

what it is to be old

Once, now more than a generation ago, I wrote a book that after many changes ended up with an awkwardly long title: *hope lies in our ability to bring back to awareness WHAT IT IS TO BE HUMAN.*

Needless to say, everyone remembers it as What It Is To Be Human. It was first published in 1994. I won't bore you with the details, the time and effort wasted in promoting or marketing a book. Yes, in America it is the writer who is supposed to promote the sales of his book (unless, of courses, the writer is already famous, has a recognizable name).

I learned early that I was unable to promote because promoting a book means promoting me. And I have never learned how to do that, perhaps because I grew up in a very different world where, for instance, the word "I" was considered uncouth, rude, selfish. The nice librarian who helped me find books on how to promote a book, told me I should get radio and TV interviews. I did that for a few months. The TV interviews were usually at night, after 11PM when a studio was available. Radio interviews were easier because all of them were over the phone. But every interviewer, sooner or later, asked the same question: "Tell us some more of your adventures!" I would answer, No, the book is not about my adventures, it is about other people, living very different lives in other countries, other cultures, speaking other languages. And their response was always: "But people want to know about **you**."

It did not take me long to realize that I simply could not do what an author is supposed to do. One evening I had a liberating thought: *Since I cannot promote the book, the book will have to find its own readers.* Eventually, slowly, it did — by word of mouth. People who had read the book told others. Six years later a large publisher bought the rights to the book, their editor edited the text to conform to American standards or fashion. The title changed to *Original Wisdom; Stories of an Ancient Way of Knowing.* That book came out a few weeks before 9/11 in 2001. That meant the book was "dead on arrival," nobody bought books that Fall. It too was never promoted, but again found its own readers, all over the world. It has been translated in four languages, and sales have always been very modest, but after almost ten years it is still in print.

I am still obsessed with "what it is to be human" because I think it is important for us, humans, to remember who we really are. I resist accepting that we have become so aggressive, prejudiced, addicted to this and that, very clever but not smart. We imagine ourselves separate from all other life forms: the best, the most, the only beings with brains or with a soul. We can imagine we can do anything at all to the planet, the earth. On this planet, our our only home, we imagine that we can do what has never been done before, always with absolutely no thought for tomorrow. And we are reaping the consequences every day for such thoughtlessness. The latest craze now is to dig for so-called natural gas as an energy source. Burning natural gas instead of coal and oil makes less poisonous air in the atmosphere. But getting it out from under rock requires enormous quantities of water with sand and a mix of chemicals in it to fracture the rock (hence the word "fracking"). That water comes back up, not only with the chemicals our clever scientists put in but substances like radium, a radioactive chemical. This poisonous water may be dumped in water purification plants that are not designed to remove radium. Read an article this morning stating that some of the drinking water that comes from such a water purification plant contains as much as a thousand times the radio-active material than was considered allowable a few years back. How many people have to die from various cancers before we get smart?

First Man was clever in different ways but always smart.. They knew consequences. If you find a plant with edible tubers, you make very sure that you leave at least one tuber in the

ground so that you can find more tubers next year. They knew that you can roughly dam a stream to catch fish but you were always careful to not block the stream because it would change everything below the little dam. We have always known how to survive within the limits of our environments. Until we imagined ourselves owners, and used our intelligence to change the environment to our whims, with not a thought for consequences.

We have changed in my life time. Our western culture forces us to be very different from the people I knew when I grew up, and people I have known all over the world who had not been westernized. All, or at least most of what I have written in the last thirty or more years is about how we have changed, what we have become. Above all, what we have forgotten — how to be human as we were. This new human is not an improvement, although we are constantly told how superior we are.

We have come far from who we were before what we call agriculture (roughly ten thousand years ago, less than a tenth of the time we have been human). After much studying, reading, thinking, I am now convinced that the invention of agriculture was a huge turning point in our cultural evolution as it is called these days. First Man was a nomad, we spread from Africa, where we originated, to all over the planet in something like twenty- to thirty thousand years. What made it possible for us to spread so far and wide is our unique ability to adapt to different environments. We learned to survive in the Arctic, made shelter from snow and ice, survived on an all meat diet (only because we ate *all* meat and marrow and skin and organs — westerners eat only muscle meat, the good part with vitamins and enzymes goes for dog and cat food. We learned to survive in deserts with little water and shade. We learned to survive jungles, and at altitudes above 20,000 feet where the oxygen in the air is less. We survived on meatless diets. We survived on islands thousands of miles from other islands or continents. We survived because we adapted to the environment as we found it. We created sustainable life styles. Very different one from another, but all sustainable. That is our heritage, who we were. From my own experience, getting to know a group of people who still lived that ancient way in the deep jungle of the Malay Peninsula, the thing that stood out for me was the joyfulness of those people. They were free within only the bounds of their own part of Nature. We who pride ourselves on liberty are bound by a million laws and rules. The so-called primitive people I got to know did not know “owning.” Certainly the idea of owning land, nature, plants, animals, was literally unthinkable. I searched and found other writers, explorers, who had written about other First People in the Kalahari Desert, The Ituri Forest, a hot jungle across the center of Africa, the Inuit (Eskimo) of the Arctic. All these writers, without exception, talk about the joyfulness of people who lived as part of Nature, enjoying a freedom and a sense of being alive we cannot imagine any more. People without neuroses, without masks. They were who they were.

Probably everyone I have talked with, or who had read something I had written, looked at me doubtfully, “But we cannot go back.” No, probably not. But when I see what we have become, when I watch what is happening in the world, I cannot escape the notion that we are rushing at full speed toward an enormous collapse. The world we have created for ourselves on top of the planet is completely unsustainable. Our plunder of the earth, our overuse of energy, our expectations, all of it is unsustainable. Scientists who count these things say that we are using five times what the planet can provide. That “we,” of course, refers to a very small minority of the close to seven billion humans on this planet. That western elite We is using the resources that belong to all 7 billion of us. Obviously unsustainable. The wider We is finally getting tired of being stolen from, and losing what dignity we had as humans.

I don't like to write about politics because I have never understood it. Much of what comes

out of the mouths of politicians seems meaningless propaganda, often very obviously for someone's gain. But I have a very clear idea about the planet, and how we fit into the planetary ecology. We cannot control that ecology, we cannot control Nature. We are part of nature, of the planet. We are made of the same stuff, the atoms and molecules I breathe in have been breathed out by a chicken or a rat, has gone through a plant, a tree. The food I eat (and grow here) is edible because we have the same chemistry. I do not do well on the manufactured food that is sold in plastic.

Of course I know that a whole group of people are told, and believe, that climate change is just a theory, or a hoax. Totally unimportant what you call it, or who did it, but it is here. Ask the people in Pakistan, one fourth of their country under water. Ask the people of Russia with enormous unstoppable wild fires. Ask Australians where an area larger than Germany and France together stood under water and then a typhoon hit. Ask New Yorkers who had temperatures above 100°F last summer and this winter one snow blizzard after another. We in Hawai'i know that big fish no longer exist in the ocean around our islands. I live on what is called "the rainy side of this island," but for a few years we have had drought. The land where I live is lava with a very thin layer of soil, and some pockets of more soil, but no ground water. Things grow here because it is always warm or hot, and we used to have twice the rain we have had these last 18 or more months. Our water comes from above, not from underground. It is easy to see that the fruit we have stays small and shriveled, not juicy as it used to be. And fruit comes at strange times; skipping seasons, it seems.

I cannot stop the process that is happening. We in this nation are not willing to change our wasteful life style, and we should be the model for others to follow. The gases we dump into the atmosphere we share with all Life and the gases now released from melting permafrost are increasing rather than decreasing. And without considering consequences we are madly contaminating drinking water.

In addition to climate change, or whatever you choose to call it, an amazing number of countries already has and/or is making nuclear weapons. It seems inevitable that some of that enormously explosive stuff will get in the hands of bad people. There are an amazing number of countries who have policies and practices that cannot but lead to a reaction from oppressed populations. The wealth of the world is rapidly moving up to a tiny minority of hyper-rich people who, with all that money, have the power to buy votes and governments to organize so-called economies that suck more money from the bottom to feed the top. All that is a rapidly growing imbalance, an utterly unsustainable inequality, asymmetry.

I think of man-made country boundaries, straight lines drawn on a map. Economies, the million or billion laws and rules, all other systems (medicine, education, infrastructure, etc.) as The World. We have created a World on top of a planet that we consider our property. It is that World that is crazy busy interfering with the planetary ecology, what we call Nature, the Biosphere where all Life lives. An unsustainable World battling a planetary ecology that is what makes sustainability. Insanity!.

Enough of all that. I've written the same story many times. To sum it up, we have entered a time of a unique war, the (manmade) World against the Planet. Now the Planet is fighting back by slowly cooking the World. The World, our human creation, is a powerful system, a true Juggernaut that nobody can stop or even much change in time. This Planet is our only home. My guess is that the Planet will survive albeit changed possibly so radically that we, humans, can no longer survive on that changed planet as our biology and chemistry were adapted to the planet as it was for the last many thousands of years. Other Life forms will emerge.

Scientists have studied earlier eons of Life on this planet, and have found five what they call Extinctions. Times when for one reason or another a large number of the millions of species disappeared. The last one, 65 millions years ago, was when dinosaurs disappeared; many millions of years before there were beings even somewhat like today's humans. The same scientists also found that after each Extinction evolution speeded up and rapidly made large numbers of new species. An ecology, any ecology, needs variety to be stable. Some scientists now talk about the Sixth Extinction, the one our manmade World is making. It is reasonable to expect that after this latest Extinction a great surge of new species will appear again. Perhaps, even probably, a new species of human, adapted to whatever new planet will emerge.

For now all we can do, all that is required of us, is to *adapt*, the very talent that we always had in abundance. Adaptation is always local. We pride ourselves on having made a global economy but adapting cannot be global, must be local. Wherever you are, adapt to your unique environment. Today but always keeping in mind tomorrow.

What it is to be human in my thinking is to be smart first, clever after. Always aware of consequences. For instance, all First people and most indigenous people, have always been aware of the number of people their environment could support. Much as we all love children all people have always known to control births. I know, it was one of my research projects. In many First People cultures it was tearfully accepted that old people who could no longer take care of themselves would stay behind when the group moved away (nomads move every few years). In some western countries we have turned everything upside down, we imagine that a lifetime must be maintained at all costs — the costs are enormous, bankrupting this country. We have forgotten that the first law of any species is the survival of the species; Preserve and cherish Life, the ongoing stream of beings, not an individual life time. Survival of the species, not survival of a fetus or an old man.

I know what it is to be old. I can still take care of myself, mostly. But I am beginning to know and accept that I could easily become a burden to my children who have their own burdens to bear and/or a burden to my society. Old age means limitations. I cannot lift weights that I could easily lift a few years ago. I can still feed the animals around here — knowing, by the way, that they really don't need me, they get spoiled. I do it for my need not theirs. I've always had a need to nurture, to serve; I don't like to be served. It breaks my heart each time I see a medical team working 24/7 serving medical or other needs in a part of the world severely underserved. I want to do that. I offered my services to Doctors without Borders ten years ago and was told I was too old. Now I give them money; they do wonderful work. I discovered not long ago that perhaps I write because I can no longer serve. I would have preferred to die helping others to survive a brutal war rather than die here in my bed. But old age means fewer choices. I accept that. As long as I can write, I will continue to write. Maybe always the same old same old but in new words, I hope.

As I tell my grandchildren: keep your eyes open to the sides, to above and to the ground you walk on. Our more and more uncivil civilization insists you must look straight ahead seeing only your own "goals and objectives." Wrong, very wrong. Look for open doors, peak in, you might see a whole other future that is the you you always knew you are. Be sure to always be as closely as you can to who you know you are. And as you change, change with it. Don't let others tell you what you should be. Be in touch with yourself, know who you are. It's your path, your life.

robert wolff, the last days of february 2011