

**PLANNING IN A CULTURE THAT'S LOST.**  
*Why we're lost, and how we might find our way again*

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I would like to talk about the meaning of life. More than that, I would like everyone to talk about the meaning of life. A lot. More than we talk about the weather. More, even, than we talk about the royal family, or Paul Keating's latest one-liner, or whether the dingo did it. (I reckon it did)

**Being Lost**

Because it seems to me that any culture that does not have a view, or a collection of views, about the meaning of life, is lost. Our planning, be it cultural, economic, social, physical or personal hygiene, should be about creating greater lives. But we don't talk enough, collectively, about what that actually means. We're too embarrassed to admit we're lost.

Being lost is not only boring and a bit scary, it creates planning policies that end up being plain silly when looked at from the perspective of the average human heart. And that is the perspective that I'd like to look at this whole question from. The average human heart.

Most of us, deep down are feeling lost. The reason we are feeling lost is because, deep in our average human hearts there are some simple truths. Yet the truths we feel in our own heart bear little resemblance to the daily messages and images that we are getting from, and giving to, the world around us.

**Listening to truth**

Let me elaborate on "truth". Human truth is a precious and fragile thing. A friend of mine, Victoria Higgins, once said that Truth is "what resonates within our own being. I've not yet found a better definition.

Our own spirit should be our guide to our own truth, and therefore the way we live our lives. But most of us listen more to the directions of others, without checking that those directions resonate within our own being. And so we find ourselves in places that our spirit cannot possibly recognise. We become lost and confused and surrounded by others who are lost and confused, and the world around us becomes a strange and ugly place.

A strange and ugly place like the endless curly cul-de-sacs of our cities' fringe suburbs. A strange and ugly place like the horror images of chat shows and game shows and soap operas and advertisements that bombard us on TV. A strange and ugly place like the super-markets and shopping malls that manage to keep us so desperately separate in such crowded conditions.

**A baptism**

This damaging disparity between our truths and our reality was beautifully illustrated for me by my son's baptism. Our friends and families and neighbours all came to our house to welcome him to the world. We asked people to bring messages of hope to place in a "time capsule" (actually a tin box with a key), for his twenty first birthday: *"What is your hope for the world (and those, like Jamie, who inherit it) in 2014 A D.?"*

Jamie's community, made up of people from the broadest spectrum of spiritual, cultural and political beliefs, turned out to have reassuringly consistent hopes. They spoke of well-being in its deepest, richest sense, and they spoke of connection. The well-being of his Self, of others and of the environment. And connection with his Self, with others and with his environment.

The consistency was reassuring and rather moving. You might say that Jamie's community had, in their hearts, a clear vision for what they wanted the world to become. Strategic planners would have salivated and sparkled. Our "vision statement" was clear.

What was unsettling, though, (and would particularly concern any self respecting strategic planner) was the lack of resemblance between that vision and our activities; the noise and clamour of our daily work and lives, our daily papers and TV images, our daily political debates and social conversations.

See, look at this list of what people didn't hope for, for Jamie and his world:

- ever increasing wealth
- a privatised world
- lots of super efficient "down sized" organisations.
- a phone company that is 15% more efficient as a result of competition.
- public services and large organisations that have the very best in pre-recorded customer service.
- computer graphics that go beyond virtual reality
- the ability to do all his shopping, his socialising, his life management without leaving his front door.
- a suburb with beautifully manicured display gardens, defined and designed by state of the art covenants.
- an abundance of parking space at the local shops.
- roads that take him to the shopping centre two and a half minutes faster than they do now.

- early purchase of a swimming pool,
- a lotto win, or a younger look; beautiful jewellery, a smaller mobile phone; even air conditioning.

These do not figure in the deep hopes of the average human heart. Yet these are the images and issues that fill up our work and home lives, clamouring and clattering for our attention.

### **A culture of immediacy**

They bombard us from all angles, and we all show dutiful and sometimes genuine interest. Yet most of these things, I would suggest, are not really in our hearts. Instead they are desperate games to try and distract us from the terrible fact that we are lost. We're bored and scared and don't know where to go. But as every one else seems content to play these strange and noisy games, we feel that we better do the same.

Thus we create a culture of immediacy. We ignore the visions of our heart and try to maintain an image of moving forward when we have no idea of where we are heading. We are all discouraged, from within and without, from expressing and debating and arguing about the truths that are in our heart. These truths, that are the real guide to human destiny and could show us the way forward, are strangely unfashionable in this brave new world of pragmatism, so we all keep our most valuable guide hidden away. And so remain lost.

### **A mid-life crisis.**

But the other reason we're lost may be because we're due for a mid-life crisis. Western culture is getting old. A bit like me. It's lived for a few hundred years of arrogant certainty and suddenly finds itself at a place where the old ways are either pointless or damaging, and no clear new ways have presented themselves.

There is an inevitability about this. To quote from the thoughtful novel "Seasonal Adjustments" by Adib Khan reflecting on Australia's looming decline: *"History is slow and unfeelingly neutral in dispensing justice. It is not in our power to guide history. If it were, civilisations would never decay. It is history, as a subtle, living force, which taps in on our weaknesses and erodes cultures in a manner which is beyond the grasp of the generation it is humbling."*

Let me get more personal about this. I have been through a long, rich, difficult mid-life crisis. In my early twenties I had dreams of how to live my life and the dreams have served me well. I have achieved much of what I wanted to achieve. Life has been good.

But then, without me noticing really, the same things that used to give me satisfaction no longer do so. More than this, the things that I thought were important no longer are, and I need to find new interests, new certainties, or perhaps an ability to live comfortably with the un-certainty that life is a mysterious event. You might say I have lived a full but fading life in the world of things and structures. And I am awakening into a new world that has been lying dormant for some time - the world of the soul. This is confusing and rich, painful and exciting, destabilising and empowering.

Similarly we, as a culture, find ourselves in a fading world of things and structures that has achieved great things. My great great granddaddy would not recognise our technologies of convenience and immediacy, our politics of universal suffrage, our working conditions, our quality of primary health care and infrastructure and our consequent mortality rates, the lack of hunger and nutrition. Despite important and ongoing concerns with social justice he would be amazed at this world of luxury and ease that we have created.

But, it hasn't really worked for us yet. It hasn't created widespread happiness, or rich lives. It hasn't created a warm feeling of well-being in our hearts. It might be argued, if you liked a good argument, that the quality of our lives have got worse. More tiring, more confusing, more empty than ever. Depression appears to be rising exponentially. And of course it has all been achieved on the back of unacceptable poverty on a global scale. More than that, many analysts are suggesting that we just might be looking down the barrel of environmental and economic collapse.

The old certainties have disappeared. The new certainties have yet to appear. We are in a period of transition. We are in a mid life crisis. We are lost.

But this is not a bad thing. It could be a good thing. It is a good thing if we acknowledge it and do something about it.

### **Managing a crisis**

A crisis is filled, not just with danger, but also with opportunity. My old Universal English Dictionary defines a crisis as

*1. The decisive moment or stage, a) in affairs, life, fate, politics; b) turning point in a disease. Hence, 2. any difficult, dangerous, fateful situation, combination of circumstances.*

Not a disaster, then, but a crisis, a turning point. Difficult, dangerous and fateful, but most of all decisive. It is not a time for panic. It is certainly not a time for despair. The ancient Greeks invented the word crisis with their word *krino* "I separate, decide, judge". So we must face this mid-life crisis that our culture is lost in not with panic or despair, but with separation, decision, judgement.

If we don't pay attention to this crisis we will continue to do hideous things. We will invent more and more obscene advertising and soap operas and meaningless TV. We will continue to build shopping centres where young people are not allowed to sing for fear of security guards. We will continue to insist that locked houses and garages are great places to live, while we sit and gaze at the flickering TV, refusing to hear the gentle moan of 10,000 human spirits dying. We will continue to put our ease of getting to work, or the temperature inside our houses ahead of our great grandchildren's' very lives.

If we, as an individual or as a culture, ignore our mid - life crisis, we will either die, or we will become old and embittered and ugly. If we pay attention to it then we can listen to the confusion and let it teach us wisdom.

So, to sum up, we must admit that we are lost, confused and in crisis.

We must debate vision and focus - the truths in our hearts - rather than wasting our time on the noisy and petty and meaningless debates of immediacy that dominate our lives at the moment. Only from this level of debate will clear ways forward emerge and slowly, haltingly, we will find our way.

Let me illustrate this idea of planning by simple truths, by confessing to mine. Let me propose a single focus - a single overriding goal - for our culture: the development of spirit.

### **Developing Spirit**

This single objective "Developing Spirit" should guide all human endeavour. It should guide our choice of holidays and houses; it should guide our economic and environmental policy. It should guide our political debate and our bureaucratic decision making. It should guide Foreign Affairs and Defence and Health and Community Services. It should guide how we plan seminar sessions, how we manage staff, how we raise children, how we make love.

This objective is not only important in itself. It will also give us the power and the imagination we need to manage the crisis. It is a key to planning in a culture that's lost.

The Universal English Dictionary defines **Spirit** very simply as, "*The life giving principle; the breath of life*". So just as air breathed into and out of our lungs gives us life, so our Spirit, if allowed to flow easily, gives us life.

All of us feel it, when we are feeling a great enthusiasm. All of us feel the lack of it when we are feeling exhausted, apathetic or numb.

It is this Spirit that we must develop. But "Develop" does not mean build or create something new. It means, literally, to "unwrap". As my dictionary puts it: "*to grow, unfold, take shape, become larger and more complex, evolve in natural process*".

A Spirit developed will result in a magnificent life. A spirit choked will result, at best, in a life in front of the Telly; at worst in violence and abuse.

But there are more than personal reasons for developing spirit.

### **A world of choked spirit.**

Despite our culture's quite stunning advances technologically, intellectually, and even ethically we see rising rates of individual, family and community stress and breakdown. We see rising rates of crime and, more importantly, disproportionately increased rates of fear. And we see levels of consumption that are, quite literally, destroying our planet.

The major cause of all these things is the suppression and choking of the human Spirit - the breath of life. A drowning person struggles and fights to stay alive, even lashing out dangerously at his or her rescuer. S/he clutches at anything to try to stay afloat. And when all seems hopeless, when the breath of life is all but exhausted, s/he ceases to care. In exactly the same way, when we are choked of our breath of life - our Spirit - we will fight and struggle, often harming our Self and all the people around us. We will kick at friends, at our families, at strangers. We will grasp at all manner of material things to fill up the space that is choked of "breath" - of Spirit - inside us. Finally, tragically, we may cease to care. Without our Spirit we cannot live a life worth living. And we cannot re-build a culture and a world worth living in.

Our culture is filled with people choked of Spirit. It is the great illness of the West as we approach the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The development of that Spirit, so we can breathe it freely, should be the primary objective of every human endeavour, including every aspect of planning.

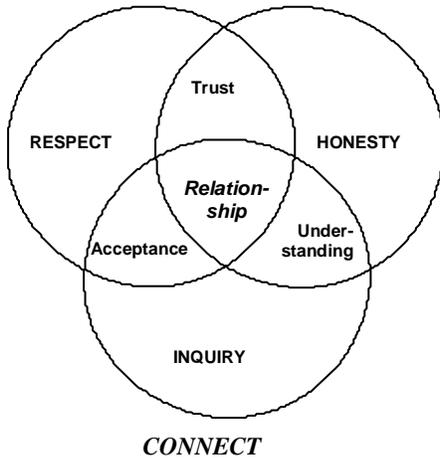
Nothing else matters so much as that single objective, because all other objectives are dependent on it. For people with real Spirit will not lash out, or abuse power, or consume frantically. And they will not be lost in, or seduced by, the strange expectations of a de-railed culture.

### **The pocketbook guide to developing human spirit.**

A lot of wise things have been said about various aspects of developing spirit. I've summarised them, here, into 9 circles which can provide a framework for every aspect of planning. There is much to say about every circle, and not time to say it. So I'll just present them here as a conversation starter.

If we are to build a culture that develops Spirit we must aim at three things. We must build a culture that encourages: 1) development of Spirit in individuals, 2) connection between individuals, and 3) protection of the spirit of individuals.

To foster the growth of individual spirit, we must allow all beings full opportunity for action for experience, and for listening to their own deep wisdom. As the diagram shows, the *combination* of these elements of life give us the benefit of powerful individual 'truths', 'directions' and 'abilities'. A time proven way to bring a culture to its knees through colonisation is to consistently disallow or ridicule or ignore the action, experience or wisdom of that culture and its people. Just ask the Aborigines. (And gasp in admiration at their survival in the face of such systematic disempowerment.)



Our culture, for reasons that are beyond me, is hell bent on a strange kind of "self colonisation"; we strive to colonise the spirit of our own people. We are all perpetrators and victims of this colonisation because we are lost. We follow the action and experience of others because we do not trust our own hearts. We listen to the advice of others because we do not trust our own wisdom. If, instead, we insisted on the development of the human spirit, our own and others, the world would start to move forward in a way that actually works.

But a world full of individuals with strong spirit could be a positively dangerous place if it that spirit was not connected with others. The leaves of a tree, no matter how magnificently they flutter and float, are quite useless if they do not stay connected to the whole, the tree.

Connecting individuals will involve building relationships, building families and communities and societies that understand their own interdependence; that through that understanding act as though they belong to something, rather than acting on others as though from the outside of a cage.

And, as the diagram shows, connecting spirit requires three disciplines: honesty, respect and inquiry (or deep listening). Not one or two but three of these - integrated and in balance. Either one without the others can become a source of abuse or deceit. But integrated and balanced they will, between them, create the benefits of understanding, acceptance and trust. Take any one of the disciplines away and you lose two of the benefits, and you lose relationship. Take any two of the disciplines away and you lose all three gifts. And of course, relationship.

So we must build a culture that insists on the three simple disciplines of connection: Honesty, Inquiry and Respect. These disciplines should be fostered in governments, organisations, communities and individuals. And they should be used to build a culture that insists on justice - the balance between the needs and aspirations of all beings - those alive today and those who inherit the future.

We must build a culture that fully understands all of the parts of our world are dependent on the whole. We simply cannot hope to develop the spirit of our selves ("I"), of others or of Nature unless we keep a clear focus on justice for all three. Individual justice, community and social justice, and environmental justice. To ensure our own well-being, then, we must involve ourselves in both collective and personal action, and we must act with compassion. And of course, to have the energy to do this, our Spirit must be developed.

We must develop, connect and sustain spirit. The first is the task of empowerment, the second is the task of building community, the third is the task of justice. If our culture decided that the meaning of life was development of spirit, our tasks would be clear. We would not be lost. We could plan.

And how would this change our world? I only have time to toy with a few examples. But hopefully they are enough to illustrate that, by setting a clear vision, the planning task becomes more effective.

**Town Planning**

In a culture that focussed on development of spirit we would not place so much energy on designing car-parking and road systems that encourage us to stay locked in our cars. The aim of shopping centre design would not be to make people buy things they don't need (ie "maximise retail return".) We would not focus primarily on lot yield, fencing quality, landscaping covenants.



Rather we would create spaces and places, buildings and services, processes and ideas that develop the spirit of people. We would design shops as public domain; streetscapes that maximise both interaction and privacy, rather than just privacy; community involvement, street level decision making (even if it means conflict!) parks that have both danger and adventure for children.

Let me be clear; planners are responding at the moment to the demands of people. For safety, for silence and escape, for avoidance and conformity. This is what a culture of fading spirit is asking for. I am not suggesting that planners are lost. I'm suggesting our whole culture is lost.

#### **Educational planning**

In a culture that focussed on development of Spirit, education would not be about developing people for industry and government. It would not be about making people into something they are not. It would be about developing the spirit of people, allowing them to become their full selves. It would provide opportunities for a great deal of action and experience, allowing them the power of choice. It would allow them to express their wisdom and listen to the wisdom of others. Thus they would start to develop real truth, to begin to focus on their own missions in life, to come to understand their own abilities, to develop real spirit.

We would understand the power of Winston Churchill's remark "I love to learn; I hate being taught."

#### **Corporate Planning**

Corporate Planning would no longer focus on building a lean, efficient hardworking organisation, but about how to develop the collective and individual spirit of people, thereby, as a spin-off, improving productivity. We would build connections with our staff through honesty, respect and inquiry (participation). We would develop an environment that enhances their ability to be powerfully themselves, working together within the diversity and unity of their (workplace) community, rather than mere cogs in a misguided machine.

#### **Cultural Planning**

Cultural planning has huge potential in the development of the human spirit. It can focus people in an integrated way, on "me", others and environment. It can build experiences and opportunities for people, and can give an outlet for their wisdom, their dreams and values and abilities. But if it becomes lost in, say, the tourist dollar rather than the human spirit, it could fall into a trap of trying to categorise something as rich and confusing and sacred as individual and collective culture into understandable chunks. This could do more damage than good.

#### **Economic Planning**

It goes without saying that economic planning would become far more focussed on people, as individuals and communities, and the environments that support them, rather than on an increasingly meaningless array of incomprehensible indicators.

#### **Integrated local area planning**

This process (which, of course, incorporates all of the above) would be far simpler, because a single objective would allow meaningful dialogue between a wide range of disciplines, be they social, physical, environmental or economic.

#### **Conclusion**

To sum up then; we must confess to being lost; lost in a mid life crisis that is filled with opportunities. To find our way we must all strive to express the truths deep in our hearts. To do this our spirit must be developed, 'unwrapped'. So the first and most central planning question for every discipline must be: "how can we contribute to the development of the human spirit?"