

# Values: a sense of balance

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The values of money and the market, not the values of life, dominate our lives. If we are to begin to address the enormous challenges of our time, it will be necessary to restore the balance between self-interest and the common good. That's the only way our longterm self-interest will be truly served.

## The Ceifin Conference 2005

This time last year, at the Céifin Conference, Emily O'Reilly made a heartfelt plea that reverberated far beyond the walls of the conference hall. In her presentation, the Ombudsman sketched an image of modern Ireland as a vulgar fest of unrestrained debauchery and random violence, over-dosed on economic success and reeling from the worst effects of new and sudden wealth.

Given that the enormous economic transformation Ireland has experienced in recent years, is what was broadly wished for and planned for, Emily O'Reilly wondered why there should be such widespread disquiet about the nature of Irish society and the sort of people we have become. The challenge, she suggested, is to accept our newly secular society and find a way to 'inject it with a value system' that restores the best of what we've lost, and discards the worst of what we've gained.

Her well-observed and candid commentary was debated for weeks afterwards in the media and in the letters columns of the newspapers. Clearly, she had touched a nerve.

### Adjusting our perception of society

There is a hint in this suggestion however, that we are somehow separate from society. We are here, and it is over there, and we need to do something *to it*. This is not an uncommon view and it is amplified in everyday conversation, especially in the media.

Just today, while thinking about writing this article, I heard a well-known radio presenter observing in relation to a particular issue, that "society of course, is moving in a very different direction these days." Later, another popular radio host offered the view that "society is moving so fast these days you really have no option but to keep up."

The same sort of reality adjustment is happening when business people rush to claim the successes *they have achieved* but blame "the market" for falling profits, layoffs and any other result they would rather not claim responsibility for.

In our culture it is easy to think that the world is 'out there', like a stage and set, waiting for us to walk on and play a part, and walk off again whenever we wish. Our culture doesn't encourage us to see that we are an integral part of the great tapestry of life and that what we do matters, and matters a great deal.

Such a recognition would be incompatible with, and potentially explosive for, an economic model dependent on ever-increasing consumption of ever more material goods. But if we don't make that vital connection we won't see that the world is unfolding, not around us, as we might think, but *through us*.

We cannot walk on and walk off. We are always on.

Life comes to life moment by moment, always unfolding, and always a reflection of the world that

lies deep within us, embodied in the beliefs and assumptions, and *the values* that guide our choices and decisions. When this simple, but profound truth is invisible to us, we can completely miss the connection between our personal behaviour and the global reality.

In the absence of this understanding, we focus exclusively on our own patch and down in the trenches of our daily endeavour a false sense of separateness - what the late Scott Peck labelled 'rugged individualism' - drives an unremitting pursuit of self-interest which lies at the heart of so much of the social and environmental destruction in the world today.

The debate about what sort of society we have or want, is fundamentally a debate about culture. And far from being 'out there' somewhere, culture is like the air we breathe: we are in it and it is in us. So, if we want to think about filling the values vacuum, perhaps we need to start by exploring to what extent we, as individuals, and active participants within our organisations and institutions, are part of the process of creating the vacuum we are now suffering from.

### The shaping power of values

Imagine for a moment, that you could beam yourself into the heart of New York, or contemporary Dublin for that matter, and then with a wave of a wand drop in to the Tibetan district of Ladakh, high in the Himalayan mountains.

These would be two very different experiences because the cultures are almost polar opposites. One being a crowded, hyper-active, secular, cosmopolitan, wealthy, modern city, the other being a sparsely populated, environmentally harsh, deeply spiritual, relatively poor, mountainous region.

What is it that makes one culture different from another?

Culture is the tip of the iceberg - the outward manifestation of the beliefs and assumptions and values that underpin society. It is these 'framing' or governing ideas that lead one culture to organise itself around the motor-car and technology for

example, while another prioritises draught animals and the land. Or teaches one that the Earth is to be exploited for the singular benefit of humans, while another strives to live in harmony with Nature.

Values are critical because they influence behaviour, and it is behaviour that communicates and is added to the cultural soup to produce the society we experience. Put simply, values are *what we value*. They tell us what to prioritise, how we should respond to the world, how we should act in the moment of decision.

What we add to the cultural mix as individuals is important. But in the developed world, where our life and experience is increasingly mediated by institutions and organisations of all kinds, *organisational* values are even more important. Organisational values have immense shaping power in our culture, influencing where and how we live, what we eat, what we drink, what news we hear - how we should behave and what we aspire to.

### Contemporary Ireland

Values of course, are intimately linked to the Story at the heart of the culture - whether it is the culture of a particular business or institution, a particular industry or profession, or an entire nation. Here in Ireland, economic success has become our central Story, with profound consequences. In his seminal work *Small is Beautiful* the economist E F Schumacher describes it thus:

*"The development of production and the acquisition of wealth have become the highest goals of the modern world in relation to which all other goals, no matter how much lip-service may be paid to them, have come to take second place. The highest goals require no justification, but all secondary goals have finally to justify themselves in terms of the service their attainment renders to the attainment of the highest."*

In other words, in such a culture, things only make sense if they make economic sense.

Ireland has chosen to adopt this philosophy lock, stock and barrel, and while we can legitimately

claim to have gained much that is positive from it, the relentless drive to push market values into every corner of life comes at a price. When the material values of business and the bottom line become the primary values of society, deeply embedded human values such as justice, harmony, truth, beauty, quality and even health are threatened.

That is what we see all around us today. It's there in the stress-filled lives of ordinary people commuting long distances, juggling childcare and career, caught in the gridlock of life and work in order to pay the mortgage on the house they haven't time to enjoy. It's there in the sprawling urban developments that have been consciously designed and built with no amenities, no open spaces and no soul. It's there in the crimes and violations emerging with astonishing regularity in our church and state institutions, as well as in big business. We see its footprint in our schools and hospitals, and in our communities across the nation.

It's the values of money and the market, not the values of life, that say that twenty-four hour shopping is ok. It's money values not life values that enable businesses to consign their customers' interests to a detached call-centre that has no relationship with the customer. It's money values not life values that drive the airline and auto industries for example, to keep growing their markets even though their carbon emissions are already unsustainable, and life-threatening.

It's money values not life values that permit food companies to load our food with chemical preservatives to lengthen shelf-life in order to ship it round the world - the same money values permit legislators to create legal frameworks that support this. And it's money values not life values that make it ok to define young children as a legitimate 'market segment' to be targeted.

This may seem like an attack on business. On the contrary, I believe the values of money and business are essential to any healthy and sustainable society. The question is one of balance, and as the values of money have increasingly come to define who we are and what

kind of world we live in, there is now a serious imbalance in the relationship between society, the environment and the economy.

### **Values need to evolve**

A critical step in addressing the imbalance, is to appreciate that the values of money are on the lowest rung of the values hierarchy. Together with the heightened need for security and control, acquisition and ownership, that are so prevalent in contemporary society, these primitive, fear-based values of self-interest and survival anchor us to a very small view of the world and our place in it.

However, a growing global awakening to the complex connections between escalating social and environmental issues and the underlying assumptions of 'market philosophy' is beginning to provoke a fundamental questioning of the conventional values in modern society, and sooner or later Ireland will be forced to address this in a practical and meaningful way.

Appearing to reflect this questioning, the latest survey from futures research company Amárach, shows that in the past three years there's been a significant loss of trust in all institutions across the board in Ireland - government, the media, the legal system, business, the Church and the Gardaí. Only a tiny 1% trust business "a great deal".

This hasn't happened by accident. These figures are witness to the progressive dismantling of civic trust that is inevitable when the primary driving force of our institutions is self-preservation and self-interest.

Self-interest will always ensure that the goals we set are small goals. If we are to begin to address the enormous challenges of our time, it will be necessary to let go of our fear and begin to restore the balance between self-interest and the common good. If we choose to move towards a more evolved values system, we will discover that it is only by serving the common good, that our long-term self-interest is truly served.

### **What we can do**

The connection between personal choice and the global reality is not well understood, but everyone

can, and does affect the world that unfolds on our watch. How we choose to behave at this critical time in our evolution will have far-reaching consequences for future generations - whatever our response.

One of the most important decisions we can all make in relation to restoring the balance, is to get informed. There are many ways of doing this aside from the traditional media, which by its very nature and structure is more part of the problem, than the solution, and we can all seek out alternative, reliable sources of information.

Once informed we can become involved. We can work to develop a deeper sense of self and purpose, and temper the need to compete with a balancing desire to co-operate. We can fight the habit of self absorption and challenge short-termism wherever it rules, especially in our professional lives.

We can choose to withdraw our support from values we don't agree with, wherever we meet them. We can choose to stop conferring material and social rewards on those who transgress the norms of socially or commercially acceptable behaviour. We can choose to stand up for something better, at every opportunity, even when it's difficult: a better decision, a longer-term solution, quality rather than quantity, stewardship rather than exploitation. There's much we can do to take back our lives.

Finally, I make no apology for including a second quote from E.F.Schumacher's "Small is Beautiful" (a good place to start getting informed by the way). The author offers this advice in answer to the question, what can I do?

*"The answer is as simple as it is disconcerting: we can, each of us, work to put our own house in order. The guidance we need for this work cannot be found in science or technology, the value of which utterly depends on the ends they serve, but it can still be found in the traditional wisdom of mankind."* ||| dya

## About the author

David Youell is a partner at **downey youell associates** and works with individuals and organisations to address issues of culture and change in the workplace and the community.

He is a qualified Cultural Assessment Practitioner and co-author of *Exploring the Communication Dynamic - 301 Building Blocks to Enrich your Working Relationships*, a desktop companion of practical communication tips and inspirational wisdom. [Oak Tree Press, 1998]

He helped create *Q5 - New Leadership at Work* to prompt a movement for personal and organisational change, in which each of us begins to see our working and professional life as an opportunity to address the critical issues of our generation.

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