Now that it has Happened

Digby Hartridge

In my eightieth year in the middle of a pandemic, what I always thought to be my duty, to make sense of existence, took on a new urgency. I hasten to add: such introspection is only one strand in my life! I have other preoccupations: classic cars, Shona sculpture, oral history, feeding the blackbirds – the usual incoherent mix. But the failings of our society are suddenly manifest, especially where our elemental sectarianism and western self-centredness combine and collide with our dependence on a fragile web of technology and last-moment supply chains. I see how few relatives I have left and how deceased friends have been replaced by latter-day never-more-than acquaintances. I see how badly equipped I am, compared with, say, my grandfather, to cope if my car breaks down, let alone to survive in a wilderness or even a prolonged power cut.

We are all uniquely formed and we do not wholly understand one another. If I correctly, though rather baldly and simplistically, interpret the latest thinking: as babies we start devising frameworks to cope with our lives and everything thereafter must be fitted into them; these frameworks are adjusted by happenstance and education and propaganda, but arguably insufficiently to shape us into competent beings and certainly insufficiently to slot us readily into our splintered communities. When you consider our diverse histories and the varying order in which even shared familial relationships come to us, it is reassuring to see how well we do rub along.

Here I shall discuss the Sea of Faith, conscientious and questioning, strand in my life. In this mode I imagine I have been expecting the present crisis all my life. (Though the trigger could have been some other pandemic or nuclear war, pollution, asteroids, antibiotic resistance, climate change, drought, a standoff with China – and any of their consequences.)

The following clarification is also by way of apology to you: By chance I was born during the Second World War into a privileged ruling class and into a land isolated from the worst of the hostilities, Southern Rhodesia. My grandparents came from different places and different backgrounds – Anglican evangelical and Irish Catholic, Liberal and Conservative, upper and middle and lower working class – and at the turn of the 20th century all four had emigrated, separately, and the Empire allowed them to come together and pass on their disparate but distinctively late Victorian views, views that have been since less modified than they might have been had we all stayed at 'home'.

For three of my infant years my father was fighting in Italy and my mother was with me all the time. As a studious only child I learnt from books rather than from my peers. I lived in comfort beside poor people in a thinly-populated land – and always on the fringe of the bushveld where I could see the depredations of man as pesticides and buildings and industry replaced game and insect. At University, Social Anthropology put Economics into perspective. The British Empire's religion sustained me, the paternalistic Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius.

Then I suffered an illness. Recovering, I found myself quite suddenly on the political fringe, not one of the ninety per cent of an electorate that believed white rule would last forever: through circumstances rather than by nature I was a (somewhat limp) rebel. On the 'native question' I had drifted fortuitously into believing my own eyes. I took to heart the ideas of Olive Schreiner or Doris Lessing, just as on other matters I was persuaded by Ruth Benedict or Rachel Carson or Vance Packard or Mary McCarthy or Sloan Wilson.

Sometimes I was arrogant: was I not one of the few who saw the Emperor had no clothes? But more often doubting myself: could I really be right? Just as I ask today: perhaps we can after all wheedle our way out of this mess by means of conspicuous consumption and ingenious scientific tweaking? Then (as now) I was not particularly brave: there were few political white martyrs in Rhodesia as we 'liberals' were merely insulted or ignored. I realised I was accidentally set apart and in retrospect I think it caused me to be, rather than confrontational, oblique and flippant, for if I disagreed I could make little difference by arguing with my contemporaries – frightened people tend to splutter with rage and erect barriers – but I found I might make some impression with a joke or disconcerting aside.

I experienced a feeling of helplessness and irrelevance, and now I am suddenly reminded of it. What should be one's role in a highly polarised society? In Rhodesia a *military* one was assumed. But then and later and in all contexts it is hard to be a

militant centrist. Thoroughly sceptical, unwelcome in my own country, I emigrated twice, to Australia, where the class system and racism and hypocrisy surprised me, and then to England, where little did – my standard Empire-wide education had prepared me for it. And here I can sometimes pass as a native!

Of course nowhere am I persecuted but, let me tell you, émigrés of colour endure a startlingly different experience: I have witnessed their world at Heathrow or at the Visas & Immigration Service and Support (sic) Centre, Solihull. But like all immigrants I shall never be at peace, never feel 'planted', fated to look at events from a remove. My deepest feelings have been set aside, and I confess it follows that English natives can appear to me to be colossally complacent, though they may be no more so than anyone. Yet the outsider does have his or her perspective.

I thought in some excitement that the pandemic, the first of the expected catastrophes, would wake everyone up. Perhaps it has but I can see little evidence of change – as always there is a surfeit of new ideas, but old habits persist. Climate change and environmental destruction had stirred us into some action, but minimal action. We had tolerated crass populism; we met the loss of biodiversity with the token reintroduction of a favourite animal; the causes of illegal immigration remained unaddressed; overpopulation was a non-subject. Now perhaps we would begin to stir? But to my quarantined mind we were not rising to the challenge – yearning to book optimistic holidays in the (amplified) sun or queue at Primark or otherwise swarm.

The only plus is that my stunted emotional growth has been explained: I never learned to hug everyone at sight. Fault lines appeared: vaccine nationalism, profitable outsourcing, bizarre rumours, denialism. There was global callousness beside local kindness. And I could see little sign that we Sofists were stirring. I have been disappointed that, while we happily argue about philosophical concepts, we rarely tackle the starkly obvious moral dilemmas of the 21st century.

African elephant among endangered species. wwf.org.uk

Morality

The following are questions of morality and I will start with the essential ones. What should be the response of a person of a religious sensibility, albeit an atheist post-Christian person, to the challenges we face? I do not positively look forward to an imminent end to the world so, as our prospects diminish, how can I live with myself?

Climate change dominates intelligent discourse but the politicians and religious leaders and no doubt influencers are wriggling to avoid clear answers. Capitalism's excesses I take it most of us acknowledge but do *all of us* not satisfy ourselves with half-measures? What if everyone lived as *you* do? What do *you* say to Christians who have forgotten the Sermon on the Mount? To true believers who maintain no one would want to be a 'wealth-creator' if they were not disproportionately rewarded?

Though we are all asking questions now, are they anywhere near radical enough? And of course we do not think rationally. We think emotionally and it is here I revert to the child. As a child I saw Africans in mud huts near our spacious bungalow and I asked my mother about it. She said: 'They are happy with very little.' Oh, and some truth in it: we really do not need many material possessions, and I can bear witness to the way peoples with very little freedom or personal wealth can live with their burdens and face the world with laughter.

At the age of twenty I wrote, for my studies in Social Anthropology, a dissertation on the many hundreds of sectarian sects in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). Their congregations might number a score or maybe a thousand. Typically they loved hymns and foot-stamping and intoned gospel readings and dancing in the aisles, revelling in dramatic ceremonies like total immersion in baptism or exorcisms. They valued Revelation and gnostic writings. They merged Christian teachings with traditional beliefs in ancestral spirits or clan taboos; frequently they permitted polygamy. And joining an independent church could be a substitute for political protest, then most tightly controlled by the government.

Bemba people. Image: kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com

I was greatly moved by the story of the Ban ma Mutina. I dug out my notes and find I am moved still. The Ban ba Mutima were lapsed Roman Catholics and their preferred text was 'Blessed are the poor'. Their leader, Emilio Mulolani, walked barefoot and carried no money. Church members, themselves poor, gave away clothes and food to all in need, especially to paupers. (Some anthropologists saw this as congruent with the Bemba peoples custom of food-sharing.) In church, collections were taken in secret, to discourage showing off. Men and women sat together in services. Husbands were exhorted to destroy pride by participating in housework. So be it there were more female than male adherents: they took Jesus's words seriously. Fancy that! In England, anon, the Rector did not fancy seeing their story in the parish magazine.

This is just scratching the surface of the moral universe. There are scores of practical issues, and space for barely one of those here, to illustrate a point, because the issues might relate to the construction industry, power generation, transport, agriculture, clothing, cosmetics, you name it. Specifically, a boy obsessed with motoring and still a boy, I knew enough to be wary of buying a diesel car. And today I suspect that electric cars are a poor solution to the problems of personal transport. If you insist on your own conveyance, the best provisional answer is probably to keep your petrol car for twenty years and a million miles, quite attainable with proper maintenance and spares provision and the proud skills of mechanics of the old school, while waiting for a viable hydrogen fuel or hydrogen cell replacement. There are dozens of such practical matters. The solutions on offer are likely to be ill-understood or short-termist and highly expedient. Or obvious and neglected: wear every garment a hundred times and patronise a tailor if you cannot do the alterations yourself.

No one knows more than a tiny sliver about our world. So how do we persuade people who are not equipped to deal with science or the modern media (ourselves in other spheres?) to steer through the complexities, even if we are rational and caring, to avoid the trap of believing only what is *comfortable* and what suits industrialists? Or, if you reject these arguments, what is your message for the poverty-stricken? Are the dying poor natural wastage, unavoidable casualties, as Malthus fatalistically argued? What are not avoidable are the arguments about population – unless you blank your mind. If David Attenborough can make little progress, I do not expect to. For a start, I do not fully understand why we are we all so reluctant to tackle the matter. Though do I really have to explain I am not proposing selective euthanasia and forced sterilisation?

Random reflections. But the major religions take up their positions, diametrically opposite to the drift of mine, so it is surely our duty as Sofists to give

some thought to it. I am not pretending to have any remedies but I can tell you that the main recommendations of the organisation Population Matters include educating and protecting the rights of women, maintaining aid, reducing overconsumption and promoting balanced third world economies.

I am of an age where folk run back over their lives and are wracked by guilt, various personal regrets to the fore, and I am serious when I ask: where has my thinking gone awry? How would I know if I were tipping into dementia? Are these just the misgivings of a rich man standing before the eye of the needle, combined with fashionable colonial guilt? Please advise.

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Select Reading

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Population Matters (populationmatters.org)

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Freedom to Love

Nothing can take away the freedom to love;
not even a torturous death on a cross.
For love is the source of life itself
and God is that Love; love is our hope.

Christ died not to undo things done.
Christ died to show us how to love;
how to get out of a hopeless condition.
In short, he showed us how to live.

To be 'in Christ' is to be in love.
'Yes', it is as simple as that.
No fancy church dogma needed;
just straightforward love.

All our systems should be based on love,
since love is the way to live fully;
fully human lives are meant for everyone.
Love is the only true capital.

And the paradox of all paradoxes
is that selflessness, and not selfishness,
is the foundation of love and, therefore, life.
Life is truly relational; not individual.

To be rooted and grounded in love
is to let Love live in you;
to let Christ live in you. And yes,
to be surprised that it works.

The dark night of the soul is all
about letting love work in you;
not knowing where it will lead,
but trusting the source of love.

Clarity and certainty, there are none,
but the joy of love is inestimable.
Fears are dispelled; anxiety is quenched.
Sterile beliefs are replaced by living love.

No man is an island; we are all part of the whole.
Government should be for all; not the few.
Compassion should be the only guide,
along with maximum freedom to love.

And simple, 'few words' prayer is the way
to discover the daily, ongoing path
such that love can travel in and out
through the ever swinging door of life.

Grenville Gilbert