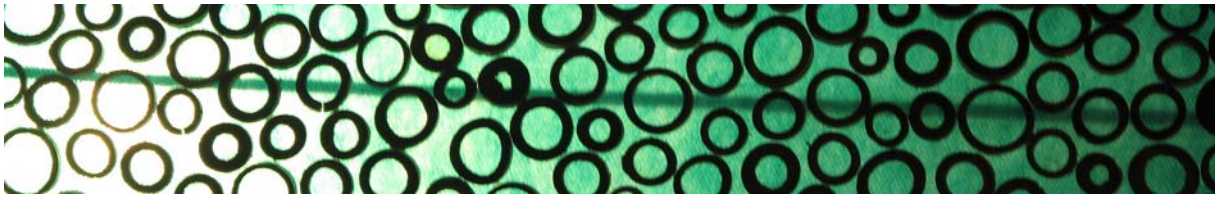


From the Kitchen

1 June 2011



It is easy to imagine that we are self-sufficient in our adult lives, making our choices independently of others and believing that we don't need anyone else for our survival. However, very few people actually *are* self-sufficient.

Almost everything we do and enjoy in our modern lives is dependent on what others do: the work they do and the services they provide. This was also true in societies centuries ago; a local village and its surrounding farms may have been self-sufficient in food and many everyday items, but was probably still dependent for some of what it needed on people in other parts of the country.

Homo sapiens is a social species, with its need for co-operation and social interaction seemingly programmed into it. We can punish people by ostracising them, exiling them, banishing them. These are all words indicating the removal of a person from their group, their family or their society. It is a rare person who can happily live a solitary life.

In a few horrible cases where children have been kept in a cellar or a cupboard for years, they are often unable, later, to form relationships or live effectively in the community. When individuals' behaviour leads us to effectively take them out of society and hold them in institutions, they quickly learn to fit into their new community or, if they don't, they suffer the unhappiness of an outsider.

If all of the above is true, why do we act as if the individual is so important? If the individual *is* important, how is that balanced against the need to preserve the cohesiveness and welfare of the entire society? Can the society be structured so that the needs of all individuals are met?

One way of looking at this is to see society as an organism and the individual people as the cells of the organism; institutions, government departments, etc., would be equivalent to organs. In this model, individuals are not important *per se*. However, the majority of them need to be healthy for the whole to be healthy. It is, therefore, in the interest of the entire organism to keep all its cells in excellent health.

The model can only be taken so far. In a living body the welfare of any individual cell seems unimportant and sick cells are disposed of; in a modern society this would not be tolerated, although we do something else that bodies do: we 'encapsulate' individuals who pose a threat to the whole – in jails and other institutions. Instead of killing off sick individuals, we try to heal them, to make them well again. We may also quarantine individuals who could make others sick.

A major difference between a living body and a society is that in a body the individual cells exist for the good of the entire body, whereas in a society, it can be argued, the larger whole exists to serve the individual. Societies *have* existed, and many still exist, where the individual is thought to have a responsibility to put 'self' aside for the good of the whole.

This is also the case in times of war, when a whole society is threatened and its survival can depend on individual sacrifices.

When we look beyond societies at the entire human species and beyond that to the entire biosphere, the likes and dislikes of any individual may become entirely irrelevant. Going back to the metaphor of the organism, commercial enterprises or whole industries, even entire societies, can become cancerous growths that threaten the whole. As with cancers in a body, there are various ways of attempting a return to health, including a change of diet and lifestyle, surgery, chemical attack or 'burning' (with radiation). Similarly, an industry that is threatening the survival of the human and other species may need to be assisted to change to more widely beneficial activities, or be expunged.

The idea of a change of diet or lifestyle is quite apt in this regard. We, the society, can take on an attitude of distancing ourselves from the tumour, even be angry with it or ignore it; on the other hand we can stop supporting it by changing the way we live and the things we buy. If enough people do this, the unwanted enterprise or industry will cease to exist, or it can change what *it* does so that it is no longer a threat.

A cancer in a body is selfish; it grabs resources needed by the rest of the body and is only interested in its own growth and survival, even if this kills the body (and, of course, at the same time kills the cancer itself). The cancer can be starved of its resources if the right choices are made.

For individuals this requires vision and determination and, in the case of a society, the human species or the biosphere, it requires leadership with vision and determination. The compromises, half-hearted efforts and back-tracking we witness in the wider sphere is akin to the individual with cancer not wanting to make any sacrifices or life-changes and expecting to survive. Most such individuals don't.