

Spiritual Progress and Spiritual Wealth

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There is a scene in the movie *Dances with Wolves* where the Lakota elders are discussing the migration of white people into their country. The Lakota were concerned because they knew that the whites had a reputation for being dishonest, wantonly violent, with a casual disregard for nature. The tribe's holy man, Kicking Bird, captures the mood of the meeting when he says: "The whites are a poor people and they cannot fight, but there are too many of them." When he says "poor", he does not mean that the whites lack material things. He means they are *spiritually* poor and they lack what the Lakotas call "power". Although Kicking Bird believed that, other things being equal, the Lakotas would win every time, he knew that the whites used devious means and modern weapons to fight battles, as well as superior numbers. He assumed they had to do this precisely because they were spiritually poor and lacked true "power"

A few years later, when devious means, modern weapons and superior numbers had overcome the tribes of North America, the meaning of spiritual poverty became all too apparent. Gone were the health, happiness, dignity, wisdom, deeper meaning, and ecological living that were common among many of the tribes before the whites arrived. In their place came poor health, loss of dignity and loss of meaning. It is surely no accident that, once they had been overcome by "white" culture, alcoholism, obesity, addictions, depression, suicide and sexually transmitted diseases became epidemic in the tribes and that many of them have now resorted to running casinos, for the want of anything better.

The experience of the North American tribes has a lot to teach us. If Kicking Bird were alive today, he would note that poor health, unhappiness and the absence of dignity, wisdom, deeper meaning and ecological living are widespread throughout the world, and he would not be surprised to learn that alcoholism, obesity, drugs, depression, addiction, suicide and sexually transmitted diseases are epidemic in "white" society. However, unlike many of us, he would attribute all this to *spiritual poverty*. And he would have to search long and hard to find a wise elder or a warrior with true power. In modern society, wisdom and true power are conspicuous by their absence. That is because they are not valued or even recognised. We are all paying a high price for this.

It is not without significance that the problems of the modern world today are exactly the same as those experienced by the tribes after they were overwhelmed by the modern

world. The people of the so-called “developed world” today are no different from the North American tribes. If there is spiritual poverty, they suffer a whole range of problems. However, since the modern world values the material much higher than the spiritual, it assumes that the big problems of our time have their roots in material poverty. Although it is true that material deprivation may be the cause of some problems in some communities, it is worth noting that the tribes were at their happiest and healthiest when they were materially poorer than nearly everyone in the world today. Their problems began only when they were overcome by the modern world.

The implications of this are immense, for it suggests that money and material things are unlikely to solve the world’s problems. It suggests that the solutions lie instead in replacing spiritual poverty with spiritual wealth. Before we discuss what this is likely to mean in practice, let us look at the nature of modernity, because it was modernity that defeated the tribes. Modernity seems to have a lot to do with spiritual poverty.

What is Modernity?

Modernity is the set of values and beliefs that have shaped, and continue to shape, the modern world. I suspect that the values and beliefs that prevail in the world today have their deeper roots in *scientism*. Scientism is the belief that only science can provide the truth and that all metaphysical, religious and philosophical claims that contradict science must therefore be rejected. That single belief has removed or marginalised huge amounts of deeper meaning from humanity. When coupled with science’s claim that the universe began for no reason and that life emerged by chance on this planet, it is a miracle that any deeper meaning remains. One of the characteristics of modern societies is undoubtedly *loss of deeper meaning*.

Modern societies are also characterised by *loss of wisdom*. If science rejects the accumulated wisdom of the ages in favour of its own empirically derived body of knowledge, then, since science is the dominant form of knowledge today, wisdom is effectively pushed to the margins and no longer informs our lives in the ways that it used to inform the lives of the Lakota and other non-modern societies. In modern societies, we have to prove everything, even the obvious. In non-modern societies, people simply knew without having to have anything proved to them. It should come as no surprise to us that, with wisdom and meaning pushed to the margins, we have become the most dangerous and destructive form of life on the planet and that our behaviour now threatens the very existence of all life here. Nor should we be surprised that older people, who in non-modern cultures were the respected wise elders, have been also pushed to the margins, many of them right out of sight into care homes. A wise society values its elders and the group. A modern society produces the cult of the young and the individual. In a wise society, the stock of wisdom increases. They wise up. It seems that modern societies have a tendency to dumb down.

I believe that loss of deeper meaning and loss of wisdom are at the root of the big problems of our time. Their loss has led directly and indirectly to the defining characteristics of modern culture today. In my view, these are:

Economism – this is the tendency to view the world through the lens of economics, to regard a country as an economy rather than as a society, and to believe that economic considerations and values are the most important ones. This tendency is clearly evident throughout society and is a strong influence in government and political circles. It is significant that in non-modern societies economics is a *means* to an end, whereas modern societies have made economics the end itself, in the sense that perpetual economic growth seems to be the central purpose of most countries today.

Consumerism – this is the attempt to acquire meaning, happiness and fulfilment through the acquisition and the possession of material things. The new religion is undoubtedly shopping and the new cathedrals are the huge shopping malls, where the modern world spends more and more of its time. Although people report that they get temporary satisfaction from shopping, they say it does not bring lasting happiness, and they need to do even more shopping to try to compensate for that. It is a dangerous downward spiral.

Technocracy - because modern science is reductionist in nature – and therefore reduces knowledge-gathering to narrow fields, it has led to another characteristic of modern culture - *technocracy* - in which specialists have high status and make the rules. In non-modern societies, it is the intelligent generalists, with a wide range of experience and knowledge, whose status is high and whose advice is sought whenever there is a problem. The solutions proposed by wise generalists tend to be very different from, and more sustainable than, the solutions proposed by specialists. A society ruled by specialist experts is unsustainable.

Secularism – this is the belief that religion should have no place in civic affairs and government. Secularism has driven wisdom and meaning even further underground. I think that it is significant that in the many “science and religion” dialogues taking place all over the world, the unspoken deal is that science gets to provide the facts, while religion gets to provide the morality. The Lakota would regard this as bizarre, because they understood that the great truths of life come from deep religious practice and accumulated wisdom.

Postmodernism – this is a misnomer because modernism is still very much with us. Postmodernism is the belief that there are no universal truths. It is a natural outcome of science and scientism. If, as science claims, the universe and humanity have no intrinsic meaning, because they are the results of chance, then there can indeed be no universal truths, only relative truths that emerge in each particular context. For most people, outside the rarefied worlds of art and literary criticism, this is confusing and unsatisfactory. It simply does not ring true.

None of this is to suggest that the modern world is all bad. Kicking Bird would no doubt agree that it has brought given us many good things. He liked Kevin Costner’s telescope,

for example. However, he would be seriously concerned at the implications of the following comparison:

We have more...

Money and things
Speed
Choice
Stimulation
Schools and universities
Doctors and hospitals
Activity
Telecommunications and talking
Goods and services
Entertainment
Police, prisons and security services

We have less...

Happiness
Time
Discernment
Calm
Education in the true sense
Health
Genuine progress
Relationships and listening
Self-reliance
Intelligent culture
Security

Trying to Fill a Spiritual Vacuum

By marginalising wisdom and removing deeper meaning, modernity has unwittingly created a spiritual vacuum. As a consequence, many people feel that something very big is missing from their lives. They may not be able to put this into words, but they have a big hole inside them that cries out to be filled. They experience this hole as anxiety, constant discomfort, fear, insecurity, a sense of pointlessness, or anger. Understandably, they try to fill the hole to make themselves feel better, and they do this in a huge variety of ways. They overeat, they overshop, they overindulge, they watch a lot of television, they engage in a lot of activity (no surprise that being busy is regarded as a virtue today), or they use sex and drugs as pain-killers. These behaviours, unhealthy in themselves, often lead to other forms of ill health, such as alcoholism, obesity, addiction, depression, suicide and sexually transmitted diseases, as well as the health problems that follow from these, such as diabetes and heart disease. So long as a spiritual vacuum remains, people will continue to behave in these ways. The plain fact is that modernity is bad for our health.

There is an equivalent for society as a whole. When society as a whole experiences its familiar social and economic problems (ill health, poverty, crime, anti-social behaviour, pollution, congestion, etc.), its typical response is to try to relieve the “symptoms” rather than address whatever it is that is causing these symptoms to appear in the first place. That is neither effective nor sustainable. Treating the symptoms may make things better for a while. It may even give the impression that the problems have been cured. But if the causes are not addressed, the problems will inevitably reappear, often worse.

As a society, we treat ill health, inequality, poverty, crime, and threats to the environment as if they were the problems themselves, when in fact they are symptoms of a deeper

malaise. If we want to solve these things once and for all, we have to understand the nature of that deeper malaise and address it. Crime, for example, is typically addressed by recruiting more police, building more prisons and imposing tougher sentences, all because criminal behaviour is seen as the problem rather than as a symptom of something deeper. The same is true of ill health. Society's main focus is on the medical treatment of symptoms after people have fallen ill. It would save a lot of time, money and suffering if our main focus was on promoting good health. And if people did slip through a better health promotion net, it would make much more sense to identify and treat the underlying causes of illness. What is true for crime and health is equally true for our other social and economic problems. Prevention is better than cure, but if you have to cure, make sure you are curing the root causes. Having said this, the symptomatic approach is undoubtedly appropriate when the symptoms have become life threatening or otherwise intolerable. But we should remind ourselves that it is we who have allowed them to reach that point.

The benefits of addressing the deeper causes of problems are so considerable that it has to be asked: why are people not already doing this? There seem to be several reasons: they may doubt that seemingly complex, intractable problems can have simple solutions. Yet the simplest way is often the most intelligent, effective way. They may believe that their (symptomatic) approach is working. It all depends what they mean by "working". Things may seem to be working when the symptoms are reduced or removed (e.g. more people off the streets in prison, shorter waiting lists for operations), but the symptoms will just come back if the deeper causes are not addressed. Perhaps the most important reason is that the process of going deeper into anything often throws up issues that many people prefer to avoid. For example, it usually involves acknowledging that you may be part of the problem rather than part of the solution. A lot of people would prefer not to go there.

Just as "space-filling" behaviours are not the answer to individual anxieties and concerns, "symptomatic relief" is not the answer to the problems of society as a whole.

So, what are the answers?

Stated at its simplest, the solution to our problems, be they individual or collective, is to allow wisdom and deeper meaning to re-emerge into all aspects of our lives. I wonder how many people would agree with me that, given the right conditions, wisdom and meaning will re-emerge because wisdom is a natural characteristic of human beings and because meaning is an inherent quality of the universe? In my view, wisdom and meaning are absent from modern society only because they have been repressed, attacked or ignored. It follows that they will re-emerge only when we address the forces that cause this repression, hostility and ignorance. This is clearly a huge undertaking. However, I think that it is possible to outline some of the general conditions that will favour their re-emergence.

Encourage and Allow People to be True to Themselves

If we believe that wisdom is innate, then it follows that if we wish wisdom to re-emerge, we must first create the conditions that allow it to do so. This has to begin by allowing

every individual to be who they really are. In Lakota culture, this is exactly what happened. So long as you did not harm people or nature, you were permitted, indeed encouraged, to do and say more or less anything you wanted. All opinions were listened to and valued. Not all of them were acted on, but no one was afraid to speak their truth.

If we want wisdom to re-emerge, we must ensure that everyone feels free to express what they really feel and believe, and be fully who they are, without any negative repercussions. This alone would be a giant step towards the re-emergence of wisdom. Too often, people feel afraid to speak their truth, because they worry that it might affect their job security or offend the voters or the stock market.

Bring Genuine Education Back into Society

Another step in the right direction would be the introduction of education in its true sense of bringing out the best and uniqueness of each individual. Although we continue to use the word “education” to describe what happens in schools, colleges and universities, the fact is that there is not much true education around these days. To a large extent, it has been replaced by its opposite, schooling – which is the process of shaping people to believe certain things and behave in certain ways. There are, of course, some notable exceptions, but these are the exceptions that prove the rule. When schooling is combined with economism, the “education system” ends up being little more than a training in how to perform well in, or contribute to, the economy. It is high time we replaced schooling with education.

Encourage and Value Wise Eldership

Older people have been pushed to the margins of modern society, while the young occupy centre stage. Many TV programmes give us the impression that older people have been airbrushed out of existence. Far from being seen as our main source of wisdom, older people are often portrayed as a burden on society or merely as a market for retirement services. Is it any wonder that so many older people feel unvalued and isolated? In too many instances, it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy that as one gets older, one gets less healthy, more dependent, and less valuable. The fact that so much potential wisdom is being lost as older people are marginalised is one of the tragedies of our times. We could, if we wished, enable the re-emergence of a vast amount of wisdom simply by raising the status and value of older people.

Encourage Self-reliance in Individuals and Communities

One of the hallmarks of modern societies is their increasing dependency on business, government and experts for goods, services and knowledge that, in many cases, individuals and communities would be better providing for themselves. As a rule of thumb, dependency is unhealthy and self-reliance is healthy. The Lakota and other tribes were self-reliant, empowered communities. They were living cultures, as distinct from vicarious cultures. They recognised the central importance of basic human capacities, such as caring, living healthily, cooking, healing, educating, creating, and entertaining,

and would not dream of having these things provided as commodities and services by government and big business. To a significant extent, wisdom and meaning arise naturally out of self-reliance. Insofar as modern society is, increasingly, a society dependent on business, government and experts for the basics of living, it inhibits wisdom and meaning. One of the ways of enabling wisdom and meaning is to encourage as much self-reliance as possible. In effect, that would require a new economics, with correspondingly new values and relationships.

Adopt a New Economics

A frequently heard definition of the world's dominant socio-economic philosophy, neoliberalism, is that it values money and property higher than people and nature. That is in complete contrast to the value-systems of the Lakota and other non-modern societies. They lived healthy, dignified lives, in harmony with nature and each other. We live largely unhealthy, undignified lives, often in conflict with nature and each other. So, why on earth are we so attached to a philosophy that causes so much disharmony and conflict? We are attached to it because its myths are so powerful, and because these myths are skilfully advocated by government, business, the media and by sections of academia. Simply stated, the myths are:

- The market knows best. It should not be interfered with, and it should govern as many aspects of our lives as possible
- Private ownership is always more efficient, therefore more desirable, than public ownership
- Capital is a virtue and deserves the lion's share of the rewards. By contrast, labour is a cost and that cost should be kept to a minimum
- Consumption, too, is a virtue and a path to happiness
- The economy must never stop growing. Therefore all of us need to be ever more competitive and work harder and harder
- The threats to the natural environment are not as serious as some people say. Indeed, new technology will enable us to circumvent these threats without having to change our behaviour
- The rising tide will lift all boats. Thus, economic growth will eventually reduce material poverty and inequality and alleviate problems that are assumed to have their roots in material poverty, such as crime and disease

These are the principal myths that keep neoliberalism in place. They are supported by a range of misleading indicators - such as GDP, corporate accounts, and stock prices - that give us the impression that we are doing well, when the opposite may be true.

The reality is very different. In reality, there is growing inequality within and between nations. Important aspects of our culture are being dumbed down in the interests of creating mass markets. Many cherished parts of our lives are being commercialised in the interests of private profit. Neoliberalism is eating away at some of our basic human capacities, such as our capacity to care, cooperate, and create. Work is an unwanted drudge for many people. We have a value-system that encourages and rewards personal ambition, so why are we surprised that crime, stress and dishonesty are on the increase? The natural environment is more seriously threatened than ever. We have an “education” system that is little more than a schooling to produce a few entrepreneurs and leaders and an army of compliant workers, compliant consumers and compliant voters. To cap it all, we have political and other institutions that serve the interests of the economy rather than the interests of society.

Neoliberalism is *disempowering and dehumanising*. We urgently need to replace it with a philosophy that values people and nature much higher than money and property, and that is empowering and humanising. That would be a New Economics. As many will know, a New Economics is already being developed and practised by many individuals and communities around the world.

Conclusion

I am acutely aware that I have covered a lot of ground at some speed. Inevitably, I have been unable to go into much detail. My intention at this stage is simply to draw attention to the fact that modernity is not a health-producing or happiness-producing culture. It lacks wisdom and meaning, and it is spiritually poor. If we are ever to solve the many problems of the modern world, then one thing is clear to me. We have to replace spiritual poverty with spiritual wealth. This means many things, but ultimately it means allowing wisdom and meaning to re-emerge into our private and public lives. The sooner we do that, the better for all of us.

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