

The Eloquence of Paradox

confessions of a guitar teacher

Preface

"Writing is finally about one thing: going into a room alone and doing it. Putting words on paper that have never been there in quite that way before. And although you are physically by yourself, the haunting Demon never leaves you, that Demon being the knowledge of your own terrible limitations, your hopeless inadequacy, the impossibility of ever getting it right. No matter how diamond-bright your ideas are dancing in your brain, on paper they are earthbound."

William Goldman, Adventures in the Screen Trade

"The writer who loses his self-doubt, who gives way as he grows old to a sudden euphoria, to prolixity, should stop writing immediately: the time has come for him to lay aside his pen."

— Colette, Earthly Paradise

"At the time we were all convinced that we had to speak, write, and publish as quickly as possible and as much as possible and that this was necessary for the good of mankind. Thousands of us published and wrote in an effort to teach others, all the while disclaiming and abusing one another. Without taking note of the fact that we knew nothing, that we did not know the answer to the simplest question of life, the question of what is right and what is wrong, we all went on talking without listening to one another."

Leo Tolstoy, A Confession

Anyone moved to write would do well to approach the task with due humility. That's something I've tried to do in this account of matters that seem to me too important not to talk about. Although a teacher (of sorts) by trade, I seek primarily not to enlighten anyone, but simply to look for plausible answers to questions that I find myself constantly asking.

Danger: many hazards ahead. Please proceed slowly with due care and attention.

Introduction

Peace of mind is not easy to find. Nowadays, it seems harder than ever. That, at least, has been my experience and I'm guessing the same might apply to you.

We live in the age of the self-help book. Having read a good many and not found even one which quite hit the spot for me, I decided to write one of my own. This is it.

Actually it's my third attempt. 'The Eloquence of Paradox' follows in the wake of 'In Search of Sanity' (2013) and 'The Insanity of Genius' (2016).

As with its two forebears, it has a lofty ambition, in that it tries to bring together essential elements of philosophy, psychology, religion and science and weave them into a coherent whole. It is also an unashamed polemic for these dangerous times.

It's not too long and the print is not too small - two important factors in a piece of writing anyone is likely to actually read.

It is my hope that the Eloquence of Paradox might go some way towards soothing a troubled soul.

Ray Hume
24th August 2018

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The Eloquence of Paradox

Yin and Yang for the Western Mind

1. A Kind of Madness

Some say the world is going mad. There are even those who say it's **already** off its rocker.

But what is it, this thing called madness?

Ignoring the fact that the answer to almost every question spawns a never-ending series of other questions I proceeded boldly to inquire.

Here's what came up when I Googled 'madness':-

1. The state of having a serious mental illness.
2. Extremely foolish behaviour.
3. A state of wild or chaotic behaviour.

Items 2 and 3 rang a bell. A good many of us used to exhibit these kinds of symptoms in our younger days. By these definitions madness is a temporary state which can be remedied simply by growing up; or by coming to one's senses. In other words, mad people of this ilk have a choice. They can decide whether they would like to carry on being mad or would prefer to desist, which they can do simply by changing their ways.

Definition no. 1 is a little more tricky. How shall we know who is seriously mentally ill? Sick people know they're sick: they feel it, and blood tests usually confirm it. But do mad people actually feel mad? Is the schizophrenic aware of his condition before the doctor tells him of it? How much do psychiatrists know anyway? Can they understand madness unless they have personal experience of it? And just how mad can madness be? Was Van Gough as mad as Hitler? How safe do you feel, living next door to that eccentric neighbour of yours?

OK, let's face it, we're not likely to find unequivocal answers to questions like these. As with all words, a one-size-fits-all meaning cannot be found. Words live and breathe. That's what makes language so exciting. It's like nature: forever on the move.

So... if definitions are so hard to come by, where are we to look?

Perhaps instead of wondering 'where', we should be asking 'how'. Maybe the eye of the heart sees better than the eyes of the head. And what of the **soul**? Nowadays the very mention of such a word is a kind of heresy (how ironic!). The high priests of Science are all but unanimous: we are nought but flesh and blood.

But is that how we actually feel? I don't know about you but I find it hard to put out of my mind the impression that the essential 'me' is something beyond mere molecules. As to whether or not we will still be around in some form after our bodies have conked out is of course another massive metaphysical issue. The jury has been deliberating on this one for such a long time that every one of the jurors must surely now be long departed.

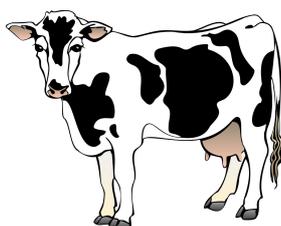
Those of us who are daft enough to cling to a vain glimmer of hope for the existence of some kind of mystical essence might say that it's the only part of us that can be relied upon to make sensible judgements about the big questions of life. Alas we are very much in the minority in these digital times. Indeed, many people would call the very notion of a soul a kind of madness.

Yet there was a time not so long ago when it was not uncommon for people to put their trust in something called 'conscience'; a time when the difference between right and wrong was easy enough to know; a time when many people lived their lives with noble intent, guided by Divine Truth. In slaying the soul, Science stands accused of robbing us of our humanity. And therefore, perhaps, of our sanity.

But there we go again. We're getting beguiled by words; those wriggly little critters that are so hard to catch - 'soul', 'right', 'wrong', 'conscience', 'truth', etc. - every one of 'em as slippery as an eel and harder to pin down than Schrödinger's cat. There must be a better way...

2. Kinds of Wisdom

Guessing the weight of a cow or the number of coins in a large jar is a popular tradition at many a country fair. An average of the guesstimates of all who participate is usually remarkably close to the right answer, especially if a lot of people take part. This is an example of the phenomenon known as the 'wisdom of crowds'; and it's the way civilised society tends to arrive at a commonly-held belief about many things, from growing leeks to dealing with a serial killer. We make a judgement on the basis of a consensus derived from a wide range of opinions. Over time a certain way of thinking emerges as the norm - the best approach to dealing with whatever it is that's at issue. This kind of wisdom is known as 'the received wisdom'.



Guess my weight mate

Unfortunately, as with many a Christmas present, what we receive is not always what we were hoping for; or is good for us.

For instance, it's the received wisdom that the appropriate set-up for manufacturing cars is the so-called 'private' sector in which ('public') companies compete with each other in order to make profit for those who already have enough spare money to invest in shares. Meanwhile the roads are maintained by the highways department (the 'public' sector, now often partially privatised) where there is never enough money. Hence the incongruous sight of many a posh shiny vehicle bumping

ingloriously along a dilapidated and pot-holed road. If this is where received wisdom is leading we'd better keep our eye out for trouble on the road ahead.

This is but one reminder that our good friend Received Wisdom may be less reliable than we might like to believe. In the cold light of day it can often amount to little more than myth.

Since time immemorial, humans have of course lived by myths, and they do have their uses. If you believe in a supernatural being who is going to give you a hard time if you misbehave, you're more likely to mind your Ps and Qs.

We now have science, however. So who needs myths?

Hang on... what if science itself owes as much to mythology as to reality? What if its basic principles are fatally flawed? If you listen to what physicists have to say about the origin of the Universe, and the behaviour of the even tinier particles that lurk inside infinitesimally small particles, you're likely to become pretty dumbfounded. You might even find yourself starting to think of Harry Potter as just a regular guy.

In spite of this, the mindset of many remains remarkably mundane. Because the dazzling wonders of the modern world were created by our own fair hand, it seems reasonable to believe in a future without limits. Given enough time, Man's boundless ingenuity will ensure that everything there is to know and understand *will* be known and understood, and that we will continue to advance towards a progressively more enlightened and even braver newer world.

But some might say such blind faith in a bright future is precisely what makes it so unlikely.

3. Technophilia – Destroyer of Worlds

We have seen that a definition of madness is elusive. We've also seen that collective wisdom might be a bit dodgy. Where else then can one turn to find out whether or not the human race as a whole should be sectioned under the Mental Health Act?

Well, we could start by asking ourselves a very simple question: 'How are we feeling about our lives? What is the state of peoples' minds in today's world?'

Google's **ngram viewer** can provide clues. It displays a graph of how frequently a word or phrase has been used in print between a given year and 2008 (for some reason it's a whole decade behind the times). If you type in 'mental health' over the period from 1900 you will notice something very striking. Despite a few ups and downs, the expression 'mental health' has been used with steadily increasing frequency. This is surely very telling. It suggests that what happened during this period of time has somehow led to people feeling less comfortable in their own skin.

You might expect to see a big rise in the ngram graph during the years of each of the two world wars, but this is not the case. What you actually see is a pretty straight steadily rising line throughout the twentieth century, not only for 'mental health' but also for 'stress', 'depression' and 'suicide'.

There are of course plenty of other reasons to think that many of us living in twenty first century Britain - and probably many other places too - are somewhat lost. It seems there's something missing from our lives. Hence the huge upsurge in self-help books and the general trend away from smoking and over-drinking towards healthier diets and regular exercise.

This shift of consciousness is no doubt due in part to the realisation that we're likely to drop dead prematurely if we don't mend our ways, but maybe that's not the whole story: maybe it's also because the demise of religion has left us somewhat stranded. Gone are the days when children were despatched to Sunday school once a week, and knelt beside their beds to offer up their daily prayers. It could be argued that this is all to the good. On the other hand the number of antidepressants being prescribed to the under-twenties has risen sharply, as has drug abuse and violent crime. It's starting to look as though the sidelining of God has brought his wrath down upon us.

Yet as everyone knows, those fortunate enough to have lived in the 'developed' world during this period have enjoyed massive benefits: improvements in nutrition, improvements in welfare provision and improvements in general health and sanitation, not to mention a veritable revolution in medicine. We've also witnessed an explosion in creature comforts - labour-saving gadgets, home cinema and hi-fi, as well as ever-more-accessible transport facilitating regular worldwide travel. Not to mention a cornucopia of bewildering electronic wizardry.

So why the hell are we so damned miserable?

Could it be that peace of mind is actually inversely proportional to well-being? Sages through the ages have repeatedly warned us that the key to contentment cannot be found in the places where people habitually look for it. So this could indeed be a factor in the equation.

Another possible culprit is technology. Technology is of course the means by which so many of the good things in life have been delivered to us. But it comes with a hefty price tag. It's the ultimate paradox. Technology emancipates while enslaving us, delights while frustrating us, enlightens while bewildering us, and connects while separating us. Our gadgets used to be our servants but the tables have turned. Now they threaten to engulf us. We're so bedazzled that few have noticed we're teetering atop an ever-steepening slippery slope.



Technology marches relentlessly forward at an alarming pace. We're all aware of the dangers of high speed on the highway, but you seldom if ever hear anyone advocating the curbing of the speed of the Juggernaut of Progress. Stringent restrictions protect us from the risks that might be associated with new pharmaceutical products, but is anybody monitoring the potential hazards of new technology?



No-one now lives as their parents did. Even in the heart of cider-making Herefordshire, people are just as likely to be eating an apple from New Zealand as one from the orchard adjacent to their home. Because we can, we carry coals to Newcastle the world over. How sensible is this? In the name of efficiency we're hell-bent on extracting fuel - even from deep beneath the oceans - just to achieve such foolish things; burning up the sky and poisoning our lungs in the process.

Meanwhile the McDonaldifying and Coca-Cola-isation of the entire world have so compromised the foreignness of virtually every foreign land that it hardly seems worth bothering to go anywhere. Even if you do you'll be unlikely to come across anything much you haven't already seen.

As for the natural world..... what is there left to say?
 For 'development' read 'devastation'.
 The merciless trashing just goes on regardless.
 Everywhere.

And it seems we're powerless to prevent it. This is the ultimate outrage. How can those of us who have revered the living world since early childhood not be heartbroken? How can the grief that oppresses our souls ever be assuaged? How can we not be mad with rage?

But don't take my word for it: check out the views of an expert:-

It felt as disorientating as forgetting my pin number. I stared at the caterpillar, unable to attach a name to it. I don't think my mental powers are fading: I still possess an eerie capacity to recall facts and figures and memorise long screeds of text. This is a specific loss. As a child and young adult, I delighted in being able to identify almost any wild plant or animal. And now it has gone. This ability has shrivelled from disuse: I can no longer identify them because I can no longer find them.

Perhaps this forgetfulness is protective. I have been averting my eyes. Because I cannot bear to see what we have done to nature, I no longer see nature itself. Otherwise, the speed of loss would be unendurable. The collapse can be witnessed from one year to the next. The swift decline of the swift (down 25% in five years) is marked by the loss of the wild screams that, until very recently, filled the skies above my house. My ambition to see

the seabird colonies of the Shetlands and St Kilda has been replaced by the intention never to visit those islands during the breeding season: I could not bear to see the empty cliffs, whose populations have crashed by some 90% this century.

*I have lived long enough to witness the vanishing of wild mammals, butterflies, mayflies, songbirds and fish that I once feared my grandchildren would experience: **it has all happened faster than even the pessimists predicted.** Walking in the countryside or snorkelling in the sea is now as painful to me as an art lover would find her visits to a gallery, if on every occasion another Old Master had been cut from its frame.*

*The cause of this acceleration is no mystery. The United Nations reports that our use of natural resources has tripled in 40 years. The great expansion of mining, logging, meat production and industrial fishing is cleansing the planet of its wild places and natural wonders. **What economists proclaim as progress, ecologists recognise as ruin.***

This is what has driven the quadrupling of oceanic dead zones since 1950; the biological annihilation represented by the astonishing collapse of vertebrate populations; the rush to carve up the last intact forests; the vanishing of coral reefs, glaciers and sea ice; the shrinkage of lakes, the drainage of wetlands. The living world is dying of consumption.

We have a fatal weakness: a failure to perceive incremental change. As natural systems shift from one state to another, we almost immediately forget what we have lost. I have to make a determined effort to remember what I saw in my youth. Could it really be true that every patch of nettles, at this time of year, was reamed with caterpillar holes? That flycatchers were so common I scarcely gave them a second glance? That the rivers, around the autumn equinox, were almost black with eels?

*Others seem oblivious. When I have criticised current practice, farmers have sent me images of verdant monocultures of perennial rye grass, with the message "look at this and try telling me we don't look after nature". It's green, but it's about as ecologically rich as an airport runway. One of my readers, Michael Groves, records the shift he has seen in the field beside his house, where the grass, that used to be cut for hay, is now cut for silage. Watching the cutters being driven at great speed across the field, he realised that any remaining wildlife would be shredded. Soon afterwards, he saw a roe deer standing in the mown grass. She stayed throughout the day and the following night. When he went to investigate, **he found her fawn, its legs amputated.** "I felt sickened, **angry and powerless** ... how long had it taken to die?". That "grass-fed meat" the magazines and restaurants fetishise? This is the reality.*

When our memories are wiped as clean as the land, we fail to demand its restoration. Our forgetting is a gift to industrial lobby groups and the governments that serve them. Over the past few months, I have been told repeatedly that the environment secretary, Michael Gove, gets it. I have said so myself: he genuinely seems to understand what the problems are and what needs to be done. Unfortunately, he doesn't do it.

He cannot be blamed for all of the fiascos to which he has put his name. The 25-year plan for nature was, it seems, gutted by the Prime Minister's office. The environmental watchdog he proposed was defanged by the Treasury. Other failures are all his own work. In response to lobbying from sheep farmers, he has allowed ravens, a highly intelligent and long-lived species just beginning to recover from centuries of persecution, to be killed once more. There are 24 million sheep in this country and 7400 pairs of ravens. Why must all other species give way to the white plague?

Responding to complaints that most of our national parks are wildlife deserts, Gove set up a commission to review them. But governments choose their conclusions in advance, through the appointments they make. A more dismal, backward-looking and uninspiring panel would be hard to find: not one of its members, as far as I can tell, has expressed a desire for significant change in our national parks, and most of them, if their past statements are anything to go by, are determined to keep them in their sheepwrecked and grouse-trashed state.

Now the lobbyists demand a New Zealand settlement for farming after Brexit: deregulated, upscaled, hostile to both wildlife and the human eye. If they get their way, no landscape, however treasured, will be safe from broiler sheds and mega-dairy units, no river protected from run-off and pollution, no songbird saved from local extinction. The merger between Bayer and Monsanto brings together the manufacturer of the world's most lethal pesticides with the manufacturer of the world's most lethal herbicides. Already the concentrated power of these behemoths is a hazard to democracy; together they threaten both political and ecological disaster. Labour's environment team have scarcely a word to say about any of it. Similarly, the big conservation groups, as usual, have gone missing in inaction.

We forget even our own histories. We fail to recall, for example, that the Dower report, published in 1945, envisaged wilder national parks than we now possess, and that the conservation white paper the government issued in 1947 called for the kind of large-scale protection that is considered edgy and innovative today. Remembering is a radical act.

That caterpillar, by the way, was a six spot burnet: the larva of a stunning iridescent black and pink moth that once populated my neighbourhood and my mind. I will not allow myself to forget again: I will work to recover the knowledge I have lost. For I now see that without the power of memory, we cannot hope to defend the world we love.

George Monbiot, published in the Guardian 29th June 2018

Ultimately our only home is being wrecked because of an insatiable urge to profit: profit - the buzzword that legitimises every kind of corruption and crime. But (to paraphrase Mark 8:36):-

What shall it profit Man if he gains great wealth yet loses the earth?

Yet is Profit not our ally? Surely it pays the wages of Progress? Indeed - but what if the price is too high? What if the Pied Piper of Progress is leading us down the road to hell? What if we've become so entranced by his music that we'll dance to his tune regardless of our fate?

How shall we find meaningful work - or indeed **any** work - in the automated world we are assured is just around the corner? How shall we safeguard ourselves from the ravages of nuclear or biological warfare? Or from constantly-mutating microbes bent on thwarting our every defence? What can we do about the population bomb, itself a by-product of technological advancement?

Furthermore, how can our heathen young learn to value virtue and humility as highly as they value cheap thrills and the whims of fashion, given that their attention spans have dwindled to less than that of the average goldfish? (or so we're assured - by people who have somehow found a way of determining whether or not a goldfish is paying attention!)

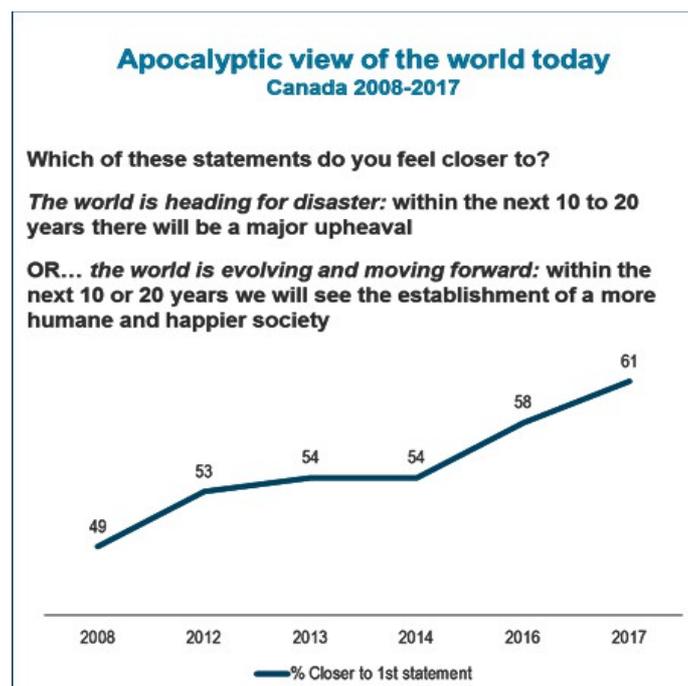
Meanwhile, despite the growth in renewables, carbon dioxide and methane continue to accumulate alarmingly in the troposphere.

While we're squabbling over our playthings there's a monster creeping up on us.

We have of course been here before. 'fiddling while Rome burns' and 'rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic' are two familiar idioms reminding us of the dangers of head-in-the-sand insanity. We could add 'Brexitteering while Gaia dies.'

What kind of future can realistically be expected on a planet so overcrowded, so overheated, so overexploited and so contaminated? Most children beyond the age of three would surely have a pretty good idea. Yet many adults seem perpetually blinkered: incapable of thinking the unthinkable or speaking of the unspeakable. That's why, sooner or later, unthinkable and unspeakable things always happen. Murphy was right: anything that **can** go wrong **will** go wrong.

In Canada, at least, it would seem that this way of viewing our situation is rapidly gaining ground:-



(from www.crop/ca)

4. All Shall be Well

The inability to accept unpalatable truths is known in posh-speak as *Cognitive Dissonance*. *Cognitive dissonance* is good for you - miraculous indeed. It's the panacea of our time; the app to surpass all apps.

Forget your pills, forget the gym and those faddy health diets. Get with it. Get *Cognitive Dissonance*: far better than meditation or yoga. And it's free! No wonder they're all queuing up for it. Here are just a few of the many benefits of *Cognitive Dissonance*:

You like to smoke? Okay - no problem, just stop believing that it's killing you and start believing it isn't.

You like eating as much as you can get? Fine, carry on putting on the kilos. They've all got it wrong: being obese is not what's making you feel wretched, it's simply not having enough to eat!

You want your children to have a good life? A life at all, even? We can fix that too, just go to Google and check out all those articles that tell you climate change is a myth. Or the ones that say there's no need to denuclearise in order to save ourselves from ourselves.

Don those rose-tinted specs and any fool can see that the glass is well and truly half full.

Nice one! Gonna go out and get myself a barrowload of Cognitive Dissonance!

5. Revelation and Revolution

'This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come.

For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God'.

The above passage from the St. James version of the bible, can be found in the second epistle of St. Paul to Timothy (chapter 3 verses 1-4). Modern readers unfamiliar with this text who happen upon it are liable to be stopped in their tracks. Although he may in fact have been referring to the Romans, who weren't always very nice to Christians, the language in this passage has an unnerving ring to it. It sounds uncannily as though St. Paul is talking about you and me in the here and now: the Age of the Selfie.

Of course, Christians (and in particular Jehovah's Witnesses) have always spoken of Armageddon - a time of reconciliation between the forces of good and evil, the Rapture, the Revelation, the Second

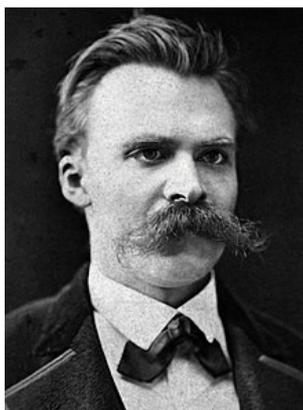
Coming, the End of Days, etc. But reading his words one has an eerie feeling that Paul has somehow seen 2000 years into the future - an era characterised in many quarters by the abandonment of virtue: a time when the notion of any kind of divine providence or design has long been discarded and discredited. And he's telling us these days will be the LAST DAYS.

If I was the worrying sort I might start having trouble getting a good night's sleep.

Then again, perhaps I should rest easy. Surely we live in enlightened times? Why should anyone concern themselves with what some ancient cleric had to say? The received wisdom now is that God is dead. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) was clear about this:-

"God is dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"

Neither Nietzsche himself nor any other individual, nor any political party or regime, can be held to account for the demise of the Almighty. It was the collective vanity of society at large that put an end to Him. It was you. It was me. It was the rest of them. We stand accused en bloc. So inebriated have we become, supping from the cup of Science, that we are now blind to our own conceit.



Friedrich Nietzsche

Friedrich was right, we ourselves have become as gods. Of sorts. The Immortal Flame of Omnipotence, which once lit up the sky above Mount Olympus, is now condemned to flicker feebly in the hearts of mere mortals, who have little idea of how to keep it from going out.

Poor old Nietzsche... he had a rough ride from the press, as is so often the case with truth-tellers. Not only was he wrongly accused of murdering God himself (the one who finds the body is often the chief suspect); he's also regarded as guilty, in some peoples' eyes, of giving birth to the ideals that set Hitler on the road to perdition.

Actually it's more than likely that Nietzsche's views were wilfully distorted by those in search of a scapegoat for the abomination of The Holocaust.

Great minds are in great danger when they oppose the received wisdom of the day - which is exactly what they generally do.

Another thing about Great Minds is of course that they don't always think alike. This is partly because they are restricted by the cultural milieu of their time. When St. Paul was alive it was generally held that the earth was at the centre of the Universe, Obviously, he could never have known about many things that are nowadays common knowledge, even among primary school children.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, was still alive up to the very end of the 19th century - a time when something quite extraordinary was about to change the way thinking people would view the world forever. No, not the invention of Marmite; nor Tarmac; nor even the first transatlantic radio communication (all of which occurred in the first two or three years of the 1900s). This was something that would prove far more earth-shattering.

Max Plank, Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr were among the big players in a community of physicists who, in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, were destined to turn science on its head. These three gentlemen were curious about what goes on in the world inhabited by particles even smaller than an atom - the eponymous world of the sub-atomic. The ideas that emerged in the wake of their investigations were utterly bizarre - so strange that they were all-but incomprehensible, without resorting to a mathematical language so rarefied that few can make sense of it to this very day.

Their findings resulted in the sprouting of a completely new branch upon the Tree of Science. It came to be known as 'quantum theory', a term which would later mutate into 'quantum mechanics' and then latterly into just 'quantum physics'. The three expressions are now often used more-or-less synonymously.

What took place at this time was nothing short of an earthquake; an earthquake of such magnitude that the aftershocks are still felt to this very day. The solid edifices of science erected by the likes of Galileo and Newton were rocked so vigorously that they all-but crumbled. They were, at best, damaged beyond repair.

For in Quantum Land preternatural things happen. It's a place more surreal than Alice's Wonderland, more self-contradictory than Jekyll and Hyde and at least as mysterious as the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection of Christ.

It's about things of insignificant size that possess properties of massive significance.

Within the past two decades everything about the way we live our daily lives has changed beyond recognition: the laptop, the internet, the play-station, the smartphone, satnav, and enough emails, texts and tweets to sink a dozen battleships several times over.

Fundamentally, every one of these wonders depends for its existence on two things:

1. The paradoxical nature of the building blocks of the universe.
2. The ingenuity of those who discovered the fact.

The ecosystem of things smaller than an atom is indeed a very strange place - a place far beyond the limits of logic. For starters, it seems that an electron can be in two different places simultaneously. That's right, you heard it correctly. But I'll say it another way just to make it crystal clear: the tiny

particles of which everything is made can, at any given point in time, be both right **here** and also over **there**.

Secondly, they are not really made of matter. They are just waves. Actually, to tell the truth they are neither waves nor particles. They are both. This applies not only to electrons and photons, but also to leptons and quarks - not to mention a host of other ghostly entities. They all exhibit the same incredible property of having a double identity. Hence the oft-used term 'wave-particle duality'. The equivalent in human terms would be to say of someone that they were both black and white, male and female, or dead and alive.

What's more, it's not easy to find out what these troublesome little demons are really like, because trying to 'watch' them affects the way they 'behave'. It's a bit like me with my guitar. On a good day I can play a tune pretty well, but if my wife walks into the room it's not unlikely that it'll all fall apart.

Oh, and that's another thing: the fourth and final blow to anyone who makes the mistake of trying to understand the workings of the infinitesimal in terms of common sense:-

Quantum Physics is not about what happens; it's about what may or may not happen.

So there you have it. Now we know for sure. The universe is underpinned by uncertainty. Despite Einstein's having said that it could not be so, it seems that God does indeed play dice. Even though he's dead.

Or is He?

Don't you think it's a little ironic that the man who was so sure that God was dead should himself have died just a year or two before some people were beginning to wonder, in the light of quantum, if God might not be about to make a comeback? For now it seems that the world around us, which most people used to believe was made of indestructible atoms, is actually built upon sand - the shifting sand of unpredictable entities that, in a sense, don't really exist at all: the inner workings of all we can see and touch are haunted by restless spirits. Was religion ever more mystical?

Meanwhile, far beyond us at the other end of the scale, lies another extraordinary realm: the infinite empire of empty space. It's a place that knows no bounds, where titanic clashes rage. Among **the one hundred billion galaxies in the observable part of the universe**, the monoliths of ancient time hurtle through the void. Red, White and Yellow Dwarfs vie with each other for mastery of this stark, silent and staggeringly enormous place, where the monotony of the darkness is relieved only by the occasional colossal collision. Periodically a supernova will self-destruct in spectacular fashion, lighting up the night sky on distant worlds, while whole constellations are gobbled up greedily by insatiable black holes from which they can never return.

*Can Hollywood ever match the Wars of such Real Stars?
Or God Himself move in more mysterious ways?*

And at the heart of the heart-stopping profundity of outer space lies a mystery even greater than wave -particle duality, for it seems there is something missing: Dark Matter. Nobody knows whether or not it's actually dark because, search as they may, no-one seems to be able to find any of the

stuff, even though it must be out there *in greater abundance than all of the stuff we can actually see*. Otherwise the universe, we are told, would just fall apart.

Those who have discovered and can make sense of such far out things would also have us believe in something called Dark Energy. Apparently there's a tug-of-war going on between these two irreconcilable forces, one of which is trying to pull the universe apart while the other is trying to compress it.

It's fascinating (not to mention unsettling) to realise that, as far as can be seen at the present time, things both larger and smaller than we are capable of imagining have something important in common: they are both self-contradictory. Their true nature can only be grasped by abandoning the search for straightforward answers.

Unfortunately it's in *our* nature to *seek* answers and we're not good at accepting the sort that don't make sense. But now philosophers everywhere are going to have to think yet again. It's back to the drawing board fellers! For ever since Socrates, logic was the fundamental particle that held philosophy together, but now that we understand that particles can be without form - in other words without mass - thinking people everywhere are obliged to distrust logic.

It's no coincidence that the twentieth century saw the biggest shake up in the Arts the world has ever seen. From the strident sounds of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring to the bizarre works of Picasso and beyond, we can see that the quantum issue has undermined the stability of civilisation as we knew it. The pillars of beauty crumbled. Wisdom was wise no more. Where next?

To put their querulous minds to rest, there are many who would rather believe in something completely mad than flounder in the cloud of unknowing. Take the Big Bang Theory: it's been top of the pops in scientific circles for a good many decades now, yet it has to be one of the daftest ideas ever dreamt up. Surely no-one but a fool could be taken in?

Not that that has prevented the scientific community from swallowing it hook line and sinker for over half a century. What's that you say? A singularity? What... a lot smaller than an atom? Zero mass, yet infinite density? And one day it suddenly exploded and made the whole of the billions-of-light-years-wide universe? Do me a favour mate. Talk some sense.



Science has lost the plot. Even world-renowned physicist Michio Kaku admitted not so long ago that 'physics is having a nervous breakdown'. One could be forgiven for suspecting it's even more serious than that: perhaps dementia has taken hold. A rational society might want to find a nice quiet nursing home somewhere in which Science can be put away for its own safety. Not to mention yours and mine.

6. Resurrecting the Creator

Yet humanists who resolutely refute the existence of god and disparage religion in all its forms appear only too happy to put their trust in Science. Given the deeply mystifying properties of the fundamentals of everything, is that wise? Surely it would be better simply to acknowledge that we are living in an unfathomable universe, whose origin (and purpose?) we may never live to know. The knowledge we now have has stripped away every last morsel of hope that we ever really knew anything worth knowing. Rather humbling, wouldn't you agree? (and reminiscent of one of philosophy's founding fathers - the inimitable Socrates - as well as Leo Tolstoy).

This being so, and given our unquenchable thirst for explanations and peace of mind, is it unreasonable that we should conjure up a mental image of a benign being - an ideal upon which to model ourselves in order to live harmoniously? We could even postulate that such a 'creature' (for want of a better word) might be the source of the whole of Creation. Whether or not such a figure actually exists is not the point at issue here. Simply abiding by the ethics of a divine icon, whether real or imagined, could help to foster a spirit of altruism which is surely the hallmark of sane society.

Maybe heaven and hell, and god and the devil, were never meant to be taken literally.
Maybe God doesn't mind whether we believe in her or not.

When people of my generation (the so-called 'baby boomers') were growing up, the influence of traditional Christianity was still widely felt. In school assemblies across the land our souls would be regularly nurtured by readings from the scriptures and on Sundays it was not unusual to go to church where a bald man in a white frock would impress upon us the importance of not straying from the path of righteousness. He talked in a strange language using words which were seldom if ever heard in everyday speech. The god he spoke of was very old, very white (as opposed to black or brown) and almost certainly voted Tory. Above all, God was emphatically *male*.

As I came to realise many years later, the gospel according to the vicar was the gospel of The Establishment.

Perhaps I wasn't paying attention properly; for whatever reason I used to get very puzzled: puzzled by the bible and puzzled by the words of the hymns we had to sing and the prayers we recited with bowed heads and tight-shut eyes. I was puzzled by heaven, puzzled by hell; puzzled by the life hereafter and puzzled by Jesus Christ: if he was the Son of God, why did he have such a hard time, and how could the fact that he was so horribly tortured on the cross have anything to do with saving you and me from our sins?

And what about God Himself? Where did he hang out? In heaven? In our hearts? At the centre of the universe? And was he really listening to our vain supplications? It was well-known that nobody had ever met him; or even seen or heard him, come to that (apart from people in the bible, that is). So how could we be sure he existed? Quite apart from the issue of sexism (why not 'She'?) who ever said that the Throne of Omnipotence has to be occupied by a being in our own image at all? In these post-quantum times surely the concept of 'God' doesn't call for some bearded multigenarian sitting upon a cloud.

But the most puzzling thing of all was not the words; it was the lack of them. The elements of the Christian faith were no less mystifying than the elements of the universe. The Holy Trinity was about as easy to grasp as Latin would be to the Yanomami, or space travel to a dog (god rest your soul, Laika), or quantum physics to anybody of sound mind. If we were ever to make any sense of it all we needed help.

Alas, no such help was forthcoming. Nobody ever tried to explain to us what it all meant. Not really. The real significance of all that pontificating remained hidden from our view - shrouded beneath a veil - a conspiracy some might say: a conspiracy of silence.

In our tender years some of us had taken rather longer than others to realise that Our Father in Heaven was not the same chap as the Father who dropped by at Christmas with our presents. Embarrassed by our innocence, we were probably far too timid to ask anyone to explain to us what was really going on. So we all just sat there soaking up the rhetoric. Later, at secondary school, the pretence continued. At the end of every term we were required to sing the words of William Blake's majestic 'Jerusalem'. But what did it mean? Which feet? What dark satanic mills? Why build Jerusalem here? Once again - silence. Nothing in any of our lessons ever enlightened us. It wasn't until many years later that the pieces of the beautiful jigsaw gradually fell into place.

So, why exactly were we kept in the dark about such divine mysteries? Why were we not told the truth? The answer is of course staring us in the face:-

We weren't told the truth because there is no truth to tell.

The reality of Religion is the same as the reality of Science. In both cases, the answers to the best questions simply cannot be found. Your guess is as good as mine. The opinion of a child of five is as valid as that of a physics professor or the Archbishop of Canterbury. The pillars of the Establishment were bound to crumble, built as they were upon such squelchy ground. This is a bitter pill to swallow, but perhaps the time to take it is was never more pressing.

*Could it be that humbly declaring our profound ignorance
(like Socrates, like Tolstoy) is the safest road to sanity - and salvation?*

The truth is we just have no idea at all how the universe got here and whether it's legitimate even to ask the question why, any more than we really know how life got started. We are stuck on a planet in a solar system in a galaxy of stars. That's about as much as anybody can be sure of. Everything else is speculation, so you might as well invent a god, if you find it comforting. It's no more potty than adhering slavishly to the dictats of a discipline (science) that seems to be leading us into realms way beyond our ken; realms into which it might be wise not to allow ourselves to be drawn without a comprehensive risk assessment.

Making a choice between Science and Religion has led to many a furrowed brow and many a disagreement. Some would say the differences between the two are too great for reconciliation ever to come. But next time you're wondering which side of the fence you're on you might like to contemplate this:-

If God is without form - in other words 'spiritual' - then perhaps Its invisible presence pervades the entire universe: perhaps Dark Energy and Almighty God are one and the same. Furthermore,

since God is omnipotent he must be possessed of the power of quantum. In which case it's reasonable to posit that, just like Schrödinger's cat, He both exists and doesn't exist.

Now that really would put an end to the argument.

7. The Warmongering Hordes

Today is Sunday July 1st 2018. It's the second day of an annual two-day event here in Cleethorpes known as 'Armed Forces Weekend'.

Yesterday I went for a bike ride. As I rode through the streets of the town en route to a little peaceful solitude, I was struck by the volume of people. The place was heaving under the strain. The forty thousand people of Cleethorpes had suddenly increased fivefold, as if augmented by a tsunami of migrants from across the North Sea. Most of the streets were closed to traffic and there was nowhere left to park - even in our own road which is nearly a mile from the seafront.

One consequence of this was the unusual sight of scores of people walking into town from the suburbs: droves of family groups striding forth purposefully as if on a mission, - which they were of course.

Late on both Friday and Saturday evenings the sound of fireworks reverberated around the town. Earlier, familiar pop songs had been blaring out from somewhere beside the sea. I could easily hear every word as I stood in our back garden.

It was nothing short of a jamboree. A veritable celebration. A celebration of war.

Let's just pause for breath. Did I hear myself right? Did I say 'a celebration of war'. Have I gone mad? Have **they** gone mad? Forgive me but can somebody please remind me what exactly it is about war that fills our hearts with so much joy that we must take to the streets in jubilation?

Ah yes! I remember. We the oppressed must resist the oppressor. I'm a peaceful man, but if you so much as lay a hand on my wife or children I will kill you. The biological bottom line is that we will willingly lay down our lives for the sake of our own. We are programmed this way.

Multitudes of young men slaughtered - or worse (ie: mutilated). Multitudes of weeping widows. Multitudes of fatherless children. Graveyards stretching as far as eye can see. The hopes and dreams of an entire generation swept away on a tide of blood, tears and national pride. That's war.

Then again...

"Battle is the most magnificent competition in which a human being can indulge. It brings out all that is best; it removes all that is base. All men are afraid in battle. The coward is the one who lets his fear overcome his sense of duty. Duty is the essence of manhood." - General George S. Patton.

Well, many thanks George, for bringing me to my senses. Of course! How silly of me to have forgotten about the incredibly life-affirming qualities of a good war.

On the other hand...

"What difference does it make to the dead, the orphans and the homeless, whether the mad destruction is wrought under the name of totalitarianism or the holy name of liberty or democracy?"
- Mahatma Gandhi

and...

"It is forbidden to kill, therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets." - Voltaire.



Why do so many come to an Armed Forces event? Does it reassure them that they are safe? That Britannia still rules the waves? That Britons never never never shall be slaves? Or is it something even more primeval? Boys with toys. Men with machines, Nations with the fire power to wipe the likes of Cleethorpes completely off the map in the blink of an eye?

Unfortunately for the prospects of the human race, there are far fewer Ghandis and Voltaires in the world than people like the ones I saw so close to home. Just yesterday.

"Only the dead have seen the end of war." - Plato

"War will exist until that distant day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige as the warrior does today." John F. Kennedy

That war is a terrible thing is as obvious as sunrise at the daily dawn. However, bad things happen when good men do nothing. We cannot allow bullies and tyrants to hold sway. Is the taking up of arms not defensible in the defence of peace?

It's a paradox.

8. Our Divided Selves

Answer truthfully - yes or no: will the next word you say be 'no'?

One day as a small boy I asked my mother about what went on in the Houses of Parliament. In particular I wanted to know why there were two main political parties. She gave me a straightforward answer. She said that the one party was for the people who did ordinary everyday jobs like working in a factory or sweeping the streets and the other party was for the educated people who had important jobs, like bosses and lawyers and doctors. That's the gist of the conversation as I recall it anyway and, although I didn't say as much at the time, I remember thinking 'how absurd!'. How come there were two types of people? And if there *were* two types of people, why should one group be catered for at the expense of the other?

My mother (like her son) may not have the most astute of political brains. Nevertheless her down-to-earth summary of two-party politics didn't actually fall that short of the mark. It's pretty much the way many people see it to this day. Mind you, there's a bit more to this than meets the eye...

Much has been said about the two main political parties in contemporary Britain. This is not surprising because if there's one thing that sets politically-minded people apart from the likes of you and me it's that they like the sound of their own voice. Let's face it, most of us are bamboozled, bombarded and bewildered by the deafening racket of political-speak we are subjected to every damn minute of every damn day. Just for a moment let's cut through the crap and talk fundamentals. Let's peel away all the layers of petty bickering, gossiping, and ego-nurture and see what we've got left...

...

...What we've got left is just that: **The Left**. And of course, **the Right**.

On my Left, ladies and gentlemen I give you the Champion of **Equality**.

And on my Right, behold the Defender of **Freedom**.

Let battle commence and may the best man prevail.

Freedom and Equality were born to squabble. They can never be happy bedfellows. They're mutually exclusive. If we're all free to do our own thing some will rise while others fall. We'll soon be miles apart. On the other hand if we're confined within the Cage of Equality we can never spread our wings and fly. We'll become indistinguishable from each other, like a battery of hens.

Yet humans yearn for both these states. We'll willingly lay down our lives for either. Or both. It's been a widely-held belief throughout our tortured history that both Freedom and Equality are worth fighting for to the death. Surely this is the mother of all paradoxes? How can we resolve it?

Hang on a minute... this reminds me of something... I wonder what it could be? Ah yes, of course - our brand new friend - The Quantum!

Could it be the case that the all-but-incomprehensible world of particles and stars can

provide the key to making sense of our lives? Is it possible that understanding what is virtually impossible to understand will unlock the door to Utopia?

Viewed through the prism of paradox the world makes more sense. Once you get your eye in you'll see another paradox staring sternly back at you wherever you look. Here are just a few to be going on with, until you go about the task of making a really comprehensive list:-

*good v. evil
god v. devil
faith v. doubt
religion v. science
pity v. blame
simple v. complex
wild v. tame
war v. peace
cooperation v. competition
optimism v. pessimism
ugliness v. beauty
extrovert v. introvert
to be v. not to be*

Whilst it's true that some of the items in this list may be thought of simply as opposites, or the two poles of a continuum, there is no shortage of situations in which opposites can apply simultaneously, and which are therefore paradoxical. For instance you can at one and the same time be both hopeful and doubtful, or nervous and excited (in other words, ambivalent). Similarly, it's a truism that competitive co-operation drives the wheels of commerce and industry the world over; while every kind of team sport operates on the same principle: individuals compete with each other to be selected, and the members of the team then co-operate in order to compete with their opponents.

So as well as being a fundamental feature of both matter and energy, it would seem that paradox is also at the heart of the human condition and therefore of life as we know it.

Yet life as we know it is seldom lived with conscious awareness of this state of affairs. 'Paradox' is not a word heard in everyday conversation. Is this because **having opinions** is considered right and proper? Is it that we're not comfortable sitting on fences and we don't really approve of people who don't come down on one side or the other? It looks likely. It seems we just can't be happy until we've made a firm decision to make a clear distinction between one thing and another. Like nature's vacuum, an open mind is abhorrent.

This is very dangerous. What follows from it, of course, is a powerful urge to unite with those who have the same opinion as ourselves. Meanwhile people of an opposing view club together under a different banner. Hence football mania, hence party politics, hence war.

This need to make a choice between one point of view and another goes against the grain of who we really are. It can compromise our authenticity and therefore inhibit the development of harmonious and stable relationships and alliances across the board - all the way from the nuclear family right up to the global community.

A happy marriage is one in which neither partner seeks to impose their will upon the other. Similarly, effective and benevolent government demands allegiance to both freedom and equality in equal measure; which leads one to think there's a lot to be said for coalition.

Tsunami

It's doubtful if I can remember more than one percent of what I was supposed to have learnt during the years of my formal education. But there is one particular day at school I'll never forget - the day Mr. Frisby, our bald and bespectacled physics teacher told us this: 'for some experiments', he said, 'it's better to think of light as particles; but for other experiments it's more appropriate to think of it as waves.'

That was the day I lost the Faith. What's that you say... 'better to think of'?, 'more appropriate'? What the hell's going on? I thought science was unassailable - a fortress of granite!

This was a pivotal moment in my life. A tsunami, no less. The vessel which had been carrying us sixth-formers towards the Land of the Edified was rocked so violently that I fell overboard. For quite a while I was all at sea. Eventually, though still somewhat dazed, I made it back to terra firma where I was called upon to set out on the road that had been mapped out for me by well-meaning but misguided adults.

Arriving at Birmingham University Metallurgy Department in 1963 with John Frisby's words still ringing in my ears, I guess I was suffering from post-traumatic shock (though that particular phrase had yet to be invented). I was, in any case, in desperate need of psychotherapy.

Fortunately, help was at hand in the form of music - and words:-

*I am blinded by the light of god and truth and right
and I wander in the night without direction'*

Wow! A kindred spirit! Was Paul Simon also suffering from the Tsunami Blues?

The Magic of The Blues

Discovering the blues is a rite of passage. Hear it and you'll never be quite the same again. Born from the suffering of countless millions of Africans subjected to the horrors of slavery, and their descendants, blues nevertheless has a surprising capacity for **lifting the spirits**.

The simplicity of the twelve bar blues structure is hypnotic. Some say it's too predictable, but its very predictability is precisely what makes it so alluring. It's the perfect vehicle for delivering poignancy with powerful immediacy.

Another important feature of the blues is its **swing rhythm** - a feature characteristic not only of the blues, but also of virtually the whole of jazz, rock and pop. Swing rhythm arises from the subdividing of each one of the four main beats in each bar into groups of three (known as triplets).

Thus the music possesses both 'evenness' and an 'oddness'. In terms of rhythm, it is **simultaneously both duple and triple**.

Ring any bells?

But there's more....

Despite being transported against his will to the southern states of America, the black man brought with him a priceless gift: **syncopation**.

In its commonest form, syncopation is simply the modification of a melody by the singing (or playing) of some of the notes a fraction of a second ahead of the beat. This can revitalise even the most world-weary of tunes.

Although syncopation has probably been around for as long as music itself, it was the black man who first used it as a matter of course, and of course it was the black man who brought us jazz. And jazz without syncopation just ain't jazz. Which is why colloquially we talk of 'jazzing it up' when we opt to enliven a tune with syncopation.

*How ironic that the white man's music was released
from its bondage by the very people he enslaved.*

When Elvis Presley burst onto the scene back in the 1950s, many people were shocked. But none as much as The Muse herself. She could never look back. She'd never be the same. Music was changed for good, though some would say not for the better.

Nowadays the vast majority of people everywhere listen exclusively to the kind of music whose origins - like yours and mine - can ultimately be traced back to Africa.

In the 1950s, people who listened to (or played) music that was lacking in syncopation were known as 'square', though it was a decade or so earlier when the word had first appeared in jazz circles. The term 'square' was actually quite appropriate, as the bulk of classical and traditional music consists of two, four and eight-bar phrases, and is devoid of any syncopation worthy of the name.

'Square' music was for fuddy-duddys; it wasn't 'hip', and even today it's neither 'hot' nor 'cool'.

But blues blows forever hot and cold. As capricious as a quark, it has something hiding up its sleeve...

Did you ever walk into a shop and find yourself being served by someone whose gender was not immediately obvious? Do you remember how unsettling that felt, and did you wonder why it felt like that? The reason is obvious. Sex is the great leveller. Of all the aspects of our make-up, the male / female divide is the most fundamental. Not knowing whether the person we are addressing is a man or a woman is a situation guaranteed to demand your full attention!

So now, ladies and gentlemen (and others) I give you the trump card of the blues: **KEY**.

*Sex is key to life, and the musical equivalent of male and female is **major** and **minor**.*

Please don't misunderstand me - I'm not suggesting that women are inferior to men - far from it! No, it's just that tonality - the sense of being in either a major or a minor key - has a significance in music which is equivalent to that of gender in life.

Unlike almost all other types of music,

blues is not in a major key, or a minor key. It's neither one thing nor the other. It's both.

This is the principle source of its irresistible power. The blues reminds us of who we are. Just as we talk about the battle of the sexes, in acknowledgment of the love / hate nature of many intimate relationships, so with blues a war rages between major and minor. Superimposing the one upon the other (which is essentially what happens in a blues) mirrors with uncanny precision the ambivalence of the human condition.

The most powerful tool at the disposal of the blues musician is a note that cannot be written down in standard notation - the so-called 'blue note'. It hovers tantalisingly between major and minor. As a result we are instantly (though subconsciously) transported back to that shop where we met the transsexual hermaphrodite. We're transfixed.

Finding that magical 'in-between' note is easy enough for a singer, and for players of many musical instruments. But it's not possible for a traditional pianist. Perhaps that's why so many young musicians defect from piano to guitar.



The great Robert Johnson (1911 - 1938)

Protest and Peace

Paul Simon himself was not really a bluesman, but the blues (or 'rhythm and blues', as it was known then) was enjoying a wave of popularity in the early '60s - as was a new guitar-based art-form known as the 'Protest Song'. Bob Dylan was its greatest exponent, though shortly after acquiring justifiable worldwide acclaim as a polemical lyricist he would descend into the chaotic corridors of surrealism - just like the Beatles. *Glory can mess up your head.*

In the heady 1960s the times were fast a-changin'. Those of us who picked up our guitars to follow in the wake of the minstrel-gurus of the day were united by our passion. We were searching: searching for freedom: freedom from Vietnam and freedom from The Bomb. All we were saying was give peace a chance.

Unfortunately, although the world was visibly shaken by our plaintive protestant pleas, Martin Luther King's dream of the Promised Land remained beyond reach. The world was barely changed and our personal hangups still bugged us. A good while later Paul Simon would reluctantly confess that he was...

'still crazy... after all these years'

One knows the feeling - swallowing and fully digesting the bitter pill of quantum is no walk in the park. As with most medication there are side effects. Had it been available on prescription it would no doubt have come with a government health warning, such as: 'quantum can seriously damage your mental health. If you think you're going crazy you should contact your doctor immediately'. (and if you don't think you're going crazy, it's still quite likely that you actually are - so better phone the doc anyway!)

But perhaps a few decades of insanity is a small price to pay for the benefits.

For now I've come to my senses. I've called off the search for Nirvana. There will be no epiphany. I've come to the conclusion that spiritual enlightenment is more down-to-earth. It doesn't slap you in the face or blow you away. It's more subtle than that. You won't wake up one morning changed forever by a single earth-shattering vision.

But rather, providing you let it, insight will seep steadily into your soul throughout your life.

Simply learning to accept duality as the backdrop to everything can lighten the heart and clarify the mind. The Quantum poses no threat. It's no monster from the fires of Hell: just a mischievous dancing elf, who came to lead us gently by the hand: out of the darkness and into the light.

So nowadays I welcome with open arms the polarity I see all around me. At last I've got the plot. It's not so weird to settle for something weird. Weirdness is the way of the world. Pretending that it's not weird is what causes us so much of our grief.

We need to recognise that, as with the building blocks of the material world, we are ourselves both yin and yang. People of the Orient have known this since the dawn of time, but we of the degenerative West have lost sight of such wisdom. Without grasping the nettle of this monumental truth, our hearts and minds - and therefore our intentions and interactions - can never be properly understood, in which case the endless wrangling will surely never cease.

9. Me and Mine

Sometimes I think I'm the luckiest man alive:-

1. I have a wonderful loving wife who means everything to me.
2. I have challenging creative work and no shortage of interests and hobbies.
3. I am self-employed and therefore free to organise my workaday world as I see fit.
4. I enjoy a very healthy diet, regular exercise, ample leisure time and I sleep like a log.
5. At the age of 74 I continue to enjoy good health, as I have done consistently throughout my life.
6. Although my friends are few I seldom feel lonely.

It would be fair to say of me 'he's got it made!'.

And yet...

*I'm still not convinced that being alive is preferable to the alternative.
There are many times when the essential pointlessness of it all weighs heavy upon me.*

I'm haunted daily by Apocalyptic visions. I find it hard to believe that we will avoid self-annihilation.

I despise the ways of the majority - the delusions, the vanity, the shallowness, the greed, the ingratitude, the belligerence, the gossip, the half-heartedness and the deepening disregard for the natural world around us.

So here we go again - more dichotomy: having just erected a monument in honour of my contentment, I have - without so much as a second thought - demolished it. By wallowing in ontological insecurity, I've allowed myself to turn against my better nature.

Can this be rational? The answer is yes, because both ways of thinking make sense. Ambivalence is OK. I'm OK. You're OK.

10. Choices

Struggling to choose between one thing and another is just that - a struggle. You're not insane if you find it hard. Follow the head or follow the heart? Or the gut? Or the groin? Who can say? It's now pretty well-established that we have brain cells in both the heart and the gut, and only a fool could deny that the genitals play a big part in our decision making. Very big indeed!

So what exactly do you and I have to do to get round the problem? How can we quell the stormy waters that ebb and flow within us? What has to happen for us to maximise our enjoyment of life and minimise our despair at its futility?

The answer is as simple as it is difficult: we need to be self-observant. We have to step outside of ourselves and watch the tricks our thoughts are playing on us. It's just like dealing with troublesome kids. That's how unruly an unobserved mind can be. If we want inner peace we've got to teach our thoughts how to behave.

The better we get at being attentive to the processes of our minds, the wiser - and therefore the happier - we become. Don't take my word for it. You will find it time and time again in the writings and teachings of psychologists, gurus and wise people the world over since the dawn of civilisation. Watch your thoughts, your words and your deeds. Notice their consequences; be your own critic; learn from your mistakes; aspire to equanimity. Above all, make your peace with ambivalence.

We hear a lot nowadays about yoga, meditation and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, but there are plenty of other tried and tested alternatives, from the stoicism of ancient Greece to the Gestalt therapy of the 1930s and beyond. Any (or all) of these may help, but at the end of the day there's really no substitute for simply deciding to do it and getting on with doing it yourself. It's similar to learning to play a musical instrument...



During the four and a half decades over which I've been trying to teach people to play the guitar I've learnt many things. Some would say I've learnt a lot more than most of my students!

Perhaps the most important discovery (which I made very early on) is that there are essentially just two types of student:

1. The ones who come to the lessons and do what they're told and then go home and forget about it until they come again the following week and have to be told all over again. They are a good little earner (though not such a good little learner, in most cases). **Abundant everywhere.**
2. The ones who are possessed: possessed by passion. Consumed by a vital urge to express themselves, they tend not to come for lessons for very long because they quickly become self-reliant. They usually have natural aptitude and enough resourcefulness and energy to make rapid progress without any input from a teacher at all. Definitely not good for business! **Uncommon.**

This of course is the key to success in everything. Without inner drive no-one gets very far. Those who stand out from the crowd have the determination and focus of a bird of prey.

Where does it come from, such unwavering devotion?

It's a gift from above - the kiss of an angel bestowed upon few. It's also a curse from below - a satanic plot to lead you astray; those who cannot help themselves from chasing the elusive butterfly of their dreams pay dearly for it.

But the vast majority of us are much more down-to-earth than this. Mother Nature programmed us to obey two simple commandments:-

1. Thou shalt seek sustenance and partake thereof.
2. Thou shalt go forth and multiply.

The principal driving force behind most people's lives is whatever it takes to feather their nest and raise their brood. It really is as simple as that.

Our default state of mind is no different from that of any other living creature.

These imperatives are ingrained in us so deeply that only a minority ever give a thought to alternatives. Human society everywhere is obliged to conform. Consequently, most of us find ourselves married with 2.4 kids and a nine to five job, before we've even stopped to think about it. Few have the wit to ask of themselves the most basic of questions, such as:-

Why get married? Why have kids? Why work? Why do (or not do) anything?

For most of us, thinking outside of the box is a challenge too far. It's far easier just to fit in and do what everyone else does; like the type 1 guitar pupils. This kind of obedient conformity is precisely what the captain of every ship is looking for, of course. Why should we expect Gaia to be any different?

But the shakers and movers in this world are not like the type 1 guitar pupils. They've got their own agenda. They're not the sort to kowtow to authority. They're potentially mutinous.

Actually, a mixture of both inventive and productive types is no bad thing. Just as good health demands diversity in the balance our gut flora, so a variety of personalities is necessary for a thriving society. Utopia calls for free spirits, but also menial minions by the million: clever people with original ideas, but also plenty of plodders to implement them. The eccentric individuals who enjoy pursuing butterfly dreams across the flowery landscape of their imagination are indispensable. But we cannot achieve much without a huge army of workaday warriors to back up the lepidopterists among us.

In peaceful times, such as we've known in the United Kingdom during my lifetime, this combination of a relatively small number of creative minds and hordes of obedient workers generally serves us pretty well. But what about times of crisis? What happens if we're confronted by existential threats beyond the daily round?

11. Turning up the Heat

Today is 26th July 2018.

I've just been watching a special BBC news programme about the extraordinary heatwave which has held most of the northern hemisphere in its grip for the past six weeks. At 35 degrees celsius, today was the hottest day of the year in London, but this is nothing compared to the 42 degrees in both Japan and California and the 51 degrees in Algeria reported in recent days. Around a hundred people lost their lives in wildfires in Greece just yesterday, and the earth is on fire across great swathes elsewhere - notably in California, and also Sweden - where the flames reach even into the arctic circle.

Apparently a majority have now accepted that planet Earth is slowly cooking. The evidence is plain enough and with the passing of each year the numbers of people who blame the side effects of human activities continues to grow. This has led to increasing investment in renewable energy - particularly in the form of wind turbines and solar panels - but the truth is that we still continue to devour vast quantities of fossil fuels and we remain on target to surpass the 'safe' levels of greenhouse gases as set by the IPCC.

Of course, most people have never even heard of the IPCC. Well perhaps that's not true: a good many (especially criminals perhaps?) are aware of the Independent Police Complaints Commission, but I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change, which is basically a sub-committee of the United Nations.

The people who sit on this panel know what they're talking about. The conclusions they draw are backed up by solid science (in the best sense of that word); and they've been repeatedly telling us for thirty years that if we fail to change our ways then we face a **very frightening future**. The overall global temperature of the planet is now approximately one degree celsius higher than it was in pre-industrial times, and it's mainly because of us. This is beyond dispute; and it's getting hotter.



Back in 2015 nearly every nation signed up to an agreement (in Paris) to limit any further increase to **less than one degree celsius**. But the latest findings indicate that we're already falling seriously short of this target. If we fail to tighten the reins we face dire consequences, sooner than any of us would like to believe.

Of course there's a limit to what the United Nations can hope to achieve. As a body, they're about as effective in affecting national behaviour as a school teacher whose pupils run amok. The IPCC is a toothless advisory body. It's like Cassandra of old whose prophecies were guaranteed to fall upon deaf ears.

The once-powerful phrase '**Saving the Planet**', first heard in the 1960s, could have enabled us to chart a different course - a safe route to a land of milk and honey; but alas, it has now become just another platitude, the wind all gone from its sails. Yet no matter where you look - earth, sea or sky - you see the same old sorry story: everything's getting worse. Over half a century of growing understanding of just how profoundly important it is to curb our all-consuming ways, only for the majority to disregard it. Like it or not, since we're all in the same boat, every one of us is sailing in the same direction: headlong into uncharted and ever-deeper waters.

Frankly the wind has gone out of my sails too. I cannot be bothered any more. I cannot be bothered to recycle, I cannot be bothered to read endless depressing articles about damage and destruction, or watch TV programmes about the loss of vibrant wilderness and the dwindling populations of almost every species you can think of apart from our own. I cannot be bothered to surf the net looking for yet another miserable article about paradise lost. And I cannot be bothered to talk about it or to carry on writing about it. I've had enough.

It's quite obvious that we are incapable of saving the planet.

Here's why:-

Democracy as we know it is all about majorities. Therefore, whenever the populace is called upon to voice an opinion, the odds are stacked heavily in favour of those with the least ability to imagine anything other than the status quo. All the worker bees are so busy making honey while the sun shines - so busy chasing after tasty treats - that they don't see the looming clouds. And because there are far more worker bees than the rest, they're guaranteed to win the day when it comes to election time. Parliament is little more than a giant rubber stamp. One way or another business-as-usual is what we vote for and what we get.

The usual business of real bees is of course making honey and if you replace that 'h' with an 'm' you get 'money' which is the usual business of humans. How can we get it and what can it get us - that is

our prime concern. Everything else comes a poor second. There's a crisis looming that threatens to wash us all away yet all we can think about is what we can get.

We're but dimly aware of the all-consuming allure of the religion we've created from the worship of Mammon. As with all religions, a vocabulary of euphemisms has developed to legitimise our crimes. Abominable cruelty to animals is sanitised by innocuous phrases like 'the benefits of economies of scale'. The destruction of irreplaceable forests the world over is swept under the carpet of 'secure investment'. Meanwhile the desperate plight of the impoverished and dispossessed who grovel in the dirt for a meagre grain of rice in faraway lands is hidden from our eyes by constant assurances that they live in a 'developing' country. Get the wording right and your conscience can always be salvaged. While the money pours in. Ask anybody who works in the sinister world of advertising.

Unless I'm very much mistaken it's the lure of profit that drives the wheels of the worldwide monetary machine. Profit is essentially the business of acquiring money for nothing. Providing you already have more money than you actually need, profiteering is a simple matter. All you have to do is lend some of it to somebody (usually some body - as in a company) and after a while you get a nice little handout for your trouble. The handout is known as a dividend. Sometimes it's abbreviated to just 'divvy', which in urban slang means a stupid person. That's all you have to do, you don't have to get your hands dirty - that's for the people you lent the money to. They'll be happy to do that.

Oh yeah, and there's a song about it:

'nice work if you can get it - and you can get it if you try'

But now some people are beginning to realise that this is not such a great way to go on. Like our old friend King Midas, those who are paying attention are beginning to see that the urge to get something for nothing leads to the swamp of despair. Perhaps those streetwise kids were right: living off divvies is for divvies.

One is also reminded here of that other well-known king - the one who had no clothes: remember him? As with the situation we find ourselves in today, it wasn't so much the deluded king that was the problem; it was more his subjects - the people. **They** were the real culprits. Just like their monarch they couldn't bear to be thought of as dim, so they pretended they could see something that wasn't there at all.

So don't blame the Donald Trumps of this world. Blame the electorate.

The storm clouds approach, yet we avert our eyes. It's a scary situation. It may of course be the case that some friendly volcano comes to the rescue by spewing millions of tons of lava into the sky. Or maybe the Gulf Stream will weaken significantly. Either of these could help turn off the heat for a while, but only a fool would count on it, or expect it to grant us more than a stay of execution.

But never mind all that. Let's not waste any more time talking about saving planets. Let's talk about something much more important:-

A Wedding and a Divorce

The marriage between Britain and Europe was a marriage of convenience. Preparations for the wedding ceremony began as long ago as the early 1950s. The wedding was a lavish affair and it went on for a long time, but like many a loveless union, constant intervention from marriage guidance counsellors was necessary right from the start. After half a century or so things finally came to a head on 23rd June 2016. That was the day when it was decided that divorce was the only viable way forward.

Rather than leave it to the professionals, the powers that be threw it open. ("This is an important matter, so let's ask the people what they think").

Like democracy itself, it's a nice idea, but only if the people have the requisite information and the brains to make sense of it. Though we like to believe that it isn't so, the truth is that very few of us actually do have either.

We chose (if you can really call it that) to leave the European Union by the narrowest of margins. Yet politicians keep telling us they 'have a mandate from the people'. So a slender majority of voters with neither the knowledge nor the intelligence to make a rational choice constitutes a 'mandate' does it? Hmm! Not exactly democracy's finest hour.

Brexit Brexit Brexit. There's hardly been a single news report for the past two years without this silly word (and its derivatives) cropping up.

In or out - everyone was either for or against. Abstainers were nowhere to be seen. It's the same old story: no-one wants to be caught sitting on the fence. Yet, given that the referendum result was as marginal as it was, there's probably not that much to choose between the two options. It's not the end of the world which damn club you belong to.

Meanwhile the Real End of the World looms ever larger. Oh well, I suppose there's no harm in re-arranging a few deck chairs or playing a cheery little ditty on the violin while we await the inevitable.....



12. Seeking Peace of Mind

Life on Earth as we know it may well turn out to be no less finite than our own individual lives, but accepting that this is so doesn't have to preclude positive engagement with it. Though the future may be bleak, and though life may be essentially meaningless, there are nevertheless plenty of things I can think of to deter me from contemplating suicide. Here are my top three:-

1. Spending time with my wife.
2. Making music.
3. Writing.

OTHER REASONS NOT TO KILL MYSELF

Pleasures of the Flesh
Aesthetic pleasures
Physical Exercise
Helping People
Friendship
Thinking

Plus the joys of:-

giving, sharing, caring, belonging, learning, tidying,
having integrity, taking a pride in a job well done.

And I could go on, as I'm sure you could yourself.

There was a time when bird watching and nature study in general would have been included in this list, but habitats have become so degraded and populations so depleted that the passion is gone. Nowadays I mostly just stand at the kitchen window watching the marauding hordes of starlings and pigeons.

To me it's a tragedy beyond words. Nature inspires in a way and to a degree that Man can never match. All the wonders of his inventions, all the great edifices and extraordinary feats of engineering and electronics; all the magnificent works of art and literature and even the music: none of it can stir the soul quite like being outside in the old-fashioned English countryside - especially in spring - as I recall it from the days of my childhood and adolescence.

We've become so accustomed to living in a phoney world that we've forgotten what reality looks like. Children today are denied experiences once commonplace: the splendour of familiar constellations on truly dark nights, a countryside criss-crossed with tall elm trees and dense mixed hedges full of buzzing insects and twittering birds, wild flowers of many hues in abundance, larks, lapwings and wild partridges in the fields, flycatchers and finches nesting in people's gardens, the call of the cuckoo echoing endlessly throughout the whole of May and well into June, and everyday butterflies and moths in abundance.

This is how it used to be in the 1950s. This was My England. And they've taken it all away.

I knew there was another England - a far away place where important people discussed important things in imposing buildings - a world of pompous pontificating and international intrigue. But that was a world which meant nothing to me. Party politics and newspaper gossip held no appeal. My world was a precious and personal place. It was a haven from the horrors of boarding school, but it was so much more than that. Freewheeling along those Worcestershire lanes, alive with birdsong and bees, the thrill of the first swallow in spring and rarer sights such as the exquisitely-plumaged redstart and the song flight of the tree pipit: these things filled my young heart with a sweeter song than anything else could have done. Fain would I return there.....



Cock Redstart

Yesterday (28th July) I cycled through ten miles and more of what's left of the Lincolnshire countryside. As usual I chose a route with at least a modicum of wildlife potential, including the RSPB Tetney Marsh nature reserve, but despite the pleasant weather there was little to tempt the eye. Apart from pigeons and gulls I came across barely a bird. Butterflies and flowers were few and far between.

Then, towards the very end of my ride, just as I was reflecting upon how much richer the countryside of my youth used to be, I suddenly spotted it: a beautiful pale green butterfly. I knew immediately what it was - a female brimstone. It was a heart-fluttering moment. I brought the bike to a skidding halt and quickly got out the camera. A surge of excitement took me back sixty years in less than a second. Even in those days a brimstone was not an everyday sight. And here it was, in all its leaf-imitating glory, calmly nectaring from a spear thistle. I could feel the blood in my veins. It was a moment of jubilant rejuvenation - a vivid reminder of the thrill I would feel every time I came across one of nature's gems at first hand as a youngster.



Brimstone on Spear Thistle

The elation did not stay with me for long. I was only too aware that this was a lucky break - the exception that proves the rule - and that experiencing ecstasy in nature is a dying art, something of which most people born in twenty-first century England are likely to live their entire lives in total ignorance.

The first nuthatch I saw, the first fish I ever caught (a ruffe, with a striking spiny dorsal fin), the emperor moth that appeared from nowhere in our garden when I released a female that I'd raised from the caterpillar stage: these and many other cherished moments are still alive in my imagination to this day. Compared with these I think my first kiss was something of a disappointment!

The difference between the experience of childhood today as compared to that of us baby-boomers cannot be exaggerated. Not once in four and a half billion years has it been greater. The systematic industrial-scale dismantling of the garden of Eden has delivered a desert. That children today in the so-called "developed" world seldom encounter any living creature at all apart from humans and their pets is sacrilege.

The generation gap forever widens. Older people are sidelined by the clamour for novelty. To the list of society's traditional ills we can now add the move away from the stability of family life and paranoia about child abuse. Educationalists are obsessed with 'safeguarding' children - especially those who require 'intervention' because they have 'learning difficulties'. Goodness knows how many millions are spent on one-to-one tuition for those with 'special needs'.

Nature is now something kids probably learn about while sitting at their desks gawping at a screen. We mustn't let the little dears step outside. After all, it might rain. It's startling to hear a recent statistic: the inmates of prisons now spend more time outside than children do.

The vocabulary and the buzzwords of the times speak of them more lucidly than any number of government white papers and other verbiage that nobody in their right mind would ever want to read. Old-fashioned words like 'lazy' and 'bad behaviour' become 'attention deficit syndrome' and 'hyperactivity'. In the space of barely a couple of decades, serious intimidation has become simply 'inappropriate behaviour' - and nasty aggressive little boys who grow up to be criminals are now described as 'vulnerable'.

Everybody knows how silly (not mention dangerous) this is, and how true it is that it's not at all in anyone's long-term interests. We all know that absolving children from personal responsibility does nobody any favours. But we have to talk about it with muted breath in shady corridors. We dare not speak it audibly lest we be labelled 'regressive' or 'disciplinarian'. 'Discipline' is after all a vulgar word. As for 'self-discipline', well that's positively obscene.

If nothing is anybody's fault, if every hurtful action is simply 'inappropriate', if no-one is to blame for anything, if every wrong can be excused on the grounds of diminished responsibility or genetic make up, how can we ever hope to improve anything? How can we be human?

The abuse of language is leading us astray.

But to come back to that **awesome** brimstone...

Nothing in this world is worthy of such a once-majestic adjective; nothing, that is, apart from the miracles, the magic and the mysteries of life itself. Whilst no-one could deny that the marvels of digital technology are breathtaking in their ingenuity, '**awesome**'?... well, a word like that should surely be reserved for Gaia, Mother Nature or Almighty God, or whatever you want to call Her, Him or It. And brimstone butterflies, of course.

Shinrin-Yoku

Shinrin-Yoku is a Japanese word which translates roughly as 'forest bathing' or forest therapy. It's all about immersing yourself in the aroma of the forest. Just being in nature.

The Japanese think nature is very important. They live on a crowded island, mostly in cities with fast-paced modern jobs. They've become concerned that they're missing out on the many benefits of nature.

As a result they've developed the idea of shinrin-yoku to encourage each other to visit wild places. This has also inspired some ground-breaking science looking at the influence of forest environments on human health. At the Centre for Environment, Health and Field Sciences at Chiba University, scientists conducted an experiment from 2004 to 2012 into the health benefits of forests. They found that exposure to forests boosts the activity of natural killer (NK) cells. These are a key part of our body's natural defences. They are associated with immune system health and cancer prevention.

Led by the Nippon Medical School and the Centre for Environmental Health and Field Studies at Chiba University, scientists conducted a study from 2004 to 2012 into the health benefits of forests. They found that exposure to forests boosts the activity of natural killer (NK) cells. These NK cells are a key part of our body's natural defences. They are associated with immune system health and cancer prevention.

In a study in 2009 subjects showed significant increases in NK cell activity in the week after a forest visit, and positive effects lasted a month following each weekend in the woods. This was due to essential oils, generally called phytoncides, found in wood, plants and some fruit and vegetables, which trees emit to protect themselves from germs and insects. They found that forest air doesn't just feel good; by breathing in phytoncides from trees it can actually improve immune system health!

On top of this they measured salivary cortisol (which increases with stress), blood pressure and pulse rate variability during a day in the city and compared those to the same biometrics taken during a day with a 30 minute forest visit. The study found 'forest environments promote lower concentrations of cortisol, lower pulse rate, lower blood pressure, greater parasympathetic nerve activity and lower sympathetic nerve activity than do city environments'. Our parasympathetic nerve system regulates our rest and digestion systems, while the sympathetic nerve system regulates our fight or flight responses.

Essentially, forest environments helped people relax and reduce their stress levels. A further study showed that people felt less hostility and depression in forest environments than in urban environments. They also showed greater liveliness and the study recommended forest environments as a therapy for chronic stress.

Many of us have intuitively felt that places with trees made us feel better but it's great to have some good science to back it up. The Japanese government is so impressed that it's included shinrin-yoku as part of a programme of preventative medicine.

Robert Enderby, writing in Lincs wildlife Trust magazine, Spring 2018.

This of course is all well and good: providing you can actually **find** a forest. At 13%, the UK is close to the bottom in the European league table of woodland as a percentage of total land area. Many of our neighbours - France and Germany for instance - boast more than double this amount. Meanwhile, as everyone is only too aware, forest on a worldwide scale everywhere is under assault. Not a square centimetre of it anywhere is guaranteed to survive the onslaught of the holy dollar.

As for Britain, much of our 13% is just a monoculture of non-native conifers and, as such, of precious little interest to wildlife.

To the children of today nature means nothing. Where can they find it? Apart from playing fields and the occasional tree embedded in a pavement, they have few close encounters with the colour green. Their 'natural' habitat is now a technicoloured world of make-believe. Anything that can't be plugged in or downloaded is of little interest. Such few pockets of greenery as remain (most of which are areas 'awaiting development') are generally out-of-bounds. The imperative of 'safeguarding' stifles their exposure to the very things that, once they'd learnt to open their eyes and ears, would do them more good and provide more excitement than any classroom or play station could ever offer, for...

Being out-of-doors is where we belong.

Colloquial talk of the days before civilisation is often of cavemen. But how many caves are there in Britain? The homes of the majority of our hunter-gatherer forefathers would have consisted of simple shelters made from whatever materials were at hand, but most of the time it's likely that people would have been in the open air, just like the millions of generations before them.

Britain in Paleolithic times would have been unrecognisable to modern eyes and ears. Among many other mammals, bears, lynx and wolves roamed freely through a landscape that was largely wooded - 'The Wildwood' as modern naturalists call it. The Wildwood must have been a wonderful, but also a scary place. A bit like we are ourselves...

Wishful Thinking

It's the last day of July. Yesterday afternoon Helen and I went for a walk hand-in-hand along the river at Louth. It's a beautiful, mainly tree-lined route. We spotted a kingfisher twice and watched a grey wagtail gathering food for her young for several minutes. We also saw good numbers of peacock butterflies and a couple of red admirals. It was a day on which to be grateful for small mercies.



Peacock on Buddleia

Later, as we were driving home, a young man crossed the road in front of us as we waited at the lights. He was walking along pushing his bicycle with a one-handed grip of the saddle. We were both

amused by his youthful 'look at me' swagger. Helen remarked that she could never be attracted to anyone with an inflated ego and I said something to the effect that I was way too old to worry much about my image.

Earlier, I'd removed the pump from our garden pond as it had stopped working. I'd spent quite a while fiddling with it to see if I could get it going again, but to no avail. As we were preparing something to eat Helen, who is very good at DIY, offered to have a go at fixing the pump herself. My response was a bit muted. 'Here we go again', I was thinking 'it's always like this - **I** mess around and get nowhere and **she** comes along and sorts it all out'.

Without raising our voices, we tried to find the words to explain our different positions, but as we sat down to eat a meal which I failed to finish, the silence of indignation fell upon us. Afterwards Helen got in the bath and I got on my bike. As is the modern way, we then exchanged several texts, the final one of which took the form of an unconditional apology on my part.

*Hormones, irony, pride and prejudice: we went to separate
beds in a swirl of jumbled thoughts and feelings.*

This of course is a situation many couples would recognise: woman offers help, man doesn't want help, he wants to sort it out himself. Woman wants to express her love with kindness, man can't cope with feeling impotent - the ego forbids it. Even star-crossed lovers - nay, **especially** star-crossed lovers - are vulnerable to this kind of impasse.

Though commonplace, incidents like this are rarely discussed. We don't like to own up to our weaknesses. We'd sooner keep them out of sight. We don't want to face the fact that our foibles are like volcanoes: you can never be sure they won't suddenly erupt and bring chaos, even on a calm summer's day.

Most people have an innate desire to think well of themselves, but in achieving this we're inclined to overlook unwholesome truths. It was easy for me to say I was too old to be troubled by my ego, but in the cold light of day a different truth emerged.

This is a classic symptom of delusion which is of course a kind of madness. As Wikipedia reminds us, delusion is 'a mistaken belief that is held with strong conviction even in the presence of superior evidence to the contrary'. Sounds to me like a climate-change denier or a flat-earther. Or a Jehovah's Witness. But what would I know: I'm deluded myself!

We can learn from books and we can learn from Google. Sometimes we may even learn something from a teacher, but there's no learning quite like finding out about ourselves **from** ourselves.

If we haven't mastered the art of critical self-examination, if we fail to see the effect our behaviour is having in everyday situations that threaten to drive us apart, we're hardly likely to be in a position to avoid the coming nightmare. Miraculous intervention apart, the outlook is less than reassuring.

13. The Retreat from Dystopia

While we're waiting for some benign spiritual being to enter our souls and save us from ourselves, let's bury our heads in a little fanciful contemplation. Let's imagine a perfect world.

I don't know about yours, but my Utopia would look something like this:-

1. The nation state would be replaced by world government.
2. Weapons of *every* kind would be proscribed.
3. Population would be regulated to conform to the limits of finite space.
4. The sanctity of the natural world would be upheld everywhere, with great swathes of land and sea set aside as permanent wilderness with restricted human access.
5. All forms of pollution would be outlawed.
6. Civilisation would be restructured so that we move away from the nuclear family towards small-scale communities. (around 150 people in each) - ie: villages. Cities everywhere would be dismantled.
7. Most work would be concerned with the production of food and the monitoring and maintenance of the good health of both ourselves and the planet. Most people would work out of doors.
8. The financial system would be replaced with a zero-growth economy. Profit - and profiteering - would be abolished.
9. Strict limits would be imposed upon the development of new technology.
10. People with a high psychopathic tendency would be forbidden to hold high office.

On the face of it this sounds like totalitarianism gone mad. Some will say it just couldn't happen - that it *mustn't* happen, even; and yes indeed, there are certainly some very big issues around the creation of world government and the imposition of such sweeping limits to freedom. But there's no compelling reason to think that democratic principles could not still be upheld, even in a one-party single-state world. After all, neither two-party adversarial politics nor international diplomacy have served us particularly well.

And in any case, what's the alternative? Business-as-usual has already brought us to the brink and threatens to annihilate us. We have colossal problems, and they require a radical rethink.

Of course the truth is that none of this **will** ever happen. How could it?
The world we've made was made in our own image.

The suffering, the strife, the iniquity, the cruelty, the atrocities, the mayhem that we see depicted on ten billion screens every second of every day of every week of every month of every year: it's all

a product of our collective rage. The man-made horrors of the world were born in the bowels of the hatred we hold in our hearts.

Until we're freed from this insanity there can be no hope.

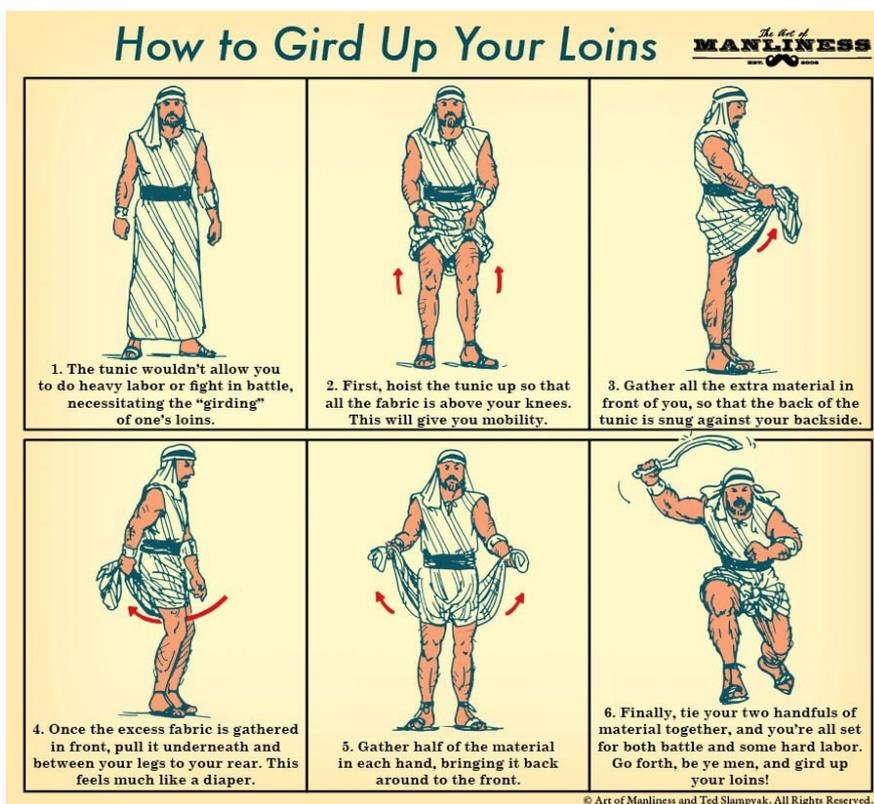
When I was a young man Hope was very much in the air: The Pill; CND; the hippy movement. These three forces combined to powerful effect, threatening to bring the pillars of the Establishment crashing down. Maybe, just maybe, giving peace a chance would unlock the Gates of Eden. Maybe if the Bomb could be banned and love was all we needed then all would be well.

It was of course a short-lived dream. A few guitar lessons doesn't make a rock star and a few long-haired peace-loving protest singers high on pot can't overthrow the world order. Nice try, guys; but it wasn't enough.

If what we are saying is 'give hope a chance', there's a lot more to do. And it begins with ourselves.

As long as there is breath in my body the prospect of dying is not sufficient to kill the will to live. Striving to be everything that one can be just for its own sake may be all that's left but it seems strangely adequate.

On the road ahead there will be many shady hollows where demons lie in wait. But I'm ready for them. Our mission is not to arrive; it's to travel. There *is* no destination - the journey is the thing. On the endless trail towards becoming the kind of person we aspire to be, the art of critical self-examination is of course the key component. We're going to have to gird up our loins...



We perceive our surroundings mainly with the eyes, but it's a truism that instead of what is actually out there, we're inclined to see the world as we believe it to be. If we've programmed the central processing unit in our heads to be on the lookout for dog poo, we're going to find it at every turn. Equally, if we're in the habit of looking on the bright side, we'd be likely to notice the sunshine more than the showers on a typical day of British weather.

Looking for rainbows rather than poo is not such a bad idea if you're after peace of mind, of course; but consistently maintaining an objective view of our thinking processes in general presents a formidable challenge. How are we to avoid the pitfalls?

The art of cogitation is reflected in the way we use our computers. Because the choices are unlimited we tend to flit like a bee from one juicy flower to the next without having clear goals in mind, or even giving full attention to what we're looking at at any given moment. As if these alone weren't problems enough, we also have to contend with hormones. Unlike computers we are no automatons. Organic beings such as ourselves are at the mercy of a complex array of mental images, emotions and bodily demands, which can often overwhelm us.

Perhaps this would account for the long-established tradition amongst ascetics and gurus of seeking a place of refuge from the turmoil of the daily round. It could also go some way towards explaining why the pharmaceutical industry is doing so very well these days!

All we ever hear about is failure. Other peoples' misfortunes sell newspapers. Success is not newsworthy, so we only find out what's going on where there's trouble. When was the last time you heard any mention of Norway or Switzerland in a news bulletin? Come to that, what about monasteries or meditation retreats, the Amish community or far-away forest tribes of so-called 'primitive' people? Places where - relatively speaking - life is orderly, are just not picked up on the radar.

*The news media are polluting our thinking.
We're being force-fed a diet of dog shit.*

When I'm not preoccupied with the minute-to-minute demands of my day, and I manage to sneak a peep at my own thoughts I can't help noticing how chaotic they are. The 'where-am-I-going-and-what-have-I-got-to-do-today' type thoughts are not so bad: I can write them down on a list and work steadily through them, which can be surprisingly therapeutic. But those are not the thoughts that are out to get me: it's the emotionally-laden ones. It's amazing how frequently a snippet of some conversation or incident from years ago will pop up unannounced and precipitate a spiralling descent into the mire of discontent.

Is this unique to me? I doubt it: it's likely that many, if not most, people are not dissimilar. The trouble is, we seldom get to find out. An embarrassing inferno rages in our hearts - the sexual cravings, the jealousy, the anger, the fear - and we're desperate to keep it all hidden. Better to let it carry on poisoning us than give the game away. It seems we just can't get through the day without the help of our defence mechanisms - without distancing ourselves from each other. Don the Mask of Persona, lest they find you out!

But what is so wrong with being found out? Just how much have we got to lose by laying our cards on the table instead of holding them so close to our chests? If we were less afraid we would be more

candid. If we were more candid we'd get to know each other better and this would surely be all to the good. Unfortunately, many millenia of evolution have taught us to be sparing in our use of mutual trust. No doubt this would have served us well in earlier times.

But how appropriate is it for a globalised community in possession of weapons of mass destruction?

The origins of the recurrent negative thought patterns that threaten to devour us are not hard to see. Right from the start we're disciplined by our parents. Don't do this, do do that, don't do the other - right from our first teetering steps. And then at school: are we good enough? Are we clever enough? Are we dyslexic? Autistic? Special Needs? And then... the rat race. How big is your house? How new is your car? Are you earning enough? Are you happy? As if that lot isn't enough to drive us to meltdown, we've got the ever-tricky business of sex to keep in its proper perspective. Or try to!

Sometimes it seems that horror movies are the only ones on offer in the cerebral cinema. Apart from the regrets and disappointments of our past, it's all too easy to dwell upon what's yet to come, even though time will likely tell a different tale. Regret and dread conspire to rule our days and this can lead to anxiety and depression of such intensity that the call to self-destruct grows ever louder. Unless...

Unless what?

Unless our loins are well-girded. Unless our mental eye is watchful. Unless we're constantly on our guard; and, above all, puposefully occupied. (Alternatively you could just keep taking the pills of course).

Whatever we're called upon to spend our time doing in this life it's surely right that we give it our best shot. This requires effort of course - a determination to persevere in spite of setbacks. And as we've seen, self-observation is also indispensable.

My own experience in this respect is somewhat bipolar. In appraising my efforts I can vascillate from awarding myself an 'A' to 'D' and then back to 'A' again in a very short space of time; and doing it the other way round is even easier! It doesn't help if you're born to be one of life's stargazers. We're a troubled breed - ill-suited to the rough and tumble of modern society. Too sensitive, too shy and too alternative to adapt to the rigours of market forces, we lurk in the backwaters and linger on the twilight fringes. Meanwhile the go-getters are out there going and getting everything they can.

14. The Quantum Chameleon.

Not that all go-getters are bad. There is such a thing as a good go-getter. There are many people striving to make the world a better place, battling against the stormy seas in search of the Promised Land. But the current that flows against them is so strong that many are swept away. The cut and thrust realities of life are just too much for the very people we need the most: the ones who hold true to principled values.

This is of course is how Mother Nature designed us: she wanted the strong to survive and the weak to fall. What she hadn't bargained for is just how unruly we humans - her cleverest children - would

turn out to be. It hadn't occurred to her that some of us would grow up to wreak such havoc. That's the danger of optimism of course: expecting that all will be well without taking due precautions is for fools. Not that Mother Nature is a fool. It's not her. It's some of us. They are the problem. They created the problem in the first place, and they are the ones who perpetuate it. The Promised Land they have in mind - if they even have the wit to dream - is a very different one from the one the good guys are thinking of.

We all know who they are. They are the baddies in every Western you ever saw. They've been around since the beginning of time and they are not about to go away any time soon. The archetypal villain - the embodiment of the Antichrist - is alive and well today. His name is Donald Trump. What's more he was (apparently) elected by a majority of the people of the most powerful nation on earth.

What are we to make of them, such monsters - those who speak with the forked tongue of hatred, who care for no-one and nothing apart from their own inglorious fame, who would willingly murder millions in pursuit of their demented dreams? What can be said of them?

Wise men call them psychopaths. Fools elect them to office.

If it were the case that this situation was a one-off, a once-in-a-million aberration, then the world could survive it. Unfortunately Mr. Trump is not alone. There are lots of Mr. Trumps. There always were. They lurk in dark corners within the corridors of power, they hide in the shadowy haunts of thugs and thieves. The glittering gems of their ill-gotten gains dazzle and blind the proletariat and the far-reaching consequences of their misdemeanours lead to faraway children crying themselves to death.

A benign regime would surely put **them** to death. But not us. Nowadays crooks of this calibre are far too clever. They don the fine apparel of the great and the good and make vote-winning speeches that promise the earth. It's not too hard to win over an electorate who think of little but Facebook and phones.

This is the crux of the pickle we're in. As in apeland, so in humankind: Darwin rules the day. Sexy girls always go for a hunk, especially the sort who'd willingly start a fight. They just can't help themselves. It's not just the girls, of course. Men too have a grudging admiration for their more pugilistic colleagues. Hence the fever each time the world heavyweight boxing championship comes round.

And so the endless cycle goes on - one damned despot after another.

And what of the rest of us? The plodders, the thinkers, the dreamers? The myriads of decent folk who work hard, who wouldn't hurt a fly and who suffer many an injustice without complaint. The good guys. Where did it come from, this thing called goodness?

Those who now say God, are few and far between. Nowadays most would say that altruism was born on the plains of Africa where a handful of us still remain, hunting wild animals in close-knit teams, helping each other to stay alive. This is surely the straightforward explanation, and it's not hard to believe.

By now you've probably guessed where this has all been leading: *Goodies and Baddies*. If we're honest, when we look inside ourselves, most of us will see a proportion of each. This of course is the ultimate paradox: the paradox of us: the Quantum of Man. This is the truth of who we are.

Many words since ancient times have been written in the search for Truth. But it was all in vain. No holy grail, no philosopher's stone, no god above was ever found. Not until about a hundred years ago, that is. That's when the weirdest animal the world has ever seen was teased out from its hiding place: The Quantum Chameleon.

At last the question that drove some of the greatest minds of all time to insanity has finally been answered. Now we can look Truth in the eye, and see it for what it really is: it's yin and yang, it's yes and no, it's this and that. Now we've come to know Truth in its own terms; we've come to realise Reality. The only problem is that *knowing* the nature of truth is not quite the same thing as *believing* it.

The traditions of our culture were established long ago in the ancient worlds of the Middle East - a place where Logic was honoured above all other gods. Ever since our first day in school - ever since we were told that one and one makes two - we've been programmed to believe that the world can be grasped with a slide rule and a calculator; that our brains work like computers: everything is either one thing or another - on or off, yes or no, zero or one. But now we can see that this way of thinking was wrong; that's not the way it is. At least, not everywhere, all of the time. It's not 'either/or', it's both; and of course neither.

It's a catastrophic revelation and frankly I'm still reeling from the shock of it. At the same time it can be surprisingly liberating. That of course is the very nature of the quantum quandary.

But old ways of thinking die hard and many people are not ready to embrace the Quantum Chameleon.

Perhaps you're thinking 'what has all this airy-fairy arty-farty mystical nonsense got to do with me?' I'm far too busy to be bothered with stuff like that. Life's hard, and we've just got to get on with it and try and be nice to each other.

True enough. But how in fact do we spend much if not most of our time, we humans?

Look and see!

(This may take a little time. Please be patient while the update to your brain is downloading).....

What did you notice?

We've already seen it, of course. It's commonsense, it's everyday. It's staring us in the face wherever we look:-

Opinions > options > discussion > negotiation > argument > disagreement > frustration > anger > chaos > disaster.

It's a familiar and very depressing sequence of events. We can't agree and we can't agree to disagree without coming to blows, one way or another. And it all starts with a point of view. We don't want this, we want that. We're being mistreated. It's unfair. And it's someone else's fault. Hence fallouts, hence divorce, hence holocaust.

These past few weeks the world has been on fire - Real Fire. Real Flames. Something very scary is happening to the weather machine.

And what is all the talk of in the papers this morning? (9th August). Oh yes, it's all about the furore over what Boris Johnson (ex foreign minister) said about women wearing burkas; or what Jeremy Corbyn (leader of the opposition) *didn't* say about antisemitism. Pretty earth-shattering stuff. Meanwhile the *earth actually is shattering!*

It's staggering to see it. The top people - allegedly the top brains - spend their time doing what kids in playgrounds do the world over. In-group / out-group gossip: 'Did you hear what so-and-so said?' 'I'm not having **her** in my gang anymore'. 'I'll get him after school'.

That our so-called leaders should behave like this is mind-numbing. It's incredible. It's tragic. Meanwhile it's not just Rome that's burning. The whole world is alight.

What is happening to us? Why do we allow ourselves to be like this? How come we are so preoccupied with trivia? Can we not imagine the terrifying consequences of indifference to the dangers that confront us?

Like most people, I get out of bed each morning and go about my business as best I can. But inside there is turmoil. It's not easy to concentrate fully on what's at hand when you're haunted by daily nightmares of a world in terminal decline.

But whenever I switch on the TV or radio or just watch people going about their business, it seems I'm the only one thinking like this. The impression one gets is that yesterday, today and tomorrow will follow each other in the same orderly procession, to the same reassuring jingle of the tv news, ad infinitum. Sure there will be changes, but we'll make the adjustments required to accommodate them when the time comes. Don't panic lads, it'll all work out in the end.

What do you suppose an alien would make of this?

If this isn't madness then I'd like to know what is. The signs are written with abundant clarity wherever you care to look - serious climate damage, international sabre-rattling, diminishing resources, destruction and pollution on a scale never before seen on earth, a population bulging at the seams, the wholesale abandonment of self-restraint, the iniquitous distribution of wealth, loss of long term vision... well I could go on, but you've heard it all a thousand times.

We've **all** heard it a thousand times. But rather than rise up as one and do something about it, it seems we'd prefer just to pour another beer, sink into an easy chair and carry on gossiping. In case you'd forgotten the term, let me remind you: this is classic *Cognitive Dissonance*.

The fact is civilisations have always crumbled. Why should ours be any different?

Just as the earth's crust protects us from the grumbling magma beneath our feet, so the veneer of polite society masks the truth of our origins. We're wild animals, with all the predictability of a simmering volcano; and we live for ourselves and our own. And sod the rest!

That's how to be an animal. Watch the birds in your garden for five minutes and see for yourself. Selfish rules the day. Look after Number One. Don't get too matey with your pals. These are the cardinal rules of animalhood.

But surely civilisation came to temper all that? Some bright spark ignited the notion that we were different, that - in the time-honoured phrase - *God created us in his own image*; meaning, presumably, that humans are not simply animals after all: we're superior to animals, probably cleverer than animals, and certainly more important than animals. All those scriptures, all those sermons, all that churchy paraphernalia down the centuries - it was all designed to elevate us to a position from which we could have dominion over every other living thing; to brainwash us into believing that we were something special. Like teachers' pets, we're god's chosen creatures. Infused with spiritual essence, we've been put here on Earth in order to learn how to behave in a manner appropriate to our exalted status. It's God's Purpose and we must obey His Word.

Now certain things in this life don't go together well - like ice cream and crisps, or oil and water - and if you take a raw naked ape and add a sprinkle of divinity you're heading for trouble. It's an explosive mix. Angels and apes are worlds apart.

Yet the art of civilisation is the art of balancing these two opposing forces. For 'angel' read 'wave'; for 'ape' read 'particle', and what have we got? **The quantum chameleon**. We're poles apart yet we're one and the same: We're neither one thing nor the other, just as we're both.

*Quantum is the perfect metaphor for humanity. It's mystical,
it's contradictory, it's hard to grasp. And it's beautiful.*

Beauty was once revered of course, but now it's outlawed. Creative artists everywhere have turned their back on it. The art of artistry is dead. Once upon a time a masterpiece could sooth a troubled soul and smooth a furrowed brow - transporting us to a place beyond the drudgery of daily toil; allowing us to rise above ourselves and, for a brief moment at least, experience the bliss of a life worth living.

But now the trend is in the opposite direction. With relatively few notable exceptions, the purveyors of the arts have been trying to shake us: shake us and shock us: shake us awake from our rose-tinted slumbers and shock us by depicting life in all its raw and wretched ugliness. They called it 'modern' and they called it 'reality'.

It may seem strange that the beginning of the rot more or less coincided with the arrival of quantum mechanics, but it's no coincidence. As with science, so with the arts: the pillars of tradition were brought down by the thunderous footfall of the dreaded two-headed beast.

Beauty, as is so oft said, is in the eye of the beholder. This being so, a one-size-fits-all definition of the word is elusive. However, we can take it for our purposes here that a beautiful piece of work is one which a substantial body of opinion agrees to be pleasing to the eye (or ear; or mind). There used to be a tacit understanding amongst all who thought of themselves as creative artists - whether painter, musician, sculptor or writer - that their principal purpose was to lift us from the mundanity of the world and to allow us a sneak preview of heaven.

With the coming of quantum all that had to change. Now that it was known that the world was underpinned by duality, creative minds must reflect the New Order. If the contexts in which Newton's laws of motion apply were strictly limited, then it followed that Truth itself was compromised. Maybe Truth is true only some of the time. As for Beauty... well, she's nothing but a wicked seductress - the Devil's handmaiden - sent to lead us astray.

How sad that we should have come to see such an elegant lady as nothing but a tart.

In the unlikely event of this so-called civilisation of ours enduring for even a couple more decades, I would personally like to see us turn the clock back. As a lifelong musician I've explored the sounds of many centuries, and - up to a point - the further back you go, the more wonderful they were. I never did understand why nobody wants to write music in the style of Bach or Mozart anymore. Going forward from where we are now, are we to be tortured by ever more explicit and techno-crazed songs in the world of pop, and an endless procession of atonal twaddle in the remnants of the orchestral tradition?

The truth is of course that the Arts have always reflected their times, and the early 21st century is no exception. Today's musicians, moviemakers, writers and exponents of the visual artists speak with an unequivocal voice, and it tells us one thing: we have lost our way. There's nowhere left to go; and nothing left to say.

But does this really matter? Who said we must stride ever forward? Why must we progress? We've seen where it's leading - and we'd be wise to apply the brakes. In fact an emergency stop might be more appropriate. Is there no new Martin Luther King to shout from the mountain tops 'I have a dream that the dream is over: thus far and no further!'

What is actually wrong with being content with what we've got - with simply enjoying what we have already? The range of styles and forms that are already available to artists of every hue can surely suffice to keep us gainfully occupied, and our audiences suitably enriched, for many years to come. Why keep poking around in grubby corners for something more enticing when so many breathtaking views of paradise have already been handed down to us a thousand times over? Should we not be grateful for what we already have in abundance? Whatever happened to gratitude?

15. Word Power

Not so long ago I made up a piece of music for my students. It took the form of a simple tune with the kind of harmony that church-goers are familiar with, and that music students frequently encounter during their studies. It's known as four-part harmony.

Because it sounded like a slow hymn I decided to call the piece simply 'Gratitude'. One day I was working through it with three grammar school girls when the question of the meaning of the title arose. To my amazement they thought it was something to do with geography! (they were thinking of 'latitude').

How very telling that such a once-familiar word should have already slipped into oblivion. In another few years it will probably be marked 'archaic' in most dictionaries. Remembering this incident prompted me to go to Google's ngram viewer again to get an idea of the fortunes of some other once-cherished words, such as:

simplicity, modesty, humility, humble, honesty, virtue, virtuous, pride, apology, studious, goodness, joy, truth, beauty, fortitude, good character, wisdom, patience, persevere, heaven, cherish, solitude, contemplate, toil, noble, sufficient, decency, manners, politeness, wisdom, patience, persevere, punish, sacrifice, faith, church, worship, religion, hereafter, delight, soul, considerate, brave, respectful, gentle, gentleman, nature, human nature, natural, disgrace, disgraceful, duty, pompous, folly, ignorance, evil, devil, sin, wicked, rude, remorse, sorrow, cheat, corruption -

all of which have, since the 1800s, steadily decreased in usage,
whereas, unsurprisingly, the following have steadily increased:

get, want, grab, sex, sexy, sexual, rape, self, bigger, buy, spend, shopping, stuff, new, toy, win, fun, holiday, huge, massive, giant, aggressive, loud music, hit, financial, economy, market, push, shove, gang. Not forgetting **fucking** which was barely heard before the late 1950s and which has now surely become one of the top ten most-used words in the English language. In England at least it must be **the** most oft-used adjective.

Words are the litmus paper of our lives. They speak articulately of our collective mindset. But that's not all. Words do more than just define and describe: they manipulate us. The way we use them changes us - for better or worse. And the more we use a given word the stronger and also the weaker it becomes: stronger because it fortifies the way of thinking that it describes; weaker because familiarity breeds blindness. The more it's used, the greater its power, but the less we notice how powerful it is.

'Progress' is a good example. Perpetual forward motion as a way of life is such a deep-rooted faith - so embedded in every aspect of modern life - that we've stopped noticing it. Improving our lot is now the be all and end all - our guiding light. So mesmerised by this gleaming star have we become that we're only dimly aware of the fact that we follow it like the shepherds' flocks at Bethlehem.

'Progress'. It has such a positive ring to it. Let's all follow wherever it wants to lead us. But where is it leading us? Have we ever actually stopped to wonder? Or have we decided that a word with such a positive ring can do us no harm. Come what may, progress is a good thing. Lead on.

The richness of the English language is second to none and if you don't use it, you lose it. People whose vocabulary is restricted to a mere handful of words and cliches pay a high price for it. If we shy away from the diversity a wide vocabulary offers, if we shun the spice of synonym and choose not to dip into the vast trove of idiom, then our ability to communicate is compromised. It's like playing a piece of music without any nuance - no ornamentation, no dynamic variety, no 'molto espressivo'. People who play like that don't tend to attract big audiences. Similarly people with limited language skills find it hard to express themselves with sufficient clarity and interest to hold each other's attention. They're also prone to precipitating misunderstandings or offence. And we all know where they can lead.

The way we speak reflects the way we think. If we fail to hone the many tools of speech at our disposal by making regular use of them it's likely that our thinking will be more foggy than it might be. Without words it's not easy to put your thoughts in order - even to **know** what it is that you **are** actually thinking!

Not much chance of effective self-awareness then! And as we've already seen, an inability to monitor oneself objectively is tantamount to madness.

Furthermore, there's every reason to suppose that what's true at an individual level is also true for corporations. Local councils, national governments, and the financial system of the entire globe as a whole: all are at risk of going awry if the people who run them don't have the will and the wherewithal to assess the consequences of their actions accurately and honestly.

16. The Godforsaken Globe

In a perfect democracy, you and I would run the show: the will of the people would determine the ways in which society functioned. In the real world that rarely happens. Governments, elected by the people, are supposed to be in control, but only a very naive person would believe that that's the whole story, even though it may be true in principle. We live in corrupted times. Perhaps we always have.

Because they never have enough money to provide adequate public services, both local and national authorities are liable to pander to the demands of those who have plenty, namely big business, and in particular multinational corporations; not to mention wealthy individuals. And money-launderers. And crooks. The temptation to make dodgy deals can prove irresistible. It's a slippery slope.

And then of course there are the ones with the money themselves. If you think they have scruples, think again. Money comes to those who make it their business to chase after it. If you want money in quantities beyond your needs it's best not to ask where it came from. All that interest on those investments, every penny of the pensions governments and others pay out, it's all come at a high cost to someone down the line. If you knew the truth about who was paying for your comfortable life style, you might feel a little less comfortable about it.

All over the world things are happening that nobody wants to happen, things that are at best not necessary and at worst downright damaging. You don't have to look far to see them.

Don't take my word for it. There must be many thousands of pieces of writing about the dangers and iniquities of unregulated capitalism. Here is just one :-

In February 2017, college sophomore Trevor Hill stood up during a televised town hall meeting in New York and posed a simple question to Nancy Pelosi, the leader of the Democrats in the House of Representatives. He cited a study by Harvard University showing that 51% of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 no longer support the system of capitalism, and asked whether the Democrats could embrace this fast-changing reality and stake out a clearer contrast to right-wing economics.

Pelosi was visibly taken aback. "I thank you for your question," she said, "but I'm sorry to say we're capitalists, and that's just the way it is."

The footage went viral. It was powerful because of the clear contrast it set up. Trevor Hill is no hardened left-winger. He's just your average millennial—bright, informed, curious about the world, and eager to imagine a better one. But Pelosi, a figurehead of establishment politics, refused to - or was just unable to - entertain his challenge to the status quo.

It's not only young voters who feel this way. A YouGov poll in 2015 found that 64% of Britons believe that capitalism is unfair, that it makes inequality worse. Even in the U.S., it's as high as 55%. In Germany, a solid 77% are skeptical of capitalism. Meanwhile, a full three-quarters of people in major capitalist economies believe that big businesses are basically corrupt.

Why do people feel this way? Probably not because they deny the abundant material benefits of modern life that many are able to enjoy. Or because they want to travel back in time and live in the U.S.S.R. It's because they realize—either consciously or at some gut level—that

*there's something fundamentally flawed about a system that has
a prime directive to churn nature and humans into capital...*

and do it more and more each year, regardless of the costs to human well-being and to the environment we all depend on.

Because let's be clear: That's what capitalism is, at its root. That is the sum total of the plan. We can see this embodied in the imperative to grow GDP, everywhere, year on year, at a compound rate, even though we know that GDP growth, on its own, does nothing to reduce poverty or to make people happier or healthier. Global GDP has grown 630% since 1980, and in that same time inequality, poverty, and hunger have all risen.

Earlier this year, CEO of American Airlines Doug Parker tried to raise his employees salaries to correct for "years of incredibly difficult times" suffered by his employees, only to be slapped down by Wall Street. The day he announced the raise, the company's shares fell 5.8%. This is not a case of an industry on the brink, fighting for survival, and needing to make hard decisions. On the contrary, airlines have been raking in profits. But the gains are seen as the natural property of the investor class.

*What becomes clear here is that ours is a system that is
programmed to subordinate life to the imperative of profit.*

For a startling example of this, consider the horrifying idea to breed brainless chickens and grow them in huge vertical farms attached to tubes and electrodes and stacked one on top of the other, all for the sake of extracting profit out of their bodies as efficiently as possible. Or take the Grenfell Tower disaster in London, where dozens of people were incinerated because the building company chose to use flammable panels in order to save a paltry £5,000. Over and over again, profit trumps life.

It all proceeds from the same deep logic. It's the same logic that sold lives for profit in the Atlantic slave trade, it's the logic that gives us sweatshops and oil spills, and it's the logic that is right now pushing us headlong toward ecological collapse and climate change.

Millennials can see that capitalism isn't working for the majority of humanity, and they're ready to invent something better. Once we realize this, we can start connecting the dots between our different struggles. There are people in the U.S. fighting against the Keystone pipeline. There are people in Britain fighting against the privatization of the National Health Service. There are people in India fighting against corporate land grabs. There are people in Brazil fighting against the destruction of the Amazon rainforest. There are people in China fighting against poverty wages. These are all noble and important movements in their own right. But by focusing on all these symptoms we risk missing the underlying cause. And the cause is capitalism. It's time to name the thing.

What's so exciting about our present moment is that people are starting to do exactly that. And they are hungry for something different. For some, this means socialism. That YouGov poll showed that Americans under the age of 30 tend to have a more favorable view of socialism than they do of capitalism, which is surprising given the sheer scale of the propaganda out there designed to convince people that socialism is evil. But millennials aren't bogged down by these dusty old binaries. For them the matter is simple: They can see that capitalism isn't working for the majority of humanity, and they're ready to invent something better.

What might a better world look like? There are a million ideas out there. We can start by changing how we understand and measure progress. As Robert Kennedy famously said, GDP "does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play . . . it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile."

We can change that. People want health care and education to be social goods, not market commodities, so we can choose to put public goods back in public hands. People want the fruits of production and the yields of our generous planet to benefit everyone, rather than being siphoned up by the super-rich, so we can change tax laws and introduce potentially transformative measures like a universal basic income. People want to live in balance with the environment on which we all depend for our survival; so we can adopt regenerative agricultural solutions and even choose, as Ecuador did in 2008, to recognize in law, at the level of the nation's constitution, that nature has "the right to exist, persist, maintain, and regenerate its vital cycles."

Measures like these could dethrone capitalism's prime directive and replace it with a more balanced logic, that recognizes the many factors required for a healthy and thriving civilization. If done systematically enough, they could consign one-dimensional capitalism to the dustbin of history.

None of this is actually radical. Our leaders will tell us that these ideas are not feasible, but what is not feasible is the assumption that we can carry on with the status quo. If we keep pounding on the

wedge of inequality and chewing through our living planet, the whole thing is going to implode. The choice is stark, and it seems people are waking up to it in large numbers: Either we evolve into a future beyond capitalism, or we won't have a future at all.

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How did we get here? How come we've allowed the super-rich to stay in possession of all the aces?

Like most stories, it's a tale of both triumph and tragedy. Our achievements in terms of the manipulation and modification of the planet to our advantage have been breathtaking - today's world bears little resemblance to the one from which we came. Human ingenuity would seem to know no bounds.

Yet when it comes to the creation of a society that is prosperous; and fair; and sustainable, it seems we are completely clueless. Establishing a system that elevates the world's poor from the gutter and curbs the excesses of the wealthy seems to be quite beyond us.

A tale of two countries

The share of U.S. pre-tax income accruing to the bottom 50 percent and top one percent of income earners, 1962-2014



Source: Thomas Piketty, Emmanuel Saez, and Gabriel Zucman, "Distributional National Accounts: Methods and Estimates for the United States," 2016, Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research
Note: The unit is the individual adult and incomes within married couples are split equally.



"It's a tale of two countries," the authors wrote. "For the 117 million U.S. adults in the bottom half of the income distribution, growth has been nonexistent for a generation, while at the top of the ladder it has been extraordinarily strong."

And it's not due to the aging population. Rather, income has actually dropped for the working class. In fact, none of the growth from 1980 to 2014 went to the bottom 50%, the study pointed out. Only 32% went to the middle class, while the top 10% reaped 68% of the growth. A full 36% went to the 1% alone. Troubling?

Is there a flaw in the human psyche that makes such increasing disparity inevitable? The answer would appear to be 'yes'.

Our biology demands that the strong shall prevail over the weak; Mother Nature's manifesto stipulates that winner takes all. Civilisation was supposed to tame us; but civilisation has consistently underestimated the persuasive powers of the human genome.

The first rumblings of civilisation must have started around the time when our hunter-gatherer forbears were evolving towards a less nomadic lifestyle, and establishing settled agrarian communities. This would have led to a need for a more structured social order which would have given rise to the notion of hierarchy. In the inevitable leadership challenges that would have ensued we can suppose that natural selection would have held sway.

As we've already seen, the powerful instinct to promote the strongest men to the highest office is still very much alive and well today. But in a world so far removed from Neolithic times, just what kind of strength is it desirable that a leader should have?

The sexiest kind of strength - the sort that is inclined by definition to self-perpetuate - often comes with a generous portion of not-so-desirable other characteristics, like belligerence; and intolerance; and psychological instability. In these unsettled times such traits are particularly dangerous.

Leaders, like the rest of us, come in a variety of shades. The blood-red of Ghengis Khan; the pure-white of Mahatma Ghandi; together with all those good kings and bad kings that we learned about in school, they make for a vivid tapestry. This being so, perhaps we shouldn't be too concerned about the Donald Trumps or Kim Jong Uns of this world. Time will pass and more philanthropic overlords will emerge in due course, perhaps. That's assuming these two keep their fingers off the trigger, of course.

But is there something more to this? Are modern times altogether unique?

17. The Uniqueness of Now

The answer to this question is a resounding 'yes'. There are three main reasons:

1. The Death of God.
2. Globalisation.

3. Growth.

Let's explore each of these in a bit more depth:-

The Demise of the Almighty

For many centuries the vast majority of those us living in the shade of the tree of the Judeo-Christian faith believed in an all-powerful all-knowing god who had created both heaven and earth. Terrified by sermons of fire and brimstone, most people in times of old must have been quite literally god-fearing; and it's not hard to imagine that this would have been pretty effective in encouraging them to toe the party line. Ensuring that you kept on the right side of God would have tempered the urge to profit at other peoples' expense. Furthermore, those of lowly status would have been more willing to accept their impoverished lot given that a reward in the hereafter was guaranteed.

*Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth
and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal*

*But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor
rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal*

(Matthew 6: 19 & 20)

The loss of God diminishes us. Without the promise of a heavenly afterlife there's little incentive to pursue noble ideals. If Hell is but a myth why not grab what you can as soon as you can, and tread upon a few toes while you're doing it?

But that's not really the point of God. Any fool can be good given the promise of reward or the threat of punishment. But religious faith runs deeper than that. It's about being good for its own sake: a bit like how we'd prefer our kids to be!

Perhaps neither God above nor the Devil below ever expected us to take them literally. If they are simply allegorical then it makes not a scrap of difference whether or not they exist. What **does** matter is the way we respond to the ideas they represent. The fact that the very words 'god' and 'devil' differ from 'good' and 'evil' by just a single letter is very telling. For 'good' think particle. For 'God' read wave. Likewise, for 'evil' and 'Devil'. It's that enigmatic chameleon again!

If we think of the words 'God' and 'good' as simply two sides of the same coin, faith becomes easier. If you have even the vaguest idea of what the word 'good' might mean, then it could be said of you that you believe in God. And the same applies to 'evil' and 'devil'.

We're not diminished by the loss of 'God' per se, but what if 'goodness' is dead?

If goodness is dead we have a problem.

Once you've descended into the heathen pit of nihilism you're at the mercy of the Devil. One by one, your principles fall by the wayside, leaving you disinclined to do anything at all unless you yourself are the beneficiary. Like autumn's falling leaves, traditional virtues are gone with the wind. You're less inclined to care, less inclined to give, and less inclined to be forgiving. You're also less inclined

to take up arms in the struggle against inequality, which means that the villainous rich can continue their plundering ways unchallenged.

The hand of international finance has got such a crushing grip on the way business is done everywhere that it's squeezing us all to death. Big Money is king, and it has no conscience. Whether its demands lead to anything of benefit to anyone is of little concern. The fact that some distant children somewhere are starving as a result of its demands raises not a single furrow on the foreheads of the guys in the boardroom. If they don't look they won't see. In which case all will be well.

But there are some who would say loss of conscience is only a step away from loss of consciousness.

Rather than fearing God, serious-minded Christians favour **worshipping** Him. As with 'God' so with 'good'. God will probably not lose any sleep if he hears that you don't believe in him, but what happens if we jettison the concept of goodness? The answer is of course bad things - if not to us ourselves then surely to those with whom we interact.

If, on the other hand, you see virtue as being its own reward - if you see goodness as an end in itself - the world will be grateful. And your mum will be proud of you!

The Perennial Parental Problem

*You've thrown the worst fear that could ever be hurled
The fear to bring children into the world*

Bob Dylan 'Masters of War'

Even before I encountered Bob Dylan I knew that I never wanted kids and not once in my life even for one second did I ever waver. The avoidance of fatherhood remains the single most enduring constant in my life.

My father was a good man. Few people who knew him would have thought any different. As a staunch atheist and a taciturn Scot he had little time for sitting around and talking. Jock was a doer. Cynics would say a do-gooder of course, which is not quite the same thing, but the fact remains that the list of local charities he worked tirelessly for without any reward was impressive.

I never really knew my dad. Because he was always out there doing good things for everyone, he was seldom at home. Mother used to complain about it.

Mostly, as I recall it, on the relatively few occasions when I was actually at home instead of away at boarding school or out on my bike, dad would be at home for an evening meal, during which time the six o'clock news would be on the radio. If, as sometimes happened, I asked him for more information about whatever the current preoccupations of the day were, he would invariably respond by saying 'listen, listen, listen'.

Dad was no teacher. The irony of the fact that I eventually became a teacher of music is not lost on me, especially now that I find myself day after day echoing that same annoying mantra: 'listen,

listen, listen! It would seem that Jock is determined to haunt me with those words for the rest of my days!

To judge from his diary, the early days of fatherhood were a joy to dad. But, as so often happens, the novelty must have worn off, because I don't really remember having a relationship with him, in the sense of meaningful talk; or what in today's parlance is known as 'quality time' together.

My feeling has always been that I was a disappointment to him. This of course is very common. Parents are by definition considerably older than their offspring, and it's difficult for them not to think they're wiser and therefore know what's best for a young person taking their final few steps on the road from childhood to adulthood. If they're lucky enough to have produced someone in their own image - someone with a similar outlook - then the transition can no doubt be handled relatively seamlessly. But this was not my experience.

Dad was a practical sort of man. I don't mean he was good at DIY. He was good at holding down a proper job, paying for whatever needed paying for and serving the local community. He was frugal, which was not surprising given his humble origins. Unfortunately he was a bit lacking in the kind of qualities one needs to get the most out of life. He didn't really have any friends and he didn't really do light-hearted. He wasn't good at being daft - messing about and just having a laugh. In fact I rarely heard him laugh. And I **never** heard him fart!

Whilst he was making all the right moves to set me up in a life similar to his, I suppose it could be said of me that I was away with the fairies - a place where I have continued to spend many a happy hour to this very day! Being of this temperament I failed magnificently to conform to any of the norms with which I was presented.

Given my own difficulties in growing up, perhaps it's not surprising that the idea of having children never really appealed. There's also the minor global issue of over-population: I'm doing my bit for the planet. Plus kids are annoying. And in any case life is by no means all it's cracked up to be.

Anyway, all of this was a very long time ago, and now I've arrived at the other end of the scale - the other problem one encounters with one's parents nowadays, namely what to do with them when they get too old to cope.

Helen's mother was widowed over five years ago. She lives alone in the same house she shared with Colin for many years, though she refuses to use the living room. Sylvia cannot get over the grief. She has crippling scoliosis which causes her severe pain and she doesn't really have enough to occupy her time. It's no wonder she's suffering from depression, as well as OCD.



These days Helen is run ragged trying to minister to her mother's every whim. I therefore spend the bulk of my spare time on my own. In other words, three people are having a hard time because one person is having a hard time. To say this is commonplace is a truism; so commonplace that not many people escape it in one form or another. It's the stuff of life.

There are challenges for all three of us in attempting to deal with the inevitable questions this situation throws up. Sylvia's plight speaks for itself. For me the main issue is trying to keep the big picture in perspective and not allow thoughts of resentment to creep in. As for Helen, well she is of course the one with the heaviest cross to bear. How to divide her time between Sylvia and Ray? How to cope with the fact that both of them are inclined to take a negative view of life? Not to mention the practical issue of finding time to fit everything in without compromising her own health.

*It's a balancing act that only a skilled dancer could perform.
Fortunately Helen is (or was) just that - a skilled dancer.*

In fact Helen is skillful at everything she turns her hand to. But of course I **would** say that: she's the love of my life, my raison d'etre, my sine qua non!

Inevitably, the difficulties we have to face are likely to get worse rather than better, but I'm up for that. My loins are suitably girded.

Deterioration and decay trump all, but that's no reason not to play the game.

Resilience

In order to get through what life throws at us we need to adopt an attitude of resilience. In this respect, those of us who were brought up in a world of cold showers, rugby in the snow and a good flogging if you stepped out of line, are probably better placed than some. In terms of readiness for the rough road ahead the lifestyles of modern kids leave something to be desired.

If you're looking for guidance as to how best to navigate your way through life's many challenges you could do worse than have a look at Stoicism. This is a sort of self-help philosophy which was based principally on the thinking of three men who lived in the first century after the birth of Christ, namely Epictatus, Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. Stoicism lives on today in cognitive behavioural therapy. In some respects it's also reminiscent of Buddhism.

Here is a synopsis of Stoicism, courtesy of Nils and Jonas Salzgeber. (www.njlifehacks.com).

Against the odds, old documents from Stoic teachers and practitioners have survived.

Meet the 3 Stoic principal leaders:

- **Marcus Aurelius:** The last good emperor of the Roman Empire, the most powerful man on earth, sat down each evening to reflect on the day and write down in his private diary. This private diary has been published as the book *Meditations* and it's the most significant source of Stoic Philosophy.

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•**Epictetus:** Born a slave, gone a legend. He founded his own school and taught many of Rome's greatest minds, one of which was Marcus Aurelius. His teachings have been written down by one of his students, Arrian - 'Discourses and Enchiridion'. 'Enchiridion' often gets translated as 'handbook' but it literally means 'ready at hand' - more like a sword than a handbook, always ready to deal with life's challenges.

•**Seneca:** Tutor and adviser to Nero (the Roman emperor who later forced Seneca to commit suicide) and Rome's best playwright and wisest power broker - the modern day entrepreneur if you will. Many of his personal letters survived and serve as a great source of Stoic philosophy.

• Together the documents from these principal leaders form the bedrock of Stoicism.

Stoicism was founded around 301 BC by Zeno of Citium in Athens, Greece. It was nearly forgotten for two millennia. Fortunately various texts from the 3 principle leaders Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and Seneca survived and now build the bedrock of the reviving philosophy.

Here are ten key principles of stoicism:-

1. Live in agreement with nature. What separates the human being from animals are our mental and social abilities. We are meant to apply reason to all our actions. We are able to think about our preferred action before we act. This is the Stoic goal of life: To live in agreement with our nature by applying reason to our actions.

2. Live by virtue - Virtue is the highest of all goods. No matter what happens to us, we can always try to apply reason and choose to live in accord with virtue. We should always try to do the right thing, it's all that we control.

3. Focus on what you can control, accept what you can't. All we control is our mind and the actions we choose to take. We can try our best, and accept all that happens because we don't control it. If we get disturbed by what we don't control, we become helpless victims.

4. Distinguish between good, bad, and indifferent things. The only good is virtue - living by wisdom, justice, courage, and self-discipline. The only bad is vice - folly, injustice, cowardice, and intemperance. Everything else is indifferent and does ultimately not matter for a happy life.

5. Take action like the true philosopher. The true philosopher actually lives by the ideas, he is a warrior of the mind. Today, many people learn and acquire knowledge only to store it in their mind. They forget the most important part: to live and practice the ideas.

6. Practice misfortune. This is a gem. Imagine potentially "bad" scenarios in advance and they won't catch you by surprise, and you'll be able to face them calmly and act according to virtue. Visualize shit before it happens and you'll be able to take it much more calmly.

7. Add a reserve clause to your actions. You can control your actions but not the outcome. You can give your best but maybe it won't bring the results you wanted. Choose to do your very best to succeed and simultaneously know and accept that the ultimate outcome is beyond your direct control.

8. Love everything that happens (amor fati). Accept rather than fight every little thing that happens. You don't decide everything that happens to you, in fact, you control very little. Imagine that everything that happens, happens specifically for you. Wish for situations to happen as they do and your life will go smoothly.

9. Turn obstacles into opportunities. How you perceive things is highly important. Everything that happens can be looked at as an opportunity. Even if it sucks, because you can always see it as a chance to practice virtue.

10. Be mindful. You must bring your full awareness in your actions. Otherwise you act out of emotions instead of your rational decisions. Observe yourself and go through your daily actions before you go to bed so that you will make better decisions the next day. Stoics often get misperceived as unemotional because they try not to act out of their emotions and they want to be indifferent to things they don't control. This is a classic misconception. Stoics feel emotions just like everybody else, but they are not enslaved by them. Stoics don't get overwhelmed by emotions and they act in a rational manner despite their emotions. It's not about not having emotions, it's about the domestication of one's emotions.

Everything you do should be good for mankind. It's being rational not for egoistic ideas but for the whole. We are all connected and if we do wrong, we wrong ourselves first and foremost. Therefore Stoics do not get annoyed by other people, for they know that the wrongdoer does not know any better. The Stoic tries to be an example rather than to seek revenge.

Ultimate beauty lies in your character. It's what you do and who you are that matter most. Your character is your best calling card and it will pay in the long term. The Stoics contemplate and compare themselves against the hypothetical ideal Stoic Sage. This is the perfectly good and wise personality that can help you in difficult situations. Just ask yourself, "What would the Sage do?" and you will know what's the best thing to do.

'Waste no time arguing about what a good person should be. Just be one'.

Marcus Aurelius

Now We Are One

In less than a lifetime an extraordinary thing has happened on Earth. We've all become connected. It's called globalisation. More than ever before, what happens in one place affects what happens in another. You might expect that globalisation would have brought many benefits, which it probably has, but like most kinds of change the benefits haven't come without negative side effects.

We've been gradually becoming more globalised over several centuries but the last fifty years or so have seen an unprecedented upsurge in the extent of our inter-connectedness. This of course is largely because of technological advancement - especially in communication and transport.

Disadvantages of globalisation include:-

1. The dilution of cultural diversity. (everywhere looks the same)
2. The increase in corporate power. (multinationals don't have a conscience)
3. The drowning of smallscale enterprises in a sea of multinationalism. (bastards!)

4. The emasculation of democracy. (you and I are out of the picture)
5. The increase in disparity between haves and have-nots. (bastards!)
6. The exacerbation of worldwide environmental damage (I'm still weeping and gnashing my teeth)
7. The facilitation of world wide crime. (change your passwords frequently)
8. The increase in worker exploitation. (give up work or go self-employed)
9. The acceleration in consumption of resources. (even less time left to finish this treatise!)
10. The increased risk of a pandemic. (better stop breathing!)

Advantages:-

1. We're talking.
2. World government is a little closer (only a million miles away now).

Growth

Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell --Edward Abbey

Growth - they never stop talking about it, the money people. Growth brings all things good and true. If we want to improve the world then we need growth. Growth is essential in order to keep the wheels of The Economy turning, and The Economy is the undisputed ruler of the human kingdom. Whatever it demands, **thou shalt provide**.

An imaginary conversation:-

Ray: So let me just check I've understood this right. The word 'growth' means getting bigger, doesn't it?

Professor of Economics: Quite right.

Ray: So on this single finite planet we are required to expand and expand and expand until... until what?

Professor: Growth creates jobs and makes everyone better off.

Ray: Yes I understand that. Sounds good. Only.. what about the fact that we only have one earth?

Professor: Well that's not really the point. You see growth is a very positive thing as it leads to higher incomes for workers and firms which means there will be greater tax revenues so the government can provide better public services.

Ray: Oh I get it. We'll all benefit then.

Professor: That's right. Growth means everyone benefits.

Ray: Is it a good thing that the population keeps growing?

Professor: Absolutely. The more people the better because that will mean more workers and therefore productivity will go up so everyone will get better things and more of them.

Ray: But surely there must be a limit? I mean the carrying-capacity of the planet isn't infinite. And anyway, what about the damage to the environment - surely that increases pretty much in line with population growth?

Professor: Well I'm not really the person to talk to about that. You see I'm an economist. You'd need to talk to an ecologist about that.

18. Last Days

The prefix 'eco' comes from a Greek word 'oikos' which meant 'house' or 'home'. The suffix 'nomy' is from the Greek word (nomos) for 'law'; and 'logy' is also derived from a Greek word (logos) meaning 'study' or 'reason'. So it could be said that whereas 'economy' means 'the rules of the house', 'ecology' means 'the study of the house': not much difference between them, then.

Actually, in spite of the apparent similarity, the two words have come to be used quite differently. To understand their contemporary meaning without losing sight of their origins we need to think of 'home' in the sense of the whole planet being our home.

To most people today, the term 'The Economy' is all about people in suits talking about money: how much you, me and the government have of the stuff and who has more or less of it than whoever else. 'Ecology', on the other hand, conjures up an image of a slightly nutty guy with a butterfly net crouching in some place where there are no houses, talking about birdies and beasties.



'Ecology' is a species of word that semantic evolution threw up relatively recently. It's now a proper science which you can study at university, even though it has struggled to gain a foothold in the ecosystem of the more established sciences. It's about how living things interact. This of course is very complex, but that doesn't mean we should shy away from ecology, or consider it in any way less worthy than its elders.

Like 'chaos theory', ecology sweeps with a broad brush, encompassing elements of all of the traditional branches of sciences.

Butterfly Mayhem

Chaos theory and ecology have something in common. It's called the 'butterfly effect'. This expression has become a popular idiom for the way in which an apparently insignificant series of trivial events can have massive ultimate consequences.

Here are three striking examples from human history:-

Abraham Lincoln dreams of his death - 1865

Ten days before Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, he had a dream in which he attended his own funeral in the White House. Despite being extremely disturbed by this dream, he decided to take a trip to the theatre with hardly any security to protect him.

His assassination at the theatre marked a pivotal point in American history as all the work Lincoln had undertaken to free African American slaves was rejected by his successor - Andrew Johnson. Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is still regarded as the heart of America's national identity, and it is certainly true to say that if he had not have gone to that theatre, he would have gone on to do many other great things.

One man's kindness caused the Holocaust

Henry Tandey was in France in 1918 fighting for the British Army when he decided to spare one young German's life. This decision was to cost the world in ways no one could have ever imagined. Tandey was fighting to gain control of Marcoing, and saw one injured German soldier trying to flee. Because he was injured Tandey could not bear to kill him so let him go.

The man's name was Adolf Hitler.

A rejected letter caused the Vietnam War

In 1919, Woodrow Wilson received a letter from a young man called Ho Chi Minh who asked to meet him to discuss independence from France for Vietnam. At the time, Ho Chi Minh was quite open-minded and ready to talk, but Wilson ignored the letter which angered the young Ho Chi Minh. He went on to study Marxism, he also met Trotsky and Stalin, and became a staunch communist.

Later, Vietnam did win independence from France, but the country was split into a communist north and non-communist south, with Ho Chi Minh leading the North. In the 1960's, North Vietnamese guerrillas were attacking the south, and the USA stepped in. Something that would not have happened if Wilson had read Ho Chi Minh's letter.

(From a post by Janey Davies of Shoppersbase.com)

When we pause to reflect upon the way our own individual lives have turned out, many instances of the butterfly effect come to light. It's easy to see that things would have turned out very differently if various unforeseen comings together had not taken place. You might like to try this thought experiment, if you are not already one of those who makes a regular habit of it. It can be very illuminating!

For every time the word 'ecology' is heard in the modern world, the very similar word 'economy' must be heard a thousand times. What does this tell us? Surely the answer is 'everything'. Everything we ever needed to know about ourselves but were too stupid to ask. We have comprehensively lost our way in a jungle of sand and stone of our own making. Lost sight of trees, lost sight of joy, lost sight of simplicity, lost sight of truth... the list goes on ad infinitum.

Ecology is the study of the complex web of relationships between the myriad forms of life in the whole of Nature's Kingdom - a kingdom of which we were once but a humble part. The Economy, on the other hand, is about something very different. It's about what we perceive to be ours. Unfortunately for us, we have come to think of the whole planet as ours. It all **belongs** to us. Even ecologists themselves often use of the term '**our planet**'.

Is there a precedent for this? Has any other species ever taken such an arrogant view? No, of course not. It's only us. We've seen what we're like: the greed, the vanity, the lunacy.

Remember St. Paul's words all those years ago? If he were here today he might be tempted to say 'I told you so!' Just to remind you: according to him, these are among the signs of the coming of the Last Days:-

Men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, unthankful, unholy, false accusers, fierce, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God'.

It's been demonstrated time and time again - human nature always tends to err on the optimistic side. It's therefore likely that the majority will incline to the view that the doomsayers have it all wrong - human ingenuity will save the day; we shall find a way to forge a safe passage between the icebergs that lie ahead.

There are however quite a few of us who are full of dread; who think that unless the captain issues orders to stop fiddling with the deck chairs, and make a drastic and immediate change of direction instead, then we are all heading for a watery grave.

Oh, but I forgot! We don't actually have a captain!

In contemplating the finale of the human story, and the prospect of planet earth reverting to a state of harmony in our wake, I suddenly find myself thinking of something which was a common sight in my childhood: a tin of Lyle's Golden Syrup. It showed a picture of a dead lion in which a swarm of bees had made their nest. Although I was less than ten years old at the time, I can easily recall how fascinated I was by the beguiling inscription, which you can probably just about make out out beneath the lion:

'Out of the strong came forth sweetness'



An appropriately eloquent paradox to mark the end of our journey

and

a fitting epitaph for the two-legged predator who succumbed to the power of his own strength

RH

24th August 2018