

# LIMITS TO LONGING

Robert Burke

“What is the end goal towards which we should direct all our activities?” and “what is the ultimate purpose of human experience?”, were questions posed by Aristotle (384-322 BCE) in his work ‘Nicomachean Ethics’.

How relevant these questions are today. They remain unanswered.

Concepts such as being more ‘resilient’ and ‘adaptive’ regarding leadership and life itself, suggest that reacting to setbacks and problems by being resilient and adaptive is good. As Charles Darwin is so often quoted, *“it is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent; but the one most responsive to change”*. What I believe that as good as these abilities are, they are only managing a current situation, usually a current problem, which although it is important and therefore given most of our energy, is based from the past to the present and, because of this, is not enough to create a desirable and preferable future. Essentially, perhaps the greatest responsibility and role a leader has is to make it possible to create a preferred future, the essence of Aristotle’s questions.

In order to create the future the world needs, according to my worldview, means that we have to engage with it with the same energy as we do to the past and present, and somehow to separate our selves from just reaction, and our reaction to our reactions, in order to see the desired future from a different lens, one that is not distorted by current ‘reality’, the kind of reality that is contestable, simply by the need it created to be resilient and/or adaptive in the first place. Amanda Sinclair<sup>1</sup> refers to it as the need for ‘renewal’ when consistent resilience is not making any significant change.

Throughout history we see that it is this type of reactive contestability that is the issue, the problem, such as in Syria today. Why it is contestable is to do with the many different worldviews and the meanings, realities, these different worldviews promise. We are capable of changing our worldview, but how, as a collective, can we honour the many different worldviews and, at the same time, create a universally accepted worldview that enhances our humanity towards each other? If ever there is a ‘global’ leadership challenge then surely this is it.

Creating a ‘universality worldview’ means first contesting that which gets in the way of achieving it. Foremost of these, in my opinion, is nationhood and nationality itself, the fragmentation of the planet. Nationhood is the root cause of the big difference it makes to those who had the misfortune to be born in captivity, poverty and often starvation, and those who had the good fortune to be born into a prosperous and nourishing society, some two billion of us.

Second is gender. Women are outrageously discriminated against even by many of those nations who claim to practice gender equality.

Third is race, the absurd notion that there is a preferred race, a chosen race deemed so by 'God', or similar, and that the chosen have the right to choose *"this is the right way to live and is the right way to interact (deal) with the unchosen"*, e.g. Adolf Hitler.

The fourth is religion, and similar to that of race, in that 'God' chose "my" particular religion as the one true religion. This is not to suggest that a particular 'God franchise' is not suitable in a particular circumstance, but rather that the concept itself of one particular 'God franchise' being better than another denies an all embracing universality worldview e.g. the Balkans wars.

Futures studies, because it embraces the many different worldviews as central to its methodology, may give us an opportunity of creating strategies and gaining reconciliation between human's greatest needs, beyond that of survival, that of material wellbeing and that of spiritual wellbeing as John Armstrong<sup>ii</sup> argues. Need the two be incompatible? I would not think so providing we do not allow ourselves to be consumed by either to the point of fundamentalism e.g. extremist religious sects (Jonestown) and extremist capitalism (ENRON).

I was struck recently reading<sup>iii</sup> that contentment – long-term satisfaction – comes not from *"doing whatever you like and having what you like"* but from *"liking whatever you do and wanting what you have"*. You could say that the true secret of "happiness" is to find a positive side to whatever actually "happens" and one of which would make us more content and happy, one way being our ability to embrace "limits to longing".

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<sup>i</sup> 'Renewal' Amanda Sinclair, *Mt Eliza Business Review*, Winter/Spring 2004 p.39-44

<sup>ii</sup> 'In Search of Civilization; Remaking a Tarnished Idea, John Armstrong (2009), Allen Lane

<sup>iii</sup> 'Achieving Happiness in a Sustainable World' Gioietta Kuo and Lane Jennings, *World Future Review, A Journal of Strategic Foresight*, Volume 5, Number 2, Summer 2013, Sage, from which I also took the title and the term "limits to longing".