

REFLECTIONS ON HEALTH AND CARE IN A CONSUMER SOCIETY

Tony Devaney

Easy money or instant fame,
you can only be a winner
if you play the game.
Shackled to a life that is
ruled by vanity, welcome to
the madness that we call sanity!

The health implications of widespread problems with food allergies and additive intolerances in our society are still being largely 'swept under the carpet' by government and Industry. Sometimes, very severe symptoms associated with such problems can go undiagnosed or unrecognised for many years, often being put down by GP's to individual anxiety or stress. Sufferers may even be seen by employers and others as being 'malingerers.'

When public concerns are raised about the dangers of factory farming and potentially harmful chemicals used in food and drink production, the government often rushes to defend the interests of the industry. Productivity and economic concerns always seem to come before the health of the nation. Biased science, sometimes funded by the industry itself is used to allay public concerns and to ensure continued corporate profits.

This is perhaps only one aspect of a much larger problem in our society. Many other aspects of our consumer lifestyle may be causing severe stress related illnesses. These are being diagnosed all too often

as relating solely to individual weakness or pathology, rather than to any likely social causes or effects.

In a channel 4 television documentary in 1999, called *New Britain on the Couch*, the psychologist Oliver James, posed the question whether consumer culture is poisoning our minds via the media, causing us to compare ourselves with others and to feel a sense of failure - a manufacturing of depression. Quoting statistics available at the time, James reported that half a million people were on Prozac at any one time, and that for every person on anti-depressants up to five others may remain undiagnosed or untreated. He observed that, 'New Labour are doing nothing to address our psychological well-being. In fact, they might be making things worse.'

In a triumph of marketing over morality and truth, the public are now being further duped and exploited by the increasing use of expensive television advertising campaigns funded by the taxpayer, to 'educate' and inform them about how to stay healthy, thus putting the onus firmly back on the individual. There is talk now of GP's issuing 'fitness notes' and tackling the 'sickness culture.'

Simply pathologizing, or blaming the affected individual for taking time off work through stress or environmentally related illness, is a form of social repression and control. The interests of the economy and of an elite group of free market capitalists and would be 'masters of the universe' are constantly being placed above the physical and emotional wellbeing and wider spiritual needs of individual citizens.

Instead of the system serving our real needs and giving more real choice and opportunity for personal development, we are all being made to serve the system. Passive acceptance, wholesale conformity and denial of truth are financially rewarded, while real initiative or the honest revealing of deficiencies in the system are punished. It is a form of social coercion.

People live in fear and anxiety, all too often allayed by constant shopping, eating, or consumption of alcohol, to stay 'sane.'

Through the manufacturing of public consent via global technology, rampant consumerism and an illusory notion of progress, we are being fooled into supporting a corrupt and morally bankrupt system, and giving away our spiritual birthright.

The following extracts, including my poem *Futilitarianism*, were part of a message put together by people attending the Worcestershire Jubilee Earth Summit in 2002. Participants included members of the public and representatives from youth, community, women's and environmental groups, churches, schools, colleges, farmers, businesses, public agencies and councils. **The message was later presented to World leaders** at the Johannesburg Earth Summit, by two local young people, who attended the Summit as part of the international 'Your Wakeup Call' initiative. It was also sent to senior UK ministers and members of business, education and environmental delegations attending the summit. The message, as shown in the conference report, included the following requests:

POVERTY & SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS:

We ask you to; Strive for new and better ways of tackling poverty, Put the interests of communities first before the interests of global trade.

CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION:

We ask you to; Put more emphasis on education in schools and in the media to make the link between consumption and the natural world. Work for more local sourcing of food. Put more emphasis on corporate social and environmental responsibility and demand a more ethical approach from companies.

My poem, written in 1994, was performed at the Jubilee Earth Summit and included as part of the message.

FUTILITARIANISM

We have a culture of greed
And a culture of speed,
Producing and consuming
More than we need.

What will we do with
The time that we save
While rushing madly
Towards the grave?

When the life of the spirit
Surrounds us today,
Why do we squander
Our birthright away?

Why is man killing
for gold and for oil,
Destroying the landscape
Polluting the soil?

Laying down concrete
And cutting down trees
Who really benefits
Who does it please?

The poem appeared along with a colour print of an artwork banner made by children aged from 5-14, who also took an active part in the Summit. Their own simple and moving messages on the banner, were asking for world peace, an end to war, poverty, and pollution.

Three words from the poet Dylan Thomas, 'Ambition is critical', set into a pavement in Swansea, echo my own long held belief. We can no longer afford to remain silent, or passively acceptant of the status quo, at a time of pressing need for a radical change of moral values in our world.

*Someone who holds back the truth causes trouble,
but one who openly criticises works for peace.*

(Proverbs 10:10)

Tony Devaney, April 2010.

(Edited, August 2017)