The community and the chocolate factory

A new strategy for wellbeing

William House

When our children were young the north wind brought caramel. Our house backed onto the Cadbury's Factory in Keynsham – perhaps a child's dream of the perfect place to live, downwind of a chocolate factory. But sadly, as most people will know, production moves to Poland next year and the community will lose 400 jobs. Then the north wind will bring only the cold chill of unemployment as we all confront economic recession. How can we improve the wellbeing of the community in the face of this chill wind – find some sweetness in it once more? This article aims to outline a novel strategy in answer to that question on behalf of the local health and wellbeing partnership.

Even before the announcement of the chocolate factory closure Keynsham shared the UK's familiar public health problems: obesity, diabetes, domestic violence, child abuse, depression, teenage pregnancy and drug and alcohol abuse. In Keynsham, a quarter of adults are obese and nearly a quarter of them have diabetes – about 1000 people. Around one sixth of adults have disruptive symptoms of anxiety or depression at any one time[1] and 40% feel tired and rundown.[2] The NHS has been very slow to wake up to the intimate links between these health problems in individuals and the quality of communities and wider society. Like other GPs I have felt mounting frustration with this unsustainable 'fix-it' approach and at the failure of our leaders and of the healthcare community to tackle the underlying social causes of ill-health. This failure has always looked to me like a love affair with disease-focused technology, and with those who develop and sell it.[3]

But things are changing. The frequent talk of wellbeing is clearly an attempt to move the agenda away from disease and towards a more positive conception of health. The publication in 2009 of *New horizons: A shared vision for mental health*, though embroidered with political point-scoring, is a landmark in this process of transformation.[1] It focuses on underlying causes, explicitly shares responsibility for action across 10 government departments and integrates social care and the third sector. Its title says mental health, but the concept of wellbeing transcends the mind/body divide and all the general principles of the report apply equally to the health of the body.

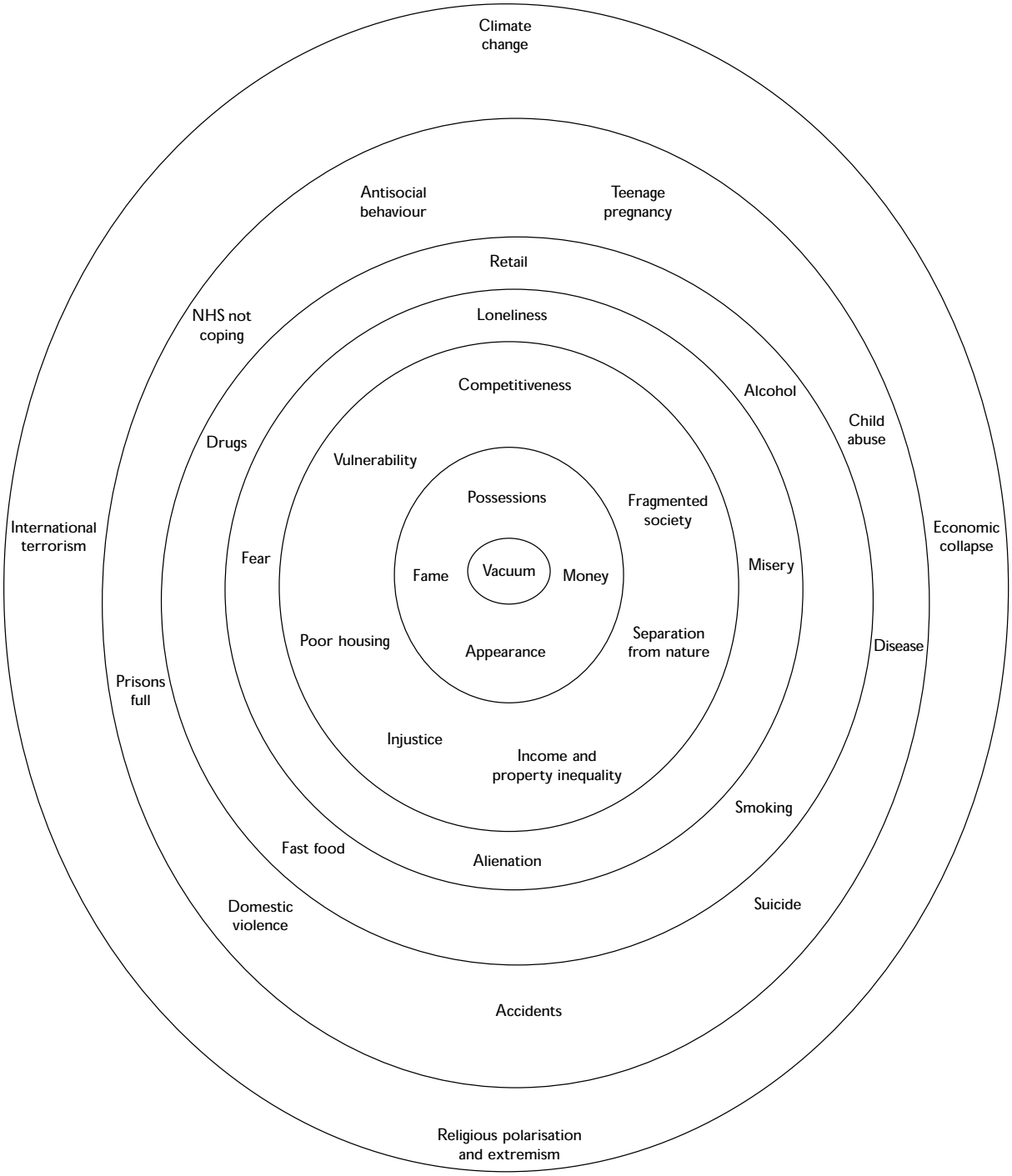
But the chocolate factory in Keynsham shows that the link between social arrangements and health is not news. The factory was built in 1935 by JS Fry & Sons, later to merge with Cadbury Brothers. Along with Rowntree and Terrys, these confectionary makers were Quaker families who lived out their values of 'justice, equality and social reform, putting an end to poverty and deprivation'. For instance, John Cadbury had led the campaign to outlaw the use of 'climbing boys' or child chimney sweeps. In this spirit the Keynsham factory incorporated playing fields, sports ground and pavilion, a social club and low cost housing. Also in 1935 the Pioneer Health Centre opened in Peckham, south London. This was a bold long-term experiment to test the effect on health of physically and mentally active lifestyles. Ironically, in a post-war era of scientific optimism, the advent of the NHS in 1947 led to the closure of the Peckham experiment. In terms of health, both of these ventures were 75 years ahead of their time and the NHS has only just caught up.

Why did it take so long for the mainstream healthcare to link the social and the medical? The NHS believed from its inception that science and technology could save us from ourselves. Ironically, it is now through science that we have laboriously 'rediscovered' the ultimate power of community and the limitations of technology. Thomas McKeown's 1976 research showed that improvement in the control of TB was down to lifestyle and diet, not antimicrobials.[4] More recently social scientists and epidemiologists, including Richard Wilkinson and Michael Marmot, have shown beyond doubt the social and economic determinants of illness, particularly that relative poverty makes you ill.[5] Figure 1 shows the 'onion' of our dysfunctional social norms and their consequences: moving from deeper attitudes and societal problems to

their more obvious manifestations. The years of inaction about this seems to be due to the Titanic momentum of medical science. Like all venerable institutions it will accept unfamiliar truths only on its own terms and by its own standards of evidence. The views and values of a group of Quakers cuts no ice. Nor do the seemingly cranky ideas of two pioneering doctors in Peckham.

Now that science has finally caught up with religion and the lived experience of general practitioners, we still do not know exactly how to find some sweetness in the chill north wind of change. Statistical associations between social measures do not tell us how to improve things: social science is a blunt instrument. Its origins in the biological sciences give it a legacy of linear and mechanistic

Figure 1: Circles of dysfunction



thinking, whereas complex systems like societies have non-linear dynamics and multiple interconnecting causations. Communities are no more machines than are individual human beings. In the absence of answers from the scientists, government departments have sought examples of successful schemes in the hope they can be reproduced elsewhere. There are many successful projects going on, notably the latterday Peckham experiment led by Dr Sam Everington in Bromley-by-Bow, east London, but these schemes don't travel well. Communities are unique organisms, even more so than individuals, whereas conventional science needs to find measurable generalisation. Certainly, Bromley-by-Bow and Keynsham are very different places in countless ways. However, there is a common feature among successful community transformations: they are 'organic' – they arise from within the community and are not imposed from outside. People don't like being told how to live their lives and, in any case, outsiders usually get it wrong. So how can a community be helped to develop more wellbeing?

The 'new' science of complexity does promise help here. It tells us that the interactions we have with one another, repeated innumerable times, are the main determinants of the patterns of being and behaving that emerge within families, communities and society.[6] There is no need for a master plan, which in any case, will over-simplify, be unresponsive, prone to political whim and to powerful vested interests. The process is more like balancing a bicycle than carving a statue – it is dynamic and fluid with a pattern of movement that never repeats itself exactly, though the overall direction is more predictable. Given the right conditions, wellbeing will emerge. This is how the natural world works, for natural systems will self-organise to create patterns that are unpredictable but vary, often in beautiful ways, around a theme determined by the quality of the innumerable interactions within the system. In the case of human communities, these interactions are conversations and shared activities. Of course, all systems are embedded within larger systems: families within a community, communities within a region, regions within a nation and so on. Each embedded system must be acutely aware of what is going on in the larger system of which it is part. Communities that are cut off fail to adapt and are likely to die off.

The crucial question remaining is how to ensure that we have 'the right conditions', the right 'quality of the innumerable interactions' and the right sensitivity to the environment. There are plenty of examples of societies and even whole civilisations that have self-organised into committing terrible atrocities or have failed and disappeared altogether. According to anthropologist Jared Diamond, success or failure is determined, in part, by the way we respond to problems.[7] He identifies vested interests and rigid value systems, often combining into a form of 'groupthink', as the key obstacles to adaptive change. Yet it is value systems that must form the basis of our innumerable interactions from which our healthy and flourishing community will emerge. Diamond says we must decide which core values to hold on to and which to discard.

The question of values is, therefore, central to this quest for wellbeing in a community. Figure 1 shows a 'vacuum' at the core where the nourishing values informing every conversation and action should be. Next to the core of the onion is the quartet of personal values identified by psychologist Oliver James as having a close association with mental illness: appearance, fame, money and possessions.[8] However, James's work is based on the genesis of mental illness, not wellbeing. These are related but not the same. His quartet of undesirable values does not tell us how they should be replaced or perhaps counterbalanced. The New horizons document includes a set of evidence-based actions (not values) to improve personal wellbeing developed by the New Economics Foundation.[9] The five actions they offer are interesting but, for now, we need values to inform conversations so that actions emerge from the community and are not delivered by outside institutions, even forward-looking ones.

I would argue that the vacuum at the core of Figure 1 was occupied by Christianity. Keynsham, once home to the largest Augustinian Abbey in Europe, now has active and well-attended churches but their Christian values are no longer at the core of the community. Instead we have a secular materialism defined by money and objects: allowing objects to speak for us, even to stand for us and to express our worth. In his play, Lady Windermere's fan (1892), Oscar Wilde gave to his character, Lord Darlington, one of his unforgettable lines. Answering the question 'What is a cynic?, he replies: A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.[10] This came amidst a banter between upper class Victorian gentlemen, steeped in ironic self-deprecation. Earlier in the same scene another of these characters delivered this line: 'In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is much the worst; the last is a real tragedy!' The characters here are flirting with their privilege while protecting the vulnerability of their deeper emotions behind a screen of cynical bravado and Havana cigars. The subtext is a profound truth about the emptiness of 'having' – status, money, possessions. It happens that the 'commodity' about which they speak is a woman. Love is a leveler – it transcends social and gender status and so is a threat. When love is the dominant currency, money loses its power and so do those who have it. Wilde's own career ended ignominiously through love: even a great man cannot carry the banner of love alone. Today we still have institutionalised greed and avarice with no effective moderating influence: we have profanity alone.

I suggest we need to rediscover the sacred to balance the profanity and underpin the shift that has already begun in health, wellbeing and environmental awareness. This needs to be in a form that can stand alongside organised religion without being a part of it, and it needs

to be accessible to the bulk of the population. The writings of two of our other great thinkers can support this project: poet and artist William Blake, and psychoanalyst and writer Carl Jung. They were both brought up in religious families but rejected the church as an institution while embracing the sacred and the divine. They also shared another important belief: they saw life and reality to be fundamentally dialectical, that is emerging from the dynamic relationship of opposites.[11, 12]

Blake called these opposites 'contraries', for instance conservative and radical, producer and devourer. He believed that contraries cannot be combined for to do so would collapse existence itself. (This resonates remarkably with quantum physics two centuries later and with Chinese philosophy.) So a healthy life is one that allows contraries to co-exist and to find their own balance. Similarly, Jung believed that the fundamental operating system of the psyche is the 'tensions of opposites'. This tension provides the energy and vibrancy of the lived experience. This can be seen as cyclical movements or oscillations which Jung called 'synchronic' dynamics. For both Blake and Jung the processes are fluid, dynamic and contradictory. Without opposing forces stagnation occurs. This theory finds close parallels in complexity science.

So here we have two great thinkers proposing that we do not 'negate' values of which we disapprove, but we balance them with their opposite. So we set the sacred alongside the profane and we improvise our solutions. But what does the 'sacred' mean in a secular world?

Blake described the 'divine body'. By this he meant a deeper level of existence in which we can all engage. The route towards the divine body is the imagination. By this he meant not quite the same as we usually mean today, but rather a level of consciousness through which we gain access to deeper meanings. He felt that art in particularly helped us with this, whereby the artist shows us a glimpse of the eternal. This involves not being content with our five senses alone – he regarded these as a trap – but to combine our senses with compassion or love. This is the context of the famous stanza:

> *To see a World in a Grain of Sand*
> *And a Heaven in a Wild Flower*
> *Hold infinity in the palm of your hand*
> *And eternity in an hour*[13]

Here the world of space and time has been set aside, and things are understood in their relation to the divine and the eternal. This again resonates with quantum mechanics and comes close to Buddhist mindfulness.

Jung wrote of the divine drama in which we are actors (echoing Shakespeare). For Jung, this was closely linked with 'the symbolic life'. He was preoccupied by symbols through much of his life.[4] By this he meant, not only visual images, but also events, behaviours and dreams which, when understood at a symbolic level, give us access to deeper and sacred meanings – perhaps to Blake's divine body. It is at this level of awareness that his archetypes and the collective unconscious operate. At this level we are intimately connected with one another and with the rest of the natural world.

It is this deep connection that Blake and Jung both tried to help us understand. It is this that becomes the cohesive force enabling people to celebrate life and withstand misfortune. It is this, when repeated innumerable times in ordinary conversations, that will produce a vital community. It will do this by complementing money with goodwill, generosity and even love as the dominant currency. I can do no better than to finish with a paragraph by human ecologist Alistair McIntosh:

> *True communities can never be about herding, or being mindlessly subsumed into a conformist or cultic mass consciousness. The vanquished perhaps submit, but lovers only ever surrender. The one implies going under, being subsumed; the other, surfing high on a freely given yielding to the fullness of life. To have life abundant we must become great lovers in every sense of that expression. That is the vocation to which we are called – both in and through the experience of community.*[15]

References

1 HM Government website. Available at: www.newhorizons.dh.gov.uk/index.aspx (accessed April 2010).

2 Elliott AM. Symptoms in the community study. University of Aberdeen, 2009, personal communication.

3 House W. Vested interests and the greater good. *Journal of Holistic Healthcare, 2009*; 6(1): 23--25.

4 McKeown T. *Modern rise of population*. London: Edward Arnold, 1976.

5 Wilkinson R. In: Marmot M (ed) *Social determinants of health: The solid facts*. Geneva: International Centre for Health and Society, WHO, 2003.

6 Sweeney K. **Complexity in primary care.** Oxford: Radcliffe, 2006.

7 Diamond J. *Collapse*. London: Penguin, 2006.

8 James O. *The selfish capitalist*. London: Ebury Press, 2008.

9 New economics foundation website. Available at: neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/Five_Ways_to_Well-being_Evidence_1.pdf (accessed April 2010) Note that the Foresight programme is about mental wellbeing, but the Five Ways to Wellbeing has (sensibly) dropped the 'mental'.

10 Wilde O. Lady Windermere's fan, Act 3.

11 Roberts J. William Blake's poetry. London: Continuum International Publishing, 2007.

12 Van Eenwyk JR. *Archetypes and strange attractors: the chaotic world of symbols*. Toronto, Inner City Books, 1997.

13 Blake W. Auguries of innocence,1803.

14 Levy P. *The Apocalypse is its own solution*. Available at www.awakeninthedream.com/artis/*APOCALYPSEISOWNSOLUTION*WEBSITE.htm (accessed April 2010).

15 McIntosh A. Rekindling community: connecting people, environment and spirituality. Dartington: Green Books, 2008.

This article will be followed by a further one to specify how these celestial ideas can restore some sweetness to the north wind of change!