environmental or green movement, like almost everything in the resigned world of denial, proved to be empty rhetoric because it did not address the real issue involved in humans’ destruction of nature, namely the human condition, and in failing to do so was not a real attempt to end humans’ destruction of the natural world. Only by confronting and solving the human condition could the criticism the natural world represented be resolved, and the need to attack it be removed. In truth the green movement was just more ‘bullshit’, another ‘brick in the wall’ of the denial and delusion humans have lived off in the resigned world.

Baldwin’s belief that some people—the ‘heroes’ as he calls them—could both ‘remember’ and ‘forget’ is recognition that some people were less arrogant and deluded about their resigned, false, alienated state than others, and, as a result, were capable of at least alluding to the existence of another true world. That was a heroic thing to do because once you were resigned, breaking the silence, admitting to your alienation, being a little bit honest, ‘ratting on’ your condition, undermining or betraying yourself, did require considerable courage. The great literature of the resigned world, such as the examples given from the writings of Patrick White and Alan Paton and others in the Introduction, is ‘great’ precisely because of its honesty in breaching the fortress of denial in the face of the overwhelming necessity to maintain that fortress.

The courage required to disown your resignation was different to the courage of ‘ships at sea’ who avoided resigning when their corrupted condition dictated that they should. Similarly the ‘pain’ associated with avoiding resignation was different to the ‘pain’ from the loss of clarity and integrity that came with having resigned and become alienated.

There has been another heroic response to the human condition, in this case one that involved despising and mocking the resigned structure, despite being part of it—being as we say, ‘larger than life’. The character Zorba from Nikos Kazantzakis’ classic 1947 book (and subsequent film) Zorba the Greek was someone who was larger than life. He was often irresponsible, and even destructive, but in his crazy way defied, and even to some degree escaped, the confines of the human condition. It was actually the degree of honesty in two individuals, one a ‘ship at sea’ and the other a ‘larger than life’ character, who helped save me from total bewilderment and estrangement when I was defying the resigned world of denial as a young adult. I will talk a little about my journey in the essay titled The Demystification Of Religion.

Olive Schreiner’s extraordinarily honest recollection of the world of the pre-resigned mind

Olive Schreiner, whose work is mentioned throughout this book, is a renowned South African writer who lived from 1855 to 1920. She is one of the three most denial-free, unevasive, honest female thinkers I have encountered, the other two being author Simone Weil and anthropologist Dian Fossey. On her death bed, Olive Schreiner wrote an amazingly honest description of the world of the pre-resigned mind. It is extremely rare to find such an articulate description of the state of mind that precedes resignation because, as described, once resignation has occurred it is nearly impossible to revisit the issues that made it necessary.

The following extract, marvellously titled Somewhere, Some Time, Some Place, is from a 1987 collection of Schreiner’s writings titled, An Olive Schreiner Reader: Writings on Women and South Africa, edited by Carol Barash.

‘When a child, not yet nine years old, I walked out one morning along the mountain tops on which my home stood. The sun had not yet risen, and the mountain grass was heavy with dew; as I
looked back I could see the marks my feet had made on the long, grassy slope behind me. I walked
till I came to a place where a little stream ran, which farther on passed over the precipices into the
deep valley below. Here it passed between soft, earthy banks; at one place a large slice of earth had
fallen away from the bank on the other side, and it had made a little island a few feet wide with water
flowing all round it. It was covered with wild mint and a weed with yellow flowers and long waving
grasses. I sat down on the bank at the foot of a dwarfed olive tree, the only tree near. All the plants on
the island were dark with the heavy night’s dew, and the sun had not yet risen.

I had got up so early because I had been awake much in the night and could not sleep longer. My
heart was heavy; my physical heart seemed to have a pain in it, as if small, sharp crystals were cutting
into it. All the world seemed wrong to me. It was not only that sense of the small misunderstandings
and tiny injustices of daily life, which perhaps all sensitive children feel at some time pressing down on
them; but the whole Universe seemed to be weighing on me.

I had grown up in a land where wars were common. From my earliest years I had heard of
bloodshed and battles and hairbreadth escapes; I had heard them told of by those who had seen and
taken part in them. In my native country dark men were killed and their lands taken from them by
white men armed with superior weapons; even near to me such things had happened. I knew also
how white men fought white men; the stronger even hanging the weaker on gallows when they did not
submit; and I had seen how white men used the dark as beasts of labour, often without any thought for
their good or happiness. Three times I had seen an ox striving to pull a heavily loaded wagon up a hill,
the blood and foam streaming from its mouth and nostrils as it struggled, and I had seen it fall dead,
under the lash. In the bush in the kloof below I had seen bush-bucks and little long-tailed monkeys
that I loved so shot dead, not from any necessity but for the pleasure of killing, and the cock-o-veets
and the honey-suckers and the wood-doves that made the bush so beautiful to me. And sometimes I
had seen bands of convicts going past to work on the roads, and had heard the chains clanking which
went round their waists and passed between their legs to the irons on their feet; I had seen the terrible
look in their eyes of a wild creature, when every man’s hand is against it, and no one loves it, and it
only hates and fears. I had got up early in the morning to drop small bits of tobacco at the roadside,
hoping they would find them and pick them up. I had wanted to say to them, “Someone loves you”;
but the man with the gun was always there. Once I had seen a pack of dogs set on by men to attack a
strange dog, which had come among them and had done no harm to anyone. I had watched it torn to
pieces, though I had done all I could to save it. Why did everyone press on everyone and try to make
them do what they wanted? Why did the strong always crush the weak? Why did we hate and kill and
torture? Why was it all as it was? Why had the world ever been made? Why, oh why, had I ever been
born?

The little sharp crystals seemed to cut deeper into my heart.

And then, as I sat looking at that little, damp, dark island, the sun began to rise. It shot its lights
across the long, grassy slopes of the mountains and struck the little mound of earth in the water. All
the leaves and flowers and grasses on it turned bright gold, and the dewdrops hanging from them were
like diamonds; and the water in the stream glinted as it ran. And, as I looked at that almost intolerable
beauty, a curious feeling came over me. It was not what I thought put into exact words, but I seemed to
see a world in which creatures no more hated and crushed, in which the strong helped the weak, and
men understood each other, and forgave each other, and did not try to crush others, but to help. I did
not think of it, as something to be in a distant picture; it was there, about me, and I was in it, and a
part of it. And there came to me, as I sat there, a joy such as never besides have I experienced, except
perhaps once, a joy without limit.

And then, as I sat on there, the sun rose higher and higher, and shone hot on my back, and the
morning light was everywhere. And slowly and slowly the vision vanished, and I began to think and
question myself.
How could that glory ever really be? In a world where creature preys on creature, and man, the strongest of all, preys more than all, how could this be? And my mind went back to the dark thoughts I had in the night. In a world where the little ant-lion digs his hole in the sand and lies hidden at the bottom for the small ant to fall in and be eaten, and the leopard’s eyes gleam yellow through bushes as it watches the little bush-buck coming down to the fountain to drink, and millions and millions of human beings use all they know, and their wonderful hands, to kill and press down others, what hope could there ever be? The world was as it was! And what was I? A tiny, miserable worm, a speck within a speck, an imperceptible atom, a less than a nothing! What did it matter what I did, how I lifted my hands, and how I cried out? The great world would roll on, and on, just as it had! What if nowhere, at no time, in no place, was there anything else?

The hand about my heart seemed to grow tighter and tighter. A helpless, tiny, miserable worm! Could I prevent one man from torturing an animal that was in his power; stop one armed man from going out to kill? In my own heart, was there not bitterness, the anger against those who injured me or others, till my heart was like a burning coal? If the world had been made so, so it was! But, why, oh why, had I ever been born? Why did the Universe exist?"

And then, as I sat on there, another thought came to me; and in some form or other it has remained with me ever since, all my life. It was like this: You cannot by willing it alter the vast world outside of you; you cannot, perhaps, cut the lash from one whip; you cannot stop the march of even one armed man going out to kill; you cannot, perhaps, strike the handcuff from one chained hand; you cannot even remake your own soul so that there shall be no tendency to evil in it; the great world rolls on, and you cannot reshape it; but this one thing only you can do—in that one, small, minute, almost infinitesimal spot in the Universe, where your will rules, there where alone you are as God, strive to make that you hunger for real! No man can prevent you there. In your own heart strive to kill out all hate, all desire to see evil come even to those who have injured you or another; what is weaker than yourself try to help; whatever is in pain or unjustly treated and cries out, say, “I am here! I, little, weak, feeble, but I will do what I can for you.” This is all you can do; but do it; it is not nothing! And then this feeling came to me, a feeling it is not easy to put into words, but it was like this: You also are a part of the great Universe; what you strive for something strives for; and nothing in the Universe is quite alone; you are moving on towards something.

And as I walked back that morning over the grass slopes, I was not sorry I was going back to the old life. I did not wish I was dead and that the Universe had never existed. I, also, had something to live for—and even if I failed to reach it utterly—somewhere, some time, some place, it was! I was not alone.

More than a generation has passed since that day, but it remains to me the most important and unforgettable of my life. In the darkest hour its light has never quite died out.

In the long years which have passed, the adult has seen much of which the young child knew nothing.

In my native land I have seen the horror of a great war. Smoke has risen from burning homesteads; women and children by thousands have been thrown into great camps to perish there; men whom I have known have been tied in chairs and executed for fighting against strangers in the land of their own birth. In the world’s great cities I have seen how everywhere the upper stone grinds hard on the nether, and men and women feed upon the toil of their fellow men without any increase of spiritual beauty or joy for themselves, only a heavy congestion; while those who are fed upon grow bitter and narrow from the loss of the life that is sucked from them. Within my own soul I have perceived elements militating against all I hungered for, of which the young child knew nothing; I have watched closely the great, terrible world of public life, of politics, diplomacy, and international relations, where, as under a terrible magnifying glass, the greed, the ambition, the cruelty and falsehood of the individual soul are seen, in so hideously enlarged and wholly unrestrained a form.
that it might be forgiven to one who cried out to the powers that lie behind life: “Is it not possible to put out a sponge and wipe up humanity from the earth? It is stain!” I have realised that the struggle against the primitive, self-seeking instincts in human nature, whether in the individual or in the larger social organism, is a life-and-death struggle, to be renewed by the individual till death, by the race through the ages. I have tried to wear no blinkers. I have not held a veil before my eyes, that I might profess that cruelty, injustice, and mental and physical anguish were not. I have tried to look nakedly in the face those facts which make most against all hope—and yet, in the darkest hour, the consciousness which I carried back with me that morning has never wholly deserted me; even as a man who clings with one hand to a rock, though the waves pass over his head, yet knows what his hand touches.

But, in the course of the long years which have passed, something else has happened. That which was for the young child only a vision, a flash of almost blinding light, which it could hardly even to itself translate, has, in the course of a long life’s experience, become a hope, which I think the cool reason can find grounds to justify, and which a growing knowledge of human nature and human life does endorse.

Somewhere, some time, some place—even on earth!’ (pp.216–220 of 261)

To focus on a technicality after such an inspirational discourse is a shame but I do want to address Schreiner’s comment that she was ‘not yet nine years old’ when she recalls she was able to gain a philosophical appreciation of the dilemma of the human condition. According to my thinking and research this seems premature. I mentioned earlier that nine-year-olds are normally still in the hitting-out-in-frustration stage, yet to enter the deeply-thoughtful stage, let alone plumb it to the extent of being able to reach some appreciation of the meaningfulness of our brutal world. Schreiner was recalling an event 50-odd years after it occurred so possibly her memory was not accurate and she mistook the age she was when it occurred; however, her memory of all the details of what took place seem so clear that her claim of being ‘not yet nine’ deserves to be trusted. It is possible that someone who retained exceptional innocence and sensitivity and was also exceptionally intelligent could develop such an early appreciation of the dilemma of the human condition.

Although being resigned is a bit like being pregnant, in that you either are or are not resigned and cannot deny and admit the truth at the same time, it seems that in Schreiner’s case resignation had been partially resisted. The subtlety involved is that for people who should resign, the degree to which they can understand the human condition is the degree to which they can avoid resignation. Most people can find no reconciling understanding of the human condition but Schreiner describes having been able to arrive at some awareness of a meaningfulness to human life, which, while not actual understanding of the human condition, is nevertheless a form of reconciling knowledge, and it seems that it was this that allowed her to be so exceptionally honest in her writings. This is not to deny that she was also a person of exceptional moral courage.

Acknowledging the fundamental questions about human life: ‘All the world seemed wrong to me’; ‘Why did everyone press on everyone and try to make them do what they wanted? Why did the strong always crush the weak? Why did we hate and kill and torture? Why was it all as it was? Why had the world ever been made? Why, oh why, had I ever been born?’, Schreiner says she could not accept that ‘The world was as it was!’, without ‘hope’. She ‘began to think and question myself’, and discovered the human condition without (‘so hideously enlarged and wholly unrestrained a form that it might be forgiven to one who cried out to the powers that lie behind life: “Is it not possible to put out a sponge and wipe up humanity from the earth? It is stain!”’) and within (‘Within my own soul I have perceived elements militating against all I hungered for’ and ‘you cannot even remake your own soul so that there shall be no tendency to evil in it’), and also
discovered the immense depression those truths lead to (‘the darkest hour’ where ‘the whole Universe seemed to be weighing on me’ and where ‘The band about my heart seemed to grow tighter and tighter’, asking ‘why, oh why, had I ever been born? Why did the Universe exist?’).

Schreiner tried to resist resignation, she ‘tried to look nakedly in the face those facts which make most against all hope’, saying ‘I have tried to wear no blinkers. I have not held a veil before my eyes’.

To hold back resignation Schreiner held onto ‘the consciousness which I carried back with me that morning’ where, in ‘a flash of almost blinding light’, she saw that ‘nothing in the Universe is quite alone’; we are ‘a part of the great Universe’ that ‘strives for’ ‘something’ that we can ‘hope’ for which is ‘that glory’ of an integrative or cooperative destiny where, through ‘a growing knowledge of human nature’, we will produce ‘a world’ ‘Somewhere, some time, some place’ in which ‘creatures [will] no more [be] hated and crushed, in which the strong help the weak, and men understand each other, and forgive each other, and do not try to crush others, but to help’—a reconciliation, which has now occurred, that leads to a lifting of the human condition and ‘a joy without limit’.

As one prepares to die, evasion finally becomes useless and the deepest truths can sometimes emerge. It seems that impending death transferred Schreiner back behind the walls of denial to the real questions and thoughts about human life. All the relatively evasive middle years were discarded and her original clear view of the real truth and dilemma about life came to the fore.

A history of analysis of resignation

Resignation is the most important psychological event to occur in human life and yet it is very rarely acknowledged and almost never discussed and analysed.

In the extremely insecure, evasive, alienated times we currently live in, resignation is almost totally denied. Only recently on an Oprah Winfrey program titled, Is Your Child Depressed?, Dr Siegler, author of the latest evasive, mechanistic book on adolescence, The Essential Guide to the New Adolescence: how to raise an emotionally healthy teenager, arrogantly proclaimed to depressed adolescents sitting before her that their depression was nothing more than their ‘puberty hormones…overwhelming them’ (15 May 2000). Similarly, a recent newspaper article was published under the heading ‘Lost Generation — Adolescence is a vulnerable stage of life. But in Australia, it is potentially fatal. Youth suicide is on the increase’. It gave the following explanation for youth suicide: “They [adolescents] are having to come to terms with a huge amount of change”, says Bronwyn Donaghy, author of Leaving Early, a book on youth suicide. “From the changes going on with their bodies; the transition into sexual beings; changing relationships with parents; exams and looking for employment”” (Sydney Morning Herald, 24 Aug. 2000). There is no acknowledgment in these words of the real issue involved of resignation. What has been said is all evasive ‘bullshit’ or ‘cave speak’, to use Plato’s allegory.

The reason depression and youth suicide are increasing worldwide at such a rapid rate is because of the equally rapid increase in alienation around the world. The level of dishonesty that humans are now practicing is so great that new generations arriving in the world find it almost unbearable. Resigned alienated people are blind to their level of falseness but it is visible to the innocent and to young people who have not yet resigned.

A 1999 book by clinical psychologist Dr Michael Yapko, titled Hand-Me-Down Blues, records that ‘someone born since 1945 is likely to be up to 3 times more depressed than their parents and 10 times more than their grandparents’. A recent book about depression states that