
PART FIVE

But wait! There's more! (As the TV huckster used to say).

Although I am critical of universities in the way they are currently constituted, I have to thank both the University of Sydney and the University of NSW for introducing me to the Ideas Business. They helped make me enthusiastic about trying to know and understand stuff of all sorts. I used to study for my exams by getting up around 5am (my early morning paper run had made me a lark, not a night owl). I have a vivid memory of reading John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty* before anyone else in the house was up, and being amazed at how much more there was to the concept than I'd had any inkling of – and that this was true of just about any topic you'd like to name. Also, I was introduced to the tenets of the scientific method, which is the most systematic and open-minded approach that I have come across in trying to make sense of the world. They helped me to have the courage to question the religious ideas that I grew up with, and to find them wanting, which in turn made me question the usefulness or otherwise of all belief systems based on unquestioning faith. Later, when I was at UNSW, studying things from the perspective of sociology helped me to transcend a whole raft of assumptions that many of those around me never even realised were only assumptions and not facts – and that unearthing social assumptions and realizing they are not facts is one of the healthiest intellectual activities that one can undertake. (As Bertrand Russell put it: *"In all affairs it's a healthy thing now and then to hang a question mark on the things you have long taken for granted."*) The intellectual life ignited in me a love of reading serious books that in their turn opened up a world of disciplined thinking and courageous arguments that questioned all sorts of accepted verities. No matter what reservations I might have now about what universities have become of late, the approach to understanding the world that I derived from being in the Ideas Business for a while has been crucial in moulding my worldview – for which I am forever grateful. These notes from here on deal not with the events that happened to me as I shuffled along this mortal coil, but the ideas that I consider to underlie the important realizations and advances in understanding that occurred to me as I made that journey.

Ever since I began as a student in the hallowed halls of academe I have been keeping a note of the quotations and influential passages that have impressed me - passages written by minds way more astute than mine could ever be. And this is a habit which has persisted after I left UNSW for a life where your fingernails get much dirtier. I'm not all that drawn to poetry (amusing doggerel is more my line), but I do remember from my English studies at Sydney Uni a line from Alexander Pope's *Essay on Criticism*: *"What oft was thought but ne'er so well expressed"*. And that describes quite well most of the stuff I've collected over the years. I've selected those passages and excerpts that I feel, looking back, were the most influential in shaping my thinking -- how those ideas have brought about change, or strengthened convictions, in various aspects of my life.

Work

One thing that stands me out from most of my colleagues and friends is that I have not had a regular job since I was 43. I haven't had to tug my forelock any more to people I didn't respect who were higher than me on the organizational food chain, and this, I've come to realize over the years, is to be privileged in a special way. George Gardstein, an anarchist, has this to say about the relationship between most people in the Western world and the jobs they do: *When we meet a man we habitually ask him, "What do you do?" and he replies with information about that part of his life that he hates most: "I am a drill grinder". But not only does he not say, "I go out to the country now and then with my wife and kids, and I play the trombone", he says I am a drill grinder, not "I grind drills in return for money". His work, his bondage, his alienation become what he is, not what he does. Instead of a man he becomes a worker.*

When people ask me what I do, I am at a loss to answer them truthfully, since a lengthy

answer is not expected. Not so much now, but in my younger past I used to do all sorts of things, but I get bored doing the one thing over and over again. I'd never be bothered making a set of kitchen chairs for instance, because you'd have to make six of the same thing. I have had the luck to be able to follow my own interests. I have been able to become a Generalist. And it pleases me that a job working for The Man is not what defines me.

It's very hard to extricate yourself from the societal assumption that the majority of your life will be taken up with some sort of work in order to get money to pay for your existence. Sometimes I wonder how I managed to get out of that cage of assumptions. True, I had to save enough money to buy my house in Crows Nest, and then become a *rentier* in order to live off the rent. But it wasn't a lot of money, and anything I made from selling items of my creative output certainly didn't add up to a living. What made it possible was the fact I decided to live a very different kind of life to the one I had been living before, and that most people live for all of their working lives. I reused and recycled wherever I could, hardly ever bought new clothes, and generally eschewed a consumerist lifestyle. And you learn to look at things differently. *Being rich is having money; being wealthy is having time.* (Stephen Swid).

If we don't know how to enjoy leisure it is because we have learned only the habit of toil. The pity is that toil is accepted by government, and by employers, and even by organized labour, as necessary and virtuous... Most unions assume that the battle they have to fight is not so much over conditions, but low wages. This is an error in strategy. The attack by organized labour should be directed at eliminating repetitive and degrading human tasks, rather than at being paid more money for doing them. No man or woman should be expected to waste fifty years of his or her life working in a factory as a servant to a machine, with only two or three weeks' holiday and an unofficial strike, or an unwelcome spell of sickness, to break the monotony. (Jeremy Hunt)
Hear, hear.

The environment and consumerism

When I look back over my life I see an unrealized consistency in the fact that one of my early PhD topics was to investigate the gap that people seem to have between what they believe and how they behave – the contradiction between words and deeds if you like. My reading had convinced me that consumerism (among many other important considerations like the changing face of capitalism) was incompatible with any sort of sustainable form of social organization on the planet we live on, and I couldn't ignore the fact that while I lived according to the social assumptions of modern post-industrial society I would continue to be part of the problem. It was the impact on the environment of First World assumptions that led to my most radical decisions about how I should live, (*If you want to change the world, start with yourself.* -- Gandhi) and when I left UNSW for the bush I was trying to bring my behaviour into line with my beliefs. I'd like now to look at some of those unhelpful ways of being and their ramifications.

In our society anything, however hallowed or rare, 'has its price', and is fair game for the marketplace. In a society of this kind, nature is necessarily treated as a mere resource to be plundered and exploited. The destruction of the natural world, far from being the result of mere hubristic blunders, follows inexorably from the very logic of capitalist production. (Murray Bookchin, another anarchist). And here is Philip Slater (again): *Imagine a mass of cancerous tissue, the cells of which enjoyed consciousness. Would they not be full of self-congratulatory sentiments at their independence, their more advanced level of development, their rapid rate of growth... Would they not rejoice in their control of their own destiny, and cheer the conversion of more and more normal cells as convincing proof of the validity of their own way of life? Would they not, in fact, feel increasingly triumphant right up to the moment the organism on which they fed expired?* It's a good image, and for my money that is exactly what is happening to the planet.

Philip Slater goes on: *Most of our social problems...would cease to exist if we stopped rewarding people for creating them. Our national policy has always been to subsidise the rich and ambitious in various ways. Currently, for example, we provide incentives*

to those who exploit and brutalise the environment – developers, loggers, highway contractors, oil companies and manufacturers. We soften risks, give tax relief, offer inducement to do what is already highly lucrative. We have given oil companies, for example, billions of dollars to despoil the environment, maintain inefficient practices, engage in expensive and dishonest advertising...The fact that a corporation is taking some risks in order to make a huge profit seems an inadequate reason for giving them charity.

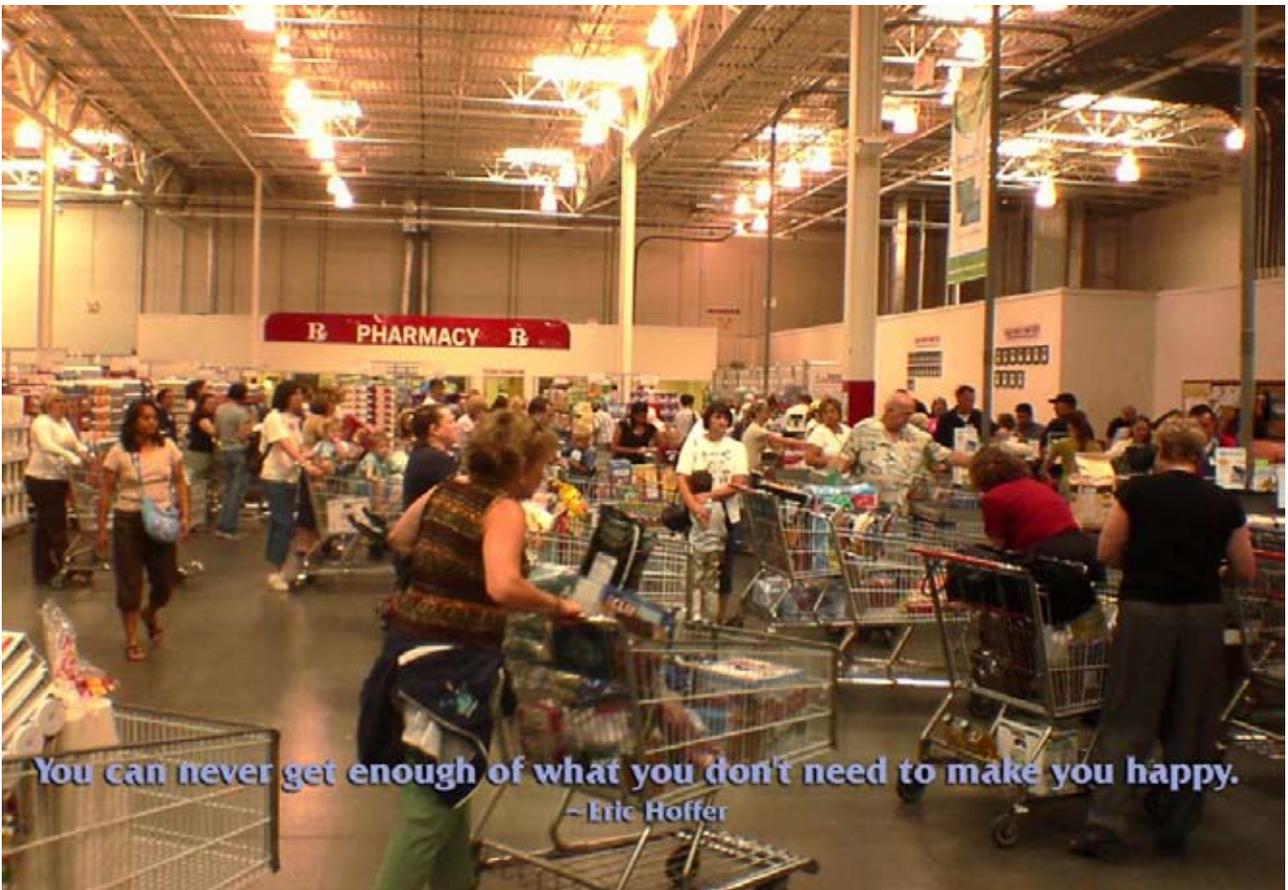
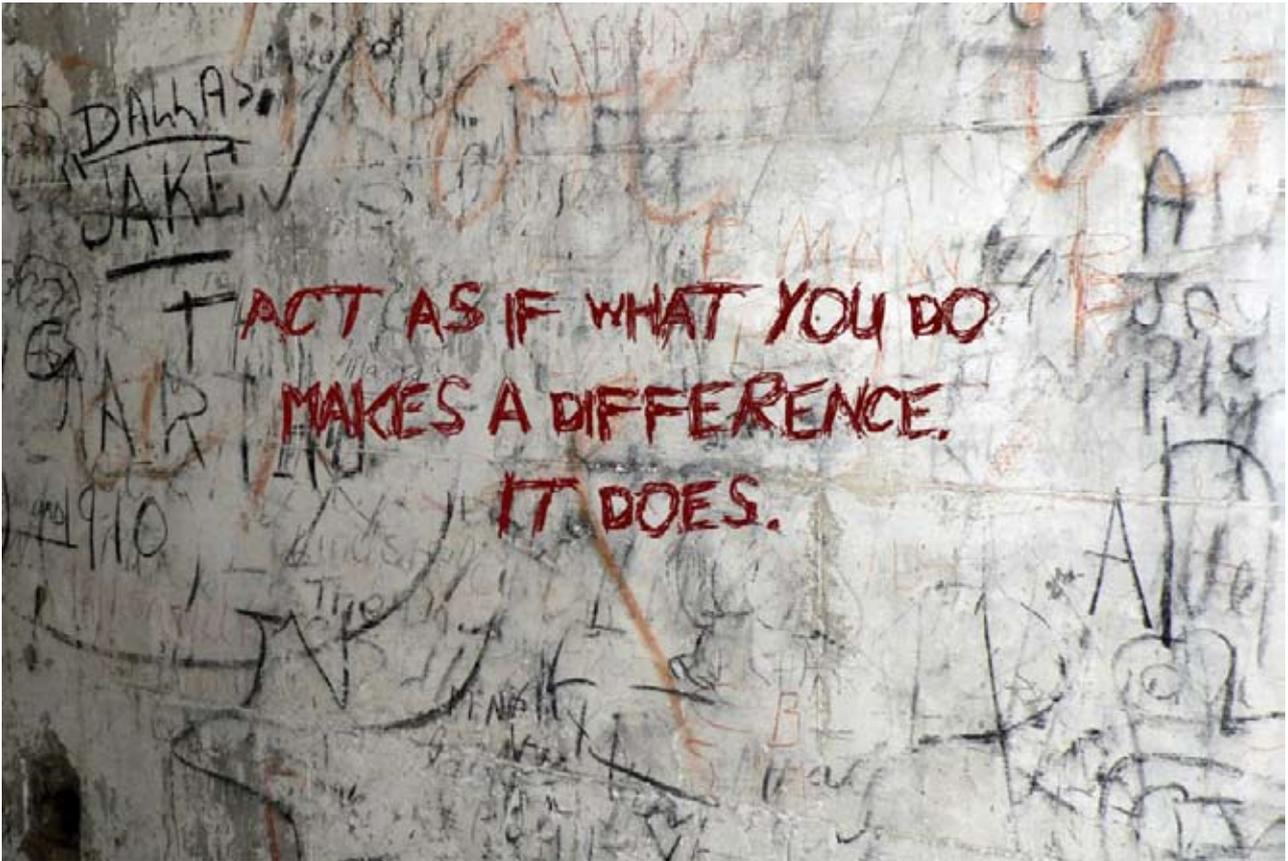
Annie Leonard, who wrote the harrowing *The Story of Stuff* sums it up: *We depend on this planet to eat, drink, breathe, and live. Figuring out how to keep our life-support system running needs to be our number one priority. Nothing is more important than finding a way to live together – justly, respectfully, sustainably, joyfully – on the only planet we can call home.*

Yet, I know of no politician who would dare tell his electors that we must, urgently, find ways not to rely on the notion of economic growth as an indicator of how we are progressing as a species. This is a no-brainer The earth is finite, and you don't have to be the brightest bulb in the chandelier to see that running the place as though infinite growth were possible is the most glaring of contradictions. Yet nobody in power admits this – not the President of the United States, not the President of the World Bank, or the IMF -- you name the position of power---nobody is game to seize this nettle. I've lost the source for the next passage, but it is right on the money, too:

It is said that we cannot afford better schools, communities, health care and so on. But what we can afford least of all is to allow some people to become very rich. This is our most expensive social programme. To make it possible we have spent billions upon billions of dollars, allowed our air and water to become polluted, our environment to become ugly, our cities to deteriorate, our health care to become third rate, created untold poverty, misery, sickness, suffering, chaos, disorder, and mass murder. We nonetheless managed to afford it.

And this: *We spend hundreds of billions of dollars to find ways of killing more efficiently, but almost nothing to enhance the joys of living...However familiar and comfortable it may seem, the old culture is threatening to kill us, like a trusted relative gone berserk so gradually that we are able to pretend to ourselves that he has not changed...Nobody amasses a grossly disproportionate share of wealth or power as a reward for intrinsic virtues. All great fortunes were initially stolen from the people, directly or indirectly. One important function of the police – subsidiary to their primary role of maintaining order and predictability – is to prevent any of the people from stealing it back...If you find this a bit extreme, have a read of Howard Zinn's *A Popular History of the United States*, in which he looks at the history of the US from the founding of New York to the Clinton administration, but from the viewpoint of ordinary people. The difference from conventional "top-down" histories is startling. If you finish it you'll understand just how much bullshit emanates from the powerful and privileged sectors of society, how much self-serving propaganda, and how, one way or another, the brunt of every economic and social setback is borne by "the ordinary people". And you'll also understand why it is in the interests of those same powerful and privileged sectors to do little about the antagonism between poor whites and poor African Americans, because deep down they fear that if ever these two most exploited sectors of the population ever overcame their antipathy to one another and realized that they are both subject to the same oppression by the power/privilege machine of pitiless social domination, there could well be an uprising that couldn't be contained. This is the too often unacknowledged underbelly of the "land of freedom and opportunity".*

But a bit more about consumerism: *If we are going to continue to have an ethic based on consumption – that you are what you own, that you create your identity by buying things, that you must have a good address and a nice car – then we will have to continue heating up the economy through advertising, destroy non-renewable resources and create enormous amounts of pollution. (William Irwin Thompson). Which leads to an inevitable situation where...the big clash in the industrialized world is going to be between those who are insisting on a path towards voluntary frugality – which means energy conservation, resource conservation, and leveling off of the GNP curve as we*



have previously defined it – and those who are convinced that we must keep on with technological growth, massive energy use, GNP expansion and so on. (Willis Harmon).

But nonetheless, as R.D. Laing reminds us, *society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus be normal. Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years.*

Kurt Vonnegut adds this: *When I learned politeness at my mother's knee... I learned not to offend anyone by discussing excretion, reproduction, religion, or a person's source of wealth. We are free to discuss all these things now. Our minds aren't crippled any more by good taste. And I can see now all the other more sinister taboos which mingled with sex and excretion, such as religious hypocrisy and ill-gotten wealth. If we are to discuss truthfully what America is and what it can become, our discussion must be in absolutely rotten taste, or we won't be discussing it at all... Any sadness I feel now grows out of frustration, because I think there is so much we can do -- things that are cheap -- that we are not doing. It has to do with ideas. The trouble is, new and potentially useful ideas make people feel uneasy, and they close their minds to any proposals that suggest we might do things differently, even though to do so may well result in our being much better off in human terms.*

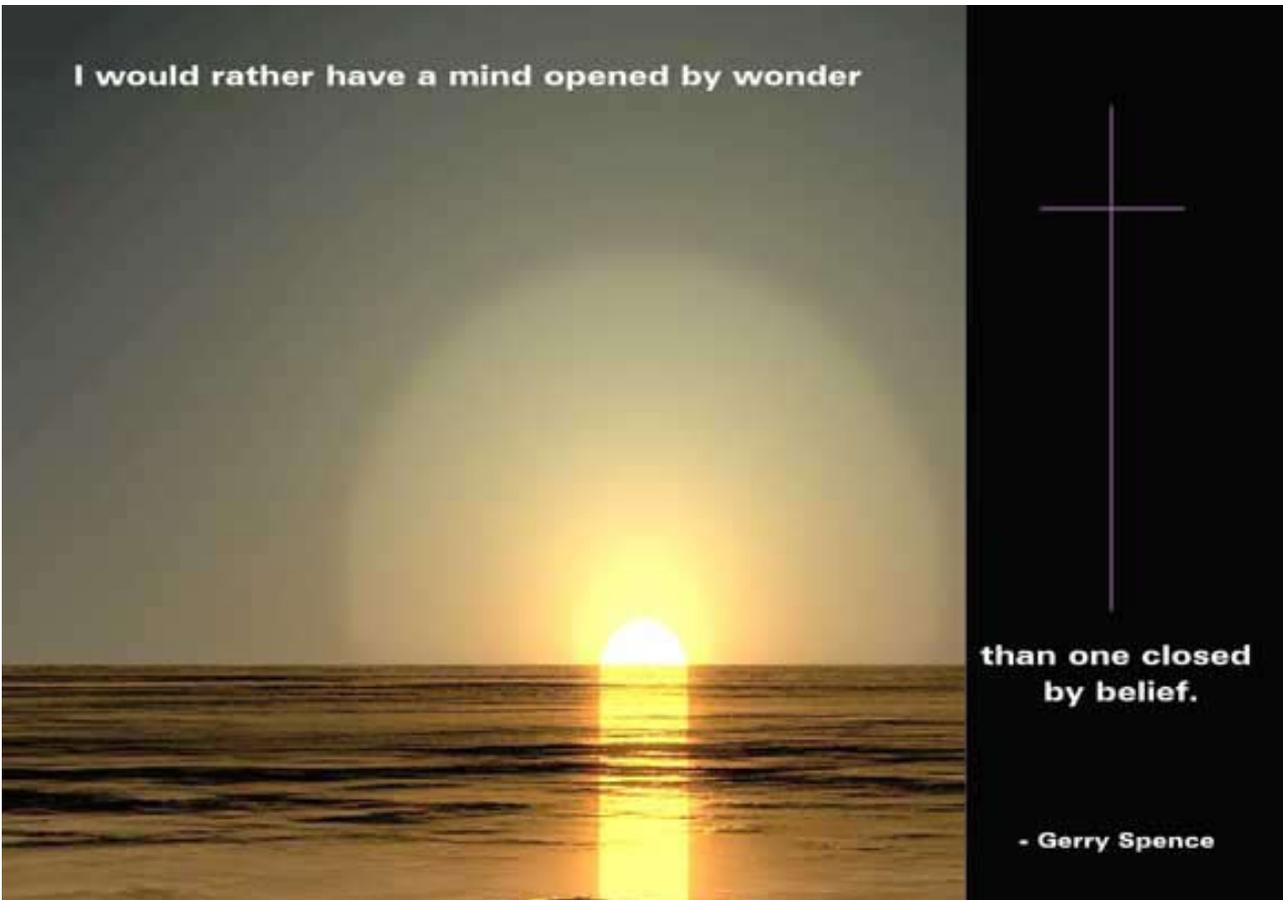
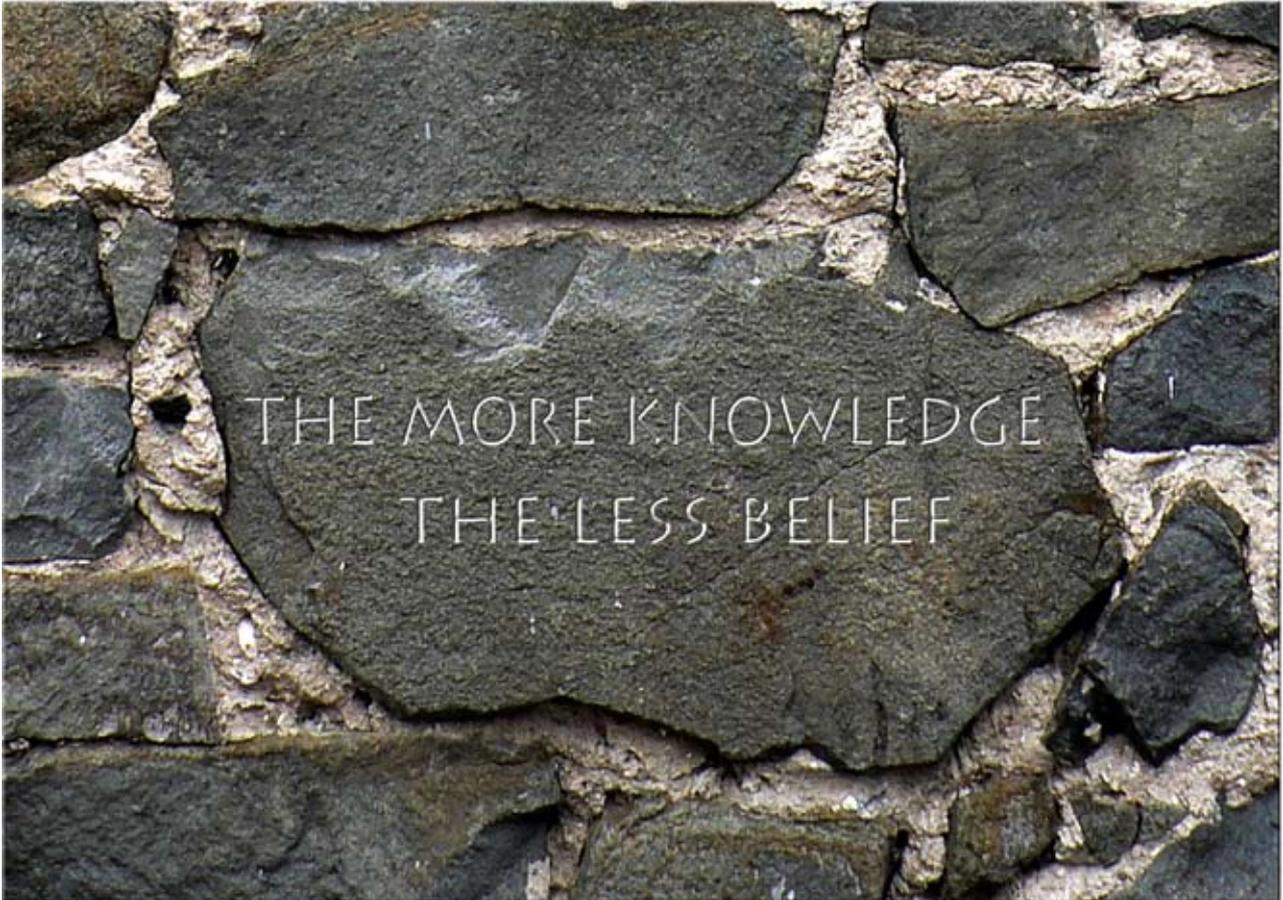
But George Gardstein (again) cautions us with a nuanced warning about class differences: *It would be unwise in a capitalist society, which requires millions of obedient and unimaginative epsilons, to make any effort to bring education and culture to everyone, to bring creativity out of everyone. It would subvert capitalism. People who could see the possibility of work which was satisfying and which contributed to their growth, would not be prepared to put spokes in bicycle wheels all their lives. But is it possible to distinguish between beautifying drab lives and spiritually bankrupt souls on the one hand, and ramming bourgeois culture down working class throats on the other. This last sentence raises questions which I've yet to find the answers for.*

John Holt, an educationist, tries to explain why things are as unsatisfactory as they are: *There are unjust men in the world, and it is an unjust world, but it is not the unjust men, primarily, who make it so. It is an unjust world largely because it is composed of faulty institutions. These institutions, in turn, are merely the collective habits of individuals, but individuals can have bad habits without being bad people. In general, people are unconscious of their bad habits, particularly their institutional habits. People can become aware of their institutional bad habits and change them. The world then would be a better world, made up of still imperfect people. There are of course some people who know that they have bad habits but do not want to change them. There are others who are afraid to examine their habits for fear that their consciences would then be troubled. This is the worst that can be said of most people. It is enough, however, to explain how the world can be worse than the people who live in it. Well, although I can see what Holt is getting at here, I have to admit that I think that this is not a sufficiently persuasive argument to let off the hook the sort of shortsighted, self-interested ignoramuses who are presently running this Pacific paradise that we call Australia. (As I write this we are being subjected to the policy decisions of the incoming Abbott government, and let me tell you, you need a pretty thick political skin to read the news these days without being plunged into very deep depression). This gloomy situation is not confined to Australia, of course. The rest of the developed world ("developed"? what a joke!) all seem to be headed in much the same direction, except maybe for a few Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands about which we are told little by our media.*

You have succeeded in life when all you really want is only what you really need. (Vernon Howard). I like to think that I've come pretty close to achieving this goal. I hope I'm not kidding myself.

Religion

The other big idea that had a very large impact on my life was the realization that organized religion was a con – as Theodore Roszak called it *the hocus pocus of social domination*. I wish I could understand why such a moribund, outdated set of beliefs could be so



persistent. At the moment, the Catholic church is being bombarded by accusations of the most vile behaviour to protect pedophiles, and there are many books which detail the ludicrous contradictions in this faith which has colonized the minds of the majority of people all over the planet. But things go on as they always have. It is testament to the survival power of bullshit beliefs despite their demolition by reasoned and thoughtful argument. As Arthur C Clarke says: *The greatest tragedy in mankind's entire history may be the hijacking of morality by religion.* My friend Telford Conlon put this another way. He said that *the church has no more monopoly on morality than General Motors has on the wheel.*

How dare they even try! But they do, and appear to have prevailed. As usual, Bertrand Russell puts things succinctly when he writes: *There is something feeble and a little contemptible about a man who cannot face the perils of life without the help of comfortable myths. Almost inevitably some part of him is aware that they are myths and that he believes them only because they are comforting. But he dare not face this thought! Moreover, since he is aware, however dimly, that his opinions are not rational, he becomes furious when they are disputed.* Alan Watts has more to add: *Religions harden into institutions that must command loyalty, be defined, and kept "pure" – because all belief is fervent hope, and thus a cover-up for doubt and uncertainty – religions must make converts. The more people who agree with us, the less nagging insecurity about our position...Irrevocable commitment to any religion is not only intellectual suicide; it is positive unfaith because it closes the mind to any new vision of the world.*

And then there is what I consider to be the ultimate fusillade from Gore Vidal: *I must warn you that I am not a believer. And though I'm sure that the revelations of other men must be a source of infinite satisfaction to them individually, I shouldn't for one second be so presumptuous as to make a choice among the many thousands of recorded revelations of truth, accepting one at the expense of all others. I might so easily choose wrong and get into eternal trouble. And you must admit that the selection is wide, and dangerous to the amateur.*

There are so many thoughtful and persuasive arguments that highlight the moribund and unhelpful basis of faith-based ideas, and yet the stupidity persists. This stuff should be well discredited and consigned to the history of outmoded ideas. Whatever the particular brand of religion we are talking about, as long as it based on unprovable ideas that are not allowed to be questioned it is part of the problem, not part of the solution. All religions discourage any questioning of their faith-based ideas. I don't understand why people still cleave to these medieval ideas when we have the methods of science at our disposal, where everything is open to question, and the skeptical intellect is paramount.

A mind that accepts the contradictions and sheer silliness of metaphysical beliefs as facts when there is not a shred of evidence to support them is a mind that is not using all of its potential.

Luck

I have come to think, over the years, that luck often has much to do with what happens to us – with what shape our life takes. Luck, both good and bad, does not seem to be equally distributed. My Mum's life was irrevocably altered by the loss of her two baby boys, and in both cases it was simply bloody bad luck that the doctors of the day misdiagnosed the illnesses. Had that whole scenario happened in current times, it is probable that both boys would have survived. Without pet scans and cat scans and Doppler tests and other high tech wonders that we take for granted these days, GPs had to do a helluva lot more guessing, without anything like the amount of information available to them today.

I think my life has been a good one because I have been pretty lucky. My sister Christine had the bad luck to be born with a thyroid deficiency which has circumscribed the size of her life to a certain extent, I had the good luck to be born without that affliction. Chris and I were both lucky to be born into a non-violent family, and to have responsible parents and

an especially loving mother. I was lucky to be born at a time when I didn't have to serve in the armed forces and be sent away to lay my life on the line in some futile international dispute that had nothing to do with me. I have been lucky to have had a reasonably healthy life (until lately), and the two motor accidents I have been involved in were not serious. I also feel lucky that my daughter has blossomed into an impressively responsible, capable and intelligent adult who has told me that I am one of her best friends -- and my grandson seems genuinely to like me. And I think that, unlike many other people in the evening of their lives, I have a companion who is a comfort to me, and with whom I share reciprocal love and respect. I wonder will I be lucky enough to avoid a grisly end, though?

The downside

While I am pleased to think I have been lucky enough to have achieved some degree of intellectual emancipation from the blandishments of capitalist, consumerist societal assumptions, being in that situation does have some negative consequences. Gurth Higgins, an English sociologist, is one of the few academics that I have come across who confronts this fact. He says: *Once you have experienced disbelief in the reality and values held by most of those about you and of the organisations you spend our life in, you cannot undo it, no matter how hard you try. If need be you can go on existing in the old reality, but never again with vitality and commitment, but with weary despair. You can never explain where you are to believers. The only means you have of trying to is in the terms and with the logic of the old reality which they believe in and you don't... The only comfort is to discover there are others where you are – and it can be an enormous comfort. They can help you keep your promise to stay with it – to stay intact because the only other options so often seem to be either despair or to surrender to the psychiatrists, in their role as the witch-hunters of the old reality.*

Yes, it can make you feel particularly alienated from the social world you live in, and fairly lonely for like minds. Bertrand Russell puts it like this: *Always the skeptical intellect, when I have most wished it silent, has whispered doubts to me, has cut me off from the facile enthusiasms of others, and has transported me into a desolate solitude.* I'm no stranger to this desolate solitude, and I felt a pang of recognition the first time I read it. So much of what most people seem to go for these days appears to me to be nothing more than "facile enthusiasms", superficial entertainment invented by adherents of the status quo to keep the whole mad merry-go-round going around merrily – yet another product to be consumed uncritically by an unreflective public who are a huge part of the problem, but unaware that they are.

The late sixties and early seventies of the twentieth century were, for me, a time of hope and optimism. The "counter culture" was a political force and a part of the social analysis of a great many people in the West – especially the young. Looking back from the vantage point of now, those years seem almost impossibly idealistic. The conservative forces of politics are now in the ascendancy, especially in Australia, and the selfish satisfactions of consumerism and unending growth are very much in control. I find it all pretty bleak, I have to admit.

The idealistic lyrics of the various protest songs were a rallying call to a similarly idealistic youth culture. I see little optimism or idealism in the unintelligible lyrics of Heavy Metal rock songs, or the similarly unintelligible lyrics of rap and hip hop. (But then, I'm an old bugger now, and oldies tend to see the music of their youth as better than what's on offer now). I found a parody of Bob Dylan's *The Times They Are A-Changin'* recently. I don't know who wrote it, but it captures well my feelings of despair about where the world is headed:

*Come gather round people wherever you roam
And admit that the whole revolution has blown.
'Cause all we do now is sit home and get stoned,
I'd be out on the streets but it's rainin'.
We once were together but now we're alone
And the times they are remaining.*

*Don't worry congressman, don't heed the call
It was only a phase, it was nothing at all
I look back on it now and it's hard to recall
Just what was the use of complaining.
Why hassle a cop and get kicked in the balls
When the times they are remaining.*

*Come writers and critics who speak with a pen
It's easier now. It was much harder then.
You have to admit you make more money when
You need only to be entertaining
Write for Rolling Stone, Ram, get what you can
For the times they are remaining.*

*The line it is drawn, the course it is cast
The future's decided, the moment is passed
It's sad to find out we're completely outclassed
But the effort's too much for sustaining
Take everything easy, sit back on your arse
For the times they are remaining.*

Endgame

The Sine Curve of life works such that when you begin your journey along it you are helpless, and need to be fed, washed, clothed and have your arse wiped by someone else. When you get towards the end of the journey, if you're unlucky, you again have to be fed, washed, clothed, and have your arse wiped by someone else. I hope I drop off the perch before I reach that latter stage. Not only have you become a bane to yourself and a burden to others, I imagine that the process can't be very pleasant either. In our society we have the means to dispatch people in a calm and peaceful way. We do this for dogs and horses, but it is illegal to assist a human to die at a time and in a way of their own choosing, even if they are terminally ill, and continuing their existence has absolutely nothing going for it. Right at the very end there is a situation in which the sufferer has no independence or autonomy of decision-making about their own existence, and having spent so much of my life gaining independence and autonomy I find the situation anything but agreeable. That this state of affairs still exists is largely because of the fucking religious lobby. It makes me angry every time I think about it. It goes against just about everything I have come to cherish about how to approach life (and death).

If I could have a Peaceful Pill stashed away somewhere to use when I've had enough of living or partly living, I would live out the rest of my days with blithe unconcern and quiet satisfaction. I'd still be the one in control of decisions about my life. The idea of no longer existing corporeally doesn't worry me, but the prospect of an unnecessarily protracted departure does. I watched as my mother lived to 99, and her last decade or so was nothing more than a debilitating shrinking of the size of her life. She wanted to die well before she was able to, and nobody took any notice. I really hope that something like that doesn't happen to me. What a shithouse full stop to have to put at the end of the story of your life. Still, as The Rolling Stones have reminded us, you can't always get what you want, and perhaps the final creative challenge is to find a way to meet this situation with equanimity. I doubt that I'll be able to, though. As I've said earlier, luck plays a big part in what happens to you, and I can only hope that my luck will hold and I'll cark before I get that far down the track.
