

Australian Conference on Lutheran Education

Contemporary society – an Australian view
[Living in character building times]

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[Note: The following is based on Geraldine's notes and does not reflect fully her whole presentation]

Reflection:

A century from now, what shall be said of our journey in these times? And who shall the shapers have been? Who shall have shaped the future more? The hopeful dreamers who were strong enough to suffer for the dream? Or the fearful pessimists who were convinced that dreaming and hope are for sleepers only not for those awake to the age?

A century from now, shall hope and humour have been strong enough to enable living with unanswerable questions?

[From "The Journey" by Lilian Smith]

I read a thoughtful piece the other day in a journal of international Catholic opinion called 'The Tablet' about work done by a priest called Father Richard Rohr, an American, working a lot with men and boys, because he sees quite a void there, spiritually and emotionally.

He explained his enthusiasm for something that does not necessarily thrill a lot of modern thinkers – namely initiation rites. He even confessed to the odd bit of drum beating on men's retreats, the ultimate cartoon-illustration of masculinity for some feminists – apparently there is some semi-primal connection between drumbeat and the stirring of a male soul! (I may even begin to understand it, having thrilled to the odd percussion explosion at a symphony concert.)

But what he went on to say also fascinated me. He believed that older cultures had an ethic for the two halves of a life – for the ascendant and the descendant. And that a prime function of rites-of-passage was to lead the young man towards the edge of his easy skills, his easy mastery, to show him the limits that accompany all human beings of the descendant phase. That you looked into these limits, saw the yawning gap they presented; did not (could not) avert your gaze ... accepted, humbly, the fact of it ... and then came back, down the other side, safely home.

Importantly this was not a solitary journey. The young man was well-butressed, in Father Rohr's plan, well-fortified and not hung-out-to-dry; not defeated, that is not the plan, but wiser for knowing an inalienable truth: that humans are finite and that, as ever, the truth shall set you free.

I might add, these modern initiation ceremonies were emotional wilderness experiences not situated in some impenetrable desert, with cup-hooks inserted into soft tissue parts!

Essentially he argued that the West had not developed a good ethic for the descendant portion of life ... and that it was producing ennui and drift and bewilderment among a wide range of people, beyond boys. I think he is on to something, and I sense it as the backdrop to your request to me to assess these character building times and consider how we refresh ourselves, at macro and micro levels, in our daily, privileged lives – where we do live amidst plenty and we do (by virtue of being here) have choices over our fate.

So by reference to some of the best epidemiological research conducted during the last fifteen years on British civil servants in English Government departments undergoing change

... those who have greater proportional control over their fate measured considerably higher on a range of wellness scales, both self-judged and externally. Being down-the-food-chain in a group who does not care to draw you in, is not a healthy place to be.

And in passing, may I offer the observation that I very rarely see women, especially thrive in organisations or groups that are chaotic. Probably most men do not either but some do, some love it, are quite stimulated/aroused by the turmoil of constant change, where one day's experience can not reasonably predict the next at any level. 'Keeps you on your toes', creative-tension-flows and all that – well it does not work for me!

Anyway, back to my thesis about the liberation of recognising limits in life. Maybe we are at something of a tipping point in our community, for obvious and less obvious reasons.

Our security and values are being challenged ... maybe the first is undesirable but the second could be full of merit; and possibly this could not eventuate without large scale, real tension.

Three things have occurred in the external world which I think contribute to the sense that we are passing through a highly significant period in terms of the relationship between people's public existence (often expressed through work) and private meaning.

Temperamentally, I am an optimist, despite some big challenges of late, I am inclined to quite a bit of hope. Here are my three contributing factors; first, the declining birth rate, whose parameters are at last genuinely moving onto the front pages of newspapers; second, September 11; third, the end of the 20-year business bull-run, with its related collapses and puncturing of myths.

To the first. As a working woman of my age, who began full-time work at the age of 21 and has worked ever since, though with time out for my two children, I have wondered more or less throughout that period: what will be the spur to induce genuine reflection on the way we work, with its assumptions of being 'at your desk' and that 'someone was home looking after the children', when they increasingly were not.

Well after a couple of false dawns ... like the arrival of the dot.com era which did not after all change perceptions about divisions of labour ... that spur has arrived via a visible, empirical measurement: the falling fertility rate.

It is up there for all to see, proof that huge social change has occurred within the last 30-40 years and that this must bring in its wake, big attitudinal changes. Changes you cannot easily sketch in advance, except very much in the broad, which really does not help much. As it turned out, the kernel of these shifts would revolve around questions of timing, choice, the trade-off between the joys of family life versus paid work, questions of obligation to others versus self.

The presumption had generally been that when it came to divvy-ing up our cup of energy and commitment, that family and what you might call succession planning would essentially win out over all else on offer. That people in the breeding ages would know they had a finite time to tackle this vital activity and duty ... and do so.

In fact, it did not happen like that with significant numbers of people. As the 80s and 90s unfolded, with the emphasis on competition, market-led trends, globalisation, family breakdown and re-formation, the sense of inevitability around child-bearing and child-conceiving began to alter.

Something economists call opportunity cost ... the result of weighting up the costs of what is lost and what is gained by a particular action, in this case having children in the midst of busy working lives ... (the opportunity cost) started to be perceived by those very people in the breeding demographic as tipping against children and for delaying ... maybe not for work, but definitely for delaying procreation.

Interestingly, of very recent times, led really by people like Melbourne writer Anne Manne,

men are now being included in this discussion. There is now growing curiosity as to the impact of potential fathers' decisions as well as the potential mothers, both their willingness to have babies and at what age and their willingness to commit to long-term relationships. I particularly applaud this turn of events. It is plainly obvious that it takes two to form babies and it was simply counter-productive to attempt to single out one gender as the main actor. Now that we are starting to ask better questions, we might get some better answers.

But the person who can really take the credit for putting this on the agenda is ANU demographer, Peter McDonald, along with Bob Birrell, Centre for Population Research. Once Peter began publicising the rates of decline, and talking so provocatively, a few of us in the media first took notice, then gradually others in government and business, like Jeff Kennett (remember!) joined in.

I knew at some stage it would explode onto the scene ... and it has, such that we are genuinely starting to wrestle with the factors influencing decision-making. So I, for one, am ecstatic that we have reached this point, which I have been yearning for around fifteen years.

We live in an age where measurements ... let alone pictures ... can speak much louder than words. And the fact that the birth rate is now down to 1.74 children per woman and that on latest figures, I think it is reckoned that almost 30% of women (and I not sure what percentage of men) will not have any children, has really focussed various minds.

The second contributor, which is related to the third: September 11, it is too early for any good hard data on this yet. But I have had the instinct for a while that one of its vivid legacies was to re-introduce the notion of limits in life, at both a macro and micro level.

It terrified people, of course, exposed them to insecurity that bewildered them, as we saw an example in that case of the new magistrate, already going through some personally difficult times, an ex policeman, who admitted that the brutal attack on the mighty United States empire had absolutely thrown him, a mere citizen of Australia. And that this had subsequently influenced him in making fairly inappropriate remarks from the bench, remarks that have eventually forced him to step down from his new job.

It angered people too and simply confused them ... lots of reactions. But Joanna Murray-Smith, the Melbourne writer and playwright, said during one Life Matters program a couple of years back that she believed it had hastened an already-developing 'ennui with materialism'; that it was sufficiently traumatic to cause people to behave as they do after a death in the close family circle; that is, to re-evaluate the trade-offs they are making in life.

She writes about the middle class, of course, primarily, and her thinking was clearly that of an educated middle class, though not necessarily prosperous person. But she believed the personal insecurities that followed September 11, had encouraged people to venture into the territory of "Is this really where I want to be? Is it worth it? Is it of value?" ... places you often did not go when things were roaring ahead, when the next deal or possibility beckoned, if only you were quick enough to act.

Thirdly, the spectacular demise of this bull-run, the macro and micro incompetencies and follies on display with things like HRH, One-Tel, etc, in my opinion, invited lots of us to consider something both constraining and yet, in an odd way, strangely liberating: that useful ambition has limits; and the secret is learning what they are; that hierarchies will exist in life and the secret is doing whatever is necessary to keep them as fair as possible; that work is a means to an end only. That balance is, as ever, core business for those seeking meaning; and this word may not have lofty overtones these days as it tended to in the 70s and 80s, but may be seen as good immunisation against say, depression or suicide, by-products we are much more aware of nowadays.

There is absolutely nothing new about all this, I hear you say. Our parents, many with nothing more than a couple of years of secondary education, had no choice but to accept all this. And my grandparents emigrated from Ireland in order to have any choice at all!

But people of my age group, the recipients of Menzies' huge boost to tertiary education in Australia, and the cohort immediately following, slowly came to believe that maybe the sky was the limit.

Especially in the last ten years ... and heavily aided by propaganda from American capitalism ... a mentality of seize-the-day grew steadily, a sense that we were into paradigm-shift territory, where new rules were being written, aided by new technology; where new positioning was on offer; where only the deliberately resistant or inert ... or dull among us ... would fail to take advantage of chances, yes, to dream new thoughts about golden eras of individual growth and prosperity, if only we could free ourselves from imposed restrictions.

It was a heady time, hard to hold onto other views, like arguing for a job-share or for the sovereignty of reasonable breaks between long shifts. In the Anglo-Saxon countries especially, we have just not been well-equipped to argue the case for moderation, for maintenance of boundaries that actively seek a balance between the market and the private and community sphere. They seem to be much more capable in the European context.

Then, as I say, came September 11, and the final burst of the bull-run, events of epic proportions, and suddenly, the overpowering inevitability of limits came back into sharp focus. History had indeed not ended.

I would argue that these vents provide us now and for the immediate future, with an opportunity to re-assert the need for structural limits within the workplace to be clearly articulated; to try to think through codes which establish that healthy modern communities need healthy regulations; that they will need to be constantly alert to shifting sensibilities and will recognise the tension between individual entrepreneurship and collective responsibility, acknowledging that both are necessary ingredients in a mixed economy.

OK: so that is a broad-scale invitation to engagement; to, I think, a pretty exhilarating challenge to us, as a community and individuals, particularly people like you, involved in healing and support.

But: notwithstanding my earlier observation about certain leading-edge adaptation to change, I want to acknowledge that many, many of us do feel like we have been on a roller-coaster ride for the last twenty years ... and we would prefer it to be slower, to have a little more peace of mind.

A very wise psychologist seated beside me at (yet another) dinner party commented to me that many people felt 'flooded'; and the natural response to this flooded sense was to set up boundaries. He hypothesised that this might explain some of the politics of our times, some of the averting-of-our-gazes from unpleasant truths; some of the fascination with bread-and-circuses.