

Sometimes

A Lifescape viewpoint work in progress, March 2006.

ONE Sometimes in our lives we are drawn back

Sometimes in our lives we are drawn back. It can be a random thing that triggers this – a touch of a familiar scent or wind on my face in a particular place or time in the day; a brush with beauty or pain. It can be the realisation of happiness and then the balancing fear of losing what it is that is precious in this moment. Then there can be a wave of memory – a thought, a picture or maybe just a tintured evocation of something past that carries emotion.

For me, the evoked memory or revisiting is often touched with poignancy - although I am rarely nostalgic for what was real - more for what I did not have 'back then'. There is a sense, therefore, in which this loss is illogical - because it is more about a sense of losing something that I wished I had, rather than something that is now actual or absent. And yet it feels so real...

In moments like these I wonder if this is just me, that it is only my condition that is structured in such a way; that over time I have become hard-wired (to use that hateful, yet perhaps all too accurate, mechanical little phrase) **by** experience **to** experience the world like this, or whether there is something in the existential human condition that evokes this twisted sense of nostalgia in us all.

I'm not sure how much it matters which is the truer, or whether both can co-exist simultaneously. There is a temptation here to draw back into theory, of course, and a revisiting of the great debates of the 20th century – of nature vs. nurture, of evolution vs. blank slate, of developed personality vs. soul.

There's another (perhaps false?) divide between science and poetry. The first spends years searching for the truth that can be proven; the second spends years searching for the words that can prove truth. Again, perhaps, this is another debate not to get into - another conversation carrying the potential for avoidance.

However as I write I wish to resist this temptation and stay with the experience and with the question: am I alone or is this something I share?

And to stay, a little, with what is evoked:

The boy, the search for love, the loss of experience only imagined. Dreams of power and of richly coloured, hinted meaning. Beaches now and beaches then. What it could mean to be a poet, to be a scientist. To be what I was born to become, whatever that might be. The 'acorn'¹ that encapsulates all this and with it the knowledge that there are only stories, and even then only a few:

"Life has five plots:" writes the poet Peter Finch,
"rise to fame, fall to grace,
gain love, lose it
*and death"*²

Maybe I might add a sixth: the yearning for all these. It is in this sixth plot where the clue could lie to what draws us back to re-explore ancient grounds to try to discover what this all means - what **I** mean. The archaeology of the soul has yearning at its heart.

And even as I write this I am brought in a circle back to the question: is this yearning mine or is it universal? You see how the question seems to want to matter, to demand attention?...

TWO **Sometimes in our lives we must look forward**

First there is hope and clarity of purpose. At other times there is clouded vision, and confusion.

The paradox of the future is that it has not happened yet, and yet is, in some ways, more real in its basis than the past. When we imagine a better world and a happier, more authentic life for ourselves we will often evoke the real outer world. When I think of the future I think of the future of my family, my work, my community – of the world and its pains and future glories, of the things I could do and places I could go.

I think of the real people who inspire and intrigue me with their ideas and their ways of seeing into the future. Dave Hicks³ – whose ways of envisioning the future are firmly grounded in the world and in the causes of justice; Neil Crofts⁴ – whose vision of people being authentic in their work or lives is firmly grounded in the real and the possible; Marty Seligman⁵, whose positive psychology holds out a promise of happiness for all if only we can learn to match up the strengths of our personality with what the world is asking of us.

In the authentic, positive and just world of the future – my future – I am a poet, an entrepreneur, a successful psychotherapist perhaps – a man who has found love and accepts fully what this means in his life; who has made a difference in the world to some greater or lesser degree.

And yet while the future can give me hope, it can also be an escape route from the present – a way of always wanting more and never being satisfied – and it can carry fear too. I understand that this is the future I have constructed for myself from my past and in my psychology, but nevertheless there is a touch of the never-never about it sometimes. Always striving, always seeking. What on earth would the world be like without a future to hope for?

I wonder about this too – the future is always also in the hearts and minds of those who would destroy. We do not all share their hope; their hope is not a hope **for** us all. Vision is all very well but if it is not shared and carries destruction and evil within it – what then? Isn't the future then just a dangerous chimera that promises all, but is blind to the fact that much that we already have is precious?

And yet not all is well in the world: there are wounds to be healed and hope to be enacted. I am not all that I would like to be. I know I can achieve more; become more authentic, positive and visionary. Isn't the future a guiding light that can lead us to make ourselves and our world better?

Maybe the future is much too important than to be left to big visions for change and personal fulfilment. What I do know is that the future makes me restless, and at the same time (I must admit) it holds up that light of promise. Perhaps I need a more down-to-earth utopia – one which stands up to a little sifting and scratching. To imagine myself and the new world I will live in and help create, I might need a more grounded, humble archaeological imagination.

In her visionary book 'Always Coming Home'⁶, Ursula LeGuin reflects on how she can construct an "archaeology of the future", imagining and reaching the people who "*might be going to have lived a long, long time from now*":

"the only way I can think to find them, the only archaeology that might be practical, is as follows: You take your child or grandchild in your arms, or borrow a baby, not a year old yet, and go down to the wild oats in the field below the barn Stand under the oak on the last slope of the hill, facing the creek. Stand quietly. Perhaps the baby will see something, or hear a voice, or speak to somebody there, somebody from home".

What is she saying? Perhaps that if we see the future as if through a baby's eyes, keep a humble ear to the earth, treat the future as we should our past (with the love and respect it deserves); and if we envision the ways in which others might choose to live their lives, rather than how we would like them to live them, then maybe the future can be a friend after all...

Notes, links and references

¹ The 'acorn' is the metaphor for the soul put forward by James Hillman in **The Soul's Code** (1996, Random House). He writes: *"In a nutshell, then, this book is about calling, about fate, about character, about innate image. Together they make up the 'acorn theory' which holds that each person bears a uniqueness that asks to be lived and that is already present before it can be lived"*.

² The quote is the last stanza of the poem, **Llywelyn Goch Ap Meurig Hen At Speed** by Peter Finch, in Poetry Review, Volume 93, No 2, Summer 2003.

³ **Dave Hicks** at the Centre for Global & Futures Education, Bath Spa University: www.users.bathspa.ac.uk/hicd1/home-page.htm

⁴ **Neil Crofts**: www.authenticbusiness.co.uk, www.authenticguides.com and www.authentictransformation.co.uk

⁵ **Marty Seligman & Positive psychology** - Authentic Happiness site: www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/ and the UK site run by Alex Linley: www.personalitystrengths.com

⁶ From: **Always Coming Home** by Ursula LeGuin, Grafton Books, 1988.

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