

Thought for the month, October 2020

‘May we look upon our treasure, the furniture of our houses, and our garments, and try to discover whether the seeds of war have nourishment in these our possessions.’ So wrote John Woolman, journalist, Quaker and preacher born in October 1720, New Jersey. A radical statement at the time; radical still today.

For the most part, life in the UK in 2020 is by historical standards comfortable. We may have more complex lives and in some ways more sources of stress than our 18th century counterparts but we live in a free society where food is generally plentiful, most have decent homes, education and healthcare universal, energy and water are on tap, opportunities for leisure abundant and culture rich in its diversity. A golden age perhaps.

But the future of all of these things – all of them – is no more secure than the better world past generations strove for. Nothing can be taken for granted.

We’re told the natural world is in a state of collapse, with species after species tumbling off the cliff of extinction. We’re told that in spite of recued carbon emissions due to the economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the atmospheric concentration of carbon continues to rise, and with it, climate instability. We watch in shock as millions of refugees flee war, environmental desolation and poverty caused in large part by factors put in place by our own predecessors (and from which our economy still benefits). And we can see the growing number of ‘strong men’-led regimes around the world, with the rise in isolationism, posturing and the erosion of the rule of international law that entails.

The good news is that each of us has both a stake in and influence over the way the world responds to the current suite of crises swilling across the globe. If Covid has taught us anything it is that we’re capable of sudden, dramatic change in our behaviours in the face of an obvious need. More substantial by far and just as immediate, the climate crisis calls for a similar commitment to change in our daily lives.

The recently convened citizen’s Climate Assembly UK has generated some radical policy recommendations, such as additional taxes for frequent flyers, elimination of combustion engine vehicles, etc. But we don’t need to wait for laws to enforce change. We can choose individually to examine our habits, patterns of consumption, buying choices, means of transport. In doing so we might find that the more sustainable choices are in fact the enriching ones.

It can’t be over-emphasised: the climate crisis is the deepest challenge we have ever faced collectively. Whatever we as individuals are doing to address it *is not enough*. It’s beyond time to look upon our lives and see whether anything about them contains the seeds of a future no-one wants to see.