

# DISCOVERING MAUDE BARLOW: MY INTRODUCTION TO 'ECONOMIC GLOBALISATION

By Sue Jackson

**First published in August 2000 in *VAFT News***

Initially, I thought that perhaps the VAFT newsletter was not the place for this piece – but now I think, 'where better'?

Therapists are influential, well positioned people who are rarities in that we have the privilege of intimate conversations with many people from all walks of life. Therapists are not, however, necessarily experts on the global scene, or that is certainly the case with me. Because I have been pessimistic about people's capacity to make changes except at a micro or local level, it has rarely entered my head to ask clients questions about global issues. Undoubtedly this has resulted in me having more circumscribed, less creative conversations than were necessary. In the past economic theories have always affected me like mathematics. – "ho hum, moving right along". They have fitted neatly into the 'too hard basket', into a realm best left to other people.

Then along came Maude Barlow, and with her inspiration the very strong sense that if we continue to leave global issues to better informed or credentialled others, we will almost certainly end up with the kind of world that will appal us. Since listening to Maude and doing a little research, I have, for the first time, begun to develop a rudimentary understanding of economic globalisation, free trade, commodification and their interplay.

It all started when I read in the Women's Trust newsletter about a public meeting, featuring a speaker whose name was completely unfamiliar to me. The brief and modestly worded advertisement explained that Maude Barlow was a Canadian whose interest in change encompassed the local AND the global. This appealed to me at once because I had

been feeling increasingly concerned that my best efforts to make a difference were insignificant.

Like many other people, I had been struggling for years to live a green and globally friendly life. We seek out ethical investments, we have one car, and I fill out all the Council questionnaires in copious detail. We carry string bags and try to minimise our use of plastic. We compost and recycle conscientiously and when Yarra Council recently reported that our area had outstripped all recycling targets, I felt that it was obviously all our doing. I have even begun researching the possibility of a worm farm. And yet these efforts seem so small when you consider how in so many places and at such an alarming rate we are raping, pillaging and killing our environment.

So, my friend and fellow VAFT member Susie Costello and I, and several of our adult children, braved a cold June evening and ventured to North Melbourne Town Hall. On arrival we were astonished to find the place full. Where had all these people come from? We had not noticed any advance media interest. In introducing Maude, representatives of the Women's Trust, Circus Oz and Monash University, who co-sponsored her visit, were fulsome in their praise, but I wondered what all the fuss was about. I didn't have to wait long to find out.

My fantasy was that an activist would be earnest, dour, possibly angry and probably humourless. Maude's 'official' credentials are certainly impressive: political activist, author, media commentator, advocate for social justice, senior adviser on women's issues to Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau. She is also currently the chair of the International Forum on Globalisation of Water and working toward international cooperation in setting labour, social and environmental rules in a global economy. She is an outspoken opponent of free trade. The latest issue of 'The New Internationalist' lists Maude Barlow as one of the 'economic thinkers who've dared to challenge the dominant view', and describes her as a 'key strategist in the fight against unaccountable 'corporate rule' and for basic rights of citizenship'. Maude is also a founder of The Council of

Canadians, Canada's pre-eminent citizens' watchdog organisation, which has been operating for fifteen years and has a membership of 100,000. A non-partisan organisation, it works to preserve Canada's social programs, culture, wilderness and sovereignty.

Maude talked rapidly and assumed a level of economic and political knowledge which, I am ashamed to say, was far beyond me. But my fantasy proved wrong on all counts. She was warm, funny, irreverent, entertaining, a marvellous raconteur, and despite her knowledge and erudition, was able to laugh at herself.

Maude got her message across in an inspiring and accessible way. It was so wonderful to hear a woman who seemed just like us - the Council of Canadians began its life in her friend's family room - who has managed to make such a difference in the world. The personal and professional were interwoven seamlessly in her talk via heartfelt stories of both, so that the personal experiences became global ones. Her storytelling had the compelling quality of Alastair Cooke in his 'Letter from America'. Maude was able to bring to life potentially dry and tortuous political issues by focusing on the human angle. Her whole approach was narrative, and at least in that aspect I felt on familiar ground. Next morning I dreamt I was an eco warrior.

Maude began by outlining the struggle against the signing of a free trade agreement with the United States, which she was involved in as chairperson of the Council of Canadians. She is opposed to free trade, that is, trade between different countries free from governmental restrictions or duties because it is not a 'level playing field' and all the evidence suggests that it will never become one. That campaign was hard fought and the conservatives, who had promoted free trade, lost the next election. But celebrations were cut short when the triumphant Liberal party changed horses and signed the agreement as their first act of government. Maude gleefully reported that the Council of Canadians did have a small victory. At the agreement signing, a protestor managed to pull the American flag over the Canadian one so that many of the media images had the Canadian Prime Minister signing the agreement in front of an American flag!

Reflecting on this whole discussion, I thought that someone who put so much into the Canadian battle against free trade and lost, but who has gone on to fight for other things, is a great role model of resilience, hopefulness and the strength of the human spirit. Perhaps, to use narrative terminology, she was able to access an alternative story about this defeat? Perhaps the struggle had been invaluable in uniting people? Perhaps the lessons learned would be helpful in the battles ahead? Maude was clearly not broken by the impact of the dominant story of defeat. I had applied these narrative ideas effectively in other domains, yet never before had I fully appreciated their implications for the global picture.

Several months ago, 'Anne' came to see me because she felt very stuck in her life. She reported feeling directionless, lacklustre, and as if life was pointless. Anne felt that she had never really recovered from the disappointment experienced in a job she had finished three years previously. She had committed herself body and soul to a campaign to prevent woodchipping in a national forest. Early optimism, fuelled by promises from Canberra and the enthusiastic support of many people, came to nothing. I worked with Anne on the obvious issues of grief, but was somewhat concerned because she never returned. I now wonder how much my belief in a dominant story – defeat is probably inevitable against big money - might have prevented me from engaging with her in a more hopeful and empowering way. With Maude Barlow's example in my mind, I would love the opportunity to talk to Anne again.

It is quite a stretch for me to try to articulate economic globalisation here, but here goes. Put (very) simply, fifty-two of the largest one hundred economies in the world are multinational corporations. Because these corporations transcend national boundaries, and because they are driven by the profit motive, they do not have the interests of individual countries at heart. In fact, when progress is defined in purely monetary terms - with the rich most admired and the poor labelled 'losers' - it fuels a global competitiveness around trade and desire to attract investment to one's own country. It can be difficult for

governments to take a strong stand against rapacious or polluting companies for fear of losing their investment. Even relatively affluent countries frequently act from a position of fear of alienating investors.

For the poorer countries it can be even more difficult to hold the line against negative behaviour. Part of what attracts multinationals to third world countries, apart from cheap labour, is the absence of stringently enforced environment protection measures. In fact, the whole world is being 'shafted' by the pervasive belief that progress means that everything is for sale. This is global commodification. If we continue to look to our increasingly market driven governments to lead us, we risk feeling more and more despairing and impotent on environmental issues. That is why we need to look instead to our fellow citizens.

Maude provided two wonderful examples of the efficacy of 'citizen power' in the face of the rapaciousness of big corporations. The neem tree has for centuries provided many Indian villages with shade, and been a natural insect repellent and birth control agent. Recently, a multinational company patented this tree. Villagers now have to pay the company to use the products of the tree. A wonderful Indian woman activist encouraged many villagers to collect all their local seeds. The seeds were then patented in the names of the local villages, ensuring that nobody could take over ownership. This notion of the 'seed keepers' of India gives hope to those confronting the greed of the multinationals.

The second example came from Bolivia, where a multinational bought access to the local water supply, promising reductions to the cost of water to consumers. The opposite happened, the price escalated dramatically. Bolivians in their thousands protested vigorously, and the company was ousted. The hero was a 4'8" Bolivian village shoemaker, who spearheaded the protest, and was subsequently commended at a huge meeting in the States chaired by Maude. He described (through an interpreter) how multinationals are like enormous boulders that drops of water wear down to pebbles. He said people are those drops of water.

Closer to home, when I began to look for exceptions to the problem-dominated, newspaper-selling global story, I was heartened to think about the following examples. Recently I read a report of a country Victorian woman of over eighty who hired a shipping container, parked it in her back yard and, with help from family and neighbours, filled it with provisions for distribution in East Timor. At a national level, the image of so many people marching over Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of reconciliation is a good example that the people can convey a powerful message where the politicians have failed. Similarly, on a global level, the celebration of the New Millennium was by and large a positive, life-affirming experience, despite bureaucratic and media hype about potential catastrophe and human craziness. Once again, ordinary people were in a different, more positive space than their leaders. These instances all fuel the optimism that has been bubbling up in me since the meeting.

It occurs to me that when we look back on earlier eras we can easily make the connection between what was happening in the world then and its psychological impact, particularly in such areas as people's sense of joy and agency in their own lives. How much have ideas of ecological disaster and political or economic impotence been affecting the universal unconscious and influencing the formation of negative archetypes? Perhaps people today are not so much selfish as interested only in looking after their own family because they feel powerless about their ability to make an impact on a wider stage? They do the very best they can in the bit of the world over which they feel they have some influence. Unfortunately, all the while that 'bit' gets smaller and smaller.

I am intrigued by the whole area of myth making. For some years I have had a particular interest in working with people on the Single Again experience. In that domain, myths abound and can be incredibly debilitating. For example, 'all the nice men are married' (I know quite a few nasty men who are married!); 'the only people left are inadequate' and 'nobody would be prepared to take on a woman with children', are commonly presented as truths. Much of my work has been around assisting people not to

be tyrannised by such myths, but to challenge them and to be prepared to be a trailblazer and a model for others.

Since the meeting I have been wondering just how much I have been constrained by global myths and how liberating it might be to start challenging them and contributing to the development of an alternative dialogue. There is power in '1' and massive power in '1 plus ...', as evidenced by the events in Seattle in December last year. It was there that the World Trade Organisation held its third Ministerial Conference to define the trade, development and environmental agenda for the 21st century. Opponents of the WTO believe it is working only in the interests of big business and against environmental and social concerns. Seattle saw the largest protest ever in the Western world on economic and free trade issues. The talks collapsed in disarray. Maude Barlow was one of the protest organisers.

Therapists have always had the potential to be social activists. Working as I did for a decade in the area of HIV/AIDS, and providing therapy essentially from a systemic orientation, it was impossible not to be aware of the impact of the wider societal systems on our clientele. The local, national and global perspective on AIDS was ever present. Occasionally we therapists were propelled into action and frequently our clients would tell us about the transcendence that was possible when they thought of themselves as merely a small part of a much larger phenomenon. Many gave generously of their time to our research because they wanted to make the way easier for those following them. Viktor Frankl, writing in the wonderful 'Man's Search for Meaning' made the point that action on behalf of others is one very legitimate way that people make meaning of life. He should know, having spent years incarcerated in Auschwitz observing how he and his fellow inmates coped with such trauma.

Similarly, many narrative therapists have grasped the nettle in this area of social action. I can still remember how astonished I was about 15 years ago to hear Michael White say in a crowded public forum how he encouraged young women struggling with anorexia

to deface billboards promoting skinny young women eating junk food or drinking soft drinks. In more recent years, Dulwich publications, for example, has produced newsletters on issues including domestic violence, homelessness, Jewish immigration to Israel, bullying in schools and reconciliation. Despite this exposure, my appreciation of the potency and centrality of social action had sometimes wavered in my own private practice.

But something clicked for me at the Maude Barlow meeting. Economic theories finally made sense in terms of their implications for people – people just like my loved ones and me. It was such a profound experience that I know I have to take action. I am reminded of the wonderful scene in Orson Welles' classic film 'The Third Man'. Harry Lime, the amoral profiteer, takes his friend on a ride high above a fairground. Lime had been selling fake penicillin on the black market, a practice that had led to the death of many people, including children. He rationalises his involvement, pointing out the people milling about far below, by saying: 'Would it really matter if a few of those ants down there disappeared?' Distance can make for objectification and lack of identification with other people's plight. Maude's stories make such a stance much more difficult to sustain.

As was apparent at North Melbourne Town Hall, people are keen to consider global issues. In the first instance, there must be more space created for alternative discourses about what constitutes a successful life. I feel heartened by the changing values of some of the young with whom I come into contact. Increasingly, their voices are also heard in the dissent against the mainstream dialogue that suggests worthwhileness is measurable exclusively in financial terms. As this voice gains strength world wide, I hope support will grow for politicians as well as citizens battling the myth that wealth equals worth and taking a stand against economic globalisation. There will be ample opportunity for us as therapists to contribute to this chorus of dissent.

In the past, because I felt powerless and pessimistic about the global situation, I probably avoided the topic and unconsciously contributed to my clients' existential feelings of hopelessness. Thank you, Maude Barlow. I feel liberated. I have always believed that one

of our main tasks as therapists is to convey hope. I now believe that there are more reasons to hope and real ways in which I can make a contribution to the global scene.