

## What, Me Worry? *by Meredith Kunsal*

All of us bear the imprint of the culture and the time we are born into as much as we do the imprint of our genes, our family system, our birth order. Our experience of community, for instance, has a retrospective aspect, involving a tradition carried from generation to generation. Great events of the immediate centuries of our lifetimes (those great events of history from wars to religious turmoil, from political to social, to environmental realities) affect the cycles of our families and our own generation. There's also the *prospective* aspect that can be described as making part of one's life part of the whole stream and not a mere stagnant puddle without any overflow into the future.

This feeling of community starts out for some simply as cooperation or consideration and eventually can become a feeling of being connected with the whole, with humanity, and a perspective on the welfare of mankind. As I grow older, I realize that the sum total of such events has in many ways shaped who I am. Not everybody develops this sense, but without it how else can we hope to address the significant evolutionary ideas of humankind?

A frightening possibility facing us all today is Global disaster where mankind may extinguish itself. To put an end to humans would require an extremely unlikely blend of social disaster, human malevolence, technological perfection, and bad luck. Ours is more likely to be a continuous struggle toward an improved civilization or a terrible (but not final) outcome for our planet.

Our country's present focus on terrorism has required sacrifices from a citizenry that has responded by putting community ahead of self. The 9/11 crises caused a new, untried President Bush to begin to lead, and the majority of our people sup-

ported him. That it is not the case, I believe, in the impending war with Iraq. Yet in a long-standing American pattern, our officials reacted to the 9/11 emergency by using the crises to create a new social contract.

Prior to the 9/11 events, American society had enjoyed a long era of relative peace and comfort. We had settled into a mood of general pessimism about the long-term future, fearful that our superpower nation, exemplified by the personal aspects of our presidential chief Clinton, were somehow rotting from within. We were definitely too individually focused. *Overly* focused, perhaps, on an “I” and “me” outlook instead of a “we” outlook. During the World War II era we once thought ourselves collectively strong. Yet just over a year ago we regarded ourselves more as individual entities. Even today in our isolated and inward focused families we forget that we breathe common air, drink common water, inhabit common communities. In the face of the general apathy in society concerning social and family programs, *how do we overcome this passivity? How do we re-thread our society which has become so unraveled?*

Even though our recent attention and resources have been focused on the War Against Terrorism, programmatic needs in our own American hometowns remain daunting, for behind each problem lies another problem that must be solved first, and behind that lies yet another, and another. To fix crime we have to fix the family, but before we do that we have to fix welfare, and that means fixing our budget, and that means fixing our civic spirit, but we can’t do that without fixing moral standards, and that means fixing schools and churches, and that means fixing cities, and that’s impossible unless we fix crime. There’s no fulcrum on which to rest a policy lever.

*So why don’t more of us act? Is it because we feel overwhelmed, don’t know how, don’t have hope?* The more we do take committed stands, the more we create inspiration for others to do the same. Technologically, we can connect through hundreds on the web who host grassroots groups concerned with issues such as anarchism, media activism, nonviolence, economic sanctions, environment, health, human rights, labor, police brutality, disarmament, third worlds, diversity, and gun control.<sup>1</sup>

I’m hardly qualified to answer the *what now?* question. Each generation has its own symbols and emblems that seem to capture their collective personality. The G.I. generation before mine had Superman, and my own had Alfred E. Neumam’s “What, me worry?” Not the most self-complementary image. But I have never felt

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.gn.apc.org/pmnp/index-h/htm>

cynicism about my voice counting, or that my actions don't count, or that nothing we do will matter. And what I can say is that one never knows where one's journey will end, you just have to have the faith to begin. *How do you motivate yourself to take the first step?* Find some issue you care about. *Can't you make the most impact simply in the way you live your life today?* The way we live our life is important. Cumulatively, thousands of decisions help make more options possible. *Who will take care of healing the planet? Who will clean up the mess of our corrupt campaign finance system? Who will address our growing inequalities, where the wealthiest 1% now control more wealth than the bottom 94%?* These challenges can only be solved through common action. We must bring into the public sphere our deepest felt convictions, what we believe in our heart.

Even if we ourselves do not directly cause a change, perhaps someone who has heard us and believes in what we see may make that change and thus we have made a difference. We may never know the impact of our actions. Keeping silent is a form of consent.

Regardless of our callings in life, as social individuals we need to acknowledge our connectedness both to the past as well as to the future. What we are able to do in our lives depends very much on the contributions made in the past by others. A critical question that faces each person is, *What will be my contribution to life? Will it be on the useful or useless side of life?*

How are we going to get the substantial group of people who have lived all their lives as moral outlaws to see and appreciate the inherent virtues of responsibility, self-control and other necessary virtues? This question calls for more than slogans and transcends our political and economic ideological differences. I believe the answer begins with the old concept of character development. We need to more visibly prize character, demonstrate it, and instill in young people the desire to have it. We need to teach them and remind ourselves that character counts.

The six core values crucial to a democratic society identified by the Institute of Ethics which founded the nonprofit and nonpartisan Character Counts! Coalition<sup>2</sup> includes:

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<sup>2</sup> <http://charactercounts.org>

1. Trustworthiness: honesty, integrity, promise-keeping, loyalty.
2. Respect: regard for the worth and dignity of all persons; tolerance; refraining from violence, coercion and intimidation; treating others with courtesy, civility, politeness.
3. Responsibility; accountability, pursuit of excellence, self-discipline.
4. Justice and fairness: impartiality, commitment to equity and equality, openness to information and ideas, reasonableness, consistency.
5. Caring: regard for the well-being of others, kindness, compassion, consideration, charity.
6. Civic virtue and citizenship: living up to social obligations, participation in the democratic process, law abidance, protection of the environment, community service, doing one's share.

I, along with fellow travelers of my generation now in elderhood, see the protective family structure of our youth disintegrating around us - often in our own childrens' families that are falling apart. Global terrorism has shaken the sanctuary of our home ground.

As the elder stewards of this time in history, we must look for ways of staying connected with the younger generations. Upcoming Baby Boom grandparents are looming. The recent average age of women turned first-time grandmothers in 2000 was 47. We "Grands" have a unique inter generational understanding. For those of us preceding the Boomers, our core values stress participation over authority, and process over results; listening, adapting, seeking a consensus; not standing out are values to be embraced and celebrated. They are values particularly suited to elderhood, to the old ones who may lead quietly by seeming to follow; who, by having no "blood boiling" agenda of their own to which they are attracted, may allow a larger agenda to emerge from the circumstances of the moment which is in the best interests of everyone to pursue.

To me that's a far better way to live than giving up our hope and our voice. So we act to make a better world, one we'll pass on to our children and grandchildren. But ultimately, we do it because it makes us more whole, teaches us who we are, reminds us why we're here on earth.