

REALNEWS

Reflections at Day's End

No. 10 January/February 2010



**Marysville, Victoria
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As the Waters Warm

When it comes to matters of health, whether it be of the body or of the planet, we all crave simple solutions. But as anyone who has had to deal with the effects of multiple pathologies knows, there are no simple solutions. Similarly, when one seeks out the causes of chronic disturbance and progressive breakdown, whether it is of the body or of the planet, it soon becomes obvious that they are rarely due to a single factor. Yet in both medicine and in the political debate on climate change, discussion has tended to centre on the influence of single factors and the search for simple solutions.

The single factor universally identified as the main cause of our gathering planetary woes is the level of carbon in the earth's atmosphere. Regardless of the proclamations of such peculiar anachronisms as Christopher Monckton who recently waltzed through the Australian mediascape reassuring us all that anthropogenic climate change is a cynical and pernicious myth perpetrated by a shadowy cabal within the United Nations whose real agenda is to control the planet, there can be no question that the burning of fossil fuels to power industrial civilisation has released immense quantities of carbon dioxide – and numerous other toxic influences – into the ecosphere. Over a century ago, the Swedish chemist Arrhenius first described what has become known as the Greenhouse Effect, where increasing levels of atmospheric carbon dioxide will inevitably cause the temperature of the

atmosphere to increase. And it is an established fact that the level of carbon dioxide present in the atmosphere has been steadily increasing over the past century.



Meanwhile, a report in a recent edition of the *New Scientist* (13th January 2010) notes that the Pine Island Glacier in the Antarctic will, according to the most optimistic projections, irreversibly lose half its mass over the next century. This event alone will raise sea levels by 24 cm. Richard Hindmarsh of the British Antarctic Survey is of the view that the glacier is likely to melt completely in that time. And Pine Island is but one of a number of glaciers on the fringe of the West Antarctic ice sheet that are destabilising. The northern hemisphere holds a similar story.

In addition to increasing levels of atmospheric carbon, the earth's dynamic equilibrium has also been seriously disturbed by many of the other consequences of industrial civilisation. These include the deforestation of entire continents, the desertification and intoxication of vast landscapes by the practices of industrial agriculture, the progressive collapse of fish populations within the world's oceans, the toxic destruction of the earth's great lakes and river systems, and the mining and

dispersion of vast geological stores of metals and minerals.

These and other ecopathologies have been given scant attention in the present discussions. We remain fixated on the need to identify a single isolatable cause which, when corrected, will deliver us from our woes. Yet, as is the case in human experience when multiple pathologies occur simultaneously, addressing single elements may bring temporary relief from symptoms, but will do very little to check the overall movement towards progressive dissolution. Each of the elements described in the preceding paragraph – and numerous others that could be detailed - contribute decisively to an escalating loss of the stability, predictability and availability of resources which provide the essential bases upon which technological civilisation rests.

When our bodies are afflicted by a disturbance, we will look for a specific cause, be it a microorganism or a change in blood chemistry, without giving much attention to the behaviours that may have increased our susceptibility to such disturbances. And, once a quick fix is found, be it in the form of antibiotic or other medication, we will tend to return to our previous ways as soon as possible.

Much of the current cavil and debate on climate change reflects a deep desire for things to return to normal as soon as possible. All we need to do is to reduce our carbon emissions quickly and painlessly and then we can continue on our merry way. The nuclear industry has more recently leapt into the picture as the new saviour of our planet and of Western civilisation. Hundreds of millions of

dollars have been poured into promoting a “renaissance” of what had been a moribund industry through the courting of politicians, the crafting of public relations campaigns, and the promotion of nuclear power as a “safe”, “clean” and “green” technology.

Even such a counter-cultural hero as Stewart Brand, founder of the Whole Earth Catalogue during the 1960s, has recently become a zealous supporter of both nuclear energy and genetic engineering of food crops as the redeemers of a civilisation in rampant decay.

These and other “fixes” are predicated on a desire that the freedoms we enjoy in the Western world be maintained at all costs, and that our patterns of economic growth and extravagant consumption be protected and preserved regardless of the fact that billions of lives born into the so-called developing world continue to be lived in poverty and privation.

Increasingly, we hear arguments that our present levels of energy consumption need to be not only maintained, but actually increased so that those in less-developed nations may be able to enjoy the Western lifestyles that have become “non-negotiable.” Rather than identifying those elements of simpler and more sustainable ways of living in the developing world that may enable us to disengage from the damaging practices and voracious consumption that is laying the planet to waste, we seem intent on having everyone join the party while the lights are still on and the music is still pumping.

REALNEWS will continue to keep a watchful eye on both the illuminations

and the deceptions that weave through the fraying fabric of these difficult and troubled times.

POEM FROM UPWEY

The Eagle's Nest

Above the tree tops
Soaring through clouds
Higher, higher,
Until the earth seems whole
And the self seems a part of something else
Riding the sounds of ecstasy
Back to a soft landing in the nest

Nico Di Stefano
Upwey, Victoria

LETTER FROM ALEXANDRA

A Fearful Baptism

Our God is a consuming fire. (Hebrews 12:29)



Fire is the terrible devourer and transformer of things. It may be harnessed as friend and

warmer, light bearer and defender against the dark but it is never domesticated just like God it seems. Fire is good at making bonfires of our vanities and yet at hearth distance it is intimate companion and doorway to visions. But when broken out of its constraints in indiscriminate conflagration or weaponised by human intent, it is all attrition.

Undomesticated, fire can, as we have so terribly known, bring untold death and

destruction, pain and distress. In its wake nothing remains unchanged.

Why then associate fire with any kind of divine purpose? Perhaps because fire has an irrefutable beauty alongside an elemental fury. Pain giver and life taker it surely is and yet there is a bigger pattern of life and death to be uncovered in its wake.

Fire has a capacity to baptise, which is all about the kind of making that happens out of being broken and then transformed. Fire is energy and light and extremely dangerous. That too sounds like God once you strip the skin off that difficult three-letter word and do away with human niceties. God in the raw so to speak: Indiscriminate, wild and indifferent to sentiment.

Fire, life bearer and death giver, totally random and accidental in its wounding and its blessing, just like life itself. This consuming God is fearful and fey, saving us and everything else the hard way. No life without a death, no salvation without ordeal and immolation.

Putting God and fire together in the same breath may be an obtuse academic indulgence to many people so soon after the Black Saturday disaster. Why God should be a consuming fire is just another unanswered question blowing in the wind. Why indeed? Why God at all? Or is this sure proof of bastard God or just pitiless relentless nature or else as I heard recently from some unknown source "nature is Satan's church."

Predictably there is a lot of silence in the blowing wind. Six months down the track from catastrophe, grief has its own wavelength but is inaudible to others,

whilst Theological Questions for nearly all take a back seat to the daily struggle and business of rebuilding life.

But the why-so-hard a fire, so hard a life, so hard a God question is wrapped around the still mute shock and unresolved trauma so widely felt in my little community.



Summer breathed death just a few fateful kilometres from me on Black Saturday. I will never forget the sight of that mushroom cloud looming over the desolating heat of that day. It gave me an instant pang of fear and dread. Little did I know. Unheroically I was at first all too preoccupied with defending my own space and plant from attack. With my vigil mass already cancelled I kept night vigil with my only contact - one fraught neighbour - and the battery powered wireless. Meanwhile sirens wailed and the sky glowered dully in the south. News at first was misleading. The disaster still seemed quarantined, reports were unclear, hope and disbelief conspired to create expectations of reduced casualties and loss.

In the morning the news was not good. A few startled and silent worshipers came to mass. With them came the news of deaths and then it comes, news of someone you know, the instant

connection with the manner of their dying, the unreserved horror of it imprinted on the imagination as quickly as you try to lose the address of that imprint.

So it is just a little distance from the epicentre of an atomising firestorm. There are few if any degrees of separation. In small rural communities everybody knows somebody who knows. Pain and death then became very quickly known but the feeling of it, that's always a long slow burn. Country people are fiercely independent by and large, tougher than urbanities on many levels, so things get hammered down soon after any ill wind has blown them off. So the fires that burned in the open get extinguished but inside things still smoulder. The fire still consumes; fuelled by grief, anger and incomprehension, the question of what is important and what isn't works itself out daily. Flimsy securities are combusted, routines disrupted and comforts removed while business as usual requires recovery on demand and someone to blame on the way.

All of this slow consummation wrought by fire and loss largely happens in places inaccessible to regular scrutiny. People are stressed and cranky or depressed but do not connect the dots. And even if you do connect them and make some picture out of dread and fear and destruction, it is hard to colour that picture and represent it to even the most gifted of counsellors. In the end you had to be there to really understand.

I was not there in that place that saw fire hunting down everything in its path but I have gotten close to some who were. You hear stories of fearful noise and

embers whizzing through the air as fast as bullets, then stories of near miss and deliverance alongside tragic accounts of death, injury and ongoing loss. One man spoke to me about pulling out seventeen bodies from fire-destroyed homes. Fourteen were known to him. I will never forget the look on his face, not just deep pain but something ineffable, a look of one who has touched untellable horror and dislocation. The same look - while perhaps not always quite as acute - has swept like a deep shadow over many people I have met. Now six months down the track, summer has given way to a fleeting autumn and an even more fleeting winter with spring and summer rolling everything quickly back to another dry fire season. In it, all the bush strikes back green against the fire ravaged black but people do not and cannot recover so quickly.

For that matter the bush is more a cosmetic green thinly painted over the wound of scorched earth and burnt wood, unable to disguise the fact that this fire has changed all kinds of outer and inner landscapes for ever. All that can be done is to acknowledge that fire brings unnegotiable changes and to find somehow the same rising green that nature herself so relentlessly draws out of the passing of fire. Rather than Satan's church red in tooth and claw and full of a most inhuman and terrible beauty, nature still can communicate to us an extraordinary capacity for resilience and endurance. This calls forth a kind of unknowing that may even overcome trauma and grief whereby we trust life on the deepest of levels. As the Taoist sage Lao Tzu observed:

*Nature does not hurry
Yet everything is accomplished.*

Shock, trauma and suffering will continue and will need skilled ministrations, but the consuming fire inevitably elicits more than just woe. Right from that first night on so much of the best of people, it has been evident in the midst of nature's holocaust. So many in the two main towns of my parishes and beyond displayed such grit, courage and compassion. Especially the elders in the town and in my own parishes have yet again shown the stoicism, toughness and enduring sense of civic duty that subsequent generations beneath them still need to acquire.

Out of disaster there has been at times an amazing display of community, solidarity, bravery and tender kindness. Right from the first days of real and present danger, there was an extraordinary response to the disaster moving right up and down from the local to the national level. Something about Black Saturday arrested the entire nation; perhaps because in peacetime none of us have seen so hard a blow.

At my local level, many did a lot of heavy lifting in terms of relief, recovery and active fire fighting. Homes were refuges for many refugees. Besides which an army of people were amongst the stricken doing their best to aid and comfort. There were many chaplains seemingly parachuting from all corners of the land, commendably trying to help people in that frontline moment of bereavement and duress. There was a lot of unpolished human goodness to be seen right at that most acute moment of danger and necessity.

For my part I felt less than unpolished. For too long I was stunned, almost as if I was swimming through mud, somehow

getting from one place to another but feeling wretchedly useless and dismayed by it all. For a time I was caved in under the weight of my own melodrama of guilt. Then something I can only attribute to the Divine Spirit simply quietened me down enough to get me out of the way. It was time to forget about making comparisons and rushing in panic and just wait and respond as I was called.

I was not alone in my panic. Such a detonation of grief and distress vibrates and tears through the fabric of our social being. It still does. As a result, the causalities of the day are still to be reckoned with which brings me back to God and fire.

One of the things easily consumed and atomised in an off-the-scale firestorm is faith. As we have seen in the commissions and post mortems since, there is much loss of faith in the capacity of human beings to adequately respond and prepare for such disasters. Our very faith in each other is severely strained and abraded. Our faith in the seasons and in business as usual command and control of events is in tatters. The world itself seems to be drying out beneath us and the future conspires against all our grandiosity. Beyond this, there is that loss of faith that is like an abyss and God (that difficult word again) lost in the desolation of nothingness and broken dreaming. All that remains is impartial silence and inhuman emptiness.

Such a loss only counts for one who has previously dreamed of a world fitted with order and promise and guided not pitilessly but under the secret hand of providence. But after the casting of fire, nothing much can seem believable anymore except the irreducible power of

time and death. Life by comparison can look like an unlikely accident and all the yearning and bleeding that goes with it a song and dance show for a deaf and blind universe. Loss of faith is like that.

Still, there is the Zen saying: "If you meet the Buddha be sure to kill him." Can it be then that one kind of faith has to be consumed before another far more engaged kind of knowing and living replaces it? Is this one of fire's hard lessons? For a time all seems fully dissolved and then something returns into view hidden and disguised in the very reality we are living and breathing.

Although I was merely on the outskirts of a great calamity, I have sensed something of both this loss and this finding. The day before Black Saturday I travelled north to anoint a dying woman. It was hard to behold her on that all so hot Friday. Death had almost emptied her of visible presence. Like the country rolling away in parched contours of stretched land and unbelievably arid air, she was ready to be consumed. Family hovered dimly and sadly around her but her gaze had already gone through the veil. She was tense with anticipation. So too was the day. The radio repeated words of dire warning but like to all still lost in the land of the living, dread and death appeared eminently avoidable. Avoidable, that is, until one hard hot day too many.

Now after such a fire everything around me appears like the last days of empire, church of course, but also the system as we have known it, the dry world of callous economic calculus and political spin baked hot under the delusion of seeking endless expansion and unyielding control. Time then to unzip oneself of old false certainties, to walk

more humbly, grounded in what unites us in sympathy and care of one another.



This most simple, most direct and constant power of human care and compassion is what I saw through the veil of Black Saturday. It was every bit as astonishing and powerful as the fire event itself. How is it that such goodness arises in the face of such death and darkness? How is it that pain teaches us so more eloquently than our pleasures? Yet in this still dim seeing, faith comes back into focus at least at a chaotic street level. Here you see with gratitude and amazement the chivalry, the toughness, the bravery and the tenderness of human kindness when truly awakened. This is something tangible belying a kind of force field of connection between us. And not just us but with all of nature's children.

Still it seems only in terror and loss is this deeper truth of us most lived. Out of ashes, love and life shyly persist.

In the end something still is being consumed in me. Just one particular firestorm has found in me faith abandoned and faith tenuously held onto. God will play havoc with us no doubt. As we ourselves have played havoc with God, if God were nothing more or less than nature around us. But it is the word *us* in which this consuming God is to be uncovered. Uncovered in the slow, patient, practical love of people helping each other through major adversity.

But not too quickly should any baptism of fire be spoken of, nor too hasty a final *Deo Gratias*. God will continue to

remain hidden, embedded in the courage and kindness of strangers. Nothing much is understood apart from silence and suffering. Maybe the Christ knows most of all what this fire consumes and can cry out in a way that resonates with all our grief and all our fierce hopes:

*I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already!
There is a baptism I must still receive, and how great is my distress till it is over.*

Vincent Jewell
Alexandra, Victoria

RESTORING THE CADUCEUS On Technology and Medicine in a Time of Troubles



It has often been said that we live in an age where darkness is perceived as light, and light as darkness. Strong words to describe strange times. The events of recent decades have shown us that our illusions of safety, stability, and "business as usual" can very suddenly and catastrophically change.

Exponential change is one of the key signatures of the present era. We have, over the past century, moved from Morse code to mobile phones; from saddles to computer controlled, air-bagged automobiles; from sabres at close range to intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The development of increasingly powerful technologies has changed the

lives of all who live in wealthy nations. Machines now fly across continents and between planets. Our voices are carried effortlessly through the ether by microwave radiation. Acts of war are perpetrated with deadly precision and devastating consequence by remote control. Over half a billion computers, all of which will eventually break down and be discarded, hum away in numerous households, businesses, and institutions around the world. The exhaust gases of six hundred million cars daily poison the air of every city on the earth as their occupants sit comfortably, listening to the news or enjoying music on FM stations.

At the same time, the few remaining forests of northern Europe and North America corrode under a rain of industrial pollutants. In Australia and New Zealand, the skin of young children reddens and blisters even under cloudy skies. Icebergs the size of small countries begin to break off the Antarctic ice shelf and float northwards through shipping lanes. The great coral beds of Queensland's Great Barrier Reef and elsewhere whiten and slowly die as the oceans begin to warm. Deadly radionuclide plumes continue to spread out from such repositories as Lake Karachai in the former Soviet Union to pollute ground waters and rivers in their inexorable movement towards the great oceans. Nearly seventy million tons of vital topsoil are lost every year through the championed methods of industrial agriculture. Politicians in Tasmania and the Amazon Basin ignore calls to preserve their great forests, and cede to the demands of reckless owners of wood mills who would turn ancient watchers of time into wood-chip and pulp.

Yet our minders continue to reassure us that all will be well. Through the power of technology and the indomitable human will, we will adapt to the changes wrought by technological civilisation and establish a *paradisum in terram* governed by free trade and global commerce, and energised by old and new generations of nuclear reactors powered by uranium, plutonium and thorium.



Our technocratic custodians will ensure that we remain well heeled and comfortably entertained in the midst of escalating social, political and environmental disturbances. Some among them are certain that because we are such a clever species, we will soon develop technological solutions for what are becoming increasingly dangerous environmental realities.

Home Truths



In 1991, the great cultural historian Thomas Berry offered a prescient view of the planetary consequences of industrialisation and the proliferation of

new technologies:

The earth cannot sustain such an industrial system or its devastating technologies. In the future, the industrial system will have its

elements of apparent recovery, but these will be minor and momentary. The larger movement is towards dissolution. The impact of our present technologies is beyond what the earth can endure.

These are not the alarmist comments of a renegade technophobe, but the considered judgment of one who has given over a major part of his life to a pursuit of the meaning of twentieth century civilisation. Berry continues:

I do not wish to dwell upon the devastation we have brought upon the earth, but only to be sure we understand the nature and the extent of what is happening.

Our children are born into a world that was unknown a short century ago. They are more likely to be greeted by the glow of fluorescent lights and the glint of forceps and stainless steel than by the sound of flowing rivers and the murmur of waiting midwives. If they happen to arrive a little early and find themselves housed in a windowed humicrib, they will likely experience at a very tender age the banality of technopop piped day and night through FM systems in the brightly-lit prem wards of city hospitals. And if they have quivered like autumn leaves in the hypoglycaemic tremor that ripples through so many premature newborns, they can be sure thereafter of being lanced every three hours until their heels turn blue, as blood is routinely drawn to test their glucose levels with hand-held electronic devices.

And at the close of our days, we may well end up in similar environments with a constant monitoring of our pulse rate and temperature, perhaps wired and drip-fed through an ebbing consciousness, far away from home and family and

whoever else may wish to ease us into the approaching night.



During the mid 1970s, Ivan Illich directed his incisive intelligence to the role of technology in medicine. He observed:

From Stockholm to Wichita the towers of the medical center impress on the landscape the promise of a conspicuous final embrace. For rich and poor, life is turned into a pilgrimage through check-ups and clinics back to the ward where it started. Life is thus reduced to a "span," to a statistical phenomenon which, for better or for worse, must be institutionally planned and shaped. This life-span is brought into existence with the prenatal check-up, when the doctor decides if and how the fetus shall be born, and will end with a mark on a chart ordering resuscitation suspended.

The picture has changed little since.

Broader Vistas

A few years ago, a young woman in her early twenties made an appointment with me for an osteopathic problem. During the consultation, she described how she had unexpectedly fainted at her place of work the previous week. She immediately called a multi-practitioner clinic nearby and arranged to see a doctor. During the course of their brief interview, he cursorily examined her and informed her that her blood pressure was low. He suggested that this was the likely cause of her fainting spell. The young woman asked for some advice regarding how she should deal with this, and was

told that she could use a little more salt in her diet. The doctor suggested that she should get back in touch if the fainting recurred and politely escorted her to the door.

During her visit with me, I made my own inquiries. This young woman held a full time secretarial position. Most of her days were spent sitting in front of a computer screen. She was also completing a university degree part time. Her late afternoons were spent grappling with peak-hour traffic and she spent her evenings attending lectures. She ate when she could, usually on the run, and in between boosted her energy with coffee, carbonated drinks and snack bars. The only exercise she took was walking from her car to her place of work or to the lecture theatre. She was tired a lot of the time, but always completed her assignments by the due date. I asked her whether she thought that sprinkling a little more salt on her salad sandwiches would clear the problem. She replied that she was considering seeing another doctor.

Although this should not be construed as a typical story, it does reveal much about the underlying assumptions of contemporary biomedicine and dramatically depicts the alienation that has overtaken certain practitioners who operate in fast entrepreneurial environments. It also reflects the impoverished consciousness that hurriedly seeks out singular causes and singular remedies for all health problems. It demonstrates the weakness and unreality of epistemological strategies that limit all variables in the pursuit of simple solutions to complex problems. This story exemplifies how some practitioners of biomedicine have lost

sight of their patients and the broader nexus of their patients' lives.

One occasionally hears that religion, law and medicine are the most fixed and refractory of the professions. They all tenaciously hold to their established norms and practices and are usually the last to concede the need for change in the face of new understandings. We can also include politicians as part of this elite group.

Experience carries more influence than does dogma, and consensual understanding more consequence than does coercion. When collective experience crosses a certain threshold, institutional reassurances begin to lose their authority. The tree of biomedicine has been shaken on several fronts over the past half century by a number of informed and articulate critics. At the same time, we have witnessed a growing acceptance and patronage of more naturalistic styles of medicine by many at a grass-roots level within Western communities.

Early Light



Rene Dubos was one of a small cadre of scientists who searched for cures for bacterial infections during the 1940s.

Inspired by the great successes of the early

penicillins used in the cities of war-torn Europe, Dubos discovered a number of powerful antibiotic drugs produced by soil microbes. Yet even from the midst of such triumphs, Dubos cautioned against

too simplistic a view of the nature of health and disease. Writing in the late 1950s, he observed:

By equating disease with the effect of a precise cause - microbial invader, biochemical lesion or mental stress - the doctrine of specific aetiology appeared to negate the philosophical view of health as equilibrium and to render obsolete the traditional art of medicine. Oddly enough, however, the vague and abstract concepts symbolized by the Hippocratic doctrine of harmony are now re-entering the scientific arena.

It has taken nearly half a century for this insight to reach the consciousness of Western doctors. Dubos' understanding was grounded in a sensitive reading of the currents of medical thought that have coursed through history. Although a committed laboratory researcher, he was never seduced by the positivism of an emergent medical technocracy. He had a deep understanding of the transformative influence of civil and sanitary engineers during the nineteenth century. These unwitting healers improved the health of nations by removing the sewage and wastes of burgeoning urban communities and by providing their inhabitants with clean water.

Writing in the late 1970s, Rene Dubos reserved judgement regarding the self-proclaimed status of biomedicine as a scientific discipline:

There is more to medical science than the reductionist analysis of cellular structures and chemical mechanisms, more to medical care than procedures derived from the study of isolated body systems. . . . The scientific medicine of our times is not yet scientific enough because it neglects, when it does not completely ignore, the multifarious environmental and

emotional factors that affect the human organism in health and in disease. Reducing the normal and pathological processes of life to the phenomena of molecular biology is simply not sufficient if we are to understand the human condition in health and in disease.

Dubos was as much a shaman as a scientist. He understood our essential embeddedness within life, and the social, cultural and historical realities that condition our being as deeply as do physiology and biochemistry. With Barbara Ward, he was later to co-author the remarkable document of a civilisation in deep trouble, "Only One Earth".

A little closer to home, a newly graduated doctor from the University of Sydney began to pay attention to the less desirable consequences of an increasingly technologised medicine. Richard Taylor was to become one of the most courageously outspoken critics of biomedicine in Australia. Taylor was active within the Doctors Reform Society during the late 1970s, and later published "Medicine Out of Control. The Anatomy of a Malignant Technology." The very title of his book reflects Taylor's uncompromising use of language. He wrote scathingly about the self-serving interests that shelter under the mantle of the profession of medicine. He cut deeply to reveal the fear-based mechanisms of control and compliance used by forces within the medical establishment to create vast numbers of docile patients dependent upon regular check-ups, expensive tests and questionable screening procedures.

Richard Taylor detailed the apparent inability of biomedicine to effectively address and deal with the root causes of

disease and social pathology in the present day:

Rather than adopt measures that can be understood and carried out by the normal average person, the medical establishment has elected to usurp the capacity of the individual to look after his or her own health. Instead of encouraging self-sufficiency, independence and self-reliance in health and illness, doctors have persistently contrived to produce dependent hypochondriacs. Rather than emphasising change in lifestyle and mores by education and through environmental, social and economic channels as a means of tackling the main diseases of modern man, they have concentrated on doctor-patient contact and 'treatment' as the main means of prevention.

He called attention to the fact that pharmaceutical and technological fixes more often than not serve to mask a neglect of the over-riding role of social, environmental, economic and life-style issues in disease creation and perpetuation:

We must recognize that it is the way we live, eat, smoke (or not smoke), work, drive, exercise (or not exercise), that are the main determinants of our health. And that these actions are determined as much, or more, by concrete circumstantial factors relating to social and economic organization as they are by individual 'choice'.

In the years since the publication of Taylor's book, things may have changed a little. Everyone now knows about the dangers of smoking. Government funded health promotion units now encourage people to get off their couches and onto their feet. Organically grown vegetables, "heart-smart" beef, and free-range

chickens are now available at most supermarkets for those who can afford it.

Yet fast food outlets continue to do a mighty trade. Television shows continue to be punctuated by advertisements for trashy sweets and frozen treats. And both printed and electronic media conspire to maintain a widespread social and cultural anaesthesia through a constant serving of the banal and the inconsequential.

The popular media places little value on promoting a reflective, informed, and autonomous culture capable of responding healthily to the myriad abuses of persons, peoples and planet to which we are daily witness. This would simply not be in their interests. Yet the creation of an active public awareness is precisely what is needed if there is to be a healthy and systemic response to the deepening crises of technological civilisation.

Quickening Seeds

Across the Pacific, American philanthropist Laurence S. Rockefeller was apportioning significant research funds to a number of groups in the U.S. that were undertaking health-centred rather than disease-centred research.

One of the recipients of that funding was Kenneth Pelletier, director of the Stanford Corporate Health Program at the Stanford University School of Medicine. Rockefeller funded a five-year study of 53 prominent individuals who, in Pelletier's words, represented "prototypes of optimal health" selected from the heartland of corporate America. Pelletier and his group worked with such corporations as American Airlines, IBM, Apple, Bank of America, Hewlett-Packard, Lockheed and others. The

group's findings are detailed in Pelletier's *Sound Mind, Sound Body: A New Model for Lifelong Health* published in 1994.

One wonders how many of Pelletier's "prototypes" had elbowed their way to the top of the corporate pile, possibly at great cost in terms of human and ecological values. Two of his exemplars were associated with the formation and development of the Trilateral Commission, a body which has been identified by some as a politically motivated organisation that has used Western corporate wealth and influence to control political, military, and economic activities in a number of third world countries.

One also must query where the little man and the strugglers might fit into all this. Political economists have for decades described the U.S. health system as exclusivist, expensive, ineffectual and neglectful of the poor. As we have recently witnessed, Barack Obama's attempts to humanise U.S. health care have been continually thwarted by the efforts of drug company lobbyists and Republican politicians determined to keep the American health system firmly in the hands of corporate interests that do not wish to see anything change.



Writing in the 1990s, Pelletier was clearly aware that there was something terribly wrong with the direction U.S. health care had taken:

Our hospitals, intensive care units and morgues are the repositories of a collective social pathology. Medicine itself is symptomatic of a greater societal ill for which resources are limited and choices need to be made. These choices extend far beyond medicine into the realms of ethics, social responsibility, and morality, where answers are not amenable to the scientific method. Finding solutions will require that we be both creative and iconoclastic. Every individual and society pays dearly when social and economic problems become medical cases.

He also detailed some home truths about the practice of medicine in the U.S. at that time:

More than 14% of the total Gross Domestic Product goes to support this "health care system," yet it is one of the least effective and least satisfying in the world, in terms of its ability to elicit and sustain health. There is deep dissatisfaction with the quality of the relationship between health practitioners and patients, as all too often patients are seen as a cluster of symptoms, not as human beings with complex psychological, social and spiritual dimensions. Prevention guidance is negligible, and medical care costs continue to escalate out of control.

Interestingly, Pelletier and his group found that a significant number of their respondents made use of so-called complementary and alternative medicine during periods of illness. Pelletier reported that the majority of those who participated in the study regularly made use of such treatments as acupuncture, massage,

homoeopathy, herbal medicine and spinal manipulation.

Unlike both Ivan Illich and Richard Taylor, Pelletier paid little attention to the contradiction between the present style of technological medicine and the need to develop a conceptually broadened, ecologically sensitive, and economically sustainable model of medical practice. And unlike Illich and Taylor, Kenneth Pelletier places much hope in the role of increasingly sophisticated and expensive medical technologies as corrective influences within the biomedical enterprise.

Kenneth Pelletier projects a peculiar ambivalence that embraces the principles of holism yet fails to address the complicity of biomedicine in propping up the dominant political and economic reality. His work leaves one with an uneasy sense that one of the unspoken agendas of the biomedical project is the preservation of the social and economic patterns that have come to be associated with “successful” capitalist economies.

Even while acknowledging the seeming inability of biomedicine to deal with the escalating social, environmental and economic pathologies that are a major cause of ill health in the U.S. and elsewhere, Pelletier confidently cleaves to the notion that corporate beneficence will somehow save the day.

One could argue that corporate activities over the past century, and more particularly during recent decades, have in fact brought us to the perilous edge on which our civilisation now hovers.

Perilous Times

As the Cold War intensified during the 1980s, a powerful wave of realisation began to sweep through the international medical community. Groups such as Physicians for Social Responsibility and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War attracted many doctors who were increasingly troubled by the political, social and economic influences that undermined the historical mission of medicine. The IPPNW were particularly vocal in both the lay and the medical press in their efforts to call our collective attention to the great danger confronting humanity during the heated confrontations between the US and the former Soviet Union during the Reagan Era.



During the early months of 1984, four separate editions of "The Lancet" carried letters or articles describing the

total uselessness of biomedicine in the event of a nuclear war. Medical supplies and facilities within cities targeted by thermonuclear weapons would be vaporized in the initial maelstrom while those on the periphery would be destroyed in the inevitable firestorms that would follow. One respondent pointed out that even herbal medicines would be difficult to collect and apply in such catastrophic circumstances.

Although Gorbechev's reforms and the dismantling of the former Soviet Union brought the Cold War to an end, the present posturing between Israel and Iran, the tenuous relations between India and Pakistan, and the growing nuclear

arsenal of China continue to remind us that the great nuclear beast has not been vanquished, but is merely sleeping.

Meanwhile, it is now clear that industrial and technological civilisation have profoundly altered the delicate planetary equilibrium that had slowly and steadily developed over a period of tens of millions of years. Yet in the name of economic necessity, governments and large corporations across the world scramble to secure supplies of oil, coal and uranium, construct massive pipelines for the transport of dwindling gas reserves and oil derived at great environmental cost from tar sands, and commission the construction of numerous uranium-fired nuclear reactors across the planet.

The most recent failure of the Copenhagen climate talks reflects further the opportunism and cynicism of governments and multinational corporations intent on preserving the powers and privileges that have been won at great and continuing cost to the earth and her peoples. One of the major difficulties in dealing with these realities is the sheer magnitude of the problems. We are also confronted by the stubborn recalcitrance and the petulant fixedness of many of the political, industrial, and economic institutions that govern the big picture.

The contradictory forces at work in the present time can have a paralysing effect on our own sense of personal power and influence. Yet within this, there is no shortage of well-meaning but often impotent gestures that reflect the growing need to feel that we are doing *something*. We dutifully put out our plastic, glass, and paper wastes for recycling. Many of

us have now begun to compost all vegetable wastes from the kitchen and return them to our gardens. Many now choose to walk or ride bicycles rather than using their cars. To display the term "environmentally-friendly" on the label of produce has now become *de rigueur* in marketing.

Meanwhile, convoys of semi-trailers continue to burn rubber and fuel as free trade and the market economy moves foodstuffs and other commodities interstate and around the world. If we happen to live in a large town or city, it is virtually impossible to buy a clove of garlic that has been grown within a radius of ten kilometres - or even a hundred kilometres - from where we live. Yet every supermarket carries huge racks of bulbs that have been imported from China and Mexico.

Ailing Bodies, Ailing Earth

In matters of personal health and disease, there is a growing understanding that powerful prescription drugs may keep us alive but will not necessarily keep us healthy. Like the planet itself, we cannot endlessly assimilate the products of a toxic civilisation without suffering the consequences. We are not infinite repositories capable of continually absorbing junk food, industrial effluent, agricultural chemicals, and workplace stresses without undermining our own physiological equilibrium.

The forces that have created and which continue to sustain the current style of medicine practised in the Western world, like those that have created and sustained technological civilisation, are powerful and entrenched. A diagnosis of cancer automatically commits one to a course of

chemotherapy, radiation or surgery. Similarly, a diagnosis of hypertension, cardiac arrhythmia, hypercholesterolaemia or rheumatic arthritis will be treated by the same medications regardless of whether we visit a doctor in Auckland, Brussels or Chicago.

Yet in recent decades, cancer support groups throughout the Western world have shown that other therapies based on a combination of such approaches as detoxification, nutritional therapies, the use of herbal medicines, mental techniques such as meditation and guided imagery, stress minimisation, and even such methods as prayer and energetic healing can have powerful healing consequences. Similarly, practitioners of the various modalities of natural medicine have demonstrated that they have much to offer in terms of both preventative strategies and effective therapies for the treatment of many conditions.



The call for a reduction of carbon levels in the atmosphere has seen a determined

push to cleave to existing methods of energy generation. Coal continues to be loaded into massive ships at Australian terminals bound for the coal-burning power plants of China and elsewhere as technocrats assure us that non-existent carbon capture and storage systems will soon minimise the damage. Despite the former vehemence of the present Australian environment minister, the mining and export of Australian uranium

now helps to fuel a so-called nuclear “renaissance” based the construction of enormously expensive and ultimately dangerous nuclear power plants throughout the world. We still do not know what to do with the radioactive wastes they produce, and their eventual inevitable decommissioning is simply not part of the present discussions.

Despite the rhetoric about thorium-based and fourth generation IFR (Integral Fast Reactor) generators, the new reactors being built around the world will continue to make use of uranium and will continue to produce increasing quantities of dangerous wastes that we don’t know what to do with. And when the figures are added together, it is generally agreed that these reactors will contribute only marginally to any reduction in atmospheric carbon levels.

In the same way that there are other ways of dealing with ailing health in the human body than the standardised and uniform approaches of biomedicine, so too, there are other ways of generating energy for use by human communities that will create fewer problems for future generations. The past two decades has seen a remarkable growth in the development and application of large and small scale solar panels, solar-thermal systems linked to salt-based heat traps, wind turbines, tidal generators and geothermal facilities capable of providing numerous safe and sustainable nodal sources of electrical energy.

Other essential influences that govern the return of health after major illness or disturbance in equilibrium are the principles of austerity and balance. The neglects and the excesses that have contributed to a breakdown in health

must be addressed and corrected if there is to be a true convalescence and recovery rather than a temporary and short-lived remission. The wasteful patterns of consumption that have squandered both energy and diminishing resources, and the wilful disregard of and disrespect for the needs of the earth and her many interdependent systems that have characterised industrial civilisation must change now dramatically if there is to be any real turning around.

We have learned from Copenhagen that such changes are unlikely to come through the major political and economic institutions that call the tune. As in matters of personal health, we need to become directly involved in those small changes that can bring about collective transformational consequences. We are confronted by deep structural issues that limit the capacity of both governments and large institutions to address fixed patterns of behaviour, even in the face of dire necessity. This is an ongoing discussion in which each of us can expect to participate in coming time.

LETTER FROM GEMBROOK

Apocalypse?

For most of my life, in my conscious recollection, I've lived with the underlying threat of nuclear war and human obliteration. This was particularly strong in the 1960's during my adolescence at the height of the cold war, and this must have influenced my attitudes then and helped shape my views now.

Added to that, my parents were religious and served up an unhealthy portion, regularly, of apocalyptic prophesy from

The Book of Revelations, which left me scared stiff and waiting for 'Kaboomba' at any moment. I claim now, more than forty years on, that this was not good for a developing mind and may have been the reason for my rebellion and somewhat unpredictable, foolhardy, and antisocial behaviour in my later youth. In common lingo, I was screwed up, without understanding why.



I'm not bitter about this. It's nobody's fault. Seven years before I was born, atomic bombs destroyed entire cities in Japan in one swift hit. This historic event was witnessed by my parents in the media of the day after six years of World War II during their adolescence. Then came the arms race and the cold war with the Soviet Union. The whole world was screwed up.

It's still there, the threat of nuclear destruction, but we've probably all relaxed a little thinking that if nobody has pushed the button yet, then there's a good chance they won't. Who knows really?

A couple of years ago I bought a book in an op. shop, an autobiography called *Dr. Helen Caldicott, A Passionate Life*. I came across it this morning and had a quick look. She starts off by saying how

she read a book that changed her life when she was nineteen, *On The Beach*, by Neville Shute. That must have been in 1957, and it led her to spend 25 years of her life in political activity campaigning for nuclear disarmament.

A little into the first chapter, Helen revealed that as a baby she was suddenly abandoned by her parents for two weeks when her mother was pregnant with a second child and in the interests of her health her husband organized a holiday while Helen, 18 months old, was placed in an institution that cared for babies.

I quote: “Years later when I became a pediatrician, I discovered that when a baby is suddenly abandoned by its parents, it screams for about two days for no avail and then gives up and sits in the corner of its cot, uncommunicative and severely depressed. It often takes months for the baby to forgive its parents and it may never completely return to normality and a state of trust.”

What amazed me was that I never expected to find common ground between Helen Caldicott and my brother, Jod. When mum was pregnant with me, she and dad, at Auntie Clare's insistence, went on a holiday to West Australia with Clare, who paid. They left Jod at mum's friend Zoe's. When she came back, Jod was a different child and hardly recognized her. She felt terrible for having left him, a guilt I think she still carries. Jod is two and half years older than me, so he would have been about two years old. He turned 60 last month and for much of that 60 years was at war with his parents and the world in general.

After describing how desperately ill she became while her parents were absent,

Helen Caldicott continues: “These events changed my life. From being a trusting happy child I put a wall around myself and never really trusted anybody again, and to this day I let very few past this barrier.”

My childhood best friend, Graeme ‘Bubs’ Forster, whom I haven't seen for probably more than 20 years, said to me the last time I saw him, when we were discussing our childhood, “We're all victims of victims.” It's not a bad way of looking for understanding of people.

In Helen Caldicott's second last paragraph she says: “However the work of global preventative pediatrics is not over. The lives of my grandchildren are now threatened with on going ozone depletion, the perils of global warming, pollution of the air, water and soil with a multiplicity of chemicals and radioisotopes, deforestation, and species extinction combined with the rampant overpopulation of human beings. I paid a personal price for the intense political work that I conducted over a twenty-five year time span, through the pain I inflicted on myself and those dear to me. That said, I must continue.”

Helen Caldicott's book was published in 1996 but the message still packs a punch. The ozone one has diminished, but the others are bigger than ever. As far as I can gather Helen Caldicott is still writing and campaigning on environmental issues. She must be a remarkable woman whom I'd love to have to dinner.

Let's hope this Copenhagen thing can help save our children's children.

Carey Williams
Gembrook, Victoria

POETICA

At the Turning Point

When things are close to completion
The scent of freedom tinges the air

The wind blows soft at first
Sounding through the leaves
A sigh of resignation
Acceptance of a certain inevitability

When things begin to warm up
Both winds and currents course strong
Seeking spaces wherein they are stilled
Of their tempestuous and untrammelled natures

At that point
Unsuspected worlds can form
Unthought possibilities emerge unbeckoned
It is not all done when it is done

Stilled blood and cooling bone
Herald another turning of time
Change of scene
Mode of being

It is not all done when it is all done