



UNIVERSITY OF WITHYWOOD

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION

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THE PLAN written by Anton Bantock circa 1968

These words are for those people, and especially young people who find that their lives have no special meaning or purpose, and who want a few signposts to positive thinking and positive living. The need for this is more acute today than at any time in the past. And this is why. 60 or so years ago the lives of most people in the western world were controlled, for better or for worse, by a number of factors which have since disappeared.

One of these is our class system. Although flexible, the existence of classes conditioned most people to an acceptance of their lot. They were either privileged, or had a more or less servile position. Although the condition of the latter, who were his majority, was often hard most of them were content. They knew the limits of their world and had a code of behaviour imposed by tradition and often reinforced by the church; especially the non-conformist churches. The upper classes too had values, and many were trained in public schools to a position of leadership in government, the armed forces, colonial administration etc., positions which called for a high standard of integrity and loyalty. As such, they were an inspiration to the rest of society. One could always rely on them to give a lead not just in politics but on all moral issues.

Victorian morality although often sneered at since for being narrow-minded and bigoted, nonetheless upheld values which encouraged people to live decent, purposeful and constructive lives. The 2 world wars and other factors have levelled the classes. We have lost the identity which belongs to class, and lost the code of moral behaviour that went with it.

Permissiveness, advanced as spurious doctrine to liberate people from the constraints of the past, has produced a new bondage. The new freedom, euphemistically called '*doing your own thing*' amounts, in practice, to following one's own selfish inclinations and becoming slaves to one indulgence or another. Parents, teachers, leaders, churchmen, have all, to some extent, been infected by these new trends and are afraid to distinguish between RIGHT and WRONG for fear of being thought old fashioned. Moral guidance, from being the hallmark of 19th Century education, is now left to the few brave enough to uphold it, and the rest wallow in their permissive fog.

Another factor which is disappearing is the family. An average family 60 years ago contained very few grandparents, in-laws, aunts or uncles, living under the same roof. The authority of the father and grandfather was immense. At its worst it was tyrannical and inhabiting. At its best it provided a hidden code of behaviour that was truly admirable. The existence of an adult world at close quarters conditioned the young to an early acceptance of adult standards.

This concept of 'family' has been gradually eroded. A new stage has been artificially created in the form of the 'Teenager', with its own world, its fashions, its heroes, cultures and values. Some of the values are good, but most give little permanent guidance to young people on how to conduct their lives. The most striking result is to widen the gap between parents and teenage children. Lack of understanding for the other's values has created a 'generation gap' and has enormously reduced the authority of the parents. This can be good thing, but it can only be good if another authority takes its place: that is, the authority of a code of behaviour, a design for living, which produces positive action. So far, a lot of teenage culture has not provided this substitute, and the process of becoming an adult in the full sense, is indefinitely postponed.

The process of finding the right career has enormously aggravated the difficulties of growing up. In the past there was no problem. A son, in many cases, simply did the same as his father. The son of a miner became a miner. The son of a farmer became a farmer. Girls either didn't want a career, or had to work in domestic service. The growth of modern education has increasingly widened the choice of career. In theory, this is good. In practice it often leads to bewilderment, and competition for the best jobs can be a cause of great disappointment to those who had high expectations. Failure at the age of 19 or 20 leads to demoralisation; and the welfare state, with the best intentions, makes it easy for people to 'drop out' and get by on government assistance.

A satisfactory job or career may not, of course, be necessary to leading full, happy and constructive life; but in most cases it is a very powerful aid. To rely on government charity on the other hand, can be degrading and dehumanising experience. The limits of a young person's world may have been narrow and constricting in the past, but it did ensure that people worked and saved their money. It was essential to survival. Even if it was a hard life, it could be psychologically an enriching and ennobling experience. The current contempt for work among some young people may be a justifiable revolt against a corrupt and competitive social order; but its effects are to deny a human being one of the most powerful and creative instincts, and can only lead to mental stagnation and atrophy of character. It is more than likely that economic recession and increasing automation will deny more and more people the right to work, and we must be prepared to accept more subsidised employment from the government. But increased leisure, whether we want it or not, is bound to come, and this could be a disaster to those who have not developed fulfilling and stimulating alternatives to work.

The influence of the Church is often said to be declining. There is certainly less formal church-going than 100 years ago, but church-going then was very

often a social habit. Such church-going may not have led to any real appreciation of Christian values or provided much inspiration on how to get the most out of life, but it did condition a very large section of the public to the observance of certain values, most of them admirable. There were probably more long-term security and stability in our grandparent's youth than there is today. We have short-term security in the form of many benefits of a welfare state, but the stability has gone from our currency and this has removed the incentive to save or even work. The British Empire which was a source of pride and moral uplift to many has gone, and the common market has not provided a substitute either.

With all the barriers down which confined human activity in the past, there are many who would say *'Here at last is that freedom to live our lives as we want'*. But it does not seem to make us happy. Too often it leads us to become slaves to some indulgence, whether it is a craving for fame and popularity, security, success or money. What is it all leading to? Isn't there something more to just the living out our lives and then dying? Aren't we meant for something more than an animal existence; and then death and to be forgotten totally, just as we lose all knowledge of our great-grandparents, and even our grandparents?

Within each one of us is a not often recognised capacity for reaching out of ourselves and seeking a rational explanation of our existence. It is this thirst which drives many young people to see in Communism, Maoism, or neo-fascism a new meaning to life. Others try to lose themselves on the road to Kathmandu and find a new purpose for existence from the teaching of the Hindu gurus.

Those incapable of figuring out the answers on an intellectual basis, try to get there by short cuts. At least they can drown the nagging thoughts by getting 'high' on amplified music, psychedelic lights, alcohol or fantastic adulation of idols. Today we see TV sets are now so worshipped. There is no doubt that these avenues afford some satisfaction to many, but these can only be temporary substitutes for a wholly credible and comprehensive explanation of the purposeful human existence.

Ask any group of young people what their main aim in life is, and you get a list something like this:

- An interesting and worthwhile job
- Happy personal relationships – including marriage
- A healthy and active
- Travel, excitement, variety
- Success; popularity

This is an interesting reflection of crude propaganda of our capitalistic and competitive society. All but the most gullible soon realize how shallow and transparent its values are. Assuming we have enough money to live on then it does not count amongst life's priorities. Without these, happiness, it would seem, cannot be obtained. To be happy then is man's ultimate aim, but what

is happiness? Whose happiness? The happiness of oneself or the happiness of the world?

Happiness when pursued has an uncanny way of eluding us. If it becomes merely the pursuit of pleasure, it is not real lasting happiness. Happiness comes rather as a result of doing something worthwhile – creating something; loving someone, or people generally in the sense of selfless dedication to another's need taking part in an activity with others which is worthwhile exciting or amusing. In each case it means to a certain extent, losing sight of self. Almost in proportion to the degree that one does this, is one most sure to be happy. Very often, the happiest people are those whose personal happiness is furthers from their minds, and for whom the happiness of others is their main concern.

If you take this argument a little further then it ought to be possible to be happy without the conditions listed above. For those with interesting jobs, easy success, lots of money, happy marriage, popularity and good health, it ought to be easy to be happy, although, significantly, many who have all these things, are not happy. But many will go through life with none of them. All of us, lucky and unlucky, will have bad days and good days times when all seems to go well and times of difficulty, disappointment and frustration. Is it still possible, when really tested by bad luck, bad health, unhappy circumstances, or unpleasant experiences, to be truly happy?

To those that absorb average TV programs and newspapers, this hypothesis would seem to be nonsense. The news media and a lot of public entertainment dwells on all that is abnormal, criminal, diseased and violent in the human race, because only sensational events are sufficiently diverting to sell newspapers or TV sets. To such people, life must appear to be a succession of completely fortuitous chance occurrences unpredictable and unalterable. However, if one can lift oneself above the trivial and sensational, and take an objective view of mankind and of our greater and immediate environment, then it is possible to assemble a great mass of evidence to support yourself.

As human beings we possess a free will of our own, we have a colossal advantage over other forms of creation which are controlled by instinct and biological laws. But this very free will can lead us to depravity and even disaster unless it is controlled. We don't need external controls. This would turn us into robots. We already have a built in control system. It is called intellect. We have intellectual facilities, unlike other creatures, that enable us to reason out the answer to our own human predicament; the apparent human anarchy compared with the sublime order of space.

We also have the faculty of distinguishing between answers which are better than those which are not as good, depending on how far they measure up to some unwritten human code whose criterion seems to be, 'what is best for the human race'. This faculty nay is called conscience. Conscience is that nagging feeling that seems to tell us not to do something and causes us uneasiness when we do not do it. But it is not always infallible because the

criterion 'what is best for the human race' can be corrupted by subtle propaganda and conditioning. Conscience can also get out of hand and become too dominant, producing guilt complexes and other forms of neurotic behaviour. So we must fall back on our intellect; our rational faculties, a need to travel any further in determining our role it is necessary to accept:

Those who have experienced this vividly, and who were able afterwards to record it coherently, set down truths which are manifestly the same; whether they are called the force they confronted Jehovah, Krishna, God or Allah. And this tells us more about the author. As well as being a creative and life giving force it is the sum total of all goodness and truth. The values and virtues recorded by Gautama or Jeremiah, Zarathustra or Confucius, by Marcus Aurelius or St Augustine are manifestly the same ones. To no one who has conscientiously studied comparative religions, the overlap is too great to be coincidental. Love of ones neighbour, humility, unselfishness, justice, truth, honesty, sobriety, tolerance -all the virtues which all civilisations have agreed are the right ones are derived in origin from man's confrontation with its creator.

If now you can accept this great creative force is part of ourselves and we are on our own path towards seeing one's life purpose laid out like a map, a road, a pilgrimage. We perhaps have our own personal destinations with a variety of ways of arriving there. Whatever method is used, the results will be totally negative if one assumes one knows all the answers and lacks humility. Some of the most frightful crimes against humanity have been committed by people who believed they were doing them in the name of some god or faith. Only by a conscious and deliberate recognition of our weakness, our fallibility and our capacity to delude ourselves can we then remain open to ultimate truths.

What really enslaves a man is being a victim of his own greed, selfishness and passions. To forego this is to become free from imperfect, man-made authorities. Your thoughts, words and deeds will be a result of conscious communication. Those who have achieved this will say that the effect is the opposite of servility. It is a liberating process which enables you to become the person you could be.