

## FINDING MEANING WITHOUT CONSUMING

*the ability to experience meaning, purpose and satisfaction through non-material wealth*

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Since the 1960s, a wave of anxiety has welled up every 15-20 years about looming ecological breakdown. Each time, anxiety intensifies with a growing sense that pressures on physical life-support systems are coming closer to tipping point. Yet, there is still resistance to accepting that the causes of apparently 'outer' problems are rooted in our 'inner' selves. Twenty years ago, systems thinker, Ervin Laszlo (1989:26), recognised this when observing that:

We cast about for innovative ways to satisfy obsolete values... We contemplate changing almost anything on this earth but ourselves...

He insisted that:

It is high time we engaged in an individual and collective soul-searching; in a much needed psychoanalysis of our inner limits. Even if the process is painful, its potential benefits should encourage us to carry it through... By examining and identifying the arbitrary inner limits to our growth and development, we should learn to cast them off like the outgrown habits of our collective adolescence. (ibid: 28)

We *know* that obesity, heart disease, chronic fatigue, depression, cancer and other health problems are often symptomatic of lifestyles and associated desires and priorities. The same is true of our ecological malaise. But beliefs and feelings have a far tighter hold over behaviour than mere knowledge of facts. We are so strongly attached to our ways of living, and our *convictions* that they are good for us, that we avoid acting on what we *know* - that we are the causes of our own dis-ease. What we prefer to see as the 'problems' are actually ways of unconsciously avoiding these deeper causes within ourselves. These are the real problem, but this is just too excruciating to admit. Unless we do so, however, we will continue, ever more urgently and uselessly, to rearrange deckchairs on the ecological Titanic as it sinks deeper into the ocean. We have been doing this for decades already.

The 'inner' human causes of ecological breakdown are emotional and cultural. Emotions like desire, anxiety and fear are what *move* us. It's right there in the word – *e-motion*. But emotions are experiences which *we need to make meaningful sense of*. It's natural for humans to want to do so. And we do this using cultural-type thinking: through beliefs, models, purposes, priorities, prescription, decision-making and so on,. What we attach to most ardently is generally what we are convinced can best satisfy or quell our difficult feelings and emotions.

After decades of avoidance, we're starting to own up to the fact that belief in ever more material consumption and possession as the way to satisfaction and happiness both causes ecological breakdown and is a phantom, as it does not ultimately satisfy (see *Advertising Awareness and Emotional Wellbeing*, this volume). We are on a paradoxical crash-course to destroying ourselves in our quest to feel better - quite a dilemma! Even though we know these facts, can see our behaviour is illogical and dangerous, and, what's more, *can choose to do differently*, we keep on the same path

anyway. Like addicts, we are fixated and obsessed with our false beliefs. And, like any addict, it is nigh impossible to contemplate giving them up. Without them, it feels that life will lose meaning and purpose. Threats to this are inevitably resisted.

Resistance is a powerful force. So is the force of cultural habits which protect us from the difficult emotions we feel threatened by. Even if I do *experience* something else as true, I may also feel huge social pressure *not* to believe it when this would threaten the belief-habits of my collective peer group. I might be excluded, marginalised. Besides, even if I don't go along with what's deemed to be true, then how am I to make sense of my experience? What belief frameworks am I to use to make sense of my self and life, if not those that are culturally acceptable and to which I've become habituated?

More and more people - through empirical evidence of their own first-hand experience – are, however, recognising that their belief-habits both fail to live up to their promise of satisfaction and are gravely dangerous ecologically. Decades of analysis back this up, but by writers who have been ostracised as prophets of doom by mainstream society because too challenging to accept. See, for example, Paul Ehrlich (eg 1971), Donella Meadows (1972, 1992), Geoffrey Vickers (1968), Herman Daly and John Cobb (1989), James Lovelock (1979), Edward Goldsmith, founder of *The Ecologist* magazine (1992), Erich Fromm (1978), Ervin Laszlo (1989), Roy Rappaport (1979), and many others including those cited in these authors' works.

So why is it so hard to find convincing alternatives to our cultural habit of seeking satisfaction and life-meaning through material possession and consumption? We have made other alternatives unacceptable. Dominant culture has effectively de-legitimized any explanations or possibilities for meaningful life that do not have a materialistic basis. This is in spite of the logical contradiction in insisting that non-material desires can be satisfied through material means.

Most cultures in human history have had non-material options for satisfying non-material needs, usually through some form of belief, based on empirical observation, that humans exist within a context that is bigger than them, encompasses them, and that they can experience themselves as having a meaningful role or niche to play within it (Maiteny 2004). Today, such spiritual or religious-type belief is popularly dismissed as ignorant superstition, at best, and mad delusion, at worst. This is despite the fact that many people continue to find life-meaning in such convictions, and in ways that are more sustained and long-lasting than purely materialistic beliefs can generate (see Maiteny 2002, 2008).

The context-based mode of meaningfulness can be compared with fitting a niche in an ecosystem, or with the notion of Gaia, the planet as living organism, where all aspects play a part in the healthy functioning of the whole (Lovelock 1979, also [see \*Gaia Awareness\*, this volume](#)). But it contrasts markedly with the consumption-based mode of meaning-making which can never succeed and results in an ecologically destructive need for constant, addiction-like replenishment.

Meaningfulness through the contextual, relational mode ([see \*Ecological Intelligence\*, this volume](#)) does not depend on consumption, material or otherwise. On the contrary, it depends on persons and groups *experiencing* themselves as part of the bigger ecological whole, with a role to play within it, and in service to it. This is *contextual* awareness. It puts the person in touch with non-material wealth, enabling them to go beyond the cognitive skills of *thinking* systemically or relationally to actually *feeling* ecologically embedded and related in ways that generate meaning, purpose and satisfaction through non-material means. As humans we do not 'fit into' the ecological whole like this as unconsciously and instinctively as do non-humans, although we might find we feel an

instinctive truth in such a perspective. No, for we humans finding our role within the ecological scheme of things has to be a more *conscious process of inner inquiry* and discovery. We have to choose the contextual over the consumptive mode. In this sense, it is akin to a spiritual or quasi-religious process (the word 'religion' deriving etymologically from 'to re-bond' or 're-connect'), but in a modern, scientifically-informed way.

There is, in fact, an stream of evolutionary thought, ignored by neo-darwinists, that is concerned with *future* evolution through human psycho-social development (see *A Learning Society*, this volume). Sir Julian Huxley, zoologist, founder of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, first Director-General of UNESCO, and brother of Aldous, was a high-profile researcher in this field. So was Sir Alister Hardy (1975), Professor of Zoology at Oxford University. He considered it perfectly logical that *all* human capacities must have significance for human evolution and adaptation. This, of course, includes being able to experience oneself as embedded in a bigger context, and to imagine and conceptualize this in symbolic, religio-spiritual forms.

Huxley (1957) put it like this:

As a result of a thousand years of evolution, the universe is becoming conscious of itself, able to understand something of its past history and its possible future. This cosmic self-awareness is being realized in one tiny fragment of the universe - in a few of us human beings. Perhaps it has been realized elsewhere too, through the evolution of conscious living creatures on the planets of other stars. But on this, our planet, it has never happened before...It is thus part of human destiny to be the necessary agent of the cosmos in understanding more of itself, in bearing witness to its wonder, beauty, and interest...

Amongst other things, this is a poetic way of saying that the human species has a special part to play in nature by virtue of the capacities we have evolved that we do *not* share with other species. These include, of course, our capacity to symbolise and a greater degree of free choice than other animals.

One application of choice is, as mentioned, to see 'others' - nature, people, the world - as *ours* to consume as we want, pursuing only our basic instinctive needs, as other animals do, but using our ingenuity to consume it far more intensively than they ever could. Religious teachings have, of course, consistently been distorted to justify and reinforce such self-interested, materialistic aims. Their true message is contrary to this, being concerned with finding one's niche in the encompassing Whole.

At a day-to-day level, this consuming and possessing orientation tends to mean seeking happiness by using things and people to fill up an emotional hole of dissatisfaction or inner emptiness. It means people seeing themselves as being, as it were, at the centre of the universe. It is as if everything else exists to serve them with material to consume. This, of course, can never ultimately satisfy. It's not actually the *thing-in-itself* that we desire but the feeling-experience we *believe* it will bring us. We project the desire onto the object and the object therefore comes to represent satisfaction of the desire. We confuse the thing for the desire and the hoped-for satisfaction it symbolises in our imagination. Shopping is a good example. Once people have got what they wanted, the satisfaction soon disappears ('the novelty wears off') and their desire moves on to seek something or someone new they believe will satisfy them instead. It sets up an addictive and constant cycle of gasping-grasping-gasping for more and more. *It's the non-material experience that people seek.* The 'thing' simply symbolizes that. Emotions are non-material. People cannot ultimately satisfy them by consuming and possessing things (or people). But they can choose to *believe* they can. Unfortunately, as we're beginning to experience, this belief eventually

puts our life-support systems – and hence ourselves - in grave danger.

The other application of our capacity for choice and self-awareness is to see ourselves as *part of* the ecological scheme of things, bound up within it, with a unique part to contribute in its further evolution, as Huxley describes above. He sees humans as having the *possibility* of generating the next phase of evolution - through psycho-social development, not biological. It would mean harnessing all our unique capacities to this purpose – but we have to choose to do it.

This orientation entails finding a role to take in the ecological scheme of things, in the body of Planet Earth, linked with other ‘organs’ playing their parts too in a great complex web (see *Being-in-the-World* and *Gaia Awareness*, this volume). Experientially, learners find meaning and satisfaction from *feeling* and *believing* they have a purpose to serve and *role* to play in the ‘ecological scheme of things’, and in trying to work out for themselves what that might be. Interestingly, the purpose of the great spiritual traditions has always been to help guide learners in a process such as this. Ecological experience and thinking is a new way of expressing it.

When learners find meaning and purpose in 'fitting' themselves to planetary ecology rather than seeking to 'fill themselves up' by consuming it, bio-ecological sustainability will start happening as an *inevitable* consequence of reduced consumption. It will start happening almost without trying. Physical pressures put on resources and ecological systems by consumption will simply lift when satisfaction-seeking shifts away from consumption.

Materialistic culture has denied ecological experience more than most others in human history. And it is no coincidence that this has gone hand-in-hand both with growing numbers of people experiencing emotional unsustainability of meaning in life, and with being the first species in the history of planet Earth to have had such a suicidal impact on the global ecosystem on which its existence depends. Odd and contradictory though it is, we have ‘achieved’ breakdown – ecological and emotional - by consuming in pursuit of happiness and meaningfulness. We have the possibility of evolving and the capacity to do so.

### Activity

The following activity is designed to engage learners in investigating how they live through reflection on consuming and contextualizing orientations in their own lives, as a step towards finding meaning through non-material wealth.

Firstly, list ways in which you consume to satisfy your basic material needs such as hunger, thirst, shelter, clothing, warmth, exercise... Like everything else in nature, satisfying material needs by material means is essential and inevitable. It is when we feel moved to try and satisfy non-material needs in this way that contradictions emerge.

The next step is to list ways in which you try to satisfy non-material needs through consuming or possessing. Obviously this applies to material things but you might also consider ways in which you take a consuming or possessive *orientation*, say towards other people or ideas. It might, for example, feel as though something of yourself feels lost or empty without these people or things. What do you do when you feel this? Do you look for something more to fill the ‘gap’? How long does that satisfy you for before you feel a need to look for something new again? This is the gasping-grasping-gasping vicious circle that is similar to addiction.

Now think of times you have felt a sense of meaningfulness, purpose, beauty, love, joy or

similar emotion that feels satisfying or nourishing. Give yourself time and space to bring the experience back. Allow yourself to *feel* it again. To what extent does this feeling *depend* on consuming or possessing something or someone. Chances are that when you try to grab it, to have it, the feeling dissipates, whereas feeling absorbed *within* it allows it to remain more readily. To what extent does the feeling depend on feeling connected or part of something bigger?

You might also like to think about your 'life's big questions'. What's it all about? What are you here for? What role can you find for yourself? And many other such questions. They might seem embarrassing or 'too big'. But this is, at least partly, a response conditioned by current cultural embarrassment with them. It can be well worth sitting that out and pondering the questions anyway. They can help develop that contextualizing and relating orientation towards finding meaning, purpose and satisfaction in life. I wish you well on your journey.

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