

PHOTO-ILLUSTRATION

Contemplating Climate Change

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key words: Climate, activism, environment, Fibonacci, spiral, dream, nightmare

There are a lot of organisations and many people around the world currently contributing a voice for climate activism. Although, changing the attitudes of politicians and high-profile businesses and corporations towards replacing coal and gas with renewable energies is a challenge. Everyone involved in climate change engagement is important, as the many environmental problems engulfing the planet are so serious and complex as to be 'wicked problems' (Rittel et al. 1973). It is crucial to convince people that we are spiraling towards a future where life will be unsustainable on the planet. It is essential to change our relationship to the environment.

This photo essay will document my life in rural Tasmania and the effects of a nightmare I experienced as a small child. I was three years old in 1956 when I first experienced this recurring nightmare that appears in hindsight to justify David Attenborough's warning that we are heading to extinction. He has been documenting life on the planet for many years. In 1954 he began producing his natural history programs the same year that the British Government requested permission for Maralinga in South Australia to be used as a nuclear testing site. In 1956 the first British atomic explosion occurred at the Maralinga atomic weapons test range. Many other tests were activated over subsequent years in South Australia. Growing up on a rural farm in Tasmania radios were the entertainment at that time for families and while nuclear testing would have no meaning to a three-year-old fears provoked in adults around me may have subconsciously affected me.

Our family moved to an old farm house in Lymington, on the southern coast of Tasmania. We lived in ideal surroundings for a child. It was here that I first developed a lasting affinity with the camera photographing my family and my surroundings. However, a dark cloud appeared to hover over my nights. Towards the end of the year in 1956 I began to experience a repetitive nightmare of the destruction of all life on earth. It could be argued that young children can experience nightmares including sleep disorders but this was a very, very powerful dream that repeated regularly, growing into a narrative lasting for two years from when I was three and a half to when I was five and a half. I became very uneasy as the time to start school approached, fearing that the nightmare would affect my concentration. The impending commencement of school was already causing anxiety. The nightmare was appearing every night and its final iteration manifested into a violent spiral. My father had to spend most of the night with me to prevent the dream returning and seeming to project onto the walls of the room. I could not explain to my father what was wrong. For many years afterwards I feared that the nightmare would return.

Years went by until a trigger brought it back in 2000. The trigger was studying design when I finally saw symbolism in the nightmare repeatedly presented. I still wonder why a three-year-old child who loved nature dreamed of the destruction of the environment and all its inhabitants on earth in such a way. This nightmare was so powerful that I could never forget it, too powerful to ignore. It may have been the result on a young mind of adult fears and discussions about a nuclear threat widely prevalent at the time, but now it feels prophetic. While a nuclear threat remains in the background it is climate change that looms as the major threat today. If governments of the world do not do anything now it may be too late. Climate change may lead to the extinction of many species or even the destruction of all life on the earth. Scientists have been giving warnings of the impact of global warming for many years, but they have not been acted on. Can we redeem ourselves before it is too late? Can we save the planet or is total climate decimation inevitable?

Reference: Rittel H. W. J., Webber M.W. and Melvin M.1973 'Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning', *Policy Sciences* Vol. 4 (2) 155-169.



Growing Up in Rural Tasmania

The Rolling Hills of Lymington

My terrifying dream commenced when we moved in late 1956 from suburbia to an old farmhouse built in the early 1920s. The walls were devoid of any paint, an ideal canvas for young children to visually document their experiences. I learnt to draw on the unpainted walls. A new life with a dog, a vegetable garden and chickens. Vast landscapes to explore because our nearest neighbours were farmers. The main agricultural staples were dairy, apple, pear and plum orchards. When I was seven my grandmother gave me an old Kodak Box Brownie. I only managed a few rolls of film when the camera disappeared. I now assume that it was too expensive to keep developing and printing the 120 film. My brothers and sisters were available subjects to practise taking photographs. In the above photographs on the left is my younger brother and two sisters taken on the lawn at the back of the house. The image on the right is my older brother and my youngest sister. We would have expeditions throughout the countryside and steal apples. My youngest sister died in a motor vehicle accident at the age of 16. I never knew her at that age because at that time I was in my twenties and working on the mainland.

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The 1970s-1980s

Coastal Living

Ten years later my father single handedly built a house a few kilometres away from the old house. It is the late 1960s in a new house at the dawn of a new era complete with a television set. Just a 10 minute walk down a dirt road to the beach, a small area of sand and a rocky coastline. We would go fishing and walk around the cliffs which were dangerous when the tide came in, and at times we were caught but we survived. The rocks along the coastline were a showcase of past marine activity covered in a plethora of detailed indentations of shells and animals caught in either mud or lava; life before humans. The rock is shale and breaks away easily revealing even more fossils. I never took any home, rather I just admired and explored them. I am grateful to my father for moving the family to the country where I could interact with nature and better understand our natural world.

The old house was situated on a hill, the new house on flat ground. The landscape was vastly different – from the rolling green hills, orchards and paddocks to a bush and coastal landscape. The nightmare faded into the background but remained latent as I explored new landscapes.



The Nuclear Age

Replant and Reforest Native Species

Since the first nuclear test called 'Trinity' in New Mexico in 1945: 'The following half century was one of intense nuclear testing, the residue of which might be the signature for the proposed new epoch of the Anthropocene' (Cordle 2020). 'In both eyewitness accounts and in fiction, Trinity is described as a moment of rupture and rapture: rupture because it marks the transition from a pre-nuclear to a nuclear age; rapture because the encounter with dazzling light and a power overwhelming the senses has the quality of religious experience' (Cordle 2020). In 1954 the British requested land in South Australia to be used as a nuclear testing site. In 1956 the first British atomic explosion occurred at the Maralinga atomic weapons test range. Many other tests were activated over the forthcoming years in South Australia and in other countries of the world. Could the nuclear bomb testing in the 1950s and 1960s in South Australia have some bearing on the nightmare?

Reference: Cordle, N. 2020 'This is what happened the morning the first atomic bomb created a new world', *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/this-is-what-happened-the-morning-the-first-atomic-bomb-created-a-new-world-142184> (accessed 20/07/2021).

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The 1950s

Tranquility

In the 1950s living in a rural community, radios were the entertainment for families and while the nuclear testing would have no meaning to a three-year-old its impact on adults could have been communicated. Growing up during this era we did not have access to the communication technologies we have today. The technological revolution has now affected the way we communicate, learn and think. The digital age now impacts daily lives in almost every aspect of our twenty-first century life. Living with analog seemed a simpler way of life, especially in the country with apple orchards and rolling hills, flora and fauna to discover, and a small community, which all enhanced my awareness of nature. In an analog world far from the sprawling suburbia this appreciation was built through the freedom to roam and explore the countryside.

When the dream began it was pleasing manifestations of various pieces of nature forming in a circle with each picture fading in and out changing to various scenes of flowers and landscapes, streams and animals. To describe this, is to imagine snippets of nature organised in a circle slowly rotating on a computer screen as a digital photographic presentation.

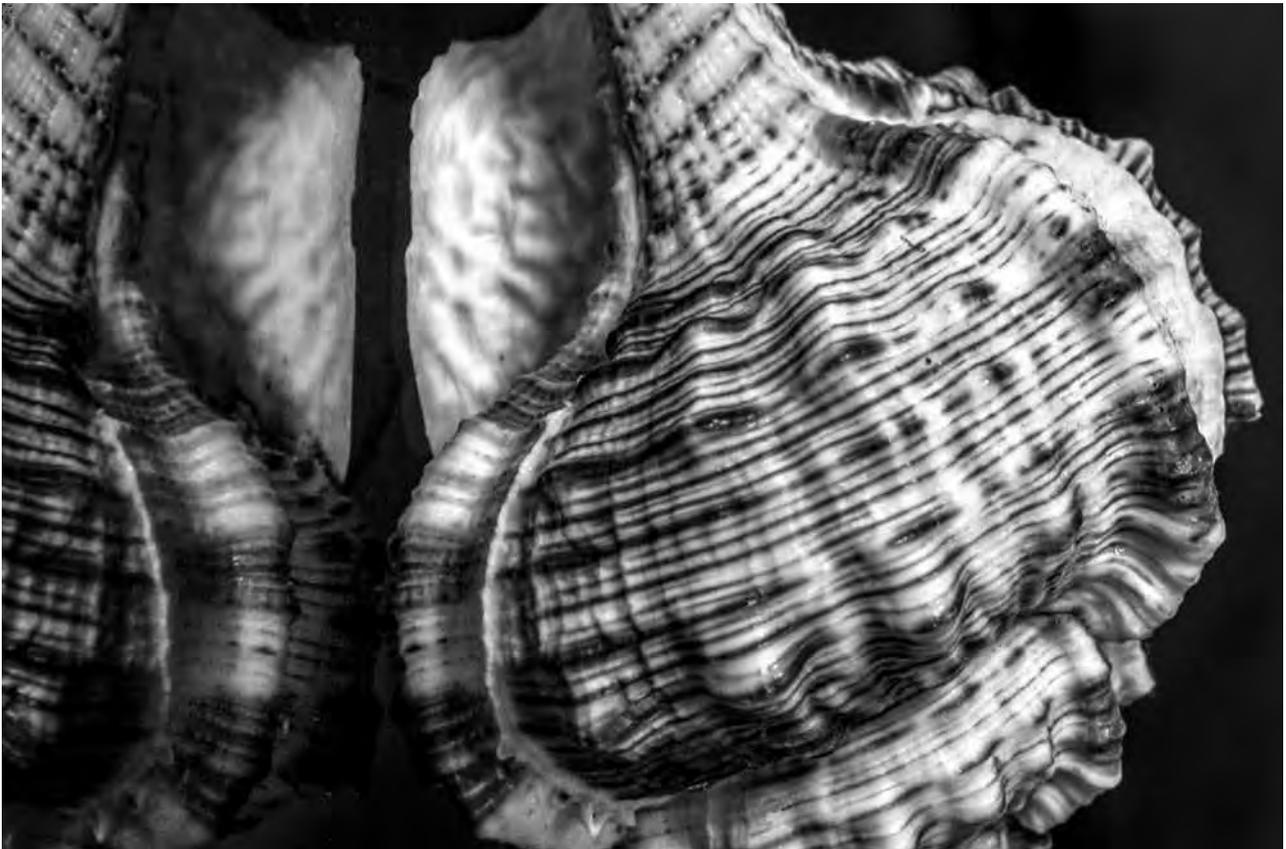


Time and Time Again

Foreboding Nature

Slowly over time the images of nature in my dream became foreboding. Most of the images of nature turned dark and desecrated. The dream would start the next time at the stage of its previous incarnation. It begins by quickly moving through the cycle then moving slowly in a circular motion. I was five years old when the dream began repeating more often. It began slowly over what seemed a long period of time starting once a month, then twice a month, then five then eight then thirteen until it manifested every night of the week. It appeared every night for about three days until it came to a crescendo of just the spiral.

This experience was extremely distressing, I could not wake up no matter how much I tried. I was not able to stop it from happening or explain the dream contents to an adult. I was too young to understand the fears it symbolised as a sequenced narrative, performing iterations over two years. I could not explain. I did not have the vocabulary to understand what I was dreaming. I just saw nature spiral out of control and the dream's physical apparitions were disturbing enough to know that the nightmare had well and truly made its presence known.



The Fibonacci Sequence

Twenty-four Iterations Equals Two Years

The time-line of the nightmare appeared to present a spiral sequence. I was too young to understand a spiral let alone the Fibonacci sequence to base on the dream's frequency, therefore I surmise that the iterations were repeating patterns presented over 24 months. The Fibonacci sequence are mathematical repeating patterns that produce a spiral replicated in shells or fractals seen in the iterations of leaves on plants. This sequence is the embodiment of the natural world. The main reason it is so important to life is that it is the closest approximation in integers to the logarithmic spiral sequences seen in nature including the universe. This distinctive ratio can be used to describe the proportions of everything from nature's smallest building blocks to the most advanced patterns on earth including large celestial bodies. Nature relies on this mathematical proportion to maintain balance as all life follows the Fibonacci pattern from replications of atoms and bacteria to leaves to the formation of hurricanes, all life-forms are connected. Another name for this ratio comes from the twenty-first letter of the Greek alphabet, Phi shown as ϕ (lower case) and Φ (Upper case).



The 50s and 60s

The Dream Begins

The nightmare could be read as dread induced in a small child by fears of nuclear holocaust, fears prevalent in these years, or as a warning that our invasive habits and lack of care towards the natural environment could end in our total destruction. But the nagging question remains with me as to why a three-year-old child in tune with nature would dream of the destruction of the environment and all inhabitants on earth in a way that reflects David Attenborough's candid comments.

'With a million species at risk of extinction, David Attenborough explores how this crisis of biodiversity has consequences for us all, including putting us at greater risk of pandemic diseases' (BBC 2020). A validation of his contention that 'everything in the natural world is connected by networks that support the whole of life on earth, including us, and we are losing many of the benefits that nature provides to us' (BBC 2020).

Reference: BBC One 2020 Attenborough D. *Extinction: The Facts*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000mn4n> (accessed 24/02/2021).



Revelations

Environmental Acceleration

In this immediate fast paced industrialised world, it is essential that we heed the warnings revealing the consequences of our environmental abuse. Many young people though, are now taking up the cause. They are holding governments accountable for their destructive exploitation of nature and urging them to change their policies to practices that will be sustainable into the future. Governments, politicians, people in power, presidents, industrialists and climate deniers need to acknowledge that there is now the capacity to use renewables and the knowledge to better protect the environment. The world has become unbalanced, the negative has overpowered the positive, the Yin is overpowering the Yang. How can we make those in power and those that are in denial, listen and change their attitude? As Jung (1964,1976) emphasises 'Nobody can afford to look around and to wait for somebody else to do what he is loath to do himself. But since nobody seems to know what to do, it might be worthwhile for each of us to ask (themselves) whether by any chance his or her unconscious may know something that will help us'.

Reference: 1964 Jung C.G., *Man and His Symbols*, 8th edition, New York Doubleday 1976.



Accelerating Climate Change

Humankind and Their Symbols

We have been polluting the atmosphere by burning fossil fuels from the industrial revolution to the digital age of today. Climate change is accelerating making it significantly harder to halt. I sincerely hope that copious amounts of land will be replanted, replenished and reforested with native species around the world to secure the future of the planet and its inhabitants. New and sustainable technologies are being invented and must be adopted by governments. Jung, in his 1964 book *Man and His Symbols*, avowed that if everybody did one positive action billions of people could make a positive change for the betterment of all living creatures. It will take a variety of projects using many diverse communicative devices and strategies. It is important to act NOW to continue pushing for policy change and community action. Act now or donate to those that are.



Already Dystopian

The 'Other' Realm

The dream was a major influence on my creative output and my early work was an attempt to create a message to encourage people to contribute to climate action or activity in some way, however small. My first computer-aided artworks were photoshopped photographs presenting a post-apocalyptic world. I studied Graphic Design, Illustration and Photography during which I explored artists who delved into the 'other' *realm* fueling an already dystopian attitude. Fifteenth century artist Hieronymus Bosch portrayed in his paintings the sins and follies of humankind and the consequences of these actions. Also influential were the works of twentieth century Swiss surrealist H.R. Geiger who created the 'Alien' for the movie of the same name; conceptual photographer French Christian Boltanski who explores life, death, and memory blurring the boundaries between truth and fiction; and Joel Peter-Witkin, working from New Mexico constructed photographs that depict macabre often grotesque scenes.



Conclusion

Finally

It may be easier now to communicate the concerns evoked by my early nightmare now that climate change is accepted as reality. I believe this is the right time to reveal urgency 64 years on since I first had a nightmare of the destruction of the environment. Perhaps this was a warning for this era as many more people throughout the world are now experiencing the consequences of climate change and understand that we must take action.

The last iteration of the dream was the most frightening. Look at a spiral in motion even for a minute and look away – you see a latency where the object you look at seems malleable, moving and distorting. The image above is a representation of the nightmare in motion, when it manifested as a fast-moving spiral and then seemingly projected onto the bedroom wall. Finally to my relief the nightmare stopped from that night on, but it left an everlasting impression on my subconscious and conscious self. For example, the above image shows butterflies being sucked into the vortex of the spiral.



Biography

Author : Photographer

Debra Livingston has a Doctorate of Creative Arts (Photography) and lectured in photography at the Queensland College of Art (QCA) and the University of the Sunshine Coast. She is a published artist and her photography work is presented in solo and collaborative exhibitions locally in Queensland, nationally in Melbourne and Sydney, and internationally in New York (NYC), Florida, Chicago, Paris and India. Her work resides in private and public collections, Livingston has published in the American journal, *Poets and Artists*, achieved honorary mentions in the PX3 Paris Photography Awards, finalist and semifinalist in the annual Australian HeadOn Foundation Photographic Portrait Awards, Sydney, Australia and twice finalist in the International Brisbane Art Prize.

The images in this photo-essay were all produced by the author.