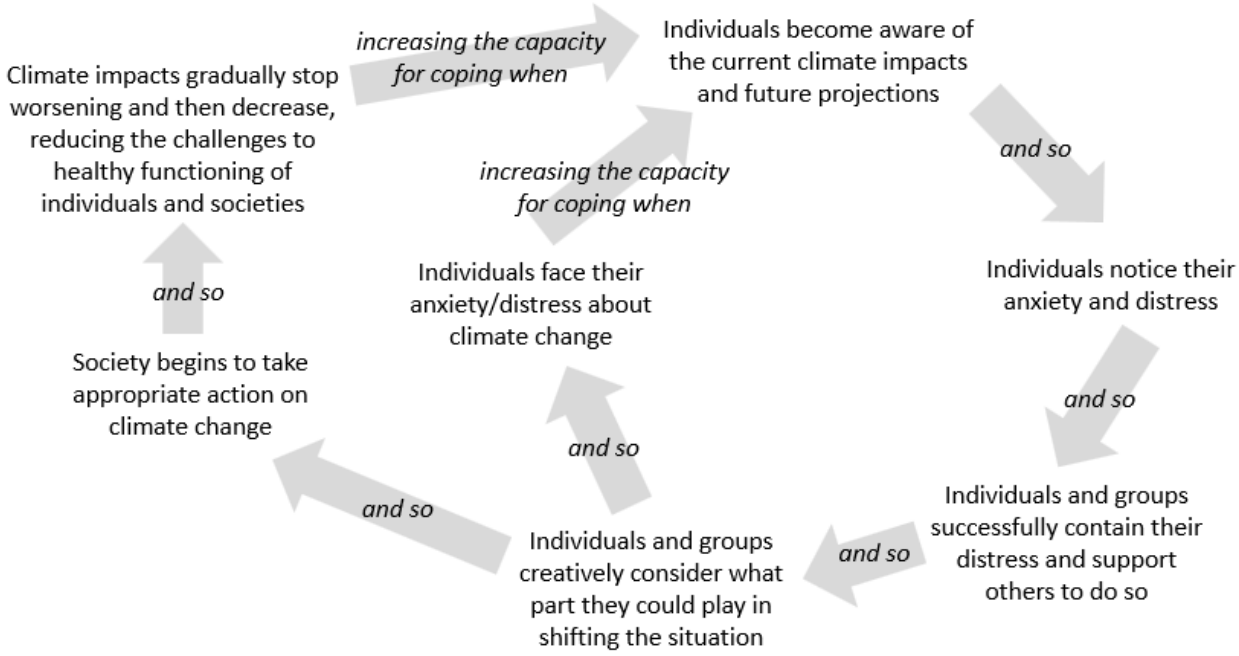
Utilising strategies of disavowal and denial often succeeds in reducing discomfort in the short term, removing the requirement to grapple with the uncomfortable existential and moral issues that climate change raises (Ojala, 2012; Weintrobe, 2012a). In the longer term, however, the underlying causes of the discomfort remain unaddressed. On an individual level, this increases anxiety, which in turn requires more energy to suppress it (Weintrobe, 2012a). On a systemic level, the unaddressed issue continues to worsen, triggering more real-world implications that further undermine the determinants of individual and societal mental and physical health (Swim et al., 2017). This vicious cycle is depicted in Figure 1.

However, practitioners are adept at supporting people to, where possible, turn vicious cycles into virtuous ones, so it is useful to imagine an alternative, virtuous cycle. In the cycle shown in Figure 2, noticing and containing the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings triggered by climate change facilitates appropriate and creative reactions. This allows human effort and energy to flow where it is required, into social and political change, as well as strategies for mitigation, transition, and adaptation. These more adaptive responses help the individual to experience and manage their distress in ways that provide a sense of autonomy, meaning, and purpose. On a systemic level, they work towards enabling systems to transition towards socially and ecologically just futures, supporting a stabilisation of the climate system on which our individual and societal health depends.

The vicious cycle of silence, disavowal, and avoidance is socially organised and reproduced (Norgaard, 2011), and as such has proved challenging to shift, particularly given the systems of oppression at work. However, accepting it as inevitable and the situation as hopeless is likely to itself be a coping mechanism. Perhaps, this says more about the discomfort and prior traumas that are being triggered in us than about the

reality of the social situation which, being complex, rather than just complicated, has the capacity to shift rapidly in unexpected ways (Lewis, 2021; Lewis et al., 2020; Woodbury, 2019).

Figure 2. The Virtuous Cycle, Where Distress is Noticed and Contained



Making the Shift

As an individual, shifting from a vicious to a virtuous cycle involves first noticing the ways that we ourselves as counsellors or psychotherapists may use avoidance or disavowal to cope with our feelings of discomfort about climate change. Lewis (2021) argues that containment, which, in its broadest sense, is something that helps us cope with difficult situations, is a critical component to our capacity to face climate change. She notes that containment can be constructed

- relationally, through connections with others who are facing the same issue,
- cognitively, through ways of thinking that offer new perspectives on the issue and help manage overwhelm,
- agentically, through taking action with others on the issue, and
- spiritually, through connection to the greater-than-human.

Relational and agentic containment can be sought amongst friends or family, in local climate action groups, by learning about and participating in Indigenous practices that steward the land, like cultural burning (Steffensen, 2020), or through engagement with national groups like Psychology for a Safe Climate. Spiritual containment can be sought in nature, creative expression, religion, or broader spiritual connection in a variety of

contexts and traditions (Lee & Han, 2015; Macy & Johnstone, 2012; Steffensen, 2020). Strategies for cognitive containment continue to develop in response to the problem, and more work is needed in this area (Charlson et al., 2021).

The Work That Reconnects (Macy & Johnstone, 2012) has been evolving since the 1970s as a form of therapeutic group work designed to support people to honour and contain their pain around environmental destruction, with the understanding that this will allow them to begin or sustain action that contributes positively to the living world. The way that it is often used by activist and environmental groups engages all the strategies of containment identified above. Budziszewska and Jonsson (2021) identify existential therapeutic approaches as a useful framework to handle climate distress. The focus on values and mindful presence and the strategies for coping with difficulty in acceptance and commitment therapy (S. C. Hayes et al., 1999) may make it a good match for this issue.

Lewis et al. (2020) suggest the use of dialectics to contain climate distress in a therapeutic environment. This involves identifying the opposing poles that are inherent in the current experience. For example, if the client is mired in a feeling of despair, the dialectic identified may be hope and hopelessness. The next step is validating the pole the client occupies, while opening the space to include the opposite pole with the attitude that there is enough space for both to exist simultaneously. In this model, the therapist's role is to provide containment and keep the dialectic open, thus helping the client avoid collapsing towards one pole or the other. Some other common dialectics explored by Lewis et al. (2020) include climate reality/social reality, individual agency/collective agency, and uncertainty/certainty. In addition to these approaches, self-care and community strategies (including supportive physical routines, time in nature, mindfulness or meditation practices, and supervision or counselling) are useful in individual containment efforts (Davenport, 2017; Driscoll, 2020).

Climate Distress

Through containment of their own distress, practitioners can prepare themselves to more effectively provide support for climate distress in their clients. For the purposes of this paper, climate distress is broadly defined as distress triggered by an understanding of human-caused climate change. It often includes existential elements, as well as anxiety, frustration, anger, grief, overwhelm, shame, and guilt (Clayton, 2020; Verlie, 2019). While uncomfortable, it is largely framed by scholars as an appropriate and potentially adaptive response to climate change, containing the potential to trigger striving towards the social changes that are necessary to reduce and mitigate climate change. Nevertheless, when climate distress is particularly intense, or when individuals lack the skills to manage it, it may become debilitating and require support (Clayton, 2020; Comtesse et al., 2021; Cunsolo & Ellis, 2018; Pihkala, 2020a). It can also mask already-experienced mental health issues or bring them to the surface.

Climate distress appears to be more common in young people, Indigenous people, those who have directly experienced climate impacts, and women, although the findings on women have been variable between cohorts living in the United States and those living elsewhere (Clayton, 2020; Heeren et al., 2022; Middleton et al., 2020). It is unsurprising that Indigenous Peoples around the world are particularly at risk for climate distress, given the emphasis that many Indigenous cultures place on connection to and care for country, and, for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the adverse impact on social and emotional wellbeing of the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation, Stolen Generations, and genocide (Dudgeon et al., 2022; Lansbury Hall & Crosby, 2022). Similarly, it makes sense that young people, who are likely to live to see more extreme disruptions to the climate system, appear to experience climate distress in larger numbers than older cohorts (Heeren et al., 2022). In a recent international study on the attitudes of 10,000 people aged 16–25 years, 75% of respondents said that "the future is frightening" due to climate change, and strikingly, 53% said "humanity is doomed" because of it (Hickman et al., 2021). This concern may translate into challenges with daily functioning, misanthropy, and suicidal ideation. Two recent studies on the rates of climate anxiety found that 20–25% of respondents reported that their anxiety about climate change gets in the way of their normal functioning more often than "sometimes" (Clayton & Karazsia, 2020; Heeren et al., 2022). This indicates that there is a significant proportion of the community who are struggling with climate distress at any one time. The finding that people who have been directly affected by climate change are also more at risk of climate anxiety and associated functional impairment is an indicator to practitioners that the number of people experiencing appreciable levels of this form of distress is likely to be growing steeply in Australia.

Disavowal in the Counselling Room

Despite the climate distress that appears to be already experienced by the community, working with it does not appear to be a particularly common occurrence for most counsellors at this time. No data currently exists for Australia, but a U.S. study found that just under half of the 160 counsellors surveyed had never had a client raise climate change in an emotionally meaningful way, although 77% had a client raise it "in passing" (Seaman, 2016). Everyday denial, including climate disavowal, is often socially organised, which means that people notice or ignore something partly because of a particular social role they are playing (e.g., the role of a counsellor or psychotherapist), or a situation they are in (e.g., the counselling session; Norgaard, 2011; Zerubavel, 2006). Just as silence about climate change may be culturally understood as the norm in most social situations (Geiger & Swim, 2016; Norgaard, 2011), it may be understood as a norm in the counselling session as well. At least some of those "in passing" comments may have held the possibility for discussions that did not occur because the counsellor (or perhaps the client) did not view climate change as a relevant or appropriate subject for discussion in counselling, or the counsellor felt under-skilled to hold the conversation.

Even when the subject comes to the surface as a subject of deep distress for the client, there is no guarantee that it will be handled well by the counsellor who, like many other people, is likely to be using coping strategies to manage their own concern about the issue. There are some initial reports of clients whose climate distress was poorly handled by their counselling professionals (Silva & Coburn, 2022; Young, 2020). It would not be surprising to find many counselling professionals under-prepared to support climate distress, given the high levels of disavowal in the community at large (Brulle & Norgaard, 2019; Weintrobe, 2012a) and the lack of engagement that has so far been shown both within formal practitioner education and professional development opportunities (Silva & Coburn, 2022). However, to date, there have been no studies focusing on the experiences of clients to verify this conjecture.

Implications for Practice

Practitioners who aim to shift themselves into the virtuous cycle (and support their clients to shift) will work to notice distress and avoidance in themselves, making space for distress as it arises, and constructing regular spaces and times for engaging with their reactions to climate change even without overt distress. This process involves exploring any numbing, avoidance, or emotions (positive or negative), in ways that are both emotionally containing and agentically liberating, ideally in relational connection with others (Davenport, 2017). This experience can lead to a process of creatively considering what actions they themselves should take to affect the situation most powerfully. This may well include supporting others in a professional capacity, perhaps through volunteering to support activists, or becoming an advocate for the issue in the professional arena (Azuri & Campbell, 2021).

During practice, it is important to be sensitive to the possibility that clients, particularly young and/or Indigenous people and those who have been directly affected by extreme weather events, may be experiencing climate distress but may not feel comfortable to raise it as an issue themselves. It may be useful for professionals who use an intake questionnaire to include a question about this issue. Those supporting climate distress in others can access a growing pool of resources (Davenport, 2017; Gillespie, 2019; Weintrobe, 2012b). Training and support can be sought from groups that have a climate focus, such as Psychology for a Safe Climate, and therapeutic training groups, such as We Al-li, whose Indigenous worldview means that relationship with and respect for country is foundational to all work. Professionals working with climate distress need to acknowledge that this is an issue that affects them just as much as their clients, and to be aware that the personal climate journey of the counsellor is a foundational aspect of working with climate in practice, requiring high levels of reflexivity, and sometimes also needing additional external support (Azuri & Campbell, 2021). This personal journey is likely to involve examination of other areas of disavowal, including around the patterns of injustice and consumption that both sustain current systems of privilege and are primary drivers of climate change.

Crucially, those working in peak bodies have the opportunity to influence the social norms of the profession and begin to break down the silence about climate change that currently exists. Particularly at times of natural disaster, or when important reports are released, peak bodies like the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia have a responsibility to communicate in a socially responsible way with their members about the climate distress that some of their clients are likely to experience. This may involve highlighting the issue of climate disavowal in practitioners, in order to help individuals to work with it more effectively, without minimising or mischaracterising the distress as itself pathological. Events like Earth Day and World Environment Day also provide easily accessible opportunities to raise practitioner awareness of the issue.

Additionally, training institutions need to examine their moral obligation to support students to turn towards this issue. The importance of connection to country means that work on the awareness of climate distress fits easily within training produced by Indigenous healing practitioners and Indigenous-led organisations involved in climate-related education and activism, such as Seed Mob. Indigenous cultural wisdom on how to address climate change and climate injustice has been and continues to be overlooked. In many instances, counsellors and psychotherapists speak about Indigenous communities without referencing or centring Indigenous people's own voices, insights, and wisdom. For formal counselling and psychotherapy courses, providing Indigenous-produced content on climate justice that integrates traditional wisdom can offer a valuable opportunity to broaden trainee practitioners' understandings of themselves and their clients as inextricably embedded within broader systems of life, growth, and interdependence.

Practitioners, just like other humans, will sometimes feel overwhelmed by climate change, particularly if they understand themselves as deeply connected to the living systems around them or have been affected by climate-induced weather events, and it is not surprising that such practitioners may use disavowal and other techniques to manage their own responses. Understanding these responses as predictable coping strategies has the potential to remove the guilt, supporting individuals' capacity to begin to acknowledge these mechanisms in themselves and work to dismantle them, rather than ignoring their own disavowal and projecting it onto others.

Conclusion

Disavowal of climate change is simultaneously an entirely understandable response and a cause of grave concern, as it appears to be hindering our professional capacity to respond appropriately to one of the most pressing issues currently facing humanity. As practitioners who are familiar with the inner dynamics that cause people difficulty, we have an opportunity to turn towards our own disavowal wisely, with compassion, and in a way that avoids compounding the harms of colonisation. Doing this will expand our capacity to act creatively in response to climate change ourselves and to support our clients and colleagues, and perhaps even wider society, to do likewise. Whether we have been acknowledging it in ourselves or seeing it in session, climate distress is present, as

the planetary systems we rely on are already disrupted, leading to disruptions in ourselves. Making space for this acknowledgement requires that we, as practitioners, cultivate the capacity to tolerate our own distress. In exchange for an illusion of safety and control, we are offered an invitation to see ourselves as deeply, endlessly, and seamlessly connected to a network of life much greater than ourselves—wisdom that has already been central to Indigenous communities and healing practices. Along with this comes the call to consider, again and again, what it is to be human at this strange time, and how exactly we can contribute as practitioners, with our unique skills and talents, both to the present and to the future that we are all right now in the process of cocreating.

Positioning Statement

I am a counsellor trained in the humanist tradition who loves working with creative therapies. I grew up experiencing privilege as a white, non-religious, able-bodied, cisgender woman who had a tertiary-educated and supportive biological family of origin, albeit of limited financial means. As an adult, I experience relative economic privilege. I was raised by artist parents in an intentional community in the bush, on unceded Githabul land. I was taught to value compassion and contribution, to love stars and stones, trees and water, to respect science, and to value the sacred and mysterious in art and nature.

I woke up to the urgency of the climate crisis in 2008, but my own and society's climate disavowal meant I did not actively engage with it until 2016. I volunteered extensively with various organisations in the climate movement from 2016–2019, and participated in the ongoing discussion within the movement about how to help people engage with climate change. Feeling called to support others in their climate distress and explore how this might enable a more sustainable engagement with the issue, I completed a master's degree in counselling at the University of the Sunshine Coast from 2020–2022.

I carry in one hand a weight of grief, guilt, anger, and helplessness around this issue. In the other, I hold (and am held by) a wider, longer, and altogether larger awareness of humans and all their doings as a part of nature, and this as just another chapter of the world's story, with elements that are simultaneously tragic, beautiful, and sacred. I continue to learn about myself through my own ongoing struggle to turn towards climate change.

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