

BEYOND THE SLAP OF THE BEAVER'S TAIL:
UNDERSTANDING THE THREATS TO OUR FUTURE

As addressed to
The Way Through to the Future
an event celebrating the 166th anniversary of
Sydenham Street United Church
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
March 11th, 1977

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"Something has gone wrong."

These words were spoken by Dr. J.A. Corry, Past-Principal of Queen's University on the occasion of his being honoured by the Royal Bank of Canada. They are the slap of the beaver's tail. They sound a warning of present and approaching danger which we ignore at our peril.

Strong words, I grant you, but the confusion of our age cannot be pierced by an uncertain sound. A beaver's tail which cracks the water with all the impact of a softly falling spruce bough would not serve as a reliable warning signal. On the other hand, a beaver which could not distinguish between the warning slap of another beaver's tail and the backfire of a passing automobile on a nearby road, would soon be a nervous wreck. Eventually such a beaver might even give up the attempt to tell the difference between sounds which warn and intrusive noise. Such a response, while understandable, is dangerous. The beaver's future would be threatened by his inability to discriminate.

So it is with us. Our survival, as persons and as a society, depends upon our ability to notice, attend to, grasp, and finally respond appropriately to the warning signs in our environment. Our future is threatened to the extent that we are unable to hear the cries of warning which are now being raised. If we do not hear warnings, we will not act.

Does this last fact account for the apparent normalcy of our situation? Look around. Relatively little seems to be happening in our society that indicates that we are deeply aware of the fact that our present way of life poses a threat to ourselves, our grandchildren, and this earth. Futurists and theologians may talk of the need for new forms of life, but the active demand for such life seems to be small. Even futurists, in spite of their talk of brave new futures, tend to assume that the basic social climate in North America between now and the end of the century will be no more disruptive than the last twenty-five years have been.

This is not to say that changes are not being made. Articles on the conserver society proliferate, as do advertising appeals to cut down waste and reduce energy consumption. But by and large life goes on as before. Major disruptions to that life seem inconceivable. I mean, when stopping the Spadina Expressway, banning pull tab aluminum containers, and reducing development on the Niagara fruit land from 7,000 to 4,000 acres, are seen as major victories, it seems to follow that there are no threats to our future which will seriously disrupt the way we now live. If there is danger around us, we seem to be oblivious to it. We do not seem to know that we and our children are threatened. We act as if we have not yet heard the slap of the beaver's tail.

Now while this seems to be the case, I would remind you that the sun seems to set. No, I think we must look elsewhere to grasp and understand what it is that so many of us are feeling, and sensing, intuiting, and thinking, about ourselves and our situation. While it is not yet obvious that we are engaged in significant social transformation--the outward manifestations are few--it is also true that more and more of us are devoting more and more of our time and energy to attending to and trying to grasp the warning signs of our environment.

This judgment is reinforced by the work of Cathy Starrs¹ and Grant Maxwell², and by my own experience. Both Cathy and Grant conducted extensive interviews with hundreds of Canadians about their hopes, aspirations and fears for the future. They found that, when it became clear to those they were interviewing that Cathy and Grant were not Gallup pollsters but human beings who shared their concerns and who were willing to listen, those interviewed were willing, even anxious, to reveal and share their deepest feelings and fears. It is clear from both Cathy's and Grant's reports that Canadians are a good deal more worried, anxious and confused than we are normally willing to admit, even in letters to the editor. My own work reinforces this point. One of the parts of my little book--The Illusions of Urban Man³--that has been picked up and commented on most frequently and approvingly has been the Introduction. In it I draw our attention to our schizophrenia--to our official optimism and confidence on the one hand, and our private concern, fear and despair on the other.

No, it will not do to argue that our passivity rests either on ignorance of danger, or on an uncaring attitude. Rather, we need an understanding of ourselves that will allow us to hold together at one and the same time the minimum disruption to our daily life and our growing concern for our future. This is consistent with Marshal McLuhan's observation at the end of a seminar on the future at University College, "Do you hear what the students are saying? They are interested in the future because they can't stand the pain of the present."

Our situation will become clearer when we notice that we cannot convert the statement, "If we have heard no warnings, then we will not act to protect our future" into, "If we do not act to protect our future, then we have heard no warnings." To try to do so is a common but elementary mistake in logic. The point, of course, is that our own lack of passionate involvement in transforming our lives, our institutions and this earth, is not incompatible with gnawing doubt, growing concern, and debilitating anxiety. How then should we account for both our concern and our passivity? The following thoughts may help.

First, some see themselves as impotent. They have given up all hope of ever making a difference. Richard Goodwin expressed this when he said, "It would be hard to overstate the extent to which the malaise of powerlessness has eaten its way into our society, evoking a nameless unease, frustration and fury . . . We feel helpless. Perhaps one can no longer understand the world--only experience it. If this is true, politics can offer no real answer."⁴

Worst yet, if Goodwin's suspicion be true--that we cannot shape life, but only experience it--then not only politics but every form of intentional human activity--including the events of this weekend--offers no answer or hope. If such is our condition, then purposeful action is not possible. At best we can act randomly or according to patterns we have inherited, but have not made our own. To try to act otherwise may be sweet or even heroic, but it is finally foolish--it is not grounded in reality. Accordingly, we become victims of dead traditions, fads, mobs, and corrupt leaders, be they charismatic or cohesive.

Second, our inactivity may be grounded in the naive hope that, since human beings have come this far in history, there must be some pre-ordained--possibly even God-given--protection which will ensure that mankind will always muddle through. In short, we adjust, and, with ole Br'er Rabbit, "lie low". This has been captured by Colman McCarthy:

Is it true what they keep telling us--the end is coming? . . .
 If it is true--that we sit now in death row, awaiting the chaplain to escort us the last mile--why is there such a calm? People continue to visit the shope, talk with their neighbors, commute to work, pay their bills. Few grumble, few shake their shoulders to throw off the weight of gloom. The calmness is reassuring--at least until it is examined. But when it is . . . the calmness becomes more frightening than the predictions of gloom. It suggests that large numbers of citizens, in the face of such immense disasters as famine, pollution, inflation and recessions, choose to adjust to them rather than offer some measure of resistance. Adjustment to the abnormal becomes a greater threat than the abnormalities themselves. ⁵

Third, we may be attracted to and taken in by those strong and often charismatic leaders who assure us that they not only care for us, but that they know what is best. They assure us--falsely--that we discharge our full responsibilities by supporting them in their efforts to create a new world. Such leaders may chastize us when they feel we are not being supportive enough, and even accuse us of being uncaring, of living by a mean and selfish spirit. Witness our present Prime Minister.

Fourth, we may be aware, however dimly, of at least some of the signs of the times, but do not yet know what to make of them, or what the future demands of us. We may not yet be confident enough of our perceptions or our judgments to rely on them to break with the dominant culture within which we are immersed. This sense is often combined with the troubling yet realistic recognition that there is no point in threshing about and expending energy when one is not yet clear what it is that needs to be done.

This latter line of thought suggests that many of us are already aware of the warning of the beaver's tail. Our problem is not hearing it, but moving beyond it. Unlike beavers, who do not have to think what to do when warned--namely, dive for home--human beings must determine the nature and significance of the warning, and what an appropriate response would be. For us, it is not enough to know that we are in trouble, or even that something has gone wrong. Rather, we must also know what to do about it. Without knowing where to direct our energy, we become panicky and random, or despairing and passive, or both.

Note that putting the point this way obscures the fact that there is an intermediate step between our discovering significant trouble and our taking action to correct it--namely, understanding the trouble, its nature, origin, and implications. In medical terms, before we can prescribe an effective remedy, we must be able to accurately diagnose our condition.

Now we in North America like to see ourselves as "action-oriented". Our inclination is to get "right down to it", to "get on with it". We like to be doing. The danger, of course, in being so single-mindedly action-oriented is that we will leap too quickly from the perception of problems to fiddling with their solutions. Little time is spent developing diagnostic skills--namely, those skills by means of which we can select, attend to, and make sense of, the symptoms of our conditions.

Now, I have a fairly rich sense that often we miss the point we have claimed to grasp, and that our much-touted and expensive prescriptions, which we have designed to restore us to health, often make us worse. Therefore, I encourage you not to rush out to create a new world until you have a better sense and a deeper understanding of what you are up against.

Let me tell you a story. Scene 1: It is a cold and rainy night. A motorcyclist stops, reverses his coat, and puts his collar up to protect himself from the rain. Scene 2: The same motorcyclist is being taken from the scene of an accident to the morgue. He is quite dead. He skidded off the road, and landed in a nearby pile of straw. How then was he killed? This is the question which the attending policeman asked the first person who came upon the scene. The latter explains, "My first thought was how lucky this man was. He landed on the straw. He must be all right. Then I saw that through some freak accident his head had been turned right around, and by the time I turned it back again, he was dead."

I am suggesting that one of the most destructive attitudes in today's world is that with which both John Kennedy and Pierre Trudeau came to power--namely, the combination of a rich sense that we have troubles (they too had heard the slap of the beaver's tail, which is one of the sources of their appeal) and the sense that there is no question that they and their colleagues know what they are doing. They are, after all, the best and the brightest. At last competence has arrived--would the rest of us either ask how we can help or get out of the way so that they can get on with the job of restoring the nation and mankind. Such an attitude in this world in 1977 is unconscionable--to much damage has been and continues to be done by it. Too many good intentions have turned sour and bitter, to allow such men to continue to have free rein among us, when their demonstrated record is so tragic. They mean well, they work hard--but the suffering of the nation increases.

The theoretical point is this: the healing of our society, ourselves and this earth, is not merely a function of our good intentions, or even a function of our good intentions enacted massively, with money and many years. We must not only intend and do, but we must actually do the right things. Healing is a function of our executing adequate prescriptions, and these, of course, rest on and flow out of our understanding of the situation--our diagnosis of it. If our diagnosis is wrong-headed, so will our action be, regardless of our intentions of the intensity of our effort.

These things are not really new to us. Yet, consider how often we let ourselves and our leaders off the hook when the results of our actions and their actions are clearly disastrous. We do so on the ground that we and they were trying to bring about good, and that, we feel, should be worth something. In our public life, we have almost come to the position that we only hold our leaders and one another responsible for their actions if it can be shown, not merely that the actual results of the actions were damaging (as is the case of the present state of the economy, or the A.E.C.I. bribery, or the paving of farmland), but that such actions were done willfully and wantonly--that is, the actual consequences of the actions were understood, foreseen, and intended. I want to suggest to you with as much conviction as I can muster, that if we continue to use this standard of judgment for measuring the performance of ourselves and others, there is very little hope for us.

Why is this the case? First, because there are no evil men among us. Note that I did not say that there is no evil. On the contrary, evil surrounds us. But as Paul reminds us, our struggle is with principalities and powers, not directly with one another. I know of no person who deliberately and intentionally stalks this earth trying to destroy other persons. Consider Albert Speer, passionately urging on Patrick Watson⁶ the importance of our understanding that he, Hitler, and the other leaders of the Third Reich, must not be seen as evil men, for otherwise there is no lesson to be learned. It is only if they are like us--pleasant, well-intended, troubled, overworked, insensitive, and almost wholly oblivious to the evil they do--that we might benefit from meditating on their lives and the outcomes of those lives. In short, if good intentions and ignorance of the evil we do is sufficient, calmly and without pain, to disavow the actual results of our actions, then with very few exceptions, there is no room for a moral discourse among us.

However, our present habits of moral discourse, at least with those we love and care for most, reveal a very different sense than that which our public judgments display. The most significant conversations between us are pointedly directed to calling one another's attention to the unintended and unforeseen effects of our actions. It is commonplace among friends to start a conversation with, "Don't you see what you're doing. . ." This, of course, is also the constant theme of the Old Testament prophets--Israel is self-satisfied but blind. She cannot see what she does. So she is judged. Good intentions are not enough to keep the covenant.

The second reason why we should begin to hold ourselves responsible for the effects of our actions is that such a position takes seriously the actual and damaging effects of our actions. As long as we insist on covering up the actual effects of our actions by pointing to our good intentions, then we will continue to ignore the damage and also the good we do. We will pretend that we are impotent when we are not.

At least those who accuse us of deliberately doing the damage we actually do, understand the impact and the reality of the damaging effects of our actions. Much of the concern over the sexist nature of our society takes this form. The women among us are clearly right to point out the overwhelmingly sexist nature of this society and its negative effects on both men and women. They are wrong, however, to assume that we males designed it that way. To the extent that my mind is sexist, it is not because I decided one morning to be

sexist. Rather, I just grew up in this society. One--both male and female--picks up sexist attitudes and assumptions simply by being present. Now I do not want to suggest that I bear no responsibility for the shape of my imagination. Rather, I am sure that I participated all too willingly in sexist structures and attitudes and took advantage of them. My point is that willing but unwitting action is not intentional action, although the results are indistinguishable.

Now if we develop an understanding of ourselves which allows us, at one and the same time, to face and face up to our good intentions and the damaging results of so much that we do, then we can begin to grasp the fact that we live in a society which can be characterized by the words "well intended--well attempted--but ill directed". We suffer from what I call the Aswan High Dam complex.

The Aswan High Dam was to have healed Egypt, to have provided electricity for her factories and irrigation for her fields. Its completion was to provide the impetus for a great leap forward. The actual results, however, have been at best ambiguous, and at worst disastrous. The lower Nile farmlands no longer are fertilized by the silt of the yearly floods. Water-borne diseases have been spread far up the Nile in regions where they were hitherto unknown. The very silt needed in the lower Nile delta piles up behind the dam. Accordingly, there is less water in the lake than anticipated for both electricity and irrigation. In addition, evaporation from the lake is higher than anticipated. Again, the result is less water. Finally, the fishing in the eastern Mediterranean as far west as the southern coast of Italy has been affected. Are these effects real? Yes. Were they intended? No.

How are we to judge Egypt and ourselves?

We have come this far. First, we are more concerned than our public behaviour suggests. Second, our inactivity does not reflect apathy, literally a-pathos, but the frustration of impotence and not knowing how to act out our best intentions. Somehow we know that there is no point in making commitments we cannot make good on. Third, the actual effects of our actions are often bitter and damaging, and not at all what we intended. Fourth, the failure of our actions is largely a function of the inadequacy of our diagnosis.

What is the next step? Let us take it with a question. Why are our diagnoses so often wrong, or at least wrong-headed? The answer is fairly obvious, although not always attended to. Our diagnoses are inadequate when we do not know what it is we are dealing with, or when our knowledge of ourselves and our situation is importantly deficient. Consider a medical analogy. A good diagnostician draws upon an immense amount of detailed, specific knowledge of biology, physiology, anatomy, neurology, pharmacology . . . and a host of other "ologies". Not that only cracking the books will make a good diagnostician, for there is still an art in attending to phenomena and patterning them adequately. But a diagnostician who never cracked a book--who could not draw upon a wealth of background information and a generalized understanding of human beings--should not be trusted, at least not with anything precious.

As our prescriptions for action are a function of our diagnosis, so our diagnosis is a function of the understanding on which we draw. In short, if we are to escape the well-intended but ill-directed syndrome of our culture, we need not merely to arrive at new diagnostic conclusions--new public policy--but to attend to and examine the understandings on which our diagnoses rest.

We cannot sustain successful and intentional actions in relation to something which we do not understand. If we are mistaken or confused regarding who we are or what our situation is, we will almost certainly, regardless of the intensity of our conviction or effort, act inappropriately. And if our mistakes and confusions are deep and abiding, then the results of our actions will reflect those confusions and not our good intentions. At the heart, then, of our struggle towards not merely well-intended but appropriate behaviour is our need for an accurate and adequate description of our situation and our condition. We need to move towards an understanding of ourselves, and of the many inconsistent things going on in and around us, that is sufficiently powerful and persuasive to allow us to find our bearings, to form life-giving intentions, and then to "govern ourselves accordingly".

This way of coming at things suggests that the source of our troubles lies in our understanding of ourselves and of the world in which we live; that we betray our best insights and good intentions not merely because we are trivial or lazy or greedy and forgetful or even deliberately evil; but rather, we betray our best intentions because we are *silaituq*. This is a word of the Inuit people. The closest English translation would be "stupid", but this is misleading. For what it means is one who is not at one with his environment--that is, one who carries images in his head that are out of kilter with, that are not congruent with, one's environment. Such a person, one who does not understand the nature of his environment and the fit between himself and that environment, will be *silaituq*. On the other hand, the intelligence that is valued by the Inuit is not related to I.Q. or cleverness. Rather, intelligence is marked by the degree to which there is identity between what one carries in one's head and what one's environment is.

This gives a focus to the deepest agenda of this weekend--namely, that we understand the importance of the understandings we carry in our heads, and move at least a little towards life-giving understandings. We need to come to ourselves.

We can come at the same point through an article by Jay Forrester, entitled "The Counter-Intuitive Behavior of Social Systems".⁷ In it he draws our attention to the fact that social systems behave in ways that run counter to our normal intuitions, and that, therefore, if we naively trust our intuition of complex social systems, we will almost always be wrong.

Now you will no doubt notice that Forrester's point of the counter-intuitive nature of complex social reality is congruent with my own sense that our is a well-intended but ill-directed society. However, while Forrester draws our attention to the same phenomenon that I have been driving towards, I think he misleads us in one important matter--namely, he leaves us with the impressions that the source of our trouble is somehow a fault in the nature of

reality--namely, the fact that it is inherently counter-intuitive. In my judgment, this understanding lets us off the hook. The same phenomenon can be captured if we twist Forrester just this much. Let us talk not of the counter-intuitive nature of reality, but the counter-reality nature of our present intuition.

This latter formulation takes the well-intended but ill-directed nature of our society seriously; it takes our puzzlement seriously that our good intentions have not by now created the well-being we worked for; but it also locates the responsibility for the failure as our own. The fault, dear Brutus, lies with us. Our problem is not that reality is inherently counter-intuitive, but that our intuition as shaped in this culture over the years has become increasingly counter to the nature of reality. As the Inuit would say, we have become *silaituq*.

This reformulation drives us towards accepting responsibility, even for the shape of our intuition, for the shape of our imagination. By this I do not mean that any one of us has any choice about his mother tongue, or the dominant concepts of the culture within which he is first socialized, or the logic of those concepts. We inherit these things from our forefathers, even if most of us are not aware of the inheritance. But this is not to say that we have nothing to do with our imaginations. Rather, as with our feelings and our thinkings, it is both possible for us and incumbent upon us to become aware of their patterns and content and, over time, to take responsibility for shaping them and not merely being shaped by them. No one of us can change the shape or patterns of his imagination over night. We cannot even become aware of the shape and patterns of our imaginations over night. However, bit by bit, if we are willing to engage in the struggle, it is possible to identify both the shape of our imagination and alternative shapes which it--and therefore we--might take, some of which will be more life-giving. To not engage in this struggle, to argue that our imagination is simply given to us and that it has nothing to do with us, is to be grossly anti-human and irresponsible.

It is, interestingly enough, also to be at least 200 years behind the times. There was a day when it was commonly thought that human perception was something that happened to us, rather than something we did. One of the major thrusts of the last 200 years of philosophy and science has been to break down the image of human beings as passive and static in the face of a world which acts upon us. The evidence is forcing us towards an image of human beings as actively involved in our seeing as well as our doing. Perceiving is something we do, something we learn to do, and therefore, within limits, we do it well or badly. So it is, I am suggesting, with the basic shape of the imagination by means of which we conceive of ourselves and in terms of which we shape our lives.

Now I am well aware that the majority of Canadians are not aware that their mother tongue has a particular logic, let alone an implicit ontology. And very few of us can say something about the nature of the logic or the ontology of our mother tongue. However, this is slowly changing. What is more, it must change, if we are to survive.

Now the process of becoming conscious of the patterns of our consciousness will be something akin to the earlier-referred-to dawning of consciousness regarding the sexist patterns of our own lives, and of our environment. No one of us can stop becoming sexist merely by deciding not to be. Rather, it is like weeding a garden. Each sexist pattern must be identified and then rooted out. It takes time and effort, and one does not always have the inclination to make the investment. On the other hand, no one of us can rid ourselves of a sexist imagination if we do not at some time discover and acknowledge the basic shape of our minds and decide to do something about it. The discovery and acknowledgement of the shape of our consciousness is a momentous occasion.

Let me give an example. Are you aware that English has a higher capacity to nominalize verbs than any other language on earth? That is, we in English have a higher capacity and a greater tendency than any other people on earth to turn dynamic processes into static entities. Consider: we turn "informing", as a total human process, and reduce it to the conveying of "information", as if that information were as independent of persons as trees and rocks and glaciers. Among other things, this allows us to see our responsibility for others as merely conveying neutral and impersonal information to them. We bear no responsibility, or so we say, for ensuring that the other is informed. Surely we let ourselves off the hook. We ignore the degree to which our informing of one another is a function not only of "information", but of openness and trust and encouragement.

Or consider that we turn "valuing", as a human activity, into "values". We have come to talk of values as if they are things in the world, as if we would include values in a complete inventory of the world. We fail to recognize that, while it is proper to speak of the things that we value or do not value, and to determine which of these things we value most or least, that to speak of values as things is to mystify ourselves. If we are confused enough, we can even get into values clarification, and values education--and what is more, we take this as a sign of our caring, not of our confusion. But our language gives us away.

In like manner, it has become commonplace not only to talk of health as if it were a thing, but as if it were a thing that could be transported and delivered. Not only in Ottawa, but the whole country is full of talk of our need for a better "health delivery system". We use this phrase as if we know what we are talking about, which is destructive enough in itself. What is worse, we use this phrase with no sense that by continuing to use it, we are not merely dishonest, but importantly damaging. Milk can be delivered; health cannot.

I am arguing that human imagination is shapeable over time, and that it is shapeable literally by means of and in terms of the main categories and the logic of those categories of our language. Let me give you another example. In your mind's eye, draw a line in space. Now pretend to yourself that that line represents the flow of time. Still in your head, think which way does time flow for you, from left to right, or right to left? It is a safe bet that the vast majority of you see time as moving from left to right, in part because this is the way the dominant languages which have shaped Western culture are written and read. This confirms the interpenetration of consciousness and technology. Now (again in your head), mark on that line

the relative locations of past, present and future. Again, it is a safe bet that the vast majority of you will locate the past towards the left end of that line, the future towards the right end, and the present somewhere in the middle. This is the way that we conceive of time.

But we do not merely talk of the past being behind us and the future ahead of us, we experience it this way. Note what this allows us to do. This orientation of time allows us to see the future as largely uncharted, and the past as largely fixed. We say--I think wrongly, and I will explain why in a moment--that hindsight is better than foresight. Further, we can argue with one another about the importance of history because the past has gone and is, therefore, optional.

Now, let me explore the time line further. If we were sitting in Jerusalem in the 8th century B.C. and the same question was asked--namely, draw a line, pretend it is the flow of time, which way does time flow?--time would flow from right to left. Hebrew is read that way. But where would we mark on that line the past, the present, and the future? The interesting thing is that both past and future would be towards the left-hand end, and the present at the right-hand end. In other words, there is a rich sense in Hebrew, which is inherent in the very shape of the Hebrew imagination, that the past is not optional--that it stands before one, even to the fifth and sixth generations, as both blessing and curse. (Note also that this is an empirical, not a moral, judgment.) The future the children create for themselves is not created on a blank page. It is created in the midst of and with the inheritance of all that the fathers have left them. It is not merely that history is not optional for the Hebrews, as we might use that phrase, but history is that which has given one one's shape.

We are now in a position to understand the main point I want to make tonight: namely, that the main source of our troubles lies first in our inadequate and inaccurate understandings of the nature of our imagination, and second in the actual shape of the imagination which dominates us and our society. Put more boldly, let us ask, "What is it we have to change in order to ensure a just and sustainable future?" The answer is not primarily that we need to change our intentions, or to intensify our efforts, or to develop new policies, or to change the government, although all of these things have their place. But just as new programs in the service of outworn, misleading and damaging objectives are not an advance but a setback, so new major efforts to heal our world must not be premised on and cast in terms of our present dominant understandings. To continue to embody in our actions and artifacts--what we do and what we make--the same imagination which has betrayed us before is *silaituq*. It is to be wide open to another betrayal by our counter-reality imagination. Instead of trying harder with the same imagination, we need to try other, with an other imagination. We need, then, a rich and accurate appreciation of the nature and importance of our imagination, and an imagination the actual content of which is dramatically different from that which now dominates our lives.

Now you can understand when I said earlier that we mistakenly claim that hindsight is better than foresight. This is only trivially true. The facts of the case are that we understand our present and our past with the same eyes and the same imagination as we project onto the future. Insofar as our

imagination and insight are inadequate for the present, they will also be inadequate for the past, and for the future. The critical issue for us, for historians and for futurists, is that of the imagination within which we work. This explains why most long range planning does not work--it is the projection into the future of an already inadequate imagination of ourselves and our well being.

Let me be more specific. One of our Prime Minister's first acts after the 1968 election was to ask Ronald S. Ritchie, then Vice-President of Imperial Oil, to develop a model for an independent institute for research on public policy. The Prime Minister has a rich sense, founded on bitter experience as Minister of Justice and no doubt deeply reinforced since then, that all too often the "policy alternatives" offered up to Ministers by the bureaucracy are neither policy nor alternatives, in any important sense. He wanted to create, then, a "Brookings-like institution" which would provide not only the government, but all Canadians, with alternative policies by means of which we could shape our future. In a little over a year, Mr. Ritchie submitted his report. It languished in the Privy Council Office and then was finally acted upon. At the present time, the Institute for Research and Public Policy is located in Montreal. Its President is Dr. A.W.R. Carrothers.

What's wrong with that, you may ask? At the level of intention, my answer is, "Nothing". The Prime Minister is right. Such an institution is sorely needed. At the level of execution, the Institute has been troubled from the beginning, but then any new institution can have teething problems. No, my criticism of the Institute is deeper. The Institute as conceived by Mr. Ritchie and as executed to date by Dr. Carrothers, does not recognize, let alone understand, that the keystone and the challenge to public policy in Canada is the development of an adequate alternative imagination of ourselves and our situation. This is required if we are to develop the much needed capacity for accurate and life-giving diagnosis. In short, there is no point in developing alternative and even inventive public policies to solve problems which have been identified and shaped in terms of a distorted and damaging--a *silaituq*--imagination.

If you read Mr. Ritchie's report carefully, you will see that it did not occur to him that the source of our problems may be deeper than the kinds of solutions that can be offered up on the basis of "objective interdisciplinary system analysis" (his favourite phrase), and which is carried out by the best academics in Canada in a "campus-like atmosphere". Let me quote from a critique I wrote of the Ritchie proposal on first reading the document in 1970:

- (1) The Ritchie proposal is wholly unaware of the fact that it stands within one particular intellectual tradition of Western culture and of the nature of that tradition. This inadequacy is both sad and ironic, given that the basic reason for creating an Institute for Public Policy Research is to enable the government and Canadians to make wide-eyed and conscious choices regarding the alternatives before them. That is, the very instrument which proposes the Institute does not allow either the government or the people to make wide-eyed and conscious choices regarding the foundations on which such an institute is to be established.

- (2) The intellectual and cultural tradition upon which Ritchie's proposal rests is under increasing attack and can no longer simply be asserted as fact. Further, in my judgment, these attacks are largely justified.
- (3) My argument with the Ritchie proposal is not only, or even primarily, at the organizational level--that is, an argument for seven directors rather than twenty-one, or three locations rather than one--but at the deepest level of the intellectual and cultural commitments reflected in the proposed institution itself.
- (4) My summary judgment would be that an institution established according to the imagination of the Ritchie proposal will fail the Canadian people in deep and important ways, although this failure will not readily be apparent over the short run. But over the long run, the institution will be unable to fulfil the best aspirations of the Prime Minister, the Canadian people, or Mr. Ritchie.

In short, the major problems of the Ritchie proposal are conceptual in nature, and spring from its single most important fault--its unconscious and uncritical acceptance of an inadequate conceptual orientation. The secondary problems regarding personnel and organizational style basically stem from the inadequacy of the proposal's conceptual foundations. ⁸

In like manner, if you think that our new found passion for systems and systems analysis will save us, I invite you to think again, to look afresh. The "net human benefit" of our systems is that now we damage systematically where before we damaged only randomly. Nevertheless, as T.S.Eliot reminds us, we continue "to dream of systems so perfect that we will no longer have to be good".⁹

My point by now may be clear. Much of the confusion, tension and damage in our society results from our earnest, well-intended efforts as we try to account for our experience on the basis of inherently inadequate understandings of ourselves and our world. We continue to explain ourselves to ourselves inappropriately, and we continue to damage.

The symptoms surround us. Pollution, increasing cancer rate, over-population, maldistribution of food and power. But a concensus is slowly growing that these are only symptoms of a deeper malaise, and that that malaise has to do less with hard issues of resource shortages, than with the soft issues of our imagination and the patterns of our society which reflect and reinforce our imagination.

Consider Karl Deutsch in his summary of the Nobel Symposium of the Future in 1975: "The main present day limits to growth . . . are not based primarily on any rigid objective facts of nature, but rather on current social and political institutions, on the relations among states, and on the relation of human beings to each other." ¹⁰ Or consider the summary statement of Gil Winstanley in her analysis of the Limits to Growth literature: "Our future lies neither in doom--by depletion of environmental resources, nor in salvation by technology. When we may run up against some resource limits, and while technology may solve some of our environmental problems, the solution to the 'world problematique' lies in the social, economic, and political arenas. The limits which constrain our future are political and social rather than physical, and survival may require more than we are prepared to give." ¹¹ In short, the threats to our future lie with and in our imagination and the way we have embodied that imagination in our environment.

I have said that we must change our appreciation of the role and nature of human imagination, as well as work to change the concepts and logic of those concepts which dominate our own imaginations. I am dealing with the former point tonight. The question of the content of our present imagination and the content of an alternative imagination will be the main subjects of tomorrow's seminar.¹²

Our understanding of the nature of imagination must change in this way. Up until very recently, we did not have a rich appreciation of the fact that human consciousness could take on particular shapes and that those shapes were prior to human experience--that is, they were the shapes through which we experienced. Rather, since Aristotle the dominant image of Western thought has been that all men have the same experience and the differences among persons can be accounted for by the fact that we interpret this experience differently, that we push it into different shapes. Such an understanding, of course, does not lead one to explore the importance of human consciousness, the shapes of human consciousness, and the shaping of human consciousness in history. However, we are now coming to understand that there is a deep, permanent and rich interpenetration between thought, consciousness, action and environment.

In an earlier time, and still to an appalling degree today, the fundamental images of both man and the world were static, not changing importantly in time, with the one separate from the other. Man was seen as impinged on by the world in sense perception. Even in the church, where we have theological reasons for knowing better, the Gospel of our Lord has too often been understood individualistically, and our obedience as obeying static laws, rather than being filled with a new imagination by a new Spirit.

By now, this image--at least conceptually--has been thoroughly destroyed and discredited. The static, timeless, individualistic (solipsistic) image of man is being replaced by images which are dynamic, time immersed and relational. We are not only in time and space, but time and space is in us. Even to say that man is an intruder on the natural environment is to harken back to the older image which posited an essential separateness between man and this earth. St. Francis knew better; the earth was his sister.

Regardless of what else one may think of the work of Freud, Darwin, Marx, Collingwood, Peter Berger, B.F. Skinner, and McLuhan, they have this much in common: they are all driving us to recognize the deep interpenetration of ourselves and our environments.

Such interpenetration is deep and hidden. It is not obvious. But then, they suggest, to accept the obvious as fact is almost always not merely to be mistaken but to be importantly confused. For example, one thing that is obvious is that the sun sets; or, more importantly, it was obvious that nothing good can come out of Galilee; or, again, it is obvious to virtually everyone in our society that we are individuals, that we stop at our skins!

I have implied that persons, unlike other living things, do not merely live, but have conceptions of life and, more important, it is by means of and in terms of such conceptions that we discover, experience and shape the world in which we live. It follows from this that, while what we think or say

about the moon had until recently no appreciable effect upon the moon (although it may have an appreciable effect on us), what we think and say about human relations, human thought patterns, or human feelings does contribute significantly to what these relations, feelings and thought patterns will be. In short, our life as persons is not independent of what we think and say about our life as persons. Hence the importance of the word we speak and enact about ourselves.

Given this, it is important to understand both the nature of the inter-penetrations between language, reality and human consciousness, and what it is we as Western men have traditionally thought about these things, for we have been affected by them.

Human consciousness, and therefore language, are social and therefore historic phenomena. They both reflect and reinforce our perceptions of reality. Our experience is both limited and extended by the vocabulary and syntax of our language. Our language is shaped by our culture and, in turn, shapes our culture. Our language, our experience, our understanding, and our culture are forever interwoven. We must give up the comfortable, common, but very wrong-headed idea that nothing really changes when only our concepts change. Even in the church, we have known--at least until recently--that heresy was dangerous to our common life and that it should be taken seriously. We have also known that to excommunicate--to cut some one from the Word--is to treat that person as dead.

To be a person, then, is to be caught with other persons in the dynamics of shaping and being shaped. We are immersed in history. Our perceiving, thinking, feeling, experiencing, conceiving, are not something that we have, but something that we do. Whether we like it or not, or acknowledge it or not, we can over time become responsible for them. To not do so is not only to deny our humanity, but to give over to others the shaping of ourselves, our common lives, and this earth. The key to our life, then, is to develop a life-receiving imagination--an imagination of ourselves and our earth that allows us to receive that which is given unto us by the earth, by the creatures we share it with, by one another, and finally, by God.

Now, our future is threatened not only because the imagination in terms of which and by means of which we shape our lives distorts our essential reality, but because in large measure the imagination by means of which we are creating our world is one that precludes the very possibility of our discovering that the key to life is to take on an alternative imagination, mind and spirit--one which allows us to receive, not grasp at, life. So deep is our confusion. Our situation is captured by St. John the Divine:

"For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked."

Revelations 3:17

It shouldn't be news, particularly for those of us in the Hebrew-Christian tradition, that to speak is an awesome responsibility, for as the word is spoken, so it becomes and is. Those of us who are Hebrew and Christian have often had impressed upon us that the God who has to do with us seems by nature to be an incarnating God. He is a God whose word becomes flesh in the speaking

of it. This is witnessed to not only in the Old Testament but in the New. That which God speaks is done. God seems to be the only actor on this earth who has no trouble embodying His best insights--His word--in action.

Unfortunately, it has not also been explained to us that we too are incarnating creatures, that we share the image of God even to the extent that we too have the power to incarnate in action and artifact--in what we do and what we make--the deepest words we know about ourselves. The tragedy, of course, is that not understanding this point about ourselves, we have made little attempt to map and understand the dynamics of embodying. Accordingly, we are ill-prepared for the fact that, by and large, the deepest word we speak about ourselves, the word we actually embody in the actions and artifacts of this world, is not the word we intended to embody, but the word of our deepest imagination. When we finally recognize the words we have spoken, we recoil in horror and wonder how they got there. For surely it was not done by us. All this confusion and turmoil in the midst of which we live has nothing to do with us. So we disown this earth, rather than make it our own.

But the Hebrew-Christian testimony, and, interestingly enough, the basic thrust of most recent scholarship, denies our claims of innocence. That which this world is becoming is of our hand. If we are not pleased with the world which we are creating for ourselves--if we cannot pronounce it good--then we should attend to the dynamics of shaping and becoming, and to the words which we speak so that we can be shaped by, and in turn embody, a life-giving word.

But here too the mere intentions of receiving and being shaped by a different word are not enough. If they were, this world would have been healed long ago. Rather, we need to recognize that we have come to where we are over a long process of interpenetration among ourselves, our forefathers, this environment, and human consciousness.

Again, the Hebrew-Christian tradition is helpful. There is a recurring theme in the Old Testament that both the sins and blessings of the fathers are visited on the children to the fifth and sixth generations. We, in our ignorance, often read this in moralistic terms, proving that the God of the Old Testament is a God of hateful wrath, while the God of the New Testament is a God of love. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Old Testament insight is empirical in the first instance, and not primarily moral. There is a deep recognition that, whether understood or not, whether acknowledged or not, whether liked or not, to the fifth and sixth generation the forefathers have some hold and influence on the children. So it is with us.

Given the degree to which we have embedded in our build environments words about ourselves which stunt and distort us, we will be under their influence for a very long time indeed. For it is not possible to refashion the shape, size, organizational patterns of our buildings, our blocks, our cities, of our organizations overnight. The task of refashioning our world will be measured in generations, not merely in years. If we understand this, it will at least protect us to the extent that we know what we are up against, and in what direction temptation lies, and what is to be resisted.

Let me note in this regard, that among those who encourage us to instant solutions are those who encourage the Parti Quebecois to hold its referendum early so that we can get this matter over with, and those who see the next

federal election as being decisive for national unity. They mislead us; they mislead themselves. What is more important, our response that "That is just politics" implies that we think that we live in a world in which short term gain--at the cost of distorting our vision and the reality in which we live--is acceptable and compatible with long-term well-being. The extent to which we think this is the case marks the extent of our mystification. There is no possibility of a human future which is not founded on day-to-day actions by ourselves and our leaders that are consistent with the nature of the environment in which we live. To think otherwise, is not hard-nosed realism; it is to be *silaituq*.

The tragedy of our own times is not that we do not have bright and often heroic men struggling for a better world, but that, unwittingly and ultimately destructively, we engage in that struggle in terms of and by means of the same imagination which, in large measure, has brought us so close to turmoil and despair. This is captured by William Brienbaum when he said,

"Much of what passes for future think is an imagination of what the present would look like if it 'worked right' . . . It is an imagination dominated by now which aims to imprint the 'best' of now on the future. The trouble is that the best of now is not very satisfactory." 13

The point is put even more sharply by John Schaar and Sheldon Wolin. They wrote:

"The great intellectual task of the present is the task of rethinking every aspect of technological civilization. That this civilization inherently moves towards self-destruction is now clear, and any radical rethinking must start from the premiss that its manifest destructiveness will not be stopped by a broader distribution of the values or more intensive application of the methods and processes which constitute and sustain the evil itself." 14

In short, the limits of our imagination are the limits of our future, the shape of our imagination is the shape of our future. If we want a future world in which we are more fundamentally at home, then our refashioning must include not only the obvious levels of programs and hardware, nor even the deep structures of our economics and social organizations, but the very shape of our imaginations.

Let me summarize what I have said. The roots of the current confusion and breakdown of our society, which is increasingly oppressive, can be traced to the shape of our imagination--by means of which most of us live most of the time--and the fact that this imagination is now reinforced so consistently in our build environment--in our buildings, organizational patterns, street patterns. . . and on and on.

The chaos and breakdown of our own day, therefore, should not surprise us. They are not accidents, but the outcomes of a set of damaging and deluding images and understandings that we have inadequately understood. In the words of Northrop Frye, "In what our culture produces, whether it is art, philosophy, military strategy or political and economic development, there are no accidents: everything a culture produces is equally a symbol of that culture." 15 Or again, to use the words of Stafford Beer, "If society is a dynamic system, all these phenomena are not simply blemishes--they are its outputs. These unpleasing

threats to all we hold most dear are products of a system so organized as to produce them--to produce them, and not their contraries. They are not accidental; and they are not mistakes." 16 The innocence we profess and the bewilderment we express regarding the origin of the damage we inflict on one another will no longer do.

I can remember the horror I felt when I heard the Prime Minister, at the height of the F.L.Q. crisis, talk of those who had kidnapped Pierre Laporte as "those who have come among us"--as if we had nothing to do with them, as if they had landed in Canada from Mars on the end of a string. The Prime Minister showed no sense then--and I sense none in him now--that a major skill in our culture is learning to use other people and things for your own ends--which is surely what kidnapping is all about. The mistake of the F.L.Q. was not to run counter to this culture, but to step outside the bounds of our self-mystification, so that their abuse of other could be clearly seen. If you hear this as tolerance for the activities of the F.L.Q., you wholly misread me. Rather, my judgment rests on our leaders who encourage our further mystification, who do not help us to understand ourselves and, therefore, to come to ourselves. While it may be more comforting in the short run to live under the tutelage of a Prime Minister who disavows responsibility for activities in which he is clearly involved--for such a Prime Minister is not in a good position to call us to account--yet such a man finally and importantly deludes us, and, further, encourages our irresponsibility.

You and I know that while we may be dull, we are not stupid. Eventually, we catch on to what the game is and we play it. Witness the retort of Claude Wagner when first asked about the special fund to support him as Conservative candidate. His response was that he was no more interested in that fund, what happened back in the fall of 1972, than the Prime Minister was in who the donors of his swimming pool were. My fundamental point, of course, is this: our innocence is thoroughly tattered. There is no credibility in our surprise or our complaints. What is happening to us is of our own hand. At the very least, we should have the integrity to acknowledge that we are reaping the harvest we have sown.

This point is made graphically and painfully in the fourteenth chapter of Jeremiah. Let me read it to you:

This came to Jeremiah as the Word of the Lord concerning the drought:

- 2 Judah droops, her cities languish,
Her men sink to the ground;
Jerusalem's cry goes up.
- 3 Their flock-masters send their boys for water;
They come to the pools but find no water there.
Back they go, with empty vessels;
- 4 The produce of the land has failed,
Because there is no rain.
The farmer's hopes are wrecked,
They uncover their heads for grief.
- 5 The hind calves in the open country
and forsakes her young
Because there is no grass;
- 6 For lack of herbage, wild asses stand on the high bare places
and snuff the wind for moisture,
As wolves do, and their eyes begin to fail.

- 7 Though our sins testify against us,
 Yet act, O Lord, for thy own name's sake.
 Our disloyalties indeed are many; we have sinned against thee.
- 8 O hope of Israel, their saviour in time of trouble,
 Must thou be a stranger in the land,
 A traveller pitching his tent for a night?
- 9 Must thou be like a man suddenly overcome,
 Like a man powerless to save himself?
 Thou are in our midst, O Lord,
 And thou hast named us thine; do not forsake us.
- 10 The Lord speaks thus of this people: they love to stray from my ways,
 they wander where they will. Therefore he has no more pleasure in them;
 11 he remembers their guilt now, and punishes their sins. Then the Lord
 said to me, do not pray for the well-being of this people. When they
 12 fast, I will not listen to their cry; when they sacrifice whole-offering
 and grain-offering, I will not accept them. I will make an end of them
 13 with sword, with famine and pestilence. But I said, O Lord God, the
 prophets tell them that they shall see no sword and suffer no famine;
 14 for thou wilt give them lasting prosperity in this place. The Lord
 answered me, the prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have no
 sent them; I have given them no charge; I have not spoken to them. The
 prophets offer them false visions, worthless augury, and their own
 15 deluding fancies. Therefore these are the words of the Lord about the
 prophets who, though not sent by me, prophesy in my name and say that
 neither sword nor famine shall touch this land: by sword and by famine
 16 shall those prophets meet their end. The people to whom they prophesy
 shall be flung out into the streets of Jerusalem, victims of famine and
 sword; they, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, with no one
 to bury them: I will pour down upon them the evil they deserve. ¹⁷

Isn't that deadly? And isn't it life-giving! There is a recognition that, while our God may care for us even to the point of death, He is not sentimental. He is steadfast, not only in His love for us, but in His insistence that we become what He would have us be--namely, responsible co-creators of this earth with Him. No other response will do. If, because of the corruption of our imagination, we are unable to choose His word from among the many others contending for our attention, it is clear that not even His love for us can protect us from the effects and the results of our choices.

There is, then, no future in the dominant present. There is no way through to the future on the road we are now travelling. It is not a question of sincere good intentions, or even of the Avis complex (trying harder). We stand in need of a new imagination--only so can we escape the death that awaits us and live.

There is, then, an agenda for the nation, a focus for our life together which is worthy of our best and constant attention. Our game should not be merely keeping the country together, or the development of some alternative policy for transportation, but the fashioning of a new consciousness of ourselves and this earth so that we may in turn act to create a world fit to live in, and that we become persons fit to live with.

If you say that I am Utopian, or idealistic, or merely moralistic, and not tough-minded and hard-nosed, I would invite you to further conversation, but with this comment. You may understand that we are in trouble, but I doubt

that you grasp the depth of the trouble in which we find ourselves. As that depth is plumbed and understood, you will discover that, to refashion our consciousness so that life is no longer seen and understood as a function of goods and services, but rather as inherently relational--given to and received from one another--is not merely sweet, but the only possible future for mankind which is worth living.

The "better future" for which we long is contingent upon our first developing reality-centred imaginations, and then embodying those imaginations in ourselves and in our environments in ways which both reinforce and reflect our deepest self-understanding. This agenda is finally the only one that matters. To think otherwise is to persist in the illusion that we know what we are doing, we know where we are going, we know to whom we belong, and we know what the outcomes of our actions will be--when the evidence so graphically testifies against us.

A parting thought: if our mystification is as deep and our confusion as rampant as I fear they are, then now is not the time to mount another children's crusade. Our response to perceiving our situation and our condition more deeply should not be to "get on with it". In fact, it cannot be that, for to do so is to invite the disaster of acting out half-formed intentions on the basis of our present imagination. Rather, we have a long period of time in which our prime agenda must be the development of an understanding of ourselves and our world which is sufficiently powerful to allow us to act in hope, with reasonable confidence. Meanwhile, precisely because we are coming to understand the depth of our confusion and are beginning to glimpse the innumerable ways we betray our best intentions, we will do as little as possible. The major projects will be postponed rather than undertaken, or, as Robert Theobald says, "One should do what one can, plus ten percent for risk." 18

One can put the point, drawing on the Bible. Jesus' response to his baptism is to be led into the wilderness by the Spirit. Why? Not to heighten his resolve, or to deepen his good intentions, or to intensify his efforts, but to understand the nature of who he was and the nature of what he was up against, and finally to ensure that the spirit by which he lived was the Holy Spirit of our God. So I suggest to you that we, too, have a wilderness ahead, in at least two ways. First, because so much of life as we have shaped it is shaped in destructive images. Look again at the fourteenth chapter of Jeremiah. Second, because we too need the gift of the wilderness to be led by the Spirit, not to heighten our resolves or deepen our intentions, but to clarify who we are, in whose service we stand, what we are up against, and what it is we are called to become.

We are called to receive life--to be now who it is we can become. If we reject this call, we shall surely become who it is we are now. We should also remember that who we are becoming shapes, and is shaped by, who and what we choose to serve.

The God whom we claim to serve awaits us in the wilderness.

Let us go hence.

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