

Visions of a New Renaissance

The project

In late 1992 a small group of citizens in Cheshire began a project of discovery. The world seemed full of many problems, and yet there appeared to be no concerted effort to address them. Indeed the general trend appeared to be to reinforce wrong directions, despite limited activities which seemed to be going in a sensible direction. Neither politics, economics, education, religion, science or arts appeared to offer satisfying directions. What was going on?

The example of the 15/16th century Renaissance stood as a beacon of what might be. This period had seen a flowering of the human spirit across many fields of human endeavour. Such a flowering was surely what was needed today.

Thus was set out the project - to establish *Visions of a New Renaissance*. Once we have vision there is a direction and inspiration for action. 'Without vision the people perish' was an ancient saying we soon alighted on.

Well known speakers were invited to come to Knutsford to describe and discuss their own vision and point the way to individual action. Nineteen lectures were held over the period 1993-96, and the 1996 Manchester Schumacher Lectures were held on the same theme. What has been learned?

Many common themes emerged from speakers across very disparate disciplines. This article attempts to draw out the main features of the emerging vision of a *New Renaissance*.

Fields of enquiry and speakers

Our aim was to span a broad field of inquiry, illustrated by the following roughly categorised list: from politics (David Ennals, Jonathon Porritt, Sara Parkin), through economics (James Robertson, Paul Ekins), religion (Donald Reeves, David Jenkins), science (Rupert Sheldrake, Stephan Harding), ecology (Edward Goldsmith, Diana Schumacher, Peter Harper), arts and architecture (Michael Tucker, Bill Grant, Arthur Quarmby), education (Satish Kumar), anthropology (Helena Norberg-Hodge), psychotherapy (Richard Llewellyn), consumerism (Richard Adams) to philosophy (Henryk Skolimowski).

Problems and root causes

It is striking how common was the view of today's problems, across such a broad spectrum of speakers. We are becoming clear on the parameters of our predicament, which appear to have been largely caused by the successes and failures of the past 400 years since the last Renaissance! Indeed these problems are far more widely discussed in 'mainstream' media today than they were in 1992 when our project began!

Pollution, population, sustainability

The annual *State of the World*ⁱ reports have focused attention around the world on the limits to the world's capability to sustain human life, and the way in which mankind is pushing towards these limits, fuelled by the spread of Western-style development and by growth in populations. The phenomena of global warming and ozone layer depletion have forced themselves into the public consciousness, leading to a much broader recognition that there may indeed be a problem.

The UN conference at *Rio 1992* presented the first apparently serious attempt by the world political establishment to recognise this and to do at least something about it, beginning the move towards sustainability.

Economic growth and development, poverty

Economic growth and the paradigm of 'development' for 'undeveloped' countries are apparently the cause of increasing poverty in the third world. We have had inappropriate development - large mega projects at the expense of indigenous populations, the notorious problems of third world debt due to over-stretched loans, and the detrimental social effects of stringencies imposed by the International Monetary Fund.

Equally the paradigm of 'development' has seen the increasing destruction of local and indigenous cultures and the destabilisation of the traditional family. In the West, driven by parallel technological development, we see increasing disparity of wealth, growth of insecurity and unemployment, and the development of an increasingly unemployable underclass.

A further by-product of economic growth is to fuel the capability of countries, notably those whose political systems are less mature, to wage war both internally and against each other. Western countries have appeared only too willing to support this in terms of the arms trade. Intractable terrorism is a not unrelated problem.

Size, globalisation

Globalisation of world trade is clearly felt by those in power to be a 'good thing', as shown by the various GATT rounds with their emphasis on liberalised trade. Apparent positive effects in terms of goods available in the West are undeniable.

Its less welcome effects are apparent in degraded third world environments, pollution from widespread transport of goods, wars to protect strategic oil supplies, destruction of traditional communities, etc.

Even within countries such as the UK the trend to size and centralisation has been apparent during the long years of conservative government. The disempowering of local communities, towns, boroughs and counties has continued apace.

Materialism, mechanism, reductionism

Materialism has been the dominating 20th century world view. The universe is seen as simply comprising matter and space, and that is all there is to it. In the extreme version any spiritual dimension is denied.

Related to materialism is the mechanistic world view which has dominated much of science over the last 350 years following development of the theory of 'world as machine' in the time of Descartes and Newton. The need at that time was to reduce the stranglehold of a dominant and stagnant religion. Humanity needed the breath of fresh air that came from science, but mechanism in turn became the dominant and stagnating paradigm.

Fortunately physics is beginning to undermine this dominant mechanistic position. The quantum theory has long demonstrated effects that are just not explicable in mechanistic terms. Biology seems to be one of the last bastions of the mechanistic view, rejecting modern 'heresies' such as Rupert Sheldrake's theory of morphic resonanceⁱⁱ.

The reductionist viewpoint is another aspect of the dominant paradigm. Its premise is that everything can be broken down into a number of component parts, which can be separately analysed. These parts can then be reassembled to produce the whole.

Systems theory has long undermined this view. The mathematics of chaos and complexity have shown that a system can show properties that are not evident and cannot be predicted from its underlying component rules. The whole is more than the sum of the parts.

Spiritual crisis, religious decline, loss of value

The essentially materialistic western society is seeing a crisis of the spirit. The denial of soul and spirit is the denial of that which is highest in man. This is increasingly showing effects in terms of the amoral and value-free behaviour of both our government and individuals and groups within the country.

It is logical that the ultimate result of travelling the 'low road' is to reap only what is low and ultimately evil. The fate of the materialistic communist Soviet Union should surely have sounded a warning bell to the West, as well as being a source of rejoicing.

The net effect of the above has been a loss of value. Not only have we lost basic human values with the loss of a spiritual orientation and the focus on materialism, but we have also arguably been subject to a con-trick on values.

It is argued that current economics is value-free when in fact it is heavily loaded with a set of values which deny our basic humanity. It is argued that mechanistic science is value free, when it denies those things which are perhaps of greatest value.

Institutionalised religions have for millennia been a bulwark against the degeneration of values, albeit at the cost of imposing their own stultifying dogmas. The 20th century decline of religion in a world dominated by materialism has led to a crisis of values, a crisis of the human spirit.

Much of our modern art and architecture provides us with an unin-spired illustration of this.

Heart, mind, brain

Related to this spiritual crisis is the loss of heart and compassion. This is not necessarily at the level of the individual, where much of our day-by-day experience is very human. It is at the level of our heartless ruling institutions and paradigms as they attempt to grapple with problems of scale. It is at this level that we destroy communities, create the underclass, the ruination of wars, etc.

In the triad of body/ mind/ heart that characterises the personal human being the heart is neglected. Symptoms include the above dominant mechanistic paradigms and the much lamented thousands of years of dominance of the masculine/ logical at the expense of the feminine/ feeling.

Emerging vision

Again there are striking common themes across the visions put forward by our speakers. When we understand the problems and their causes the solutions tend to become apparent.

Sustainable ecology

Over the last few years the need for sustainability has been acknowledged by politicians across the world, as shown by the Earth Summit in Rio 1992. However it is still not apparent that the rhetoric is being matched by corresponding action. In particular there is a supreme reluctance to reduce the dependence of the Western economies on petroleum and the motor car - both major sources of widespread pollution and contributors to global warming.

It is also not apparent that business has fully taken on board the message, most pollution being created by business. Leading businesses are learning how to address sustainability through mechanisms such as environmental/ social auditing/ assessment.

However businesses still need to decide that this is as important as the bottom line! This will not generally happen until political leaders establish the business environment that encourages it by suitable regulation and taxation policy, both nationally and globally.

Our vision must be for both political and business leaders to make sustainability a REAL commitment, recognising their unique responsibilities. Lip service just will not do.

Responsibility

Personal responsibility is not restricted to our leaders. The direction the world takes is the sum of all our individual actions. The problem is 'us' not 'them'. We each as individuals must recognise that what we do matters and shapes the future.

The attitude that 'I'm only one individual; I can't do anything about it' is necessarily false and dangerous. We all make a contribution to the future, whether we make conscious choices or not. It does not have to be too dramatic. Our speakers gave many examples.

Jonathon Porritt stressed the importance of 'doing the little things', such as recycling, using the car less,... Satish Kumar emphasised: "Start where you stand and take a first step, followed by a second, and so on..."

David Ennals gave us the example of 'citizen peacemaking' where an initiative by ordinary citizens of Norway had made a major contribution to the push towards peace in the middle East.

Richard Adams showed how as consumers we can 'shop for tomorrow', using purchasing power to influence business in an ethical direction.

Peter Harper gave us the example set by the dedicated pioneers of alternative technologies at the Centre for Alternative Technologyⁱⁱⁱ.

Edmund Burke's truism was also quoted: "For evil to triumph it is only necessary for good men to do nothing!"

The modern preoccupation with rights, power and money must be balanced by a recognition of the responsibilities that these bring with them. These are two sides of a coin.

Similarly the power of business and its money must become balanced by a commensurate social and environmental responsibility. It is not enough to make money for shareholders and exercise untrammelled power.

The move of business towards ethical behaviour and social responsibility is just as necessary as the responsibility of the individual - of course the two are inextricably intertwined!

Local economy and politics - community

Part of this return of a responsibility culture has to be a return of power to local communities - a reclamation from the large central organisations that have leached it away. The principle of subsidiarity applies at all levels, not just between nation states and the supra-national EEC!

With his multi-level one-world economy James Robertson^{iv} showed how the economic system could be developed in directions that are much more benign than current mono-economies.

Helena Norberg-Hodge^v stressed that much of the world still lives in villages. Our vision must be that this will continue in that the local community should most effectively direct local development and must retain a balance of power with the national, global and regional barons.

Encouraging developments include Local Agenda 21 coming out of Rio 1992 and the development of the *Real World^{vi}* coalition in the UK. The latter shows organisations created to address many of our previously noted problems coming together to try to influence appropriate political and economic change.

Appropriate scale and human scale, education

Many of the political problems are problems of scale - solutions are required with an appropriate scale. Equally much of the problem of pollution is to do with the scale of operations - large industry, large scale dams, factory farming and fishing, mega war machines, huge nuclear plants, etc. EF Schumacher well recognised this with his theme of *Small is Beautiful^{vii}*. Our vision must be that all operations are undertaken with an appropriate scale - a balance between the inappropriately large and the inappropriately small. Very large scale is necessarily unwieldy, requires great concentrations of power, requires large amounts of money, and is vulnerable to terrorism and corruption on the grand scale.

One area that depends very much on very localised human interaction is that of education, on which our very future depends. It is the interaction of the teacher with the child that provides the essential basis for education. The teaching system can provide inspiration or deadening. A human scale, rather than a factory scale must be our vision.

Education is obviously critical to our vision. The prime purpose of education must become to fit the new generation to live out our vision on the earth, and develop their own vision to go far beyond, continuing the growth of the human race.

Satish Kumar's example of the Small School at Hartland in Devon demonstrates one pioneer. The approach of the Robert Muller schools^{viii} provides further inspiration - an education oriented to the miracle of human life, the human family, the individual's place in time and his place in the universe.

Open science

Science needs to move beyond the materialistic, mechanistic reductionist paradigm. It must recognise that this paradigm and the experimental method only address a part of existence, leaving behind those who would arrogantly pretend that this could be all that there is. Quantum physics and the understanding of subtle energy fields is rapidly forcing it to confront the inevitable.

Rupert Sheldrake expressed the point succinctly: "Science addresses what is repeatable and time reversible; most important events happen once and cannot be repeated."

The reality of subjective experience is only to a small degree addressable by the experimental method, but if that is the way our higher faculties lie then how long can an attachment to simplistic objectivity hold humanity back from its destiny?

Soul and spirit

Thus has the denial of science supplemented the stifling of religion in suppressing the world of soul and spirit despite the testimony of so many over the ages.

The term 'mystic' is very much disparaged in the scientific paradigm. And yet even Einstein, one of our century's greatest brains, often emphasised the mystical and non-rational source of his inspiration.

The development of our connection with those higher faculties will provide the true grounding for development of appropriate values and ethics. Also here lies the common root between all the world's great religions. We need to thus re-integrate religion into the natural order of things.

Those variants of psychology known as 'transpersonal psychology', such as the psychosynthesis presented by Richard Llewellyn, are perhaps here seen to be pointing the way.

Love, compassion and non-violence

We have referred to the masculine-dominated nature of our society. Its effect is a suppression of qualities of love and compassion. Our political and economic systems are run by 'objective' values which seem to deny compassion for our fellows. Increasingly politicians take up the mantra of responsibility but use it to disenfranchise those who are not fortunate enough to be employed - while it is their very policies which have created the unemployment

problem. Our vision must be for all human beings to reconnect with that love and compassion for each and all of their fellow beings - the message Christ came to give 2000 years ago.

When we are motivated by love then we will address problems in a non-violent way, as espoused by Mahatma Gandhi. We recognise that our supposed opponent must be a part of the solution to the problem.

Imagination, inspiration and the arts

The problem of the arts seems to be that they have become something separate and apart from the people. Modern architecture creates buildings that are functional but not inspiring, comparing poorly with those of previous ages. Art is something artists do and ordinary people admire, or not as is more frequently the case.

Our vision must be for an art which is in-spired and relevant to everyone - the legitimate pursuit of everyone. The imagination of the individual must be unleashed! The very word in-spired shows the direction in which we must look.

Bill Grant gave us one practical example of Grizedale in the Lake District where practicing artists are integrated into the local rural environment and community.

Stephan Harding, Michael Tucker and Helena Norberg-Hodge showed in their lectures how much more effectively beautiful images and sounds can get their messages across than simply using mere words!

Holistic views

There is a move to more holistic, as opposed to reductionist, views across many fields, notably in the medical field where alternative holistic approaches are increasingly being used as a complement to the essentially reductionist 'western medicine'.

The need to address ecological problems has caused an increasing awareness of the need to look at the overall systems rather than just tackle the parts. Everything is interconnected! Relationships rather than objects become of most importance.

Gaia theory is an ultimate systems view - the earth itself is seen as a living organism. The space age has allowed us the privilege and inspiration of seeing pictures of earth taken from space; their heart-rending beauty lends credence to *Gaia*.

Peter Harper gave us the image of the 'blowing vacuum cleaner', which appears effective at the level of the symptom of causing the dust to disappear, but is ineffective at the systems level as it simply shifts the dust elsewhere in the house!

Our vision must be that the systems approach treating wholes becomes our natural approach to solving problems rather than the reductionist approach treating symptoms.

Living philosophy

Philosophy is concerned with the love of wisdom. Indeed the 15th century Renaissance was inspired by the rediscovery of Greek culture, and particularly philosophy.

Today's philosophy seems to have somewhat lost its way in being seen as somewhat esoteric and irrelevant to everyday life, when wisdom is clearly so much needed!

Our vision must be for a living philosophy which reclaims the love of wisdom for our everyday use, indeed reconnects us with the other principles that we have elucidated for our vision.

This philosophy must reconnect with the perennial wisdom which has long been cherished by the wise, but at the expense of remaining largely esoteric until modern times.

Henryk Skolimowski expressed well our need to become re-inspired: "Why be afraid of words which resound with our soul?". He describes a participatory philosophy, where we become co-creators with the universe. We "think reverentially" and "walk in beauty".^{ix}

Reflections

This article has necessarily been merely a cursory overview of the emerging vision, limited by the viewpoint of the author and by the scope of the set of lectures presented. Any misconceptions or incoherencies are entirely the responsibility of the author rather than of the various speakers.

Of course, for some people there is nothing new here. Regular readers of *Resurgence* magazine will have no difficulty recognising most of the points made, and will doubtless view them as simplistic.

We have been encouraged over the past few years by signs of progress, with many of these ideas becoming of much broader currency, particularly in the mainstream media. At least there is some apparent concern and action, but there is still a long long way to go.....

What we are about is a major paradigm shift. However, Sara Parkin raised a very relevant cautionary note: “the last thing ordinary people with jobs want is a paradigm shift”. It is no good our going around trying to sell this change to a majority who are not interested. We must find ways of changing and influencing others that are appropriate and meaningful for them!

Perhaps the most important message is on our personal responsibility. What we individually do matters, and we are creating the future right now. Just imagine if we all took on board Satish Kumar’s precept of always considering the impact of our decisions on the seventh generation!

It is up to us to individually move away from our lower, darker side in the direction of our higher, lighter side - the direction of the *New Renaissance*. Humanity is a gregarious bunch - the rest may start to come along with us!

And as Jonathon Porrit said let us approach the enterprise “with celebration and joy”.

ⁱAnnual *State of the World* reports by the Worldwatch Institute

ⁱⁱRelated books by Rupert Sheldrake include *The Presence of the Past*, *The Rebirth of Nature*, *Seven Experiments the Could Change the World*

ⁱⁱⁱ Centre for Alternative Technology, Machynlleth, Wales

^{iv} Books by James Robertson include:

^v Helena Norberg-Hodge....

^{vi}*The politics of the real world*, ed Michael Jacobs *Real World*

^{vii} *Small is Beautiful*, E.F.Schumacher

^{viii} Robert Muller Schools

^{ix} *Participatory Philosophy*, Henryk Skolimowski