

DIALOGUE

Dialogue on Despair: Assessing the West's Cultural Crisis

Readers reacted strongly to THE FUTURIST's November-December 1993 article by Australian social analyst Richard Eckersley, "The West's Deepening Cultural Crisis," and to the Poll addressing the issues he raised.

Eckersley argued that despair in Western society is growing, as seen in increasing suicide rates among the young, rampant alcohol and drug abuse, depressive illness, obsessive dieting, and other social ills. He theorized that this growing despair is due to the failure of Western culture "to provide a sense of meaning, belonging, and purpose in our lives, as well as a framework of values." In other cultures, children are more likely to have stories told to them that allow them to construct a more positive outlook.

Western culture provides young people little more than themselves to believe in and gives youth no cause for hope or optimism, Eckersley said. In making the individual the focus of Western culture, it seems we have only succeeded in making the individual feel more impotent and insecure.

The opinions that follow include the November-December 1993 Futurist Poll Results on "Is Hope an Endangered Emotion?," together with respondents' comments on the questions, letters to the editor about both the article and the Poll, and, at our invitation, author Eckersley's reflections on the readers' comments. We regret that space limitations prevent us from publishing more of the very thoughtful comments we received.

THE POLL RESULTS

1. ARE MOST PEOPLE IN WESTERN NATIONS OPTIMISTIC OR PESSIMISTIC ABOUT THE FUTURE?



Optimistic: 16% Pessimistic: 63%
Unsure: 21%

COMMENTS:

- "The better informed we are about problems around the world, the more pessimistic we are." (LuAnne Feik)
- "[People are pessimistic] because they are not generally well informed." (Gary Fox)
- "People who focus on the media are pessimistic; those who focus on their own lives and loved ones

are more optimistic."
(Mark Zetzer)

- "People seem to vacillate. They want to be optimistic but can't remain convinced that it is justified." (John Vanderbilt)
- "I believe those who have a faith in 'God' are optimistic—those that don't are pessimistic." (Robert H. Appleby)
- "I think people are pessimistic about the big picture but optimistic about their own lives." (Jarel Radtke)
- "I live in Spain. People here are optimistic because they simply deny reality and trust the administration (local!) to cope with everything." (Richard Sheffilk)

2. ARE YOU YOURSELF OPTIMISTIC OR PESSIMISTIC?



Optimistic: 55% Pessimistic: 33%
Unsure: 12%

COMMENTS:

- "Too many of the things that affect my life are controlled by people who I can't believe or trust to have my best interests at heart. Greed, avarice, and self-centeredness on the parts of those people are tearing our society apart." (D.C. Dodge)
- "I believe we are in control of our own destiny. I am prepared for the future." (Barbara J. Munger)



TOM CHALKLEY

- "There is much to be joyful about. Look. It's there." (Cecelia Smith)
- "My motto: 'Enjoy life . . . this is not a rehearsal!' Too many people live on this world, not in it." (Anonymous)
- "There are still more positive, beautiful elements in our culture than negative, if the media identified them and emphasized their presence." (George W. Gratto)
- "Man has great capacity to adjust. A new Golden Period lies ahead." (W.A. Reynolds)
- "I think the whole world is an evil-dominated soon-to-be-destroyed place." (Douglas Jay Erhardt)
- "I work with young people. Giving them hope provides an opportunity to enhance the future." (Sylvia Ryce Cornell)

3. SHOULD EFFORTS BE MADE BY EDUCATORS, GOVERNMENT, OR OTHER GROUPS TO MAKE YOUTH LESS PESSIMISTIC?



Yes: 68% No: 21% Unsure: 11%

COMMENTS:

- "[Yes.] But it is important for leaders of these institutions to live up to the values they tout. Worse damage can be done by blatant hypocrisy than lack of leadership." (June Fletcher)
- "[No.] Our task is to improve soci-

ety, not influence opinion."

(John Wisley)

- "[Yes.] Even though I despise propaganda, we need more positive thought expressed." (John R. Conley)
- "[Yes.] As a teacher, I see the youth of today focusing only on the now, partly because the future doesn't seem to hold much promise." (George R. Affeldt Jr.)
- "[No.] Change the cause of the problems first. Then work on changing attitudes. But let the family be responsible." (Anonymous)
- "[Unsure.] No one can 'make' youth be less of anything. They need role models with purpose, integrity, and empathy. Few of us seem capable of providing these examples—especially parents." (David Chesterton)
- "[Yes.] Absolutely and vigorously, through the mass media, especially TV, by realistic information showing mankind has a very high potential for a hopeful, worthwhile existence." (Ralph J. Hervey)
- "In the absence of real solutions, making youth less pessimistic would be a sham." (Stephen Dobrow)
- "[Yes.] The media use of violence must be controlled. The constant harangue of negative political demagogues, who foster pessimism by sowing distrust of elected leaders and institutions, must be moderated and countered." (H.J. Woessner)

- "[Yes.] But not to make them less pessimistic, but rather to create self-responsibility for the future." (S.M. Darnborough)

4. IS WESTERN CULTURE FAILING TO PROVIDE A SENSE OF MEANING, BELONGING, AND PURPOSE AND A FRAMEWORK OF VALUES?



Yes: 84% No: 11% Unsure: 4%

COMMENTS:

- "[Yes.] Isn't it obvious?" (George R. Thompson)
- "[No.] Nazism provided all these things. It is not 'culture's' job to do this. It is our job to find it." (Eileen McCarthy)
- "[Yes.] The relentless liberal attack against religious precepts and its emphasis on secularism is destroying our value system." (Raymond E. Burke)
- "[Yes.] We have no unified values because of religious pluralism. Each sect claims they are right and all the others are wrong. So children get nothing but conflicting messages." (W. Milton Timmons)
- "[No.] People provide their own values and means to support them—guided by their experiences. In the United States, that experience has been influenced by the economics requiring both parents to work for economic survival—quite different from a choice

- to work. (Judith A. Hewitt)
- “[Yes.] The emphasis on consumerism is taking its toll.” (John B. Thune)
 - “[Yes.] We seem to value our dubious heroes of sports above people who attain high intellectual levels.” (Stephen Sarchett)
 - “[Yes.] We should deny parents tax deductions for dependents who break the law.” (Weston Evans)
 - “[Yes.] Social programs rob people of personal worth and substitute legal parameters for personal values.” (Robert W. Hughes)

5. IS IT TRUE THAT MOST PEOPLE NO LONGER KNOW RIGHT FROM WRONG?



Yes: 49% No: 40% Unsure: 10%

COMMENTS:

- “Yes. There is a need for non-religious-based standards.” (Steven S. Scott)
- “[No.] But there is, I think, a steady drift toward amorality.” (Alfred J. Coulombre)
- “[No.] Most *individuals* do, but the ‘mob’ often does not.” (Walter W. Haines)
- “[Yes.] All that counts is material

- success and self-satisfaction at any cost to society.” (Wilbur R. Hanks)
- “[Yes.] The media and government show [people] being corrupt and getting away with it.” (Craig R. Browne)
 - “[Yes.] Shoving the Ten Commandments out of schools has done it.” (Charles D. Willis)
 - “[No.] They know what’s right and wrong. The incentive to do what’s right isn’t there anymore.” (Susie Husted)
 - “[No.] More likely, society’s value of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ is shallow or unsound.” (J. Van Zante)
 - “[No.] They know, but they don’t care and are not rewarded for making good choices.” (Barbara Harper)
 - “[Yes.] A new set of ‘advanced nation’ ethics needs to be formulated and promoted.” (Gary Fox)

6. IS EXCESSIVE INDIVIDUALISM REALLY A PROBLEM IN WESTERN CULTURES?



Yes: 57% No: 31% Unsure: 12%

COMMENTS:

- “[No.] The ‘community’ is only a collective of individuals. However, a

- small number of individuals’ rights should not disrupt the community as a whole.” (Ross E. Lanser)
- “[Yes.] Individualism only works when people understand that their quest to be an individual shouldn’t infringe on others. Excessive political correctness ties in here.” (Anonymous)
 - “[Yes.] Community spirit built this country [the United States]. Now it is all ‘me’ and my rights.” (Verdean Keyser)
 - “[Yes.] We all want to be soloists—no concept of fitting into the symphony.” (Harold Logan)
 - “[No.] A strong individual sharing spiritually, emotionally, [and] materially would create a strong whole, a strong community.” (Paul Thompson)
 - “[Yes.] There is a tradeoff between individualism and social order. There must be a balance.” (Brian Burrows)
 - “[Yes.] There should be more emphasis on individual responsibility to the planet.” (Paul O. Davis)
 - “[Yes.] Plato said democracy fails when people have ‘too many’ freedoms.” (J. Mathers)
 - “[Yes.] Most people care about themselves and only themselves. Thinking of others could change society’s outlook.” (Lisa Schmitt)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

■ THE PARALLEL that Richard Eckersley draws with Hogarth’s London is apt. I wish that he had explored it further. The social and spiritual disruption caused by the Industrial Revolution was very similar to the “profound and growing failure of Western culture” that he describes today. The cause is the same—we are going through another revolution.

Revolutions are tough. Major transitions are always hard, whether of a nation, an individual, or a culture. Old beliefs are challenged, old jobs are destroyed even while new ones are being created,

crime rises, governments are overthrown, and God seems to have gone on a permanent vacation.

It seems to me that these revolutions of the past have, like castor oil, been good for us. I base this conclusion on the evidence that we really have been able to lead much better lives after each one than we ever would have been without it. It wasn’t too far back that women could expect to die in childbirth. They married at 11 or 12 in most parts of the world, and if they lived to be 40, they were ancient. Today, many women are beautiful into

their 60s, and very few die in childbirth. In addition, women also have the option of a full career outside the home. Would anybody have believed that a hundred years ago?

Albert G. Young
Purcellville, Virginia

■ RICHARD ECKERSLEY raises many of the issues that concern thinking people in advanced societies. In many ways, he is right on target. The rate of cultural change is getting beyond our ability to effectively respond, and our reactions are frighteningly comparable to

those of indigenous peoples when they suddenly came into contact with much more technologically advanced peoples.

However, it would have been helpful if Eckersley had developed portions of his argument in a somewhat different manner. First, it should be recognized that the evidence on how different our times are from previous ones is clearly mixed. Secondly, his treatment of "progress" continues a debunking and confusing approach. His usage suggests that he defines progress as a synonym for technological change.

It would be helpful if we could understand that true progress results when we are able to discriminate between these outcomes and that believing in progress today implies no more than believing in the possibility of improving the human condition. The belief that technological change would always improve the human condition was obviously an error that we are growing out of. Change may be inevitable, but improvement is not.

*Raymond Duncan Gastil
Cos Cob, Connecticut*

Editor's note: Gastil is the author of *Progress: Critical Thinking about Historical Change* (Praeger, 1993), which is available from the Futurist Bookstore and was reviewed in the November-December 1993 issue of THE FUTURIST, page 38.

■ **THERE IS LITTLE DOUBT** that the statistics that Richard Eckersley presents are correct. The trends are certainly there for anyone who wants to look beyond the isolated high-rise office or secluded suburban housing development.

When the only measurement for success is things, how can we expect any other action but for people to grab all they can and the devil take the hindmost?

If we as a culture have no vision of the future and have no concern for future generations, how can we help but grab, use up, and grab more? If we don't ask ourselves the question of what we have contributed to the problem, it will always be someone

else's job to resolve these problems.

I disagree with Eckersley that we need better managers to resolve these problems. What we need are leaders to guide the way toward a common vision.

*Craig R. Browne
Findlay, Ohio*

■ **TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO**, the Greek philosopher Diogenes showed us that you can be happy living a very simple life. Subsequently, throughout history, we have had a series of philosophers preaching the merits of a simple life and the return to nature. Looked at from this point of view, the decline of our culture can be a way to a better and happy future. It can provide a new goal and purpose to our lives, and be a way to overcome the depression and decadence of our society.

*Fred B. Benjamin
Silver Spring, Maryland*

■ **REGARDING** Richard Eckersley's article, I differ with his entire

premise. Instead of naming some phantom culprit, it would be far more productive to name the real culprit: ignorance. People's knowledge is very lopsided, with enormous pockets of relative weakness and great peaks of relative strength. Making science a culprit is, ironically, throwing out the baby with the bath water, as science provides the only real means of filling the holes in our knowledge, eliminating ignorance, and leading us to the greater understanding that is the prerequisite for greater happiness.

*Gerry Lyon
San Jose, California*

■ **RICHARD ECKERSLEY'S** article is a great summarization of the root causes of a society losing hope. When mankind tries to use technology to solve personal and social problems, expectations are never met, and the detrimental behavior that follows affects the entire society.

*Ed Bavosu
Somers, New York*

RICHARD ECKERSLEY RESPONDS

A subject as broad as modern Western culture embraces complexities and subtleties that cannot be adequately addressed in a magazine article or an opinion poll. Some of these have surfaced in readers' comments and reactions. I would like to take up just a few of these issues.

• **Individualism.** I believe that excessive individualism is central to our cultural malaise. The flaw is not in the philosophical and political recognition of the freedom, dignity, and equality of individuals—the right of everyone to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." It is in the corruption of this laudable ideal into self-centeredness and self-indulgence—in our forgetting that with freedom comes great responsibility—not the right of every man and

woman to do as they please.

Materialism and consumerism have exacerbated the perversion of the ideal, as has a diminution of the individual in a broadly political sense. The accelerating rate of change, the increasing pace of life, the complexity of our social systems, the multiplicity of issues that must be addressed, and the power and pervasiveness of new technologies have left many people feeling that they no longer have control over their own lives, let alone the ability to influence the affairs of a nation.

A society that defines freedom largely in terms of rights and not responsibilities and encourages moral license but discourages political engagement diminishes the individual.



Rather than enlarging the human spirit, we make the spirit meaner.

• **Morality.** It may seem too glib to suggest, as I did in the article, that most people no longer know right from wrong. However, surveys do show a high level of moral confusion and ambivalence. This is hardly surprising, given that modern Western culture, especially as reflected in the mass media, makes virtues of what traditionally were vices—pride (self-centeredness), avarice, lust, envy, anger—while many traditional virtues—faith, hope, charity, and fortitude, for example—are neglected. Most people may grasp what values matter but have difficulty living by those values because of a lack of cultural reinforcement and encouragement. They want clearer rules by which to live.

According to one Australian survey, for example, young people believe moral values are declining, and they find it hard to identify an accepted moral code within society un-

less they are religious. Lacking a broader sense of "community," many have difficulty in establishing an ethical framework that has any application beyond the boundaries of their own circle of friends.

• **Optimism/pessimism.** Surveys suggest that people, including the young, remain optimistic about their personal future, expecting to get what they want out of life, but have become increasingly pessimistic about the future of their nation, humanity, the world. Children's visions of the future are often filled with apocalyptic images of war and violence, growing social inequality, environmental destruction, and a dehumanized, machine-dominated world.

What these visions mean and whether they matter remain conjectural. The evidence suggests that young people don't spend a lot of time actively worrying about these concerns. Outwardly, most appear happy and well-adjusted and intent on getting on with their lives.

I believe the harm done is more subtle and insidious. To me, the visions represent a loss of faith in the central tenet of Western culture: the belief in progress, in the continuing betterment of human life. It denies young people, who are establishing their identities, values and sense of place, a social ideal to believe in—something to convince them to subordinate their own selfish interests to a higher social goal.

For individuals, the absence of a shared vision makes them more vulnerable to a "collapse of meaning" in their personal lives and so could contribute to psychological and social problems. For a society, it leads to weakening social cohesion and increasing divisiveness and inequality—a progressive splintering of communities into smaller, more-isolated groups.

I believe it is important that children and adolescents are given the opportunity, encouragement, and guidance to imagine better futures—not as a way of avoiding reality, but as part of the process of changing that reality. Doing this would encourage both a recognition that we have choices and the engagement necessary to participate in making those choices.

The brighter side of the cultural crisis I described is that before a new order can emerge the old must first fail. We are living in the turmoil of a profound transition, a paradigm shift in Western culture that will give rise to radical changes in our civilization. As I argued (a point some correspondents seem to have overlooked), science is already laying the foundations of a new world view.

The future will still be high tech, but I hope it will be driven by different values toward different goals.

It is this hope in a new beginning, this excitement of the challenge, this imperative to look beyond our personal horizons that we must impress upon the hearts and minds of young people today. □

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