

CLEAR HEADS AND COMPASSIONATE HEARTS

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Life is meant to be joyful. In fact, there is a deep joy that nothing can take from us even when things go wrong. I'll come back to that. But, first, we have to admit that life can get mucked up by some of the things we do. I don't mean things we all know are wrong; I mean things we usually think are harmless. So let's look at some of the ways our lives can become diminished by things we might have thought were harmless.

I am encouraged by what I see in young people who want to make the world a better place. But making it better requires clear heads and compassionate hearts, and that's what I am talking about.

The Roman empire was one of the largest empires in the ancient world, with a highly developed legal system, and organized government extending across many nations. The Western side of the Empire eventually crumbled, due partly to invasion by less civilized peoples from outside the empire. These were literally marauding tribes. The name given to these tribes by the Romans was "barbarians", which simply meant "foreigners". But these foreigners were remembered mainly for their uncivilized and destructive ways. After all, they ransacked Rome. And so that's the kind of thing the name "barbarian" came to mean.

We all know that barbaric things still happen, - between nations, and within nations. Every violation of human rights diminishes people's lives. People cannot be fully themselves when they are deprived of economic opportunities, or deprived of their own culture, language and customs. Some forms of barbarity are more likely to get into the news. But there are other ways of diminishing people's lives that can easily go unnoticed.

In countries like our own, barbaric acts don't always involve physical violence. As one scholar has said: "The barbarian is not necessarily known by his bearskin, his axe or his H-bomb; he may be as urbane as the 18th century philosophers who prepared the way for the guillotine and the tumbrils..." (J. Courtenay Murray, *We Hold These Truths*.)

This scholar goes on to say that what characterizes barbarians down the ages, it is the fact that they turned other people's lives up-side-down. There are various ways of doing that. Even in civilized societies, there are people who, like the barbarians of old, really don't contribute new and creative ideas; instead they just create a climate of uncertainty and confusion and spurn the wisdom that has been guiding people's lives.

So, who are the barbarians we might need to be alert to, - but who won't fool people who have clear heads and compassionate hearts? Well, they won't necessarily be wearing bearskins and wielding axes and arriving in ships like the Vikings had. And not all of them will be using car-bombs. And yet they can still turn people's lives up-side-down and undermine people's sense of purpose and reason for living. They do this by the way they influence people, sometimes by peddling half-truths, sometimes by manipulating information, and sometimes by creating loneliness. I'll give you examples of all three of these ways.

An example of a half truth: Sometimes people say: "you can't judge what other people do". Really? So you can't say that murder is wrong? Because that's a judgment. Inherited wisdom would say "you *can* judge people's actions as right or wrong; what you can't judge is their conscience and how they stand before God." But see how false a half-truth can be!

Another half-truth: "what you feel attracted to is right for you". Really? So if a man feels attracted to another man's wife, that's alright for him? And if a young person engages in self-harm, is that right for her because that's the inclination she experiences? No, we all know there's something wrong with that kind of thinking. Inherited wisdom tells us that right and wrong don't ultimately depend on a person's inclinations and attractions. Instead, clear heads and compassionate hearts will look to the design and purpose and meaning of things, which have been built into nature.

Half truths are running wild in the worlds of business and commerce. References to "development" and "progress" can be deceptive, and sometimes are meant to be. A recent news item (that didn't get on to NZ channels) featured a plan by big corporations to turn a world heritage site in Kenya into a big coal-mine. They had lots to say about "development" and creating jobs. Never mind that it involved displacing indigenous people who already live there and depend on it.

The good news is that there are now mainstream economists – with clear heads and compassionate hearts - who are questioning the economic model we have been using. The present model came about because to confront poverty it was necessary either to share resources or to produce more, and people preferred to produce more, rather than share. This model requires continuous growth. We now know that continuous growth is unsustainable. It hasn't worked anyway, because the ones who already have more are the ones who end up getting more, and the gap between rich and poor just keeps on getting bigger. Now there are economists who speak of the need for economics to be as much about sufficiency as about efficiency. (cf Daly, Myers and others in *Naked Ape to Super Species*, pp 183-5)

Barbarians are not fast learners. Recently, there was a meeting of countries that live around the arctic circle to discuss the fact that the melting of the arctic ice will have very serious consequences for countries right around the globe, especially low-lying countries. The US blocked them from making an agreed statement because the draft statement included

reference to climate change. And the Secretary of State's speech was about the opportunity the melting ice gives for mining the arctic continent for more fossil fuels, gold and uranium. Some just don't 'get it'. And if that is growth, guess who does get it.

Barbarians can also invade people homes and lives through the way communications media are used. Bullying is an obvious and crude example of damaging other people. But individuals' lives can also be diminished just by a constant flow of information that leaves no time to think deeply or critically about information already received. In a society that trivializes important things, and idolizes trivial things, we really do need people who can think deeply and critically. But if people are swamped with information and left little time to think carefully about it, they are being gradually dumbed-down.

News programmes in our country don't bother much with research and analysis, and serve up mainly items that are meant to distract and entertain, plus lots of happy chat. And, of course, as competing for our attention gets tougher, so the ways of getting it become louder and more shocking and vulgar. Those for whom TV is their market place will say "this is what the public wants". They don't say: "this is what the public has been formed to want by not giving them anything better."

We all know that digital technology has many wonderful and positive uses. But this technology can also be used in ways that create personal and social problems – even without realizing this is happening. For example, I recently watched a young mother walking down a street with two pre-school children. They were begging for her attention, asking her to look at this and that, and asking questions. She was cyber miles away. If their experience of being ignored like that was frequent, she was shutting them out during the very times that nature provides for bonding. In years to come, she may well wonder why her children don't seem close to her. Why would they be?

Another example: A recent news item told us that there has been a spike in university students experiencing early stages of stress on mental health, and some of these students were saying they had nobody really close they could speak to. Do we need to ask why this problem has spiked at this time, and why some of them have nobody close to speak with? Is it because during secondary school years, during the times when they could have been laughing and playing and chatting and forming friendships, instead they were too often locked in their cyber cells, missing out on the normal ways of forming good friendships – and not developing the skills for forming friendships? If that's what has happened, it is hardly healthy for them as individuals or for society. Have you noticed how often American teenagers involved in school shootings are described as "loners"? In the UK, they now have a Minister for Loneliness!!

Nature's way of preventing these harms – of preventing barbarity – is through experiencing community, i.e. coming out of ourselves and into the lives of one another, while always respecting the dignity and privacy of others. The fact is, we become our true selves through being with and for others. This is how we develop good relationships and the skills of dialogue. And these are the alternatives to violence, and to loneliness.

Being interested in others is also where compassion begins; we notice others' needs. This can lead to ways of exercising solidarity with others – even people far away - who are being treated unjustly. Increasingly, businesses are feeling the need to investigate their supply chains to ensure they are not benefitting by forms of slave labour. Looking out for others is how societies gradually become more civilized and less barbaric.

I said at the start that life is meant to be happy. Happiness has many layers. On TV, I watched young people at the rugby world cup, enjoying the occasion and excited by the prospect of a win for their respective teams. I was feeling happy with them. Happiness is infectious. I don't know how long their happiness lasted, but even passing happiness can do something that enriches us, and remains with us.

I have also just read a report by a young English woman describing the happiness of the many thousands who gathered in St Peter's square in Rome recently for the canonization of St John Henry Newman. She describes so well that deep faith experience that can hit us unexpectedly, wherever God is working through human experiences. I had the advantage of knowing what a canonization experience can feel like – it can be deeply moving, bringing gratefulness, and a happiness that goes deep.

Before John Henry Newman became a Catholic, he was pastor in the village of Littlemore, near Oxford, in England. He certainly had a clear head; he was an intellectual giant and founder of a university in Dublin. But he also had a compassionate heart. He loved being with ordinary folk. When he had a church built in the village of Littlemore, he had the names of the benefactors written on the walls. The names included not just those who had given money, but the names of all the children of the parish too. He saw them as benefactors because their faith and smiles and joys and needs touch older people in ways that inspire faith. That's how they contributed.

Newman saw how God works in people's lives and in everything that is good and true and beautiful, no matter how little. By declaring him a saint, Pope Francis reminds us that in the Communion of saints, Cardinal Newman is there for all of us. Ask him to help you be a leader in our kind of society.

Faith, joy and hope belong together. Pope Francis summed it up when calling us to care for the planet. He said:

“let us come together to take charge of this home which has been given to us, and let us sing as we go. May our struggles and our concerns never take away the joy of our hope”. (*Laudato Si* 244)

We need to treasure our faith, nurture it, practise it, and give it the chance to do for us what is does for Pope Francis. Our faith is the source of a hope and a joy that nothing can extinguish.