

SOFiA

Exploring Values, Meaning and Spirituality

Conference Supplement

Conference Report

The 2019 Conference was held in Christchurch on parts of Friday 1st and Saturday 2nd of November. The theme was “Transforming Communities: Finding Meaning in a Consumption - Driven World”. It was in the new “two day conference” format that the national Committee has been working on through the year, after it having been discussed for some years as a way of reducing costs and adapting to our ageing membership and high costs. There was no live-in accommodation and the conference was not held at a boarding school, but at All Souls Church’s new Merivale building.

The registration desk opened at about 12.30 pm and the introduction began at 1.45pm. Our Chair, Doug Sellman, greeted us, and Rob Campbell led us in a Mihi Whakatau. For the first time since the early nineties Sir Lloyd Geering was unable to attend because of frailty; his wife Shirley was in the same situation.

Introduction to the theme

The first presentations were three brief reflective personal views by three Christchurch people with experience in community building, on the conference theme.

Amelia Dewhurst talked about some of the stresses of being a young person these days: anxieties over climate change which those in power seem not to be addressing,

too much consumer choice and not enough provision for disposing of consumer rubbish. Local youth are trying to get effective action on local issues such as transport in Christchurch.

Catherine (Cat) McFedries, a young community activist, talked from a consciously Christian perspective about her life building community amongst the underprivileged. She encountered difficulty when local churches wanted to claim her group’s work, but also wanted theological conformity with tenets which jarred with Cat’s own sense of Jesus’ message.

Jim Consedine, an older Catholic priest with a lifetime’s work with prisoners, justice reform and among the poor, sought to carry “the best of past traditions into the present and future in a consciously intergenerational succession.” Consumerism and a low wage economy promoted by politicians and others pursuing “consumption until ruination” policies contradict traditional values in his critique. He said that we should find hope in our faith traditions.

Core groups

These introductory speakers were followed by the first of three core group sessions, each of six core groups having ten to eleven participants including a leader to guide time use and keep speakers on topic. This first core group was used for introductions, to discuss the three speakers’ pieces, and to begin the process of formulating questions for the final panel discussion. Afternoon tea

followed, served ably, as were all the refreshments through the conference, by Tricia Crumpton, one of the three conference organisers, and her small band of helpers, most of them family members I believe.

AGM

Then came the AGM at 4.00pm. The committee expected it not to be trouble-free given that there were two very controversial topics being discussed and voted on. And indeed it wasn't. About 50 people were in attendance, although it was not clear whether all were members. The usual reports were presented:

- from the Chair (a very busy year!).
- The Treasurer, Philip Grimmett. Our accounts at \$7,000, are at their lowest for some years following two years of conference cost overruns and falling numbers of members. We should consider a possible subs increase.
- The Local groups Convenor, Jan Calvert, reported increased communication between local groups and the national committee, through Zoom internet conferences. The number of local groups has fallen from 17 to 12 in 10 years.
- The membership Officer, Pete Cowley's report was read for him, as he was absent. The ways of counting membership have been adjusted in the last year, but paid membership has decreased from over 400 ten years ago, to 267 just before the conference, as we well understand older members are becoming incapacitated and dying, new members are not being recruited in enough numbers to fill the gaps. As Website Master, Pete reported that he has been checking out new and more standard and user-friendly formats for the website after taking over from Noel Cheer but has withheld publishing until the name change issue has been resolved and he can construct a permanent letterhead.
- The newsletter editor, Laurie Chisholm, says he enjoys the work and instituting improvements, and asks for more articles to be sent to him.

- Alison Eng, our Archivist, said our Archives situation remains in limbo, as it has in the previous two years, while Canterbury University determines if it can expand its Rangiora storage facility and resume accepting material for archiving. There was no resource centre report.

Name change proposals

The first major issue of the AGM was the name change, which has taken up more committee time than any other for two years or more, and not for the first time. The procedure settled on was to present and vote on two alternative names. "Rethinking Religion: Exploring meaning, values and spirituality" was spoken to by Doug Sellman, While "Quest Aotearoa: Exploring meaning, values and spirituality" was spoken to by Laurie Chisholm. "Rethinking Religion" gained 19 votes, while "Quest Aotearoa" gained 14 votes. As there were about 50 people present it is clear that not everyone voted. A second choice was then offered between "Rethinking Religion", and the existing name "Sea of Faith" which had passionate defenders. "Rethinking Religion" gained 11 votes and Sea of Faith gained 24. Then a third choice was offered between the existing "Sea of Faith", and a modification, "Sea Of Faith in Aotearoa" (SOFiA). Brian Ellis spoke to this choice. The vote was SoF 7 votes, SOFiA 27 votes, So we have now set in train what is legally needed to change our name to SOFiA.

Rule changes

The second major issue was a small number of proposed rule changes to cover a recent legal change in our relationship to the Charities Commission, the organisation's change of name, and a simplification and clarification of the wording of some of the rules. Although this has taken long and intense work and argument in committee over the past year, the AGM voted in the changes in record short time once a version with grammatical and typographical errors removed was circulated, but it did require a reconvening of the AGM on Saturday to achieve it.

The final issue for Friday's AGM was new committee members, since Doug Sellman

has finished his four year term on the committee, and both Natali Allen (co-opted) and Jan Calvert withdrew. Andrew Calvert's attendance had been in relation to the proposed rule changes and he now wishes to withdraw. This leaves Steve Collard, Philip Grimmet, Brian Ellis and Ian Crumpton who may well feel like taking a back seat after his great efforts to get this conference under way. The rules currently require eight members. We currently have no women members and both Philip Grimmet and Steve Collard suffer from having no background in Church organisation, with all the skills, knowledge and contacts that such a background brings. Nominations and volunteers were asked for, there were none. We are considering asking some of the newcomers present at the conference, even though they were not actually paid up members at the time. Brian Ellis has made some contacts. This may be symptomatic of the wider crisis in SOFiA, also shown by Sir Lloyd Geering's situation. The majority of our members have been drawn from an age cohort with a particular religious/church background that was particular to its time in the English speaking world, though all the issues to come out of that experience may not have been resolved, our organisation will have less appeal to younger potential members unless it can adapt to the issues that they think must be addressed.

The AGM was followed by a light pizza and salad meal also organised by Tricia Crumpton. This well matched the need to stay alert for the next session, the first of the keynote presentations.

Minister's welcome

Before the Lloyd Geering lecture, we were given a brief welcome by the minister for All Souls, Megan Herles-Mooar. All Soul's is a post-earthquake new construction, bringing together two previously quite separate congregations, deliberately designed to reflect a new mode of interacting with and serving the needs of its ambient community; no longer merely Anglican, but with interfaith dimensions and service dimensions responding to community needs. These needs might be of Muslims, post-massacre, LBGT people and others who

would not have been within the orbit of the traditional congregations.

This was followed by Dr. Geoff Troughton from Victoria University Religious Studies Dept. who has taken on the task of setting up a Sir Lloyd Geering Scholarship, and needs publicity and funds for it.

Lloyd Geering lecture

The inaugural Sir Lloyd Geering lecture ("Beyond Consumer Citizenship: How concepts of "well-living" can support youth in a changing world") was given by Associate Professor Bronwyn Hayward. She spoke about an international study she has been co-ordinating. This investigates the situation and the hopes of young people in cities of seven different countries. The consumption patterns of young people, their energy, transport, communications and materials use, their awareness of it, their assigning "problem" status to it and their ideas for improvements and solutions. This was followed by supper and socialising.

Doug opened the second day at around nine with a welcome.

Making meaning and transforming community

Our second keynote presentation ("Making meaning and Transforming Community") took an unusual form. We, the audience, were non-speaking third parties to a conversation between a 58 year-old father, David Hannah, and his nineteen year-old daughter, Hana Olds. He is a community worker who grew up in a Pakeha suburb with youth groups, sports clubs, no internet, smartphones, or weekend shopping. She was schooled in full immersion kura kaupapa Maori (she began her contribution with an extended mihi in confident Maori) growing up with the Internet and social media (which she has currently given up because following its "likes" and "dislikes" induced anxiety and depression). They discussed their experiences, the lessons they had drawn and their hopes, and their thinking on transforming communities.

This was followed by another core group session where we discussed the first two

keynote presentations and continued to formulate and refine questions for the final panel discussion.

Self-transcendence and assurance of meaning

Morning tea (the Crumpton family in service again) was followed by Merv Dickinson's very different presentation under the heading "Self-transcendence and the assurance of meaning". Merv has a long history in personal development and the study of individual psychology, some of it purposefully within a community setting. He takes a firmly analytical view of the psychological outlook and practice of integrating human-level individual consciousness into awareness of its place and its co-dependence in the pyramid of levels of consciousness and being, individually and in community, of all living things and the inanimate small things from which human consciousness developed, and within larger existences up to the level of the entire universe.

This was followed again by core groups discussing the presentation and the questions provoked by it.

Panel discussion

After a packed lunch there was a panel discussion with all seven speakers chaired by Adrian Skelton. The speakers answered individual questions if they wished. Questions such as: "Is society different from community?" "What practical steps can we take to create resilient communities?" "What should be our role in bringing about systemic change within our communities?" "What will feed the spirit as traditional ways are lost?" "How can we give new meanings to traditional church visions?" "How is the experience of self-transcendence related to community?"

Doug Sellman closed the conference after 3.00 pm. Rob McKay led the poroporoaki.

Steve Collard



Hana Olds and David Hanna in Conversation



The full panel

Brief Presentations

Amelia Dewhurst

1. Intro

Since I was a kid, climate change and the destruction of our natural world have been in the collective psyche of the developed world. We grew up being told that aerosols were making a hole in the ozone, we should avoid driving too much, and that the items we buy nowadays are covered in far too much plastic. It wasn't something that we had to relearn later: it was natural for us to think about the changing climate, worry about it and strategize about what we could do to help.



It was puzzling that no one else seemed to think it was that big a deal. Had they not read Dr Seuss's *The Lorax* as a child? I realise now how lucky I was to grow up with that knowledge. And we see in lots of young people today this same desire to know more, do more, and act in a meaningful way. We see others who are looking around them, knowing something is not right, and looking for friends who think the same way. We know that it is often hard to do things alone. This to me is a community, finding your whanau, a clique, a group of people who share the same journey.

2. Transforming communities

When I think of transforming communities, I think evolution - yet that does not necessarily mean better. I love Otautahi. I see change, evolution, opportunity, bloom. Yet maybe it's because I haven't got the memory of what Canterbury used to be like. We all have different values and that changes how we see the idea of change.

My belief system isn't challenged when I communicate about climate change, I didn't have to relearn, I didn't grow up thinking about the other. Values are different

between cultures, socioeconomics, generations, genders, that is recognised when we define contribution, community. We here may all have the same values, yet the foundations are different.

3. Sustainability

When it comes to commodities and brand transparency. Some people know what they are buying into. But to know there are options is a sign of luxury of knowledge. There is also a financial luxury of being able to act upon those choices. Particularly young people have accepted this way of living. Hyper competitive, decision fatigue. Leaning to the easiest option, relying on the cheapest or most convenient. It's a lifestyle many of my friends have adopted.

Not wanting to explore the options due to being tired of there being so many options....

I don't blame them for choosing convenience. Yet I'm an advocate for institutional change, increasing attractiveness for alternatives.

Seoul, South Korea, chose to deal with the massive increase in population and traffic with an expressway, which would run across the city. The Ahyeon overpass was one of 101 expressways which were built during the 1980s but deconstructed in 2014, South Korea dealt with the increasing highway congestion by converting a road back to a park and replacing it with a train, artificial river, green track - biking, walking, running, buses, trains.

In Christchurch transport options are more readily available, I personally find alternative transport more attractive. But people also need to know about the alternatives too.

Consumption is increasing as wealth and connection increases, more alternatives are available, yet people need to understand all the alternatives. Transitioning is also about learning, unlearning and relearning. Stubbornness can slow us down.

4. Consumption

Generations have different consumer attitudes. The World Economic Forum this

year discussed Income; Urbanization; Demographics; Access to technology and innovation; and evolving consumer attitudes, as the main variables when looking into increased global consumption.

Consumer markets in India have predicted individuals income segment influences preference.

There we can already correlate the wealth increasing with the change of diet.

(Penpece, 2006) described a consumer society as when objects are quickly used and disposed of wastefully. Recently this rapid use and disposal has been largely associated with the corruption of values and thus often carries a negative meaning.

Yet also more wealth, more resources, **including Knowledge** and the luxury to focus on the future. Worlds have become increasingly connected, with even more internet users, with the ability to be more informed consumers there will be greater demand for brand transparency.

I and so many young people accepted the change to our environment. Young people recognise climate change is not a belief, this is the challenge of our generation. The cost of knowledge is the fatigue, the mental exhaustion from living in a competitive environment, to know what you're doing is wrong, but to know nothing else about the alternatives, or to not be given the tools to carry that out.

5. action/ question

When I think of the consumption-driven world, I have in the past thought the "bigger the fridge, the more food you put in it". That was based on what I had been taught. While we are increasing our consumption of commodities, we are increasing access to people, ideas. The use of money has a large influence on knowledge and increasing freedom.

Catherine McFedries

It's a privilege to be here today and I'm hoping to share some of my story.

I grew up eating my mother's dumplings, attending the local primary school, and the local Baptist church. I had piano, ballet and

violin lessons. As a child, I remember curling up next to my dad, with our big old battered Children's bible. The stories were dramatic, often violent, but each night I'd pray, "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild..." I went to CGHS like my



Brethren grandmother, and like a good Chinese daughter, I wanted to be a doctor. However, my mother's dreams for me were short lived. Somehow my little suburban Baptist church put me on a radical discipleship track that changed me forever.

Rather than dishing out benign bible studies,

- we sat with the homeless
- visited gay bars
- played touch rugby with prison inmates
- ran community events in poor neighbourhoods.

My eyes were opened to another whole side of my city I had been sheltered from, and I became profoundly aware of my privilege. The teachings of Jesus, to love my neighbour, especially those who were suffering, from this point began to shape the narrative of my life.

As Sunday church became increasingly irrelevant to me, I entered my adult life searching for Christian community that was committed to social action. I found a band of crazy young Christians in inner city Wellington.

We were young, with saviour complexes, and a fair dose of entitlement. But we were trying to find ways to bridge social inequality through hospitality, friendship, and community building. We became friends with the street community, the homeless, the institutionalised, the women and queens working our corner.

We ate together, shared space together, lit candles and prayed together. We marched to the Beehive for the seabed and foreshore, against the war on Iraq. And the brave ones faced arrest and stood trial. We were bucking the system, slowing down our study

and career commitments to make time for the stories told from the fringes of society. While us young radicals were exploring downward mobility we witnessed the upward mobility of our friends with new found social capital.

Caleb and I moved back to Christchurch to start a family and we sought out the same kind of community. As life focussed more around the home, babies and nappies, our place was always full - waifs and strays included. We fostered young people who were resilient and raucous - trying to weave a sense of whanau together.

Life was full of getting the next meal on the table, going on missions, laughing, trying to build good memories. It was also marred with P addiction, doors being kicked in by pimps, heartache and grief. But somewhere in the mess something beautiful was happening. We were shaping each other, unravelling our privilege and trauma as we found belonging together.

In my experience, the communities that stayed independent of the church continued to express diversity. But where these communities started to align to mainline churches, they would have to conform to theologies, Christian behaviour and church commitments that were often at odds with community life.

Perhaps the most the most tragic and heart-breaking for me was watching how our rainbow young people were side-lined, shamed and made to choose between their identity and their faith community.

I sometimes laugh at the irony of how Jesus has been co-opted by the West. How did a Middle Eastern man who was born in the backwaters of Judea and executed under Roman occupation, become the mascot of a Western empire? How did his teachings that scorned the powerful and prioritised those who were most oppressed by their systems, come to be the religion of the greatest colonisers on earth?

As church numbers continue to decline in the West, religious institutions are losing traction and relevancy. I wonder if the teachings of Jesus have ever had more poignancy and potency than right now, as we enter an age of mass extinction. Where

Jesus' critique of power and hypocrisy, and teaching love for the stranger is a message we desperately need in the West.

With our ever-insatiable demand for resource, we need a cultural inheritance that allows us to acknowledge the deep devastation we have caused to our global ecosystems and allows us to open our doors and hearts to those who challenge us the most.

Here in Aotearoa, we must acknowledge how the church has been used as a colonising tool.

How it has been complicit in the oppression of women, the rainbow community and other cultures. But sometimes I wonder if the very stories that have been distorted to oppress might also be the same stories retold to reclaim our collective healing?

I know this has been true for so many young people I know who want to do the hard work of decolonisation, living sustainably, and making space at the table. Their Christian ethic has allowed them to reimagine a new way of relating to diverse parts of the human family and work out their part to build stronger communities.

Jim Consedine

I was intrigued by the aim of this Conference, *Transforming Communities – finding meaning in a consumption-driven world*. A truly laudable aim in a world



where, in the Western hemisphere in particular, individual human rights are generally protected while social media, driven by individual opinion, holds sway over billions of lives, often undermining the common good.

My input today comes from the experience of 50 years of active Catholic priesthood, most of it spent working among the poor, and my own years of healthy research and tentative practice of the basic tenets of

Christian faith, particularly relating to the links between social justice and faith.

It has been a journey that has led me to the outer reaches of belief, circling like a baseball runner around the circumference of faith and practice, sliding in and out of bases, and finally back into the original base which holds me today.

One vital thing I have come to see is that I am the product of successive generations of faith-filled people, many familial and even more not so, and that my personal spiritual genes, my spiritual DNA, have been moulded by two primary sources: the love, support and wairua of my tupuna who have gone before - and my sisters and brothers who walk beside me now. Through them I am linked intimately to the Great Spirit of Life who exists beyond me but also within me. Many call this one God, others Allah, Io, Atua, Creator Spirit or Yahweh. There are many other names. For me, this one is personalised in the radical historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth, now present fully alive everywhere and every day in the Cosmic Christ.

Another central thing I have learnt is to relish and be proud of my Celtic, Christian and New Zealand heritages. From these multiple strands I draw strength and identity and, at the same time, I continue to expand my understanding of where that heritage is leading me. In an ever-expanding universe, I reach out from this base and continue to explore, carrying with me the best of the past as solidly rooted ground on which to stand. This base provides me with a framework from around and within from which I can explore the great beyond.

Without a framework to work from, solid ground upon which to stand, without a scaffolding holding together my belief system, I fear I would flounder like so many others in a world of competing ideologies and faiths, all claiming the absolute Truth and many adding, it seems to me, to the state of confusion so prevalent in our modern consumer society.

Consumerism itself is presented in the West as a fulfilling spiritual pathway, the god of the shopping malls, the Boxing Day sales and the low-wage economy. The

profiteering that flows from such an ideology debases everything that our rich faith traditions teach us is important about being human.

This addiction to consumerism has led us to the brink of catastrophe worldwide through environmental exploitation and the servitude, indeed enslavement, of billions of people who are exploited and shamelessly used to hold the consumer framework together and further expand it. GNP must continue to grow, say the economic gurus and politicians. There is a huge spiritual and environmental price to pay for such selfishness, greed and downright stupidity.

In this time of great stress and even social disintegration on our planet, my question today is: how do we insightfully critique this all-pervading dominant consumer capitalism unless we retain and develop the very best of scholarship and teaching handed on from the wisdom of the past, much of it contained in the mainstream faith traditions?

We may not have much to offer except that which forms the foundational stones of our religion – faith in God, love at all times even of our enemies, hope in the midst of crises. For example, I note that all major world faiths share the crucial virtue of hope, a teaching based on belief in God, the Great Spirit of life, who is ever listening to us, guiding us and walking with us. More than ever today, we need to witness to this hope that is larger than ourselves and taps into a deeper source.

Hope is grounded in a personal experience of God's love. It is the belief that together we can make the world a better place. It is a hope that can overcome despair, that can overcome even death itself.

Conclusion

The questions around traditional faiths is to a degree, a baby/bathwater situation. I have stayed with the baby (who for me is the Cosmic Christ), trying to personally grow and nurture her in my neighbour. At the same time I have kept trying to change the bathwater to something purer and more nourishing. It makes for a fulfilled and satisfying life.

Sir Lloyd Geering Lecture

Beyond consumer-citizenship. How concepts of “Well-Living” can support youth in a changing world.

Abstract

Understanding the issues facing young people in rapidly urbanising, high consumption societies is crucial as we strive to achieve both the



Sustainable Development Goals and the ambitions of the Paris Climate Agreement. In this presentation I will reflect on initial insights from CYCLES, the Children and Youth in Cities Lifestyle evaluation, a study I led with colleagues from CUSP the Centre for Understanding Sustainable Prosperity in the UK, directed by economist Professor Tim Jackson, and 6 other partner nations, and supported from New Zealand by Post-doc fellow, Dr Kate Prendergast. CYCLES or the Children and youth in cities lifestyle evaluation and sustainability study, examines the every-day aspirations, energy and consumption experiences of children and young people aged 12 to 24 years who are growing up in seven world cities: Christchurch, New Zealand; Delhi, India; Dhaka in Bangladesh; Makhanda in South Africa; London, England; São Paulo, Brazil; and Yokohama in Japan. I want to talk to day about some of very initial insights from CYCLES and to discuss how concepts of “well-living”, which range from Hauora here in Aotearoa New Zealand; to buen vivir in South America, can also help move us beyond thinking about wellbeing as an individual responsibility to supporting young citizens to live well collectively, within communities, in low-carbon, more sustainable ways.

Introduction

As a very lapsed Presbyterian it is quite a daunting honour to give a Sir Lloyd Geering inaugural address. However, I take heart that the Lloyd Geering I grew up aware of, was a man who wrestled with God, and was famously tried for heresy. Even as a teen I was aware of his work and I recognised his debates with institutional power were creating space for new ways of thinking about social justice and spirituality in an increasingly secular society. I hope Sir Lloyd, who so inspired my own parents, including my late father, will forgive and perhaps even welcome tonight’s talk, and what maybe a contentious and certainly very secular rethinking of our tendency to moralise on youth consumerism. My aim is to help us understand how we can better support young citizens growing up in urban communities. At a time when youth suicide remains persistently high, and young people are burdened with unprecedented debt, and soaring levels of loneliness, it is deeply moving to me that teens are also leading a highly effective climate protest globally. It is up to us, to lighten their load.

Why focus on urban teens? In this the century of the city, by 2050, 7 out of 10 young people on the planet will live in an urbanising area. Cities are also the sites of consumption. Covering about 2% of total land area, cities are sites of approximately 70% of all resource use and carbon dioxide production. Understanding how to support young people to live well in in this context helps us to understand how we can all live well within limits in rapidly urbanising world.

In tonight’s discussion I will draw on very early insights from analysis of our Cycles study which asks how do young people see their urban world? This data has been gathered by research and literature reviews, focus groups in 7 cities, photo elicitations and drawing exercises followed next year by online or face-to-face questionnaires.

In this research process we have been listening to young people aged 12-24 as they talk about their everyday lives, including what they like about where they live and what they might like to change.

We wanted to understand the possibilities for young people to live flourishing urban lives in sustainable ways. To do this, we asked them to tell us some everyday consumption behaviours across 5 high energy use domains- that is we asked them to talk about the kind of food they eat and where they get it from and who they eat it with. We asked about how they get around their city and get away, we talked about how they spend their leisure time, what their home life is like, and about their work, school or unemployed and volunteer time. We also asked focus group participants to take photos of a “day in my life” across these energy domains or to make drawings to illustrate their everyday experiences and we will be sharing these images in the form of a travelling exhibition which opened last year in London as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science and will come to Christchurch in early 2010.

In the privileged position of conducting this study we are gradually starting to understand our participants’ hopes and aspirations for the future and what the ‘good life’ mean for teens and young adults in an age of environmental and social limits.

While CYCLES focuses in particular on the lives of young urban citizens living in very different contexts and situations, each youthful community faces some strikingly shared challenges: Accessing clean drinking water, ensuring good nutrition; and finding affordable, safe efficient transport. In all our communities young people spoke of enormous pressure to get a good education and their hopes, often thwarted of long term decent employment. Spending time with family, and friends and enjoying pets were strikingly similar simple and important experiences.

Between the ages of 12 and 24, young people develop values as citizens in a fast-changing world together with footprints for energy use and habits of consumption. Their desire for and confidence in social agency,

acting with others to achieve shared goals is also fostered in this time

Our aim in this study is not just to understand these phenomena but to identify pragmatic ways to help young people across our cities to achieve their full potential— within the limits of a finite planet. As my colleague Tim Jackson argues, our hope with this study is to engage in a vital conversation about young people’s prospects for the future. To improve those prospects is to improve our own lives.

This discussion tonight also presents a critical assessment of the literature on sustainable consumption in the global North and South, in the context of accelerated and mega-scale transitions that are needed across all human activities, in ways that “leave no one behind,” as envisaged in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). I want to challenge two dominant, related assumptions: an emphasis on the individual and individual aspirations of the good life, and the policy of incrementalism rational ecological modernization. I accept that individuals must act consciously to advance sustainability, but argue that nuanced interpretations of collective sustainable living, an appreciation of the meanings youth gain in consumer behaviour, and the pressure of debt they experience as we privatize costs of educating our democracies to individuals is rarely well debated

Conclusions

Discussion will highlight what young people are doing and achieving in current consumption patterns and how they are maintaining diverse values of extended family, tribe and community solidarity, and human and non-human interrelationships in ways often poorly understood by adults who I argue are often too swift to judgement and moral panic.

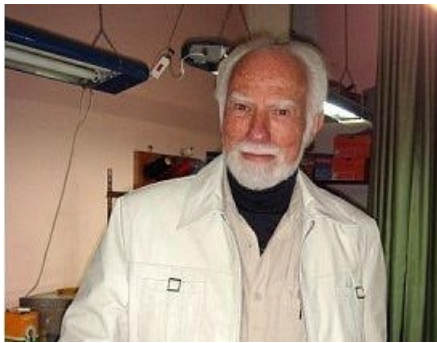
I think it is vital we notice and support the space being maintained and created by young citizens for harmonious, peaceful, spiritual, and material coexistence. Concepts such as Ahimsa (India), Buen Vivir (South America), Ubuntu (Africa), Hauora (New Zealand), or Shiawase and Ikigai (Japan), and

Va-Pacific for example can enrich our understandings of sustainable living as long-term collective action for sustainable development in a time of immense upheaval and social and environmental pressure.

Bronwyn Hayward

Self-Transcendence and the Assurance of Meaning

The question to be answered is not “What is the meaning of life?” but “What is it that makes life meaningful?”



Every living creature is aware. It gathers information about its world, and that information needs to be meaningful. The kind of meaning required varies from one species to another, depending on its level of awareness.

All species prior to the evolution of a nervous system – i.e. all unicellular species in the domains of *bacteria* and *archaea*, and all fungi, plants, and sponges in the domain of *eukarya* – possess only *simple awareness*. Simple awareness delivers *evaluative meaning* – the good news and the bad news relevant to the organism’s survival and reproduction. “This I should move towards; this I should avoid.”

Conscious awareness belongs to all animals with nervous systems capable of housing mental constructs with which raw sensory data can be symbolically represented. Species at this stage of evolution can now abstract patterns from their sensory data, symbolically represent these patterns as perceptual categories, and then “perceive” the patterned regularities in their world that correspond to these mental constructs.

The evolution of awareness has, in us and a few other species with elaborate nervous systems, given rise to *self-awareness* – the perception of ourselves as a subject who perceives. Self-aware creatures derive *contextual meaning* from their experience when they see how the self of which they are

aware fits in the context of the larger wholes to which they belong. We humans do this by creating a conceptual map of our world and a narrative account of what’s happening in our world.

Under certain conditions (e.g. meditation, psychedelics, trance states) or for no apparent reason, we may experience another, non-ordinary state of consciousness, variously known as self-transcendence, mystical awareness, or unity consciousness, in which our usual sense of being a separate self is transcended in an all-embracing unity. It is recognized in all the world’s major spiritual traditions – in Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism as *moksha*, in Buddhism as *nirvana*, in Zen as *satori*, in Hasidic Judaism as *dveikut*, in Islamic Sufism as *fanaa*, and in Christianity as *the kingdom of God*, *the kingdom of heaven*, or *eternal life*.

By no means the exclusive preserve of religious or spiritual traditions, however, such *self-transcendent awareness* is thought to be potential within all of us. Indeed, what contemporary transpersonal psychologists such as Ken Wilber call “spontaneous spiritual awakenings,” or Jenny Wade calls “transcendent events,” or Michael Washburn calls “incursions from the Ground,” seem to occur, however fleetingly, in at least 50% of the population.

Among the several widely agreed-upon characteristics of self-transcendent awareness, one is what the Hasidic philosopher Martin Buber described as “the inexpressible confirmation of meaning.” In moments of unity consciousness, he wrote, “meaning is assured. Nothing can any longer be meaningless. The question about the meaning of life is no longer there. You do not know how to exhibit and define the meaning of life. You have no formula or picture for it, and yet it has more certitude for you than the perception of your senses.”

It is as if our experience of self-transcendent awareness delivers the ultimate in contextual meaning attendant upon our intuitive and experiential knowing that we belong inseparably to the One in which all things have their being.

Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), the Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, survivor of

Auschwitz, and best-selling author of *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), concluded that our human capacity to discern such contextual meaning is the core of our spiritual nature. Our experiential apprehension of meaning is, he said, "primarily a perceptual phenomenon" that delivers what he called "the wisdom of the heart." This organ of perception can be dulled or only partially awakened, such that our discernment of meaning can vary from the spiritual equivalent of 20-20 vision to virtual blindness. Each of us lives on a spectrum ranging from the deep satisfaction of a meaning-filled life to the ennui or despair of a meaningless existence. At the "life-is-meaningless" end of the spectrum, we suffer from what Frankl called an *existential vacuum*, which he regarded as the principal malaise of our modern era.

A number of factors can be identified as contributing to this crisis of meaning in our modern and post-modern Western society. One is a heightened individualism and a diminished sense of connection. Another is the erosion of empathy. Yet another is a kind of spiritual inertia. Most worrisome of all to Frankl, however, was the imbalance created by our post-Enlightenment reliance on the rational-analytic mode of knowing and on the scientific method as the only reliable purveyor of truth, with a corresponding disparagement of the intuitive mode of knowing and the myths in which intuitive truths are typically expressed.

The loss of meaning experienced by so many today has been bluntly expressed by some of our most eminent scientists.

Francis Crick, the Nobel-prize winning molecular biologist who, together with James Watson, discovered the double helix structure of DNA, famously said that "you -

your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules."

French biologist and Nobel laureate Jacques Monod made brutally plain the threat presented by this reductionist worldview. "The ancient covenant is in pieces. Man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he has emerged only by chance."

American biochemist Isaac Asimov echoed the same conclusion even more poignantly. "Science is complex and chilling. The vistas it presents are scary – an enormous universe ruled by chance and impersonal rules, empty and uncaring."

And yet another Nobel laureate, theoretical physicist Steven Weinberg, said it succinctly. "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless."

At the risk of being cynical, the upside to this existential vacuum may be that such ennui, such despair, and the abortive effort to fill our inner emptiness from a cornucopia of assorted goodies and entertainments may be precisely what is needed to drive our consumer economy. Perhaps this crisis of meaning is what Western society requires to fuel its economy. And what it doesn't need – what must be seen as an existential threat – is "the inexpressible confirmation of meaning" that attends our experience of self-transcendence.

Perhaps, too, any spiritual quest that opens us to the assurance of meaning may be the most revolutionary thing we can do to affirm our love for our beleaguered planet.

Merv Dickinson



Another picture of (most of) the Panel