# **WN** *Columns*

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## *What do you think?*

**Geoffrey Cannon**



*Sao João del Rei, Tiradentes, Rio de Janeiro.* 'Phew, Geoffrey has dropped his spiral obsession', some readers may have felt last month, seeing only the original *New Nutrition* spiral on its first page. Well – no. The natural spiral shape, concept and philosophy should, must and will take over from the linear fixation which drives modern human psychotic exploitation of the living world. So above I also include one of the 15 spirals created by the team of volunteers convened by Inês Rugani for the *World Nutrition Rio2012* conference, from what they could see, find, or make, which they did. This one above of gripped hands moves me most, and a feature of *Rio2012* is that much of its work continues. Also above is an artist's impression of a 'worm-hole' vortex of the type said to be gates to other galaxies.

Last month the main contribution in *WN* was the review of its year of 2014. Now it is the turn of this column, and my first item below is a review of the 'What they believe' items published in 2014, plus the first two in 2013 and the most recent two this year – 15 in all so far. Taken together I see some shortcomings. For all who would like more voices in *WN,* we have some good news. Later this year we will have a website of our own. Among other basic benefits, such as the normal on-line reading and editing and instant response facilities, we will include diaries, blogs, and columns, from *WN* team and family members. More voices, more views, more exchange. Here, more will mean better.

This month, just one more item. This continues my theme of 'Human life is not sacred'. Why is it now conventional to insist on survival at almost all costs? Why does the unusual death of one person make headline news? Why is the health of populations assessed in terms of average age at death? Why don't we live in a culture in which it is normal to choose when to die, joyfully, in company? My hope is that this discussion becomes interactive. What do you think?

# *My heroes*
# What they believe

***Access Public Health Nurition September 2005 on Sources here***
***Access August-September 2013 WDYT on Mary Midgley here***
***Access October-December 2013 WDYT on Robert Skidelsky here***
***Access January 2012 WDYT on Ross Hume Hall here***
***Access February 2014 WDYT on Norman Cantor here***
***Access March 2014 WDYT on Walter Yellowlees here***
***Access April 2014 WDYT on Pablo Neruda here***
***Access May 2014 WDYT on Mike Davis here***
***Access June 2014 Geoffrey Cannon, Claus Leitzmann on Sources here***
***Access June 2014 WDYT on Sigfried Giedion here***
***Access July-August 2014 WDYT on Silvestre Silva here***
***Access September 2014 Claus Leitzmann on Sources here***
***Access September 2014 WDYT on Edward T Hall here***
***Access October 2014 WDYT on Tony McMichael here***
***Access November 2014 WDYT on Karl Miller here***
***Access December 2014 WDYT on John Waterlow here***
***Access January 2015 WDYT on Leonardo Mata here***
***Access this issue WDYT on Amartya Sen here***



*WDYT? heroes. Top, Mary Midgley, Robert Skidelsky, Ross Hume Hall (at right), Norman Cantor, Walter Yellowlees. Next, Pablo Neruda, Mike Davis, Sigfried Giedion, Silvestre Silva, Edward Hall, Tony McMichael. Then, bottom row Karl Miller, John Waterlow, Leonardo Mata, and Amartya Sen*

When I teach or present on public health nutrition, I like to start by listing those who has most influenced me, and in what I write, as here, I indicate why, what they have spoken, written and done, and how they can guide knowledge, decision and action now

in these times. My heroes, let's call them. Some might unkindly see this as a flaunt of learning. To me it is a good and courteous habit. A duty of teachers is to pass on what they know and most value, and I feel a duty to make clear where my ideas come from, and indeed, that usually they are not my ideas but those of others, some of whom lived long ago, some in modern times, some alive and active now.

A number of friends and colleagues do much the same, including in contributions to *Public Health Nutrition* and *WN* – please use the links above. Our findings on the writing and writers that have most influenced us are striking. Thus, of the *PHN* project, as quoted in *WN* in June last year:

> What impressed us and colleagues… is partly that they were almost all books. But more than that, they are mostly radical and especially concerned with poverty, often in the form of testimonies on behalf of impoverished and dispossessed populations. This seems to be the conscience of professionals committed to public health and nurition speaking out…. The choices most often made included books by Alan Berg, John Boyd Orr, Denis Burkitt (usually with Hugh Trowell), Jared Diamond, Susan George, Ivan Illich, Francis Moore Lappé, Marion Nestle and Amartya Sen.

What also impressed us was the proportion of writers selected who are not in any normal sense nutritionists but whose work shows the fundamental importance of food and nutrition – a strong steer towards a broad-minded approach. So starting towards the end of 2013 (but see Box 1 below) I started in this column to profile some of my heroes, with three restrictions. First, their writing had to be available in English. Second, they had to have been alive and active in my lifetime. Third, there had to be substantial writing by or about them which I could download and make into pdfs linked from the text, for you the readers to judge for yourselves. So here pictured above are my 15 heroes so far, with links to my 15 columns, themselves with links for further reading.

Seeing them all together for the first time (no, I did not plan them all out a year and more in advance) I am appalled to realise that there is only one woman – although I did have a hand in two *WN* celebrations by other authors of Cicely Williams and Claudia Roden. Also I am appalled to count 6 Europeans, 4 North Americans, 3 Latin Americans, 1 Australian, and 1 Asian (who has spent most of his life in the UK and the US). Plus all but one are old, mostly in their 70s to 90s, and another 8 are now dead (3, who I knew, died recently).

As with the *PHN* project I found that most of my inspiration comes from outside the nutrition profession, and often from people who cannot be put in one career box. Thus, of the first three on the left in the middle row, the poet Pablo Neruda was also a diplomat and a politician (though he is picked for his poetry). Mike Davis, currently a radical urban geographer, has stormed through a series of careers, linked by his prophetic vision. Sigfried Giedion was an architect, then a writer on architecture, and then was a forerunner of Marshall McLuhan as a philosopher of technology.

Never mind. Rough and ready, my 15 heroes so far are a philosopher (Mary Midgley), two historians (Robert Skidelsky and Norman Cantor), a biochemist (Ross Hume Hall), a physician in general practice (Walter Yellowlees), a poet (Pablo Neruda), a prophet (Mike Davis), a philosopher of technology (Sigfried Giedion), a photographer (Silvestre Silva), an anthropologist (Edward T Hall), two epidemiologists (Tony McMichael and Leonardo Mata, both so much more besides), an editor (Karl Miller), a professor of nutrition who for most of his life identified himself as a physiologist (John Waterlow).and an economist (Amartya Sen, also a philosopher).

*Box 1*

## My previous heroes

Part of my task is to celebrate remarkable and astonishing people and figures whose works, lives and legends are relevant to public health or nutrition seen as a big picture. Before the 15 pictured and listed above, my celebrations were briefer. In 2010 these were of the founder of public health nutrition José María Bengoa, the patron of Rio de Janeiro St Sebastian, the mathematicians Leonardo Bonacci (Fibonacci), and William Thomson, the typographer Claude Garamond, the dancer Josephine Baker, the public intellectual Susan Sontag, the physicist James Clerk Maxwell, and Santa Claus.

In 2011 my choices were the novelists Leo Tolstoy, Mark Twain and Henry James, the explorer Samuel Champlain, the hostess Gertrude Stein, the economist JK Galbraith, the epidemiologist Tony McMichael (also in 2014), the seer Marshall McLuhan, the politician Robert Kennedy, the food policy scholar Tim Lang, and the naturopath Rudolf Steiner. Please excuse these crude characterisations of complex characters.

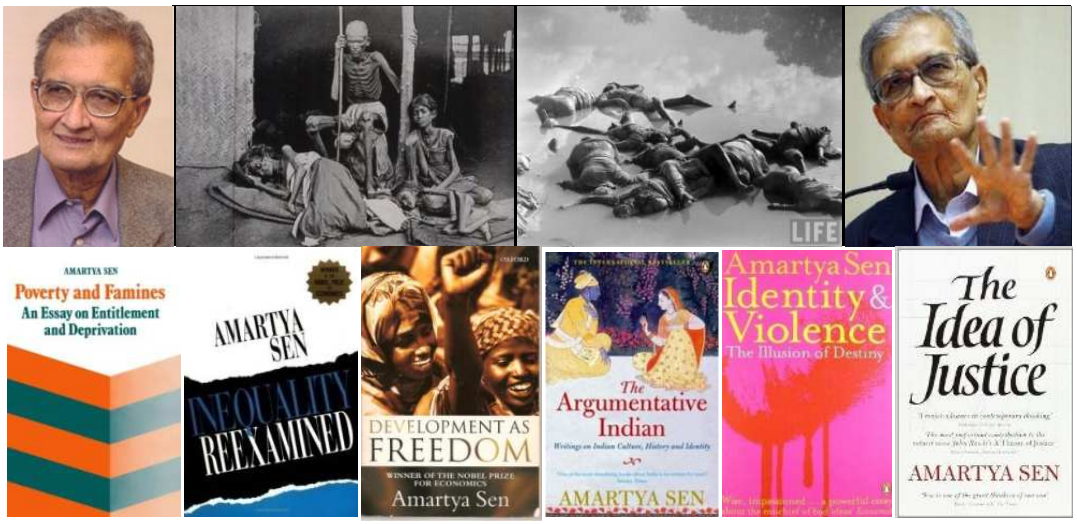


My choices in 2012 are above. These were a little less wide-ranging, with the biologist Lynn Marguliis, the food writers Michael Pollan, Claudia Roden and MFK Fisher, the writers George Orwell and Christopher Hitchens, the naturalist Colin Tudge, the public health nutritionists Inês Rugani, Caroline Walker and Barbara Burlingame, the campaigner Patti Rundall, the founder of social medicine Rudolf Virchow, and the revolutionary José Martí. These were all summarised in the WN review of 2012. My one hero of early 2013, very appropriate for public health nutrition, was the patron of impossible causes, Santo Expedito. Then there were no heroes until the current series began with Mary Midgley.

Most work, writing and action that affect both public health and nutrition is done outside these professions. This exhilarating and challenging perception is a reminder that both are topics of utmost interest and importance.

*Food and nutrition, health and well-being*

# What they believe: 15 . Amartya Sen
# Philosopher of the universe




*Amartya Sen in sage mode (top left) and in action (top right). Below, six of his books in my shelves. Above, centre, what he saw as a boy; the 1943 Bengal famine, the 1947 Bengal partition holocaust*

If one dream of the masters of the universe came true, and if the dream was to fulfil the Platonic ideal of government by philosopher-kings wise in the service of justice, Amartya Sen would be the logical choice as the first president of the world.

He is a Nobel prizewinning economist. He is also a moral philosopher. He always sees economics as a servant, not a master, and in increasingly forthright language, moving from academia to advocacy to activism, as evident elsewhere in *WN this month*. He understands the significance of history and literature, and is not over-impressed with the times we live in now. He comes from a centre of the world whose first civilisations began 9000 years ago, where four religions originated, and which has experienced successive contrasting governance. He is generous in praise and support of colleagues, including those who are more outspoken.

He is not a dreamer. An Indian who rose to become between 1998 and 2004, Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, where he had been a student and fellow, he has a lot of drive and pull. He is also charming and subtle. Since 1991 he has been married to Emma Rothschild, daughter of Victor Rothschild, also a distinguished academic. At Cambridge he was a member of the 'Apostles' secret society, and like some other very eminent people, he seems to know secrets whose nature is rumoured but never disclosed. Philosopher-kings are also known as guardians. So he ticks a lot of world presidential boxes. Another qualification is his age, 82 this November. But like Pope Francis, elected as a safe choice in old age, he might use pre-eminence in ways that encouraged the common people, which is not in the Platonic script.

*Box 1*
## Experiences and beliefs

*Extracted and edited from the chapter on Amartya Sen in The Grand Pursuit by Sylvia Nasar*

Amartya Sen is Bengali. Bengal is a river delta and fish is the mainstay of the Bengali diet. All Bengalis, Sen says, are great talkers, as he is. Bengal has a long tradition of learned men with cosmopolitan outlooks who have battled social evils such as untouchability and suttee. Sen is part of that tradition.

His family is from the old part of Dhaka, an ancient river city 240 kilometers from Calcutta, now the capital of Muslim Bangladesh. In Jane Austen's day, Dhaka was 'a big, bustling place of first-rate importance'. But by 1900, because of competition from Manchester, Dhaka's population had shrunk by two-thirds. A contemporary travel guide noted 'all round the present city are ruins of good houses, mosques, and temples, smothered in jungle.'

Sen was born in 1933 into that class of English-speaking academics and civil servants who helped run British India. The Sens lived in a typical Dhaka house, 50 or 60 feet long, narrow in the front, the middle being a courtyard open to the sky; with plenty of room for servants and relatives. He began his education at an English missionary school in 1939. Two years later, as the Japanese advanced toward British India, he was sent to live with his maternal grandparents in Santiniketan, just north of Calcutta, 'to keep me safe from the bombs.'

Santiniketan has special connotations for all Indians because of its association with Rabindranath Tagore. After winning the Nobel prize for literature in 1913, Tagore used his prize money to expand the Visva Bharati school in Santiniketan. Sen attended classes under the eucalyptus trees. His free time was spent mostly with his grandfather. 'Everyone found him formidable. He woke at four. He knew all the stars. He talked with me about the connections between Greek and Sanskrit. I was the only one of his grandchildren who had a sense of academic vocation. I was going to be the one who carried the mantle.'

The 1943 Bengal famine, the consequence of wartime inflation, censorship, and imperial indifference rather than crop failures, destroyed any remaining respect for the British. Sen later estimated that 3 million people, mostly poor fishermen and landless laborers, perished from starvation and disease. At the time, for the boy of 10, the famine meant a steady stream of starving villagers who passed through Santiniketan attempting to reach Calcutta. His grandfather allowed him to hand out rice to beggars, 'but only as much as would fill a cigarette tin'. Later he reflected on the fact that only the very poor and members of despised castes had starved. He and his family and their entire class, remained unaffected. That observation was to inform his theory of famines as man-made, not natural, disasters.

Even more traumatic was the communal violence on the eve of independence. Traditionally, Muslims and Hindus achieved a higher degree of assimilation in Bengal than in other parts of India. But when religious conflict erupted it set neighbor against neighbor in a vast pogrom. On one of his last school holidays in his Dhaka home, Sen witnessed a horrific scene. A Muslim laborer named Kader Mia staggered into the family compound, screaming and covered in blood. Stabbed in the back by Hindu rioters, he died later that day. 'The experience was devastating for me' recalled Sen. Mia told Sen's father that his wife had pleaded with him to stay home that day. But his family had no food and he had gone to the Hindu part of town to seek work. The realization that 'extreme poverty can make a person a helpless prey' Sen said, was to inspire his inquiries into the conflict between necessity and freedom, and his strong distaste for religious fanaticism and cultural nationalism.

World government would probably bring out not the best but the worst in powerful people, who like to stamp their mark. Pervasive government also amplifies human error. Amartya Sen would I am sure, politely reject the invitation but also courteously denounce the idea, because in his work and by his example, he celebrates diversity.

### *The meaning of freedom*

He continues to guide thoughtful people. His most resonant and influential book is *Development as Freedom,* published in 1999. But what he believes in is many freedoms of various types, expressed in different ways. He explains why real 'development' must mean more freedoms:

> Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance and overactivity of repressive states. Despite unprecedented increases in overall opulence, the contemporary world denies elementary freedoms to vast numbers – perhaps even the majority – of people.

He continues by putting food and nutrition in their context of fundamental and elemental public health, outside of which they do not mean very much:

> Sometimes the lack of substantive freedoms relates directly to economic poverty, which robs people of the freedom to satisfy hunger, or to achieve sufficient nutrition, or to obtain remedies for treatable illnesses, or the opportunity to be adequately clothed, or to enjoy clean water or sanitary facilities.

These resonant conclusions derive from deep scholarship, including technical analyses of poverty and famine set out in his earlier books and papers. They also derive from his own life's experience (Box 1 above) and from personal experience as a survivor of mouth cancer which he discovered as a student. People who have suffered and who feel suffering of other people are more trustworthy. His thinking is also firmly based in the realities of the everyday life of ordinary people, as he shows on Box 2, below. Here also is a passage from a presentation on *'Food and freedom'*, given in Washington in 1987, given a decade before he won a Nobel prize:

> 'Grub first, then ethics', thus runs a much quoted aphorism of Bertolt Brecht… Ethics may seem like a much more remote and much less immediate subject than the command over food that we need to survive. Freedom too, as an important concept in ethics, may seem to be far less immediate than the compelling demands of grabbing grub.
>
> But this contrast is quite artificial. The provision of food is indeed a central issue in general social ethics, since so much in human life does depend on the ability to find enough to eat. In particular, the freedom that people enjoy to lead a decent life, including freedom from hunger, from avoidable morbidity, from premature mortality, etc., is quite centrally connected with the provision of food and related necessities. Also, the compulsion to acquire enough food may force vulnerable people to do things which they resent doing, and may make them accept lives with little freedom. The role of food in fostering freedom can be an extremely important one.

*Box 2*

## A conscience of India

*Extracted and edited from an interview in The Guardian with Madeleine Bunting.*

The roses are blooming at the window in the immaculately kept gardens of Trinity College Cambridge, and Amartya Sen is comfortable in a cream armchair facing shelves of his neatly catalogued writings. But he doesn't do satisfaction. What he wants to know is where more than 600 million Indians go to defecate. 'Half of all Indians have no toilet. In Delhi when you build a new condominium there are lots of planning requirements but none for servants' toilets. It's a combination of class, caste and gender discrimination. For women, that can mean only relieving themselves after dark, with all the safety issues entailed.'

Despite all the comfort and prestige of his status in the UK and the US, he hasn't forgotten India's poor, and as a child he witnessed the great Bengal famine. His latest book, *An Uncertain Glory*, is a quietly excoriating critique of India's boom. Despite considerable economic growth and increasing self-confidence as a major global player, in modern India millions of lives are wrecked by hunger and by pitiable investment in health and education services. 'Pockets of California amid sub-Saharan Africa', say Sen and his co-author Jean Drèze. India's preoccupation with economic growth makes no sense without recognising that human development depends on how that wealth is used and distributed. India is caught in the absurd paradox of people having mobile phones but no toilets.

Even more stark is the comparison with Bangladesh. 'Our hope is that India's public policy-makers will be embarrassed by the comparison with Bangladesh. On a range of development indicators such as life expectancy, child immunisation and child mortality, Bangladesh has pulled ahead of India despite being poorer.' Other impoverished neighbours such as Nepal have made great strides, and Sri Lanka has kept well ahead of India, which has 'some of the worst human development indicators in the world', and features in the bottom 15 countries, along with Afghanistan, Yemen and Pakistan.

Sen admits 'intellectual wonder' at why people can't see that economic growth without investment in human development is unsustainable – and unethical. What underpins the book is faith in human reason. If enough evidence and careful analysis is brought to bear on this subject then one can win the argument, and it is this faith that has sustained him through more than five decades of writing on human development. It was his work which led to the development of the much cited UN's Human Development Index.

Influential he has certainly been, but people seem set on ignoring the kind of evidence he stacks up. In passing he asks: 'How can anyone believe austerity with high levels of unemployment is intelligent policy for the UK?' The Nobel prize and the National Medal from President Obama give him a platform, and he gives time to media interviews and travelling all over the world to deliver speeches. That has led to compromises on the intellectual projects he would have liked to pursue, but life has been full of compromises ever since he narrowly survived cancer as an 18-year-old: there are all kinds of food he cannot eat.

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Sen is an heir to a distinguished Bengali intellectual tradition that owed as much to poets as it did to scientists, politicians and philosophers. He is in the line of Rabindranath Tagore, the great poet and thinker of the early decades of the 20th century, who as a family friend named the baby Sen 'Amartya' which in Sanscrit means 'immortal'. The one photograph in Sen's Cambridge study is that of the Tagore with his flowing white beard. But Tagore was too patient, he says. 'Patience is a minor form of despair, disguised as a virtue.'

Here and with other contributions in this column I can only begin to touch on why I have identified my 'heroes'. Amartya Sen is very well known now, as a leading public intellectual with, so it is said, a hundred honorary degrees. But his later books, some listed below, should be read regularly and his ideas translated into local as well as general action. Finally here I paraphrase from the final chapter in Sylvia Nasar's wonderful book *The Grand Pursuit*, and also quote from it.

***With the people***

In the 1970s and 1980s, he set out a general theory that integrates economists' traditional concern for material well-being with political philosophers' traditional concern with individual rights and justice. He stated that freedom and not opulence is the true measure of a good society, a primary end as well as a principal means of economic development. He asks three questions to which he gives answers. These are: Can society make choices in a way that reflects people's preferences? Can personal rights be reconciled with economic welfare? What is the measure of a just society? Read on! Here I end with a human story as told by Sylvia Nasar:

> In January 2002, India's Hindu nationalist government of the Bharatiya Janata Party threw a three-day celebration for India's far-flung diaspora in Delhi. In a gesture that revealed both how far he had traveled, and how close he had remained to his roots, Sen left that gathering to address an outdoor 'hunger hearing' with several hundred peasants and laborers in a chilly dirt field on the far side of town. One by one, members of the audience went up to the microphone. A scrawny 14 year-old from Delhi spoke about going hungry after she lost her dish-washing job. A dark-skinned man from Orissa told how three members of his family had died after a local drought the previous year.
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> When Sen stood up, shivering in his baggy cords and rumpled jacket, he spoke less about the 'interest of consumers being sacrificed to farmers', and more about 'profoundly lonely deaths.' Addressing an audience that seemed plainly awestruck, he conveyed sympathy and encouragement. 'Without protests like these,' he said, 'the deaths would be much more. If there had been something like this, the Bengal famine could have been prevented'. Their willingness to speak out, he told them, was 'democracy in action'.

*Box 3*

## Some books by Amartya Sen

*Choice of Techniques. An Aspect of the Theory of Planned Economic Development* (1960). *Poverty and Famines. An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation,* 1981. *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*, 1983. *On Ethics and Economics*, 1987. *Hunger and Action* (with Jean Drèze), 1989. *Inequality Reexamined*, 1992. *The Quality of Life* (with Martha Nussbaum), 1993. *Resources, Values and Development*, 1997. *Development as Freedom*, 1999. *Rationality and Freedom*, 2002. *The Argumentative Indian. Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*, 2005. *Identity and Violence,* 2006. *The Idea of Justice*, 2009. *Peace and Democratic Society,* 2011. *An Uncertain Glory. The Contradictions of Modern India* (with Jean Drèze), 2013



*Hot stuff. Birth, life, death*

# Human life is not sacred (5)

***Access January 2014 Geoffrey Cannon on human life is not sacred 1 here***
***Access February 2014 Geoffrey Cannon on human life is not sacred 2 here***
***Access May 2014 Geoffrey Cannon on human life is not sacred 3 here***
***Access June 2014 Geoffrey Cannon on human life is not sacred 4 here***



*A hornet's nest that we found in our forest plot (left), with hexagonal spaces for maybe 2,000 metamorphoses. Our second cat named Cristal (right). Now the hornets and the kitten are dead*

The theme of this item, as in four previous columns (access them above) is that thinking and acting as if human life is sacred, is wrong. More, this worship of the human species and thus ourselves is a perversion, a driver of much of the troubles everybody now faces in this century. The longer I live in the global South, the more I think and feel that concepts developed in the global North, of which this product of 'the Enlightenment' is one, do not work here, and things being what they now are, actually do not work anywhere.

The dominant world powers have made a mess which only shows what not to copy, think or do. This is in large part what the uprisings in Spain and Greece are all about. But perhaps I am getting too enthusiastic about Syriza and the new Greek finance minister the 'reluctant Marxist' slap-head muscle-man Yanis Varoufakis, whose blogs I have admired for the last two years. We will see. He has a degree in games theory.

### *Awe of life*

Awe though, is a different matter. Life itself, whose very nature is metaphysical, beyond conventional scientific explanation, is awesome. So therefore is birth and death. Now I should explain the pictures above. First, the hornet nest. Live and let live, is my motto for the wildlife that surrounds my house and comes inside also. There are exceptions, cockroaches and termites being two, but I like the geckoes that nest in my study and come out at night to catch flies and to poo on my desk. Also I am OK about wasps and hornets building small nests high up on our walls. It is the

huge nests that are trouble. We found the one above, constructed for our very own local population explosion, in the forest plot adjoining our house. It was too big and too close, so sadly we fumigated it and I kept the structure, as you see – very wondrous. But even without human intervention, there is a balance of nature. Normally insects do not become plagues. If we had not noticed the nest, only a few of the eggs would have become adult insects and only some of these would have survived. Without such natural balance the planet would be a solid mass of insects.

Second, the cat. Here is sad news about Cristal 2, an Angora, our second white cat with that name, who was very cute when tiny, as you see above. A month before this time of writing, she lost interest, and anaemia was assumed, but leukaemia was disovered, and so she died, less than a year old. For a couple of weeks previously she and our then cat-size Border Collie pup Zeus had been inseparable inside the house. She adored him and tolerated him biting out batches of her fur. But then it was time for Zeus to live outside the house, and my wife Raquel thinks she died of a broken heart. Maybe. Predictably I prefer to blame in-breeding plus cat chow. Our 10 year old son Gabriel cried, but we have a new *vira-lata* (mongrel) kitten now.

In the midst of life we are in death, here in the tropics. The longer I live in a house open to nature and bordered by forest, the more awe I feel for the whole living world and the less difference I sense between trees, insects, birds, animals and people.

### *Acceptance of death*

So I say we have a duty to abandon and abolish the notion that humans are born in (the Christian) God's image. Those who think they are made in God's image are liable to behave like devils. The implications are infinite. We can start by accepting that how insects, birds and animals work in the world is how we should be also. So now I come to why this item is identified as *Hot Stuff,* because I am now going to make some suggestions about how humans can become sustainable as a species. These contradict all that we hold most holy, especially if the phrase is referring to the human species. Those who accept the limits of humanity are liable to be humane.

- Death rates. Much of public health teaching and practice is devoted to the notion that the lower the percentage of infant deaths, and the longer people live, the better. To some extent this is because data of this nature are easy to collect and compare. But the driving ideology includes the notion that human life is holy, which it is not. Long and productive lives enjoyed in positive good health, is a more rational measure. But mortality rates at the beginning and end of life should not be driven down artificially.

- Ethics of death. It is also generally accepted in technically advanced countries that rescuing damaged newborns, seriously diseased people, and the infirm elderly from death, at almost all costs, emotional, practical and financial, is a prime duty of the medical profession, upheld by law and endured by parents and families. Such artificial extension of life and even of mere existence without consciousness, is wrong, as a burden on all concerned and societies as a whole which is intolerable.

*Box 1*

## Human life is not sacred – the story so far

My four previous reflections on this theme can be accessed above. For new readers or as a reminder, here are some points already made:

In this *column in January last year* I began this occasional series by asking

> Why does public health and nutrition teaching and practice evidently believe that the bigger humans are, the younger they become sexually mature, the more there are of them – and also that they longer they live – the better for the species, future generations and the planet? Isn't it obvious that taken together – and individually also – in practice these beliefs are making humans more greedy, miserable, diseased and destructive? They seem to stem from a kind of ideology, from some sort of worship of ourselves as a species.

In my *February column* I put human life within the whole living world, and said

> The value of human life is best gauged after understanding that humans are just one species. A good start is to value non-human life more. A world whose standards are set by people who live in the countryside would be very different from the world now, governed as it is by people who live in big cities. Knowledge of nature puts the value of human life in perspective. My sense after living in Brazil for nearly 15 years, is that country people do not sharply separate human life from other life. That's what city people do, who observe nature on television or on holiday or in zoos, or when a wasp buzzes round their honey.

In my *May column* I developed this theme, and reflected on the death of our cat Kenai, killed by a car in the road outside our house, and…

> After Kenai was killed we got another *vira-lata*, Safira. She was wild and dominated Korda. Pregnant at six months, she had five black kittens which I helped to birth, blind scraps that all died from her neglect. Party girl, I thought, she will come to no good, and two months ago she ran into the street and was killed. So now we have our second Cristal, extremely cute and also bold – hearing her panic mewing at dawn this morning I took a room apart and eventually saw her up at the ceiling, having climbed a bamboo structure. Kenai's brother Koda is jealous, so he is getting family-sized love, sitting on my lap as I type.

In January I reflected on the celebrations of Nelson Mandela's life after his death:

> The people of South Africa commemorated the life, achievements and witness of Nelson Mandela after his death in December at the great age of 95. The mood has been a little like that of a Celtic wake, in which people come together when a loved person dies to sing songs, play music, enjoy themselves uproariously, and so become the midwives of the immortality of the person who has died. In sane cultures, people who die do not die. They live on in the minds and hearts of the living, and in the bodies of their descendants, and may live forever. Seen like this, death is not dreadful. There is a time to die, just as animals and plants and all living things die. The notion that human life is divine and that it must be preserved almost no matter what, fades away.

And *in my June column,* having lived through two long slow deaths in my family, I concluded:

> My own experiences make me sure that any society whose laws insist on keeping people alive almost no matter how appalling or terminal their defects, injuries or disease, is wrong. It asks too much of the people most involved to intervene.

Now I will go further and make some suggestions designed to provoke discussion, which may shock readers. These imply the types of human society, culture and civilisation that were normal throughout almost all the story of our species, but were set aside in favour of the bizarre ideology of human life as holy. All the following suggestions would work well within societies whose cultures accepted joyfully that humans are one species within the whole world. There is also a practical point here, which came to me when I first held the hornets' nest in my two hands. A main aim of human societies now seems to be to eliminate the natural limits of life and balance between life and death. No wonder the world population is exploding.

- Birth. Couples intending to have children should fully accept that if at birth their child is damaged in specified ways, it will not be allowed to survive. This should be done openly, with respect and kindness.

- Children. Couples who have one child should be supported with tax allowances and free nursery schools. Having two or more children should be discouraged. Abortion should be free on request or as required.

- Death. Any adult who decides to die should be embraced and nourished and enabled to do so, again openly, having said their farewells to family and friends, in the company of those who are closest to them.

Now for three suggestions which are more controversial, because they propose removing agency from adults. Those horrified will say they are examples of eugenics, the science of deliberate human selection, which is true, and that they are a step on a slope that slips down to the abominations of the Hitler regime, which is not true.

- Execution. All those tried and convicted of specified serious crimes, with the conviction confirmed within six months, including but not limited to murder with no mitigating circumstances, to be shot dead.

- Sterilisation. All mothers and fathers of three or more children unwilling or unable to support their families from their own resources, and all those with genetically transmitted specified serious diseases, to be sterilised.

- Euthanasia. All people with specified progressive deadly diseases to be encouraged to agree or accept that their life be ended, preferably by themselves. Those who have become completely incapacitated or unconscious to be put to death.

Two obvious objections to any of these suggestions are first, that if taken seriously they would cause uproar, and second, that altogether they would anyway affect only a very small proportion of any population. True, on both counts. They make sense only in the context of a changed culture in which human decisions on life and death are openly discussed, shared and celebrated. Enacted, they would be examples of taking life and death more responsibly and seriously, in societies that embrace the vital truth that humans are part of the living and natural world.

*Cannon G. Birth, life, death. Human life is not sacred: 5*
*What do you think*? *[Column]. World Nutrition March 2015, **6**, 3, 211-214*