

Some Reflections from October and December 1999



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

Hypothesis: ambivalence towards the millennium is not about fear of change but fear of no change.

How should we understand the widespread ambivalence about the millennium? Talk of the millennium bug in the media has subsided and there are reports of cut-price holiday deals because so many people are staying at home. First impressions of the inside of the Dome are mixed. Comments that "there are not enough rides" suggest it is just an excuse to have another theme park.

Media predictions are of tremendous possibilities, usually associated with the internet, and dire forebodings, immediately in Chechnya and Venezuela, and longer term, for example the melting of the Antarctic ice cap. This year has seen a higher than average incidence of natural disasters around the world - disaster relief funds must be under pressure- but consumer spending is on the increase again after a few lean years.

The few small investors in the stock market have become the many, because of the availability of on-line trading and sites in which small time investors swap information and learn from one another how to read the market. Is this the democratisation of a sphere of business previously controlled by elites - or greed attracting suckers, like the pyramid selling dupes in the developing world?

We worry that children are becoming isolates, sitting alone in their rooms with their computers, and yet recent surveys show that children are forming "virtual" relationships with other children all over the world and are in contact with a range of nationalities and cultures unthought-of in previous generations. Adults also from all over the world meet in chat rooms; families keep in regular and easy contact mobile phones and email.

At the same time, our face-to-face relationships seem to be increasingly defined and mediated through policies and procedures in an increasingly litigious culture. It is appropriate that we have been entertained at this time by a melodramatic libel case. At work, disputes or disagreements with colleagues are likely to be expressed through citing harassment procedures or by describing ourselves as being abused by others or traumatised by our experience. Inter-personal difficulties can become lost in formal complaint procedures which remove both authority and responsibility from people to think about and try to understand the processes at work.

Our hypothesis is that the real millennium angst is less to do with foreboding about major disaster and the fantasy of a world spinning out of control and more to do with not knowing how to relate to one another in an unstable world, where we are both able to take on an individualistic identity and also find that we are increasingly connected. It is easier to form "virtual" relationships, where we can present ourselves however we want to, than to deal with the messiness of day-to-day collaborative working which confronts us with our loving and hateful feelings, envy, vulnerability and strength.

We may well wake up on 1st January 2000 to find that life is just the same as it has always been - what Freud called common unhappiness. That is the real millennial angst.

Tim Dartington and Sheila Ramsay. 23 December, 1999

Hypothesis: that as we come up to the millennium, there is survivor guilt at work.

Survivors of the Ladbroke Grove train crash were asked about their sense of guilt. Is there a wish to focus survivor guilt on those people in the train, even a disappointment that the death toll was not worse, to avoid a much wider survivor guilt that is not acknowledged among those who have survived both war and peace, and most recently have done well enough in our market economy?

One of the most hopeful things about the aftermath of the train crash is that it is being seen as a "systemic failure". This contrasts with the move to individualism, which we have identified since the early 80's.

In the last months of 1999 we are very conscious of history. We are wanting to read the publications of historians (eg the two volume 2000 word History of the Twentieth Century by Martin Gilbert). Now we have also the newspapers' use of their archives and photo libraries.

Those who survived the Second World War (and other wars) are conscious of guilt in relation to those who died. There has been an astonishing market for survivor memoirs and testimonies, and not just for the survivors of the Nazi era. What about all those other testimonies of the abused, the adopted, the lost, the abandoned of this century.? There seems to be a rush by those with a story to tell, a memory to bear witness, to reclaim it all, document it all before the century runs out.

But there is little time, it seems, or desire to reflect on what is going on now. Our current experience of work is fraught, working long hours to keep our heads above water. Why are we allowing ourselves to become so busy and overworked?

Management in the NHS is described as an attack on therapeutic space and containment. Local authorities are introducing "best value" systems and benchmarking. The obsession is with outputs. It is only real if you can count it - with simplistic exit interviews and ticks in boxes to describe a subtle and complex understanding of lives under pressure. Where there is a wish to consult with communities and involve people in planning and decision-making about services, this is attempted by crude vox pop methods.

What is driving these work demands which is having an adverse effect? There is a knock-on from the days of recession with people fearful for their jobs when there is no job security. In addition, terms of employment and short-term contracts means that employers can bully and get away with it. Politicians also attempt to bully the industries they would have controlled, when they were nationalised.

The access to communication that is provided by information technology is also invasive. People are now beginning to not respond to their e-mail messages.

Personal experience has become entertainment: Jerry Springer and Oprah, whimsical documentaries about ordinary people failing their driving test or more sedately in Middle England, In the Psychiatrist's Chair. Experience has become a spectator activity. We can enjoy it, be outraged by it, feel superior or condemn it but we don't have to think about it.

Nor do we want to think about the 6 billion people now living in the world. Their personal testimonies would be overwhelming. We want to survive by not knowing about them except in apocalyptic images of starvation and terror.

As a result, there is an understanding of the need for a systemic approach, but only *after the event*. But those working in and managing complex systems don't have the time to think; they can only react. Pro-active events and conferences to promote understanding are under-subscribed and cancelled. Internal and public enquiries for the assigning and acceptance of blame are, however, all the rage.

All of this suggests we are living in a kind of dead space, where - despite this being supposedly a therapeutic age - we have become psychologically hard of hearing. To think systemically and reflect on the inter-connectedness of things gets in the way of the struggle for personal survival.

Tim Dartington 28 October, 1999