Good psychological health and the need for sustainable spirituality

By Shane W. Varcoe 2008

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago prominent psychologist and educator Dr. Michael Carr-Gregg, became one of the initial members of an emerging choir of secular voices, all beginning to sing what another other long standing societal institution, had been singing (almost solo) for decades (if not centuries) and that is that our culture is suffering from an ever increasing existential starvation. In fact it was Dr. Carr-Gregg who said….

> *Many young people are 'spiritual anorexics' who lack a spiritual context for their lives…For many young people there is nothing to convince them to subordinate their own personal interest to believe in and live for."*

This unambiguous and seemingly enlightened statement has become standard lyrics for this choir. Other Australian commentators from Etymologist Richard Ekersley to Sociologist Andrew Fuller have been part of this new opera and are ostensibly saying the same thing…There must be something more!(or at the very least, we need something more). But why this question; hadn't these burgeoning and very new social sciences created a new 'space' in which humanity can now evaluate, assess and diagnose maladies of the psyche (soul) without the need for a 'spiritual' concepts or frameworks?

The modernist need to jettison divine determinism, particularly in the metaphysical arena, sought a new platform on which to construct a worldview. Existentialism was probably the most prominent product of that reaction. Although aspects of modern existentialism had their origins in the 19th Century through remarkable thinkers like Danish philosopher Kierkegaard , this earlier form had not abandoned the transcendent or the divine. However, this aggressively modernist 20th century pursuit of a new framework by which western humanity could define itself required a position that was anthropocentric – man and man alone, must be the architect of his personal universe. Gabriel Marcel was believed to be the first philosopher to use the term Existentialism in the mid-20th Century, but this new space was popularised and arguably legitimised by Jean Paul Satre.

What did all this mean? This new secular platform meant, in essence, the driving of the individual and the individual alone to be responsible for the creation and maintenance of their 'existence' including ultimately the creating of a worldview and the sustaining of it and all that that entails – an incredible and until that century, a not yet experienced **cultural pressure.** Richard Eckersley reflected as much in his paper, 'Being young – getting better or never worse',

> *Particularly important is the way that social changes, including the processes of fragmentation and individualisation, have increased uncertainty in young people's lives. This uncertainty underscores a need to make sense of it all, and "make a life for one's self." (2008)[1]*

The new social sciences of sociology and psychology were then to be part of the management and/or repair of any failings within this new individualistic and very humanistic existential space. Yet as time progressed and the modernist materialist framework failed to deliver all it promised,

answers to growing psychological, social and cultural maladies were not being found – no more inadequate were these tools than in the realm of existential crisis or despair. According to current psychological methodology there is no therapeutic vehicle or tool to coerce a person out of existential despair and rarely if ever addressed from a medical paradigm. These existential 'crises', 'vacuums' or 'collapses' often end in suicide when the newer social sciences are inadequate or unable to address the deeper issues of life – the 'first order' questions and meaning itself. The following declaration from Sigmund Freud may give insight into why much of psychology struggles with these bigger issues… "The moment a man questions the meaning and value of life, he is sick, since objectively neither has any existence."[2] One of the 'fathers' of modern psychiatry essentially 'closes the door' on metaphysical ponderings and appears to not only dismiss them but attribute to them the source of some mental 'sickness.' Yet the morphing and emerging social science of psychology continues to discover evidences (that to Theologians have been clear for millennia) that psycho-social ailments that lead to the ending of existence – suicide, are better dealt with in the metaphysical space.

> *Religiously un-affiliated subjects had significantly more lifetime suicide attempts and more first-degree relatives who committed suicide than subjects who endorsed a religious affiliation. Unaffiliated subjects were younger, less often married, less often had children, and had less contact with family members… Furthermore, subjects with no religious affiliation perceived fewer reasons for living, particularly fewer moral objections to suicide. In terms of clinical characteristics, religiously unaffiliated subjects had more lifetime impulsivity, aggression, and past substance use disorders. No differences in the level of subjective and objective depression, hopelessness, or stressful life events were found."[3]*

It is to the metaphysical and philosophical arenas that we need to turn to try and address these growing existentialist problems and it is to spirituality that we must turn to find, perhaps not the merely management, but best management protocols for this growing psycho-social malaise, much to the chagrin of many secular and anti-theistic practitioners.

A landmark study undertaken by the Commission on Children at Risk in the United States of America would, arguably, complete the aforementioned emerging choir. 'Hard Wired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities' was compiled by a group of no less than 33 distinguished children's doctors, mental health researchers and scientists from such prominent institutions as Harvard, Yale and Harvard Medical school. The findings of this work will make even the ardent skeptic recalibrate. Among the 80 pages with dozens of poignant observations on values, morality and spirituality the following are worth noting….

> *Human beings are biologically primed to seek moral and spiritual meaning, and nurturing relationships are a central foundation for positive moral and spiritual development. The presence or absence of a nurturing environment may deeply affect a child's ability to develop a moral and spiritual perspective conducive to health, fulfillment, and a productive life...Nurturing relationships and a spiritual connection to the transcendent significantly improve physical and emotional health. (2003, 7)[4]*

These findings are by no means 'stand alone'. The recently released book The Child's Theory of the World, Dr Olivera Petrovich posits some point blank empirical findings about the 'hardwiring' of 'god concepts' into children's psyche. Reporting in the AGE newspaper commentator Barney Zwartz précised some of the key findings of Dr. Petrovich's presentation…

> *Infants are hard-wired to believe in God, and atheism has to be learned, according to an Oxford University psychologist…Dr Olivera Petrovich told the conference, based on her empirical research, that even pre-school children constructed theological concepts as part of their everyday understanding of the physical world…*
> **Dr. Petrovich says her mainstream hypothesis on this is that it's an aspect of human development of causal understanding. Children actively seek causal understanding. We can't biologically survive without knowing how cause works in the environment. The concept of God naturally emerges as an aspect of human causal reasoning…***Atheism is definitely an acquired position. It has to be caught or taught, and that can happen as early as five. She has seen it in children who have reasoned evidence for and against.[5] [emphasis added]*

Petrovich's observations are also borne out by recent rethought Anthropological data about the cultural notion of 'coherence' – the need for culture to have a systematic and logical integration of diverse values, relationships and ideas - Children innately and, it would appear, intuitively, land on the 'god' concept as completing that explanation. What is tragic is that this innate sense of the 'god hypothesis' in all children has been viewed almost exclusively as ignorance of the underdeveloped reasoning processes of the human mind.

WHAT HAS CHANGED AND WHY WOULD IT?

But how did we, as a modern society, arrive at that assumption after millennia of thinking otherwise?

Besides the emergence of Existentialism, there are a number of assumptions that were derived from believed 'legitimate sources', which endeavour was to set our thinking in a certain direction. This becomes a lot simpler once this thinking has been set adrift by the modernist presumption that a 'god entity' did not exist. One such source was Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget. His, what has often been considered 'seminal work,' was embraced and regurgitated as mainstream for decades. However, over the years Piaget's observations about cognition in children were shown to be mistaken. In fact many of his inferences were just false, and to quote Fernandez-Armesto 'baneful'. You see Piaget classified children as rationally inferior asserting, in essence, that children like 'early man' were caught in what he called 'pre-operational thought,' which is a detuned way of saying - less than logical.

However, is preoperational thought necessarily illogical? From a 'naturalist' presumption, this maybe so, as the naturalist denies or at the very least, diminishes the supra-cultural and in so doing negates any path to 'trust' or even investigation into that realm. Once we have moved into the purely 'naturalist/ materialist space' then our reliance becomes solely on what we can perceive and

control in our mechanistic viewed physical context. Only when all chance of control and meanings is limited or lost, do we then try look beyond that arena into the Meta-physical arena.

> *Piaget's standard of judgment was based on the way he claimed to think himself [he became his own 'control' for his observations.] If children perceived things differently, he classed them as rationally inferior; it was a discovery he claimed first to have made, to his own professed astonishment, in 1920, when he was helping to process the results of early experiments in intelligence-testing. The children's errors seemed to him to betray thought that was peculiar and structurally different from his own. Yet everyone who has listened at times to the wisdom of innocence and hear dazzling ingenuity in the mouths of babes and suckling's…Most of what Piaget took to be universal stages of mental development are merely the results of cultural conditioning.[6] (Armesto 1997, 18-19) [Author's addition]*

What is fascinating is that much of our psycho-social theorising has arisen from largely un-challenged assumptions by early architects of, from a historical perspective, relatively new fields of Sociology and Psychology. In the absence of any benchmark and the broad disregard for long standing Theological frameworks, then any new idea that sounded good and ignored a 'god hypothesis' was feverously and often exclusively embraced. (Talk about bias becoming prejudice).

To add to this growing (if not misinformation then) limited information, was that early Anthropologists supposed the notion of 'coherence' arose late in societal development and human history. This belief was arrived at, **not** because of scientific data, but more a presumption that led them to suppose certain things as givens. For example early anthropology brought heavily into Darwinian Theory of Evolution and that significantly influenced how data and evidence were viewed, engaged and interpreted. The base assumption was that we, humanity, came from ostensibly nothing and 'picked up things as we went along'. So it was assumed that humanity, once it was 'upright', went from the confusion and disorder (as it was believed such societies started off with chaos and incoherence) and then progressed through animism to many gods to monotheism and then other systems of coherence later. Yet, this was not so.

Philosopher Felipe Fernandez-Armesto whilst researching and investigating for his significant treatise Truth discovered that coherence was innate in the very earliest man who had defined and discernable constructs for making sense of the world he was confronted with.

> *Coherence, it was assumed, is constructed late in human history…It seems that the opposite was true. Coherence-seeking is one of those innate characteristics that make human thought human. No people group known to modern anthropology is without it. 'One of the deepest human desires', Isaiah Berlin has said, 'is to find a unitary pattern in which the whole of experience is symmetrically ordered.[7] (Armesto 1997, 31)*

The evidence of coherence in the earliest human cultures seems geared to either the discovery of a 'God' entity or the innate perception of such a notion spontaneously appearing in disparate and

unconnected people groups; either way the Darwinian Theory process assumptions were again shattered. These facts were validated in a number of studies, none less than in the profound and arguably, seminal work by brilliant Oxford trained Anthropologist Andrew Lang, who was initially discounted and/or deliberately negated by lesser Anthropologists, but later was found to be remarkable and erudite. In writing this work, The Making of Religion, Lang challenged many earlier assumptions and he was later proved right. Rodney Stark writes…

> *In his earlier 'Myth, Ritual, and Religion', Lang had supported Tylor's claims that primitive religion consisted of animism and expressed his commitment to a simple, unilinear model of cultural evolution. But in 'The Making of Religion', Lang broke with Tylor and overturned all previous studies of primitive religions, which were unanimous in claiming that groups in the earliest stages of cultural development had no Gods and that belief "in a moral Supreme Being is a very late result of evolution". Having carefully sifted through the most recent and reliable ethnographic accounts of religion in surviving primitive societies, Lang discovered that many of the most primitive groups, scattered in all parts of the world, believe in the existence of High Gods: "moral, all-seeing directors of things and of men…eternal beings who made the world and watch over morality."[8] (Stark, 2007 pp 55-56)*

Sociologist Dr. Eric Kaufmann of University of London, in his latest work 'Shall the religious inherit the earth?' brings back to the table the fact that globally, religious practice is growing and not shrinking, and he concedes that it is not just because of birth rates in such communities either. According to Kaufmann, currently over 80% of the world's population have a declared affiliation with religious culture and posits, that by 2020 it will be closer to 90%. Of course one of the frightening nuances that emerge from this phenomena, is that the shrinking population of first world atheistic or anti-theistic communities believe that their philosophical perspective is not only right, but superior. Now whilst some religious frameworks clearly lack logical consistency and can be shown to be patently wrong, the point is that there are religio-spiritual positions that are not only robust, but completely sustainable. Regardless of the accuracies or inaccuracies of some perspectives, it still remains from all that we have read, that this yearning for coherence and clarity as an innate human driver is not a new or unfulfilled evolutionary space, rather it appears from the clear evidence to be a disconnect from the existing supra-cultural reality.

So, the latest and best data being posited has us understanding that we, as human beings, have innate drivers - including the need for causal understanding and coherence construction - that have been with us for the outset of our human existence and that 'God' Concepts have been with us from the start.

WHAT OF GENERATION NEXT?

So what of 21st Century man? What does that mean when engaging Generation Y and Gen Next in their post and post- post-modern conundrum? The fashionable generational theory aside, one thing is not only clear but **necessary, and that is we are seeing an entire generation struggle amidst the disappearing frameworks for meaning and values.** In the first world 'West' we have

seen the values and institutions that the Baby Boomer inherited from a Judeo-Christian based system, taken for granted. This passive worldview was in no real way deliberately or intentionally transferred and consequently it was poorly disseminated to Generation X, who in the growing individualistic and materialist space, experimented with it - customised and for the most part culled aspects of it - until any discernable cultural order and/or existential anchors in Australia were lost. In their place, and largely due to the above, we have seen the emergence of a radical individualism obsessed with finding its 'own' way and 'feeling good' about whatever choices it has made. In fact to a large extent this has become the new 'sacred space' – the 'what I think and how I feel regime' must be protected at all costs, particularly from the cultural terrorists of reason, truth and other epistemological honesty.

So protected they have been for the last 20 or so years, but a malady, largely undetected at first, has emerged and this ailment is beginning to cripple us not only socially, but relationally and now *personally*…It is only here, in this egocentric space that we become willing to take any real notice.

In his work *Liquid Modernity*, Sociologist, Zygmount Bauman articulated aspects of this malady and the price the current generation is, and will pay,

> " *…'individualisation' is a fate, not a choice. It consists in transforming human identity from a given into a task, and making the individual responsible for the task and for the consequences. The double-edged consequences, for personal and social life, of this fundamental change in the relation of individual and society are spelled out in chilling detail: the individual's new 'freedom' to define their own identity comes at a high cost."*

The issue here, is that for the first time (in arguably, recorded history) the task of creating, dispensing and sustaining a World-view and all that that entails – not only description, but prescription, meaning, values, regulatory protocols etcetera) have been taken from the collective cultural/community responsibility and laid onto the shoulders of the grossly underequipped individual. This weight is unequivocally crushing. Consequently the individual only takes on small portions or aspects of this mammoth task and is not only personally the poorer for it, but this 'customised voice' only adds to the eclectic chaos and 'dis-ease' of this new and emerging cultural landscape.

This social 'dis-ease' has, I think for the most part, caught many unawares, because in this new era free of so called 'restrictive dogmas and oppressive religious moralism' which was supposed to help us embark on a 'new age' of enlightenment and empowerment and, of course, all geared to my perspective and driven by my agenda, have created a new existential crisis, not before experienced in the post-Christian West. This cultural and social syndrome is defined by its major components of meaninglessness and the subsequent confusion and hopelessness it spawns, and evidenced by the multitude of symptoms (everything from depression to the multiplicity of social dysfunctions) all only adding to the prevailing nightmare-dogma that is known as 'relativism'.

SO WHY WAS IT THAT WE WERE LARGELY CAUGHT UNAWARES?

The above aside, it is my observation that our preoccupation with the (it would now appear) overestimation of certain aspects of science and technology as being the new source and panacea has meant we 'dropped the ball' of the metaphysical. Science and technology would solve our problems, advance our economies, remedy our ills and keep us in a synthetic utopia, where all our needs are met… or so we were led to believe! After all we are using reason in our fight against 'faith'. However, for those who care to give more than a cursory glance, it is not a battle between faith and reason, rather a battle between faith and sight. The opposite of reason is not faith, it is unreason. The opposite of faith is not reason, rather it is unbelief. Reason, science and faith are part of both Theological as well as Forensic Sciences, and those who say otherwise are not only hiding something, they are blatantly dishonest.

Certainly these advances occupied and engaged us and yes, quite marvelously, have made our lives easier and even longer. They too have gone to reasonable lengths of giving us options for many of the 'Second' and 'Third Order' questions such as Who am I? Where am I going? Who is going with me? How easy and comfortable will it be and how quickly can I get there? Yet is has largely left unaddressed the First Order Questions. Why am I here? What is the meaning a purpose of my existence? What happens when you die? Is there a God, and what of the problem of evil? Indeed, if any attempt to address these issues has been made, it has been (at least from my observation) a dismissing, or attempted gagging of the questions, an attempt to render those questions meaningless, or, if one must go there, an 'existential dietary' substitute of prosperity, physical comfort and ease to assuage the gnawing hunger pangs of the unsatisfied psyche.

In this place of the inability to provide meaningful answers to these First Order questions via the 'modern/post-modern' framework, we have turned to *means and mechanisms* by which we can try and find answers or meet the need in this dimension, via processes that don't require us to look beyond to the who and why we are, but simply within what, where and how we are. For one who has ulterior motives or is trying to ignore, duck or weave, this is all perfectly understandable!

However, this is not just going to go away. There has been an awakening to the sense that there is something more and the closer one gets to that other 'something' one may find they're not actually constructing an unshakable and truly satisfying domicile for their soul in the current egocentric framework, but rather, they are actually living in a, by comparison to what could be, metaphorical 'pig sty'. Of course, to the individual who is choosing to live on the surface, this probe - this revelation is most unpleasant indeed. Consequently the 'what' or the 'who' that brought it (wittingly or not) will be viewed at best as distasteful and at worst a social dis-ease in its own right that needs to be removed. So an individual confronted with such revelations engages all means at their disposal, to pursue the agenda and comfort that they think will upgrade their domicile and in the end simply find all they can really do is decorate their 'pig sty'.

The remarkable author and social commentator C.S.Lewis actually discovered this unpleasantness during his years as an atheist.

Lewis learned by trial and error…that the experience triggering the desire was not the satisfaction of it. The longing seemed to be for something he was meant to have but had not yet experienced. He did not yet identify the desire as hunger pangs originating in what Blaise Pascal called the 'God shaped vacuum' that exists in every human heart.

Although everyone feels this undefined longing, few recognise it for what it is. **We can sense it in any beautiful thing – nature, art, literature, movies, music, or relationships. It is natural to think that the object triggering the desire should also fulfill it. But when we grasp for that thing to satisfy the longing, we find satisfaction to be as elusive as the rainbow. It evaporates and we come away empty. The longing may speak through nature and wear the lovely face of nature, but the true object of our desire lies beyond nature in a world that we cannot yet reach.** *If we realise the call comes not from these things themselves but from beyond them, we will find the true object of our longing.[9] (Willams, 2005, 174) [emphasis added]*

SUBSTITUTIONS AND CONSOLATIONS?

In attempting to satisfy this thirst, this hunger in the midst of the ignorance of denial of the transcendent, one will endeavour to engage the ever ready social environmental factors such as emotional, technological, economic and relational means at ones disposal to generate one of the following so called 'sight' based options.

1. The **Intensification** of this life – the course of hedonic pursuit. Make our experience as 'full' and as 'edgy' as we can. If that doesn't work for my emotional buzz, I'll induce the same artificially or illegitimately. Including adrenaline, alcohol, substance, relationship and sexual use and abuse.

2. The **Occupation** of this life – in the absence of the 'thrill', keep myself busy enough with 'cause' of even 'purposeful activity' and then snack on existential junk food, like pursuit of financial gain, consumerism and entertainment to keep me distracted – with the occasional 'pleasure' thrown in.

3. The **Pacification** of this life – This is the space of endeavouring to make life as peaceful and placating as possible for me first, then my immediate environment via 'causes or committees' fads, fashions or flavours, and if that fails…

4. The **Sedation** of this life - make it as painless as possible, whatever is needed to cope with the existence I now believe I have, which very much includes an embracing of hedonic process above all other possibilities, embracing more completely 'pleasure' triggers including all the cultural sedatives on offer from shopping to chemical supplements.. Sadly though if all these fail then…

5. The **Capitulation** in this life – the giving up on life where dropping, burning out or the utter immersion in self-medicating practices, such as alcohol and drug use and abuse… or worse still, the nihilistic panacea of the snuffing out of this life becomes a real option to the world weary soul

What is becoming increasingly more disturbing is that, from where I stand at least, the top three of these exercises is what is now passing for spirituality… In reality, much of the new 'teaching' and sociological posturing is about trying to keep people out of option 4 and 5 – Sedation and Capitulation. If this is achieved, by whatever legal and relatively 'harmless' means, then the social architects believe they have accomplished their end and the sociological 'happy hour' continues!

Hey, but what about our children? What do we do when they want to look behind the well-presented options to find something more profound, something not merely 'real' in a sensual sense, but authentic, substantial and true? What do we do if the smoke and mirrors fail to keep the unwary soul at bay in existential ignorance?

The only way these things can pass for 'spirituality' is if we redefine the term. Of course we must do this, because if we understand spirituality in its true context then it is transcendent, divine and supra-cultural things that we need to engage. This of course leads us to door number 6 and it is a door we cannot readily enter or control via our own devices. It requires a deferral to a source and authority that is not our own.

When we look at true spirituality we begin to see our existential abode for what it really is; far less than intended – a well decorated, fully furnished and plentifully stocked pig sty, but pig sty nonetheless and as stated, that revelation makes us resentful or even inadequate and we can't, in our new Politically Correct culture, have people feeling 'bad' about what they have created, even if it is only a spectacularly donned veneer!

SO WHAT IS SPIRITUALITY?

When it comes to the Education arena and the teaching of students (or anyone else for that matter) then 'spirituality' is distilled down to the following spurious definition… *'Whatever helps you find positive reflective space and/or provides you with a 'cause' to keep you busy and give you some sense of purpose.'* From this, it is then hoped, that the candidate, the students - our kids, will find 'meaning' enough to keep them from self-harm and/or anti-social behaviour. The sociologist and psychologist have thus hijacked spirituality to, at least in their minds a positive end, and minimized the offence to political correct sensibilities.

But is that really enough? Is this a remedy for the social dis-ease or is it merely a placebo for purported symptoms of this ailment that will only delay a greater epidemic in the future?

The Merriam Webster's collegiate dictionary defines spirituality as such….

1. something that in ecclesiastical law belongs to the church or to a cleric as such
2. clergy
3. sensitivity or attachment to religious values
4. the quality or state of being **spiritual.**
   The adjective Spiritual, again according to Webster's means… **"of, relating to, consisting of, or affecting the spirit: incorporeal man's spiritual needs…of or relating to sacred matters… concerned with religious values…of or relating to supernatural beings or phenomena…"**[10]

As we can see any legitimate use of the word Spiritual, must revolve around, or at least promote as essential, the supra-cultural; the transcendent and the religious associations vital to it. If it fails to do so, it cannot be spirituality, at least with any legitimacy.

This religious and supra-cultural context not only offers us some real options to the answer to the Second Order questions, but, more importantly the First Order Questions as well. It also assists us in discovering door number 6, the **transformation** of life that is the result of a meaning, purpose and hope – founded on something genuinely 'bigger' than us mere capricious mortals and what we can produce.

This, of course, leads us to the inevitable debate about which spirituality to subscribe to… this discussion is for another day, suffice to say, if *truth,* and not subjective preferences are the end result of the debate, then only **one** really stands up and out as worthy of such allegiance

As Christian Educators, Counselors, Chaplains or Youth Workers, we all can continue to present real and lasting options to precious children and teenagers – young people who have not yet been fully immersed in the spurious existential 'feng shui' of soul decorating or who are resigned to drink from the metaphoric toilet of pop culture 'spirituality'. In partnership, serving one another, we will be able to take more opportunities in shifting this ailed culture toward real 'living water' and eternal purpose that will truly satisfy the soul. I will leave you with yet another excerpt from the 'Hard Wired to Connect' Report…

> *"There is mounting evidence that individuals who give priority to living a loving, nurturing life and to developing a moral and spiritual perspective that supports this commitment to nurturing relationships are likely to be significantly healthier and happier than individuals who do not." (2003, 7)*[11]

Mr. Shane Varcoe
Dip Min; A.C.R.A.C.S. ; B.Min (p)
Executive Director, Dalgarno Institute
Chaplain
Affective Domain Educator
Author

ENDNOTES

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