

Where we now are, autumn 2020 – and what next?

Questions and jottings towards the end of the year



Momentous

In the history of the world, the six months between March and August 2020 appear – from a vantage point in late September – to have been momentous. So many new questions, or old questions posed with new urgencies and frames of reference. So much uncertainty and disagreement about whether indeed they are all them really momentous, and about how they are connected with each other, or may be.

In no particular order, the questions include:

1 One World

We have been dramatically reminded that physically, materially, spatially, ecologically, we live in one world, one planet. A virus is no respecter of frontiers, border controls, migration regulations. Therefore, it is no respecter of nations and nationalities, no respecter of national sovereignty. No country or continent is an island, entire of itself. Neither Britain – ‘this precious stone set in the silver sea’ – nor anywhere else can be securely self-sufficient, dependent on its own resources and leadership alone.

But will this dramatic reminder stay with us in our minds and consciousness, will it underpin new forms of, and approaches to, international cooperation?

2 Worth our love?

‘From family to clan,’ wrote Barbara Ward and Rene Dubos for the United Nations Environment Conference in 1972, ‘from clan to nation, from nation to federation – such enlargements of allegiance have occurred without wiping out the earlier loves. Today, in human society, we can perhaps hope to survive in all our prized diversity provided we can achieve an ultimate loyalty to our single, beautiful and vulnerable Planet Earth. Alone in space, alone in its life-supporting systems, powered by inconceivable energies, mediating them to us through the most delicate adjustments, wayward, unlikely, unpredictable, but nourishing, enlivening and enriching in the largest degree – is this not a precious home for all of us earthlings? Is it not worth our love?’

Shall we, indeed, manage to do something constructive about climate change and climate justice, motivated by love for life not by self-interest and the avoidance of premature death only?

3 Dusty death, dread and despots

We have been dramatically reminded during 2020 of our own mortality, each (as Macbeth said) on our own way to dusty death with more or less attendant fears, dread and terror. There is substantial evidence that such anxiety can lead humans to be suspicious and intolerant of otherness and difference, and to seek reassurance from powerful authority figures, even despots and tyrants. There is evidence also, however, that a sense of mortality can walk hand in hand with greater compassion, consideration, tenderness, kindness.

Which way will it go? Tyrannies or tolerance? Democracy or despots? The unkindness or the kindness of strangers? Clenched fists or open hands? Masks and face-coverings, or smiles and applause?

4 Racisms

One principal form of intolerance is known as racism, or else as xenophobia or sectarianism. Either way the word is generally seen as singular. It should preferably, however, be plural, not singular: racisms, xenophobias, sectarianisms. All racisms have both a physical and a cultural strand, but the mixture of strands varies according to who the target is, and what the signs and markers of difference are deemed to be, and which are salient at any one time or in any one place. There are differences between anti-Black racism and anti-Muslim racism, for example, and between both of these and antisemitism. And between personal and systemic, dinner-table and street, violent and 'polite', prejudice and discrimination.

Are we going to be able to remember and stress the plural forms of key words, or we going to over-simplify and overlook through an over-use of singulars?

5 Black Lives and Deaths

The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on 25 May 2020 was seen on video coverage throughout the world, and galvanised widespread protests and anger. The physical cause of his death – 'I cannot breathe' – chimed horrifically with deaths from the covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) campaign against police brutality drew massively greater support and acclamation than ever before. It seemed that a substantial turning-point had been reached and that the whole world would never be the same again. Yet when, only a few weeks later, a dance routine on *Britain's Got Talent* saluted BLM there were some 25,000 complaints from members of the public. It seemed that BLM was not nearly as loved and respected as earlier had been claimed.

Well, which way will it go? Acclamation and applause for BLM and what it stands for, or opposition and neglect?

6 Monuments Must Fall

It was on Sunday 7 June 2020, less than a fortnight after the death of Mr Floyd, that a BLM demonstration in Bristol, England, led to the toppling of a statue of Edward Colston and its unceremonious dumping in the waters of the city's principal river. Video coverage dramatically showed that BLM was opposed not only to police brutality in the present but also to commemoration and celebration

of white supremacy in the past. Twenty years earlier the Parekh Report had posed key questions in abstract terms: 'What does Britain stand for? Of what may citizens be justly proud? ... What should be preserved, what jettisoned, what revised or reworked? How can everyone have a recognised place within the larger picture? These are questions about Britain as an imagined community, and about how a genuinely multicultural Britain urgently needs to reimagine itself.' We now have video images to dramatise what such jettisoning and reimagining entail.

Will images of the jettisoning of Edward Colston stay in our minds' eyes, and will they give a boost to conscious and constructive reimagining? Or shall we soon return to business as usual?

7 Equalities

If racism is one word that needs to have a plural form (see above), equality is another. Well, often it is thus used – people speak, though wrongly, of the Equalities Act not the Equality Act. And a consciousness has been developing in summer 2020 that people with one or more of the characteristics itemised and protected in legislation – age, disability, ethnicity, gender, LGBT, race, religion – are more likely than others to be negatively impacted by the covid-19 pandemic and its economic consequences, and less likely to benefit from measures established to deal with it medically or financially.

But will this awareness lead to action? Will it, for example, lead to the government taking the Equality Act far more seriously than it has so far done, and therefore setting an example to all other public bodies?

8 New ways of being

'And the people stayed home,' wrote Kitty O'Meara when the pandemic lockdowns began across the world in early March 2020.' Her prose poem continued: 'And read books, and listened, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still. And listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced ... And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless and heartless ways, the earth began to heal ... '

Really? Meditated, prayed, made art, danced? Departed from dangerous, mindless and heartless ways? Became more spiritual though not necessarily more religious? Engaged too with quantum physics and cosmology, and with atheism and humanism? Really?

Written by Robin Richardson for the Elephant Times network and blog, September 2020.