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Waking from the Dream: First Thoughts

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Brendan Gleeson

Urban Research Program

Issues Paper 9
November 2008

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The Urban Research Program (URP) was established in 2003 as strategic research and community engagement initiative of Griffith University. The strategic foci of the Urban Research Program are research and advocacy in an urban regional context.

The Urban Research Program seeks to improve understanding of, and develop innovative responses to Australia's urban challenges and opportunities by conducting and disseminating research, advocating new policy directions, and by providing training assistance. We aim to make the results of our research and advocacy work available as freely and widely as possible.

Urban Research Program publication series

URP *Issues Papers* tackle current problems and challenges, and advocate potential new directions in Australian urban policy. URP *Research Papers* impart findings and conclusions from our research program.

The *Issues Papers* and *Research Papers* are edited by Jago Dodson, Research Fellow in the Urban Research Program. Email: j.dodson@griffith.edu.au.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction 1
2. Awakening 2
3. Atonement 4
4. Feast/Famine 6
5. Restitution 8
6. Conclusion: Hope/Despair 11

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1. Introduction

I'd like to begin by recording a tribute to my colleagues, including my students, at Griffith University. Urban insight arises not from detached contemplation, or the expert use of instruments. It arises from a collective interrogation of what is assumed to be true. I am very fortunate to work in the Urban Research Program: a rare grouping of commitment, industry and care.

The current 'Cities on the Edge' issue of the *Griffith Review* journal[1] is what draws us together tonight. I contributed an essay that some of you may have read, 'Waking from the Dream'. It argues, amongst other things, that Australia needs to wake from a dream of denial that takes several forms: of denied urbanism, of denied natural necessity, of denied social solidarity. These dreams of denial are preventing us from confronting the threats facing our cities, especially climate warming.

If I can allow the metaphor one more form, the writing project was for me a kind of dream. It was a journey of imagination that had a recognizable ending, when the text was sealed for publication sometime in February 2008.

What I'd like to offer you tonight is a few frames from this dream project, but also the first thoughts to emerge in its wake. These first thoughts take the form of three short essays I wrote whilst on sabbatical leave in Ireland during the first half of this year.

For those that have read the *Griffith Review* essay this approach will relieve them from the sentence of extended rehearsal. More generally, the new material tonight might possess some value by exposing the underlying ideas that stayed with me, after the writing project, and which emerged in new written forms.

[1] *Griffith Review*, 'Cities on the Edge', Edition 20, February 2008.

2. Awakening

Fire in the heavens, and fire along the hills,
and fire made solid in the flinty stone,
thick-mass'd or scatter'd pebble, fire that fills
the breathless hour that lives in fire alone… –

Christopher Brennan, Poems 1913

Australians are in two minds today. Many of us celebrate the economic boom that has generated new levels of prosperity, and pushed unemployment and want to the margins of consciousness.

And yet growing numbers of Australians are increasingly disturbed by two comets that seem to be streaking across and spoiling the bright skies of prosperity - climate change and oil scarcity.

One fiery trail reports a climate cooked and despoiled by human greed. The other marks the disappearing trail of a vital resource, the energy that propelled us to greatness, and yet ultimately became our downfall. Both entwine menacingly above us: one glowering with rising strength, the other fading and failing away.

The heavens aroused and inflamed are an awful force. Their anger shakes the groundwork of everyday life: the jobs, the holidays, the hobbies that fill our days.

The very earth upon which we stand seems to be moving under our feet; things - solid things - around us seem to be swaying. Our wonderful climate - the envy of the world - seems to be turning on us. *Terra Australis* is becoming Terror Australis, a blast furnace of drought, heat and capricious tempests.

The nation is gripped by concern about scarcity. Not of good domestic help, Chilean wine or smart European ovens. It's water, the fundamental means of existence that we are running out of.

In April 2007, then Prime Minister John Howard intoned gravely that the nation's food bowl, the Murray-Darling Basin, might soon fail. There was talk of the need to import food. Even in cities, traditionally immune to drought, years of prolonged water shortage showed in the greying, lifeless gardens of suburbia, where there lurked a quiet, deepening gloom about the deaths of things once cherished and nurtured.

Meanwhile oil, the lifeblood of our economy and everyday lives, seems to be slipping away. It's harder, more expensive, to keep a grip on lifestyles based on cheap petrol and unrestrained mobility. 'Pain at the pump' is another little unfolding agony in everyday life.

Daily we hear more about 'peak oil': a looming moment when the world's oil reserves will start to decline. The idea has been about for a while, but has been dismissed by governments and industry as the baseless rantings of survivalists, doomsayers and eccentric dons. Not so anymore.

Both the Australian Senate and the United States auditor-general have recently warned that the peak is real and imminent. No matter when it occurs, explosive global demand and geopolitical instability mean that the golden age of oil abundance is behind us. Chevron admits that 'the age of easy oil is over'. In January 2008, Shell chief executive Jeroen van der Veer predicted a global fuel crisis in just seven years.

Since the first fire in a cave, access to energy has defined human existence. We learned to be pretty careful conservers of the stocks we had. But Promethean modernity put an end to that quaint practice: more fossil fuels could always be found, and technology could transform them.

Peak oil is shattering the perpetual motion dream of the carbon economy. For most of us, the oil default is sudden, unexpected and deeply inconvenient. The busy free-ranging lives celebrated - indeed mandated - by neoliberalism are threatened.

Aspiration is turning to desperation. In early 2007, a survey of more than five thousand Australian families identified rising petrol prices as the main source of financial concern.

Sometimes passing through and surviving one (modest) crisis engenders not a sharpened wariness but its opposite, a heightened sense of invulnerability. So it seems with the 1970s oil shocks, which by the 1990s had passed comfortably into memories, adding evidence to the theory that market societies were indeed the 'end of history', our highest and most invulnerable social form.

This explains why the unexpected return of oil scarcity seems so deeply unsettling, cracking open a cemented faith in our invincibility. All the more unnerving is the mounting evidence that coal, our other great - if these days unseen - energy source, is fuelling climate change.

Most of us are guiltily aware that Australia is a global 'filthy man', stoking the global carbon economy with cheap, dirty coal. Not surprising, then, is evidence of a deeper sense of unease in the social consciousness; the substrate of politics. A new social sensibility is evident, rising awareness of our exposure to sudden, even wild, changes in the basic forces that industrial capitalism had considered vanquished, pacified and shackled to the wheel of progress.

This is where the two minds situation kicks in, problematically for most of us. It is why our heads hurt. We are intimately aware of, and buoyed along by, the economic wave that has carried most (but not all) of us to material prosperity: the jobs, the toys and the travel opportunities. We know at the personal scale how to manipulate our own role in the larger miracle economy for personal gain.

But most of us have no immediate connection to the big forces at play in environmental change, and thus little sense of how to comprehend and intervene in these processes. The consequences of the environmental and resource crises are manifesting in our daily lives: rocketing petrol bills, dead lawns, tedious water restrictions, and heat - damned unseasonable, wearing heat.

But the same sense of autonomy and power that many of us feel at work isn't available in these increasingly pressing circumstances. The feeling of frustrated disconnection, of impotency in the face of threat, seems to well and grow.

3. Atonement

The unexpected and early death in 2006 of Go-Betweens co-founder, Grant McLennan shocked the music public and many besides. We can only imagine what it meant to his soul mate of thirty years, Robert Forster.

Now, two years on, Forster emerges from the vale of grief as *The Evangelist*. Previously erudite, distant, and a little nervy, he glares with a newly calmed force from the album cover. The mouth is pursed and poised. He has something to tell us, something surely discovered in his journey through sorrow.

An album like this must contain personal traces that we will never know and some we will because they are obvious or Forster reveals them in interviews. The tributes to a lost friendship are clearly marked. And yet so are the tracks of the joyous pop imp that repeatedly sneaks its way into The Evangelist's tent. There's just enough room here for a little mischief. The wry McLennan would have expected it.

Many surely expected that this anticipated album would open with a lament. It doesn't. The hand of grief is restrained for a moment before it is freed in the second track, ('Demon Days'). This artwork reaches higher, in the greatest tribute possible to McLennan, by bringing out not just grief, but something learned from it.

It opens with a poetic song, 'If it rains', that speaks to a communal, not personal, register of feeling. It invokes the outbreak of mortal anxiety that gripped Australia's urban communities during the scarifying recent drought.

No coincidence surely that this album was conceived at the height of the crisis and in its epicentre, southeast Queensland.

Its people walked their own vale of grief as the interminable dry destroyed so much that was loved. We felt plagued, like the ancient peoples many of us had read of in Sunday School or in the Catechism. We recalled in a parched city the gentle privation of our youth: the glowering heat, the wobbling overhead propellers, the drained walls, the hard word we had to hear.

'If it rains' is the abject public prayer that an avowedly secular community could not bring itself to say. *'If it rains, we'll worship again. We've seen what came, without the rain. We'll be thankful that it came, If it rains.'* This wouldn't have been written in Sydney, or its brash sibling Perth, or its arch alternatives, Melbourne and Adelaide. Barefoot Brisbane, thick necked and old timed, sets up on stage The Evangelist, with the hard word on his lips.

From a more secular perspective, the song's unsettling grandeur arises from its reinstatement of a civic voice during the age of individualism and bully pit liberal democracy. *´If it rains*, *different this time. We won't break our chain or make our own rain. We'll just take what came.*'

It chimes with that great civic expression of remorse in our times, The Apology. After Howard's long assertion that a collective voice was simply not possible on this 'question', Rudd reanimated the civic instinct by daring to utter its language. We may ponder whether the language will survive and flourish under Rudd. Or was this a staged re-appearance before the return of Howard's 'Brutopia', the neo-liberalism that has defined public thought and purpose for the past two decades.

I watched The Apology from afar, on sabbatical leave in Ireland with my family. Web streamed by the ABC from Parliament, Ulrike and I watched with simple awe the agonizing re-opening of

our nation's heart, after years of petulant, and it seems imposed, closure. From a distance, the moment appeared deeply freighted with things I might not have observed in Australia. As a friend and colleague said to me, 'Sometimes one has to go away to see home clearly'.

Streams of emails and phone calls from friends, colleagues and family confirmed what the web press had reported to us: this event had pretty much moved the collective heart of a country that had been told it was all lean sinews and hard bone, without emotive, beating stuff.

I think The Apology moved greatly forward a nation that needs atonement with its original owners. I know enough of life to believe that we – individuals and collectively – can't move forward until we've dealt with our past. It's not a Californication but a real learning of our species in the last century. Give thanks to Freud, really.

The Apology called to prayer a nation still largely agnostic on indigenous issues. But still they came, and they came…I heard the stories…patients and staff in a doctor's surgery stilled before a clinic TV, the suits that quietly left the office to watch it somewhere, the camps where people gathered on the whispered promised of justice. How many tears were shed? For a while *'It rained'*.

There was, I believe, a great spectral presence at the ceremony – Nature. I don't mean National Parks; I mean our vulnerable selves and all that sustains us. By turning to face, at last, the original owners of our land, we confronted, if unconsciously, our misuse of their ancient inheritance.

For centuries we'd merrily plundered, always for good reasons, a rich continent whose gentle guardians we tried to erase. We devised many agricultural and industrial instruments of torture that slowly bled the land white. We knew it, we secretly knew it.

And we knew our latest invention, the Pulp Mill Economy, was rapidly making things much worse. It was geared to a smokestack global economy that was stopping the rain. I think we most of us realised a wrong turn was taken somewhere in the 1990s. Keating or Howard?, I'm not sure anyone recalls or cares who is to blame.

But by 2007 the common mind sensed that we'd become too thoughtless and too consumptive. No idea how to the bust the habit, but relieved by the opportunity to admit our folly. The Apology was a moment of great expiation that overreached, but nonetheless flowed out from, the need for Reconciliation.

At school in Coorparoo in 1979 we were told that penance was worthless if you didn't change your ways. The idea seared and singed a boof-headed boy. And it had a disturbingly long half life. I recall thinking about it again, and again, on the bus home. The injunction to mend ways lingered like a belly ache.

Saying sorry was essential but not enough. It was the start, not the conclusion, of reconciliation to a harmed other. The Evangelist summons this idea of apology. *'If it rains, now we'll change. We'll hold and save all of what came. We won't let it run away. If it rains.'* A hard word indeed.

4. Feast/Famine

I mentioned earlier that I have recently been on extended sabbatical leave in Ireland. This is where I completed the *Griffith Review* essay and where my first thoughts occurred as I emerged from the dream of writing. This is one of those thoughts.

I have a scholarly interest in and personal passion for the creation of child friendly cities and communities. My starting point is that many developed nations, especially the English speaking ones, have for some time neglected children in their collective thinking and in their public policies.

One reflection of this is cities and neighbourhoods that have, in a variety of ways, become less friendly, even harmful, to children and to the people that care for them. Changes to higher density through redevelopment have often designed out kids and carers – crowded spaces, no place for play, no family services and housing designed for the childless and the artless.

Neighbourhoods riven with traffic sewer roads that endanger children and restrict possibilities for healthy activity. A public liability crisis reinforced by blunt health and safety strictures that has dumbed down kids' play environments. The loss of green spaces where wild, nourishing play occurred to relentless urban development.

The list unfortunately goes on.

I have a lecture I give on this topic which also points out some of the ways that we might make our cities better for kids. A few months' ago I was in Sligo town on the west coast to deliver said seminar at the Institute of Technology.

Not long before I wandered the environs around the IT and chanced upon a famine graveyard. Here were buried some of the one million people who succumbed in the Great Irish Famine between 1845-1849. In the Irish language this terrible period is referred to as *An Gorta Mór,* 'The Great Hunger'.

My encounter with this remnant of mass death moved me deeply and caused me to ponder anew the inexplicable tendency of humans to harm their young, sometimes unknowingly, sometimes, sadly, intentionally.

The graveyard had a heavy air about it that suggested mass death. Internments too populous for headstones and a separate yard reserved for children. Wikipedia tells me that about 2000 people were buried in this graveyard. I sat for a while in the children's graveyard and wept a little.

Doubtless like other parents in this situation, you can't help but imagine your own children cloned in lifeless heaps under the surface. It's the only way to touch the awe of it all. From later reflection emerges a social sensibility; you begin to imagine the vast swathe of families cut down by *An Gorta Mór*.

This emotional ambush rocked my assuredness. I'd given this presentation many times in Australia, New Zealand and now in Ireland. It was always well received. But suddenly now, slumped miserably in a graveyard I'd not sought out, I wondered did I really know what I was talking about? What right had I to speak about harm to children in rich environments that these poor dead souls would have greatly desired?

Some critical reflection eventually reset my compass of thought to a slightly new course. And a sharper one, I think. First, I realised my own distant personal connection to where I sat. My

ancestors left Ireland for Australia in the late 1840s in the wake of the hunger. This helped to ease the alienation of the moment.

Second, I reflected that societal harm to children occurs both with conscious murderous purpose and much more insidiously, unintentionally. My work points to the way urban change is working against children at the insidious end of the scale. I realised it's right and necessary to work against both forms of harm.

Sometimes they come together with hideous force. This photo accompanied a story a few years back about the murder of a five year old child in a slumlike caravan park in western Sydney.

This act of barbarism was made more terrible, perhaps made inevitable, by the malign neglect that defined her life. No her parents did their best...I mean social neglect. That an Australian child should live in a hell hole like this...That her murderer was a mentally ill resident of the caravan park cut adrift, like so many, from help.

The cultural critic, Terry Eagelton, writes that at the time of *An Gorta Mór,* England's esteemed economist Nassau Senior remarked that a million dead in Ireland would 'scarcely be enough to do much good'. It suggests a deranged mind that can work at both ends of the harm scale: explicit in heartless intention but surely insensible to suffering.

A third idea occurred to me as I sat with the lost children. My own connection to famine was not merely ancestral. I'm part of a consumptive urban culture that is implicated in the hunger and death inflicted on children in developing countries today. A great food recession is sweeping the earth as agricultrual output is diverted from human stomachs to petrol tanks.

This would not be occuring if cities, where the majority of humanity now lives, were not the voracious users of oil they are. Our stubborn car dependency has made cities more polluted and unsafe for our kids. And it has made us dependent on a declining and costly resource with disastrous consequences for children elsewhere.

Like junkies we're lunging at a new quick fix, biofuels, as our oil supplies dry up. No questioning of the habit itself. The destruction of forests and conversion of farmland for biofuel production have made food much more expensive and less easy to obtain in the developing world. Last year a senior UN official, Jean Ziegler, called biofuels a 'crime against humanity'. Even the IMF is worried.

I'd travelled to Sligo on a train that at times I could have walked beside. The Irish Government is undertaking a major improvement of its rail systems but it is also building vast new road networks. Australia is also building tollways and tunnels but, unlike Ireland, is doing very little to improve public transport.

Only a very narrow calculus sees roads network expansion as good for children. We owe the children of the earth an urban lifestyle that does not deny them food. In any country, urban development that ignores children's well being will work insidiously against them. The cities will get richer and brighter, but will be poorer places for kids and their carers. Our feast will be their famine.

5. Restitution

Like you I hate queuing. Partly because I'm bad at it. At the ATM I always seem to be behind the person who needs to type their biography into the uncooperative machine. In the supermarket I always choose the check out that's land mined with price checks. At the video store I end up behind the bloke with hearing problems trying to take out membership. To avoid this I visit different video stores, but he seems to be trying to join them all.

In traffic engineering at university we learned that a Queue could be described and anticipated, if not explained, through mathematical formulae.

This hasn't proved very helpful. Queues remain a frustrating mystery for me. The experience of lining up for something often produces some unfathomable delay ('Bus not in service') or minor humiliation ('*PRICE CHECK!*').

There are a few boobies and saints who don't mind queuing. But not you, not me or just about anyone else. In the past, however, we were better about it and better at it. Think of how many of those old black and white photos we see in pictorial history books show patient, functioning queues…for buses, for soup, for autographs, for a glimpse, for a thrashing.

How many of us associate queuing with privation ('Just one cabbage each, and don't push') or punishment ('Your turn son, six of the best, put your hand out…').

Queuing is a social experience, a collective act. We generally don't get to choose who we line up with. And the line order usually ignores the social order. In real queues money or connection can't get you a better place. A great democratic sight is the unhurried pensioner at the postal counter, holding up a row of highly strung suits.

But like dogs with buckets on their heads or old ladies driving with fags in their mouths it's a rare urban sight these days. The queue's a scruffy relic in an age of universal individualism, momentary gratification and compulsory choice.

Much of our technological innovation and economic reform has been aimed at annihilating the queue, bridging the abyss of time. Some of this has improved our lives, but some of it hasn't. The infernal need to 'choose one of the following 9 options', and the ever lingering threat of being recorded for 'training purposes', has me thinking fondly of the post office….sorry post *shop*.

The news is that we are going to have to embrace the queue again. The same enterprise that went into trying to make the queue extinct has made it necessary again. The growth machine economy of the past few decades has gobbled up and despoiled much of what we need and desire and shortages are emerging.

Water, petrol, energy, green space and food are all in increasingly short supply. The high velocity global economy has also sped up the long run course of environmental harm that began with the Industrial Revolution. We face a climate emergency, not a looming threat, driven by our over consumption of carbon emitting energy.

The speed of climate change is bewildering and frightening scientists. They tell us that we have to cool the earth immediately – in the next ten years – to avoid a terrible tipping point, after which we face the unthinkable prospect of runaway climate change.

This can only be achieved by radically cutting consumption, especially in rich countries and communities. We are out of time for techno fixes or market adjustments. Many things that are in short supply and/or cause environmental harm are going to have to be rationed. We'll have to find ways of sharing scarce, damaged and damaging resources and stop imagining they are immune to injury or exist in endless abundance.

The 10 year drought, which may or may not be over, was a postcard from hell. We've been shown what it looks like and we should have the good sense not to visit. Nature is telling us to get back in line.

The queue is a wonderfully simple and effective rationing device. It's fair and deaf to complaint. We haven't completely lost the queuing know how. Witness the masses surging back suddenly on to urban public transport systems as petrol prices soar. We've handled it pretty well; there've been no reported murders.

We have enough of the queue's DNA to rescue it and clone it so that it can repopulate our imperilled cities and communities. You will soon see all sorts of queues popping up around the place. And you will see lots of them first hand, as you take your place in a line of people waiting for something.

The first bloom of the species will be queues for things we want not need: for a spot in an overused place, like a national park or a camping ground; for grossly environmentally destructive activities, which may ultimately include flying. You scoff, but we once rationed luxury goods, like imported sports cars, if for other reasons.

Rationing luxuries like resort stays isn't pretty. We're unlikely to go the full Soviet holiday-camp-for-all route, for sensible reasons, so rationing will put this form of escape beyond the reach of many who now enjoy it. It's likely that increasingly scare goodies will be captured by the rich and the well connected, as they often once were.

In the long run, and as the screws tighten, this won't do. There will have to be fairness in the distribution of scarce things, or there will be trouble. We may have to socialise some of the discoveries of the market, like resort time sharing, to manage equitably the distribution of increasing burdens and declining opportunities. Transparently fair adjustments will help us to maintain the social solidarity we will need to pass through the storm of change.

Eventually, basic things, like water, energy and food, may have to be rationed, at least for a time. This doesn't mean we have to make people line up for everything. Households can be allocated these fundamentals according to need.

Pooled provision and use will also advance the cause of rationing. The plasma screen will not be ubiquitous and we'll have to learn to go to the cinema again. The queue will be an important weapon in the war on waste because it is a powerful restraining device. If there's a queue between you and what you desire, you have to be pretty sure you want it because there will be work and time involved to get it.

This is not political prescription but a situation we brought on ourselves. Much of the rationing experience will be painful and confusing. There will be squabbles, but hopefully not worse. Some of the things which we enjoy now simply won't be possible and we'll feel the poorer for it.

Things like a recent Dublin-Bristol return flight that cost me six pounds. I took this flight on a budget carrier to deliver a public seminar on climate change. I'm part of the problem. The pain of change will be felt personally. I'm married to a European. I feel immensely worried that the

end of budget air travel will shrink her world and push her family and homeland away. This isn't going to be easy.

But there are riches on offer if we know how to identify and value them. Return to a society of modesty, solidarity and locality might not be good for Harvey Norman but it could enrich us. Rationing will slow us down and we might see more not less of each other. Importantly, parents might spend more time with their kids and take a more active part in their everyday development.

This could be the most effective way of stemming the processes that are making them fatter, sicker and sadder. Traffic calmed cities will be cleaner and safer; again, especially for children. If we walked more, we'd be thinner, healthier and happier.

It may not be The Da Vinci Code, but the mystery of the queue is more likely eventually to still our increasingly turbid hearts and minds. We might better understand that our lives are a sort of queue over which we have no control.

All of us will leave the earth in a sequence we cannot know. We might better ponder and accept that one day, like it or not, our number will be called. Animals don't queue. We invented the practice because we know its power to protect us from self destructive habits. This time the queue might save our species. Worth pondering next time you're in the supermarket deli, like me, behind the woman slowly ordering a bit of everything.

6. Conclusion: Hope/Despair

Now to audience expectation, to end critique with hope. I wish to end **not** on a hopeful note but on the question of hope.

Let me explain.

Hope is always present, indeed materially. If nothing else, children embody hope. They exude anticipation and prospect. They do not yet carry the ordinary injuries of human existence.

This is one reason I have sounded the alarm about their well being. Our economic and social course is, in the words of Fiona Stanley, making them fatter, sicker and sadder. It is the extinction of hope. A societal death wish. And yet while children are with us, there is always a reservoir of hope.

But I think it disingenuous to confront hope without considering also its negation, despair. At the Noosa festival last weekend an audience member put it to me that the long boom, the consumption carnival, has brought unmitigated hope and new comfort to all.

Cutting consumption to deflect climate threat was a reckless and sadistic prescription. There would be no constituency for it, I was told, given the intoxicated joy of the masses. I didn't share his view.

The declining state of western children indicated the need for a big rethink of the social model. Closer social inspection will reveal other forms of degeneration and despair that must be redressed if we are really serious about hope.

I was struck on my return home from Europe recently by a story in the *International Herald Tribune* newspaper. It concerned the assisted suicide of a Bettina Schardt, a retired X ray technician from a city in southern Germany. She ended her life with the assistance of a German Dr Death, Roger Kusch.

Bettina was not ill or disabled. She was alone and lonely and dreading the eventual prospect of a nursing home. Kusch put an end to her despair, and because suicide is not illegal in Germany, he will doubtless help to staunch a rising tide of elderly despair in the same way.

Eugen Brysch, director of the German Hospice Foundation stated in the same article: 'The fear of nursing homes among elderly Germans is far greater than the fear of terrorism or the fear of losing your job'.

Who can doubt that many older Australians share this priority of dread? And what of the nurturing of future despair in the miserable worlds we have created for many of our children?

Even before the miracle economy began to falter, at the height of the fantastic boom, despair was lurking and growing. It mirrored our new inability to care.

So if you want hope I'll give it to you. An age of ecological threat must be reconceived as an age of social renewal.

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