



## Body Wise

By Kamalamani

### The Burning House

*Once upon a time, many years ago, there was a wealthy man living in a huge old house. He lived in this house with hundreds of his children, and many other beings of all shapes and sizes. The house was vast, but it only had one front door. And although he was a wealthy man, this huge house was rather tumble down; decaying in parts. Now one day the man was sitting in the garden when he noticed that a fire had broken out in the house. The man was, understandably, very concerned for his children playing inside. 'Flee', 'flee!' he yelled. But, of course, being kids, they were completely absorbed in their games and toys and they ignored him – I'm sure that's a very familiar feeling for many of you parents. All the while, the house was being consumed by dancing flames and the crackling and falling of beams and wreckage.*

*The wealthy man thought on his feet, coming up with the perfect way of luring the children from the burning house so that they would come to no harm. Knowing that they were fond of interesting playthings, he called out to them, "Listen! Outside the gate are the carts that you have always wanted: carts pulled by goats, carts pulled by deer, and carts pulled by oxen. Come out and play with them!" The wealthy man knew that these things would be irresistible to his children.*

*The children, eager to play with these new toys, rushed out of the house excitedly. Instead of the carts that he had promised, the father gave them a cart much better than anything he had described - a cart draped with precious stones and pulled by white bullocks. The children were so happy, and the man was so glad the children were safe, as the house burned to the ground.*

### **This parable of the burning house**

is from a traditional Buddhist text called the 'White Lotus Sutra'. It is all about the human predicament, and may well be familiar to some of you. The burning house represents the 'burning' of the fires of old age, sickness and death (known traditionally as the first 'three sights' in Buddhism. The kindly father represents the teachings of the Buddha; encouraging the children to leave the pleasures of playing with their toys for the greater pleasure of enlightenment; being fully awake, being the complete embodiment and quintessence of wisdom and kindness. (These days, of course, the tempting toys might have to be iPads, Barbie dolls, play stations and the like, but hopefully you get my drift!) The father is very skilful in how he lures the children from the house. He doesn't nag them, or shout at them, or get in a complete flap so he's unable to take care of them. He stays calm and realises what will attract and fascinate the children based on what they love. In Buddhist jargon, he uses 'skilful means' in helping his children leave the house safely and without panic.

**This parable leapt out at me** when I realised I wanted to write about the trauma of everyday life in 2015. Not only is it one of my favourite parables, but it seems particularly fitting in the challenges we face in the world at present. From a Buddhist point of view, the world is always 'on fire', as it were. Those of us who are the metaphorical children—in that we are not yet enlightened—are habitually caught up in the 'games' of everyday life, tending to act more readily from greed, hatred and delusion, than contentment, metta, and wisdom. We tend to live as if things are permanent, substantial and satisfactory, how: 'it would all be alright, if only I had could built that extension so I could have a dedicated therapy room in the garden, or once I've done that trauma training with so and so' etc etc.

**This parable is clever** in using the image of a house as its main image. Our houses,



our homes, are, quite understandably, sought after places of peace and security. In fact, our homes, too, are on fire! Hopefully they are places of sanctuary and rest. They also decay, need work and aren't immune from tornadoes, subsidence, burglars, and, in some countries, bombing. These things which we imagine which will offer us security in some fixed, unchanging sense, can, in fact, be a source of great suffering exacerbated by our delusional views about what makes us happy and a notion of lasting security in life.

**There's a huge amount** we could talk about around this parable and its different meanings. I would like to draw the metaphor of the house as the world at present; a world in which global temperatures are rising, climate chaos is upon us, sea ice is melting, and environmental degradation is a sad fact of life. We are inflicting an unprecedented degree of harm upon other-than-human life, with us being in what's known as the sixth extinction crisis, with the United Nations Environment Programme estimating that 150-200 species of plant, insect, bird and mammal become extinct every 24 hours (Vidal, 2010).

**So the human predicament** causes great harm, not only to our personal well being, but in terms of causing harm to the planet, our home, which ultimately causes harm to us, given the interrelationship of ecosystem. And, all the while, the majority of the world's population are carrying on as if nothing's happening, as if it's business as normal. It's fairly common place for us to live our lives as if there are two, three, four, or five planets, rather than the one we've got. In fact, it's a challenge to live a life as if there's only one planet, even if you give up flying and recycle, given the carbon footprint assigned to each of us on behalf of the carbon footprint of the government on our behalf (the military, health, infrastructure etc.)

**Still, it's worth trying to clean up** our individual acts. I've had the recent good fortune to train as a 'carbon conversations' facilitator, holding a space for anyone concerned about climate change and carbon reduction to come along and understand their own powerful and ambivalent responses to the subject, supporting them to make practical changes, and understand the need for political and social change (Randall & Brown, 2015, iv). It was great, supportive, inspiring, and sobering. Great to take action in the face of themes that can be over-whelming and provoke horrified anxiety. Supportive to work with such an interesting and engaged group of people with similar interests in common. Inspiring to see that others care about the world and you're not the only one holding this seemingly dirty secret that the world's on fire and yet the majority of folk are carrying on as normal (the famous 'keep calm and carry on' motivational poster comes to mind, from World War Two). And sobering to see the size of the task in hand for all of us.

**When I heard that this fall edition** was to be about trauma approaches what was upper most in my mind - a recurring theme for me - was how can we, as body psychotherapists, make our mark here? I know I'm not alone in having clients who are becoming more and more affected by the reality of, and denial, of climate change. These clients aren't necessarily all that environmentally aware - some are and some aren't. But they're affected anyway. How can we not be affected by what's going on, when we are part of a system which is condoning loss and destruction? Where can we voice our fear, pessimism, as well as cultivate 'active hope' (Macy & Johnstone, 2012)? I am reminded of the words of Stephanie Mills:

**"Among do-gooders, it is bad form** to be a pessimist, but I cannot seem to get that extinction crisis out of my mind. Or that population explosion. Or global climate change. Or the consequences of an era of trade agreements. Can't get those billionaires; those landless, homeless, jobless billions; those new diseases; that global casino of finance capitalism; the corporate capture of the media; those aging nuclear reactors; those surveillance satellites; those crowded prisons out of my mind" (Mills, 2002: 28).

**Personally I long to be part of** a body of therapists who do their bit in embodying the father in the 'burning house' parable. We can recognise that the house is on fire (rather than stay in the house, playing, tempting though that is, with all the play things on offer in our lifestyles...) and we can offer the support, awareness and challenge to others to leave the burning house. As body psychotherapists we are well placed to do this, aren't we? So many of us understand intimately the nature of trauma.

'Carbon Conversations' originated in work pioneered by Rosemary Randall, Andy Brown and Shilpa Shah during 2005-7 for the Akashi project and for the charity Cambridge Carbon Footprint. It arose from the conjunction of Rosemary's work as a psychotherapist and her prior background in creating distance learning materials for the Open University in the UK. Carbon Conversations developed into a programme of six, fortnightly, friendly, practical groups that help participants to face climate change. See: <http://www.carbonconversations.org/home>

**Intimately in our own experience**, and in the hundreds and thousands of hours we have spent with clients and supervisees in working with, talking about, and reflecting on trauma. Working ourselves in therapy and offering that holding to our clients in visiting those out-of-reach places of terror in facing the un-faceable, feeling what's been frozen, speaking the forbidden, so we can live now in a body which is more alive and more present.

**Perhaps one reason why** more of us aren't more vocal in sharing what we know and making our mark far beyond the therapy room is because we are, in the words of Jungian Analyst Jerome Bernstein: 'borderlander personalities'. We are in touch with what he calls 'transrational reality'. He defines that as:

"objective nonpersonal, nonrational phenomena occurring in the natural universe, information and experience that does not readily fit into standard cause and effect logical structure" (Bernstein, 2005: xv).

**Bernstein points out** how many of us wouldn't be able to function without this connection, and yet, in parallel, feel forced to conceal that dimension of our experience, even from our closest people, through fear of being ostracized and seeming odd. Add to that the size of the grief in many of our hearts, as we begin the process of acknowledging the harm we're causing as a species, and it's understandable that's it very challenging to contemplate 'making our mark' given that it means dwelling in and being with the most difficult of emotions.

**If we are able to adopt** the skilful means represented by the father in the burning house, not only do we ourselves stop sleep walking towards catastrophe, but also carefully encourage others to look at their strategies of choice in the face of climate change, which may include hedonism, immense terror, overwhelm, freeze, disavowal, and, of course, denial is deeply counter-cultural and challenging. It's far from easy work, but then, neither is

practising as body psychotherapists, so we're used to a challenge. Added to that, our brains are hardwired to ignore climate change (see Marshall's excellent book on this theme: Marshall, 2014).

**I guess we can 'keep calm and carry on'** in the burning house, playing the game of business as normal. Or we can 'keep calm and carry on' knowing that whether or not climate change is reversible, whether or not the destructive ways of our species has already gone too far, we are living a simple life as fully as possible - for life is surely what this is all about! - and doing what we can in raising awareness, making changes and remembering that humans are but one life form on planet earth. In our therapy work, I wonder what would happen if we all held in mind the earth and other-than-human life, whether we work in a high rise block or in a converted shed in the wilds? Can we dare to make our mark, having the difficult conversations with family and friends about our own decisions to curb our carbon footprint? Can we bear to check out how the anthropocentrism of our world seeps into our therapy work and to bring more of a whole earth perspective?

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### References:

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