

escalating expectations, and as our level of wealth and comforts keeps increasing, the sense of well-being we hoped to achieve keeps receding into the distance. When Cyrus the Great had ten thousand cooks prepare new dishes for his table, the rest of Persia had barely enough to eat. These days every household in the “first world” has access to the recipes of the most diverse lands and can duplicate the feasts of past emperors. But does this make us more satisfied?

This paradox of rising expectations suggests that improving the quality of life might be an insurmountable task. In fact, there is no inherent problem in our desire to escalate our goals, as long as we enjoy the struggle along the way. The problem arises when people are so fixated on what they want to achieve that they cease to derive pleasure from the present. When that happens, they forfeit their chance of contentment.

Though the evidence suggests that most people are caught up on this frustrating treadmill of rising expectations, many individuals have found ways to escape it. These are people who, regardless of their material conditions, have been able to improve the quality of their lives, who are satisfied, and who have a way of making those around them also a bit more happy.

Such individuals lead vigorous lives, are open to a variety of experiences, keep on learning until the day they die, and have strong ties and commitments to other people and to the environment in which they live. They enjoy whatever they do, even if tedious or difficult; they are hardly ever bored, and they can take in stride anything that comes their way. Perhaps their greatest strength is that they are *in control of their lives*. We shall see later how they have managed to reach this state. But before we do so, we need to review some of the devices that have been developed over time as protection against the threat of chaos, and the reasons why such external defenses often do not work.

## THE SHIELDS OF CULTURE

Over the course of human evolution, as each group of people became gradually aware of the enormity of its isolation in the cosmos and of the precariousness of its hold on survival, it developed myths and beliefs to transform the random, crushing forces of the universe into manageable, or at least understandable, patterns. One of the major functions of every culture has been to shield its members from chaos, to reassure them of their importance and ultimate success. The Eskimo, the hunter of the Amazon basin, the Chinese, the Navajo, the Australian Aborigine, the New Yorker—all have taken for granted that they live at the center of the universe, and that they have a special dispensation that puts them on the fast track to the future. Without such trust in exclusive privileges, it would be difficult to face the odds of existence.

This is as it should be. But there are times when the feeling that one has found safety in the bosom of a friendly cosmos becomes dangerous. An unrealistic trust in the shields, in the cultural myths, can lead to equally extreme disillusion when they fail. This tends to happen whenever a culture has had a run of good luck and for a while seems indeed to have found a way of controlling the forces of nature. At that point it is logical for it to begin believing that it is a chosen people who need no longer fear any major setback. The Romans reached that juncture after several centuries of ruling the Mediterranean, the Chinese were confident of their immutable superiority before the Mongol conquest, and the Aztecs before the arrival of the Spaniards.

This cultural hubris, or overweening presumption about what we are entitled to from a universe that is basically insensitive to human needs, generally leads to trouble. The unwarranted sense of security sooner or later results in a rude awakening. When people start believing that progress is inevitable and life easy, they may quickly lose courage and determination in the face of the first signs of adversity. As they realize that what they had believed in is not entirely true, they abandon faith in everything else they have learned. Deprived of the customary supports that cultural values had given them, they flounder in a morass of anxiety and apathy.

Such symptoms of disillusion are not hard to observe around us now. The most obvious ones relate to the pervasive listlessness that affects so many lives.

Genuinely happy individuals are few and far between. How many people do you know who enjoy what they are doing, who are reasonably satisfied with their lot, who do not regret the past and look to the future with genuine confidence? If Diogenes with his lantern twenty-three centuries ago had difficulty finding an honest man, today he would have perhaps an even more troublesome time finding a happy one.

This general malaise is not due directly to external causes. Unlike so many other nations in the contemporary world, we can't blame our problems on a harsh environment, on widespread poverty, or on the oppression of a foreign occupying army. The roots of the discontent are internal, and each person must untangle them personally, with his or her own power. The shields that have worked in the past—the order that religion, patriotism, ethnic traditions, and habits instilled by social classes used to provide—are no longer effective for increasing numbers of people who feel exposed to the harsh winds of chaos.

The lack of inner order manifests itself in the subjective condition that some call ontological anxiety, or existential dread. Basically, it is a fear of being, a feeling that there is no meaning to life and that existence is not worth going on with. Nothing seems to make sense. In the last few generations, the specter of nuclear war has added an unprecedented threat to our hopes. There no longer seems to be any point to the historical strivings of humankind. We are just forgotten specks drifting in the void. With each passing year, the chaos of the physical universe becomes magnified in the minds of the multitude.

As people move through life, passing from the hopeful ignorance of youth into sobering adulthood, they sooner or later face an increasingly nagging question: "Is this all there is?" Childhood can be painful, adolescence confusing, but for most people, behind it all there is the expectation that after one grows up, things will get better. During the years of early adulthood the future still looks promising, the hope remains that one's goals will be realized. But inevitably the bathroom mirror shows the first white hairs, and confirms the fact that those extra pounds are not about to leave; inevitably eyesight begins to fail and mysterious pains begin to shoot through the body. Like waiters in a restaurant starting to place breakfast settings on the surrounding tables while one is still having dinner, these intimations of mortality plainly communicate the message: Your time is up, it's time to move on. When this happens, few people are ready. "Wait a minute, this can't be happening to me. I haven't even begun to live. Where's all that money I was supposed to have made? Where are all the good

times I was going to have?”

A feeling of having been led on, of being cheated, is an understandable consequence of this realization. From the earliest years we have been conditioned to believe that a benign fate would provide for us. After all, everybody seemed to agree that we had the great fortune of living in the richest country that ever was, in the most scientifically advanced period of human history, surrounded by the most efficient technology, protected by the wisest Constitution. Therefore, it made sense to expect that we would have a richer, more meaningful life than any earlier members of the human race. If our grandparents, living in that ridiculously primitive past, could be content, just imagine how happy we would be! Scientists told us this was so, it was preached from the pulpits of churches, and it was confirmed by thousands of TV commercials celebrating the good life. Yet despite all these assurances, sooner or later we wake up alone, sensing that there is no way this affluent, scientific, and sophisticated world is going to provide us with happiness.

As this realization slowly sets in, different people react to it differently. Some try to ignore it, and renew their efforts to acquire more of the things that were supposed to make life good—bigger cars and homes, more power on the job, a more glamorous life-style. They renew their efforts, determined still to achieve the satisfaction that up until then has eluded them. Sometimes this solution works, simply because one is so drawn into the competitive struggle that there is no time to realize that the goal has not come any nearer. But if a person does take the time out to reflect, the disillusionment returns: after each success it becomes clearer that money, power, status, and possessions do not, by themselves, necessarily add one iota to the quality of life.

Others decide to attack directly the threatening symptoms. If it is a body going to seed that rings the first alarm, they will go on diets, join health clubs, do aerobics, buy a Nautilus, or undergo plastic surgery. If the problem seems to be that nobody pays much attention, they buy books about how to get power or how to make friends, or they enroll in assertiveness training courses and have power lunches. After a while, however, it becomes obvious that these piecemeal solutions won't work either. No matter how much energy we devote to its care, the body will eventually give out. If we are learning to be more assertive, we might inadvertently alienate our friends. And if we devote too much time to cultivating new friends, we might threaten relationships with our spouse and family. There are just so many dams about to burst and so little time to tend to

them all.

Daunted by the futility of trying to keep up with all the demands they cannot possibly meet, some will just surrender and retire gracefully into relative oblivion. Following Candide's advice, they will give up on the world and cultivate their little gardens. They might dabble in genteel forms of escape such as developing a harmless hobby or accumulating a collection of abstract paintings or porcelain figurines. Or they might lose themselves in alcohol or the dreamworld of drugs. While exotic pleasures and expensive recreations temporarily take the mind off the basic question "Is this all there is?" few claim to have ever found an answer that way.

Traditionally, the problem of existence has been most directly confronted through religion, and an increasing number of the disillusioned are turning back to it, choosing either one of the standard creeds or a more esoteric Eastern variety. But religions are only temporarily successful attempts to cope with the lack of meaning in life; they are not permanent answers. At some moments in history, they have explained convincingly what was wrong with human existence and have given credible answers. From the fourth to the eighth century of our era Christianity spread throughout Europe, Islam arose in the Middle East, and Buddhism conquered Asia. For hundreds of years these religions provided satisfying goals for people to spend their lives pursuing. But today it is more difficult to accept their worldviews as definitive. The form in which religions have presented their truths—myths, revelations, holy texts—no longer compels belief in an era of scientific rationality, even though the substance of the truths may have remained unchanged. A vital new religion may one day arise again. In the meantime, those who seek consolation in existing churches often pay for their peace of mind with a tacit agreement to ignore a great deal of what is known about the way the world works.

The evidence that none of these solutions is any longer very effective is irrefutable. In the heyday of its material splendor, our society is suffering from an astonishing variety of strange ills. The profits made from the widespread dependence on illicit drugs are enriching murderers and terrorists. It seems possible that in the near future we shall be ruled by an oligarchy of former drug dealers, who are rapidly gaining wealth and power at the expense of law-abiding citizens. And in our sexual lives, by shedding the shackles of "hypocritical" morality, we have unleashed destructive viruses upon one another.