

From the Kitchen

13 April 2011



How do we negotiate the path between sanity and insanity, between right and wrong, between good and not-good, between the empowering and the disempowering?

There are instincts and drives with which we are born that may lead us along this path, but these are designed for survival and survival is not automatically on one side of the path or the other – it can push us to either side according to the current circumstances. At its most basic, survival is about living long enough in a healthy enough state to allow us to procreate and ensure the survival of our offspring. Outside this imperative, our instincts and drives know nothing of the dichotomies we can choose between – we choose what we think will work best for us.

Then, as we grow and develop, we learn strategies that allow us to live lives that take us beyond simple survival, because we are also designed to feel pleasure and pain and we learn to negotiate to maximise the pleasure and minimise the pain. Unfortunately, there are aspects of the ever-more-complex societies in which we live that cloud the possible simplicity of these two experiences. We can be confused into believing that something is bringing pleasure when it is not, and that the pain we experience is necessary or, at least, to be accepted. Thus, many of us live contorted lives.

I see as insane a society that allows certain of its members to exploit others in the pursuit of goals, the achievement of which does not serve the society as a whole but only the exploiting individuals or groups. I also consider insane a society which chooses a government that is unwilling or incapable of implementing programs and strategies that are of overall benefit to that society.

Human intelligence is questionable if intelligence is defined as the ability to observe what is happening, interpret those happenings, plan in relation to them and respond to them, learn from experience and make predictions of likely future happenings from all this. Human society is not sane if sanity is defined as the ability to respond to events and circumstances in such a way that we are most likely to survive.

David Wechsler defined intelligence, in part, as “the aggregate or global capacity of the individual to act purposefully, to think rationally, and to deal effectively with his environment”.¹ Robert Sternberg & William Salter defined it as “goal-directed adaptive behaviour”.² On the basis of both these definitions, humans fall dangerously short. We are failing to respond in any meaningful way to what is happening around us. Whether we believe changes to be the result of our activities or not, we need to “deal effectively” with these changes. Not doing so is akin to standing next to a burning building and arguing over the cause of the fire and speculating how much damage it might do instead of putting it out. To extend the metaphor, would a group of people stand around doing nothing at the burning building if the fire brigade refused to come, or would they take action to put the fire out?

In some respects we are like a frog in a saucepan of water over a low flame. The frog swims around, oblivious to the rising temperature until it is too late and it is boiled alive.³

There are institutions in our society that have been established to teach us ways of navigating the path through life and to teach us how to learn from our experiences along the way. Tragically, few, if any, of these institutions deliver to us as intended. With few exceptions, religious institutions of all beliefs tend to be more interested in indoctrination of dogma than teaching individuals how to enjoy a spiritual life. Schools tend increasingly to impart information instead of educating – a process of progressively leading students through experiences that allow them to learn and show them how to learn and how to learn to think. Universities have developed into businesses and have moved away from being centres of pure learning and pure research; the majority of their students are interested predominantly in employment after their courses rather than the courses themselves; staff are discouraged from open academic discussion and debate and the free sharing of ideas.

And our other institutions? Our laws are becoming ever more restrictive of those very freedoms they are touted as protecting. Hospitals are using ever more expensive equipment and complex technology and moving away from being places of healing; conception, birthing and dying are becoming more medicalised year by year and the humanity is being taken out of them. And that most important of institutions, the family, is becoming increasingly problematic for an increasing number of people.

Can we mend these institutions? If we can, how do we go about it? Should we even try to mend them or is it time to invent new ones? Perhaps we are in the process of reinventing but lack the knowledge and wisdom that is required to have the result be something that serves us rather than end up as our master. One institution that would help with all the rest is what viable societies have always had – respected Elders.

1. *The Measurement of Adult Intelligence*, Williams & Wilkins, Baltimore, 1944 ([free download available on-line](#))
2. *Handbook of Human Intelligence*, Cambridge University Press, 1982 ([see it at Google Books](#))
3. Not my original idea – see for instance http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boiling_frog. Many other references on the Internet.