

Contribution to the JRF debate on social evils of the 21st century.

I applaud the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for embarking on this debate that takes us out of the narrower framework of social science into a wider questioning about how we are as a society. And what better place to do that than at the RSA, which reaches across the too wide gulf between the disciplines of the Arts and the Social Sciences?

I was taken with Julia Unwin's suggestions for today's evils; and struck by the resonance with the seven deadly sins - avarice/greed, apathy, gluttony, even lust. I was interested not simply because I am of Highland Presbyterian stock (like the Prime Minister) and can easily be seduced into thinking about sin. And we seem to have resurrected sin. Our everyday discourse has become increasingly moralistic and prescriptive about human behaviour and increasingly determined - possibly neurotic - about developing more forensic ways to police ourselves, down now to every child having their details on a database which over 330,000 practitioners have access to it and having children fingerprinted in schools without their parents' consent to make sure library books are not stolen. And it is children and young people I have in mind in what I say this evening.

It is no accident, if ironic, that this pre-occupation with managing human behaviour is happening at the same time as we feel more insecure, more despairing, about our capacity to manage our world and to make it manageable. And that is the crux of my argument. I want to suggest that among the evils we are facing as a society are states of mind that operate at the individual and the collective level, particularly that fear and despair are evils that blight individual lives, blunt our desires and aspirations, limit social and community relations, distort our perceptions of each other, of our culture and of our society. These distortions affect our relationships with each other, our understandings of each other and of society and its discontents, and our ideas about what needs to be done to promote wellbeing.

What William Blake called the 'mind-forg'd manacles' in his wonderful poem London that still resonates today.

We have become interested in states of mind. We see happiness and wellbeing as the quite proper focus of Government. A hundred years ago there was panic because malnutrition among the poor meant we could not recruit soldiers for the Boer war; now a different kind of malnutrition is imagined - a malnutrition of the spirit perhaps. We worry intensely about our children and young people. The story we tell ourselves, and them, about them is one of fear and despair.

Julia Unwin mentioned the dangers of nostalgia as the longing for a fantasy past that did not exist and looking at the past through rose tinted - maybe blue-rinsed in my case - spectacles. And we do need to guard against that seduction, as we get older perhaps especially. There are other forms of nostalgia - a longing for an actual better past; and a critical nostalgia, questioning past settlements rather than being beguiled by them. The past may be another country but that does not make it territory we should not visit to find out about ourselves - to find the 'pastness' of the past and its presence. Much of what Rowntree worried about 100 years ago we are still concerned about now. So with a family memory of deep poverty, I can't think that affluence in itself is a social evil. It is what goes on in our individual and collective heads that makes a boon a threat.

We seem to live in a confusing morass of fear about things we feel we cannot control. When a four-year-old going on holiday says to her parents 'Don't let anyone take me', we know that fear of abduction has reached very deep. We don't say 'go out to play' any more. We end up living as 'fortress' families, risk averse in ways that would have perplexed our parents' generation. Fear has made adults give up on being in charge of the streets. Fear has made us hate. It has reduced our capacity for tolerance.

The big picture is more chilling - a pervasive, apocalyptic fear of the future. The end-of-the-world visions of mystics and horror movies have turned into our future. We hear about an all but inescapable path to human destruction. Global forces outwith human reach - global markets, global warming, global ideologies and their terror counterparts - are making our world for us our bleak future. This breeds despair. Not a lot to look forward to, then. Eat drink and be merry. It is not surprising that we go for easy, mind-numbing relief of the bread and circuses variety with reality tv as the modern counterpart of the arena bloodsports and bullying delivering the emotional charge.

Despair is a corrosive. The mental health problems among young people, the suicidal young men and anorexic young women, casualties of impossible dreams for bodies or masculinities unattainable to almost everyone; new levels of depression and of casual violence. No more jobs for life; drugs and alcohol in the streets; young people more likely to be involved in risky behaviours than young people elsewhere - all these, I suggest, emerge from despair.

The stories we tell ourselves about ourselves are important - power is the ability to define reality and have others accept it as theirs. If we keep telling ourselves about how bad everything is, we begin to believe it, bringing about what we want to avoid. I hesitate to open the Sunday newspapers - knowing I will find a stream of articles about things I shouldn't eat, shouldn't do, that yet another aspect of my parenting is deeply flawed, that I haven't adequately protected my children or myself from the threats of modernity. In my wee free background, hell was a constant concern for after life, now hell seems to be here. As researchers, helpers, thinkers, we need to ask ourselves how complicit we are in promoting the high impact killer findings that media and marketing require, but that distort the picture.

Despair is debilitating. It colours perception. 'The UK is the worst place in the world to bring up children,' said a charity spokesperson on the Today programme a few weeks ago. She would not have meant to say that, but I thought it revealing of how we think: UK children offered a debased childhood; families in dire straights; UK communities hopelessly divided. The curtain has been raised on family interiors. The tone of comment is generally negative: about the 'wrong kinds of family' or selfish mothers who 'want it all', feral children making people's lives a misery in school and on the streets, and fathers either denied their rights by malevolent mothers or 'deadbeat' fathers who take no responsibility - always exaggeration. The picture we paint of our society then is miserable and profoundly inaccurate. Would that the BBC examining of media conscience might reach into the way news is hyped. But the media is like the weather - even out of its own control. Most UK children and families are doing fine - but some really important people are not. In thinking about social evils, we must try to be measured and reasoned and look at the practical matters we can do something about so we don't tilt at windmills instead of the real enemies.

I suppose I am in danger of seeming to say we have nothing to fear but fear itself and nothing to despair of but despair. I do think we have things to fear but if we reify fear, we leave ourselves with little to hope for and a prey to the very things we want to protect ourselves from. I suppose I am with the Greek saint who said - 'keep thy mind in hell and despair not'.

Mary Macleod
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Doubting Castle and Giant Despair

I wander thro' each charter'd street
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow,
And mark in every face I meet,
Marks of weakness, Marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man
In every Infants' cry of fear,
In every voice, in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear.

How the chimney-sweeper's cry
Every black'ning Church appals,
And the hapless soldier's sigh
Runs in blood down Palace walls.

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlot's curse
Blasts the new born Infants' tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.