

Human Nature: Climate Change and the Vine

A synopsis of Alastair McIntosh's presentation at the 2008 conference of VINE – Values in Nature and the Environment. This partly uses material taken from his next book, "Hell and High Water: Climate Change, *Hope* and the Human Condition", due out from Birlinn in late June 2008.

This past year and a half I had a very difficult challenge. I was asked by the Edinburgh publisher, Birlinn, to write a book about climate change. Their original idea was for it to be a book that would tell politicians what they should be doing about climate change.

But as I undertook my research, my initial fears were soon confirmed. Most of the evidence both from opinion polls and from the observation of actual behaviour reveals that people will take small steps to mitigate climate change. But, as that ugly car bumper sticker puts it, "You toucha ma car, I smasha your face."

Tony Blair summed it up when he said that no politician actually running for office is going to be able to take radical environmental decisions. In our hedonistic democracy we get the politicians who reflect our own collective values. What the electorate presently want on climate change is reassurance that somebody else is taking steps to mitigate it – tinkering around at Kyoto and so on – but also, assurance that more roads will be built and airport capacity will keep the cheap holidays coming. The hold-up of thousands of bags at Heathrow's Terminal 5 made for much bigger news than actions that had been staged around the same time by hundreds of climate change protestors!

As I worked on my book, *Hell and High Water*, I realised that it had to be about much more than climate change. By the time I'd finished it only the lesser part addressed the science and politics of climate. The greater part turned out to be about the human condition.

Politics alone will not avert climate change

I consider that the conventional approaches to global warming – political, economic and technical ones – do not go deep enough to address the predicament. Those things are all very important, but the heart of the matter is also cultural, psychological and spiritual. It concerns the nature of human nature, and how that interfaces with natural nature of which our nature is, as the mathematicians would say, a subset.

The cutting edge of climate change is consumerism. I define consumerism as differing from justifiable consumption in that it is concerns surplus rather than sufficiency. John Kenneth Galbraith described it all happening when he wrote *The Affluent Society* exactly fifty years ago. He called it the creation of "the dependence effect". It is what happens when the axis of economic endeavour shifts from satisfying fundamental needs to generating superfluous wants.

This shift did not come from nowhere. It was carefully cultivated during the 20th century by the application of motivational manipulation in marketing. The depth psychology of Freud,

Jung and Adler was deliberately perverted, away from healing the soul and towards its exploitation. But for marketing to have been able to get such a grip the preconditions in the psyche had to be right.

Over two centuries of “Enlightenment” had seen to that. My thesis is that we in the West are collectively suffering from what T.S. Eliot called, in a 1921 essay in the Times Literary Supplement by the same name, a “Dissociation of Sensibility”: a break-down of our ability to relate to the inner nature of things. We have done outward violence to the Earth and to one another, and inner violence to the psyche, not least through developing reason out of harmony with other faculties of the soul.

There is nothing new in this diagnosis. It has ancient roots in so-called Western civilisation. Indeed, as Gandhi is reputed to have said when asked what he thought of Western civilisation, “I think that it would be a good idea!”

Hubris and Ecocide

The ancients were very aware that environmental destruction is driven by hubris – the consequences of excessive human pride and violence. We find it in the Biblical account of Noah’s flood where *Genesis* twice tells us that violence was the cause of God’s wrath. For “God”, we might read “deep process in the psyche of the world.”

An almost identical narrative to that of Noah is presented in the even more ancient *Epic of Gilgamesh* – the world’s “oldest book”. Here the gods sent the flood because the din of human hubris was keeping them awake at night!

But perhaps the richest examples of all come from Plato – not just in his account of the destruction of Atlantis and of the periodic inundations of corrupt coastal cities, but also, in a major dialogue that he has with the young men of Athens in Book 2 of *The Republic*.

Here Plato depicts his mentor, Socrates, as hanging around with the privileged young men of Athens discussing the meaning of life. Specifically they discuss qualities such as *areté* (ἀρετή), usually translated as justice, virtue, or excellence. It means the fulfilment of human potential – the fullest all-round expression of what a person is able to be.

Socrates and his friends want to understand wherein *areté* resides. They agree to approach their discernment by analogy. They will examine it, first, on the macro scale of the state, or republic. Then they will apply these principles of ‘outer’ life to trying to grasp the ‘inner’ dynamics of individual virtue.

Socrates kicks off by laying out his table. His ideal city state is the rustic idyll. In our sense it is more of a village than a city. Men and women would spend their time in honest pastoral and craft work. They would live simply, caring for their children, guarding against poverty and war, eating a humble but wholesome vegetarian diet, drinking in moderation and, in their spare time, singing hymns to the gods.

It’s a bit like life back on a Hebridean croft but with olives and cheese instead of herring and potatoes! Or an Amish community in North America, or a ‘custom village’ in Vanuatu where modern ways have been rejected by groups that choose to retain tradition.

Socrates warns that ‘ambition and love of money are ... something to be ashamed of,’ and the test of right livelihood is that people ‘leave their children to live as they have done.’ In this way he presages the definition of sustainable development that the United Nation’s *Brundtland Commission* came up with two-and-a-half millennia later: namely, ‘Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’

But the most petulant of the city sloanes, a young man called Glaucon, is aghast at these suggestions. He tells Socrates that he and his fellows expect meat plentifully on the table, homes furnished with gold, ivory and art, perfumes and adornments for the wives and courtesans, clothes and shoes, entire classes of servants, and nannies (both wet and dry) for the children.

He goes on to complain: ‘If you had been founding a city of pigs, Socrates, this is just how you would have fattened them,’ and he demands what he calls the ‘ordinary dishes and dessert of modern life.’ To this the master replies:

Very well ... I understand. We are considering, apparently, the making not of a city merely, but of a luxurious city. And perhaps there is no harm in doing so. From that kind, too, we shall soon learn, if we examine it, how justice and injustice arise in cities. I, for my part, think that the city I have described is the true one, what we may call the city of health. But if you wish, let us also inspect a city which is suffering from inflammation....

And so, with his sword now suitably blooded, the Platonic Socrates turns to his famous question and answer method, ruthlessly teasing out the contradictions in Glaucon’s aspirations.

‘Then I dare say even the land which was sufficient to support the first population will be now insufficient and too small?’

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Then if we are to have enough for pasture and plough-land, we must take a slice from our neighbours’ territory. And they will want to do the same to ours, if they also overpass the bounds of necessity and plunge into reckless pursuit of wealth?’

‘Yes, that must happen, Socrates,’ he said.

‘Then shall we go to war at that point, Glaucon, or what will happen?’

‘We shall go to war,’ he said.

‘And we need not say at present whether the effects of war are good or bad. Let us only notice that we have found the origin of war in those passions which are most responsible for all the evils that come upon cities and the men that dwell in them.’

‘Certainly.’

‘Then, my friend, our city will need to be still greater, and by no small amount either, but by a whole army. It will defend all the substance and wealth we have described, and will march out and fight the invaders.’

... ‘Yes’ ...

‘Then, Glaucon ... with such natures as these, how are they to be prevented from behaving savagely towards one another and the other citizens?’

‘By Zeus,’ he said, ‘that will not be easy.’

So it is that the terrible ironies of hubris start to unfold. The short answer to Socrates’ question is that the savagery he anticipates cannot be prevented. The very materialism by which anyone exceeds their fair share of the carrying capacity of natural or social systems has violence inevitably as its undercarriage – for the mostpart retracted and hidden out of sight. And, by Zeus, holding that in check is not easy!

Easier perhaps to bite the metaphorical bullet, to fashion bullets, and to dispatch them in adventures of imperial overspill. Easier to play the victim blaming game of infantilising the vanquished while trumpeting the heroics of your own great ‘civilisation’. Psychology calls it the splitting off and projection of the shadow; the compartmentalisation of reality along perceived axes of evil. That at least keeps savagery focussed outwards, onto the barbarians ... where it belongs!

Meanwhile, back in the metropolis the bread and circus lotus eating of polite company gets ever more surreal. Hubris further inflates the collective ego. As Homer shows in the *Iliad*, you can maybe take Troy with a thousand ships launched by Helen’s face, but not without a wasting frenzy of ever more demented violence.

Such was the manic rage of Ajax the Great while camped outside the gates of Troy that he confused a herd of sheep for his rivals and spent the whole night slaughtering them. The next morning his shame forced him upon his own sword. A red hyacinth grew from his blood, expressive of lament. Red poppies grew from the fields of Flanders. In the end, hubris hath no end, but lament.

Dissociation of Sensibility

The terrible reality is that a willingness to take by the sword slices its pound of flesh from the soul. *For violence hollows out the capacity to have an inner life*. It does so by desensitising the ability to feel and to relate to others beyond the formalised tenors of seemly conduct. As such, it opens up the gnawing emptiness of inauthenticity in human relations. It generates the culture of people of the lie. This is the chasm into which the retail therapy of consumerism pours, and here, too, are the roots of contemporary nihilism.

In *Dissociation of Sensibility* Eliot does not diagnose the cause. He simply describes the condition. He suggests that something happened to English poetry during the 17th century. The earlier metaphysical poets, such as John Donne, could describe a rose and the listener would *feel* that rose in their very being. In contrast, many of the later acclaimed poets did very clever things with wordplay, but they were much more in their intellects.

The 17th century was a time of high political hubris and much violence, be it Scottish witch burnings or English wars of sectarianism that created our modern political institutions. My thesis, building on Eliot, is that something closed down in the inner life. We glimpse what it was in the 17th century Bishop Richard Corbett's poem, *Farewell to the Fairies*:

Witness those rings and roundelays
Of theirs, which yet remain,
Were footed in Queen Mary's days
On many a grassy plain;
But since of late, Elizabeth,
And later, James came in,
They never danced on any heath
As when the time hath been.

By which we note the Fairies
Were of the old Profession.
Their songs were 'Ave Mary's',
Their dances were Procession.
But now, alas, they all are dead;
Or gone beyond the seas;
Or farther for Religion fled;
Or else they take their ease.

As John MacInnes of the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University has put it, faerie is "a metaphor for the imagination." The way for modernity and, ultimately, consumerism, was paved by driving this out. It was our indigenous inner life, grounded in the spirituality of place. It's loss leaves an emptiness inside. This lacuna is what we seek to fill with various addictions, of which consumerism is but the most all-pervading.

The point is that we have lost touch with the true "liminal" – with that which crosses a threshold of consciousness into the imaginal realm that is the source of music, visual art and poetry, and for which faerie is but one metaphor. In its place, we have been regimented, homogenised and palmed off with the liminoid. It offers the world but literally costs the Earth because, being a false god, it is insatiable. Let us explore the need to reclaim the true liminal in more depth.

Calling back the soul

During our evening banquet at the VINE conference there was a point at which I somewhat disturbed the gathering by shouting out at top of my voice, "Call back your soul!"

It was one of those wild spontaneous outbursts such as "the wild" can bring about when it rises up in us. That's why it's dangerous! What happened was that I was recounting a story told to me of a Native American group. I was telling the delegates seated at our table how relevant Native American experience is to the work that my colleagues undertake with young drug addicts in the GalGael Trust at Govan in Glasgow.

Once I asked one of the participants in Galgael's *Navigate the Future* programme why he had become addicted. His answer was the same as many could have testified to. "I'll tell you, Alastair," he said: "Heroin took away my pain, but it also took away my soul."

In my recounting this tale from our own urban native reservations and linking it to what happens on Native American ones, I forgot that I was a guest in England. It would seem that there, perhaps in contrast to the "wild West" of Scotland where I live, outrageous behaviour over a well-watered dinner is less commonly the done thing!

I say that because when I shouted out my punchline to our table, the entire hall fell to a hush. I had to act quick before somebody phoned to send in the men in white coats! I therefore turned round, got up from my chair, and took the opportunity to share the story with all.

It went like this. In the "Indian" reservation in question there was a young man who was causing very great difficulty. Within himself he was all at sea, and it was blighting the whole community. He had completely lost his bearings in life and so the elders decided on an extreme course of action.

They took him out to sea in a boat, tied a rope round his middle, and threw him overboard!

As he dragged along behind, they shouted out: "*Call back your soul ... or we'll let go of the rope!*"

And that is also how it is with the human condition in the West today. Like heroin, consumerism may have taken away some of our pain, but it has also taken away the soul.

Our most pressing task is to call back the source of our lives. We must rekindle the inner life, both individually and collectively. For if we fail, then somebody might as well let go of the rope. We'd be as good as dead anyway – spiritually, if not literally drowned in the rising waters of the psyche.

Modern Hubris and Ancient Gilgamesh

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, King Gilgamesh of what would now be Iraq reaches the height of his hubristic madness after slaying the protector of the forests and clearing the cedars, even to the banks of the Euphrates. He thereby prepared the ground for agriculture and, eventually, for the creation of the Iraqi deserts.

As he becomes more and more lonely in this desperate quest to make a name for himself, he becomes obsessed with a vain search for immortality. He cannot face death because he has no inner life. Instead, he wanders haplessly through the land, spurning the love of the Goddess and slaying lions just for the hell of it.

At length he chances upon the home of Siduri – "the woman of the vine, the maker of wine." As we can see in Sufi poetry, in Christ's first miracle of the water into wine, and in the story of the Last Supper, the wine-bearer in Middle East spirituality symbolises 'reality revealed' through spiritual intoxication.

The Bible even contains a passage about which few sermons are preached, “But the grapevine said to them, ‘Should I stop giving my wine that cheers both God and man, and rule over trees?’” (Judges 9:13) In other words, even God is metaphorically intoxicated by the Holy Spirit of God – a point echoed where Jesus says that he will not drink new wine again until he does so with the disciples in Heaven (Matthew 26:29).

For Gilgamesh, here for one last time is an opportunity for his redemption. The lovely Siduri sits there in her garden by the sea. Beside her is the golden bowl and the golden fermentation vats that the gods gave to serve her vocation.

In what probably counts as the first ever written-down speech of a woman, and surely, one of the most elegant, she lifts her eyes to him and says:

Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to? You will never find that life for which you are looking. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping. As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man.

But no. Gilgamesh rejects even the spiritual feminine in this form. He presses on and tries to steal the secret of immortality from Utnapishtim the Faraway – the man chosen by the Gods in Sumerian tradition to build an ark akin to that of Noah.

Eventually Gilgamesh dies, proclaimed a “hero” but really, a failure in life. And that’s what happens if we reject the wine of spirituality. Inwardly, we wither and die tormented by our own hubris. We drag down with us the lions and the cedars and everything else of beauty and value that shares this planet Earth. Such is the full meaning of nemesis – named after Diana’s grove at Nemi that was guarded over by *Rex Nemorensis*, the priest who slayed his predecessor and who could hold his post only until he too was slayed. As Macaulay’s grim quatrain puts it:

Those trees in whose dim shadow
The ghastly priest doth reign
The priest who slew the slayer,
And shall himself be slain.

So much for the way of the Gilgameshes of this world. In contrast to such hubris, the path of spirituality seeks an opening of the heart to that which gives life. The pressing task that faces humankind today is to rekindle such inner life that fecundates the outer life, giving it meaning and balance. Only in this way can we hope to unhook from addiction to the blandishments of exclusive and excessive focus on the things of outer life. With such understanding, the inner roots of consumerism can start to be tackled and the psychic preconditions to even start seriously to tackle climate change established.

The trellis, the vine and the wine

If necessary the vine of life can grow wild and creep along the ground, but far better if it can be provided with a trellis up which to grow towards the sun. From this it can offer its fruits

more bounteously. To be the trellis ought to be the function of outward religion, which is to say, the socially organised expression of the inner dynamics of spirituality. But too often, human limitations mean that religion is hijacked for political and cultic ends. It renders bitter the very fruit that it should have helped to make sweet. Religious institutions, and all others that are concerned with values, must therefore constantly reform themselves to allow in fresh infusions of spirituality.

Organisations that are concerned with the promotion of environmental values are, similarly, like the trellis up which the Spirit of life can grow. It is, in my view, the function of bodies like the National Trust, Natural England or Scottish Natural Heritage to acknowledge the existence of the vine, and to serve, as best they can, structures up which it can grow.

In this way the deep flow of life can be constantly infused back into the body of our culture as a whole. It is not the work of doing religion or even “being spiritual” as such. Rather, it is simply the work of allowing these values the space and support from which to emerge, take form and set fruit. As such, spiritual opening can be held even within a framework of reality that has to acknowledge the freedom of society also to express secular values. Let them all have their trellis, I say, and judge by the taste of the wine!

That is what is so important about an organisation like VINE. It doesn't have to hold a particular position on spirituality and its relationship to our environment. As we saw at our conference in Lancaster, it is an organisation that includes “believers” (it is about something much more empirical than mere “belief”), agnostics and atheists. But VINE if I have understood it correctly does have a prophetic task to play. Its role is to encourage bigger organisations better to understand the roots that can resource their work. After all, a vine is able to grow under arid conditions precisely because it puts down a very root that finds water at depths that other plants can't reach. That's where “wine” comes from. Both literally and metaphorically, wine is the sun-sweetened and yeast-fermented water drawn deep from within the body of this good Earth.

To save this world means to turn water into wine and to become inwardly intoxicated. To tackle climate change and other symptoms of having exceeded nature's carrying capacity, we need to re-balance our excessive outer life with a renewed and grace-filled inner life.

Is that not something to stand up and shout about? Such is what happens if we share the brimming cup. Such is the banquet to which we are all invited by Life itself.