

Thought for the month, June 2019

Les Misérables' author Victor Hugo said nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time has come. The history of ideas makes his point: whether change in society is good, bad, or a mixed bag, it often happens with revolutionary speed, transforming technology, opportunities and culture seemingly overnight.

People are good at ideas – from the invention of bronze through to the internet via agriculture, democracy, science and civil liberties. They're also good at suppressing them, overtly or through innate conservatism and indifference.

Some ideas seem to come out of nowhere, sweeping through at terrifying speed: political revolutions and technological leaps demanding change from everyone on pain of being trampled or left behind. To live through these thrills and spills of history can be simultaneously exciting, baffling and painful.

Other ideas can sit in the shadows for decades or even centuries, seeming strange and worthless to the majority. For the faithful, the fear is that the idea will fizzle out, wasting all their efforts and sacrifices. Then something changes: the idea gains ground and a tipping point arrives. Suddenly, former ways of thinking seem quaint or downright wrong. Ideas like religious freedom, the abolition of the slave trade, votes for women and sexual equality all took time to arrive, but arrive they did.

Now there is an idea whose time has finally come and not a moment too soon. Hardly anyone can have missed it. Across the globe a consensus has emerged: we're facing humanity's greatest challenge in the form of climate change and at last, we all know we have to amend the way we live, both to reduce it and to adapt to the consequences it's already bringing.

In spite of the hard facts and worrying science, this particular tipping point in social consciousness is one from which I draw immense hope: in the peaceful, creative protests of Extinction Rebellion; the energy and clarity of marching schoolchildren; and the quiet wisdom of David Attenborough's calmly reasoned truth-telling, we see how people can drive positive change. But for me the beautiful irony is that in this most urgent and crucial of crises, the world is being led by a child with a still, small voice, unafraid to act alone, as a result inspiring a whole planet to look to its future.

One day the statues of Wilberforce, Pankhurst and Mandela may be joined by those of Greta Thunberg but for the time being, it's all of us who need to act. Meanwhile, if you find yourself part of a small group nurturing an idea you're convinced will make for a better society, don't despair: just keeping it alive till its time has come could be a great service to future generations. Ours don't have to be the names in the history books; just the hands that make the history.