

Escaping the anxiety machine

This week I read an article in [The Age](#). As I'm reading it to you, I'd like you to think about the assumptions and world view underlying the piece.

Generation Less

By the age of 30, my mum and dad were settled, prosperous parents of three; homeowners, tenured workers tucking away super and long-service leave, and possessors of both everyday and special-occasion cutlery.

Growing up in the striving suburbia of the Hawke and Howard eras, I never doubted that my friends and I would lead lives that eclipsed theirs. I assumed we'd continue the golden trend tracing back to the Great Depression, yet another Australian generation to enjoy more wealth and opportunity than our parents did.

In my own 30th year, I doubt it now.

As I look around the bar on a Friday after five, I see none of the steady satisfaction that brimmed from my parents and their peers. Instead, I see young people squeezed by creeping pressures not of their making and largely beyond their control. I find people in their 20s living out an ever-extending adolescence as the building blocks for a stable, comfortable life slip further from their reach. I hear brittle laughter at black jokes about renting until 50 and retiring beyond the grave.

I see my generation becoming the first in more than 80 years to go backwards in work, wealth and wellbeing. That's because Australia is so busy planning for the looming grey tsunami that we're letting an entire generation fall behind. If we don't think harder about building a future for the old and the young, my friends and I will be just the first of many generations to face lives of shrinking opportunity.

Before the shrieking starts about spoiled Generation Y, consider these few facts. In 1990, a worker in their 50s earned \$220 a week more than someone in their early 20s. Today that wage gap has widened to more than \$600.

Between 2004 and 2012, average net worth for people in their late 50s and early 60s grew by almost \$179,000. But the net worth of people in my age cohort actually shrunk by \$15,000. That has seen the wealth gap between my generation and my parents' widen to more than \$839,000. There's a reason I still make my olds pick up the tab when we go out to dinner.

Young Australians are also finding it hard going in the job market. Beyond the headline youth unemployment figure, which has remained stubbornly high for more than a decade, work is becoming less secure and finding enough of it is a growing challenge. The number of young people in casual work has jumped from 34 per cent in 1992 to 50 per cent today.

Over the same period, the percentage of people working without entitlements in their later years barely moved. Similarly, where fewer than one in 30 young people were underemployed when my parents first entered the job market, the figure now stands at more than one in five.

The problems with housing affordability are well known, but the impact of this on young people bears repeating. Today, more than half of people in their late 20s and early 30s are still renting; home ownership in this age group has fallen 25 per cent since the early 1980s.

For those who do manage to get into the market, the average mortgage on a first home has jumped from \$81,000 in 1985 to \$308,000 today. What's more, young people buying now are unlikely to see anything like the huge returns enjoyed by homeowners over the past 20 years, because the cost of servicing such massive mortgages will mostly cancel these out.

All this eats at our mental and emotional health. According to an Australian Bureau of Statistics' Australian health survey, more than 37 per cent of people under 24 and almost 30 per cent of people between 25 and 34 are white-knuckling through their days in moderate to extreme psychological distress. The Department of Health reckons the prevalence of mental-health issues such as depression and anxiety may be up to three times higher among young Australians than across the community as a whole.

Wellbeing among Australia's young won't improve until we acknowledge this link between our material and emotional circumstances. At the moment, these are too often considered separate realms demanding distinct responses.

I don't believe Australians want things to be this way. I think we want to be a country that does right by all its people; a community that can take care of the old without making second-class citizens of the young. To do that, first we need to recognise where we're going wrong. Then we need to find the will to fix it. Because a country that makes no room for the young is a country that will forfeit a fair future. This must not become Australia.

Questions

1. What is the primary world view underlying this article?
2. Are the problems being pointed to real or imaginary?
3. How would you, as a Christian, relate to or respond to this article?

Pharaoh's anxiety machine

Listen to the stresses Pharaoh placed on people?

"Why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labours!" (Exodus 5:4).

"... yet you want them to stop working!" (v. 5).

"You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy" (vv. 7–8).

"Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labour at it and pay no attention to deceptive words" (v. 9).

"I will not give you straw. Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least" (vv 10–11).

"Complete your work the same daily assignment as when you were given straw" (v. 13).

"Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?" (v. 14).

"No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, 'Make bricks'" (v. 16).

"You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.' Go now, and work; for now straw will be given you but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks" (vv. 17–19).

"You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks" (v. 19).

The rhetoric is relentless. Production, not worship. Endless, ceaseless production. It's a boiler-room mentality. An anxiety-producing boiler-room mentality.

Today's anxiety machine

We're living today in an anxiety producing machine that is far more subtle, but also far more pervasive than Pharaoh could ever have hoped to create. Consider:

- The way in which society constructs the need to succeed.
- The need to own your own home.
- The need to experience travel, movies, entertainment.
- The values and programming of that entertainment.
- The need to be more beautiful.

- To wear the right clothes.
- To drive the right car.
- To conform to society.
- Even the way society demands that we be happy and satisfied — else we're a failure.

The tools society uses to program, enforce and entrap people are endless:

- TV, movies, newspapers are driven by advertisers to create a deep-seated need within us to consume and succeed.
- The internet and other forms of instant communication connects us to fantasies and pressures that have never before been endured.
- Banks and credit companies are endlessly desirous of embroiling us in endless years of debt servitude.
- Housing prices are artificially inflated through government policy, while the story is told that everyone wants to and needs to own one. And, at the same time as housing provides for a basic need, it has been artificially created into a desirable investment vehicle, and attracts property speculators and investors wanting to shave their tax bills.
- Images and stories are constantly fed us to keep us wanting more. Needing more. Endlessly cycling the mouse-wheel.
- Even in many churches, the message is that we need to keep the rules in order to measure up, conform, be adjudged right, survive God's inquisition.
- For some, the incessant need to perform when "going to church" is part of the endless cycle of stress-inducing and anxiety-inducing features of the world.

God's response

Listen to God's response to Pharaoh's anxiety machine.

1 And God spoke all these words, saying,

2 "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

3 "You shall have no other gods before me.

4 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the

fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

7 “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

8 “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, 10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates. 11 For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.

12 “Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

13 “You shall not murder.

14 “You shall not commit adultery.

15 “You shall not steal.

16 “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

17 “You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbour's” (Exodus 20:1–17).

Pillars of peace

You've probably been programmed to think about this passage as “The Ten Commandments.” But this is not the name God nor Exodus gives to this passage. Instead, it simply says, “God spoke all these words.” It wasn't until after Israel broke God's covenant (Exodus 32) that any of these words were called commandments (See Deuteronomy 5).

If you're thinking about these statements as a performance standard, you're been conditioned to think about them from Pharaoh's perspective. Instead, read them for what they are: they are pillars of peace given to Israel by their Redeemer.

Israel was anxious in Egypt (Exodus 5). And they continued their anxiety in the desert (Exodus 16).

God gave them these Words that they might experience His Peace.

How God's Words are pillars of peace

1. God announces His defining characteristic (v. 2) — He is the God of liberation. Liberation from production. Liberation from bondage. Liberation from the anxiety-producing machine.
2. God announces His liberation from and opposition to all the gods of Egypt (v. 3–7). God is supreme (Exodus 20:3). God is alone (Deuteronomy 32:39; Isaiah 45:6, 21). God is One (Deuteronomy 6:4).

God is not the god of endless production. He is not the God of performance. He is the God of rest. He's liberated us from the world's anxiety machine, and invites us to rest, as He rested. Which leads us to the Sabbath.

3. The Sabbath is the practical, pragmatic interruption of production. It is the release from anxiety. It is the day of rest. Sabbath is opposed to endless production. Sabbath is opposed to endless wealth creation. Sabbath is the practical means through which we experience God's liberation from the stressors of this world.

Sabbath points back to the first three words. Sabbath points us to the example of the God who liberated us. Sabbath invites us to rest, and to be refreshed, as He rested, and was refreshed (Exodus 31:17; Exodus 23:12).

Sabbath interrupts us from serving wealth. Jesus said, "You cannot serve two masters ... You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matthew 6:24).

Sabbath is about remembrance. Remembering is a key function of this day. Pharaoh knew that rest would bring about remembering. That's why he wanted to ban it. God knows that remembering is what we need in order that our hearts may be refreshed.

Sabbath equalises everyone before God. Notice that the Deuteronomy rendition of these words adds a little something to the Sabbath description. In Deuteronomy, it says, "On [the Sabbath] you shall not do any work, you or your son, daughter, servants, ox, donkey, livestock, visitor ... that [they] may rest *like you*." In production, we all have different skills, talents and abilities. But in rest, we are all equal. Sabbath brings equality to all of us.

The Sabbath not only points back to God, but it points forward to our responsibilities to our families and neighbours. The Sabbath is the bridge between peace towards God and peace with our fellow man. So, remember sponsor the system of rest, to resist the system of anxiety.

Those who live by the system of anxiety and death:

- Are bound to dishonour parents and all non-productive kin;
- Are bound to engage in killing violence, because the others are a threat;
- Are bound to reduce sexual interaction to exploitative commodity;
- Are bound to usurp from others if it is something they want;
- Are bound to engage in distortion and euphemism to gain advantage;
- Are bound to be committed to acquisitiveness.

But those who keep Sabbath do not need:

- to dishonour mother and father,
- to kill,
- to commit adultery,
- to steal,
- to bear false witness,
- to covet.

You do not need to because you are able to depart the exploitative system.

4. The Sabbath means release from anxiety.
5. The Sabbath means release from coercion.
6. The Sabbath means resistance from multi-tasking. Be at peace. Lay aside the concerns of your business, your possessions, your achievements. Rejoice in the presence of your God.
7. The Sabbath means resistance from covetous greed. It interrupts the production cycle. It tells us that we are more than accumulators of possessions.

Notice that scripture repeatedly reminds us that covetousness is idolatry (Ephesians 5:3–5; Colossians 3:5; James 4:1–2; 2 Peter 2:14). Being owned by possessions is worshiping an idol.

These ten words are really now formed into a circle. For covetousness now rejoins and connects with the first and second words, forming a whole.

And in the midst of this circle, is the practical insertion of the sign of sanctification. The word that contains God's name. The bridge between heaven and earth. The bridge between circumcised and foreigner (See Isaiah 56). The sign of sanctification, forming the symbol of our own consecration to the liberating, redeeming, releasing, peaceful God (Exodus 31:13; Ezekiel 20:12), and our own commitment to extend this liberation, this redemption, this release, this peace, to our neighbours as to ourselves.

References

To read further into this topic, see:

Brueggemann, Walter (2014), **Sabbath as Resistance**. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, Kentucky.