

## Spiritual Wealth

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There is a scene in the movie *Dances with Wolves* where the Lakota are discussing the possibility of white people invading their country. The Lakota were concerned because the whites had a reputation for being dishonest, wantonly violent, with a casual disregard for nature. The tribe's holy man, Kicking Bird, captures the mood of the meeting when he says: "The whites are a poor people, but there are too many of them." When he says "poor", he does not mean they lack money or material things. He means they are *spiritually* poor. And although Kicking Bird knew that the Lakota were skilful warriors, he also knew that the whites often used devious means, modern weapons and superior numbers to win battles.

Of course, that was just a movie. Yet the fact is that devious means, modern weapons and superior numbers were indeed used to overcome the indigenous peoples of North America and take their lands from them. That brought disaster. It is surely no coincidence that when "white" culture overcame them, alcoholism, obesity, addiction, depression, and dishonesty became common among the tribes.

The experience of the North American tribes has a lot to teach us. If Kicking Bird were alive today, he might not be surprised to learn that alcoholism, obesity, addiction, depression and dishonesty are common in "white" society. Unlike many of us, he would probably attribute this to *spiritual poverty*. And he would probably wonder how the modern world has managed to survive so long without destroying itself and everything it

touches. The problems of the world today are uncannily similar to those experienced by the tribes after they were overwhelmed by “white” culture. People today are no different from the original inhabitants of North America. When there is spiritual poverty, they, too, suffer a range of problems. However, since the modern world seems to value the material higher than the spiritual, it tends to assume that many of the big problems of our time have their roots in material poverty, rather than spiritual poverty. While it is true that material deprivation may be the cause of some problems in some communities, it is worth noting that the tribes were at their happiest and healthiest when they were materially poorer than nearly everyone in the world today. Their problems began only when they were overcome by a culture with very different beliefs and values.

The implications of this are immense, for it suggests that money and material things are unlikely to solve the world’s problems. Indeed, there are many who believe that the relentless pursuit of money and things may be a major root cause of our problems, *and that the solutions lie instead in replacing spiritual poverty with spiritual wealth*. This is a complex issue, and it is by no means easy to prescribe a way forward that the majority will accept, but a useful point of departure is to examine the nature of modernity, because it was modernity, in effect, that defeated the tribes and ushered in their problems. Understanding what modernity is and what its roots are may help us to understand the way to spiritual wealth and the way to deeper, sustainable solutions to our problems.

### **The Nature and Influence of Modernity**

There was a time when my home country, Scotland, punched well above her weight in inventiveness. Many of the things that we now take for granted had their origin in Scotland. The list is long and it includes television, refrigerator, microwave ovens, tarred roads, pneumatic tyres, golf, soccer, the steam engine, radar, modern banking, antisepsis, antibiotics, quinine, fax machines, logarithms, and iron bridges. Scotland’s inventiveness is fairly well known. However, it is not so well known that much of the intellectual basis for modern society was developed in Scotland, during the Scottish Enlightenment (roughly 1740-90). Of the personalities involved, Adam Smith and David Hume are

perhaps the best known, but there were many others. It is difficult today to appreciate just how influential Scotland was in those days. Scotland's intellectual during that period leadership was so powerful that the French thinker Voltaire was moved to write: "...we look to Scotland for all our ideas of civilisation." Although thinkers from other countries were also involved in the Enlightenment, it is no exaggeration to say that many of the foundations of the modern world were laid in Scotland. Scottish thinkers helped to create what we now call "modernity", namely the ideas, values and beliefs that have shaped the modern world. Few would deny that modernity brought many benefits - market economics, civic society, modern government, modern medicine, modern education and the scientific method. There is no doubt that for a long time these made life better and easier for many millions of people around the world.

However, something has gone very wrong. We have just come through the most destructive century in human history, and the present one has not begun well. As the 21<sup>st</sup> Century gets under way, wars are raging on three continents, inequality within and between nations continues to increase, mental and emotional illness are epidemic, and nature and the planet are more seriously threatened than ever. There is a growing sense around the world that the current way of doing things – namely modernity - has outlived its usefulness. There is also a sense that all attempts to make modernity work better (politicians call this "modernising") will, at best, make only temporary dents in our problems. What we have long assumed to be the solution to our problems may turn out to be their main cause. Using modernity to try to solve our problems may be like trying to use petrol to put out a fire. The economics, medicine, science, education and politics ushered in by the Enlightenment served us well for a long time but, in some important respects, they are no longer fit for purpose. This does not mean that we throw the baby out with the bathwater – there are many things about modernity worth keeping – but it does mean engaging in a fundamental exploration of why things are going so wrong. A useful starting point is to go back to the roots of modernity and to explore why it is causing so many problems.

Modernity has its roots in the worldview of modern science. At the heart of this worldview are some apparently harmless beliefs:

The universe and everything in it, ourselves included, is physical

The universe and everything in it is essentially a machine...a very sophisticated machine, but a machine nonetheless.

The universe has no intrinsic meaning

This worldview persists despite profound discoveries in physics and biology that suggest that the universe is anything but a machine, that “chance” may lie only in the eye of the beholder, and that the universe is rich in intrinsic meaning. The classic science worldview has become so powerful and influential that all metaphysical, religious and philosophical claims that contradict it tend to be rejected. It rules our lives in more ways than we probably realise. If, as science seems to insist, the universe began suddenly for no reason (the so called “Big Bang”) and life on this planet emerged by chance, then the world that science wants us to believe in must be intrinsically meaningless. The fact that this statement, as part of that world, must also be meaningless is little consolation! A life without meaning is a bleak life indeed. For many people today, the search for meaning has become little more than a desperate attempt to solve the seemingly endless problems that we are constantly creating for ourselves. It is as if the modern world consists of two disconnected halves. One half is constantly creating problems (perhaps unwittingly) and the other half is constantly trying to solve them. This is as true for organisations and countries as it is for individuals. Just think how many people are involved these days in “problem-solving” jobs. These include the obvious ones, such as doctors, nurses, police, social workers, therapists, coaches, counsellors, and lawyers, but also the less obvious ones, such as politicians, authors of self-help books, and local and national government workers. The more we think about, the more people appear on this list. A very large number of people in the world today rely for their income and job security on a huge and

predictable supply of problems for the foreseeable future. It begs the question of what they would do in a problem-free world. Meanwhile, as things stand, there is nothing like a good crisis or tragedy to give people a much needed sense of meaning and purpose, and it is interesting to reflect on the growing status of the emergency and security services over the last 20 years. There is little doubt in my mind that one of the consequences of modernity is *loss of deeper meaning*. As we shall see shortly, this is having profound effects throughout the world.

Modernity is also characterised by *loss of wisdom*. If science rejects the accumulated wisdom of the ages in favour of its own empirically derived body of knowledge, then, since science is the dominant form of knowledge today, wisdom is consequently devalued and will no longer inform our lives in the ways that it used to inform the lives of the Lakota. In non-modern societies, people are content simply to know things without feeling that they have to prove them. And they are content to take the advice of their wise elders. The obsession in modern societies with evidence means that we end up having to prove everything, even the blindingly obvious, and we do not have the tradition of wise elders to guide us. We should not be surprised that, with wisdom pushed to the margins of our lives, we have become the most dangerous and destructive form of life on the planet. Nor should we be surprised that older people, who in non-modern societies are respected for their wisdom, have also been pushed to the margins, many of them right out of sight into care homes. A traditional society values the wisdom of its older people and of the group. A modern society produces the cult of the young and the individual. In a traditional society, people wise up. It seems that modern societies have a tendency to dumb down.

If we add loss of deeper meaning and loss of wisdom to a worldview that insists that everything is physical, we should not be at all surprised that we live in an era of unprecedented *materialism*. Too many of us give high priority to money and material things and low priority to spiritual things, if indeed we ever think about these things. Our economics, our politics, our education, our healthcare and our culture are steeped in

material values and in the behaviours that flow from these. We are paying a high price for this, as we exploit each other and the world. It seems that we do not care for things we do not value. It is a short step from materialism to “economism”, which seems to be yet another feature of modernity.

*Economism* is the tendency to view the world through the lens of economics, and to believe that economic considerations rank higher than other ones. Economism is clearly evident throughout society and is a strong influence in business and political circles. It is surely significant that some politicians refer to countries as “economies” rather than as societies and that, when reporting natural disasters, some news channels mention the value of property damaged before they mention the number of people killed or injured. In non-modern societies economics is a *means* to an end. It is in service to some greater purpose. In contrast, modern societies have made economics the end itself, in the sense that perpetual economic growth seems to be the central purpose of most countries today. This is reflected in the growth ethic of the business world and in the widespread belief that happiness is to be found through money and possessions. If economic growth is the central purpose of the modern world, then we are in deep trouble, because it is a purpose that has no heart and soul and does not reflect our humanity.

Now, if it is true that wisdom has been devalued and that our fundamental beliefs are basically materialist, then our idea of what constitutes “progress” is bound to reflect this. The main indicator of “progress” in the modern world is economic growth. Not only is this thought to be desirable in itself, it is seen by many as a universal panacea that will eventually cure poverty, disease, unhappiness and many other ills. The reality is that there is nothing intrinsically desirable about economic growth. It simply means that we spent more money this year on goods and services than we spent last year. It does not tell us anything about the desirability or quality of these additional goods and services. It does not tell us anything about the human, social and environmental costs of providing them. It does not tell us anything about income distribution and social justice. Most important of all, it does not tell whether we are getting happier, wiser, and healthier and

more fulfilled, which is surely the point of it all. The principal measure of economic growth - GDP - treats the good, the bad and the ugly as if they were all good. So long as money legally changes hands, it counts towards GDP. If there is more crime to be dealt with, more divorces to be processed, more pollution to be cleaned up, more illness to be treated, and more debt being incurred, then all of this counts towards economic growth. In fact, nothing boosts growth more than a war or a natural disaster. GDP gives us the impression that things are going well when they may be going badly, yet most people continue to believe that economic growth is not only desirable, but indispensable.

But there is more to it than this. Far from being a universal panacea, the relentless drive for economic growth on the part of nations, businesses and individuals may turn out to be a universal problem, because it brings with it pressures, values and behaviours that damage people, communities and the planet. For example, there are pressures to work harder and to consume more. That causes stress and illness. There are pressures to exploit and cut corners in the interests of making profit. That causes injustice and corruption. There are pressures to acquire money and possessions illegally, if other means are unavailable. That causes crime. As for the planet, it should be abundantly clear by now that it cannot tolerate these pressures.

None of this is to suggest that the modern world is all bad. Kicking Bird would no doubt agree that it has given us many good things. He liked Kevin Costner's telescope, for example. However, he would be concerned at the following comparison:

**We have more...**

Money and things

Speed

Choice

Knowledge

Healthcare

Telecommunications

**We have less...**

Happiness and fulfilment

Time

Satisfaction

Wisdom

Real health

Genuine communication

Goods and services

Self-reliance

Entertainment

Culture

Police and prisons

Inner security

### **A Spiritual Vacuum**

By marginalising wisdom and removing deeper meaning, modernity has unwittingly created a spiritual vacuum. Many people feel that something big is missing from their lives. They may not be able to put this into words, but they feel an empty space inside them that cries out to be filled. They experience this as anxiety, discomfort, insecurity, despair, or a sense of pointlessness. Understandably, they try to fill the emptiness, and they do this in a huge variety of ways. They eat too much, they shop until they drop, they watch a lot of television or play a lot of video games, they rush around too much (no surprise that being busy is regarded as a virtue today), or they use sex, drugs or alcohol as pain-killers. These behaviours, worrying in themselves, often lead to alcoholism, obesity, addiction, depression and suicide and other symptoms of spiritual poverty. So long as there is a spiritual vacuum, people are likely to continue to behave in these ways.

If modernity is indeed the main root cause of the spiritual poverty that is widespread across the world, what can we do about it? What can we do to reverse the downward drift into even more materialism and further loss of wisdom and meaning? There is no easy answer to this. However, I do think that it is possible to outline a few of the general conditions that will favour the emergence of spiritual wealth.

### **Value older people**

Older people have been pushed to the margins of modern society, while the young occupy centre stage. Some television programmes, for example, give us the impression that older people have been airbrushed out of existence. And, far from being seen as our main source of wisdom, older people are often portrayed as a burden on society or merely as a market for retirement services. Is it any wonder that so many older people feel unvalued and isolated? In too many instances, it has become a self-fulfilling

prophecy that as one gets older, one gets less healthy, more dependent, less valuable and, for all practical purposes, invisible. In some countries people as young as 55 are considered to be “old” and many actually expect to be on regular medication. The fact that so much potential is being lost as older people are marginalised is one of the tragedies of our times. We could, if we wished, enable the emergence of a vast amount of wisdom simply by raising the status of older people and giving them centre stage. That would have a profound effect on all of us.

### **Bring back true education**

There was a time when education was very much about the growth of consciousness and intelligence, because that is what the word “education” implies. In its original sense, education is all about bringing out the best and uniqueness in each one of us, even if that means we end up questioning prevailing beliefs, values and behaviours. It is about helping us to realise our potential, including our potential to be highly conscious and intelligent. However, although we continue to use the word “education” to describe what happens in schools, colleges and universities, there is not much true education around these days. To a large extent, it has been replaced by its opposite, schooling – which is the process of shaping people to believe and follow prevailing beliefs, values and behaviours. Although there is a lot of talk, by politicians and others, about the importance of education, one is left wondering whether they are talking about a preparation for life or a preparation for work. If “education” is mainly a preparation for work, then we have a serious problem because it means that our schools and universities are producing people with skills and knowledge for working in the global economy, but they are not producing people with wisdom and consciousness for living well in the world. There are, of course, some notable exceptions, but these are the exceptions that prove the rule. The fact is that true education enhances and enables consciousness and intelligence. Schooling seems to restrict them. Insofar as schooling is the prevalent mode of “education” in the modern world, consciousness and intelligence are being restricted on a massive scale. That is a global tragedy. There is an urgent need to bring true education into the world.

### **Encourage self-reliance**

One of the hallmarks of modern societies is their increasing dependency on business, government and experts for goods, services and knowledge that, in many cases, individuals and communities would be better providing for themselves. As a rule of thumb, dependency is unhealthy and self-reliance is healthy. The Lakota and other tribes were self-reliant, empowered communities. They were living cultures, rather than vicarious cultures. They did things for themselves, rather than having things done for them. They recognised the central importance of basic human capacities, such as caring, growing their own food, cooking, healing, educating, creating, and entertaining, and would not dream of having these things provided as commodities and services by government and big business. Overdependency is spiritually impoverishing. Insofar as modern society is overdependent on business, government and experts for the basics of living, it is “poor in spirit”. One of the ways of enabling spiritual wealth is to encourage as much self-reliance as possible. In practice, this would require a new economics.

### **Adopt a new economics**

Modern economics very clearly ranks money and property higher than people and nature. If you doubt this, then just consider the amount of attention paid to people and places with money and property and the amount paid to those without. This is in complete contrast to the value-systems of the Lakota and other non-modern societies. Their value-systems enabled them to live healthy, dignified lives, in harmony with nature and each other, whereas too many of us live unhealthy, undignified lives, often in conflict with nature and each other. So, why on earth are we so attached to an economics that causes so much disharmony and conflict? We are attached to it because its myths are powerful, and because these myths are skilfully advocated by government, business, academia and the media. Simply stated, the myths are:

- The market knows best. It should not be interfered with, and it should govern as many aspects of our lives as possible

- Private ownership is more efficient, therefore more desirable, than public ownership
- Capital is a virtue and deserves the lion's share of the rewards. By contrast, labour is a cost and that cost should be kept to a minimum
- The economy must never stop growing. Therefore all of us need to be ever more competitive and work harder and harder. That will never stop
- New technology will enable us to circumvent threats to the environment without having to change our behaviour
- The rising tide will lift all boats. Thus, economic growth will eventually reduce material poverty and inequality and alleviate problems that are assumed to have their roots in material poverty, such as crime and disease

These are the principal myths. The reality is very different from the myths. In reality:

- there is growing inequality within and between nations - the rising tide is lifting the luxury yachts faster than the small boats
- important aspects of our culture are being dumbed down in the interests of creating mass markets - many cherished parts of our lives are being commercialised in the interests of profit
- our value-system encourages and rewards personal ambition and selfishness, so why are we surprised that crime, stress and dishonesty are on the increase?
- the natural environment is more seriously threatened than ever
- to cap it all, we have political and other institutions that tend to put the interests of the economy and business before the interests of society

All of this is *disempowering and dehumanising*. We urgently need to adopt an economics that values people and nature higher than money and property, and that is empowering and humanising.

## **A Conscious World**

I do not deny that modernity has given us a lot, but it came at a price. There are many who believe that the price is now too high and that it is time to bring back meaning, wisdom, ecology and consciousness into our lives and to find ways to go beyond materialism. As we do this, I believe that we shall find that we are simultaneously creating a new kind of economics, a new kind of education, a new kind of healthcare, a new kind of science, and a new kind of politics. It is impossible to predict exactly what they will be, but, if they are imbued with meaning, wisdom, ecology and consciousness, they may look something like this...

The *new economics* will be about enhancing people and planet, rather than exploiting them. At the heart of the new economics will be love, wisdom and ecology. It will bring with it new kinds of relationships, new kinds of businesses, and new kinds of institutions. The new economics does not mean that we will not have things to do. There will always be plenty to do. But it does mean that we will be much less likely to *overdo!*

The *new education* will be about bringing out the best and uniqueness in each individual, rather than schooling them to believe certain things and to behave in certain ways, which is what usually happens today in our schools, colleges and universities. At the heart of the new education will be the development, in children and adults, of wisdom, consciousness, meaning and ecology. Hard as it is to believe today, courses in consciousness will be a central part of the curricula of all schools, colleges and universities

The *new healthcare* will be about self-reliance, wisdom and ecology in health and medicine, rather than about overdependence on experts and technology. Medical treatment will be the exception rather than the rule because the main focus will be on staying healthy. There will be much less need for doctors, drugs and hospitals, partly because fewer people will be getting ill, but also because our knowledge and understanding of the human being will change profoundly as we become more conscious

The *new science* will be about applying the whole of the human being to the search for knowledge, rather than just the physical part, as at present. Science of the physical will continue to give us much that is useful. However, in the new science, knowledge of the physical will be complemented by knowledge of the non-physical, and that will give us a fuller, richer understanding of the world. The new science will reflect wider, deeper forms of knowing and the additional knowledge that flows from this. It will literally be a “science of the whole” because it will integrate the physical with the non-physical and the material with the spiritual

The *new politics* will be about the return of power to people and communities, rather than having power concentrated in the hands of politicians and the wealthy. At the heart of the new politics are two ideas - the idea that most power stays at the local level, where it belongs, and the idea that everyone has something useful to say and contribute

None of the above will be easy. People will not willingly give up the habits of a lifetime, and many in power will resist tooth and nail. In fact, if we are honest with ourselves, engaging in the kinds of changes I am suggesting here will be the most difficult thing we ever do. Transformation may seem attractive in theory. In practice, it is often messy and painful. Yet if we want to preserve this planet and survive and prosper as a race, we have no choice but to change fundamentally. That may take a generation or three, but we have to start somewhere.

## **Conclusion**

I am acutely aware that I have covered a lot of ground at some speed. My intention is simply to draw attention to the fact that modernity is no longer a health-producing or happiness-producing culture, if indeed it ever was. It has had the unintended effects of marginalising wisdom and meaning and creating spiritual poverty. If we are ever to solve the many problems of the modern world, then we have to replace spiritual poverty with spiritual wealth. This means many things, but ultimately it means allowing wisdom and

meaning to fill our private and public lives. But wisdom does not come from nowhere. It has to be nurtured and it has to be valued. I can think of no better way of cultivating wisdom than to work on one's consciousness and intelligence.

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