



# The Moral Bankruptcies of our Civilisation

*Ben Okri*

*In this powerful piece, Ben Okri calls for a fundamental re-examination of our values.*

**T**HE CRISIS AFFECTING our economy is a crisis of our civilisation. The values that we hold dear are the very same that got us to this point. The meltdown in the economy is a harsh metaphor of the meltdown of some of our value systems. For decades poets and artists have been crying in the wilderness about the wasteland, the debacle, the apocalypse. But apparent economic triumph has deafened us to these warnings. Now it is necessary to look at this crisis as a symptom of things gone wrong in our culture.

Individualism has been raised almost to a religion, appearance made more important than substance. Success justifies greed, and greed justifies indifference to fellow human beings. We thought that our actions affected only our own sphere, but the way that appalling decisions made in America have set off a domino effect makes it necessary to bring new ideas to the forefront of our civilisation. The most important is that we are more connected than we suspected. A visible and invisible mesh links economies and cultures around the globe to the great military and economic centres.

The only hope lies in a fundamental re-examination of the values that we have lived by in the past 30 years. It wouldn't do just to improve the banking system — we need to redesign the whole edifice.

There ought to be great cries in the land, great anger. But there is a strange silence. Why? Because we are all implicated. We have drifted to this dark unacceptable place together. We took the success of our economy as proof of the rightness of its underlying philosophy. We are now at a crossroad. Our future depends not on whether we get through this, but on how deeply and truthfully we examine its causes.... What we need now more than ever is a vision beyond the event, a vision of renewal.

## Lack of Vision

As one looks over the landscape of contemporary events, one thing becomes very striking. The people to whom we have delegated decision-making in economic matters cannot be unaware of the consequences. Those whose decisions have led to the economic collapse reveal to us how profoundly lacking in vision they were. This is not surprising. These were never people of vision. They are capable of making decisions in the economic sphere, but how these decisions relate to the wider world was never part of their mental make-up. This is a great flaw of our world.

To whom do we turn for guidance in our modern world? Teachers have had their scope limited by the prevailing fashions of education. Artists have become more appreciated for scandal than for important revelations about our lives. Writers are entertainers, provocateurs or, if truly serious — more or less ignored. The Church speaks

with a broken voice. Politicians are more guided by polls than by vision. We have disembowelled our oracles. Anybody who claims to have something to say is immediately suspect.

So now that we have taken a blowtorch to the idea of sages, guides, bards, holy fools, seers, what is left in our cultural landscape? Scientific rationality has proved inadequate to the unpredictabilities of the times... This is where we step out into a new space. What is most missing in the landscape of our times is the sustaining power of myths that we can live by.

## A New Orientation

If we need a new vision for our times, what might it be? A vision that arises from necessity or one that orientates us towards a new future? I favour the latter. It is too late to react only from necessity. One of our much neglected qualities is our creative ability to reshape our world. Our planet is under threat. We need a new one-planet thinking.

We must bring back into society a deeper sense of the purpose of living. The unhappiness in so many lives ought to tell us that success alone is not enough. Material success has brought us to a strange spiritual and moral bankruptcy. If we look at alcoholism rates, suicide rates and our sensation addiction, we must conclude that this banishment of higher things from the garden has not been a success. The more the society has succeeded, the more its heart has failed.

Everywhere parents are puzzled as to what to do with their children. Everywhere the children are puzzled as to what to do with themselves. The question everywhere is — you get your success and then what? We need a new social consciousness. The poor and the hungry need to be the focus of our economic and social responsibility.

Every society has a legend about a treasure that is lost. The message of the Fisher King is as true now as ever. Find the grail that was lost. Find the values that were so crucial to the birth of our civilisation, but were lost in the intoxication of its triumphs. We can enter a new future only by reconnecting what is best in us, and adapting it to our times. Education ought to be more global; we need to restore the pre-eminence of character over show, and wisdom over cleverness. We need to be more a people of the world.

All great cultures renew themselves by accepting the challenges of their times, and like the biblical David, forge their vision and courage in the secret laboratory of the wild, wrestling with their demons, and perfecting their character. We must transform ourselves or perish.

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