

# Overcoming despair and the alienation it produces

## Concerning concern

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### Abstract

Environmental work deals in the most depressing of statistics — measures of damage to our planet and measures of apparent incapacity to change them. Years working to bring about changes in the way people deal with their environment can be very frustrating and ultimately debilitating. Some aspects of personal frustration and the despair it leads to are examined. The most advanced tools used by environmental scientists such as systems theory are themselves shown to be a source of frustration. A principal source of despair is shown to be frustrated expectations based on faulty world views.

Suggestions toward resolving this outcome of concern are made. They involve personal work toward changing the expectations we have of our tools and the way we deal with reality. Evidence for the efficacy of such suggestions is taken from General System Theory itself, Deep Ecology and interpretations of twentieth century physics.

Nearly twenty years ago I became a concerned professional. Over ten years and a lengthy period of re-training and unemployment my concern heightened to the point where I finally became professionally concerned — paid as an environmentalist. Being professionally concerned allowed me to “maintain my rage” and deepen my concern to the point where I enrolled in a “despair workshop”. Whether this measure helped me cope with my despair or not is hard to say. However, it and other events did prompt me to re-assess the depressing nature of concern like mine. At the risk of being branded self-indulgent I would like to share my re-assessment with similarly concerned people.

### Sources of concern

Our way of life gives us plenty to worry about and plenty of awareness to worry with. To people like me, in selecting among worries, the things most worthy of concern are the superficially selfless issues that arise from what appear to us to be the sufferings of others. Moreover, we are usually aware that our own interests will also be served by successfully pursuing issues of a more general type. Examples of these are preservation of species, animal liberation, freedom from hunger and that most generalised concern: the suffering of our planet itself. By this I mean the suffering of Nature, the ultimate being of which all organisms are part.

— External sources

Generalised concern subsumes traditional concerns with equity, environment and health and draws

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attention to the links between them. It fits well with the new insights of systems thinkers who seek to understand the contexts of our immediate concerns (see e.g., Bertalanffy, 1968; Society for General Systems Research). It also fits well with the personal alienation characteristic of people in urban industrialised nations (see e.g., Durkheim, 1951:241-276 and more recently: Slater, 1971, Sennett, 1974 and Lasch, 1980). Both are sources of concern in themselves.

Systems thinking encourages awareness to the multitude of structures within which things happen. It offers generalizations about the way systems are organized, which may assist us in understanding the ways of living things. Unfortunately a catch with systems thinking is that it can lead to a virtual incapacity to act. For it shows that it is neither possible to clearly define problems in life nor to find “solutions” to them. Indeed if we feel we have found a solution we can be sure we are “wrong” for “problem-solving” is a concept that can only be applied to systems in which all dimensions and variables are known. Thus, it cannot be applied to real systems except as an approximation and it applies best to existing technical systems that fail and need “fixing”. It is important to realize that our mechanical systems can be treated in this way for this understanding colours the way we think about systems in general.

Defining things in terms of problems and solutions (a version of dualism) requires the non-mechanical problem solver to make simplifications (conscious or not) which will ensure that the solution simply introduces a new set of sub-problems. Many will not have been predicted, many will be slow to appear and some may actually be relatively trivial.

Systems thinking on the other hand involves accepting that what we perceive as a problem is part of a much wider set of phenomena and interrelationships which includes a superstructure made up of our understandings themselves and a quite limited capacity to deal with many variables. Moreover, systems theory makes us aware that this known super-structure is always deficient. It will always have excluded important variables and relationships between variables. Nor will it include or be able to deal with the contexts, interpretations or levels of organization within which its components fall. At least it will not be able to do these things in conventionally acceptable ways. Therefore, it can only “succeed” if we define success very narrowly. Since concerned people know better than to allow themselves to do this, outcomes of their work will

always appear to be inadequate partial resolutions which barely get anywhere. Such virtual “zero-sum” games are precursors to despair.

Consider the Keep Australia Beautiful approach to litter. Systems thinking suggests that in “cleaning up” it simply pushes wasteful ways underground, thereby delaying the day when they will have to be dealt with and in fact making the effort to do so more difficult by hiding the symptoms. Another example might be encouraging energy conservation under the auspices of an energy supply department. Consistent with systems thinking, the departments which could most easily introduce conservation, because of their demand-side orientation would be housing, welfare and health. However, at present these departments have little interest in conservation of energy.

These are straight forward examples where resolution is largely a matter of considering wider contexts of much the same type as the one we begin from. Systems thinking also prompts us to grapple with contexts of different types.

To gain public recognition and support, the concerns I am discussing here should be seen to be self-less or disconnected from immediate (especially material) personal gain to those working on them. However, they also require substantiation in some conventionally recognizable way such as material loss, recognizable suffering or some scientific measure which might also ultimately be translated into loss or suffering. These two imperatives are in a real sense contradictory. In the present politico-legal environment, we can best represent concerns if we are seen to be legitimately connected with them and yet, if we are seen to gain from the resolution of concerns like ours, others will be less inclined to accept them as genuine.

Consider the Franklin River case. Concern for wilderness is, on the face of it, suitably selfless. It is also incidentally, the ultimate terrestrial externalisation — far removed from the mire of the day-to-day human condition.

To be understood by the political machine capable of quashing the plans to inundate the wilderness, some conventionally acceptable value had to be placed on it such as tourist and scientific (potential species loss say) values. Whereas, the issues real to many of us such as:

- the loss to the Earth itself (a concept beyond intellectualisation) (see Naess, 1984; Bookchin, 1984 and Devall and Sessions, 1985).
- the loss to the “selves” or, understandings of personhood of those concerned with wilderness; and
- the perceived capitulation to the autonomy of technology, the so-called “technological fix” (Mumford, 1967/70; Winner, 1976).

had to be sidestepped. In doing this, to save a wilderness, we had to betray its essence which may only be found in ideas like these.

It must be said that numerous day-to-day concerns are continuously being internalised by our “System”, certain types of justice, safety, access to health and so on. Such concerns are like the greater issues in my first examples, while the issues of concern to me here are like wilderness. They are not amenable to recognition in conventional terms. Their essence is simply not amenable to conventionally acceptable valuation. I am not advocating that we should not use conventional valuations as expedients only that in doing so we are left to handle the new implications of the betrayal of

essence — which requires another approach altogether.

Now while generalised concern is consistent with a systems theoretic world view, it may not be consistent with what that view implies for personal or self-knowledge. Indeed it can be a source of considerable personal suffering. I refer here to the still widely held view that concern with personal relations and with one’s own feelings is somehow suspect. The notion of independent objective reality is still quite current, the idea that objectivity is simply a consensus of subjective notions has few adherents. The upshot is that generalised concern can be a way out of “being our brothers’ keepers” and of evading doing the hard work of alleviating suffering on the ground, in the supposed mire of everyday human activity. The personal anguish engendered by such separation of intellect from feeling (mind from body) is the subject of increasing attention (e.g., Fromm, 1979; Rogers, 1980).

So far we have discussed an apparent inconsistency in using a new way of looking at the world (general system theory) specifically developed to deal with failings in the present world view and, how it can exacerbate one of the hidden roots of our anguish (personal alienation). We will now turn to some more personal and immediate sources of anguish.

#### — Internal sources

From her own confrontation with the nastiest vicious circle, the arms race, Joanna Macy developed a therapeutic technique called “despair work” In workshops with people who feel an almost hopeless anguish about the way the world is heading, she attempts to confirm that such feelings are “healthy normal human responses” “Faced and experienced” she writes, the power of such despair “can be used — as the frozen defences of the psyche thaw and new energies are released” (Macy, 1983).

A few nights before Dr. Macy’s Melbourne workshop, I joined an old Yugoslav walking his bike across a footbridge. He wore shabby clothes, was unshaven and on the back of his bike he carried a hessian bag. Clearly he needed to ride that bike (had no option). On making our farewells, I wondered who the hell I was kidding, for I was also on a bike and at the moment am earning a reasonable salary. Fortunately however, my self-knowledge was sufficient to allow me to answer myself in the following way: I also need to ride as profoundly as he did, cycling is part of me. It reflects my priorities, I enjoy the “oneness” with my old machine, the weather, etc. etc. much as Pirsig did in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974). And certainly, it makes a statement I do want to make. Why then can I still not accept the legitimacy of my own needs? Why is my first reaction to undermine myself?

Wondering how despair workshops might help this problem, I related my story to Joanna Macy with the suggestion that rather than “Weltschmerz” (pain for the state of the world) the pain and despair of environmentalists may simply be a good dose of being ignored, of feeling insubstantial or unable to gain the respect of people they seek to influence. Worse still, is generalised knowledge of the type that arises from the insight that for instance: while to the majority a cyclist is ignored or merely an irritant, to the aware motorist, the cyclist may well be a source of guilt which is not the sort of feeling upon which to base change (Fisher, 1985).

Further, how did one cope with the loss of credibility suffered once people knew that one was paid to teach



about the way we live and its implications? And, isn't such despair rather a middle class indulgence; just so irrelevant when compared to that of the Ethiopians or Bangla Deshis to whom the workshop fee might well have been sent ... along with the tax-deduction? Still further, since self-image is coupled to involvement with one's concerns, doubts work to undermine resolution to continue, how does one deal with that?

Macy was impatient with all this — wanting to get on with it. So we left it and I persisted with her workshop and grew to appreciate her efforts for what she claimed for them. At the time however, it seemed to do nothing for the concerns I have just outlined.

### Toward coping with concern

About a month after the despair workshop on ABC-TV's *Pressure Point*, Huw Evans asked two feminists to discuss the issue of surrogate motherhood in the presence of a surrogate mother. One of the feminists was young, articulate, thoughtful and ardent; a professionally concerned woman. The other was older, "successfully" self-employed, self-assured and aware of her self-assurance. The third woman appeared self-assured and was quite articulate. Initially I had no trouble identifying with the young feminist. But it was the third woman who changed that and prompted this article. She evidently wasn't fussed about the "intellectualizing" the other three (including Evans) were engaged in over her head. The validity of her view had finally occurred to me.

The successful, self-assured feminist argued in effect, for the right of the individual to do as she pleased; here, to be a surrogate mother. To me this was a recipe for potential personal and community (delayed cost) exploitation. I sympathised with the ardent feminist arguing against The System and its technologies which produce alienation and bear inherent, well hidden means of exploitation (Ellul, 1980; Weizenbaum, 1976; Fisher, 1985). But, to be told you were being exploited



"For godsake stop laughing — this is serious!"  
Stan Cross SMITH'S WEEKLY 1933

when you had already thought through the implications to the best of your abilities was decidedly alienating. I didn't like it and felt angry. I had had enough of such (my own) unrelenting, campaigning concern.

Now, there are more ways of knowing than those mediated by science or, more generally, those which can be expressed in terms of cognitive (intellectualised) thought. I am also aware that education rarely "radicalises" people — we use the potential education offers in diverse ways. Thinking, as we have seen, that one can fully understand a problem is not only self-deluding but not even "half the battle" toward solution. For, in order to engage in the "battle", to gain that initial understanding, we first need to be motivated and, motivation has little to do with intellect or education *per se* (c.f. the concept of creativity). Further, perhaps Voltaire's famous insistence that he would fight for the right of others to profess different ideas to his, might also have meant that he actively accepted the validity of the other person's ideas. Such acceptance would not be the patronising acceptance normally granted to those whose capacity to understand is thought to be more limited than our own, but would reflect:

- doubt about our own understandings
- recognition that understanding develops in personal and cultural contexts that vary from person to person
- understanding that the other's understanding is unique and representative of that person
- recognition that such argument derives from failure to perceive the different contexts from which our positions spring or, that much argument is the business of determining and reconciling these differences.

The point about failing to recognize contexts is based on two things in particular. Firstly the relativity of understanding and the ideas based upon it. The "power of our own metaphor" for instance is the way individual systems of thinking and the artefacts that support them condition us (is a gauche person left-handed, or a competent one adroit or dextrous?). Secondly that lines of thought and action fall under numerous nested umbrellas of perception. Put in another way, what we do or think can be seen from many angles allowing different interpretation and each angle derives from wider points of view, which also differ.

Points like these draw attention to anguish that derives from efforts to operate with structures inappropriate to the matter at hand. Thirty years ago Gregory Bateson wrote about a particular pathological source of misunderstanding called the double-bind or *Catch 22* (1973 and Heller, 1961). It referred to the impossible situation we put ourselves in when unwittingly, we try to reconcile irreconcilables. He showed that the cognitive dissonance produced by such efforts can lead to a type of schizophrenia. Our interactions with each other are riddled with it, as a glance at any newspaper or moment spent listening to our interactions with children will reveal ("don't shout", we yell). From the examples raised in this paper, it is futile, for instance, to look to my salary for understanding of why I ride a bike.

The double-bind is a diabolical source of disease and Bateson described it with a suitably diabolical name: schizmogogenesis. By recognizing the schisms our world views create then, both the effectiveness of our work and the way we feel about ourselves stand only to improve.

The structural basis of isolation and alienation is the subject of a massive literature extending from Marx onward. A contributor to this literature was economist Tibor Scitovsky. Quite late in life he turned to the psychology of economic transactions and eventually wrote *The Joyless Economy* (1976). Here he reiterated that we do not associate the goods we purchase with their makers; it does not occur to us to look for direct responsibility for them in those who actually make them. Nor would it be possible, given the nature of production in the industrialised world. Equally, providers of goods work for employers not for the people who purchase their wares. Scitovsky went on to suggest that this situation lends itself to the demise of care associated with both the goods produced and the goods bought. The latter, in that when we buy we do not expect that producers will have considered the persons buying their products. Thus, a joyless business whose joylessness reflects the structure of our economy.

In addition to Scitovsky's point, whether we like it or not, most people work at providing water, spades, take-away food, typed words, drugs, sausages, interest on money and the infrastructure to ensure it all gets through. And, in addition to all other bases for personal world views, the things people do also impose particular ways of thinking which derive from the strength of the vested interest we have in our jobs. Such job-related contexts will rarely align themselves with those that underlie professionalised concerns.

There is therefore the best possible case for working to change the structure of our political economy and the best possible case for bearing them in mind as we work to cope with the anguish of our concern. However, the common element in the split between aspects of our reality is patent (see Shepard, 1982 for a particularly novel analysis).

— Some suggestions

I shall begin by trying to isolate some easily recognizable motivations for our personal frustration:

- guilt, feelings of personal responsibility for the (perceived) plight of others. I refer here to the responsibilities of the aware: feelings of returning the trust society put in us when it opened opportunities for us to gain awareness. Plus perhaps a hope that one might respond honourably to queries like: "where were you when they were making the bomb Dad?"
- arrogance, a belief in a capacity and "calling" to change the lives and understandings of others (a recipe for frustration if ever there was one!).
- a need to gain acceptance for our ideas (upon which, as I have already said, we base assessment of self-worth). This is an example of the context of context, for ideas can only be accepted in ways that we can believe in — in this case behavioural change in others.
- a belief in the changeability of human structures emanating from our familiar prowess in dealing with mechanical structures and its effect on how we deal with ourselves.
- ways of discussing and publicizing concern. Speech, bearing, timing and so on can be used to intimidate and demoralize. The dignity of the people we hope to influence may be threatened. Commitment itself and especially professionalized commitment are like this. Presentation is as important as the ideas themselves (Goffman, 1971; McLuhan, 1964). We simply cannot divorce ideas or the form of their

presentation from the various powerful cultural agendas we all have in our heads. Examples of these are Weber's "Protestant Ethic", a "Newtonian" world view or a "male" world view (Weber, 1930; White, 1968; Rothschild, 1983).

- finally, jobs in professionalized concern require quick outputs (change) recognizable in measurable terms while the change referred to here may be slow and not easily measurable in the short term. Moreover, our very mortality urges us to seek changes in periods we might live to see.

To deal with the despair arising from this potent combination of guilt, frustration and commitment, Joanna Macy's approach offers a good beginning. She asks us to own (admit to) our feelings, to trust that others feel as we do and to allow others to believe in our integrity. But what then?

For those who intellectualize their paths through life, the following steps are consistent with what I have already said and have been useful to me:

- work to recognize the contexts of your own concern.
- accept the validity of the understandings and contexts of others. Corollary: seek confidence in your own.
- accept that no change is so urgent as to warrant smashing or over-riding the dignity of others.
- recognize that behavioural change does not immediately follow attitudinal change (look at your own experience).
- alter approaches used to present ideas so that support for them is not found in discredit and humiliation.
- as awareness of them occurs, work to reveal the biases and contexts of the knowledge and knowledge dissemination structures used.
- accept that structures involving people cannot be conceived in machine ("technomorphic") terms and that effective change occurs with the collaboration (hence: balance) of those concerned — slow as this may be.
- recognize the sufficiency of doing the above; that is, that it is all that can reasonably be expected of you.

In conclusion, two philosophical views might be of help. I believe the way to resolving the agony of concern lies in cultivating a new philosophy from which the points listed above arise naturally. The first aid arises from a deeper understanding of system theory, the second from what has recently become known as "Deep Ecology".

In his preface to the remarkable book *Autopoiesis* (Maturana and Varela, 1980), Stafford Beer points out that a consequence of this powerful new system's concept is that:

... every social institution (in several of which any one individual is embedded at the intersect) is embedded in a larger social institution, and so on recursively — and that all of them are autopoietic [capable of independently producing (sic) themselves]. This immediately explains why the process of change at any level of recursion (from the individual to the state) is not only difficult to accomplish but actually impossible — in the full sense of the intention: 'I am going completely to change myself'. The reason is that the 'I', that self-contained autopoietic 'it', is a component of another system. (Square parentheses mine).

In other words, change only comes about once adaptations have been made that reflect a



harmonisation of the change with the “rest” of the individual. We are non-smokers say, only years after the intellectual decision to quit. In my case, I am still not entirely alone with my bicycle after 15 years of daily commuting.

Perhaps this way of thinking extends the insight we can draw from the systems view; it asks us to transcend expectations of system thinking based on the old world view of dualism, linear causality and so on and to seek the personal harmony available in applying system thinking to our own use of system’s understandings.

The other aid is to be found in a new “eco-philosophy”. The essence of Deep Ecology is cultivation of the capacity to recognize intrinsic value. Father of Deep Ecology, Arne Naess, points out that living with intrinsic value means recognizing the meaning of vital (as in “life”) needs. Consideration of vital needs is a call to grapple with the implications of satisfactions whose essence lies in minimizing stress on GAIA or Nature as a whole (Naess and Sessions, 1984). This capacity is not an exercise in standard western “objective” and anthropocentric logic. It is more akin to the process by which Zen Buddhists go about the resolution of the apparent paradoxes (koans) they set themselves as exercises; which brings us finally to the insights of modern physics.

Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle has shown us that all phenomena are intrinsically unknowable, at least: not fully describable. It is not that our tools are inadequate to the task but that unknowability is a property of “reality” itself, which in turn is the interaction between our Selves and Nature.

Thus the resolution of our personal anguish and ultimately the answer to our approach to change lies in learning to accept what Watts has called the *Wisdom of Insecurity* (1951). That many secular (and science-based) thinkers are realizing this is apparent from such recent titles as *Search for Certainty* (Spradlin and Porter, 1984), *Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty* (1980) and *Order Out of Chaos* (Prigogine and Stengers, 1984). From these titles and the many like them we might well draw some good “old fashioned” optimism.

Just as pre-Kuhnian scientists were in the main unaware of the sociological contexts within which they practised (Kuhn, 1970; Barnes, 1984), so the new profession of concerns seems to be unaware of the contexts in which it operates. It is time that we did recognize the strength of the environmentalists own metaphor: that of the ecosystem and GAIA, and began to apply it to ourselves. Success will enhance the self-respect of others as well as our own and, do more to confirm the validity of our own concerns than anything else.

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