

# Coaching

with the

# earth in mind



Diane Parker talks to executive coach, therapist, supervisor, Time to Think global faculty and former founding Chair of BACP Coaching, **Linda Aspey**, about her work with global activist movement Extinction Rebellion (XR).

**Diane Parker:** Linda, for the benefit of our readers who may not be familiar with your work, can you tell us a little about your background and experience as a coach and therapist?

**Linda Aspey:** I've been involved in this work for almost 30 years, combining therapeutic, change management and organisational development ideas and principles, with staff, leaders, teams and organisations. Twelve years ago I became deeply involved with the Thinking Environment®, my teacher being Nancy Kline of Time to Think, and six years ago I joined the Time to Think global faculty, where I teach, qualify and supervise Time to Think coaches, facilitators and consultants.

I joined BACP in 1992 and became involved in various initiatives, committees and divisions, the BACP board as a governor and, in 2010, BACP Coaching, which I started. It was BACP's first new division in many years. We also launched this very journal, *Coaching Today*, and I was awarded a BACP Fellowship shortly afterwards.

**DP:** How did you get involved with XR? What is it about their message and mission that compelled you to join them?

**LA:** I have always been interested in the environment and concerned for the health

of our earth, people and all living beings. Human and animal suffering pained me deeply from an early age. I think I inherited it from my mother; she was the kindest and most compassionate person I've ever met.

I knew that we were trashing our planet, but I don't think that the scale of the climate and ecological crisis had really registered with me, until late last summer when, in my car, I caught the tail end of a radio documentary about the natural world. One statistic grabbed me: 84 per cent of Holland's butterfly population had disappeared in the past 130 years. *Eighty-four per cent!* It was as if something had hit me. Tears started flooding down my face and I had to pull the car over. I sat there and literally wailed for a while. When I got home, I spent the next few days online, finding out more. I was horrified by the huge impact on our natural world of the use of pesticides, fossil fuels, barbaric animal agriculture practices, and how much human, animal and ecosystem suffering there was as a result – floods, drought, famines, wars, natural habitat loss, crop failure, pollution. The earth boiling up, the atmosphere toxic; all kinds of amazing, beautiful species dying out at a rate we'd never seen before. And when I read that we have started the world's sixth mass extinction event, I truly felt the enormity of it all. It was shocking, sad and massively depressing.

I was astounded how little we all knew about it really, beyond the occasional reference in the mainstream media and the increasing coverage about plastics. I had to really search online and for alternative news sources to find it. I couldn't understand why, if it was this bad, wasn't it top of every news programme, government statement, every politician's and every business' agenda? I spent the next few weeks in a state of shock, disbelief and grief. I tried to talk to friends and coaching colleagues, but most weren't interested beyond small talk on the extreme summer heat that was weirdly followed a few days later by torrential rain. I didn't want to push it on people – only a couple

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of close friends were genuinely interested and yet it was hard for us to receive or give comfort.

As I mourned, it seemed that everywhere I looked, even close to home, I saw an increasingly impoverished world. My garden felt devoid of insects. I heard the muted song of the birds at dawn when they once would have woken us up in chaotic chorales. I noticed there were no moths in the house even when I had the windows open and the lights on at night. I saw how fields that were once abundant with wildflowers were now oddly sparse. I knew that psychological defences are normal and I came to realise that I too had been in a state of denial and disassociation for some time, not helped by the appalling lack of decent news and media coverage. It is improving – in large part, I believe, due to the wonderful efforts of Greta Thunberg, Extinction Rebellion and many more climate and environmental activists, but it's still not top of →



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every news outlet. And it should be. We cannot continue with business as usual.

My therapeutic background and knowledge of the grief cycle was oddly reassuring, and I felt that I would find some way through, but I didn't know how or when. I knew there wasn't a kind of 'happy ending' but I also knew that loss is something we can become accustomed to. I decided to host a free workshop event in London for professional friends – coaches, therapists and facilitators – calling it 'Our Beautiful Planet is in Crisis'. I was touched by the response – around 30 people came, keen to talk, find out more, and be together in community. It was an emotional day, but I felt hopeful for the first time in ages. After that, several of them ran similar events in their communities and workplaces. And then by total coincidence, only a few weeks later, I heard about a new organisation forming – Extinction Rebellion. Its

message was clear – we are heading towards a man-made hothouse earth, and we are not doing anything like enough to change course. We are on track for a global temperature increase of four degrees (some say more) if we don't change now, and we are already struggling at just over one degree higher than we've experienced during the lifetime of humankind.

XR's three demands made sense to me, given what I had learned already. Their first is that we need the Government and media to tell the truth; secondly, we need to act now to halt climate change and biodiversity loss; and thirdly, we need a new approach – one that is beyond party politics – to making decisions about our world by implementing a Citizen's Assembly. And we need to do it all without violence or blaming individuals for our choices, as we need system change first and foremost. Yes, we all need to make better choices too, but many people don't have much choice. It all completely resonated. I felt a massive sense of relief. I'd not been an activist before, but to me it was clear I had to do something, and XR's non-violent, regenerative approach really spoke to me.

So I joined XR, and soon I was being trained in understanding non-violent direct action and civil disobedience, and I then became a facilitator and trainer of trainers. I also trained to deliver the main XR talk 'Heading for Extinction and What to Do About It', which I give as open talks to the general public, and by invitation to private sector companies, members' clubs, schools, colleges and universities. XR takes training very seriously – we want people who join to be well informed, well prepared, and well supported. I took four months off work over the summer so I could train and speak to as many people as possible and encourage them to join. We're a decentralised organisation and I'm in the Oxford XR Training and Talks

Working Group, very involved with XR Banbury and I recently set up XR North Cotswolds. We design and deliver new learning events constantly as the landscape is changing so quickly; for example, I'm currently co-designing a new programme on Climate Conversations. It feels like I'm putting many of my existing skills to good use. For me, the opposite of despair is not hope; it's action – and community. And XR is an amazing community of people who deeply care.

I took part in both the April and October Rebellions in 2019, and my experiences were hugely positive. I didn't get arrested and I didn't set out to, mostly because I had a lot of training to deliver. The public may not understand why we carry out the actions in the way that we do them, but they are beginning to understand why we are taking action. Our stance of non-violent direct action is based on social science, in particular the study of successful social movements like those led by Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks and Gandhi. Erica Chenoweth's research shows that non-violent, disruptive, sustained and economically damaging civil resistance works.<sup>1</sup> It's more effective than any other large-scale social change process carried out by citizens. I should say that not all people have the privilege of protest – I am innately privileged by my whiteness – nor do they have the privilege of choosing non-violence, something that XR is acutely aware of. Some cannot even protest safely – it is reported that around 200 environmental activists are murdered every year.<sup>2</sup>

**DP: As a coaching practitioner, what do you see as the fundamental connection between our responsibilities to our clients – and the organisations/systems we and they operate within – and our collective responsibility to the future of our planet?**

**LA:** I think that the connection has become increasingly close, even overlapping, as in many systems. The impact of climate change and biodiversity loss threatens every aspect of our way of life and even life itself, and so I think we have a shared, collective responsibility to care about the future of the planet. We have responsibilities on so many levels – to other living things, to future generations, to people in areas like the global south, whose lives are already devastated by climate change (and who've done the least to cause it), and to ourselves to look after the life we have. But some politicians, industries, leaders and individuals have put economic growth before everything else, and in doing that, haven't



adequately considered their responsibilities, their impact on the planet and the wider ecology – or have chosen not to consider it.

Our clients are human beings. They have families, friends, jobs, businesses. They have dreams, hopes, fears, values. They are seeing the same news stories that we are seeing, now that coverage is improving. Many are changing aspects of their personal lives in an effort to reduce their impact on the earth. Many are changing their business/organisational practices. Some are even taking advantage of the crisis and seeing it as an opportunity to reshape for the better, or for the more financially motivated, to make a gain. And as organisations are increasingly being asked by consumers, customers and supply chain partners about their own environmental practices, their short-term survival might depend on them being informed and willing to take positive steps now to reduce their impact on the environment.

As coaches, we are supremely well qualified to help our clients do all these things and more. So what some of us are now asking is: 'Should we coach with the earth in mind?'. One of the biggest challenges for us as coaches is: can we do that when clients don't acknowledge the climate and ecological crisis? When they want to talk about growth without considering the environment? Or build massive steel, concrete and glass structures or ravage natural resources in pursuit of profit? Or do deals without thinking who or what will be disadvantaged along the supply chain by those deals? Or when they want to make changes solely for the purposes of 'greenwashing'? Do we need to explore these questions as professionals if we are to take our responsibilities to the planet, the things that we

share it with, and the future life on it, more seriously? What is our role?

In August, I collaborated with two other seasoned coaches, Alison Whybrow and Zoe Cohen, to issue a call – in the form of an open letter – to the coaching community: to coaches, supervisors, professional bodies and educators, asking them to commit to several actions.<sup>3</sup> We started discussions with some before the October Rebellion; however, that has been superseded by the formation of the Climate Coaching Alliance (see Resources and links). Because an equally important consideration is: how do we prepare ourselves for our own grief, our own losses, a new world view? How do we talk to our children and answer their questions? How do we hear and respond in coaching conversations we never imagined for a moment we would have, when our clients tell us their stories of fear or loss? The tragic and devastating Australian wildfires have brought the crisis sharply to our attention, perhaps unlike any other climate change-fuelled disaster in recent years (although there have indeed been many of those – both in the UK and globally); yet I still meet coaches who are not thinking that their lives will be affected, but that it's business as usual. Change is coming, and we can prepare for it, even if we cannot avert it.

**DP: In your opinion, how does the field of coaching need to evolve to address the current ecological crisis? What do we need to embrace in terms of our ideologies and approaches, and on a more practical level, in terms of training, professional development, working contexts, etc?**



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**LA:** Just as our clients' lives and worlds evolve in these times, so too must the field of coaching. There have been some recent evolutions, such as less of a stark differentiation between coaching and therapy, more understanding of neuroscience and how our life experiences are embodied, which have informed our practices, but there hasn't to my knowledge been a significant change in how we work. Business as usual is not going to work for us either. Coaching has largely evolved through providing a service that works with whatever the client wishes or agenda in, at least not consciously or explicitly. However, the late John Whitmore, one of the founding fathers of coaching, believed that a key task of coaching is raising awareness so people can take ownership and responsibility. And that's what we do. We raise awareness of things that are often outside of our client's awareness. We help them face what they →







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might be avoiding. We help them develop their skills in dealing with change, in building, generating and growing. Yet we aren't used to doing this in the context of existential crisis; so I think this is something we need to explore in the profession.

I also think we need a shift in focus – away from self to system, away from individualism to community, away from growth to restoration. I have personally never liked the term that's often used in personal development: 'being the best version of myself'. I understand why it has become popular, but to me it implies a self-serving mask. I prefer 'contributing my best'. We need to acknowledge that the way we are living in the Western world is hugely unjust, and that vast numbers of people in other parts of the world are suffering because of our actions. We need to contribute more and take less. Life will change – I have no doubt of that – so how we help our clients and their offspring to adapt is going to be a responsibility of every person who calls themselves a professional coach.

So I believe we must start a conversation about what coaching is currently – and what does it need to become to be of service now, given the scale of the crisis facing us? Do we need to navigate new ways of working with clients, whether these are personal coaching clients, individuals or teams in organisations, or whole organisations, so that the environment is at the heart? And if so, how? We are all building

the bridge as we walk on it, and we may not get it right all the time. But if we don't try, we won't know what's on the other side.

Perhaps it must start with us. Our values: who and what is most important and who or what do we really want to work with? Our emotional availability and resilience: how can we best deal with our own – ongoing – grief if we are to help others with theirs? Our conversations: how can we have better conversations that invite people to think about the earth as a support system, without attacking them? Our intentions: if we want to tell our clients at the first point of meeting them, that our intention is to help them to develop in alignment with doing minimal harm to the earth, how do we do that? Our practices: what do we need to change in our lives and businesses if we are to stop adding to the problem ourselves?

I don't see how we can help to build a better world if we still comply with all that is wrong with this one. So we need to think about *regeneration*. With that lens, we can respond thoughtfully to the climate and ecological crisis, use our vast pool of skills and good hearts to help ourselves and our clients to engage in meaningful, life-affirming dialogue. We need to give back more than we take.

**DP: Among my own peer group, I have noticed an increasing desire to integrate climate change activism with therapeutic/coaching practice. There seems to be a growing acceptance of the fact that we are now in a state of emergency, and a corresponding urgency to take action. What advice would you give a reader of *Coaching Today* who is looking for a way to become more involved in this area?**

**LA:** Firstly, I think it's important to get well informed about climate and ecological crisis. Only when you know the scale of it can you begin to engage with it. As I have already mentioned, mainstream media, with a few exceptions, have been operating a policy of deciding for us what we want or don't want to hear about climate and ecological crisis, as it does with all news. So I would recommend reading – whatever your politics – the more

enlightened *Guardian*, which is the only newspaper to have had a permanent staffer covering environmental issues for decades. We need more investigative journalism, not less! Extinction Rebellion's own website is massively informative.

The newly formed Climate Coaching Alliance, led by Eve Turner, Alison Whybrow and Josie McLean, and inspired by the Climate Psychology Alliance, aims to provide useful information, guidance and learning resources for coaches. It's open to all professional coaching and coaching psychology bodies, and to all individuals and coaching-related organisations, globally (see Resources and links). We have our first webinar coming up (date to be announced) where I'll be in conversation with a psychologist from Australia and a coach from the Lebanon, who has extensive experience in working with trauma.

There's an increasing number of coaches coming together to discuss how we respond, and I would urge anyone interested to draw on or form your own community of coaching/therapy practitioners. It's a relief to be with others who are grappling with this. My regular conversations with Zoe and Alison, whom I didn't know until earlier this year, have been so helpful. Don't be alone now.

It's important I say that we can't focus on this 24/7. It's exhausting. It's easy to get burned out and overwhelmed with all the new stuff emerging daily, to get 'apocalypse fatigue', and it's normal to want to run away and go back to the way things were. I don't fight that anymore. I take time out and do completely different things: I just spent three days doing an upholstery course – and it was therapeutic! So I would urge anyone who wants to get involved to remember they need to regenerate themselves too.

**DP: Finally, on a more personal level – what's next for you? Where do you see your own desire for social change leading you?**

**LA:** The way I see the world has changed in the last year and so I am not sure where I am heading! Whatever I do, I am not expecting it to be easy. I have been criticised and dismissed more times in the last year than I have in years, but I think that goes with the territory. I have



become increasingly selective about what paid work I do and with whom, but I know that's easy to do from a place of privilege. I would like to do a lot more to raise awareness of climate change as a social (in)justice issue, and more around galvanising the coaching community to respond positively to these huge challenges. I will continue with my Extinction Rebellion colleagues to develop new learning events that keep us current and effective and I'm now getting invited to more coaching conferences to talk about what is happening in the world. I really want to do more talks for young people: I certainly don't think we will achieve everything we need to overcome this crisis in my lifetime, so I am keen to develop the next generation too. I will just see what comes along, I didn't expect this last year to be as it was, so I have no idea what next year or beyond will bring. ■

## Resources and links

**Extinction Rebellion website**  
[www.rebellion.earth](http://www.rebellion.earth)

**Coaches for Extinction Rebellion**  
[www.coachesforxr.earth](http://www.coachesforxr.earth)

**Climate Psychology Alliance**  
[www.climatepsychologyalliance.org](http://www.climatepsychologyalliance.org)

**Climate Coaching Alliance**  
[www.climatecoachingalliance.org](http://www.climatecoachingalliance.org)

## References

- 1 Chenoweth E, Stephan MJ. Why civil resistance works: the strategic logic of nonviolent conflict. New York, NY: Columbia University Press; 2011.
- 2 Watts J. Environmental activist murders double in 15 years. Guardian Online 2019; 5 August. [Online.] [www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/05/environmental-activist-murders-double](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/aug/05/environmental-activist-murders-double) (accessed 18 November 2019).
- 3 Cohen Z, Whybrow A, Aspey L. An open letter to coaches, the coaching and coaching psychology professional bodies and coach educators. LinkedIn 2019; 23 July. [Online.] [www.linkedin.com/pulse/open-letter-coaches-coaching-psychology-professional-bodies-zoe-cohen-1e/](http://www.linkedin.com/pulse/open-letter-coaches-coaching-psychology-professional-bodies-zoe-cohen-1e/) (accessed 18 November 2019).



**Linda Aspey**  
[hello@aspey.com](mailto:hello@aspey.com)

Aspey Associates:  
 Climate and Ecological Crisis  
[www.aspey.com/climate-crisis](http://www.aspey.com/climate-crisis)

## BACP Coaching responds...

This is a stirring call to action from a founder of our division and we are grateful to Linda for making such a powerful contribution to our thinking. We recognise that many people are now feeling a great outer circle of anxiety about the future of our planet, which in turn encircles the political and social uncertainty that we have been facing for several years now, as a society that is failing many of its members. This, coupled with our own internal struggles, can create a great sense of powerlessness and paralysis. As coach-therapists, we know that we need to work with our own feelings of vulnerability as well as supporting our clients in this process. We may also be in a position to bring information to those clients with power and influence in our current system. We recognise that, at the least, we need to reduce carbon emissions and increase carbon capture, and that to do this will require a huge upheaval of the assumptions and principles upon which post-industrial Western society is founded. Many of us coaches are skilled at working

with assumptions and helping people to create and manage change, and as an Executive, we recognise that we have a role in creating a space for constructive conversations on the climate emergency. When we update our strategy next year, we will seek to include specific measures and actions related to addressing this crisis, but we are only at the start of our conversation about this.

We would like to hear from you, our members, about how you see our role as coach-therapists in raising awareness of this issue if it is not already on the radar of the client. What are you noticing and supporting in terms of a shift towards community and action? What do you see as our contribution as professionals? We would really like to hear about what you are doing in response to this issue and please let us know what you think that we as a division should be doing so that your voice has a potential to influence our actions.

**Coaching.Chair@bacp.co.uk**