

## *what I look at looks at me*

What if... we, humans, were not the unusual, superior species we think we are but just one of the many millions of species of this planet? What if what I look at looks at me? I see a cat and the cat sees me, terrifying perhaps or known to give food. I see a mosquito and automatically slap at it. But the mosquito also looks at me because all too often I miss. We may think ourselves obviously superior to mosquitoes, and yet mosquitoes not only drink our blood but can infect us with some nasty diseases. Those of us who can read this—literate humans—probably cannot imagine that who or what we look at also looks at us. A matter of how we think of ourselves. And that is mostly a matter of the culture we grow up in, live in. Very rarely are we aware of how we think of who “I” am in the all that is. The great majority of the almost seven billion humans on this planet have little choice about how to live, and so, how to survive. Finding food is a daily struggle for at least half, more likely two thirds, of all humans. For those of us privileged to have been born into an affluent society we can choose how to fit in.

Of course we also can choose not to choose, go along with whatever is the current thing, float on fad and fashion. Being passengers has its advantages and occasionally its excitement. There are the other passengers to relate to, the captain and the crew to admire or detest. They, the ones who run the boat, make sure we are entertained 24/7 — and get our daily dose of propaganda. It is said that the Media not only entertain but often mislead us about what is really going on. Adventure comes when the ship hits an iceberg, or runs out of fuel in mid ocean. Or runs aground. Full stop; not going anywhere. That seems to be where we are today. Unexpected huge loss of jobs and homes. Food is getting more expensive, water in many parts of the world is a growing problem. Our voluminous garbage is smothering the earth as well as the oceans.

I was lucky, jumped ship half a life time ago and discovered that not everybody was on the same ship. Quite a few people chose different ways to be in the world. I even happened upon people who had lived within nature for thousands of years. They were the freest and most joyful people I’ve known. They survived without any of the things we structure our lives around. They owned nothing. They did not understand the concept of *owning*. The idea of owning nature, the planet, was unthinkable.

It took me years to understand that their ancient way of being is a matter of how we think about ourselves in relation to what is. Modern humans think ourselves outside of nature, in fact controlling nature. We imagine we own this planet and all that is on, above and under its soil.

We also think of ourselves as ‘thinking beings’ although most of us never think about who we are in the context of a planetary ecology. We are who our parents or society wanted us to be. In today’s world (the manmade world) that means consumers. Few ever questioned consuming, made easy by credit cards that were almost forced on us. Almost everyone I know of what we call the Boomer generation owes enormous sums of money to credit card companies, paying monthly changing interest rates and/or penalties. We don’t even think of those credit card debts as loans. As long as the credit card companies—banks—have the billions to buy the people who make the rules our debts as well as the nation’s debts will never be paid off. The interest and other charges we pay finance the rule makers who make the rules that force us to pay. A system that sustains itself although utterly unsustainable in the planetary ecology. We root our civilization in an economy that must always grow. It should be obvious that growth without decay is impossible. A new car every other year; throw the old car on the heap of garbage that is strangling our world. Always more until there isn’t anymore. Isn’t that where we are now?

At the same time something new has entered the equation. Yes, we are addicted to oil, as our previous leader proclaimed. More important is that we are addicted to owning, a concept that we ourselves invented. Owning land, plants, domesticating (owning) animals, owning people, owning the earth itself. For the past several hundred years different we’s have owned land and made civilizations. In every case we stripped the earth of its trees, water, wealth. Every empire crashed.

The last sixty years we have taken possession (another concept we magicked) of the entire planet, digging up known and unknown metals, and several different forms of carbon pressed

over eons of time into coal, oil and “natural” gas. Burning coal and oil releases the carbon into the atmosphere around the planet now preventing heat to radiate into space, making the earth warmer. We’ve known this for at least half a century but have never seriously considered not burning coal and oil to generate the electricity that drives our way of living. Yes, a few Scandinavian countries have successfully weaned themselves from oil and coal, but their laudable efforts have no measurable effect when the two largest polluters, China and the US, continue to increase the tons of carbon they spew into the atmosphere. The two nations, with less than a quarter of all humans, are responsible for more than half of the carbon added to an already dangerously out of balance atmosphere.

I think about the CEO’s of the big oil and coal corporations. They are probably born well, educated reasonably well, ambitious, even greedy perhaps, but they must also have intelligence to understand what scientists and reporters tell us in simple enough words. Their children, and certainly their grandchildren, will live in a world 2°, 3° even 4°C (3.6°, 5.4°, 7.2°F) warmer. The first half of this year was the hottest ever recorded. Recently New York and other cities on the east coast had days when the temperature was 103°F — imagine 110°F on a summer day in New York. A few degrees does not seem much, but I learned that 1°C (1.8°F) warmer worldwide means the loss of one tenth of world food production. Three or four degrees would be a loss of 30%, 40% of the food that the earth can grow for an increasing world population. Impossible, of course. Long before we would have become aware of massive disruptions, to put it mildly. Don’t CEO’s of oil and coal companies have children or even grandchildren?

Evidently the big governments are not smart enough to stop our addiction to oil and coal. I have a suggestion: let just one huge international corporation stop drilling and selling oil. Clean break. Important that they stop dealing oil all at once, completely.

I can see the headlines: *EXXON-MOBILE OUT OF OIL INTO ALTERNATIVES.*

It would wake people up from too long a slumber. It would take a few years instead of decennia for the whole world to tip. And is it unrealistic to imagine that at least one corporation would discover that helping people (consumers) can be very profitable? Getting people well-paying jobs making alternative energies, electric cars, designing a whole new kind of small local electric nets, packing and wrapping in celluloid instead of plastic, designing smaller but zero-energy-using dwellings. I’m dreaming a whole new world. Almost certainly more profitable than oil and coal and what’s more, their and our grandchildren might inherit a livable planet.

Had an interesting dream the night after writing this. In the dream I had to ride a bicycle to Volcano and back, up and down, down and up. Volcano is a small village at 4000 feet (1230 meters) above sea level. The road is steep occasionally an rarely flat. In the dream I learned that if I dreaded the ride up, or made going uphill a big problem, I had big trouble. But when “I just did it,” it was easy. It did not wear me out, I was not even out of breath. Thinking that changing our way of life is too big a problem, it will be. But I’m certain that if we *had to* we would, and when done we would know it hadn’t been that hard either.

I have little faith that today’s super capitalism will come to the rescue of humankind. What I see is a very few humans who hoard virtually all the wealth of the planet, buying the leaders and the political bureaucracies that we think we elect. The very rich against the very poor, the masses. Are we then, all of us, passengers? All recorded history—which is not long—teaches us that sooner or later the masses rebel; always a bloody mess. Do we really need a captain and crew to make decisions for passive passengers? How about just leaving it to the people.

I’ve known wonderfully joyful people who chose to be themselves. The idea of a boss made them laugh almost as much as the idea of owning an animal, a plant, the earth. No, the idea of owning the earth, even by all of us collectively, did not make them laugh. It made them think that we must be very, very sick in the head. Are we? Ecologies do not recognize bosses and masses. In a healthy ecology everything is related to everything else. Literally: what I look at looks at me.

robert wolff, 21 july 2010