

CIVILISATIONS AND CONSCIOUS EVOLUTION

A public lecture given by John Alexandra – 2012

The first rule of human relations is you can't tell anyone anything. People hear if they have ears to hear. Given this enormous limitation, I'd like to put a few ideas to you. You'll disagree with most of them. But some may stick. They're ideas that have been with us for thousands of years and, from time to time, surface again.

WE KNOW THERE HAVE BEEN MANY CIVILISATIONS:

China. Mesopotamia. Babylonia, the Khmer and Ottoman Empires, Assyria, the Mayans, Incas, Egyptians... And there could be scores more lost in pre-history.

Today, our view of history depends on where we're born. For instance, Japan's view of the history of World War Two we would consider either pernicious or quaint in the extreme. The Chinese view of history relegates Europe to a barbarian rabble of uneducated upstarts. As for the Western view of history - that's equally lopsided. But as it's all we have, let's look at some of its popularised landmarks:

Caucasians view the past with some superiority.

We tut-tut at the human and animal sacrifices of savage times.
At the superstition, squalor and cruelty of the Middle Ages.

We're a bit happier with The Renaissance. We consider a flowering of art and individuality agreeable.

We probably approve of the Reformation with its overthrow of dogma and religious oppression.

Then came the so-called Age of Reason - the belief in natural law as the basis of ethics and the hope that the state could be a rational instrument.

Quite acceptable.

Closer to us is the crossroads of the Industrial Revolution - - the overthrow of traditional crafts - exploitation fuelling nationalist expansion.

And in recent times - the oppression of Fascism and Communism.
Then the standoff of the cold war.

And what do we have today?

The ultimate flowering of Democracy? In name only. Another fine ideal that, like the others, has become a veneer to hide a thousand sins.

Have you ever wondered if this civilisation has stalled? Has the impetus and ideals moving through past centuries faltered? We seem to be left now with little more than scientific progress and corruption.

Of course, we still live comfortably in the so called West. But life in general is increasingly chaotic.

The population explosion's made us locusts - stripping, denuding the planet. And world population will double in fifty years. And it seems that the destruction of biodiversity, the reduction of resources and increasing pollution are irreversible.

That means we're unsustainable. There are now so many of us, we're becoming the only resource. Soon we could be farmed like cattle. You can see the indications now.

Entrenched conglomerates disseminating misinformation to protect their franchises.

The subversion of education by business.

Drugs and the corporatism of crime.

The corruption of professions, institutions, governments. People treated as units of consumption.

We're victims of our violence, inertia, mental slavery and greed. I'm not making anything up. These are hardly new ideas.

MIND YOU, DEMOCRACY'S HAD A GRAND RUN.

It flourished in ancient Greece – a slave state by the way, which apparently helped things along. It's now kept afloat by advances in science and technology - but notice how each new solution spawns a dozen new problems - from nuclear waste to the cane toad?

What if progress is a myth to placate the bewildered?

Democracy has twin foes - communism and capitalism. And the second is now more dangerous than the first. Because it's changing democracy to plutocracy. And the plutocrat's catch-cry is free-market globalisation. Free for whom?

Supply-side economics, functioning without distortion or corruption, is effective. But its ideology is a veneer that covers a thousand abuses.

As Chairman of Intel, Andy Grove said, "The purpose of the new Capitalism is to shoot the wounded."

We're told that the profit motive can serve the public good. But do you buy that without qualification? Does free trade assist the poor, or create them?

I'm suggesting that Western civilisation is moving in circles and probably degenerating. Why? Because without an informed impetus at exactly the right time, eventually everything becomes its own opposite. You may disagree with that, but there are examples through history and on every level of endeavour:

The religion of love spawning the inquisition and the crusades.

The war to end all wars.

Communism reverting to despotism and decimating the masses.

Antibiotics causing more resistant bugs.

Right down to claims-exploitation making the cost of insurance prohibitive.

We thought technology was going to save us and that became the modern myth. Technology's merely an amplifier. Yet people cling to this notion of progress - because the alternative is despair. If the world doesn't have meaning for you, you become a nihilist - the modern malaise of our youth. It creates a lack of values. And without values, corruption sets in. The scams, rip-offs, takeovers, monopolies, kick-backs, collusion, insider trading, spin-doctoring.

Here is a syllogism:
 Progress (growth if you wish) depends on resources.
 Resources are finite.
 Therefore progress is unsustainable.

In the ancient Laws of Manu, which have come down to us from the early Hindus, there is a verse that says this:

A kingdom peopled mainly by Sudras (Sudras are people without initiative or with wrong views), filled with godless men and deprived of twice-born inhabitants, will soon wholly perish, stricken by hunger and disease.

In other words, without ethics, societies decay. As you see from the quote, they knew that 5,000 years ago.

SO THERE'S AN OVERVIEW.

On many levels our civilisation's stalled. Life becomes more and more complicated but the complications don't introduce anything really new. We endlessly repeat the old forms. And as things become more difficult and entangled, there's an increasing lack of common sense.

Is - for example - nuclear proliferation common sense?

The superpowers were supposed to shrink their arsenals to a third by 2012. But they can withdraw at three month's notice, redeploy from storage any time. The rhetoric's non-proliferation. The reality's unstoppable spread.

The nuclear club's now very densely populated. And several nations are playing with the matchbox now.

BACK TO THE STUDY OF CIVILISATION:

Our medieval ancestors had a certain worldview. In this century of derision and despair, we call it absurd. But lets examine it.

They had many intelligent aspects to their lives – such as rituals and customs based on sensible practices to do with hygiene and social order. They had pressure-valve festivals such as the Lord of Misrule. They also had Mysteries that were acted in a way that challenged both performers and spectators. For instance, the life of Christ was not the life of Jesus. These peasants, as we picture them now, were not entirely dumb. Communications were glacial, people were few, change slow, life short. But some had values that made the inner life tolerable at least.

Now how did their beliefs differ from ours?

I'd like to concentrate on one aspect of that because it's the opposite of how we now see things.

They considered that a normal human existed for a purpose not his own. That the universe has a purpose and they were required to participate in it. In other words, people were expected by the cosmos to pay for their existence. It was an age when science and society were still connected to ethics.

The final departure from this rustic and oppressive view we now call The Enlightenment.

Of course, there were flaws in the glass. Superstition. Stupidity. The practice of indulgences, for instance suggested that people could be carried automatically to some automatic heaven. Immortality without effort. You see echoes of this now in fundamentalist Christianity and Islam. Leaders and followers with rigid views have always distorted everything - have always wielded the carrot and stick to oppress the gullible. And mostly got away with it.

But can we sneer at the Medieval bumpkins? Despite all our knowledge and science, our sociological savagery is probably worse than it was then.

SO HOW IS CIVILISATION ENHANCED?

Is it something to do with values or ethics?

Through the centuries, great men have appeared who were appropriate to the time and the location. The appeal of Christ to the emotions. The appeal of Buddha to the mind. The appeal of Mohammed to the sanctified body. Perhaps there is a perennial philosophy that can make life at least tolerable. That can revitalise civilisations as all these teachers did. There have been many systems of social change that tackled results, not causes. And that's why, ultimately, they've failed as ours may do. The men I've spoken of began with causes - an enormously potent thing to do. And that's why their teachings prevail.

But I'm not advocating some mindless belief in that figment created by man in his own image he calls God.

I'm saying that there's no such thing as a mass instinct for excellence. You can turn on TV to verify that. Nothing is possible through mundane means - through legislation or the protestations of the masses. I'm suggesting that change - real change - depends on the individual.

WHAT ARE WE TALKING ABOUT HERE? EDUCATION?

People are designed to inquire and search. Every small child has the inquisitive sense hard-wired. The most impressionable time of life is childhood. And culture begins at home - or should. There are many possibilities there. The character could be trained by self-made entertainment, by growing things, by inculcating the sense of service as an ideal, of doing things for oneself and helping others. Perhaps, in a simpler age, this kind of thing worked.

Education should be the great civilising influence. It's slow, insidious - less immediately effective than, say, health care, but far more pervasive in the long term. But what education?

In Bacon's time, perhaps the Renaissance Man was possible. Later, there was still nobility in the utility of the useless - the emphasis not on winning but playing the game and so forth. And the idea that individuality is the mark of the educated man was present for centuries.

But now - when knowledge doubles every seven years - when Universities are economically obliged to turn out corporate fodder - all-round development is rare. And many fine and noble things in life, many fine and thrilling ideas, are simply ignored in the rush to place money above morality. While we preach the doctrine of a better world, the scum rises to the top. And young people see that. So do we stand on the shoulders of the past? Compared to some ages, in spirituality, artistic

insight, and education, we're subhuman.

As for our famous science - anything that can be done, will be done. Be sure of that. When people function on knowledge alone, perspective dies.

Take a wet-behind the ears graduate in agronomy and put him in charge of running a farm. It's pounds to peanuts that the practical farmer who has little formal education but real experience of animals, plants and the land will produce a better result than he can.

I'm saying that knowledge without the flywheel of experience and judgement can even be destructive. Clever people who lack insight and practicality will simply do whatever they can get away with.

What we need is not Luddites but integration. People need to grow up. Knowledge alone may be enough to produce an Edison or an Einstein. But its voltage is too weak to produce a William Blake or a Gandhi.

Mere knowledge misses the mark. Remember the tree of knowledge and the Garden of Eden? Religion talked of original sin. Perhaps this old and now quaint idea once held some kind of truth. But truths die, become degraded, and need to be reinterpreted.

One contemporary reinterpretation of this ancient notion is this:

Animals, as we know, are perfect, fulfil their function admirably. But man fouls his nest wherever he goes. Why? Is nature mad to have created such a mistake? I suggest that nature knows very well what she's doing.

We're not just animals. We're designed as self-developing organisms. Nature brings us to a certain stage of development. Beyond that point, we have to do the rest ourselves. This presupposes that the adult human is unfinished.

An animal lives completely in the physical world. But humans straddle two worlds - the world of the physical and the world of the psyche - the psychological world of language, opinion, attitudes, concepts and much more. We never see it that way. But except for basic matters of safety, shelter and sustenance, our second world very much influences the first.

Allow this strange view space for a moment and apply it to education.

Our education leaves off where in the distant past, it once began. Between the ages of 18 and 21 is an idealistic period when people are searching for something to give more meaning to life than anything they see about them. It's a time when the human heart aspires.

But if more of the same is fed - for instance the scientific postulation of a vast, meaningless, purposeless universe in which we, like some strange aberration - exist alone like some pimple on a pumpkin - do you really believe that? And that we're here just to provide the greatest good for the greatest number - then no wonder young people become disappointed.

And they do. Some become cranks or suicide. They turn to cynicism, violence - which creates an equal and opposite reaction. To sentimentality or sex. Or to self-indulgence masquerading as humanitarianism or art. Or to quietism, which also doesn't work.

Shakespeare described life as: 'A tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing.' He said it was neither good nor bad but our thinking makes it so.

Perhaps life is not good or bad but neutral, simply a substrate or field of possibilities. For what?

Like it or not, we have to pay for our existence. We have to suffer, labour and die. Nature insists on that. But we're so egocentric that we see ourselves apart from nature, which is logically daft. Now what if we're here not for ourselves, but for her?

Here's a worldview put forward by a renowned British editor of the 30s, A. R. Orage: I quote:

All explanations of life are now based on personal prejudice. We cannot formulate a philosophy except from the point of view of personal interest. Nietzsche said, "I no longer ask of a philosopher, is true but what was the interest for the philosopher?"

Even reform movements become personal. Without objective discrimination, philosophy becomes a matter of the head with a view to personal welfare. Subjectively coloured and egotistically determined. For instance the view that God did not create the universe for a practical purpose but out of sheer benevolence in order that we might be happy. The implication is - that it is our chief purpose to be happy, and that the path to this is to make others happy. This is a childish attitude - yet is Schopenhauer.

Another variation is that only individual happiness counts - the philosophy of the ruling class, the subjective error into which Nietzsche fell - that mankind exists for the development of a few supermen. This assumption is common to the Napoleonic types. The opposite view is that individuals don't count. That only sociological progress counts - the good of the collective. Then there is the variant of modern science - the accumulation of facts, which will eventually benefit future generations. There is the notion of the universe as some kind of school. (Maybe it is - but a school where there is learning but no teaching.)

I think the scientific view is one of the most pernicious. We believe we know everything - or soon will. And if we don't like it, we'll fix it. This kind of attitude induces nothing but sterility of feeling.

SO WHERE IS THE EDUCATED MAN - THE INDIVIDUALIST?

Here's another radical idea.

Education is measured not by knowledge but by the degree of consciousness or perception. Change begins with the individual, but requires an increase of consciousness. Change and civilisations are incited by more conscious men.

If this is true, then, to change the world, you have to change not what you know, but what you are. This works on the personal level, too. What you do, flows from what you are. So it's not good trying to change events. You have to change yourself.

But how to change what you are?

LET'S EXAMINE WHAT WE'VE COME TO:

This civilisation is stalled. Everything is going mass. There's an increasing lack of common sense. Wars are increasing, not decreasing. Our attempts at social change don't work because they tackle results, not causes.

Nothing is possible through the masses or through violence.

We have knowledge but no understanding. We lack insight.

Change begins with the individual.

Man is born incomplete and designed as a self-developing organism. His development is in the area of consciousness.

The universe has a purpose and man is required to contribute value on a cosmic scale. He is not created for himself and is required to pay for his existence.

There can be no possibility of improving his general situation without conscious effort.

I'M PRESENTING A VIEW THAT MUST SEEM UNFASHIONABLY POSITIVE AND NAIVE. I'M SAYING THERE ARE SOLUTIONS. BUT WE DON'T SEE THEM THROUGH OUR LACK OF PERCEPTION.

I'm saying direct means don't work. Violence is generally ignorance - provokes the equal and opposite reaction. We think we can do something but we're symptoms, not the cause. The core of creative action is self-change. But that's almost impossible, even more an act in depth than altering the perspective of people through what we call education, which is now degraded. Because real change isn't on the level of general life at all.

Our doing is reaction because the element of greater consciousness is lacking. And that only comes through greater integration.

This begins with a new direction and refinement of attention. If we could move toward a greater inner unity, the inner would transform the outer. And that would be real action. Not reaction but response.

What if the scale of existence moves from non-being to being - a kind of Jacob's Ladder on which evolution and involution move up and down. What if a true becoming implies an ascent to a higher order of being? Do we simply collect impressions and excrete behaviour? If the Universe is the body of God - then what are we? Enzymes, atoms of cells?

If everything is connected and we're the microcosm of something, knowing ourselves would mean knowing the universe. This was the approach of the Rishi's, which now has echoes in quantum physics.

I'm saying that we look for answers in exactly the wrong direction. That we can only know as much as we are. And that what you are is what happens to you.

As the old Sufi statement has it: 'I fear you will not reach Mecca, oh pilgrim, for the road you are taking leads only to Turkistan.'

So what's the approach to this barely understood concept of being?

Basically, being is related to self-embodiment - the inner sense of oneself as a corporeal or organic entity - and has three aspects - mental, emotional and physical. In most people these aspects are dispersed, distracted, disconnected. But if they can be integrated and aligned, a new perspective is possible. In other words, an expansion of perception.

What if our waking state is really akin to a kind of sleep or automatic functioning? That we're the

behaviourist's nightmare - just a series of conditioned reactions?

Could we avoid this dispersion and move toward greater integration? First we'd have to see our waking sleep, then intentionally oppose it. The last would be impossible without the first.

Oppose it with what?

With our attention. We have to harness our attention and direct it. To what? To the state of our inner functioning. Real change, as Socrates said, begins with self-knowledge.

Such an approach is not for everyone. To most people, it's nonsense. Most are satisfied with life and should leave such arcane notions well alone.

But if you feel some truth in the idea of humanity being an incomplete creation - brought only so far by nature then left - as a potentially self-perfecting organism... Then - possibilities begin for you.

Well I think I've said more than enough. And perhaps you'd care to join the discussion?