

Reflection on an Election

A Personal Essay May-June 2019

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*I tell you naught for your comfort,
Yea, naught for your desire,
Save that the sky grows darker yet
And the sea rises higher . . .*

*Do you have joy without a cause?
Yea, faith without a hope?*
G.K. Chesterton

Since the election those lines from G.K Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse* keep swirling around in the brain. Why does this election result feel so devastating, so much worse than other election disappointments in the past? I felt this way after the ousting of Gough Whitlam in 1975, but not since. Many USA citizens felt the same on the election of Trump in 2016. Is this a turning-point from which there is no return, confirming the ultimate inevitability of the drift to the right that we have experienced for the last 3 decades?

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After all, it was not a landslide. The coalition will only have a majority of about 3 seats in the parliament, hardly a devastating loss for the ALP, which has seen much worse electoral results in the past. But it somehow feels like the end of the road, and this feeling is shared by many others; the despair is not mine alone, but it is felt by many people committed to working for social justice, human rights, and environmental sustainability (whom I will from now on refer to as 'we' and 'us'). We – or at least the way of life we have come to accept as normal and as our right – are doomed, and we just have

I think our feelings are right, it IS the end of the road. 'Faith without a hope' is about right. This is partly because the ecological crisis has given everything a sense of urgency – we simply don't have time for the metaphorical pendulum to swing back again before things get a lot worse (global heating and all the crises that will flow from that, as well as other ecological crises).

to accept that. In 1975 we could at least look to rebuild, though in retrospect we never really did, as the Whitlam agenda was slowly wound back by both Liberal and Labor governments in the subsequent years. But we no longer have time for such optimism. In a curious way I think the result has done us a favour.

We are now forced to wake up and accept that we have been living a false optimism – 'joy without a cause' as Chesterton's lines suggest. An ALP government would have kept alive a glimmer of false hope – false because the ALP basically accepted neo-liberal assumptions and would not have implemented the fundamental transformations that are now urgently needed.

At least now we cannot live in that dream world of Dickens' Mr Micawber or Voltaire's Dr Pangloss, pretending to ourselves that everything will somehow turn out all right. It won't - though it seems as if the majority of the population are still living the delusion.

Confronting Reality

There are truths that this election result forces us to confront. This is painful, depressing and frightening. I feel as if the assumptions on which I based much of my life and work, grounded in the tenets of liberal democracy, no longer hold, and I am searching for some new way of giving meaning to what is left of my life. And I suspect many others have similar anxieties. But it is only from that confrontation - facing the demons - that we will be able to move forward to something else. These truths that now brutally confront us, in no particular order, are:

- ☛ We must realise some uncomfortable things about Australia: its conservatism, its materialism, its individualism, its selfishness, its racism, its misogyny, its heteronormativity, its superficiality, its anti-intellectualism. It is NOT the '*greatest country in the world*' as our PM likes to say. This is not to blame the Australian people directly – there are many good people in this country who defy those generalisations, and generosity and goodwill still survive, though in diminished form – but it is rather to recognize and understand what has led us to this awfulness. The discursive power of neo-liberalism, of individual and corporate greed, of capitalism itself is at the heart of our many problems, has helped to create the awful society in which we live and also has helped to persuade many people that it is actually not awful, but a paradise of freedom, material wealth and democracy.
- ☛ We need to understand the power that perpetuates the awfulness. That power is manifest in several ways. There is economic power: evident in the annual gatherings at Davos and Bilderberg, but usually hidden from view and always hidden

from scrutiny. There is a relatively small number of individuals and families who own and control most of the world's wealth and who are determined to hold on to that wealth, indeed to find every opportunity to increase it. They fund institutions such as think tanks, media outlets and other activities aimed at maintaining and strengthening their wealth and power. This is now extended to social media, with the advent of surveillance capitalism and its sophisticated forms of 'behaviour modification' (Zuboff 2019). Then there is discursive power: the power to create, manipulate and control dominant narratives. This is seen in the influence of the Murdoch press and also in the manipulation of social media – both were evident in the election campaign and helped achieve the desired result. There is legal power: activists are sued, whistleblowers are prosecuted, and the legal system is heavily class-biased, race-biased and gender-biased. Finally there is increasing coercive power, seen in the militarization of police forces, the AFP raid on the ABC, heavy police presence at peaceful demonstrations, the criminalisation of dissent, and so on; this seems likely to increase in coming decades as democratic safeguards unravel. The power maintaining the current unjust and unsustainable system is formidable and we underestimate it at our peril, yet we have been underestimating it, consistently, in the hope that somehow things would change. Politely asking for change will be ignored, advocating an alternative will be ignored or ridiculed, and aggressively asking for change will be suppressed. It is naïve to think otherwise. We are up against it, and there is no room for naïve optimism: 'joy without a cause' and 'faith without a hope' are rather pointless.

- ☛ We also have to recognise that it is not just Australia. The power of neo-liberalism and corporate greed is global and all countries are affected, some more than others (the lucky ones are countries like Aotearoa, which is too small and remote to matter much to global power). It works out differently in different cultures and different political systems; but we must realise that our distress is not a purely Australian phenomenon. For every occasional slight move to the left in global politics (e.g. Spain at the time of writing) there is at least an equivalent move to the right somewhere else. Global consensus around progressive politics, though absolutely necessary at the present time, is clearly a bridge too far. Neo-liberalism is everywhere, and it needs to keep growing and devouring more human and non-human 'resources' to sustain itself, whatever the cost: economic, human, environmental. It is a global cancer that destroys and devours its host. The election is not an isolated Australian phenomenon, but has its parallels everywhere.
- ☛ We will be unable to prevent catastrophic global heating (Wallace-Wells 2019, McKibben 2019).

It may be true, as we are told, that we have the means to do so if we act immediately. But this requires turning the global economy on its head, and it also requires *all* nations to follow through with massive emissions cuts, greater than those promised in Paris. It just isn't going to happen, especially given the global shift to the right and the number of national governments, led by the USA and Australia, for which it is a low priority. And even that would still not address the underlying cause of growth-oriented capitalism (see Naomi Klein 2014). We could only avoid serious global heating if neo-liberal capitalism can be overthrown, globally, within the next few years – and pigs might fly! And, consistently, global heating is happening more quickly, and with more serious consequences, than had been predicted; the feedback loops are kicking in, and the tipping points are approaching. We are already locked into serious global heating and it can only get worse.

- ☛ There will be other crises in the coming years, not just global heating. Another economic crisis seems to be just around the corner with possible global recession and there are the crises of biodiversity, over-fishing of the oceans, mass extinctions, water, toxic pollution, soil erosion, and so on. While some of us like to point out that '*times of crisis are times of opportunity*,' it is neo-liberalism that has made the most of those opportunities (see Naomi Klein 2007) and will certainly continue to do so. Market-driven and technological 'solutions' will be imposed on what are at heart social, political and moral problems, thereby reinforcing the dominance of a neo-liberal world with no alternative and avoiding the questions that need to be asked, while hastening our ultimate decline and fall.
- ☛ Liberal democracy, as we know it, has failed, and is everywhere corrupted. In the era of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) it is even more compromised than before, often invisibly. The public space for civil engagement, on which any idea of democracy is premised, is rapidly being eroded. This will only increase as technology develops, for example 'deep fake' videos will within the next year or two become impossible to detect. We must stop thinking of liberal democracy as the road to progressive change – that is surely obvious from this election. We had a manifestly incompetent and manifestly corrupt government, yet it was re-elected. A Fabian approach – gradual progressive change – just doesn't work anymore, if it ever did; we are going backwards, not forwards. Even the mild reformist agenda of the ALP was labelled as radical or extreme (what a joke!) and strongly and malevolently opposed and undermined. So the ALP is now looking to support coal mines, give up on the environment, and give up on any serious redistribution of income/wealth, just so they can get into power – what is the point? Just so they too can talk about being

'given a go', and the 'Promise of Australia' (as one commentator noted, it sounds like a cruise ship), while achieving very little. The Greens, who do represent a real attempt at genuinely transformative politics and who do understand the scale of the transformations required in the coming years, are stuck on around 10% of the vote and are widely vilified or at least not taken seriously. And this corruption of democracy is replicated around the world. To borrow from Jane Austen and the UK anti-Brexit protests, *Pride and Prejudice* has eclipsed *Sense and Sensibility*, with the support of powerful and corrupt interests. Democracy, as we have known it, cannot work properly in such an environment and is inevitably itself corrupted.

☛ We have to accept that the values of social justice and human rights are not universally embraced. We used to assume that we could simply appeal to those ideas to win the support of others. That is no longer the case, as such values are often attacked and vilified, while the values of selfishness and greed are embraced and promoted. 'Social justice warriors' are ridiculed by the Murdoch press and the right-wing shock-jocks. Altruism seems only to be electorally acceptable if it involves not giving up *anything* (e.g. the rejection of changes to franking credits and negative gearing, notwithstanding multi-millionaire Dick Smith's strategic post-election conversion). And the same is true of environmental sustainability; it is only acceptable if our 'way of life' or our 'economy' is not threatened, which is impossible.

☛ We also have to accept that this awfulness is the historical norm. In virtually all human 'civilisations' since the Neolithic Revolution, there has been inequality of wealth and power, slavery (if not always so labelled), greed, corruption and ruthless exploitation and suppression of the masses by the elite. With the notable exceptions of some Indigenous societies, life for nearly everybody has been, in Hobbes' words, '*poor, nasty, brutish and short*', but Hobbes' prescription of the need for a sovereign to protect our rights has simply perpetuated it. This has only ever been changed by violent revolution, major wars, natural disasters, plague or disintegration into chaos, and each time this has happened, the same pattern of domination and corruption has speedily re-emerged. The social democratic experiment of the mid-20th century was a historical exception, a reaction to the horror of WW2, and it too has been supplanted by the historical norm. The awfulness wasn't invented by neo-liberalism – it has a much longer history – but neo-liberalism is effectively taking us back to '*business as usual*', though now on a global scale, breaking the Earth's limits.

Is There a Way Forward?

One sad thing about all this is that we actually do know the way forward; we know what has to happen to reduce

global heating, to promote biodiversity, to promote social justice, to move to a world where genuine community-based sustainability is possible, where human and non-human flourishing is supported, and so on. There are many writers and thinkers who have been charting this way forward, backed up by significant bodies of research, and there is substantial agreement among them. Almost every day I come across a new blog, book, video, article or reference that outlines a way forward, involving new paradigm thinking, reactivating the commons, connecting with the non-human world, ecological and organic/holistic thinking, alternative economics, degrowth, alternative agriculture, matriarchal values, genuine sustainability, de-colonising, re-invigorating community, localism, drawing on Indigenous knowledge/experience, and so on. These may have different emphases, but they are broadly compatible and point in the same direction. They have informed my own work for many years.

It simply is not going to happen except in a few isolated and localised cases, and even there it will be very difficult to sustain. Had we really started 30 years ago, when we became aware of the problems, things might have been so different . . . we can blame Exxon, Murdoch, Thatcher, Reagan, Howard, Abbott, Ayn Rand, Hayek, the Koch Brothers, Milton Friedman, James Buchanan and many others, but it's too late now; they have done their dirty work.

Many people will point to the activism of youth, the school strikes, Greta Thunberg, and so on. "The young people are our future", "They are taking the lead where their elders have not", and so on. Yes, those young people are inspiring, and it is great to see their passion and their activism; but I cannot resist a feeling of scepticism.

I come from a global generation that also had grand ideas and was big on activism: the demonstrations of the 1960s, when I was a student, in many parts of the world, are a powerful memory, and those were heady times. But what happened to justice, peace and love? Yes, the demonstrations arguably helped to end the Vietnam War a bit earlier than it otherwise would have, and promoted ideas of civil rights and racial justice in Australia and also in the USA, but what happened in the long term? That same generation, my generation, has been responsible for comprehensively stuffing up the world. It is the generation that ushered in, and celebrated, the neo-liberalism of Thatcher and Reagan, and that drove corporate power, greed, inequality and corruption to new levels. Wars have continued, racism is alive and well, patriarchy, despite the gains of the Feminist movement, is also still strong, environmental degradation is far worse, and most nations are more unequal now than they were in the 1960s. What did that activism really achieve over 50 years? And will

the current young activists be any more successful than we were?

This is all very confronting, but I believe we must accept this as the reality of the environment in which we are living working, and trying to make a difference.

We have the ideas, we have the visions, and we have the commitment. But we face strong opposition, and have run out of time for such a transformation on a global or national scale.

I am inclined to agree with Jem Bendall (2018, 2019) who, in a widely-read paper last year, after looking at all the evidence, suggested that human ‘civilisation’ is now headed for ‘*certain collapse, likely catastrophe, and possible extinction*’. We are fully justified in feeling angry, scared, lost, defeated, depressed and fearful for the next generations. These are realistic reactions to our present predicament, so beware of anyone who tries to pathologise them or give them a ‘*mental health*’ label (of course we are depressed and anxious – perfectly healthy reactions to what we are faced with). And beware of anyone who asks ‘*Can’t you say something hopeful?*’ – that is simply an invitation to denial and to avoiding the awful truth of where we find ourselves and to the delusion of false hope. We simply have to confront and accept that truth before we can move on.

Collapse

Of course human civilisations have collapsed before (Diamond 2011) – it is a natural phenomenon. No civilisation can last forever. Civilisations by their very nature over-reach and become both unstable and unsustainable, and they end up collapsing, often quite quickly, through revolution, economic collapse, war, climate change, plague, natural disaster, or some combination of these. The problem now, however, is different, for three reasons. *First*, human civilisation, though culturally diverse, is increasingly global in terms of economics, politics, trade and communication. The fall of the Roman Empire, for example, went unnoticed in the Americas, Australia and the Pacific and in most of Africa and Asia. Other civilisations could develop and thrive in these places while Rome collapsed. But now we face *global* civilisation collapse. The *second* reason things are different now is the reality of nuclear weapons and civilisational collapse may be accompanied by levels of mass destruction unimaginable to the Roman Emperors. The *third* reason things are different is that collapse will inevitably be accompanied by unprecedented ecological change at a global level, triggered by global heating. We are facing collapse on a completely different scale.

The end of ‘*civilisation as we know it*’ is frightening, and there is no doubt that many will suffer and die in the process. But at another level we can see the ‘*end of civilisation*’ as perhaps necessary for ultimate human

survival in some form. If Emerson is right when he says ‘*the end of the human race will be that it will eventually die of civilisation*’, then the collapse of the ‘*civilisation*’ might be what is necessary for the survival of some form of humanity.

Several writers have suggested that we can still work towards a better world, though in a more limited and less ambitious sense. Joanna Macy (2012) tells us that sunsets can also be beautiful and that if our civilisation is coming to an end, we can try to make it a beautiful end. Bendall (2019) has used the analogy of a person with terminal cancer: to tell them to be ‘*hopeful*’ and pretend that everything is fine is both insulting and harmful, but we can do much to help them end their lives with dignity and to make the experience one of beauty and peace. He suggests that we do the same with human civilisation, whose condition is also ‘*terminal*’.

Paul Kingsnorth, a life-long environmental activist, came to the conclusion in about 2009 that it is too late to ‘*save*’ the environment and avoid ecological disaster (Kingsnorth 2017). He started the ‘*Dark Mountain*’ project (2010), which was about no longer struggling to attain the unattainable, but instead to concentrate on confronting the awful reality and telling stories towards ‘*uncivilisation*’, imagining a world beyond civilisation, drawing on the work of artists, poets, writers and others, to inspire imagination and creativity, rather than only rigorous scientific analysis, to understand what it means to be human in these times and to live well.

A worm-hole to a world beyond collapse?

These writers (and there are others) have three important things in common. The *first* is their insistence that we not embrace the false optimism of those who still maintain that there is still hope to save the ‘civilisation’ we know. *We can only move on (not necessarily ‘forward’) if we confront our demons and face the awful reality of the neo-liberal Anthropocene and the inevitable collapse of the world we know, the world of liberal democracy, the world of Enlightenment Modernity, the world of growth, the world of the Western colonial project, the world of industrial and post-industrial capitalism, the world, in short, of Western (now global) ‘civilisation’.*

So while being rightly frightened by the awful consequences of civilisation collapse, how can we work towards minimising catastrophe and exploring the potential for a new humanity to emerge from the ruins?

The *second* important argument of such writers is that they insist that we can, and should, still do the little things that affirm our humanity. Help, care, conviviality, love, kindness, generosity and valuing ‘nature’ are still important, and we can help make the world a better place even if its ultimate future is frightening. People with disabilities can still have a better life with appropriate

living aids. Aged care facilities can be improved. Indigenous communities can receive better and more appropriate resourcing. Health care can be provided with respect, and so on. These things continue to be important, and we have a challenge in maintaining such human services at a time of declining 'resources'. Human services are still important and always will be; though we will have to find new ways to do them (here I struggled for a word – to 'provide' or to 'deliver' human services linguistically commodifies and dehumanises them). *The future of human services, as I have been arguing for 30 years now, must be with human community, and should reclaim the original meaning of 'service', i.e. to serve, rather than to deliver a commodified product.* And activism to achieve change is still important, even if the ultimate utopian goal has gone and if both lights – the one on the hill, and the one at the end of the tunnel – have been extinguished.

Three degrees of global heating will be horrendous, but four degrees would be much worse, so three degrees is still worth fighting for, and may still be a realistic goal. Climate activism remains critically important.

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A rise in *Newstart* payments is still a goal worth working for and would improve life for many of the most disadvantaged. Asylum seekers have a right to be treated with dignity and respect, and activism towards this end is important. Indigenous land rights are still significant – more so than ever. We do still need to be advocating and agitating, in whatever ways might work, for the goals of social justice, human rights, non-human rights, earth rights and sustainability. But we can do this activism not because we believe it will bring about a utopia, and usher in a world of 'social justice', but because it is a worthwhile struggle to affirm the values of humanity, especially in times of crisis and collapse.

All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky

W.H. Auden

So the core tasks of people like social workers, welfare workers, community workers and activists – helping people to live well – remain. These issues are worth our time and effort, even if the utopian dream has been replaced by a dystopian nightmare. Seeking to promote human flourishing remains important, even if we have to discard linear progressive history and stop believing that we are somehow part of creating an ideal 'better future'.

In Lars von Trier's film *Melancholia*, the impending inevitable destruction of the earth from a planetary collision evokes three different responses from the various characters. The rational man of science takes his own

life – overwhelmed by the tragedy it is his only way out. One group decides to open the champagne and party like there's no tomorrow (which is true). The others seek a more transcendental ending, reaching out to each other within a quickly built pyramid, finding meaning, peace with each other and something more spiritual though undefined. All end up dead, of course, and all three are rational responses to inevitable disaster. The metaphor is clear and obvious:

how will we celebrate the end of our civilisation? Choices can still be made, and we can still seek Joanna Macy's beautiful sunset.

W.H. Auden, in his powerful poem *September 1 1939* (quoted above) included the line 'We must love one another or die'. Some years later he said that it would be better as 'We must love one another and die', and I have now come to appreciate his position. The original wording plays into dominant narratives of denying death – if we love one another we will somehow avoid the finality of death – whereas Auden's later version is more real and true to the times, accepting death as inevitable. Our civilisation is dying; loving each other will not stop that, but it will make for a better death.

The *third* important point made by these writers is the importance of the creative. *Stories, poems, novels, films, art and music are all important in enriching humanity, and their significance is magnified rather than diminished by the predicament in which we find ourselves.* This is the point of the Dark Mountain project (2010); just as a person dying of cancer is likely to have their humanity affirmed more by reading a novel than by reading the newspaper, so our lives can often be more enriched by the creative and the artistic than by the brutality of politics. While this sounds like a cop-out, it can also be a way forward, a worm-hole to a new world. At least it is an alternative way to find meaning and human connectedness. As US blogger and film-maker Macky Alston (2016) wrote in 2016 on the election of Trump:

It is the time for poets and prophets and speaking our love for one another publicly, personally, politically, regularly, gratuitously, dangerously – to our neighbors, our workers, our estranged friends, our family members, the ones who voted with us and the ones who voted against us, who perhaps are just as terrified as we are and that's how we've arrived at this moment.

The coming decades are going to be catastrophic: wars, famine, disease, starvation, storms, state terror, genocide, conflict and more conflict. Many people (at least many millions, probably a few billions) sadly will die well before their time. This we now have to accept, devastating though that is, though of course it is already the case that millions die before their time, through war, poverty, famine, starvation and brutal inequality. The difference now is that it will not just happen to people on the other side of the world, but it will happen to 'us'. I am old enough to not be

seriously affected, but will my children and grandchildren be among the victims? This is a real possibility, which I must now accept – it is not just an abstract ‘humanity’ that will suffer, but my own flesh and blood and people I love. At the very least, their lives will be greatly diminished from the hopes and possibilities that they now hold. It is a tragedy, one that OUR society has created. I must share the guilt of my generation. But it may not be the end of humanity. How can we somehow keep a human flame alive? *Is the idea of the worm-hole into a new world a possibility? We do not know, but we can try, we can explore, we can dare to dream.*

So where do we go from here?

The old answers will not do, because the old questions will not do. What new questions can we ask about being human, about human and non-human flourishing, about living well? Bendall (2018) talks about the need for three Rs: *resilience, relinquishment, and recovery*. Resilience is about staying strong in facing our reality, relinquishment is about what we need to let go, and recovery is about what we need to draw from past human experience. Are these the questions we should be asking as we lurch towards a dark and frightening future? Might they help us find the worm-hole?

Resilience: How can we stay strong and active in the awful world in which we find ourselves? Resilience has often been understood individually, but the individual is readily overwhelmed by the awfulness of the world. We are socialised into individualism: if we cannot achieve individual agency it is somehow our own fault. And we are taught to take pride in our individual differences and to assert our rugged individuality rather than agreeing and working with someone else. But in the current and future crises, *we will only achieve resilience through the collective: through our relationships with others, through solidarity, through community, and being able to respect our differences but work together and sustain each other for common cause.* Caring for and about each other, and caring for and about the natural world, is the key to resilience. This requires community development – an argument I have been making for 30 years but never more urgently than now.

Relinquishment: What do we need to let go in order to pass through the worm-hole? This is arguably the hardest of the three. We have become used to owning and acquiring more and more, and to judge our success by what we own, including wealth, property and material possessions. *This also applies at the societal level: modern society (Western and increasingly non-Western as well) is simply unsustainable and using up far too much of the world’s resources, and societies, as well as individuals, now have to relinquish. As Ted Trainer and others have said, we must learn to live simply so that the world can simply live.* The process of relinquishment requires some fundamental questioning and some hard decisions. Asking ourselves what we need to let go of is a major challenge, but essential for on-going sustainability even after the collapses and the catastrophes. And it is not only material possessions that

need relinquishment; we will need to relinquish some ideas, ways of thinking, ways of relating, ways of moving on the earth, technologies, ways of knowing. Inevitably, much about Western Modernity will need to be relinquished if a reformed human ‘civilisation’ is to survive.

Recovery: What things that have been lost do we need to recover? These may be ways of thinking, ways of being, or ways of doing. In the knowledge explosion, what knowledge, and what kinds of knowledge, have been lost that we now need? They may be artefacts, low-tech machines and tools, skills, memories, cultures, and traditions. They may be stories, art, ideas, myths and folklore. They may be ways of relating, ways of surviving. They may be endangered species, natural environments and sacred places. They may be ways of living on the earth, of living with other species.

Such recovery will require a deep understanding of history: the history of things, of ideas, of people, of cultures, of science, of art, of mythology.

It will particularly require a learning from Indigenous Peoples, who have an amazing repository of knowledges about the world and about humanity, that may be ‘history’ but are sorely needed at the present time. Thus, it will require a serious and far-reaching decolonisation of knowledge, as Western knowledges are relinquished and other knowledges are restored. History is essential; not the triumphalist Western version, but broad, deep and respectful history of different times, cultures, places and lives.

The projects of resilience, relinquishment and recovery are the three challenges of the present time, and can help us, both individually and collectively, to live and hopefully flourish (or at least survive). They are not easy, and stand against the dominant narratives of Modernity. But they do represent fields of action for those concerned about the awfulness of the world and who wish for some kind of better (or at least not quite so bad) future.

To pretend that we can adopt these principles as a wholesale program for the redemption of humanity is naïve (though it’s a nice fantasy). But we may be able to follow and implement such ideas at a smaller scale, in the places where we live and work. Obviously, we can try to make these changes at an individual or household level, but that is not sufficient (despite the mass of popular advice to the contrary). Community workers and activists are well-placed to follow these ideas in their work at community level, whether as part of their paid work or in their private lives. They can form the basis of our practice.

Ultimately, we work with relationships. And we need to reaffirm the principles of relational reality, i.e. that reality emerges from relationships rather than from individual entities. Resilience, relinquishment and recovery can only be achieved with strong relationships, not with isolated individuals. It is only through the collective that any sort

of recovery can emerge from our current chaos.

This requires not so much an emphasis on rights, but on *ethical duties*. We know from the research that the happiest people are those who are giving rather than those who are getting. This idea has a long history, from the Bible – “*It is more blessed to give than to receive*” – to Wordsworth – “*Getting and spending we lay waste our powers*” and resonates with many religious and cultural traditions, with the exception of neo-liberal modernity with its emphasis on greed, consumption and acquisitiveness. Giving to and caring for others, and for the Earth, makes us happy, taking from others and from the Earth diminishes us and makes us sad. *Modernity’s emphasis on human rights rather than human ethical duties, though well-intentioned and a powerful idea that has achieved a great deal, is nevertheless based on getting and owning these things called ‘rights’ rather than giving and sharing, and is ultimately not the basis for strong sustainable community.* In religious and non-Western cultural traditions, it is human ethical duties that claim priority rather than human rights, and ideas of rights are then deduced as a consequence; this is the opposite of conventional Western human rights discourse. Rather than protecting and promoting human rights, perhaps *we should be finding ways to protect and promote human ethical duties.* Instead of human rights education, perhaps we need to promote human ethics education.

67 } Have we become so obsessed with helping people to get – benefits, rights, safety, shelter etc. – that we have ignored helping people to give, to care, to contribute, to love, including giving to and loving the non-human world?

Is this a way towards both human enrichment and stronger communities? It may help in a modest way to make the world a better place, even in these times of crisis and immanent collapse. *We can nurture spaces – community spaces – where this affirming may help to make the sunset more beautiful.* And who knows where that might lead?

I struggled to write a conclusion to this essay. But then I realised that to do so is to succumb again to Western Modernity thinking, requiring the nice neat conclusion and clear directions ‘forward’. We have to stop thinking that way. Why always be thinking about going ‘forward’? Why must we have neat conclusions? That closes things off, it pretends that we have the last word. Nobody does. *All we can really do is imagine, dream, and perhaps open up possibilities . . . ●*

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