Journeys Into Awareness: The Long Emergency and Counselor and Psychologist Training

Mary Beth Mannarino

Chatham University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Abstract

Educating counselors- and psychologists-in-training about the effects of climate change, environmental degradation, and a healthy planet on human health and well-being prepares them for being problem solvers during what Kunstler calls the long emergency. This narrative describes processes for integration of such information in programs that train counselors and psychologists, including addressing how the long emergency might affect humans, how it might show up in work with clients, and what counselors and psychologists might do about the issues. The challenges of doing so while also considering the worldviews of the trainees are also discussed. Key Words: Climate change—Education—Behavior change—Attitudes—Values.

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor's weekly report published on January 27, 2015, roughly 98 percent of California was still experiencing some level of drought, with 78 percent of the land area in extreme drought and 40 percent labeled as exceptional drought. One year ago, those numbers were 98, 67, and 9 percent, respectively.

—Mike Carlowicz, NASA Earth Observatory (2015)

As I write this paper, I learn that California may have only one year of water left. I read about how this will affect agriculture, food security and access, and grocery prices. It is not a big leap to think about the impact of the long drought on employment, physical health, emotional well-being, and national security. This particular news item is just one example of millions of the effects on human health and well-being of climate change and environmental degradation, rooted in large part in our reliance on fossil fuels. It is one sign that we are in the midst of what Kunstler (2005) calls the long emergency or "the end of oil, climate change, and other converging catastrophes of the twenty-first century" (p. iii).

There is no separation between us humans and all that is around us; we are embedded in and dependent upon the larger natural world. Climate change and environmental destruction thus have profound implications for our current and future lives. How do practicing psychologists or counselors make use of this information for their work? As a psychologist educating counselors and counseling psychologists, I wonder how to prepare students for integration of the information into their professional work when these topics are not commonly associated with professional training and when a single psychology and environment course may be the student's first and last exposure to such material. And how do we do so in a way that in the end engenders agency and hope, rather than fear and helplessness? Teaching theory, science, and research is one thing; helping students deal with their emotional responses to the material is another. I share here some thoughts about how we might meet these challenges, beginning with a story about my own gradual folding of the issues into my identity and continuing with tales from the classrooms of students.

Every one of us is called upon, probably many times, to start a new life. A frightening diagnosis, a marriage, a move, loss of a job or a limb or a loved one … it's impossible to think at first how this all will be possible. Eventually, what moves it all forward is the subterranean ebb and flow of being alive among the living … High tide! Time to move out into the glorious debris. Time to take this life for what it is.

—Barbara Kingsolver (1995, pp. 15–16)

One morning, spring of 2011, I read reports from the investigation of the 2010 Upper Big Branch, West Virginia, mining explosion that

resulted in the deaths of 29 people (Governor's Independent Investigation Panel, 2011). What was evident in the reports was that the causes of this explosion could be laid at the feet of the mine owners who had demonstrated negligence and callous disregard for the well-being of their employees. And to a lesser extent, responsibility could be extended to government agencies that levied multiple fines against the owners for ongoing safety violations but failed to follow through in collecting the fines or closing the mines. As I read the reports, I felt pain and sadness. My family roots are in mining towns of Harlan County, Kentucky. I had witnessed the economic and social effects of boom and bust cycles of the mining industry and the terrible health consequences of black lung disease. I was furious that some humans could act so contemptuously toward employees and community members that they would sacrifice lives to line their own pockets. I did not yet see that I was also a part of this particular aspect of the long emergency.

A few weeks later, I participated in the March on Blair Mountain in West Virginia, an event commemorating the 1921 conflicts between miners seeking basic labor rights and the mine owners with private militias. The culminating battle took place on Blair Mountain between over 10,000 miners and the hired soldiers; hundreds died. The 2011 marchers hoped to prevent ecosystem-destroying mountaintop removal (MTR) mining on that land, to preserve the mountain as a historic site, and to assert the value of the workers and the community and the land with all its richness and biodiversity. Marchers witnessed to the damage of MTR mining to ecosystems and to human economic, physical, and mental health. And miners with their families drove by in trucks with signs saying, "Turning your lights on? Thank a miner!" This experience brought home the horrors of MTR mining for people and planet and also the complexity of the issues, the differing perspectives.

It was not until the following summer that I saw my own role in the scenario—my complicity in the global energy crises and climate changes and my responsibility to help address the long emergency. In May 2012, I attended Mountain Justice Camp, a week-long immersion in activities focused on ending MTR mining. I began to connect the dots between mining practices that damaged ecosystems and human health, our dependence on coal to sustain lifestyles common in the Western world, class and race inequities, environmental injustice, governmental confusion, implications of all this for global well-being, and my own privilege as a White, healthy, and fully-employed doctoral-educated college professor. I realized there was a dot connected to other dots in this twisted web in almost every act of my daily life.

I left the camp more enlightened, inspired, and overwhelmed and also at sea about what I as one person was to do. How could I discern what might be best use of my own gifts? Is it possible, even with millions of people using their own gifts in concert with others, to shift human consciousness and behavior to such a degree that the progression toward environmental destruction would just stop? There are so many almost insurmountable barriers to such change in our systems of economics and government, in our own habits and our refusal to see. Could it be true that "people will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own souls" (Jung, cited in Sabini, 2008, p. 169)?

And yet I couldn't not do something. I already did some activist work in my personal life, but I wanted to do more professionally. I had taught psychology and the environment courses for graduate counseling and psychology students for several years but had long sensed that we had not gone deeply enough. When political discussions about climate change inevitably arose, for example, in an effort to be "open to differences" and, truthfully, to avoid conflict, I had allowed the discussions to stay flattened, much like the practices of some news programs that present both sides of the climate change issue as equivalent, to be debated in terms of opinions and beliefs. I sidestepped messiness that could have led students to wrestle with tough realities and complicated feelings and beliefs, in spite of research demonstrating the relevance of values and ethics (Plumwood, 2007) and emotions such as empathy (Schultz, 2000) and hope and despair (Fritze et al., 2008) in the formation of worldviews about the environment.

So I decided to take the risk to create a space where this could happen and to actively invite students to come into the classroom with their whole selves intact, with political, spiritual, and religious beliefs and practices, with fears, joys, uncertainties, denial, doubt, anger, even apathy. Only in doing so could we get to open and honest discussions of the long emergency, how it is affecting us, how it might show up in our work with clients, and what we can do about it. A first question to be addressed was the legitimacy of even considering the environment, the natural world, as relevant for discussions of human health and well-being.

> The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings.
> —Rachel Carson (1962/2002, p. 5)

In our training programs, we have always included the perspective of Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) and his *socio-ecological* model for understanding individual development and behavior. In this model, the individual is embedded within multiple contexts, including family, school or work, neighborhood, religion, culture, and government, and develops in response to multidirectional interactions

between the person and her or his contexts. Bronfenbrenner's model addresses *human* behavior and is thus, understandably, anthropocentric in its design. Despite its label as a socioecological model, however, what is not articulated as part of this model is the most basic context of all—the nonhuman natural world on which we depend for survival. To truly grasp the reality and implications of the long emergency, our discussions of contextual factors that influence clients' development and behavior should include, as proposed by Stanger (2011) in his reworking of Bronfenbrenner's model, the natural world.

Many students are initially puzzled by the presentation of Stanger's reoriented *eco-sociological* model. In prior coursework and training focusing on assessment and diagnosis, interventions, advocacy, and prevention, contextual factors typically meant those described above; *context* referred to relationships, organizations and institutions, systems affecting diversity and multicultural issues. Adding the earth, the natural world, to the mix, takes some stretching. In class, it begins to make sense when we look at *place.* We ask, what place has been important to you? How has it shaped your being? Imagine yourself there, the smells, touches, sights, sounds. What would it be like to lose this place, to experience *solastalgia* or "the distress that is produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment" (Albrecht et al., 2007, p. S95; Warsini et al., 2014)? What can we learn from research about the effects of environmental degradation of place or ecosystem on humans? Then we can begin to look at the existing threats to place in our own communities and across the globe, as well as the implications of the threats, of the long emergency.

But first comes *talking about* talking about all of this.

> Teaching and learning, done well, are done not by disembodied intellects: they are done by whole persons whose intellects cannot be disentangled from the complex of faculties held together by the heart … We will help our students learn that the facts in every field—the history of cruelty and creativity, the degradation and restoration of the environment, the literature of despair and hope—pose tension-inducing questions that, if embraced, can make them better citizens and better people.
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> —Parker Palmer (2011, p. 128)

The first time I use the word "climate change" in a class, I sense a variety of reactions from the students, including a physical tightening up of the body for one, an open and curious look on the face of another, a barely audible snort from who knows where. There are nods of acknowledgement, as well as comments of skepticism and doubt. Other words elicit equally strong reactions. For example, in most classes, the words "activist" and "environmentalist" initially evoke negative responses. I hear such comments as "Activists—they're in your face, judging, trying to tell you what to do. I can't stand them!" and "Environmentalists are smug … They are crunchy granola people who don't live in the real world." This is in a classroom with students strongly committed to social justice issues! But environmental issues, initially at least, strike many students differently.

Language associated with climate change and other environmental issues can clearly engender, among other emotions, feelings of fear and discomfort. People's openness to hearing information about environmental problems and the implications of these for their own lives varies with their level of knowledge about the topics, as well as their worldviews involving religion and politics (McRight and Dunlap, 2011) and demographic status (Speiser and Krygsman, 2014). We need to think carefully about how to communicate about such sensitive and complex topics (see Yale Project on Climate Change Communication, n.d.).

As in the public sphere, conversations in the classroom about the long emergency and our dependence on the natural world can be unpredictable. I do not ask that students disclose specific political or religious beliefs, but I do ask that they explore in writing possible connections between their personal perspectives and their beliefs about the relationship between humans and the rest of nature. I also invite students to talk publicly about the relevance (if at all) of their own views in these domains to their identity and their daily life. We then move into, "How do we want to talk, as a group, about topics that can be controversial, when your religious or political or spiritual perspectives might influence how you think and act about the topics and may differ from those of your peers?" Respect is essential if learning and creative thinking are to take place, as are group norms that support a "brave space," one that encourages expression of and working through differences of opinions (versus simply "agreeing to disagree") (Arao and Clemens, 2013). "The relational dynamics of the classroom have a more lasting impact on students than information that they retain just long enough to pass the test" (Palmer, 2011, p. 133).

In a co-created brave space, I observe that student views are wide-ranging, often mirroring those in the public sphere. Some students describe clear knowledge about environmental problems and a political commitment to address them. Many, on the other hand, express dissatisfaction with the political process in general and a lack of understanding about its role in environmental issues. They describe difficulties sorting through contradictory information in the media, distrust of political processes and candidates, and uncertainty about if and how they should act. We explore research about challenges facing the particular age cohorts in the classroom (for example, see

Drake, 2014), discussing how to think critically about conflicting information and to act in some way at some level consistent with their values and beliefs.

Student ideas about the connection between religion or spirituality and environmental issues are also diverse. Some students hold biblically based beliefs that the earth's resources were created for Man (*sic*) to use and steward and that God will either replenish the resources as needed or let things play out naturally to the end. Others express skepticism that humans are at the top of the life pyramid, beliefs that other forms of life are of equal value, and uncertainty about a higher power's place in the picture. We explore implications of each set of beliefs for behavior related toward the environment, again with attention to mutual respect.

We stretch not only beyond our own political or religious beliefs but also beyond our shared discipline of psychology. Orr (2004) described one of the dangers of our current ways of doing higher education as "imprint[ing] a disciplinary template onto impressionable minds and with it the belief that the world really is as disconnected as the divisions, disciplines, and subdisciplines of the typical curriculum … yet, the world is not this way" (p. 23). The environment consists of interconnected ecosystems, built environments, and cultural, societal, belief, economic, and governmental systems, at minimum. For our psychology students to begin to understand topics as complex as climate change, environmental degradation, and the value of a healthy natural world, they must grapple with work from such disciplines as biology, chemistry, political science, anthropology, public policy, history, humanities, and philosophy.

Being able to listen and learn from one another and from other disciplines, we can finally move into details that we know about human connections to the earth and the long emergency.

> Your reality check is in the mail … we face the end of the cheap fossil fuel era. It is no exaggeration to state that reliable supplies of cheap oil and natural gas underlie everything we identify as a benefit of modern life. All the necessities, comforts, luxuries, and miracles of our time—central heating, air conditioning, cars, airplanes, electric lighting, cheap clothing, recorded music, movies, supermarkets, power tools, hip replacement surgery, the national defense, you name it—owe their origins or continued existence in one way or another to cheap fossil fuel.
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> —Kunstler (2005, p. 2)

Here comes the big challenge—looking at what we know. Based on peer-reviewed research across the world, we know that the use of cheap fossil fuel contributes significantly to climate change and that climate change leads to cascading negative impacts on earthly and human health and well-being (IPCC, 2014; U.S. Global Change Research Program, 2014). How do psychologists and counselors fit into this scenario? We do because we know that psychological processes, particularly thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors driving our Western ways of living and doing business (which are spreading rapidly to non-Western parts of the world) are bound up with the use of fossil fuel and thus contribute to environmental degradation of a planet that we need to survive.

Throughout modern times, many writers have addressed the relationship between nature/environment and human well-being (Carson, 1962/2002; Fisher, 2002; Leopold, 1966; Naess & Rothenberg, 1993; Roszak, 1992). More recently, in the field of psychology, the American Psychological Association Task Force on the Interface between Psychology and Global Climate Change (2009) and a special issue of the *American Psychologist* (see Swim et al., 2011) reviewed research about climate change and its causes, psychological factors related to harming or healing the environment, and psychological impacts of climate change on human health and well-being. Clayton, Manning, and Hodge (2014) compiled updated research about the negative impacts of climate change on psychological, physical, social, and community health, and ideas for addressing the problems.

How do students respond to all this information? I notice waves of understanding, occurring at a unique pace for each student, not unlike my own two steps forward–one step back process of realizing the larger picture and my place in it. There is initial intellectual understanding of the reliance on the earth for survival and of environmental problems and their human drivers and negative impacts. Basic fact-finding activities about where our own water and electricity come from and what is involved in manufacturing a favorite item of clothing or in growing and shipping preferred foods lead to deeper engagement and sometimes surprise. *I am confused! Do I buy organic produce shipped here on trucks or locally grown non-organic food … and yes, I know these are "first-world" problems*. Hearing stories from people whose current lives are still devastated by the effects of Hurricane Katrina or Superstorm Sandy engenders more emotion, more outrage about social injustice. *How can that be? … That can't be true … Our government wouldn't let that happen*. And students read and report on related news and current events each week. Threaded throughout, I see overlapping defensiveness, anger, fear, feelings of hopelessness, helplessness or being overwhelmed, and also, fortunately, inspiration and commitment.

My responsibility is to sit with our students through these processes, to witness and affirm the complexity of the issues and also their differing experiences of them, share my own struggles, and seek and amplify moments of hope and grace.

> Responsibility to yourself means that you don't fall for shallow and easy solutions.
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> —Adrienne Rich (1977)

It would be easy for students to take what they are learning in class and set it aside, in a compartment separate from their work. Perhaps they could use the information to make changes in their personal habits or to engage in activist work of some kind; many do so. What is more challenging is to build a bridge from what they are learning to their actual work with clients. How would the integration of nature into therapy be beneficial? What would a mental health professional's advocacy for a healthy environment and a more sustainable lifestyle look like? What can we *do* that might contribute to mitigation of or healthy adaptation to the long emergency?

This is one of the most creative aspects of our work. While there is a large body of research related to general environmental education, information about how to apply this specifically to the education of counselors and psychologists is scant. Many psychologists have long recognized environment as relevant for health and well-being, but evidence about the effectiveness of integrating these issues into psychological work is perhaps in its adolescent stage; it is growing but not yet mature. In addition, research documents the negative psychological, community, and/or physical impacts of climate change and environmental degradation (Adeola, 2009; Bullard & Wright, 2012; Clayton et al., 2014; Cordial et al., 2012; Downey & Van Willigen, 2005; Hedges & Sacco, 2012), and conversely, the importance of a healthy environment and/or time with nature for health and well-being and relief from distress (Celedonia & Rosenthal, 2011; Gawande, 2014; Korpela et al., 2001; Marcus et al., 2011; Norton & Holguin, 2011; van den Berg and van den Berg, 2010). In addition, there are works describing in detail many aspects of the actual integration of nature into therapy (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Gass et al., 2012; Jordan, 2014), exploring theories and techniques of practice as well as ethical issues. In the classroom, how do we weave these emerging ideas together to enhance work with clients? How do we do this remaining consistent with our ethics codes (American Psychological Association, 2010; American Counseling Association, 2014)?

In addition to reading the literature, we learn from practitioners who are actually integrating nature and/or environmental issues into their clinical work. We visit a horticulture therapy operation that serves individuals with dementia and their caretakers, and a vegetable and herb garden created and staffed by community members alongside individuals with severe chronic mental illness. We hear from local activists about such situations as socioeconomically challenged communities where very poor air quality negatively affects school attendance and later vocational outcomes, or where poor access to affordable transportation and fresh food negatively affects physical health.

We imagine about and role play asking different questions in assessments. Where do you live? Are there safe spaces for outdoor play and recreation? How is the air and water quality in your community? Do you have access to fresh and healthy food? Does your child with ADHD get recess? If we are aware of local environmental problems, such as hydraulic fracturing or drought or MTR mining, we can ask how clients are affected, economically, physically, psychologically, or socially, by these situations.

We brainstorm about how to use existing research to create meaningful interventions in collaboration with clients, alongside conventional treatment. Knowing that experiences in nature can be positively correlated with better physical and psychological health, we might suggest that depressed or anxious adolescent and emerging adult clients play with the ratio of "screen time" to outdoor activity in their lives. With clients whose communities are being damaged by industrial activities, we explore possible connections between community health and their own, and ways to address this if they are interested in doing so. We may also explore how simpler lifestyles, in terms of material goods, or higher civic engagement can contribute to a sense of individual well-being as well as a healthier community and earth.

We talk about gathering practice-based evidence to guide our understanding and future, and explore how to add to peer-reviewed knowledge. We are in the process of gathering information from graduates about the impact of the class on professional and personal life. We are often groping in the dark, but keep at it.

> Knowledge without affection leads us astray every time. Affection leads, by way of good work, to authentic hope. The factual knowledge, in which we seem more and more to be placing our trust, leads only to hope of the discovery, endlessly deferrable, of an ultimate fact or smallest particle that at last will explain everything … It all turns on affection … Don't you see?
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> —Wendell Berry (2012)

Each time I teach the course, it is different. I know more; the students are different; the world has changed in good ways and bad. I know that I have limits, limited knowledge, wisdom, time on earth, with so much that I want to do. Kunstler (2005) asks, "How long might the Long Emergency last? A generation? Ten generations? A millennium? Ten millennia? Take your choice" (p. 5). I am often overwhelmed by the magnitude of what I do not know and cannot do, and I know that I am not alone in this. What feels limitless to me, however, is affection. Affection, according to Berry, is necessary for healing humanity and the unexpected and awful ways we are treating

the earth and each other. What sustains me is affection for home and earth, for humanity with all its beauty and warts, for my children and grandchild, and in this moment, for our students. This affection urges me to keep stretching my own mind and heart as I work with the students, knowing that they are awakening to the realization of the fix that we are in. It allows me to share with them, and to encourage their sharing with one another, what they might need to feel wise, powerful, and engaged for dealing with what is ahead. Is this enough? I live "in the fields of uncertainty" (Williams, 2012) and know my limits, but the affection keeps me present, gives me hope.

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Address correspondence to:
Mary Beth Mannarino
Graduate Psychology Programs
Chatham University
Woodland Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15218

E-mail: mmannarino@chatham.edu