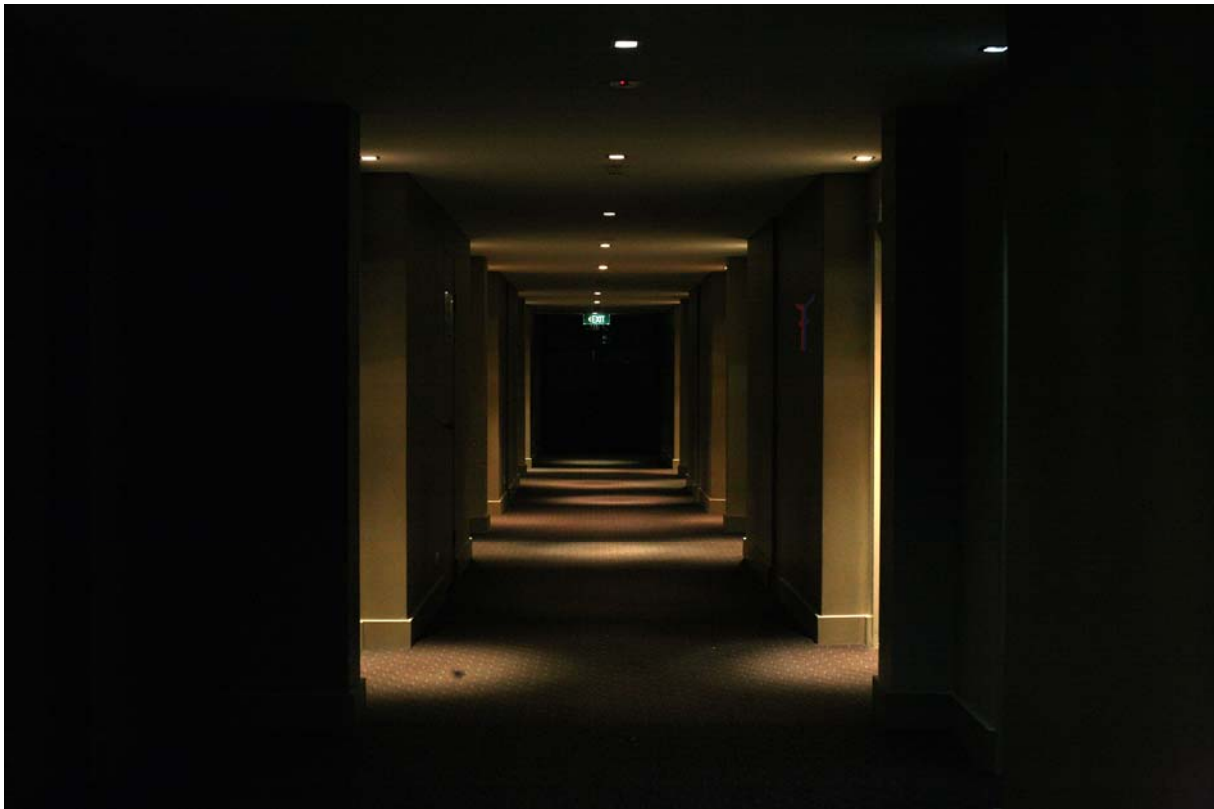


6 August 2016

Uncharted Waters



I have read the *Magna Carta* (well, a translation), and the *Bible* (ditto) and parts of the *Quran* (again, ditto) and, likewise, translations of numerous other texts: the *Baghavat Gita*, the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Book of the Dead* and *The Divine Pymander*. Interesting reading. Inspirational. Thought-provoking.

So what?

I have also read, in their original language, the *Australian Constitution*, the *Crimes Act* and ... I could go on.

So what?

How do any of these collections of words, expressions of belief, exhortations to live the 'right' life help me live in an ethical way in a just society?

To a large extent, I can control my own behaviour to have it be, what I believe, ethical. If everyone else lived equally, close-to-ethical lives, we would probably manage a just society. But there, as another famous author put it, is the rub. Despite all those wonderful, inspirational works, our society seems to be moving further and with growing momentum away from what I consider to be just.

Fashions come and go and return. However, I have never considered as fashion such concepts as truth, integrity, ethical behaviour and honesty. They sound old-fashioned and perhaps even cute. They hark back to a time when a 'binding' agreement could be entered into with a handshake, when "my word is my bond" meant something. These ideas seemed to form the foundations of the society I grew up in. When they were breached, there was a

corresponding reaction and correction. They were the weight in the keel that provided stability to the ship of state.

What, if anything, provides that stability now? I ask this, because the ship is listing dangerously.

Those we elected to represent us in the legislature and the executive have always had vested interests – both expressed and covert. They have also been guided by ideologies and strong beliefs. And mostly they exhibited behaviour that acknowledged the need for integrity and honesty. The voting citizens expected it. Dishonesty was usually punished at law or through the ballot box.

The ballot box seems no longer to have the power to bring erring politicians to account and those same politicians are fomenting a disregard and disdain for the law. They have also developed a culture in which evidence (scientific, sociological, medical, historical) can be impugned and ignored with impunity. Some political leaders have been forthright in thumbing their noses at the concept of ‘society’. Margaret Thatcher said, “There is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women, and there are families.” Others, such as John Howard and Tony Abbott have eroded it through well-chosen double-speak and by undermining and disparaging the institutions that underpin it.

We have probably always been lied to by (some) politicians, but now it seems that an increasing number of people are willing to accept (and expect) the lies. Are we losing the ability to distinguish or do we no longer care? Either of these will lead us into danger.

The danger is also in not noticing the incremental changes, whether in the behaviour of politicians and business leaders, or in the climate and the living world around us. We accommodate those changes and adapt. This is both an individual and a societal survival strategy that will also have us sail into disaster.

There have been prophets we would have done well to heed. I am thinking about relatively recent ones, such as Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring*, 1962) and Abraham Lincoln. The latter wrote in 1864:

“I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. ... corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed.” (letter to Col. William F. Elkins)

It feels as if we are adrift in uncharted waters. Adrift we may be, but these waters have been charted and the charts are available to those who are concerned enough to read them, in their original languages and in translations. We will also need to promote into political power those are willing to heed what the charts can tell us.