

MANNA matters

Newsletter of MANNA GUM.

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News from Manna Gum

November has been a month of bad news for the Mekong River and the millions who depend upon it for their livelihoods. On November 2 came news that the Cambodian Government had approved development of the Lower Se San 2 hydroelectric dam on the Mekong's most important tributary system. As well as directly displacing many thousands of people, this dam is being constructed in an ecological hotspot that will affect Mekong fisheries for hundreds of kilometres up and downstream.

Then, a couple of days later, came news that the Government of Laos had finally confirmed, after months of evasion, that it is going ahead with the construction of the Xayaburi Hydropower Dam, which will be the first blockage of the mainstream of the Mekong south of the Chinese border. This dam will also have a significant fisheries impact and will probably spark a cascade of other mainstream dams in Laos. As the proverbist says: 'As a dog returns to its vomit, so man returns to his folly.' (Pr 26:11)



Construction of the Xayaburi Dam in Laos has begun.

I have sometimes said that despair is global, but hope is local. December has begun on a more hopeful note with the conclusion of our *A Different Way* exposure week, which has become a fixture on the Manna Gum calendar (jointly run with TEAR). The week is about nothing less than life and how we live it, and what the Christian gospel has to say about it all. Over the week we combined Biblical reflections on creation, salvation, money, poverty, cities and work with practical experiences in compost making, gardening, killing and preparing a duck, urban gleaning, resource recovery and ethical shopping, plus many other things. Thank you so much to all those who helped in some way, and to the participants, who entered into the week with such a willing spirit.

Finally, as the cacophony of consumer religion surrounds us all this month, I pray that you are moved by a different story: the story of how God became a baby - obscure, poor, powerless and vulnerable - and showed the world what love really looks like.



Standing At The Crossroads (Part 2)

The economics of renewal

by Jonathan Cornford

In the previous edition of *Manna Matters* I argued that the church is in crisis, and the crisis of the church is one and the same as the crisis of the world, because that is what we have become. Whether it be the global financial crisis, climate crisis, resource depletion crisis, mental health crisis, or the crisis of the family, Christians find themselves implicated like everyone else. Through a series of shifts and turnings that took place over centuries and millennia (see *Manna Matters* September 2012), we have lost sight of the truth that the gospel of Jesus calls us to a radically distinctive way of life that rejects the programs of power and wealth, and refuses to participate in activity that does harm to another or does harm to the earth, which is the same thing. Instead, those who would follow the way of the Galilean are called to form God-centred communities whose work is to heal the brokenness of the world in all its forms: personal, social, economic, political and ecological. When it is doing this, it is acting as the very body of Christ, the Word become flesh, good news for the world.

If the church is in crisis in a time of general crisis, what would renewal of the church look like? What would it take for the church to begin to more fully reclaim its original vocation? What would the church look like if it were to be a distinctive community that bears good news for a world in crisis?

It has been oft observed that times of crisis are also times of opportunity. The prophet Jeremiah, during a time of deep crisis for his people, at one point interrupts his dark warnings to offer this cry of hope:

*Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls.*
Jeremiah 6:16

Jeremiah understands that if hope exists anywhere, it does not exist in denial; rather, the beginning of hope is being brought to a standstill. It is only from this place that we can look clearly and soberly at the truth of our predicament, and it is only when we come to such a place that we can see clearly that there is another possibility - we can choose a different road. It is instructive that for Jeremiah, finding the way of hope and goodness does not require making new discoveries, but upon remembering what has been forgotten.

In the first part of this article I cited some of the statistics that indicate the church's social position is in radical decline. This tells us that, whether we like it or not, the shape and structure of the church in the coming years will no longer be what we have known it be. However, this should not be interpreted simply as a negative thing. It is almost certainly *necessary* that Christianity fall from its place of cultural privilege in the Western world in order for it to begin to disentangle itself from those great narratives lie at the heart of Western civilisation – individualism, capitalism, secularism – and that have so confused our understanding of the gospel of Jesus. The more penetrating Christian thinkers have seen this truth for a long

The more clearly we begin to see the divergences between the gospel and mainstream culture, the more conscious we will become of our need for renewal.

time now. Visser 'T Hooft, a European Christian leader, wrote this in the 1930s:

What is the Christian task at this crucial moment? In the very first place it is necessary that Christians understand the new position, which is completely different from the old one. They must realise that they can no longer count on the momentum of the old tradition, that they are no longer going to be treated as the honoured representatives of the main current of culture, or, to put it quite shortly, that they will be less and less at home in the West. The West is again becoming for them what the Roman world was for the early Christians: a world whose presuppositions contradict their faith, *a world which is not only secretly but quite openly indifferent or even hostile to their essential convictions.*

The more clearly we begin to see the divergences between the gospel and mainstream culture, the more conscious we will become of our need for renewal. It would be irresponsible of me to suggest that there is some formula for renewal, and delusional for me to try and make a prescription for it. That said, perhaps there are some things that we can point to that may be necessary if the church is to be rejuvenated as an alternative community that witnesses to a new human possibility.

Surely, any movement of authentic Christian renewal has to be centred on a rediscovery of Jesus and his message, and the expression of that discovery in people's lives. I am convinced that *one* element of this – but by no means sufficient – must be the reclaiming of the Biblical story's distinctive perspective on our material lives. In a time when the bad news confronting humanity centres on the structure and content of our material lives, the good news of Jesus will only fully become good news when it also finds expression in our material lives.

What might such a movement look like? Let me suggest seven dimensions of an alternative economic life that would express God's counter-cultural good news in 21st century Australia. Here I will focus primarily on the individual lives of Christians, rather than address the economics of the institutional church – in this matter, there can be no real or lasting transformation of the institution until change is embraced and embodied by its members.

1. Rejection of the idols of 'more' and 'me'.

Perhaps the greatest task to be undertaken is to become conscious of, name, and then resist, the operation of two great false gods in our time – consumerism and individualism. These two forces go far beyond the cultural habits and practices of shopping – they shape our very deepest convictions about what life is for, and what a good life is. Our understanding of everything – even family and work – is refracted through these lenses.

The first part of this struggle is mental and spiritual. It

requires becoming conscious of the ways in which we are shaped – more than we know – by the ocean of advertising and marketing that we swim in, and by the example of those we see around us. We need to take account of what is shaping our minds and our hearts, and take some responsibility for what voices we give our ears to.

The second part of this struggle comes down to some big, life-shaping, practical decisions. What sort of income do I and my family need for a decent life? What sort of home and material possessions do we require to be satisfied? How much is enough? However we might answer these questions, it seems fairly safe to say that the poor of the world, our families and communities, and even the earth itself, need us to answer: 'We can live with less!'

If Christians could, *en masse*, make active, conscious and careful choices to live with less, it might open up all sorts of new possibilities. Certainly, it is hard to think of a more counter-cultural or evangelical witness than this. And not only might new things become possible for Christian communities in all sorts of practical matters, it could allow spiritual breakthroughs which cannot take place while these two idols hold sway.

The first part of this struggle is mental and spiritual. It requires becoming conscious of the ways in which we are shaped – more than we know – by the ocean of advertising and marketing that we swim in, and by the example of those we see around us.

2. Care & nurture

In place of conforming our lives to the narratives of 'more' and 'me', we need to pass our whole lives – family and relationships, work and leisure, consumption – through a new filter, and ask a new fundamental question: how does this further God's great work of restoring a broken humanity and a broken creation (see 2 Cor 5:18-20)? How does it bring forth goodness in the world?

Another way of stating this is by testing all of the components of our lives against the simple ethos of care and nurture. What is the effect of my choices (whether it be work, consumption or recreation) upon others – upon my family, upon my community, upon the poor and vulnerable, upon the earth and its creatures, and upon my connection to God? How can I take *care* for them in my choices? How do I actively *nurture* my family, community, and the earth itself?

3. Good Work

Rejecting the idols of 'more' and 'me', and shaping our lives to the ethos of care and nurture, demand that we radically re-think our attitudes to that activity which dominates most of our waking lives – work. This is a subject which deserves much fuller elaboration in a future edition of *Manna Matters*, but here let me articulate some critical questions.

Why do we work, what are we seeking out of work and how much income do we need from work? What work needs to be done?

To think well about these questions we need to include in our frame of reference all of the unnoticed and unpaid work – most of it work of care and nurture, much of it still shouldered by women – that upholds families, communities and society itself.

Rather than simply thinking about work from the perspective of income and individual fulfilment, we would do better to think first from the perspective of the household: what work – paid *and* unpaid – needs to be done; how much income is needed; who does what, and how do all parties find dignity and worth in their work? Rather than work being an activity that *isolates* members of a household from each other, can the working patterns of the household become ones that reflect mutual care and nurture of each of its members, adult and children, and which are owned and valued by all? When it comes to choosing paid employment, how can we choose employment that serves the world rather than exploits it?

These questions are particularly pressing for those younger ones who have not yet solidified major life decisions about work, especially for those who have the real luxury of *choice* (not everyone does). For those already well down the path of work decisions, making changes can be much harder, and we need to be realistic about what is possible in the short term. Even for these, though, in the medium to longer term, there may well be more possibilities for change than is generally acknowledged. What is certain is that the more we can make a choice to live with less, the greater degree of freedom we will have to make all sorts of creative choices that nurture goodness in ourselves, our families, communities and the land.

4. Responsible consumption

In modern Australia, most of us have been relegated to the position of consumers – very few of us actually produce anything tangible and material, let alone produce things that serve our basic everyday needs. Moreover, we sit at the apex of a global consumer economy that has been so structured to ensure that we can devour new consumer items – that is, the earth's resources – at an ever increasing pace. It is a profoundly destructive system, and if we are going to be people who work for healing and wholeness we must begin to take responsibility for the impact of our consumption.

At the heart of taking responsibility for our consumption is the preparedness to pay more for many of the things we buy. We can afford to consume so much because we do not pay the true cost of things – either to the earth, or those involved in the making and getting of things to us. By paying more – for fair trade, organic, locally sourced, more ethical, less

wasteful, less disposable, more durable, more recyclable, less plastic, less toxic etc. – we are expressing a higher level of care for our neighbours and for creation. Of course, paying more means we would not be able to buy so much – we would need first to accept living with less ...

Finally, we cannot talk meaningfully about responsible consumption without addressing technology consumption. The cumulative effect of global mining, ever-cheaper labour, and e-waste that underpins this industry is vast, and that is not saying anything about the damage we are doing to ourselves, our families, our communities and culture with our mindless devotion to novelty and distraction.

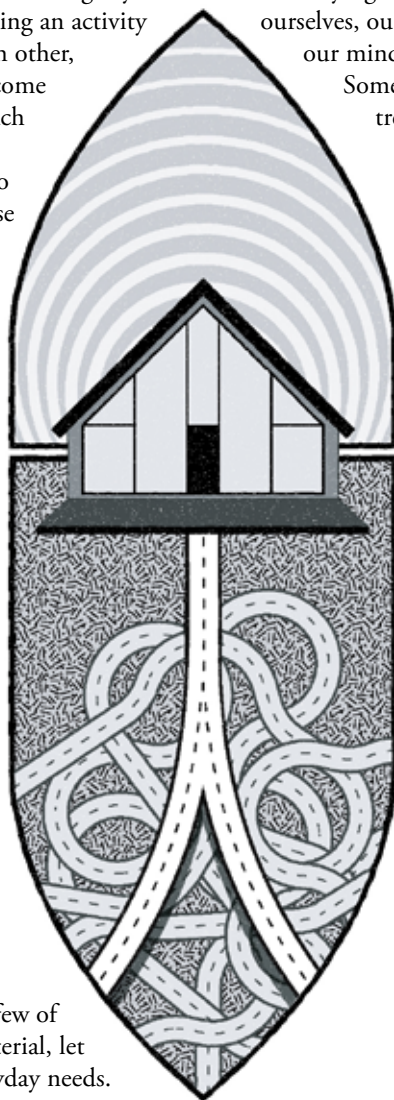
Somehow we need to get off the ever accelerating treadmill of constantly purchasing and updating new gadgets, and treat technology purchases with a seriousness that will be incomprehensible to the broader culture.

5. Household economy

The corollary of rediscovering a healthier approach to work and becoming more responsible in our consumption is rediscovering the household as a place of good work, even a place of production, for both men and women. With the advent of the industrial revolution, men became alienated from the household economy filling only the role of bread-winner, and women bore the burden of care alone while increasingly finding this role was ascribed no social value. Now the general consensus is that everyone should aspire to escape the 'drudgery' of home-making; we have been taught to think of our homes merely as places of comfort, retreat and ever increasing luxury, and all of us are the lesser for it. Wendell Berry writes:

The modern failure of marriage is a failure of our home economies. The practical bond of husband and wife in the home has almost disappeared. It's a sacred and practical bond that gives order to a home, to family, to their descendants and to community. The work of the home is the health of love. And to last, love must enfold itself in the material world – produce food, shelter, warmth, surround itself with careful acts and well-made things.

If we are to take more care in our consumption and if we are to live with less extravagant budgets, this will take serious thought, time and creativity to be applied to the household economy, and it will require both men and women to apply their skills to it, and to re-learn many skills that have been lost. The work and challenge of nurturing healthy (that is, holy) households is a life-giving adventure waiting to be rediscovered.



6. Generosity

Not only does the Biblical message insist that God's people forsake activities and ways of life that gratify the self at the cost of others, it consistently calls us to give money away! The call to generosity, to share out of our abundance, is not simply a call to charity and philanthropy, it is a central and practical expression of the deeper spiritual movement that the gospel calls us to. This has been discussed at length in a previous *Manna Matters* (August 2011), suffice to note here that at the precise time when we are wealthier than ever before, our levels of generosity are declining. We have lost the habits of structuring generosity at the centre of our household economy (tithing) and we have become hardened to that impulse which responds spontaneously to need without calculation (almsgiving).

At this point it is worth pausing to do some quick sums. So far, I have said that we need to learn to live with less, to be prepared to pay more for what we buy, and to be more generous in giving money away ... what!

Live with less + pay more + give generously = ???!!!
(Are you serious?)

Let's be honest, as far our culture is concerned, this is a ludicrous suggestion. It is a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the gentiles, which is a clue that there might be something of the wisdom of God in it.

7. Economic interdependence

Up to this point I have discussed ideas concerning individuals and households.

The current of our time is towards the disintegration of community, making our relationships with others increasingly abstract - dependent no longer upon locality or necessity, but upon nothing more than choice, making friendship yet another variant of consumerism. The opposing current then is to begin to re-establish some practical and material interconnections with others, and especially within Christian communities.

I am not here suggesting that we try and emulate the Jerusalem Community of Acts chapters 2 and 4 – that is a story which is a sign in the distance, calling us forward. However, there are many small and modest initiatives of sharing and cooperation – such as sharing mowers, whipper-snippers and trailers, making soap together, neighbourhood gleaning and salvaging, or running food and bulk-buying cooperatives – which really can practically enhance our weekly lives, and begin to add a new dimension to our connections with others. Once we become better at such small expressions of economic community, who knows what bigger things might begin to seem possible?

I should conclude with some qualifications about what I have said above. Once again, I want to stress that these ideas could never be considered as a formula or prescription for renewal of the church. I do believe that *some sort of movement* to reclaim the radical and counter-cultural implications of the gospel for our material lives will be *a necessary element* of any recovery of deeper and more authentic expressions of Christian faith and community. However, other movements, deeper spiritual movements, will be needed too, and who is to say what will be cause and what will be effect?

Secondly, such a brief description of such big life movements is clearly unable to do justice to the complexity and practical difficulties involved in any of the movements described above, or to engage the huge variations in people's living circumstances that form the starting points from which any of us come at these issues. Moreover, most of these movements cannot be implemented over-night, or even in a year – they require the work of small but consistent steps over many years, perhaps the rest of our lives.

What I have articulated here is the merest beginnings of a sketch – it needs so much more colour and detail. And let it never be said that I have suggested any of these movements is *easy*, let alone all of them together. But I will contend that they are all perhaps more possible and more attainable than our cultural programming would have us believe.

What I am proposing here is not a heroic lurch to some radical new experiment in community – something likely to be a flash in the pan. Rather, what we need to recover is a Biblical lens on life – eyes to see and ears to hear – and to begin, from the contexts where we find ourselves, to re-examine the thousands of choices we make through this single lens. The movements that will be of most significance will be ones made carefully and thoughtfully, with a clear view of the complexity of life. Whether we are making big steps or little steps, what is important is not so much what we succeed in attaining, but the direction in which we are travelling. The trajectory of our lives needs to be clear enough that our children will comprehend it and take the journey further than we are able.

Jeremiah calls for us to make a turning at the crossroads and follow an ancient way. But if this road seems difficult, obscure and little trodden, then let us take comfort that this is the way of Jesus:

For the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it. (Matt 7:14)

It is a road that can only be walked one step at a time.

The trajectory of our lives needs to be clear enough that our children will comprehend it and take the journey further than we are able.

Illustration by Ben Liney.

Economics of Remote Aboriginal Communities

Part 3 - Moving beyond dependency

by Tim Trudgen

In the previous articles we saw that while it is wrong to say that Indigenous people make no contribution to their local economy, the monetary economy of remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory today is a false economy, almost entirely dependent on the injection of government monies. So, how can real jobs and a real sustainable economy be re-established in these regions (remembering that indigenous people had an extensive trade system pre-colonisation)? On the basis of nine years of work in business development with indigenous families, I think there are four main points that need to be considered:

1. A local economy grows from personal motivation and energy, it cannot be built from outside.
2. Human support is required to overcome cultural and bureaucratic barriers where motivation exists.
3. Primary production, the basis of any real economy is driven by local ownership.
4. Flexibility is needed, appropriate for the pioneering and unique circumstances of remote communities.
5. Subsidies are the best mechanisms of financial aid to support fledgling enterprises.

In this article I will discuss the first two points of this list: motivation and support for motivation.

1. Motivation

The basis of our whole economic system is not money, but labour. Value in the economy is created only through sweat and hard work. In any community where people live in a state of welfare dependency, people believe that their effort is irrelevant. Instead, they believe that finding the secret “open sesame” results in money and riches. Money is seen as giving access to labour and not the other way around.

In fact, sometimes the Government seems to believe this too – that money can be used as a carrot and stick to create a labour force. The recent economic focus on remote Aboriginal communities has the Government and others looking at ways to bring big business into communities, believing that this will create job opportunities and that such opportunity will create local participation. But others could also argue that importing industry would exploit the cheap labour potential in these communities. Pure capitalists probably wouldn't see the problem with that; such a method would create the “necessary” economic growth. But this approach ignores the social impact of big business take-overs on local morale and the existing problems of economic dependency. This same “job opportunity” approach is seen in current policy, and programs that are geared to teaching ‘work readiness’; that is, teaching people to believe in the sale of their labour. The current expression of this in CDEP (Community Development Employment Project) and Work for the Dole is enculturating people into a 9 to 5, ‘work while you're being watched’ mindset. So, what is the problem?

The problem with these models is that dependency is maintained,

... internal motivation is at its peak when people are driven by a passion for the work itself or for a dream they believe in. This is what I call a ‘creative calling’

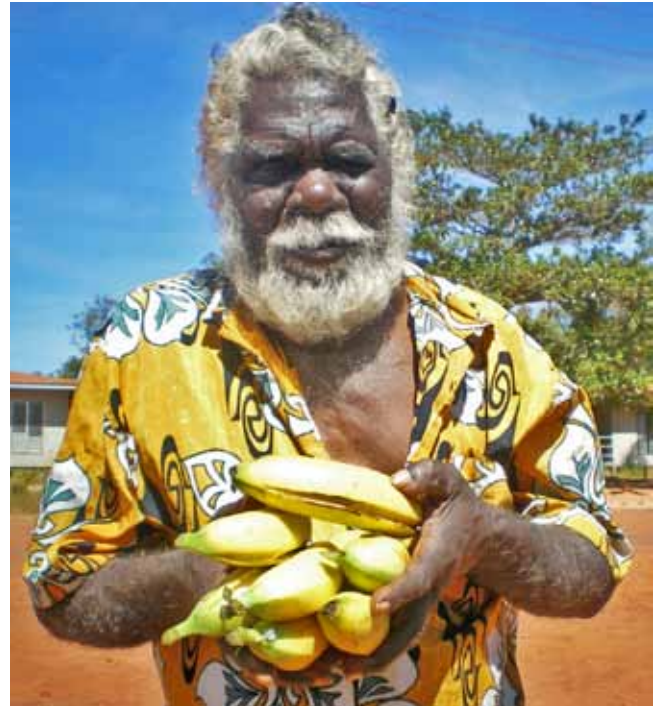
dole workers are dependent on the lure of money and a ‘big brother is watching’ incentive to work is developed. People are being taught to be dependent on the carrot and stick – a reward and punishment, in order to participate. This assumes and maintains a situation where there is no trust in people’s independence. The result is that people will not lift a finger outside of what they absolutely have to do to get paid. This spreads to family, clan and home life. Males are particularly susceptible to this Western enculturation, believing that having done their hours, they can slack off for the rest of their lives and leave it to their wives. Sounds familiar? The modern economy encourages this compartmentalisation of life in us all – but multiply it by five or ten for people who have grown up with government handouts, and have been given no other way to understand that wealth comes from productivity, which comes from labour. And labour in both its quality and quantity is a result of personal motivation.

When reward and punishment is used to motivate people, they do only as much as they must, and resist increasing labour input. To put it another way, they resist productivity and growth. But when people choose to do something out of their own values system, they are internally driven and will increase labour to reach their goals. This internal motivation is at its peak when people are driven by a passion for the work itself or for a dream they believe in. This is what I call a ‘creative calling’ (or purpose), which has more productive potential than other internal motivations, such as, “I want my kids to be well off”, or “it’s good to be productive”. Whatever the internal driving value, without motivation coming from within the person, there is no incentive for growth, innovation, or independence. But it is these very factors that drive entrepreneurship and market diversity – particularly in primary and secondary production. Personal motivation is the only place from which people will draw forth the effort required to kickstart and maintain new enterprises and the new economy that is required in places such as Arnhem Land. Once people start working out of a sense of purpose, goal, dreams and passion – rather than simply believing in the power of money – they begin to believe in their own power in themselves and others. This becomes the place from which economic development is achieved in a way that will move beyond government support.

Some people ask if there is really anyone with motivation in indigenous communities. Yes, despite the disempowerment suffered, there are many amazing individuals who continue to dream and believe that they can create economic and social independence for themselves, their families and their clans. These are the people we work to support through the AHED project, which is now supporting a dozen or more endeavours in one remote community at any one time.

2. Supporting motivation

Passion and motivation die hard. We came to Galiwin’ku to support motivated individuals and groups 18 months ago. In that time, more than 18 different people and groups have engaged with us in enterprises they are actively developing, based on their own internal motivation and effort. This is despite 30-40 years of crisis, demoralisation and welfare



Timothy Demala celebrates his first crop of bananas after his garden burnt down.

disincentives in their community.

But without support, people give up. Motivated individuals must be supported to overcome all the barriers involved in participating in the economy and running an enterprise. They need help to find resources, supplies and the practical things that come with managing money, staff and analysing business decisions etc. This is not much different to the needs of mainstream entrepreneurs. However, for many remote Aboriginal people, support must also include learning the “white man’s” rules about how to start and run a corporate structure, such as understanding the taxation system and the function of a corporation. They also need help overcoming cultural barriers. As many remote locals have English as a second language, they cannot communicate well with the mainstream and don’t know where to start to find even basic information about their needs. Without support in these areas, they find themselves in the dark and isolated; unable to succeed and not knowing why. This turns motivation into depression and other mental disorders.

Motivation cannot be created by outside influence. Real, empowering education gives people the ability to find their vision, but passion is birthed within the person by their own soul. No one can insert it. This makes it a valuable commodity indeed. So when it blossoms, it must be supported.

Surprisingly, in 2008 we found that very few (almost no) services existed to provide such support to economic visionaries in Arnhem Land remote Aboriginal communities. Programs were designed to help write business plans, and get loans or even small business grants, but mostly there was nothing designed to give no-strings-attached help to the everyday learning, information and resourcing needs of Indigenous people with big ideas. This support to local visionaries is the second key to successful and sustainable

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Go to: www.whywarriors.com.au/ahed-project/volunteer-opportunities.php

economic development, because it enables those with the passion and internal motivation to overcome barriers to create new productive nodes in the local economy.

Let's look at an example. One of our clients many years ago was successfully running a lush tropical market garden, using treated effluent from the local sewage farm. The effluent was being pumped onto his land, but he did not know that he could not use it under Balanda (Australian) law without a special license. His access was shut off. At this point no one offered to help him get the right licenses or teach him how to use the water safely. Even while the local community garden in town failed time and time again, no one asked how can we provide long-term help to allow this visionary to maintain his once flourishing garden. He got help here and there, but when he came to us shortly after we started the AHED project in his community, he was successfully growing sugar cane, but his bananas were still failing for lack of nutrients. He was also an old man now so he needed workers to help in the garden. Thus supporting his motivation meant finding and importing a sugar cane juicer he could afford, helping him learn to run a market stall for his juice, bringing in expert advice on how to get nutrients with his low income, looking into the law on sewage reuse and working towards a reuse license, helping him find strategies to save for vehicles and equipment, and helping him find and motivate a workforce. Despite some setbacks his garden is gradually improving without the nutrients from the effluent and we are working toward him getting his license. Despite his age and the barriers he has faced, his motivation and activity in his enterprise has increased.

Supporting visionaries in their passion unfortunately is not as simple as diving in and helping everyone with anything they want. If the support person ends up running around doing everything for the visionary, this is not empowerment, but rather, leads back to an unhealthy dependency and can

undermine a person's drive. The visionary will likely creep into laziness at the hands of an overzealous program or supporter. The supporter can also get into the danger of managing the client and their vision, which strips their sense of control from the client and also ruins motivation. So, support must focus on keeping the visionary informed, educated, and the principal party in all decisions. We must focus on supporting a person's motivation by removing the real barriers they face and leaving the barriers that they have the ability to change themselves. By this process the short-term success will not be shown in statistical outcomes, but in the direct effort the local visionary puts in, and this effort should well exceed that of the dominant culture supporters. In the example above, our gardener today proves to have as much or more motivation in his enterprise than when he started, even though his workforce failed him many times and his garden was lost to a bush fire on one occasion. Still, his motivation is demonstrated by his increasing commitment to put in hours and effort every day to improving his garden.

To support motivation for economic growth in indigenous communities, we must do so through mechanisms that allow the entrepreneur to do the hard yards – to allow them to fail and get back up. Motivation can only be supported if the models for economic and enterprise development value the person and human process *over* the economic outcomes their enterprise might achieve. The result is not rapid economic growth and the sudden rescuing of these Aboriginal economies (a dangerous hope), but it is gradual, sustainable growth, with the potential for the exponential expansion of these economies in the long term as people's hopes and hearts turn mistakes into learnings – and finally success.

Tim Trudgen is the Managing Director of Why Warriors Pty Ltd. He has worked closely with Indigenous people from North-East Arnhem Land (Yolŋu), Northern Territory Australia, since 2001. Today he works as a cross-cultural educator, and as an Enterprise Facilitator to help Yolŋu develop their economic and social endeavours.

Simplicity Parenting

by Janet Ray

*Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them,
for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.*

Matt 19:14

Earlier this year, a friend passed on a book to me - *Simplicity Parenting* by Kim John Payne. I am not one to read many books like this, but once I picked up this book I found it hard to put down. Parenting is hard work at the best of times, full of joys and struggles; but parenting in a hyper-consumer culture throws up a whole new level of complexities and conundrums. There are so many questions: what do I *think* about this? What do I *do* about that?

This book by Kim John Payne has really helped me to clarify some of my thinking as well as given me practical strategies for action. So much so, that a group of us have used the book as the basis for a whole day-long discussion on parenting – not just about the ideas in this book, but about our own experiences of parenting as well. It is such a worthwhile thing to do, I thought I would give a very brief summary of the book here to encourage any others who are asking similar questions to have a look, and to talk about it with others.

1. Why Simplify?

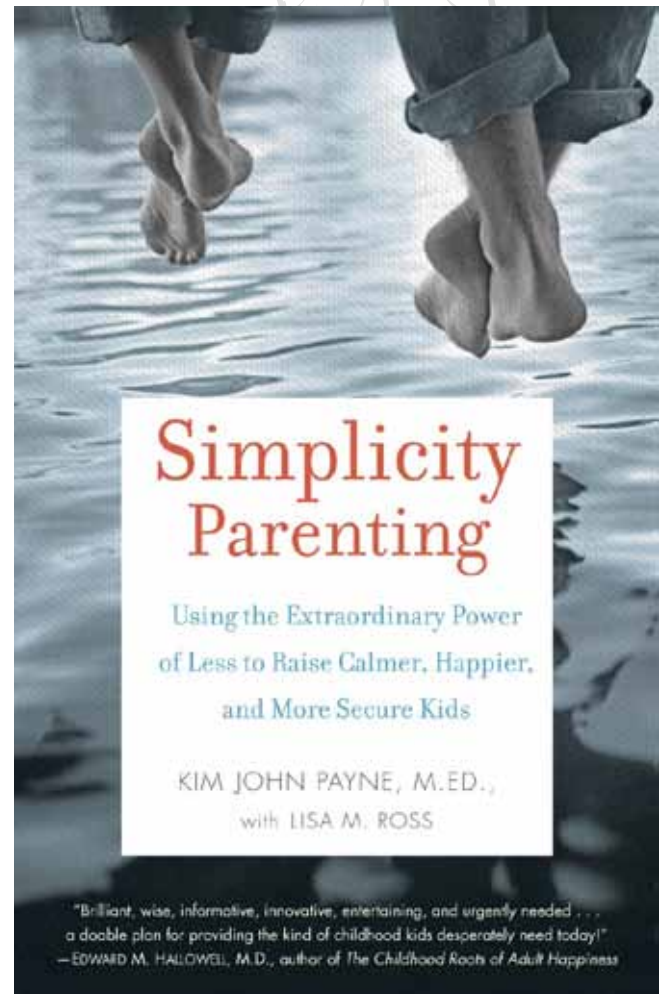
Kim John Payne covers some of “the problem” with our society’s view of childhood in this chapter. He asserts that our drive towards “too much, too soon, too fast” deprives our kids of what they need most: opportunities for deep, focused play, and connection with family - a safe haven to slowly unfold into the people they are meant to be. Too many toys, too much adult information, too much media, and too many scheduled activities take their toll on both these things.

What is it about childhood that you want to protect and preserve for your little ones? Be specific – get a clear picture of your dreams for them. Having a clear image of our goal will ease the daily decisions that must be made in a way that protects childhood.

2. Soul Fever

Soul Fever is what the author describes as the emotional equivalent of a physical fever. When small (or large) stresses accumulate, you may find your child with a soul fever: they are “out of sorts”, not at their best (and quite possibly at their worst), and they may seem stuck in that frustrated state. Payne suggests that we notice this and take it as seriously as a physical fever – slowing down, drawing the child near, suspending normal routine in order to give the child the calm and safe space to untangle their “emotional knot” – to return to their best, most balanced self.

How do you know when your child is overwhelmed? Some children may become sullen, others hyperactive. Some may



become more irritable, or have less patience with siblings. As Payne described in the book, when a child is overwhelmed with cumulative stress, it is almost as though your child becomes a caricature of his normal self, with all the “quirks” intensified.

“When your child seems to deserve affection least, that’s when they need it most.” When the quirks are showing, when the behavior is most embarrassing, Payne makes the point that that is the time for us to draw them close, to dial back on daily routine, to have a quiet day at home – for many children this is all they need to come back to their best, to “reset”.

3. Environment

How much stuff is too much? What kind of environment is most healthy? What environment is most conducive to nurturing imagination or to a giving spirit?

This chapter discusses the “mountain of toys” that is so common in bedrooms and toy boxes everywhere, and the implications this phenomenon has on developing children. It’s been only 50 years since the advent of mass-produced, inexpensive toys, and the marketing of those toys directly to children. Over this time, one historian, Chudacoff, notes that children’s play has taken a dramatic shift – now far less focused on activities, but more focused on the things involved. Kim John Payne also notes: “The trend towards more high-tech toys speaks to the presumed need for more and more stimulation to hold a child’s attention. This notion has been sold to us so aggressively, not by any one advertisement, but by the cumulative whole. It is the endgame of the commercialization of play. It asserts that play requires products, and that parents must constantly increase the quantity and complexity of toys to capture their children’s attention.”

This chapter really gets you thinking about the role of advertisers in your child’s environment. Marketers fill children’s programming with the message that they should not be content with what they have. That what they really need is more things – that fulfillment can be found in “stuff”. We, too, may be vulnerable to messages from marketers that claim that toy will spark creativity and unleash imagination! Payne comments: “Ironically, this glut of goods may deprive a child of a genuine creativity builder: the gift of their own boredom.” I found it helpful to remember here that there is no toy that a child really needs to develop well. What they need is unstructured time.

The good news is that we can choose another way. That we can, as Payne says, “draw lines in the sand around our children”, protecting them from the commercialization of childhood and the onslaught of too much stuff. We can give them the opportunity to engage deeply in imaginative play, to create their own worlds and characters. We can provide them an environment of calm openness. Perhaps, best of all, we can

nurture in them a spirit that will be for them a lifelong gift – a knowledge that fulfillment comes from relationships, not things. This chapter goes into great detail with tips for paring down the toys and books and keeping only what is best.

4. Rhythm

“Meaning hides in repetition: we do this every day or every week because it matters. We are connected by this thing we do together. We matter to one another. In the tapestry of childhood, what stands out is not the splashy, blow-out trip to Disneyland but the common threads that run throughout and repeat: the family dinners, nature walks, reading together at bedtime, Saturday morning pancakes.”

The message in this chapter is that we can help our children and our families thrive by providing elements of rhythm or predictability. Payne describes these rhythmic family rituals as “islands of consistency and security” that can give our children a chance to take a breath, to re-center, and to stay balanced. Learning is increased and tantrums are kept to a minimum. Our routines need not be complex — It may be one or two simple family rituals that connect your family. You will be amazed at how everyone benefits, and how you will look

forward to these times just as much as your little ones!

If your family is busy, rhythm is still achievable, and is even more important. If both parents work, if hours are unpredictable, little rituals can work wonders to ground your

family and give your children a sense of security.

5. Schedules

Payne says in this chapter: “Just as too many toys may stifle creativity, too many scheduled activities may limit a child’s ability to direct themselves, to fill their own time, to find and follow their own path.”

Research cited in the book notes that, since 1981, homework time has doubled, scheduled extracurricular activities have doubled, and school days have lengthened – so that time for child-directed play is scarce. Spontaneous neighborhood games have been replaced by organized leagues, directed by adults. Even play is often adult-directed.

Payne suggests we discover “the gift of boredom” – and understand what a gift it truly is! Boredom can unleash some of the best, most creative, child-directed play – the kind that is the antidote to so many of the stresses they face. He says: “Let your kids be bored. Let them be. Sometimes in my lectures I write up a ‘prescription’ for parents: “Boredom. To be allowed three times a day, preferably before meals.”

By allowing down-time, we restore balance, and the “high” moments, the camping trips, the birthday parties, the trips to the zoo, are made even more valuable. They are anticipated, daydreamed about, remembered. Payne explains that anticipation counters instant gratification. It strengthens our children’s inner life with patience and an ability to wait - to

our drive towards, “too much, too soon, too fast” deprives our kids of what they need most: opportunities for deep, focused play, and connection with family



hold back their own desire for ‘everything now.’

He clarifies the point: “I am not against sports, or toys...I am against the way that we’ve transposed adult endeavors – with an adult sense of competition, fanaticism, and consumerism – into children’s lives.”

6. Filtering Out the Adult World

One way we protect childhood is by acting as a “filter” for our young children – doing what they cannot yet do for themselves. This chapter gave some great practical tips on what things to hold back on while children are still very young. And central to it all is the need to simplify screens and learn to say “No, Thanks”.

It’s so counter-cultural it can make you look a little bit (or a lot) crazy, but rest assured you can do this in a way that works for your family, and you may even find this simpler way of life is much easier with young kids! Payne says: “Choosing not to have a television, at least while your kids are young, does not say ‘Television is an unqualified evil’ or ‘We want to go back to life in the 1940s’. It says, simply, on balance, ‘No thanks.’ It is a choice for engagement (with people, and the three-dimensional world) over stimulation, and activity over passivity, especially while kids are young. And you will greatly diminish your children’s exposure to violence and consumerism. Most of all, you will expand, almost doubling on average, your family’s free time.”

This chapter makes the strong case that limiting or removing television is one of the most powerful tools for a family who wants to simplify. Not only is there a new, safe space for children to develop slowly, but there is much more control

of those messages targeted directly to children by marketers: *what you have is not enough; you are not complete; you need more stuff* (particularly the stuff we are selling!).

Another place we can act as good filters is in the conversation that takes place around our children. Children are often offered too much adult information, too much emotional clutter, before they have built the foundation to process it. This chapter points out that too much information does not prepare children for the grown-up world, rather, it paralyzes them. With great intentions, we lecture kindergarteners about shrinking oil reserves and world hunger – these topics are popping up more and more in children’s books and on children’s TV. We may think we are helping to create young activists, but childhood is not a time for these anxieties.

I loved the simple rule of “True. Kind. Necessary.” for conversation around children. Before sharing anything, we can ask: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?

I think that the main thing that I have taken from reading this book is to slow down and be more mindful of what, who and how our family nurtures and supports our children in their growing – physically, emotionally and spiritually. I have also really appreciated journeying with other parents in exploring how to best grow our children, knowing that we are not alone, and have a framework and the support of other parents in our work. I encourage you to read this book with your fellow parent, grandparents, friend or group of friends and share your thoughts and experiences.



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