

Some Reflections from February 2000



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Hypothesis: In the increasing complex world of global communications, network-based relationships and identity defined by lifestyle, we are becoming untrusting of (and possibly unskilled in) intimacy, leaving us deprived of places where we can be our authentic selves.

Maybe after all, people were affected by the millennium break - for a short time there was the possibility of space for reflection and spirituality. This was quickly lost and we are back in the business of our daily lives and nothing much has changed.

Our newspapers and TV screens are increasingly full of couples, friends and families discussing the nature of their relationships in intimate detail, as though intimacy is now only safe if experienced vicariously. When "spin" is the prevalent form of communication from political leaders, where every news story has to have an "angle" and where advertisements win prizes for style and not whether they sell things, why worry about being authentic? But this leaves little basis for trust and without trust the risk of intimacy is too high.

Stock exchange fortunes are now made on dot.com companies that are unlikely to make any profit in the foreseeable future, whilst blue-chip companies see their shares slide and are regarded as part of the old economy.

The self-improvement literature which fills shelves at railway stations, motorway service stations and airports (feeding us the illusion that important people are always on the move?) offer trite phrases, quick fixes for deep-seated anxieties. The promise is of painless transformation of ourselves, as though underlying chronic anxieties and uncertainties will disappear overnight if only we adopted the right positive attitude.

Tony Blair omits any mention of "New" Labour when he speaks to party activists at their 100th birthday party. This may have been a wish to avoid any expression of dissent, but in part recognises that what is being mourned by many party members is the loss of "traditional values", which is more painful and profound than quibbles over specific policies.

The pages of tributes to Stanley Matthews and the huge crowds who lined the streets for his funeral have evoked nostalgia for the days when sportsmanship, humility, industry, commitment, honesty and integrity were the characteristics that we aspired to. The mourners spanned the generations, youngsters whose only experience of a sporting hero is David Beckham have turned out to honour Matthews and pay homage to what he represented. If these values are still what we hold as important, the seduction of the quick-fix of the lifestyle gurus will leave us disillusioned and disappointed.

The intensity of the debate over section 28 has partly articulated a fear that the traditional family is on the way to becoming extinct, and at the moment there seems to be no new 21st century way of meeting our need for intimacy and being our authentic selves. We can be who we like in an on-line chat room, but where can we be who we really are?

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