WN *Columns*

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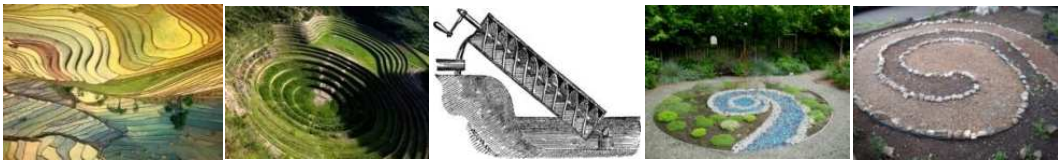
What do you think?

Geoffrey Cannon



Spirals and curves shaped by respectful and rational relationship with nature. Rice fields, Vietnam. Inca terracing, Cuzco. Archimedes Screw. Flower garden, Japan. Medicinal garden, New Mexico

Juiz de Fora, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo. What is in the shops, and therefore what most people buy and eat, is largely determined by the nature of agriculture. We can get a good idea of the quality of what is produced, by the physical appearance of the land used for growing food. Industrialised products characteristically come from terrain turned into more or less level featureless great blocks within which crops are grown in straight lines, determined by the nature and scale of the machines used. By contrast, long-established dietary patterns characteristically derive from land shaped by hand. This may follow the curves of natural contours, as the Asian and Latin American examples above (left), or be built in similar shapes also on a human scale. Curved, circular and spiral agriculture is naturally beautiful because it respects the physical environment. It also sustains rural livelihoods, and produces healthy food.

My hero this issue of *WN* is *Sigfried Giedion* (1888-1968). His *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948) shows that as a central feature of the 'industrial revolution', the nature of food supplies was transformed largely as a function of what was then new technology. One example is the mechanisation of death beginning in the mid 19th century using railroads and disassembly lines such as in the Chicago slaughterhouses.

The next item, which follows an earlier column on 'ideology' in its neutral sense, includes some ideas about 'equ(al)ity'. It touches on differences and similarities between the concepts of 'equality' and 'equity', and how careless or confused use of either term is against the public interest. Finally, I end with continuing to think about what is meant by 'human life is not sacred'.

Box 1

Spiral inspirations



DNA. A fingerprint. Cochlea (inner ear), Haemoglobin.. The galaxy containing our planet. These images inspired by The Way of the Earth, which I have chosen as my number 1 text

You find what you look for, says my wise friend Urban Jonsson. Too true! I have read, browsed and referred to *The Way of the Earth* by Teri (TC) McLuhan for nearly 20 years, and *in this issue of WN* I have chosen this as my number 1 source of inspiration. Yet only now have I registered that the spiral is the visual motif of her book. Above are five of the reasons she shows. From the left, the double helix of DNA. A fingerprint. The cochlea of the inner ear. Haemoglobin. The Milky Way – the galaxy containing the solar system and our planet.

The Way of the Earth explains the double spiral image found in the stone carvings of many Neolithic cultures. Charles Ross, who now in his late 70s is completing a Great Pyramid-scale response to celestial events in the New Mexico desert, in the early 1970s traced the movement of the Sun over a year, and found that as it burned into wood every day for a year, the shape of a double spiral was formed (below, left). In the early 1990s the French Ministry of Culture commissioned him to install the whole 366 days of burns in a special room in the Chateau d'Oiron in the Loire Valley, converted into a museum for installations, with the double spiral inlaid in bronze on the floor (right). The shape is also shown in carvings in Chaco Canyon, New Mexico, around 1,000 years ago by the Anasazi people, for whom astronomy was central to life and their understanding of its meaning (centre).

Such knowledge and insight help to explain and justify constant attention to the spiral form. In this current period of human history we are preoccupied by linear forms – the straight line, the path of an arrow, with their implication of constant novelty. The image of the line misleads us into imagining that progress and development is a never-ending quest for more and more. This delusion is driving the human species and the biosphere to destruction. The reality and secret of life is shown as spirals and circles. Teri McLuhan also collects sayings of first Americans. Here is Black Elk (1863-1950 CE), Oglala (Sioux) shaman:

> Everything an Indian does is in a circle. That is because the Power of the World always works in circles,...The Sky is round. I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nest in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours... Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves



The movement of the Sun over the period of a year forms the shape of a double spiral, as traced by Charles Ross (left and right) and as observed by Neolithic astronomers (centre)

Food and nutrition, health and well-being

What they believe: 8. Sigfried Giedion
Machines may be masters

Access November 2010 Edible Geography Nicola Twilley here
Access April 2011 Book World Tom Vanderbilt here
Access July 2013 ANZ Architects Mirjana Luzanovska here
Access this issue Source, Geoffrey Cannon, Claus Leitzmann here



Sigfried Giedion (row below, second from left) was a friend of Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and James Joyce (top pictures from left), and influenced Marshall McLuhan, and the Independent Group including Rayner Banham and Richard Hamilton. The topic of most of his work is architecture (above, right) but his great theme is impact of the machine age on how we live, what we think, and who we are

The provocative collage above evokes Sigfried Giedion (1888-1968), my eighth hero in this series. A visionary thinker and writer, he was a co-creator and organiser of the inter-World Wars modern movement of architectural design, as a contemporary and colleague of Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier. He also inspired postwar movements, notably the London-based *Independent Group* whose thinking fused 'high' and 'mass' culture, and invented Pop Art. Images and language are central in his life and work.

Sigfried Giedion is one of those seers whose relevance becomes rediscovered every decade or so. His first book is *Space, Time and Architecture. The Growth of a New Tradition,* published in 1941. The second, celebrated here, is also a part of what he planned as an encyclopaedia of the meaning of life in the machine age. This is *Mechanization Takes Command. A Contribution to Anonymous History,* published in 1948. Both books are epic, each over 650 pages, magazine format, masterpieces of the book-maker's craft, with hundreds of pictures. Their covers are shown above.

In 2005 and again *now elsewhere in this issue of WN,* *Mechanization Takes Command* is chosen as one of the five books I most recommend for the understanding of public health and nutrition. Two of its images, of hand-held machines used in 19th century

slaughterhouses to kill pigs and cattle, are shown above, lower row left and right. Three recent reviews can be accessed above. The best, by Nicola Twilley on her wonderful *Edible Geography* site (read her on *the invention of lunch as a meal here*) is digested in Box 2 below. The immediately relevant part of the book is the 155-pages of 'Mechanization encounters the organic', which shows the invention and use of machines and technology for the mass production of crops, bread, and meat.

Machines determine supply

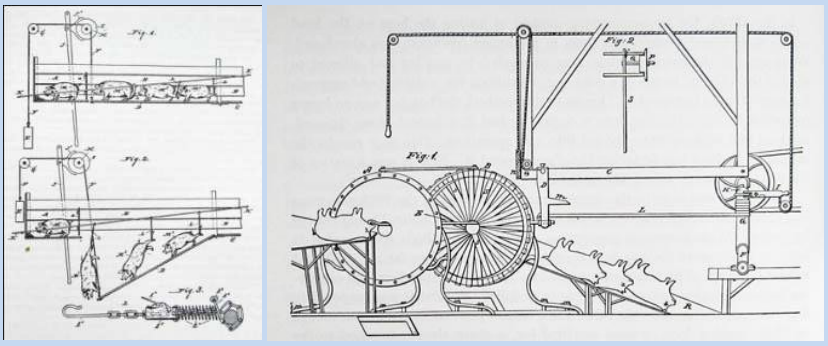
Supply determines demand. This does not mean that customers and consumers have no choice. What it does mean is that our choice is confined to what is available and affordable. The range of choice is greatest for those who have plenty of money and access to supermarkets. Most people do not have much choice. So what determines supply? The answer is technology, amplified by machines. From the hoe, stirrup and paper to the tractor, train and telephone, and now far, far beyond to what we live with now, these extensions of ourselves tend to turn the possible into the inevitable. Thus, daily eating of meat is a function of railways, disassembly lines, and refrigeration. Early techniques of mass production of pork are shown below.

The story of the mass production of meat and its products told by Sigfried Giedion up to the 1940s remains true, while now vastly magnified. Parallel stories can and have been told of other food commodities – milk, margarine, sugar, biscuits, candies, soft and alcoholic drinks, for example, as well as crops and bread.

Box 1

Pig slaughter

Two images from *Mechanization Takes Command,* with captions taken from the book. The book's section on the origins of mass-production methods of animal disassembly, adapted by Henry Ford for automobile assembly, and then by the Nazi regime for mass murder of humans, includes pictures of the vast slaughter-yards of Paris and Chicago



Left. Apparatus for Catching and Suspending Hogs. 'The hog M acts as a decoy for the others, and much time and labor are thus saved.' (U.S. Patent 252,112, 10 January 1882).

Right Hog-Cleaning Machine. The flexibility of steel and rubber are used to operate upon an organic body mechanically. 'The capacity of this machine is from five to fifteen thousand per diem... The apparatus consisting, essentially, in the employment of substances of the requisite elasticity to yield to the irregularities of the body, while adhering thereto with the force necessary to remove the hair.' (U.S. Patent 44,021, 30 August 1864).

Box 2
The disassembly line

Taken from Nicola Twilley's review on her Edible Geography site

Sigfried Giedion assembles an incredible wealth of archival detail to retrace the one-step-forward, two-steps-backward story of mechanisation and its impact on 'our mode of life'. The book outlines the replacement of human labour and the introduction of continuous production and scientific management in various aspects of food production, processing, distribution, and preparation. In an amazingly titled section, 'Mechanization encounters the organic' he covers 'Reaping mechanized', 'The oven and the endless belt', and 'The mechanization of death'.

'How did mechanization alter the structure of bread and the taste of the consumer?' he asks. 'What are mechanization's limits in dealing with so complex an organism as the animal? And how does elimination of a complicated craft, such as the butcher's, proceed?'

The most striking insight of this section of the book is the way in which the resistance of 'the organic' to mechanisation shaped modern production processes. After tracing its conceptual forebears back to Oliver Evans' grist mill and the British sea-biscuit factory, he explains that the pork-packing industry saw 'the birth of the modern assembly line' in large part because the devices invented to mechanise slaughter 'proved, with few exceptions, unfit for practical use.'

'Even when dead, the hog largely refuses to submit to the machine'. The machines invented in an attempt to tame the hog nonetheless provide some of the book's most captivating illustrations — an array of devices that conjure up Rube Goldberg and medieval torture chambers simultaneously. Given the hog's resistance, Sigfried Giedion writes, 'for the speeding of output there was but one solution: to eliminate loss of time between each operation and the next, and to reduce the energy expended by the worker on the manipulation of heavy carcasses.'

In other words, the inability to automate led to Fordist perfection in terms of assembly line efficiency: 'In continuous flow, hanging from an endlessly moving chain at twenty-four inch intervals, they now move in procession past a row of standing workers each of whom performs a single operation... What was revolutionary and what could not have been invented in earlier periods, in other countries, or even in other industries, was the way [assembly line techniques] were used to speed into mass production an organic material which defies handling by purely mechanical means'.

In one of his most powerful passages, he describes the impact of mechanisation on humanity: 'In a Chicago packing-house, hogs, hanging head downwards, moved uninterruptedly past a staunch Negro woman at the curve of the conveyor system. Her task was to stamp, with a rubber stamp, the carcasses examined by the inspectors. With a sweeping movement she smacked the rubber stamp on each skin. Perhaps we start from false premises; but in an outside observer a strange feeling was aroused: a creature of the human race trained to do nothing else but, day after day, and eight hours each day, stamp thousand after thousand of carcasses in four places'.

'Never has mankind possessed so many instruments for abolishing slavery,' he concludes. 'But the promises of a better life have not been kept. All we have to show so far is a rather disquieting inability to organize the world, or even to organize ourselves.'

***Must mechanisation command*?**

The great change that has come after Sigfried Giedion's day, is mass manufacture also of ready-to-consume snacks and dishes. The same general law applies. The macro-technology of machines (used for extrusion, hydrolysis or hydrogenation, as examples) is now coupled with the micro-technology of chemistry, and in particular the ever-more sophisticated use of processed oils, sugars, starches and additives.

Mechanization Takes Command has been with me ever since I took it out of the shelves of my father's library, which I much later inherited, and is one of the books I knew I would keep and bring with me to Brazil. I often refer to it. In the book, and in the mind and heart both of its author and my father, the hope of a new world that so many felt in the 1930s had turned to anguish, with news of the death camps and the atrocities of Dresden and Hiroshima. In the concluding chapter Sigfried Giedion says

> Mechanization is an agent, like water, fire, light… Like the powers of nature, mechanization depends on man's capacity to make use of it and to protect himself against its inherent perils. Because mechanization sprang entirely from the mind of man [and is] less easily controlled than natural forces… it is the more dangerous to him… Future generations will perhaps designate this period as one of mechanized barbarism, the most repulsive barbarism of all.

His final thoughts include: 'The human organism requires equipoise between its organic environment and its artificial surroundings. Separated from earth and growth it will never attain the equilibrium necessary for life'. He also writes: 'One must discriminate between those spheres that are fit for mechanization and those that are not… We must establish a new balance [and] allow for each region to develop its particular language, habits. customs'. Yes, indeed. But who now is 'we'?

Box 3

Books by Sigfried Giedion

Space, Time and Architecture. The Growth of a New Tradition, 1941. *Mechanization Takes Command. A Contribution to Anonymous History,* 1948. *Walter Gropius, Work and Teamwork,* 1954. *The Eternal Present,* The Beginnings of Architecture, 1962. *Building in France, Building in Iron, Building in Ferroconcrete,* 1995. Book about Giedion: Sokrates Georgiades. *Sigfried Giedion: An Intellectual History,* 1993.

Reference and note

1 Giedion S. *Mechanization Takes Command. A Contribution to Anonymous History.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1948. Other editions have been published since and are available on Amazon. *The text is advertised as available on the internet* but at the time of writing there seems to be a problem with the link.

Language

Equ(al)ity

Access June 2013 What do you think? on language here
Access March 2014 Update Commission on Political Determinants of Inequity here



The door of a state-owned church in France. It carries the aspirational motto of the Republic that emerged from the French Revolution beginning in 1789. But what exactly does 'equality' mean?

This piece is tentative and very much open to discussion, please. It is about language in general, and in particular the terms 'equality' and 'equity'. As a student long ago of philosophy, politics and economics (or PPE, the Oxford University 'Modern Classics') I am aware that these powerful concepts form part of the foundation of thought and action concerning the meaning of and aspiration towards justice, rights, and democracy, and therefore are bound to be ideologically charged. What merchant bankers mean by either term (and whether they think that either apply to society as they see it) will be different from what public health professionals mean (especially those who believe that equity, and-or equality, are keystones of social structures).

But for a start, the two terms do have different meanings. For instance, to take a notorious example, in 1998 the UK politician Peter Mandelson (now Lord Mandelson of Foy) was a cabinet minister as secretary of state for trade and industry. He stated that the 'New' Labour government of which he was an architect was 'intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich'. In this rejection of equality, he was – it might be supposed – supporting the notion that a society in which entrepreneurs are aided and abetted by governments to amass vast fortunes, is one in which 'all boats rise' and the impoverished benefit, which is less equal but arguably more equitable. Yes, it is a stretch to make sense of this foolish statement; and the notion of rising boats, the excuse for greed, has now been disproved by Thomas Piketty.

Part of the point of the rather arid type of philosophy I studied, is to pay attention to what words and terms mean, including when they are used in ways that can be shown to be muddled or misleading. Arguments about substance can actually be confusions of language. There again, confusions of language, which may be accidental or deliberate, impede understanding and can even block policies and actions meant to improve the human lot. On this, see Box 1, below.

So as Kasper Gutman (Sydney Greenstreet) says to Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart) in *The Maltese Falcon* movie: 'Here's to plain speaking and clear understanding'.

The Oslo-Lancet report

Here is an example of the use of 'equity' and 'equality'. A *WN Update* contribution in March this year summarised the admirable analysis and findings of the Oslo-*Lancet* Commission on Global Governance for Health report on *The political origins of health inequities.* (1,2). Note please, 'inequities'. A typical passage from the report is:

> The biomedical approach cures disease, but it alone cannot address the root causes of health inequity…The deep causes of health inequity cannot be diagnosed and remedied with technical solutions, or by the health sector alone, because the causes of health inequity are tied to fairness in the distribution of power and resources rather than to biological variance.
>
> Yet, most international health investments tend to focus on specific diseases or interventions…Construing socially and politically created health inequities as problems of technocratic or medical management depoliticises social and political ills, and can pave the way for magic-bullet solutions that often deal with symptoms rather than causes.

This is quoted here because of the key term 'equity' used four times in the text, and in its title, here used negatively as 'inequity'. Another passage in the report is

> The conditions of hunger and obesity within a country are subject to various local, national, and global political processes. As Amartya Sen argued three decades ago (3), nutritional status is not determined solely by the availability of food, but also by political factors such as democracy and political empowerment. The politics that generate and distribute political power and resources at local, national, and global levels shape how people live, what they eat, and, ultimately, their health. The global double burden of overnutrition and undernutrition is thus one of serious inequity.

Compelling stuff. But my point here is the use of the concept of equity, rather than that of equality, which sounds similar, looks similar (in English, anyway) but has a different meaning and significance. Reading the Oslo-*Lancet* report, my heart soared like an eagle. While 'equity' and 'equality' do have different meanings, it does seem to me that its use of the term 'equity' is correct, appropriate and helpful, whereas other documents on public health and other topics use the term 'equality', in ways that seem to me to be incorrect, misleading and unhelpful.

Box 1

Watch our language

We are bound to use language in order to make sense of what's happening to us, the people we know and see, and what's happening in the world at large. The words and terms we use can impede understanding. Also, as we all know, the language used by those who want to influence us is often misleading, and is often meant to be misleading. One grim example is 'surgical strikes', which refers in particular to bombing in cities of targets such as telecommunications centres. Surgery is meant to heal and usually is carried out with the permission of the person operated on. Surgical strikes in practice also involve 'collatoral damage', which usually means the deaths of civilians including women and children.

In this column a year ago I gave six examples that relate to public health (4). One is 'the free market', which is designed to give freedom to corporations, not to the rest of us. Another is 'lifestyle', which implies that we all can choose to enjoy well-being and good health and to avoid disease, which is not true often even for those of us who have ability and scope to make choices, and certainly not true for younger children and impoverished populations.

Identification of words and terms as misleading, implies responsibility to specify alternatives. 'Ways of life', a neutral, inclusive and plural term, clearly should replace 'lifestyle' when appropriate, but there again, to say for example that diabetes is a disease of 'ways of life' is almost as vacuous as to say that it is a disease of 'lifestyle'. Descriptively it is a chronic disease. Causally it is a diet-related disease.

Perhaps there is no neutral term to replace the very loaded 'free market' with its resonance of liberty and convivial exchange. What the term usually refers to, is unrestricted corporate exploitation, or the French term *laissez-faire* (roughly, 'let them do as they will'), which is to say, an economic and therefore political system in which governments cede responsibility to industry, and to other private entities.

Some experiences

Progress when engaging in public affairs must involve attention to language. My experience goes back a while. From 1992 to 1997 I was director of the project that led to the WCRF/AICR *Food, Nutrition and the Prevention of Cancer: a Global Perspective* report, and, as such, also head of its secretariat. The panel agreed the need to watch language and to avoid being tendentious. So 'fruit and vegetables' was replaced by 'vegetables and fruits'. 'Individual' was avoided where 'personal' could be used. Browsing the 670 pages now, it's evident that the panel agreed replacement of 'lifestyle' by 'ways of life', or 'patterns of life'. Panel member Sushma Palmer gently wondered if 'undeveloped' or 'less developed' as in 'country' was appropriate, and looking now at chapter summaries, the final text did progress as far as 'economically developed'.

As mentioned last year (4), this was for me focused at the SLAN (Nutrition Societies of Latin America) triennial conference held in Buenos Aires in 2001. Ricardo Uauy, Nevin Scrimshaw, and as I recall Reynaldo Martorell, Ben Caballero and Carlos Monteiro, were in a ring, and I joined them. Ricardo was in expansive mode, as usual. He was explaining the urgent need for a comprehensive revision of terminology used in nutrition and public health. This prompted my first publication on bad words and terms, thanks to 2001-2005 IUNS president Mark Wahlqvist (5). Ricardo succeeded Mark from 2005-2009, and I then proposed an IUNS task force specifically on language. Nothing came of this, unfortunately. The job remains worth doing.

Equality

To me, examples of troublesome use of the concept of equality are in documents that address what they term 'inequalities in health', as many do.

The plain language fact is that 'equality' implies 'the same'. Thus, as we have all been taught, one plus one equals two, and equal pay in any group means that everybody in the group gets paid the same (given that they are in the same grade and work the same hours). As a variation, to say that 1,68546 US dollars is equivalent to 1.00 UK pound sterling, which it was on the day of writing, is a way of saying that while the currencies themselves are different, these values are the same.

The problem with the term 'equality' though, is that it is also used not factually but rhetorically, as an aspiration. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, as the drafter and editor of the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, claimed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal…' Soon afterwards, the leaders of the French Revolution began to develop a motto for the Republic, which became 'Liberty, equality, fraternity'. The first Article of the UN 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* asserts: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'.

It is not easy to make sense of all these claims. If the *Declaration of Independence* said that all men (and women) are born equal, it would be false. The idea of being created equal, can only mean something like 'we are all equal in the sight of God'. The French Republic motto has more meaning, being clearly aspirational, much like the WHO vision of 'Health for All'. The *Declaration of Human Rights,* which mixes the US and French concepts, makes sense if understood to imply 'All human beings have the right to be treated as if they are born free and equal in dignity'. It is actually not a statement of fact. It is aspirational. So as I see it, the US and UN declarations have three problems. One is that they are going against the basic common-sense meaning of the term 'equal'. Two is that unless interpreted to mean something other than what they seem to be saying, they are untrue. Three is that without interpretation, they are liable to seem unrealistic, and may be counter-productive in their effects.

Equity

In the field of public health, including nutrition, to get the concepts of equality and equity right, matters a great deal. One example will do. In the UK in 1977 the Department of Health, then in a period of Labour government, set up a working party chaired by an eminent public health authority, Douglas Black (6). The title of the report it produced in 1980 was *Inequalities in Health* (7). By that time the government was Conservative. The new health minister rejected the findings of the report as 'quite unrealistic in any present or any foreseeable economic circumstances'. Only a few copies were printed. A common view of public health professionals at the time was

that the Conservative government had behaved outrageously, and a Penguin edition of the report published a couple of years later increased enmity.

The tenets of public health are socialistic in nature, and the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher became infamous for saying 'there is no such thing as society'. *Inequalities in Health* may have been doomed at that time, whatever its title. But the uncomfortable fact is that the Minister of Health was right. Inasmuch as the report seemed to advocate equality both of access to and of treatment from a publicly-funded National Health Service, this aspiration was unrealistic then, and would be more so now. My sense is that antagonism would have been less likely had the report been titled and positioned as 'Inequities in Health', and focused more on social justice.

Universal basic primary health care should be available to all. That should be feasible (8). But no national health service can provide complex and expensive medically prescribed drugs and surgical procedures for all, especially now that more and more people suffer from chronic diseases. Selection is inevitable. The equitable approach is selection according to need, not just ability to pay. The concept of 'inequalities in health' is mistaken except in its aspirational aspect – we should strive to make states of health and treatment for disease closer to being equal. But in any real world, that work involves choice and judgment, and so is engaged with issues both of equality and of equity. This is recognised in a 1987 report that followed *Inequalities in Health* (7), in a section 'What is meant by inequality'. This says

> There are natural inequalities in health in the population – human beings vary in health as they do in every other aspect of life. What is being assessed in this report is the extent of unfair or unacceptable inequalities: what some would call 'inequities'.

The point is now evidently also accepted by the World Health Organization, whose briefing document on the topic in its health systems series states (9):

> Equity is the absence of avoidable or remediable differences among groups of people, whether those groups are defined socially, economically, demographically, or geographically. Health inequities therefore involve more than inequality with respect to health determinants, access to the resources needed to improve and maintain health or health outcomes. They also entail a failure to avoid or overcome inequalities that infringe on fairness and human rights norms. Reducing health inequities is important because health is a fundamental human right and its progressive realization will eliminate inequalities that result from differences in health status (such as disease or disability) in the opportunity to enjoy life and pursue one's life plans.

Moreover, a leading public health authority now closely associated with the 'inequalities in health' concept, with many reports and papers on the topic of 'health inequalities' is Michael Marmot of University College, London. In 2011 he set up a special unit within his department, with the name 'UCL Institute of Health Equity'. Its mission statement is 'Reducing health inequities through action on the social determinants of health' (10).

Conclusion

Equality. In its everyday meaning, this is an absolute term, a matter of fact, and implies 'the same'. In this meaning it can reasonably be used in a very general sense, as in 'we are all equally human'. It also can be used as an aspiration, such as in human rights normative teaching and practice on moving towards equality with fundamental and elemental needs such as adequate shelter, sanitation, employment, food, water and health care. The differences in meaning should be made clear.

Equity. This is not a word in everyday use, and is a relative term, requiring judgement, involving concepts like fairness and justice. In the example immediately above, it is more meaningful to say (for example) 'the supply of safe water and adequate sanitation should be according to need and be universal and equitable', which recognises the fact that some inequalities are equitable. This immediately and rightly raises issues such as degrees of equity, and equity in what areas of life.

Here is my very provisional conclusion, on an important topic with vast ramifications. My suggestion is that in public health discourse the term 'equality' should be used cautiously, and in its usual everyday meaning, or else clearly in an aspirational sense. In general though, the term and concept of 'equity' seems to me to be more precise, more useful, and in a world of increasingly limited resources more realistic and persuasive.

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Birth, life, death. What I believe: 11 (continued)
Human life is not sacred

Access January 2014 item on human life is not sacred here
Access February 2014 item on human life is not sacred here
Access May 2014 item on human life is not sacred here



Chief Dan George in the 1970 movie Little Big Man. Reflecting on persecution and massacre of his people, his character says: 'The human beings believe that everything is alive'. Whereas white men ...

In the 1970 movie *Little Big Man,* whose title role is played by Dustin Hoffman, Chief Dan George (1899-1981) plays Old Lodge Skins, Little Big Man's adoptive father and guide to life. At the end of the movie Old Lodge Skins, who has experienced much in his long life, including the coming annihilation of his people, dresses in the most beautiful formal clothes and head-dress he has earned as a chief, walks out in front of an awesome landscape somewhat like that above, says 'this is a good day to die', thanks the Great Spirit for his life, his victories and his defeats, and lays himself down. In the book he does die. In Arthur Penn's movie, rain wakes him. 'Sometimes the magic works, sometimes it does not work', he observes.

Educated by learning a little about the beliefs, customs and ways of life of the original people of the Americas, and elsewhere, it seems to me that in many ways they and their societies were wiser and more able than are we and ours. The story told in the movie is not fanciful. Some at least of the native American peoples did have the ability to choose and to will the time of their death, and others accepted being helped to die, when they were very old or ill, or because for some reason it would be impossible to keep them alive. In such societies the choice of death, while it might be unusual, was a normal part of the culture, and could be joyful.

When I started to explain in this column what is meant by saying that 'human life is not sacred', I thought I might immediately write a long meditation that came to definite conclusions. Well, I have not done this, not yet anyway. The topic is complex, it raises many issues, and for anybody who has experienced a long grievous dying of a close relative, as I have twice, it is hard.



The pictures here are to celebrate the long fruitful life of Maria Klonowska, teacher and artist, who in her tapestries and paintings celebrates the richness, variety and beauty of Brazil and of its people

But 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.

Just lately there have been a lot of deaths in the large family of my Brazilian wife Raquel. The teacher and artist Maria Klonowska, some of whose works are in our home, died days before I write this, age 93. In her fading years she was cared for by her sons, neighbours, friends and admirers, and she remained vivid until her last two days. Then the hospital surgeons decided that she had to undergo a major procedure which common sense said would kill her, as it did, and so she died in 'intensive care', alone. That was wrong. We need a society where it is easy to die at home at a time of your choosing, surrounded by what and who you most love. We lit a candle for Dona Maria in front of the tapestry you see above. She lives on in Raquel's heart.

Status

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