

Worth, Values and Happiness

While we might feel that we live in the craziness of the modern world, we might not be so particularly special. Earlier generations lived through similar sensations, in the context of **their** times.

The following quotes indicate some of our more common frustrations.

'Too often we enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.' **John F Kennedy**. June 11, 1962. Yale University commencement address.

'History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes.' Attributed to **Mark Twain** (1835 – 1910), in *The Gilded Age: A tale of today* – written with Charles Dudley Warner. 1873.¹

'Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities.' **Voltaire**, French philosopher (1694 – 1778)

'It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong.' **Voltaire**, imprisoned for a year (1717-18) in a windowless Bastille prison cell during the regency reign of Phillippe II, Regent of France (until Louis XV reached maturity – aged 13 in 1723) and imprisoned again in 1726.

Likewise, the comedic movie of 1980, '**The Gods Must Be Crazy**'², a parody of our modern priorities, illustrates how easily people can be confused by only understanding the world around us, in terms of **our own life experiences**.

In the movie, an empty glass Coke bottle had been dropped from a low-flying light plane in South Africa. It landed intact in the sands of the Kalahari Desert where glass had been unknown previously.

Suddenly, into the culture of the isolated Bushmen, so effectively adapted to that harsh desert environment ... a puzzling object had arrived. Something that they had never needed before became a rare and valued necessity ... and unfamiliar emotions began to stir ... a feeling of wanting to own it, of not wanting to share.

In the laughing comedy of satire, we are gently reminded that we are the unwitting limited products of our life experiences, understandings and

¹ Mark Twain with Charles Dudley Warner, ASIN B003YJGO9Y, FQ Books. 1873 and 2010

² The Gods Must be Crazy 1980 IMBD

beliefs, and that perhaps we should be humbly thoughtful before rushing into opinions about others. (See the JFK quote above.)

So, let us ask what our values might be.

What is the worth of objects or behaviours in our world? Why are some activities, that each require thoughtful skills, considered to be more financially worthy than others (eg chess, bridge or orienteering vs investment banking or movie making or professional sport)? What is the meaning behind how we think about ‘correctness’ ... the right way to behave, the right values to hold?

The US Declaration of Independence preamble states: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

It was a laudable statement of intent by some thoughtful men back on 4 July 1776. They had set a template for a new nation ... that would be **free** ... **would not be bound by allegiance to any monarch** ... albeit with the *restraints of only mentioning the self-evident rights of men and presumably those who had life and liberty because many could not be assured of that in the United States of 1776 (particularly First Nations people, enslaved people of colour and non-privileged women).*

Then, let us further ask, ‘What is the meaning of the pursuit of Happiness?’

Generally, it has been described as having the lifelong freedom to follow your own meaningful activities, self-improving, learning as you go and having positive relationships ... rather than just momentary pleasures. Implicit in the pursuit is the notion of being in accord with reason and virtue (*the writers of the preamble were influenced by the ‘Enlightenment’ philosophers of their time*).

The happiness might well be expressed more as **contentment** with one’s evolving place in family and society – a decent life, respected by others ... in contrast to a more materialistic or hedonistic, transitory and possibly hurtful notion of ‘happiness’.

Distilled from that concept **is a sense of worth** – being valued for your social contribution, your manner, your wisdom ... an example for others ... an ‘Elder’ in later life.

While diamonds, precious metals and art works can have the worth of rarity, beauty, exclusivity and financial value, the more general happiness in life is more one of community, accepting/valuing the joys of family experiences and appreciating the beauty of nature around us – while **resisting the more destructive, addictive temptations of greed, control or malice towards others.**

Which leads us to **the values by which we live** – the principles that guide our behaviours and our thinking – our consistent anchors in times of stress or extreme decision making.

Generically, they are often such traits as honesty, integrity, compassion and respect for others. Perhaps that might generate some hallowed image of purity but that would usually be quite far from the truth. Rather, **it might be more about the wisdom of humility rather than of hubris.**

People who operate from a sense of values undoubtedly make mistakes like everyone else (and they try to learn from them). They defend the reasoned honour of their upbringing (whichever form that takes). They are always searching for wiser ways to do things, constantly engaging in challenging reflection about their ingrained moral principles (*morality is context driven eg survival morality in combat zones may be very different from a harmonious peacetime mode*). But, primarily, the most observable characteristic of ‘values-operating’ people is that **they are authentic – predictable, decent, trustworthy.**

However, many cultures have their **own particular chosen values** by which to live. The universal acceptance of **moral absolutes** is rare across the planet.

Values tend to be conditioned by the different societies into which a person is born, by the level of broad education (*beyond survival and restrictive dogma*), by the level of access to alternative views, cultures, languages and living conditions ... and, importantly, by the freedom to reflect, to allow cognitive growth ... with permission to change one’s considered perspective as additional testable evidence informs understanding.

Most dominating societies have a particular style of language to justify controlling behaviours. That language is intended to show the rightness of proposed particular entitlements. **Revisit Voltaire's quotes above.**

As examples: The expansion of the United States across formerly native lands was reasoned as the inevitable '*Manifest Destiny*'³ of the settlers. In Australia, the notion of '*Terra Nullius*'⁴ was used similarly to ignore the prior cumulative 60,000-year presence of native tribal structures, the Nazi war expansion of 1930s and 40s used '*Living Space*'⁵, Japan's aggression in a similar era was excused as a '*Co-Prosperity Sphere*'⁶.

Colonial imposition over centuries frequently used the explanation of bringing civilisation and religion to 'savages'⁷ – although the armies were also quite obviously maintaining 'peaceful subservience' in the **commercial interests** of their nations' trading businesses.

Astute readers will immediately call to mind many other **present and past** smarmy '**justifications**' for colonial-style entitlement with an irrational rhetoric that disguises their access to the spoils of 'invasion'.

There is a world history of deceptive spin, along with the power of armies, institutions, and the delusions of charismatic persuaders that have influenced the invasive power of expansion across most of the planet.

Was it (is it) right?

Many missionaries and medical practitioners were well-intentioned, devout helpers of people that they perceived to be disadvantaged.

But, with the benefit of the hindsight of history, most were oblivious that they were actually **doing the bidding of powerful interests**, whose priorities/values were more about profit, power and influence ... with scant regard for anyone else's views or ... sovereignty or ... cultural history.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manifest_destiny

⁴ <https://www.library.gov.au/learn/digital-classroom/legend-and-legacy-james-cook/challenging-terra-nullius>

⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lebensraum>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greater_East_Asia_Co-Prosperity_Sphere

⁷ <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-worldhistory/chapter/27-3-3-the-civilising-mission/>

So, in terms of values, **people have been prepared to give their lives rather than compromise their values.** That is particularly the case in defensive wars against aggression.

The priorities by which people lead their lives are very important. Likewise, so is the wisdom acquired from **self-reflection and the dispassionate study of the complexity of the world's cultures.**

Even today, there are violent actions/happenings that are absolutely abhorrent to most minds in the 21st century, **but ... beyond horror, sympathy, anger and retribution, there must also be a place for understanding a bigger picture of how it came to be that so many could be duped into such unacceptable punishable behaviours by the deceptive deceitful veils of what should be trustworthy social leadership, institutions and practices.**

Check out some of the history above, which might euphemistically be described as 'drinking the Kool Aid.'⁸

Always ask, objectively ... evidence-based, **'Why is it so?'**

Albert Einstein: *Blind belief in authority is the greatest enemy of truth.*

In the context of bringing civilisation to the less advantaged, **Mahatma Ghandi** is attributed with a famously **ironic** winking response:
 Journalist: **Mr Ghandi, what do you think of Western Civilisation?**
 Ghandi: **I think it would be a good idea.** ☺

⁸ cf 1978 Jonestown Massacre – implying blindly accepting foolishness without critical checking