

# Kluwer Mediation Blog

## Contemporary (existential) conversations

Ian Macduff (NZ Centre for ICT Law & School of Law, Auckland University) · Friday, February 26th, 2021

” . . . how are we to deal with this grief? People might react with despair, sadness, frustration, lack of control, hopelessness, and even apathy. It’s understandable, given the enormity of the destruction taking place. It’s understandable to feel powerless when faced with the news of another whale dying, another forest being decimated, or another oil spill. But though it’s important to acknowledge our ecological grief, we also need to use that grief to take action, to get laws changed.”

Kriss [Kevorkian](#), “On environmental grief and the rights of nature,”

On occasion, when time and tide allow, we enjoy clambering over the rocky foreshores at either end of the beach near where we live. This can be a means of escape to a quieter, smaller bay, or an off-road route to the next seaside suburb and coffee. After a high tide, we typically find ourselves remembering the childhood adventures we each enjoyed, not far from our present location, on similar rocky coasts, pausing to examine the rock pools and whatever the departing tide might have stranded. Invariably, there’s a note of loss: our childhood rock pools, admittedly from some decades back, always had anemones, one or two small fish, maybe little crabs or a small starfish, and always signs of life. Now, nothing. We know that we’re seeing the effects of water quality decline, diminishing fish stocks, and reduced aquatic biodiversity. We know, too, that others, such as our grandchildren, won’t know what they are missing, in the same way, I’m sure, that we have little idea of what is missing from our lives that our preceding generations took for granted.

In order to capture that sense of loss, Australian environmental philosopher, Glenn Albrecht, coined a new term in 2003: “solastalgia”. In this word, he hoped to express the sense of loss of a place or an environment that we have known but that is now lost, typically to environmental degradation or to industrial capture. The word comes from a combination of “solace” and “algos” combining a sense that what gives (or gave) us comfort now gives us sorrow or grief.

“Solastalgia is the pain or sickness caused by the loss of, or inability to derive solace from, the present state of one’s home environment. Solastalgia exists when there is recognition that the beloved place in which one resides is under assault. Any context in which pervasive change to the existing order challenges place identity has potential to deliver solastalgia.”

Albrecht, G. (2006) “Solastalgia”, *Alternatives Journal*, 32 (4-5). pp. 34-36 (abstract) [See also Albrecht, “Negating Solastalgia: An Emotional Revolution from the Anthropocene to the Symbiocene”, *American Imago*, Volume 77, Number 1, Spring 2020

In recent years, we have seen the rise, in most if not all countries, of public awareness of issues of

sustainability and environmental degradation. Most commonly, the focus is on climate change and the prospects of our collectively meeting or missing the [Paris targets](#). Predictably, we also see a corresponding rise in resistance, denial, and misinformation. For many, the most visible sign of this awareness takes the form of protests, such as the [Extinction Rebellion](#) movement, [School Strikes for Climate Change](#), or environmental activism around mining or other industrial sites. Such acts and activism are what, after all, generate headlines, even when, as is common, there is a rich foundation of environmental science behind the actions.

There are at least three risks in this, none of which is an argument against activism. First, there will be those who resist and resent anything that looks like “protest”. Second, the underlying information typically doesn’t come to the surface through the headlines of photo montages or protest slogans, with the result that there is a failure of dialogue or even of the invitation to dialogue.

The third risk is that the growing body of information on climate change and the consequences of failure to meet the Paris targets can be too readily misinterpreted, perhaps innocently, or reduced to simple equations, with the consequence that those reading that information succumb to numbness, fear or a sense of helplessness. It’s not so long, for example, since we heard from the IPCC that we essentially had twelve years to get our targets and actions sorted, or face significant further degradation. This was too readily filtered by social media or schoolyard conversations to mean that the world was going to end in twelve years. That is hardly a prospect designed to encourage dialogues on possible futures.

There is also important work being undertaken on what can be broadly called “existential risk”, at centres such as [The Future of Life Institute](#) in Boston or Oxford University’s Future of Humanity Institute’s studies on [Existential Risk](#). While it’s recognised that there have always been natural and cataclysmic risks, the particular challenge now is the risks we have created for and to ourselves:

“An existential risk is any risk that has the potential to eliminate all of humanity or, at the very least, kill large swaths of the global population, leaving the survivors without sufficient means to rebuild society to current standards of living.”

Most readers of these blogs will be familiar with the foundational work on “difficult conversations”, undertaken over the past couple of decades at least, whether arising from the work of the Project on Negotiation at Harvard [eg Douglas Stone, Sheila Been, Bruce Patton, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*], or from family therapy settings, or more widely through the work of groups such as [Essential Partners](#). The starting point in all of this is the recognition that we will all face, at some time in our lives, tricky or challenging conversations, or the need to have such conversations, whether at home, work, or our public lives. At their core are complex emotions, unpredictable responses, ingrained patterns of response (or of power and hierarchy), deeply held political or religious views, none of which seem amenable to dialogue.

The risk in such settings is that we or our counterparts fall into familiar patterns of resistance, rejection, denial, oversimplification, shutting down, sticking to well-rehearsed scripts, blocking or thwarting the other, flawed assumptions about the other’s intentions and losing sight of our common goals. We will also be aware of the times we have done some or all of this when we’ve been caught off guard – ambushed – by a challenge or a conclusion masquerading as a conversational opener.

Beyond the familiar business or family settings of the difficult conversations commonly discussed, we have seen the rise of some excellent work on addressing contemporary diversity and ethnic relations – a conversation that we only began to see as important a few decades ago. For example, some years ago, Dr Linda Human, a professor in the field of diversity and intercultural communications in business, published a book on the challenge of diversity in the workplace, *Contemporary Conversations – Understanding and Managing Diversity in the Modern World*. At the heart of her experience lie the imperatives of acknowledging that there is an issue about which to have a conversation, addressing our own internal conversations (of resistance, denial, power etc), facing the need to engage with others, and doing so on the basis of well-founded information rather than popular assumptions. As Lord Bhikhu Parekh wrote, “We approach [others] on the assumption that they are similar enough to be intelligible and make a dialogue possible, and different enough to be puzzling and make a dialogue necessary.” [B Parekh (2006) *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, 2nd ed., New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan; p. 124]

Now, as both the science and widespread response tell us, there is a new agenda item for public conversations. If Albrecht’s solastalgia captures the sense of personal loss and grief, and the research tells us that there are existential risks, this conversation is all the more important for its intergenerational imperative and participants. Our shared experience of the current pandemic has led also to widespread discussion about and exploration of the prospects for (and political and commercial resistance to) “green recovery”. In part, the question arose for me some time ago in wondering how to sit and have such conversations with our two older grandchildren, who were sufficiently informed to be scared but not sufficiently so to be hopeful. You, readers, may also be aware of people in their 20s and 30s now choosing not to have children because of their fears for the future. Somewhere between helpless despair and naive optimism lies the prospect of dialogue.

This does not, however, require a reinvention of the solid tools of dialogue. If we think of what we know, from mediation, negotiation, public conversations, citizens’ assemblies, and “better conversations” projects (such as Theodore Zeldin’s [conversation dinners](#) or John Sturrock’s [Better Conversations Bus](#)) we have gathered an understanding of what helps dialogue, even the ones we’ve been avoiding. The challenges (memo to self when next the occasion arises!) are:

- choosing to have the conversation;
- recognising the fears, concerns and perspectives of the other – though without feeling obliged to legitimate those beliefs;
- grounding the conversation in knowledge, information;
- diagnosis of the specific concern;
- exploration of steps, distinct actions that can be taken;
- fostering hope rather than fear or optimism;
- generating collaboration (to counter a sense of isolation);
- and enabling or empowering us all to act.

“ . . . if humanity is to rise to the existential threats it faces, we must put our differences aside. But

when we all agree – or pretend to – it becomes harder to make progress. Disagreement is a way of thinking, perhaps the best one we have, critical to the health of any shared enterprise, from marriage to business to democracy. We can use it to turn vague notions into actionable ideas, blind spots into insights, distrust into empathy. Instead of putting our differences aside, we need to put them to work.”

Ian Leslie, “How to have better arguments online”, The Guardian, 16 February, 2021 (extracted from his book *Conflicted: Why Arguments Are Tearing Us Apart and How They Can Bring Us Together*)

“Whenever I walk with a child, I think how much I have seen disappear in my own life. What will there be for this person when [s]he is my age? If [s]he senses something ineffable in the landscape, will I know enough to encourage it?”

Barry Lopez, *Crossing Open Ground*

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