A MISCELLANY

Introduction

Years ago in a different life, when I was working at a university, I compiled a book of quotations that I had collected over the years, so that I could make the ideas available to students. Because of the subjects I was teaching, most of those quotes were of a sociological nature. Recently, some dozen years into a life where the walls are unclad rather than ivy-clad, and mudbrick rather than redbrick, I belatedly discovered that computers are versatile tools that you can make things with, rather than intimidating and mysterious machines that are mostly used like fancy typewriters. You can make music on them, and books, (and misteaks), and all sorts of other things. Since I like making things, this is another little book of quotations and other bits and pieces that I've put together - just for the fun of making it.

This time I've not only included quotations that I've kept over the years since then, but also some of the stuff that I've written since I've left the constraints of academic life (there are some thoughts about making things, for instance.). A lot of the ideas still show a sociological bent, since they tend to hang around such areas as work, leisure, the environment, creativity, and how to use your time. I've tried to source the quotations and extracts from other people's writings where I could, but some have lost their origins over the years. To keep my ideas separate from those of other people, I've put their quotes in a sanserif typeface like this.

Readers will only read what they want to. I'm sure that some of the pieces will be ineffably boring to some readers, but what bores one person may engross another. In general, it's not a good idea to assume that others necessarily share your enthusiasms, but airing mine in this context means that I don't have to worry about being boring because you'll only read the bits that interest you. Further, I've found that it's sometimes difficult to talk to people about shortcomings in the social world (which we all share in) without them suspecting that maybe I'm indirectly having a go at them. Getting the ideas down in print avoids anyone feeling defensive and lets the ideas circulate free of any specifically personal reservations.

I called it ***The Dunny Book*** *because most of the pieces in it don't require long sittings to read. Furthermore, some things in it you may violently disagree with, which may well give you the shits - so the dunny's the place to be in that event. And if it goes in the bookshelf it'll be unlikely to be opened again, whereas leaving it in the smallest room in the house for browsing through at least keeps the ideas in it in some sort of circulation. After all, what you choose to read and think about while you're on the throne is a political act.*

Wirrimbirra 1996

Small Run Publishing

I was brought up in the days of Linotype machines, repro proofs, quoins, bull's pizzle hammers, mats, stereos, electros, zincos, dragon's blood, deep-etched halftones, make-readies and platen-packing. To get something printed was a complex and expensive operation involving several craft industries such as photography, process engraving, stereotyping, typesetting, art assembly and printing. And it was hardly worth beginning on this process if you didn't need at least a couple of thousand copies of whatever it was you were printing because if you only wanted a small number the cost would be prohibitive.

Of course, computer technology and advances in xerography have changed all that. Now you can set up a book with a word processor (complete with a choice from a range of typefaces, rules, boxes, borders and other bits and pieces that would have staggered your average pre-computer compositor), print out one good copy and then photocopy the result. As long as the book is designed to suit the technology, this means that you can write a book and publish, say, only ten copies if that's all you need. And the cost is quite reasonable, as long as you haven't gone overboard with expensive design elements and other fancy inclusions. In the past, publication at this level could not be done beyond carbon copies on a typewriter, or small runs on a Gestetner machine or something similar - and the ritziness of the result was hardly impressive. But these days quite small runs can be produced with quite a sophisticated degree of finish.

Now this state of affairs has important implications. In the past, getting something nicely printed was largely the province of corporations or institutions with enough money to do it. Publishing a book had to be done through a publisher and once the manuscript was delivered the author largely lost control over the production and publication process. Nowadays however, an individual of quite limited means can publish something in small quantities and still have control over the process as a whole. Now you can photocopy stuff and get it bound according to demand. No more having to take a gamble on how many you might sell - you just print them up as the demand develops, requiring no investment in stock or storage.

This book you are reading now is an example. Working out the size of the potential market for an oddball book like this would be very difficult indeed - and convincing a publisher that it might be worth a go would be even more difficult. But all I have to do is xerox off copies in small numbers as I get requests for them. Which amounts to making the ideas here available cheaply and easily to anyone who might be interested - which is quite a different thing to printing thousands and then trying to talk people into buying them. It becomes an exercise in ideas-propagation rather than one predicated on being assured of an acceptable profit before it can be begun.

So far I've produced two books this way - two books of transcripts of interviews that I did with old people who live in the valleys near me, and the system seems to work pretty well. Both books were of inherently limited appeal and would never had been a conventional publishing success, but feedback suggests that they were enjoyed by the several hundred people who have bought copies so far. (I am also working on another similar book about my mother's life - transcripts of her taped reminiscences. This will probably have an even smaller potential readership - probably only interested family members or close friends of Mum's.)

Advances in sound recording technology coupled with the advent of computerised print production and high-quality xeroxing have offered similar opportunities in the making and distribution of sound recordings. Moderately-priced equipment now gives ordinary people the chance to produce sound tapes of quite reasonable quality (hi-fi if not CD), packaged in well-printed tape covers and dubbed, photocopied, and delivered on demand. Again, no inventory worries, and it can be done by people with quite limited means. (I have made several home-produced tapes this way, with solar-powered recording equipment, and have more in the pipeline.)

All this means that material which previously would not have been considered as publishable now turns out to be. Stuff that is published in small runs need not be seen as second-rate. Indeed, it can come to be seen as rare and even valuable by those who appreciate small-scale individual output. It also only uses up resources at the rate dictated by demand, and there is minimum waste and no remaindering of unsold stocks. It is the written equivalent of community radio and TV narrowcasting on the airwaves that has recently come into being because of new opportunities offered by technological developments in radio and TV transmission - a sort of community-level decentralised print shop.

In the past, governments were quick to realise the power of the publication of ideas. This is why printers had to license their presses and radio and TV stations are ultimately government controlled. We think immediately of the monopolisation of the means of information and persuasion by authoritarian regimes, but so-called "free" societies are no different - that's why the ownership and control of the mass media is such a hotly contested issue. Having too many ideas floating around uncontrolled is not a comfortable state of affairs for those wishing to govern people's behaviour. But computer technology makes centralised control of the dissemination of ideas pretty well impossible - the kerfuffle over sexy stuff or recipes for explosives on the Internet is an example of this - and now whole books of ideas can be passed around without the government being able to do a thing about it. As we've seen with videotaping programs off home television screens, any laws that may be passed to try to control this sort of thing are virtually unenforceable. And to someone of a libertarian persuasion like me, that's A Bloody Good Thing. But of course there are other aspects to advances in computer technology that are not so rosy. The following quote draws attention to a more problematic related aspect.

Attend any conference on telecommunications or computer technology, and you will be attending a celebration of innovative machinery that generates, stores, and distributes more information, more conveniently, at greater speeds than ever before.
To the question "What problem does the information solve?" the answer is usually " How to generate, store and distribute more information more conveniently at greater speeds than ever before." This is the elevation of information to a metaphysical status: information as both the means and the end of human creativity. We are driven to fill our lives with the quest to 'access' information. For what purpose or with what limitations it is not for us to ask; and we are not accustomed to asking, since the problem is unprecedented. The world has never before been confronted with information glut and has hardly had time to reflect on its consequences.

- Neil Postman: *Technopoly.*

(Since I wrote this, the extension of professional-level technological capabilities to individuals has, of course, proceeded apace - think digital still and movie technology, CDs, DVDs, and increasingly sophisticated colour printers, to list just some.)

This Art Business

I'm pretty confused about this art business. The more I think about it and read about it the more confused I become. I've just got back from a browse over the National Gallery in Canberra. You might remember the sculpture that graces the entrance way, a huge ironbark log roughly chainsawn into an approximation of an animal-ish head. To me it has absolutely nothing to recommend it, and it puts me off every time I pass it to go inside. It always makes me wonder just how an art work gets to end up in the NG - and I usually conclude that it is not always for reasons of unambiguous artistic excellence (whatever *that* might be!)

How do you tell if this bit of art is better than that bit? Is it the price it will fetch? Is it how much *you* like it? Is it what the critics say? Is it how long it's been hanging around the place? Is there a continuum of art excellence that you can range works of art along, to sort all this out?

It seems to me that if we are to talk about art, it's helpful if we make clear first in what sense we are using the word. Are we talking about the sort of art that critics you might read in Saturday's *Herald* are talking about (in the 'entertainment' pages)? Or are we talking about the sort of art that makes the Balinese say "We have no art. We try to do everything as well as possible."? Or are we talking about the sort of art that prompts an art gallery to pay multiple millions of dollars for 'an acquisition' and then lock it away in the basement until it's time to put it on show and make a buck out of it (like the Peter Stuyvesant Collection in New York)? Or are we talking about the oozing daub of slime on a wall or a baffling installation that is a highly personal 'expression' of something or other? You could go on with this list of course, but however long it gets, for purposes of helpful analysis it can be divided into two broad categories: art as a creative human activity and art as A Business. The first is about something uniquely human, something whose motivations are various and often inscrutable; the second is about money. Of course these two categories often bleed into each other (though not always) but it is usually the second which subsumes the first, rather than the other way around. Whatever, the second category (like the minds of its enthusiasts) is simpler to understand than the first, so let's have a brief look at that to begin with.

There was a big exhibition of Brett Whiteley's work held at the Bonython while he was still alive, and twenty four hours after it opened Whitely was a million dollars richer. When the National Gallery paid what was it?..three million dollars for *Blue Poles* it was controversial, but with the passage of time the controversy has worn off (because now it's worth several times that amount). Businessmen vie with each other to pay astronomical prices for a Van Gogh or a Monet. To me these things have little to do with Art *per se*, and are really about investment. About making money. Is it of any real consequence that the objects for which money is changing hands are paintings? Couldn't they as easily be stocks and shares? Or Elton John's old shoes? Or a stamp collection? The fact that it is paintings that are bringing these prices seems to me to be mere happenstance, and what we are seeing here is the really weird way that humans ascribe value to various things. It is a sociological phenomenon rather than an artistic one. It has to do more with things like fashion, greed, entrepreneurship and lemming-like social behaviour than it has to do with Art. Yet very many people are continually confused by this, and think that Pollock must be a 'better' artist than, say, Whitely because his paintings cost more.

Can *any* object made by a human ever be really worth that sort of money? - especially when we consider all the other things which are so badly needed that could be bought with that money (like piping clean water to Third World villages for example, or providing kids in underprivileged schools with a creative environment and material resources).

For my money (pun intended) it's enough to recognise that this ultimately commercial side of Art exists - though I do think it obfuscates much thinking about Art. In the end it's only Mammon intruding into the world of Art the way he intrudes into just about everything else. So let's look instead at the other, more personal and creative dimension to Art.

Speaking approximately, science is seen to be about knowledge and truth, and art is about creativity and beauty. In a still influential book written some years ago called *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn argued that science was above all a social activity, and that what is considered to be 'science' at any given time was that part of the overall scientific enterprise that found favour with the relatively small number of eminent scientists that ran the various elite institutions of science. In other words, OK science is what the guys running the science business give the thumbs up to. They don't have to be right, but they legitimate certain areas of scientific endeavour and (importantly) exclude others from serious consideration.

I think something very similar operates with Art. What's accepted as Art is what the luminaries in the Art Biz legitimise. What Patrick McCaughey says is art carries more weight than anything an unknown but talented artist might have to say on the matter - though this is not to say that the latter's ideas might not be considered weightier once he has been 'discovered' by the Art establishment (think of the Ern Malley hoax).

A couple of years ago an 'unknown' artist sued Edmund Capon because Capon publicly derided his entry in the Archibald that year (it was a portrait of Rene Rivkin). Derision from Capon (who for all I know might only be able to draw breath) had the power to mightily insult the artist, whereas the opposite wouldn't raise a ripple on the art pond. A sidelight to this episode, and one that fits my argument here is that the artist (Vladas Meskanas - not exactly a household name) was also outraged that Capon invited Sir(!) Sydney Nolan to enter the Archibald that year, thereby (as the press report said) 'making the outcome of the Archibald a foregone conclusion'. Nolan's entry was predictably going to be judged as superior to Meskanas' no matter *what* he painted, because Nolan is of the Art Establishment (and also part of the Australian social elite - a fact underscored by his title).

Many years ago I was distressed to read how Fred Williams used to go to his art dealer (Rudy Komon) with a number of different new approaches to his work, and Komon would pick which new direction that Williams should pursue. To me there's something wrong with a broker telling an artist how to go about his art (even though historical examples of this abound). And even when the art isn't being flogged by merchants, but hung in a museum for the delectation of the multitudes the context in which it is viewed denaturises the art and turns it into History - turns it into an example of a certain 'school' or 'period'. (What is it about painting specifically that seems to have so encouraged the cult of the hero? How come painters can be so famous while designers of superb structures are virtually anonymous? Do *you* know who designed the Gladesville Bridge? Or the Anzac Bridge, or the Colosseum?)

I don't think the social context in which art is carried on in societies like ours is the least bit congenial or satisfactory for the artist at the personal level. To be 'successful' in this context is to be compromised as an artist. Is it the pinnacle of artistic endeavour to have your art work shown and (hopefully) sold in a commercial gallery where the proprietor reaps a disproportionate reward simply because he/she owns the exhibition space?

Social activities vary across cultures, and they become so taken-for-granted that it is often very difficult for people from within a given culture to see that a particular social activity could be carried out in any other way than the way they've always done it. Many people can't conceive that the social context of art could take any form other than the way we do

it in our society, and the way we do it doesn't seem at all strange to them. To such people, our way of doing things is just the way it is, and that's all there is to it. To them the Balinese, the Inuit and the Aborigines are all wrong, and our way is right.

So what are we to conclude from all this? For mine, I'm buggered if I know what to make of it. As I said, I suppose I find our culture's approach to art pretty unsatisfactory in general. I can see lots of things about it that I don't like. But I can't say I have any suggestions as to what to replace it with, or how to go about changing it even if I had a vision of what to change it to. Most of the time I'm as bewildered as the next person, and I feel this most when I am confronted by things like that dreadful bloody formless lump of lumber outside the main entrance to the National Gallery. Jesus!

Art promotion works only for a few artists at a time and chooses them opportunistically, even if with care. Even those who benefit from it can doubt its ethical worth; it encapsulates in a particularly glamorous but also ruthless way the efficiency and the vanity of capitalism... The artist not among the elect has additional material reasons for trying to circumvent the system. In a world divided into exploiters and exploited he can't fail to see himself among the latter. The question has now arisen whether he should accept that passive role in the hope of gaining the stardom that is the system's reward to a few, or whether he should use what invention and cunning he has to survive without the system and ignore its particular market. Finding another market, another public, could well be the way towards reintegrating art with contemporary society.

Galleries, art dealing, art critics, national and international art exhibitions with or without prizes are still quite new phenomena, by-products of the eighteenth century's break in tradition. They serve a function, but it is a very limited one and they serve it imperfectly because they cannot act disinterestedly... The several attempts by Western countries to devise forms of state patronage and state support has led as much to further promotion of already promoted individuals and groups as to spreading its benefits to those who have been overlooked by the commercial network. All artists know that the art world is a crude instrument, undiscriminating even where its support is justified but, once its maw is full, uncaring of the demands of wider justice. However much wisdom and truth it enrols in its own support, it has many of the aims and habits of the business world to which it increasingly appeals for sponsorship and from which, less openly, it derives its financial fuel.

- Norbert Lynton: *The Story of Modern Art*,

Good taste is the most obvious resource of the insecure. People of good taste eagerly buy the Emperor's old clothes. Good taste is the first refuge of the non-creative. It is the last ditch stand of the artist. Good taste is the anaesthetic of the public.

- Harley Parker.

Artists today lack orientation in the contemporary world. They come together in small groups in great cities where, in the safety of little circles that shut out the rest of the world, the initiates share one another's images.

- Georgy Kepes.

A comprehensive attitude towards everything that comes to hand, a joyous enterprisingness, and an ungovernable cross-connectingness of mind such that possibilities of making are scanned with a quite new width and in unforeseen combinations.

- Christopher Cornford: *Creative Behaviour*

Everyone has something they can do easily and can't imagine why everybody else is having so much trouble doing it.

Borrowing melodies from existing music was a commonplace throughout the Middle Ages. Of the 2452 surviving works of the troubadours, at least 514 and perhaps another 70, have been reckoned to be imitations or borrowings with respect to their melodies. Later, Vivaldi borrowed from his predecessors, and then Bach borrowed whole compositions from Vivaldi. It was not a game or a deceit. Making music had very little to do with originating melodies. It was a process intent on individualising something out of a tradition - making it `new' through an expression that was individual.

- Jamake Highwater.

Some more about this art business

Saw an SBS program on modern artists recently, in which a number of artists had the opportunity to explain to the viewer what their work was about - how they conceived it, what they were trying to express with it, and so on. I found this interesting, even though some of the works shown were still pretty inscrutable to me even with the benefit of the artist's explanation. With others, after the artists had explained what they were on about, I wondered why they thought it worth going to all that trouble to make the sort of statements they did - I felt that it must be hard to maintain a commitment to the importance of the idea in question in the face of what must be a barrage of doubts along the way. (And quite a few of the ideas being proposed seemed pretty trite to me in terms of relevance to the human condition. I couldn't work out why these particular works were worth the attention they were getting. Why pick *them* out of all the things they could have picked?).

My hunch is that if a number of people were asked to write down what they thought a given artwork was trying to achieve (without the benefit of any knowledge of the creator's intentions) the responses would be very varied and probably would bear little resemblance to what the creator had in mind. And a lot just wouldn't know what to make of it. And the more offbeat the artwork, the more varied the response and the wider the discrepancy with the artist's intention - and the higher the number who are simply mystified.

Now a lot of trees have been used up writing about this problem of author's intent - whether it matters in the end or not, whether other meanings construed can be also valid, and all the ramifications that flow from these ideas. And from what I've read about it, the matter still seems far from satisfactorily settled. I'm certainly still confused. Do we *have* to cotton on to the creator's message? If we don't, who fails? Us or the creator, or both? What is the status of the meanings we impute to a work of art that make a lot of sense to us personally, but which may have nothing to do with what the artist was on about? What

are we to make of artwork when it may make a lot of sense to its creator but has nothing to say to us personally?

When wrestling with these ideas, I keep coming up against the obdurate fact that communicating successfully entails using symbols which have a *shared* meaning. It seems to me that if the artist uses symbols whose general meaning is widely agreed on, then there's a good chance that a number of viewers will work out the symbolic message that is intended. Yet there is a tendency to judge stuff whose meaning is immediately apparent as unsubtle - (which of course it may well be).

But if the meaning of the symbols for the artist is *not* a meaning that is widely shared, if the symbolic meanings are sufficiently idiosyncratic to the artist's own biography and mental processes that they need explanation to the viewer - then surely the artist has no chance of conveying the message that was intended to be conveyed *by means of the artwork alone*. And how much does this matter when, in the final analysis, the artwork may sell because the colours would look just right with the loungeroom curtains?

But really, what's the point of putting stuff on public exhibition whose meaning is so private to the artist that it can't help but be obscure to the public? And how realistic is it to think that someone might want to pay a couple of thousand bucks for something like that? Yet this seems to be happening all the time, and I'm buggered if I can see why. And on top of all this the viewing public seem to feel that the fault lies with them if they can't work out what an artwork is about. Sometimes I can see why some people sort this out by dismissing artists as merely a bunch of wankers.

Here we are, huddled together for failing comfort, in the near ruins of a civilisation marked for early destruction by a wide array of gruesome means: 'art' has meant a lot of different things at different times.What can it possibly mean now?

- Mike Brown

The queues that today form for Impressionist paintings include those members of the public who are thought to be the enemies of modern art because they still ask: `What does it represent?'; and those who are seen as converts because they have learned *not* to ask what a work of art is about. The second sort is in many aspects the more troubling...

- Norbert Lynton: *The Story of Modern Art.*

Sculpture is the art of the hollow and the lump. -Rodin

What, for instance, is the use of playing music? If you play to make money, to outdo some other artist, to be a person of culture, or to improve your mind, you are not really playing - for your mind is not on the music. You don't swing. When you come to think of it, playing music is a pure luxury, an addiction, a waste of valuable time and money for nothing more than making elaborate patterns of sound. Yet what would we think of a society which had no place for music, which did not allow for dancing, or for any activity not directly involved with the practical problems of survival?

- Alan Watts: *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are.*

Creative Intentions

This business about the importance of knowing what the creator of a given work had in mind can get pretty complex if you think about it for a while. Over the years I've enjoyed saving up various pithy aphorisms, and from time to time I get an idea for a visual presentation of one and I do a poster-type graphic design of it as a way of keeping the ideas in circulation. One of the posters I did was of the phrase: *Life makes no sense, but it's ours to make sense of.* This was an aphorism I had kept because... but this is where it all starts to get complicated. To understand why I thought it worth keeping the statement in the first place, and then to understand my intentions as far as developing the poster for it goes, it is necessary to embark on a longish path back into my early biography. Here goes:

Back in my early twenties I used to have a regular weekly drink with a mate called Ian Findlay at a bar in town we used to call *The Leather Chairs.* It was an upstairs bar in that pub in Hunter Street across the lane from where the Herald Photo Sales used to be. Compared to most pubs in Sydney at the time it had a clubby atmosphere, and the thing we liked about it were the deep old leather chairs. Those, and its relative quiet compared to the bloodhouse atmosphere that characterises most pubs too often.

Ian was the only bloke I knew from the same sort of background as me that read very much that wasn't Zane Grey or mystery stories. He had a paperpusher's job with some insurance company at the time, but his main interest was acting. He saw himself as a bit of a thespian I think, and he used to go to the Stage Club late at nights and entertain me over our beers with lurid stories of his sexual exploits. I think I probably disbelieved a large proportion of them (I *had* to, because at that time my own sexual exploits were pretty much limited to the odd knee-trembling fumble at the front door, or a bit of groping at the drive-in) but I admired him for his audacity, even if only a small percentage of his stories had any truth in them. I liked drinking with him because he seemed a pretty sophisticated bloke compared to the rest of the guys I used to hang with. I mean, it didn't take much to leave Dickie Robbo and Flippy Miller for dead when it came to sophistication.

But it was more than his being a saloon bar Lothario that attracted me to Ian. Although I don't think I saw it this way then, looking back he stood out from the rest because he was the only one who'd been game enough to try doing something different to what was expected of him. While the rest of us were all busy being the safe, predictable things that a young bloke from Drummoyne or Five Dock might be, there was Findlay with a dead-end job that he didn't care was leading nowhere, and an approach to life that seemed to say that he could see that there were ways to lead your life other than the unexamined ones that you were expected to choose from. I think you could say that, in his own way, he was the first radical that I had come across.

But I suspect that we were probably both a bit up ourselves about it all, nonetheless. I'd just started to go to university at night, and I used to like to talk about the English texts I was studying, and Ian and I had a bit of an overlap of interest with the drama stuff that I was doing as well. And we used to frequent *The Leather Chairs* because it was a bit upmarket compared to our usual watering holes. (Somehow the public bar of the Birkenhead Hotel didn't have an ambience conducive to the serious consideration of life's thornier aspects.)

I can remember one night. Findlay comes into *The Chairs* with a copy of Plato's *Republic*. As it happened, this particular book was on my reading list for Philosophy I but I was a bit impressed that anyone would choose it for everyday reading on the bus. We talked a

bit about it, and deep inside I found myself wondering if Ian's grasp of the ideas that Plato was chewing over was as shaky as mine was. Anyway, not long after, I was down in that musty but arty little bookshop that used to be downstairs at the lower end of Rowe Street, and I browsed across a paperback edition of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Well! I thought - now *there's* a couple of notions that should pin Findlay's ears back! To me at that time it was all a bit breathtaking to ponder such huge abstractions. I mean, that's about as ultimately abstract as you can get, isn't it? *Something or blank.*

I proceeded to get into it so I could drop a few casual references to it that week at *The Chairs*. But of course my intellectual motor wasn't tuned to fuel of such high octane, and I ended up being critical of the book when I spoke about it to Ian. I couldn't get past the idea that, to Sartre, life was 'absurd'. I found out *that* much from the blurb on the book jacket, and the mental resistance it set up must have prevented me from properly taking in the sense in which Sartre used the word. While I was prepared to deal in ideas that suggested that the world might be rather different to the way it looked from South Street, Drummoyne, to take as your starting point for understanding the world that it was *absurd* was for me, then, simply...absurd. After all, I mightn't have been able to put it into words, but experiencing the dew on the first tee at Massie Park when you're the first off with Gibbie just after dawn and you've diddled the bloke out of paying for the round - that was enough to make me feel pretty strongly that the world wasn't absurd. I can still remember feeling a bit frustrated and impatient that such an idea could have gained enough currency and influence to be published internationally in many languages. Life in Drummoyne mightn't have seemed too glamorous sometimes, but whatever else it wasn't, it certainly wasn't *absurd* to me. It clearly could be good - even if not all the time.

Obviously I wasn't ready to take in what Sartre had to say. Looking back, my lack of comprehension had a lot to do with the fact that the ideas were couched in a mandarin jargon that made them impenetrable to someone unversed in its arcane style (a bit like this sentence). At a later time I found myself agreeing vehemently with Theodore Roszak when he wrote of intellectuals and their tendency to 'preserve the mysteries of the guild against vulgarisation'. (It still goes on, of course.)

Quite a few years later, when I'd had considerably more practice at translating the argot of abstractions, I found myself reading Sartre once again. This time I think I got the gist of what he was on about, and I found it considerably disturbing. Since I had stopped seeing An Omnipotent Being as the answer to the cosmic conundrum long before this, in may ways Sartre's arguments were pretty persuasive. I couldn't basically disagree with his analysis of how the world was - but I sure didn't like where that left things. (This would have been around 1970). I found it very unsatisfactory that his ideas seemed to leave the notion of ethical or moral conduct as a non-starter. "Goodness" has to go out of the window. Relativism reigns. Everything is as good as everything else. Vulgar post-modernism here we come!

Even though this time around I'd cottoned onto Sartre's usage of 'absurd' in its strict sense of 'without inherent meaning', (and not just ,'silly' or 'stupid', which was the simplistic way I'd read it back in the days of *The Leather Chairs*) I felt very uncomfortable about the implications of this. If there is no inherent meaning in the world other than the meaning we give to it, then what gives one person's meaning system primacy over someone else's? These days (the mid nineties) I can see that in one sense the answer to that is: nothing does. And from this realisation flow some good arguments against the way that the meaning system of a small and privileged handful of people rules over the ideas of the less privileged majority. But from the way I was reading Sartre in 1970 he seemed to be saying that nobody should make value judgements about *anything* that people did, and I couldn't handle that - because that licensed exploitation, cruelty, pack rape... you name it. I agreed with his premises, but I found the conclusions that these

premises led to most unpalatable.

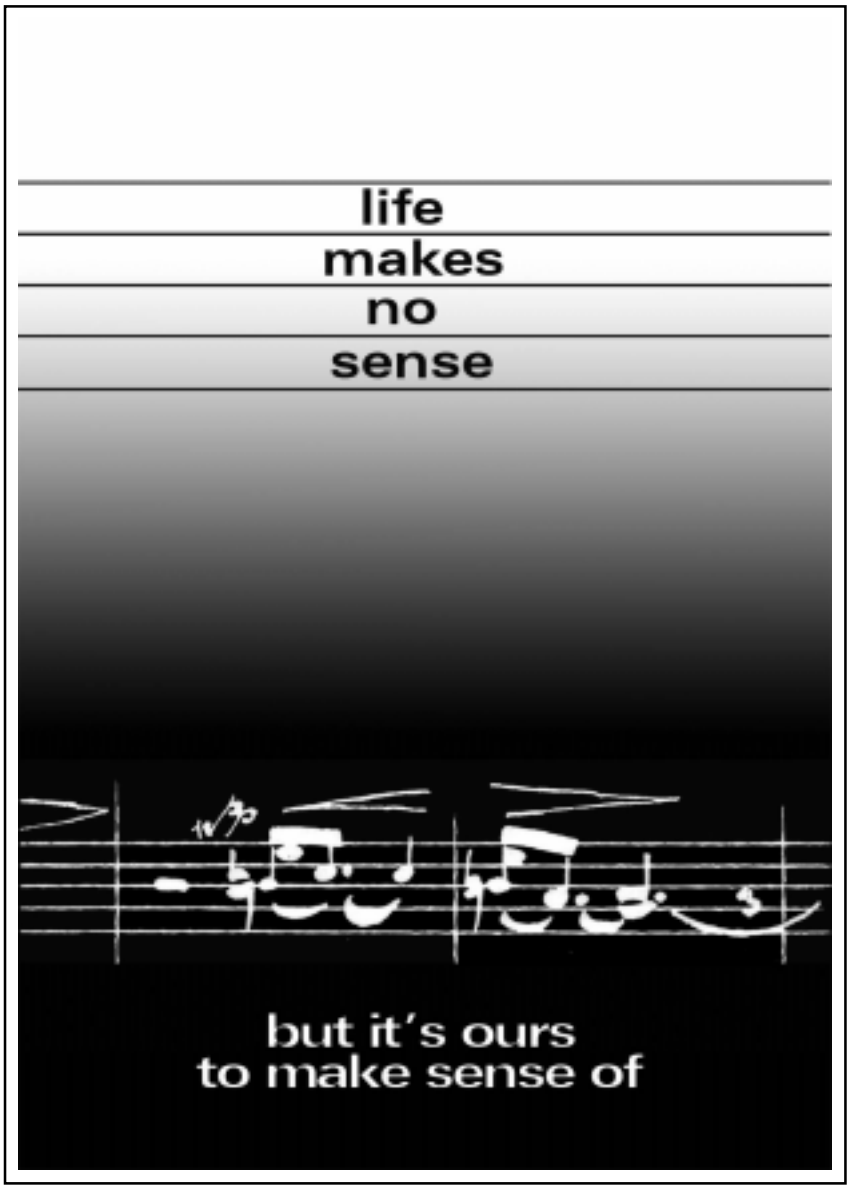
Actually, all this stuff played merry hell with the way I'd been looking at things in general. Some people these days might be tempted to say that it threw me into something of a spiritual crisis. Until then I'd been happy with my basic atheism/humanism approach, but here was the doyen of that approach, when I read him carefully, apparently saying things that my whole upbringing of fair go-ness revolted against. It took quite a while - a year or so, I suppose - to sort this one out. The clue came from a book by Hazel Barnes called *An Existentialist Ethics* in which she suggests an analogy with a chequerboard. Most people, she says, see life as being like a game of Chinese Checkers - a game with one set of rules that we all agree on and play by. But in a tighter analogy with the way life really is, the board has holes of different sizes, and the marbles are different sizes too - which throws into confusion the assumption that one set of rules will suit all. Suddenly I could reconcile this with what I think Sartre was saying: there's not one set of rules to the game - we each have to work out the rules for ourselves to make a satisfying game of it, according to what size marble we have, how it relates to hole sizes, etc. I won't elaborate the analogy any further. It gave me a way to look at things that didn't deny Sartre's insights, but enabled me to locate them in an ethical dimension. Pack rape and exploitation became again inadmissible - just because you're having trouble trying to negotiate a tricky portion of the board doesn't give you the right to throw away other players' marbles, or hamper their chances to play *their* game.

Now that's hardly a satisfactory outline, but you either describe the general idea in brief or you could go on forever.. Point is, it enabled me to work out a way to look at things that made sense - to me. And it didn't leave me with that awful feeling of moral vacuity that my earlier grapplings with the ideas of the existentialists used to provoke. (I suppose I agree with Fred Dagg, though: by and large, despite the fact that they were dealing in important ideas, they were a dreary bloody lot.)

Now we leap forward about twenty years to a year or so ago, when I got the idea for the poster saying: *"Life makes no sense... but it's ours to make sense of."* I assume I'd extracted this quote from somewhere a few years ago because it was a fairly succinct summation of the outcome of my wrestle with existentialism. It had been stuck in a folder with a whole lot of other aphorisms with the half-intention to make illustrative linocuts or something of them one day. Many of them are pretty abstract notions, and I've always found looking for visual analogues for slippery notions a bit of a challenge. I don't know why it was then rather than at some other time that the idea of using two lots of five lines came to me - ideas seem to come in their own good time, (and it's a special kind of dissatisfaction when you want them to come and there are none there).

Anyway...whatever the satisfaction I'd got from sorting something out that made coherent sense to me, coming up with a complementary visual summation like this one was a particular buzz - with its own special personal satisfactions. The idea of five parallel lines, (which could mean anything, or nothing), repeated below with Debussy manuscript on them was a particularly compelling visual expression of what the phrase meant to me. And with a whole lot of related associations resonating away.

You can make all sorts of things out of five lines - or nothing. But look what Debussy chose to do with them! Think how people have used them to store and communicate musical ideas. Music: that most uncategorisable of activities that makes both sense and no sense at the same time - the living challenge to all who would reduce life's affairs to matters of organisation, prediction, and rationality. Like the five bare lines, music, too, is what you decide to make of it - an exemplar of the fact that the same thing can mean quite different things to different people. A person's biography shapes their perceptions - like in the chequerboard analogy.



The five bare lines that become bar lines is a particularly arresting visual thing for me because of my particular biography - because of the experience I just happened to have with the ideas in question. Not everyone comes across these particular ideas, and I imagine the poster would mean something different to them - if it meant anything at all. At the same time, many people would understand what was intended, even though, of course, they haven't had exactly the same experiences as I have. The more I think about it, the more I come to the conclusion that it's a dodgy business, this artistic expression and communication.

It must be well over thirty years since I've seen Ian. Perhaps I'll track him down, meet him for a beer, and ask him what *he* thinks about it. (I wonder what books he's reading these days?)

Since writing the above I have continued to make posters that I think of as advertisments for worthy ideas. I call them ***Signs of the Times****, and they can be found in the middle drawer of this electronic filing cabinet/website under* ***Images****.*

A Sort of Review

*of Charles Birch's **On Purpose***

This is a book that discusses very important matters. I think a lot of people should read it. Listed below are some of the bits I noted while reading it. They might give you some idea of the sorts of considerations that it traffics in.

Life depends as much upon our response to events around us as upon the events themselves.

No one really teaches anyone anything. We can teach others how to learn. We can lead them to the path of discovery for themselves.

The present is the fringe of memory tinged by anticipation. (A.N. Whitehead).

To escape from emptiness through fun makes joy impossible.

Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone somewhere might be having a good time. (H.L. Mencken).

The ecological model emphasises relationships and process between events - not just what can be measured.

Traditional economics must steer the ship no more.

To hope is to stay open to possibilities.

Try to be the leaven in the loaf - then you don't need majority support to help things happen.

Once, the abolition of slavery looked impossible.

Good decision-making requires access to pertinent information.

A clash of ideas is not a disaster - it is an opportunity for further exploration.

I found it pretty heady stuff. But I'm buggered if I can work out why Birch needs to anchor it all, in the end, to some notion of God. God's not necessary - the edifice stands up in its own right as a highly persuasive argument for ecologically informed and environmentally-driven human relations with the world and all that's in it.

But how do we get Birch's message across to today's world? How many would even want to listen, let alone think seriously about it? And it's not a simple worldview to communicate. Getting to see things his way requires much effort on the part of the understander. It's a hard message to simplify, since the dangers of oversimplification are an important part of the way he sees things. And anyway, Big Daddy beliefs are much easier to flog to the millions - who've come to expect the world to be the way Big Daddy says it is and should be.

Nonetheless, the mounting evidence increasingly shows that people, especially those in positions of power, are going to have to start viewing things more Birch's way if the planet is to survive. The trouble with this though, is that for this to come about, many of

those presently in positions of power and/or privilege will have to give up the good life (as they've been taught to think of it), something which doesn't seem very likely. It's about as likely as Birch giving up his ideas about the existence of God.

You'd think someone like Birch wouldn't still be in the thrall of having to find a way to fit God in somewhere. The main thrust of the book is terrific, but the God parts worry me.

Half-full or half- empty?

However it may seem, I am not a pessimist. I don't think that life's contras outweigh its pros. I suspect that which way the balance tips will depend on the context of a given situation. I do think that we shouldn't deny the existence of the contras, though, however unpalatable they may be. To play down the crook bits of life so that you can convince yourself that you can at least approximate some kind of happiness only makes it easier to play down things like the existence of social inequities of all sorts - or to conveniently overlook them. It's like getting practice at making things easier for conservatives who want to preserve the (contra-laden) status quo.

One of the reasons conservatives are so successful in convincing people that things are not so bad is that people do a lot of the job for them - by ignoring the unpleasant contras and fooling themselves that things are better than they are - or else that they are at least as good as you can expect them to be. And that's one of the Big Questions: How good can we reasonably expect things to be? Or, even bigger: What is it reasonable to expect from one's life?

Pessimism and hopelessness serve only to maintain the *status quo* ... no change can come from it. To brood over the past and fear the future is to miss the present. It alone provides an arena for action. The present is pregnant with possibility. But we have to give it direction and meaning. We do not have to begin with injustices perpetrated far from where we live and work. We can begin with injustices at home... Life depends on events around us. Yes, *but,* life depends as much on our response to events as to the events themselves. It is what a person brings to the crisis, not the crisis itself, that determines the prospect.

- Charles Birch: *Confronting the Future.*

You're not happy, are you? Nobody in this country is happy but the rich people. Something is wrong. I'll tell you what's wrong: We're lonesome! We're being kept apart from our neighbours. Why? Because the rich people can go on taking our money away that way. They can go on taking our power away. They *want* us lonesome; they want us huddled in our houses with just our wives and kids, watching television, because they can manipulate us then.

-Kurt Vonnegut: *Wampetas Foma and Granfalloons.*

Of all our hallucinations, the most pernicious is that we think we know what we are doing.

A waste of time in a time of waste

It's a strange thing. We find ourselves on this planet - one of a species that is dotted all over the globe. The fundamental thing to do is to exist (I suppose) and yet we are born into a situation where a relatively small number of people say that *they* own the space that we need in order to exist. So we have to use up a large part of our existence doing (often meaningless) work to get money, so that we can pay these people for a bit of space on the planet in which to live. Having done that, we join the game and put fences around our bit of space to keep others out of it. And the relatively few people who benefit most from this state of affairs have built into it a set of rules which pretty much ensure that this is the way that things are going to stay. This makes changing things a fairly difficult process.

So insightful and creative critics of the status quo make a film, or a book, or a television program to expose its inadequacies and idiocies. Thousands are exposed to the message, and understand the points being made, yet it has little or no effect on them, or the way they live their lives, or the way things are organised.

Small groups of humans make rules so that they can visit all sorts of inconveniences and indignities and 'punishments' on the rest. Why on earth should some of the members of the species have the right to severely restrict my freedom by putting me in gaol if I lie naked in the sun? They make money out of me by flogging me alcohol, then put me in gaol if I am drunk in public. Stripped of societal assumptions and viewed objectively, this way of organising things seems to be a very inferior way of living together on the planet. We went wrong somewhere a long way back, and things are in a right royal old cock-up now. Surely that much is evident.

When you look at all of life you see that if you took away all our green relatives or our four-footed relatives or our relatives who crawl and swim and live within the Earth, life couldn't exist on this planet. But if you took away all the two-legged creatures - human beings - then life would flourish.

- Russell Means, American Indian activist.

It would be preposterous to think that anything any one person says or writes, demands or pleads for, could bring about the needed change of direction. Such a spiritual regeneration happens of its own mysterious accord or not at all. And of course it is happening... Though whether the reversal will happen soon enough and on a sufficient scale there is no telling. That is the cruel edge of the adventure.

Theodore Roszak: *Where the Wasteland Ends.*

...Between those who are still locked in the box ...and those who have escaped it there will always be the tension of disagreement. For Jack-in-the-box will insist that there is nowhere to be but where he is. Jack-out-of-the-box will know otherwise. It is the inevitable contrast of sensibilities between the free and the imprisoned mind - and only the *experience* of more will ever overcome anyone's allegiance to less.

Thoedore Roszak: *Where the Wasteland Ends.*

People are aggressive and self-seeking and selfish. People do not have to be that way. Their behaviour is not based simply on the capacity for aggression and territoriality but on customs which develop in specific environments and social circumstances. People's major behavioural characteristics are cultural. Culture is learned behaviour... Aggressive and non-aggressive behaviour are both possibilities within the behavioural capacity of people. It doesn't have to be one or the other.

- Charles Birch: *Confronting the Future.*

There is no other species on earth that does science. It is, so far, an entirely human invention, evolved by natural selection in the cerebral cortex for one simple reason: It works. It is not perfect. It can be misused. It is only a tool. But it is by far the best tool we have - self-correcting, ongoing, applicable to everything. It has two rules: First, there are no sacred truths; all assumptions must be critically examined; arguments from authority are worthless. Second, whatever is inconsistent with the facts must be discarded or revised. We must understand the Cosmos as it is and not confuse how it is with how we wish it to be.

-Carl Sagan: *Who Speaks for Earth?*

Currently, many well-intentioned ecologists are busy wrapping zero-growth economics in the hair shirt of dismal privation, as if a healthy relationship with nature must mean grim, puritanical self-denial. This is not only politically futile as a stance in public debate, but it is simply untrue. Economy of means and simplicity of life - voluntarily chosen - have always been the secret of fulfilment; while acquisitiveness and extravagance are a despairing waste of life. That ought to be a platitude. In our situation it's a heresy.

Theodore Roszak: *Where the Wasteland Ends.*

(There is) a kind of hopeless apathy in what, for want of a better term, you can call the public mind. We begin to see the problems; we do not yet begin to see the ways of dealing with them. The entrenched interests and institutions that we have created are world-wide, and now control us. They hold the keys to government, to employment, to education, to the media of communication, even to social acceptance. To stand against them is to risk literally everything that they have taught us to want and to think we need. Dissent is tolerable only up to a point - the point where it begins to look really dangerous. After that, the doors close, while the old satanic mills keep turning; and we turn with them, because we have become cogs in their machinery.

Judith Wright: *Our Vanishing Chances.*

Governments go through the constitutional motions of governing while most of the decisions that affect the vital concerns of the citizens are made by those who control the modern technology of production, transportation, communication, and warfare... The multinational companies are the most striking manifestation of this supersession of national governments. Decisions are made by these huge corporations where the power resides, and they are made to save the economic and social status quo.

- Charles Birch: *Confronting the Future.*

The real difficulty lies, then, in the brief time we have to change human attitudes and get the action going. Historically, attitudes change extremely slowly, even where there is obvious need for change: You only have to think of attitudes towards war to realise this. How are we to convince the largely urban populations of today that their continuing well-being will depend on the well-being of the biosphere - the country and marine environments they so seldom see and know so little about? It will certainly need a massive alteration in, among other things, the direction of our present education and our present habits of thought.

We must, in effect, cease to be thoughtless predators and become informed managers of a world not given over entirely to our hands. We must regenerate ourselves if we are to regenerate the earth.

...The real problem of conservation in education, then,...is that it cannot be taught as a *subject* because it is a matter of *attitude.* That implies that we have to change the whole attitude of education today to achieve it. And for that we have to change the whole attitude of society. For that, of course, we have to change the philosophy by which the society is directed.

Judith Wright: *Education and the Environmental Crisis.*

We have the chance, at last, of finding full stature and our proper role in relation to the planet; and we have the capacity to do it. We have minds; and the proper use of them is to learn, to gather information, to evaluate it, and to initiate action. We have tools of the most sophisticated kind to help us... There is a great deal we do not know, but we can now find it out if we take the job seriously. We have voices, and we must use them. We have the capacity to change ourselves and we must change. We can take responsibility ourselves, and demand responsibility of our government and industries... We have been able to take over the earth; we are equally capable of learning how to manage it, and to manage ourselves.

Judith Wright: *Our Vanishing Chances.*

...organisations at any moment are finally composed of individuals, whose own attitude and ethic (if any) the organisation partly reflects, partly imposes. To step outside the organisation, or the prevailing social attitude, is for any individual a tremendous and perilous thing, for it leaves him exposed and vulnerable, unsupported by anything but his personal ethic and belief. Yet only through such individual choices and perils can the change begin... Organisations are powerless to change themselves. Only individuals can change themselves, and if enough of them do this, they in turn can change organisations.

Judith Wright: *The Individual in a New Environmental Age*

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The spectacle of many groups of intelligent people doing their utmost to destroy the vital life support systems of their posterity on earth, and angrily opposing efforts by more enlightened groups to mitigate or prevent the mischief, is truly a remarkable phenomenon of our age... Among the very great tragedies of human history few have been more painful than the accidental co-incidence of the universal opportunity for freeing most of the human family from their long bondage of ignorance and poverty with a brief period of impatient, insensitive, greedy and aggressive mass intervention on the part of an ostensibly civilised group of advanced countries, who ought to have known better. In ecological terms, the damage done by the more high-minded and charitable of the intervenors has been hardly less than that of the greediest.

Max Nicholson: *The New Environmental Age.*

Dropping Out

*(This rather self-congratulatory piece was originally put together to send to the **Herald's** "Monday, Bloody Monday" column. In the end I didn't submit it because they insist on not using pseudonyms and it sounded all a bit too up myself to put my name to in public. It was written in 1996).*

In these days of increasing environmental awareness, consider the following quote. It's from *Shelter*, a book published in the early seventies that looks at, among other things the impact our housing practices and domestic assumptions have on the environment:

"What would life be like with less energy consumption? We'd grow most of our own food and it would taste better. We would again make things with our hands. We would build and maintain our own houses. Life would be less hectic. Less machine labour, more muscle use, better health, rediscovery of dormant capabilities. We'd make our own music."

Influenced by such ideas, fifteen years ago I decided that life in the city was not worth the candle and I 'dropped out' to live in the bush a couple of hours out of town - one of the not inconsiderable number of disillusioned people looking for a saner way to live. In the city I was all too familiar with the "Monday, Bloody Monday" feeling. Also the "Thank God it's Friday" feeling. I can still remember being in the executive loo of the multinational corporation that I worked for. I was hosing away next to a colleague and we were both discussing our plans for the coming weekend. Zipping up thoughtfully I was struck by how much of my living time was spent earning the bread I needed to have a `normal' city existence. The idea took root, such that I eventually took the plunge and moved to the bush to try living the "alternative lifestyle", where I opted for less energy use, more discretionary time and lots less money. I went for the whole starry-eyed idealistic bit - the mud brick house made of recycled materials, the veggie garden, the solar energy system - all that.

Now my Mondays aren't bloody any more. Sure, I still have off days (after all, it isn't Utopia by any means, and lots of things impinge on your life other than the domestic context). But I feel like I've given that whole Mondayitis, workaday weekly grind the slip. (I find it hard to describe how things are better without sounding infuriatingly smug).

The *Shelter* quote has pretty much become the way I live now, and overall my life makes more sense than it used to when I used to live in town. No more do I work at something pretty meaningless for most of my life to get the money to pay people to do things for me because I haven't the time to make and do them for myself because I am at work getting the money, and so on round the merry-go-round. To make it all work on a necessarily limited budget is a much more enjoyable and stimulating challenge than solving personally irrelevant problems for some impersonal organisation in the city.

All my heating needs are provided by the sun and/or firewood (which I now have time to gather and cut for myself), so my ongoing heating costs are zero, whereas in the city 70% of my electricity bill went to heating water. My house is designed so that a moderate amount of exercise is needed to run it ("less machine labour, more muscle use, better health") Meeting your needs by making and doing for yourself as much as possible brings a much larger range of activities to everyday life than city life ever did, and it's a perpetual creative challenge ("rediscovery of dormant capabilities"). The beer is homemade,

other euphorients come from the garden for free (compare *that* cost with the city!) and I make music with a solar-powered keyboard and a 4-track recorder using homemade as well as conventional instruments. I've had to wake up to an alarm only three times in the past twelve years (to catch a train), so life is certainly less hectic.

Living this way makes you realise how the much-vaunted "quality of life", like many other products of post-industrial society, is merely another overblown, ultimately unsatisfying claim. I mightn't drink a lot of Grange Hermitage, but the quality of my existence has turned out to be considerably better than I ever would have dared hope when, with some trepidation, I chucked my secure job and embarked on the whole business more than a decade ago. I don't want to suggest that going feral would be everybody's solution to urban dissatisfaction, but it's sure working well for me so far. Apart from the personal rewards, it's also nice to know that there's thirty tons less carbon dioxide goes into the atmosphere each year as a consequence of the technology I've chosen to meet my domestic needs.

The structure of our society is at risk because it is based firmly on employment. Identities, status, hierarchies, respect and self-respect are all dependent on what sort of employment people are in and how much they earn doing whatever it is that they do. We have an employment-based society where money determines value, and for most people this money has to be obtained from their employment.

- Barrie Sherman: *Working at Leisure.*

The twentieth century's rampart materialism is fine - let's all enjoy it for what little it's worth. But let's also realise that this way of life is in itself a form of mass delinquency. And let's not be so obtuse as to look for "abnormality' in young people if at times they show an inclination to giving our synthetic paradise an utter wrecking.

- Mike Brown

Hidden carefully away in the foundations of conventional economic thought is the assumption that greed makes the world go round and *ought* properly to do so. Since Adam Smith the economist's address has been to man's 'self-interest' - the 'self' involved being conceived as some gargantuan swine never to budge from the trough. Assume that, and all the rest falls neatly into place. What is it, after all, that our economic policy making takes for its object? To keep the swill flowing and the pig well-purged for the sake of non-stop ingestion.

-E.F. Schumacher: *Small Is Beautiful.*

One of the ways to approach high unemployment is to change the way we think about work. Whilst this is not happening at present, we are certainly changing the patterns of employment in a major way. These changes in turn are having an impact on social relationships. Together these are revolutionising the way that millions of us approach our jobs and the way we do them. They are also changing leisure time and what we do with it."

- Barrie Sherman: *Working at Leisure.*

The world composes and recomposes itself in an endless process of dissatisfaction.

- E.L. Doctorow.

Do whatever you've always wanted to do - all of those things that were fanciful, and whimsical, and bizarre, and liberating - pull out all the stops."

- Jack Zajack.

(The following extracts come from a book called ***Smallcreep's Day,*** *written by Peter Currell Brown. The scene is the office of a factory-owner talking with one of his employees. His subject is modern society in general and modern work organisation in particular.)*

"Throughout the ages men have believed in malignant little spirits which inhabited dwellings, or holes in the ground, or lurked in streams or wells. We today have our germ creatures, who similarly inhabit houses and drains and crevices, or certain specified substances."

"But germs actually exist," I said "everybody knows that".

"Have you ever seen one?" he retorted. "Is it possible to see them?"

"No, I've never seen one," I admitted, "but there are people who look at them every day through microscopes."

"Oh yes," he said, "the witch-doctors see them with their magic instruments."

"But they do," I explained politely, "they actually do."

"Oh, I don't doubt it," he said in a soothing voice. "I also do not doubt that witch-doctors are actually aware of evil spirits, probably actually see them. But the modern housewife, who daily performs long and exhausting rituals to exorcise these creatures, has never actually seen one, and it is a simple medical fact that her rituals are irrationally elaborate. All this cleanliness, clean floors to walk on, clean clothes, odourless bodies, children with clean faces, clean cars, even the tops of shoes. Then there is our obsession with whiteness. What could be more irrational than the concept "Whiter than white"? But these ideas sell cleaning powders and sell them to the entire population. Sheets, bread, baths weddings, collars, crockery and skin, all must be white, because whiteness is believed to be proof against evil influences. You see, we retain in full that irrational preoccupation with appearance rather than with content which is characteristic of the primitive mind. To the savage all that glitters *is* gold, and with us whiteness *is* purity, propriety *is* goodness. We make cars and shoes and teacups shiny, and judge commodities by their wrappings, whether we think we do or not, and men by their clothes."

..."We have entirely lost touch with the material world. Once upon a time, when our lives depended on the cut of a flint or the time of a sowing, every little child knew the feel of a good stone and the habits of the sun, and what you could do and what you couldn't do with an oak sapling, even if spirits did live in them. But the average modern householder hasn't the faintest idea how the polyester-faced pressed wood of his radiogram cabinet got to be like that, and has neither feeling for nor knowledge of the real nature of valves. What man lays his hand on a stone now to hear its heart beat, or thinks of the wind and the water and the fire which turned into rock the bricks of his house and the plates in his kitchen? "

..."We have invented for ourselves," he continued, "a complete imaginary world where people do not die but are everlastingly attractive to the opposite sex, where everything is clean, where it is always spring and the streams are menthol-fresh, where everything is

exciting, where everyone can be a rebel and a bohemian but at the same time can be clean and smart and surrounded by people exactly like themselves, where everyone is an adequate, self-possessed and civilised human being."

"...People can, with a little prodding in the right places, be pursuaded to buy anything, eat anything, join anything, believe anything, vote for anybody, or do anything you like to think of. Today we persuade people to spend most of their waking lives doing work they hate, spend most of their money on things they don't need, rear children they don't want and force them to acquire an education which is useless to them; live with women they've grown tired of, vote for politicians they know nothing about, respect people who sponge on them, help to enforce laws which rob them of what is rightfully theirs, give their faithful support to unions which tie their hands behind them, and do all sorts of things you wouldn't think possible. ...People like yourself are allotted both the worst jobs and the least money, and are persuaded that that is the very quintessence of justice."

"Every week I give you a pay packet with which you could buy, if you wish, at least a little freedom. But none of you chooses to cash it in that way - you exchange it for families and television and washing machines, and come back next week for more slavery. You do not buy freedom because you dare not. In a society of free men you would be forced to face up to the truth of what you really are. In every sense of the expression you would have to do your own dirty work, you would have to forge your very own relationships with those around you."

..."In a free society you would have to come to terms with yourself and with others like yourself. You would have to sort things out with them yourself instead of having social workers or political parties or policemen or shop stewards to do the job for you, and in the process you would be forced to face up to what sort of person you yourself really were."

"...In the name of anti-fascism you would put into power the most brutal dictator you could find, in the name of anti-communism you would submit to martial law for the rest of your lives." I was dismayed. "But we have freedom of speech," I said, "We are great talkers."

"Oh yes, and no doubt a list of the subjects which you discuss amongst yourselves at work and at home would be a very long one. But then you all take daily newspapers and you know nothing. You do not use words for communication at all, you use them to reinforce herd feelings, you talk for the same reason that sheep bleat and hens cluck... Don't you agree that all this talk of freedom of speech and freedom of thought is just so much hogwash and fiddle-faddle if it is not accompanied by freedom of action?". I interrupted, protesting that of course we had freedom of action. "This is a free country," I said, "everybody knows that. It is the freely-chosen aim of us all to avoid behaviour which would prejudice the well-being of the community. Most of us are hard-working, law-abiding, respectable citizens and wouldn't wish to be otherwise."

He turned to me with an unpleasant sarcastic sort of smile on his face. "You see, my dear Smallcreep, the product is always the same. That is just what the average dictator would require you to be, for all his brass bands and uniforms."

"But we aren't forced to come and work here at bayonet point," I said.

"What does it matter as long as you come? You hate your work and yet you all do all the overtime I allow you to do. Bayonets or not, the work is no better."

"Then we live well," I said quite impatiently.

"If you mean that you eat well, then I must agree, but that has nothing to do with democracy either, and pigs and horses eat well if their owners have any sense. If you are speaking, however, of the quality of your daily lives, then I do not agree. You are as stultified as tinned sardines, living in a dream world because your real world is so totally unfulfilling."

Blueprints vs Ingenuity

There are two major ways to approach making something. The commonest way is what I'll call the *Blueprint* approach, where you make it in your head first, then work out ways to make the object so that it matches your mental vision of it. In between conception and fabrication, most often there is a plan of some kind which describes, usually in quite some detail, how it's supposed to turn out. Materials are specified and precise dimensions given. It's all worked out in advance, and the necessary materials are procured to make it exactly as planned. This is the conventional approach to making things in modern industrial culture.

The other way of making something I'll call the *Ingenuity* approach, and it's quite different to the first one. It's more flexible and intuitive, and the details of the thing being made are not specified in advance. Unlike the Blueprint approach, with the Ingenuity approach you don't go out and buy the exact thing for the job. Instead you try to find an ingenious way to use what you already have to hand. Approaching the making of things from this other direction is to be much more open about acceptable materials and very flexible about the precise form the object will ultimately take. Unforeseen things that can happen along the way can affect the outcome, whereas the Blueprint approach brooks no deviation from what was originally intended. Approaching the job via Ingenuity means that flaws in the material may have to be circumvented or incorporated, where the Blueprint approach requires that imperfect material be rejected.

In woodturning, an example of the first approach would be making an item by following the directions given in a how-to-do-it article. An example of the second approach would be where a wood worker sets out to make something as vaguely defined as 'a vessel' from a nice piece of wood that he happens to have at the time. If in the course of making it unsuspected defects in the piece of wood are revealed, the developing form of the vessel will be modified to take this into account. With the Blueprint approach you'd throw away the defective piece of wood and go and get an unflawed piece.

Further on in the process it may happen that for some unexpected reason or accident the idea of making a vessel from that particular piece of wood is not going to be possible. But the semi-worked piece of material is not then jettisoned unless there is no chance that what's left mightn't be able to be incorporated into some future project. (This is what my father used to call "keeping stuff that might one day come in handy.") Or you might make it into something else that you didn't originally set out to make - like an eggcup might become a scoop when you unearth a serious flaw in part of the cup wall. Happenstance and serendipity often play a large role, and woodturners know this approach well. Many one-off crafted objects are made this way where nature's marks are incorporated as you go, and the whole thing is in a state of flux right up until it's finished. *And each product is unique.*

Of course you can't build things like oil tankers or bridges or aeroplanes by this second method, but it is ideally suited to many workshop-sized projects, especially turnery, sculpture and carpentry. I used it as a general approach when I built my own dwelling. I didn't have a detailed idea of what the house was going to look like when I began. I built in stages, and often the dimensions of parts of the building were determined by the size of the recycled materials I had scrounged. As I built I leaned things, and what I learned changed how I built and what I built. (Mind you, this approach to building causes local councils some consternation.)

Once you experience the buzz of making something this way you find yourself amazed at

the amount of money that people spend in the pursuit of perfection - and as the wise men of the East remind us - perfection can be boring. Making things from the Ingenuity approach doesn't mean you have to abandon aesthetic considerations - you just accept a different and more flexible set of boundaries to exercise your ingenuity within. Contrast the precision of a machine finished item with the rough charm of a primitive artifact made with cruder tools. The latter expresses an authenticity and integrity that is creative ingenuity speaking to us.

Although there is no way to measure it, it seems to me that our culture often tends to assign an inferior status to the Ingenuity approach, whose products are seen by some people as mean, or impoverished, or crude. We seem to like the predictability, the control, and the precision that modern technology brings with it. I'm not saying that making things to preconceived design specifications doesn't have its place - many projects would be impossible to accomplish any other way. But I think it is too often the unexamined first resort, and the possibility of approaching the making of something in a different way is often not seriously considered.

Nowadays there is another strong argument for using the Ingenuity approach more than we do. Not only is it an affordable and practical outlet for creative ingenuity, it also brings with it the bonus of being environmentally responsible. Because it minimises the use of new materials it makes much lighter demands on planetary resources. And it is hugely satisfying to boot. I think we'd do well to consider it as a possible way to go with everything we make, so that we work more *with* the material rather than forcing our preconceived ideas onto it.

All Wood's nice, though, Isn't It?

Species tall and species small -
All yield up their lovely wood.
Trouble is, it mostly splits
(Which most see as not very good).

Golden tans and pinks and browns,
Reds and creams in every hue,
Grain all curly, round and round -
Shame the termites love it too.

Lovely stuff though. How we waste it!
How we use it no one cares.
Soon we'll find we've used the lot up -
Even cracked bits will be scarce.

" *So I try to use the defects,*
Leave in all the cracks and knots.
(Leastways, that's my explanation
Where my work is rough in spots!)

You could Sell That, You Know...

The problem of pricing in an art and craft world full of bullshit.

When I was but a stripling somebody looked at something I had made and said "Now that's really nice. You could sell that, you know." It was meant as a high-powered compliment. He was saying that although I was only young, I had made something good enough to actually *sell!* To him it was the ultimate accolade. If you can *sell* something you are a professional. You've arrived. Commercial viability - the main criterion of success in whatever the field of endeavour. If it's good enough to sell then it must be good indeed. But as we all know, that's crap - because you can sell *anything* if you try hard enough, and the sale is no guarantee of the quality. (Look at Macdonalds.) But although how well your stuff sells might be no indicator of worth (now *there's* a subjectively saturated word - 'worth') we all have to get around to selling stuff sooner or later.

Some time ago I came across an ingenious design for an outdoor folding chair that nobody seemed to be doing anything with, and I thought it might represent a chance to make a few easy bucks. It would have been fairly easy to make the bits and then package them in kit form, and the whole marketing operation would have been very efficient, simple and small scale. Now, in the case of making something for sale like this (that is the result of a series of repetitive operations that stay the same over time) it's relatively easy to work out what price to put on it. You follow standard business practice and establish how much for raw materials, how much for processing, how much for overheads and other on-costs and so on. Then you add your profit margin and work out whether it's a goer or not. (As it turned out I got distracted from the project by something else and I never went ahead with it - which was fortunate because about six months later I saw that someone else had had the same idea and brought the idea to fruition. And very nicely too).

But pricing is not always that straightforward, and it's at its most dicey in the area of the arts and crafts - which is one of those 'creative' areas where confidence and ego count for more than they should, reliable criteria are very thin on the ground and the bullshit quotient reads well up on the scale

I like making things. All sorts of things. The more varied and different the better. I can't specialise ("To specialise is to brush one tooth") and most of the time it bores me off my twig to have to make several things in a row the same. And so I build furniture, make sculptures, candlesticks, produce small-run publications, make sound recordings - I'm a totally promiscuous fabricator (which you have to admit even *sounds* pretty deviant).

A few years ago I bought a lathe, and after I got vaguely proficient on it my rate of output of round things increased rapidly, and I soon found myself knee-deep in bowls, lidded boxes, bowls, ashtrays, bowls, candlesticks, bowls, and other rotundities. I'm no specialist woodturner, mind. I'm no threat to the Raffans and the Vic Woods' of this world, but some of the stuff that I make is OK. I mean, it's too good to just burn or chuck out. And a lot of people seem genuinely to like some of it too - to the extent that they ask if it is for sale. So how do I arrive at what I think is a fair price? For many people this seems not to be much of a problem - they simply charge as much as they hope the traffic might bear and keep slowly revising downwards until the item eventually moves. I'm not comfortable with that.

The value of handcrafted objects in today's world is something that has occupied many people. I've read about various ways to arrive at the asking price. Some of these are quite sophisticated pieces of accounting, while others are more rule of thumb. But once you decide to go into serious business with your craft the whole game changes.

I'm reminded of an article I read some time ago in one of those glossy Taunton Press woodworking magazines from America about a bloke who made fine furniture for a hobby. All of his friends had ordered items from him, and as his reputation spread he built up a backlog of orders that he had trouble filling by working in his spare time. Before too long he decided to take the obvious step and move from making furniture as a hobby to making it full-time - as a full-on commercial venture. The long and short of his story is that he eventually found that in taking this step he had turned himself from an enthusiastic amateur into a harried proprietor of a business that brought with it many headaches. Before he knew it he was spending less time actually making stuff (which was his enthusiasm and his love) and most of his time was taken up being a bookkeeper, a manager, an employer, an accountant, and all the other things you have to become if you are going to run a business properly. He'd had to hire staff to keep up with the demands of the market, and his turnover had become of great importance - as was profitability, of course. Deciding to do full time the work that he once did for the sheer love of it had meant that he was doing less and less of what he loved the more successful the business became. The furniture he now made had to be designed and built with efficiency and profit in mind, and all unnecessary extras were pruned off. His pieces of furniture lost their distinctiveness. After three years he woke up to the dangers of the cash register's siren song and returned to a normal day job - pursuing his woodworking interests once again as a 'non-professional', where he regained his sense of joy and creativity in what he does. ("The quiet pleasures of the amateur.")

Which is sort of where I am, in a way. It has been my experience, too, that as soon as you undertake to make something with the cash register tinkling away in the back of your mind, then something special goes out of the process. I don't know what it is, and I don't know why it happens. All I can say is that for me the process of making somehow becomes diminished so I usually tend to avoid commissions when they are offered. (I'm also aware that it's a pretty privileged position to be in to have the choice whether or not to go mercantile.)

But as I said towards the beginning of this, I still find myself having to put a price on various bits of my output - if only to reduce the number of round wooden things that keep cluttering the place up. Trying to be 'businesslike' about this and keep tabs on how long things take me to make, how much the raw materials cost, and so on doesn't work for my context. For a start, many of the materials I use are scrounged. I made a largish bowl from a chunk of red cedar that I had come across which would have cost in the vicinity of eighty dollars if I had bought the blank from a timber merchant. It was a superb piece of unflawed wood. Because I happened to get it for nothing should I pass this saving on in my price? Or should I have factored in the timber merchant's price? And like I said, I'm no specialist, and sometimes I take a helluva long time to do something that a specialist, with specialist tools, could knock over in a fraction of the time. Should I charge for my slowness compared to the pro, or take less to compete with him? Sometimes I'll spend an inordinate amount of time decorating a bowl, say, only to find that the decoration doesn't look any good when it's finished. In cases like this I might just call it quits, ignore the hours spent, and finish up the bowl so that it's passable and not a complete failure, but nothing like the grander vision I'd had in mind earlier. And certainly nothing that would warrant charging for all the hours that *actually* went into its manufacture. Of course, then there's the other side to that coin, where something really impressive and satisfying comes quickly and easily, and to work out a price based on the (short) time it took would be inappropriate as well.

I also have a dilemma with those things that I've made that I consider to be failures but which other people like a lot. Often, in amongst a pile of reject bowls or in the throw-out heap a friend will find something that they really like - but it's something that I hadn't even seen fit to keep. What do you do in a case like this? Should you sell stuff you're not happy with? If you take the creative high road and refuse to traffic in things you're not happy with then all you do is deprive someone of their enjoyment of the thing just because you yourself don't like it - which in my book is setting yourself up as a taste arbiter in a bit of an arrogant way. Usually I give away the item in question on the grounds that I can hardly charge money for something that I was prepared to chuck out. If I think it's junk and they don't, then that's their good luck.

I've been told that professionals don't like enthusiastic amateurs charging low prices for their stuff because it makes it harder for the professionals to sell their wares at the prices they need to ask to make even a modest profit. I can see both points of view, I think. Each are coming from (and probably going to) somewhere completely different, and each is valid in its own way. But I sometimes wonder if it's reasonable to expect people to come up with the sort of money that's required to buy handmade articles from full-time professionals these days. This brings in considerations of social stratification, since only rich people can usually afford things like handmade dining settings and the like. Have a look at the prices on the beautifully made items at the next exhibition of good woodcraft you go to. You can see the hours of care and painstaking attention to detail in the pieces (or most of them) and you can see how they come to cost what they do. But who can afford such beauty except the very rich? Does this mean that the less well-off are to be denied the pleasures of owning hand crafted stuff? Or is that where hobbyists and mucker-arounders like me come in? (Not that being handmade necessarily makes it good, of course - it could be quite horrible.)

However much I think about it, I still find pricing my wares a problem. (I'd rather hoped that in writing this out I'd find out what I thought about the matter, but it remains as opaque as ever.) These days I've given up any pretence of using any sort of system to arrive at a price and about all you can say about it is that it's consistent in its arbitrariness - and complicated by the fact that I can never make up my mind how good any given piece is anyway.

Fear is the greatest problem. If we can work without it, work for the joy of working, then we are free. Because then we are no longer working for money, for fame, or for mother, but for ourselves. Having no fear leaves us free to take risks and thereby to learn from our failures and our successes.

- Jenny Lind.

No machine can compare with hands. Machinery gives speed, power, complete uniformity, and precision, but it cannot give creativity, adaptability, freedom, or heterogeneity. Preople prefer the creative and the free to the fixed and the standardised.

- Soetsu Yanagi.

One person's dirt is another's patina.

Some more about woodworking

With everything I make it always becomes an exercise in deciding just when it's finished. Questions like: What is an appropriate surface for this piece? Just how much trouble am I prepared to take to eradicate every last scratch? When have I taken it far enough and when am I just being lazy? ...and so on.

Picture this typical situation: I'm finishing up a wooden bowl on the lathe. When I get about halfway through the whole process of painstakingly working through the increasingly fine abrasive grit sizes I notice a flaw that I hadn't picked up before. To get rid of it I'd have to go back to the gouge (thereby undoing all the finishing work I've done on it so far), then to the scraper, then through all the sandpaper grit sizes again, just to get that imperfection out and be back where I am now, still with final finishing to do. It often happens to me that it's not till I've laboriously finished a piece to the Danish oil stage (rubbed off with a cloth before it sets glassy, of course) that a really close and thorough inspection reveals a myriad small scratches which had not been apparent earlier in different light, and before final polishing. Since most of the stuff that I turn out is usually only fair to middling, I usually leave the fine scratches there because the item simply isn't crash hot enough to warrant the expenditure of all that time, energy, and electricity - and anyway, how many people look closely enough to notice?

Aha! But the thing is supposed to be some sort of extension of its maker. The maker is supposed to be proud of his/her output - even ashamed to let really inferior examples of work to be seen, let alone sold. And a highly finished piece does show that someone cared enough to spend a lot of time getting it to that condition. Even if other aspects of the piece are not as impressive as the high degree of finish and you don't really like it all that much, you tend to give the maker credit for at least being serious about it - even if you think his taste is in his armpit.

While it would be going too far to suggest that a high degree of finish has become *de rigeur* in craft objects today, there does seem to be something of a general expectation of it, so that high finishes would rarely offend on their own account. People sometimes seem to think that less than perfect finishes are a bit crude, rough and ready - unprofessional. (We're all familiar with the artificial glossy skin of polyurethane that seems to be the favourite of what I think of as 'retired bank manager wood turners'.) I'd want to argue that glossy and glassy finishes can too often look crude themselves in their own way. Why should someone who is making something by hand (even if it is machine turned), and who presumably feels that its handmade qualities will make it more or less unique - why should they put themselves through a boring, repetitive, and energy-guzzling process to try to get a machine-like, perfect finish that belies its handmade origins?

I took a small bowl made out of casuarina to a high finish once. It finished up quite glassy even before I'd put any surface treatment on it. But when I had it all finished, and waxed and polished to within an inch of its life, and it was sitting there radiating its shininess, it was still somehow unsatisfying. A bit *too* shiny. It was so flaw-free that it became predictable and boring. There was nothing in it to surprise you.
Most of the times that I think I will take a bowl or something to a reasonably high finish, I find that I'm somehow incapable of ever taking enough trouble to do it properly - to get every last scratch out before proceeding to the next grit and all that. For me, the achievement ain't worth the effort.

Besides, there's that very important consideration that I mentioned earlier, about whether whatever it is that you're making is really worth the entropy debt you incur when you

undertake to burn up all that energy just to get something really smooth. Very little of what I make would warrant the energy it takes to make it, I suspect - though that gets you into the troublesome area of how to decide if the energy-use is 'warranted' or not. Who says, anyway? How do you arrive at the 'worth' of anything? But that's a huge question that will have to wait.

Where did the idea that shiny is good come from? I imagine that in our culture it had something to do with the fact that shiny surfaces require lots of work and dusting and polishing and so on to keep them looking their best, and only rich people could afford to pay someone to spend time maintaining a highly impractical shiny finish. Poor cottagers might have had beautiful patinas of age and use on their furniture and wooden items, but they didn't go in much for high gloss - except maybe to envy it as a symbol of status.

And of course these days you get your high gloss by applying an artificial plastic skin on top of the real wooden surface. Good ole polyurethane. But compare such a finish with the feeling that comes through when you look at an example of 'primitive' ware - stuff that's made with very low-level technology. The surface of the latter to me has a warmth, a connectedness with the original state of the material it has been made from. It has a sort of dignity. It hasn't been coerced into trying to look like something it's not. And again, there does seem to be that general feeling among the public that marks of the manufacturing implements might be acceptable on 'primitive' items, but are not welcomed on modern or contemporary pieces.

Yet despite these broad tendencies there are nonetheless a few modern makers who aren't seduced into glossville. These people, to me, seem to have an almost palpable authority of approach, a confidence, that is embedded in the marks they leave so that you just know they're there intentionally, and there's no suspicion of anything remotely slipshod going on.

There's been a sort of flatness in my response to most of what I've made on the lathe so far - there's nearly always some sense of dissatisfaction with each piece as I appraise it after I've declared it finished. This response set in early, very soon after I'd enjoyed the initial rush of actually making a bowl, or a lidded box for the first time. It was as though I was merely adding my bit to the total of all those other turners. And what I was making wasn't very different from what everyone else was doing, except for a certain virtuosity that was apparent in the output of the top turners that I hadn't the experience or the skill to match.

But since getting my thoughts a bit better sorted out on this degree-of-finish business I think I now approach my making with a somewhat different intent and philosophical underpinning. For the next while at least, I'm going to try only doing the enjoyable bits and keep in mind how much energy I'm consuming. Hopefully the stuff I make will have a bit more distinctiveness as a result. The tool marks and the textures will be there, hopefully, as pleasing and interesting in their own right.

We'll see what happens.

Most of our society's products are being made by people who do not enjoy making them, whether as owners or workers. Their aim in the enterprise is not the product, but money, and therefore every trick is used to cut the cost of production and hoodwink the buyer, bu colouring and packaging chicanery, into the belief that the product is well and truly made.

Alan Watts: *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are.*

There is a general feeling for the need to learn and develop, but at the same time, because of limited educational opportunities, there also exists a general lack of awareness which can lead to a state of being too easily satisfied with the craft product.

...There is a large quantity of mediocre work sold through small, less discriminating gift shops and pavement markets, produced by some of the people in this category. The practice of exhibiting and selling work before gaining proficiency often distorts the public's appreciation and discernment of the quality and standard of original craft work. This in turn affects the vocational craftsman's chances of making a living wage.

David Williams: "The Practice and Ideologies of Craft" in *Craft Australia* Summer 1978.

Bending Around and Up Down Under

(*The American magazine* ***Fine Homebuilding*** *used to run a regular feature on their inside back page where readers contributed off beat experiences with building. The following piece was accepted for publication, but an incoming editor deleted the feature before it was published.)*

There's a bloke lives near me in the bush a couple of hours north west of Sydney. He's building a nice house out of huge eucalypt poles and mud brick. One of the features of the design is a spiral(ish) staircase from ground level to upper bedroom, with ironbark treads and a green-bent wattle handrail. The treads attach to heavy steel brackets cur from RSJ's, which in turn are welded to a suitably spiral-bent length of six inch heavy-wall steel pipe. The main factors that shaped this particular stair design were: (a) the bloke (Kent) had an engineering background and was something of a dab hand with a welder; (b) good quality hardwoods are plentiful in the area; and (c) there happened to be a couple of lengths of suitable 6" steel pipe already hanging about the building site.

The pipe was to run straight for about ten feet, then it had to curve rather sharply around a radius of some two and a half feet, describing a half-helix curve just before the end of the pipe. This meant that as well as having the right curve in it, it had to end up spiralling upwards smoothly at the right rate of ascent to allow the treads to fall at the correct stepping intervals. Kent roped in Andre, another owner-builder in the area, and me as helpers, and embarked on the planning for The Big Bend. I was glad it was Kent who was doing all the calculations.

Some days later Kent called a Briefing for the Big Bend. The three of us gathered around the elaborate contraption that Kent had been working on for the past several days. It was designed to achieve The Bend in one smooth operation, and was a most impressive affair. What was to finish up as the top end of the 'stairpipe' was bolted to a massive bloodwood stump. The rest of the pipe lay straight as a die for what looked like a country mile. Up near the stump end was a temporary forge arrangement filled with coke, complete with a blower cobbled up from an old industrial vacuum cleaner. Cheek by jowl with the stump and the forge was a monstrous chunk of specially-cast concrete with two galvanised pipes passing up through two holes in it. This 18" thick concrete semi-circle was the main former, and it was poised precariously up the pipes about two feet above the ground, held there by what looked like the most fragile of props.

Kent explained how it worked: "Now, all you've have to do, Andre, is when I give the

wave you put on these heavy gloves and pull all the bricks out of this side of the forge so the pipe can pass round here as it's bending. Bill, you just tug this prop out from under the cement block with this rope, so it can drop down into position on those steel braces and act as a former. While you blokes are doing that, I'll be driving the front end loader with the pipe attached, around this arc I've drawn on the ground. As the pipe's bending to shape I'll raise the front arms of the loader to put the height into it. I'll have to get it up to that mark on the post there before it gets too cool, so we'll have to be pretty quick. And I'd say that it'll take quite a few hours to get the forge and the pipe up to heat." Firing up seemed to be the main imponderable, so it was agreed that The Big Bend would take place sometime the following day, with Kent to call us onto the site when the forge was approaching the required heat..

It was still dark when the phone rang the next morning. "Reckon she's about ready to give 'er a burl" crackled Kent's voice, "Andre's on his way over. It should be well hot enough by the time you both get here."

Andre was getting out of his car when I arrived, and soon the three of us were standing around the glowing mass of yellow-orange coke, warming our bums and going over the procedure one last time. There was a certain air of excitement and expectancy around, especially heightened in Kent, who had been getting up to the alarm at two hourly intervals throughout the night to stoke the forge. It was his determination to ensure that the fire was hot enough to give us a good bend that had resulted in the forge getting up to heat earlier than he had anticipated - hence the need to roust us out of bed in the chilly pre-dawn. But now Bending Time had come. Andre donned his gloves, I grabbed hold of my rope and Kent climbed aboard the loader and started her up. We all looked at each other. "Ready?" shouted Kent above the road of the motor, "then let's go!"

Andre begins scrabbling at the bricks in the forge. The loader revs. The pipe begins to move. Andre has his bricks cleared in no time flat. I pull on the rope (Kent has learned over the years to trust me with the more complex jobs). The prop comes out and the cement block drops down into place. Everything is going exactly as planned. The barrel of the heated section is in view where Andre has been at work. It is glowing very bright red - little sparks crackling everywhere make it look like a giant sparkler. Our beaming faces are reflected in the light of the fire as Kent begins his triumphal wrapping of the red hot pipe around the former. It begins to take shape beautifully. And then...

As we watched, the heated part of the pipe began to kink and flatten. Then it began to sag - and to tear - and to split along its length. The further it got wrapped around the former the more spectacular its disintegration became.

"Oh, bother," said Kent (or words to that effect), "Guess the fire might have been a tad too hot. The pipe was by now scarcely recognisable. It had ripped and torn into fantastic shapes. But there was more to come.

Kent had just begun the crucial upward lifting part of the operation when it became clear that the pipe was history, so he lowered it back down and slumped in his seat to take stock of the situation. He sat bolt upright almost immediately, because when he had lowered the pipe one of its more baroque protuberances came to rest on a hunk of 12x12 hardwood joist - which promptly burst into flame. Kent quickly raised the front arms of the loader again and began to back the machine off so as to get the hot pipe off the timber. But in backing off, the back tyre of the loader rubbed against another curlicue of hot ex-pipe, and it, too, erupted into flame. Fortunately, all this bursting into flame business turned out to be more startling than dangerous, thanks largely to Andre's alertness and accuracy with the garden hose.

Now a lesser man would have called it a day at that, I reckon. But not Kent. Two days later, at a more daylight hour, another call came: "Ready to give 'er another go?" And we did. With a second piece of pipe and a less fearsome blower - this time made from a hair dryer. And we did it in two stages. First we heated the pipe and did the horizontal bend, then rebuilt the forge, heated her all up again and then did the lifting part. And it all worked like a charm.

The next time I saw the pipe it was in position with the hefty cut-down I-beams welded to it ready to take the massive ironbark treads that Kent was sanding as I arrived. "Y'know," he said as I inspected the installation, "that first bit of pipe won't be wasted. I think I'll make it into a garden sculpture and pretend that it's meant to look like that. Nobody'll be able to work out how I did it!"

The more I want to get something done, the less I call it work.

Kicking the Habits

(The following piece was hawked around three or four magazines dealing with house building and renovating - with no success. Given the serve that it gives to consumerist ideas in the building industry I suppose it was a bit naive to submit it to them in the first place.)

Why do we build houses the way we do? We have quite definite ideas about how houses should be, and we rarely give serious consideration to anything much different to what we've become used to. Yet there are lots of things that we've come to take for granted in our houses that don't have to be the way they are. In fact, over the years many of our ideas about houses could do with some re-examination - especially if we are going to take seriously our overall impact on the environment.

Conventional house design and construction take the form they do because of a mixture of factors. Technological limitations, or innovations in materials and methods often determine how construction problems are solved. Entrenched cultural expectations play their part too - for instance, in Australia kids don't usually sleep with their parents, and farm animals don't share the house, though in other cultures they might. Unexamined practices and assumptions also make their contribution, which is why we still have such complicated joinery in wooden casement windows, or why most doors still open inwards, for example. But the most subtle shaper of our expectations of how houses should be is the ideology of consumerism. A browse through any of the glossy magazines about houses and interior design will immediately make clear the part played by wealth, luxuriousness and conspicuous consumption in forming our unconscious expectations of how houses should be if they are to be considered 'good'.

But why do things have to be as ritzy as the magazines (and the increasing number of television programs) would have us aspire to? Why do our taps have to match, for instance? Why can't they each be an individual old tap, with its own character? Why is it seen to be somehow inferior to have unmatched accessories? Why is new automatically

better than old? If it still works OK or is easily fixable, why don't we look on a worn, used object (imbued as it is with its own history and the marks of its past) as being preferable to a shiny, soulless new one?

We can see the value of non-newness in antiques, so how come we've been sold so effectively on the idea that 'new is best' when it comes to the trappings of everyday domestic life? Nothing is new for long, and if we accept uncritically that new is automatically best then last year's model quickly loses its appeal well before it is worn out, and we soon hanker to renovate (ie. literally "to make new again") and replace. It's a never-ending cycle of dissatisfaction which is great for manufacturers' sales but really rough on planetary resources. An uncritical acceptance that this is the way things should be is the necessary state of mind for most people to have if consumerism is going to succeed - as it *has* done so spectacularly over the postwar years.

But we know now that we can't continue with these sorts of assumptions any more if we're going to have any sort of a planet left for us all to live on. It's no good living in a millionaire's mansion if the surroundings are uninhabitable. We know this, yet those old unexamined habits of mind are still in there directing our choices, and they urgently need replacing with a more environmentally-benign way of approaching things. The needed changes in our approach will not come about by legislation, even if we were suddenly blessed with a truly environmentally-aware government. The change will only come about through the cumulative effect of a multitude of individual buying decisions. The decisions that *you* make about your next building or renovating project will either be part of the solution, or a contribution to the continuance of the problem.

To kick the habits of thought that we've picked up over years of unexamined building practice (that evolved before we'd realised the importance of environmental considerations) we need to become aware of just how much fads and fashions dictate the form that our houses take. We need a new awareness of the amount of resources that we needlessly and heedlessly consume because of these unreflective habits of mind. Builders *waste* as much in the way of materials as they actually incorporate into the building. Renovators throw out heaps of stuff like light switches, sinks, PC items and such simply because *they are no longer new*, even though they are still functional.

I think we need to see it as a creative challenge to do something aesthetically pleasing with what we already have to hand - to find ways to re-use and recycle materials much more than we do at the moment. We need to get to know the buzz that comes from solving a building problem *without* using anything new, and to value it more therefore than the merely new. Buying exactly the right thing - new - for the job at hand needs to become the last, rather than the first resort.
Once you start to dig out these consumerist assumptions and start viewing building from a creative recycling approach, you find yourself astounded at the things that people spend large sums of money on, or throw away, simply because they haven't seriously questioned whether new really *is* better. You realise that how people build or renovate their houses is a reliable index of how much they are still under the thrall of unquestioned consumerism.

Recently I saw a magazine article about a garden which featured a concrete mowing strip around the garden paths that cost more than my entire kitchen did. You can get lovely old brass taps from your local scrap yard for a couple of bucks each (true - they might need a new washer and a scrub up) yet people still prefer to spend hundreds on sets of matching Dorfs. A kitchen floor made out of recycled house bricks whose patina improves by the year can be had for the cost of the several coats of expensive sealer needed to give imported Italian floor tiles that (ironic, isn't it?) *old, weathered look.* And do you really need doors on kitchen cupboards? The crockery and other utensils are quite decorative in themselves and there's no real need to shut them away. Is concealing electrical conduit

worth the trouble? Having functional things exposed can be made into a feature (think of the Pompidou Centre in Paris with all its ducting and wiring on view).

Approaching building and renovating in this way doesn't mean you have to throw aesthetic considerations out of the (recycled) window and end up with a shanty rather than a house. Things still have to function, to be structurally sound, and present no threat to public health or safety. It can still be well-designed and aesthetically pleasing - and the bonus is that whatever the outcome, it will be *unique*, which is what most people are after in the first place.

It's a question of how you deal with the creative challenge. You just accept a different set of boundaries to work within, and once you do this the process generates its own aesthetic - and tremendous satisfaction. The house that I built several years ago on these environmental building principles may look different to a more conventional one, but I think it looks good in its own way. Building it was a very satisfying experience in every way, but particularly so creatively and aesthetically. The best houses that I've ever seen were built this way. Somehow they seem to function better at a human level and have a feel about them that is absent from a house built from more conventional assumptions about materials and methods. They're more of a personal statement of how you feel about the world and your place in it. On top of all this, it's cheap - cheap in its demands both on your wallet and on the planet. Its almost as if environmental virtue brings its own economic rewards.

You might be thinking that these ideas might work OK as long as you're building in the bush and that it's a different matter in more urban environments. Granted, much will depend on the enlightenment of the Council you have to deal with. The current building regulations make no mention of recycled materials, but while this does nothing to encourage their use, neither does it discourage it. The acceptability of recycled materials is left to the discretion of individual building inspectors, who are supposed to take each case on its merits. I suppose you could hardly used old bridge timbers to renovate an old lounge room that has Gyprock walls - but come to think of it, why couldn't you? It's just another buried assumption about what's acceptable isn't it? I'll bet it could be done, and made to look terrific too. It's just a matter of getting your mind around the problem in the right way.

They say that charity begins at home. So does environmentally responsible building.

There is a spirit in re-used material in the same way as there is poetry in some words, which, when we use them then recall other scenes. It's not corny. It's elemental experience and the stuff of life... Environmental building and environmental living are not a withdrawal from life, but a renewal of it. Neither is it a habit or a fashion. It is a belief in action.

- Alistair Knox: *Living in the Environment.*

Life is in part its own meaning. The sheer experience of living, of walking, of seeing, of tastes and smells of sensuous and emotional experiences, and all the rest make life worthwhile. When they are no longer positively enjoyed, life itself is called into question.

- Abraham Maslow

The Garden Shed

All over Australia the backyards of houses are dotted with those tinny, soulless-looking sheds that every Aussie feller's got to have to keep his shovel and his mattock and his mower in. I doubt that passers-by are ever struck by their beauty because they look terrible and do nothing whatsoever to enhance their surroundings. One of these prefab little beauties three metres by two metres with no windows and one door and six inches spare headroom will set you back around $400 (this is the early 1990's), - and still you've got to erect it and bolt it all together yourself.

For less than a tenth of this amount you could build a garden shed the same size, (and with more headroom) out of bush poles, mud bricks on their edge, leftover roofing iron and scrounged bits and pieces. I built one like that for under $30, (but I did have a fair bit of stuff lying about waiting to be used up). But aside from being cheap, it was such good fun to build. And to me it looks heaps better than a tin shed as far gracing the backyard goes .

Imagine how much nicer the suburbs would look if the garden shed were to become accepted as an outward expression of the owner's ingenuity and environmental awareness. Once you've had the satisfaction of planning and constructing a garden shed along these lines it soon becomes obvious how much more sense it makes to approach things this way. Not to mention the buzz you get from knowing that your shed is, in its own small way, a contribution to the solution of our environmental problems, rather than an unthinking contribution to our societal entropy debt. It would be an environmentally helpful garden fashion trend if it were to take off.

A Change of Mind

(Lyrics for a song.)

A green direction seems the way to go.
(Not that our politicians care you know.
They only care if GDP will grow.)
They need a change of mind.

The earth we're fucking up is all we've got .
Most people do not seem to care a lot.
They just can't see beyond their own small plot.
They need a change of mind.

And as for what we leave our kinder -
So what if it's a bloody cinder?
Just look out of a city winder
And see what industry can do.

The means are there, we've only got to change
A few priorities and rearrange
Our lives a little - it won't be that strange
If we'll just change our minds.

A Critique of Housing in Modern Society

(The following piece was written wayback in 1977 when I was on Study Leave in England, attached to the Open University. I think most of it still applies today.)

"The great mission of the Utopia is to make room for the possible, as opposed to a passive acquiescence in the present actual state of affairs."

- Ernst Cassirer: *Essay on Man*.

When I began to look into the difficulties associated with trying to build an unconventional house based on ecologically-sensitive principles I was struck by a paradoxical situation. On the one hand we have a growing body of scientific literature urging industrial societies to change their building habits because of their adverse ecological implications for the planet as a whole, while on the other hand we have a mass of rules and regulations which ensure that our current practices continue largely unchanged. In what follows I've tried to draw together some of the more important reasons why housing takes the shape it does in societies like ours.

It's very difficult to build your own house if you want to build anything very far removed from what is generally considered to be an 'acceptable' house. By the time you've met the requirements of the various authorities associated with housing, the resulting building is rarely very much different from the conventional idea of what a house should be like. Whether the design is ecologically-based or just idiosyncratically different, it is unlikely that the authorities will look kindly on the project. If you're lucky you may only have to go through an irritating series of time- and money-consuming hoops. At worst, the hurdles that confront you will prove too wearing, and your original vision will be seriously compromised or abandoned altogether.

Right at square one the regulations assume that you will have a detailed design, specified down to the last detail, which has to be officially approved before you can begin building. (Although it might seem preposterous to question this, we need to remember that most of the world's dwellings are built in a "Topsy" basis - being built and added to according to need. Yes, Virginia, there *are* ways of going about things other than Our Way.) Anyway, many innovative ideas are killed at this early stage of planning approval. Authorities have wide powers to stipulate construction techniques, materials to be used, and even aesthetic considerations ("it doesn't harmonise with the area").
(Interestingly, the Sydney Opera House was erected without official building permission. It contravened too many rules, so in order to get on with it they had to dispense with this requirement. But you can do things like that when you're running the show.)

I should stress at the outset, though, that I appreciate that these restrictions have been devised in most instances to protect people from unscrupulous builders, and to ensure that new houses meet certain minimum standards (though as we shall see, these standards are based on a middle-class worldview). But as well as achieving this laudable aim, the various regulations (without intending to) often effectively inhibit creativity and innovation and diversity in building design and construction, because the rules set limits beyond which a homebuilder cannot legally operate.

In all industrialised societies a set of recipes has grown up that dictates how to handle administrative complexities appropriately. Sets of institutionalised norms and procedures dominate the ways we do things, from the formal to the highly informal. The assumptions about how we should do things that are of most interest to us here are those that directly affect the homes that people get to live in. All large-scale industrialised societies use

centralised bureaucracies to cope with the complexity of organising large numbers of people, and in recent years this has been given added impetus by the advent of the computer. But most industrialised societies have become over-dependent upon centralised solutions to social problems.

Most people would agree that a continued rise in the material standard of living has not brought the rewards in terms of human wellbeing that many hoped it would. Most social observers agree that the relationship between the individual and society has somewhere gone awry. Book after book appears detailing the many subtle ways people feel isolated in the midst of their fellows, how alienation and anomie are rife, how 'homeless minds' are caught up in 'the pursuit of loneliness' as they lead lives of 'quiet desperation'.

Though there are many reasons for this state of affairs, I want to single out for attention the way the State, in order to manage the increasingly bewildering array of matters over which they have arrogated authority, has centralised all but the most trivial social and political functions. In doing this the State has taken out of the reach of its citizens just about all responsibility for decisions that intimately affect their lives. Although (as usual) the rich and the privileged are buffered to some extent from the full impact of this process, it is for the people on the bottom of the social heap that the effects are most debilitating. For them, the very idea that people might participate in decisions which vitally affect them is seen as some sort of radical aberration, and individual initiative has been all but smothered by the ministrations of paternalistic authority.

This heavy reliance on centralised bureaucratic processes is particularly evident in the way housing is provided. In order to provide their citizens with shelter, modern societies have developed complex bureaucratic apparatuses to oversee the supply, delivery, and distribution of houses. The guiding notion behind all this is that it is cheapest (and therefore desirable) if things are done on a large scale, because a standardised regularity keeps costs down. As a result, housing has become a commodity, something offered in large and standardised amounts to a 'market' made up of consumers. The blandishments of post-industrial society have made us into passive consumers of goods in many sectors of life - commodities which bear no imprint of ourselves on them, and housing is no exception to this, where the assumption is that this basic human need will be satisfied by a supply-and-demand marketing exercise. The tracts of houses in the newer suburbs demonstrate this dramatically.

So, if you judge the results from a human perspective rather than a bureaucratic/efficient one, the way we are going about things at the moment is clearly not working very well. The alienation of the individual and the corrosion of community feeling that comes with the sort of housing produced by centralism are so well-known and accepted that we even make jokes about them ("a house is a box tied up with red tape"). The Nanterre students referred to modern housing development as the place "where unhappiness becomes concrete". In fact, hardly anyone seems happy with the houses that result from current procedures, least of all the poor people (in both sense, usually) who have to live in them. I've yet to talk to anyone who is prepared to claim that the fruits of present rules and regulations come even close to being satisfactory built environments - in human, as opposed to merely economic terms. And that includes architects and town planners. Yet still the machine turns out more of the same unsatisfactoriness, modified (if at all) only towards more homogenisation in the name of cost effectiveness.

The acceptance of all this despite its shortcomings is not surprising since it is a natural companion to the other major social assumptions that underpin all growth-oriented industrial societies: that more is better; efficiency is good (because it leads to greater productivity and more profits); that quantity takes precedence over quality; that economic considerations should always win out over "softer" human considerations, and so on.

These largely tacit core values are part of the atmosphere we live in, and most people accept them as 'natural' and unquestionable. We seem to have lost sight of the fact that our methods are only one way of solving the problems that come when lots of people live together. (Try talking to people about social organisation coming from the people and not from the State, and within a few sentences you'll hear about its impossibility because of 'human nature'.) In fact, people themselves are increasingly treated as commodities and internalise this definition of themselves. They have become things to be manipulated by centralised institutions over whom they have no control (no matter what the prevailing 'democratic' orthodoxy would like to have us think). Which is, to me, a terrible state of affairs. The social assumptions on which consumer society is based have got us to the stage where "we are surrounded by more and more manufactured articles, but fewer and fewer people actually *make* anything. The idea that people can create with their own hands, produce food, shelter and clothing, and can create things of beauty, is becoming more and more remote from ordinary people. The skills which made people human have become rare and freakish."
(from *'Where do we go from here?'* a working paper by Stan Windass.)

There is a broad cleavage in societies like ours today between those who think things are not tightly enough controlled and those who think that there are too many controls already. The first lot are not particularly comfortable with human messiness, spontaneity and inconsistency. They like things to be predictable, tend to value and seek security, and have a legislative mentality that sees the solution to problems of social order lying in more rules and laws. Although it isn't always recognised by its proponents, the results of such an approach are to keep the populace tractable and accepting so that they don't threaten this essentially conservative view of the world. People who are content to lead a regimented life in mass living quarters are likely to have a docile and acquiescent approach to things generally, and are unlikely to pose any challenge to the continuation of the system that put them there.

The second lot have an almost diametrically opposed viewpoint. They feel that the social world is already too constricting for the individual - already there are too many rules, fettering and eventually stifling natural impulse and crippling creative capacities. These people feel more at home with ambiguity and diversity. Order for its own sake is less important to them, and they tend to see life more in terms of an exploration of rich and variously-textured experience rather than something that gets reduced to the desperate pursuit of an illusory tranquillity.

In the context of housing, the first 'order-oriented' group would see it as important that a group of houses have some overall unity of appearance. They see visual harmony stemming from houses looking rather the same. (As Paddington was becoming gentrified many years ago there was a move to have council make it mandatory for all houses to be painted the same colours.) The second group would see it as more important that the houses fulfil their human functions first, and would be more likely to be able to see aesthetic value in a highly diverse-looking built environment. It's generally the adherents of the first viewpoint that occupy positions of power in bureaucracies (because of the sort of person you have to be to make it to the top in that arena) and consequently our access to land, materials, professional advice, and the finance to acquire these things is limited by their world view, and we become subservient to the decisions, tastes, (and too often the whims) of the bureaucratic mentality. And so it all results in the cultural hegemony of a middle-class, 'order-oriented' view of the world.

But broad dichotomies like this one are grossly oversimplified. Each of the above groups has been described in extreme terms and most people fall somewhere between the two poles, and only a small proportion are aware of social processes in these terms. For the majority of people, their social context is simply 'the way the world *is*', and it is accepted

unquestioningly. But it is these two basically conflicting world views that shape most political differences, rather than partisan policies or more conventionally defined political groupings. They account for the radical/conservative factions in all parties. The directions in which each group would like to see the social world develop pull against one another, which is why a full understanding of the ramifications of this situation requires an appreciation of the way that power is distributed in society, and its relation to vested economic interests.

However, opposition to conservative assumptions is not very strong because it is hampered by the fact that the hegemony of the middle-class world view extends downwards through the layers of social stratification. If you want to be thought of as 'decent' (which you do if you are upwardly socially mobile), then the middle-class world view is something to emulate. Marx called this 'false consciousness', and Herbert Marcuse drew attention to the inherently ideological nature of consumer culture, especially the way it imposes certain patterns of life on people who live in a society conditioned by advanced technology. To conceive of a society *not* based on assumptions about efficiency, the 'goodness' of work, and the primacy of economic matters is scarcely thinkable for most people. The crucial role played by the assumptions of 'hard' technology explains the lack of public acceptance of the ideas advanced by proponents of the 'softer' technologies. That's why people advocating alternative energy solutions are dismissed as 'unrealistic'. As Jacques Ellul pointed out decades ago in his book *The Technological Society*, discussion must take place within the framework of a hard technology world view, and arguments from outside these assumptions are considered simply inadmissible.

For this reason, little or no serious consideration is given to the very intimate relationship that should exist between people and the dwelling they live in. Giancarlo de Carlo's dictum that a person's dwelling is their 'affirmation in space' is not likely to be heard tripping lightly from the lips of your typical housing bureaucrat. We no longer recognise the relationship of organic wholeness between what you live in and how you live your life. We've become deluded by a preoccupation with utilitarianism.

Housing which comes anywhere close to satisfying intrinsic human needs has become the prerogative of privileged and advantaged minorities. I think it was John Turner (in *Housing by People*) who pointed out that the system of planning ordinances in the US has ensured that 'urban renewal' has become synonymous with 'running the poor out of town'. Their system of public housing has meant that the term 'housing project' now means 'low income, high problem ghetto'. It's pretty much the same in Australia too (think of the tower blocks near Redfern). Despite its good intentions, authority-provided housing has changed the life circumstances of the poor hardly at all. As Colin Ward says in his perceptive *Housing: An Anarchist Approach,* our intractable housing problem is really a poverty problem, made worse by the fact that we seem somehow to have made it impossible for those of the homeless who still have any initiative left unstifled to improve their own situation.

So again we see how core notions of centralism are so entrenched in our thinking that people rarely question their appropriateness (and are suspicious of those - like alternate technology buffs - who do). The way things are now is seen as the only way things *can* be, rather than being seen as an experiment in social organisation that we may well have to abandon if the results don't start getting better soon. I, for one, am not holding my breath.

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So far we've looked at some of the ways that centralism inhibits creativity and innovation, but in doing this it also inhibits the creation of a diverse environment. Centralism is an homogenising force. But it's a well-know ecological maxim that homogeneous envi-

ronments are not healthy environments - vigour demands diversity. What we seem to have done is to deny the diversity of the needs to be met, and oversimplify them to meet the requirements of the controlling system. Centralised administration operates on a sort of statistical average of people's needs, which in the case of housing means that the outcomes are only ever partly satisfactory to those being housed, since the individual's housing needs bear about as much relationship to the statistical average as you do, reader, to the 'average person'. So no one is very happy except the people who get their kicks from having all the sums come out right.

We can't afford to go on accepting the assumption that the only factors in the provision of housing that are worthy of serious consideration are those of the technocrats and the capitalist building industry. We have to find ways of including popular involvement in the equation. Ward sees this as the real housing problem - to find 'how to change the ways that housing and planning issues *are perceived*, and how to shift the initiative in planning from the bureaucrat to the citizen, and how to shift it in housing from passive consumption to actual involvement'. (Or, as John Turner put it "Who decides for whom?") So, as we've seen, because the shaping of our built environment is determined by the values of consumerism and capitalist economics, and by the aesthetic predilections of the middle-class people who make the decisions, only a small portion of the spectra of need and taste gets represented.

There is another wrinkle on this: The (usually grudging) provision of niggardly welfare benefits to the disadvantaged has provided opportunities for subtle forms of social control, and welfare benefits are given as though a basic minimum standard of living is a privilege rather than a right in an affluent and civilised society. Persons being housed are expected to have an attitude of uncritical acceptance and also (if possible) to appear suitably grateful. Except for the very rich and those who are unusually emancipated from our dominant cultural assumptions, the range of options in housing has become extraordinarily constricted, and the situation becomes worse the further you go down the poverty ladder.

Being in control of a situation means having the power to alter that situation if you want to. But not only do most people not have that power, they've not been shown how to use what little room to move that they do have - or even made aware that there is any room to move at all. Hardly anyone is being formally educated towards active, participating citizenship, despite our educational rhetoric. Obedience and submission are the real foundation stones on which our education system rests. Outside the formal education system attitudes of paternalism, authoritarianism and submissiveness are deeply embedded in our culture, so that to be a 'good citizen' is to be one of those pillars of bourgeois respectability who are so much part of the problem. (As David Reisman said in *The Lonely Crowd*, to be a good democrat these days is to be indistinguishable from your peers. A genuine citizenship would have to be a much more autonomous notion.)

Meanwhile, people with upward aspirations use the meek, accepting notion of citizenship as their model for acceptable behaviour, and there is scant evidence that many recognise the need for a responsible, concerned, participating sort of citizenship. The trouble here is that educating people for genuine participatory citizenship would require that they be educated about the realities of power in their society - a course that the presently powerful are unlikely to prosecute with much zeal.

Up until now I've focussed on the ways that certain social assumptions have become embalmed in an array of codes, regulations, and other restrictive forms of legislation. But as well, there are conventions and habits of mind which operate on a more covert level, and also affect the final form a house takes. These are also part of our world-taken-for-granted. For instance, we see it as fitting that there should be a bathroom separate from

the main living area; sleeping space is usually separate from the main living area, and there is usually a separate place for food preparation; we automatically assume that farm animals will not share the house with humans, that children usually don't sleep in the same room as adults, and that we use the toilet in private. We also have the idea that a house has to be a fully-furnished, fully-serviced entity right from the start - all cosmeticked up the way the advertisers and the mass media have brought us to expect.

But not one of these notions is universally held by all human cultures, many of whom have quite different ideas on such matters. We should remember that our ideas about housing are specific to one period in history (the period since the industrial revolution) and to one mode of social organisation (growth-oriented industrialism). They are man-made and therefore capable of being transcended (if we want to enough). Yet designers of dwellings incorporate these ideas into their plans as a matter of course - probably without giving any thought to the matter. (I'm not saying that it is wrong to do this - I'm just trying to show what any ideas for change are up against.) There are so many hidden social assumptions of this kind that it could be argued that they fundamentally influence the final design more than technical and aesthetic considerations do.

Like all professions, those to do with the planning and administration of housing in our society have enduring links with the status quo too. If they didn't have such links they wouldn't be professions in any socially legitimated sense. In order to be legitimate as a profession - that is, to be recognised and accepted by the socially powerful - their world view mustn't seriously threaten the world view of those same socially powerful. Viewed from this perspective, the ultimately conservative nature of conventional architecture, town planning and kindred professions becomes apparent. So we have yet another set of mutually reinforcing factors that reinforce the 'view from the top'.

The important thing to realise about this thrusting of the planners' and administrators' world view on everyone else is that the buildings which result from this process literally concretise social assumptions in a particularly durable form. They become part of the physical environment in which future social life has to take place, thus giving expression to highly abstract and often preconscious social concepts at the level of everyday reality. And because the fruits of professional labour are so omnipresent, the idea that the way things are is the only way that they *can be* gets further reinforced and even more deeply entrenched. More than just expressing deep-rooted social assumptions, buildings propagate and reinforce prevailing ruling class assumptions, embedding them in the shared world-taken-for-granted and making any attempts to suggest that they might be otherwise sound outlandish. As a result many innovative and progressive ideas bite the dust because they are seen as peccadilloes of the lunatic fringe, not warranting serious consideration.

But after all that macro view it's now time to get down to the micro. Despite the seemingly impenetrable web of sociological factors that combine to shape our society's housing, in any society with pretensions to freedom the question needs to be asked: "Why shouldn't responsible adults be free to build their own home the way they want it - provided that in doing so the rights of others are protected?" At the moment this is not the case, especially if what you want transgresses prevailing assumptions - because all the factors we've been looking at also shape the building ordinances and the attitudes of local council building inspectors. To pose this question is not to suggest by implication that it isn't necessary to regulate building construction to some degree (especially commercial building construction). But there is no reason that I can see why, given the will, regulations could not be devised that didn't discriminate so heavily against people who want control over the decisions that affect the house they are going to live in. The rules we have at the moment have become a subtle instrument of social control whereby the built environment is shaped in accordance with middle class ideas about how the world should be, to the exclusion of any other ideas about how things might be made better.

Bible Belting

Found myself up quite early one day last year, and idly turned on the telly to see what was on at that hour while I downed my cornflakes. I became mesmerised by an early morning godbotherer's programme on one of the commercial channels - one of those syndicated and sent worldwide from the bible belt broadcasting bunch in the US. I found it hard to believe just how awful it was. It was awful from so many angles. Two insincerely sincere fundamentalist guys in plaid jackets on a set that incorporated just about every cliche of indoors middle America. I found it depressing to think about the assumptions about the world that lay behind what they were saying. They'd go through a long, rambling, hesitant, but oh-so-folksy elaboration of a verse from the Bible, and the line of development didn't stand up at all well to serious and thoughtful scrutiny. I was about to write 'line of reasoning' there for moment, but reasoning is what's missing from just about all of it. Reason is most definitely subordinated to faith here.

I have seen old ladies and self-righteous gentlemen on docos whose whole framework of assumptions about what's important in life is very much threatened by, say, homosexuality, or sexually explicit material. They can't imagine how anyone could see anything but evil in such things. I know how they feel, 'cos that's how I feel when I see programmes such as this one. To me, the ideas that these guys peddle are bloody well evil. Oh yes, I know that it's a tired old complaint, and that to go on about the evils of religion is in the final analysis unfashionable, but every time I let myself dwell on just how perniciously regressive and unhelpful all this faith stuff is, I find it literally obscene. The ideas tend to deprave and corrupt the world view of those that entertain them. From my perspective, those two guys spouting such utter bullshit were far more obscene than sexually explicit material could ever be.

I can understand how people used to make sense of their world with religious ideas back when just about everyone used to think that way. But I'm stuffed if I can understand how people still choose dogmatic metaphysical explanations for things when we have perfectly satisfactory, tried and tested, rationally-based explanations these days. Back in even more superstitious times the power of consensus was strong indeed, and clear thinking was not encouraged by religious dogmatists. But these days things aren't so mentally straitjacketed, and dissent requires nothing like the courage that it did in former times. You no longer risk imprisonment or death if you question the faith. So I wonder why so many people still seem to prefer the ultimate unsatisfactoriness of interpretations of the world which by their very nature are untestable and unprovable. Why do people prefer them over quite coherent, demonstrably adequate explanations derived from more rigorous and reliable ways of thinking?

But beyond that, my despair is deepened by the realisation of how totally unhelpful the ideas are that they traffic in. The approach to life that they advocate is not likely to be much of a positive force for the future planet or its future inhabitants. If, as a species, we are going to solve the urgent problems that confront us on a global scale, we're not likely to get very far very fast with these two TV hucksters and their adherents guiding things. *Yet so many people watch the bloody programmes! And keep sending money!* Even the exposures of Swaggart and others as hypocrites and scam-mongerers doesn't seem to have made a dint in the ranks of the faithful. How can this be? Are they really *that* dumb?

Oh well, there have been hucksters and con-men and charlatans for as long as we can remember, I suppose. But the amount that are still around doesn't say much for the efficacy of what passes for education these days. (A recent survey showed that over a quarter of the students at ANU actually believe in astrology. These were tertiary students,

and the year was 1993. Fuck!)

Perhaps this is a relevant place to include two quotes that I've hung onto over the years. One is from Alan Watts, from *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are:* " *Religions harden into institutions that must command loyalty, be defined and kept 'pure', and - because all belief is fervent hope, and thus a cover-up for doubt and uncertainty - religions must make converts. The more people who agree with us, the less nagging insecurity about our position... Irrevocable commitment to any religion is not only intellectual suicide; it is positive unfaith because it closes the mind to any new vision of the world. Faith is, above all, openness - an act of trust in the unknown."*

The other quote is from Gore Vidal's *Messiah: "I must warn you that I am not a believer. And though I am sure that the revelations of other men must be a source of infinite satisfaction to them individually, I shouldn't for one second be so presumptuous as to make a choice among the thousands of recorded revelations of truth, accepting one at the expense of all others. I might so easily choose wrongly and get into eternal trouble. You must admit that the selection is wide, and dangerous to the amateur. I accept no man's authority in those realms where we are all equally ignorant."*

In my view, the human condition would be greatly improved if confrontations (of ideas) and a willingness to reject hypotheses were a regular part of our social, political, economic, religious and cultural lives.

- Carl Sagan.

If it is committed in the name of God or country, there is no crime so heinous that the public will not forgive it. -Tom Robbins

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More than anytime in history mankind faces a crossroads: one path leads to despair and utter hopelessness; the other to total extinction. Let us pray that we have the wisdom to choose correctly.

- Woody Allen.

Desiderata

Go placidly, possums, into the rat race. Hearken to others, even the mute -
For they too have a tale to tell.
Avoid ratbags, for they are legion
And, verily, a pain in the arse.
Get your act together, and keep interested
In your own work, for the world is full
Of cowboys, moonlighters, and rip-off merchants.
Be yourself.
Do not put on the dog or come the raw prawn
With your fellow man or woman.
Even in interpersonal relationships
What you miss out on the swings
You'll lose on the roundabouts.
And if you wear life lightly, like a brunch coat,
You have the whole day to look forward to.

Christmas

For the first time last Christmas I was really uncomfortable at the thought of the thousands of young trees cut down to ritually "celebrate" a religious festival brought to you by the same outfit that also brought you the Inquisition, the burning of witches and the oppression of women. In the week between Christmas and New Year I drove to Sydney down the expressway and saw hundreds of brown conifers jettisoned along the side of the road, presumably because they didn't sell and there was no further use for them. But they were only the more visible ones. The Christmas trees in all the houses that *were* sold all have to be jettisoned somewhere as well once the decorations come down.

It seems to me that if people took seriously the basic Christian message that Christmas is supposed to be about and really cared for everyone, then they'd stop unthinkingly doing this disservice to the planet. Imagine how many young trees must be lost worldwide each Christmas!

Wouldn't it be nice if instead of showing those syrupy seaside sunsets with unctuous subtitles to flog their product on television, the Churches ran ads that encouraged people to decorate elegant already-dead branches each Christmas as a small gesture of their concern for the planet. I think they could look just as nice. It ain't traditional, that's true, but traditions have to change along with everything else when they're no longer appropriate. After all, ritual sacrifices are out these days, even though they were traditionally observed for centuries once. Reckon Il Papa would buy the idea? Likely!

Schooldays

A couple of years ago I got an invitation to a Reunion of Old Fortians of 1953. Fifty bucks a throw for dinner, grog, and the chance to brag to old schoolmates about how well you've done in life.

But why would I want to go? After all, my schooldays were not exactly the happiest days of my life. The hierarchical male culture that held sway there only encouraged the sort of person that subsequently I've tried not to be. We were always addressed by the headmaster as "Gentlemen", and if you didn't choose a subject list that suited you for one of the conventional professions you were made to feel your caste position. I found the overweening self-confidence of the largely privileged pupil population irksome, even though I couldn't exactly identify it as that at the time. Elitist bunch of bastards.

Fort Street has always had a reputation as a good school, but I'm buggered if I can see why. They must have had some good teachers over the years, but the lot I had were pretty unremarkable. Some were downright outrageous, like the superannuated old science retread who used to teach according to principles that were hatched at Rugby last century. Overall, teaching methods were anything but innovative. Conservatism reigned supreme. Subjects like music and manual work were subtly stigmatised and were seen as the domain of dubbos.

Then there were the heroes that the school had produced that they were so proud of. Doc Evatt was one, but so was Garfield Barwick and...wait for it... John Kerr. We constantly had it dinned into us that we were somehow special because Fort Street was a selective school. I hated it then, and I still hate all that their primary values stand for.

Years later when I lived in the city as an adult my house was a few doors down the block from Crows Nest Boys' High School (as it was then). I used to pass by the playground at recess or lunchtime and wonder how I survived the brutalising macho culture of a boys' school. Here are a couple of accounts of it in action at Fort Street:

The first happened when I was in fourth year, and getting along as a pretty normal high school kid with my own group of friends. I was no school sports hero or anything, but you wouldn't have said I was unpopular or a loner. One lunchtime I made some remark or other to one of my friends who, out of the blue and for no apparent reason, recoiled in mock horror, yelling: "Aaargh! Bumley! Unclean!" He said it loud enough that other groups lunching on the front lawn heard him, and not knowing what had caused his outburst, nor caring, they took up the refrain. Suddenly I was surrounded by a yelling mob of schoolmates, all chanting: "Unclean! Unclean!" It was towards the end of fourth year, and everyone was a bit bored and jaded, and it was just one of those bad jokes that happen sometimes. I tried to take it in good part and didn't worry too much about it going home that day. But when I got to school the next day I found that some of the blokes couldn't let it drop, and they started up the jeering and mock avoidance again. Then things began to escalate as news of my baiting spread throughout the school. "Unclean" began to appear on blackboards in classrooms, It seemed like everyone was studiously avoiding me, and the more precocious kids from lower years would have the odd cheeky go at me. It became a game to find subtle or clever ways to rib me. One morning I walked in the school gate and two boys wordlessly walked in front of me waving a flag and ringing a bell. This sort of thing went of for some six weeks, and life became intolerable for me. I had been sent to Coventry for no real reason - just the bored whim of a bunch of kids. I was baited for entertainment - like a bull. What blew me out most was the way that even blokes that I would have called good mates ignored any feelings of loyalty or

sympathy for my position and joined the majority. And then one day it just began to tail off as quickly as it had started, and within a few more days things were back to normal. And never spoken about, as far as I can remember. It was an exercise in self-reliance that I wouldn't relish going through again.

The other happening also has to do with group conformity. In second year I joined the school cadets, mainly to prove to myself that I could hack something that deep-down I was scared of. We were at an end-of-year camp at Singleton when one morning before dawn the entire school cadet corps were rousted out of their stretchers and ordered to get into full dress uniform. We all wondered what the hell was going on. We were assembled on parade and marched to a nearby playing field where the whole school contingent was lined up in two long lines that stretched the length of the field. In the grey light of early dawn we were told that several of our number had been caught doing something terrible the night before, had been court-martialled, found guilty, and that they had to be punished. We weren't told the nature of their offence. The offenders (all NCOs) were brought forward and their stripes ritualistically torn from their sleeves. The twin lines of their schoolmates were ordered to remove their webbing belts with the brass buckles and flay each of them as they passed down between the lines. I can't honestly say that I understood this then in the way that I see it now, but it didn't seem right to me that, appropriateness of the punishment aside, we didn't even know what it was we were punishing. As they passed me I couldn't bring myself to lay into them as ordered, even though I didn't particularly like two of them, so I waved my belt in their general direction without actually making contact. But most of my schoolmates seemed only too happy to belt the bejesus out of them, and that worried me then as it still does now - the infectious irrationality of mob behaviour has always scared me ever since. Subsequent scuttlebutt had it that their crime was to waylay one of the more unpopular NCOs in the sergeants' tent, hold him down, de-bag him, and 'give him a flip'. (I wondered later if the fact that the unpopular NCO was the son of one of the teachers had in any way influenced the severity of the punishment meted out.) Of course the court-martial and punishment was overseen by grown men who were members of the regular army, including our school sportsmaster who was our CO. That was Fort Street's idea of how to prepare young gentlemen for their future life.

So much for schooldays, Fort Street, and Fortians. Not that I blame it all on the school . Kids, especially boys, are like that everywhere (and worse). Which I find pretty freaky.

Reason is a tool. Try to remember where you left it. - John Clarke

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"What a rich book might be made about buds, including, perhaps, sprouts."

- Henri DavidThoreau

Chivalry is the most delicate form of contempt.

THE SECRET OF LIFE: You can blunt a saw but you can't blunt a hammer.

Drugs

Some time ago SBS ran a series of programs by David Suzuki about drugs and how various societies handle them. It was an overwhelming compilation of statistics and arguments that show that how the US (and Oz, of course) approach drugs and their abuse is only making things worse. It's hugely wasteful, inhuman, discriminatory, and brings about more social disaster than just about any other tack we could take. The contrast with The Netherlands, where they treat drug abuse as a health problem and not a crime problem, was stark. I've long been of the opinion put forward in the program, but virtually every time I've discussed this with others they are horrified at the suggestion that hard drugs should be decriminalised. I find it most depressing. A distressing number of well-educated, thoughtful people can't seem to get past the prohibition mentality, despite the mounting evidence of the futility of repressive measures. It's a classic case of people not being able to question the conventional wisdom - not able to see that all the damage we are doing springs from a few basic, but wrong, assumptions. Talk about the mind-forged manacles!

For me, one of the most important things I've learnt about life is the importance of trying to ferret out our assumptions about things, and then holding them up for inspection and questioning. I have to say that for me, doing this is always intellectually exhilarating, and I see it as one of the keys to undoing the mind-forged manacles. Yet it is a highly unpopular stance to take socially. Nobody likes their cherished assumptions questioned - (think of the male geront —ocracy that runs the churches for example, though other examples abound.

It's a puzzle why there should be such resistance to the process, because many problems and contradictions become explicable when freed from certain wrong assumptions. A memorable example of this process in my own life was when I renounced the religious assumptions I was brought up with. I was twenty five. The assumption that there was a God like the churches claim had been so deeply embedded that it was truly an article of faith, and it took a long time before I was able to let myself seriously consider whether it all mightn't make more sense without this God. For me it was like a conversion in reverse. So many questions and problems and contradictions fell away once I made the effort to see how it all looked if I questioned that one basic assumption.

Another piece of assumption-questioning that has had a huge impact on my life was when I dared to consider trying to live without a 'normal' job. After all, a tenured lectureship was not a job to be thrown away lightly, and the idea that you must have paid employment to legitimate your membership in this society is as pervasive as the oxygen in the air we breathe. But looking back, challenging that assumption didn't come all that easily for me, even though I'd had a fair bit of practice at assumption-unearthing because of my job as a sociologist. Maybe it's harder to do than I realise - after all, there are bound to be heaps more assumptions that I've yet to ferret out.

But somehow in The Netherlands enough people are good enough at it to have got the government to do the same, so that now the country is famous for radical policies not only on drugs but on a wide range of social issues. I wonder how they can do it and we don't seem to be able to?

Being rich is having lots of money; being wealthy is having lots of time.

Sex

Mum and Dad considered themselves to be 'progressive' in matters of sex, and compared to most parents then I suppose they probably were. They didn't hide their nudity - though they didn't flaunt it. There was little in the way of bathroom privacy as I grew up. When Mum sprung me and the two brothers down the road exploring our boyish erections there was no big scene. I don't remember the details of how she and Dad handled the episode, but I was left with the notion that what we'd been up to wasn't a real good idea, but that it wasn't as bad as a lot of people at the time seemed to think it was. And later, when I began asking questions that weren't easy to evade, about tampons and the like, Dad sat me down and gave me the classic 'birds and bees' talk. (Mind you, I still can't work out how the hell birds do it!). I was twelve at the time, and I can remember feeling it to be a considerable responsibility to be privy to this knowledge that most of my schoolmates wouldn't formally be given for a couple more years - if at all. I don't remember any details of Dad's talk, but I can very clearly call how much I felt complimented by the fact that he considered me grown up enough to be trusted with this important information. I suppose it was as close as we come in our culture to being initiated into the arcane knowledge of the adult world.

My parents' conviction that it's best to tell kids the truth rather than misleading half-truths is of course to be applauded. As far as I can gather Dad told me the basic mechanics of the whole productive process, but not surprisingly for those times, he didn't touch on any of the personal and emotional aspects of sex. It was pretty nuts and bolts stuff. And in the remarks that follow, any criticism is aimed at our mainstream social attitudes and not specifically at my parents. After all, they encouraged an openness about the topic that had to be healthier than the general approach in those days. I suppose, for their times, they were fairly enlightened in their outlook on such matters. But having said that, over the years I have nonetheless become aware of just how circumscribed their personal experience of sex was. The stultifying and almost superstitious ethos behind *their* socialisation was staggeringly benighted by today's standards.

Despite their openness in general, they were still not really comfortable talking about sex in any detail - any frankness about sex was usually manifested in being accepting of bawdy jokes. Dad certainly never broached the topic with me in any serious context, even after I was married. I can remember Mum, though, telling me of an occasion from her youth when a fellow walked her to the tram stop after a dance, and that when he went to kiss her he tried to put his tongue in her mouth. This to her wasn't a nice thing to do, and as far as I know she still feels that way.

On several occasions over the years Mum has remarked that hers and Dad's sex life was always satisfactory - that she certainly had no complaints about it. From today's perspective it certainly smacks of ignorance being bliss. They kissed with their mouths closed - always. Further, it was intromission... and that was it. They were engaged for six years during The Depression while they waited to save enough money to get married. I asked her once if they really managed to wait that long without actually 'doing it'. "Yes," she replied, "your father was always understanding and patient and never forced himself on me." I ventured that they must have done just about everything else but, having to wait such a long while when they were both so young, horny, and in love. Mum looked a bit mystified for a moment, then she exclaimed (I can still hear her): "Oh, you mean The Manuals. Your father would never be in anything like that!" This tied in later with a story Dad told me about losing a bike race. He thought he'd lost because his performance was impaired because he had a wet dream the night before the race. I relate these things not to ridicule their beliefs - merely to establish the extent of sexual ignorance, naivete and superstition that existed then, even for people who were not particularly conservative about sex in general.

I have a vivid memory of Dad's funeral. The family was standing around outside the chapel, and the officiating cleric had finished yet another meaningless religious gig where he said socially-acceptable words to acceptably dispatch the atheist departed. (Dad didn't want any of it, and would have hated it, but it was important to Mum to do it all 'the proper way'. What Dad really wanted was no service of any kind - "Just get rid of me with minimum fuss and cost".) Anyway, it was at this stage in the proceedings that the tears began to flow for me. And what made them start then was the thought of how Dad had spent his life trying his best to be a good and decent citizen, and how the prevailing values, assumptions and attitudes of his time had meant that spending his life that way had resulted in little more than a tragically unnecessary lowering of the expectations he had for his life and himself. The mind-forged manacles of a working class existence. But the ideology of his times and culture had not only kept him in his place and stopped him getting ideas above his station - it had also denied him the full enjoyment of his sexuality. A good wank was one of the few of life's luxuries that was available (free) to someone in his position, and he even got cheated out of that.

And the same applied to Mum too, of course. But the idea of a woman masturbating was simply not on. My parents were still very much bound by the tendrils trailing forward through history from Victorian times. And the cold, joy-denying hand of the church reached into the lives of everyone, believers or not, and tied the tendrils tight. Just how tight was brought home to me not all that long ago when Mum mentioned to me that throughout their married life she had never let Dad see her 'down there', as she is still wont to put it. He'd seen her bush in the bathroom, of course, but the actual hidden mystery between her legs was forever to stay just that. I was almost horrified when Mum said this, but she is so innocent in these matters, finally. She had no idea what an unnecessary denial this would have been to Dad. To her it was part of 'being nice', (and to him, too, probably). She thinks that is an ugly part of her, and screened it from Dad out of shame. She had no idea that it could be something of great arousal - of almost spiritual transcendence when viewed in the right way and in the right circumstances. But when you have absolutely no idea what you've been missing, then I guess ignorance can be bliss. To me, what I knew about their 'satisfactory' sex life made it sound like they were happily living on a diet of Sergeants pies, in blissful ignorance of the existence of lobster thermidor.

There's not quite as much ignorance around these days as there was then. One of the side benefits of the advent of AIDS/HIV (if there can in fact be *any* benefits) is that, perforce, the society has had to learn to be more open about sex in all of its manifestations in its education campaigns in the interests of public health. When AIDS first hit there were people who were affronted by the public depiction of a condom. Now those same people know about things that people do sexually that I'll bet they had no inkling of previously. Nowadays the sex education books are much more explicit and honest - mainly because they have to be to deal adequately with the issues raised by AIDS. There is much more information around these days than there was in our parents' time. Phoney propriety plays a considerably reduced role, and in the literature things are more gritty, more real.

But I wonder just how far this has changed us? Are we all that different to our parents? The circles I move in wouldn't be called uninformed, and they wouldn't be called prudish. But they still seem to be a long way behind the literature as far as coming to terms truly honestly with their sexuality. There seems to be an unspoken but widely shared social assumption that sex is still not quite publicly acceptable, and that too much attention to it is still somehow unsavoury. The tendrils are still with us, even if not quite as tightly as with Mum and Dad. Take masturbation as an example: the serious books on sex these days see masturbation as a healthy, normal sexual outlet, and encourage people not only to do it to themselves when they feel like it, but also to add it to their repertoire of safe sex practices with others. And if a spot of 'non-violent sexually explicit material' is a

turn-on, then that's OK too. It's all part of a healthy approach to sex - even endorsed by sexologists who write under Christian auspices.

Now if this is the latest consensus among serious scholars of sex, and if I find it congenially resonant with my own ideas on such matters, how come I would be embarrassed to be sprung coming out of a sex shop? (Depending on who springs you of course, this might be of only marginal embarrassment, but by and large it's easier to keep that sort of thing anonymous). If wanking is all that normal, good-for-you and gung-ho, why aren't we all swapping notes on techniques and turn-ons? Why did I think for so long before deciding to include this piece here? I think it's because the mind-forged manacles are still in place. Even though they might be a bit looser, they're still there. In matters of sex it's always safest to be conservative in what you admit to. The ghost of puritanism still walks. People relish gossip about people's sexuality. Prurience is far from dead. Sex is still salacious.

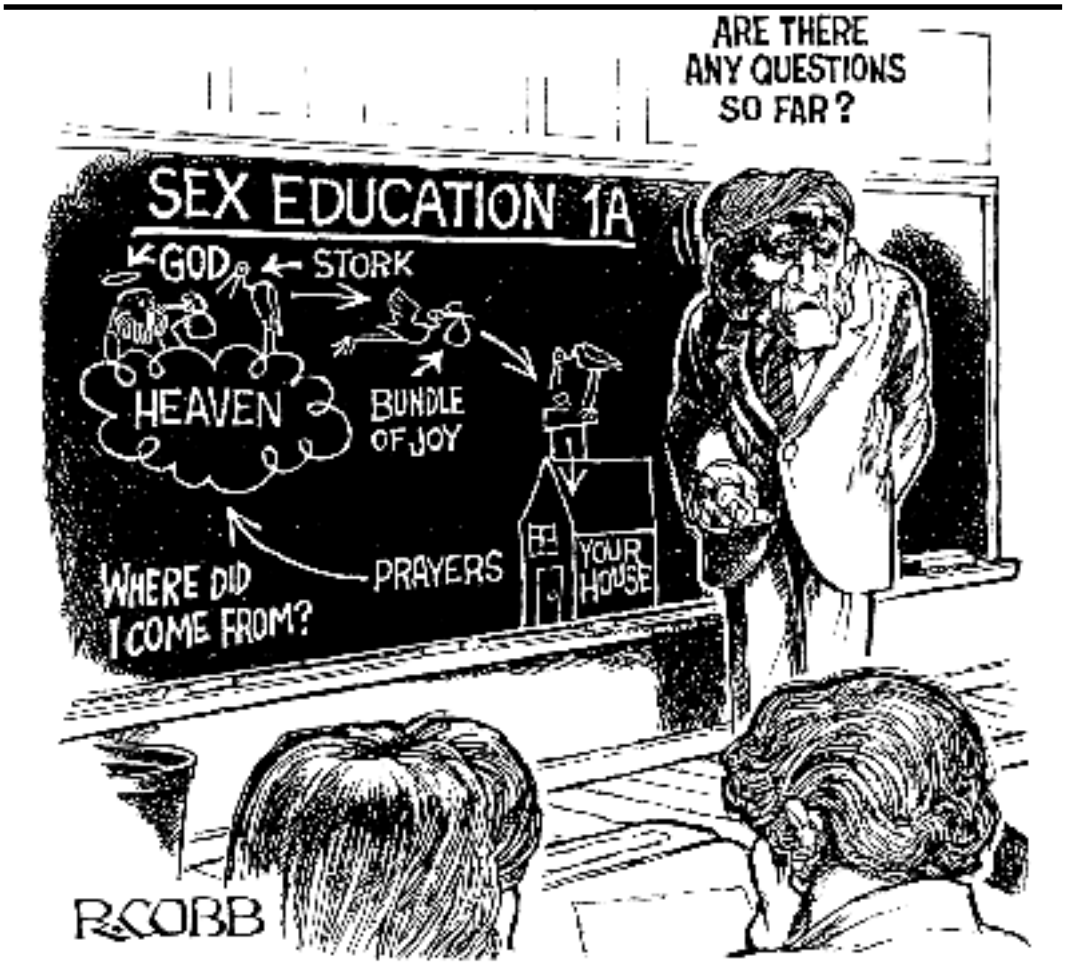
There's still a sort of double standard. On the one hand you have the boundaries of acceptable sexuality being thrown ever wider with admirable and heartening honesty and directness in the serious literature, while on the other hand you have a sort of hypocritical social ethos that says something along the lines of: Oh sure. Of course I'm broad minded about sex. You can't shock me. But I'm pretty straight and conventional myself and certainly not sexually suspect in any way.

Look at it another way: If there are all these bisexual masturbating cross-dressing swingers with a penchant for neoprene knickers out there, then how come I've never met one? If anyone publicly admitted to being less than straightforward in their horizontally athletic activities then everyone would immediately know about it. People don't want such things generally known about them. They keep it a secret. Besides, it's nobody else's business anyway.

I can see a certain amount of strength in this 'nobody's business' approach, but I'm a bit uncomfortable with the secrecy aspect. It's not kept a secret *only* because it's nobody else's business, but also (and more pertinently) it's kept a secret because it would be socially belittling at the very least, and devastating at worst were salacious stuff to become general knowledge. Which says clearly to me that we still have a long way to go before we can consider ourselves a sexually healthy society. Talking with people about this I find that many people seem to want to think that we are really very enlightened and have things pretty much together these days as far as sex goes. My position is to challenge this assumption. It's not all that long ago that it was considered socially inappropriate to divulge how you voted, yet few people today worry about this - even if, strictly it is nobody's business but yours how you vote. We're not at this stage with sex, yet.

Gay people came out. They've done it hard, broken the ground. Looks like they've got more courage than most of the masturbators, cross-dressers, rubber fetishists and what have you. Want to see a man look uncomfortable? Engage him in serious and earnest discussion about his sexuality. If you do this in public you will be sure of his discomfiture. Even in private you'll be unlikely to get an interested and engaged response - more likely you'll find your motives will be under suspicion. If you try talking that way with a women she'll be suspicious that you have hidden motives, too.

Sexually sorted out? Who? Us? All I can say is that it's bloody lucky I'm not a bisexual masturbating cross-dressing swinger with a penchant for neoprene knickers. (Actually, I'm more into Wellington boots and tu-tus myself.)



"The sexual attitudes of any given society are the result of political decisions... In societies where it is necessary to force great masses of people to do work that they don't want to, marriage at an early age is encouraged on the sensible ground that if a married man is fired, his wife and children are going to suffer too. That grim knowledge makes for docility.

"Although our notions of what constitutes correct sexual behaviour is usually based on religious texts, those texts are invariably interpreted by the rulers in order to keep control over the ruled. Any sexual or intellectual or recreational or political activity that might reduce the amount of coal mined, the number of pyramids built, the amount of junk food confected will be proscribed through laws, that, in turn, are based on divine revelations handed down by whatever god or gods happen to be in fashion at the moment.. Religions are manipulated in order to serve those who govern society and not the other way around."

- Gore Vidal: *Pink Triangle and Yellow Star.*

If one has been watching television because there seems to be nothing better to do, one's consciousness becomes steadily flatter, like a bottle of soda water left open. Take up a volume of philosophy at this point and the mind shrinks from the effort. Note, on the other hand, the champagne-like quality of consciousness when one is excited by ideas, or moved by music; it seems to fizz and bubble with *potentiality...* The problem is that it is difficult to inaugurate these changes oneself.

- Colin Wilson: *Beyond the Outsider.*

The world is a seamless cloth. Take shelter in it but do not expect it to fit. - John Clarke.

Desire for knowledge strongly tends to foster infidelity. - Rev W.B. Clarke, 1841.

It's often difficult to tell with money whether *you've* got *it*, or *it's* got *you*.

- Bruce Petty.

No war is ever fought for the people. - Mary Gilmore.

How best to use your time? To enjoy yourself while doing something you think is worthwhile.

What are riches to the man who has just been stung by a bull-ant?

- Lennie Lower.

Most of us do not set out deliberately to paint a grand portrait of ourselves. Rather, we stumble like drunkards over the canvas of our self-conception, throwing a little paint here, erasing some lines there, never really stopping to obtain a view of the likeness we have produced.

In the rare instances where a person really does attempt to incorporate a new alternation into his life in some overall meaningful and coherent fashion, it is usually part of a total conversion of some sort, like to a new religion or a new philosophy of life.

- Peter Berger.

When I learned politeness at my mother's knee... I learned not to offend anyone by discussing excretion, reproduction, religion, or a person's source of wealth. We are free to discuss all these things now. Our minds aren't crippled any more by good taste. And I can see now all the other more sinister taboos which mingled with sex and excretion, such as religious hypocrisy and ill-gotten wealth. If we are to discuss truthfully what America is and what it can become, our discussion must be in absolutely rotten taste, or we won't be discussing it at all... Any sadness I feel now grows out of frustration, because I think there is so much we can do - things that are cheap - that we are not doing. It has to do with ideas.

- Kurt Vonnegut: *Wampeters, Foma and Granfalloons.*

ARE WE REALLY GOING TO LET A BUNCH OF GREEDY FOOLS RUIN THE PLANET?
