

The Spiritual Health of the Nation

Homo sapiens: I'm worried about the future of the species

1. Like every species, Homo Sapiens must engage with the raw and abrasive aspects of life. We are at risk of entering an evolutionary cul-de-sac by the pursuit of comfort and pleasure i.e. living life as if we were toddlers in a play pen. We are at risk of entertaining ourselves to death.

Alister Hardy studied marine biology as his way of understanding evolutionary forces. Hardy died in 1985, he had lived through a tumultuous century, a century marked by world wide wars but which was also characterised by growth in affluence and the growth in technology. Drawing on these insights he feared that the species Homo sapiens was at risk of entering an evolutionary cul-de-sac, and would follow the route of many species, which after a brief period of flourishing would fall into extinction. The reason Hardy made this dire assessment was the ease with which the species used its energy and creativity to avoid the struggle of grappling with the raw and abrasive aspects of life. Aldous Huxley likewise hypothesized that what we love will ruin us because we have been captivated by the pursuit of comfort and pleasure seeking.

2. We underestimated the extent to which 'addiction' is an Achilles heel for the species
3. Circumstances matter, but not as much as we think. There is an inclination to cede too much potency to 'circumstances' in making sense of our lives, 'circumstances' have acquired a more potent status in our life script than is warranted¹.

We cannot resist comparing our circumstances with others: rivalry is hard to resist. So, rather than relax in financial security, we find ourselves having to negotiate a new batch of worries about losing out on the advantages that others have secured. In other words, we rarely assess our circumstances objectively, but rather we assess them in comparison with others. The work of positive psychologists suggests that circumstances matter, but not as much as we think. There is an inclination to cede too much potency to 'circumstances' in making sense of our lives, 'circumstances' have acquired a more potent status in our life script than is warranted. This inclination to overestimate the power of circumstances has its roots in what psychologists refer to as 'the focusing illusion', i.e. Nothing in life is quite as important as you think it is *while* you are thinking about it. For sure, circumstances matter, but not as much as we think.

We cede too much potency to 'circumstances' in making sense of our lives. In our culture 'circumstances' have acquired a more potent status in our life script than is warranted leading us to underestimate the scope we have for 'intentional activity'. The surprise is how little impact 'circumstances' have on people's wellbeing. Research by Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade suggests just ten percent . If we can get the motivation to engage in positive or meaningful intentional activities, circumstances associated with health, money, and even upbringing have a surprisingly small impact on wellbeing. So for example, lottery winners are unlikely to be any happier one year after their win. There are three things that have been identified as having an impact on wellbeing: The set point comes from our genes. Our genes play a significant part in whether, in this context, we are upbeat or prone to gloom. This doesn't mean that those with gloomy genes can never be happy, just that when happy the gloomy genes are prone to pull us back to our 'set- point'. We are locked into a culture which inclines us to over-rate the impact of circumstances and underestimate the significance of our 'agency' (i.e. our ability to engage in meaningful intentional activities).²

4. An epidemic of narcissism, an over developed self regard, may have infected most of us.
i.e. self-regard has toppled over into selfishness and self-preoccupation.

Narcissism is an unpleasant and disruptive state.³ The bad news is that the evidence suggests that this toxic personality syndrome is growing. For example, Twenge suggests that over the last twenty years narcissism has risen as much as obesity and the two may be related: both are due to our inability to control our desires⁴. Narcissism is not just a lifestyle trait. It is a route to ruination, not just because it makes us psychologically unhealthy and spoils relationships. As narcissism becomes extensive we are caught in a fearsome trap - where love is the thing most desired and yet also most feared. Commitment becomes virtually impossible because of the unquenchable demands of an insistent 'me'. This is a dastardly state of affairs, because to be fully human is to be able to express love and commitment to another.

5. We have fallen for the deceit that the pursuit of plenty provides a route to wellbeing.

Having everything we want, especially when combined with narcissism makes us miserable. Intuitively we have always sensed this to be the case, however, the work of Martin Seligman and others positive psychologists, now provide copious amounts of evidence to support this intuition. For younger people the mismatch between lofty expectations of getting and having and the disappointing reality can be harsh, and in the absence of any other motivation for life, this existential predicament is reflected in the growing rates of suicide amongst young people.⁵

Living psychologically beyond our means

It would seem that we are not just living beyond our economic capacity; we are also living beyond our psychological capacity in our inclination to 'limitless self expansion'.⁶ It is in relation to this that religion matters. We are familiar with the role of religion in providing reassurance about death not being the end of life, and this has led to religions being criticised as little more than immortality formulas. What is less acknowledged is that religions address this inclination to live beyond our psychological means. It is easy to despise narcissistic people, only to discover that the inclination to despise often has its roots in the same psychological failing. We are all saps, vulnerable to the mood music that surrounds us, easily addicted and besotted by celebrity and selfishness.

Having said all this, I also note: *The perception of negative dynamics easily dominates our view of the world. An exceptional feature of the species is that no predicament is so powerful that it is beyond resolution.*

Some ways forward

a. Learning from the Gay community: self-restrained individualism⁷

One of the most explicit shaking free of the constraints of social rules is that achieved by the Gay movement. Within a generation being Gay has become an accepted lifestyle. The image of a gay lifestyle that often is promoted is one of indulgence and decadence, *and narcissism*. What is less noted is the frequent commitment of those who are gay to the voluntary or third sector, and that includes a commitment to the Church. The issues of individuality and choice, and the casual and sometimes deliberate letting go of social rules or norms are all closely related. Those who are 'out and proud' Gay have made a conscious, and on occasion, a costly decision to step outside social norms. But instead of this triggering a mode of individuality that speaks of 'everyone for themselves from birth to death', for many who have 'come out' their wider life choices speak of a concern for the wellbeing of others. How else to explain the tendency of Gays and Lesbians to have long careers in public service, especially in the more arduous and less well rewarded Church, voluntary and community sector.

Those who have made a choice to pursue same sex partnerships provide an important illustration of how shaking off social rules does not have to mean denial of social responsibility. This is an example of *self-restrained individualism*. By this I mean that each of us can limit the degree of individualism and the degree to which we pursue self interest and self indulgence. And more than this, a case can be made that such self-restrained individualism represents an exceptional level of moral behaviour because self-limitation is chosen rather than forced upon us by social rules and norms.

b. Harnessing the Re-mixes

The Remixes are the growing number, especially of millennials, who are unaffiliated to a specific religion, but purposefully pick up insights to create their personal spirituality. No longer is such self-selection subject to defensive critiques, personal choice now has unquestioned legitimacy. Spirituality means rehearsing (continually practicing) in our hearts and minds and souls, the alternative performance that speaks of different values.

“A spiritual person knows that money cannot buy the most important things. A spiritual person is one who values what cannot be seen; the beauty of nature, the generosity of others, the dignity of every other living thing. Religion and spirituality are related, but they are not the same thing. Religious practice often nourishes people’s spiritual life and helps people feel that they belong and have a purpose.”⁸ Professor John J Macdonald

With haste we have been stricken by challenges that are only beginning to dawn. In our troubled times the challenge for all of us, including the spiritually fluid remixers, is how our faith supports and motivates when the chips are down. At least the intention to develop a counter-cultural spiritual health offers the possibility of responding creatively to our context of disease, unease and disintegration.

c. A renewed theology

An important role of faith is to help people to establish for themselves how to contain and deploy personal freedom. This contrasts with earlier Christian practice, where the Church dictated and enforced self-restraint in order to counter any inclination towards independence of thought and individualism. We now need a theological constellation⁹ that permits, even encourages individuality and lofty sense of uniqueness - but also enables us to limit our freedom and self-centredness. There are five aspects to the theological constellation that furthers this self-restrained individualism:

- A sense of self that speaks of uniqueness and preciousness in the sight of God
- An emphasis on *struggle* rather than sin
- Acknowledgement of the implications of the conscious and unconscious dastardliness that taints all that we do
- Acknowledgement of the importance of forgiveness both for ourselves and forgiving others
- Confidence that deep and enabling benevolence permeates the whole of creation; this is to acknowledge the terrain of classical theology that speaks of grace and the Holy Spirit.

These five points are emphasised by the teaching and manner in which Jesus lived his life. These five features of the constellation are deliberately *sin-lite* because sin is a tricky concept in a culture that invests in individualism and legitimises the pursuit of pleasure and self-fulfilment and where people have unhitched themselves from social rules and constraints. However, this ‘sin-lite’ approach is moderated by an emphasis on *struggle*, in that it becomes essential to emphasise struggle for insight and self-discipline amidst the vast array of conflicting voices and ideas - and this struggle is more than a struggle of the intellect or the emotion, it is a struggle at the level of the soul (to be *woke*).

It is bold to suggest that an emphasis on struggle can supersede an emphasis on sin. Sin is so much associated with Church and being a Christian it can be shocking to have sin relegated to a lower league. For many Christians, the 'raison d'être' of Jesus was to conquer the power of sin by dying on the cross and rising to new life. For centuries, if not millennia, social rules have been kept in place by describing their breaching as sin, and sin leads to hellfire and damnation. We know this riff, but it no longer works; in fact no longer do any threats of a religious nature work. The new riff, whilst not denying the salvation that comes from Jesus' death and resurrection, puts the emphasis on Jesus saving us by showing us how to live, and in examining how Jesus lived, or 'performed' we see the extent to which 'struggle' was a part of his life.

William Bouwsma also proposes that commitment to struggle is an essential element of the Christian faith and that the avoidance of or quitting from struggle is the very worst state into which Humankind can fall. In this Bouwsma also shifts the emphasis away from sin, and he does this straightforwardly. He notes that a central tenet of the Christian faith is that sins can be forgiven. To resist 'struggle' however, is to deny the call to creativity and compassion made by God. Furthermore, Bouwsma suggests that commitment to struggle, the struggle that is deeper than intellect and emotion, is an essential feature of maturity, both for those who embrace a Christian faith and those who do not.¹⁰ This emphasis on struggle resonates with insights from evolutionary biologists who recognise that, if a species is to thrive, it must enter fully into a struggle against the raw abrasive aspects of life.

d. Learning from early Methodism

It is not just through our theology that we can counter the hazards that are afflicting our species, it is also through the fellowship of fellow travellers on the way. And there is an exceptional illustration of efficacy in urging people towards transformation and sustaining people in their efforts to maintain such transformation. There are powerful examples of how the empowerment that comes from faith has helped people to muster the determination to change both their attitudes and behaviour. There are historic examples of when the process of 'church' has achieved this. Early Methodism and the early days of the Salvation Army were extraordinary facilitators of people changing their attitudes and behaviour and being sustained by their involvement in these expressions of church.

There are echoes here of Bahro's assertion that when a culture becomes sickly, a new culture is created by a few people who are not afraid to be insecure.¹¹ Those few people will be those who have a sense that their life has meaning, and know the feasibility of engaging in intentional behaviour in the pursuit of this meaning in their lives. Early Methodism and Salvationism pioneered just this. They fostered within people the ability to make sense of their actions within the larger frame: 'God', and this in turn brought vital motivation to embrace the intentional activity that enabled people to resist becoming *victims* of troublesome circumstances.

Some commentators suggest that Methodism was the revolution in Britain. Revolution is a rare historical state. It involves throwing off the perceived constraints of circumstance and taking up new intentional activity both individually and corporately. Revolution involves the transformation of values and approaches, bringing new ways of seeing and a new way of organising. Revolution also involves a shift in the balance of power away from the status quo. Methodism accomplished this amongst 'the anxious – the dislocated, the rootless, the disturbed'.¹²

“Everything can be taken from a man but one thing, the last of human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.” Victor Frankl

Being and becoming a Christian is about making an effort to choose one's attitude to one's circumstances –church is an important resource for the task. It is in relation to character formation that the effectiveness of religious commitment comes into its own. The commitment to follow Jesus in the way he lived his life, is a major contributor to empowerment that enables a sense of purpose to flourish. Faith commitment impacts on our attitude to our circumstances, when our attitudes change so too do the micro-actions in which we engage.¹³

Where do we see 'an effort to choose one's attitude to one's circumstances' happening?

We have done in the past...

In early Methodism 'Class Meetings' were groups of seven to twelve people who gathered together to discuss the state of their relationship with God. The question used in the eighteenth-century was, "How does your soul prosper?"

What did the early class meeting (Methodism!) produce?

- Opportunities for people to hear themselves think
- A process to support 'intentionality' i.e. rising above circumstances
- Generous solidarity and creative generosity
- A movement that didn't kill anyone, despite mal-treatment
- A belief or confidence in people being 'transformed'
- Accountable leadership

Early Methodism: A Movement with a distinctive process?

- Peaceable resistance ... non-violent resistance - Jesus was not a zealot neither were the early Methodists
- Solidarity in relation to intentionality ... prompting the Salvation Army and Alcoholics Anonymous (via Frank Buchman)
- Process now harnessed by Citizens' Organising (Tolpuddle Martyrs)
- A resource for resilience

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¹ S. Lyubomirsky, K M Sheldon, & D Schkade (2005) "Pursuing Happiness: The Architecture of Sustainable Change," Review of General Psychology, Special Issue: Positive Psychology 9 (20: 111-131)

² For more see A. Morisy (2008) *Bothered and Bewildered: Enacting Hope in Troubled Times* London: Bloomsbury

³ J. M. Twenge (2006) *Generation Me*, New York: Free Press p.68-69

⁴ J. M. Twenge and W. K. Campbell (2009) *The Narcissism Epidemic*, New York: Free Press p.31

⁵ In 2018, there were 6,507 suicides registered in the UK, an age-standardised rate of 11.2 deaths per 100,000 population; the latest rate is significantly higher than that in 2017 and represents the first increase since 2013. Three-quarters of registered deaths in 2018 were among men (4,903 deaths), which has been the case since the mid-1990s. The UK male suicide rate of 17.2 deaths per 100,000 represents a significant increase from the rate in 2017; for females, the UK rate was 5.4 deaths per 100,000, consistent with the rates over the past 10 years. Scotland had the highest suicide rate in GB with 16.1 deaths per 100,000 persons (784 deaths). Despite having a low number of deaths overall, rates among the under 25s have generally increased in recent years, particularly 10 to 24-year-old females where the rate has increased significantly since 2012 to its highest level with 3.3 deaths per 100,000 females in 2018.

⁶ This point is made by Sigmund Freud in 'Thoughts for the Times on War and Death', (1915), *Collected Papers*, Vol. 4, New York: Basic Books, (1959) pp. 316-317

⁷ A. Morisy (2011) *Borrowing from the Future* London: Bloomsbury

⁸ J. J. MacDonald (2005) *Environments for Health* London: Earthscan

⁹ A small subset of all the theological insights that are available to us.

¹⁰ W. Bouwsma, 'Christian Adulthood' in E. Erikson (ed.) *Adulthood*, New York: Norton, 1978

¹¹ This quotation is not referenced on the website of the Northumbria Community

<http://www.northumbriacommunity.org/>

¹² B. Semmel (1973) *The Methodist Revolution*, London: Heinemann p.7

¹³ See Stephen V. Monsma and J. Christopher Soper, (2006) *Faith, Hope and Jobs*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press and Sheila Suess Kennedy and Wolfgang Bielefeld (2006) *Charitable Choice at Work*, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press