

Spirituality, progress, meaning and values: Implications for leadership and management

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ABSTRACT

This paper weaves a large tapestry on the themes of spirituality, meaning, values, progress and well-being. It reveals a coherent picture, with an internally consistent message. However, given the space constraints, the tapestry won't be richly detailed. The key points are: scenarios of global futures are closely tied to issues of spirituality and meaning in life; crucial to these matters are how we see and use religion and science and technology, and the choice we make between new 'transformational' religions and old fundamentalist ones; this is part of a broader challenge to find appropriate sources of meaning in late modern or postmodern societies; this challenge includes redefining progress which, as currently pursued, is inequitable, unsustainable and, contrary to its core objective, is not making life better or people happier – at least in countries like Australia, that are already rich; values are central to the tasks of redefining progress and searching for meaning; they are neither absolute nor totally relative; both religion and science can provide moral guidance, but the lessons are human interpretations, drawn from experience, not laws of God or of Nature; and leadership and management, perhaps especially in the corporate sector, are still a long way from addressing adequately the social implications of these matters – although there are encouraging signs that mindsets are changing.

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Introduction

I want to weave a large tapestry on the themes of spirituality, meaning, values, progress and well-being. I think it reveals a pretty coherent picture, with an internally consistent message. However, given the constraints of time and space, the tapestry won't be richly detailed (although more detailed here than in my presentation).

To provide a sketch of the overall picture, here are some key points:

1. Scenarios of global futures are closely tied to issues of spirituality and meaning in life.
2. Crucial to these matters are how we see and use religion and science and technology, and the choice we make between new 'transformational' religions and old fundamentalist ones.
3. This is part of a broader challenge to find appropriate sources of meaning in late modern or postmodern societies.
4. This challenge includes redefining progress which, as currently pursued, is inequitable, unsustainable and, contrary to its core objective, is not making life better or people happier – at least in countries, like Australia, that are already rich.
5. Values are central to the tasks of redefining progress and searching for meaning. They are neither absolute nor totally relative. Both religion and science can provide moral guidance, but the lessons are human interpretations, drawn from experience, not laws of God or of Nature.
6. Leadership and management, perhaps especially in the corporate sector, are still a long way from

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A choice of futures

At a futures conference in Perth earlier this year, I heard Damien Broderick, the science fiction and science writer, talking about his book, *The Spike*, and discussed it with him. Damien says developments in computer, gene and nano technologies will produce, some time over the next 10 to 30 years, or by 2050 at the latest, a 'spike' or technological singularity, a period of change of such speed and scale it will render the future opaque and unseeable, where things become unknowable.

It could end in human obsolescence or human transformation. It could mean, as computing power continues to obey Moore's Law and double every year, the rapid emergence of not only intelligent machines but superintelligent, conscious, machines, which leave humanity in their evolutionary wake. Or it could result in bionically and genetically enhanced beings who are effectively immortal. (I'm quite attracted to this eventuality. The more I try, the more I realise that I am just not intelligent enough to understand what's going on and what we should do!)

Damien is optimistic about these possibilities, saying there will be neither the need nor the means for the rich and powerful to use the technologies to exploit or oppress. Providing a counterpoint to his spike is another 'spike': this time the population spike of a plague species – us – as it grows exponentially then collapses as it overshoots the capacity of its habitat to support it. And this within about the same timeframe as the technological spike!

I recently met another Australian writer, Reg Morrison, who argues in a new book, *The Spirit in the Gene*, that this is the certain fate of humanity. Reg says evolution ensures this outcome for any species that threatens to become too dominant and reduce the earth's biological diversity. His intriguing spin on us is that our genes have bequeathed us a self-destruct mechanism – or time bomb. This is a sense of spirituality - our tendency to spiritualise or mysticise our existence - with the result that we will never –cannot - behave rationally enough to achieve sustainable planetary dominance, and are predestined to suffer the fate of all plagues.

There is a fascinating symmetry to these 'spikes', both the result of exponential growth – one in technological power, the other in human population – both occurring at about the same time in history. Maybe we'll see the evolution of a new level or form of intelligence and consciousness just as its progenitor – Homo sapiens – reaches its zenith, and burns out: a metaphorical spaceship jettisoning its booster rockets, which fall back towards earth and burn up, as it soars into the wide open horizons of outer space.

There are several scenarios for the human response to either or both of these imminent 'spikes', each of which has profound implications for human civilisation:

- a) Surrender and abdication: the scale and speed of change is so big people will give up any hope of trying to manage or direct it. The sheer impotence of government or any other human institution in the face of such change will totally undermine our faith in already weakened institutions leading to further political disengagement and an even greater focus on individual goals, especially hedonistic ones - precipitating a period of chaotic change.
- b) A fundamentalist backlash: the technological 'fundamentalism' that Damien's spike represents will trigger a desperate response by religious or nationalist fundamentalists, to whom what the spike represents is deeply offensive, and who will use every means at hand to oppose it - including potent technologies such as biological or nuclear terrorism. A population spike could also see a fundamentalist revival, but for a different reason – this is the action of a vengeful God.
- c) A new universalism: a more benign outcome is that the spikes – one or other or both, because of the global threat or challenge they pose - help to drive the emergence of a new universal culture, a new sense of human solidarity and destiny, and a resurgent spirituality. Set against the momentousness of these events, all differences between us become petty, and our present priorities trivial. Only the most fundamental aspects of the human condition matter.

Both spikes are highly deterministic – one technologically, the other biologically. There is a strong element of inevitability about them, which I'd challenge. I also feel, as indicated in response 'c', that spirituality is crucial to meeting the challenge of the future, not a source of the problem.

But the stories and our responses contain several important lessons for us. The 'spikes' are very real

possibilities; they are not events in the far distant future, but within our lifetime or that of our children. Even if you regard them as too extreme and so improbable, they can serve as metaphors for contemporary global trends, and as stories that compel us to fix our gaze at much larger visions of the future. Furthermore, there are elements of all three responses in the ways we are dealing with these trends today.

And yet there is no recognition of these issues and possibilities in current political debate. Government and business are dominated by linear optimists – those who believe that by continuing on our current path life will keep getting better. Their opposite might be called linear pessimists - those who believe that life will inevitably get worse. What we need are systemic optimists - those who believe life can get better, but only if we change systemically the way we think and do things.

In creating scenarios of the future, we are taught to express key variables as dichotomies or polarities, and to construct scenarios around these. I'd like to mention two such contrasting scenarios based on inner- and outer-oriented values, meanings and satisfactions: 'cheap thrills' and 'inner harmony'. They occurred to me when, on a recent family holiday to Queensland, we spent a day at Dreamworld and, about a week later, walked along a bush road one day to visit Chenrezig, a Buddhist retreat in the hills inland from the Sunshine Coast. (The scenarios also reflect two of the three responses - 'a' and 'c' - to the historical spikes I have just described.)

Bear in mind that scenarios are extremes, or 'pure' expressions of plausible realities - I'm not suggesting we will all either live our lives in theme parks, or become Buddhist monks. Dreamworld – like all theme and amusement parks, casinos etc - is a good metaphor for the current pre-occupations of modern Western societies: the quest for more and new experiences that offer pleasure, fun, excitement. Chenrezig, with its signs requesting no drugs and sex, is about something entirely different: developing a whole new (from a modern Western perspective) awareness of ourselves and our relationship with nature.

'Cheap thrills' and 'inner harmony' reflect growing and conflicting trends, an increasing tension between our professed values – a desire for simpler, less materialistic, less fraught lives – and our lived lifestyle – one encouraged, even imposed, by our consumer economy and culture. 'Cheap thrills' does nothing to address the deep challenges we face. In fact, its appeal lies in allowing us to turn away from these issues, in celebrating the power of technology to distract and amuse. As Woody Allen once said, 'Don't under-estimate the power of distraction to keep our minds off the truth of our situation'. 'Inner harmony', on the other hand, reflects an emerging global consciousness, environmental sensitivity and spiritual awareness – a transformation of the dominant ethos of industrialised nations in recent centuries.

Science and spirituality

Embedded in the historical spikes and response scenarios I've outlined are the futures of religion and science and technology, and the relations between them, so let me turn to this topic. The relationship between science and religion today hangs in balance between conflict and concurrence. As the writer, Harvey Blume, said recently: 'Third millenium America is a curious and unstable mixture of futuristic technology and old-time religion.' The outcome will depend on our interpretations of what both are.

Back in the 1970s, I spent two years travelling through Africa, Western and Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union and Asia. My travels allowed me not only to experience many other cultures, but, as much as is possible, to view my own culture from the outside. I saw just how much religious belief could deepen and enrich life; on my return to Australia, I felt ours was a spiritually desiccated way of life.

Other experiences were more personal – for example, the wonderful sense of spiritual release or liberation we can feel in desert places, a sense of our own spirit expanding to the horizons of those immense open spaces. But my most intense experience of the spiritual was when I lived for a time in a cave on a remote part of the south coast of Crete. It was there, alone, watching the full moon rise over the sea one night, that something happened that I find almost impossible to put into words.

There was nothing 'romantic' about the moment. I felt as if some force or power had penetrated to the core of my being, a part of me that seemed to go back in time forever, and be connected with everything else. I was filled with awe and reverence. I understood instantly why my ancestors had worshipped the moon, so eerily powerful in a vast, otherwise-unlit landscape. But for me, the rising moon was the trigger, not the source, of my transfixion. I have no doubt that had I come from a religious background, I would say that I had 'felt the presence of God'. But my background is science, so I think of the experience as the tapping of a 'genetic memory' of my evolution, of everything that had ever come before me.

The mystery of my experience, and the difficulty of articulating it, is well understood. I remember the Catholic theologian, Tony Kelly, saying in a television program that God is beyond images and beyond thought. 'Thomas Aquinas said that we know God best when we come to the point of knowing that we don't know him.' A Sanskrit text, the Upanishad, says of Brahman (the ultimate reality, or Self, from which the world was created): 'Brahman is unknown to those who know it and is known to those who do not know it at all.'

The novelist, Morris West, a devout Catholic, once said: 'I don't know who or what God is but I do know that there is a relationship between me and the Cosmos and its origins - I'm part of it.' The biologist and theologian, Charles Birch, also emphasises the 'relational' nature of God. God, he says, 'is internally related to all that is'. 'God is to the world as self is to the body.' As I understand this, he is saying our relationship to God is personal, but it is an internal relationship, not a relationship to something or someone else; there is no 'other'.

After my stint as a Cretan troglodyte, I travelled back to Australia through Asia. I got to talk to quite a few disciples or devotees of various gurus and cults. I could see they were all speaking of the same ultimate truth, but using different stories or metaphors. Yet they usually couldn't see this; they tended to believe their faith was the one true path to enlightenment, and everyone else was just 'on a trip'.

My definition of that truth, of spirituality, is a deeply intuitive sense of relatedness or connectedness to the world and the universe in which we live. I see religions as social institutions built up around a particular spiritual metaphor, or set of metaphors. God is real, but we can only know him as a metaphor. (My own term, 'genetic memory', is also a metaphor.)

Religions may be socially necessary and desirable to obtain the greatest social and personal benefits from a sense of the spiritual - meaning, fulfilment, virtue. I don't feel my own spirituality is particularly adequate or developed. On the other hand, religions can be made so rigid and sclerotic by institutional inertia, and by layers of bureaucracy, politics and corruption, that their spiritual core withers. When this happens, they become self-serving institutions lacking any higher purpose; worse, they can become potent ideologies of oppression and abuse.

Science also uses metaphors to describe the world, especially at the more abstract, conceptual level. These days, cosmology is full of terms like black holes, worm holes, quantum foam. We are learning that science and religion use different metaphors to describe the same world, or different dimensions of the same world. (Some metaphors, such as Gaia, the notion of the Earth as a single, self-regulating living system or organism, can even be both scientific and religious).

Here are two scientific descriptions of the world. The first comes from the biologist, Richard Dawkins:

In a universe of electrons and selfish genes, blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.

The second is from the physicist, Paul Davies:

The true miracle of nature is to be found in the ingenious and unswerving lawfulness of the cosmos, a lawfulness that permits complex order to emerge from chaos, life to emerge from inanimate matter, and consciousness to emerge from life.... (T)he universe (is) a coherent, rational, elegant and harmonious expression of a deep and purposeful meaning.

The two views represent the extremes of the modern scientific worldview. According to the first, we are doing what all species have ever done: to do as well as possible, to sequester for ourselves as much of the earth's resources as we possibly can. According to the second, we are part of an awesome evolutionary pattern that has seen, in the space of some 15 billion years, the emergence of a universe that can wonder and marvel at itself. I don't think the two are irreconcilable, and simply reflect different dimensions of the evolution of life – Dawkins focusing on living organisms and their struggle for survival, Davies on a cosmological perspective.

Western culture has been deeply influenced by the old, Newtonian model of a dead, mechanical, clockwork universe. It has yet to absorb the significance of the new model, one of a dynamic cosmic network of forces and fields, of an 'undivided, flowing wholeness' - to use physicist David Bohm's words - that is far more compatible with a spiritual sense of connectedness to the universe.

The Nobel laureate, Steven Weinberg, argued in *Scientific American* a few years ago that life as we know it

would be impossible if any one of several physical quantities had slightly different values. For example, the vacuum energy or cosmological constant appears to need to be fine-tuned to an accuracy of about 120 decimal places for life to exist in the universe. So is this the razor's edge of probability or exquisite precision engineering?

The significance of all this, for me, is not that there is some Divine Purpose or Supreme Being somewhere 'out there'. Rather this understanding of our relationship with the Cosmos fosters a sense of deeper purpose, or meaning, within ourselves.

Spirituality is the intuitive sense of what science seeks to explain rationally. The anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, said that, 'Whatever else religion does, it relates a view of the ultimate nature of reality to a set of ideas of how man is well-advised...to live.' It has often been said that science, while also offering a view of 'the ultimate nature of reality' lacks the moral dimension. Yet research in a wide range of disciplines – from psychology and physiology, epidemiology and sociology, to ecology and cosmology – does provide guidance on how we ought to live – guidance of a kind that is compatible and consistent with religious teaching.

But in both realms – science and spirituality – we are operating at the very limits of our capacity to comprehend 'the grand scheme of things'. We can only express ourselves in clumsy metaphors; the moral lessons can only be human interpretations, not laws of science or of God.

Human well-being is associated with the personal, social and spiritual relationships that give our lives a moral texture and a sense of meaning - of self-worth, belonging, identity, purpose and hope. Psychologists have shown that positive life meaning is related to strong religious beliefs, self-transcendent values, membership of groups, dedication to a cause and clear life goals.

Meaning in life need not be religious. Many people today find it in the pursuit of personal goals – in careers, sport or family, for example. But spirituality offers something deeper. It is central to the age-old questions about the meaning of life: Who am I? Where have I come from? Why am I here? It represents the broadest and deepest form of connectedness. It is the most subtle, and so easily corrupted by societies, yet perhaps the most powerful. It is the only form that transcends our personal circumstances, social situation and the material world, and so can sustain us through the trouble and strife of mortal existence.

I read - in the context of the coalition between Muslims and Catholics on the issue of birth control at 1994 United Nations summit on population and development in Cairo - that the Iranian deputy Foreign Minister had stated that 'the war of the future' would be fought between the religious and the materialists.

This is one tension we must deal with, as I noted in response 'b'. There is another growing tension that will also bear mightily on the future: a tension between developing new, or renewed, 'transformational' religions and retreating to old, fundamentalist faiths. The former would use metaphysical metaphors and practices attuned to our times and our modern, scientific understanding of the world; the latter offer rock-solid certainties in a time when these can be enormously destructive.

I don't mean, in talking about this tension, to sideline current mainstream faiths, but rather to suggest they will be caught up in it, and could be profoundly shaped by it. The danger with fundamentalism is that it mistakes the religious 'metaphor' for the spiritual 'truth', and so cedes too much power to those who claim to speak on God's behalf. On the other hand, more 'modern' concepts of God, while philosophically compelling, may be too abstract to meet the human yearning for spiritual comfort and moral authority. Still, this path seems to me to offer the best prospects of a better future – harder, undoubtedly, but more likely in the long run to lead to a peaceful, equitable and sustainable world.

The new religions would transcend, rather than confront, the powerful individualising and fragmenting forces of postmodernity. One of the most exciting ideas to emerge from recent postmodern scholarship is that we have the opportunity, however small, of becoming truly moral beings, perhaps for the first time in history.

That is, we have, each of us, the opportunity to exercise genuine moral choice and to take responsibility for the consequences of those choices, rather than accepting moral edicts based on some grand, universal creed and handed down from on high by its apostles. This seems close to what theologians call the doctrine of 'primacy of conscience'. This is an immense challenge, and it may well be asking too much of us. But the ideal is there, if often hidden, in both religious teaching and science.

Meaning in life

I've argued that meaning in life is crucial to well-being, but that meaning need not be spiritual or religious. I

want now to present a broader take on meaning in life in the context of the social changes associated with modernity and postmodernity.

On 20 March 1995, members of Aum Shinrikyo (or Aum Supreme Truth), a Japanese religious sect, carried out a nerve-gas attack on the Tokyo subway, leaving 12 people dead and thousands ill. The sect is one of several 'Doomsday cults' linked in recent years to mass murder and suicide. Aum Shinrikyo attracted many highly intelligent and well-educated young people, including chemists, physicists and medical specialists. As the report of the World Commission on Culture and Development observes, these people possessed a formidable mastery of scientific know-how, but not an iota of know-why. 'I did not want my life to be meaningless,' a senior sect member said.

For most of our existence as a species, meaning in life was pretty much a social given. Children grew up in a close network of family and community relationships which largely defined their world - their values and beliefs, identity and place. People knew little of what lay outside that world, of other ways of living (except through the intrusions of trade or invasion).

Beyond the mortal realm, they had a religious faith that gave them a place in the Cosmic scheme of things. Much of life was predictable and what wasn't was explained in terms of the supernatural. The old ways might often have been harsh and oppressive, but they allowed people to make sense of their lives at several levels. As the 19th Century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, said: 'He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how'.

Today, things are different, especially in the West but increasingly elsewhere as well. The speed, scope and scale of economic, social and cultural change have made the past seemingly irrelevant, the future uncertain. Family and community ties have been loosened. We know much more of the rest of the world and how differently others live and think. And while most people today retain some form of religious belief, this is not nearly as absolute and binding as it once was.

Initially, as these changes occurred, we were convinced they represented progress. The old certainties gave way to the exhilarating possibilities of human betterment through economic growth, social reform, scientific discovery and technological development. Even if life's meaning became less clear, life itself became more comfortable, more varied, safer, healthier and longer.

Over the past few decades the faith in material progress has given way to growing doubt. We now live in 'postmodern' times, marked by the end of the dream of creating a perfect social order, the realisation that some of our problems may be unsolvable; despite our efforts, war, poverty, hunger and disease remain with us. Science and technology, intended to give us mastery over the natural and social world, have instead (or, at best, also) created risks on an unprecedented, global scale.

The result is a world characterised by ambivalence, ambiguity, relativism, pluralism, fragmentation and contingency. The profound paradox of our situation is well described by the scholar, Marshall Berman, who said: 'To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world - and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.'

Meaning in life is no longer a social given, but a matter of personal choice; it has to be constructed, or chosen, from a proliferation of options. Some writers celebrate this development as offering unparalleled opportunities for personal growth and development. They say, for example, that the new technologies of cyberspace allow the creation of 'liquid identities' - multiple, flexible selves - which undermine traditional notions of identity as a single, stable entity. Players in multi-user domains or dungeons can move from one computer window to another, changing personas like costumes; 'RL (real life) is just another window', says one.

So it is with values, with what we believe to be right and good. Cultural pluralism and moral relativism, taken far enough, mean values, too, become just a matter of personal choice, requiring no external validation and having no authority or reference beyond the individual and the moment.

Some claim that young people are attuned to this world: adapted to its transience and fragmentation; comfortable with its absence of absolutes and blurred distinctions between real and virtual; equipped for its abundant opportunities, exciting choices and limitless freedoms - and its hazards and risks. They are the first global generation: confident, optimistic, well-informed and educated, technologically sophisticated. They are self-reliant (even self-contained), street-wise, enterprising and creative, fast on their feet, keeping their

options open.

There is something in all this. From today's perspective, the conformity and constraints of the past are suffocating (Martin Scorsese's film, *The Age of Innocence*, captures well how thoroughly, and subtly, the lives of the rich in 19th Century New York were ruled by the norms, customs and traditions of their class and times). Yet the celebrations of our situation also reveal a very postmodern quality: the inability to separate reality from fantasy.

Modern Western society is failing to meet human needs in several important respects. The openness and complexity of life today can make finding meaning and the qualities that contribute to it - purpose, direction, balance, identity and belonging - extremely hard, especially for young people, for whom these are the destinations of the developmental journeys they are undertaking.

Another vital quality, hope, is also easily lost if life is episodic, and lacks coherence and predictability. In his famous account of life in World War II concentration camps, *Man's Search for Meaning*, the psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl says the prisoner who had lost faith in the future was doomed. With this loss of belief, he also lost his spiritual hold, and went into a physical and mental decline. 'It is a peculiarity of man that he can only live by looking to the future'.

While loosening social ties can be liberating for individuals, and create more dynamic, diverse and tolerant societies, too much cultural flexibility can have the effect of trivialising the convictions and commitments that we need to find meaning, and to control our own lives. Tolerance, taken too far, becomes indifference, and freedom abandonment. Our power as a people comes from a sense of collective, not individual, agency, from pursuing a common vision based on shared values, not maximising individual choice in order to maximise personal satisfaction.

Beyond the risks of excessive choice and freedom is the evidence that these can be, in any case, illusory. Social constraints remain, and in some cases are increasing, whether these concern sex or cars (both totems of freedom which are highly prescribed by rules and realities), or class and privilege (which still substantially define opportunity). The sociologist, Mark Elchardus, argues: 'There seems to be a growing gap between the cultural emphasis on autonomy and individual choice, on the one hand, and the experienced lack of autonomy, on the other.'

There is more. The postmodern ideal is really a Trojan horse for the social promotion of particular choices and values. Western societies present a façade of virtually unlimited autonomy that disguises a powerful preference for consumerist and individualist values that define our way of life today.

In this historical evolution, we have altered profoundly our notions of the 'self', of what it is to be human. The self of the early Middle Ages was an immortal soul enclosed in the shell of a mortal body. Today, according to the psychologist, Philip Cushman, we have created 'the empty self', stripped of community, tradition and shared meaning. Our era, he says, has constructed a self that is, fundamentally, a disappointment to itself, and must be soothed and made cohesive by being constantly 'filled up' with consumer products, celebrity news, and the quest for self-improvement and personal growth. Martin Seligman, another psychologist, argues that one necessary condition for meaning is the attachment to something larger than the self, and the larger that entity, the more meaning people can derive. 'The self, to put it another way, is a very poor site for meaning.'

Contrasting with the view that young people are adapted to our times is the evidence that rates of psychological and social problems among youth have risen in almost all developed nations over the past 50 years. Highly-publicised problems like youth suicide and drug-overdose deaths are only the tip of an iceberg of suffering among the young, with recent studies showing that a fifth to a third of young people today experience significant psychological distress or disturbance.

Many recent surveys of youth attitudes show that many - perhaps most - young people are uncomfortable with the broader changes they see taking place in society, even if most are, most of time, happy and optimistic about their own personal circumstances. Nor are they inspired by the visions of the future held up to them by society. Most continue to work within 'the system', but many no longer believe in it or are willing to serve it.

Despite the cultural propaganda of our times, it is clear that constantly filling up an 'empty self' is a poor substitute for the web of meaning provided by deep and enduring personal, social and spiritual attachments. We are told that a highly individualistic, consumer lifestyle is compatible with strong families, social cohesion and equity, environmental sustainability, and a sense of spiritual connectedness to the universe in which we live. It is not.

This critique of our way of life will strike many as exaggerated. But it is an attempt to give a clear definition, a sharp edge, to issues that are, in reality, diffuse, often unconscious, and hard to discern from 'inside' our culture. To argue that Western society is seriously flawed in these ways is not say a meaningful life is impossible, only more difficult. Nor is it to suggest that we return to old ways. Rather, we need to go forward towards new goals, guided by different values.

There has never been a period in human history when so much hangs in the balance between what is and what might be, when so much depends on the choices we make as individuals, when it is so clear that we are, each of us, 'decision-makers' in deciding the destiny of humankind. It is a time, then, that offers so much meaning. And yet, because of the pressures, preoccupations and priorities of life today, we don't sense this significance of the moment - or sensing it, seem unable to hold it and be inspired by it.

This is one of the most profound paradoxes of our times. Recognising this can help us make the right choices - and find more meaning in our lives.

Progress and well-being

Against this broad cultural background, let's look again at linear optimism. Is it a valid, tenable belief? Linear optimism is framed by the conviction that economic growth = progress, that more means better. So, our Prime Minister, John Howard, declared in a speech to a World Economic Forum Dinner in Melbourne in March 1998 that: 'The overriding aim of our agenda is to deliver Australia an annual (economic) growth rate of over 4% on average during the decade to 2010'. At a Liberal Party conference in April this year, Howard said of the Government's 'great record of (economic) reform': 'That reform program has not been pursued because we want to get an A+ in the exam for economic rationalists. Economic reform is about satisfying human needs. Economic reform is about making people feel more secure, happier, more able to care for their families.'

This is progress as a pipeline: pump more wealth in one end and more welfare flows out the other. By this standard, Australia is doing very well. Australians are, on average and in real terms, about five times richer now than at the turn of the last century. If we maintain economic growth at over 4% a year, we will be twice as rich as we are now in about 20 years' time, and so ten times richer than we were 100 years ago - and about 40 times richer than 200 years ago.

This model of growth as progress is inequitable; unsustainable and is not meeting its core objective of making life better or people happier:

Equity: About 200 years ago, the average income in the richest country of the world was about three times that in the poorest; today it more than 70 times greater. There is currently, in the literature, a lot of debate about trends in global inequality. It depends, for example, on how national currencies are adjusted in making comparisons. Thus, the UN Statistical Commission has just released a paper which says that using purchasing power parity rather than exchange rates, 'the fifth of the world's people living in the highest income countries have 60% to 65%, not 86%, of the world's income, and that the gap in per capita income between the countries with the richest fifth of the world's population and those with the poorest fifth is not 74 to 1, but 16 to 1, and that the gap is not unequivocally widening but moderately fluctuating'.

Sustainability: World Wide Fund for Nature recently released the second of its Living Planet Reports. It notes that its Living Planet Index, based on an assessment of the health of forest, freshwater, marine and coastal ecosystems, has declined by a third since 1970. Humanity's Ecological Footprint, a measure of the ecological pressure of people on the Earth, has increased by half over this period. Sometime in the 1970s, WWF says, we passed the point of living within the regenerative capacity of Earth.

Quality of life: International comparisons show a close correlation between per capita income and many indicators of quality of life, but the relationship is often non-linear: increasing income confers large benefits at low income levels, but little if any benefit at high income levels. Furthermore the causal relationship between wealth and quality of life is often surprisingly unclear.

Some of the strongest evidence for material progress is that the vast majority of people today say they are happy and satisfied with their lives, and people in rich countries tend to be happier than people in poor countries. However, one of the most surprising findings of research into what psychologists call subjective well-being (which includes life satisfaction and happiness) is the often small correlation with objective resources and conditions. One recent estimate is that external circumstances account for only about 15% of the differences in well-being between people.

Only in the poorest countries is income a good indicator of well-being. In most nations the correlation is small, with even the very rich being only slightly happier than the average person. That people in rich countries are happier than those in poor nations may be due, at least in part, to factors other than wealth, such as literacy, democracy and equality.

Another striking finding is that the proportion of people in developed nations, including Australia, who are happy or satisfied with their lives has remained stable over the past several decades that these things have been measured (about 50 years in the US), even though we have become, on average, much richer.

It appears that increased income matters to subjective well-being when it helps people meet basic needs, but beyond that the relationship becomes more complicated. There is no simple answer to what causes happiness. Instead, there is a complex interplay between genes and environment, between life events and circumstances, culture, personality, goals and various adaptation and coping strategies.

The evidence suggests that people adjust goals and expectations and use illusions and rationalisations to maintain over time a relatively stable, and positive, rating of life satisfaction. In other words, life satisfaction is held under homeostatic control, rather like blood pressure or body temperature. This does not mean that social, economic and political developments do not affect well-being, but that the relationship between the objective and subjective realms is not clear-cut and linear.

There is another way to measure people's perceptions of quality of life that maybe gets us around this homeostasis: ask them, not about their own lives, but about how they think people in general are faring. These questions yield much more negative findings. In a May 1999 poll I organised for the Australia Institute, despite the long economic boom, only 24% of Australians said 'the overall quality of life of people in Australia, taking into account social, economic and environmental conditions and trends' was getting better; 36% said it was getting worse and 38% that it was staying about the same.

People were also asked 'in about what decade do you think overall quality of life in Australia has been at its highest'. Only 24% said the 1990s; a similar proportion chose the 1980s and 1970s, with the 'vote' then declining through the 1960s, 1950s, and before the 1950s. There was a good fit between how people answered the two questions: most of those who chose the 1990s as the best decade thought life was getting better; those who picked the 1980s were most likely to say it was staying the same; and most of those who chose the 1970s or earlier believed life was getting worse.

While personal quality of life measures are positively biased, those of social quality of life may be biased towards the negative - by, for example, the media's focus on bad news. Still, there is evidence the social perceptions are grounded in real changes in modern life. They appear to be fundamentally about values, priorities and goals - both personal and national - and the degree of congruence or conflict between them.

Surveys show many of us are concerned about the greed, excess and materialism that we believe drive society today, underlie many social ills, and threaten our children's future. We are yearning for a better balance in our lives, believing that when it comes to things like individual freedom and material abundance, we don't seem to 'know where to stop' or now have 'too much of a good thing'.

Beyond the abstract moral issues, surveys also reveal more tangible dimensions to our concerns about 'progress' and its impact on quality of life. We feel that: we are under more stress, with less time for families and friends; families are more isolated and under more pressure; a sense of community is being lost; work has become more demanding and insecure; and the gap between rich and poor is growing. All these concerns are linked, directly or indirectly, to the 'growth priority'.

These associations between growth and the quality and sustainability of life today expose some of the myths or misperceptions about growth in the contemporary political and public debate about its relationship to well-being. I'll just mention these, focusing on the third:

1) If you are against current patterns of growth, including economic globalisation, you are for failed socialist, centralised, command economies. This confuses means and ends, function and meaning, systems and worldviews - how we do something rather than why we do it. This confusion leads to the claim that whatever its faults, capitalism or neo-liberalism is the best system we have and we should stick to it until someone invents a better one.

2) Growth allows us to spend more on meeting social and environmental objectives. This is understandable: high growth, more revenue, bigger budget surpluses, more to spend on new or bigger programs. But this myth

ignores the evidence that growth processes are not socially and environmentally neutral. It assumes that, at worst, we can always repair with more wealth the damage that wealth creation causes.

3) Increased income (eg as measured by increased output per hour of work) is better, 'all other things being equal', because it increases our choices, our 'command over goods and services'. Again, this view seems straightforward and compelling. But I don't believe all other things can ever be equal - that, to the contrary, the processes of growth inevitably and inherently tend to affect 'all other things'.

Here are some examples. Growth, as we know it, is closely linked to cultural trends like increasing consumerism and individualism, which place the individual at the centre of a framework of values and encourage us to live for the gratification of material wants. Yet:

1) US researchers have shown that people for whom 'extrinsic goals' such as fame, fortune and glamour are a priority in life tend to experience more anxiety and depression and lower overall well-being than people oriented towards 'intrinsic goals' of close relationships, self-acceptance and contributing to the community. Referring to 'a dark side of the American dream', the researchers say that the culture in some ways seems to be built on precisely what turns out to be detrimental to mental health. Similarly, Australian psychologists have found consumerist and materialist values are positively correlated with depression, anxiety and anger; materialism is also negatively correlated with life satisfaction.

2) A British researcher found in a recent cross-national study of values and crime that tolerance for a set of 'materially self-interested' attitudes – like keeping something you've found, or lying in your own interest - was higher in men, younger people, larger cities, and had increased over time. This mirrors patterns of criminal offending. These self-interested values were also found to be statistically associated with crime victimisation rates.

3) In my own research looking at the socio-economic and cultural correlates of youth suicide in OECD nations – male rates have tripled or more in several countries including Australia over the past 50 years - I found no significant correlation with a range of plausible socio-economic causes including youth unemployment, child poverty and divorce (which is not to say that these factors are not involved, only that an association did not show up). But suicide rates were positively correlated with several measures of individualism, including personal freedom and control. Both youth suicide and individualism were also negatively correlated with older people's sense of parental duty. While the interpretation of these findings is by no means clear-cut, they may reflect a failure of Western societies – and some more than others - to provide appropriate sites or sources of social identity and attachment, and, conversely, a tendency to promote false or inappropriate expectations of individual freedom and autonomy and the happiness they are supposed to deliver.

Back in 1970, the Swedish economist Stephen Linder pointed out that as income and therefore the value of one's time increases, it becomes less and less 'rational' to spend it on anything besides making money - or on spending it conspicuously. Citing Spender, the American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi states: 'As is true of addiction in general, material rewards at first enrich the quality of life. Because of this we tend to conclude that more must be better. But life is rarely linear; in most cases, what is good in small quantities becomes commonplace and then harmful in larger doses.'

A new report by the World Bank, *Quality of Growth*, released just a couple of months ago, stresses the importance of 'the sources and patterns of growth to development outcomes'. The report questions why policy-makers continue 'to rely so heavily, and often solely, on the pace of GDP growth as the measure of progress'. The report emphasises four crucial areas that complement and shape growth: improving access to education, protecting the environment, managing global risks and improving the quality of governance. The last includes making institutions less corrupt, more transparent, and accountable to ordinary people – all aspects of a civil society.

At the news conference to launch the report, a journalist from The Economist noted that if the report was saying that GDP did not cover all aspects of human welfare, this was obvious and nothing new; if was saying that there were circumstances where growth in GDP should be sacrificed for other things, then this was radical. Both the World Bank's chief economist, Nick Stern, and vice president and lead author of the report, Vinod Thomas, said that, in short, yes, this (the latter) was what the report was arguing. Thomas says that: 'Just as the quality of people's diet, and not just the quantity of food they eat, influences their health and life expectancy, the way in which growth is generated and distributed has profound implications for people and their quality of life'.

In essence, then, a fundamental problem with growth, as it is currently measured and derived, is that it is failing in its core objective of making life better and people happier, at least in nations that are already wealthy. On the contrary, 'good' economic numbers are being met with persistent public disquiet. This should not be interpreted as an attack on economic and technological development as such, but as a critique of the ends towards which it is being directed, and the manner in which it is being pursued.

A key issue here is the narrow focus on the rate of growth, rather than its content. At present, government policies give priority to the rate, but leave the content largely to the market and consumer choice. Most economic growth is derived from increased personal consumption, despite the evidence of its personal, social and environmental costs. We need, individually and collectively, to be more discerning about what economic activities we encourage and discourage. While such suggestions are often dismissed as 'social engineering', this criticism ignores the extent to which our lifestyle is already being 'engineered', through marketing, advertising and the mass media, to meet the requirements of the economy.

These issues need to be incorporated into a new *weltanschauung*, a new view of the world and our place in it, a new framework of ideas within which to make choices and decisions, personally and politically, as citizens and consumers, parents and professionals. My sense is that if we removed growth – becoming ever richer, regardless of where and how - as the centrepiece of our worldview, things would fall into place, the tensions would be resolved, a sense of coherence and balance would be restored.

This sounds much simpler than it is. There is a huge social inertia that resists this change. Worldviews tend to be 'transparent' or 'invisible' to those who hold them because of the deeply internalised assumptions on which they are based. And if individuals find change difficult, institutions find it even harder, running along grooves cut deep by past ways of doing things.

Values

I argued earlier that the nature of religious belief and scientific knowledge meant that the moral lessons we draw from both must be our interpretations, not laws of God or Nature. Spiritual belief encourages a moral life but cannot dictate it. Values cannot be absolute and immutable, but nor are they totally relative and flexible.

It has been suggested, for example, that traditional values have passed their use-by date. The values of self-restraint and moderation (and by implication, their converse, social obligation and responsibility) were shaped by scarcity; in a time of plenty, they have become obsolete. The values shift is symbolised by those temples of consumption, the vast shopping malls, which have replaced churches and town halls as the community centres of modern life.

This proposition might seem plausible in a culturally diverse and seemingly abundant world. That it effectively defines 'the good life' today is a measure of the moral force of the economy, and the fast-paced, high-pressure, hyper-consumer lifestyle which it depends on, even demands. But we have seen that an ethic of self-indulgence and self-centredness is untenable when considered in a context anchored in psychological, social and environmental realities, and a spiritual awareness.

Modern Western culture effectively reverses traditional (or universal) values. Most societies have tended to reinforce values that emphasise social obligations and self-restraint and discourage those that promote self-indulgence and anti-social behaviour. This maintained a balance – always dynamic, always shifting - between individual needs and freedom, and social stability and order. The 13th Century theologian, St Thomas Aquinas, listed the seven deadly sins as pride (self-centredness), envy, avarice (greed), wrath (anger, violence), gluttony, sloth (apathy) and lust; the seven cardinal virtues as faith, hope, charity (compassion), prudence (good sense), temperance (moderation), fortitude (courage, perseverance) and religion. Other values widely regarded as virtues include patience, honesty, fidelity and forgiveness.

Virtues, then, are concerned with building and maintaining strong, harmonious personal relationships and social attachments, and the strength to endure adversity. As the famous sociologist, Emile Durkheim, observed in his seminal study of suicide a century ago, a crucial function of social institutions such as the family and religion was to bind the individual to society, to keep 'a firm grip' on him and to draw him out of 'his state of moral isolation'. Vices, on the other hand, are about the unrestrained satisfaction of individual wants and desires, or the capitulation to human weaknesses. Most consumption today (beyond meeting basic needs) is located within the traditional vices, little within the virtues. We cannot quarantine other aspects of life from the ethical consequences of ever-increasing consumption.

We do not need to resort to biblical images and rhetoric in discussing the moral consequences of trends such

as consumerism and individualism in modern Western culture. Instead we can look at them in a more modern way: do they increase or decrease our well-being and our humanity in the broadest, fullest sense? The consequences of this cultural shift include not so much a collapse of personal morality, but its blurring into ambivalence. Qualities important to health such as a sense of optimism about the future and mastery over one's life require a clear framework of values within which choices can be made and goals set. Its absence leads to a tendency for individuals to make themselves the centre of their moral universe, to assess everything - from personal relationships to paying taxes - in terms of 'what's in it for me?'. It encourages a pre-occupation with personal expectations that keep rising, and with wants that are never sated because new ones keep getting created.

This risks creating a vicious cycle of declining social cohesion, social support, personal control and other psychosocial factors important to health and well-being. People continue to believe in their own basic decency but, being left increasingly to their own moral resources, they perceive a widening gulf between their own standards and those reflected by social institutions such as government, business, religion and even the family. This produces a growing sense of alienation and disengagement, a rising cynicism about social institutions and their roles. Public surveys provide clear evidence of this perceived 'moral divide' between individuals' own values and those they believe drive society. There is also evidence of a growing social reaction to this situation, although it has yet to find clear political expression.

But while most universal values remain as important as ever, they always need to be tested for their relevance to our times and circumstances. And the way they are taught does and must change, as does how they are translated into practice. Values are abstract principles to guide how we should live, and should be taught as such. The time is past for framing them in highly prescribed behaviours and imposing these prescriptions in an authoritarian manner; it is totally incompatible with current levels of education and modern notions of individual sovereignty. How values are lived is up to the individual, who must also take responsibility for their choices and accept the consequences – as 'the primacy of conscience' doctrine suggests. (There are obvious exceptions where there is clear harm to others, in which case values are usually embodied in laws.)

Can the market be moral?

What does all this mean for leadership and management, especially in the world of private corporations? I once asked the young daughter of friends who were the bad guys in her worldview. The big multinationals, she replied without hesitation. The young woman is a 'feral'. Still only in her early twenties, she is a veteran of many forest and desert protests. You might be inclined to dismiss her opinion as extreme and ignorant.

Yet consider this: in sociologist Michael Pusey's Middle Australia Project, about two thirds of his respondents said they were unhappy or angry about what is happening with Middle Australia today. Asked to whom or what they directed their resentment, the top three targets were politicians, the economic system and big business.

Business leaders like to urge the rest of the community to embrace change, especially that wrought by economic globalisation. These changes include high salary packages for chief executives which, we are told, are essential if we are to be internationally competitive. Yet these same leaders seem reluctant to embrace any change that threatens their privileged status – especially, the whole-system changes our situation seems, on the evidence I have presented, to demand.

The moral failure of business does not just reside in the issue of chief executives' salaries, and the not-unrelated cash-for-comments scandal. These involve sums of money well beyond what any one person or family could usefully spend to improve quality of life. They indicate an ever-intensifying competition for social status measured by the number of digits after a dollar sign. They do substantial social damage through the division and resentment they give rise to.

Nor is this moral failure limited to the repeated, specific cases of corporate wrongdoing in many sectors, involving pollution and environmental despoliation, health hazards and corruption: the tobacco companies that long denied the health hazards of smoking and continue to recruit young smokers; the oil and chemical companies that pushed lead additives in petrol over safe alternatives knowing the health risks of lead; the major car manufacturer that failed to correct dangerous faults in one of its models because it calculated it would be cheaper to pay any damages resulting from death and injury attributed to the fault; the powerful industry lobbying behind the international failure to respond appropriately to the enhanced greenhouse effect and global warming.

The problem is the much bigger issue of 'big business', as a powerful section of society, seeking to remould society in its own image, according to its own objectives of efficiency, competitiveness and profitability – promoting, through both political influence and consumer marketing, a lifestyle and economic system that is not conducive to personal or social well-being.

This role must be extremely hard to reconcile with any sense of the spiritual, or with the universal values most people say they hold to, or with the scientific evidence on personal or planetary well-being.

There is increasing recognition by individual leaders and some individual corporations of this broad failure. So we read in last weekend's papers of the acknowledgement of one of the biggest and most powerful of the multinationals, Monsanto, that it has been arrogant, blind and insensitive, and that it will be honourable, ethical; and open in its future actions.

This is encouraging, indeed, although I suspect the 'invisible hand' of hired spin doctors behind Monsanto's dramatic mea culpa. The record suggests that we should doubt that the corporate sector, or any single corporation – or other institution, for that matter - has the capacity to reform and transform from within. What we need is, as I said, whole-system change, and this will require a lot of pressure applied from outside – by other corporations, governments, citizens and consumers - to bring about the social transformation necessary to achieve a high, more equitable and sustainable quality of life.

Conclusion

To put the challenge ahead of us in slogans, we need to shift from 'going *for* growth' to 'going *beyond* growth'; our primary goal should not be 'a *wealth* producing economy', but a '*health* producing society', where health is defined as total well-being – physical, mental, social and spiritual. As I've shown, the two are not necessarily the same.

To achieve these shifts, we need to acknowledge in our broad social and political debate the importance of deeper philosophical and historical insights, such as this one by Morris Berman at the end of his book, *Coming to Our Senses: Body and Spirit in the Hidden History of the West*:

Something obvious keeps eluding our civilisation, something that involves a reciprocal relationship between nature and psyche, and that we are going to have to grasp if we are to survive as a species. But it hasn't come together yet, and as a result, to use the traditional labels, it is still unclear whether we are entering a new Dark Age or a new Renaissance.

Or this by Richard Tarnas in *The Passion of the Western Mind*:

(The) masculine predisposition in the evolution of the Western mind, though largely unconscious, has been not only characteristic of that evolution but essential to it...to do this, the masculine mind has repressed the feminine...a progressive denial of the soul of the world, of the community of being, of the all-pervading, of mystery and ambiguity, of imagination, emotion, instinct, body, nature, woman.

In ordinary times, it is normal for different planes of perception about the human condition to remain relatively separate and distinct, with little friction between them. In transitional epochs – when how we ought to live and for what we should strive are undergoing profound evaluation and radical alteration – these planes of perception need to come together in a single, if multistranded, discourse. Ours is such a time.

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