

WN *Editorial*

World Nutrition Volume 5, Number 5, May 2014

Journal of the World Public Health Nutrition Association

Published monthly at www.wphna.org/worldnutrition/

Climate change

We need Virgils

Where are we, and where are we heading? There is another way to ask the question. In 50 years' time when the stories of the first decades of this century are told, what will these say about the crises humanity faces now? How will we be judged?

So, where are we? Five years ago the US commentator Bill Moyers asked this question to the radical US academic and author Mike Davis, holder of a MacArthur 'genius' fellowship. The immediate context was meltdown of international finance, but Mike Davis also spoke of the climate crisis, a theme of this issue of *WN*. He said:

The first explorers to visit the Grand Canyon simply were overwhelmed. They couldn't visualise the Grand Canyon because they had no concept for it. There was no analogue in their cultural experience, no comparable landscape that would allow them to make sense of what they were seeing. It took ten years of heroic scientific effort by John Wesley Powell (director of the US Geological Survey), before anybody was truly able to see the Grand Canyon as we see it now. Before then there were confused images and feelings of vertigo.

Do we have the concepts to understand the nature of the current crisis other than to step back shaking from the brink and say 'this is profound?' Because we're in this situation where not only do we seem to be having a second depression, but this is occurring in the context of epochal climate change. It's occurring at a time when the two major benchmarks that seemed to be surviving for global social progress, the United Nations Millennium Goals for relieving poverty and child mortality, and the Kyoto goals for reducing greenhouse admissions, are clearly not going to be achieved. They slowly failed. And now we face a meltdown of a world economy in a way that no one anticipated. No one counted on this happening in such a synchronised, almost simultaneous way across the world.

Bill Moyers then quotes Mike Davis: 'We are looking into an unprecedented abyss of economic and social turmoil that confounds our previous perceptions of historical risk. Our vertigo is intensified by our ignorance of the depth of the crisis or any sense of how far we might ultimately fall.', and asks, 'Do you have a sense now of how far we might ultimately fall?'

No. No one does.

Needing guides

A Chinese saying is: 'It is better to be a dog in a peaceful time than to be a man in a chaotic period'. The sense of chaos typically is worse than the experience of hardship. Our own lives and that of our family may be secure. But our perceptions of world governance that is broken, with the planet's resources depleted, abominable inequities between and within countries, obesity as a blatant symptom of sick societies, so many aspects of life becoming unsure, and always above all the implications of climate change, are liable to make us disoriented and demoralised. This is a sure explanation of the current obsession with movies and videos of fantasy worlds, total wars, and galactic obliteration.

We need guides. It is hard to avoid getting swamped and stuck in the mud made by the torrents of information on the web and specialist sources. Who to trust? Ourselves first of all, but how? The big question worms into us: what in hell is going on in the world now, and what will happen? The word 'hell' is here not just for emphasis. One concept of hell is mad chaos. When nothing makes sense, we become disorientated and try to stop thinking, and finally are liable to create a sense of inner order that has little relationship with what is ordinarily seen as reality. That is to say, we may go crazy.

In *The Divine Comedy* Dante Alighieri writes of entering hell. He is guided by the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BCE) who wrote about beekeeping in a period of intense disturbance after the assassination of Julius Caesar. To enter, explore and understand the terrifying territory of the world that confronts us now, we need our Virgils.

Building solidarity

'Evils being *once* recognised are *half way* on toward *their* remedy' declared Elizabeth Gaskell. Given Mike Davis's compelling analogy, the first stage towards a new world that really is ordered, is ask what, when, why, who, how? Guy Standing, of the School of African and Oriental Studies in London addresses 'when' and 'who'.

During the globalisation era, a process of class fragmentation took place... An elite of absurdly affluent and powerful figures emerged... able and eager to influence governments wherever they could. For several decades, the elite, stretching from the multi-billionaires in Silicon Valley to the oligarchs in Russia and Ukraine, encompassing the hedge-fund managers, property tycoons and so on, have dominated political discourse. No prospective prime minister or president in a European country has risked offending them... This elite is detached from any nation state and, unless it favours their long-term interests, is detached from national or local democracy... Curbing their collective political and economic power should be a central objective of any democratisation.

Guy Standing identifies a new mass class. He calls this the 'precariat' class, as a successor to 'proletariat', and because the state of being precarious is its defining characteristic. The class now probably includes most people in higher income countries. Just as the inchoate proletariat at the time of the 'industrial revolution'

became cohesive by creating trades unions, Guy Standing proposes that the precariat in this time of the ‘electronic revolution’ must now become a coherent force. So he also addresses ‘what’ and touches on ‘how’:

If the re-embedding phase of the global transformation is to occur, it will be about re-regulating in favour of new forms of social solidarity, about reconstructing social protection in favour of the emerging mass class in the economic system and about redistributing the key assets in favour of it.

Is this adequate? The French economist Thomas Piketty goes further, in his current number 1 US best-seller *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, deliberately evoking Karl Marx. Could monetarism now be tossed in the trash? Could current conventional political parties in high-income countries disintegrate? Is this the time, in this month of the World Health Organization World Health Assembly, to begin revival of universal primary health care, as current WHO director-general Margaret Chan has always wanted? This is beginning to feel possible.

Gaining conviction

How can all this be done? ‘The Second Coming’ by WB Yeats, written after the chaos of the First World War, contains an awful warning. After ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world’, comes ‘The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity’. Who is prepared to get tough and to give what it now will take, really to be part of the solution? Are we professionals and citizens now prepared to identify climate change, with all it implies including the eventual collapse of established food systems and thus of social order, as the first and foremost menace to humanity and to our own work and lives?

This issue of *WN* includes some relevant leads. In our cover commentary Tony McMichael, Helen Louise Berry and Colin Butler of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, challenge us all to wake, speak and act. Update includes an account of the *EAT Forum* in Stockholm, whose purpose is to unify thought and action on food, nutrition and health in the context of climate change. Following last month’s commentary by David Werner on primary health care, Maria Hamlin Zuniga and Claudio Schuftan also foresee revival of Health for All. Yes, ‘ideology’ in its plain sense of ‘system of ideas’ is needed, to achieve transformation to a new world order in which among many other issues, the underlying and basic causes of immiseration and thus malnutrition, are admitted, confronted, reduced, and finally eliminated.

Public health nutrition professionals are making progress. *The Food System*, regularly featured in *WN*, with its insistence that food and meals come first for every kind of health, is nourishment for the planet also. As a profession, emphatic confirmation that public health nutrition is not subsidiary to clinical nutrition but is part of public health with all this implies, will also help. There is also much more to do.

The editors