



A SHAKY LIFE WITHOUT BELIEF

In an increasing number of countries, Governments including ours, in an attempt to lift the standards of living of their peoples, are seeking ways to inspire and enable their citizens to develop their personal capabilities to the highest potential possible. They also often talk about national development that will enable more innovation, inclusiveness and wealth creation.

In many countries what is missing from this laudable set of goals is how such development might occur on a daily basis. Countries like Singapore, Korea, Taiwan are much more up front than New Zealand in acknowledging the intangible moral dynamo that is essential for these goals to be achieved. This is the set of beliefs that a society has about itself and the personal convictions of its citizens which provide the inspiration and energy to make things happen, to achieve personal and national goals.

Most observers of human behaviour acknowledge that it is the spirit/ethos of a family, a workplace, a school, a Government, that is the fundamental driver which brings about the development of the potential that is inherent in each individuals.

In 1967 David Bell, the American sociologist, concluded, in research commissioned by Life Magazine, that the nation had become one which had no fixed points of reference to govern the behaviour of children growing up. Research released late in 2003 confirmed and extended some of Bell's findings when it found convincing scientific evidence that the mechanisms that bond people together have a biological basis i.e. children are "hard wired" to form close attachments to significant family members and to their broader society.

This research, entitled "Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case For Authoritative Communities", has an interesting conclusion. It advances the case for families, schools and the broader community to supply moral and personal sign posts for the young.

This insight connects us back to the inherent ethos/spiritual convictions that people have or don't have as they interact with one another in various settings. It is the collaborative task of families, neighbours, religious groups, schools, voluntary organizations and business all to do their part in lifting each of us beyond our narrow ambit of self interest. Commitment to the local and national common good is part of creating the dynamo that will advance everyone's interests. Microsoft Corporation works well as a unit because of its ethos, teamwork and inexorable commitment to achievement, which is well understood and appreciated by those working for it.

Moral decline is not a popular concept to talk about. However, if we are to do something about mob violence at beach resorts, violence of various kinds on our streets, or to confront dishonesty, we have to find ways to address the apparent spiritual vacuum in many human beings who see others as objects, rather than as sacred individuals. If our young are not hardwired to belong, to have empathy and respect for others united in their common humanity, our society will slide rapidly into chaos.

When it is enforced, the law will keep most people on the straight and narrow, but as the former communist states demonstrated this in itself does not bring about free, supportive,

collaborative societies which are innovative and wealth creating. In New Zealand we still are not bold enough to acknowledge that it is the spiritual dimension of each individual that ultimately motivates them and is the basis for their decision making. In a pluralistic society, spiritual belief systems will be varied, but as many in psychological circles will assert, an effective spiritual belief system has to be linked to what the great psychologist Jung called the "collective unconscious" (God).

History demonstrates that anarchy readily emerges in states that lose their moral vision and moral compass. When the social virtues such as self control, politeness, decency and the pursuit of ideals are not taught and practised, a rapid dilution of social cohesion occurs.

Fortunately the concept of collaboration is on the rise and this provides some hope that as a society we are reappraising those dimensions that hold us together. People are slowly starting to talk to each other about spiritual hunger and are looking for ways to satisfy it. Collaboration doesn't occur unless people can see there is a reason for interacting with one another, and have some motivation that supports this.

Former Prime Minister Jim Bolger often spoke about the need for accelerating the building up of our social capital if New Zealand is to achieve its goals. This in practical terms means the ability to trust others and to look out for their good, as well as our own.

When you think about it, successful New Zealanders, like Stephen Tindall, ascribe to what all religious traditions and the great civilizations have known, the importance of justice and compassion, which in turn, are rooted, not only on individual entrepreneurship but on habits of collaboration. These are the fundamental virtues and structures of our humanity.

We will only achieve personal and national citizenship goals when we are prepared to acknowledge trust is a fundamental pre-requisite for ultimate success in our lives which is built through 'hard wiring'. At the same time, there is need to recognize the spiritual dimension within and outside of ourselves, which through reflection, can provide us with guidance about what works best as we seek to promote the common good of our society.

Ultimately, New Zealand will fly as a nation when we are more up front with one another, and particularly with our young, about the vital importance of moral relationships and the spiritual basis of them.

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