

Image: michellemcquaid.com



Afterword: My ongoing search for positive change.

I have an ever-nearing stalker; getting closer by the day. Peering down into deep reflections, I see him stretching gnarly tentacles to pull me into the unknown abyss. At times he has almost succeeded; one day I am sure he will. But in truth my main concern is not me - *George McCleod* - it's those who come after me I care about.

In addition to the late *Christopher Hitchens*, over the past few years I have also become a devotee of historian and philosopher, *Yuval Noah Harari*. Like Hitchens he excels in print *and* at the podium; his ideas and deliberations far surpassing mere mortals like myself. And what he lacks in charisma and wit, compared to *The Hitch*, he makes up for with pure genius when it comes to teasing out what we are as human beings: where we have come from, and perhaps more importantly, where we are going to.

Towards the end of *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* - the third volume of his unique and inspiring trilogy - Harari declares: *the first thing you need to know about yourself is that you are not a story... human feelings are not part of a cosmic tale ... they are ephemeral vibrations, appearing and disappearing for no particular purpose*. This, according to his sense of reality - and scientific fact to date - is probably true; or perhaps as near to the truth as we can get, given our fragility and miniscule period of time, as an infinitesimal part of the perceived universe.

Nevertheless, if we have no story to tell then what is the point of our existence. Not much point at all says Harari. But then, so many stories have been told across the millennia, by a myriad of people from different parts of our magical planet. Many of us are aware of Cleopatra, Julius Caesar, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein: this is our collective history. Recently I was quite moved by a comparatively modern video story from my own era, which portrayed an elderly Paul McCartney going back to his Liverpool roots, to sing songs – karaoke style – that he had written and made famous over the past 60 years. For his achievements he received his society's highest accolade: a knighthood. Can that all be consigned to the realm of atoms and molecules?

No. Humanity exists to tell its stories, within its own sphere of comprehension. In the longer term and on the scale of the known universe, the stories we have to tell have no significance; but for the here and now, and even despite the fact we might just be a bunch of ephemeral vibrations, our stories for ourselves and each other, are profound.

The ultimate mystery, constantly discussed, debated and fought over, is what happens when the story ends. What comes after the memoirs? Will the gnarly monster pull me into that gloomy underworld, or will I float skyward on cottonwool clouds? Will my body and soul re-emerge as a worm focused on regurgitating soil, or could my being come to light in another realm altogether - in another unknown universe - where existence is above the level of human comprehension? Or ... will there be nothing?

The answer means everything. It is after all, what drives religious faith. But the answer also means nothing - is irrelevant – if we focus on the then and now: our past and present, and what that means to our future and the futures of our children.

To be meaningful within this context, each story of life has to have meaning for the storyteller. If not, then the story is not worth telling. But again, meaning comes in all shapes and sizes, it can be at a basic level of struggles to raise a family within a village existence, or a much more complex world of international politics and corporate affairs.

At times the story transits from one extreme to the other: Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela are worthy examples of this, recounted thousands of times.

My story is somewhere between the extremes, and like a billion or so others at least, relatively normal, but with a few intriguing twists and turns along the way. Moderately quirky one might say, with the ever-present *bruncle* factor impinging on my being – knowingly or unknowingly – since before I was born. But the story also alludes to another intrigue, played out over the same timeframe as my own existence on Earth; this is the transition by homo sapiens, from basic industry to advanced technology; from self-sufficiency to almost total dependency; and while some of this can be viewed as positive progress, there are numerous aspects which appear to harbour more negative change. Recently I encountered a situation, which to my inquisitive mind clearly demonstrated this:

I was seated in a café, when a family of four arrived at the table next to me. I guessed the parents were both around the 40 mark; their kids, an older boy and younger girl, probably about 15 and 10 years respectively. What caught my eye was that immediately they were seated – parents one side, children the other – the parents and the older boy were all working away on their smartphone screens, texting or scrolling. From the moment their backsides hit those cushioned seats they were ‘phone-active’. The young girl - perhaps deemed too young to own a phone – who seemed an outcast from the ritual, sat twiddling her thumbs, wriggling in her seat.

Not one word was spoken for the first five minutes, before a waiter came with the menu and dad tabled his phone, with a few words to his daughter. Food and drinks arrived, causing screens to be put aside, but only momentarily; as soon as consumption was over, mum and the older boy were at it again. Dad seemed more reticent, perhaps sympathetic to the plight of his daughter, who did not have the equipment to be included in the club. As they left, all three had their phones at the ready, mum scrolling, the boy texting, dad’s on hold just in case. The girl made her escape and ran ahead.

My immediate reaction was to begin writing a short piece from which the extract above is drawn. At the top of the article, I drafted the title: ‘*What have we come to?*’

This episode to me is symptomatic of a malaise within society, where very many of us have succumbed to the power of technology. Rather than being able to pick and choose

where and when we need *it* to work for us, technology now tends to dictate how we can serve *its* insatiable needs for exponential growth, via a manufactured culture of consumerism. And as I tap away on my laptop keyboard, I cannot excuse myself from being a part of this global phenomenon, driven by *Silicon Valley*, devoured everywhere. Even village-dwelling Africans, having leap-frogged several stages on the hi-tech circuit, know more about the intricacies of a smart phone than I can ever hope to understand, while the tech companies obligingly come down to meet their needs in terms of price.

According to *Harari*, what we now see as the global growth of hi-tech, is just the beginnings of more to come, and the phenomenon that could become the biggest challenge to be faced in this 21st Century. He surmises that artificial intelligence could turn the tables on humans by taking control of many aspects of our daily life, which may lead relatively quickly to the creation of an Orwellian society, with a few humans in control and multitudes subjected to their wishes. The outcome, as he sees it, will be the result of a merger between InfoTech and Bio-Tech, where marketing techniques will involve understanding more about our desires than we know ourselves, with medical advice given by a computer that scans possible ailments faster than a flotilla of trained doctors. This is a world far removed, almost alien to that place I came to know when I emerged on the scene in mid-20th Century, post-war Britain.

As laid out in the earlier chapters of this book, the script read that I was the seventh child of the family matriarch, when in truth, I was the first of the eldest daughter. Lingering Victorian ethics still ruled the roost. My supposed siblings were all born between the wars, in the 1920s and 30s: three males and three females. As duty demanded they all married, and those six couples went on to bear a total of 24 children: the so-called baby boomers of the late 40s and 1950s. Now, almost 100 years after my mother was born, only two of the initial 12 are still alive, and a bit like the X-factor, the two remaining compete in the finale, to see who will be the last one standing. The next generation of 24 gave birth to what is termed the millennial set - a total of 40 children - and as humanity dictates, reproduction continues, albeit at an ever-decreasing rate.

Returning to the original family of six, we find a group born before the age of plastics and information technology, who grew up with austerity and hardship as a part of their being. The maxims I learnt from them at an early age - *Waste Not, Want Not*, and *Do Unto Others As You Would To Oneself* - were unwritten guidelines for life, which I and others around me followed without question, as an integral part of our upbringing. But today those dictums have been cast to the winds, as ideals that no longer seem to have much validity; voluntary principles now needing to be replaced by involuntary laws, to control such matters as single use plastics or protecting the less fortunate in society.

There's no doubt that compared to the early days of that starter *Generation of Six*, things are better now, for the lucky ones in a material sense at least. But these perceived rewards have come at enormous cost, both to the environment and to humanity. It is as if we have ascended several steps on the development ladder, but while doing so the ladder has dropped to the floor below. And despite the outer glitter of instant, pan-global communications, plus total access to products from all over the world, we have in reality gone backwards, rather than forwards, with reference to the manner in which we interact with our environment, and our fellow humans.

In the 70+ years since that start-up generation began to multiply, the population of the wider world has more than tripled in size - from 2.5 to 7.9 billion people - but along with that exponential growth in numbers, has come a range of enormous challenges that surround our daily lives and threaten the planet we live on. The pollution of land and water by non-biodegradable plastic residues, coupled with the overarching phenomenon of global heating, are the two greatest environmental dangers that humankind has ever known - greater than terrorism or a pandemic, or all the world wars combined, even outstripping potential nuclear war. Why? Simply because plastics pollution and climate change are phenomena created by man, which in the long term, endanger the existence of almost all species that exists on Earth ... including humans.

But as discussed at the start of this chapter, in the shorter term there seems to be an even greater challenge to humanity, which relates solely to humankind and the ways in which we interact with each other. The rapid advance in communications technology has meant that many of us - and this is now beginning to include the have-nots, as well as the haves - connect much more easily to screens than we do to actual people. The phenomenal speed of development in this area, has taken us way beyond the known lifestyle limits that existed, even just two or three decades ago.

I can remember renting my first Amstrad computer, along with its floppy discs in the 1980s, and then my first mobile phone coming around the start of the new millennium. Back in the 80s, the company I worked for put a CB radio in my car, attached to an enormous ten-foot aerial, waving in the breeze ... and I hated it, because it meant that *Big Brother* could forever watch over me. Now of course, that notion is absurd; we are in instant contact with people anywhere on earth and we have all become used to *Big Brother watching over us*, every minute, every second of every day.

And so, I ask myself, are we any better off than that *Generation of Six*, who when they started out, new nothing of computers, or smart phones, plastics or climate change. Yes, we have restaurants that serve fine foods and wines from all corners of the planet; and at a moment's notice, we can fly to any of those corners to laze on the beach or go spotting rhino, with our latest iphone at the ready to capture the images. The *Generation of Six* awoke to learn that Hillary and Tensing had conquered Everest; now there is a line-up of monied people queueing to kiss the summit, leaving a trail of litter from the peak back to the base camp and beyond. That generation awoke to spend time with their friends and next-door neighbours; now many of us spend more time with our phones and play-stations than we do communicating on a face-to-face basis with family or friends. And that generation appreciated that their forebears had suffered wars for the sake of their children, and their children's children; now such thoughts are so far in the distant and fading past, that they are hardly credible!

Of course, it's impossible to turn the clock back. Fossil fuels, plastic products, the technology revolution and now the climate crisis, have all become an acknowledged part of our make-up, our daily language and our daily lives ... and regardless of future hazards, many would want things to stay that way. But many others – myself included – see an imperative need to re-visit those days of yesteryear in order to re-evaluate the world of today, which has been created from that base. *Waste Not, Want Not* and *Do Unto Others* are maxims that appear to have been discarded, in the frantic scramble for growth and the good life. In this 21st Century there is a growing need to re-group, re-visit the past, learn from our history, and retrieve that which we feel is necessary to bring about positive change. In our stampede towards progress and modernity over the past 70 years, we threw the baby out with the bath water. Now we need to return to the bathroom, pick up the pieces and begin to assemble a lifestyle which blends the good from previous generations, with the sustainable advances of today's world.

This process of re-visiting and re-evaluating, relates in particular to two ever-increasing challenges that loom large in today's world (and which probably cause more division between people than most other issues): *the climate crisis* and *immigration*. If we examine these topics, it doesn't take a genius to realise that those two simple maxims I learnt from my past, can provide the key to unlocking these thorny problems of today.

Waste not want not, was the first truism, which in effect is the past's simple version - in a nutshell as it were - of today's more complex term: *Sustainable Development (or sustainability)*. I grew up not leaving food on my plate and turning the tap off during the process of brushing my teeth ... small things admittedly, which scaled up can make a big difference: in effect, more food and water to go round.

But there are much more significant aspects to contemplate. Our unbridled use of fossil fuels (coal and oil in particular) and timber, over the past century or two, needs to be severely curtailed and modified, so that we do not use that which we cannot replace, or which pollutes. In terms of wood, then replacement is possible with plantations and sustainable forests, though it is also important to replace the natural forests that have

been denuded. Energy supplied by fossil fuels pollutes and cannot be replaced, so we require energies that are non-polluting and *renewable*, such as wind, wave, solar and geothermal power. In fact, there are so many alternatives to burning fossil fuels and natural forests, one wonders why man has persisted with these destructive options for so long. The short answer to that historical conundrum, lies somewhere within the melee of misinformed economic growth policies and accumulation of monetary wealth by a small percentage of people, within an unbridled capitalist system.

In hindsight, economic growth based on the burning of fossil fuels and forests is a policy doomed in the long term to failure, simply because the supply of fossil fuels and forests is finite. And as the industrial world is now discovering, a switch *can* be made to renewable energies and non-polluting systems, so that industries can rely on infinite resource supplies, create new jobs, become non-polluting, and are totally sustainable. Thus, our seemingly unsurmountable challenge becomes first a golden opportunity, then an invaluable asset.

In addition, part of the answer from *waste not want not*, encompasses the truism *do unto others*, because by revising our systems and building a more sustainable world, based around renewable and non-polluting energies, we are building something worthwhile to hand on to future generations: doing unto them a service, that we would want to have done to ourselves, thus enabling a livelihood for them, that is as good or better than the one we ourselves have been able to experience.

This aspect also includes the here-and-now component of our thinking, specifically how we treat fellow humans who are caught in the grips of poverty, or famine, or war, even personal turmoil, and who want to achieve a better life for themselves and their children. Do we consider them as friends in need, and offer them shelter and food, education and employment, even citizenship; or do we build walls, declare ourselves superior, separate family members, and turn our backs? How would we want to be regarded if we were in that situation? Do we have the courage to treat another person's child the same way as we treat our own, regardless of the circumstance?

If we are a self-respecting society that encompasses self-respecting humans within its bounds, then surely these two maxims that have been with me since my childhood should ring true for everyone, and we should do our utmost to follow them. If we do not, then our society - built on a finely balanced planetary ecosystem which has stood the test of time for millions of years - could be confronted by a slow and painful, but relatively rapid death, played out over just one or two centuries!

To have and to hold; or to have and to throw away
... such is the power of humankind.