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YOUNG PEOPLE'S WELLBEING AND THE CONTEMPORARY SEARCH FOR MEANING

Richard Eckersley is a researcher who has worked for many years within the area of epidemiology and public health, with a special interest in youth wellbeing; more recently within the National Centre for Epidemiology and Public Health at Australian National University in Canberra. He is one of the few researchers in Australia (and internationally) who takes a broad, interdisciplinary view of health and wellbeing giving a panoramic perspective on the life world of young people. This is helpful not only to those concerned with population health, but also valuable for professionals working in the education and care of youth. In particular he focuses on the complexity in relationships between culture and the personal, spiritual and moral development of young people. This is a vital area for educators because they are not only concerned with developing young people's educational competencies, but with helping equip them to live meaningfully and happily in an increasingly complex and puzzling world. The *Journal of Religious Education* is grateful to Richard Eckersley for permission to republish the following extract from his book *Well and good: Morality, meaning and happiness*, (2005). It is available from Text Publishing, www.textpublishing.com.au. It is an insightful interpretation of the cultural situation that conditions the thinking and feelings of young people – and not only the young. We consider this book (and much of Eckersley's other writings) essential reading for educators. This article also says something significant about 'identity', which will be given special attention in a later themed issue of the Journal in 2007.

Questions of meaning frame contemporary world events, the most dramatic being the recent acts of global terrorism and the wars waged against it. But these events are just the tip of the iceberg of a much bigger convulsion taking place in our view of the world and our place in it. How they develop and are resolved will depend fundamentally on how we, individually and collectively, respond to this situation.

Meaning in life is a crucial aspect of human wellbeing. We need to have reasons to live, to know what makes life worth living. For most of our existence as a species, meaning was pretty much a social given. Children grew up in a close network of family and community relationships that largely defined their world – their values and beliefs, identity and place. People knew little of what lay outside that world, of other ways of living, except through the intrusions of trade or conquest. Beyond the mortal realm, they had a religious faith that gave them a place in the cosmic scheme of things. Much of life was predictable and what was not was explained in terms of the supernatural. The old ways might often have been harsh and oppressive, but they allowed people to make sense of their lives at several levels, to answer the fundamental questions of existence: Who am I? Where have I come from? Why am I here? As the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche said: "He who has a *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*".

Today things are different, especially in the West, but increasingly elsewhere as well. The speed, scope and

scale of economic, social and cultural change have made the past seemingly irrelevant, the future uncertain. Family and community ties have been loosened. We know much more of the rest of the world and how differently others live and think. And while most people today retain some form of religious belief, this is not nearly as absolute and binding as it once was. Initially, as these changes occurred, we were convinced they represented progress. The old certainties gave way to the exhilarating possibilities of human betterment through economic growth, social reform, scientific discovery and technological development. Even if life's meaning became less clear, life itself became more comfortable, more varied, safer, healthier and longer.

Over the past few decades this faith in material progress has given way to growing doubt. We now live in 'postmodern' times, marked by the end of the dream of creating a perfect social order and the realisation that some of our problems may be unsolvable. Despite our efforts, war, poverty, hunger and disease remain with us. Science and technology, intended to give us mastery over the natural and social world, have instead (or, at best, also) created risks on an unprecedented global scale. The result is a world characterised by ambivalence, ambiguity, relativism, pluralism, fragmentation and contingency. The profound paradox of our situation was well described by the scholar Marshall Berman, who said:

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth,

transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. (Berman, 1996, p. 11)

Meaning in life is now less a social given and more a matter of personal choice; it has to be constructed, or chosen, from a proliferation of options. Some writers celebrate this development as offering unparalleled opportunities for personal growth and development. ‘Liquid identities’ – multiple, flexible selves – are undermining traditional notions of identity as a single, stable entity (Turkle, 1995, 1997). The new technologies of cyberspace assist the process: players joining online virtual communities through ‘multi-user domains’ can move from one computer window to another, changing personas like costumes. “This is more real than my real life”, says one player, a man playing a woman who is pretending to be a man; for another, “RL” (real life) is just “one more window”.

There is something in all this. From today’s perspective, the conformity and constraints of the past are suffocating. Martin Scorsese’s *The age of innocence* shows how thoroughly, and subtly, the lives of the rich in nineteenth-century New York were ruled by the norms, customs and traditions of their class and times. Yet the celebrations of our situation also reveal a very postmodern quality: the inability to separate reality from fantasy. The openness and complexity of life today can make finding meaning and the qualities that contribute to it – autonomy, competence, purpose, direction, balance, identity and belonging – extremely hard, especially for young people, for whom these are the destinations of the developmental journeys they are undertaking. Another vital quality, hope, is also easily lost if life is episodic, and lacks coherence and predictability. Faced with a bewildering array of options and opportunities, we can become immobilised – or propelled into trying to have them all. Pulling together the threads of our postmodern lives is not easy.

While loosening social ties can be liberating for individuals, and create more dynamic, diverse and tolerant societies, too much cultural flexibility can have the effect of trivialising the convictions and commitments that we need to find meaning and to control our own lives. Tolerance taken too far, becomes indifference, and freedom abandonment. Our power as a people comes from a sense of collective, not individual, agency; from pursuing a common vision based on shared values, not maximising, individual choice in order to maximise personal satisfaction.

Beyond the risks of excessive choice and freedom is the evidence that these can be, in any case, illusory. Social constraints remain, and in some cases are increasing. Sex and cars, for example, are both modern symbols of freedom that are highly prescribed by rules and realities; class and privilege still substantially define opportunity. The Belgian sociologist Mark Elchardus argues that, for all the importance placed on individual freedom in modern societies, many contemporary developments

threaten, not strengthen, this freedom: “There seems to be a growing gap between the cultural emphasis on autonomy and individual choice, on the one hand, and the experienced lack of autonomy, on the other.” (Elchardus, 1994).

There is more. The postmodern ideal is also a Trojan Horse for the social promotion of particular choices and values. Western societies present a facade of virtually unlimited autonomy that disguises a powerful preference. We may have abundant choices as consumers, but to choose not to consume requires real willpower. We are told, as part of the new pluralism, that traditional values have passed their use-by date. The values of self-restraint and moderation (and by implication, their converse, social obligation and responsibility) were shaped by scarcity; in a time of plenty, they have become obsolete. And ‘plenty’ is symbolised by those temples of consumption and indulgence, the vast shopping malls which have replaced churches and town halls as the community centres of modern life. The proposition that past values no longer apply might seem plausible in a culturally diverse and seemingly abundant world. But it is untenable when considered in a context anchored in psychological, social, global and environmental realities. That it effectively defines ‘the good life’ today is a measure of the moral force of the economy, and the fast-paced, high-pressure, hyper-consumer lifestyle which it depends on, even demands.

In this historical evolution, we have altered profoundly our notions of the ‘self’, of what it is to be human. The self of the early Middle Ages was an immortal soul enclosed in the shell of a mortal body. Today, according to the American psychologist Philip Cushman, we have created ‘the empty self’, stripped of community, tradition and shared meaning. Our era, he says, has constructed a self that is, fundamentally, a disappointment to itself, and must be soothed and made cohesive by being constantly ‘filled up’ with consumer products, celebrity news and the quest for self-improvement and personal growth (Cushman, 1990).

Martin Seligman, another American psychologist, argues that one necessary condition for meaning is the attachment to something larger than the self and the larger that entity, the more meaning people can derive. To the extent that it is now difficult for people to form these relationships with God, country or family, he says, meaning in life will be difficult to find. “The self, to put it another way, is a very poor site for meaning.” (Seligman, 1990). Meaning and identity require a foundation. Without it, Australian futurist Sohail Inayatullah observes, “the result is a reality with too many selves – the swift Teflon vision of the future, in which identity is about speed and the collection of a multitude of experiences”. (Inayatullah, 1999, 2002). The Teflon self is not glued to history, does not stick to pain, but instead moves on to different pleasures; it is choice that is essential.

Lacking quality we seek quantity; in the absence of commitment and certainty we pursue diversity and

variety. We see growth at the extremes of self and meaning, a loss of balance: pathological self-preoccupation at one end, the total subjugation or surrender of the individual self at the other. A vast consumer economy has grown to minister to the needs of 'the empty self'; and religious cults and fundamentalist movements flourish as people struggle to find what society no longer offers.

Despite the cultural propaganda of our times, it is clear that constantly filling up an empty self is a poor substitute for the web of meaning provided by deep and enduring personal, social and spiritual attachments. We are told that a highly individualistic, consumer lifestyle is compatible with strong families, social cohesion and equity, environmental sustainability and a sense of spiritual connectedness to the universe in which we live. It is not.

This critique of our way of life may strike many as exaggerated. But it is an attempt to give a clear definition, a sharp edge, to issues that are, in reality, diffuse, often unconscious, and hard to discern from 'inside' our culture. To argue that Western society is seriously flawed in these ways is not to say a meaningful life is impossible – only more difficult. Nor is it to suggest that we return to old ways. Rather, we need to go forward towards new goals, guided by different values.

Given the era we live in, the challenge we face can be framed in terms of individual choice. We can choose to go with the flow of modern Western culture, and pursue a life of personal ambition, distraction and gratification. This can be a pleasurable enough existence, particularly if nothing goes wrong and we keep getting what we think we want; but it is a life that lacks depth and resilience and comes at a price to others and at a cost to the future. Alternatively, we can resist the pressures to conform to social expectations, powerful though they are, and choose to find meaning in our lives by focusing on the things that history, religion and science show matter most.

Realistically, the choice is not that stark. What matters is where, on the continuum between the two extremes of total acceptance and total rejection, we choose to locate ourselves in the quest for meaning – the focal point towards which the 'self' will be drawn even while it is being pushed and pulled about by the demands and temptations of modern life. The research evidence suggests we know in our hearts what is important and what is right. But living by these beliefs can be hard when society appears to operate according to different moral rules.

There has never been a period in human history when so much hangs in the balance between what is and what might be, when so much depends on the choices we make as individuals, when it is so clear that we are, each of us, 'decision-makers' in deciding the destiny of humankind. It is a time, then, that offers so much meaning. And yet, because of the pressures, preoccupations and priorities of life today, we do not

sense the significance of this moment – or sensing it, seem unable to hold it and be inspired by it. This is one of the most profound paradoxes of our times. Recognising this can help us make the right choices – and so find more meaning in our lives and improve our wellbeing.

The book *Well and good* discusses the above issues; it is about progress and how we define it and measure it, about wellbeing and what influences it. 'Progress' is examined from several different perspectives and scales. It is mainly about rich Western nations because we in the West tend to assume we represent the leading edge of progress. It is also mainly about the more intangible, cultural dimensions of life such as meaning, values, goals, identity and belonging, because we tend, in Western societies, to manage our affairs as if material things matter most.

The importance of these cultural contributions to wellbeing provides the common theme for the book. It deals variously with modern Western culture, happiness, quality of life, health, young people's wellbeing, science, religion, the media, the future, economic growth, social justice and equity, the environment, and politics. This eclectic approach serves an important purpose: it demonstrates the connectedness of things, that whatever the approach and for all the complexity and contradiction, there emerges an underlying coherence in the picture of life today that can help us understand what we need to do.

This is also an exercise in changing the world. I am constantly surprised by how limited the public and political agenda is, how many things we assume or take as given. Despite the uncertainties, I believe the evidence demonstrates that we are not managing our affairs nearly as well as we could; that we deal more crudely and clumsily with complex matters than we should; and that, while the course we are taking may not necessarily lead to catastrophe (although it might), it is not the way to make the most of our potential and opportunities.

In doing this work, I have been struck time and again by the realisation that we are beyond my comprehension; that, however hard I try, I am just not intelligent enough to grasp what is happening; that the world is both simple and complex, fragile and robust; that, in some vague social parallel with quantum physics, the very act of trying to measure subjective qualities changes those qualities; and that any attempt to explain the world – to impose any logical 'story' upon it inevitably distorts its nature or reality. I often feel I am skating on thin ice – the thin ice of available evidence and my capacity to understand that evidence, and so of my own convictions about these things.

Science often struggles with those aspects of life that are subtle, intangible, tenuous, abstract, subjective. Yet these aspects make up a big part of the human condition. In *Biology and the Riddle of Life*, the Australian biologist Charles Birch says there is an enormous gap between

what science describes and what we experience, between the mechanisms of life and what it is to be alive.

There are two points of view – the inside and the outside, the subjective and the objective, from within and from without... [T]he solution to the riddle of life is only possible through the proper connection of the outer with the inner experience (Birch, 1999, p. 58).

Given all this, it may well be that science will never give us clear-cut and objective recipes for making life better. Nevertheless, it is contributing to a growing willingness to question and discuss what, all things considered, makes a good life. For me – and this is a radical view in science – it is preferable that we obtain imperfect knowledge about the important issues of our times than precise answers to what are, in the overall scheme of things, trivial questions.

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