

# A Very Spatial Evening with John Ralston Saul

By Sue Jackson

First published by PEN, 10/06/10

The talk by John Ralston Saul, President of International PEN, at Melbourne's Capitol Theatre in May made me feel like a young mountain goat. A novice, one step behind, concentrating hard just to keep my footing, leaping from rock to rock and covering fresh ground at speed, in company with a master.

By the end, even though my grasp of the topic 'Freedom and Globalisation' remained somewhat shaky, it didn't seem to matter. I'm on a mission now to rectify that situation by reading all of Saul's books. In the meantime, I'd like to explain why the evening made such an impact on me.

I won't attempt to summarise the many theories presented by Saul in his talk. No doubt he expounds them brilliantly himself in his many books. Instead I'd like to accept his challenge to eschew a linear approach and be more spatial by focussing on the connections some of his ideas have sparked in me.

Saul started the evening by congratulating us Australians on our luck. He believes that in the current environmental crisis, Australia, like his homeland Canada, is ideally positioned to become a world leader in spearheading the radical changes necessary for survival. This is possible because we have potential access to the ancient and rich philosophical traditions of Indigenous Australia. In particular, Saul suggests that the Aborigines' 'spatial' approach, which locates humans firmly within, not above, the natural world, provides a crucial shift of perspective. By embodying a much wider view of reality, this stance encourages us to transcend our immediate preoccupations and 'step into the bigger picture'.

The spatial tradition, Saul goes on to argue, provides an antidote to the rational linear approach that emerged in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. This philosophy, which has Western society

in its thrall, has much to answer for. For example, one of the reasons we are struggling to deal with global warming, he suggests, is that we are hamstrung by environmental theories and policies that originate with thinkers like Rousseau and Thoreau – romantics - whose ideas are irrelevant to places like the Australian bush or the Canadian wilderness.

Saul makes a strong case that globalism, which he defines simply as the notion that ‘the world should be viewed through an economic prism’, is highly destructive. Nevertheless, it has dominated Western rational linear thinking for the last 40 years. Even though Saul publicly predicted globalism’s implosion ten years ago, he went unheard, and in the intervening decade the situation has steadily worsened. Saul observes that most countries are more in debt and dependent on commodities than they were in the 1970s. Yet despite the preoccupation with our economic plight, he argues that our current global crisis is not fundamentally financial, but rather about the theory necessary for running the world.

Saul believes that averting the impending calamity necessitates translating theories into action. But while people these days are better educated and informed, they can’t bring themselves to act. He suggests that the cause of this paralysis is adherence to the tired old philosophies, entrenched in public institutions like universities. Of course, that makes them difficult to unseat. Difficult but not impossible, he suggests, because a viable alternative - the wisdom of our Indigenous peoples – is on our doorstep.

Saul’s position reminded me of two other inspiring thinkers I have encountered in recent years, who by very different paths have reached similar conclusions.

Vandana Shiva is the founder of ‘Ecofeminism’. This philosophical approach suggests that Western science is at the root of the difficulties that currently confront the earth. Ecofeminists point out that alternative knowledges that respect the needs of other species as well as humans have always been preserved and utilised by women and Indigenous peoples. Substituting these alternatives for the rapaciousness of the mainstream belief system, they argue, represents the way forward; and that is why ecofeminists are often at the forefront in actions to protect other species.

One threatened species Shiva championed was the neem tree, which has been prized in Indian villages from time immemorial for its shade, for being a natural insect repellent and as a birth control agent. The threat to the tree came from a multinational corporation that some years earlier had patented the neem, so that thereafter villagers had to pay the company for the use of the tree's products.

Seeing where this might lead, Shiva encouraged villagers across India to collect all their local seeds. The seeds were then patented in the name of each village, ensuring that nobody else could ever take over ownership. In recognition of her efforts she was dubbed 'the Seedkeeper of India'.

A physicist by training, Vandana Shiva is Director of the Research Foundation for Science, Ecology and Technology in New Delhi. She has written thirteen books and was described by the *Observer* as 'A Green International Star'. Although Shiva decided over twenty-five years ago to commit ten years to environmental activism, she is still hard at it. It seems to me she is an excellent example of someone whose adoption of a spatial approach has made taking action, and effective action at that, irresistible.

So too is the case with Satish Kumar, whom I heard speak at Ceres in Melbourne in 2007.

Kumar was born in Rajasthan in India in 1936. At nine he chose to become a Jain monk, and nine years later, inspired by Gandhi, he left the monastery to campaign for land reform. Soon after, he undertook an 8,000 mile peace pilgrimage, walking around the world without any money to deliver 'peace tea' to the leaders of the four nuclear powers.

I'd not heard of Satish Kumar until I received a notice advertising his visit to Australia. The title of his talk 'Soil, Soul and Society: Towards a Sustainable Future' proved irresistible. When he is not busy in England editing *Resurgence* magazine, Kumar travels the world promoting the idea that the fate of humans, other species and the planet itself, are inextricably linked.

An admirer of Vandana Shiva, Kumar too points to the wealth of wisdom to be gleaned from Indigenous people. He argues that instead of becoming paralysed by the prospect that our planet has reached the point of no return, we should appreciate that we have reached 'the point of return' – to the

wisdom, art and elegance of our Aboriginal forebears (and of many rural women and men). The traditional owners of our land have always seen themselves as ‘trustees’ of that land and lived in harmony with the natural world. This, he suggests, is exactly what we will need to do to create a sustainable future.

Kumar argues further that we need a new trinity, a philosophy to guide us into that future - we need to simultaneously take care of the soil, by which he means the whole biosphere, our souls and our society. He has written extensively about how we can attend to these areas, but something he emphasised in his talk is how important making things is for the soul. Crafts, cooking, gardening, making compost are all activities he encourages. And to free up time to do these things, he recommends Westerners exit the rat race and start working part-time. He argues that if you cannot take care of yourself and your own soul, how can you possibly take care of the earth? As to society, Kumar pointed out that at the moment half the world goes to bed hungry every night. For a fair and equitable society and social justice all humans need access to land, which nature gives as a free gift. He concluded by stressing that our Western lifestyle needs to be transformed. We need to commit to living simply, harmoniously and elegantly. And we have to become experts in reusing materials; the waste of energy, food and water is not acceptable in this new age.

I appreciated Kumar’s practical guidance on how, in Saul’s terms, we can become more ‘spatial’. Because even when we agree that we need to tap into Aboriginal wisdom, the way to do this is not necessarily obvious; in fact it’s hard to imagine how to translate that ideal into day-to-day practice. And one thing for certain is that such wisdom is unlikely to be attained via direct instruction.

The failure of the instructional approach was beautifully illustrated in the film *Bran Nue Dae* (2009), directed by Rachel Perkins. Ernie Dingo’s character, Uncle Tadpole, had great fun taking the young white hippy who was giving him a lift in his kombi, for a ride. In answer to the young man’s earnest query about his passenger’s origins, Uncle Tadpole replied, with a straight face: ‘I was born in ... the Dreamtime. My mother is from the crocodile mob...and my father is a koala bear’.

Saul himself made no attempt to catalogue ways in which we might go about learning from our Indigenous neighbours. Perhaps a ‘how to’ analysis would have exemplified the very linear approach he abhors. Instead he told a story – a story against himself.

As a 27-year-old high-flying academic, he once went to a meeting of the Hunters and Trappers group in far North Canada. He imagined he would be utilising his rational thinking skills and his strategising experience to assist the members of the First Nation in the difficult environmental situation they faced. Instead, after a mere hour, he emerged from the meeting totally confused. ‘I heard a completely different argument than I expected. They saw their relationships as human beings “towards” the place they lived in, not “above” it.’ Their approach, while utterly foreign to Saul at the time, he subsequently concluded was ‘very post-modern’.

Saul’s story brought to mind an experience of my own. My brother-in-law, Brien Nelson, is a Jaara Elder, who lives with my sister on a farm near Bendigo. Every time I visit, Brien presents me with items of bush tucker for transplanting into our inner-city garden. Last year he decided it was time for chocolate lilies to feature on the menu. And sure enough in just a few minutes, in one of the more remote paddocks, he spotted them, camouflaged amidst the native grasses.

I squatted down next to Brien as he dug delicately below the luscious growth of a mildly chocolate-scented plant. He then removed a handful of small tubers before carefully replacing the earth at the plant’s base. Brien explained how his predecessors only ever harvested a limited number of the tubers, so that the plants remained strong, healthy, and productive for passers-by in years to come. He continues the practice even though it is unlikely that nomads will be travelling that way in the near future.

Later, try as I might, I found it impossible to spot the lilies in a paddock where Brien had no trouble pointing out hundreds. It got me thinking about how different Brien’s view of the world is from mine. Even with his patient one-to-one attentions and my determination, it

was still difficult for a mere visitor to see things his way.

That is why something like an immersion approach to Aboriginal culture undoubtedly has merit. In fact, immersion is what is on offer at the highly successful Garma Festival, auspiced by the Yothu Yindi Foundation and held annually in Northeast Arnhem Land. The Festival is a celebration of the cultural inheritance of the Yolngu people and is designed to ‘encourage the practice, preservation and maintenance of traditional dance (bunggul), song (manikay), art and ceremony on Yolngu lands’.

The Festival has a strong political agenda, as expressed in 1989 in Yothu Yindi’s international hit song *Treaty*, about the dedication of the Yolngu people to reconciliation, land rights and achieving broader recognition of their culture and law. Over the five days of the Festival, non-Aboriginal people get the chance not just to visit, but to participate in an intensive cultural interaction and exchange.

If travelling North is not an option, there are things to be gleaned about Indigenous wisdom from the comfort of our armchairs. Signposts to spatial living are there to be discovered in numerous songs, films and books. And art’s capacity to stimulate empathy means that the learning is not just intellectual but heartfelt. These are a few examples.

Even though I’ve heard it many times, I can’t listen to Paul Kelly’s iconic song ‘From little things big things grow’ without feeling very emotional. The story about the Aboriginal activist, Vincent Lingiarri, and his struggle with British beef baron, Lord Vestey, always stays with me long after the music has stopped. I’m in awe of the Gurindji peoples’ determination and patience in the face of injustice. As Kelly concludes:

That was the story of Vincent Lingairri  
But this is the story of something much more  
How power and privilege can not move a people  
Who know where they stand and stand in the law

The film *Ten Canoes* released in 2006 features a fictitious account of the lives of the ancestors of the present-day Yolngu people. Director Rolf de Heer collaborated with the people of Ramingining for three years in telling this story. Watching the people making their canoes, building platforms high up in the gum trees, tracking down the eggs of gumang, the magpie goose, all in the beautiful Arafura Swamp, was an enthralling experience. The film conveyed vividly the time-honoured elegance of Aboriginal life.

And in a very different sort of film, the wonderful irreverent musical *Bran Nue Dae*, it was impossible not to identify with young Willy's conclusions about what makes for the good life. 'I want this. To be at home, under the stars, fishing. To be with you (his mother) and my girl, Rosie. God is here. This is heaven.'

As I mentioned at the outset, I'm not sure I understood completely what Saul believes typifies a spatial approach. My take on it is that living spatially involves avoiding being hidebound, and instead attempting to be flexible, open-minded, receptive and creative, all of which enhance our ability to keep the bigger picture in mind. Anyway, whether it was intentional or inadvertent, I believe Saul modelled what I see as a spatial approach to life throughout the evening at the Capitol.

His way of operating owed little to old pedagogic styles and seemed to be all his own. For example, at question time he suggested that he answer four questions at once rather than in the more conventional linear one-at-a-time way. In doing so he demonstrated how moving outside the box allowed him to come up with fresh and unique responses.

Saul chose not to answer one question because 'I have nothing original to say on that subject.' It is most unusual to hear such an admission from a public figure. Yet it's exactly that sort of humility and honesty that will be necessary if we are to benefit from the traditions of ancient Australian wisdom; first we will need to let go of our sense of superiority and then recognise that we need our Aboriginal neighbours' input.

As Arnold suggested in his thank you, Saul's essential humanism shone through his presentation. In his analysis of theories and policies there was always a strong sense of his preoccupation with their impact on ordinary people. He adroitly avoided the trap of stereotyping; there was no sense that Saul was categorising people into good guys and bad guys. He admitted his admiration for quite a few unexpected people, such as some merchant bankers, whom he rates as amongst the best thinkers around.

Despite warnings that saying 'I told you so' is socially unacceptable, Saul stood by his assertion that he had predicted in 1999 that globalism was collapsing, and that disaster was looming. He did not display false modesty about his prescience nor has he fallen into despair about the decade that has been lost. Throughout the presentation, Saul came across as funny, light hearted and 'relatively optimistic' about humanity's prospects. Unlike so many people who are paralysed by their adherence to the old philosophies, Saul's commitment to thinking independently and acting on his conclusions clearly keeps the spring in his step – something I'd also noticed in Vandana Shiva and Satish Kumar.

Reflecting on the whole evening, I realise that mountain goats have a lot going for them. They learn early in life that leaps are not to be feared; in fact advancing is impossible without them. And looking backwards is no help at all; it can even be perilous. Finally, while a master can point the way, every individual is responsible for his or her own actions. Ultimately, we all have to trust our instincts and our capacity to leap and land safely a little higher up the cliff face. It can be exhilarating - a truly spatial experience.

## SELECTED READINGS

John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West*, The Free Press 1992

John Ralston Saul, *The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World*, Penguin (Australia)

2009

Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, Fernwood Publications, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

1993

Vandana Shiva, *Globalization's New Wars: Seed, Water and Life Forms*, Women Unlimited, New

Delhi 2005

Satish Kumar, *No Destination: An Autobiography*, Green Books 1992

Satish Kumar, 'Only Connect: Soil, Soul, Society', *Resurgence Magazine*, Issue 201, July/August

2000