



## ANOTHER PLANET? THE STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES

Coaches and sustainability advocates **Penny Walker** and **Linda Aspey** reflect on the stories we tell ourselves that get in the way of acting on the climate emergency.

*‘But you may inhabit an environment that valorizes blindness, so you don’t look. Who or what is it you are blind to? In the end, I think it’s you. You become blind ... to yourself ... to your better self.’<sup>i</sup>*

The gap between what we say we want and the way we behave is rich territory for coaches. People often get in their own way when aiming to achieve their goals; they make excuses for their perceived failures, blame others or assume too much responsibility. Our internal stories, the ones we tell ourselves, are one of the ways we do this. As coaches, our role to help people be more honest with themselves about what’s *really* going on and what their choices are.

There’s abundant research on what makes it hard for humans to engage with difficult issues<sup>ii</sup>, so the better we understand this phenomenon in ourselves the better we can, as coaches, help not only individuals but also organisations, societies and other systems.

The role of coaches in helping address the climate emergency has already been recognised in a number of ways: in July 2019, together

with Zoe Cohen and Alison Whybrow, Linda wrote an open letter to coaches, the coaching and coaching psychology professional bodies, and coach educators, calling on them to acknowledge and respond appropriately to the climate crisis. Since then, the Climate Coaching Alliance has been established, and many of the major professional coaching bodies have collaborated and issued a joint statement about the ecological crisis and the role of coaching.<sup>1</sup>

### WHAT ARE THE STORIES WE TELL OURSELVES?

There are widely accessible tools that enable individuals to estimate their personal contribution to climate change (see, for example, WWF Footprint<sup>2</sup>). There are also certain lifestyle choices that are known to reduce a person’s direct impact (e.g. eating a plant-based diet, and avoiding flying and fossil-fuel-based driving). It’s often clear which ‘bad’ behaviours lead to a high carbon footprint, yet personal change does not always happen.

A recurring theme is the gap between people’s conscious understanding of how human-induced climate crisis is real and recognising their individual contribution to the problem, for example through greenhouse gas emissions from their travel or household energy choices, or the destruction of carbon sinks like forests and peatlands, which is accelerated through individual’s dietary or shopping choices.<sup>iii</sup>

One of the common ways in which humans respond to incongruences like this – which prevents us from addressing uncomfortable issues – is to generate stories. We hear many stories about climate change. Here we focus on three:

- The truth is unbearable
- I am only one
- Still I am one

When these stories emerge in coaching, it’s useful for us to recognise them *as* stories so that they can be appropriately approached and explored with curiosity and interest, rather than uncritically accepted or summarily dismissed.

### STORY ONE: THE TRUTH IS UNBEARABLE

This story is a form of denial and we hear it expressed in a range of thoughts, emotions and behaviours:

- If it’s as bad as they say, it is unbearable. I can’t think about it and live my life/do what I have to do. I know it’s not as bad as they say. As the old German adage says, things whose existence is not morally possible cannot exist.
- The person believes ‘it is that bad’ and feels and expresses strong negative emotions such as grief, anger, sadness and shame. They may fear that these emotions will get in the way of day-to-day life, glimpsing the ‘unbearability’ yet ploughing on. ‘The tension between what’s possible now and what’s needed, may distract me from what I’m doing [to solve the problem] day to day.’<sup>iv</sup>

1. Read the statement in full on p37

2. footprint.wwf.org.uk

- The ‘unbearability’ may mean turning away. ‘Anyone else feel like packing it in and going to the pub?’ (as said by a sustainability professional in a social media conversation).
- When a carbon-footprint or analytical tool shows things to be ‘bad’, the person responds by critiquing the tool. ‘If I were convinced that what we are doing now really is unsustainable, I’d think differently.’<sup>v</sup>

### STORY TWO: I AM ONLY ONE

This story is a form of the passive bystander effect: in a situation where many people could act, individuals wait for someone else to act first – they subsume their personal responsibility in the collective responsibility of the group. It reveals itself in a number of thoughts and self-justifications:

- I’m just one person. It’s just one flight. The plane would have flown anyway. Everyone else is flying.
- I am one person. I’m alone in this, so we don’t have a hope of solving the problem, and my contribution to trying to solve it is pointless or unnecessary.
- I have no choice but to be ‘bad’. I’m normal, and society gives me no real choices.
- ‘[Our company] is avoiding having this conversation – we haven’t put it on the agenda – we know individually that it’s right, but we are avoiding discussing it.’ (As said by a sustainability professional).<sup>v</sup>
- ‘I’d like to eat less meat, but my partner won’t eat anything unless it has meat in it, so there’s no point in cooking something different for me.’ (From a conversation at a climate activist gathering).

### STORY THREE: STILL I AM ONE

This story can seem helpful in promoting action. However, it can still get in the way of the client thinking clearly about the responsibility they assume for fixing the world and may result in burnout. It focuses on the power of one individual to effect change and reveals itself in thoughts or statements such as:

- The fact that I am just one person is not a reason to not play my part.
- Look at Greta Thunberg! If I knew I could make one change – even if small to start with – I’d make a difference *and* feel a lot better.
- ‘It will be a miracle if we pull it off. But it is still worth trying.’<sup>vi</sup>
- ‘For me sustainability is a “life mission”. I do it in the context of a job so as to pay my bills. The job and the organisation in which I do that job, in any conventional sense, mean nothing to me.’<sup>vii</sup>

### THE ROLE OF ASSUMPTIONS

Nancy Kline, author of *Time to Think*, observed that ‘the quality of everything we do depends for its quality on the thinking we do first.’ Importantly, when thinking appears to be blocked and progress or action stifled, Kline says it is often due to assumptions that *seem* true, but when examined are not. She called these beliefs ‘untrue limiting assumptions’. We have noticed these in many stories, and they become clearer when the stories are voiced.



In coaching we might respond to these assumptions with: 'Do you think that's true, and what are your reasons for thinking so?' Often clients begin to realise that it's not 'true', and that an alternative, more accurate assumption is more liberating in promoting appropriate action.

### THE ROLE OF DENIAL, CONGRUENCE AND INCONGRUENCE

Sigmund Freud used the term 'defence mechanism' to describe unconscious mental processes that enable a person to reach compromise solutions to internal conflicts. Defences protect individuals from threatening internal drives or feelings. A useful way to think of defences is as 'shock absorbers' from the harsh realities of our imperfect selves!

Outright climate denial could be seen as an extreme example of this, where – despite overwhelming evidence that man-made climate change is damaging our world – individuals deny its existence, claim it's a conspiracy or blame it on just one nation.

However, in our experience, denial occurs on a daily basis – and in a state of fluctuation. A client story illustrates this well. While food shopping, the client saw a mouth-watering avocado from Mexico and put it in her trolley, telling herself 'I know it's naughty but I love them and it's already been freighted here anyway'. As she continued around the shop she remembered some of the many reasons to think twice: the carbon footprint of the refrigerated air freight; the amount of water needed to grow avocados when water is scarce; the contribution to deforestation and the relentless rise in monoculture; and the organised crime and fear behind much of the industry.<sup>vii</sup> Her internal battle continued: should she buy the avocado and contribute to farmers' livelihood, or not do so and hope she had made the right choice? Still not completely sure, she put it back on the shelf. She concluded that in buying it she knew she would be perpetuating an unjust system and, as she added with a wry smile, 'every mouthful would be hard to swallow!'

In that one scenario our three stories play out:

1. The decision to put the avocado in her trolley: the truth is unbearable.
2. The client telling herself that 'it's been freighted anyway': I am only one.
3. The decision to put it back: still I am one.

Psychologist Carl Rogers observed that incongruence between a person's espoused beliefs and personal actions may not only be a source of profound discomfort but also presents practical challenges and can result in the instinct to push uncomfortable feelings away.<sup>viii</sup> An exercise to explore this is described by Penny Walker in Michelle Lucas' book on coaching supervision.<sup>3</sup>

### WORKING WITH OUR OWN STORIES

As coaches, we are not immune to generating stories and experiencing (in)congruence in relation to difficult problems. Many of us will have been faced with health, social or environmental work-related dilemmas. Take a long-haul flight to deliver an exciting coaching skills programme or offer to find the client someone more local. Facilitate an entrepreneurial leaders programme where the brief is to explore opportunities for growth and to not let them 'get side-tracked' on climate issues. Coach a client in the tobacco industry or not. Sometimes the decision to decline or accept feels crystal clear and easy, other times far less so. And if we accept a brief with an unspoken intention or hope that we will 'convert' said clients, how ethical is that?

Reflecting on this as coaches may enhance confidence to create opportunities for new stories. Increased awareness of what prevents or enables our own capacity to change behaviour can enhance understanding of how this might be done for others. Feeling a high

3. For a review of *101 Coaching Supervision Techniques*, see *Coaching Perspectives* Issue 26, p60

degree of incongruence can lead to self-doubt and defeatism, which makes it hard to help others. But low morale can be avoided by seeing incongruence as a phenomenon to be curious about, rather than as a failure.

As most coaches will tell you, change starts with the self. Bringing our own stories into the light can help us begin to explore how we might then work with our clients' stories from a place of insight, compassion and personal agency.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Penny Walker is a coach, facilitator and chartered environmentalist (CEnv.) Penny began her career as a campaigner, taking part in the first national day of action on climate in the UK, in January 1989. For the last 25 years she has been an independent consultant, facilitating and coaching in the wider arena of sustainable development. During this time, Penny has run numerous workshops for self-identified climate leaders and sustainability professionals, as well as for coaches and facilitators with an interest in these issues.

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Linda Aspey is a coach, supervisor, psychotherapist, facilitator, Time to Think Faculty. Linda has worked in individual, team and organisational development for 30 years, most recently focusing on climate-change psychology, sustainability and regeneration. A speaker with Extinction Rebellion and member of the Oxford University Climate Society, she is currently studying at the Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership. She has been interested in the environment for many years, yet at times knew she wasn't congruent and told herself stories to assuage the discomfort. This led her to explore more deeply the role of coaching in relation to the climate emergency.

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