

Clarity v Denial in Difficult Times

I've recently been clearing out old files and discarding redundant material. Our recycling bin has seldom been so full of old paper. Yet I've also rediscovered valuable items that had fallen out of sight. They include letters from old colleagues and friends, short items I'd written for now-forgotten publications and the occasional gem of an article. Among the latter was a piece written by Ted Trainer in 2007. I'd never met him but was aware that he and I were distant colleagues working toward broadly similar ends. Like myself, he'd found what one interviewer called 'a home of sorts' in academia. One thing I believe we both understood was that underlying the deceptively smooth surface of everyday life was a chasm of uncertainty and hazard that was routinely ignored by most people, media and mainstream institutions.

While I'd built a career (of sorts) as a Futurist / foresight practitioner, Trainer had focused more on alternative ways of living and the quest for sustainability. The article I rediscovered was published in *Arena Magazine* under the heading 'Greenhouse: Refusing to grasp its significance'. Reading it again some 12 years later was like looking right into a time capsule. But in this case one that hardly differed at all from the present. In fact what was striking was how current and up-to-date his reasoning and conclusions were. Here are some of the key points he made in that article about defining 'the problem':

The recent surge of interest in greenhouse and energy problems provides a powerful illustration of the capacity humans have to ignore what they do not want to recognise.

(If it is accepted that levels of CO₂ in the atmosphere need to be limited to around 400-450 ppm then) our fossil fuel budget would be around 3 per cent of the present per capita average. In other words we would have to almost entirely cease our use of fossil fuels within a few decades.

(There is, however) no possibility of getting the emissions down to the necessary levels without extreme system change away from any kind of consumer society.

(The futility of economic growth shows up in the multiples necessary to sustain it. So) how can you make sustainable a society in which the volume of production and consumption and the GDP must increase at 3 per cent per annum forever? (To imagine this continuing to 2050 means that) Australia would be churning out four times as much each year as it does now...but on 5% of the present fossil energy use... Such multiples totally rule out any faith that technical advance will eliminate the problems while we all go on merrily pursuing affluence and growth. The point is that a consumer capitalist society cannot be made sustainable.

What, then, is the answer? The point is that there isn't one... Yet there is a highly workable and attractive way out, well described as 'the simpler way.'

The rest of the article describes some of the aspects of that 'simpler way' that, in essence, have been broadly understood for many years but which remain 'news' for the vast majority who've still never encountered them - at least not in any detail. Instead, huge efforts continue to be exerted each day by the usual interests (social, economic, political) to actively persuade currently affluent populations that present ways of life still make sense and, despite a few problems here and there, are sustainable. We have known for some time that this is a deception perpetuated on a compliant, dependent population on a truly vast scale. But the science, as they say, is well and truly 'in'. We know what is happening and we know why. Over the last century, and particularly over the decades since WWII, humanity has been on the receiving end of a growing crescendo of what foresight practitioners refer to as 'signals' from the global system. These unambiguously show exactly how that system is being destabilised by ever more disruptive human activity. The changes may not be obvious as first since natural systems tend to be resilient - but only up to a point. When they begin to shift under constant and continuing pressure they respond - glacially at first, but then with unstoppable momentum and overwhelming force. Having ignored the early signs that all was not well, this is where humanity stands at the present time, confronted by multiple crises across many domains. Even seasoned observers are beginning to wonder if it is already too late to prevent some sort of gigantic civilisational collapse.

In this context most people seem to prefer recourse to common strategies of psychological comfort - distraction, avoidance, denial - rather than face up to the fact that the underpinnings of human civilisation are shifting beneath them and, in some cases, disappearing altogether. Trainer and myself are two among many workers who've attempted to draw attention to the actual human predicament and engage with others in seeking viable ways forward. This is not particularly easy since, by definition, such work tends to confine one to working 'at the edges' rather than in the mainstream where, in any balanced view, we should be welcomed and hence able to be far more active and effective. We are sometimes tolerated by mainstream organisations but seldom encouraged. Behind our personal stories, however, a vast and diffuse symbolic battle going on about what can be considered 'right' or 'legitimate' during this time of upheaval and hazard. The politics of the day are widely regarded as disappointing. They can barely acknowledge anything much about the broad process of global deterioration we have caused and are living through. They seem fixated on present business in a here-and-now environment in which the future effectively vanishes from view. So what can be done?

One way to frame our collective dilemma is as a choice between clarity and denial. I'd argue that while seeking the former certainly requires time, effort and a certain amount of dedication, the pay-offs are bountiful. At the very least you can say 'goodbye' to depression and actually get on with something useful. The big weakness of denial is that it solves nothing and merely defers what is feared or avoided to a later date - by which time one's autonomy of action and response will have been significantly degraded. Don't we all know this? A stitch in time saves nine; forewarned is forearmed etc? Of course we do. But we're so practiced

at allowing ourselves to be reassured and persuaded that it's OK to avoid reality, 'it's not our problem', 'she'll be right'. Except we can't in the end avoid reality, it is our problem and, no, she won't be alright unless we learn to respond more fully to the challenges ahead.

This is not the place to set out even a fraction of the strategies and creative options available within a realistic and informed forward view. But I will mention just one. What if we acknowledged that social collapse has happened before and could very easily happen again - but this time on a global scale? One consequence could be that we'd stop being scared stiff about 'the problem' and shift our attention toward strategies of conscious descent. Descent, that is, from the peak of over-growth and environmental decline. What I will do, however, is draw attention to several sources that provide multiple insights into what can be done, how and by whom.

Alexander, S. & Gleeson, B. 2019, *Degrowth in the Suburbs*. Singapore, Palgrave.

Re-imagines the suburbs in a post-growth future. Considers issues such as an energy descent future, 'unlearning abundance' and 'prosperity' under energy and resource constrained conditions. This is an original and inspiring work, hence highly recommended.

Gidley, J.M. 2017, *The Future: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP.

Exactly what the title says. Provides a lucid account of the grounding of 'the future' in history and an excellent overview of how the field developed in the 20th and 21st Centuries. Provides a useful and succinct summary of different approaches to futures and futures work. Concludes with an outline of 'grand global challenges' and list of resources. <https://foresightinternational.com.au/review/gidley-m-the-future-a-very-short-introduction/>

Slaughter, R. 2015, Beyond the global emergency: Integral futures and the search for clarity. *World Future Review* 7, 2-3, 239-252

Argues against technology-led views of futures as espoused by, e.g. Silicon Valley, in favour of a more balanced assessment of interior and exterior factors. Suggests how Integral methods can open up new or renewed strategies that can be seen as 'proto-solutions' to pressing global issues. [https://richardslaughter.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Integral Futs Clarity WFR pp 239-252 2015.pdf](https://richardslaughter.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Integral-Futs-Clarity-WFR-pp-239-252-2015.pdf)

Slaughter, R. 2014, The denial of limits and interior aspects of descent, *Foresight* 16, 6, 527-549.

Examines denialism in the context of the much-abused Limits to Growth study. Uses Integral criteria to characterise aspects of 'the denial machine' and addresses some of the under-appreciated interior aspects of descent (as opposed to collapse). https://foresightinternational.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Denial_of_Limits_Final_230315.pdf

Trainer, T. 2007, Greenhouse: Refusing to grasp its significance, *Arena Magazine*, December-January 2007-8, 13-15.