**Copout in Cairo**

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As COP 27 drew to a pitiful close with no action on emissions of reparation, I met a friend in a cafe in West London. Distracted by our discussion, we failed to notice his Earl Grey being served in a takeaway cup; aghast, I requested a china mug for mine. Blowing and sipping, we grumbled about the lack of environmental responsibility, including the now widespread use of plastic cups in cafes.

These cups give the impression ‘happy to be recycled’, but on the whole they cannot be; and even if they could, most staff and customers would likely throw them in with general rubbish, to be buried. Probably in the ground of a poorer country, that needs the trade, albeit in environmental vandalism.

In the UK an estimated 2.5 billion takeaway cups are annually thrown away; it’s more than 50 billion in the US apparently, mostly going to landfill. In addition, half a litre of water and 61 g of carbon dioxide are used in the manufacture process. They are an environmental sore, one of many daily irritants that together constitute a chronic planetary disease, The Environmental Crisis.

So why I asked don’t cafés use china – don’t they realise the plastic paper-looking cups are bad for the environment? They don’t care, was my friend’s blunt reply; same as the water companies that routinely pump sewage into the seas, the CEOs of the energy companies swimming in money, the fast fashion bosses, everyone who makes and eats animal produce, and most politicians, especially those in developed nations. According to the evidence, they just don’t care. The question then becomes, is it possible to make people care. Care about the environment, about one another, about rain forests, sea, air, climate, animals, ecosystems, etc. To which old friend replied, no, you can’t.

Certainly most politicians show little or no interest; Corporate Man and Woman don’t seem to care a jot, and the majority of individuals are too overwhelmed with the demands of life to be unduly concerned.

COP27 has reinforced the notion that, ‘caring’, certainly by the nations chiefly responsible for the mess (and now haggle over paying to mitigate the impact), is totally absent. And that the environmental crisis is just another annoying consideration to be juggled within an economic framework of perpetual growth; perpetual that is until the moment when all the natural resources are used up, global warming has reached unbearable levels, 3/4oC maybe, land masses submerged, hundreds of millions of people displaced, ecosystems and remaining animal species wiped out.

Caring is a driver for action and, as is repeatedly chanted and consistently ignored, without urgent action the cause is lost. Children are striking from school, because they care deeply, also because they are furious at the adults, who a) caused the catastrophe, b) aren’t doing anything much to address it, and c) because they want to envisage a future for themselves. Heartfelt caring fuels not just everyday action, but action of a certain type or quality – Right Action, based on, imbued with, love.

So, make people ‘care’ through raising awareness of environmental issues (local and global) and the consequences of (their) behavior, and ‘The People’, with a small and large ‘P’, will wake up and change their habitual, often destructive ways. That’s the theory, well that was my theory in the Portuguese café.

Who cares?

We can determine what someone cares about and what they value by their actions – most often its themselves. Businesses are driven by the determination to make money; politicians want votes so they can stay in power, and individuals, most of whom are physically drained and emotionally battered, care about their families/the people they like and depend on, and creating some level of security in, what is for most, a hostile, uncertain world.

If caring – the carrot, isn’t on the table as an effective motivating force, certainly not within the time scale required to Save Our Planet (SOP), then the only option is the stick, heavy and painful. Legislation, my friend asserts, is the only way to curb destructive environmental behavior; and, to a degree, he is right. Pass a law that CEOs of companies polluting the air, water, soil will be imprisoned if such behavior continues and they will, he believes, be more inclined to clean up their act.

But, effective as such legislation might be, the flaw in this approach is that it doesn’t impact on the legislative body itself, i.e., governments. In addition it requires that these governments, are not corrupt, i.e., are free from corporate influence – energy companies, big banks, private water companies , etc. But as we know, far from being independent of such bodies, politicians are usually snuggled up in bed with them.

Notwithstanding these drawbacks, legislation is a powerful stick, and applied vigorously would, could, should, be an important tool in changing behavior. But, and here I’m afraid we are back to caring, given that governments don’t care enough to employ the stick, pressure needs to be applied to force them to wield it. And for this to happen ‘the populace’, or large enough numbers of the weary masses need to care sufficiently to mobilize and act; to protest, to boycott polluting companies, petition politicians, to engage.

To a degree, a larger than ever degree, this is now happening, but despite powerful campaigns by for eg Extinction Rebellion (XR), Just Stop Oil (JSO), and the brilliant Schools Strike for Climate, very little is changing and the scale of the environmental emergency/crisis/catastrophe grows daily. We are, it seems, back at the beginning.

Who caused the catastrophe?

The people responsible for the catastrophe live in developed nations, particularly the richest people in the richest countries. It’s not the behavior of those in Sub-Saharan Africa, or Bangladesh, it’s not the poor of the world that are driving climate change, and for the record the environmental crisis is not in any way caused by overpopulation (birth rates are now falling in every country, including India and China), as many in developed nations seem to believe. Blame ‘the other’ always, the brown/black ‘other’ usually; don’t look at yourself or the facts, don’t accept responsibility, simply blame someone else.

It is the comfortable and complacent in developed nations who caused the mess and continue to fuel it. And, spoilt, deeply selfish and with a myopic view of the world, they refuse to change behavior, refuse to give up anything. To stop eating animal produce, to cut back on air travel, to stop buying stuff they don’t need, to stop driving fossil fuelled vehicles, to shop responsibly, and to engage. Because, and here we go again, ‘they’ don’t give a damn, or not enough of a damn to take the uncomfortable steps and make the boring changes required.

Absence of caring hasn’t happened accidentally, it has been deliberately cultivated to strengthen an unjust socio-economic system of exploitation and division. Whole societies have been conditioned into selfishness, greed and (sensory) pleasure; taught virtually from birth to be competitive and ambitious and to do whatever it takes to get what they want, irrespective of the damage to others, society or the natural world. Materialism and consumerism, two sides of the same rusty coin, form the ideological framework of this cynical ugly world view; a view that, via globalization has been spread far and wide, polluting every nation in every continent.

Excerpted from: ‘Copout In Cairo: ‘They’ Just Don’t Care’.

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