

# Unkind, risk averse and untrusting – if this is today's society, can we change it?

**Viewpoint**  
Informing debate

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The JRF's recent public consultation revealed a strong sense of unease about some of the changes shaping British society. This *Viewpoint* continues the discussion about modern 'social evils' on the theme of 'a decline in values'. Julia Neuberger argues that we can change society for the better by deliberately rebuilding trust, opening up our institutions, and stopping the 'blame culture' from preventing simple acts of kindness and altruism.

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## Key points

- We have become more self-obsessed, more narrowly focused, as the public domain seems increasingly dangerous.
- It is harder to help others than it used to be, and doing so in any structured way has become fraught with bureaucracy and barriers, so that where altruism still exists it is harder to express.
- We increasingly devalue older people, while we live in an increasingly ageing society.
- Ideas of mutual obligation have taken a considerable battering. We are not sure who we ought to be responsible for, nor who our 'neighbours' really are or who we want them to be.
- We are seriously risk averse whenever we offer help or care professionally, and that leads to unkindness as it is easier to do nothing than to run the risk of blame.
- We tolerate high levels of human misery, at the same time as we are shocked by appalling scandals in care.
- The more fearful we are of allowing our children out, or our older relatives to be visited by strangers, the more we look in at ourselves and take our own emotional temperatures. Our obsessions then become how we feel instead of worrying about the welfare of others.
- Part of our fear comes from a deep distrust of our politicians, and doubt as to whether they can do anything about it or, even if they could, whether they are to be trusted to get it right.
- The solution lies in trying to rebuild trust and encourage altruism; opening up our institutions so that communities can own them; stopping blaming people when things go wrong by recognising systems failure rather than personal failure; and reassessing the value of concentration on the self, encouraging a sense of purpose in life by getting people involved in doing things for others in their communities.

There is a rabbinic saying, probably from the first century BCE, that sums it all up:

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when? (Mishnah, Ethics of the Fathers, 1:14)

Broadly interpreted, the rabbis were saying this: I have to look after myself, for I have to stand proud and know who and what I am. But if that's all I do, what kind of a human being am I? Selfish, uncaring and unkind. And there is some urgency here – the world needs to be made into a better place and though I may not be able to do much, I can do a bit, and it's no good saying someone else can do it. The responsibility lies with me, and I cannot leave it till tomorrow.

Society today is selfish, individualistic, lazy, uncaring. That is what many of the participants in the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) consultation have alleged, and there is a large element of truth in it. But it is not simple. Broadly, this is a social evil that negates the community we live in, or, more accurately, the communities we live in, overlapping and supporting as they should be.

## Introduction

I have watched bemused as we seem to have become less and less caring for, or even aware of the suffering of, the most vulnerable in our society. This is not to say that there are not hundreds of thousands of people who carry out acts of kindness for a variety of people in trouble day by day. Nor is it to say that we are bad people, or uncaring – although we may be insensitive to the needs of others, incompetent, or somehow unaware in other ways. Nor is it to argue, as religious leaders have often done and as respondents to the JRF consultation have asserted, that we have become selfish – although that too may be partially true. I believe that something else is going on, a complex pattern of interactions of ideas, events, zeitgeist, and personal human attitudes that has somehow allowed us to reach this position.

The idea that we have an obligation to society beyond the demands we ourselves wish to make of it is becoming unfashionable. Utilitarianism – the greatest happiness (or welfare or benefit) for the greatest number – is a philosophy now held in severe disrepute. Individual endeavour is adulated, as is personal autonomy. Utilitarianism might deter the huge efforts, for huge gains, of the talented entrepreneur. Thus society looks less at the welfare of the whole, and more at the welfare of the individual. And the intervention of the state is seen as less than desirable, and often less than benevolent to boot.

Meanwhile, the old sense of mutual obligation, somewhat fostered by war-time, has taken a battering. We are into understanding ourselves, into self-improvement: improving our homes, our looks and our minds. And our view of faith is also increasingly individualistic. We choose the elements of faith that suit us – we may go to church, synagogue or mosque. Individual salvation is part of the appeal of the evangelicals. Personal salvation is the carrot held out. But the requirements our faiths put on us to consider and care for others may get less than their fair attention. We look at ourselves, not beyond. And despite all the surveys demonstrating widespread belief in God, despite the huge readership of religious books and the increasing attendance at evangelical churches, our views about social solidarity, evening up the inequalities and making a difference to groups or individuals who suffer, have taken a battering.

This is a huge generalisation. Yet our obsession with 'self' – not necessarily selfish but perhaps self-indulgent – leads to strange behaviours. As the death of Princess Diana recedes into history, it is hard to remember the reaction many people had to it. Yet a walk through London's parks in the days immediately afterwards was a curious experience. All over, there were groups of people sitting in small groups, often round a lighted candle, contemplating, reminiscing, remembering and memorialising. Their grief, though real and genuine at the time, was not truly about the death of 'the fairy princess'. This was quite different. This was remembering for themselves; grieving for those they had not grieved for before, remembering mothers, fathers, siblings, or even children. It was a sentimental wash of grief, until then unexpressed and even unrecognised. The sadness was for themselves, although the grief for others may have been necessary and incomplete from earlier times, and it played out as something truly self-indulgent. Those participating were looking inward, at themselves and their experiences, one of the curses of our age, rather than thinking about what outward action they might be taking to improve things for others worse off than themselves.

And yet, more than 50 per cent of adults in England and Wales volunteer at least once a month<sup>1</sup>. People clearly do get out of bed to help others. They want to make a difference. All the polling shows that people want "to improve things or help people", or that they feel that "the cause (is) important". Nor is it necessarily only older people who volunteer, despite popular preconceptions of volunteers being old ladies who sort clothes in charity shops. Indeed, it is impossible to measure the 'informal' volunteering that goes on within communities, except that we know it to be significant, and possibly to be in decline since 2001. This was shown in *Helping Out* and in evidence presented to the Commission on the Future of Volunteering in 2008, arguing that informal volunteering was not taken seriously.

So why does the accusation of selfishness in society stick? Two reasons: one of the main motivations in much volunteering is to give the volunteer a reason to get up in the morning – more for themselves than necessarily for the people who need help, although that does not mean volunteering is not valuable. Secondly, those who are genuinely altruistic, or who simply want to help make a difference because they cannot bear looking at their community as it is, often find it extremely hard to lend a hand. And that is because we have become seriously risk averse – fearful as a nation, scared of terrorists, child molesters and violence on the street – and as a result we make it harder and harder to help those who need our aid, and we become more and more withdrawn into ourselves.

It is hard for ordinary people to give a leg up to someone less fortunate, to help the kid in care or the granny whose life is getting tough. As a result of scandals surrounding some of our institutions and carers, such as children's homes, schools and foster homes, we do not allow ordinary people to visit other than in a structured way. Therefore there is no sense of the local community just 'passing through'. The clearest example of this is our obsession, not wholly misplaced, with sexual predators on young people. That has made it necessary for anyone who works with children or vulnerable adults to be checked by the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). Until recently, this meant that a child in the care of foster parents could not spend a night at a friend's house unless the friend's parents were themselves prepared to undergo CRB checks too. Yet what children in care need more than anything else is to have ordinary friends and to live ordinary lives. The need for teachers in schools or volunteer helpers with reading or similar to be checked for their past record also means that those who might be willing to be mentors and friends to young kids on an occasional basis – like a sort of rent-a-granny scheme – have to be CRB checked too.

In itself this is no bad thing, but the fact that we have become so stringent in our requirements about checks on those who work or have any relationship with children has perverse consequences. First, children themselves are encouraged to be suspicious of adults in a way that may be quite unhealthy, both for themselves and for society as a whole. Second, those who are inclined to look after a child or young person who is distressed – who is, for instance, lost or being attacked by older children – will be very nervous of getting involved. An example of this is the tragic case of Abigail Rae, a two-year-old child who drowned in a pond after she escaped from her nursery school in Warwickshire. The inquest into her death heard that Clive Peachy, a bricklayer, had passed by the toddler as she wandered down a road alone, but failed to stop and help her because he was afraid that people would think he was trying to abduct her<sup>2</sup>. Suspicion of what their motives might be has forced some people, particularly men, to restrain themselves from showing ordinary common decency. Yet many of our most troubled young people – although by no means all – have no regular male role model in their households and need to know what being an ordinary, stable, feeling, understanding man is all about.

Add into that a public worry (ever growing) that some of those apparently stable men (it is largely men) may well be interested in pictures of young girls (or boys) in sexually provocative poses, and may download them from the internet – a criminal offence. Such men may therefore pose a real threat to the young, and so we look at all of them through nervous eyes. Indeed, you begin to see a picture of a society that wants to protect children from potential attack, but may end up scuppering valuable relationships between young people and their elders because the fear of sexual attack takes precedence over a belief in ordinary common humanity. When pictures of children at nursery school cannot be taken without parental consent, for fear of pornographic use, we have a problem. When we are so suspicious of adults' motives in wanting to help a child that one cannot help in a school without a thorough and lengthy police check, including one's own children's school, we will deter all but the most determined, however legitimate our concern may be. When more than 11.3 million people will be on a child protection database by 2009 when the new Independent Safeguarding Authority comes into force, and volunteer school bus drivers and parents who host school exchanges will soon be subject to CRB checks, the question arises, as Professor Frank Furedi has put it so well, of whether the fears of attacks on children are themselves being stoked by a "stealthily expanding" growth in child protection measures<sup>3</sup>.

But our fear of sexual predators on our children is by no means wholly unfounded. In recent years we have lived through the Soham murders, through a series of scandals surrounding children's homes and special schools, through the disappearance of Madeleine McCann, and through the ever more bizarre story of Shannon Matthews. The Roman Catholic Church is still reeling from revelations about attacks on young children by priests as well as stories of violence and abuse by priests and nuns in Catholic-run children's homes, about which senior church members knew and did nothing. Or, worse, they simply moved the offending priests or nuns on, and did nothing to protect the children or to heal their wounds. Yet with all that, such a level of protection as we have instituted will make children unable to trust anyone. Those accused of any attack on children will be run out of town and are therefore likely to go underground. And those who want to help children whose own families may be the worst abusers, by far the majority, or children whom circumstances have let down in a big way through parental death or family breakdown, are deterred by the bureaucracy that they have to deal with. It is as if we are trying to create a risk-free society, which we know in our heads and our hearts is impossible. The result is that we restrict and regulate, hoping to make abuse impossible, while knowing we cannot. And, that way, we deter the willing and the kind.

## Community breakdown

Our attitude to older people can best be described by our willingness to accept a high level of neglect and abuse of older people, despite knowing that it goes on. We would not tolerate it for younger people. Yet, curiously, we fail to be truly shocked when older people die in hospital in Kent because the circumstances of infection with clostridium difficile were so pervasive, and patients were being told to "go in the sheets" rather than helped to the commode or the loo<sup>4</sup>. We live in a society which has tolerated older people suffering from malnutrition in hospitals, tolerated lack of pain control in care homes, and accepted inadequate payments for older residents in care homes and the poor quality food and care that flows from that. And we have tolerated a society that has seen the disappearance of public loos, park benches and park keepers, all essential if older people are to feel comfortable and safe going out of the house.

To add to that, we have been less than clear about who is responsible, and who should pay, for older people's care – it is all of us, young and old alike. We talk about 'bed blockers', as if it is older people's fault that they have nowhere to go, and we discuss euthanasia rather than improvements in the quality of care. We allow our frailest and oldest to be cared for by people with no qualifications and poor pay and prospects, yet we seem surprised if the care is not always first rate. And we fail to learn from other countries that living arrangements for older people, including those with dementia, can be infinitely better, kinder and more satisfying. But, worst of all, we tolerate a dramatic increase in loneliness amongst older people – up from 5 per cent of older people surveyed by Help the Aged in 2005/06 to 13 per cent in 2006/07. Nearly one in three older people said their life had got generally worse over the last year. But still we fail to see what we are doing to our communities by not including older people within them.

Related to this is a lack of clarity about who is responsible for whom – a result of what many respondents to the JRF consultation describe as 'family breakdown', but which is in fact a mixture of straightforward family breakdown and a change from lifelong relationships to shorter, but faithful, marriages and partnerships (loosely this can be described as serial marriage/monogamy). As a result, it has become less clear who is responsible for whom in terms of caring for elderly or disabled relatives. Are you, for instance, responsible for your ex-mother-in-law?

Then we are also increasingly unclear as to who our 'neighbours' are. Our attitudes to community and outsiders have shifted. We still have a certain amount of suspicion of 'outsiders', though many people relish the diversity of our cities. There is also a growing body of opinion that feels our policies towards asylum

seekers are plain cruel, and that if we cannot sort out our immigration and appeals system it is hardly fair to blame those who are trying to come here, even if some are 'economic migrants' rather than true refugees. While cynics might argue that many immigrants are here to exploit our welfare systems, leaving less for those who have paid for it and continue to do so, the presumption should be (and some of the respondents suggested this) that people have come for the right reasons. Therefore there should be a fast, firm, fair and compassionate system which sieves out those who have not. If we cannot sort out how we should judge people who came here looking for a safe haven, or set up a sensible system for doing so, it is hardly appropriate to make them suffer for our incompetence. Indeed, it might be argued that our incompetence should lead us to treat them better, rather than worse.

These principles have to be set against an increasing xenophobia that is astonishingly widespread, which ranges from a general distrust of asylum seekers and refugees to a more particular and frightening hostility towards Muslims. In the wake of 9/11 and 7/7, such hostility embodies the fear that all young Muslims are the extremist Islamists who are so often portrayed in our media. There are many who have sympathy with the Muslim community – more accurately, communities – over this, but their opponents are many and various. Hostility emerges from the mouths of people who would otherwise think of themselves as very tolerant, at least in part because many Muslims simply do not share many western liberal values. Some politicians, shamefully, play to this xenophobia, and allow genuine asylum seekers to be treated with outrageous hostility.

We are also frequently intolerant of those who have mental health problems or learning disabilities, although in some ways our attitudes have improved since the old habit of locking them all up in the old long-stay institutions, which became warehouses of neglect in many cases. Indeed, some people are passionately concerned about the welfare of people with mental illness, as demonstrated in the British Conservative party between 2001 and 2003, when championing the cause of those with mental illness was not necessarily likely to win friends and voters.

There is enormous prevalence of mental ill health in our prisons. In 2002, 72 per cent of male and 70 per cent of female sentenced prisoners suffer from two or more diagnosable mental disorders, according to the Social Exclusion Unit's *Reducing reoffending by ex-prisoners* report (July 2002). In 2004, 20 per cent of prisoners had four of the five major mental health disorders<sup>5</sup>. Last year saw 22,459 recorded instances of self-harm in prisons<sup>6</sup> and 92 prisoners committed suicide, while over 100 prisoners were resuscitated after serious self-harm incidents<sup>7</sup>. This suggests that people with mental illness are all too likely to drift into what is our last 'closed'

institution, with the old hospitals gone. And there is little heed given to, and inadequate treatment provided for, people with mental illness in prisons, by and large: far less is now being spent on each patient within the prison system than on a comparable patient outside<sup>8</sup>.

We are also surprisingly unmoved by the fate of children who have been in care. We often choose to ignore the overwhelming statistics of our prison populations, with disproportionate numbers of people who have been in care, or had severe mental health problems or educational difficulties. Though we continue to have high expectations and hopes for our own children, it appears that many of us have given up on any hope, or sense of responsibility, for those children in society's care. Yet they are undoubtedly part of our community – or should be. Most of us will know something of what happens to children when they leave care. And we will also have met them: the sad kids asking for spare change; the young boys going from door to door with trays or kitbags of dusters, candles and CD cleaners to sell for too much money; the young kids on drugs, alcohol or glue sitting in the park staring rather vacantly into space with no apparent prospects; or the girls hustled and bullied into the sex trade with many apparently caring men their willing customers, even if they are under-age.

Not all young care-leavers have these experiences, but enough do for us to notice, observe and pass by on the other side of the street. Yet we blame family breakdown for their predicament, rather than our own lack of attention to what is going on around us. While we agonise over the risk of sexual predators who might attack our children, we ignore the sexualisation and sexual exploitation of those children who leave our care system. Similarly for those who fail to get into care when they run away from home, because there is so little provision for runaways in our cities.

What kind of society are we that locks up those young people with mental illness in prisons rather than where they can get help and care, such as some kind of mental health unit designed for young people? Behavioural and mental health problems are particularly prevalent amongst children in prison<sup>9</sup>, with 85 per cent of children in prison showing signs of a personality disorder and one in ten showing signs of a psychotic illness. Young women under 18 years old are twice as likely to injure themselves as adult women. In 2007, 89 per cent of girls under 18 years old had self-harmed<sup>10</sup>.

And what kind of society are we that allows our young care leavers to get into the criminal fraternity so easily, and does not make sure they have the support of sensible adults as mentors and befrienders for their late teenage years and early twenties? Indeed, what kind of society are we that makes it so unattractive, to young men particularly, to volunteer to act as mentors to troubled young people because of the fear of how

they will be perceived? In 2007, 13 per cent of men who do not volunteer to work with young people, but do volunteer, said this was due to the fear of being perceived as a paedophile, according to a survey carried out for the NCH children's charity<sup>11</sup>.

## Values beyond community

Our inability to address some of these issues in our own, local communities has led to two conflicting developments. One is the keen concern felt by many people, largely younger, about the environment and scarce resources. It is this movement which has drawn our attention to climate change, to water shortages, to the damaging effects of flying, to the horrors of 'food miles' – the travelling of green beans from Kenya rather than eating the local and seasonal produce of the area. But the same self-righteousness of this environmental concern can play havoc with the fragile economies of the developing world. If the farmers of Kenya cannot sell their green beans to us because of environmental concerns, they will go hungry. If we start arguing only for local produce, the farmers of the developing world will be left worse off than ever.

Many of these same young people will volunteer abroad, raise money for aid charities, and adopt a child and ensure she or he receives healthcare. But their conscientiously held views may themselves be part of the problem. Right or wrong, climate change versus human survival in the here and now, are not easy problems. Slogans are less helpful than a considered view on how best to help and support marginal farming, and the sense that 'globalisation' is bad leads to a moralising position that may well harm the world's poorest, a luxury only the developed world can afford.

## Risk aversion

Meanwhile, as the evidence about child protection makes clear, risk aversion all too often takes precedence over kindness and risk aversion militates against communities supporting themselves. The smallest of risks (and some are not so small) takes precedence over what we used to call kindness and care. The result is that the kindness one sees in hospitals often comes from porters and care assistants rather than from senior staff; from the people whose training has not yet brought them into a culture where risk aversion is so strong. The result is that kindness to people with severe mental health problems often comes more from the owners of cafés where they sit for much of the day, or the staff in public libraries, than from the nurses and outreach workers who are in a position to extend a hand. Many of these nurses and outreach workers are wonderful, dedicated human beings, but the system they work for is increasingly

loath to allow them to take on any risk. An arm around the shoulders might be thought to be common assault. An invitation to come and have a meal might be seen as some of kind of sexually predatory lure. Often ordinary caring and kindness is shown to the most vulnerable by ordinary people who have not had it professionally frightened out of them by a risk-averse system.

Risk aversion has increased a natural human reluctance to get involved, the lack of caring highlighted by some of the respondents. That reluctance is always exacerbated by city living, where city dwellers have an unspoken, unofficial code of not interfering in each other's lives. This means that those who are troubled can become totally isolated all too easily. Around Christmas and New Year, when many of the regular support services close for ten days at a time, those who are old, cold, young and isolated, mentally ill or with learning disabilities, can find themselves totally unsupported. No friends, no family, and reluctance on the part of strangers who have observed what is going on to get involved.

That reluctance will grow unless we look carefully at why we have (deliberately) grown such a culture of risk aversion and the regulation to go with it, why we are so suspicious of sexual motives, why we no longer trust the 'stranger'. And that requires examining our own personal experiences. If we fall in the street, it is the stranger who picks us up and dusts us down. If we have a car crash, it is the stranger who calls the police and stays with us to give comfort. If we are mugged, it is the stranger who, all too often, gives us the wherewithal to get home. If we are suddenly distressed, or feel ill or overcome with fatigue, it is often the stranger who carries our bags, who asks if we are all right, or who offers to take us to the Accident and Emergency department of the hospital. Those of us who have reached our older years, or watched parents and relatives do so, know that it is often the friendly, caring stranger who will do what is required at that very minute. Yet we are making it more difficult. Why, as evidence grows that crime is down, are we ever more fearful, ever more timid and ever more frightened of each other? And why do politicians foster that fear, encourage us to be ever more watchful, and surround us with CCTV so that 'Big Brother' (apparently) has his eye on us – to make us feel safer once our fear has been encouraged to grow?

That fear of others has turned us inwards. We have never been so internally reflective, so obsessed with ourselves and our feelings, or so enveloped in understanding ourselves. As we look deeper into ourselves, we lose the will to think beyond ourselves to others, we lose the inclination to help, serve or work for others. And we fail to look into the middle or near distance and deal with what we find within our communities.

Part of this desire to look inside ourselves is precisely what leads to that lack of a longer, more measured view. Psychotherapy has brought great gains, allowing those with unusual behaviours to understand themselves and behave differently, but it does encourage the personal over the group. Although cognitive therapy is shown to make a huge difference to many people with severe mental health problems, its rightful place is in the clinical setting and not in the everyday encounter with self-examination that, at worst, leads to an inability to act.

One could argue that all this emerges from an unfortunate confluence of events, or of intellectual and emotional pressures. For, at one and the same time, individualism became paramount; the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher stated that there was no such thing as society<sup>12</sup>; and consumerism hit new heights and the consumer, rather than the citizen, was king. That was the very period when the obsession with looking inwards grew in intensity, combined with a political and philosophical view that the individual should control what happened to him or her. All these factors combined led to a distaste for looking at the welfare of society as a whole.

For we are individuals now. We demand things. We go for the personal. We understand our own needs. We look inside ourselves, and we access information on the internet. We know what we want and we will demand it. The idea that we might not each of us be able to have what we believe we want and need is anathema to us. We have become demanders, not citizens – people who look to ourselves rather than to the whole society. It was always thus, to some extent. The tendency is not new; it has just acquired far greater weight. But the words so often uttered until just a few years ago, particularly by elderly people, that ‘I have had my turn, it’s someone else’s now’, are becoming rare. We see no need to moderate our demands or say that we have had our share. Though we may feel that the doctors have done enough for us in the way of interventions and we want no more, it is no longer about what we regard as our fair share. Instead it is about when we feel, as individuals with autonomy, that we have had enough.

## Trust

Trust is both political and ethical. In a society where voting figures go down and down, and where trust in politicians is at an all-time low, reassessing what we provide for the most disadvantaged, including the oldest in society, is difficult to do. What we have is a failure of trust combined with an aversion to risk: those who work in our services do not trust the politicians not to blame them when things go wrong. What we have is a society that thinks politicians lie when they promise things for all of us, including the most disadvantaged. Improvement

in education? Show me. More higher education? Where is it, and why have I got to pay for it? And so on. Yet trust is essential if we are to value our services. And risk aversion makes for poor services, where no one will do what seems natural and kind in case they get accused of behaving improperly or riskily. They do not feel they are trusted to do the right thing.

Indeed, trust is ‘blowing in the wind’, and a trusting society will be hard to claw back. Politicians are, often unfairly, regarded as only out for their own ends, not ours. But if we want a society where people feel that fairness is part of the ethos, we need to be seen to be involved with our politicians and thinking about our society. We cannot just let it go, and then complain. And if we are too individualistic, then we will suffer. Our happiness, as Richard Layard has argued so cogently<sup>13</sup>, will suffer, and so will our sense of belonging. When David Cameron argued that “we know we have a shared responsibility; that we’re all in this together, that there is such a thing as society – it’s just not the same as the state” (leadership election campaign, September 2005), he was reflecting back on his predecessor Lady Thatcher’s famous comment. But he was also saying something important. We are all interrelated, but the state may not be able to put all the ills of our society right. The result of this is that everyone will have to make more of a contribution to righting the wrongs of society. Altruism will need to be fashionable again, and helping others, for whatever reason, will need to be a part of our daily lives.

But that is not so simple. For the question remains of who forms part of that society in which we will all have to play a greater role, voluntarily. Ultimately, this is about who belongs to our society and how we regard them. It is about insiders and outsiders, trusted and distrusted. If we recognise mutual obligations, how far does that mutuality extend? Who is ‘us’, and who can we legitimately say we do not count as being part of ‘our’ society, to whom we therefore have no obligation? If we only look to ourselves, we narrow the view, and in the end become automata, selfish, self-obsessed and shirking responsibility. If we are only interested in long-distance travel and adventures miles away, we miss what is under our noses. Both the furthest and the nearest gaze negate the need for trust. It is in the middle distance, from one’s fellow citizens to one’s politicians, where trust, debate and discussion, and making the world a better place, truly sit.

Escaping inside will just negate our experience of friends and colleagues. Escaping to the ends of the earth will bring excitement but no permanent gain. The issues we need to grapple with are in our cities, towns, families and countries. Unless we rethink our obligations and the trust we accord to those in charge, we will become even more cynical, even more atomistic, even more individualistic. And then there really will be no such thing as society.

## Conclusions

- We must rebuild trust. That means politicians being less frightened of the voters and closer to them. It means doctors and other professionals talking frankly about risks and benefits. It means the media applying self-denying ordinances to stories of blame, day after day. It means all of us heeding the lessons of Onora O'Neill in her Reith lectures on trust, and of W.H. Auden's famous line in the lead up to World War Two: "We must trust one another, or we die"<sup>14</sup>.
- We must open out our institutions so that ordinary people can see what happens in our care homes and children's homes. Of course we will need to be careful. But these are institutions within our communities. They need to be part of our communities. And ordinary people need to go into them, on our behalf.
- We must challenge the insurers and the writers of policies in care homes and other institutions. Fear of fault-finding has led to masterly inactivity. That must cease. We need to stop blaming people and stop seeking their dismissal, unless in extreme circumstances. We need to recognise that getting most things right most of the time is an impressive record in human interactions.
- We must reassess family breakdown and put more emphasis – in settlements, in counselling and in relationship support – on those who suffer as a result but never chose to part the ways, notably children and other dependents.
- We must reassess the prevailing emphasis on ourselves – our contentment, our inner feelings. Sometimes those feelings need to be addressed. But all too often the focus on self leads to an inability to do things for others. We must work out how to focus on the glorious sense of purpose that comes out of doing things for others rather than oneself.
- We need to reinvent altruism, and take up the challenge which argues that the state cannot do everything for everybody. It probably cannot do everything, but it can undoubtedly set out the circumstances in which more of us can, and would wish to, do things for each other as part of normal behaviour – without being threatened with burdensome regulation and an atmosphere of mistrust.

## Footnotes

1. Cabinet Office, *Helping Out: A national survey of volunteering and charitable giving*, September 2007
2. BBC News, 23 March 2006
3. Frank Furedi and Jennie Bristow, *Licensed to Hug*, Civitas, 2008
4. Jo Reville, 'The dirty truth on the wards', *The Observer*, 14 October 2007; BBC News, 11 October 2007
5. Paul Goggins, Hansard, 17 March 2004
6. Hansard, written answers, 5 March 2008
7. Ministry of Justice, Deaths in Prison Custody, 2007, <http://www.justice.gov.uk/news/newsrelease010108a.htm>
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