

## **‘A New Humanity: The Quest for Well-Being in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’**

**~ Rev Peter Owen-Jones**

The eternal quest for well-being.

The quest for well-being underlines the course humanity has taken since the beginning. In our age we are surrounded by images of sun drenched beaches, smiling couples on posters for health insurance and history has handed us the enigmatic medieval pleasantries, the romantic movement, all of these testament to an unquenchable desire for well being. We are born into a world full of stories which contain directions to happy ever afters. We inherit religions and heavens whether we want them or not. We arrive within a system and whilst that system is going to have its obvious differences from place to place it is still a society with its traditions its demands its bills its moralities. Our lives to a certain degree are set within the cauldron of struggle and to a certain extent we have not yet as a species learned to truly understand this struggling. This struggle is perhaps reflected in our desire to experience beauty, really to be as relaxed as we can about being here for the time that we are.

Despite the fact that we in the west, in our society we have apparently never been wealthier it is also a fact that we have never ingested such huge amounts of anti-depressants. The truth is that capitalism was never conceived to make us happy it, it has been very successful at making some of us rich and therefore I do not feel inclined to berate it for something it was never designed to do. But a system that sets each individual human being against each other is never going to create or more importantly engender a sense of communal or individual well-being and I am not sure whether my children's generation are going to invest in this way of 'being a society' any more. I am also not sure however how much longer we can describe ourselves as 'free' as long as we increasingly have to pay increasingly more for this version of freedom. There is surely a tipping point where the demands of the system become heavier than any benefits it might happen to offer. When societies approach that point the resulting stress on the individuals who make up that society begins to show itself. We are perhaps much closer to that point as a society than we are really being honest about and once that point is passed there is always revolution. At some point over the next twenty years the new generation will wake up and realise the true extent of the social manipulation that they have been subjected to, they will then look into the distance of themselves. I don't like the roads revolutions take, they are for the most part journeys into the brutal, the vicious and the bloody this is because they are power battles, they are about control, the victors take control, what kind of peace can ever be built on blood? It is very important I feel to understand that the quest for well-being reveals within its pathways the shadow of itself, our own tolerance of injustice, corruption and the deeper into this mirror I look my capacity for greed, for selfishness, for the pitiful need to control. That the quest for well-being and happiness

if it is not simply expressed and mediated on a material level is always the starting point for revolution and as Gandhi understood the manner of the revolution will always reflect the nature of the society that emerges from it. That we cannot have a society based on well-being and happiness unless we have a revolution characterised by happiness and well-being. We cannot have a revolution based on happiness and well-being until first of all we connect with the first truth and it is that all life is connected. We exist with and are utterly dependent upon the myriad forms of life that we share this planet with, in that sense we are many beings, we are not the individual that we imagine we are. The journey of my life from conception to growth to this adult existence is the narrative of connectedness. The oneness that Christ speaks of is the state of communion with God, God is in communion with all life we enter that place of communion through acknowledging our connectedness. The story of humanities journey since the reformation has been written from a point of separation we are in the perilous position we face because we have not acknowledged the first truth the connectedness of all life. We cannot ever have peace on earth until we make peace with the natural world, until we live in peace with the natural world. Christianity needs urgently to embrace a bigger vision of peace on earth.

I find it strange that religious visionaries have been humanities most potent revolutionaries but they have never been described as such. Much of their individual legacies have been mired by institutional infighting or high jacked by their own cultural conservatism but that doesn't change what they have had to say about living happily and finding well-being. Firstly I don't want to convert anyone that's not what this is about, neither come to that is believing in a divine force or an afterlife or Christmas or Ramadam. It is just that in fifty four years I have not found any other sources that deal so directly with the quest for happiness and well-being. The fact that we see these dreams and visions as religious ideals has in many instances watered down their veracity but set apart from religions and institutions they are still dreams and visions and for the most part they still retain their revolutionary vision for being human. Perhaps that is what makes them almost uncomfortable because they ask a lot of each one of us, so they should. There are four areas I would like to gently explore the first is the soul.

## SOUL IS THE SOURCE.

Being physical and impermanent and I'll come onto that later, being alive now here breathing, come on look at us we are, it is nothing other than extraordinary. What an adventure, what a ride. However difficult, however painful at times, however perplexing and physically challenging Life is a gift. An experience we unwrap. If there is a revolution coming something the deep ecologist Joanna Macy calls the great turning it is not to with our physical existence it is to do with human identity. How we are what we are. Really what is beginning to take place is a spiritual

revolution a discernible movement from one mode of being human to another. We are coming to the end of one age and the beginning of another. You won't find this in the news or in the shops not yet. This change is taking place deep within us at its heart is a knowing and understanding that we are souls, spirits in a material world. This change is coming about because of the great advances in medicine in particular, but also in communications and a general level of comfort in the west at least, that humanity has never really accepted before. The need to simply survive is not as pressing as urgent as it has been in the human past. Whilst the experience of life comes with no guarantees modern medicine has enabled us to be slightly more relaxed about being here for the time being, we are not living under the same fragile license as our forebears did. Not living under the same fragile license is creating a new space. Whilst we are hard wired at a very deep level for physical survival the demands made upon us emotionally and spiritually to physically survive are not nearly as immediate as they would have been even only four generations ago. One of the by products of not having to concentrate on physical survival not to have that ringing in our ears all the time has meant much to the surprise of science that we are becoming more spiritual. We have the great privilege of having more space to experience existence rather than endure it. We have become more relaxed about living, being, because the threat of it all ending in plague or TB has been for the time being reduced. Of course we still fear the pandemic but it appears slightly further away to us than in previous generations. This really has created space for the soul, it has given time for the soul that human living up until now did perhaps not afford. The old religions in the West at any rate are declining because they existed within the framework of the fragile license and within that framework life was much less certain so you needed to constantly repent because you were not sure that you would be able to do so next week. So we have more space, more mental space in which to explore. I can only speak of my experience here and that it is been one of understanding that the I that has this body is not this body but something simply living within it. But it is when I look at others and see them as having a similar experience to mine that everything changes, when I see you as souls just like me inhabiting a body which is for the most part identical to mine. When I recognise that right now we are having a shared experience and once I have accepted that I am talking to souls, soul to soul, not to bodies at that moment it is as if everything calms down and I am not struggling any more. It feels rather like coming home that I recognise you as a soul experiencing life just like me and there is a tremendous sense of peace within that knowledge, that knowing that I have not experienced before and maybe in the future we will be able to bring that inner being much more to the surface. To understand that when we start to live consciously as souls then our sense of well being in the midst of this experience will be greatly enhanced perhaps because it is the truth of who and what we are. This is perhaps what Christ meant parables such as the treasure in the field, the pearl of great price he was talking about consciousness, he was a teacher of consciousness. The treasure in the field is the field itself no more no less. So I would say number one is to become soul conscious it is from here that everything else begins. Our current religious models are based largely on a re-enactment of the Christian calendar. I concede that for hundreds of years it provided a rhythm for life

but really the Christian calendar has very little to do with the teaching of Christ. Are we not in the position now in regards to Harvest festival where we are actually celebrating the eradication of butterflies and song birds not to mention the environmental cost of what is produced in other lands and flown here. If we were to acknowledge our connectedness, our oneness would our harvest festivals sound the same. When Christ speaks of God caring for the sparrows and goes on to say how much more then does God care for us. What he is saying is that as sentient beings we can know the love of God more deeply, not that the sparrow is loved any less than we are. Therefore.

## HONOUR THE FLIES.

I love what the Jain traditions has to say about our relationship with the natural world. First of all we are asked to experience the natural world as something sacred and therefore something that we do not harm. It is this 'not harming' that is so essential to our experience of being who we are. In the west we have never lived in peace with the natural world, it has not been our tradition, it has not been our way of seeing ourselves. We have been predators, despoilers, eradicators and when we see the natural world that is the reflection of ourselves that we see in it. The deep ecology movement invites us to see our humanity differently through our relationship with the natural world. Invites us into a vision where we are not predators, despoilers and eradicators, but nurturers and guardians where we exist in a state of communion with the environment. We have in the west never lived in this way, this in part has to do with the human identity we have inherited from previous generations, which has a great deal to do with their understanding of the sacred. But the Jain tradition and the emerging deep ecology movement have recognised that it is not possible for human beings to reach a place of well being and ultimate happiness if we are living at war with the natural world. I am afraid this state of war is deeply entrenched in our way of life and making peace will rightly ask a great deal from each one of us. The evidence of war is stark, just one look at the rapidly declining numbers of song birds, butterflies and invertebrates in this country is sobering enough. If that can't reduce us all to tears then the United Nations red list of critically endangered species surely will and all of these desperate figures, these salutary facts present the greatest challenge to all the so called world religions, because it has been under their watch that all this has and is taking place. The whole idea that you simply have to believe in God to be saved looks increasingly ludicrous and utterly disconnected from the backdrop of devastation unfolding at our hands in the natural world. Christ's call was for compassion, not to celebrate history but to realise the conscious state of compassion, to become compassion, to become love.

There are however some signs of real hope. The organic movement, the countless N Go's working to protect and nurture. I'm not keen on the term 'alternative sources of energy' it is natural energy and all of us should welcome and support its re-

emergence, natural energy works with what is given rather than what is taken. It moves us closer to harmony with the natural world and living in an underlying harmony with the environment is nothing other than essential to realising a state of happiness and well-being. This state of harmony needs to be present on every front of our existence. Up until now technological progress has largely been sold to us claiming that it will make living more easy and one of the main illusions that we have all subscribed to is that easy living will give us happiness and well-being, it hasn't. And it hasn't been able to do that because we haven't begun to measure the complete cost of the dishwasher in terms of what it costs the environment to be made and brought to our door and the environmental costs from there on in. The current world financial system is based based on one element, gold, and does not take into account the cost, the impact, that our way of life is having on the rest of the planet, it has become dangerously one dimensional hiding the true cost behind what is fast becoming an outmoded economic model for the planet. How many trees are felled on my behalf so that I might read? How many butterflies poisoned on account of my loaf of bread? How many dead fish are thrown back so that I might eat one. Yes we move a little closer to this way of understanding by measuring our carbon footprint but really none of us have any idea of the true cost of the manner of our existence and yes that is going make pretty harsh reading but we languish in illusion until we face that truth. Because that truth will reveal how disharmonious our current form of existing is in our relationship with the natural world. Just imagine what it might be like to be a nurturer, a guardian what manner of beings might we become celebrating all life carrying one life and living in a manner where we recognise one life carrying all life. That is the revolution we need, to awaken to that reflection of ourselves as nurturers and guardians, to be conscious that our well-being is intricately linked to the well-being of all life on this beautiful planet that we share. The philosopher and theologian Albert Schweitzer writes 'until he extends the circle of his compassion to all living things man himself will not find peace.' The release of recognising this truth is immense, to realise that all birth is my birth, all breath is my breath, all blood is my blood, all pain is my pain, all love is my love. Oneness.

## REALISE THAT NOTHING BELONGS TO YOU.

The belief that we own things is actually a far shallower illusion than we might believe, but the weight of carrying the belief that things actually belong to us is far heavier than we have realised and so many of us carry so much. Houses, cars, clothes, computers, paintings, it is a long long list. It serves the financial and governmental institutions to foster an idea of ownership it comes from an ancient exchange mechanism. Kings, Queens, Moguls offered protection in return for allegiance and tax, vestiges of this ancient arrangement still very much remain. The self acknowledged first duty of any government in this country is the defence of the realm. But for you and your family to be defended the deal is you give something in return, that is where the very powerful idea of ownership comes in. Fast on the heels of the idea of ownership comes the idea of value and there just happened to be a very handy little metal called gold that everyone eventually agreed should be the

benchmark for value. As I mentioned previously this system of valuing things on gold alone has become increasingly dangerous for all of us. First of all ownership is not a reality it is merely a belief system, our society functions on the belief in ownership and value. Part of the environmental crisis we face is down to the fact that we believe in ownership, in ownership of fields, woods, rivers, trees, sheep, cats. One of the tenets of ownership is that if we believe it is ours we will take better care of it. Just one look at the state of planet earth is enough to show how flawed that argument is and the belief system from where it came. Don't we tend to take better care of things when they don't belong to us, when we have borrowed them from a neighbour. The belief in ownership and our one dimensional value system is one great blockers of well-being and happiness but it is relatively easy individually to find a way through. You just don't believe in it any more that's all there is to it, you let it go. Do it now pick up what you believe is your pen and say to yourself this isn't mine, it's just a pen that I happen to be holding in my hand, the pictures on the walls they are not mine, this house, this apartment this isn't mine either I just happen to be experiencing life here for a while, really I am just taking care of it for the next person who lives here. And this field, this field doesn't belong to me, these flowers, these grasses they don't belong to me, right now it is being used by a plethora of life. I might use some of it to create hay to feed some cattle that I am taking care of but neither the field nor the cattle belong to me, I am just taking care of them. The idea that we will only take care of something if we own it diminishes our human being because it is rooted in selfishness and that is the reflection of ourselves that we will reach by following that path. The great Buddhist philosophy of 'non attachment' and Christ's observations on materialism invite us into a different way of seeing ourselves. Just look at the body language of ownership, it's mine. Both Christ and Buddha reached a state of being where they recognised that the state of constantly craving more and more possessions means that the illusion of ownership has taken a hold. The illusion of ownership or of seeking to own will only result in an almost constant state of craving, agitation and dissatisfaction, worry, as we find ourselves or choose to become entangled in the roots of a system that has set us against each other competing for the possession of things that were never ours to take and are never ours to own. By not subscribing to the illusion of ownership actually frees us from selfishness and possessiveness and you and I become human beings that take care of things for the sake of others and we will feel quiet differently about ourselves as a result. Should Christians own property should diocese own churches.

## EMBRACE YOUR IMPERMANENCE.

Sometimes I clatter around antique markets looking for presents. In many of them you can find old black and white photographs of faces from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Men sporting fabulous moustaches, couples standing in front of church doorways, children holding puppies. I assume all of these individuals are now dead. Our fear of death is one of the main stumbling blocks to well-being and happiness, just knowing that we cannot last in this particular form that at any

moment, this moment could be our last tends to generate a state of uncomfortable tension, unease. If that is the case then I have not completely accepted the reality of my own impermanence. Organic life on this planet exists and re exists in a constant cycle of death and birth my body is umbilically linked to that cycle and there is nothing any of us can do to escape it. Some of us may believe in an afterlife and that may act as a kind of 'death insurance' for us but a recent survey discovered that those with religious beliefs were just as fearful of death as those claiming to have none. So what do we do with the leaden weight of mortality? As our bodies fold inexorably into old age. Our field of reference for life begins within our mothers and when we emerge from her womb our world ends or our world extends to no more than a couple of feet. As we grow the world grows with us until one day we realise that I am me. There are two things that happen at that point the first is we become self-conscious it is a momentous point of awakening, this point of awakening is there in the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. Having eaten from the tree of knowledge of good and evil they then recognise for the first time that they are naked. With the awakening of self-consciousness the ego rises and stakes its claim. At the age of fifty three I am just beginning to celebrate the fact that we not born into something immutable we are born into a fluid, moving reality. By taking part in that reality we take part in creation in that sense we become creation. The astro physicists will tell you that the dynamism of birth and death, this constant state of movement means the universe lives and it is perhaps movement, change, evolution that is the signature of existence. I love the fact that in probably no more than three hundred and fifty million years life on this planet will be unable to exist as the sun expands and ultimately consumes this beautiful world. That planet earth is perhaps now in full bloom. When we look around the rest of this solar system every other planet it would appear does not have this cacophony of life that we are experiencing. And all of us are constantly presented with a stark choice we can either fear the reality of our impermanence, which is right at the root of our fear death or we can celebrate it understanding that this is our flowering, brief and confusing, agonising and wonderful, that this is the signature of a universe we a part of and that is part of us. The happiest elderly people I know tell me that they are in greater state of wonder at the sheer reality of life than they have ever been and that looking back over there lives there memories appear increasingly numinous and extraordinary. Their relationships, their sorrows, their struggles, their joys. As one elderly man put it 'I never realised how beautiful it is and it becomes more beautiful every day' I asked him about death, did he fear it? 'Of course' he replied 'but not nearly so much now that I have found wonder, really it feels like I have opened a door into the stars and at some point some of me will go through.' It is the state of wonder, the ability to wonder that is not only the antidote to fear, the cure for the ills on the lid of the tin that we all experience from time to time. And it is this state of wonder that is the critical key to well-being and happiness maybe because within it is an acceptance of the utterly ethereal impermanent reality that we are in, here in the earth of each moment, the moment now. The key perhaps to the state of wonder is in being real about our impermanence and about our fragility, our vulnerability. Saint Francis saw this I think very clearly, from a place of vulnerability comes compassion from

compassion comes love and love is the mother of peace. We have much to become.