

A Sample of Chapter 20

Should the next generation have life better than we have had?

This is the 'better life' fallacy. Parents often want the future world of their children to be an improvement on the challenges that previous generations had to work through. **There is a flaw in that aspiration.**

Part of the reason that many parents have been successful is because they had to battle through hard times, to get knocked over in the disasters of life and to pick themselves up and start again.

It is natural for a parent to want the children not to suffer difficult times, to learn lessons from their parents on how to avoid hardship – but in the process

...

The children are possibly missing out on what they need most; resilience and persistence.

History is full of successful business people bequeathing their assets to the next generation, only for the businesses to fail and for the assets to be lost.ⁱ The missing ingredients of passion for the work, the adaptable smarts and the toughness to battle on through adversity are not necessarily passed on.

The challenges of modern society are complex and the interrelationships can rarely be reduced to the simplistic commentary that features on conventional media or government talking points.

Resilience is a key character trait for survival.

Part of that toughness is the understanding that it is alright to fail and to carry on. That message needs to form a greater part of the social commentary – because that is what life is actually about,ⁱⁱ not the aspirational perfectionist ideal of advertisers or spin merchants or 'happy-ever-after' movies.

People, young people in particular, need a sense of belonging and worth to lead healthy lives. Without that, they will seek other ways of gaining their self-esteem or perhaps retreat into substance abuse to forget it all.

The moral position, as a society, should be to recognise the fallacies for what they are. The adult role should be to help children and adolescents to understand and to not accept the waves of sales pitches and misinformation that proliferate in modern society.

Society is full of inequalities and disenchantments. Not all share in the success or prosperity – as the disparity of wealth illustrates.

Even those who are lucky enough to be born into a free, developed country or have inherited family resources or had the time to engage in fun activities ... even they are frequently confused and disoriented by the meaning of life.

Mental health referrals and sessions with psychologists are more common amongst the privileged than they are with those battling through the survival challenges of life.ⁱⁱⁱ

The late comedian, Robin Williams, said that 'Cocaine addiction is God's way of telling you you're making too much money'.^{iv}

At the other end of the wealth scale, petrol sniffing and alcohol abuse amongst young people are major problems in communities where the youth see no relevance or way forward from their lot in life. It happens from Cambodia to Nepal to Nicaragua to Australia.^v

The moral position must be to recognise that these major social problems exist. They are symptoms of the catalogue of challenges which are often the most avoided questions of society.

Inequity, lack of opportunity and a continuation of 'same old, same old' are unlikely to resolve the dilemmas – nor is there much assistance from the stalemate of government decision-making processes, despite the constant rhetoric.

Political diversity should energise the drive to achieve policy outcomes – not stifle them by oppositional theatre or a handwringing lack of practical leadership.

To return to the question of, *Should the next generation have life better than we have had?*

Probably it is a natural human response to have a sense of hope, of optimism for the future, a belief that things can be achieved. The birth of children encourages the hope for new and successful lives as part of the natural succession of life. Clearly, parents should want the best for their offspring.

The alternative is the pessimistic view that we'll all be ruined.^{vi}

So, let us consider: **what makes us assume that the next generation should have life better?**

Does it come from the waves of social persuasion about growth – economic growth, in particular?

Self-help books pledge access to wealth and happiness. Silver-tongued economic commentators and political treasurers gush their single-message mantras that growth is the only solution to the national and global lifestyle problems.

It is like the irresistible call of the Sirens in Greek mythology,^{vii} beckoning and enticing sailors towards them with false promise, when in actuality they will crash onto the rocks.

Does it come from years of experiencing a steady progression in lifestyle in many developed countries since the 1950s and 1960s?

This is more fuel to suggest that the economic commentators must be right in promoting their way forward – and that they have been, certainly for some people, in recent decades. But that path may well be a progression of depletion that is approaching an end.

Or does it come from a belief system that emphasises hope – that things will always get better or that people will be able to afford more?

Sadly, while hope is a salve for the worriers – that someone else will solve the problem – hope is not a strategy. At some stage, humans have to consciously either approve or change the direction.

There is an alternative approach to that thought process.

Could it be that we might be content with sufficiency?

We could lead happy fulfilling lives, with a bit of routine maintenance, to keep our comfortable lifestyle – **without endless growth**.

That is heresy to the current economists and politicians but sustainable living is a rational solution to many of the ills facing the world.

Could we make it our moral priority to help others?

If everyone looked after others, then other people, by the definition, would be looking out for you.

Being kind to others and sharing – isn't that what a family and a society is all about?

The positive focus on assisting others would take the focus away from self interest. Team work is a characteristic of communities that need to co-operate for survival and to make their moral decisions on behalf of the wider group – **to not be isolated islands in a sea of urban anonymity**.

Have we forgotten the lessons of history, that our material possessions can be gone tomorrow and we would go from a position of self-reliant comfort to being dependent on the kindness of others?

In the 1930s in Europe and later in the western Soviet bloc, **Jewish people** were isolated in the community, then all their possessions were taken.^{viii} They were moved into ghettos and then internment camps. For six million of them, they were then killed during the Nazi occupation in World War II.^{ix} They had been wealthy business people or professionals such as doctors, lawyers, teachers and academics. They had been tradespeople, mothers, fathers, grandparents and children. It made no difference ... and it all happened relatively quickly over less than a decade. They lost everything, including their lives.

In 2008, the **Global Financial Crisis** (GFC) was the largest financial collapse since the Great Depression of the 1920s. The Wall Street Journal estimated the losses to be \$15 trillion USD.^x Millionaires lost their millions, ordinary people lost homes, their employment and life savings. The effect was worldwide.

Some of the speculators and regulators went to jail but the investors' money – plus any illusory valuations within Ponzi schemes^{xi} – was gone.

It happened fast. Why?

Luci Ellis of the Reserve Bank of Australia noted:^{xii}

'Perhaps the most basic underlying driver of the crisis was the inherent cycle of human psychology around risk perceptions. When times are good, perceptions of risk diminish. People start to convince themselves that the good times will go on forever.'

Isn't that the position we are in now – expecting that the good times will go on forever?

Yet, during the GFC, comfortable lifestyles evaporated and **formerly successful people were suddenly living on the edge.**

Currently, in the USA, there are 1.5 million **homeless people**, using shelters or sleeping rough.^{xiii} A quarter of them are children.

In Australia, at the last census, 105,000 people were experiencing homelessness each night.^{xiv}

In Canada, it is estimated that there is a core of 200,000 people homeless or one per cent of the population without the comfort of a home.^{xv}

These are but three of the more successful economies in the world (who publish homeless statistics). By that measure, there is no certainty that what we now have will be retained indefinitely.

By what logic do we think that the next generation should have it better? Is it merely based on hope, from the context of our upbringing?

Contexts can change, not through any fault of our own. As illustrated, we can't always control how things will pan out in the future.

We also had no choice in when we were born, or to whom, or where.

- If you are **Rohingya in Myanmar**, you are being persecuted for being born as the person that you are.^{xvi}
- Likewise, if you were born with the **Yasidis in Iraq** when the ISIS terrorists invaded, you were facing potential genocide ... and many of your people were killed or taken captive.^{xvii}
- If you were born to **Dinka parents in South Sudan**, where internal warfare still rages, your best prospect is a refugee camp in Uganda or Kenya.^{xviii}

And these examples are without visiting the more renowned conflicts which are creating the major refugee movements.

If you are one of the displaced people around the world, your only hope is that some nation, *the lifeboat*, will take you on board and help you. The alternative is more of the same or worse.

Uncertainty is the new norm.

In democratic countries around the world, it seems from recent voting patterns that a majority of disenchanted voters no longer believe that things will get better, under their current governance. They are voting against anything that is current practice – the status quo.

In countries under totalitarian rule, there is no protest allowed and no prospect of improvement for the majority. The people must adapt to what is happening or revolt. And revolt for them likely means a suicidal resistance against massive military power, so successful revolution won't come any time soon.

Faced with this, how are people in developed countries responding? Many are closing the borders and retreating into nationalist shells.

What is the moral solution?

Perhaps those *who have*, need to taste the survival experience of those *who have not*, which is causing so many to flee. Covid-19 is immune to the bluster of politicians and it knows no national borders. It has shaken the economic deck of cards which had been the trusted norm – as well as normal social customs which have been taken as accepted rights. ^{xix}

To wish war or loss of lifestyle on others is hardly a good moral choice – but there does need to be a cultural change, an attitude of understanding that we are on a finite path, a relic of earlier colonial ages. There are avoided questions to be asked and answered.

Some truth needs to be spoken and heard by those who make the major social decisions.

Obscene wealth in the face of abject poverty is surely not what is seen to be right in a moral society.

The challenge is **not unsolvable** but it is **complex** and it **will take time**.

- The approach is not about self-interest but it is about the interest of the survival of the species, long term.
- It will involve a global cultural change to accept that sufficiency, rather than always being greedy for more, is a practical step along the way.
- It will require a change in attitude to continued economic expansion which relies on resource depletion and can affect world climate – and to replace it gradually with sustainable models of sufficiency.
- It will require restraint in the number of children being born.
- It will require meaningful employment/activity to engage people in a valued contribution to social life.
- It will require leadership of the type that sometimes emerges in eras of extreme hardship, like world wars – a wake-up call, a willingness to sacrifice some things in order to get wider outcomes on the path to sustainable recovery.

None of that is easy ... but it is logical.

It always seems impossible until it is done

A likely alternative to a measured program of development that can work towards sustainable sufficiency over time ... is that people will eventually go to war over land, over fresh water and resources. **That is the lesson of history.** That was a driver in the last world war – living space^{xx} and the co-prosperity sphere.^{xxi} In the aftermath, when the guns are silent, people will still have to sit down to resolve the way forward with whatever is left.

The hope for the future generation is not that they might have it better than we have had it.

Rather, it is that we don't want them to have to revisit the lessons of history.

We want them to be content with enjoying the planet, society and family.

That can happen for many future generations, if we don't avoid the difficult questions in this generation.

*If you think too long on the next step,
you will end up in life standing on one leg*
Chinese proverb

ⁱ <https://hbr.org/2012/01/avoid-the-traps-that-can-destroy-family-businesses>

<http://www.imd.org/uupload/IMD.WebSite/MicroSites/family-business/pdfs/Family%20Businesses%20%20Successes%20and%20Failures.pdf>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.wanderlustworker.com/12-famous-people-who-failed-before-succeeding>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/10439196/Children-of-rich-parents-suffering-increased-mental-health-problems.html>

^{iv} <http://www.vulture.com/2014/08/robin-williams-tribute-obituary.html>

^v <http://www.progressio.org.uk/blog/empowered-blog/nicaragua-%E2%80%98lost-generation%E2%80%99-glue-sniffing-street-children-masaya>

^{vi} Read John O'Brien's classic Australian poem 'We'll all be rooned, said Hanrahan'

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Said_Hanrahan

^{vii} [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siren_\(mythology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siren_(mythology))

^{viii} http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_vault/2015/10/02/how_the_nazis_confiscated_jewish_belongings.html

^{ix} <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005687>

^x <http://blogs.wsj.com/economics/2012/10/01/total-global-losses-from-financial-crisis-15-trillion>

^{xi} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ponzi_scheme

^{xii} <http://www.rba.gov.au/speeches/2009/sp-so-150409.html>

^{xiii} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness_in_the_United_States

^{xiv} <http://www.homelessnessaustralia.org.au>

^{xv} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness_in_Canada

^{xvi} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2016%E2%80%9317_Rohingya_persecution_in_Myanmar

^{xvii} <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yazidis>

^{xviii} <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-southsudan-refugees-kenya-idUSKBN0P00TJ20150620>

^{xix} Addition in 2020

^{xx} <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebensraum>

^{xxi} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_East_Asia_Co-Prosperity_Sphere