



So much to muse on, so little time.

Clay Nelson © 26th April 2020

This has been a full week.

On Monday, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that our Level 4 lockdown would drop to Level 3 in a week. The reason is most of our nearly five million citizens did their essential work: staying home in their bubble, washing their hands and when they did go out for the limited reasons allowed, kept social distance. The result is that, as of Thursday of this week, there were only 3 new cases of infection identified, 8 people in hospital and only 370 active cases.

On 22 April the world celebrated the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. This is a special day for me personally because in January 1969 I awoke to the news of a major oil spill from a platform off the Santa Barbara coast. My dorm room at the University of California was 100 metres from the beach being fouled by untold barrels of oil tar. Many of us answered the call to try and save the wildlife that lived there and clean the beaches. For weeks we spent evenings scrubbing tar off feet and hands with turpentine while grieving for the birds and animals we could not save and giving thanks for those we could. This event inspired a Wisconsin Senator to pass legislation declaring the first Earth Day a year later. While environmentalists have been and still are mocked relentlessly and dismissed as loony by those who care more about profits than the health of the planet, Earth Day today is widely recognised as the largest secular observance in the world, marked by more than a billion people every year as a day of action to change human behaviour and create global, national and local policy changes.

Yesterday, the nation celebrated ANZAC Day with virtual dawn services. In 104 years, that was a first. As a conscientious objector I struggle with commemorating war. Too much chest beating. The first ANZAC Day was in part a recruiting tool as Kiwi enthusiasm for signing up to be cannon fodder for “King and Country” was fading after the horror of Gallipoli. The day has had many permutations over the years. Today ambivalent folk like me can wear a White Poppy for peace instead of the white feather of cowardice. We can stand with those wearing Red Poppies as one people who care, instead of being sent to a dismal prison camp. We don’t allow the colour of our poppy to divide us.

So which of these should I muse on? While apparently disparate events, they all demonstrate the importance of solidarity. Being married to a

trade union leader, you won't be surprised that I hear a lot about solidarity. It is an essential ingredient in seeking the common good. We need it to change the world for the better.

So, if it is so obviously important, why is it so hard to achieve? In spite of 88% compliance by New Zealanders with Level 4 lockdown rules, an estimated 50,000 have decided the restrictions don't apply to them.

The vast majority of the world's nations have agreed, at least on paper, to carry out the Paris Climate Accords, but not one of the worst polluters, the US, and climate change deniers are in abundance worldwide, even here.

While we pride ourselves on being nuclear free and spending only 1.1% of our GDP on defence, we still support the war efforts of major powers. We still have blood on our hands supporting other countries' wars. Sadly, we have not yet fully taken on board the lessons of Gallipoli.

Clearly solidarity is not an inherent human value. Unless...

Moral philosopher Bernard Williams tackled my question. Simply formulated, the problem is that no one can be motivated to act by being presented with a reason from without unless they are already motivated in some way to act on the relevant concern. If they are already motivated, it is because they have an internal reason, a reason of their own, to act, and to do what is required. Without such an internal reason a pious sermon, a heartfelt exhortation, a call to arms, will have no effect in moving people to action. However, the faithful believer, the committed philanthropist, the patriotic citizen, the trade unionist, this Unitarian minister already has such internal reasons and so can be mobilised. The stimulus from without resonates with their own – possibly dormant – motivation.

Williams goes on to observe, "The call to love one's neighbour as oneself will fall on deaf ears unless the hearer already has a motive to be benevolent towards others; the challenge to give up smoking for the sake of health will have no effect unless the smoker wants to stop. So it is that in the current crises, those who invoke 'solidarity' in the context of humanitarian appeals on behalf of migrants fleeing from war and poverty are astonished to find their appeals have such little effect. Similarly, cosmopolitans arguing for a world community in which the rights of every single person should be upheld as urgently as the rights of any other are surprised when their appeals to our shared humanity and the values formerly celebrated as '*fraternité*' and the 'brotherhood of man' are ineffectual. So much so that frustrated representatives of the cosmopolitan cause resort to guilt as the reliable motive which could mobilise support for the cause."

Aristotle and John Stuart Mill in their different times and contexts thought the solution was in the formation of our youth. In theory, maybe, but who

will form them? Other thinkers believe we have to demonstrate that solidarity is in the individual's self-interest. I am more inclined to agree with them. The common good does encompass self-interest, but unfortunately we don't see it. We don't think it through

Those of us who hold solidarity to be a key term in our scale of values will have to make greater efforts to hone our arguments to allow our hearers to grasp and understand that what is asked of them is firmly rooted in their own value systems and is not an imposition from without. The arguments we will have to use may be religious and theological but they will also have to be secular since the common good at stake is not restricted to believers but is a good for everyone: the good of living in a world order in which peace and stability are secured, the earth is healed, and the rights of everyone are guaranteed.