



# Restoring Harmony and Connection: Inner and Outer

*A speech by HRH The Prince of Wales at the Foreign Press Association Media Awards, Sheraton Park Lane Hotel, London, 25th November 2008*

*In this profound analysis, The Prince of Wales, like Ben Okri, takes a deeper look at our current predicament by framing it in terms of a crisis in world view in which we are disconnected from Nature as well as from our inner selves. He advocates a participatory approach in which we value intuition along with rationality, working in harmony with Nature as well as rediscovering our spiritual roots.*

**G**OOD EVENING Ladies and Gentlemen. I would like to thank the Foreign Press Association for inviting me to speak at your awards tonight. The FPA is twice as old as I am and doubtless is in far better shape after celebrating its 120th anniversary than I am after my 60th!

Throughout those 60 years I have become accustomed to journalists accusing me of occupying a privileged position – the privilege to be abused, if you ask me. If I may say so, you also, ladies and gentlemen, occupy a privileged position. It is surely your role not only to look at the world and study the way it works, but to report what you see accurately, to explain it and, indeed, to interpret it. In so doing you shape the view and define the perspective of millions of people and that is an enormous responsibility – a responsibility I know that many of you in this room fulfil with integrity and flair.

I imagine the responsibility you bear compels you from time to time to step back and take stock of your perspective. After all, our view can so easily become obscured by the cultural values that surround us all and if our view is not wide enough - or deep enough - then our perspective cannot be sure.

## A Crisis of World-View

In fact, there is mounting evidence that our collective perspective is not at all as sure as we once thought it was. Wherever you look the arguments that justify what we call 'progress' are finding it harder and harder to hide the less than glamorous side-effects of all we have achieved. The present crisis in the financial world, known to us all as the 'Credit Crunch', is but one recent graphic example; the environmental crisis that confronts us and is, in fact, a 'Climate Crunch', is another. I wonder, though, whether these crises would have flared so alarmingly had our perspective been somewhat wider when the decisions that have caused the troubles we now face were originally taken?

Also, we live in an age when technological ease has become so much a part of the accustomed way of life that it seems 'natural' to some, and even their right. But what does our comprehensive dependence upon such technology do to our connection with Nature and its patterns? Is it possible that it has loosened our inner moorings and shifted our orientation onto something extraneous to us? Does our increasing dependence upon technology begin to make us

believe that we, too, and the world about us, are merely part of some enormous mechanical process?

These are questions that have concerned me for many years, and in considering them I have attempted in various ways to highlight what I see as the limited perspective that supports them. Why? Because there is now a worrying imbalance in the way we are persuaded to see the world. Our perception of Nature, in particular, has become dangerously limited.

Needless to say, when I have spoken of these things I have been shot at from all sides – the natural consequence, I suppose, of having the temerity to challenge the status quo of scientific Modernist rationalism. But undeterred by the barrage of high calibre invective, I would like to explain what lies at the heart of my concern and why I have expended so much of my energy trying to rectify the problem in the areas where it has manifested itself most virulently. I want to do this because the way you see the world, Ladies and Gentlemen - the way you understand why things are the way they are – is, I would suggest, vital to the future of this threatened planet.

## Pressures to Consume

It was a question from a newspaper correspondent back in the 1930s that drew from Mahatma Gandhi one of his pithiest responses. During his visit to Britain he was asked what he thought of Western Civilisation, to which he replied, 'it would be a very good idea.'

Gandhi realised that Humanity has a natural tendency to consume and that if there are no limits on that tendency we can become obsessed simply with satisfying our desires. The desire grows ever more potent as we consume ever more, even though we achieve very little of the actual satisfaction we desire. Is this not so in the Western world today? Despite such high levels of consumption, we hear so many people admitting to feeling deeply dissatisfied. Studies now show this to be the case too. A report by the Children's Society in this country concluded earlier this year that the pressure on children, particularly those from poorer backgrounds, to have the latest designer clothes and computer games is resulting in more and more of them falling into depression. Which reminds me of that wise observation about Gross National Product made by Robert

Kennedy forty years ago, that it 'measures everything except that which makes life worthwhile.'

One of the downsides of consumerism, it seems to me, is that it forces us to compromise on issues that should not be compromised. I'm sure there are many people who know that it is wrong to plunder the Earth's treasures as recklessly as we do, but the comprehensive world view which we now inhabit persuades us that such destruction is justified because of the freedom it brings us, not to say the profits. In other words, our tendency to consume is legitimised by a view of the world that puts Humanity at the centre of things, operating with an absolute right over Nature. And that makes it a very dangerous world view indeed.

It is an approach which accepts as the norm a one-sided, entirely 'linear' form of progress and an extremely literalised view of the world. For some reason we have been persuaded that what we see is all we get. It is a view encouraged, I am afraid, by some of the Media, and it concentrates only on the outward parts of creation. It does not look to the whole - so much so that we happily de-construct the world around us, dismissing as unreal anything that cannot be objectively measured and tested. It is, if you like, a world of only visible quantities.

### **An Approach Fit for Purpose?**

The question I would ask you to ponder this evening, then, is whether this predominantly rational, technologically driven and secularist approach to life is actually 'fit for purpose' in the twenty-first century?

It is an approach which has been adopted in such a wholesale fashion that I feel many do not even realise that we have lost something very precious - what I might best describe as that intuitive sense of our interconnectedness with Nature - which includes the realm beyond the material.

The movement responsible, in my view, for the imbalance rose to dominance at the start of the 20th Century. As you will know it is often called 'Modernism'. Now, this movement must not be confused with the great social, economic and political advances of the earlier 'modern' age, the many benefits of which endure to this day.

No, the 'Modern-ism' I refer to offered us an unrelenting emphasis upon a material and mechanistic view of the world. To quote from the Victoria and Albert Museum's foreword to its recent exhibition on Modernism, 'Modernists had a Utopian desire to create a better world. They believed in technology as the key means to achieve social improvement and in the machine as a symbol of that aspiration.' Generally speaking, we can say that it focussed its attention upon the parts and not the whole - to the point of deconstructing the world around us - and dismissed as unreal anything that could not be objectively measured and tested.

As I said earlier, this approach has, of course, brought us obvious benefits. But I would argue, however, there have also been costs to this 'instrumental' relationship with the world which, as we are finding out, are increasingly painful and destructive.

By the arrival of Modernism the West had been held in the sway of a mechanical way of thinking for over two hundred years. An approach set in train by the likes of Descartes with his concept of Man as Machine. The collective view of things had also been shaped by two centuries of what has now become the comprehensive industrialisation of life with its linear process of inputs and outputs and with urban perspectives taking precedence over traditional, rural ones. Thus the ground was laid for the arrival of those straight, efficient lines of Modernism with the aim of simplifying and

standardising the world, making things as efficient and as convenient as possible.

This is why, for example, the curved streets of towns became straight matrices and why we have so many buildings grouped into single-use zones, including those for living - most noxious of all, those high rise blocks of flats which, throughout the 1960s and 70s, became the living quarters - indeed ghettos - for thousands of people in every city across Europe and the United States.

### **Architecture and Community**

Removed from their communities, people were accommodated in these brand new, convenient, concrete cul-de-sacs in the sky, and lo and behold, when their newness quickly faded those areas all decayed into violent and soul-destroying ghettos with no sense of place, nor any capacity to nurture community. And guess what is happening now in the new cities springing up in China and India? As they doggedly follow the Western pattern of forty years ago people are, once again, compelled by forces beyond their control to leave their farms and their communities to seek housing where they end up living like factory-farmed chickens in those self same, high-rise, soulless, mechanical boxes. Thus are millions more people condemned to the same toxic future.

The reason I have been so exercised about such architecture and such urban design is that the imposition of that simplistic and empty geometry drastically reduces the richness of a complexity that is actually more crucial to health than many seem to realise. Unfortunately, those who drove this 20th century ideology did not seem to understand (or perhaps they simply ignored) what today's intricate studies of biology and microbiology declare loud and clear - that complexity is actually key to life. The diversity that made up this complexity was bulldozed away in the pursuit of simplicity, of increasing uniform monoculturalism and, above all else, convenience, creating an instant appeal that continues to fuel the conspicuous consumption and throwaway societies we now see everywhere. Just what Gandhi most feared and predicted...

### **A Crisis in Perception**

The question is, how has this come to be? I would suggest it is the net result of two important seismic shifts in our perception.

First, Modernism fuelled a fundamental disconnection from Nature - from the organic order of things that Nature discloses; from the structure and cyclical process of Nature and from its laws which impose those natural limits Gandhi was at such pains for us to recognise.

As a result, our perception of what we are and where we fit within the scheme of things is fractured. This is why I consider our problems today not to be an environmental crisis per se... nor a financial crisis. They all stem from this fundamental crisis in our perception. By positioning ourselves outside Nature and believing ourselves to be free without limit to manipulate and control her constituent parts, imagining somehow that the whole will not suffer and can take care of itself whatever we do to its separate parts, we have abstracted life altogether to the extent that our urbanised mentality is now out of tune with the key principles under-pinning the health of any economy and of all life on Earth. And those principles make up what is known as 'Harmony'.

Biology now shows us that in all living things there is a natural tendency towards Harmony. Organisms self-organise

themselves into an order which is remarkably similar at every level of scale, from the molecules in your little finger to those vast eco-systems like the all-important equatorial rainforests. Life seeks and finds balance. This means there is an over-riding coherence to the complexity of life on Earth, at every level of scale - to the extent that we should really see every organism as a complex system of interrelated and interdependent parts. They work together in a coherent way to produce a harmonic whole. And when it is in balance, when there is harmony, the organism is healthy.

But we do not think we need this in our farming, nor in the streets where we live, nor in the way we treat our own health and our immune systems. And so, whether it is the microbe, the ecosystem or the entire environment upon which we all so profoundly depend, the living organism suffers 'dis-ease'. It gets sick.

This is why, for what it is worth, I have been so concerned and outspoken about the way in which industrialised agriculture sees Nature simply as a mechanical process, as if it is supposedly ever capable of producing yet more at no long term cost. When you consider that in one pinch of soil there are more microbes than there are people on the planet you have to ask what irreversible damage do we do to the delicate, complex balance of such a fragile ecosystem as the six inches of top soil that sustains all life on Earth when we subject it to chemicals that are so much part and parcel of the agri-industries of today? The soil's health is our health. And yet we have eroded it and poisoned it and failed to replace lost nutrients to such a degree that a recent worldwide survey for the UN found that in just fifty years we

have lost a third of the world's farmable soil. That is hardly a sustainable rate of exploitation. We have done so because we have either ignored or simply forgotten how profoundly 'health' depends upon organisms operating in harmony with their surroundings and within the cyclical rhythms of Nature. This is neither a debating point nor a coincidence. It is a fundamental law of Nature. All organisms depend upon a state of harmony to be healthy.

But this is only half of the story. And I don't want to end without making a brief mention of the other, and in my view, deeply worrying aspect of our separation from what Nature discloses.

### Spiritual Roots

Implicit in the ideology of 'Modernism' was the notion that we could somehow disconnect ourselves not just from an outward contact with Nature, but from our inner nature too; from the accumulated wisdom of the ages. Thus spiritual practice is nowadays denigrated by many. It is seen to be nothing more than outdated superstition. But, being lovers of words, I am sure you will be as intrigued as I am that 'super-stition' actually means something much more profound if you see it as two words. They point to a heightened sense of something within. But what? Could it be that animating source of the harmony inherent in all life? Could it be that intuitive element in our human constitution; that 'sixth sense', perhaps?

It is interesting that the physicist Werner Heisenberg, who gave his name to the Uncertainty Principle in quantum physics, would tell his students not to see the world as being



Kinabatangan river in Sabah, Borneo  
by Olly Robinson

made of matter. It was, he said, made of music. He recognised what Pythagoras knew well, that chaos is ordered by number and that Nature is made up of precise numerical patterns. They express diverse movement, but always within the defining boundaries of Unity.

Is it not worth recalling that every one of the great civilisations right back to ancient times understood this patterning? They depicted what might be called the 'grammar of harmony' in their mythology and through the symbolism that adorns much of their art and architecture. That is because these patterns reflect symbolically the nature of the unseen realm. Such patterns, so familiar to us in every sacred building from the ancient Hindu temples of India to the great Gothic cathedrals of these islands, were seen as key to understanding the subtle structure of awareness, which is the ultimate sacred wonder. Our nature mirrors that sacred wonder. Now, is this superstition or, once again, to do with the fundamental laws of Nature?

In cutting ourselves off from Nature we cut ourselves off, more and more, from what we are; from our inner selves, and from what that in-born tutor, our intuition, offers us.

By this stage in the proceedings you may well be asking what on earth I am trying to get at. You may believe that I have some curious and reactionary obsession with returning to a kind of mock Medieval, forelock-tugging past. In fact all I am saying is that we simply cannot contend with the global environmental crises we face by relying on clever technological 'fixes' on their own. It is, as the conservationist Aldo Leopold has put it, like fixing the pump without fixing the well. We have to alter our perspective of the world and to begin to realise that Modernism on its own is in fact unfit for purpose in the twenty-first century.

The lessons are all around us. When I went to see the appalling devastation of the Tsunami in Sri Lanka I was fascinated – but not surprised – to learn of how the tribal peoples of the tiny Andaman and Nicobar Islands survived. They live in the middle of the Bay of Bengal, 800 miles east of Sri Lanka and 340 miles to the north of Sumatra. They were closest to the epicentre of the earthquake and yet, despite the islands bearing the brunt of the devastation, nearly all their people were saved. And how? By using their instinctive powers of participation. Coastal tribes like the Onge and Jarawa on South and Little Andaman noticed subtle changes in the behaviour of birds and fish. These warning signs are woven explicitly into their folklore – passed down from one generation to another – and so they responded immediately to these warnings.

### Participation and Harmony

Such people, Ladies and Gentlemen, do not observe the world from the outside. They consider themselves to be participants in it; they define life on Earth as 'sacred presence' and they do something if they sense that the balance of things is beginning to fragment. So maybe there are lessons for us here: firstly, that to ignore all the God-

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given senses, save the rational, may be the quickest way for mankind to head for extinction; and, secondly, that we, too, should consider where our modern day 'folklore' is leading us.

So, what I am suggesting then is a regaining of an active appreciation of the harmony inherent in all life. And that means, shifting our perception; taking a step back and seeing that we are not separate from Nature - we are immersed in it completely, as a fish is in water. But we can only do that by restoring to the mainstream the essence of the lost spiritual dimension. Simply because the real treasure in life lies in our hearts. And yet all Modernist approaches to education educate it out. It is time to restore that sense of the sacred to its rightful place before it really is too late.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have tried to suggest that the denial of our real relationship with the universal truths through a deep connection with Nature and her laws has engendered a dangerous alienation. In denying or forgetting the invisible 'grammar of harmony' we create cacophony and dissonance. So if we hope to restore the balance, we need to reintegrate in a contemporary way the best parts of this abandoned and ancient understanding of Harmony with the best of modern technology and science, not least by developing the kinds of innovative and more benign forms of technology that work WITH the grain of Nature rather than against it.

You may say that this is impossible, but it seems to me that a good start would be to take that long, hard look at ourselves and, as I suggested, to question very seriously whether the dominant attitude of our day is fit for purpose; whether it really enables us to see things as they truly are. Then, but only then, we may begin to head in the right direction, towards a much more participative, integrated way of living; one that places greater value on coherence and the limits of Nature. And, essentially, sees the world the right way round.

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