

What will Spring be like?

“Little darling, it's been a long cold lonely winter. The smiles returning to the faces. Little darling, it seems like years since it's been here” – George Harrison

“For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land”– the Bible, Song of Solomon Ch 2 v11-12

Some are comparing the present Emergency to war-time conditions. It may be that in due course we will emerge into a 1945 moment.

We stand on the cusp of the most far reaching change in our life-time. A different future is possible. The scope for developing a new social and business model for society is only constrained by the limits of imagination. If Covid showed us anything it is that we can tolerate massive social change.

This is one of those moments such as you see on the railways. A switch point means that the train can go in a different direction. It's been coming down the track but will not continue as it has been.

It could be 'business as usual', certainly in the short-term. After all, the need to get the economy going after its unforeseen heart attack will be paramount surely. It depends on the shape of recession. To default to economic activity in the form of life as we know it will be crucial short-term.

Longer-term may be a very different story. How often has it happened that the world stopped spinning for three months? A sharp shock is unlikely to be short anymore than if an asteroid fell to Earth. A heart attack often precipitates a radical re-appraisal. The shock will reverberate for years.

It is not a moment for eco-socialists on the grounds that things need to be done differently. Things ARE being done differently. Structural change is here to stay. It had in fact been building up anyway. Concern about inequality in global society plus palpable eco-strain already had been troubling us.

For at least a brief moment, shining in the darkness, solidarity broke through in new and unexpected ways. Can we build a better world; shift to a more hopeful future? That's what this blog is about.

It's called 'what does Spring look like?' and is based on what is the top lesson to come out of all this, namely the need to re-think our value system so as to re-centre on factors that sustain:

1. The environment and social ecology which is so tied up with well-being. The acceptance of drastic action has been accepted. We got a taste of clearer skies and fresher air.
2. People – the lives of those trapped in poverty are no less valuable than the rich people. Sharp inequality was exposed in the pandemic and those doing health care and menial jobs are the highly valuable people. Mental issues are vital
3. Community – solidarity locally and with the whole human family
4. The economy otherwise people don't have a job & there are no taxes to pay for health care

Contemporary culture anaesthetises anything to do with tragedy or trauma into banal superficiality where everything is fun. And then came Covid; the minute enemy that ripped through the planet.

The scars will last a long time. The economic shock was both deep and dramatic. Experts warned this week that the world is likely to face a global crisis in poor mental health after pandemic has passed. An Ipsos Mori survey at the end of March showed people's mental health was already affected by the 'stay at home' policy. It revealed increased levels of anxiety and fear of suffering mentally.

Pandemics tend to magnify existing inequalities rather than flatten them. The most affluent managed to shelter, hide from the virus in their gardens or second homes, work remotely and get food delivered to their homes courtesy of Deliveroo and on-line slots. Poverty made the experience of Covid harder to bear. It was the lower paid working communities that were harder hit, often cramped in tower blocks and homes without gardens. Plus of course the elderly and vulnerable. There was an inter-generational as well as class divide. Resilience depends on capacity. How people fared in that public health emergency was a very different experience according to social location.

But there is resilience of spirit as well as economic resilience. The latter requires some spare capacity to withstand shocks to the system. When I was working for the UK Government in the early 1980's, I was closely involved with setting up a strategic stockpile of raw materials that came out of South Africa. These were the Apartheid years. Essential supply could get interrupted if the balloon went up. The counter-argument against this insurance policy was that the cost of putting resilience into the system and ensuring spare capacity outweighed the risk. It was akin to the need for snow ploughs in the south of England where I worked. They would rarely be used.

So what gets us through in such a severe shock? Intervention using the firepower of a modern State for one; dedication of those in the care professions for another. Then there was social solidarity invoking enormous kindness. But there was as well the remarkable charismatic personalities of cities and communities; such as when New York firemen, lauded for their response in 9/11, came to applaud nurses and doctors. Or the faith communities reaching out in tandem with mutual aid groups that multiplied everywhere but also had their own resource of hope based on another world.

Will we see a new social model? The challenge of the hour is towards a larger, collective polity that helped us get through, a model that must include sources of hope such as faith communities that help engender spiritual stockpiling and personal resilience. Taken together, in its pain and severe social stress, the crisis could help open up society in a way that was much needed.

There are of course many voices that will be extremely wary of anything that smacks of eco-socialism. It is true that the flood defences of economy and society were overwhelmed for a while but let's now set about re-building using familiar materials. The default could be business as usual.

When extreme push came to extreme shove, the hyper-individualistic market society to which we have become accustomed could not get us through something major. That is worth reflecting on. The only way was looking out for each other combined with a war-time level of State action.

What does it say about how society works if the vulnerable pay a higher price? Our social and business model must take stock of the fact that family, friends and neighbours were first responders, before paramedics showed up. In societies prone to unacceptable levels of pernicious loneliness, these were vital sources of solidarity and need to be strengthened by carefully crafted policies.

The need for social solidarity was exposed by this. The ideology that free markets alone will handle everything and take care of people was laid bare: moral bankruptcy of a hyper-individualistic model

of society uncovered. The organic growth of community support groups has been remarkable. When combined with top-down action by the State, how can we channel this into something sustainable?

There is no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It was free markets that brought us Zoom that morphed from a conferencing App to being the social network of pandemic choice – or What's App that enabled neighbourhoods to talk to each other. The infrastructure of big tech or the global race to find solutions and pool knowledge is based on responsive and responsible industry.

The model of economic value that enabled this should of course be combined with State action and communal solidarity including sources of hope. So when the inevitable social autopsy comes, will the value system be examined to ask what was it that brought us through?

There COULD be an arc in some areas of the world towards greater authoritarianism as offering the best way forward to organise society. The Covid Emergency saw much debate about how far authoritarian regimes could impose draconian measures and greater social control more effectively. Democracies and societies more given to soft power took longer to ramp themselves up for what was needed. A public health emergency on this scale was not only hard to prepare for, it staggered the imagination. Covid was beyond the experience of anyone alive. The only parallel for the older ones amongst us was war-time measures. Then it was accepted that this was a temporary necessity

This is a consequential moment. Times of trauma and shock often serve their potent impact as a wake-up call. At the extreme end of social experience, near-deaths have often led to re-prioritising. Strain on old ways of doing things had proven overwhelming. Trust in the kind of institutions that are vital to a mature and secure democracy fell low in popular estimation. Now the expert has returned.

Material prosperity is not enough. Longer term, we will get through this with a new collective resolve to build a different future; a future where people come first – even those that have seem to have little value; especially those that seem to have less worth. Their lives are valuable too. How little we needed to make us happy back then. It was the human interaction that sustained us. We can with hope build a very different value system, not based on money with its turbulent, faltering value but on the value of people and of our staggeringly beautiful world we lost sight of.

Now though, how should we even think about knowledge and values? We are used to thinking about life as a constant drama of decision-making. Increasingly, decisions are taken by algorithms. We lack philosophical models to understand such an existence. With what shall we repair crumbling edifices? Renewal is possible if we revive our values rooted afresh in the re-invention of value for a diverse, forward-looking world. A renewed conception of the Common Good is looming rooted in broader imagination about what value means and its ultimate source.

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 re lives and economy)
- The value of the economic realm as the sphere of wealth and welfare creation

With Spring potentially in the air, that will be a good outcome.