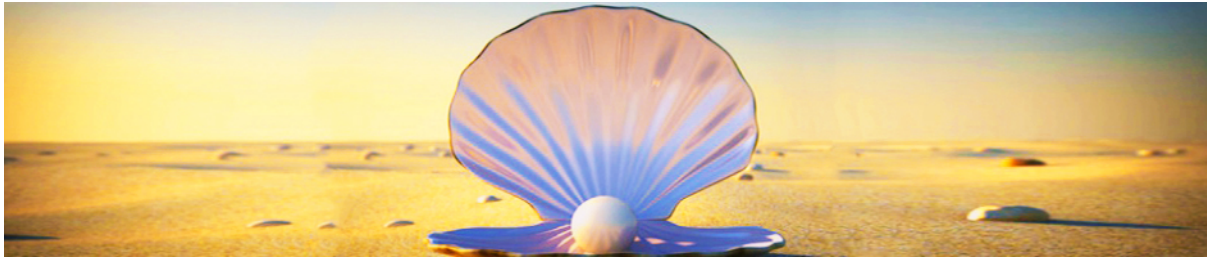


John Menadue – Pearls and Irritations



STEPHANIE DOWRICK. Communication in a time of crisis

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“Isolation” is also a crisis of communication for us as social beings. And an opportunity to consider with fresh interest how we can more thoughtfully support others – receiving with grace and gratitude what they may have to give.

My work over decades has largely been to encourage others (and myself) to live not just more ethically, but with far greater concern and care for one another – coming from a sense of inner connectedness that is our only path to peace, safety and self-respect. Yet in recent days, and perhaps like many of you, I have been feeling particularly flat. (“Flat” is code for feeling somewhat low, anxious, sad, lacking vitality – foggy. I hardly need explain.)

Nonetheless, I also know – how could I not? – that a part of me is entirely well and can never be anything but well. Call that aspect “soul”, “spirit”, “original nature”, the name doesn’t matter. It lets us receive the kindness of others or the inspiration we need, even when much within us feels shut down – if we allow that.

A willingness to receive is key here. As I write this, I am mindful of three acts of loving friendship that I’ve received in recent days that have truly been “Rescue Remedies” to my soul and being. Why am I sharing these stories? Well, in large part hoping that you may newly value what you can give in this time of great need. But also, so that you may be more consciously open to *receiving*, even when what’s coming your way doesn’t quite fit your expectations of how things “should” be. Like any change, that needs some detachment to see things anew, it also requires stillness.

In the first of those gifts a dear friend emphasised this stillness as she pointed out to me how the possibilities of conscious “receiving” depend also on *not* being constantly busy. Of course! Some of my own misery has been due to my frustration and sorrow that I can’t be as active as I would like to be in any sphere of my life, and especially I can’t be supporting my family, including my grandchildren, or my friends and congregation, in the practical ways that I long for.

Before the pandemic shut down, I was relatively shut in for four months with illness, including 10 weeks in hospital(s). I am not a patient patient! “Being busy” is for me a psychological defence. It’s also a source of positive stimulation, connection, inspiration. Yet didn’t I write a book called [Intimacy & Solitude](#)? Don’t I know that to be effective in the world, we need time to resource ourselves? Don’t I sometimes long for more inwardness, not less?

The answer to all these questions is *yes*. So I can see clearly the need to make our choices more compassionate as well as more conscious. In illness, our world shrinks. In social isolation, our world

shrinks. Yet it's precisely now that our vision must enlarge. *Choosing* to be the smallest bit more generous, perhaps more tolerant in both directions (giving and receiving), **is itself an act of empowerment**, an act of self-respect and even love – for ourselves and for all with whom we share this planet. Not much matters more when so many familiar choices have been taken from us.

The second gift is simpler still: it's honesty. Speaking to a close friend in New Zealand, I was unable in that moment to put a "good spin" on how I was feeling. I felt raw, disarrayed – and somewhat ashamed. After all, despite those health challenges and ageing, I am hugely blessed with inner and outer resources. I am massively aware how many people are desperate about their most basic survival. Many have no safe place to "hunker down" and no funds to "stock up". Many are in greater danger than ever before. Some are losing their loved ones or their lives. Nonetheless, my own grief is real, as is my unceasing concern for members of our own family who are on the health front lines. (That concern I can hardly bear, particularly when some are rushing to "revive" the economy whatever the cost to our precious health workers who are also sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, lovers of life.)

My friend received what I had to say quietly. And only later reminded me how essential it is that we do our social justice work with clarity and determination and also do what's nourishing, lovely, uplifting – even in small ways. How ironic is it that we so often neglect what will help us even when we know what that is? This is where insight comes in: not asking, "Do I feel like...?" (You may not...) But rather, "What's happening?" And, "What's needed?" There's honesty in that, too.

Will such questions make everything better? Probably not. "Everything" is a mighty ask at a time of global and personal suffering. But we do actually live moment by moment, breath by breath, even if that's a reality we frequently rush past. When we're down, our thoughts leap into a future that's frightening. When we slow down, by contrast, we can experience *this* moment and – when we can – infuse it with greater vitality and hope. We can surround people and situations with the energies of loving-kindness and care, rather than anxiety or raw terror. And when we do this, we ourselves will benefit.

The third act of loving friendship – given and received – is a poem, "The Layers", written by Stanley Kunitz and sent out by a writer friend. It tells its own story – but the lines that sang to me are:

"Live in the layers, not on the litter.

Though I lack the art to decipher it,

no doubt the next chapter in my book of transformations

is already written. I am not done with my changes."

None of us is "done with the changes", not now, not ever. The inspiration here is how words – *words*, wisely chosen – can reconnect us to ourselves. And to others. Another poet, Rabindranath Tagore, wrote many years ago, "Our true life lies at great depth within us." As we connect to ourselves with greater kindness, our judgements of others will soften. Our world becomes more intimate as well as spacious. And who could resist that, in these so-called isolated times?