

Death by Chocolate?

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"And finally, monsieur, a waffer-thin mint?"

A hugely obese man enters a restaurant, rude and demanding. After vomiting violently over himself and others he orders an obscene quantity of food and proceeds to gorge himself. The Maitre D' appears at the end of the gastronomic binge and urges his customer to have one last treat – an after dinner mint chocolate. It was to be the fatal mouthful for this character, who explodes in a disgusting shower of innards.

If we are to avoid a fate as ugly as *Mr. Creosote's* in the *Monty Python* film, *The Meaning of Life*,¹ then a complete change of priorities and a drastic shift of focus in how we value 'things' are critical. We have to look again at the question, 'what do we want?' and see if the answer damningly remains 'individual gratification and short-term gain'.

While the *Maitre D'* (who represents a global, market-driven economy, selling whatever the customer demands and perpetuating increasing demand) panders to every want of his biggest customer (who represents the existing social paradigm² of unsustainable levels of over-consumption) then the future looks very unpleasant indeed. That last "*waffer-thin mint*" represents the tipping point in our abuse of natural resources beyond which there are disastrous consequences.

Is this a dramatic over-statement? Not if we believe half the predictions of combined global systemic collapse³ from peak oil, population growth,

¹ Monty Python's 'The Meaning of Life' © 2003 Universal Studios

² "A paradigm is a collection of assumptions, concepts, beliefs, and values that together make up a community's way of viewing reality. Our current paradigm dictates that more stuff is better, that infinite economic growth is desirable and possible, and that pollution is the price of progress. To really turn things around, we need to nurture a different paradigm based on the values of sustainability, justice, health, and community." *The Story of Stuff*, www.storyofstuff.com

³ "Our Panarchic Future", Thomas Homer-Dixon <http://www.worldwatch.org/node/6008>

resource depletion, food and water shortages, habitat destruction, species extinctions, rising waste and pollution, ecological tipping points and runaway climate change⁴, macro-economic malfunction, social inequity, cultural breakdown, mental and physical ill-health, religious radicalism, political protectionism and the effects of resource wars including mass migrations.

In Wales, per capita, we consume the equivalent of three planets worth of natural resources and in very simple terms we have to drastically downsize our consumption of natural resources to be living equitably within natural limits – we have to go on a diet!

Of course, *Mr. Creosote* made a *choice* to eat that chocolate. And the *Maitre D'* should have been more *responsible* in his servitude. But we are addicted to excess, so this analogy portrays grotesquely the current dilemma we face in our daily lives as individuals, businesses, communities and as a nation within a burgeoning global society on a finite planet: to change, we need to kick our addiction, rediscover what it means to have 'choice *and* responsibility' and know when we have enough!

Change is a 'movement', or 'shift', from one behaviour to another. The question is, how do we make that move?

Freedom to choose has been bought by disconnecting the consumer from the producer through a 'smoke and mirrors' global market of supply and demand – 'guilt-free shopping' where the price is always right! But consumerism is a blinkered tread-mill and that disconnect goes deeper to an emotional level as we lose our understanding of the real-world value of things beyond the price we pay.

Mr Creosote is lonely - disconnected from those around him. The danger is that we are also giving up our connections with the world and people around us in exchange for consuming things that we don't really need. We don't care where the things we buy come from because the 'quick fix' retail therapy is all we want. The social norm (stupefyingly reinforced by recent government efforts to 'save our economy') is to consume - we consume because that is our social purpose!

That we are buying 'stuff' to fill a void left by an emotional disconnect from our families, local communities, environment or society at large is something unspoken.

Missing elements in this scenario are 'knowledge', 'understanding' and 'direction'. Like a recovering addict, to recognise and *know* the problem is the necessary first step in altering our ways. We *understand* once we have internalised and absorbed the consequences of our actions and can see alternatives. We can then alter *direction* as we go on a journey of change.

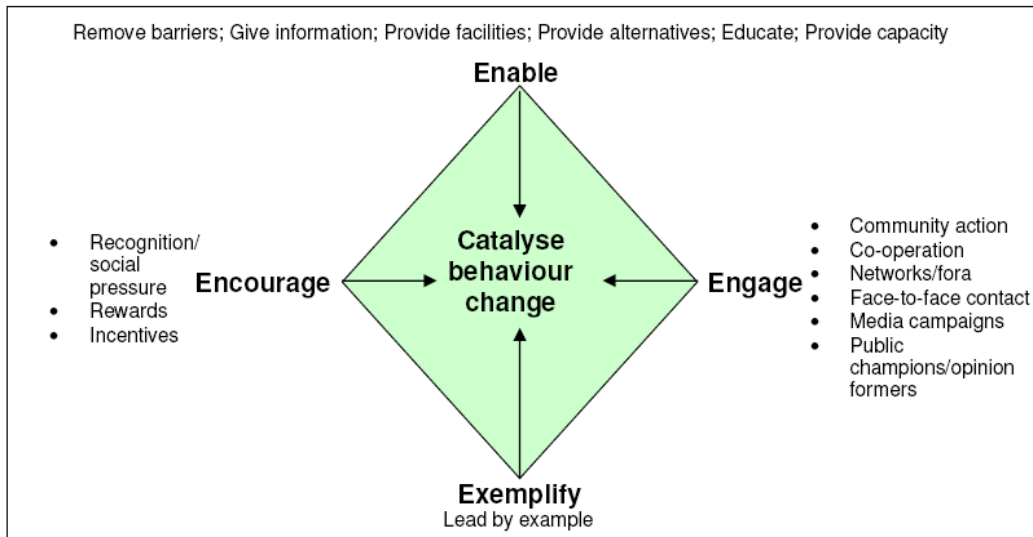
⁴ 'Devastating Natural Disasters Continue Steady Rise' Petra Löw/ June 4, 2009
<http://www.worldwatch.org/node/6129?emc=el&m=252273&l=4&v=aa01b091bf>

But we are social animals. We need a comforting hand to feel good in our choices. We need to feel we *belong*.

When we act, common sense is often over-ridden by emotional ties, relationships, camaraderie and social identity. A sense of *belonging* can be more powerful in affecting behaviour than any other facet of our knowledge & understanding. Picture a family living in a run-down Valleys community⁵ where poor health, alcohol and drug use are prevalent, there is little work, and where educational attainment is something for others. Personal ambitions are suppressed as people experience the, absolutely genuine, mutual support of their families and trust of close friends. The option to change their situation or improve their lot is over-ridden by close local bonds - a sense of belonging.

The Sustainable Development Commission recommends the ‘4 E’s’ approach in encouraging a shift towards more sustainable behaviour:

Helping People Make Better Choices:



Big change can happen if *all* the 4 E’s are present encompassing an enabling infrastructure, leadership, prevailing social expectations and, crucially, a guiding hand close to where the change is needed.

But change comes from within – a *belief* that doing things differently is the right thing to do. It is personal wellbeing, understanding *and* a sense of belonging that will bring about the swiftest change.

Thankfully, there are signs that changes can be achieved quickly. For example, people’s willingness to recycle (with an increase from 3% to 36% of Welsh household waste now recycled⁶) is an example of how people will respond to new demands to alter their daily habits. However, this has been achieved with enormous effort and huge financial input.

⁵ ‘One Family in Wales’, BBC Wales Production <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00i8bq8>

⁶ Mal Williams, Cylch CEO, speaking at SW’s ‘Resilient Local Economy’ conference, April 2009. <http://www.sustainablewales.org/blog/wp-content/conference-proceedings.pdf>

A related behavioural shift sweeping society: the shopping bag. Abandoning throwaway plastic in favour of a robust reusable bag is a simple lifestyle change that has had a renaissance. In Wales, the community action charity Sustainable Wales (SW) has influenced Porthcawl traders and shoppers to the surprising extent that 94% of traders are displaying their window stickers (*pictured*), with a quarter reduction in plastic bag use in just over a year.

And this success has again happened through the 4 E's: high level media exposure, readily available alternatives, waste management pressures, large chain-stores taking up the challenge, reusable bags as fashion accessories and, crucially, SW created a live and colourful presence within the community itself.

The Bagman character⁷ appeared on the high street in person and convinced the local Chamber of Trade to get involved. The help and guidance handed out by the Bagman was central in making the town's traders feel they belonged to something worthwhile and generated a willingness from them to go somewhere new together. And the shoppers who are choosing to use their own bags now belong to a new movement of people who publicly display their responsible concern by carrying their own bags - it's that simple!

Councillors in nearby Bridgend are now wishing to adopt the campaign and stating with great dismay in the press that SW's bag campaign has stopped due to lack of funding. But the Porthcawl experience shows that to get everyone involved the process needs to include someone close to the ground. People like to have their hands held – it comforts them, guides them and makes people feel that they are not alone. We will willingly walk with someone we trust. The 'journey of change' just needs a few guides to show us the way.

So the choice is stark. We can foster a sense of belonging and go together on our journey. Or we resign ourselves to individual self-interest and consume our own life-support system.

Mint chocolate anyone?

Help Porthcawl become a
Plastic Bag Free town



www.plasticbagfreewales.co.uk
(01656) 783405

⁷ Bagman strikes again! <http://plasticbagwatch.blogspot.com/2008/01/bagman-strikes-again.html>