

## what it is to be human

Who are we, humans? We are the ones who invented airplanes that fly us all over the world in hours. We are the ones who talk to each other all day through little boxes that are not only for talking with each other but also take pictures, movies, play games, allow us to shop and buy things from all over the world. All that in seconds, at most minutes. We changed the course of rivers and dammed them. We blow up mountain tops to get coal, dig deep into the earth—even under water—to get the oil that makes the energy that drives the trillion gargantuan and microscopic machines we have made. We are obviously smarter than other animals because we can do so many things animals can't; we have shut off knowing all the things animals can do that we can't. We change plants and animals to grow faster and fatter, resist diseases and pests. We have eradicated many animal and plant species that we judge to be dangerous to us, or we don't like them. We rule this planet. We are superior beings, the end result of creation. We think of ourselves as the ones who were meant to own or at least manage this planet. We are what it is to be human.

We may have made some mistakes but compared to our achievements they are but glitches, bumps in the road. At this time in our history we are having some difficulties but most of us feel confident that we will get back to our ever advancing civilization. Soon. As always we have big plans and see a glorious future. Progress. Today the planet, tomorrow the moon and other planets and after: the stars.

My friends know that is not who I think we are but they also made it clear that my idea of who we are is not only different but unpleasant to think about. Negative is the word most often used. They need hope, and my idea of hope is so hopelessly strange that it does not count.

Frequently my friends send me links to articles by people who propose ways to get out of the down we suddenly were dumped in a few years ago. Just in the last few weeks I remember an economist who has a plan for a totally new kind of economy. A woman who sees the end of patriarchy as an evolutionary shift from third chakra to fourth chakra. A man who has designed and is manufacturing modular houses. A seer who sees a humankind with a sudden change of consciousness, from hierarchical to horizontal. Two men who have very different plans for all-electric cars in the near future. An inventor who designed a new way to move goods all over the world. And dozens more solutions that are believable, probably possible, certainly thinkable. Some of these people add a word or two about the planet may be warming; most of them don't. All of these ideas are meant to make us feel good, hopeful. We like, no we need to be reassured that things will be normal again. The old normal. Scientists, entrepreneurs, inventors are boiling over with ideas for better things and smoother systems back to the good old days of a few years ago.

Then it struck me that all these projects add new products to old ideas. Of course, because they are talking to a small slice of today's humans. The humans who have become used to a life style never before even dreamed, ever better.

Recently saw an article and movie with lots of details explaining why this country has not enthusiastically embraced solar and wind power. The problem, it seems, is power lines. When we think of generating energy we think large corporations, centralized. An entire desert one solar plant, a wind farm the size of a county. That then requires moving enormous amounts of electric energy from where it is generated—far from anywhere—to cities that need the energy. The big fight, this article said, is over *where* new power lines ought to run. Is it strange that Americans cannot think as Germans did who legislated a very successful program to put solar panels on every house in the country. Decentralized energy generation, no new power lines needed. It works.

All the projects add new forms to old systems. Neither of the two geniuses who talk about electric cars considers that cars may not be the best way to move people and things. When you think even one minute it seems clear that cars are inefficient. 70% of cars move one person. Let's say the car is the latest of the latest with computer everything. It weighs a ton and costs thirty thousand to buy. Keeping it running, insurance, and paying for fuel costs at least a thousand a year. Most of the time that

major investments sits in a garage and only now and then moving one person a few miles. Once or twice a year it makes a long and tiring trip to far away. Americans cannot even imagine anything but cars to move people and things. The rest of the world has had rails, buses, super fast trains for decades.

Then a deeper thought. All of these things humans think and do are based on an assumption. My dictionary says that an assumption is "*a thing that is accepted as true or as certain to happen, without proof.*" The assumption underlying our idea about who we are is that humans are special, essentially different from animals, and that it is our right, or our destiny, to run the planet. We assume that we humans must use our skills, in particular our brains, to make the planet what our latest need or want is. When you are born and raised in a world built on this assumption of course you cannot see it as an assumption.

It is from the point of view of a different assumption that the modern root assumption becomes visible. The other point of view is what humans everywhere believed the first hundred or more thousand years of being human. It has been expressed by Native Americans and other indigenous and aboriginal people. That assumption says that humans are intimately related to all other Life, not better or special, just different. The four legged, the feathered, the many in the ocean, are my sisters and brothers. Trees and plants are made of the same stuff humans are, we breathe the same air, use the same water. Need the same sun. I share that assumption. It cannot be proven and yet, as all assumptions, a lot of people take it for granted, even now.

It is a shock to come to a country where what people think humans are is a kind of opposite to what I believe humans are. I don't believe that we are superior. How can any species be superior? We need each other to live. And I cannot believe that it is our job to control nature. It seems all too obvious to me that we can't. Our attempts to control nature, control Life, are a disaster that is unsustainable.

By now I know that my voice is a whisper in a storm. Few can hear me, even fewer understand.

Do I believe (because believing is all you can do with an assumption) that "mine" is better than yours? It is not a matter of better or worse. It is a matter of survival. The assumption that Humans are made to rule because they are special is measurably, visibly, unsustainable. When I think of the thousands of frantic attempts to control nature, or masses of people, all I see is death and destruction. I know that we humans have wonderful talents and abilities. But for the last so many hundreds of years we have made ourselves dangerously lethal, brutal, and destructive. One of the Ten Commandments is Thou shalt not kill. My assumption would accept that as a matter of course. But believing that humans are meant to rule the planet has made us expert killers. We've invented ways to kill thousands of people at a time at the press of a button. We no longer hesitate to kill our friends and family if someone orders us to do that. And if we don't kill who we don't like for one reason or another we put them in prisons, throw away the key. Yes, life eats life, animals and humans kill to eat, but no animal is as cruel as we are. Our owners have learned to hide the ugly stuff, so most of us don't know what we eat. Just so it tastes good and modern chemistry sees to that. Yes, the word "owners" slipped in there. Almost all humans are owned by a few.

I grew up among people who had a different assumption about who we humans are. Of course their assumption was just as "of course" to them as the humans-are-special is to civilized people. Their assumption (I call this the root assumption) is that humans are part of nature, as animals are, and plants and trees, even rocks. Native Americans said *All my relations*, the four-legged, the creepers, and the feathered are our brothers and sisters, the smallest flower a cousin. They knew themselves to be part of nature, part of the great web that is Life and sun and air. They knew themselves to be children of Mother Earth. The people around us where I grew up thought it rude to say "I", theirs was a we culture. Ours is an I, me, culture. They were as smart as we are, they invented things. But although the inventor was admired nobody rushed to make the undeniable improvement on a tool they used daily. They were fiercely egalitarian. Someone in their village might have money—he had a car—but he was very careful to park it far from the village proper. Their root assumption makes a sustainable way of

living life. No particular expectations. They laughed when a Peace Corps woman said "you can make better your life." Modest and moderate describe them well—that was now 35 years ago.

This modern world is becoming all modern very rapidly. Our way of life is not sustainable; the only way we, westerners, can live as we do is by inequality. The rich are rich by the blood and sweat of the poor. No, I am not a Marxist, not even a socialist. It's a matter of statistics. There are close to 7 billion humans living on this planet now. If all of them would live as, say, the average American lives, we would use five times what this planet grows. Scientists figured that out, I didn't. Already now, June 2011, enough food is grown on this planet to feed all of us a healthy diet. The problem, as with the wind and solar farms, is transport. Thanks to what we proudly call modern agriculture we can grow one crop on a thousand acre "farm" but only by using very potent chemicals to rebuff pests and super-fertilize the soil. Getting it to Africa where people are starving costs money. Who is going to pay? We throw food away when one in five children of the earth go to bed hungry.

In the world of the people with the ancient root-assumption food is always shared. Nobody is rich and nobody is poor either. We like to say, *They have no ambition*. Probably true because ambition is not something to strive for when you believe, know, that we are all related, truly equal. How is it worded in our Constitution? Are we equal, or only *born* equal? Born equal fits the famed level playing field theory. After we are born we each, individually, can pursue the American Dream: with hard work, some luck, and shoving competitors out of the way, you too can be rich and powerful. To those who think of themselves as related to all Life, being rich and powerful is not valued. In that reality hope is to grow wiser and more compassionate with age.

How we think of ourselves is a core concept; nothing to do with ideologies, religion, politics, conservative or liberal. Simply that we believe things about who we are as humans. Beliefs that come from parents and their group of people, all the way back to whenever. And because it is an assumption we believe without question it is so. Doesn't anyone know that. Never even visible unless from another point of view. The relevance of who we think we are is that these root-assumptions change us. A changed humanity has changed the planet. Modern humans are not who we were originally. Maybe better or worse, or a bit of both, but definitely different. The new way we think about ourselves has resulted in a manmade world, a staggering increase in the number of people who are using more of the fruits of the planet than the planet can grow. We are impoverishing the planet and, what I think most important, we are seriously disturbing the planetary ecology by a rapid reduction in biodiversity.

We forget that we, humans, are born of this planet. We too must rely on the planet for our very life.

How we think of ourselves, I believe, is a key to the future. It may well determine whether we can survive as a species. Seeing ourselves as different from all other Life inevitably also allows some of us to feel better than others. Assuming ourselves special and therefore the rightful owners of the planet has led to ever more inequality within the species. A very few humans have amassed never known power over the masses of lesser humans, as well as power over other species. No ecology can survive such inequality.

The health of ecologies depends on variety: the more different species there are in an ecology, the stabler they are. That is why island ecologies are fragile. The island of Guam, not long ago, had the misfortune to suddenly find a snake that ate birds. Perhaps an unintended import from the Philippines. In an amazingly short time Guam had almost no birds left, certainly no small birds. Without birds insects of all kinds multiplied. Plants that depended on birds for fertilization died out. The impact on that island ecology is catastrophic.

We who assume we are special, the boss of the earth, face a number of similar problems if we continue to destroy a forest, or a mountain, or make a road splitting a forest in two. It may seem progress to us but it results in the extinction of species, a serious reduction of biodiversity. That diversity is essential; reducing it makes the

ecology of the planet weaker. Its impact is on our food. We are very clever making food in factories, but the raw material still has to come from the planet.

As long as we see ourselves as born to rule the planet we see every problem as something humans need to fix. If the problems we worry about are our doing the first thing to "do" is not doing. When readers ask, What can I DO? The easy answer is stop doing what we did to bring about the problem. The more realistic answer is more difficult of course. Our planet is not a thing, not an object. It works much as a living organism; it has its own complex systems that maintain balances. Organisms heal themselves, although the *healing* may not be what we expected or wanted. It is extremely unlikely that the planet will get back to how it was 50 years ago. At this point in time it seems unimportant whether we, humans, caused global warming or not. It is going on, and almost certainly cannot be stopped, or even slowed down. The usual statement is that even if we were to stop spewing CO<sub>2</sub> and other gases into the atmosphere this minute global warming would continue for at least 30 years. We must adapt to whatever climate we find where we live. And continue to adapt from year to year. Isn't that the way we always lived?

We've done that before. Adapting to an environment is our human strength. We found ways to live in the Arctic on an all meat diet, and in hot climates on an all plant food diet. Our blood has adapted to living at 16,000 feet altitude where there is less oxygen in the air. We have adapted to live on small islands where only coconuts and sweet potatoes grow but the lagoon is full of sea life.

Full circle. After a breathtaking ride of unimagined experimentation and never before experienced change, we've come to today. Our species thinking itself in charge of a planet we made over to serve the interests of a very few of us. The planet doing what it must do to respond to our excesses; we call it global warming, climate change, and a rapid, dangerously diminishing biodiversity. All that inevitably effecting all Life, including human life. What this means is that all living beings, including humans, will adapt as they can. As before we shall adapt to the planet as we find it. There really is no choice. Any species, even ours, has only one direction: survival. To survive we must adapt. In the end survival of our species trumps even the overwhelming power of corporations.

We can find the ancient root-assumption again; it is still inside us. Accept that we are not exceptional, we don't own this planet but were born of this planet as one of the millions of other species. We are part of all Life. With all other Life we adapt as best we can to our environment as it is. Knowing that it is not up to us to change the planet to our wants. The ancient root-assumption reminds us that we are no more no less than other life forms. A world of equals makes happier people.

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"Oh, yes, I went to the white man's schools. I learned to read from school books, newspapers and the Bible. But in time I learned that they were not enough. Civilized people depend too much on man-made printed pages. I turn to the Great Spirit's book which is the whole of his creation. You can read a big part of that book if you study nature. You know, if you take all your books, lie them out under the sun, and let the snow and rain and insects work on them for a while, there will be nothing left. But the Great Spirit has provided you and me with an opportunity for study in nature's university, the forests, the rivers the mountains, and the animals which include us."

Tatange Mani, a Stoney Indian; from his autobiography

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