

undercurrents

challenging the mainstream | imagining what is possible

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CULTURAL HYPNOSIS

Ever get the feeling that something is wrong? Our culture conditions us to destroy what is important - and works hard to persuade us there's no alternative. It's time to break the spell.

This essay was first published in the May 2006 edition of *The Dubliner Magazine*.

I am a Dubliner. This city is in my bones. My paternal great-grandmother sold fish on Portobello Bridge, and my maternal great-grandmother was a chef whose legendary culinary skill was much sought after by diplomats and gentry eager to impress with elegant dinner parties in the grand houses of Merrion Square and Fitzwilliam.

The bells of Saint Patrick's and Christ Church Cathedral marked the passing of my early years. St Stephen's Green was my playground, Grantham Street my schoolyard. Almost all of my professional life has been lived on Baggot Street, just a few steps from where my mum went to school. My window overlooks the streetscape in which she and her large family played out their lives. My desk, my books, my computer and all my worldly paraphernalia are gathered around me in sunny rooms that may well have once been filled with the aroma of my great granny's cooking.

All of this bestows on me something quite precious: a sense of place. I've been part of this place for most of my life. Now I'm witnessing its transformation, and I want to speak out about it. I want to say how hard it is to live here now. How ostracised I feel in its over-crowded streets. How disappointed I feel at what Dublin has become. I want to say that in the process of liberating itself from its historical poverty and joining the global elite of wealthy cities, this ancient city has left its soul behind.

But the Dublin I live in now is a place where I cannot say

that. Or rather, I can, but I risk being labelled anything from a killjoy to a crank. Vaguely 'weird'. Out of step. Wealth doesn't like to be criticised.

One thing I have discovered is that I'm not alone. There are others like me, who sense the emptiness and regret the blandness of what we are becoming and try to speak up for what we are losing, and who find themselves in the place where anyone who challenges the mainstream has always found themselves. On the edge. Striving to be heard above the din of the current common sense and the pulsing heartbeat of electronic tills.

Some things have improved, of course. Neat, red-bricked town-houses with real bathrooms and running hot water now stand where our tenement building once stood. O'Connell Street is shaping up to be a boulevard where people will be privileged over traffic. Trams have returned as silver street trains. An influx of different nationalities has created a healthy cosmopolitan air about the place. Patches of wasteland and ugly hoardings that once scarred the urban landscape have been papered over with modern apartment blocks, many of which already have the look of tenements.

That the elegant city-living promised by the hype often fails to materialise, is just one of the numerous contradictions of this city. There are more high-class restaurants and more well-dressed businessmen who think it's ok to piss in Georgian doorways. There are more big cars and environmentally-selfish SUVs with this year's registrations, and almost nowhere to park. There's more money to go around, and a meanness on the street I don't remember being

there before. I have work, and I can't afford to buy a home in my own city. I can find a skilled barista and thirty varieties of coffee on any corner, and food which has all but lost its taste. If I wanted to, I could travel to the tropics on a whim, and not notice that the daffodils are in bloom too early.

On the surface, things are getting better. Deep down, something's badly wrong.

'Experts' and commentators tell me I'm the one who's wrong. They ask me to discount my experience and the evidence of my eyes and place my trust in their data - the cool numbers that prove we've never had it so good. Like a hypnotist, telling me to watch the watch while he takes my mind to a place my body is not, they ask me to suspend my judgement and ignore the obvious contradictions of my culture.

But I can't. I don't seem to be suggestible enough. What's wrong with me? Why can't I get it? Instead of seeing the logic of their logic, I see something else: a darker, deeper pattern of what's happening not only in my culture, but to people and cultures the world over.

To appreciate the source of this pattern, you have to understand that human culture isn't something that just appears out of nowhere. Whether it's the Bushmen of the Kalahari, downtown Manhattanites or the anthem-singing workforce of a Japanese auto company, all human cultures are built on a Big Idea, a Story we tell ourselves about who we are, why we're here, and what we're supposed to become. More than a narrative, this Story is a bunch of deep-rooted assumptions and framing ideas that shape our values and guide our choices and decisions, and fundamentally influence our behaviour.

A funny thing about a culture's Big Idea is that it's not explicit. There's no rulebook to tell you, this is the Story and you'd better believe it and live it. Yet it shows up everywhere, in countless ways. Its assumptions can be found in everything from the buildings and cars we design, to the towns and cities we plan, the policies we create and priorities we set. You see it in the language we use and the way we behave. It's in the products and services we believe to be important, and in our habits and fashions. It's behind the ideas we privilege and the people we cast as heroes or celebrities.... all of these things tell the Story at the heart of our culture.

Most of us I suspect, would like to believe that our thoughts and actions are completely our own. We don't feel the power of our Story, yet it exercises an astonishing power over us and can seduce us down a path signposted 'self interest' even when it leads to disaster.

Throughout history, different elites have presented different Stories to justify their privileged position. Priests offered access to God, for example. Kings offered protection. Today's elites include economists, whose claim to authority is that they know how the economy works and can predict it, corporations whose claim to authority is that they're there to provide jobs and income for everyone else, and government, whose claim to authority is that they are working for the common good.

Divine right, once vested in God, is today vested in capital. The iron grip of The Church with its promise of salvation, has been quietly replaced by the iron grip of The Market, with its promise of freedom. Both promises are empty, yet each has had the power to influence whole nations and fundamentally shape Life on Earth.

To see the lie that's at the heart of our culture today, we have to weave together narrative threads that are always presented to us as if they are separate. To start seeing connections between early daffodils and late parenting, for example. Between pressure on salmon stocks and pressure on hospital beds. The relentless drive for cheap food and the alarming rise in suicide. The growth in industry and the incidence of cancer. Monotonous work and road deaths. Falling interest rates and rising Prozac sales. Prawn take-aways and distant coastal erosion. Cheap flights and the wall of water that buried the city of New Orleans.

Scratch the surface of these apparently disconnected phenomena and you find they all have something in common. They share the Story of Growth. Consistently and comprehensively we are told in all sorts of ways, that we must keep growing to keep going. Consumption must grow. Companies must grow. Production yields and productivity must grow. Pension funds, circulation figures, market sectors, audiences, exports, profits, the economy, GDP... all of it has to keep growing. Growth mustn't stop because growth is good. Growth is the key to progress and social well-being. That's the Story. Watch the watch. Watch... the... watch.

In order to grow the numbers, however, we have to produce more stuff, and to do that we need more energy. Enter Stage Left, a key protagonist in the fairytale of continuous growth: Cheap Oil.

Oil has worked incredible magic on human affairs, and now we depend on it totally. Our entire food and farming system is based on oil. So is our transport system. The banking and financial systems and pension funds are built on investing in industries that are built on oil. Oil powers our cities. Literally everything we make, use and throw away, needs oil.

But oil is finite. It's a once-off legacy of evolutionary events that happened millions of years ago, under conditions that will never happen again. Never. And in a mere hundred years or so, a blink of an evolutionary eye, we have managed to use half of all that ever was. And what have we done with it? Well mostly we've set fire to it. Burned it up in cars and trains and planes and factories and power stations - the engines of our growth economy and the foundation of western civilisation. In the process, we have dangerously degraded life's vital support systems to the point that our addiction to fossil-fuelled growth is literally killing us.

When you look at the whole picture - the exponential increase in population, degradation of land, depletion of resources, accumulation of waste, pollution of all kinds, the destruction of biodiversity, and the big one, climate change - it is clear our way of life is perceptibly affecting our planet home, like a disabling disease. Our Story is pathogenic.

But western culture, like a chronic alcoholic pre-AA, is in a mess, and in denial. Establishment 'experts' confidently assure us that the cure is more of the same medicine, and that our future well-being and prosperity depends on exporting our Story right across the globe, to the four billion humans who haven't yet learned to be as clever as we are. We have to keep growing to keep going. Watch... the... watch.

It's hard not to see our intrepid leaders as monkeys chattering high up in a tree while the trunk and the roots are dying.

The deception is amplified by the Story-tellers - a largely uncritical media which, with a few notable exceptions, dances to the same tune: growth is good. Baked beans, newspapers, motorcars, cheap flights, thirty second spots, whatever your game is you gotta sell more. And then some. And in the battle for mindshare a diet of celebrity and titillation keeps intellectual challenge and unpalatable truths at bay.

Even when the consequences are covered, the Story remains unchallenged. The Sunday Tribune, for example, recently reproduced two splendid wall charts mapping the global scale of species loss, and ecological destruction, and within a couple of weeks had commissioned a computer simulation of the impact of global warming which predicted that rising sea levels will put landmarks like the GPO, Trinity College and Leinster House underwater and transform Donnybrook and Drumcondra into seaside resorts.

But nowhere in the editorial pages was there any hint of the connection between these indisputable facts and other facts reported in the same newspaper: soaring bank profits, the direction of business investment, the nature of property development, the shape of our enterprise and energy policy, the pattern of consumption being advertised at us, and other 'routine' news.

Commercial radio and television are similarly compromised. Dilemmas that are radically interconnected are presented as separate often because producers, directors, editors, journalists, reporters and presenters simply don't understand how the pieces of the jigsaw fit together.

The guests reviewing the Sunday papers on the Marian Finucane Show were deeply amused by the picture painted by the Tribune article. A Sunday Times journalist giggled at the prospect of gondola trips round a Venician-like Financial Services Centre. A well-known economist and lecturer suggested jauntily that the political clout of Dublin 4 residents would ensure a sea wall was built. And Marian and her producer, having given the topic a fair shot at just over two fun-filled minutes, went to a commercial break - to sell more stuff.

What happened here was more than a bit of fun. It was the cultural immune system at work in a demonstration of denial. Cultural historian, Edward Said once wrote that "*the power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming, is what defines culture.*" The blocking power of the culture's immune system will be felt by anyone who attempts to expose the deceptions of the dominant narrative. Thus the celebrated playwright Harold Pinter is pilloried by the liberal press for taking the opportunity of his Nobel lecture to paint the "*tapestry of lies*" that maintains power and keeps people ignorant of the truth of their lives.

Noam Chomsky's lifetime of serious writing and political comment, which among other things shines an uncompromising light on the bias of the media, receives similar treatment. Arguably one of the feistiest, plain-speaking intellectuals alive, he is rarely quoted or invited to comment publicly by the gatekeepers of free speech.

When Chomsky's recent visit to Dublin was discussed on RTE's 'Tonight with Vincent Browne', the panel couldn't get their heads around why a septuagenarian who lacks the wit and colour of a raconteur drew thousands to his Amnesty lecture at the RDS, and thousands more had to be turned away. Referring to his followers as "*a cult*" this coterie of cosy commentators completely failed to see themselves implicated in Chomsky's radical critique, or to appreciate that so rarely is the unadorned truth to be heard in the so-called free press of the so-called free world, that people will literally stand in the rain to hear it courageously articulated.

The lie at the heart of our culture is also exposed by the coarsening of our humanity. In the past forty-eight hours in this city I call home, I have witnessed a pharmacist in a well-heeled south Dublin suburb lose his temper and push a tiresome female customer out of his shop with a force that brought her to the ground. I've seen a van driver jump from his cab and bang on the roof of the car in front, screaming at the "black bastard" who dared to bip his horn. I've seen a

mature man in a smart grey suit walk out of a pub, open his fly and open his bladder onto Merrion Row rather than find his way to the gents. I've listened to the ongoing background noise of road deaths, murders and casual shootings, and I've had a middle-aged woman in the post office queue, turn to me and say, *'God, I hate what we've become'*, for no reason that I could discern.

Human beings under pressure, like an elastic band stretched to its limit.

To understand how a cultural pattern can shift so markedly, it helps to see the human being as a spectrum of possibilities to be explored. At one end of the spectrum is our most primitive drive for safety and security, motivated by fear and a narrow definition of self-interest. At the other end, a wider sense of self and an intuitive appreciation that our deepest self-interest is inextricably bound up with the long-term well-being of the human and natural systems in which we exist.

From our deeper possibilities we've created art, built fine cathedrals, cured diseases, sent probes to distant planets, and tirelessly worked to build a better future. Driven by fear and greed we've stockpiled nuclear warheads, overfished the oceans, converted ancient forests into wasteland and undermined the future.

A society is presented with all these possibilities, and what we become depends entirely on the Story we choose to believe. Do we believe we should prioritise money over life? Do we want to live in an economy or a society? What kind of legacy do we want to leave to our children, and their children?

Questions like these determine our direction as individuals, as institutions, as nations, as a species. When asked from a deep sense of possibility, they call for an Apollo-mission mentality, challenging us to think big, beyond today and beyond ourselves, towards what we're capable of creating and becoming.

But questions which call attention to our power to shape our destiny, are no longer posed in our culture's mainstream - not in the political sphere where the frameworks for what becomes possible are created, nor in the business forums where decisions are made that shape our bodies, our landscapes and our lives, nor in the media whose spotlight has the power to direct our gaze towards what really matters.

Earth is warming. The icecaps are melting. Children are dying. Species are disappearing. Ancient cultures are succumbing. And despite the weight of such evidence, the Story of Growth continues to hypnotise us. We call it, "Progress".

It is perhaps the ultimate irony that, believing ourselves to be more advanced than any generation before us, we've arrived at a more perilous place precisely because we've been persuaded

that our self-interest lies in turning life into cash. Of course, cash holds neither meaning nor intrinsic value which is why we exchange it for something else that does, and why people who have collected vast quantities of it so often give it away in truckloads when they discover what they were looking for all along wasn't money, it was meaning. And that's one of the few things in life that's not for sale.

Given that in our culture, we've made work our central focus - what Charles Handy calls a form of 'modern monasticism' - it's not surprising that the fault-lines in our Story's logic are now so visible in the workplace. Stress is endemic, and absenteeism, declining energy levels, increased bullying, fear and a growing dependency on alcohol and other drugs at every level are now commonplace. A Royal College of Surgeons study published last month finds astonishingly that Irish managers experience a lower quality of life than the terminally ill!

Popular analysis links this to the pressures of a 24/7 global marketplace, wired up to always-on technologies. When you connect this to the mantra that we must do more, be more, sell more and *grow* more than last month, last quarter, last year, it's easy to believe that people feel pressure.

But there's something deeper going on. How could it be that in service to contemporary ideas of "progress", 70% of managers and over 50% of 25 to 35 year olds in UK workplaces find their lives devoid of meaning? How could it be that in service to "progress" 37% of all working time is wasted... 73% of workers are "disengaged" from their organisation... and 19% would happily sabotage it?

Survey after survey reveals a crisis of meaning at the heart of western culture underscoring the fundamental human need to make a contribution, which those of us who deal with the human dimension of organisational life can confirm. Work is central to our well-being, but work that's meaningful is what really matters and there can be little meaning in our work if it neglects or damages what we consider to be important.

And that's the nub of the matter. The gathering social and ecological storm clouds prompt urgent and legitimate questions about the purpose of work, the nature of business and the way that money is made, but in our culture, public discourse that joins the dots between personal values, professional decision-making and the wider consequences of what we do, is not allowed. Or more precisely, it's blocked from emerging. Yet such a dialogue is a prerequisite to the renaissance of human culture needed to address the challenges of this defining moment.

And we need it urgently.

Following a newspaper article in which I suggested that

unless we use the world of work to create a healthy society and environment, business cannot continue to be successful into the longterm, a banking client invited me to address a lunch on the issues I'd raised. One of the bank's guests was Frank Dunlop, who'd recently been exposed as the broker of planning favours between property developers and council officials.

Frank opened our lunchtime dialogue with a remark that has remained with me ever since: *'Your presentation seems to implicitly refer to something spiritual'*. At the time his comment astonished me because I had made no reference whatsoever to spirituality or to values. But of course, he was absolutely right, and he illustrated perfectly the schism that is increasingly evident between private values and professional choices.

Unless we acknowledge that every act has moral consequences, it's entirely possible to live a Jekyll-and-Hyde life and dedicate a career to buying political decisions for cash without allowing oneself to think too hard about how those decisions will misshape the pattern of life for generations to come. And while questionable cash payments can arrive in brown envelopes, they can also come in the form of salary cheques for more respectable decisions.

The engineer who, when faced with the damage his project had caused a major aquifer, said recently in his defence *'I'm a road engineer - I don't know about acquifers'* was engaging in the kind of self-deception that disconnects personal decisions from their wider consequences. The manager whose response to a colleague's question about the effects of his company's agri-chemical products on food, was to say flippantly *'We're not in the taste business'* was engaging in the very same self-deception. So was Marian Finucane's economist reviewer, whose professional position is *'I don't do morality.'*

The claim that his profession makes for the positive potential of 'The Market' depends absolutely on the mindfulness of those operating within it. Yet when do we hear economists remind us that the health of the market depends on the mindfulness of its participants, and that maximum freedom must be exercised within the boundaries of responsible choice? We may choose to look away from the consequences of what we do - or what we teach and preach - but we can't *not* do morality.

When Carl Jung wrote that *'In the history of the collective as in the history of the individual, everything depends on the evolution of consciousness'* he was suggesting we look in the mirror for the source of a better tomorrow. Our collective challenge is not external to us, in some abstract place we call 'society' or 'the environment' or 'our institutions'. It *is* us. And we are trapped only by the way we think, the assumptions we make, the beliefs we hold, and the possibilities we imagine,

or deny.

It's time to break the spell of a Story that says your well-being is separate from mine, human well-being is separate from nature's, that we can be destructive and pretend we're powerless to do anything about it. The real Story is that we are radically connected, and through our choices and decisions each one of us is an active participant shaping the world that is unfolding on our watch.

We can continue to take refuge in scapegoats, of course. Councillors can blame Frank Dunlop and his wealthy clients for the shape of Dublin city. Journalists can blame media moguls and reader taste for the editorial slant of their publications. CEOs and managers can blame the bottom-line imperative of shareholders and customers who pursue cheapness, regardless of its human and environmental consequences. Customers can blame business. Employees can blame managers... everyone can blame everyone else.

But there's no one else to blame, I'm afraid. Powerful forces only become corrupt when we, as individuals, become complacent or cowardly about our responsibility for the stewardship of what is in our care. Human consciousness now determines all of evolution, and we're the generation that will decide if aquifers and shorelines, corner shops and green spaces, professional integrity and human community strengthen or decline.

We are the people we've been waiting for, and if you want a future worth living in, it's time to take it personally. Time for you and I to overcome the profound separation at the heart of our culture by reconnecting our inner and outer world and becoming fully human again - not just in private, but in public, especially in the professional sphere where even our minor decisions can have profound unintended consequences.

Those who feel isolated by private convictions that are at odds with the current common sense can take some comfort from American and European cultural research which suggests we are far from alone. Indeed the fastest growing social group in the western world are people who are quietly turning away from the dominant Story, towards something else. Perhaps the best kept secret in town is just how many we are, and if you've read this far, you're probably one of us. Now, our real challenge is to stop being silenced, and start becoming visible to each other as an emerging movement for deep institutional, social and personal change.

For inspiration and insight into how such deep change might come about, we can look to nature and life itself. Evolutionary biologist Elisabet Sahtouris uses the metaphor of the butterfly to comment on the process of social change. Little things that biologists call imaginal cells first begin to form in the body of the caterpillar. At first they're not

recognised, so the caterpillar's immune system wipes them out as they pop up. It's only when they begin to join together that they become strong enough to resist the blocking force of the immune system, until finally, the immune system itself breaks down and the caterpillar's body becomes a sludge the imaginal cells transform into a butterfly.

Our cultural immune system *is* breaking down. Change *is* inevitable. The question facing all of us is: Am I part of what is dying? Or part what is trying to be born? ||| **dya**

Your comments are welcome at **mail@dya.ie**

a reflection

UnderCurrents is intended to respectfully provoke new conversations and challenge individuals and organisations to become conscious of the web of relationship in which everything exists, and the profound responsibility that lies with each one of us for the world that unfolds on our watch. We encourage you to reflect on these ideas privately, or together with colleagues.

Questions you might explore:

- Where am I in all of this?
- Where is my organisation in all of this?
- What are we contributing to the way things are?
- And how might I / we experiment with our life and work practices to foster healthier patterns of relationship?

About the author

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UnderCurrents

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