

*Photo by Duncan Gregory*



## WASTE NOT, WANT NOT: for ourselves and others!

Today we live in a world of turmoil. It seems like a fight to the death between the haves and the have-nots, between peoples with different skin colours and between humans and their natural environment. In many ways the lucky ones have it all. Today's youngsters grow up in a digital age, accustomed to social media platforms and supermarkets providing their daily needs. Yet there was a time, not that long ago, when it was all so very different.

I was born into a large family, soon after World War 2 ended. My own place in the group was something of a fabrication, which was in part a reflection of the times. The script read that I was the seventh child of the matriarch, when in truth, I was the first child 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: baby boomers of the late 40s and 1950s. Now,

almost 100 years after my mother was born, only two of the initial 12 remain on this Earth, 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 in this case of 40 children, and 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 IT 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. But today those dictums have been cast to the winds as free-thinking ideals, replaced in the main, by laws for such matters as single use plastics, or protecting the less fortunate in society.

There's no doubt that things are better now – for the lucky ones, in a material sense at least – compared to the early days of that starter *Generation of Six*. But these perceived rewards have come at enormous costs – 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 all the outer glitter of instant, pan-global communications, plus total access to produce from all over the world, we have in reality gone backwards, rather than forwards, in the way 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 7.7 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 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.

In the shorter term there seems to be an even greater challenge to humanity which relates solely to humans and the way 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. Individuals in village Africa, for example, now have smart phones, for work and for personal use, with social media accounts and rapid communications to the wider world, way beyond the previously known limits of just a decade or two before.

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 early 80s, the company I worked for put a CB radio in my car, attached to an enormous aerial ... 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 of every day.

And so, I ask myself, are we any better off than that *Generation of Six*, who when they started out, knew nothing of computers, or phones, plastics or climate change. Yes, we have restaurants that serve fine foods and wines from all corners of the planet; and we can even fly to each of those corners to laze on the beach or go spotting rhino, with our latest iphone at the ready to capture the images. That generation 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 there, back to the Everest base camp and beyond. That generation awoke to spend time with their friends and next door neighbours, now most of us spend more time with our phones and play-stations than we do 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 past for young people, that they hardly remain credible!

Of course, it's impossible to turn the clock back. Fossil fuels, plastics products, the technology revolution and now the climate crisis have all become part of our make-up ... and regardless of future hazards, many would want things to stay that way. But many others - this writer 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 21<sup>st</sup> Century there is a growing need to re-group, re-visit the past, and retrieve that which we feel is necessary to enhance our world of today. In our stampede towards progress and modernity, 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***. And each in turn can be guided by those simple maxims from the past:

### ***Waste not, want not***

In effect this is the past's simple version of today's more complex term, *Sustainable Development* (in a nutshell as it were). 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, oil and gas) and timber (trees) 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

that 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 cannot be replaced, so we need to move to energies that are *renewable*, such as wind, wave and solar power. Generating oils from plant growth and utilizing organic materials (biomass) are other possibilities. In fact, there are so many alternatives to burning fossil fuels and natural forests that one wonders why humankind persisted with the destructive options for so long. Misinformed economic growth policies and accumulation of monies being the short answer.

In hindsight, economic growth based on the burning of fossil fuels and forests is a policy doomed, in the long term, to failure, because the supply of fossil fuels and forests is finite. And as the industrial world is now discovering, the switch can be made to renewable energies and none-polluting systems, so that industries are generated which have infinite resource supplies, are non-polluting, and totally sustainable.

***Do to others, as you would to yourself.***

Part of the answer to *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, as we would want to have done to ourselves.

Another aspect relates to 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 treat them as friends in need and offer them shelter and food, even citizenship; or do we build walls, separate the family members, and turn our backs? How would we want to be treated if we were in that situation? Would we treat another person's child in the same way as we treat our own?

If we are a self-respecting society that encompasses self-respecting humans within its bounds, then surely these two maxims should ring true, and we should do our utmost to follow them. If we do not, then our society - built on a finely balanced planetary ecosystem that 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 the next century or two.

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

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