

VIEWPOINTS

Carl Jacob

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This is an Internet Edition. To assist the reader in locating topics of interest, the sequential Table of Contents has been expanded to include more detail.

This book is dedicated to the late Doug Giles, a very practical person, who never made a big thing out of the most challenging problems.

Preface

This book continues my work on practical philosophy started in *Perspectives*. Although some of the topics are inter-related, they can be read independently. Much of the material is presented in notebook form with brief explanations and concise arguments in selected areas. As with the earlier work, the material is primarily experience based, though not necessarily directly my own. It differs, however, in that the topics concern problems that people are likely to encounter rather than philosophical issues they might consider only if they stopped to think.

Perhaps the closest academic area related to the material in this book is that of psychology as it is concerned with individual human thinking and behaviour, but in my experience, it is impossible to compartmentalise problems to the exclusion of other disciplines and relevant thoughts may be associated with any field. In keeping with all of my work, I have attempted to avoid specialised language wherever possible.

In a few areas, a semi-religious perspective may also be included. I make no apology for this, as the integrity of personal behaviour cannot be separated from whatever the person believes in, and the scriptures of all the major religions contain material that is also of practical use. In this respect my apparent preference for particular sources is incidental to my familiarity with them.

The book is not written to offer magic answers to any of the reader's problems, although if one emerges in an individual case I would be delighted. Rather I hope it may help to orient them to the issue in question from a more universal perspective whereby they can see their own situations more objectively, and possibly start asking further questions that could lead to a deeper and more lasting solution.

The major part of this book emerged from my interaction with real people whose lives were beset with a variety of problems in the areas discussed, and my reason for not acknowledging them individually by name is to preserve their privacy. Nevertheless, I remain indebted to them for their confidence and to others who offered their constructive criticism. I trust that readers will find some useful thoughts in the pages that follow.

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Chapter 1

APPROVAL

The craving for approval is as old as humanity and, according to legend, was evidently the principal motivating factor behind the first murder in human history. In the biblical account, Abel's sacrifice was accepted by the Almighty while Cain's offering was treated with disdain. This led to jealousy and conflict resulting in the death of Abel at the hands of his brother.

Approval comes in a variety of forms such as, praise, kudos, standing, respect, compliments, applause, accolades, and reward. Children seek the approval of their parents; teenagers of one another, professionals of their peers, clients and superiors, students of their teachers, entertainers of their audiences and critics. A subtle but important distinction needs to be made between approval as a reward in itself and approval as a form of feedback to confirm the correctness of our direction. Although the same response tends to cover both purposes, the receiver's interpretation and reactions may be very different.

The need for approval stems from the pursuit of happiness itself. At a basic level, we need to cooperate in order to survive. We are almost invariably required to 'specialize and exchange', and for this to be workable, our input must be accepted and sufficiently valued to earn our survival needs. At higher levels, approval is a sign of unity, harmony, inclusion and love, and these form part of the framework of self-respect. Thus, we have many good reasons to want to get things right and be seen to get them right, but by whose criteria?

Some Principles

- It is impossible to gain universal approval when different sources have conflicting criteria. We can choose the criteria we will try to satisfy and be content with the approval that comes from the sources that appreciate the standards we achieve. Alternatively, we can focus on the source from which we want approval and seek to satisfy their criteria. Either of these can be workable, but it is rarely possible to do both.
- Focusing on particular sources is natural in the formative years as the influence of parents and teachers become key factors in the development of character and personality. As these begin to stabilise, this orientation to approval seeking can become dysfunctional where a person becomes obsessed with a particular relationship through which approval is sought but not forthcoming. The necessary personality or behaviour needed to gain approval may be inconsistent with existing character.

- In establishing a working relationship that depends on approval, it is essential to ascertain the standards and criteria on which it depends and work towards satisfying them. However, it is possible that criteria may be in conflict or economically unachievable.
- It is pointless seeking approval from those who don't know what they want.
- With power over people, we cannot extort real approval, only a show of approval.
- Some shows of approval are hypocritical and lack any substance. They may arise out of fear, or the desire to manipulate or please.

The Pursuit of Approval

In the pursuit of approval, the sources and the criteria need to be prioritised. The key sources often considered are the moral authority to which we have allegiance, official sources within the 'system', individual people and ourselves. There are problems connected with all of these:

1. The standards of our chosen moral authority need to be revealed and interpreted. They may vary according to one's belief system, level of understanding and chosen emphasis.
2. Official sources within the 'system' such as appointed judges and panels often operate with hidden agendas, or award artificially scarce approval in a competitive framework.
3. Other people may be unstable, unknowable and completely indifferent to whatever we do.
4. Our own approval of our performance can be dominated by perfectionism, superstition and conflict, and be inconsistent with achievable reality.

While the pursuit of approval is a natural and arguably essential part of the pursuit of happiness, it can also be highly dysfunctional causing major personal problems and great *unhappiness*. Some of the reasons can be that

1. We seek it from an indifferent, manipulative or unstable source.
2. There is unrealistic perfectionism.
3. We have an obsession with a source that appears to be impossible to satisfy, leading to endless frustration.
4. Our own approval seeking process is counter-productive. For example, where approval initially requires the pursuit of attention, accomplishing the first step through notoriety or 'disapproval' does more to sabotage the ultimate aim.
5. The pursuit of approval is dominated by fear, obsession or unfounded imagined expectations.

For the pursuit of approval to be consistent with emotional health, there must be objectivity, realism and prioritization.

1. Objectivity is desirable to ensure that criteria serve a tangible purpose and are not simply arbitrary.
2. Realism is essential in that expected standards must be economically and logically feasible.
3. Prioritisation is necessary because resources are invariably limited and the desire for approval may be greater than what is achievable. Choices may need to be made as to 'which master we will serve'. We must learn to be content with the consequences of these choices and accept that we cannot satisfy everyone in every way.

The highest priority needs to be our relationship with what we believe in. Our pursuit of approval must start with the criteria and standards that sustain our integrity. Next, we need to consider the sensitivity of other people who are affected by what we do, and give it equal emphasis to our own. The central question needs to be whether the Almighty or the Universe would approve of us in these respects, and do we approve of ourselves? We can then accept and delight in any additional approval that comes our way without being frustrated and devastated when it does not.

It is essential that we manage our own expectations. It is rarely possible to achieve universal approval, as we cannot be all things to all people, or even to any one person. If we speak and act from informed conviction then we must anticipate that some people will disapprove and we have to be prepared to live with that. The approval of others also depends on a large variety of factors beyond our control, some of which may not be predictable or even rational. For these reasons it is far healthier to minimize its active pursuit and be content to appreciate the approval that comes our way as useful feedback.

It is also vital that we manage our lives in such a way that our need for approval is within our capacity to satisfy the standards of those we depend on. This involves being in the position to minimize the desperation and panic factor whenever approval is not forthcoming. In other words, we should be able to fall back on other harmonious relationships, reserves of resources and other areas of performance to reduce our vulnerability to the 'ups and downs' of approval cycles in different areas of our lives.

Indifference, Rejection and Meaning

Reactions to whatever we are or do can range from highly positive approval through acceptance, tolerance, indifference and rejection, and each of these is directly connected with our sense of purpose and meaning. As I suggested in *Perspectives*, meaning is relevance, and our sense of mutually beneficial connectedness with other people contributes significantly to this need. Indifference is a denial of connectedness, and rejection is a strong indication of a desire *not* to be linked at least in some particular way. Approval is, of course, the exact opposite, and therefore naturally tends to make a positive contribution to our sense of meaning.

For meaning to be present in our lives, it is not essential to achieve universal approval in all things. Rejection and indifference are not in themselves objectively undesirable, but rather necessary phenomena. Overall, and especially in terms of close relationships, positive acceptance and approval tend to be the exceptions. It is rather like the relationship between lock and key. Regardless of the quality of either, most keys will be rejected by any given lock, and very few will succeed in opening it. Examining the realities more closely, we recognise that nearly all professionals have no more than a relatively small clientele, and for each of us, true friendship and intimate compatibility is possible only with a few other people at best. Positive approval in a modest number of areas from those whose reactions we value is generally sufficient to make a significant contribution to our sense of purpose.

The problem lies more with the feelings than with the realities. Fear of rejection is a common human trait, for negative or indifferent reactions can cause hurt and embarrassment, particularly if they are public and unexpected. Here it is particularly necessary to avoid putting all our 'eggs' in one 'basket' and remain conscious of our other sources of approval. It is even more vital that our sense of meaning and purpose be tied to deeper values than superficial signs of acceptance.

Conclusion

When we seek consistency within ourselves, and harmony with the laws of the universe as we understand them, it is more likely that approval will find us without our having to look for it. We will also be less dependent on it or vulnerable to its vagaries.

Chapter 2

A FOCUS ON BLAME

The *avoidance of responsibility* has arguably been endemic in human nature from the very beginning as typified by the legendary story of the fall of mankind: Adam blamed Eve and she blamed the serpent! Almost every major dispute, war or separation drama in the bitter break-up of relationships is an exercise by both parties in seeking to allocate blame away from themselves and as much as possible on the other. Every legal system functions largely through the attempts to hold one or other party responsible for the unwelcome situation in question and blame is at the core of all civil litigation.

Human beings have a natural tendency to seek causal explanations. Where an outcome is positive, it is satisfying to be able to take the credit. If it is unfavourable, we would prefer that the causes be found outside ourselves and the avoidance of responsibility is likely to be even more successful if we can fix the blame on some other individual or factor beyond our control. People in authority who are negligent, corrupt or incompetent often resort to seeking scapegoats, and organized criminals have been known to set up a 'fall guy' to take the rap so that they can remain looking impeccable.

When a person is aware of his own contribution to a bad situation, it takes considerable character to admit the truth and face the consequences, for there are significant disadvantages in accepting responsibility and resisting the inclination to try to pin blame on others. Accepting responsibility could be seen as diminishing our own bargaining position and weakening our resolve to win against the other party. There is also the risk of incurring costs due to implicitly admitting liability, and as a result we might have to carry a disproportionate share of the fault and possibly suffer unreasonable penalties.

The process of assigning appropriate and legitimate blame is probably a necessary feature of civilised society. Laws must be enforceable and penalties are used as a deterrent to crime. However, if justice is to prevail, it is essential that the penalties be directed only at those who are properly identified as responsible. Criminal investigation is about finding who is accountable, and without this there cannot be a resolution.

Nevertheless, the pursuit of blame as a general response to problems also has major personal, social and organizational disadvantages.

- The act of directing blame is essentially an admission of one's own powerlessness, and we adopt a 'victim' mentality. It is *disempowering*.
- It tends to be fragmenting and divisive. Consciousness shrinks inward towards the narrower self and each party thinks in terms of 'I, you, or he', rather than 'we'.
- Blame is generally associated with anger, resentment, hatred, bitterness and other negative emotions. These are known to be very detrimental to health.

- Blame always focuses backward in time rather than forward. Often both sides rake up a long history of recriminations in their attempts to prove that the other party 'started it'. This fuels and prolongs the animosity.
- The 'witch-hunt' mentality is conducive to cover-up, lying and the concealment of evidence rather than allowing the situation to be used as a learning opportunity for long-term benefit.
- A blame culture within an organization puts people on the defensive, lowers morale and initiative, and generates excessive caution that hinders development.

Blame has appropriate applications, but it is highly prone to being used unproductively. The extent to which this can be restrained depends largely on personal character and the culture of the organization or system within which we operate.

Chapter 3

COMPLEXITY

Defining Complexity

Although the concept of complexity is intuitively understood by most people, it is much more difficult to define precisely in a way that covers its usage. Part of the problem is that it is a 'system-level' concept, which does not fit well with the persistent 'reductionism' orientation to understanding the world.

Situation Complexity

Situation complexity is different from system complexity but will generally include selected aspects of each of the systems the decision maker must contend with. The notion includes:

- The number of variables that must be considered in coming to any strategic resolutions [tactical or strategic complexity].
- The variety of decisions that must be made within any given length of time.
- The level of certainty in the environment as related to the rate of change of information.
- The certainty of decision outcomes, which influences the variety of scenarios that need to be considered in arriving at a strategy.

System Complexity

Essentially, system complexity may be described by the number and variety of its inter-related parts, the variety of processes and the number of steps in each process that make up the working entity.

Benefits of System Complexity

All we have to do to appreciate the value of complexity is to observe ourselves and the natural world, and wonder with awe at its intricacy, beauty and versatility. Beyond the natural world, many of our own complex human inventions such as the aircraft, the motorcar and the computer have vastly extended our own possibilities. It is self-evident that complexity can achieve more than the most basic simplicity. This is largely due to the fact that complexity can generate greater variety, and the interaction or cooperation of different entities has a power beyond that of the separate components acting alone.

Drawbacks of System Complexity

Along with complexity, comes

- Increased vulnerability both of the system itself, and as a consequence, anything that depends on it,
- Added burdens and more stringent requirements. For any complex system to survive and continue functioning, appropriate internal and external conditions must be maintained.
- Increased difficulty in diagnosing problems.

The Burden of Complexity

It is important to distinguish between the complexity of a system and the burden that complexity imposes. This burden depends on

- The degree of automation and reliability.
- The variety of information coming from within the system that may affect any decision.
- The variety of decisions that have to be made in operating the system.
- The number of decisions that have to be made simultaneously when operating the system.

Complex natural systems are usually relatively robust and tend to have a number of features: They are redundant (either over-engineered or their sub-systems are duplicated several times), self repairing and automated to a large degree. Human designed systems often lack one or more of these features, increasing their inherent unreliability. The most severe problems, however, occur at the interface between our complex man-made systems and the human beings who use them, control them or must work within them.

Consequences of Increased Complexity at the Human Interface

- Heavier learning load.
- Heavier memory load.
- Information overloads resulting in confusion.
- Pressure, stress, fatigue and burnout.
- Increased incentive to cut corners in the pursuit of efficiency resulting in errors, mistakes and oversights.
- Increased probability of system breakdown.
- Increased tendency to opt out of using the system wherever possible.

Most of these problems are exacerbated with an increased rate of change in the system. While most natural systems may be very complex, they tend to be stable and evolve very slowly. Many man-made systems, particularly rules, regulations and procedures are changed very frequently and often without adequate consultation with users and those who must implement them.

Managing Complexity

Complex systems can be made more manageable by

- Clearly identifying the fixed and the variable aspects of the system.
- Clarifying the natural and logical relationships.
- Increased frequency of use.
- Available support.
- Having written instructions readily at hand.
- Increasing the inherent reliability, and thereby reducing the monitoring requirements as well as the broader cost of breakdown.

Some General Observations

- There is an inverse relationship between system complexity and reliability. The greater the complexity that must be manually controlled by any one person, the greater the likelihood of errors.
- Severe limits exist to the manageable level of complexity, and this level depends on the operator / decision-maker's
 1. Natural ability,
 2. State of alertness (intoxication, fatigue),
 3. Training received and understanding of decision outcomes,
 4. Ability to prioritise,
 5. Interest and sense of responsibility,
 6. Ability to concentrate (preoccupation, distraction, boredom),
 7. Interval between involvements and the 'forgetting factor',
- If the allocation of management resources is based on optimistic assumptions then the system will fail in realistic scenarios.

Conclusion

Stable, learnable, reliable, versatile complex *material systems* offer great benefits to the individual and society. However, they can become a severe burden to individuals who have to maintain, operate and interact with them if principles such as robustness, interface simplicity and efficient maintenance are compromised in the design process.

On the other hand, *human systems* governed by very complex continuously changing procedures present a very challenging management problem that arises largely because the designers and controllers of these systems are rarely their operators or clients. They have the luxury of issuing directives and shifting the burdens down the line. For complex human systems to work optimally, it is essential that those in control work with those who must operate and interact with the system. Because no human system is perfect, there is an ever-present tendency to patch up problems with added complications as the alternative is usually a complete and costly redesign of the entire system. To counter the relentless trend towards increasing complexity, it is highly desirable to grasp every opportunity to simplify wherever possible.

Chapter 4

GENERAL DECISION PARALYSIS AND THE 'YES, BUT...' RESPONSE

Situation

A person is discussing a persistent problem with a potential adviser. As the interaction continues, the adviser offers a series of apparently appropriate suggestions each of which are rejected as less than satisfactory. The typical response starts with, 'Yes, but

' followed by the reason that course of action is considered unsuitable. While this may become very frustrating to the adviser, extreme patience is required on his part, for it is counter-productive and threatening to have a confrontation on this issue: The problem is already difficult enough without the person having to delicately manage the present interaction. The 'Yes but' response is most usefully treated as an indication that neither the person nor the adviser have as yet uncovered the real reasons for the existing decision paralysis, and that it may require insight at a level deeper than the one at which the problem situation has hitherto been explored.

An Explanation

From the *decision analysis perspective*, the process is bogged down in the search for suitable courses of action. This may be an indication that too little attention has been paid to the preliminary stages of the process:

1. Understanding the situation comprehensively.
2. Clarifying the person's values, purpose, aims and objectives, and the criteria which any alternative must satisfy, and the development of an order of priorities within the objectives and criteria.

Most decision-making situations are notorious for under-estimating the time and attention required by these two stages. They are more important than all the stages that follow. There is often too much urgency to 'define a problem'.

The second difficulty stems from the fact that in a complex situation it is very difficult to keep all relevant aspects of the picture in perspective at the same time. Whenever the person indicates a desire for some feedback, he might believe that the whole picture has been revealed, only to find that more emerges as a result of being challenged with a suggestion to consider some particular course of action. This generally indicates that:

- More methodical recording of the situation is needed so that both the adviser and especially the person seeking useful input develop and *retain* a relevant comprehensive view.
- More time needs to be spent at the second stage because 'problem' situations invariably exist only in relation to values, objectives etc.

Other Possibilities

A number of possibilities may emerge if, despite this process, the 'yes, but...' cycle continues:

- The person is in a 'multiple (not just double) bind'. This is like the 'check-mate' situation in chess. Neither he nor anyone else can (yet) find a viable way out.
- The person is unable or unwilling to take certain kinds of risks. This may be due to a lack of confidence that they can handle the outcome.
- The person is unwilling to pay the 'minimum necessary price' of solving their problem. There may be an extensive case of 'system induced dependency' with little or no 'room to manoeuvre'.
- The person (subconsciously) *needs* the problem situation and is yet unwilling to part with it. He may have an 'ulterior motive' such as a need to have something about which to interact with the counsellor or others who show an interest.
- The best course of action may be the 'least unattractive'. Choosing it and implementing it may require more courage than the person has.
- The search has to be shifted to a higher or deeper plane, such as character, maturity or spiritual development.
- The situation lies beyond the adviser's models or paradigm, or his experience, sensitivity or expertise.
- Other reasons.

A Warning

Lack of time and client funds may be a very real constraint in the counselling setting. This puts considerable pressure on early definition, rapid visible progress, and measurable results. However, the realities of difficult and elusive problem situations are such that they do not respect our haste. To the extent that the necessary preliminary stages are neglected, the risk of failing to achieve a satisfactory outcome will be greatly increased.

Decision Paralysis

"The present situation is unsatisfactory, but every move could potentially make it worse." We don't know what to do!

It is relatively easy to make a decision on a single criterion in an environment of certainty. If we can accurately anticipate the outcomes of a range of options, then all we have to do is choose the one that optimises that criterion. This represents the simplest end of the decision-making continuum. From here on it gets more difficult and at the other extreme it can become completely impossible. There can be a variety of reasons why a person might find it impossible to make a decision. Some of them are listed below followed by a few strategies for handling them:

- We really have to wait until the situation clarifies itself. Something else has to happen, or someone else has to act, before we can choose. [Strategies: Vigilant observation, patience; suspending the objective and taking the initiative in another direction]
- Not knowing what can be done. [Strategies: Discuss with someone who has good imagination, understands the system or may have faced similar situations]
- The possible outcomes or the cause-effect relationships are unknown. [Strategies: Learning; seeking advice; taking a conscious gamble]
- There are too many criteria. [Strategies: Prioritising; eliminating unfounded superstitions; identifying and questioning the implicit assumptions]
- There is excessive sensitivity to risk. [Strategies: Controlling fear; collecting support]
- The complexity of the situation is beyond the capacity of the decision-maker. [Strategies: Describing it progressively on a large sheet of paper; telling someone who is a good listener]

Conclusion

Some situations are indeed so complex that no simple evident solution is readily forthcoming, at least at the level at which the problem is being analysed. This calls for patient persistence at greater depth with lateral thinking on part of both the person seeking constructive input and the adviser.

Even if we cannot make a decision, the situation will always evolve or stabilise without any action on our part. The question is whether it might also get worse and whether we could make a positive difference through our own initiative.

Chapter 5

A LITTLE DIPLOMACY

Responding to Perceived Falsities and Distortions

There are alternative and less offensive ways of saying the equivalent of

- ‘You are a liar’, or ‘you are lying’ or ‘you are deliberately trying to mislead.’
- ‘You are a fool.’
- ‘You are incompetent.’
- ‘You are an idiot.’

The responses below are less likely to put the other party on the personal defensive. They steer the discussion away from the personal level. They make the respondent sound more controlled, reasonable and objective, not only to the target of their response, but to other listeners within earshot. They are not directly (personally) judgemental, are constructive in suggesting ways to improve thinking and are more consistent with comfortable personal and professional relationships. However, in significant issues **THE PRIORITY REMAINS THE TRUTH**. Some of the following responses to false or misleading statements might be useful depending on the situation:

- ‘You are mistaken in this instance.’
- ‘I think that may be an exaggeration. / overstatement / misperception’
- ‘What you are saying is not consistent with all the facts.’
- ‘Your picture of the situation is incomplete in a number of relevant details.’
- ‘I think your memory is not accurate.’
- ‘Your reasoning does not follow.’
- ‘I think you may have been misled.’
- ‘I think one has to be careful in jumping to conclusions.’
- ‘[That other matter you have introduced] may well be the case, but it is not what we are discussing.’
- ‘I hear what you are saying, but where is the evidence?’
- ‘Following that course of action could have serious implications.’
- ‘I prefer to reserve my comments about that for the time being.’
- ‘It may appear so on the surface, but a deeper investigation would / might reveal a different picture.’

It is not necessary to correct every mistaken impression in unimportant matters. It is useful to have an open policy never to confirm, deny or discuss rumours about oneself, and never participate in rumour-mongering about anyone else.

Managing the Expectations of Others

A standpoint of humility (which is not an air of grovelling or subservience, but slight dignified understatement) is much more comfortable and secure, and

personally 'lighter' as a burden than living perpetually in fear of not being able to deliver what one appears to promise.

Some ways of managing the expectations of the listener or receiver of the service:

- 'I will listen carefully and give you as accurate and complete a response as I can.'
- 'Let me look into it more thoroughly and
 - a) I shall call you back when I have more information, or
 - b) Call me back on [some specific date and time] and I may have further information, or
 - c) That is beyond the scope of my expertise, but you could enquire with [someone you believe could help].'
- 'I can give you an intuitive answer that might be helpful, but it may not be rigorously correct.'
- 'I will listen and try to point you in the right direction as best I can.'
- 'I can give you an answer that would satisfy me, but it may not satisfy you.'
- More frequent use of words and phrases such as 'may', 'might', 'could', 'is likely to', 'probably', 'possibly', 'tends to suggest', rather than making categorical statements of which one is less than certain.

Having Realistic Personal and Mutual Expectations

In some occupations, less than (say) an 85% 'first round' service delivery from a professional could suggest a degree of incompetence. 95% is usually excellent. No professional can deliver 100% service guaranteed without fault, especially on a first round attempt at solving a problem. What can be expected of a professional is that he takes the responsibility to complete what he has promised and repair any mistakes he has made. In general, a professional can take responsibility for the quality of service within the developed 'state of the art' of his profession, and must be honest with his client as to what the current practical limits are. He cannot take responsibility for the client's problem and lead the client to expect services he may not be able to deliver. Nevertheless, he should take a genuine interest in the client's problem within economical limits.

Perfection is impossible except in rare instances, and perfectionism is extremely costly and unproductive in the overall picture. A knowledgeable professional can usually answer 80% of enquiries from his head, 90% from a notebook, 95% from a well organised file and 98% if he carries a very large continually updated library around with him. Clearly, the additional cost of approaching 100% performance far outweighs the additional benefit. The figures may not represent all fields but the principles are the same.

Negotiation

A few basic principles:

- Never make a concession without demanding a concession

- Do your research on the needs and wants of the other party. The extent to which you can fulfil or withhold them is your bargaining power. Get advice on the dominant negotiating style in the geographical, occupational and cultural area. If possible, talk with others who have had negotiations with that party.
- Be honest with yourself as to what you can and cannot compromise.
- Make your initial price higher than your bottom line, as it is easier to let them beat you down to it than it is for you to sustain your first price against all opposing forces.
- Be patient, don't communicate urgency, and be prepared to walk away having given and received nothing. Never make an agreement while you have reservations.
- Ask for what you want and never give a reason. Negotiation is not begging.
- It is generally best to confine communication to polite, moderate and firm language that is unambiguous. Avoid showing spontaneous signs of emotion, as these tend to reveal your stronger needs and aversions, giving more power to the other party.
- Avoid calling your opponent's bluff, or making threats you are not prepared to carry out.
- When in doubt, ask for more time and use it fruitfully: Consult advisers, do more research and build a more complete picture of the situation.

Unless It Is Necessary

Some actions tend to put a person into a more vulnerable and disadvantaged position, and unless there are overriding reasons of far greater importance in a deeper, broader and longer-term context, they are best avoided. The following is a suggested but incomplete list of behaviours anyone, particularly a professional, should try to avoid unless it is necessary:

- Breaking the law.
- Using force or destructive behaviour.
- Displaying anger or aggression.
- Irritating or harming others or their interests.
- Taking dangerous risks.
- Getting into debt.
- Surrendering his power.
- Telling lies.
- Revealing secrets or breaking confidences.
- Breaking promises.

The Issue of Trust

The moral and ethical imperative obliges us to pursue the best interests of all parties that may be affected by any decisions we make. However, it does not oblige us to trust anyone. Wisdom dictates that we should trust any person only to the extent that we know them unless it is necessary in a particular

instance. In such a situation, we need to be consciously aware of the risks and be prepared to accept the consequences.

When dealing with a potential adversary or possible source of threat, it is essential that we prepare ourselves for all of their capabilities regardless of their declared intentions. The stated intentions may change, the power could fall into the wrong hands or a new situation may evolve that changes a peaceful coexistence into an uneasier one.

It is also unwise to believe any important piece of information regardless of its origin. It should always be confirmed from at least one other independent source, whether that be another authority, ones own observation and experience or personal common sense. There may be no malicious intentions but the person from whom the information originates can be mistaken, we might have misunderstood them or the message may have become distorted through the communication process. When two or more independent sources concur, the reliability of the information generally increases substantially, the likelihood of blame and recriminations is reduced and better relations are maintained.

The central issue is not one of advocating active suspicion or open distrust of a general kind, for trust is an essential component of efficient harmonious close relationships in all areas of life. What is needed is an awareness that trust must be based on both the loyalty *and* competence of the person being trusted. Even within families, one of these may be present without the other in any particular area. Your loving partner may never dream of hurting you, but they might have a habit of losing important items.

Conclusion

Diplomacy is a vast discipline and only a few of its applications have been touched on here. However, it needs to be practiced in all areas of life, not only at high levels of government in foreign affairs. It is essentially about wisdom and the effective use of power to optimize the whole picture of ones interests in the longer term. It is not only about what we say, how we say it and what we do not say, but about all aspects of our behavior in relation to others.

Chapter 6

FAIRNESS

Sensitivity to fairness or justice seems to be natural to most human beings. This is not to say that we are innately inclined to treat others fairly, but that we generally tend to compare ourselves and instinctively question why we should be worse off than another person. We usually expect consistency in the application of rules and standards, and prefer not to be victims of the arbitrary use of power to our disadvantage. A number of related concepts have evolved over centuries such as rights, equity, equality, equal opportunities and 'the level playing field', and have become embedded in our institutions. Regardless of this, the concept of fairness is more complex than the intuitive notions most people carry around.

Some Reasons Why People Might Consider a Situation Unfair:

- Others get more reward for less effort.
- Others have more opportunities, resources or freedom.
- Their partner does not contribute equally in the relationship.
- A promise was not delivered.
- The rules were not applied consistently.
- They are not treated equally.
- The rewards and opportunities are based on irrelevant criteria.
- The relationship appears to be one-sided.
- They are being exploited by a power advantage.

General Observations

- The general perception of fairness appears to be of great importance to peaceful coexistence at all levels of society.
- Values dominate issues of fairness. Nobody calculates fairness on the basis of something that is of no importance to him. On what scale or criterion is the comparison being made?
- In issues of fairness, we are often more inclined to compare ourselves with others who are better off than those who are worse off. Do we ever complain of unfairness when we get more than we deserve compared with others?
- In theory, the assessment of fairness always rests on the concepts of equality, balance or tolerable inequality in relation to some criterion or weighted combination of criteria. In practice, the assessment often reduces to a 'gut feeling'.
- It can be very difficult to reach agreement on 'what is fair' due to differences in personal criteria and weighting.

- Expectations are based on context, skills, individual differences, traditional duties and culture,
- Sensitivity to fairness varies from person to person.
- Perceived unfairness may result in resentment, depression and despair.
- Perceptions in relation to fairness can be very unstable.

Reality versus Perception

The 'partial picture' problem: What appears to be unfair to us on the focal criterion may not seem so unfair when the whole picture is considered. The person with whom we are comparing ourselves may have some severe disadvantages we do not know about. On the other hand, things that appear fair on the focal criterion may be very *unfair* when the whole picture is considered.

Basic Principles

- Justice requires that the law be enforced consistently for all people.
- Decisions in public matters must be made on relevant criteria.
- "Can I not do what I will with what is mine?" We are not entitled to equality with others in receiving what is given voluntarily.
- "From him to whom much is given, much is expected".
- Positive ways of responding to problems of unfairness are more generally beneficial in the long term. These include: Faith in the ultimate justice of the universe [The parable of the rich man and Lazarus]. Being thankful for the advantages we have but *don't* deserve and offsetting them against any unfairness to ourselves in other areas. Widening the 'community of the concerned' by promoting awareness in others. Appealing to the more noble and reasonable aspects of human nature.
- Negative ways of responding to unfairness are rooted in the smallness of our thinking: Revenge is one such response, and is based on the principle of 'an eye for an eye'. Others include sulking and disillusionment. The main problem with negative responses is that they tend to damage both parties.
- Honour your word. A person is entitled to what he has been promised.
- Ultimately, you are not defined by the way you are treated, whether fairly or otherwise, but by the way you treat others.

Ensuring Fairness

By Others towards Us

1. First we must (1) be in a bargaining position where the other party has enough incentive to give us what we want, or (2) have sufficient access to support within the system, or (3) know that the other party wants to

be seen to be fair and we are able to ensure that the process is open. In other words, the party from whom we want fair treatment must see it in his own interest.

2. Second, we must know what we want and what we would be happy to accept.
3. Third, we must be prepared to ask for what we want at the negotiation stage, and not agree to the other party's demands without a reasonable price attached.
4. Fourth, we must be prepared to walk away if we don't get what we want.
5. Fifth, we should not expect payment for what we give voluntarily.

By Us towards Others

1. First we must resist the temptation to use our power to exploit those who are not in a bargaining position.
2. Second, there must be a mutual understanding of what each party considers fair.
3. Third, we should always consider the relationship open to reasonable renegotiation if the circumstances change.

Fairness and the Pursuit of Overall Improvement

Situations often arise where changes are introduced for the improvement of the system as a whole. This can lead to a number of internal outcomes:

1. Every person in the system is equally or proportionally better off.
2. Some are better off but nobody is left in a worse position.
3. The majority are better off but the change is detrimental to the minority. This is a very common feature of 'democratic' thinking and modern management.
4. A minority are much better off and the majority suffer. This is likely to be very counter-productive in the longer term.

These arguably represent a decreasing order of fairness assuming that the original balance of personal advantages and disadvantages was considered fair in the first place. Only the first and second outcomes, however, could qualify as 'just' to any level of general acceptability.

Occasionally overall conditions deteriorate as in a financial or environmental crisis. Human systems will re-adjust themselves in an endeavour to cope and a parallel question of fairness arises.

1. It is an unfortunate reality that some people do make huge profits in a crisis. This exemplifies the situation where despite the overall deterioration in conditions, a minority become better off with the majority being left in a position much worse than necessary. It would be very difficult to defend this on any criterion of justice.
2. Another possible outcome is that part of the original whole is abandoned altogether so as to leave the remainder no worse off than

before. This way of thinking predominates within the capitalist economic system, and might be considered reasonable where the crisis is localized and the abandoned part can be equally accommodated somewhere else. In a widespread predicament, however, there is no such place as 'elsewhere' and the philosophy is no longer defensible in terms of justice. An extreme moral dilemma can arise in survival situations with insufficient resources where an equitable distribution might mean that nobody survives.

3. Once again, probably the most broadly acceptable outcome is that the impact of the crisis should be proportionally shared by all, but questions still arise as to whether the impact should be borne more by those who have the greater ability to absorb its effects.

Personal Expectations

Ultimately, fairness is at best an ideal towards which we ought to be working rather than a reality we can automatically expect. It is the way we should prefer things to be, but there seems to be nothing in the material laws of nature that is necessarily conducive to fairness by any human criterion. Depending to our religious beliefs, we might have confidence in eternal justice and take it as our duty to conduct our lives in harmony with principles such as 'love your neighbour as yourself', that are conducive to fairness in both attitudes and outcomes without the issue even being raised. We can try to build justice into our systems, enforce them wherever possible and consider ourselves fortunate whenever we succeed.

In this world, the sensitivity to fairness appears to be uniquely human. Ensuring its existence must therefore remain essentially a human responsibility. Although law can make a limited contribution, the presence of fairness hinges much more on initiative, example and education than on enforceable expectations. It is important to remember these things whenever our sense of fairness is offended, and avoid adding self-inflicted injury to insult by harbouring resentment and other negative emotions whenever we are powerless to alter the situation.

Chapter 7

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

Instantaneous Overload

A growing problem is that of being confronted with large volumes of 'information' in a literature search on a subject of immediate interest. This is the combined result of the reading material availability explosion, the anti-memorization trend in education, the use of unfamiliar specialized language and the decreasing availability of affordable and knowledgeable human sources and intermediaries. These interact with the personal preparedness of the user, which depends on his prior familiarity with the subject and his consequent ability to sift and recognize what is valuable. The more limited his working familiarity with the subject, the greater the negative impact. Much medical, legal, financial and scientific material falls into this category.

People live within a material and social system of growing complexity. They are increasingly called upon to make important decisions that have potentially far reaching implications for themselves and for others. It is both morally and legally expected that they have informed themselves of all the relevant matters that could have a bearing on the consequences, and often they must formally declare that they have done so. However, while all the relevant information may technically be available, in practice it is often impossible to absorb more than a small fraction of it within the time that can be allowed. A frequent outcome is that the 'informing' party is legally covered while the other party is actually not properly informed, blindly accepts all the risks and has no defence.

Part of the problem lies with the pursuit of internal efficiency, which results in pressures to shift the cost of providing information. Rather than maintaining adequate readily available human expertise, organisations direct their clients to websites and other sources of self-informing material. Thus, a query that might have been answered in a few minutes can take many frustrating hours of independent sifting often to no avail. Sometimes the client has to start developing his own expertise from first principles just to reach the point where he can identify what is relevant! This problem is also increasing in the sphere of tertiary education with the growing emphasis on 'independent learning' that is often motivated more by costs than learning principles. The encouragement of independence is laudable, but often it is both excessive and premature.

In fairness, we cannot have it both ways. If we insist on the right to judge for ourselves what is relevant, we have to go through the long process of educating ourselves in the field. If some learned expert creates a summarised, popularised version that the rest of us can digest, it may suit many interested readers, but much will necessarily be over simplified or omitted that may be relevant to more exceptional situations. Often these are precisely the areas that even professionals seldom encounter and the client

wishes to clarify for himself. What is 'relevant' is governed not by the subject, but by the situation and the objectives of the decision maker. Where these possibilities are extremely diverse, it is impossible to organise the information in any given area efficiently to every possible purpose and it is extremely difficult to be simple, concise and comprehensive at the same time.

On-going Overload

There are two important principles related to the volume of stored information - relevance and access. Relevance must be identified and access must be organized. Both of these tasks are time-consuming. However, the former is the more important because access can be organized on a large variety of principles, each of which is more suited to a different purpose. If these tasks are neglected then several problems arise: Disorganized information accumulates where the content is either unknown or is rapidly forgotten. The growing backlog makes the reviewing and organizing task increasingly daunting, and a growing proportion becomes obsolete by the time it is dealt with and probably never. There is also the dilemma of storage and clutter.

How much information should be retained and in what form?

Assuming that storage itself is not the crucial issue, the key factor is ease of search. This might require nothing more than good cataloguing and indexing, but even this comes at a cost in time and effort. However, a further question arises in relation to the *form* of storage. Paper occupies large amounts of space and requires manual indexing but no intermediate viewing devices. Computer-accessible memory devices such as CD's, flash-drives etc. occupy very little physical space, can hold vast quantities of information and are easily searched using suitable programs, but they require technical intermediary devices (computers and related equipment) to make the information available. When these reading devices break down, access to large volumes of information becomes paralysed, and if they are scrapped due to their obsolescence, the information becomes permanently inaccessible unless it has been converted to a form readable by the more modern equipment. These storage devices also have a much more limited durability and if damaged or corrupted there is a very high risk that all the information on them will be lost. Consequently backing up is essential. All of these processes are also very time-consuming. Regardless of the form in which information is stored, ongoing usefulness depends on regular culling, reviewing, updating and other 'maintenance' with a clear emphasis on current relevance or historic significance.

Conclusion

Not having the information one needs when decisions have to be made has obvious costs. Having too much material in the wrong form actually amounts to the same thing. If information is not economically accessible, it is more of a liability than an asset.

Chapter 8

BEING OVERWHELMED

It is easier to account for why people and systems are overwhelmed than to offer remedies.

The capacity of every person or system is limited in scope and degree. There are conditions that can inhibit and pervert its functions, and forces that can destroy it. Correspondingly, every system has a range of conditions within which it can function more or less effectively and efficiently. In this outline we are concerned with the problem of people finding situations beyond their capacity to handle.

Some of the Fundamental Causes

- Any person or system is much more likely to be overwhelmed by additional human-imposed requirements than by those that come from nature or the universe. Although the latter are often complex and subtle, they are also stable. Man-made rules are never perfect, can be extremely unreasonable, entirely arbitrary, continuously changing and increasing to infinite complexity.
- Most tasks can be done sequentially. Some must be done concurrently. The larger the number of concurrent demands, the more likely they will exceed capacity.
- The pace of change may be beyond the rate at which some of those affected can learn and adapt.
- When anything changes, we must be prepared to adjust everything. The more complex the 'everything' is, the more difficult the adjustment.
- Impermanence is a major contributing factor. Too many tasks can never be put aside as 'done' for any significant length of time.
- The frequency and variety of 'necessary attention shifts' makes it impossible to focus on any one thing long enough. This is much worse when attention capacity is more limited and any inattention may be very costly.
- There is too much to be done with too little time and resources.
- There are forces we do not have the strength to resist.
- The required pace may be beyond capacity due to inadequate strength, speed potential, storage and access, or inbuilt tolerances.
- The minimum performance needed for basic survival becomes greater than the maximum performance of the system. E.g. Interest rates rise to the point where a person's loan repayments become greater than the income he is capable of earning.
- Alternatively, the system's maximum performance falls so that it is no longer able to meet 'fixed requirements'. E.g. Our income goes down and we can no longer afford the rent. This, like the previous two, is a problem related to overhead loads that may be excessively high.

- Added demands continue to be imposed without removing any existing requirements.
- The person or system continues to operate against the forces in a losing struggle instead of 'thinking laterally' and getting 'around' the forces.
- The strategy or approach to management is faulty at a basic level.

Consequences

Performance falls further and further below expectations. The requirements of success or survival become increasingly difficult to meet. Progressive or sudden paralysis occurs. There is an increasing frequency of random breakdowns or deterioration usually in the areas of greatest weakness or neglect. Resource deficits escalate. There is often an escalation of 'borrowing' from the future or the 'neighbour' without any foundation for repayment. The focus shifts from prosperity and personal growth to survival and trying to postpone the 'inevitable'. Those who are responsible become more prone to seeking various forms of escapism, taking desperate gambles and employing illegal or unethical tactics.

Perceptions Associated with Being Overwhelmed

- Clutter
- Complexity
- Obscurity
- Information overload
- Darkness
- Disorder
- Threats, pressure, demands, critical deadlines
- Internal inconsistencies, contradictions and double binds
- Management has failed
- The situation is out of control

Associated Feelings

- Exhaustion
- Hopelessness
- Panic
- Confusion
- Don't know where to start
- Don't know what to do
- Immobilised, paralysed
- Not coping
- Can't prioritise
- Everything is critical and nothing more can be cut
- Desperation

Resource Limitations, Scarcities and Deficiencies

There is an old saying that man does not live by bread alone, suggesting that nearly always a larger variety of resources are needed for any system or person to function effectively. It is a mistake to believe that everything is reducible to time or money, especially in the short term, or that more of these will necessarily render a solution. Specially needed resources that are in limited supply may not be able to be readily substituted. For human beings, any of the following may be scarce, and *that* particular restriction may be a critical factor in the person becoming overwhelmed:

- Time
- Money
- Energy
- Health
- Information
- Knowledge
- Tools
- Input materials
- Available complementary cooperation
- Environmental conditions
- Drive, enthusiasm or motivation

The capacity of a system to perform is limited by the scarcest necessary input regardless of any abundance in other areas.

Feeling Trapped

Although feeling 'trapped' or figuratively 'imprisoned' does not necessarily lead to being overwhelmed, in most cases it is a logical precondition. Feeling trapped is the outcome of a relationship between resources and constraints, that is, abilities, means and options on the one hand, and restrictions or unacceptable consequences on the other. Every 'resource' that was listed above is always required to some degree, and relative scarcity in any of them will impose natural constraints on what can be done. However, other restrictions may also be in place:

- Insurmountable 'hoops', bureaucracy and protocol.
- Legal restrictions.
- Morally forbidden options or methods.
- 'Unthinkable' options or methods that offend our sensitivities or images of ourselves.
- Perceived commitments and responsibilities.
- Superstitions.
- Fears.
- Threats of unacceptable consequences.
- Insecurity and lack of confidence or courage, or habitual risk avoidance.
- Addiction or dependence.

It is, of course, possible for a person to *be* trapped without feeling so, if they are actually in a situation that is acceptable to them. However, if they have no 'room to manoeuvre' they are still vulnerable to being overwhelmed when critical changes take place. For example, a person who is indebted to the limits of his financial capacity may feel comfortable until interest rates rise or the style of management at work changes. Feeling trapped may lead to feelings of 'hopelessness' and result in decision paralysis.

Decision Paralysis may also be due to:

- Unclarified values
- Lack of criteria
- Lack of acceptable options
- Excessive complexity in the problem situation
- Fatigue
- Fear

What Can Be Done When Already Overwhelmed

Several strategies can be attempted, but in each case there can be reasons why a person might be reluctant to give it a try.

- Discuss the situation. [Why waste time when it might not help?]
- Slow down. [Against one's rational instincts.]
- Seek assistance. [Upset our pride. Can't afford the cost. No confidence in anyone caring enough to listen or having a solution.]
- Have faith. [Fear of letting go!]
- Go back to basics. Focus on the natural and universal principles. [No time!]
- Take one thing at a time. [The parts now being ignored may mean disaster.]
- Start anywhere possible
- Describe the total picture on paper. [Even less time left.]
- Escape for a while and rest. [Fear of the situation getting even worse in the meantime.]
- Do something useful and worthwhile in some direction.
- Think laterally. [If we had that ability, it might never have come to this.]
- Pray. [Difficult when one does not believe!]

Preventive Measures

Every system can be overwhelmed. However, it is ***much more likely*** to find itself in that position ***sooner*** if:

- Maintenance is neglected, progressively increasing the probability of malfunction and breakdown.

- Planning is inadequate, likely scenarios are not explored and contingency resources are not supplied.
- Optimistic assumptions are made and over-commitment is permitted. Resource depletion and debts are too easily allowed.
- Efficiency is over-emphasised and redundancy is eliminated without a corresponding increase in designed reliability.
- The internal system is over designed and excessively inter-dependent. When tolerances in one area are exceeded or one part breaks down, the whole may be immobilised.
- External support systems are excessively automated without adequate *knowledgeable* human guidance available. Operating instructions are ambiguous, obscure, based on unjustified assumptions, or are excessively time consuming to master, particularly for a system that is used so infrequently that processes cannot be adequately memorised.
- Ad-hoc, initially less expensive short-term solutions persistently override more permanent ones.
- The urgent dominates over the important and persistently overrides it. Complacency or procrastination rules in the absence of urgency.
- Allowing disorder to develop in our resources.
- Allowing ourselves to become ignorant of the relevant picture.
- Resources are wasted resulting in depletion.
- Tasks are started too late with little slack time at the end.
- Failing to manage the expectations of those who make demands. We volunteer openly out of goodwill for responsibilities beyond our *confirmed and experienced* competence.
- Failing to recognise and act on problems in the early stages while they are still within manageable proportions.
- Neglecting the present with too much focus on the past or the future.
- Taking too little interest in the future or failing to learn from the past.

Some Relevant Thoughts from the Scriptures

- *‘Come to me all of you who labour and are burdened, and I will refresh you.’* This is about being strengthened and recovering.
- *‘Take my yolk upon you, for my yolk is easy and my burden is light.’* This stresses the importance of following the right kind of guidance that does not lead to exhaustion. It could be argued that a heavy temporary burden whose outcome is a lasting form of development may be worth enduring, but an on-going one whose function is no more than maintenance generally suggests that something is seriously wrong with our approach to life.
- *‘The Pharisees bind heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them.’* This highlights one of the major contributing factors to people becoming overwhelmed. It includes the unjustified expectations we impose on one another and ourselves.
- *‘Which of you will start to build a tower without first calculating the cost?’* This concerns the exercise of wisdom and discernment in terms of what we let ourselves get into.

- *'Martha, you are anxious about many things, but only one thing is necessary.'* This deals with prioritising and choice.
- *'Do not be anxious about tomorrow. Sufficient for each day are its own troubles.'* We can make our lives far more manageable by working on present real problems rather than worrying about future possibilities.
- *'Fear not. Only believe.'* When we are close to being overwhelmed, fear threatens to immobilize us or induce us to make desperate and unwise decisions.

Each of these is directly concerned with the subject of life management and is constructively applicable to cases where a person has serious doubts about his ability to cope with some of the situations he encounters.

Sustainability

Lack of attention to the issue of sustainability is often one of the primary causes of a person or indeed any system becoming overwhelmed. It can therefore be useful to review some of the basic principles.

The Basic Principles of Sustainability

- The necessary internal and external conditions must be satisfied. These may depend on the required performance level and the robustness of the system. Some systems can tolerate more variation in environmental conditions and behaviour than others. Internal conditions can be even more critical requiring effective input filtering and efficient waste removal.
- Input and output must balance. This applies in both simple and complex ways. It may be elementary that expenditure cannot exceed income in the long term, but this requirement applies no less to energy and materials although the relationships may be more subtle depending on how the inputs are transformed into outputs.
- The operators must respect the operating limits. No system has the capacity to meet infinite demands on performance in *any* respect. Usually there is a short-term intermittent performance level that is marginally higher than the long-term sustainable level, but any attempt to maintain or exceed this for long periods, results in rapid burnout and possibly catastrophic failure.
- Maintenance must be carried out close to the required intervals. Rest, repair and replacement cycles need to be adhered to. Neglect and complacency in this area eventually reduces the performance capacity of the system usually to zero.

Some of these principles may appear abstract and technology oriented, but they apply no less to human beings. It is very important to recognise that regardless of how legitimate, pressing or unavoidable the reasons for violating these principles may be, the consequences follow equally inevitably. Natural law does not respect our excuses no matter how reasonable they are.

Being Overwhelmed at Work

Much of what has been discussed applies equally in the work environment, but the response may vary according to the person's position and the organisational culture. There are two main factors involved – increasing pressures and declining individual capacity.

Many strategies are invoked by employers to extract even more performance from their workers, such as shaming, patronising and appealing to their personal and professional pride or the less subtle threats of being replaced by a long line of potential applicants for the position. These may be justified where there is substantial slack, but beyond this the level of stress rises as their private time is confiscated (taking home work and unpaid 'overtime') until they no longer have any appreciable 'quality of life'. However, even the issue of slack must be measured on the appropriate criterion. It is a gross misunderstanding of human resource limitations to imagine that highly intensive concentration or energy output of any kind can be sustained beyond a very moderate fraction of the standard working week. The inevitable result is slow or sudden burnout. While short-term economic rationalism may rule the day, the interests of the whole community are damaged to a far greater degree.

The inability of an individual to cope in the workplace is not always due to an increased workload, but often the result of having to accomplish the same objectives under greater constraints such as tighter security procedures, more limited resources and support facilities, and a less congenial work environment. While some will adapt, for an increasing number it is the 'last straw that breaks the camels back', because in the modern economic climate everyone is operating much closer to the edge.

Being overwhelmed is not only an individual problem, but one that can, and often does, spell the demise of the entire organisation. In the highly competitive market place that requires a relentless pursuit of efficiency and cost cutting, immediate business survival may dictate that any expenditure of money, time or other resources on anything that is not urgent be postponed, sometimes indefinitely. Unfortunately, the consequences of neglect often result in an accumulation of critical urgencies beyond the coping capacity of the system.

As the real boundaries of human and system capacity are breached, among the outcomes of greatest public concern is the increasing incidence of professional mistakes ranging from the minor to the critical. Accuracy is not verified; important details are neglected and quality is compromised; often, vital communications are 'shelved'. Even if individual poor performance is covered up for as long as possible by subtle strategies, eventually client dissatisfaction, anger and frustration results in bad publicity, and in extreme cases, can endanger the safety of the people representing the organisation.

There is no easy solution to these problems in the commercial world as firms struggle to compete and survive under the prevailing rules of the game. I

believe that the best suggestion for individuals who are vulnerable in this context is to eliminate, or at least substantially reduce, their debts, save as much as possible and invest in marketable skills to which they are naturally suited. Any advice specific to business organisations is beyond the scope of this article, except the observation that more business failures result from excessive overhead expenses than from most other causes. Governments are warned that totally embracing globalisation, free trade and economic rationalism is not conducive to a generally sustainable quality of life at the local level whatever the apparent movement of the overall economic indicators. Furthermore, the key to alleviating most of the problems of people becoming overwhelmed lies much less in increased pay than in substantially reducing the burdens imposed on them. No amount of money can buy more than 24 hours in a day.

Conclusion

Sometimes the victim's own folly may be the principal cause of his becoming overwhelmed, but this is not always the case. Often it is the unfortunate outcome of what seemed a reasonable risk at the time. However, regardless of whether it was foreseeable or preventable, in the majority of cases the person in the situation sees no solution within his own limited power and requires assistance. Possibly all that is needed is for someone to show him a practical way to achieve sustainability. At the other extreme, extensive material support may be needed, and sometimes all that is available is not enough to prevent collapse. Ideally the input must be sufficient, not only to alleviate the unviable state, but as far as possible, also to instigate the necessary changes to ensure future buoyancy with a realistic margin of safety.

Chapter 9

POSSESSIONS

A Basic Philosophy

- The states of having or not having a range of possessions are not ends in themselves. There must be *reasons* based on their good or bad contributions to our well-being.
- In making rational decisions about what to keep or discard, we must face the likelihood that a small percentage of things we dispose of will be regretted. However, we must ask ourselves whether it is worth keeping everything to avoid that risk.
- There is no point in having something and not knowing that we have it. Possession without awareness is generally pointless.
- Possession is an economic question – not only of money, but space, time and alternatives foregone. The *total* costs and benefits of any possession need to be assessed. If it gets in the way of more important pursuits then it is more of a liability than an asset.

Factors That Influence Retention or Discarding

- The likelihood of being able to acquire it when needed.
- The inconvenience or consequences of not having it when it is wanted.
- Frequency of use.
- The space available, the space taken up and the opportunity cost of not being able to use that space for something else.
- Maintenance cost and effort. The initial purchase price is often the smallest part. If you cannot afford the maintenance, then we cannot afford it.
- The number of duplicates in one's possession.

Things that Should Almost Never Be Thrown Away

- Personal documents of identity and qualifications.
- Summarised medical records.
- Valuable property documents of ownership.
- Records related to any current or ongoing involvement. Contracts and legal documents. Financial records required by law.
- Assets that are easily convertible into money and are increasing or stable in value.
- Things that are currently or recently in good use.
- Instructions for the operation of equipment still in use. Current guarantees.
- Spares for superseded items no longer produced but still in use.
- Items of major aesthetic value or sentimental historic interest.

- Things you forgot you had, but are glad that you found again.

Things that Should Be *Considered* for Disposal

- Anything you would not acquire now if you did not have it.
- Anything you might want in the future for a specific but unlikely or unimportant purpose.
- Unused assets easily convertible into money and decreasing in value.
- Anything that revives bad memories.

Things That Can Readily Be Discarded

- Anything you think you might want in the future but do not know what for.
- Spares for something you have never used or no longer have.
- Records that are unlikely ever to be called for, and the consequences of not having them when needed are minor.
- Items that have never been used, are unlikely to be needed and are easily available.
- Things you forgot you had, but are indifferent to having found again.
- Things you would willingly give away to someone who said they needed them.
- Items where the cost of their maintenance outweighs the benefits of having them.
- Things that tie you down preventing you from pursuing your 'mission'.

Natural Obstacles to Avoiding Accumulation

- Buying compulsions.
- Gullibility to sales talk.
- A hoarding personality.
- Identifying with one's possessions.
- Insecurity: Lack of confidence in one's ability to 'cope without.'

Conclusion

The right possessions can improve the quality of life and work. There is no virtue in crippling levels of poverty. However there is also no direct proportional relationship between the volume of a person's possessions and their happiness and every indication of rapidly diminishing returns. In fact, possessions beyond our needs can become a burden, an obstacle to freedom of action and a hindrance to personal development. They can possess *us* instead.

Chapter 10

POVERTY

Poverty is relative shortage or lack on the same continuum as wealth. It is a matter of degree, not the simple presence of a condition. To a large extent, it lies in the mind of the perceiver. Nevertheless, its causes and consequences are real.

The point that defines 'the poverty line' is arbitrary and depends on the environment of the individual. One can only compare people and communities on the basis of per-capita income in the same circumstances: A person trying to live on \$100 per week in New York is far worse off than another on \$10 in many African countries.

Poverty is comparative and relative to personal expectations. It can also be voluntary. For these reasons, it cannot be classified as a universal evil and must always be considered in the light of preferences and consequences.

Some Signs and Implications of Poverty

- Limited power
- Misery, hunger, inability to afford medical treatment
- Unsanitary or dilapidated living conditions
- Inadequate resources to seize opportunities
- Lack of material comfort
- Inability to satisfy basic wants
- Living on the edge with no reserves

Observations

- It is hard work to be poor when your needs exceed your means.
- Poverty tends to be defined in materialistic terms because the other conditions of 'deprivation' have special names such as ill health, loneliness, hopelessness and lack of meaning.

Causes of Poverty

It is important for the victim to understand the causal chain, including the situations and actions that led to poverty in the given instance, and distinguish this from any reasons for the decisions he made along the way. The purpose of such an exercise is learning and enlightenment, not defensiveness. His own decisions may or may not have been reasonable at the time and circumstances might have been foreseeable or unavoidable. Nevertheless, if there is a way out, a sustainable better quality of life is much more likely to be

achieved with objectivity and complete honesty with oneself. Some of the more immediate possible causes may include

- Ignorance and lack of education
- Laziness
- Debt
- Drinking, gambling, smoking, obsessive and impulse buying
- Misfortune
- Unjustifiably optimistic decision-making
- Consuming one's capital
- Wastage of money and resources – usage patterns, shopping habits
- Low income due to weak bargaining position
- Too many dependants on too little family income
- Capitalism and wide income disparity
- An 'all or nothing' unemployment policy
- Imposed government burdens

Some Partial Remedies for Involuntary Poverty

- Charity
- Government support
- Need management: Questioning our values and criteria
- Education and practical skill development
- Taking care of the basics
- Economizing techniques

Economizing Techniques

- Research and compare.
- Buy non-perishable consumables in bulk.
- Buy quality items second hand rather than inferior items new.
- Learn to do it yourself: Some tasks need a trained professional, but often the cost of hiring one is much greater than the expense of buying the necessary tools and materials.
- Fix it - don't replace it unless it is beyond economic repair.
- Don't buy false economy. There is no point in buying perishable items in bulk at 20% discount if half of them go bad before you can use them.
- Share and borrow.
- Don't accumulate ballast: It costs to store it.
- Insure only what you cannot afford to lose.
- Avoid 'advertised gimmick items' of untested quality.
- Don't pay for 'brand labels' where the quality is not known to be proportionally better.

It is important to remain aware that between bare survival and the ideal lies the *adequate*. Between the shoddy and the elite lies the *effective*. Between

the shabby and the exquisite lies the *elegant*. It is rarely necessary to be at the upper extreme and the added cost usually far outweighs the extra benefit.

Poverty and Politics

You cannot eliminate poverty by force. Attempts to eradicate it by taking from productive people what is beyond their defined needs and transferring it to the poor have invariably been self-defeating because they tend to act as a disincentive to effort and initiative resulting in a decline in the welfare of the whole community. This, however, does not mean that nothing can be done.

The problem of poverty in developed countries is fundamentally different from that of people in the 'third world'. In developed countries it is more often the outcome of involuntary exclusion from the productive system or unrestricted economic rationalism that results in enormous disparity of incomes for the same input of time. Nevertheless, only the minority suffers serious hardship. In the 'third world' great differences in wealth also exist, but the causes of poverty are usually attributable to lack of system development whereby the majority are adversely affected.

Conclusion

Poverty is not a problem that can be eradicated on a community-wide basis, and its incidence and typical causes differ with levels of economic development. In more advanced countries there is no single universal reason for its existence and each case must be considered on an individual basis. The victim may be responsible to a degree, but blame is not a useful response to the predicament. However, uncovering and understanding the causal chain can be an important step towards a lasting solution. In each case, a variety of avenues can be explored and various economising techniques may contribute to relief. A minority of those caught in the poverty trap can work their own way out; some are able to do so with assistance, but unfortunately the majority are unlikely to attain more than a basic level of subsistence even with community support.

Chapter 11

PRIORITISING

Prioritising is clearly not always necessary, for it makes very little difference in what particular order we eat the food on our plate or clean up the house. However, when a person is faced with a logistic problem such as the successful timely completion of a more complex task or an economic problem such as the allocation of a limited budget, order and emphasis can suddenly become very important. The escalating pressures in the workplace and society are leading to an ever-increasing need to not only speed up and stretch resources further, but to make decisions regarding how to organize commitments, and what to neglect more or possibly even sacrifice altogether.

Types of Prioritising

Time Sequence Prioritising is controlled by:

- Logical prerequisites. E.g. One must open the door before going through.
- Effectiveness or efficiency. E.g. It is *possible* to get dressed before getting out of bed, but it is much easier to do it the other way.
- Window of opportunity. E.g. Watching the news on television might be less important than cooking dinner, but the news is only on at a set time and dinner can be done a little later.

Resource Allocation Prioritising becomes necessary where resources are scarce in relation to the range of objectives being pursued. It is controlled by:

- The benefit per unit resource allocated. E.g. Doing the easiest questions first for earning the maximum marks before time runs out in an examination. The '80/20 rule' often used in management, suggests that very often a disproportionately larger benefit (80%) results from a very moderate input (about 20% of the effort that would be required for perfection), and beyond that, little extra is gained at rapidly increasing cost.
- The expected consequences of not doing the task at all or not doing the task to a particular standard.

When anything is prioritised in the face of scarce resources, it is always at the expense of something else that is done to a lower standard or not done at all.

Prioritising and Decisions

Prioritising always involves decisions and choices about when to do things, in what order and how much of each of the available resources to devote to it. Like all decisions, it is concerned with things we wish to achieve, preserve or

avoid. Prioritising decisions will therefore be influenced by the decision-maker's values, and his scope of awareness and concern in terms of time, people and depth.

Relativity

Prioritising is essentially the specification of order in time, resource allocation or expendability. Prioritisation of tasks can only be done in relation to some objective. Objectives are prioritised on the chosen hierarchy of values and associated criteria. These levels of prioritisation run parallel to the operational, tactical, strategic and moral levels of decision-making of which the moral is the highest that controls and pervades all others.

- Typical values include health, material comfort and security, profitability, safety, appearance, ethics, relationships and learning. Each of them is likely to have a minimum acceptable standard above which compromise might be acceptable for gains on other values. It follows that -
- Values can be prioritised in relation to one another only in regard to any extra gains beyond the minimum tolerable standards. Any value will automatically take higher priority when it approaches or falls below the minimum acceptable level. It further follows that if our tolerable standards on several values are set too high in relation to our means, then prioritisation can become increasingly difficult and unstable.
- The order that might optimise one set of values and criteria will not necessarily satisfy another.
- Some orders of priority depend on the situation. Changes in the person's internal or external circumstances may force him to question and rearrange his priorities.

Basic Principles

- Absolute criteria (minimum necessary requirements) must always be placed ahead of negotiable criteria.
- Prerequisites must come before focal objectives in order of time.
- The supporter (the 'means') is usually more important than the supported (the 'end') in need of attention.
- The supported is usually more important than the supporter in order of values.
- The necessary should take priority over the optional or desirable in the issue of expendability.
- The purpose or reason for any method or rule is more important than the method or the rule. (No law is above its purpose.)
- Minimum necessary standards on *all* criteria must be placed ahead of higher standards on any particular criterion. (You cannot sacrifice one of the car's wheels for a more comfortable seat.)

A set of necessary requirements can be prioritised *only in sequence*, and *only if sufficient resources are available* for all of them. Attempting to prioritise them in the absence of adequate resources is pointless when they are already reduced to minimum standards.

To Prioritise Effectively

- The whole picture must be developed; otherwise the effectiveness of the imposed order will be undermined by an important intrusion we were not thinking of at the time.
- Investigation may need to take place before effective prioritisation can be done. We can only prioritise among possibilities that we know exist.
- The consequences of each possible order must be explored.

Factors that need to be considered in setting priorities:

- The benefits of doing a task – to any given standard or at all.
- The cost of not meeting a standard on relevant criteria and the risk of incurring the cost.

Conflict of Priorities

Between people tends to occur due to

- Disagreement regarding values or criteria. Whose values and which criteria should apply?
- Contradictory purposes. What objective should be pursued?
- Differences of opinion as to the best order to achieve a common purpose.
- Differences in preference when more than one order is effective but only one can be implemented.

Within a person can occur when

- He wants to have both of a pair of mutually exclusive objectives,
- His values are not clear,
- There is a tendency towards perfectionism,
- The potential risks and consequences of actions are unknown.

Some Causes of Unsound Prioritising

- Ignorance and inexperience regarding the consequences of actions
- Faulty reasoning
- Confusing the urgent and the important
- Over-sensitivity to some signals
- Inappropriate dominance of particular character traits (virtues as well as vices)
- Placing the narrow, superficial or short-term considerations ahead of those that are broader, deeper and longer-term.

Setting aside any religious connotations, 'temptations' are essentially sources of pressure to put some circumstantial opportunity into a position of inappropriately high priority. They assume a disproportionate importance largely because of our own acute sensitivities.

Some Natural Ways of Prioritising

In their daily lives, people tend to use a variety of instinctive, but not necessarily optimal or even appropriate, methods of arriving at the order in which they tackle a list of things that should or could be done. Often they are subconscious. Some typical ways include

- Greatest attraction, Personal preference, Interest.
- Threat, Urgency, Greatest discomfort
- Awareness (distraction)
- Logical prerequisite
- Ease of task completion
- Habit
- Maximum benefit /cost efficiency (for whom?)
- The contribution to security
- The needs of short-term survival

Prioritising by Employees

Where the hired person has professional integrity and a generous degree of discretion, the overall principles of prioritising, as discussed here, tend to apply. However, in the absence of any of these conditions, either the burden of prioritizing falls back on the supervisor or it will be set implicitly by the performance appraisal system. Most people who depend on others for earning their livelihood will devote their greatest attention to the visible criteria on which their performance is measured regardless of all other considerations. This has major implications for personnel management, particularly as workload increases towards and often beyond capacity. The consequences of excessive emphasis on burdensome accountability processes or unsound evaluation methods can become literally counter-productive as the priority shifts from real performance to complying and appearing to perform.

Some Rational Approaches to Prioritising

- First the minimum requirements in logical sequence and necessary resource allocation, followed by maximising some weighted combination of other criteria with the remaining resources.

- Absolute order with leftover resources allocated to the next in line. This is the reverse of the order of expendability, and is reasonable only where there is no more than one minimum requirement.
- ‘Minimizing the potential regret’ is an order of priority set by a very cautious person. The first task attended to or allocated the greatest share of resources is the one where the consequences of neglect are most feared.
- Expected net benefit. This is an order of priority set by a person who wants to maximise his long-term net gains balancing the risks and the expected rewards. It may be called a ‘neutral strategy’.
- Other rational orders such as
 1. First: Things that must be done to a given standard at or by a set time otherwise there will be an unaffordable penalty.
 2. Next: Things that may incur an affordable penalty if not done.
 3. Last: Things that need never be done.
 This is a more severe version of ‘minimising the potential regret’.

Some Sources of Prescribed Prioritising: “First, First, First!”

Religion, law, management, family tradition and accepted occupational ethics may prescribe a special order of priorities to govern behaviour. The following are some examples:

- Safety first (natural caution).
- First do no harm (medical ethics).
- Family first (political slogan).
- The children come first (family law).
- Put yourself first (self centeredness).
- Love God first, then your neighbour as yourself (religion).
- “Seek first the kingdom of God and all other things will be yours without the asking” (religion).
- The ship comes first (maritime tradition).
- The mission comes first (military).

Prioritising in a Crisis

Work out your values and general order of priorities before you are confronted with any crisis. When it is upon you, it is too late to start developing a philosophy. Keep your own affairs permanently in order.

1. Concentrate and act methodically to minimize accidents and mistakes.
2. Prevent the situation getting worse: Control the dangers.
3. Attend to the means of sustaining life in the short term.
4. Escape with irreplaceable documents, essential clothing, money or access to it.
5. Gather support from a point of relative safety.

A Recommended System of General 'Importance'

- People have priority over animals and material things.
- The longer term, broader and deeper considerations take priority over short term, narrower or more superficial elements except where neglecting the latter jeopardizes the former.
- Common humanity takes precedence over personal or group identity.
- Considerations based on love are greater than considerations based on fear.
- Duty, commitments and promises take precedence over pleasure and opportunities.
- Moral factors and conscience take precedence over legal considerations. Love and responsibility over-ride rules and customs.
- Health and safety take precedence over legality.
- Personal moral integrity is more important than ones own survival.
- Survival and well-being are higher than comfort. Basic necessities are more important than conveniences.
- Comfort and convenience are more important than aesthetics.
- Personal development is more important than comfort or security.
- Effectiveness is greater than efficiency. The real is more important than the apparent.
- The original mission or intention takes priority over distractions and incidental opportunities unless the latter are clearly shown to be of greater importance.
- The irreplaceable is more important to preserve than the replaceable.

These principles are neither exhaustive nor will there be universal agreement in all situations. They are based on the assumption of 'other things being equal'. When more than one principle could apply, the principles themselves may need to be prioritised. Furthermore, they are *general*, and it is likely that most experienced professionals will have evolved some specific system appropriate to their own roles and special circumstances.

The Ultimate Question

'To do or not to do', *that* is the question! Until this point we have assumed that everything that is allocated some priority is worth doing, but the most fundamental decision to be made is whether a given task is worth doing at all. Often the task of prioritising can be greatly simplified by addressing this issue first.

It starts with being honest with ourselves as to whether the action is taken in pursuit of a goal or avoidance of a fear.

- If it is towards a goal, is the gain worth the input? Are there more efficient approaches? Is the goal itself worth pursuing as against alternative directions?

- If it is in response to a fear, does the real risk justify the cost of avoiding it, particularly in view of the possible gains if the resources were directed elsewhere?

In attempting to resolve these, some of the following questions may be helpful:

- What do I have to lose if it is not done?
- What am I giving up in doing it?
- Who or what else will be affected if it is done or not? In what way does it matter at all?
- Did I promise to do it?
- Am I doing it out of habit, superstition, guilt feelings or obsession?
- What more information do I need to decide?

Conclusion

Prioritisation is ultimately a personal or community issue that is logically pragmatic in practice, but with dogmatic elements having a strong influence. Priorities are essentially set by people, and they must bear the consequences of whatever order they choose. Altogether, effective prioritising is really an application of wisdom.

Chapter 12

WORRY

In addressing this area we are not concerned with the special highly dysfunctional psychological causes or outcomes of a tendency to worry, but the practical implications of the natural human response to certain situations. Terms such as unease, anxiety and worry are often used interchangeably in everyday speech, although they could suggest increasing levels of intensity.

For worry to exist, a number of factors must come together: Sensitivity, values, threat and doubt. We must be sensitive (aware and emotionally able to react) to something important to us that we perceive is vulnerable and under threat, and we are uncertain as to whether we can prevent or remedy the potential harm.

Typical areas of worry include relationships, money debts and income, reputation, health, possessions, people and lifestyle. Each of these may involve all the factors.

Each of these factors also offers an avenue for attempting to remove or at least reduce the worry.

- People can try to desensitise themselves by a variety of means including self-talk, alcohol or distracting their awareness. Any of these can vary from harmless to destructive in the long term.
- The importance of the value in question can be critically examined and it is possible that a greater degree of detachment might be developed.
- The actual threat to this value may be more realistically assessed and any unwarranted exaggeration highlighted.
- Doubts regarding our ability to avert or handle the feared outcome can be reduced by enlisting support or developing strategy and skill.

Worries can be continuous, circumstantial or conditional. Continuous worries are there all the time, at least when we think about them. One example is the risk of an earthquake or a sudden failure of health. Circumstantial worries are only associated with specific situations that are sometimes unavoidable but not always present, such as having to cross a busy road. Conditional worries are associated with situations we freely choose to enter or where we have more control over the outcome that depends on our diligence, but we still have some remaining doubts as to whether we have done enough.

Sometimes the amount of worrying is multiplied by attempting to avoid rather than facing the problem and tackling it head on. This is a personal economic issue. We might hope that the problem will disappear by itself and a low level of continuous worry may be easier to tolerate than summoning the courage needed for a major confrontation.

Worry of a sufficient magnitude can lead to desperation and it is arguable that the latter is just the extreme end of the continuum. The person may become increasingly prone to irrational, immoral or criminal courses of action to try to avert the impending situation they fear so intensely. There are no easy solutions to desperation for it reaches this stage partly *because* the problems have been increasingly perceived as unsolvable.

Having Something to Worry About

There is a natural tendency for people to compare themselves on the basis of the perceived adversity of their circumstances. A person who is in a poor state of health or financial trouble is seen as one who has more to worry about. Other factors being equal, this is reasonably valid. However, more often than not, sensitivity differs and one person may be naturally more optimistic and comfortable living closer to the edge than another. They might also have more skill and experience in handling adverse outcomes. Worry is relative to both reality and personality.

Faith, Confidence and Natural Optimism

One of the most significant factors in controlling the inclination to worry is the person's practical belief system. This may be related to religion and all the major denominations offer useful advice. It is also to a large extent a product of experience where the more often recovery occurs or support is forthcoming, the less likely any new situation will result in the same level of worry. One cannot conjure up confidence, fake faith or pretend optimism to oneself, but these can be acquired to some degree through courage, learning and interaction with others who have them.

Harmful Effects of Worry

Worry usually involves mental preoccupation, which can have serious implications for safety, efficiency and personal relationships, and lead to sleeplessness, eating disorders and digestive difficulties. These tend to worsen the situation as they deplete our reserves that may be needed to solve the problem. They are conducive to further clouding our thinking and affect our ability to make sound decisions as we become more inclined to respond to an exaggerated sense of urgency rather than to real importance. For these reasons it can be very beneficial to discuss the problem with someone who is more detached but may offer some useful input.

Least productive of all is a tendency to worry endlessly about imagined possibilities to the point of mental and physical debilitation. It is bad enough to die as a result of real unsolvable problems, but to be killed by the 'hypothetical' is a real waste.

Constructive Approaches

- If you are inclined to be anxious, you may as well worry about the reality rather than some mistaken imagination. Discuss the problem situation; put it down on paper to build a comprehensive picture.
- Get realistic information about the probabilities. Brainstorm the options.
- Gather relevant facts rather than let confusion go endlessly around in your head. Uninformed worry is a pointless waste of energy when relevant information is available.
- Often worries can be cut down to size by considering the worst case scenario and developing a strategy to cope with it. In fact any strategy based on credible hope that gets the person involved and empowers them to make a positive contribution to the solution, is useful.
- Sometimes excessive anxiety is the result of the situation becoming exaggerated out of proportion to its real importance in the person's life as a whole. It can occupy too large a focus such that they lose sight of everything else in their life that is good. Regaining the broader personal picture can take the edge off the worry.
- Become a warrior rather than a worrier: Welcome the challenge and try to exploit it for the maximum personal growth you can extract from it.
- Unless there are very good reasons to do otherwise, confront the task or situation as soon as you are properly prepared rather than procrastinate. This minimises the total anxiety time.
- Having made all responsible preparations, try not to think about the object of anxiety until shortly before you must confront it.

If feelings of desperation begin to set in, it is necessary to recognise the signs such as any serious contemplation of harmful irreversible actions. It is time to do the *unusual* as compared with our normal behaviour – but not the irrational, illegal or immoral. If we were always proud, it may be time to be more humble. If we have lived too cautiously an act of courage may be needed. If we cherished our independence and self-reliance we could begin to involve others. We might try to accept some things we have always resisted. More than anything else, it involves a change in our way of thinking and believing, and contrary to popular assumptions, we do have some power in these areas: Faith, hope and love. Faith in the form of an unwavering belief that only those things which are conducive to our development are allowed to happen to us, is extremely helpful in removing desperation from the equation. Hope consists of the willingness to act as if solutions are possible and refusing to give up. Love, meaning responsible concern and caring, is a powerful antidote to feelings of desperation both when it is received and when it is given.

Some clarification may be useful. Firstly, faith, hope and love are character traits and conscious choices, not accidents, feelings, or even the visible behaviour often associated with them. For example, while it is true that love is patient, so is a predator stalking its prey! Patience is not necessarily love. Equally, no situation is ever 'hopeless' – only the *person* can be. Secondly, where there is abundant evidence, few impediments and natural compatibility, it is easy to believe, feel optimistic, and appear patient, kind and gentle.

However, it is only through commitment when evidence is scarce, obstacles are more formidable and coexistence is a challenge, that faith, hope and love begin to grow and become more firmly established. Thirdly, like intelligence and wisdom, they are not directly observable or transferable from one person to another: We need to develop them within ourselves to observe the results. They involve disciplining ourselves to think forward, outward and also more deeply inward, with genuine caring rather than manipulative solution-mindedness so that we can come to terms with the true meaning and role of each problem.

Short Term Partial Relief

When a person is evidently anxious, it is pointless to tell them not to worry unless there is sufficient credibility behind the statement. There must be some convincing reasons why the worry is needless.

Depending on the personality and the type of situation causing the anxiety, any of the following may be useful on a temporary basis:

- Reassurance of another person's support
- Attractive distraction
- Talking to a good friend, minister of religion or experienced counsellor. Being with the person and getting them to talk about it can relieve some of the anxiety at the time even if the listener cannot offer any useful input.
- Meditation
- Constructive humour
- Meaningful work and involvement

These can be useful particularly when the situation is likely to be temporary, or the anxiety about it passes through acute phases in which desperation can set in.

To be supportive, one must take an interest, try to understand and empathise but not commiserate, judge or criticise.

General Advice and Observations

Worry and fear are related. Fear fogs up the brain and cripples the ability of the mind to consider a situation rationally while responsible concern sharpens it. Proper concern should start long before the problem becomes a desperate situation.

When dealing with daunting projects, the time to be a constructive pessimist is during the planning and preparation phase. In this way, we adopt the most responsible orientation and minimise the number of things that might cause us anxiety later when we are already committed. When taking the first irrevocable step, we must become realists: we check that the conditions are favourable, get started and continue to take each situation as it is. Having

become committed, we should become optimists regarding the outcome. Usually the most intense worrying occurs just before we get started.

The tendency to worry varies throughout a person's life. Small children who are well cared for tend to worry very little. Teenagers are much more vulnerable and are known to have among the highest suicide rates. Part of this may be due to a rapidly expanding sensitivity without having developed sufficient resilience including the practical abilities and experience to cope with normal adversities. The elderly have the most extensive experience, but personality and loss of physical and mental robustness can make them increasingly vulnerable, and the tendency to worry may again increase. It is also true that at different stages of their lives people tend to worry about different things.

Something even greater to worry about, often makes the original situation pale in significance. This cannot be artificially provided, nor should it be, but if it occurs naturally it may cure the original worry and paradoxically improve the overall state of mind.

We are willing to go to great lengths and spend lots of money to set our minds at ease. The security, insurance and health-related industries thrive on this. Much of the expenditure is needlessly wasted when some elementary low cost precautions would be more effective and leave more resources available to cope with the occasional emergencies that do arise.

Conclusion

It is interesting that we are very future oriented beings. All planning and decision making is about the future. Worry is also almost entirely about the future, but more often than not, things turn out *different* from how they are imagined or anticipated. A person should look ahead, think ahead, plan ahead but never worry ahead. To quote an old proverb: 'Don't be anxious about tomorrow; let tomorrow be anxious for itself; sufficient for each day are its own troubles.' Nevertheless, if we have become caught up in the worrying frame of mind for whatever reason, there is much that can be done constructively to break the pattern or at least diminish the intensity in the given situation.