

THE 2011 RICHARD GUSH MEMORIAL LECTURE

given by John Schmid

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Good morning, Friends.

The title of this year's Richard Gush lecture is 'Life' - just that. With such a title, you could expect almost anything - and that's just what I hope you'll do! But I also hope that what I'm going to say will make you realise why this word is important to me, and what a great range of meanings it can express.

I've been a keen observer of life, and even a participant, for 85 years, so I can claim to be an expert on the subject. But life has taught me to be sceptical of experts, and I advise you, as George Fox did, to check everything I say against your own experience.

Before we start, let me tell you about the tune Rob Thomson has just played. It's a light-hearted Afrikaans song called Bokkie about a buck whose tail is too short, and it was used as the signature tune of Laurens van der Post's seven part BBC TV series The Lost World of the Kalahari, in which he visited remote Bushmen communities. I first saw it in black and white on TV in Vancouver in the late 1950s, and the tune stayed with me. On a weekend course at Woodbrooke in 1972 or 1973 I met a South African Friend who then kindly sent me the sheet music.

1. My early life and some books I read

Now back to my claim as an observer of life. I didn't adopt this role - it adopted me. I was born near Zurich in Switzerland one day in February 1926. It was none of my doing: I simply found myself a denizen of this world. Of course it took me some time to become aware of the fact, but my mother told me that in one of my first essays in primary school I wrote: I am happy to live in the world and I still stand by that.

I grew up in Zurich at a time of world-shaking events. I was seven when Hitler came to power, and 19 when the war ended. We had food rationing, fuel shortages, blackouts and the occasional stray bomb, and we listened with anxious hearts to the daily BBC broadcasts. But mercifully Hitler did not march in. If he had, my father would have been one of the first to be marched out to a concentration camp because he was a fearless journalist, and it's

most unlikely that I would be standing here today.

My parents were very loving, but they were not of the church-going kind. One of my most vivid childhood memories is of waking up in my cot next to my parents' bed on a Sunday morning, listening to the church bells, and then, in the magical silence when the last bell stopped ringing, hearing bird song and the regular breathing of my parents who always had a good sleep-in on a Sunday. So I missed out on the usual Sunday school stuff. Instead, my parents taught me a love of books from an early age.

Some were children's books by an author called Dhan Gopal Mukerji. I remember running to my mother full of excitement: 'It says here God is within us'. This was so different from the bearded father in heaven that my grandmother had told me about.

Actually, the full sentence is: 'God is within us and we must live without hate or fear'. This particular book is called 'Jungle beasts and men', and it tells the story of two young Indian boys who took their cow on a pilgrimage to the Himalayas because her karma needed it. You can't get much more Indian than that, can you?

It's an adventure story full of fierce tigers, snakes and magicians with vivid descriptions of life in villages and the sights and sounds of the jungle. Its main theme is how to conquer fear. Let me read you a short extract:

One day they accompanied a hunter who was asked to shoot a tiger who had terrorised a neighbouring village. When he found the tiger asleep he threw a small stone at him, looked him straight in the eyes and shot him. 'One mustn't kill anything without first giving it warning', he explained to the boys, 'but I knew I could kill him because I had already meditated on it. If you do not meditate, how can you overcome fear? In meditation one listens to the speech of God who is the ultimate silence and who resides in our own hearts.' That evening they sat together with the hunter and his wife, and tried to listen to the evening silence that was walking over the land, coming out of the forest, passing through the village and reaching far into the outer spaces. The stars were like lamps lit for the worship of him whose name is silence.

Powerful stuff for a children's book, don't you think?

Other favourites of mine were Kipling's Jungle Book and all 10 volumes of Dr Dolittle by Hugh Lofting, which were published during my childhood. (Even Mukerji was published during my childhood.) I was like those Victorians who impatiently waited for the next instalments from Charles Dickens or Conan Doyle.

2. Religion is about how we relate to life

All the same, I grew up in a culture that evolved out of the beliefs of conventional Christianity, and at the same time absorbed the analytical mind set of the age of scientific exploration and discovery, as most of us do in the West. I was taught to think that there are explanations for almost everything, and that our enquiring mind should search for these explanations. My parents later insisted I should go to confirmation classes so that I would be able to make up my own mind about Christianity. The priest did his best to set out the tenets of Christianity - it was all hard and fast and admitting no doubts. (How different from a reader of The Friend who wrote to the editor: 'Doubt is the only thing I'm absolutely sure about.')

Anyway, I was duly confirmed...but not convinced. A few months later I found out that my priest seriously believed that only Christians will be 'saved' while Muslims and Hindus are out of luck. That's when I resigned from church membership (and of course told him why).

From that time I have just lived life and dealt with its joys and pains

and challenges as they arose. To me, religion means how we relate to life. We are all part of it, together with atomic particles, elephants and galaxies, but it remains the ultimate mystery. The scientists are busy discovering some of the hows, but the why is not accessible to scientific enquiry. Underlying my world view is the fact that there aren't explanations for everything - some things are unknowable.

3. Some biographical details

But let me now give you a few biographical details. After studying at college for a diploma in electrical engineering I left Switzerland in 1949. My first job, in Sweden, was in electronics - quite a different field from electrical engineering - and this was to become my future profession in which I was entirely self-taught. Then, while working in England for the UK representatives of the Swedish firm, I married Patricia, a lady from Stafford.

We migrated to Canada in 1955. It took our combined savings to finance the six-day sea passage on MV Britannic, arriving more or less penniless but with the thought that in a country of 12 million people there must be that one extra job that I could do to pull up our financial socks again, and that job turned out to be on the technical side of the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation).

I was with CBC-TV for more than 12 years, the first year in Toronto and the last three in Montreal, but the rest very happily in Vancouver, surrounded by sea and mountains and with a marvellous public library. Canada taught me to be self-reliant, to stop wearing a tie, and to say 'Hi, Ross' to my boss instead of, 'Hello Mr Whiteside'. I was later transferred to Montreal to become head of the CBC's Technical Training Centre and devise and teach a course about colour television. However, the annual six months of snow shovelling, followed by humid summers with hordes of voracious mosquitoes, got on our nerves and we moved again, this time to Kenya - again without a job lined up.

I loved Kenya from day one and I did find a job. But we were not so lucky. I was back to saying 'Hello Mr Tyrrell' to my boss, and Mr Tyrrell's firm, an agency for various overseas companies, didn't really prosper. Sadly, my marriage to Pat was also on the rocks and in 1970 we returned to England and to separation. For me that separation was a deep blow (like the death of someone close to you) which it took me two years to get over.

Meanwhile I had found an interesting job in Harpenden with an American electronics company called Tektronix. This involved training our own technical staff, and also giving lectures to our customers all over the UK, teaching them how to make the best use of our equipment. Tektronix was the sort of company that would tell a customer to buy a competitor's instrument if they thought that instrument was more suitable for the customer - an attitude that made me feel proud to be part of the organisation.

In Harpenden I felt rather lonely at first - no kindred spirits with whom to share my thoughts and experiences (especially of Africa). Harpenden, you know, is part of what they call the 'stockbroker's belt' where the financiers of the City of London live. But then, also in Harpenden, I found the Quakers and at once I was among like-minded people. Later I bought a cottage in the village of Breachwood Green, some miles from Harpenden through the fields and woods and lovely winding roads of Hertfordshire.

4. Animals

One thing worried me a bit about the Quakers: they seemed to lack a close relationship to animals. I saw animals differently. From childhood I have thought of them as friends and fellow travellers. As a child, while my parents declared war on house flies with that cruel invention, sticky fly paper, I decided that my room would be a fly sanctuary, and whenever I got a chance, I wafted flies into the safety of my refuge. I give top marks to my parents for respecting this arrangement. You might say that this was my first

stint as manager of a refugee centre!

Later I discovered that many Quakers do have empathy for animals. Let me read you two lovely passages. The first is by Kathleen Lonsdale, a Quaker and scientist, talking to sixth-formers about whether animals, like humans, can have self-awareness. (In case you're not familiar with these terms: a Labrador is a certain breed of dog, a bitch is a female dog and a gosling is a baby goose.)

Whether human beings are the only animals to possess self-awareness is, I think, questionable. I can only report, as a simple matter of scientific observation, that when Tess, the Labrador bitch in my daughter's household, was adopted by a gosling as his mother, Tess accepted the responsibility, but with such an air of acute embarrassment that it was all we could do not to laugh at her - and she is very sensitive to being laughed at. If this was not self-awareness then I don't know what the word means. She felt a fool, obviously; but she was a good mother to the gosling as long as he needed her.

I recently heard a talk by John Barrett who was working in the Burmese teak forests in the days when using elephants was the only way in which the huge teak logs could be moved to the nearest river. He described the truly amazing life-long partnership between individual elephants and their mahouts, and the way elephants will stand still and unhurriedly figure out the best way to handle a log so that it does not snag on its way to the river. Barrett does not hesitate to describe this activity as thinking.

My second quotation is from a charming booklet called 'Still here' a collection of pieces published over the years in *The Friend* by Margery Still. Margery was an English Quaker, but for a time in the 1980s she lived in Zimbabwe and acted as the warden of Bulawayo Meeting House.

From her window in England she observed the crows in the top branches of a tree across the road, and for three years running she reported on their behaviour to readers of *The Friend*. In the first two years there were no baby crows and Margery wondered 'if the lady was practising some sort of contraception'. Then came the year when she spotted five of them in a new swaying nest. This is how she ends her report:

The crows know I watch them (they know everything). They also run a superior intelligence service, so my absence of four days was chosen by the parent pair as the moment to create the new detached desirable residence in the exact position of the old one, among the high thin branches that catch all the wind. So now they sit around smirking, the troubles of the past forgotten. They visit their edifice several times a day, simply to admire, one or other lumbering above, then hopping and flopping down to inspect. Life has smiled on them at last, as it occasionally does on us all. May they bring forth and multiply and replenish the earth, and may they have joy in all they do.

'May they have joy in all they do' - it sounds like a benediction.

5. The Kenya Magic

But now back to my life: in spite of the troubled days in Kenya, that country had bewitched me and the idea of writing a book about Kenya never let me go. In late 1977 I opted out of electronics, bought an SLR camera and spent an exhilarating year exploring Kenya. Then, back in my cottage, came the writing of the text, selecting 210 pictures from my 4,700 slides, designing the book and the jacket, proof reading, finding typesetters, colour printers and distributors - six years of learning new skills - but not finding a publisher, so I finally published it myself in 1983 under the imprint of Breachwood Publications, and then acted as my own publicity agent.

The Kenya Magic is my proudest achievement and was warmly acclaimed by readers.

6. My interest in Buddhism

So life taught me many things: above all, that we must accept what we can't change (and of course the corollary that we must try to change what we can't accept) and that we must willingly learn new skills, practical and emotional ones, from whatever situations we are faced with. In spite of having said good-bye to organised religion I was always interested in spiritual matters, and I found that Buddhism offered the most down-to-earth and practical (and to me plausible) world view. We are our own masters in the universe; nobody can absolve us from our mistakes and we have to suffer the consequences, but we can learn to do better in future.

Seen rightly, this can be a great source of happiness. In the west, many think that Buddhism is a sorrowful affair, as the Buddha seems to talk a lot about suffering, but not so: he taught us to accept suffering as part of life and thereby overcome it.

My cousin Walter and his young family worked for several years in Bhutan, where Buddhism is the universal religion, and they were much impressed by the poise and joyfulness of the ordinary people. The very popular King of Bhutan has said that his prime concern is not to increase the gross national product, but the gross national happiness.

Conventional Christianity, with its stress on what we ought to believe and do and what rewards (here or thereafter) we can expect in return, is, I think, wide of the mark. I want to tell you about my father's despair and then add some further comments.

My father led a very busy life. He was a primary school teacher (grades 4 to 6), but also an idealistic and courageous journalist and politician who wrote about any injustices that he observed. At one time he was simultaneously a city councillor and MP in the provincial and federal parliaments. He also became Switzerland's first ombudsman. In other words, he drove himself tirelessly.

In his sixties he became afflicted with Parkinson's disease and suffered from depression. One day, when I went over to Zurich to see him, he said plaintively: 'Why does God punish me like this? It's so unfair.' The remark came as a shock to me. First, that he still clung to the belief that there is an entity called God that metes out favours and punishments. Secondly, that life is supposed to be fair. And then I was surprised that the secular father who I thought I had known all my life had in fact, when push came to shove, very conventional Christian beliefs. I tried to explain to him my philosophy of taking life as it is, however it comes, without value judgements - but he looked sceptical.

7. The role of God in people's lives - and the 'it' word

My next illustration comes from a book by Kuki Gallman, an Italian-born lady who lived in a rugged part of northern Kenya. First she describes a journey she made by Landrover on a dirt track next to a sheer drop of several hundred metres on the edge of the Rift Valley, a road with which she was very familiar. On that day her brakes failed as the vehicle descended towards the critical spot. She managed to bring it to a halt a mere metre from the abyss. She writes that at that moment she realised that God really existed.

Later in the book she describes travelling on the same road again and finding a Landcruiser parked near the same spot with its tourist passengers standing agitatedly around. One of them had wanted to stop to relieve herself, but with the escarpment concealed by vegetation she went one step too far and fell to her death. Kuki does not comment on God's role in this incident. Is God always on the side of the survivor - and why?

I feel that the concept of an omnipotent God actually belittles reality, particularly when it is used with the personal pronoun. We try to describe the indescribable facts of existence because we think we need a description

to make sense of reality. It has to conform to our view of how life ought to be - but isn't.

Some years ago I was watching the annual wildebeest migration in Serengeti on TV. Uncounted millions migrate north and then south again every year. The babies are born while the herds are in the north and then have to follow the parents as best they can back to the south. Tens of thousands of babies perish on the way, trying to cross swollen rivers. Only the strongest survive. This migration has taken place for the best part of two million years and the herds are as strong as ever.

This is not a man-made cruelty. Is it then the invention of a cruel God? If we say that, we are saying that we can pass judgement on life, the same life of which we are part, to which we owe our existence, and which is totally inexplicable. And if we pass judgement, are we saying we could have designed a more satisfactory universe? Really?

Can you see why I can't use the word God - and when I hear it my mind goes into top gear, trying to figure out where the speaker comes from and what she or he means by it?

Karen Armstrong argues that in the olden days people were much better at appreciating myths (mythos in Greek - as opposed to logos, logical statements about the world around us). Myths attempt to express the more elusive, unknowable, indescribable aspects of life and were understood as such. It is only much later that religious teachers started to treat the myths (such as that of Adam and Eve in the garden) as hard and fast, indisputable, rational facts. I reckon that with all this fundamentalism (both Christian and Muslim) washing round the world it will be a while yet before the pendulum swings the other way.

Meanwhile I use the 'it' word (life) instead of the 'he/she' word (god). Think of the word life, if you like, as 'the spirit that informs the universe'. But I'm not trying to create a new theology - it's just a feeling that that phrase expresses a truth.

Look out for the 'it' word as this lecture proceeds: it occurs in many quotations and its meaning is seldom in doubt.

8. Chance events

I need to fill you in on what happened after I published *The Kenya Magic*. It is soon told. The year in Kenya was full of adventure, but back in England, working on the book was a lonely task, so afterwards I wanted to do something more sociable. I decided to go to Australia to help my cousins build their house in the bush, near Bathurst behind the Blue Mountains.

I had booked my ticket to Sydney and said good-bye to many of my friends. A few days before the flight I went to Friends House in London to tell others. But in the corridor I bumped into John Harding, who said he was urgently looking for a manager for a small refugee centre near Gaborone called Kagisong. I was interviewed the same week by four people (including himself and Bunty Biggs) and accepted there and then. No paper work, no medical checks, just asking me whether I could say 'no' when the occasion demanded it.

At the end of the interview they put me under pressure to leave for Botswana almost overnight, and I had to firmly say 'no'!

Meeting John Harding was a chance encounter that changed the course of my life. So what is chance? I like the description by David Hume, written in 1739: 'What the vulgar call chance is but a secret and concealed cause'. Indeed so: if the cause of an event is known we do not call it chance, but events with precisely known causes are in fact quite rare. So chance is a code word for the unknowable combination of factors that have led to a given event.

Here's another example of a chance event. In World War One, in 1916, Winston Churchill was commanding the 6th Royal Scots Fusiliers and was operating from a bunker near the front line. One day he was summoned back to headquarters by a message. He grumbled, but went. When he got to HQ, nobody knew about the message or who had sent it. No doubt he then grumbled even more. But while he was away from the front line, his bunker was blown up by the Germans.

Can anyone say how the course of history would have changed if Churchill had been killed? Our minds cannot even begin to piece together what this other history might have looked like, what fateful encounters, what chain of events, what causality, could have led to this other outcome, and whether, in this other world, we would all now be sitting in a Richard Gush lecture?

Churchill has in fact some wise words to say about life:

One must never forget when misfortunes come that it is quite possible they are saving one from something much worse; or that when you make some great mistake, it may very easily serve you better than the best-advised decision. Life is a whole, and luck is a whole, and no part of them can be separated from the rest.

So chance took me to Kagisong. My job there went like this: You wake up, fetch some tools and deal with a blocked pipe in the dormitory toilet. Then you go and see the Minister of Home Affairs about a refugee threatened with deportation and combine this with the weekly shopping at Sefalana. After lunch you try to find out why your trial balance in the account books doesn't balance. At 3 o'clock a truck arrives unexpectedly with 26 refugees who need to be housed and you raid the store room to see if we have enough food and toiletries for them, discuss supper with the cook and organise the bedding. In the evening a refugee from Namibia comes to tell you his life story. Then you go to bed, but at 2 am there's a knock on your bedroom door: the police have brought back 'one of your boys', a refugee who drank too much at a bar. You go to sleep again, knowing only that tomorrow will be a completely different day.



Photograph by John Harding

Well, on one of those completely different days, Kelitha arrived - a refugee from Robert Mugabe - and the course of my life was further changed. We were married in 1987 at the Registrar's Office in Gaborone, and in 1988, when my job in Botswana ended, we travelled to my cottage in Breachwood Green. I never did get to Australia.

My next job was in Tanzania as treasurer of an Anglican diocese in the little town of Korogwe where we lived for five and a half years. This is where I learnt to use and to program computer spreadsheets and this is where

I got first-hand insight into corruption. I was in fact sacked by the Archbishop for trying to expose corruption in the diocese. But we enjoyed our days there - the gentle lifestyle, the balmy weather, the beautiful language, the gentlemanly politics - and made many friends.

Then two more years in the UK before we moved to Bulawayo in 1999. As a retired person (so says my residence permit) I was roped into voluntary work, first to tidy up the accounts of Dabane Trust, then those of Hlekweni where, as board treasurer, I found myself a toothless bulldog, and meanwhile replacing Edna Caddick as Bulawayo MM treasurer. When, at YM 2002, we embarked on the Food Relief Action, I little knew that 1.7 million pula and 600 tons of maize meal would pass through our hands, and the logistics would become my new full-time occupation.

9. Humankind has always puzzled me

I have always been surprised and puzzled by the behaviour of humankind. I have an inward standard for common sense, and I find this violated in many fields of human endeavour.

TABOOS

First, nudity. If I hadn't been too busy all my life I might have joined a nudist club, because I can't believe that nudity is a sin - and indeed, nudity is a kind of openness. In my parent's home, if perchance I entered a room where my mother was undressed, she would scream and cover herself. I'm sure she must have had a beautiful body (and one that she would call god-given), so why these antics? Even as a five-year-old child I was puzzled by this.

So dress is used to cover the so-called sin of nudity, but often designed in a way that titillates and stimulates the same sexual desires that the sin brigade is trying to suppress.

Mother also regarded masturbation as a cardinal sin. But it is a very powerful natural impulse for those without sexual partners that should not be condemned but welcomed in the age of HIV-Aids. The only person I ever heard giving this advice was Kim Hope. More power to her elbows.

HIV-Aids itself was of course (and sadly still is in many circles) a major taboo subject.

NUCLEAR POWER

How can anybody think it is right to use a technology that requires the safe storage of radio-active materials in underground caverns for thousands of years and in ever growing quantities? What if one day a meteorite hits the earth just where such a cavern is located? We burden future generations with this fearful inheritance because nuclear power is maybe cheaper than solar or wind power, but I suspect also because its development is closely linked to nuclear armaments. This, in my view, is a real sin.

A SENSE OF PROPORTION

Sometimes, when I hear people quarrelling (even married couples or good friends) I think: If only there could be a small catastrophe - a house on fire or an earth tremor - these people would forget their petty concerns and would instinctively help one another in the struggle to survive, as indeed they all did after Japan's recent earthquake and tsunami.

A few weeks ago I heard of a new affliction, Facebook Syndrome. I'm not joking. A woman was so hooked on Facebook that she could not live without it - she no longer washed or cleaned or cooked - it was Facebook all her waking hours. What saved her was not a doctor or a new tablet, but a friend with a life threatening disease who asked her for help. This gave her, in the modern jargon, a reality check.

Laurens van der Post goes even further. Talking about World War Two, he says:

Something happened to all of us in that war... It went deep down, we were so near the end of ourselves. I believe that the human spirit at times really needed wars because it was the only way in which life could put people right with themselves.

We know how war can bring out the best in people (as well as the worst), but what an indictment of our humanity!

POLITICS AND HUMAN RELATIONS

We all inhabit one planet and should learn to get on with one another through tolerance and mutual respect. So after the shock of 9/11 I hoped that Bush and other statesmen would realise that we must search for the roots of the discontent that made Osama bin Ladin harbour so much hate - and what to do to change that. Something new might have been born. Instead we have the war on terror that will have the opposite effect. Since war begets war, this can't be a long-term solution.

EQUALITY

You've heard of Richard Wilkinson's work that clearly demonstrates that more equal societies have a greater life expectancy, less crime, better health and more prosperity. It makes obvious sense to me. But the worldwide trend is in the opposite direction, which brings me to economics.

ECONOMICS

I was about half-way through life before I first heard how our post-war economic system depends on permanent growth. But my immediate question was: for how long - because the size of our planet is finite. Not even the recent financial crisis seems to have shaken the belief of the experts that we must return to more economic growth, putting more pressure on the ecosystem, and further widening the gap between rich and poor. Another sin.

In Buddhist philosophy, unskilfulness is a sin, and I'm afraid that most economists and politicians, through their focus on the short-term and the expedient, must be regarded as unskilful.

We must think matters through ourselves. Nothing of real importance in life is so difficult that lay people can't think it through and weigh up the facts. It's known as lateral thinking - opening your mind widely - and comes next in importance to intuition.

10. Economics in particular

I want to dwell on economics in more detail. Economics is the field in which no two experts agree - some people call it 'the dismal science' -, but also one in which I have weighed up a lot of facts.

The two most urgent problems we face are:

(i) if, because of our present system, the rich keep on getting richer, and the poor poorer, eventually the poor will rise up; and

(ii) if, because of our present system, we keep growing, eventually the earth will rise up.

So it's in all our interest (rich and poor) to find solutions. When I talk of the rich, I don't mean the rich who, through hard work, pulled themselves up (such as Bill Gates) - I mean those who became rich because of unearned income such as interest, financial speculation or land speculation. A new economic system must eliminate these opportunities for enrichment, and

thereby create a level playing field.

One such system was proposed about 100 years ago by Silvio Gesell, a German-Argentinean business man and a lateral thinker par excellence. He proposed technical changes to the monetary system and a change in land ownership laws. I won't give you details of the first proposal - it's too technical for a Richard Gush lecture - but the second proposal is for land ownership to revert to the local communities who then rent it out for use by granting, say, 99-year leases. If we compare this proposal with the currently known systems we find:

Capitalism = private land ownership and private use.

Communism = public land ownership and public use.

Gesell's proposal = public land ownership and private use - whereby privately owned land would revert to the community as and when the property comes up for sale and at a fair price. The very fact of land reverting by law to the community at the time when it is put on the market will automatically end land speculation.

You will also be aware that all aboriginal communities find the idea of buying and selling land abhorrent. Their land always belongs to the community - it is their common wealth.

Gesell's proposal attacks the privilege of unearned income from both the monetary side and from the land side. It comes as no surprise that all vested interests have been fighting these proposals fiercely. An added but legitimate hurdle is that a state can hardly be expected to adopt a new monetary system on the strength of theoretical proposals in a book. But how can you test a new monetary system without actually introducing it? So, despite best efforts by idealists, Gesell's proposals remained untested except in some local experiments in Austria, France and the USA which were promptly suppressed by those countries' central banks.

But now, 100 years later, two things have changed: the threats of global warming and of social unrest have intensified and should cause grave concern, while new technology has opened up the possibility of a computer simulation of a whole national economy. We hear about simulations for weather forecasting, traffic control, analysing the effects of medical interventions, and many more. So why not test an economic system that could radically change our planet's future by bringing about a more equal society? My common sense tells me that of course we must. I also think that, if successful, a small enlightened country (probably a Scandinavian one) would be willing to try it and pave the way for others to follow.

Such a simulation would be extremely expensive and would certainly need to involve the best brains of several universities, but it would still be very much cheaper than what the major nations spend on armaments each year. Yet when I devoted two solid years (1997-99) in the UK trying to promote this idea I failed to get together a group of like-minded people, let alone arouse the interest of the universities. Will it then take an even worse financial crash, the flooding of the whole of Bangladesh, or another French revolution before we will seriously study fresh solutions?

11. First Nations - no puzzle here

I said that the actions and decisions of humankind have always puzzled me. But this does not apply to the philosophy and life style of aboriginal peoples, which are - to my mind - much saner. A statement by the anthropologist Wade Davies was quoted in a recent issue of Australian Friend:

Clearly, had humanity as a whole followed the way of the Aborigines, the intellectual track laid down by these descendants of the first humans to walk out of Africa, we would not have put a man on the moon. But on the other hand, had the [aboriginal] Dreaming become a universal devotion we would not be contemplating today the consequences of industrial processes that by any scientific definition threaten the very life support of the planet.

And - he might have added - we would not be contemplating the fact that nowadays, in the UK alone, every year more than 3,600,000 experiments on animals (mostly vivisections, but politely labelled 'procedures') are conducted in an effort to find safer cosmetics, safer food additives, and better tablets to counteract the effects of our inappropriate lifestyle. What happened to our reverence for life?

On the other side of the world, the North American Indians (now called First Nations) had an attitude to life very similar to that of the aborigines. I paraphrase and quote from a book called 'Touch the earth', a collection of their speeches and writings:

The Indians were wholly in tune with their environment and shocked by the white man's desecration of it. They were shocked also by the white man's broken promises and the idea of land being a saleable commodity. To them, all of nature is holy. They speak of the Great Spirit that pervades everything. They speak of their love of silence: how every morning each man must go alone to meet the silence.

One Indian writer says: 'If you ask an Indian: "What is silence?" he will answer: "It is the Great Mystery - the holy silence is in his voice". If you ask: "What are the fruits of silence?" he will say "They are self-control, true courage or endurance, patience, dignity, and reverence. Silence is the corner-stone of character."' This was their religion - not spoken about, but lived. Book learning was regarded with suspicion because the people who had it did not live by it.

A Seneca chief called Red Jacket said: 'Our religion teaches us to be thankful for all favours we receive [and I'm sure that included thankfulness towards the animals that they killed for food]; to love one another and be united. We never quarrel about religion because it is a matter that concerns each man and the Great Spirit.'

12. The way of Jesus

But deep down we also know this. We know the message of Jesus - it's all there in the Sermon on the Mount - and we should become, like Albert Schweitzer, 'humble followers of Jesus'. That means, both knowing the way and being aware when we stray off it and resolving, battling, to do better in future.

Helen Gould, an Australian Quaker, warns us of the danger of disobedience to the spirit:

Implicit in Jesus' teaching is love of all living beings, of the earth and of the whole web of life. Today we are reaping the whirlwind, the terrifying consequences of our failure to care for all beings and the whole of life. I believe this is what 'judgement' means - the inexorable consequences of our thoughts, words and deeds.

The execution of Jesus was not God's will, it was wrong human behaviour. Jesus did not die to save us from the consequences of our wrong-doing; he died because of our wrong-doing.

What Jesus taught is not unique, though his life is deeply inspiring. It is the same call for compassion that you find in all world religions, in Islam, in Judaism, in Buddhism (they call it loving kindness) and among the Sikh, the Baha'i and the Hindu.

And having been taught, we no longer need to talk about it, but to get on with doing it. Religion, as I said, is how we relate to life - how we conduct ourselves.

Lama Rimpoche, the abbot of a Tibetan monastery in Scotland, said in an interview:

If I have stability, calmness and wisdom, then the whole of my family will benefit because I'll be a kind human being. So long as we have a mind we can find our own source of happiness, fulfilment, clarity, joy - all these - then this religion business doesn't actually matter any more.

And the following is by Reshad Feild, a Sufi author. (Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam.)

A New Age will come when we will meet in the knowledge of Unity. It can only come about through the inner, hidden knowledge that underlies all the great religions and which unites us all. The New Age doesn't mean the formation of a new religion; far from it. There will be no need, any more, for any form of religion. When you come upon the essence, do you still want the form? When you have drunk of the water of life, do you still need the glass to contain it? It has fulfilled its purpose and thus something new can come about.

Are we Quakers perhaps doing too much navel gazing?

13. A lesson at Mombo

Turning to lighter matters, we had an interesting lesson from life in Tanzania. We had been visited by a friend who needed to get to a town some 170 km away before nightfall, so we offered to drive him there. The fuel gauge indicated sufficient petrol for the return trip. On the way back I realised that the gauge had become stuck, and sure enough, after dark, as we passed through a village called Mombo, we ran out of petrol. But I hadn't brought any money with me and the garage owner didn't know us. So Kelitha went to fetch the priest whom we knew. He also didn't have cash, but promised the garage owner to draw some from the bank the next morning, and on the strength of that promise we received some petrol.

Meanwhile a man with a briefcase had approached us and asked for a lift to Korogwe. It was a pitch black night and Mombo had been the scene of recent hi-jacks. We politely refused to give him a lift. We then left and got home without further incidents.

The next morning Kelitha managed to hitch a lift to Mombo and took some money to pay the priest. But when she found him, the priest said: 'You don't owe us anything. That stranger that you didn't give a lift to, he paid for your petrol.' I reckon that man was trying to teach us something!

14. The Frankl book

Last year we drove to Nairobi (and of course passed through Korogwe and Mombo on the way). We stayed with the Thomases, who some of you may know. On their table I saw a little book called 'Man's search for meaning' by Victor Frankl (1959). It spoke so much to me that I went to one of Nairobi's bookshops to buy my own copy. Maybe some of you have read it long ago, but for me it was new.

Frankl was an Austrian Jewish psychiatrist who ended up in Auschwitz where he lost his wife and parents, but miraculously survived. This book tells of his experiences and those of his fellow inmates, and of some of the insights that he gained. Here are some of his reflections about camp life and you will see that they are equally valid in war and in peace, for all of us and at all times.

Any attempt to restore men's inner strength in the camp had first to succeed in showing them some future goal. Whenever there was an opportunity for it, one had to give them a 'why' - an aim - for their lives to strengthen them to bear the terrible 'how' of their existence. A typical reply from these men was: 'I have nothing to expect from life any more'. What was needed was a fundamental change in our attitude toward life. We had to learn ourselves, and furthermore, we had to teach the despairing men, that it did not really

matter what we expected from life, but rather, what life expected from us.

Doesn't that remind you of John F Kennedy's ringing phrase: 'Ask not what this country can do for you - ask what you can do for this country'?

We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life - daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfil the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.

These tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from man to man and from moment to moment. Thus it is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way. Questions about the meaning of life can never be answered by a sweeping statement.

'Life' does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as life's tasks are also very real and concrete. They form man's destiny which is different and unique for each individual. No situation repeats itself and each calls for a different response. [...]

When a man finds that his destiny is to suffer, he will have to accept his suffering as his task, his single and unique task. He will have to acknowledge the fact that even in his suffering he is unique and alone in the universe. No one can relieve him of his suffering or suffer in his place. His unique opportunity lies in the way in which he bears his burden.

This is pure Buddhism, if you ask me.

I'd like to share with you another short passage. He writes about their liberation and how difficult it was to adjust to the new freedom.

[Prisoners] with natures of a primitive kind couldn't escape the influences of the brutality which had surrounded them in camp life. Now, being free, they thought they could use their freedom licentiously and ruthlessly. They justified their behaviour by their own terrible experiences.

I was walking with a friend across a field towards the camp when we suddenly came to an area of green crops. Automatically I avoided it, but he drew his arm through mine and dragged me through it. I stammered something about not treading down the young crops. He gave me an angry look and shouted: 'You don't say! And hasn't enough been taken from us? My wife and child have been gassed, not to mention everything else, and you would forbid me to tread on a few stalks of oats!' Only slowly could these men be guided back to the commonplace truth that no one has the right to do wrong, not even if wrong has been done to them.

I think of Israel - the very people who suffered so much in the holocaust, but also of Zimbabwe, whose policemen, soldiers and youth militia will one day (only slowly, as Frankl says) have to be guided back to this commonplace truth.

15. Life's last great adventure

As I come towards the end of this lecture, I will naturally be looking more towards the future. We all know that death is part of life. I always think of it as our last great adventure and hope that when the time comes I will die consciously and with a peaceful heart.

If reports from people who had near-death experiences are anything to go by, death brings not darkness but an ocean of light (to use Fox's words), a release from all the petty concerns when, in a flash, we encounter the truth about what really matters.

But I think that while we're alive, we must do more to free ourselves from

those petty concerns that may otherwise haunt us in death. Freeing ourselves doesn't mean sitting in an armchair and doing nothing - rather, we must learn not to be attached to our possessions and our concerns, to take them lightly and never lose sight of the need to love and to trust.

Now that you've heard my story, you will have realised that my philosophy of life is very simple - it is to get on with it and live it, and not to cling to dogmas and not to expect certainties - as simple as that.

16. C G Jung's retrospect

Let me finally turn C G Jung, and see how he describes his life in the last chapter of his autobiography. I am always moved when I read this passage. He was one of the 20th century's greatest psychiatrists and looked deeply into the human condition. Yet at the end he finds these humble words:

I am satisfied with the course my life has taken. It has been bountiful and has given me a great deal. How could I ever have expected so much? Nothing but unexpected things kept happening to me. [Isn't it revealing that he relished the unexpected things?] Much might have been different if I myself had been different. But it was as it had to be and came about because I am as I am. Many things worked out as I had planned them, but that didn't always prove of benefit to me. But almost everything developed naturally and by destiny. I regret many follies which sprang from my obstinacy; but without that trait I would not have reached my goal.

For me, the world has from the beginning been infinite and ungraspable. I have no judgement about myself and my life. There is nothing I am quite sure about. I know only that I was born and exist and it seems to me that I have been carried along. I exist on the foundation of something I do not know. In spite of all uncertainties, I feel a solidity underlying all existence. And the more uncertain I have felt about myself, the more there has grown up in me a feeling of kinship with all things.

'A feeling of kinship with all things' - that should surely be our highest aspiration.

Thank you, Friends, for listening, and may you have joy in all you do.

[The lecture ended with a repeat of Laurens van der Posts's signature tune and some Friends spontaneously started dancing.]

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