

## What is the point of a wasp?

We understand the value of bees. We like bees. We don't like wasps because we can't see their value. What is the point of a wasp? What do they do for us?

Putting a price on something doesn't necessarily capture its whole worth. The economic value of pollination services was estimated at £690 million per year in the UK but that does not mean that £690 million can account for the total value of all the UK's bees for a year. You cannot really capture the value of a bee in economic terms in any satisfactory way. Valuation alone is not what is going to determine the fate of the species. To create the change we really need, the priority should be to take action by banning harmful pesticides and creating more suitable habitat. If we care for lives, what price do we put on human beings? What is the value that society places on its participants?

Values are debated in the context of this or that organisation or country as a way of doing things or what is important. Our times call for something further; values (plural) around the value (singular), not just of financial assets but of people, of communities and of nature in which we live, move and have our being. This book had been a platform of observation; charting, recording, observing landscapes, watching and waiting for the stealthy march of hope. Maybe that time has now come.

We are called, however, not to be dispassionate watchers and waiters but activists; informed by what we see in order to change things and work inch by inch towards the transformation of the world. It is a platform for action; a platform for lobbyists everywhere to meet and greet and foment revolution. Its credo is a revolutionary who lived long before the march of left, right, left right; a Galilean revolutionary of love who upended the lazy assumptions of power as well as temple tables. Despite both urgency and emergency, we are required to be prophetic rather than apocalyptic in tone. Apocalyptic sees things not in terms of getting back on track but that there is no more track. It is outside history whereas prophetic probing takes place within history.

When at Advent 2019, I took up the book that is emerging on this (under the title 'what will Spring be like?') two big stories were dominating the headlines.

A man had just run amok on London Bridge, killing and stabbing the very people who had been trying to turn his life around. Usman Khan was attending a conference on rehabilitation at the chandeliered drawing room of the Fishmonger's Hall on the power of rehabilitation when he turned from delegate to murderer. Those present had been reflecting on the importance of storytelling and creative writing in reforming criminals. But here was someone who was not nearly as rehabilitated as he appeared. And here was a story that went desperately wrong leaving participants for which

there was no happy ending. Like Covid, unseen, unbidden, a deadly virus had been worming through the man's mind. Evidently Usman Khan had not stopped believing that there lay a fast track to paradise; a track that sped to joyful bliss through the blood and gore of victims. There would never be, could never be, rehabilitation of a corrupted life without restoration of a mind so badly warped. Mounting theological challenge is imperative. The warped ideology must surely be de-constructed.

The second story also concerned a killer; this time a killer whale. It was not the state of a Cetacean mind but the stomach that gave rise to the headlines. Washed up on the beach in northern Scotland, the stomach had been unable to digest a hundred kilos of rubbish, including the ubiquitous plastic bottle. What a menace we are. What are we doing to a staggering array of lives who share the world? What are we doing to the natural order of things in which we are irrevocably embedded?

For this was the weekend the nations of the world – or at least 185 of them – launched out into the deep waters of a global conference on climate change. Conference of the Parties (COP25) began to meet on a Madrid morning for two weeks of talks amid a growing sense of crisis. The President of an island nation on the frontline said it is in a "fight to the death" after freak waves inundated the capital. Gases such as the notorious carbon dioxide were acting like the glass roof of a greenhouse. According to UN Secretary General António Guterres, "the point of no return is no longer over the horizon". This too is a killer. Habits and habitats are at stake.

Pandemics are signs of disruption. A global wildlife trade teams up with agricultural intensification, de-forestration and urbanisation. Animals are partners whose health and habitats should be protected. Covid was not a random act of God. It's caused by what we do to the environment.

These are crises of the very idea of value. Reinventing value is an imperative for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Its conceptualisation and social practice must surely constitute system-wide change and re-calibration.

We had just marked 30 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. With one bound, being told that the wall was now open, citizens in East Germany were freed from the humiliation of a surveillance society. They could take control of their own destiny and choose their leaders. In its wake came the fall of Communism. Arguments about how to organise society seemed to have been settled. Money had won as the ultimate arbiter of worth. The jury of history is less sure. The unification of humanity under a single social system might look like the end of history. But liberal capitalism is less assured as the inevitable outcome. The rise and rise of China is associated with political capitalism in which authoritarian Governments legitimise themselves by delivering economic growth to their people. A better model? Then came Covid-19 with State intervention handed out on an unprecedented scale.

As Israeli historian Yuval Harari observed at the Davos gathering of international leaders at the dawn of the third decade, the usual bargain is that philosophers have a lot of fanciful ideas, and politicians basically explain that they lack the means to implement these ideas. Now we are facing philosophical bankruptcy.<sup>i</sup> The twin revolutions of infotech and biotech gave politicians the means to create heaven or hell, except that philosophers were having trouble conceptualizing what the new heaven and the new hell looks like. That was a dangerous situation for spiritually rootless times. If we fail to conceptualize a new heaven quickly, we will be misled by naïve utopias. Fail to conceptualize the new hell quickly enough, we may find ourselves entrapped there with no way out. But then came Covid. Big tech came out stronger; public saviours in providing public utilities everyone needed. The toxicity attaching itself to large digital platforms melted. Big tech re-built reputations.

Could we re-imagine how things are towards a world shaped by love and justice? Alongside many others, Christians fight for such a world. It goes under the name of the reign of God; significant influence from the kingdom that is to come erupting into the politics of the present. We don't build it. God does. Sounds pie in the sky or meal on the plate while you wait with the hungry of our times.

So take this blog as a serious challenge to the value systems underpinning our troubled times. We do not need an answer but a new set of answers – and maybe a new set of questions. It would be brilliant if, along so many others, it can help be the midwife of a movement. Communities and natural environment are interwoven. Inextricably and intimately, the social ecology is the bio-cultural sphere in which human life coheres. Only by acknowledging the context in which it operates can business be redeemed as a force for good in the community. What if we challenged the whole value system on which society in the liberal West has depended? What would we put in its place?

We dwell in a world haunted by escalating inequality and environmental degradation; a world at risk from global terrorism and impersonal forces. It is a world where the natural sphere with which we interact so profoundly has lost its sacred quality and become a resource; a world conditioned by progressive domination of a monetary scale applied impermissibly across the board. Amidst the astounding technology, the niche consumption and the financialisation that characterises much of the globe, the prevailing mood music was that the only values we can only usefully measure were expressed in terms of economics. The near vacuum of ideals meant that constantly, incessantly, we were back to numbers, back to the balance sheet. As a result, our way of life was characterised by fragmentation and by a short-term focus on profit. Erode the economic and you erode the personal. There has to be a better way of organising society.

It is clear to any observer who both looks around and dares to peer within that the really important issues that frame the contemporary human situation are those that cannot be measured. How, to invoke Oscar Wilde, did we end up knowing the price of everything but the value of nothing? What price can be placed on time (the scarce commodity of late modernity) and on gift (the essence of relationship)? What price on living harmoniously with nature or community (the two-fold context where we live together in our common home)? In a realm where we are more than isolated entities, measures of quantity and numbers are unavoidable. How else do you apportion scarce resources? Yet quality is also vital to human flourishing. What after all is wealth for? What kind of society do we want to be in? What price the non-quantifiable and non-economic goods that make life worthwhile?

In a previous book, I argued for a 'high value society'; a new vocabulary for a common platform that challenges power and calls at the same time for human flourishing within valuing environments plus the natural ecology of which symbiotically and unavoidably we are a part. To put society back together and grapple with the need to put us on a war footing to deal with looming environmental emergency requires new thinking about the social ecology as an integrated unit.

How are we going to re-build ourselves? 'What does Spring look like?' Essentially what is proposed is a re-invention of value based on a quadrilateral, four legs of a chair and not just a triple bottom line:-

- The value of the environment
- The value of community as social ecology – including parks and green spaces
- The value of individuals & sacred life (highlighted in trade off in lives v economy)
- The value of the economic realm as the sphere of wealth and welfare creation

We will explore what each leg of the chair looks like through the prism of what it means to flourish and what values arise. An opportunity to re-build; a chance to re-boot comes but once a lifetime. The future is something we can all create. With Spring in the air, that will be a good outcome.

What do you think we could create out of this wreckage? Will it be suspiciously like the future we have been agitating for or will it be genuinely new, unexpected and emergent? Let me know.

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<sup>i</sup> Yuval Harari (2020) Yuval Harari's blistering warning to Davos World24 Jan 2020