

# The Ultimate Treadmill



An early morning jog is a fine way of keeping fit but more important to me is the way it tunes my mind up for the affairs of the coming day. In British Columbia recently it was so wet that I had to visit the anaesthetic atmosphere of the hotel gymnasium where, on four successive days, I pounded away on the treadmill. My body might have gained from the exercise, but it did nothing to get my mind ready for the day ahead. I was simply bored. Treadmills keep you going but they don't actually get you anywhere.

An email this morning from a student at Atlantic College, reassured that he could go on a gap year this autumn to investigate human learning after leaving school, wrote "I feel happier now that I've decided to do this, rather than enter into a reductionist university course next year!" His thinking sounded so like those students at the University of Victoria when they said, *"we have to adjust our lifestyles to make more meaning of life, (none of us) want to be as screwed up as are many of the parents of our friends. You are older than us. Please do help us to understand why we are in this extraordinary muddle... it's a pointless treadmill (that word again) that just exhausts us but gets us nowhere"*.

So just where are we trying to get? What are we educating people for? Do we see them simply as future customers able to distinguish between 200 brands of cereals, or as pilgrims (in the sense of John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress) preparing to direct their own lives in a purposeful and positive fashion? Figuratively, do schools see themselves as providing the cages for battery hens, or the opens paces needed for free-range chickens?

This is a truly existential question to which my simplified answer, made up of five points, is contained in the attached document, which is only a starter for what has to become a bigger and more fundamental discussion. This has been written hopefully to engage the attention of those undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Victoria (and elsewhere) as they explore the Underground Curriculum. It will be interesting to see where the conversation goes, for as a recent "16 rising 17" said, *"It's easy to fit in, it's much more difficult to think outside of the box"*.

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- **Economic Theory.** Back in 1946, months after the conclusion end of World War 2, the influential economist John Maynard Keynes wrote, *“the day is not far off when the economic problem will take the back seat where it belongs, and the arena of the heart and the head will be occupied or reoccupied by our real problems – the problems of life and of human relations, of creation and behaviour and religion.”*

I was only 7 years old at the time Maynard Keynes wrote that and totally unaware of economics or economists but I slowly came to recognise that my teachers were actually suspicious of educational theories as they came to the realisation that under the Nazi regime gas chambers had been built by learned engineers, children poisoned by educated physicians, infants had been killed by trained nurses, and women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates... all that in a nation that had produced brilliant musicians, scientists and theologians. Whatever else, our teachers were effectively saying to us, and as I did myself as a teacher 20 years later, reading, writing and arithmetic are only important if they make the next generation more human.

- **Replacing ‘Needs’ with ‘Wants’.** The thinking of the post-war economists and the American manufacturing industry was so successful that by the late 1950s industry was producing more than was necessary to house, feed and educate everyone. To ensure full employment as world population increased, economists recognised that the world economy needed to be stimulated not by basic needs (as understood by Maynard Keynes) but by artificially contrived ‘wants’. *“Our enormously productive economy...demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfaction, our ego-satisfaction, in consumption... We need things consumed, burned up, replaced and discarded at an ever accelerating rate”.*

This worked wonders for the economy, but its knock-on implications for environmental and human well-being have been horrific. Ronald Wright, in his much acclaimed ‘A Short History of Progress’ in 2004 wrote, *“If civilisation is to survive it must live on the interest, not the capital, of nature. Ecological markers suggest that in the early 1960’s, humans were using 70% of nature’s yearly output; by the early 1980’s we’d reached 100%; and in 1999 we were at 125%.”*. Quite simply the modern economy is consuming its own seed corn; today’s world is borrowing against our children’s assets.

As people become ever more acquisitive, so individuals are driven into false expectations of what they actually ‘need’ and encumber themselves with unsustainable, heavy levels of debt. The implication of this means that *“British family life is in crisis. It is parents who are to blame who by working like pit ponies to house our offspring, feed them and keep them in with the latest digital cameras and micro scooters, it seems we have created a generation of miserable children who are wallowing in materialism. We spend £7.3 billion on toys in children’s bedrooms, when what they really need is to play outside with friends and family...”* As inflated economic pressures became ever greater, family life was falling apart.

- **Human Motivation.** In a little-known book ‘Driven: How human nature shapes our choices’, published in 2002, two economists employed by the World Bank, flagged up a warning that we are still ignoring. They had gone to Russia in 1989 intending to transform the Communist economy by a shock course in free-market economics. In one sense they were eminently successful basing their

recommendations almost exclusively on the logic of neo-classical belief that all humans are, at heart, rational maximisers of their self-interest, and that unrestricted markets could best coordinate their efforts.

Eleven years later a tiny minority of the Russian population were fantastically wealthy but, as of 2001, more than half the people had become statistically 'impoverished' as against only 2% twelve years later. There had been 'an economic miracle' but at the cost of de-stabilising human relationships. Questioning why things had gone pear-shaped, the economists concluded that what Russia had really needed was policies based on a much broader, more unified understanding of human behaviour than simply economic theory. Delving deeply into the nature of human behaviour and psychology the two economists concluded, from a massive literature search, that human behaviour derives from an ever shifting compromise between four innate drivers – the drive to acquire, the drive to bond, the drive to learn, and the drive to defend, all of which are encased in the innate predispositions that form the basis of every human decision. If any one of those drivers becomes too dominant the overall impact on a society is like an old-fashioned coach and four where one over-exuberant horse throws the other three into such chaos that the carriage is overturned. What the economists concluded was that what the Russians had needed were not a series of high-performing, ego-centric specialists in certain aspects of society, but "a well-rounded, seasoned 'general practitioner' for an entire human society, an expert to use an old-fashioned term, in applied political economy".

Which was not too dissimilar to Fritz Schumacher's 'Small is Beautiful' (1973) with its challenging subtitle, 'economics as if people mattered'. In my mind, though not necessarily in anybody else's, this thinking was continued in Juliet Schor's 'Born to Buy: The commercialised child and the new consumer culture' (2004).

- **Conflicting Expectations.** Which takes me back to Vaclav Havel, "education is the ability to perceive the hidden connections between phenomena". The more complex the situation, the more important become the connections between the competing claims, the most significant of which are often the more difficult to see. Profound disillusionment with the market economy has become the determining factor in so many aspects of social policy. The need for change is urgent. Writing in *The Guardian* in May 2004, a journalist found herself, an atheist who throughout her life had looked to politics for idealism, commending two bishops for being concerned with "*the yearning for happiness and fulfilment... and for an ethic of human flourishing, which is rooted in human nature.*" She went on to observe that, "*It has become almost unthinkable to go to politicians for this kind of language or ambition. [If they told us] that their main intention in public life was to make us happier, or to challenge us to rethink our values, we'd laugh in their faces. The political arena has shrivelled drastically, back to a technocratic promise to use our taxes to provide services a bit more efficiently than the other lot.*"

Efficiency is a concept dating back to the Greeks. However the Greek philosophers used the term efficiency in a significantly different way to the meaning ascribed to the term by the late twentieth century advocates of open markets. To the Greeks, efficiency was a means towards achieving Virtue, both for the individual and for the state. The Platonic division of labour was not about individuals engaging in efficient exchange of money, but rather about the best combination and utilisation of human resources to achieve the ideal state.

Clive Hamilton, the Australian author of the groundbreaking book 'Growth Fetish' (2003), argued that political thinking evolves very slowly. "Today," he explains, "*the compulsion to participate in a consumer society is no longer prompted by material needs (these have been largely solved) but rather by political coercion. It is prompted by the belief of the great mass of ordinary people, taking their cue from political leaders, that to find happiness a society, as with individuals, must be forever getting richer, regardless of how wealthy they already are. If ordinary people today are exploited*", argues Hamilton, "*it is by common consent.*" People, it seems, have swallowed the dream that more money must inevitably bring greater happiness. Intuitively people know better, yet nevertheless they are driven by society's pressures. More often it seems that for most of us to travel hopefully is more rewarding than to arrive. Despite incomes having gone up two and a half to three times (in current day values)<sup>7</sup> in America and much of the European Union in the past fifty years the recorded level of happiness, as noted by psychologists and other students of social affairs, has continued to fall during that period. At the same time levels of clinical depression have gone up ten-fold and bipolar depression is increasing everywhere in the developed world. Money has never been the measure of happiness, and it seems never can be.

Robert Wright, the vastly influential evolutionary psychologist writing in 'The Moral Animal', in his attempt to explain what he engagingly says is 'why we are the way we are', shows that the human species has not evolved to be happy, rather it (i.e. us) has evolved to be effective. Being effective may frequently lead to being happy for it is in the everyday affairs of life that happiness is generated by knowing that you have done a good job. It is that sense of fulfilment that becomes self-energising, and no money value can be placed on that.

"*The price of abundance has been the disintegration of community, and the disintegration of self*", continues Clive Hamilton. In short, now that the economic problem has been solved, we need a politics that encourages people to pursue a rich life, instead of a life of riches. "*The defining struggle is no longer between proletarians and capitalists about how to divide the surplus of the production process; today it is about how to live a genuine life in a solid structure that manufactures 'individuality' and celebrates 'superficiality'.*"

It is surely what the Occupy Movement has been all about?

- **Matters of Belief.** My fifth point is very important and to many controversial, so that in a short explanation like this it is best for me to restrict myself to personal reflections and not to a deep theological or philosophical argument. I wrote about this ten months ago in the short paper 'No Small Matter'. It is about the relevance of faith in a vision – about a belief that life has a purpose and, importantly to me, that such a faith places a great responsibility on its adherents. The indigenous peoples of British Columbia revere the late nineteenth century Chief Seattle who said, "*We have not inherited this world from our parents, we have been loaned it by our children*". The Jewish Scriptures said something very similar that when the Holy One took the first man into the Garden of Eden and said: "*Behold my works, how beautiful, how splendid they are. All that I have created, I created for you. Take care, therefore, that you do not destroy my world, for if you do there will be no-one left to repair what you have destroyed*".

As an unqualified 19 year-old standing in for a teacher I was faced by a group of ten year olds wanting to discuss space travel. When someone asked what people would look like on another planet one youngster burst out, "*it's easy, they would look just like us!*". The class mocked him, and

he started to cry. I asked him why. *"In the Old Testament it says God made man of his own image so if we look like God, so would they"*. That thinking of that youngster had an enormous impact on me as it challenges me every day to see in anybody a touch of the divine, the sign of something very wonderful.

As a practicing member of the Church of England I have been personally challenged times without number to consider the words of The General Confession, *"we have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us."* In other words, I am daily reminded of my responsible not only for doing what I am told to do, but for acting responsibly in situations where there are no rules.

Too often I have got caught up in contemporary arguments about the relationship of science and religion which are as pointless as the hypothetical arguments about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin! But the belief expressed by a retired soldier when he gave me a lift some 50 or so years ago, that he *"wasn't too sure about religion, but what I am certain of is that it is my job to leave this world in a slightly better state than when I came into it"*. That, together with the insight of that 10 year-old, inspires me daily.

A society that has yet to discover reasons for its faith in the future is a mean place in which to bring up young people. Together we have much work to do. Treadmills deceive us. Just keeping fit without knowing where we are going is a pretty pointless exercise. But it is worse than that. Being well-exercised, but having no real awareness of where we have come from and where we might go, leaves us with pent up energy. We are prone to follow any attractive distraction, like dreaming of that exotic holiday we can't really afford. Eventually we rationalise that it's worth borrowing just a bit more money and so we buy the ticket. Weeks later our credit card statement comes in. Frightened by the interest charges we opt to do some further overtime....and so the cycle repeats itself, and we have allowed ourselves to become part o the problem.

How do we get off this treadmill?

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